

## **A Defense of the Westminster Confession's View of the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath**

What are Christians to do with the fourth commandment? Should we see it as binding on our consciences, like the rest of the moral law? Or should we view it as fulfilled in Christ in such a way that it is no longer directly applicable to us, like the rest of the ceremonial law? If it is part of God's moral law, does the Westminster Confession go too far in its description of the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath, burdening God's people beyond what Scripture requires? Is the Westminster Confession Pharisaical?

I believe Scripture and the Confession are in full harmony with one another on the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath. I believe the language of the Confession and Catechisms is correct in how it defines the Sabbath and how it describes how the Sabbath has been fulfilled by Christ and remains applicable to believers today.

The Scriptures teach us that the Sabbath has its origin in creation, and is thus a creation ordinance, part of God's unchanging moral law, woven into the warp and woof of Creation. As part of God's moral law, the Sabbath shows us how to love God and love our neighbors. The Lord's Day, as the Christian Sabbath, retains the force of the moral law but is fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ, giving it an even stronger redemptive aspect as we remember the resurrection of Christ as the inauguration of the new creation and look ahead to the Day of the LORD each Lord's Day.

### **The Origin of the Sabbath:**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> Day of Creation, God rested and, by doing so, blessed the seventh day and made it holy.  
Genesis 2:1-3 –

*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. <sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.<sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.*

In the Fourth Commandment in Exodus 20, God refers to this creation rest as the basis for the Sabbath commandment –

*<sup>8</sup> "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

– Exodus 20:8-11

We see the two main elements of the moral law both reflected in the fourth commandment: Love of God by keeping the whole day holy unto the Lord, and love for neighbor by giving them rest.

As further evidence that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance and not just a part of the Mosaic covenant, consider: Even before God gave the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 16, in the giving of the manna, God

was enforcing the Sabbath. He instructed His people to gather twice as much manna on the day before the Sabbath, and the leftover manna did not spoil on the Sabbath, when God provided no manna.

In Deuteronomy 5, God gives the Fourth Commandment a second time, this time in a redemption context, that of being released from bondage and so giving rest to those who serve you, including your animals –

*<sup>12</sup> “Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. <sup>13</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>14</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. <sup>15</sup> You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.*

So, the Sabbath commandment is given differently in the two accounts of the Ten Commandments, the first rooted in creation and the second in redemption. Both emphasize the call to love our neighbors as ourselves and to give justice to workers by allowing them the rest God designed them to need as creatures. In both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, we are clearly told that our obligation in keeping the Sabbath is to give rest to others as well as to take rest ourselves.

Thus, based on the Pentateuch, we can conclude that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance, is part of the moral law of God, and involves both loving God and loving our neighbor, as we remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy unto the Lord and also give the gift of rest to our neighbors.

### **Jesus and the Sabbath:**

Jesus openly and repeatedly challenged the Pharisees on their regulations regarding the Sabbath. Because of these repeated confrontations, those who have a high view of the Lord's Day as a Christian Sabbath and are known as “strict Sabbatarians” are often accused of being “Pharisaical” in their view of the Sabbath. But was Jesus seeking to lower the bar on what it meant to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy? Should we see Jesus' actions and words as loosening the standards of the moral law? If that's what Jesus was doing, it would be a contradiction to everything else He did regarding the moral law of God.

Rather than seeing Jesus' confrontations with the Pharisees as aimed at lowering the standard of God's moral law on the Sabbath, we should see them the same way we see Jesus handling the moral law in the Sermon on the Mount and in other places: He restores the moral law to its original intent as the One who is both the author and the embodiment of the moral law. In doing so, He takes the moral law to its internal and spiritual application, to rescue it from the reductionistic “dumbing down” of the Pharisees. Remember, the problem of the Pharisees is not that their view of the law of God was too high but that it was too low!

So, what was the deficiency with the Pharisees' view of the Sabbath? They forgot the justice and the love of neighbor embedded in the commandment. They had reduced the commandment to a list of rules and had created loopholes to allow them to circumvent the seemingly strict regulations they had created. This allowed them to be legalistic in the true and worst sense of the term: They added to God's law,

and their additions were actually a subtraction, a reduction of the law, by neglecting justice and mercy, love of God and love of neighbor, in exchange for rule-keeping, box-checking self-righteousness. Healing on the Sabbath was exactly right, giving rest to your neighbor from the work of bearing the burden of disability or sickness or demonic oppression. Giving rest to your neighbor in love of your neighbor is exactly what the fourth commandment calls us to do.

### **Paul and the Sabbath:**

The proof-texts of those who deny the Lord's Day as a Christian Sabbath come from Paul's teachings regarding the ceremonial law, like Colossians 2:16: "*Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.*" These references from Paul are all referring to the ceremonial Sabbaths, or the Ceremonial Law aspect of the Sabbath, not the creational Sabbath.

The creation Sabbath is the one day in seven, which God set in place at Creation, and not the added holy days and Sabbaths of the ceremonial law in keeping with Mosaic feasts and festivals. These ceremonial law Sabbaths are fulfilled in Christ in such a way that they are no longer binding on believers, as with the dietary laws, the sacrificial system, and the Mosaic worship calendar.

### **The Change from the Last Day to the First Day:**

The resurrection of Jesus did consummate His fulfillment of the Law, of every promise in the Law and Prophets, and it fundamentally transformed the meaning of the law in every aspect for believers. Regarding the Sabbath, the resurrection of Jesus changes the day from the last day of the week to the first day, and also changes the focus and emphasis, so that the day of rest is now called "the Lord's Day" – that is, "the Day of the Lord."

Jesus rose on the first day of the week, made His appearances to His Apostles on the first day of the week. (Ever wonder why poor Thomas had to wait a week?) Believers very soon began gathering for worship on the first day of the week, and by the close of the Christian canon, the Apostle John in Revelation I was referring to the first day of the week as "the Lord's Day."

We no longer base our Sabbath solely on the creation rest of the seventh day but even more so on the new creation in Christ. Our salvation rest of the first day celebrates the rest we have in the hope of the resurrection. This redemption aspect of the Sabbath was already embedded in Deuteronomy 5, but it is made even more full and explicit in Christ's resurrection, securing exodus not just from Egypt and human slavery but from the bondage of death and the slavery of the fear of death. Thus, the day of rest is now called the Lord's Day, because on it we look back on the day of the Lord's victory over death and we look ahead to His coming day, the Day of the Lord.

### **Isaiah 58 & the Christian:**

Another issue raised in Sabbath discussion is Isaiah 58, raising two questions:

1. Does this passage still apply to believers?
2. What does Isaiah mean by verses 13-14? –

*If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,  
 from doing your pleasure on my holy day,  
 and call the Sabbath a delight  
 and the holy day of the LORD honorable;  
 if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
 or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;  
 then you shall take delight in the LORD,  
 and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;  
 I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,  
 for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

Those who see the Sabbath as belonging specifically and exclusively to the Mosaic covenant think that Isaiah 58 may have some good things to say to us about justice and mercy, but otherwise the language about fasting and the Sabbath doesn't directly apply to believers in the new covenant age. I would respectfully submit that this is one of the major flaws of the “fulfilled Sabbath” view: It eviscerates so much of the Old Testament and nullifies it for believers today, much more like dispensationalism and much less like a covenantal view of the unity of Scripture.

The other question is about what the Lord means when He rebukes His people for doing their pleasure on the Sabbath, on His holy day. Some have said this language just means that you shouldn't sin on the Sabbath, and that “doing your pleasure” is short-hand for sinning and doing wickedness. If that's the case, this becomes a very strange passage indeed. Is God saying that we should do just all of our selfish sinning on the other six days of the week? Surely not! The phrase “talking idly” confirms the right understanding of this passage and helps us see why the language of the Confession that some people regard as “so strict” and “Pharisaical” is, in fact, Isaiah's language – or, rather, the Lord's language through Isaiah.

The Sabbath is the LORD's holy day and we are to delight in it. We are to delight in it by worshipping Him throughout the day and by giving rest and relief to our neighbors, just as Isaiah emphasizes the same justice and mercy for our neighbor workers that the fourth commandment itself contains.

“Doing your pleasure on MY holy day” is the heart of the issue. Yes, the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Yes, the Sabbath is a gift and a blessing and not a burden. But none of God's commandments are burdensome, even if our sin makes it very hard for us to keep them. It is our sinful selfishness that is the burden, a burden which disregards the honor that is due to the Lord and the love that we owe our neighbor for the mere sake of doing our own pleasure.

### **Conclusion:**

In the end, the fourth commandment is like the rest of the ten commandments. It's a call from our holy, holy, holy God to love Him and love others by doing something which is contrary to our culture and to our sinful nature. We are to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy, by worship and rest and loving acts of mercy to our neighbors. We are to give rest as surely as we are to take it, for we are to love our neighbors as ourselves and to remember that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Our focus is to be one of love, eager to give rest to our wives, children, congregation, neighbors, and to honor the Lord by keeping His holy day holy indeed.

Like the rest of God's moral law, we fall short and never keep it as we should. We must never see it as a basis for self-righteousness, nor must we reduce it to external rule-keeping. Rather, we are to humbly confess our sin and shortcomings, rely on the Lord for His mercy in Christ Jesus, and seek to honor Him by the power of the Spirit, as the Spirit applies the work of Christ and His righteousness to us.