

The Westminster Standards: A Comprehensive Treatment of the Sabbath

The fundamental doctrinal position of the Westminster Assembly regarding the Sabbath day is set forth in the Sabbath-day." The Confession declares:

ffVII. As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week, and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

VIII. This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

However, the statements in the Confession do not exhaust the Assembly's treatment of the Sabbath day. Indeed, the Westminster Standards provide the most full and expansive treatment of the Sabbath day of all the Reformed Creeds. The subject receives attention not only in the Confession, but also in the Shorter and Larger Catechisms[1], the Directory for the Public Worship of God, as well as the Directory for Family Worship.[1]

The position of the Westminster Standards concerning the Sabbath day can be summarised as follows:

- The Sabbath day was a creation ordinance. From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, that day was the last or seventh day of the week. However, following Christ's resurrection, and according to Jesus' own mandate, that day has been changed to the first day of the week.

- The Sabbath as a creation ordinance was enshrined in the fourth commandment of the law of God, as given to Moses. Consequently, all days of the week are not alike. One day in seven, the Lord's Day, is to be distinguished from the remaining days of the week. It is to be a Sabbath, a day of rest; rest from the ordinary and lawful activities in which men are engaged during the other six days of the week.

- The Lord's Day is to be kept holy or sanctified unto God and as such, is to be consecrated or set apart for the service of God. In order that men might devote themselves to the service of God on that day, they ought to cease from their ordinary work and recreational activities, save for those labours required on account of necessity or mercy.

An indication of the scope and detail of the Westminster Assembly's treatment of the Sabbath day can be seen in the Directory for the Public Worship of God. Under the heading, Of the Sanctification of the Lord's Day, the Directory has this to say:

The Lord's day ought to be remembered beforehand, as that all worldly business of our ordinary callings may be so ordered, and so timely and seasonably laid aside, as they may not be impediments to the due sanctifying of the day when it comes. The whole day is to be celebrated as holy to the Lord, both in publick and private, as being the Christian Sabbath. To which end, it is requisite, that there be a holy cessation or resting all that day from all unnecessary labours; and an abstaining, not only from all sports and pastimes, but also from all worldly words and thoughts. That the diet on that day be so ordered, as that neither servants be unnecessarily detained from the publick worship of God, nor any other person hindered from the sanctifying of that day. That there be private preparations of every person and family, by prayer for themselves, and for God's assistance of the minister, and for a blessing upon his ministry; and by such other holy exercises, as may further dispose them to a more comfortable communion with God in his public ordinances. That all the people meet so timely for publick worship, that the whole congregation may be present at the beginning, and with one heart solemnly join together in all parts of the publick worship, and not depart till after the blessing. That what time is vacant, between or after the solemn meetings of the congregation in publick, be spent in reading, meditation, repetition of sermons; especially by calling their families to an account of what they have heard, and catechising of them, holy conferences, prayer for a blessing upon the publick ordinances, singing of psalms, visiting the sick, relieving the poor, and such other like duties of piety, charity, and mercy, accounting the Sabbath a delight.[2]

The expansive treatment in the Westminster Standards of the ten commandments, particularly in relation to what is commanded and forbidden, has not met with universal applause. The noted 19th century church historian, Philip Schaff, writing about the Westminster Larger Catechism, commented, It is a masterpiece of catechetical skill, superior to any similar work... It serves also in part as a valuable commentary or

supplement to the Confession, especially on the ethical part of our religion. But it is over-minute in the specification of what God has commanded and forbidden in the ten commandments, and loses itself in the wilderness of details.[3]

Twentieth century Scottish theologian and Professor of Church History and Christian Dogmatics at New College, Edinburgh, Thomas F. Torrance, went so far as to say that the Westminster Larger Catechisms' treatment of the ten commandments was "highly moralistic." [4]

The explanation for Westminster's expansive and explicit statements regarding the Sabbath arise out of the Assembly's historical context. Towards the close of the reign of Elizabeth I [5], the issue of the observance of the Sabbath assumed considerable importance in the ongoing struggle between the established clergy of the Church of England and the Puritans. This issue was ignited following the publication in 1595 of a treatise on the subject of the Sabbath day by Dr. Nicolas Bound. [6]

In his treatise, Bound maintained inter alia that Christians were bound to rest on the Lord's Day; that the fourth commandment was moral and perpetual; and that it was not lawful to pursue worldly business on that day, nor to engage in such recreations and pleasures, as were lawful on other days. [7] The book enjoyed wide circulation and resulted in a mighty reformation: so that the Lord's day, which used to be profaned by interludes, May-games, morrice-dances, and other sports and recreations, began to be kept more precisely. All the Puritans fell in with this doctrine, and distinguished themselves by spending that part of sacred time in public, family, and private acts of devotion. [8]

While the Puritans embraced this view of the Sabbath, the established clergy in the Church of England did not. They viewed it as being a restraint of Christian liberty; as putting an unequal lustre on the Sunday, and tending to eclipse the authority of the church in appointing other festivals. [9]

Attempts were made by both the established clergy and the judiciary to contain the distribution of the book. Archbishop Whitgift and the lord chief justice Popham declared that the Sabbath doctrine espoused by Bound, agreed neither with the doctrine of our church, nor with the laws and orders of this kingdom; that it disturbed the peace of the commonwealth of the church, and tended to schism in the one, and sedition in the other. [10]

However, their concerted efforts to restrain the dissemination of the book proved of no avail.

In 1618, James I, who had succeeded Elizabeth I on the English throne in 1603, sought to stop the growth of Puritanism and at the same time to restrict the influence of the Papists. He sought to achieve those dual goals by bringing his royal authority to bear upon the issue of the observance of the Sabbath day. On 24 May 1618, he published "A Declaration to Encourage Recreations and Sports on the Lord's Day." The declaration formally authorised the desecration of the evening of the Lord's Day. The heart of the declaration read, as follows:

The report of this growing amendment amongst them made us the more sorry, when with our own ears we heard the general complaint of our people, that they were barred from all lawful recreations and exercise upon the Sunday's afternoon, after the ending of all divine service, which cannot but produce two evils: the one the hindering of the conversion of many, whom their priests will take occasion hereby to vex, persuading them that no honest mirth or recreation is lawful or tolerable in our religion, which cannot but breed a great discontentment in our people's hearts, especially of such as are peradventure upon the point of turning: the other inconvenience is, that this prohibition barreth the common and meaner sort of people from using such exercises as may make their bodies more able for war, when His Majesty or his successors shall have occasion to use them; and in place thereof sets up filthy tippling and drunkenness, and breeds a number of idle and discontented speeches in their ale-houses. For when shall the common people have leave to exercise, if not upon the Sundays and Holy-days, seeing they must apply their labour and win their living in all working-days? ...as for our good people's lawful recreation, our pleasure likewise is, that after the end of divine service our good people be not disturbed, letted or discouraged from any lawful recreation, such as dancing, either men or women; archery for men, leaping, vaulting, or any other such harmless recreation, nor from having of May-games, Whitsunales, and Morris-dances; and the setting up of May-poles and other sports therewith used: so as the same be had in due and convenient time, without impediment or neglect of divine service: ...but withal we do here account still as prohibited all unlawful games to be used upon Sundays only, as bear and bull-baitings, interludes and at all times in the meaner sort of people by law prohibited, bowling. [11]

The royal court set the example for desecration of the Sabbath by holding balls, masquerades and plays on Lord's Day evenings. Following the royal example,

...the rustics repaired from the house of worship to the ale-house or the village green to dance around the May-pole and to shoot at butts.[12]

At the instigation of Archbishop Laud, Charles I, the son of James I, who followed his father on the English throne, reissued the same declaration on 18th October 1633, with a few embellishments of his own. Charles required the declaration be published by ministers in all parish churches.

The declaration failed to have the desired effect. Though the declaration had the support of the established church, it struck many ...with a kind of horror, to see themselves invited, by the authority of the king and church, to that which looked so like a contradiction to the command of God.[13]

Those clergy who refused to read the declaration, and there were many, were suspended from office and some were even excommunicated. The treatment meted out to conscientious ministers over the issue of Sabbath observance, served only to lodge the issue more deeply in the affections of the people. The desecration of the Sabbath day by royal command was one of the issues that led to the ultimate demise of Charles I.

As a result of Charles' despotism, duplicity and treachery, civil war descended upon England in 1642; the king against the Parliament. Amidst this civil and ecclesiastical chaos, the Westminster Assembly was convened in 1643. The ultimate goal of the Assembly was to settle upon one form of Church government, one Confession of Faith, one Catechism, and one Directory for the Worship of God, with the design that these documents would form the basis for uniformity within the churches of the three kingdoms.

It is evident that the Assembly's detailed specification of what God has commanded or forbidden in the fourth commandment arose from the desire of the Assembly to combat the different abuses that had been sanctioned by James I and Charles I.[14] Those abuses had become so prevalent among the populace that specific and detailed instruction on the proper observance of the Sabbath day was necessary.

The criticisms of Schaff and Torrance are unjustified. The reality is that the Westminster Standards' treatment of the fourth commandment provides a useful basis for meditation and self-examination. It opens up the meaning of the commandment for the benefit of the believer who seeks to live a godly life. One way of testing the veracity of those statements is to review the Assembly's statements regarding the Sabbath in both the Confession and the Directory for the Public Worship of God, and ask, what in those statements would a believing child of God reject?

Undoubtedly, the Reformed believer needs to guard against the error of a legalistic observance of the Sabbath which frequently entails a scrupulous observance of man-made regulations, especially those of a negative persuasion. Like the Westminster divines, the Reformed believer on the Lord's Day will put aside the ordinary work of the other six days of the week and enter into the rest of that day; the spiritual and eternal rest of God, found in Jesus Christ and His salvation.

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[1] Westminster Shorter Catechism, Questions and Answers, 57-62; Westminster Larger Catechism, Questions and Answers, 115-121.

[2] Section VIII. The Confession of Faith, (Inverness: F.P. Publications, 1981), p. 386.

[3] Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, (Grand Rapids, MI.; Baker Book House, 1998), Vol. 1, p. 786.

[4] Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith*, (New York: Harper, 1959), p. xvii.

[5] Elizabeth I reigned from 1558-1603.

[6] The short title of his treatise was "The True Doctrine of the Sabbath, held and practised of the Church of God, both before and under the Law, and in the time of the Gospel."

[7] Daniel Neal, *The History of the Puritans*, (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1979), Vol. 1, p. 367.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.* p. 368.

[11] Cf. <http://www.constitution.org/eng/conpur017.htm>

[12] Schaff, *Op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 780.

[13] Neal, *Op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 561

[14] Alex Mitchell & John Struthers, Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), p. 3.