

Approaching the Doctrine of the Sabbath

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A principal conclusion of the argument I am about to present is that the church at this time should examine carefully where it stands on the doctrine of the Sabbath day, what is required of it in that respect by God's ordination, and to what extent it has or has not been responsive to the corresponding obligations that God's covenantal prescriptions have laid upon it. I begin with some initial observations related to the context in which discussion proceeds.

In the contemporary age of cultural confusion, the church does not command a significant place in the complex of ideas or affairs. In an important sense, of course, that has always been the case. A review of ecclesiastical history is not necessary to establish the point. God's characterization of his people of old as a "holy nation" (Ex 19:6), and the apostolic ascription to the church of the same designation (1 Pet 2:9), mean that the church has always been, or it should always have understood itself to be, separate from the world. Christianity, and the church as the custodian of God's revelation, have not been, and in the nature of the case they could not be, understood by the world. The church, when it is aware of its true identity, and the world live and move on contrary existential trajectories. But in the course of history, even since the Reformation rescued the church from its dogmatic slumber, there has been some intermeddling of the world and the church. Perhaps at the present time the indictment to be entered against the church is that in its doctrinal formulation, in its worship practice, and in its hospitality to alien idioms, the world is too much in the church. That in itself betrays the enigma of our

position. The church has become more than ever like the world, but the agencies of the world despise the church.

If we say, in response to such an analysis that the fault lies within the church itself, two important issues relevant to our subject press for recognition. Our cognizance of them at this time is rescued from the trite and the commonplace by the seriousness of their import. They are raised from the level of pious platitudes by the urgency of their claims. I refer to the question of *identity*, on the one hand, and *authority* on the other.

By the problem of *identity* I mean that in all too many instances, and perhaps in the general case, the confessing Christian is unaware in his practicing life of who he really is. He has forgotten that he is the redeemed and adopted child of the most high God, that he is joined to God in Christ in a vital and indissoluble union, and that the life of Christ by his Spirit courses within him. But beyond that, the Christian is all too easily unaware that he is, by creation and redemption, the property of God, that he is therefore subject to the obligations of the covenant of life that God has established with him, and that God has graciously articulated those obligations in the inscripturated word that he has given.

By the problem of *authority* I mean that the Christian too readily relapses in practice to the old mechanics of autonomy from which, above all, the grace of God has rescued him. In the ordinary life and conduct of affairs the questions of criteria of belief and conduct are indistinctly understood and addressed. In short, the challenge to be raised is simply: Has God spoken? Is what God has said authoritative? And to what extent, with the new naturalness of holy conduct that should characterize Christian action, does the confessing Christian take into account the imperatives of the moral legislation that God

has provided?

What I am now proposing as issues of identity and authority will come to immediate, stark, and, for the true Christian, unavoidable imperative in the subject before us. We shall therefore return to the relevance of those conceptions when we have examined more fully God's establishment of the Sabbath day, the obligation that is sustained in relation to it, and the proprieties of our subscription to that obligation.

It is a rewarding exercise to trace the views on the Sabbath obligation that have been held historically by the church and its principal spokesmen. That has been most ably done by James Dennison in his *The Market Day of the Soul*¹ and does not call for extended repetition at this point. It is of interest to note, however, that the English Puritan Sabbatarianism that is Dennison's main concern developed against the argument of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent's catechism that the mandates of the Lord's Day were grounded simply in the authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. It is implicit in that claim that, as Dennison observes, "The Sabbath commandment does not share the same moral and perpetual character as the other nine."² The point is made at this initial stage because at this time a heavy burden of proof rests on the church to demonstrate that in its conception of the proprieties of the moral law, parity exists between all of the Ten Commandments. That parity, there is abundant cause to fear, is all too frequently honored in the breach. The Puritanism commitment, of course, was essentially Sabbatarian, the roots of which trace unmistakably to Calvin's doctrine.

Calvin's position on the Sabbath has itself been the subject of varying interpretations, and it has frequently been referred to as anti-Sabbatarian. It is fair to say,

¹ James T. Dennison, Jr., *The Market Day of the Soul* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008).

² Dennison, *op. cit.*, 4.

however, that that is a misreading of Calvin. In his commentary on the Decalogue in the *Institutes* he states explicitly “three conditions in which . . . the keeping of this commandment [the fourth] consists.”³ Calvin’s three points of Sabbath doctrine were, firstly, that the Sabbath was a day of “spiritual rest in which believers ought to lay aside their own works to allow God to work in them” [We note there that a specific purpose is added to the abstinence from work, namely “to allow God to work in them,” and in order that there might be, as Calvin saw it, a spiritual rest from sin]; secondly, it was to be a day of worship, “to hear the law [and] to devote it particularly to meditation upon his [God’s] works, and thus through this remembrance to be trained in piety”; and thirdly, it was to be a “day of rest for servants.”⁴ Calvin’s position was anti-Sabbatarian only in the sense that he rejected the Jewish insistence on the *ceremonial significance* of the seventh day. He argued that it was necessary to “transcend Judaism . . . for we are not celebrating [the seventh day] as a ceremony with the most rigid [Jewish] scrupulousness.”⁵ Calvin wanted nothing to do with “the false prophets who in former centuries infected the people with a Jewish opinion,” and with what he refers to as “crass and carnal Sabbatarian superstition.”⁶ In his references to the Old Testament prophets on the point Calvin comments that “The Lord complains that his Sabbaths have been polluted, violated, not kept, not hallowed.”⁷ In the same context Calvin states that the Sabbath commandment is a “foreshadowing of spiritual rest,”⁸ a spiritualizing of the Sabbath as a foreshadowing of the heavenly rest. He had made the point explicitly at the beginning of his comment on

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 1960), 395. See *Institutes*, II-VIII-28–34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 399.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁸ *Idem.*

the seventh day: “The Lord through the seventh day has sketched for his people the coming perfection of his Sabbath in the Last Day, to make them aspire to this perfection by unceasing meditation upon the Sabbath throughout life.”⁹

It is of particular notice that on the matter of the choice of the weekly day of worship, Calvin saw the Sabbath day as chosen by the church “as a remedy to keep order in the church”¹⁰ and to provide, as he repeatedly stated it, a necessary day of worship.¹¹ It is not necessary to rehearse at this point the respects in which commentators have seen some ambiguities in Calvin’s doctrine of the Sabbath, a matter that has been treated at length by Richard Gaffin.¹² Gaffin concludes his analysis with the deduction from Calvin’s text that “Christians cannot be condemned who may wish to set apart some other day [than that chosen by the church] as long as they keep in view the need for stated times of worship and meditation.”¹³ But while that may be so, Calvin’s clear statement should be noted that the church being free to choose a particular day of the seven as the day of worship, its choosing the first day of the week as the weekly Sabbath “lies in the Lord’s resurrection.”¹⁴ It is clear that the church’s change of the weekly Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week both preserves the divine mandate of devoting one day in seven to the worship of God, and at the same time honors the memory of the day our Lord’s resurrection. That change, moreover, has clear apostolic imprimatur in the

⁹ Ibid., 396.

¹⁰ Ibid., 399.

¹¹ It is of interest that in connection with Calvin’s statement that the Sabbath day is chosen by the church for purposes of good order, the editor of the edition of the *Institutes* cited, John T. McNeill, has observed at that point that “It is clear that for Calvin the Christian Sunday is not, as in the Westminster Confession XXI, 8, simple continuation of the Jewish Sabbath “changed into the first day of the week,” but a distinctively Christian institution adopted on the abrogation of the former one, as a means of church order and spiritual health,” *Institutes*, 399, fn. 41.

¹² Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Calvin and the Sabbath* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, Mentor Imprint, 1998)

¹³ Gaffin, *op. cit.*, 143.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 399.

reference to “the first day of the week” at 1 Corinthians 16:2.

We may add that Calvin’s statement in the *Institutes* of the first of his three points of Sabbath doctrine, that the Sabbath was a day of “spiritual rest in which believers ought to lay aside their own works to allow God to work in them,” effectively provides the basic starting point from which an evaluation of his doctrine is to be made. That, we suggest, is his determinative viewpoint. Moreover, in the same context Calvin observes, with respect to the observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest for the purposes indicated, that “The Lord commanded it *by his example* that they might observe it with greater piety.”¹⁵ In that statement we have an indication of Calvin’s view that the mandate of Sabbath observance is grounded in creation, or, that is, that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance. Richard Gaffin has seen the importance of that for the interpretation of Calvin. He echoes what we shall see below as the conclusion of John Murray on the point. Gaffin’s conclusion is that “The notion of the Sabbath institution as a creation ordinance . . . although not explicitly stated, is consonant with and perhaps even implied in the teaching of the *Institutes*.”¹⁶

There is no anti-Sabbatarianism, but, quite to the contrary, what Gaffin refers to in another context as Calvin’s “practical Sabbatarianism,”¹⁷ in the following extract from Calvin’s sermons on Deuteronomy: “We must refrain from our own business which might hinder us from the minding of God’s works; and we must call upon his name and exercise our selves in his words. If we spend the Lord’s Day in making good cheer, and in playing and gaming, is that a good honoring of God? Nay, is it not a mockery, nay a very unhallowing of his name? Yes. But when the shopwindows are shut in on the Lord’s

¹⁵ Ibid., 396, italics added.

¹⁶ Gaffin, *op. cit.*, 31.

¹⁷ Gaffin, *op. cit.*, 109.

Day, and men travel not as they do on other days, it is to the end that we should have more leisure and liberty to attend to the things that God commandeth. . . . But most folk have no regard at all to the using of that day, which was ordained to withdraw us from all earthly cares and affairs that we might give our selves wholly unto God.”¹⁸

The Sabbath as God’s day

As we recognize now God’s establishing the Sabbath day, its meaning and significance and its place in doctrinal theology, we can profitably reflect on some preliminary issues.¹⁹ The first is implicit in what has been said. The Sabbath day is God’s day. It is a creation entity which, together with its antitypical expectation, is characterized by covenantal perpetuity. It is an element of the total reality external to the Godhead that God spoke into existence, the purpose and objective of which was the glorification of God throughout the ensuing and eternal ages. It cannot be overstated that all that was created – time as a mode of finite existence, material reality and the laws of its operation, the laws of reason and right understanding, and human personhood – is God’s property. He is therefore able to dispose of all such entities according to his will. The disposition of times and seasons and days, and of the history of what has been made, lie completely within the

¹⁸ Calvin, Sermon 34 on Deuteronomy, cited in Dennison, op. cit., 7, spelling modernized. A recent translation of this sermon is contained in *John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, edited and translated by Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, republished Pelham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2011), 109–110.

¹⁹ The classic Puritan work on the doctrine of the Sabbath is Nicholas Bownd, *The True Doctrine of the Sabbath*, 1595, revised 1606. A valuable edition with introduction and analysis by Chris Coldwell has been published by Reformation Heritage Books, 2015. For modern treatments see Ryan M. McGraw, *The Day of Worship: Reassessing the Christian life in the light of the Sabbath* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011) and references cited, and James T. Dennison, Jr., op. cit. A valuable treatment of Calvin’s view of the Sabbath is Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., op. cit. See also John Murray, “The Sabbath Institution,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume one* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 205–18. An important earlier treatment is B. B. Warfield, “The Foundations of the Sabbath in the Word of God,” an address given at the Fourteenth International Lord’s Day Congress in Oakland, California in 1915, published in Duncan James McMillan and Alexander Jackson, *Sunday the World’s Rest Day* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1916). See McGraw, op. cit, ebooks edition, 277–306.

prerogatives of God's decretive will. That prerogative extends to the purpose and intention of his own holy day. He has made abundantly clear his intention in making his holy Sabbath available to us and in clarifying his purpose and will in doing so.

In an approach to the doctrine of the Sabbath, the words with which Warfield began his essay referred to in the preceding footnote are relevant: "I am to speak to you today," Warfield says, "not of the usefulness or of the blessedness of the Sabbath, but of its obligation. And I am to speak to you of its obligation, not as that obligation naturally arises out of its usefulness or blessedness, but as it is immediately imposed by God in His Word."

An approach to the doctrine of the Sabbath necessarily turns on two important issues that are projected by what has been said to this point. First, it is necessary to reflect on certain implications of what has been referred to as the createdness of time and, thereby, of the Sabbath day as a created entity characterized by unique and special purposes in the divine decree. It will follow that the Sabbath, as a result, is to be understood as a *creation ordinance*. Its primary importance and its primary import for human conduct are not to be understood as following from God's *redemptive* decree, but from his *creative* decree. That statement should not be taken to mean that there is no relation at all between the mandate of Sabbath observance and the objectives of God's redemptive-eschatological purpose. I shall return to that relation below. The pre-fall Sabbath, like the tree of life, had sacramental significance, and as such it contained within it the promise of eternal rest to which it pointed. But the meaning of the Sabbath as it is presented to us in the revelation as a whole is understandable firstly, not under the rubric of redemption, but under that of creation. That realization will be seen to point to the

continuity in time of the creation-Sabbath mandate. That important and determinative fact has not, however, been universally recognized. The understanding of the Sabbath as a creation ordinance has been vigorously contradicted, for example, by Jay Adams in his *Keeping the Sabbath Today*.²⁰ Adams claims that Christians should not keep the Sabbath because, as he argues, the Sabbath is a Jewish holy day. Romans 14 and Colossians 2, it is said, demonstrate that Jewish holy days are not binding on Christians, and therefore “the Bible teaches that the Sabbath has been abolished.”

We shall return to the meaning and relevance of God’s creation ordinances, notably that of the Sabbath along with the ordinances of marriage and work, and their abiding relevance for human conduct and affairs. But for the present, it will throw necessary light on our discussion to reflect on the second of the preliminary issues to be raised; namely, the state of man as he came from the hands of his Creator and the relevance of that to his recognition that God had established his own holy day as a part of his creation. Adam knew at the same time, it will be argued, that he was under the requirement to keep that day, as a day of worship, holy to God.

Man as he was created was the image of God. It is necessary to say, not that man *bears* the image of God, but that he *is* the image of God. When Adam came to self-consciousness he knew with an uncluttered naturalness that he was the being of a Creator-God. For Adam, to *be* was to *know*. The *imago dei* carried with it extensive ontological and epistemic implications. For Adam, a rational, immortal, spiritual, moral, and speaking being, endowed with faculties of soul, intellect, emotion, and will, and endowed

²⁰ Jay E. Adams in *Keeping the Sabbath Today* (Stanley, NC: Timeless Texts, 2008). See the review by Ryan M. McGraw in the *Puritan Reformed Journal*, July 2009, 275-81. I am indebted for this reference to Ryan M. McGraw, *op. cit.*, ebooks edition, 307–308.

above all creation with the capacity for speech, his prelapsarian relations with God were of unique character and import. In his initial state man, with a natural self-consciousness, knew that he had come from the hands of a Creator-God. As the image of God, man thinks and speaks because God thinks and speaks, he loves because God loves and is love, he acts with reflective volition because God acts, first in the work of creation and then in the works of providence and redemption. In his initial state of intrinsic holiness man, in the exercise of his intellectual faculty, naturally knew God, with his affective faculty he naturally loved God, and with his volitional faculty he naturally obeyed the will of God. There was then a naturalness in Adam's relation with God that was lost forever at the fall, except it should be regained by the renewing, regenerating grace of God. That naturalness of relation meant that Adam naturally thought God's thoughts after him.

Adam thought and spoke because God thought and spoke. He was a moral entity because God is moral. He was immortal in soul because God had conferred derivative immortality on him. Adam was constituted in derivative personhood because absolute personhood resides in God. He was the analogue of God as to both his being and knowledge. To say that man is the image of God is to say that he is like God in every respect in which a finite person can be like his infinite Creator. All that points, precisely, to our first parent's natural consciousness of his initially-constituted Sabbath obligations.

It is that, we shall see more fully, that established Adam's cognizance that the Sabbath was what we have referred to as a creation ordinance. If it were to be said, as has been frequently observed, that it is nowhere stated in the early chapters of Genesis that man was obligated to observe one day in seven as God's holy day, the response is clear.

In his initial state, as has been said, Adam knew (in analogical extent and within the capacities of his finitude) that God rested on the seventh day and that a pattern was thereby established that was to determine his own behavior. Adam, we have said, naturally knew and thought the thoughts of God after him.

The early nineteenth-century Scottish theologian, Patrick Fairbairn, has observed insightfully to the same effect: “True, indeed, we are often told, there was no formal enactment binding the observance of the day on man; there is merely an announcement of what God did, not a setting forth to man of what man should do; it is not said that the Sabbath was expressly enjoined upon man. And neither, we reply, should it have been; for, since man was made in the image of God, it was only, so long as this image remained pure, the general landmarks of moral and religious duty which were required for his guidance, not specific and stringent regulations; for he had the light of Heaven within him, and of his own account should have taken the course which his own circumstances, viewed in connection with the Divine procedure, indicated as dutiful and becoming.”²¹ In a valuable section on “Creation ordinances” in his *Principles of Conduct*, the mid-twentieth-century Reformed theologian John Murray concurs in his observation that “The argument commonly advanced is that the silence of Genesis on the matter of the Sabbath indicates that there was no weekly Sabbath in patriarchal times and that it was first instituted after the Exodus. Genesis is not silent. Genesis 2:2, 3 proves that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance and, as such, must have been known to Adam and his contemporaries. The silence of Genesis subsequent to Genesis 2:2, 3 proves nothing as to the desuetude of the institution during the patriarchal times, nor does it prove ignorance

²¹ Patrick Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 52–53. See also Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1854), II:461–76, cited in Dennison, *op. cit.*, 8.

of the ordinance on the part of the patriarchs.”²² John Murray has illumined the controversies that swirl in the consideration of our subject in his essay on “The Sabbath Institution.”²³ He addresses insightfully “the *Obligation*, the *Sanctity*, and the *Observation* of the Sabbath.” He again insists on the identity and sanctity of the Sabbath as a creation ordinance. “The weekly Sabbath,” Murray concludes, “is embedded in that order which God has established for man as man. . . . The fourth commandment simply defined what was the already existing institution.”²⁴ But the objection I have referred to has attracted a good deal of attention and warrants further brief comment.

In his recent and highly valuable book on “The Threefold Division of the Law,” (ceremonial, civil, and moral) Philip Ross has observed judiciously on the place of the Sabbath obligation within the mandates of the law. He has referred to Tim Keller’s recent observation that a number of presbyters in the Presbyterian Church in America, for example, have stated their exception to its statement regarding the Sabbath in their subscription to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.²⁵ Ross comments that one cannot “unbuckle the Sabbath” in that fashion without unraveling the whole. “Attempts at performing a precision strike on the Sabbath produce an embarrassing amount of unintended damage. Strike out the Sabbath and you also shatter the entire category of moral law and all that depends on it.”²⁶

Ross responds, therefore, to the claims that “there is no direct command to keep

²² John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 34–35.

²³ John Murray, “The Sabbath Institution,” in *Collected Writings Volume one*, 205–18, first published by the Lord’s Day Observance Society, London, an address given in 1953.

²⁴ *Idem*, 208.

²⁵ Philip S. Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Fearn, Scotland: (Christian Focus, Mentor Imprint, 2010), 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

the Sabbath or give it religious significance in Genesis 2,²⁷ citing the claims made in that connection by Harold Dressler.²⁸ Ross's response, which is worthy of fuller examination in context, aligns with what he concludes as "the view of the confessionists and older writers such as Calvin²⁹ that the Sabbath was established at creation and known before Sinai."³⁰

The Sabbath a creation ordinance and its covenantal significance

Returning now to the second of the two preliminary issues we have raised, the significance of the fact that the Sabbath day was a creation ordinance warrants brief but important recognition. The essential meaning of a creation ordinance is that because it was addressed to man in his initial and prelapsarian state, it carries with it obligations that accrue to man as man. That is to say, as previously stated, the obligations for human conduct that are projected by creation ordinances do not fall primarily under the rubric of redemption. In God's administration they are free from the considerations of God's *redemptive* purpose, except, as will be seen, that the law that was promulgated in redemptive context, the law as given in codified form by Moses, is to be understood as the republication of the law as first given to Adam. That implies, what is of highly serious import for our study of the Sabbath, that the law of the Sabbath, like all creation ordinances simply because they are *creation* ordinances, is binding and obligatory on all men everywhere and at all times. The keeping of the Sabbath day holy is to be seen as an obligation that rests on all people at all times. That is to say, the obligation to keep God's

²⁷ Ibid., 66.

²⁸ See Harold H. P. Dressler, "The Sabbath in the Old Testament" in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1982), 28.

²⁹ Calvin, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 105–106.

³⁰ Ross, *op. cit.*, 67.

Sabbath holy is not to be understood as incumbent only on the church or on Christian people. By the very nature of its creational-covenantal identity, God calls for its honoring by all people and by the world in general. That implies that economic arrangements, organization, and practices that violate God's clear Sabbath mandate should be brought under reconsideration.

When we refer to the Sabbath day as a covenantal institution we are conscious that differences of view have arisen historically as to the respects in which God's initial relations with our first parents are to be construed in covenantal terms. Is it to be said, for example, that man is to be understood as a covenant creature by reason of his creation, or were the terms of his covenantal relation to God established and communicated to him only after his creation? It is not necessary to enter that argument extensively at this point. But by reason of what has been said regarding the knowledge capacity and complex in which Adam came to self-consciousness, it can be concluded that he was conscious of a covenantal relation existing between himself and his Creator. The present writer is comfortable with the statement that man is a covenant creature and that the covenantal obligations incumbent on Adam at the beginning continue on all people at the present time. It is that continuity which, in one of its aspects, argues for both our first parent's awareness of his Sabbath obligation and the continuity of it.

Consider, for example, what has been referred to in theological terms as the covenant of creation or the covenant of works. It is sufficient for our present purpose to observe that the obligation of keeping the Sabbath day holy, in the worship and adoration of God and in thankfulness to him, was an essential part of the obligations of that covenant. Now it is a critically important part of theological doctrine that the terms and

responsibilities inherent in the covenant of works were not abrogated when Adam fell. That the obligations that accrue to man under the covenant of works are of continuing significance, and that they embody a continuing imperative, is evident from the following. First, those who at the last day go to eternal perdition will do so on the grounds that they have not honored the terms and kept the obligations of the covenant of works. Second, it follows that impressed upon us at that point is the reason for the coming into the world of the Second Person of the Godhead as Jesus Christ for our redemption. The purpose of his coming can, of course, be stated in many terms. But in our present context it is to be said that he came to do for us what we were obligated to do under the covenant of works but could not do for ourselves by reason that we were the captives and slaves of Satan and sin. Jesus Christ, in his redemptive accomplishment, is our substitute in every relevant respect. We were associated with him in all that he did on our behalf.

It is in terms such as those, then, the continuity of covenant obligation, that the meaning and significance of God's Sabbath day is to be approached. It cannot be gainsaid or argued against that keeping the Sabbath day holy is obligatory on all people everywhere at all times because, like the covenant of works, it was established as part of man's prelapsarian obligation, and as a creation ordinance its obligation has not been, and could not be, annulled. The Sabbath day, we said at the beginning, has covenantal perpetuity. It is in that same respect that it is necessary to say that all other creation ordinances, in particular marriage and work, continue as imperatively obligatory on all people everywhere at all time. Therein lies our response to the contemporary social and cultural dissolution, particularly that stemming from revisionist theories of marriage.

The use of the Sabbath

In any reasonably comprehensive attempt to examine the doctrine of the Sabbath it is necessary to address at length the manner in which, as God's people, we are to be occupied on the Sabbath day. We have referred to the "covenantal perpetuity" of the Sabbath. We insist, accordingly, on the responsibility of God's people and the church as a confessing church to preserve the sanctity of the Sabbath day. The scriptural *locus classicus* statement on the point is undoubtedly Isaiah 58:13–14, "If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words; Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." Similarly, it is to be borne in mind that, as Calvin observes, "The Lord enjoined obedience to no other commandment as severely as to this."³¹ The relevant texts are copious: Num 15:32–36; Ezek 20:12–13, 22:8, 23:38; Jer 17:21, 22, 27. The principal burden of the texts is to the effect: "Blessed is the man that keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it" (Isa 56:2), and as in Neh 9:14, God's jealousy is for his "holy Sabbath."

The exegesis of the texts could detain us at length.³² But it lies behind the question and answer of the Catechism: "How is the Sabbath to be sanctified?" "The Sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God's worship, except so much as is to be taken up in

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 395.

³² See the comments on Calvin's exegesis of relevant texts in Gaffin, *op. cit.*, 86–109.

the works of necessity and mercy.”³³ The Catechism, of course, is a production of the Puritan period of history, written in 1647, some half a century after the classic work of Nicholas Bownd referred to in an earlier footnote, and many Christians, and perhaps the church at large in this time, have registered difficulty in subscribing to that earlier interpretation of the biblical data. But it lies on the very surface of the biblical text, and it is clear in the frequent prophetic rebukes of God’s people, that God is most jealous for the protection and proper use of his Sabbath day. The failure of the “church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38) to honor the Sabbath day, along with the peoples’ idolatry and spiritual adultery, was a recurring ground of charge against them.

But if there has developed in the church at the present time a laxity of regard for the Sabbath in what we have just seen as the older or Puritan sense, the burden lies on the church, and on Christian people in general, to justify such deviations in the light of the more copious biblical data than can be, or need to be, rehearsed at this point. The conclusion to be drawn from those data is that God has said repeatedly that he requires his redeemed people to honor and sanctify his holy Sabbath day, and to devote it exclusively to works, as our fathers in the faith put it, of piety, necessity, and mercy.³⁴ There is every reason to conclude that God is not pleased with a partial acknowledgement of his Sabbath mandate, or with the importations of alien behavior or thought-forms of the world into the recognition of his day. It is only too true that we have given the idioms of the world hospitality in the church, not only to the diminution of its doctrinal integrity but to the corruption also of its worship forms and content. It is a challenge of the highest import to us at this time to work out the true nature of worship as God has stated it in his

³³ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 60.

³⁴ See the excellent discussion in McGraw, *op. cit.*

Word and to recall scrupulously the necessary occasions of it. We do well to reconsider the manner of our subscription to the Regulative Principle of Worship; not in the patently erroneous form that argues that anything not forbidden by the Word of God is acceptable and proper in worship, but, to the contrary, in the acknowledgement that only that is to be accorded a place in worship which God has required in his Word.

But the approach to the matter of Sabbath-keeping has been very various, and even some theologians of purportedly Reformed persuasion, as in the case, for example, of Jay Adams as referred to earlier, have argued that keeping the Sabbath day holy is not now obligatory on Christians. While a comprehensive analysis cannot be attempted in the present space, a number of comments can be made regarding the starting points under which relevant questions are addressed.

First, on an individual level, discussion frequently begins by asking the question as to what is or is not a proper use of time on the Sabbath day. The question itself is, of course, in its own place, quite proper and important. But what we are speaking of at present is not the rightness of such a question in and of itself, but whether it provides a proper and adequate *starting point* for the examination of the meaning and necessities of the Sabbath day. Quite apart from the acknowledgement that in some degree, to a greater or lesser extent, attendance at worship is required, the question then is whether this or that, depending on individual habits and cultural mores, can also engage one's time. Variations of the relevant argument abound. It is hardly necessary to examine them at length. They have to do with sporting activity, professional or otherwise, on the Lord's day, with economic activity such as shopping (including the purchase of gasoline necessary to attend a house of worship on the Lord's day – an activity that might be

attended to on the preceding Saturday), and other activities that cater to personal indulgences and proclivities rather than the worship that God calls for. Such questions of personal moment may include those of appropriate reading and engagement in activities related to one's normal worldly responsibilities and occupations, including work and study.

But rather than continue such a listing unnecessarily, it is apposite to observe that a prior question is of pressing significance. If the address to the proprieties of the Sabbath begins in the manner indicated, argument has begun on the wrong track and cannot, therefore, hope to reach a biblically sustainable conclusion. That is because the implied question that begins the journey of inquiry is what is required in the interests of man, rather than what is required in the interests of what God desires and has decreed. Man and his interests are made the center of things. Such argument partakes of the all too frequent fallacy of imagining that thought can rightly proceed from man to God, rather than from God to man. The presence of that fallacy appears in all too many areas of theological doctrine and practice, notably in theological apologetics where assumptions of the competence of human reason lead to what is essentially a theological rationalism. We have just said that the same mistake in thought can intrude into our thinking about the Sabbath if, again, we begin with the interests of man instead of focusing on the interests of God and his clearly mandated requirements. All too frequently, even in the affairs of the church including its theological formations, the thought forms employed have been anthropocentric and not theocentric.

Second, the question of what it is proper for the church to include in its activities on the Sabbath has formed the starting point of inquiry. There is reason to question the

propriety of the extent to which the church has given hospitality to activities on the Lord's Day that, on more careful thought, might be seen to offend what God has mandated. In that very sensitive area it is observable that considerable elasticity of permission exists in the contemporary church. Church sponsored picnics on the Sabbath have been accorded indulgence, and it is not improper to question how that matter stands, or if it should stand, against what we observed as the advice of the Catechism that prohibited on the Sabbath "such employments and recreations as are lawful on other days." The present writer confesses that on a particular occasion he registered personal offense that an evangelical church he attended shortly after his coming to the United States provided television facilities in the church on the Sabbath so that members could watch the Super Bowl. But further questions of the proper use of the time and facilities of the church on the Sabbath day, open to sensitive discussion and possibilities of even strong disagreement as they are, require at least recognition. For example, the provision of musical programs that purport to meet primarily the necessities of the worship and glory of God, but which nevertheless are in danger of serving the interests of entertainment, appear to be a case in point.

Third, it is not infrequently advanced as a starting point for discussion that the primary consideration regarding the Sabbath day is that of rest. It is clear, of course, that "God rested on the seventh day." And there can be no doubt at all that God in his gracious provision for man ordained a day of rest from worldly employment and toil. That is for the refreshment of body and spirit. But of course, God's rest as there stated is rest from the work of creation and does not mean total inactivity on God's part. His works of providence and his immanent engagement in human affairs continue. And as we

have seen, human work on the Sabbath is mandated continuously as works of piety, necessity, and mercy. And there is no doubt that the rest of the Sabbath day points to the great eschatological terminus when we shall have entered the land of rest and gained the inheritance that God has prepared for those that love him. It is true, profoundly and graciously true, that God's people have in this life the "earnest" (Eph 1:14, KJV), or the down payment, of the inheritance that has been reserved for them. "The promise of eternal inheritance" (Heb 9:15), or the final realization of the inheritance that has been promised, is not only guaranteed to them, but by God's gracious disposition has been made available to them in this present life. The rest that is properly a part of the Sabbath day falls into that category of the taste of better things to come. As the land of Canaan was typical of the eternal land of rest, so the Sabbath is in the same respect typical of the eternal rest that is to come. Again it may be observed that while the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27), the question presses as to why and for what purpose that was so. As we have argued that it was not made for man to do with it as he might wish, but to use it for the worship and praise and honor of God, so we observe in the present context that it was not made for man to use as an occasion of idleness. It was made for man that he might use it in its entirety for the worship and praise of God.

But in spite of all that is properly to be said of the Sabbath as a day of rest, together with all of its projected eschatological significance, our interest at present is whether the concept of rest can, or should, form the primary or principal *starting point* for the examination of the meaning and importance of the Sabbath. Again our answer is in the negative. We do not intend to diminish in any respect the high theological significance of the rest to which the Sabbath points. But we are saying that it is not the

first or the *primary* issue or question that should decide our approach to understanding the Sabbath day. The concept of rest has its own important and proper place in the scheme of things. But the *first* approach to understanding the Sabbath day lies on another level. It is the fact that God has spoken and has said that he requires of all people everywhere that they should keep one day in seven separate from, distinguished from, all other days, and that that day should be occupied entirely in the worship and praise in honor of, and thankfulness to, God.

Two further points can be made in that connection. First, we have spoken of the necessity laid upon us to keep one day in seven holy to God. It is beyond the scope of our present purpose to address the change of day from the seventh to the first day of the week. Suffice it to say that the change of day honors the day of the resurrection of our Lord, and that the change has proceeded on apostolic authority. Second, if, as has been argued, the matter of the rest that is a proper element of the Sabbath day is elevated to the point of determining or driving what is to be said from that point on, the danger arises as before, and in other connections, that the interests of man are elevated beyond the interests of God and his stated mandates. Again the same possibility is presented of arguing from man to God instead of from God to man. The dangers of such a misdirection of thought need not be repeated.

The law of the Sabbath

Our argument to this point has been based on the postulate that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance. The doctrine of the Sabbath, therefore, falls, as we have said, not under the rubric of redemption but under that of creation. The question arises, however, whether the

Sabbath is to be understood as having redemptive-eschatological significance and whether doctrinal significance attaches to the consideration of it under those terms. Our answer is in the affirmative. The reasons for that conclusion have been anticipated in what has been said and can be profitably expanded at this point.

First, what is now to be considered as “the law of the Sabbath” requires that conclusion. When we speak now of the law of the Sabbath we have in view the law in its codified form as it was given through Moses. Several things are to be said in that connection. The Mosaic law, encapsulated so far as our present purposes are concerned in the Ten Commandments or the moral law, is to be understood as the republication of the law in its moral aspect as it was first given to Adam in his prelapsarian state. It is precisely because of that republication, and the status of the law as God delivered it, that we can speak of the covenantal perpetuity of the Sabbath. In the incorporation of the Sabbath law in the Mosaic codification, that perpetuity is exhibited clearly to human understanding. But in saying that, we do not fall into the error of concluding that the Sabbath law, as it was recapitulated by Moses, falls under the denomination of the ceremonial law which, by virtue of its ceremonial qualification, was terminated at the conclusion of the Mosaic administration. We do not erect by such a channel a Christian escape from the spirit and the letter of the Sabbath law commands.

Second, our Lord himself honored and spoke of the continuity of the Sabbath, speaking of the fact that “Moses and the prophets and the Psalms” spoke of him (Luke 24:44) and he stated that he himself was Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). Christ thereby brought to high exposure both the covenantal status of the law and the continuity of it, for he himself is Lord of the covenant, and he has called his people to the level of sanctified,

holy living that he himself exhibited in his keeping of the law.

Third, by reason that Christ in those ways brought the Mosaic republication of the Sabbath law under the jurisdiction of his new covenantal administration he has magnified the divine intent of the law as it was at first given. That is to say, he has condescended to our finite understanding and cognitive capacity by communicating to us through Moses a detailed guidance as to the fuller meaning and applicability of the law. That was done in order that we should again be like him in our obedience to it; not that the keeping of the law has for us meritorious salvific significance, but that in response to, and thankfulness for, redemption we honor God in obedience to the Sabbath law. It is in the sense of that republication and our Lord's authentication of it that the Sabbath law acquires definite redemptive relevance. That means that in our Lord's new covenantal administration the original creation ordinance was integrated into his total redemptive objectives and purposes. What we are saying in that statement is not that the Sabbath is now to be regarded as having been established as a redemptive ordinance. We are saying that the law of the Sabbath as an unalterable creation ordinance has been integrated with redemptive objectives, provisions, and processes.

Fourth, the conception of the law of the Sabbath as integrable with redemptive-eschatological categories is consistent with what has been said regarding the Sabbath rest in its eternal form to which the law of the Sabbath points.³⁵ In that connection we observed at the beginning that the creation-Sabbath mandate, like the tree of life, is to be understood as projecting sacramental significance.³⁶ In both those cases our first parents' experience, their partaking of the fruit of the tree and their engaging in weekly worship,

³⁵ Calvin's emphasis on that aspect of the Sabbath mandate has been noted above.

³⁶ The sacramental significance of the Sabbath has been examined by Geerhardus Vos in his *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 157, cited in Gaffin, *op. cit.*, 156–57.

confirmed to them the promise of eternal life and rest that God's eschatological purpose envisaged.³⁷

Fifth, it is to be understood that the law as given in its Mosaic codification was the property of the Israelitish nation-church that God had chosen as his peculiar people. They were to be to him a "holy nation" (Ex 19:6). The law in that form was not given to the Gentiles. Indeed, when the apostle stated in his letter to the Galatians that "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Gal 3:13) he had in view the law in its Mosaic formulation (Gal 3:10–12), and the "us" he contemplated referred to the Jews who had become believers. The Gentiles could not be said to have been redeemed from the curse of the Mosaic law because they were never the possessors of that law. Indeed, Paul goes on to state at that point that the reason for the rescue from the curse was "that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ" (Gal 3:14). The "blessing of Abraham" was justification by faith. It was necessary that at that point God's special relation to the Israelitish nation-church should be terminated and the doors of the kingdom thrown wide open to the Gentiles. There was an important respect in which, of course, the Gentiles were redeemed from the curse of law. But the law from whose curse they were redeemed was not the law that had been the property of the Israelites. It was the law that had been given to our first parents at the beginning and which, by reason of the covenantal-creation status of it, had continued to be binding on all people since its first promulgation. That law, we have seen, contained the obligation to keep God's Sabbath holy. The Gentiles were henceforth bound to the obligations of the Sabbath law, now in its reformulation in new covenantal context. In the one church of which the Jew and the

³⁷ On the question of the sacramental significance of the tree of life see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), Volume 1, 581.

Gentile had met together now that the “middle wall of partition” (Eph 2:14) had been broken down by the salvific work of Christ, the Sabbath law abides with commanding imperative.

Those considerations point to the reality that Christ, by subsuming the original and continuing Sabbath law under the scope of the requirements and benefits and blessings of his new covenantal administration, has made possible the integration of the law of the Sabbath with what we have referred to as redemptive-eschatological categories.

Identity and authority

Our argument at this point returns to a proposition with which we began. I referred there to the twofold issues confronting the church at this time as those of *identity* and *authority*. What we have said about the Sabbath, its creation-covenantal status and the continuing imperatives it conveys for Christian life, is readily understandable in the light of those stated issues of identity and authority. For when the confessing Christian knows with a life-determining consciousness who he is by reasons of the status to which he has been raised by the grace of God, he must of necessity rest securely, with a contentment born of divine endowment, under the authority of God who has redeemed him. Identity and authority are coordinate in their import. Because the Christian person is who he is, the moral mandates of God’s law command his dedication in devotion and life.

We have spoken of Adam as constituted in the image of God and as cognizant of his covenantal responsibilities. But if our first parent was obliged to, and in the nature of the case committed himself in obedience to, the Sabbath law of God, how much more should that be the joy of the Christian in this time. For consider the relation of identity

that exists. The apostle to the Romans has crystallized the issue. In his clarification of the identity of the Christians to whom he wrote, he argued that “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom 5:20). What is involved for the new identity of the Christian, the “new creation” as Paul argued it to the Corinthians (2 Cor 5:17), is that by the grace of God he has been raised to a far higher estate than that from which Adam fell. That is the “more abounding” of grace. The higher estate for the Christian is that he is joined to God in Christ in a vital and indissoluble union. Adam was not joined to Christ in the same respect. We can state the case by saying that as to the unregenerate man, the relation between God and himself is a relation between two independent entities. But in the case of the Christian that is not true. For now he is, with a spiritual literalness, joined to Christ. God abides in him. As our Lord stated, “My Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him” (John 14:23). We note the plural forms of the pronouns. “We,” our Lord says, the Father and the Son, implying the three Persons of the Godhead who live in divine perichoresis, live within the Christian. The concept in its fullest meaning and implication is beyond our comprehension. The apostle John in his first epistle states repeatedly that “God dwelleth in us” (1 John 4:12), and that we are “in him” and “in his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 5:20). That *identity*, I am now saying, responds to the necessities of *authority*. The Christian knows whose he is and whom, therefore, he serves.

It is not necessary at this stage to expand the argument at length. Let me make just one further reference to the expansive literature on this important subject. Walter Chantry, a contemporary Baptist preacher-theologian who has made notable contributions to recent Reformed thought, has thrown valuable light on the issues we have raised in his *Call the*

Sabbath a Delight.³⁸ “What joyful and abundant benefits flow from Sabbath-keeping! Did you not at conversion pledge to keep all the Lord’s holy will? Did this not include his moral law and the fourth commandment? After tasting the exquisite generosity of God’s grace – not only to pardon our multitude of sins against his law and to admit us again to his service, but also to make us sons and daughters of God, priests and kings with Christ – our hearts should overflow with loving obedience. If it would please him that I kept the Sabbath Day, my heart would run with delight to the task. Oh, to return something to the One who has been infinitely gracious and kind to me! Sabbath observance surely is part of this return of obedience.”³⁹ “Forgiven sinners have received such unbelievably precious gifts from God’s hands, by grace through Christ, that they are eager to do something for him. Christians are delighted to keep the Sabbath holy. Sabbath days bring them nearer still to the God they love and who loves them. Their love wants to give obedience and honour to the Lord on his day.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

In our foregoing argument and analysis we have not set out to address in the full sense necessary all that is to be said about the biblical doctrine of the Sabbath. We have been concerned, as our title stated, with what might be understood as an “approach” to that important doctrine. We bow in humility and thankfulness and praise before God for his conferring on us, sinners saved by his grace, the blessing of the Sabbath day which, as Isaiah admonished us long ago, we make a delight.

³⁸ Walter Chantry, *Call the Sabbath a Delight* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991). Chantry includes at the end of his book a useful guide to the literature on the subject of the Sabbath.

³⁹ *Op. cit.*, 73–74.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 79

Our conclusion follows that to keep the Sabbath day holy to God as a day devoted to his worship is thus, in a cumulative sense, incumbent on all people everywhere at all times. That follows, first, from what has been observed as the creation ordinance status of the day, and secondly, from the fact that our Lord has assumed the sanctity of the day into the meaning and benefits of his redemptive accomplishment.