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Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith

Chapter 21 - Section 7

As it is of 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.

Exposition

Our Confession next treats of the *time* consecrated to the worship of God.

It is a dictate of the law of nature, that a due proportion of our time should be employed in the immediate worship of God. The right of determining what exact proportion of time, and what particular day of the week should be set apart for this purpose, belongs to God. He has, accordingly, interposed His authority, and appointed that a seventh part of our time should be appropriated to His service. From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, He enjoined that the seventh day of the week should be employed in His worship, for the special purpose of commemorating His rest from the work of creation. The particular day, however, might be altered by the authority, and according to the pleasure, of the Lawgiver. And from the resurrection of Christ, in order to commemorate the work of redemption in combination with the work of creation, the Sabbath was changed from the seventh to the first day of the week; which is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath

From these remarks it will be obvious that the Sabbath is partly a moral and partly a positive institution. So far as it requires that a certain portion of our time should be devoted to the worship of God, it is moral, being founded in the relation subsisting between God and man. So far as it appropriates the seventh part of our time, and determines the particular day to be set apart for the service of God, it is of positive institution, being founded in the will and appointment of God. But it ought to be observed, that a positive institution, when once enacted and revealed by God, may be of perpetual obligation, and, in this sense, may be called moral. Hence it is usual to speak of "the morality of the Sabbath," and to distinguish betwixt what is *moral natural* and what is *moral positive* in the fourth precept of the decalogue. As it requires that some stated portion of our time should be consecrated to the worship of God, it is moral natural; and as it enacts that a seventh portion of our time, rather than any other proportion, shall be set apart for this purpose, it is moral positive. We call it a *positive* institution, because the observing of one day in seven as a Sabbath flows

from the sovereign appointment of God; and we call it *moral* positive, because the divine appointment is of universal and perpetual obligation; and the Sabbath is thus distinguished from ceremonial institutions, which were peculiar to the Jews, and were abrogated at the death of Christ. The morality of the Sabbath, therefore, consists in its binding obligation upon all men, in all ages.

That the appointment of one day in seven for a Sabbath is of universal and perpetual obligation, appears from the following considerations:

1. From the original institution of the Sabbath. Of this we have an account, Genesis 2:1-3. At this time none of the human race were in being but our first parents; and since the Sabbath was instituted for them, it must be obligatory on all their posterity to the end of the world. There is, unquestionably, as much reason and as much need for all the sons of Adam, in all ages and nations, in their feeble and sinful state, to have a day appointed for their own rest, and for the worship of God, as there was for Adam in Paradise, and in a state of innocence. The Sabbath, as then appointed, could not be a ceremonial institution; for while man retained his integrity, there was no need of any types to shadow forth Christ. This reasoning can only be overturned by denying that the Sabbath was instituted in the beginning, and proving that it was first given to the Israelites in the wilderness. This, accordingly, has been attempted by various writers, but the proof entirely fails. There is no reason to think that, in Genesis, Moses records the institution of the Sabbath by anticipation. The manner of the narrative would naturally lead any reader to suppose that he is relating what took place when the work of creation was finished. Although there is no record of the observation of the Sabbath for a period of 2500 years, or until after Israel came out of Egypt, yet it cannot be inferred from this that the Sabbath was not instituted from the beginning, or that it was not observed in antediluvian and patriarchal times; for neither is there any record of its observation during a period of about 500 years, containing the histories of Joshua, of the Judges, particularly Samuel, and of Saul; nor is there a single instance of circumcision on record from the time that Israel entered into Canaan until the circumcision of John the Baptist. In Exodus 16:23, the Sabbath is evidently mentioned, not as a new institution, but as one already known. And when the law was promulgated to Israel, at Mount Sinai, the Sabbath was spoken of as an institution with which they were formerly acquainted, but which had been too much neglected or forgotten. Probably in Egypt the observance of it had been in a great measure suspended; and therefore they were called to "*remember* the Sabbath-day, to keep it holy." It may be observed, too, that the division of time into weeks of seven days, which subsisted in the age of the patriarchs, cannot be satisfactorily accounted for, but by the previous institution of the Sabbath.

2. The binding obligation of the Sabbath may be argued from the place which the fourth commandment occupies in the decalogue. It is inserted in the very middle of the moral precepts which God delivered to mankind as a perpetual rule of their lives. It is one of those commands that were spoken by the voice of God Himself, that were twice written on tables of stone by the finger of God, and that were laid up in the ark of the covenant. None of these things can be said of any ceremonial institution.

3. All the reasons annexed to this commandment, as promulgated from Mount Sinai, are moral in their nature. These reasons had no special reference to the Jews, but equally respect all men, in all nations and in all ages. And hence we find that

strangers, as well as the Jews, were obliged to observe the Sabbath; but they were not bound to observe ceremonial institutions. Exodus 20:10,11.

4. That the observation of the Sabbath was to continue after the abolition of the Jewish Sabbath, is implied in the words of Jesus Christ (Matthew 24:20): "Pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the Sabbath-day." Christ is there speaking, not of the Jewish, but of the Christian Sabbath; for He refers to a flight which should happen at the destruction of Jerusalem; and this did not take place until forty years after the Jewish Sabbath was abolished. But though the Sabbath was then to be changed from the seventh to the first day of the week, yet the words of Christ certainly intimate that the Sabbath was still to be continued.

5. The perpetuity of the Sabbath is clearly taught in Isaiah 56:6-8. Whoever examines the passage, will find that the prophet is speaking of New Testament times. Under the gospel dispensation, therefore, the Sabbath was still to continue a divine institution; it was still to be a duty to keep it from polluting it; and the keeping of it was to be blessed, according to the declarations of the unerring Spirit of prophecy.

The morality of the Sabbath is not affected by the change of the day. The substance of the institution consists in the separation of a seventh portion of our time to the immediate worship of God; and the particular day is a thing perfectly circumstantial. It is not said, "Remember the *seventh* day;" but "Remember the *Sabbath*-day, to keep it holy." Neither is it said, "God blessed the *seventh* day;" but "God blessed the *Sabbath*-day, and hallowed it." But as the seventh day of the week was, by divine appointment, originally appropriated to the worship of God, the day could only be altered by "the Lord of the Sabbath." It is admitted that we have no express precept for the alteration of the day, but we have convincing evidence that the Sabbath was changed from the seventh to the first day of the week at the resurrection of Christ.

1. That the first day of the week should be the Christian Sabbath, was foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures (Psalm 118:24): "This is the day which the Lord hath made;" not which He has created - for so He has made all other days - but which He has consecrated to Himself, or made into a holy day. And the day referred to is the day of Christ's resurrection, when "the stone which the builders refused was become the head stone of the corner." - Compare Acts 4:10,11; see also Ezekiel 43:27, where the *eighth* day is mentioned as the day on which spiritual sacrifices were to be offered up to the Lord; and the Christian Sabbath may be called the *eighth* day, because the first day of the week now is the eighth day in order from the creation.

2. After His resurrection, Christ repeatedly met with His disciples on the first day of the week - see John 20:19,26. Though Christ appeared to several of the disciples on other days, yet it is only expressly recorded that on the *first day of the week* He met with them when assembled together. From this we may conclude that the disciples had already begun to assemble on the first day of the week, and that Christ approved of the practice. Many are of opinion that He continued to meet with them upon that day of the week till His ascension, "speaking to them of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God." Acts 1:3.

3. The apostles and primitive Christians stately met on that day for the celebration of divine ordinances. We read (Acts 20:7), that "upon the first day of the week, when the

disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them;” where their meeting together on that day is not spoken of as a thing extraordinary, or merely occasional, but as a stated ordinary practice. From 1 Corinthians 16:1,2, it appears that the primitive Christians, on the first day of the week, contributed for the relief of their needy brethren, and this by an express apostolical injunction. Thus the collection for the poor, which was made in the Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath, seems to have been transferred, by apostolical authority, to the first day of the week among Christians.

4. In early times the Christian Sabbath was well known by the distinguishing title of “the *Lord’s* day” (Revelation 1:10), the day which Jesus Christ peculiarly claimed as His own, and which was consecrated to His honour.

5. The first day of the week has been uniformly observed as the Christian Sabbath, from the apostolic age down to the present time; and God has remarkably honoured that day by conferring precious blessings on His people, when employed in the religious observance of it.

There is an adequate reason for the change of the Sabbath from the seventh to the first day of the week. As the seventh day was kept holy from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, in commemoration of the work of creation, so it is reasonable that, since the resurrection of Christ, the first day of the week should be sanctified, in commemoration of the greater and more glorious work of redemption. And as there will be no new work of the Almighty of superior or equal importance, it is fit that this day should continue to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

Chapter 21 - Section 8

This Sabbath is to be 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.

Exposition

This section points out what is requisite to the proper sanctification of the Sabbath. After due preparation beforehand, the Sabbath is to be kept holy, by resting from all worldly employments and recreations - by spending the whole time in holy exercises, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

1. Persons should endeavour so to dispose of their common affairs beforehand, that the Sabbath may not be entrenched upon by the cares and business of this world, and to prepare their hearts for engaging in the exercises appropriate to the Lord’s day.

2. As the Sabbath is a day of holy rest, persons ought to abstain, during the whole day, from their worldly employments - from all manual labour, and also from the labours of the mind about secular studies - and from all unnecessary words and thoughts about

such subjects. They are also required to abstain from those innocent recreations which are lawful on other days, because these would engross a portion of the time which is sacred to other purposes, and would indispose them for the proper duties of the Sabbath. To engage on that day in such recreations or amusements as are in themselves sinful, must be attended with highly aggravated guilt.

3. Persons ought to spend the whole time of the Sabbath, when they are awake, in holy exercises - in prayer, in religious reading, and meditation - in the instruction of their families, and pious conversation with them - and in attendance upon the public ordinances of grace. It is very wrong to appropriate a few hours of the Sabbath to religious exercises, and to employ all the rest in a worldly manner. A Sabbath-day is of the same duration as the other six days of the week, and the same proportion of time that we spend in our own works on the other days should be devoted on Sabbath to the public or private exercises of God's worship.

4. Works of necessity and mercy are allowed on the Sabbath. By the former are meant works which could not have been done on the preceding day, and cannot be delayed till the day following. By the latter are meant those works which are performed from compassion to our fellow-creatures. Under these heads are included such works as these: travelling to and from the house of God; defending a town or city that is invaded by enemies; working a vessel at sea; quenching a fire, and removing goods which would be destroyed by it, or by a sudden inundation; feeding cattle, and preserving their lives from danger; visiting the sick, and ministering to their comfort and necessities; and taking care of children. In short, there is nothing of this kind forbidden, though it may, in a great measure, sometimes hinder the proper work of the day; for "God will have mercy, and not sacrifice." Jesus healed the sick on the Sabbath-day, and His disciples rubbed out the corn from the ears, when they were hungry; and though the Pharisees reprov'd them, yet the Lord pronounced them blameless.

"The Sabbath was made for man." It is not an arbitrary appointment, but a most benevolent institution - designed for the benefit and advantage of man. Viewed merely as a day of cessation from labour, it must be regarded as a merciful and beneficial institution. It is intended to give to the laborious classes of mankind an opportunity of resting from toil; and the return of the hebdomadal rest is found to be absolutely necessary for the preservation of health and strength. Every member of the community ought to be secured in the full enjoyment of that day of rest which God in His goodness, and by His authority, has allowed him. But the Sabbath is not merely a season of rest from the fatigues and anxieties of secular business - it is a cessation from ordinary labour, that we may attend with greater diligence to the duties of religion. And surely one whole day in seven is not too much for the immediate service of God, for the improvement of our souls, and for preparation for eternity. Scotland has long been honourably distinguished for its decent observance of the Sabbath. It is to be deplored, however, that in this respect a sad deterioration is taking place. Sabbath profanation has of late years been making progress with fearful rapidity, and as this is the fertile source of numerous other evils, we know of nothing more injurious to the best interests of our country. The proper observation of the Sabbath is a principal means of promoting the temporal welfare of individuals and of nations, of elevating the tone of public morals, of advancing the interests of religion, and of drawing down the divine favour and blessing. The desecration of the Sabbath, on the

other hand, is detrimental to the temporal interests of men - demoralizes the community, lays waste religion, and calls down the displeasure and judgments of God upon a nation. Every one, therefore, should exert all his influence to arrest the progress of this increasing evil, and should resolve that, whatever others do, he will "keep the Sabbath from polluting it." They who honour God by a strict and diligent observation of that day which He claims as His special property, shall obtain the blessing of the Lord, according to that comprehensive promise (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."

Background note: Robert Shaw (1795-1863) was a Minister of the Original Secession Church. His *Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* was published in 1845.