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THE DOCTRINE OF THE SABBATH Part II: Keeping the Sabbath

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Introduction

In a previous article, we examined the doctrine of the Sabbath as it unfolds in chapter XXI of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. We discovered that the *Confession* teaches that, with the exception of works of mercy and necessity, the whole day (Sunday) is to be taken up in “public and private exercises” of God's worship. We want to emphasize that we are in total agreement with the principle of Sabbath as explained in Part I of this study. We believe that the Fourth Commandment is still binding; we believe that men are required to sanctify one whole day out of their seven to the Lord. We further believe that the chief activity of that sanctified day is worship, either public or private.

As the basis for this article, we will use question 119 of the *Larger Catechism*, which says:

“The sins forbidden in the fourth commandment are, all omissions of the duties required, all careless, negligent, and unprofitable performing of them, and being weary of them; *all profaning the day by idleness*, and doing that which is in itself sinful; and by *all needless works, words, and thoughts, about our worldly employments and recreations.*” [emphasis added].

While the first part of this paragraph seems self-explanatory, the highlighted portion, in which “idleness” and “all needless works, words, and thoughts, about our worldly employments and recreations” are labeled as sinful, gives rise to numerous questions. We do *not* anticipate being able to answer all questions about Sabbath observance in the following study. However, by looking at two passages from the Old Testament, we will provide at least a few principles that can be applied to the many practical questions that are asked concerning the keeping of the Sabbath.

The Text of the Fourth Commandment: Exodus 20:8-11

8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the 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.

This Commandment consists of **four parts or components**:

- 1. The first part is the two-fold order to “remember” and “keep holy” the Sabbath day.

- 2. The second part is the labor/no labor pattern for keeping this two-fold order: labor for six days, do not labor on the seventh day.
- 3. The third part of the Commandment concerns the extent to which the labor/no labor pattern is to be implemented: the pattern is to be observed by every individual and everyone/everything under that individual's authority.
- 4. The fourth part of this law is its foundation: the Lord labored for six days and rested on the seventh day; the Lord's resting on the seventh day had a sanctifying effect and establishes the labor/no labor pattern.

Our examination of this passage will consist of a number of word studies. We will begin with the first word, “remember,” which is the Hebrew term *zakar*. This word is used approximately two hundred times in the Old Testament and is translated as “bring to mind, be mindful, consider, invoke, mention” and, of course, “remember” (the most frequent translation). There is no mystery surrounding this term; the meaning is what we would expect. The vast majority of uses of *zakar* in the Old Testament refer to *reviving in or restoring to the present consciousness a past action, promise or duty*. The Fourth Commandment begins with an exhortation, therefore, designed to ensure continued observance of this duty.

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We want to notice that this is the only one of the Ten Commandments that is tied to two specific and highly significant acts in history, namely, God's “resting” after six days of creation and Israel's deliverance from Egypt (cf. Gen. 2:2, 3; Deut. 5:15). Sabbath-keeping in Israel, therefore, was a kind of *memorial*; it was a testimony to the sovereignty of God over all creation and to His powerful rescue of the nation from bondage. However, commemorations have a tendency to lose their importance, especially from one generation to the next. The command to “remember” is designed to impress upon the people the necessity of perpetual observance of the Sabbath.

Let us also note that, as we concluded in the first part of this study, the Fourth Commandment is moral in nature and is, therefore, binding on all men in all times. The exhortation to “remember” is as meaningful for us as it was for Israel. Indeed, the remembrance (or observance) of the Sabbath

principle is even more significant for those who have become part of the new creation, over which Jesus Christ sovereignly rules, and who have experienced deliverance from spiritual bondage through His work on the cross. The memorial aspect of Israel's Sabbath observance has been intensified and raised to a higher level in the Church.

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The next word of interest is “holy.” The Hebrew term used is *qadash*, which means “to set apart or consecrate.” Again, the two-fold order that introduces this Fourth Commandment is “remember” and “keep holy.” The remembrance of the duty is coupled with the *goal* of the duty, which is the regulation of the week into common and sacred portions, the first six days being the common portion and the last, or seventh day, being the sacred portion.

When that one day out of seven is set apart as Scripture teaches, there are, of course, numerous benefits forthcoming. Besides the obvious benefits that come from being obedient to the law of God, such as blessing instead of chastisement, we would like to mention one specific way in which keeping the Sabbath principle profits God's people. The keeping of the Fourth Commandment *brings order to life*; we labor six days, then we refresh ourselves, physically and spiritually speaking, in God's presence on the seventh. In this way, our lives are “reoriented” every seven days; as long as we are keeping the weekly Sabbath in the context of a Christian community where God is rightly worshiped and His Word is the moral standard, we can't drift too far away from God. Consequently, Sabbath observance, in the context we've described, promises tremendous blessing; it promises positive enhancement of every aspect of our relationship with God and one another.

What is beneficial to an individual is beneficial to a group of individuals, such as a family, a church, a community and even a nation. While obedience to all of the Commandments is, of course, advisable, only the Fourth Commandment has this “regulatory” potential. Sabbath observance requires a *weekly* realignment of priorities and a *weekly* confrontation with our sin in light of our Biblical duties. If we

remember the Sabbath day and sanctify it, we cannot avoid contact with God or His people; we cannot avoid assessing our conduct. Knowing that we will face that weekly “spiritual review” just might deter us from sinful behavior. Therefore, we might think of the Fourth Commandment, when it is observed, as a “preventative” measure because it keeps us where we should be, spiritually speaking; regular Sabbath keeping is a “restraint” against sinful impulses (consider, again, the potential benefits for whole communities and nations).

In the next phrase, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (v. 9), we want to examine the words “labor” and “work.” The word translated “labor” is *abad*, which refers to some type of service directed to a thing, a person or to God. In Gen. 2:5, for example, we read: “Now no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth; and there was no man to cultivate [*abad*] the ground.” In Gen. 29:15, we read: “Then Laban said to Jacob, 'Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve [*abad*] me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?’” In Ex. 5:18, we find: “So go now and work [*abad*]; for you shall be given no straw, yet you must deliver the quota of bricks.”

We chose three common examples of this word's usage in the Old Testament to illustrate its primary meaning, which is physical toil. In a few cases, where God is the object of the verb, *abad* is translated “worship.” It is not difficult to see how doing “service” to God could be construed as worship.

Verses 8-10, therefore, teach that we are to temporarily abandon our vocation on the seventh day so that we can pursue another vocation or duty, which is sanctification of that day.

“Work” is a translation of *melakah*. This Hebrew word refers to an occupation, a job, a duty or a project (cf. God's “work” of creation in Gen. 2:2; Joseph's “work” as a servant in Gen. 39:11; Solomon's “work” on the Temple in 1 Ki. 7:51). The meaning of v. 9, then, is that we are to labor at our vocation, whatever that happens to be, for six days. That by which we make a living or that which comprises our calling in life is to be attended to six days every week; *but*, the

next verse states, “the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work...” (v. 10) In this verse, “work” is *melakah*. Verses 8-10, therefore, teach that we are to *temporarily abandon our vocation on the seventh day* so that we can pursue another vocation or duty, which is sanctification of that day.

The prohibition against work on the Sabbath extends to all over whom we have authority

The prohibition against work on the Sabbath extends to all over whom we have authority: “...in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.” If we recall that keeping the Sabbath holy requires the temporary cessation of labor, then this phrase is interpreted easily. It is directed to those who manage the work of others — sons, daughters, servants and household guests. While there is, of course, an element of individual responsibility in the Fourth Commandment, the duty to keep this law doesn't begin and end with the individual alone. The duty encompasses all those whose labor is directly connected to an individual's pursuits. Therefore, it would be a violation of this law for a man to cease his labor on the Sabbath, but order those working for him to continue laboring. Not only would he be violating this Commandment, according to v. 10, but those working for him would incur individual guilt for breaking God's law. In this kind of situation, the one with authority over others would be guilty of a two-fold sin; he would be guilty for not restricting the work of those under him, as the Commandment orders, and he would be guilty, as a consequence, of causing others to sin by failing to keep the Sabbath.

Earlier, we stated that the Fourth Commandment can be divided into four components for the sake of study. The fourth element of the law that we mentioned is its foundation. Verse 11 of Exodus 20 provides the theological and historical foundation for the Fourth Commandment: “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the 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.” The foundation upon which the Fourth Commandment rests, therefore, is God's own activity at creation.

Two things must be stressed. First, according to v. 11, *Sabbath keeping is an imitation of God's own pattern of behavior*. The "six plus one" pattern for work and rest is a divine example that serves to balance our duties of vocation and worship. That is, God's model of work and rest demonstrates how much of our lives is to be consumed with our vocation and how much is to be spent in worship. Therefore, the Fourth Commandment, based upon God's example, is *precise*; we work six days and cease working on one day.

We note as well that those who suggest that the Fourth Commandment is strictly "Jewish," in terms of authority and application, face a major interpretive problem.

Second, we note that *this divine example is not ours to follow or reject as we please*. This is apparent from the fact that God permanently hallowed the Sabbath day by His blessing. We note as well that those who suggest that the Fourth Commandment is strictly "Jewish," in terms of authority and application, face a major interpretive problem. The foundation for this Commandment, specified in v. 11, comes from Gen. 2:1-3, a passage which, historically speaking, concerns a period long before the nation of Israel even existed. The proper way to view the matter is to say that God gave the Fourth Commandment to codify an obligation that already existed. This explanation fits the other Nine Commandments and should be applied to the Fourth.

Before we conclude our comments on v. 11, we must, of course, look at the word "rest." What does the text mean when it says that God "rested on the seventh day"? This question is important because the answer will help us determine what our rest on the Sabbath is supposed to be.

The word translated "rest" is the Hebrew term *shabath*, which means "cease, desist, rest." That we might see how this word is used in the Old Testament, let us consider the following verses:

"While the earth remains, Seedtime and harvest, And cold and heat, And summer and winter, And day and night Shall not *cease*." (Gen. 8:22)

He makes wars to *cease* to the end of the earth; He breaks

the bow and cuts the spear in two; He burns the chariots with fire. (Psa. 46:9)

Drive out the scoffer, and contention will go out, Even strife and dishonor will *cease*. (Pro. 22:10)

And he *did away with* the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had appointed to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah and in the surrounding area of Jerusalem, also those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and to the moon and to the constellations and to all the host of heaven. (2 Kings 23:5)

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: "Behold, I am going to *eliminate* from this place, before your eyes and in your time, the voice of rejoicing and the voice of gladness, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride. (Jer. 16:9)

Thus I will punish the world for its evil, And the wicked for their iniquity; I will also *put an end to* the arrogance of the proud, And abase the haughtiness of the ruthless. (Isa. 13:11)

So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work *stop* while I leave it and come down to you?" (Neh. 6:3)

Clearly this word is used in the sense of an activity or condition coming to an end or being caused to come to an end (Gen. 8:22; Psa. 46:9; Pro. 22:10; Jer. 16:9; Isa. 13:11; Neh. 6:3); and, on occasion, the word is used in the sense of people ceasing to be (2 Kings 23:5). When the Scripture says that God "rested" on the seventh day, it simply means that He ceased creating. The focus of the word *shabath* is not upon what God did on the seventh day, *but upon what He was no longer doing, namely, creating*. To say that God "rested" is to say that God stopped "working." He then sanctified the seventh day, that is, He "marked" that day as unique because on it He ceased from His creative labors.

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The "rest" that we are to seek on the Sabbath is not sleep or idleness. This is *not* what the Hebrew word *shabath* means. As we have indicated, this term refers to the stopping of activity. In the case of Sabbath keeping, to "rest" means that we temporarily cease our normal labors (whatever constitutes our vocation

or calling in life) to give our attention to another matter, specifically, the worship of God.

In our examination of the text of the Fourth Commandment, we discovered that the text of the Fourth Commandment begins with an exhortation designed to ensure continued observance of this duty. We learned that Sabbath keeping is a kind of memorial; for Israel, it commemorated God's sovereignty over creation and His deliverance of the nation from bondage in Egypt and for the Church, Sabbath keeping commemorates Christ's sovereignty over the new creation and His deliverance of us from spiritual bondage. We saw that the Sabbath principle regulates our week into common and sacred portions. Moreover, we determined that the labor that is to cease on the Sabbath is that which comprises our calling or vocation in life; and this temporary abandonment of work is to be observed by the individual and enforced with regard to others where appropriate. Finally, we learned that the Fourth Commandment is grounded in God's own pattern of work and rest and is, therefore, applicable to all men at all times.

Isaiah 58:13, 14

13 If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot From doing your own pleasure on My holy day, And call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, And shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, From seeking your own pleasure, And speaking your own word, 14 Then you will take delight in the Lord, And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

In this chapter, God criticizes His people because the righteousness they practiced was not true righteousness at all. They thought that by “going through the motions” of religious exercise, they would be favored by God. The Israelites are told that their treatment of those in need was the real indicator of their spirituality. The problem was that the nation knew the letter of God's requirements, but not the spirit. They substituted ritualistic piety for true piety and words *about* mercy for deeds of mercy. In this chapter God promises that abundant blessing would result if Israel began *doing* righteousness instead of just talking about it and portraying it in superficial ways during their fasts and feasts.

Further, the chapter teaches that the people were busy with religion, but they were not genuinely

religious. They fasted and then wondered why God did not “see.” (v. 3) God tells them they fasted for the wrong reasons (v. 4). Within this context, God makes reference to the Sabbath. We can assume that Israel's problems included desecration of the Sabbath. These verses on the Sabbath (58:13, 14) come between two passages condemning Israel for his wickedness. This gives the impression that Sabbath keeping was a “cure” for many of Israel's ailments. It's worth noting that the Sabbath is not mentioned in the immediate context leading up to vv. 13, 14, nor is it mentioned again after these verses. It appears, therefore, that God offers Israel a piece of divine “advice” designed to help the nation avoid the spiritual devastation guaranteed to come if things did not change.

As we prepare to examine some of the vocabulary used in these verses, let us remind ourselves that the behavior God commends is “because of the sabbath.” What He describes in these verses is attitude and conduct that are proper responses to the Sabbath principle.

The phrase, “turn your foot,” is a way of saying, “change your habit” or “change your direction.” In this case, God means, “If because of the sabbath, you change your habit of doing your own pleasure on My holy day...”, then certain blessings will follow. Let's consider the Hebrew term translated “pleasure.” The word is *chephets*, meaning “delight, pleasure.” This word is used in the Old Testament to describe that which produces personal satisfaction or that which conforms to a personal standard. Sometimes the word is used of God: “When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for He takes no *delight* in fools. Pay what you vow!” (Ecc. 5:4) In other verses, the subject is man: “But his *delight* is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.” (Psa. 1:2)

The implication of v. 13 is that the Israelites were in a habit of doing what pleased them on the Sabbath, not what pleased God. They spent the day doing what their personal standards of satisfaction dictated.

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not what pleased God. They spent the day doing what their personal standards of satisfaction dictated. We see, therefore, that Sabbath keeping, according to this verse, is a matter of conforming to a standard established by God; Sabbath keeping requires that *the worshiper's standard of personal satisfaction be suspended for the day*. We also would observe that this verse teaches that it is not up to the creature to determine what constitutes Sabbath keeping. The very fact that his "pleasure" is to be suspended on the Sabbath proves this point. The Sabbath is distinguished by what is done on that day; and what is done must not be the creature's "own pleasure," but what God, who is the "focus" of the Sabbath, requires.

God adds another element to this instruction on Sabbath keeping: "And call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable..." The word translated "delight" is the Hebrew term *oneg*, meaning "daintiness." This term comes from a root meaning "soft, delicate." This is an interesting way to describe the Sabbath. God speaks of attributing a quality to the Sabbath. The quality represented by this word, *oneg*, is preciousness or fragility; it denotes something that is highly valued. Therefore, God says that keeping the Sabbath is not a matter of mere perfunctory behavior (that is, behavior done in a mechanical fashion without care), it involves a worshiper in an intellectual process whereby he renders a judgment concerning a thing's worth (in this case, the "worth" of the Sabbath).

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We must remember that the Sabbath serves as a memorial. If it is to be judged (or called) a "delight," as God says, it is because of what the Sabbath represents. The value of the Sabbath, for which the worshiper labels it a "delight," is not the bare day by itself, but what the day encompasses. As the first part of this study demonstrates, the focus of the Sabbath is God — the worship of God, meditation on the Word of God, instruction from the Word of God, etc. If the Sabbath is called a "delight," that is, if the Sabbath is

held by the worshiper in high esteem, it should be because the worshiper holds God in high esteem.

The next term to consider is "honorable." This is the Hebrew word *kabad*, which means "to be heavy, weighty or burdensome." Although *kabad* and its derivatives occur hundreds of times in the Old Testament, it is rarely used in a literal sense. Here are two examples:

Now the hand of the Lord was *heavy* on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territories. (1 Sam. 5:6)

For day and night Thy hand was *heavy* upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. Selah. (Psa. 32:4)

These two verses show how *kabad* is used figuratively to express intensity or severity. There is another sense in which *kabad* is used that seems to fit the context of our present verse, however. In the following examples, *kabad* connotes prestige or dignity:

Then Balak again sent leaders, more numerous and more distinguished [*kabad*] than the former. (Num. 22:15)

"Honor [*kabad*] your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you." (Ex. 20:12)

Honor [*kabad*] the Lord from your wealth, And from the first of all your produce. (Pro. 3:9)

As we stated, these verses illustrate how *kabad* is to be understood in Isa. 58:13. God intends that the Sabbath be viewed as something honorable, something noteworthy. Both of these words, "delight" and "honorable" lead to a significant conclusion: If the Sabbath is to be esteemed as these Hebrew terms indicate, and if the Sabbath is to be viewed as something of great worth and something that is honorable, not for its own sake, but because of what it represents, and if the Sabbath represents God and provides an opportunity to worship Him, study His word and so forth, *then one's attitude toward the Sabbath cannot be divorced from one's attitude toward God*. Verse 13 certainly seems to tie Sabbath keeping to the worshiper's view of God because the Sabbath is that one day out of seven when he "focuses" on God, we might say. If the worshiper has a loving and reverent opinion of God, if he understands that God is the sovereign Creator and he

is the dependent creature, then he will, of course, desire to observe that one day in his week that is established for God's praise and he will count that day special. If the reasoning we have just offered is correct, then we could say that the opposite also must be true. That is, a low view of Sabbath keeping betrays a low opinion of God.

The focus of v. 13 shifts from attitude to action after the two descriptive words, "delight" and "honorable" are mentioned: "And shall honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure, and speaking your own word..." This part of v. 13 simply repeats what has already been indicated. In the phrase, "And shall honor it," "honor" is *kabad*, the word we just discussed. The phrases, "desisting from your own ways" and "from seeking your own pleasure," correspond to "turn your foot from doing your own pleasure" at the beginning of the verse. "And speaking your own word" is a small elaboration of what "seeking your own pleasure" means. The second part of v. 13, therefore, is an explanation of what it is to "call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable."

Verse 14 contains certain promises of blessing from God that will come in response to treating His Sabbath as He has described in v. 13. First, the worshiper will "take delight in the Lord." We should note the pattern contained in these two verses: "calling the Sabbath a delight" leads to "taking delight in the Lord." We recall that the word translated "delight" in v. 13, *oneg*, refers to something that is precious or fragile, something that is highly valued. *Oneg* comes from the root *anog*, which is used in v. 14. There is a principle here that should not be overlooked: Obedience to God's Word produces love for God; esteem for God's Word leads to esteem for God. The idea, therefore, that one can love God while having little or no regard for God's Word is contradicted by this text.

The second blessing is phrased, "And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth." The Old Testament often describes a position of advantage, prestige or power as the "heights" (cf. Job 25:2; Psa. 78:69; 102:19; Pro. 25:3; Isa. 33:16). The Lord promises, therefore, to honor those who honor Him by keeping His Sabbath. Interestingly, this promise of honor corresponds to the phrase, "call the holy day of the Lord honorable," in v. 13.

The Lord promises, therefore, to honor those who honor Him by keeping His Sabbath.

The third blessing is stated: "And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father." The "heritage of Jacob" is all that Israel was promised as the covenant people of God, including protection from enemies, agricultural abundance and overall tranquillity. This third blessing for keeping the Sabbath shows how central this law is to the relationship between God and His people. These verses imply that proper observance of the Sabbath in Israel would have resulted in national prosperity. This follows from the fact that the Fourth Commandment is concerned exclusively with the due recognition of God by His creatures; and nothing is more basic than this issue. How we relate to God is *the* question of life.

This verse ends with the statement: "For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Isaiah uses similar phrases in his prophecy to underscore the seriousness of what has been stated. Given the tremendous import of Sabbath keeping, as explained in these two verses, we can understand why the prophet concludes this section in this manner.

Return to Question 119

Let us look again at Question 119 of the *Larger Catechism*:

"The sins forbidden in the fourth commandment are, all omissions of the duties required, all careless, negligent, and unprofitable performing of them, and being weary of them; *all profaning the day by idleness*, and doing that which is in itself sinful; and by *all needless works, words, and thoughts, about our worldly employments and recreations.*" [emphasis added].

How does this statement compare with our study of Ex. 20:8-11 and Isa. 58:13, 14?

We'll consider the two most pertinent phrases separately. First, the *Larger Catechism* says that it is a sin to "profane the [Sabbath] day by idleness." Clearly, the Fourth Commandment, in particular, as recorded in Ex. 20, supports the *Catechism*. The

“rest” spoken of in that passage is not mere sleep or inactivity, but consists of a different kind of activity (as opposed to the other days of the week). As we stated earlier, to “rest” means that we temporarily cease our normal labors (whatever constitutes our vocation or calling in life) to give our attention to another matter, namely, the worship of God.

The two verses from Isa. 58 also seem to support the *Catechism*. They do not recommend a cessation of activity; they teach that proper Sabbath keeping means that a different kind of activity is the focus of the day, activity that is according to God's desire instead of man's. Our examination of Ex. 20 and Isa. 58, therefore, lead to the conclusion that the Westminster Divines were *correct* to list mere idleness as a corruption of the Sabbath. *On the other hand*, if a man temporarily abandons his labors on the Sabbath day, he *inevitably* will experience physical rest. The point is, we believe, that simple idleness is not to be the *focus* of the Sabbath. The one who ceases his normal routine on the Sabbath should be occupied with God, the things of God and the people of God. Nevertheless, he will, according to the very nature of Sabbath keeping, experience physical refreshment. But that physical refreshment is not to be his goal for keeping the Fourth Commandment.

We must remember that the Bible draws a contrast between the six days of labor and the one day of Sabbath keeping. The contrast is meant to teach us that what consumes our time and energy the rest of the week is to be temporarily laid aside on the Sabbath.

We must remember that the Bible draws a contrast between the six days of labor and the one day of Sabbath keeping. The contrast is meant to teach us that what consumes our time and energy the rest of the week is to be temporarily laid aside on the Sabbath. Obviously, we do not spend all twenty-four hours of those six days leading up to the Sabbath in constant activity. We work, of course, but we also eat, engage in recreation and sleep. Nevertheless, our work, or our vocation, is *the overriding factor of influence* during those six days. The Sabbath is to be a reversal of our weekly activity. On the Sabbath, the worship of God is to be the overriding factor of

influence. However, we do not think that the Fourth Commandment requires us to be in one, continual worship service for the twenty-four hours of the Sabbath. This follows from the fact that our other six days are dominated by labor, but also include the elements we mentioned — eating, sleeping and recreational activity. Therefore, while the Sabbath is to be characterized by the worship of God, it, too, we believe, can include eating, sleeping and other activities which, while not worship, per se, are still in keeping with the character of the day. We are thinking of reading, Bible-centered conversation, acts of charity and so forth (we are not thinking of shopping, playing softball or watching TV!).

The second significant phrase from Question 119 states that “*all needless works, words, and thoughts, about our worldly employments and recreations.*” are sinful. Little needs to be said here. Once again, it appears to us that the *Catechism* is supported fully by the two passages, Ex. 20 and Isa. 58. Many of the elements just cited apply in this case, as well. The Sabbath is a day when the attention of the worshiper shifts from himself and his pursuits to God and the things of God.

Conclusion: Summary Principles for Practical Application

At this point, we will reduce our two-part study on the Sabbath to a series of summary principles that will help us evaluate our own practices and answer some of the questions often asked about Lord's Day observance. The following, therefore, is a list of the fundamental facts that we have discovered:

1. The Fourth Commandment is still binding.

This is, of course, the most fundamental fact of all in this discussion. If this principle is accepted, we *must* take the next logical step of asking *how*, then, is the Fourth Commandment to be interpreted and applied. If this first principle stands, we are required, as the people of God, to seek understanding and application of the law.

2. *The chief activity of the Sabbath is public and private worship.*

Without this principle, talk of “keeping the Sabbath” is meaningless. The fact that the Sabbath is to be characterized by worship is what distinguishes it from our other days. If the worship of God is not to be the primary focus of the Lord’s Day, then what is? Apart from it’s relation to the worship of God, the Sabbath has no significance. In both Testaments, the Sabbath, or Lord’s Day, calls to mind God’s sovereign rule and His merciful redemption. To discuss Sabbath keeping in any other context is illegitimate. It is the focus or purpose of the Sabbath that makes it “holy.”

3. *Sabbath keeping brings balance to our lives.*

The Sabbath is a weekly “check” on our motives, priorities, methods, plans, desires, labors and recreations. Consistent Sabbath keeping ensures that we don’t work too much, spend too much time at leisure, drift too far from our Biblical moorings, become too comfortable with sin, think too little of the Church, think too little of our family, think too much of our work or think too much of ourselves.

4. *The Fourth Commandment has particular application for those in authority.*

As far as it is within our power to do so, we are to provide for and require Sabbath keeping by all those under our authority. It is in the family, of course, that this principle finds its most obvious expression. However, because the Fourth Commandment deals with the regulation of labor, it places a unique obligation upon those whose pursuits in life require the assistance of others. Legitimate authority cannot be separated from responsibility; one’s authority extends no further than one’s responsibility. Parents and employers, therefore, must be ever mindful of how they, in their respective positions of authority, observe the Fourth Commandment.

5. *The “rest” of the Sabbath day is not simple idleness.*

As we saw, the word “rest” (*shabath*) in the phrase, “God rested on the seventh day” (Gen. 2:2) refers to an activity or condition coming to an end or being caused to come to an end. The focus of the word is upon what is no longer being done, not upon what is done once another activity ceases. To “rest,” therefore, is to cease from whatever constitutes our normal labor. The Fourth Commandment is, of course, clear regarding what we *are* to do on the Sabbath (we’ve mentioned the duty of worship above). In light of the prevailing opinion in the modern Church, we need to be aware that the Fourth Commandment is provided, not for our physical refreshment, but for the fulfillment of our creaturely obligation of worship. We want to note, however, that physical rest may, indeed, be a “by-product” of Sabbath observance. None of these principles, in our opinion, rule out physical rest since physical rest is a natural consequence of ceasing from our normal routines, which is what the Fourth Commandment requires.

6. *God commends Sabbath keeping as a key to His abundant blessings.*

This principle comes from Isa. 58:13, 14. While all of God’s laws and commands come, of course, with His implied commendation, the law concerning the Sabbath seems to be particularly comprehensive. There is an undeniable link, at least in Isa. 58, between Sabbath keeping and blessing. This should be no real surprise because proper observance of the Fourth Commandment requires the suspension of our *personal and preferred* concerns so that our attention, time and abilities can be given to God and His worship. The keeping of any law that requires such concentrated and unreserved mindfulness of God surely will bring His favor.

7. *There is a relation between our view of the Sabbath and our view of God.*

This principle also comes from Isa. 58. When God says that we should call the Sabbath a “delight” and

“honorable,” He is attributing qualities to the day. Therefore, Sabbath observance *cannot* be a matter of mere routine behavior because it involves the worshiper’s intellect whereby he renders a judgment concerning the Sabbath’s worth. If, as we maintained, the focus of the Sabbath is God, and if the Sabbath has no significance apart from the God for whose sake it exists, then we cannot deny a connection between Sabbath keeping and our doctrine of God. Sabbath keeping will magnify our view of God and our view of God will, if it is what it should be, lead us to Sabbath observance.

Many, if not most, questions regarding the practical application of the Fourth Commandment can be answered with a reasonable degree of certitude in light of these seven truths.

Many, if not most, questions regarding the practical application of the Fourth Commandment can be answered with a reasonable degree of certitude in light of these seven truths. We have not attempted to deal with specific questions, however, simply because there are so many questions that could be asked and every question would have certain “variables” to contend with. Nevertheless, we trust that what we have offered will be of help. The reader may be interested to know that, Lord willing, we are planning a third and final part in our study of the Sabbath which will deal with so-called “problem” passages in the New Testament, such as John 5:18, Rom. 14:5, 6 and Col. 2:16.

Addendum: A Few Thoughts About Children and Sabbath Keeping

To consider the Sabbath a delight is to hold it in high esteem. How, then, can parents train their children to have such an opinion of the Sabbath? Here are three quick observations that we would like to offer.

First, the degree to which a child will delight in the Sabbath depends on the example set by the parents.

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Sabbath depends on the example set by the parents. This is true especially for younger children. By deliberate design and by default, parents communicate values, opinions, ethics and attitudes to their children. If a parent wants to see a child delight in the Sabbath, let that parent delight in it himself. Teaching reinforced by example is forceful; *teaching contradicted by example is mere rhetoric.*

Second, while what the child sees in the example of the parent is all-important, what the child hears from the parent is, likewise, significant.

Second, while what the child sees in the example of the parent is all-important, what the child hears from the parent is, likewise, significant. We have in mind talking about the Sabbath during the week. We’re not thinking of a special time that is set aside for a discussion on the Sabbath, we’re thinking of bringing the upcoming Lord's Day into routine conversation so that the child comes to understand that his week revolves around that meeting with God's people for worship and instruction. For example, by Wednesday or Thursday of most weeks, this writer is mentioning the coming Lord's Day in his family’s prayer times. We pray for the worship service, for the families of the church who will be coming to the worship service, for our understanding of God's Word that will be preached, etc. Our goal is to build a sense of anticipation into our children so that they will look forward to Sunday (To God’s glory, we can say that our oldest son, who is nine, often mentions the Lord’s Day in his own prayers during the week).

Third, there are some things that apply directly to the child and not the parent.

Third, there are some things that apply directly to the child and not the parent. The parent who wants a child to consider the Sabbath a delight, for example, should make sure the child gets plenty of sleep on Saturday night! The parent should make sure the child dresses appropriately to worship God. In our day of “come as you are” Christianity, this idea sounds extremely archaic, but we would argue, nevertheless, that if there is no distinction between what a child wears to play and what he wears to worship God, the parent should not be surprised if the child seems slow

to consider Sunday a special day.



**Other Books and Articles on the subject of
the Christian Sabbath or “The Lord’s Day.”**

Fisher’s Catechism. Many 19th century editions. For just the portion on the Fourth Commandment, see *Anthology of Presbyterian & Reformed Literature*, volume 5.

James Giffillan, *The Sabbath viewed in the Light of Reason, Revelation, and History, with Sketches of its Literature* (1862). For just the Sketches of Sabbath Literature, see *Anthology*, volume 5.

James Durham, *The Fourth Commandment.* *Anthology*, volume 2 #1.

John Murray, *Collected Writings*, volume 1. “The Moral Law and the Fourth Commandment” (several articles). For more reading, see the list at the end of “The Sabbath Institution.”

Daniel Wilson. *The Divine Authority and Perpetual Obligation of the Lord’s Day*, 1830.

Robert L. Dabney, *The Christian Sabbath*, 1882.

George Junkin, *Sabbatismos. A Discussion and Defence of the Lord’s Day of Sacred Rest*, 1866.

James Macgregor. *The Sabbath Question, Historical Scriptural, and Practical*, 1866.



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- *Sabbath, Part II*, by James Bordwine, p. 1
The Necessity of Reforming the Church, John Calvin,
page 11.