

WCF 21: OF RELIGIOUS WORSHIP AND THE SABBATH DAY

Introduction

The Ten Commandments summarises the will of God for His people in regard to their thought, speech and behaviour. As such, if we love God and would live for God, we would shape our lives personally and corporately around the Ten Commandments. Sadly, there is a stark departure from the Law of God in the modern church. And this departure is nowhere more evident than where it touches the two commandments which are given the most emphasis by the LORD, if the length of the commandments is anything to go by. I am referring to the 2nd and the 4th Commandments. It may be observed that in the history of the church, that these two commandments have served rather like to the two banks of through which the river of evangelicalism runs shallow or deep. When they were firmly taught, the true religion was deep and satisfying, producing long lasting and significant fruits. Such was the case during the days of the Reformers and the Puritans. But where one or both of the banks are eroded, then evangelicalism becomes broad and shallow as in our present day.

This chapter, which deals with the application of these two commandments, are therefore, of great importance, if we desire a reformation of lives unto the glory of Christ in our day.

On the Object and Manner of Worship

21.1a The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might.¹

¹Rom 1:20; Acts 17:24; Ps 119:68; Jer 10:7; Ps 31:23; 18:3; Rom 10:12; Ps 62:8; Josh 24:14; Mk 12:33.

We begin with three propositions that should lay to rest the questions of whether the obligations presented in this chapter are only applicable only to the church and those who and those who have been instructed, and not to all men in general:

- a. Nature teaches us that there is a God and that such a God must be glorious, powerful and good. Indeed, a moment's reflection should show that this God must be sovereign, or He would not be God. "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" (Rom 1:20). "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (Ps 19:1). What is taught in natural theology is, of course, confirmed in the Word of God.
- b. Common sense teaches us that therefore we must fear Him, love Him, praise Him, call upon Him, trust in Him, and serve Him, which is again affirmed in the Word of God.
- c. This must be done with "with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might" since we are His creatures and He is our Creator. The Lord affirms this duty: "The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment" (Mk 12:29–30). "The chief object of life is to acknowledge and worship God" (Calvin, *Isa* 3.368).

21.1b But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.¹

¹Deut 12:32; Mt 15:9; Acts 17:25; Mt 4:9–10; Deut 4:15–20; Ex 20:4–6; Col 2:23.

- While the light of nature teaches us that we are to worship God, the manner we ought to worship God is given in the Scripture which, according to our Confession, teaches a principle of worship, which we may call the *Regulative Principle of Worship* (RP). The Lutheran and Romish Regulative Principle of Worship is "Whatever is not forbidden is allowed," or "Whatever is not sanctioned in Scripture is not necessarily forbidden." The Reformed Principle, which is given in our Confession is "Whatever is not sanctioned in the Word of God is forbidden."

- John Calvin, the theologian *par excellence* of the Reformation, was so firmly persuaded of this principle, and taught it so vigorously, that anyone who does not hold to it should really not call himself Reformed or Calvinistic. Calvin taught: “The right rule then as to worship of God is, to adopt nothing but what He prescribes” (*Comm. on Jeremiah*, 4.543). Commenting on Ezekiel 6:6, he expands his assertion: “There is no need of a long discussion if we desire to know how God is to be worshipped. For He rejects and excludes our works. If, therefore, we do not obtrude our works, but only follow what God demands, our worship will be pure, but if we add anything of our own, it is an abomination. We see, therefore, that useful instruction can be collected from one word, namely, that all worship is perverse and disapproved by God when men bring anything forward of themselves” (*Comm. on Ezekiel*, 1.226).

- Is this a biblical principle?

The Second Commandment, properly understood, forbids the use of any images in our worship of the living and true God (Ex 20:4–6). Romanists indeed, not only combine the first and second commandments together, but teach that you can worship God by using images and that the honour they pay to their images is *eidôlatreia* (idol-service) and not *eidôdouleia* (idol-worship). This distinction is, however, a mere play of words (see *ICR* 1.11.11; 1.11.16). The scriptural prohibition of the use of images to worship God is clearly expounded in Exodus 32 when Aaron made a golden calf for the people. This calf, we must remember, was not to represent other gods, but to represent Jehovah, the God of Israel. Thus when Aaron presented the golden calf to the people, they said: “These be thy *elohim*, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (Ex 32:4). The Hebrew *elohim* can be translated as ‘gods’ or ‘God.’ But the fact the people spoke of it as having brought them out of Egypt suggests that they had in mind that it represented Jehovah. This is why after Aaron had built an altar, he made a proclamation saying, “To morrow is a feast to *Jehovah*” (Ex 32:5). This act of rebellion so angered God that He nearly wiped out the whole nation. Years later, after the reign of Solomon, when the Northern tribes broke away, King Jeroboam made two calves, setting one in Dan and the other in Bethel (1 Kgs 12:28–29). These calves were again images to represent Jehovah and it was considered a great sin so that every subsequent king in the North was condemned on account of their failure to remove the calves.

What about the general principle that only what is sanctioned is allowed? Is it a biblical principle? We believe that it is.

- a. *Old Testament.* Many who do not believe in the Regulative Principle of Worship asserts that we must not use the Old Testament to derive the principle because the Old Testament was a time of shadows and types, and the acts and elements of worship were minutely detailed. We grant the observation concerning Old Testament worship and we agree that the specific commands are no longer applicable to us today, but we assert that the principle of worship, on which those commands were based, is not changed since it is founded upon God’s character and His sovereignty. And since God does not change (Mal 3:6), this principle which can be derived from the Old Testament must be applicable in the New Testament as well.

- i. In Genesis 4, we read about the first acts of formal worship of God. Abel offered of his flocks, and his offering was accepted, but Cain offered of the ground, but his offering was rejected. Why? Fundamentally, it is because God must have instructed Adam and Eve they must always worship with a bloody sacrifice. Perhaps, He gave them this instruction when He made a coat of skin for them (Gen 3:21); and it is clear that this instruction was passed down, for we find that years later Noah would know exactly what to offer unto the Lord (Gen 8:20). Abel has offered of the ground voluntarily and sincerely, but his offerings were rejected as they were not sanctioned by God.
- ii. Nadab and Abihu had taken their censers, put fire into them and then put incense into them to offer unto the Lord. This appeared pious and reverential, but what they did was displeasing to God, for in a moment they were struck dead because they “offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not” (Lev 10:1–3). What was their sin? Jeremiah Burroughs, a member of the Westminster Assembly, answers:

Their sin was offering strange fire, for the text says that they offered strange fire which God had not commanded them. But had God ever forbidden them to offer strange fire or appointed that they should offer only one kind of fire? There is no text of Scripture that you can find from the beginning of Genesis to this place where God had said in so many words expressly, “You shall offer no fire but one kind of fire.” And yet here they are

consumed by fire from God for offering strange fire. I find in Exodus 30:9 that they were forbidden to offer strange incense, but I do not find that they were forbidden to offer strange fire (*Gospel Worship*, 3).

What is strange fire? We are not told the details, but it is either fire taken from the wrong source or they had offered it at the wrong place or wrong time—a time, place or source not expressly sanctioned by God. In other words, they had not acted according to the prescription of the Law and as a result they were struck dead. This passage very dramatically demonstrates God's zeal for the purity of His own worship, that they must be strictly according to His own prescription. It also shows that the Lutheran principle: "what is not forbidden is allowed" is false. Rather, God must be worshipped exactly as He has appointed, nothing more, nothing less.

- iii. Moses gave specific instructions pertaining to the manner of worship, and warned Israel against adopting the manner of worship of the people of the land (Deut 12:31). And he concludes: "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it" (Deut 12:32). Someone may object to our using Cain and Abel, and Nadab and Abihu by saying that "in those cases, something was commanded, therefore, it must be done precisely, but what if there is no instruction on it? Wouldn't the act then be allowed? Since there is no instruction regulating or forbidden the lighting candles or for the use of a choir in the New Testament church, shouldn't they be allowed?" This argument falls flat since Moses, under inspiration, tells us that we are not to add or diminish from God's commands concerning worship.
- b. *New Testament*. Two of the most common objections against the Regulative Principle of Worship for today's church are: (1) that the New Testament does not contain such a principle; and (2) that the New Testament does not give specific commands on what to do. However, no one, who believes that God is immutable and holy, will assert that God has lowered the standard of behaviour that He requires of His children. Moreover, the New Testament does answer the two objections. The following sections will show the elements of worship sanctioned in the Word of God, but here we show that the New Testament does indicate that the Regulative Principle is still applicable:
 - i. The Lord condemning the scribes and Pharisees for their extraneous acts of worship, quoted Isaiah 29:13 to show the vanity of their deeds: "But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Mt 15:9).
 - ii. The Lord told the Samaritan woman: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:24). What did He mean by "in truth"? The only objective truth that God has given to man is His revealed Word, therefore to worship *in truth*, is to worship according to the prescription of His Word.
 - iii. Paul confirms this principle by warning the Colossians against will-worship: "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, ... after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh" (Col 2:20–23). What is "will worship"? Calvin defines it as "fictitious modes of worship that men themselves device or receive from others, and all precepts whatsoever that they presume to deliver at their own hand concerning the worship of God" (*ICR* 4.10.8). Lighting of candles, dances, processions, dramas, song presentations, puppet shows, etc would all be regarded as *will worship* by Calvin and I believe, by the Apostle Paul.

The evidence is, I believe, compelling, which explain why from the time of the Reformation every genuine Presbyterian and Reformed church has acknowledged it as true (more or less), though sometimes in practice these churches violate the principles. We are compelled to agree with Calvin in his treatise on the *True Method of Reforming the Church*: "All modes of worship devised contrary to His command, He not only repudiates as void, but distinctly condemns. Why need I adduce proofs in so clear a matter? Passages to this effect should be proverbial among Christians" (*Tracts*, 3.261).

21.2 *Religious worship is to be given to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to Him alone;¹ not to angels, saints, or any other creature;² and, since the fall, not without a Mediator; nor in the mediation of any other but of Christ alone.³*

¹Mt 4:10; ²Jn 5:23; ³2 Cor 13:14; ⁴Col 2:18; ⁵Rev 19:10; ⁶Rom 1:25; ⁷Jn 14:6; ⁸1 Tim 2:5; ⁹Eph 2:18; ¹⁰Col 3:17.

- Worship is to be given to God alone and since God is a Triune God, worship may be directed to all three persons of the Godhead, they being the same in essence. But worship must not be directed to angels or to saints or to any other creatures. The Apostle Paul specifically forbids the worshipping of angels (Col 2:18). When Cornelius fell down at the feet of Peter in reverence, Peter straight away took him up, and said “Stand up, I myself also am a man” (Acts 10:26). When Apostle John fell at the feet of the angel in Revelation 19 to worship him, probably by mistake, the angel prevented him, saying: “See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev 19:10).
- Since the fall of man, the distance between sinful man and the Holy God is so great that a Mediator is necessary for us to come to God. The Scripture declares emphatically that this man is Jesus and Jesus alone: “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). The Lord himself declares: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6).
- The Roman Catholic Church affirms that Jesus is the alone mediator of redemption, but insists that angels and saints are co-mediators of intercession with Christ. But no where does the Scripture teaches such a distinction in the mediatorial office. Paul makes it clear that Christ is also the mediator of our intercession: “For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Eph 2:18).

On the Elements of Worship

21.3 *Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship,¹ is by God required of all men;² and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son,³ by the help of His Spirit,⁴ according to His will,⁵ with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance;⁶ and, if vocal, in a known tongue.⁷*

¹Phil 4:6; ²Ps 65:2; ³Jn 14:13–14; ⁴1 Pet 2:5; ⁵Rom 8:26; ⁶1 Jn 5:14; ⁷Ps 47:7; ⁸Eccl 5:1–2; ⁹Heb 12:28; ¹⁰Gen 18:27; ¹¹Jas 5:16; ¹²1:6–7; ¹³Mk 11:24; ¹⁴Mt 6:12, 14–15; ¹⁵Col 4:2; ¹⁶Eph 6:18; ¹⁷1 Cor 14:14.

21.4 *Prayer is to be made for things lawful,¹ and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter;² but not for the dead,³ nor for those of whom it may be known that they have sinned the sin unto death.⁴*

¹1 Jn 5:14; ²1 Tim 2:1–2; ³Jn 17:20; ⁴2 Sam 7:29; ⁵Ruth 4:12; ⁶2 Sam 12:21–23; ⁷Lk 16:25–26; ⁸Rev 14:13; ⁹1 Jn 5:16.

21.5 *The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear;¹ the sound preaching,² and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence;³ singing of psalms with grace in the heart;⁴ as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God:⁵ beside religious oaths⁶ and vows,⁷ solemn fastings,⁸ and thanksgivings upon special occasions,⁹ which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.¹⁰*

¹Acts 15:21; ²Rev 1:3; ³2 Tim 4:2; ⁴Jas 1:22; ⁵Acts 10:33; ⁶Mt 13:19; ⁷Heb 4:2; ⁸Isa 66:2; ⁹Col 3:16; ¹⁰Eph 5:19; ¹¹Jas 5:13; ¹²Mt 28:19; ¹³1 Cor 11:23–29; ¹⁴Acts 2:42; ¹⁵Deut 6:13; ¹⁶Neh 10:29; ¹⁷Isa 19:21; ¹⁸Eccl 5:4–5; ¹⁹Joel 2:12; ²⁰Esth 4:16; ²¹Mt 9:15; ²²1 Cor 7:5; ²³Ps 107; ²⁴Esth 9:22; ²⁵Heb 12:28.

- These few paragraphs show us what the Scripture sanctions to be allowable in the worship of God in the New Testament Church. We should note carefully that divine warrant needs not necessarily require an explicit command by God. Michael Bushell has well stated:

When we say that each element of worship requires a divine warrant, we do not mean that an explicit command in a single text is required in every instance. Commandment in the narrow sense of the term is not necessary to establish divine prescription. Approved example or inference from relevant scriptural data is sufficient to determine the proper manner of worship (*Songs of Zion*, 122).

This means, for example, that there is warrant to pattern our worship on the synagogue worship of the Jews during the days of the Lord, for the Lord and the Apostles sanctioned such manner of worship by attending them.

- We should also not confuse “worship ordinances” and “worship circumstances.” Many anti-RP preachers have spoken out against the RP by saying that the RP is impractical since it does not sanction pews or even printed Bibles. Worship circumstances are things that attend to our worship which do not

have spiritual significance such as pews, etc. The following table, edited from a compilation by Brian Shwertley, is helpful:

Worship Ordinances		Worship Circumstances	
Preaching from the Bible	Matt 26:13; Mk 16:15; Acts 9:20; 2 Tim 4:2; Acts 20:7; 17:10; 1 Cor 14:28	Structure in which the church meets	Acts 20:28, 17:10; 1 Cor 14:28
Reading the Word of God	Lk 4:16-20; Acts 13:15; 1 Tim 4:13; Rev 1:3; Acts 1:13, 16:13; 1 Cor 11:20	Location at which the church meets	Acts 1:13, 16:13; 1 Cor 11:20
Meeting on the Lord's Day	Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:18	Time at which the church meets	Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:18
Administration of Sacraments	Matt 28:19; Matt 26:26-29; 1 Cor 11:24-25	Clothing worn to worship	1 Cor 11:13-15; Deut 22:5
Hearing the Word of God	Rom 10:14; Jas 1:22; Lk 4:20; Acts 20:9	Type of seating provided	Lk 4:20; Acts 20:9
Prayer to God	Matt 6:9; 1 Thes 5:17; Heb 13:15,18; Phil 4:6; Jas 1:5; 1 Cor 11:13-15; Deut 22:5	Congregational use of printed Bibles and Psalters	
The Singing of Psalms	1 Chr 16:9; Ps 95:1-1; Ps 105:2; 1 Cor 14:26; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16	Incidental and co-ordinating instructions such as 'rise up', 'be seated,' 'turn to...' etc	

- Everything in the left column must be learnt from Scripture. Everything in the right column are circumstances. But note how something that may be circumstantial may become illegal in worship. James Bannerman explains:

So soon as you attach a spiritual meaning, a sacred significance, to anything connected with worship, it becomes *eo ipso* a part of worship. It stands forthwith on a like footing with the typical ceremonies of the Old Testament, many of which were quite as insignificant in themselves as white surplice or a lighted candle (James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 355, n. 2).

In other words, if there is a blackout and the minister lights a candle, that candle has no spiritual significance, and is circumstantial. But if the minister symbolically lights a candle when he comes on the pulpit (perhaps to represent the illumination of the Holy Spirit), then it takes a spiritual significance and is forbidden. In the same way the printed Bible and Psalters have no spiritual significance, but suppose each member of the congregation is required to lift up the Bible in the air, and then kiss it before reading it, then it becomes an element of worship, and becomes forbidden.

- Note that the context of each element of each element of worship, viz.: preaching, reading, prayer and singing, is either given in the Word or left to the freedom of the minister, apart from general guidelines. In so far as the Westminster Confession is concerned, the content for Scripture reading and psalm singing is provided in the Word of God and so nothing else should be read or sung (apart from what may be read as sermons). The content of preaching and prayer is left to the minister, though there are biblical guidelines such as the Lord's Prayer. However, the minister may read his sermon and prayer since they are left to his discretion.
- Beyond indicating what elements are allowable in worship, our Confession also give us some useful guidelines on how each of the five regular elements of worship is to be carried out:
 - a. *Prayer*: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of His mercies" (*WSC* 8). It should be: (1) made with thankful heart. (2) made in the name of the Son. This does not mean always intoning the name of Christ as if there is some magical power in the formula. None of the recorded prayers in the Bible ends with "In Jesus Name." What it does mean is that prayer must be

made with the mediatorship of Christ in mind. (3) according to His will: “if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us” (1 Jn 5:14b). This is a reference to the revealed will of God. In other words, we must not pray for anything contrary to the Word of God and the teaching of the Word of God. We must only pray “for things lawful” (4) attended with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love and perseverance. (5) in a known language if vocal (in public or in private). (6) for all men living or shall live, i.e., including the future generation (1 Tim 2:1; Jn 17:20); but not for the dead or for those who are known to have committed the unpardonable sin (2 Sam 12:21-23; 1 Jn 5:16).

- b. *Reading of the Scripture.* “Give attendance to reading” (1 Tim 4:13). This must be attended with godly fear. “Reading of the Word in the congregation, being part of the public worship of God (wherein we acknowledge our dependence upon Him, and subjection to Him), and one means sanctified by Him for the edifying of His people, is to be performed by the pastors and teachers. Howbeit, such as intend the ministry, may occasionally both read the Word, and exercise their gift of preaching in the congregation, if allowed by the presbytery thereunto” (*Directory of Public Worship*).
 - c. *Preaching.* “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim 4:2). This must be sound or doctrinally accurate.
 - d. *Hearing.* This must be attended conscientiously with (1) obedience (Jas 1:22); (2) understanding (Matt 13:19); (3) faith (Heb 4:2); and (4) reverence (Isa 66:2).
 - e. *Singing.* This must be done with grace in the heart. Notice that the Confession restricts the singing only to Psalms. What about hymns and spiritual songs (Col 3:16 and Eph 5:19). There is strong Biblical evidence that Paul was referring only to the Psalms as all three terms ‘songs’, ‘hymns’ and ‘psalms’ are used to describe the Psalms in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, which the Apostles and the early church used regularly. Moreover, the term ‘spiritual’ suggests ‘Spirit-inspired,’ which cannot be applied to any human composition.
- The administration of the sacraments is also part of religious worship. Notice how the Confession separates it from the other five items. It is not considered necessary to administer the sacraments, or in particular the Lord’s Supper, every week. We will look at this in *WCF 27–29*.
 - Note that our Confession also teaches that “religious oaths [Neh 10:29] and vows [Ecc 5:4], solemn fastings [Joel 2:12; 1 Cor 7:5], and thanksgivings upon special occasions [Esth 9:22],” are sanctioned in the Word of God as part of religious worship. These may be used in a holy and religious manner when appropriate. Religious vows and oaths will be studied in the next chapter, but here we note that there is no warrant for religious holy days,—be it Easter, Good Friday or Christmas,—in the Scripture or in our Confession. However, on special occasions brought about by divine providence, the church may set aside a day for thanksgiving or fasting as may be the case. There is therefore nothing wrong with having a church anniversary thanksgiving day.

On the Place of Worship

21.6 Neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is, now under the Gospel, either tied unto, or made more acceptable by, any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed:¹ but God is to be worshipped every where² in spirit and truth,³ as in private families⁴ daily,⁵ and in secret each one by himself;⁶ so more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or willfully to be neglected or forsaken, when God, by His Word or providence, calleth thereunto.⁷

¹Jn 4:21; ²Mal 1:11; 1 Tim 2:8; ³Jn 4:23–24; ⁴Jer 10:25; Deut 6:6–7; Job 1:5; 2 Sam 6:18, 20; 1 Pet 3:7; Acts 10:2; ⁵Mt 6:11; ⁶Mt 6:6; Eph 6:18; ⁷Isa 56:6–7; Heb 10:25; Prov 1:20–21, 24; 8:34; Acts 13:42; Lk 4:16; Acts 2:42.

Worship under the New Covenant is no longer restricted to, nor anymore acceptable if engaged in, any place, not even a church building (cf. Jn 4:21). Worship in spirit and in truth may be carried out:

- a. In private families daily: “And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deut 6:6-7; cf. Jer 10:25).
- b. In private personal devotions: “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Matt 6:6).

- c. In public with other brethren: “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Heb 10:25).

On the Time of Worship—The Christian Sabbath

21.7 *As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, He hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him:¹ 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,² which in Scripture, is called the Lord’s Day,³ and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.⁴*

¹Ex 20:8, 10–11; Isa 56:2, 4, 6–7; ²Gen 2:2–3; 1 Cor 16:1–2; Acts 20:7; ³Rev 1:10; ⁴Ex 20:8, 10; Mt 5:17–18.

This section teaches us:

- *Firstly*, that the Sabbath is both a creation ordinance (“law of nature”) and a moral commandment, and so all men in all ages are obliged to observe it.
 - a. *It is a Moral Institution.*

Since the 4th Commandment is part of the Decalogue which summarises the Moral Law of God, the Sabbath must be a moral institution. Therefore, all men, at all times are as obligated to observe the Sabbath as they are to observe the sanctity of life. The Sabbath is still applicable to Christians. The Sabbath is also applicable to non-Christians. It would hardly do to say that it is wrong to kill but it is alright to break the Sabbath. The 4th Commandment, like all the other nine commandments, was engraven by the finger of God. God gave 10 commandments, not 9 commandments.
 - b. *It is a Creation Ordinance.*

God could have created the world in a twinkling of the eye. Or He could have created it in 6 seconds, or 6 minutes or 6 hours. Why did He create it in 6 days? Why are we told that He rested the 7th day? But God need not rest! Yet in the creation account, we read: “And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made” (Gen 2:2–3). God rested to set an example for His creatures to follow. Thus when He spoke the 4th Commandment, He said: “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it” (Ex 20:11).
- *Secondly*, we are taught that the day we should observe this sabbath is now the 1st day of the week. The Scripture supports this change:
 - a. The Fourth Commandment (Ex 20: 8–11; Deut 5:12–15) does not indicate that the Sabbath is to be on Saturday, but on the seventh day. It does not say that Saturday is the sabbath of the Lord, but the seventh day. Thus according to the command, the Sabbath could morally and technically be on any day of the week—so long as it occurs every 7th day.
 - b. The second giving of the 4th Commandment cites deliverance from Egypt as a reason for observing the Sabbath (Deut 5:15); and the New Testament teaches us that Israel’s deliverance from Egypt typifies our deliverance from the bondage of sin (Lk 1:71–74), which means that the Sabbath is also to commemorate the work of redemption by Christ. Psalm 118 anticipates a change of day based on the completion of the redemptive work of Christ: “The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps 118:22–24).
 - c. Though the commandment does not dictate which day of the week the Sabbath is to be observed, the Lord does indicate by other means. Thus, when the Jews forgot which day they should observe the Sabbath after their stint in Egypt—where they had a 10 day week,—the Lord indicated the day by a double portion of manna on the day before the Sabbath day (Ex 16:22–23). Similarly, the New Testament, the Lord indicates to us a new day to observe the Sabbath—only this time, He indicates the day by the post-resurrection appearance of the heavenly manna (Jn 6:31–33) on the first day of the week, which is also the day the stone which the builders reject became the head stone of the corner (Ps 118:22).

- d. The practice of the Apostles and the early church confirms that the Sabbath should be observed on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10)

21.8 This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs before-hand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations;¹ 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.²

¹Ex 20:8; 16:23, 25–26, 29–30; 31:15–17; Isa 58:13; Neh 13:15–22; ²Isa 58:13; Mt 12:1–13.

This section teaches us how we should properly observe the Sabbath day:

- a. We should make ample preparation with regard to our affairs by disposing of our daily work so we would not have to be hindered by them on the Lord's day.
- b. We should make heart preparation by prayer and reading of God's Word.
- c. We should "observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations." "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" (Isa 58:13).
- d. We should spend the day in "public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy." It would be consistent with our Confession to say that four kinds of activities are allowed on the Lord's Day: (i) Acts of Necessity (such as eating, sleeping, bathing etc); (ii) Acts of Mercy (cf. Lk 13:14-16); (iii) Acts of emergency (cf. Lk 14:5); and (iv) Acts of Piety (Mt 12:5–6; Mt 12:8).

—JJ Lim