

## 4<sup>th</sup>. Vos, Gaffin, and the Westminster Confession

Based on "Westminster and the Sabbath" by R. Gaffin in *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (I, 123-144).

### Introductory comments

There used to be many "quarrels" on Sunday about what is and is not permissible (123). That sounds bad, but debate like this "can only take place where the day is taken seriously" so the relative absence of intense discussion is indicative of "the dramatic decline in Sabbath observance even among Presbyterians during the past generation" thus, we can speak of "the Sabbath in crisis" (125).

He notes that though there are differences in emphasis between British-American Presbyterianism and Continental Calvinism (Calvin and the Dutch churches, etc), there has been one mind on what Sunday observance should look like since the Synod of Dort (1618) on validity, rest, and worship (124). However, now there is a growing reformed and non-reformed decline in Sabbath observance. In this contemporary context, we are interested in the teaching of the WCF on the Sabbath, especially regarding leadership. To what view do Presbyterian ministers subscribe in their ordination vows? This leads to the following questions for elaboration. What is the clear teaching of the confession on the Sabbath? What are the objections to it? How can we reply to these objections? How does Vos tweak the confession's treatment of the Sabbath?

### 1A. WCF on the Sabbath: key elements

1) As part of the moral law, "summarily comprehended" in the Decalogue, the fourth commandment is a "positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding on all men in all ages" (CF 21:7) [126]. The main concern of the 4<sup>th</sup> is worship as a mandate regarding the time for worship (holy to the Lord), one day of seven is to be a day of rest, a Sabbath, and it is a "creation ordinance" (126-127).

Qs: what is meant by a creation ordinance? Are there other creation ordinances less subject to debate than this one?

2) The seventh day observance became first day observance because of the resurrection on the first day of the week. It is called the Lord's Day in the NT and the confession refers to it as "the Christian Sabbath" (CF 21:7; LC 116; SC 59) for the first time in a major confessional document (127).

Qs: Can we hear a complaint as an echo of the fact that "Christian Sabbath" occurs for the first time in a major confessional document? How might we respond to it?

3) Worship is the core design of the Sabbath per the confession. Note the language of spending "the whole time" in "public and private exercises of worship" (CF 21:8; LC 117; SC 60). The "exercises" of worship include prayer, reading and preaching the Word, singing psalms, administering and receiving the sacraments (CF 21:5; **The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God; prayer is cited in 21:6.**

Q: Of the six elements of worship, which is missing in CF 21? How can we add this missing element with the use of Hebrews 13.10-16?

4) The relation of the 4<sup>th</sup> to the other commandments and all of Scripture per LC 121  
It is integral to the system of doctrine taught in Scripture and summarized in the Standards (128): **because of the great benefit of remembering it [the Sabbath], we being thereby helped in our preparation to keep it, and, in keeping it, better to keep all the rest of the commandments, and to continue a thankful remembrance of the two great benefits of creation and redemption, which contain a short abridgment of religion...because we are very ready to forget it...and many worldly businesses come between, and too often take off our minds from thinking of it, either to prepare for it, or to sanctify it (LC 121).**

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