

# Our Reasonable Service

## Sabbath Doctrine of the *Nadere Reformatie*

By Justin B. Stodghill

When ... I observed the Lord's day profaned by labour, markets, merchandize, and in other forms, I was struck with astonishment, for never had I seen the like in Britain. Nay, when I understood that some learned men in published writings very strenuously contended that the Lord's day was only of human and ecclesiastical obligation, and condemned the stricter and pious sanctification, opinions which I conceived to be the profane and licentious doctrine of Socinians, Anabaptists, and Enthusiasts, and altogether unknown to the doctors of the Reformed Church, I thought it nothing wonderful that the people profaned the Sabbath, and that the magistrates did not punish them, such things being instilled by pastors and teachers.<sup>1</sup>

John, a devout Reformed Christian, had moved his family to a new home in a strange country because his native land had fostered increasing persecutions against those who held to the Reformed faith. As was his custom and his joy, he attended worship on the Lord's Day with his family and friends. Walking home after the services, however, he was shocked by the behavior of the local community. Shops were open, the fish market was crowded with merchants and customers, restaurants were filled to capacity, the parks were abuzz with sports and other recreational activities, and the bars were overflowing with raucous patrons. To make matters worse, the local authorities considered this to be completely normal and saw nothing, in any of these activities, to be amiss. John soon came to the realization that this new city, although allowing him the freedom to worship according to the Scriptures, was not the place of full freedom that he had hoped it would be. Instead of the Christian Sabbath, citizens of every rank, file and profession (or lack thereof), venerated certain "holy days," but they displayed no misgivings about treating the Lord's Day as the best opportunity

for recreation and increasing the profit margin. As a result, John began making plans to take his family and friends somewhere else.

One might think that the preceding was taken from the personal observations of an immigrant family in any American metropolitan city during the present day. But the setting was not present day Dallas, New Orleans, New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. This event actually took place in Amsterdam nearly 400 years ago. The man was a preacher and his name was John Robinson. In 1619, he wrote:

It seemeth not without all leaven of superstition, that the Dutch reformed churches do observe certain days consecrated as holy to the nativity, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and the same also (as it commonly comes to pass where human devices are reared up by the side of Divine institutions) much more holy than the Lord's-day, by him himself appointed.<sup>2</sup>

It is remarkable that Robinson's complaint was not against the preaching of the Dutch Reformed Church. Instead, his issue was with the fact that the States-General did not enforce the Sabbath in accordance with the clear preaching and teaching of the State Church. Stating his reason for desiring to leave the Netherlands, he wrote:

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1. Matthew Crawford, a Scottish native, upon visiting Belgium in the seventeenth century. Quotation taken from James Gilfillan, *The Sabbath Viewed in the Light of Reason, Revelation, and History with Sketches of Its Literature* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot and John MacLaren, 1861), 122.

2. John Robinson, *The Works of John Robinson Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers with a Memoir and Annotations by Robert Ashton*. Volume III (1851; repr. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2009), 43-44.

If any now shall object, that there are yet other things beside these, in which we consort not so well with them, nor they with us; as for example:—1. In the sanctification of the Lord's day, in which we seem even superstitiously rigid. 2. In a certain popular exercise of prophecy amongst us. 3. In our dislike of the public temples, and sundry other indifferent things, as they are termed; besides, that we are accused by some for not having in due estimation the magistrate's authority in matters of religion; I do answer, and first, that in the two first of these, the same churches do not differ from us in judgment, but in practice: as appears evidently by the harmony of the Belgic synods, lately published by S.R. (*Works of John Robinson*, 46).

The concept of Sabbath observance as central to the true practice of Christianity was not unique to Robinson and the Pilgrim visitors. There was a growing sense of urgency for the same consistent Biblical practice among Dutch Reformed ministers and professors. Discussion of right Sabbath observance was an important part of the Synod of Dort.<sup>3</sup> Sabbath observance, however, was but one of many practical issues facing the Dutch Reformed divines during the seventeenth century. There was a growing, powerful movement to emphasize Biblical Christianity *in practice* and not merely in outward profession. The flowering of this emphasis appeared in the *Nadere Reformatie*, or “Further Reformation,” of the Dutch Reformed Church. The broadest dating of this event is from the end of the sixteenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century, with its earliest representatives being Jean Taffin (1528–1602) and Willem Teellinck (1579–1629) and its latest representatives being Alexander Comrie (1706–74) and Theodorus van der Groe (1705–84).<sup>4</sup>

The resulting emphasis on doctrine and practice in the Netherlands was in complete harmony with the English and Scottish counterparts of roughly the same period, and corresponds to the “Second Reformation” in Britain, the crowning achievement of which were the documents promulgated by the Westminster Assembly

of Divines in the 1640s. This close tie between the English Puritans and Dutch Reformed divines is summarized in the following quotation.

The obvious similarity between à Brakel's writings, which represent the cream of Dutch Second Reformation literature, and Puritan literature is highly significant. It proves that the Puritans and the Dutch Second Reformation divines (sometimes referred to as the Dutch Puritans) were essentially cut from the same cloth. It will be difficult to find essential differences in Christian experience between à Brakel and such English Puritans as John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, and John Bunyan. The divines of the Dutch Second Reformation have translated literally hundreds of English Puritans into Dutch, recommending them warmly to their congregations. The Dutch Second Reformation was greatly indebted to English Puritanism for a wealth of sound experiential material.<sup>5</sup>

Among the many lights of this notable period in the Netherlands were Jean Taffin, Willem Teellinck, Gisbertus Voetius, Herman Witsius, Jacobus Koelman, and Johannes Hoornbeeck. The scope of this paper is limited to the consideration of two distinct representative English translations—one earlier and one later—of the *Nadere Reformatie* divines, Godefridus Udemans and Wilhelmus à Brakel. Both men presented a consistent Biblical model for Lord's Day observance in both doctrine and practice. Both men recognized that the practice of the Sabbath was essential for the spiritual wellbeing of their congregants and for their society as a whole. In an age when the civil magistrate refused to enforce both Tables of the Moral Law, these men boldly preached the whole counsel of God to their congregations and their society. When the parallels are so vivid between the Netherlands in the seventeenth century and America today, it is imperative that Presbyterian and Reformed pastors, presbyters and professors do no less—in profession and practice—for the present generation.

It is evident from seventeenth century Church history that, in the Netherlands as well as England and Scotland, there was a strong rebellion against the idea that one's daily walk should be strictly reflective of one's profession. But the harmony of the consistently Reformed divines is remarkable when one considers their unanimity with respect to the continuing applicability of the Moral Law. Since the 1535/6 edition of Melancthon's *Loci communes* it has been common to speak of the three uses of the law of God.<sup>6</sup> The “first use” of the

3. Cf. Daniel R. Hyde, “*Regulae de Observatione Sabbathi: The Synod of Dort's (1618–19) Deliverance on the Sabbath*” (reprinted this issue).

4. Joel R. Beeke, “The Dutch Second Reformation (‘Nadere Reformatie’)” [http://www.abrakel.com/2009/11/dutch-second-reformation-dr-joel-r\\_06.html](http://www.abrakel.com/2009/11/dutch-second-reformation-dr-joel-r_06.html) (accessed 25 March 2016).

5. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans Bartel Elshout, ed. by Joel R. Beeke. 4 vols. (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1992–1995; 2011), 1.xxi–xxii.

6. Richard Muller. *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 129.

Moral Law may be said to be civil in nature, and is applicable and binding upon the regenerate and the unregenerate alike. John Calvin posited that protects the commonwealth, "...at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats in the law."<sup>7</sup> The "second use" of the Law is of particular use for the unregenerate. The Westminster divines summarized: "The moral law is of use to unregenerate man, to awaken their consciences to flee from the wrath to come, and to drive them to Christ; or, upon their continuance in the estate and way of sin, to leave them inexcusable, and under the curse thereof."<sup>8</sup>

It would be easy to think that there is no further binding effect of the Moral Law upon those freed from the curse of the Law through Christ. But the consistently Biblical and Reformed view disagrees. There is a "third use" of the Moral Law that is of special use to the regenerate. The Westminster divines stated:

Although they that are regenerate, and believe in Christ, be delivered from the moral law as a covenant of works, so as thereby they are neither justified nor condemned; yet, besides the general uses thereof common to them with all men, it is of special use, to shew them how much they are bound to Christ for His fulfilling it, and enduring the curse thereof in their stead, and for their good; and thereby to provoke them to more thankfulness, and to express the same in their greater care to conform themselves thereunto as the rule of their obedience (WLC 97).

Beeke and Jones record: "The Spirit's teaching results in Christians being made 'friends' with the law, Rutherford quipped, for 'after Christ has made agreement between us and the law, we delight to walk in it for the love of Christ.' That delight, grounded in gratitude for the gospel, produces the greatest measure of liberty. Samuel Croke (1575–1649) put it this way: 'From the commandment, as a rule of life, [believers] are not freed, but on the contrary, are inclined and disposed, by [their] free spirit, to willingly obey it. Thus, to the regenerate the law becomes as it were gospel, even a law of liberty.'<sup>9</sup> The "third use" of the Law lays the groundwork for the Biblical mandate that believers become more Christ-like in their daily lives through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit using the Law as the plumb line for the believer's life as reflective of the holiness of God. The discussion of the perpetual and universal application of the Moral Law is not, therefore, a merely academic exercise. It remains foundational and essential to the Biblical world and life view. Discarding

any portion of the Moral Law for the sake of convenience or changing societal mores is nothing less than rebellion against God. For Reformed pastors, presbyters and professors to foster such rebellion is a distinct disservice to Christ in any age.

The translation and availability of Udemans' and à Brakel's works, along with so many like them, therefore, are a timely and important boon to modern Christendom because of their sound Biblical imperative upon the continuing importance of the Moral Law, particularly the "third use" of that Law, primarily because the rebellion against experiential religion remains a hallmark of the Christian Church even within Reformed churches. For these men, it was insufficient to have a right understanding of the Word of God. One must also put that doctrine into practice. For leaders of the *Nadere Reformatie*, then, a right understanding of God's Word, and of the "third use" of God's Law in particular, must necessarily result in experiential piety of life. In other words, the *objective* Truth of God will necessarily result in the *subjective* application of that Truth in the whole man of the genuine Christian—orthodoxy only exists where orthopraxis is evident. Udemans wrote: "In considering the practice of love, let us first remember that we do not speak here of a natural but of a spiritual love that flows not from flesh and blood but from a clean, pure heart, a good conscience, and unfeigned faith (1 Tim. 1:5). ...To practice love we should always pay attention to the moral law, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments, for love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:10)."<sup>10</sup> "The rule for holiness is the law of God," noted à Brakel (à Brakel, 3.35). Rightly understood, the practice of obedience is the result of regeneration rather than the cause of it. Second Reformation *piety* is the direct opposite of, and necessarily opposed to, the earlier error of Romanist monasticism and the later error of German *pietism*. It is in Christ that the penalty for sin has been paid and it is through the Spirit of Christ that the believer is progressively conformed more to Christ's image. À Brakel goes on to note the following:

7. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.7.10, p. 358.

8. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 96. In *The Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons Ltd., 1973), 73.

9. Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 560.

10. Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. Annemie Godbehere, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 193.

*The law is the rule of life given to man by God, the only Lawgiver, to govern the disposition of his heart, thoughts, words, and conduct thereby.*

If we view the law as a condition of the covenant of works, it carries with it the threat of death to transgressors and the promise of life to those who observe it perfectly. If, however, we view it in the context of the circumstances and the objective with which it was declared at Mount Sinai, then the true partakers of the covenant can indeed perceive what their transgressions do merit and what the consequences of perfect obedience would be. The punishment due upon them has been taken away by the Surety, however, and by their continual commission of offenses they readily perceive that they cannot perfectly keep the law nor obtain salvation by the law, but only through the Surety, Jesus Christ. They also understand that upon their transgressions God chastises them as a Father and that He graciously rewards their sincere efforts (à Brakel, 3.36).

Thus, for the child of God, the Moral Law remains the standard for one's conduct and the paradigm for holy living. It remains relevant and binding, "With the objective of being a steadfast rule of life for the partakers of the covenant of grace, to show them the way in all its purity, and to stir them up to enter into and persevere in this way, and to guide them in this way. "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to Thy word" (Ps. 119:9). In reference to this the law is called: *the way of the Lord, pathway, and path* (Ps. 119)" (à Brakel, 3.42).

Godefridus Udemans (1581–1649) was the pastor in Zierikzee and among the first wave of *Nadere Reformatie* divines, along with Jean Taffin and Willem Teellinck. Among his distinctive contributions, Udemans was the Vice President of the famous Synod of Dort (1618–19). In 1612, he published an important work entitled, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*. The work is divided into four parts: Part 1, a Preface, discussing the "Chief Christian Virtues"; Part 2, "The Practice of Faith: The Apostles' Creed"; Part 3, "The Practice of Hope: The Lord's Prayer"; Part 4, "The Practice of Love: The Ten Commandments." For Udemans, faith and practice must be harmoniously united in the lives of believers. There is a deep warmth in his approach and a keen theological mind evident in his works. Joel Beeke observes: "What William Perkins (1558–1602) did for England, Godefridus Udemans strove to do for the Netherlands—to point

11. E. W. Hengstenberg, *The Lord's Day*, trans. James Martin (London: William Freeman, 1853), 69.

the people to their divine calling in Christ ... [He] is one of the most significant, typical, and influential ministers in the early period of the Dutch Further Reformation, during the first half of the seventeenth century ... [He] had a great vision for the spiritual renewal of the Netherlands. He did not live to see that vision fulfilled as he wished, but he was given God's grace to strive for it, and in the process, he made a huge positive and spiritual impact on the lives of thousands" (à Brakel, 16–17).

Combating the stagnation of morals in both Church and society, *Nadere Reformatie* divines recognized that there must be a revival of the preaching and practice of the Moral Law. It becomes evident from the emphases in their writings that, for these Dutch divines, the restoration of Sabbath observance was central to the keeping of the whole Law. Hengstenberg has argued that Sabbath keeping was a novelty introduced to the Dutch by English and Scottish refugees. Hengstenberg writes:

From England the doctrine of the obligation of the Mosaic law of the Sabbath spread to Holland. Some English Puritans, who sought asylum in Zealand, introduced it. It was first published in two works on Ethics, by Udemann in 1612, and Teelling, in 1617. Several ministers embraced the new opinions; others retained the old. The Synod of Dortrecht attempted to put an end to the controversy; but they did not venture to do so by giving a positive decision as to the doctrine. They sought to stifle the discussion. At last it was determined, that, in the reprint of their minutes, what had passed about the Sabbath should be omitted. A commission of four theologians was entrusted with the settlement of the question, and the preparation of articles, which both parties could accept. They accomplished this, and both parties were at first really satisfied with their six articles. At the same time, it was decreed that these should be retained, and that no one should preach or write against them, till a national synod was held, which was not likely to be very soon.... As we may readily imagine, these means were not adapted to secure the desired effect. It was not long before the controversy was renewed with greater warmth than ever. From the ministers it soon passed to the professors. It spread through all the academies of Holland, and for a whole century was the cause of great and uninterrupted discord in the Church.<sup>11</sup>

There is more to this account, however. It should be observed that William Ames' *Marrow of Theology*, with the second part (containing the chapter on "The Time of Worship") was not published until 1627, six years after Teellinck's *The Rest-time, or a Treatise on the Observance*

of the *Christian Sabbath*, and fully fifteen years after the publication of Udemans' *Faith, Hope, and Love*, in 1612. Mosheim argues that both William Perkins and Willem Teellinck shaped Ames' own view of the Sabbath: "It is conceded by eminent divines among the Reformed, that *William Perkins*, an Englishman, first undertook to explain in a more accurate manner the science of practical theology; which *Calvin* and his contemporaries, had left in a rude and imperfect state. With him was associated, among the Hollanders *William Teling*, who wrote however in the Dutch Language. In emulation of them, *William Ames*, an Englishman, but a theologian of Franeker in Holland, undertook to compose a complete system of *Practical Theology*. Afterwards others prosecuted the subject."<sup>12</sup> Citing the instance of Robinson's complaint, however, James Gilfillan observes:

But if the testimony of Robinson already adduced be true—and its truth admits of full confirmation—there was no call to change the opinions of the Zealanders in reference to the institution, since both foreigners and Zealanders were substantially of the same mind on the subject, nor, though such men as Cartwright and his friends would, as occasion, offered, declare their Sabbath views, have we evidence that they felt it necessary to combat opinions opposite to their own. It was improved practice that was needed, and what English Puritans failed to effect in Holland, was by a native, profiting indeed by what he had witnessed of a well-observed Sabbath in England and Scotland, achieved in Zeeland. And when Godfrey Udemann, minister at Zierikzee, and not the least able or energetic member of the Synod of Dort, maintained in his *Practice of the Christian Virtues*, as in other writings, the doctrines of a primitive—perpetual—moral, not "Mosaic" Sabbath transferred under Christianity to a new day, he and Teellinck, who also held these doctrines, instead of introducing novelties, or requiring to borrow their opinions from abroad, found their tenets already in the creed of their Church (Gilfillan, 101).

Udemans' thorough discussion of the Sabbath, therefore, is vital to understanding the prevailing Dutch Reformed view of the Sabbath. In Part 4 of *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, chapter 30, Udemans lays out the Biblical teaching on the Sabbath and discusses its right observance. He writes that the purpose of the Fourth Commandment is to prescribe a time for private and public worship, especially on the weekly Sabbath day. Continuing his discussion, he argues that the Fourth Commandment is divided into three essential parts: the

positive command to remember the Sabbath Day and hallow it, an explanation of what God's people are to do on the Sabbath by describing the other six days for work, and the concluding confirmation of the importance of Sabbath observance because of God's resting from His creative labors on the seventh day.

Udemans proceeds to deal with various objections against the perpetuity of the Sabbath Commandment. Against those who say that the keeping of the Sabbath is merely a Jewish ceremony and inapplicable to Christians, Udemans argues: (1) The Sabbath was instituted as a creation ordinance prior to the fall, (Gen. 2:3), (2) It is part of the Moral Law of the New Testament: "Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law," (Matt. 5:18), (3) "The purpose of this commandment is everlasting in its scope. It commands the spreading of true religion, the edification and unity of the community, the strengthening of faith and godliness in our souls, and the refreshment of the bodies of people and animals. Such purposes are not ceremonial but moral" (Udemans, 288), (4) God ordained it specifically to prescribe His set and appointed times for worship, and (5) Christ's admonition that the disciples should pray that they do not have to flee destruction on the Sabbath Day (Matt. 24:20) is a clear indicator that Christ taught the perpetuity of the Sabbath for His Church. This is a critical argument since the intent of the passage is for the Church *after* Christ's ascension and it was addressed to the twelve, not to the Jews. Udemans concludes this section with the following statement:

[We] should consider the great damage that results from neglecting the Sabbath and, on the other hand, the excellent benefits that flow out of keeping the Sabbath day holy. Despising the Sabbath means despising prophecy (the explanation of Holy Scripture) and all Christian religion, and despising prophecy is the mother of ignorance, unbelief, superstition, and every kind of recklessness (Prov. 29:18). When prophecy ceases, people become wild and savage in contrast to those who maintain the law.

We must understand in conscience and know by experience that keeping the fourth commandment is the most important means to worship God rightly, to edify God's community, and to strengthen our souls. It answers the promise given in Isaiah 56:1–2: "Thus saith the LORD, Keep ye judgment, and do justice: for my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be

12. Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern*, trans. James Murdock, 3 vols. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1861), 3:193–94.

revealed [note that this refers to the time of the New Testament]. Blessed is the man that doeth this, and the son of man that layeth hold on it; that keep the Sabbath from polluting it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil.' The Lord goes on to say that Sabbath observance is a mark of His children who do what pleases the Lord, who serve and love Him, and who take hold of His covenant. He promises those who rightly observe the Sabbath that He will accept them and make them joyful in His temple, and will be pleased by their sacrifices. See also Isaiah 58:13 (Udemans, 290–91).

Udemans goes on, with judicious exegesis, to wipe away the objections of those who quote Romans 14:5, Galatians 4:10–11, and Colossians 2:16 (he observes that these refer to the feast days of the Hebrew civic calendar and not to the weekly Sabbath), those who quote Mark 2:27–28 (where the Lord Jesus insists that Sabbath observance must not impede acts of mercy without, in any way, abrogating the sanctifying of the Day), and those who claim that changing the day from the seventh to the first day of the week necessarily alters the commandment, thus repealing the binding nature of the Fourth Word. In each of these instances, Udemans proves that objections to Sabbath observance by New Testament saints is equivalent to rearing up just so many “straw men,” the design of which is to undermine God’s authority over His creation. To reject the perpetual nature of the Fourth Commandment is to reject the sovereignty of the living God Who gave it.

With reference to the positive command to keep the Sabbath, Udemans lists specific virtues that are required. Obedience to the Fourth Commandment requires that Christians prepare their hearts, in advance, for the approaching Sabbath. On the day, they should attend public worship with their families, bring offerings into the Church and, upon the conclusion of the services, spend the remainder of the day in meditating upon what they learned in the Church and doing works of mercy:

To attain these heavenly virtues, we should take the following directions: First, we should prepare for the day of rest.... Second, we should remember that this is the day on which the Lord invites us to satisfy our souls and to delight in the heavenly banquet that He has prepared to nourish us (Prov. 9:5).... Third, we should distance ourselves from worldly and ungodly company that trouble our consciences and infect our senses on the Sabbath.... Fourth, we should keep before us the

examples of God’s servants who were truly zealous in the service of the Lord (Udemans, 297–98).

Among the sins forbidden in the Fourth Commandment, Udemans includes such, “Devilish Works ... [as] drinking, toasting, dancing, skipping, quarrelling, fighting, laziness, and idleness [which] prompt us to neglect the church’s assemblies” (Udemans, 299). Instead, Christians must turn aside from all worldly pleasures: “If people attend worship services in the morning of the Lord’s Day, they think they are allowed to pass the remainder of the day as they desire. However, they give themselves too much leeway because of the following reasons. First, these worldly pleasures defy the purpose of the commandment, which says it is not enough to rest from our work and temporary affairs on this day. We should instead spend the time in holy exercises to keep the Sabbath holy” (301), for the right observance of the Sabbath, Godly ministers should preach on the duties of the Fourth Commandment and encourage the lesser magistrates to enforce it. Magistrates, according to Udemans, should enforce the Sabbath both by example and by precept, “...for they are the keepers of both tables” (305). Further incentives to keep the Sabbath include the reminder that God placed this Commandment in the *first* Table of the Moral Law, which greatly enforces it. He reminds the Church that, “...If we do not observe one day a week according to God’s commandment, then Jews and papists will rise up against us on the last day and condemn us” (Udemans, 307). Any fear or excuse to avoid making the Sabbath a present-day delight demonstrates a sincere lack of faith and threatens the Lord’s Hand of judgment upon His people and their land (Lev. 26:34).

Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711) also understood the imperative of practicing his profession of the doctrines of Scripture and he focused his ministry upon the principle that the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit naturally reflected the principle of living out one’s faith, with growth in Godly living accompanying the necessary growth in Biblical doctrine. He was the pastor in Rotterdam from 1687 until his death in 1711. As a remarkable legacy to his life and ministry, he produced his *magnum opus* entitled *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* (originally published in 1700). “The uniqueness of à Brakel’s work lies in the fact that it is more than a systematic theology. À Brakel’s intent in writing is inescapable: he intensely wishes that the truth expounded may become an experiential reality in the hearts of those who read. In a masterful way, he establishes the crucial relationship between objective truth and the subjective experience of that truth.”<sup>13</sup>

13. Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson. *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 749.

À Brakel emphasized the fact that the Fourth—of all the other Commandments—is the one that is most often ignored or explained away by men. The assault on the Fourth Commandment is one that has raged since the Lord God first declared it and was one of the first publicly broken after the giving of the written Law at Sinai. À Brakel rightly insists that this Commandment, along with the other nine, comprise, in summary form, the whole moral duty of man. He divides the contents of the Commandment into three sections: (1) a short exhortation; (2) a declaration; and (3) incentives for observance. First, under the heading of a short exhortation, the Commandment states: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” (Exodus 20:8). Observes à Brakel: “Remember, that is, see to it that you do not contradict, reject, or forget this commandment. Remember it prior to the arrival of that day in order that you may order your affairs in such a manner that nothing will hinder you; prepare yourself for this day ahead of time. Be exhorted and be warned” (à Brakel, 3.139). He goes on to explain that this Sabbath rest necessarily includes the cessation of one’s daily labors, desisting from worldly activities, and the refreshing of oneself after one’s labor. “The activity being commanded relative to this day is *being sanctified*, that is, *to be set apart* for sacred use (Exodus 13:2). There must also be preparation (Exodus 19:11), a holy and lawful use (1 Timothy 1:8), and a regarding of this day (Romans 14:6)” (à Brakel, 140).

Second, under the *declaration* of the Commandment, à Brakel explains the time of the observance of the Sabbath, the manner of observance, and the persons called to its observance. With reference to the time of the observance, he states:

The commandment conveys that it is the seventh, which follows upon six days of labor. “Six days shalt thou labor.” This is not a command to work (which belongs to the second table), but a stipulation as to how long one may work, and a direction when one must cease to labor and when the Sabbath begins. It says as much as that whatever we are under obligation to do must be performed in six days, for the seventh day is a time of rest; *it is the Sabbath of the LORD thy God*. God rested on the seventh day and has thus given us an example. He has set this day apart for sacred purposes and has commanded man to hallow this day to the glorification of His Name. *Secondly*, the manner in which this day is to be hallowed is as follows: “Thou shalt do *no manner of work*.” We are enjoined to serve God in the First Commandment, and this encompasses all our activity of soul and body at all times, during both day and

night. The Fourth Commandment, however, requires the service to God in the full sense of the word, that is, with cessation of labor (à Brakel, 3.141).

With reference to the manner in which the Sabbath is to be observed, à Brakel understands both the essential command to cease from the daily labors which are to occupy the other six days of the week as well as the simultaneous command to occupy oneself throughout the whole day in religious worship as required by God in His Word. He states: “[Doing] no manner of work and religious worship must be conjoined as being one injunction. Doing no manner of work must be understood in a spiritual sense, so that it refers to the manner of religious engagement, and thereby is distinguished from religion in the general sense of the word as it is enjoined in the First Commandment. It is not *rest* which is commanded, but rather, a *holy rest*” (à Brakel, 3.142). Yet à Brakel is careful to distinguish between one’s daily labor as forbidden and works of necessity and mercy that are permitted. Religious labors (i.e., “...when ministers preach in the sweat of their brow...”), works of absolute necessity, and works of mercy are all lawfully performed on the Sabbath. With reference to the persons included in this Commandment, à Brakel makes the most important point that all men, without distinction, are required to observe a holy resting on the Sabbath. He says, “...All men without distinction are forbidden to work. It is not sufficient that we rest ourselves, but we must also permit our children and servants to rest, and we must even oblige *strangers* who dwell or stay with us to rest.... God thus wishes to have complete silence upon the entire face of the earth” (Ibid.).

Third, with reference to the incentives added to this Commandment, à Brakel promotes three. The first incentive is the very Example of God Himself Who rested the seventh day after creating the entire universe and declaring all that He had made “very good.” The second incentive is the good that the observation of the Sabbath does to mankind. Because the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, says à Brakel, “...it is a promise of blessing made to the conscientious observers of that day; that is, the receipt of comfort, joy, and holiness for the soul, and to render the physical labor of the six workdays to be more prosperous and profitable. For everything is dependent upon the blessing of the Lord, and without this all our labor is in vain (Psalm 127:1–2)” (à Brakel, 3.143). The third incentive is in the very nature of the Sabbath as ordained by God because, in that He *hallowed* the Sabbath day, man must keep the Sabbath for the simple fact that God set it apart for the holy use of worshipping Him

in the congregation of fellow believers, as well as in the home, throughout the entirety of the day.

“Father Brakel,” in good Puritan fashion, turns then to the sins prohibited and the duties enjoined in the Fourth Commandment. He begins with seven sins prohibited in the Fourth Commandment. “First,” states à Brakel:

...we sin when we do not, with joyous approbation, set the Sabbath apart from the other days, and when we fail to acknowledge that this day has been set apart by God by virtue of His example and command, having appointed it to be a day of rest, refreshment, and glorification of God. This sin consists in disobedience and a despising of privileges (3.143).

To this prohibition, he adds the sins of turning the Sabbath into a workday like any other, transforming the day into a “market day” for shopping, filling the day with worldly pleasures, spending the time in idleness, as well as speaking against the observance of the Sabbath and mocking or condemning those who do. Of particular interest is the sin of turning the Sabbath into a “day of sin.” Within this prohibition, à Brakel includes wearing “hideous, worldly garb ... drinking in bars and inns, where one can hear the violin ... and playing of drums ... having cold buffets in one’s yard, elaborate meals in the home ... [and] this pertains to going courting.... In one word, we sin if we spend this day in all manner of looseness and licentiousness. Such sins are double in measure—yes, we provoke God in an extraordinary manner” (3.144).

À Brakel divides the virtues enjoined in the Fourth Commandment into three subheadings: preparation, observance, and reflection. Preparing for the Sabbath involves having a knowledge of one’s obligation to hallow the day, having a spiritual desire for it, praying for strength to observe it, ceasing one’s daily labors in sufficient time to prepare for it, and providing for the necessary sustenance in order that no shopping be done on the Sabbath and the minimal amount of time be required for cooking.

In the matter of Sabbath observance, à Brakel begins by stating, “*Observation not only consists in resting*—as if that were the whole or part of its observance. It also does not consist in *servicing God in a more spiritual manner* than on other days. Neither does it consist in a narrow-minded ‘touch not and taste not,’ nor in asking, ‘May I do this or may I do that?’ The Sabbath is not a snare, but rather a day of delight—not, however, for sinful flesh. Those who are spiritually minded will

almost always know what either favors or impedes the spirituality of the Sabbath and the hallowing of this day” (3.145–146). Thus, he continues, proper Sabbath observance involves a focusing on the commandment and example of God accompanied by obedient subjection and a love to imitate it, and spending the day withdrawn from one’s regular daily labors in order to spend the whole day in the joyful worship of God. One must occupy his time by beholding God’s works of creation and providence and meditate upon Christ’s redemptive work. Furthermore, faithful attendance to the public gatherings of the Church, visitation of the sick and destitute, Godly fellowship with the saints, and making contribution to the Church and poor, are all integral parts of right Sabbath observance.

Turning then to the need for reflection at the close of the Sabbath, à Brakel directs the Christian to consider how the day was spent and note particularly the ways in which he did *not* properly observe it (joining with this recognition the prayer of confession and seeking forgiveness from God with a determination to keep the day better in the future by the grace of God). To this honest self-examination, one must add the good manner in which the Sabbath was kept (though it be so little in comparison to the way in which it was violated), thankful acknowledgment to God for His blessings in the Church on that day, and a deeper yearning for the eternal Sabbath to come.

To all of this, à Brakel adds incentives for keeping the Sabbath—both negative and positive. Negatively, one should consider the way in which God views the violation of the Sabbath and the manner in which He punishes them (and here, à Brakel recommends the following passages for meditation: Leviticus 26:2, 14–16; Nehemiah 13:17–18; Jeremiah 17:27; Ezekiel 20:15–16; and Amos 8:11–12). Positively, one should contemplate the Biblical promises of blessing to those who keep the Sabbath and consider it a delight (Psalm 92:1–2; Isaiah 56:2, 4–7; 58:13–14; as well as Christ’s particular stamp upon the day, as seen in His post-resurrection appearances (John 20:1, 19, 26) and His Revelation to John upon the Lord’s Day (Revelation 1:10).

Having opened up this Commandment, à Brakel next turns to a series of objections raised against it. One notes with interest the strong controversy regarding the keeping of the Sabbath that lay in the background. The struggle between strong, Reformed Scholasticism combined with warm, experiential piety in the life and work of Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) and his successors (including à Brakel) on the one hand, and the move toward compromise in the thought of Johannes

Cocceius (1603–1669) and his successors on the other, spills out into à Brakel's defense of the Sabbath and Sabbath-keeping. One finds in à Brakel's view of the Sabbath a very clear agreement with the best English Puritan and Scottish Presbyterian divines. Following in the footsteps of the Reformers and early Church Fathers and in keeping with Christ and His apostles, à Brakel understood that the Fourth Commandment is moral, rather than ceremonial, in nature. It was this very point that Cocceius rejected, claiming that the Fourth Commandment was ceremonial in nature and therefore is no longer binding since Christ perfectly fulfilled, and thus abrogated, the whole of the ceremonial law (Cf. Gilfillan, 116–120). Rejecting this idea (as well as the notions of Jews, Socinians, Anabaptists, and Antinomians), à Brakel states: "The Church of all ages has been opposed to these propositions. We therefore maintain that this commandment is of the same moral nature as the other nine and does not typify Christ in the least. This commandment not only enjoins public worship, but also the hallowing of the seventh day following six workdays, and that this day be spent in holy resting" (3.150).

Further to prove the moral and perpetual nature of the Fourth Commandment, à Brakel shows from Scripture that this Commandment, having been instituted prior to the Fall of man, cannot be ceremonial (Genesis 2:1–3; Exodus 31:17). This is perhaps the strongest Biblical argument against those well-meaning individuals who consider the Fourth Commandment to be abrogated. [Conversely, of course, those who wish to do injury to the Law of God will continue in their rebellion, regardless of the Biblical proofs brought to bear, unless the Lord changes their hearts.] Furthermore, since the commandment to "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" is clearly given as the Fourth of the Ten Commandments, it follows that this commandment *cannot* be part of the ceremonial law since it was given as part of the moral law. "Whatever commandment is a commandment of the moral law, is not ceremonial, but belongs to the eternal rule of holiness, obligating all men. The *fourth* commandment is a commandment of the moral law, however, and it thus follows..." (3.158) that the Sabbath is not ceremonial. Again, quoting Matthew 5:16–19, à Brakel continues his defense of the moral and perpetual nature of the Fourth Commandment by contending that, as a part of the Moral Law summarized in the Ten Commandments:

The objective of the Lord Jesus in this passage is to demonstrate that by His coming, conscientious godliness

was not abolished. The reference here to the moral law can be determined for the following reasons:

It is that law which is the rule for good works and thus for a holy life (vs. 16).

It is that law which Christ did not come to disannul, since He did come to disannul the ceremonial law.

It is that law which Christ has fulfilled (vs. 17), so that by His obedience we are made righteous (Romans 5:19).

It is that law which will endure as long as the earth will remain (vs. 18).

It is that law which one was not permitted to break upon the coming of Christ, but which one was obliged to do and teach (vs. 19).

It was that law in which murder, the false and unnecessary swearing of oaths, revenge, and adultery are forbidden, and in which generosity and sincere love (even toward enemies) are commanded, this being evident from what follows in this chapter. However, this is the moral law—the law of the Ten Commandments. Thus, the reference here is to the moral law. Now, neither jot nor tittle of this law will pass away as long as the heaven and the earth endure. Therefore, since the *fourth* commandment is a full-fledged commandment of that law, also this commandment will remain and not pass away. Consequently, this commandment is not ceremonial, but an eternal rule of life, as is true of the other commandments (à Brakel, 3.159–160).

À Brakel continues his defense of the perpetual and binding nature of Sabbath observance as a commandment of the moral—rather than the ceremonial—law by proving from the Scriptures that Christ, His apostles, and the entire early Church faithfully kept the Sabbath Day. There was, however, one distinct difference; namely, the institution by Christ at His resurrection, and by His and His apostles' examples, of the *first* day of the week—rather than the *seventh* day—as the Christian Sabbath, also known as the Lord's Day. Quoting such familiar passages as John 20:26 (where the Lord Jesus appeared to His disciples on the *first day of the week*), Acts 20:6–7 (where Paul observed the Christian Sabbath on the *first day of the week*), 1 Corinthians 16:1–2 (where Paul enjoins the bringing in of the collection into the Church upon the *first day of the week*), and Revelation 1:10 (where the ascended Christ reveals His Revelation

to John on the *first day of the week, which is the Lord's Day*), à Brakel sets forth the Biblical principle of the perpetuity of the Sabbath Day with the change from the seventh to the first day of the week following the resurrection of Christ. He then adds to the Biblical testimony the witness of early Church fathers including Irenaeus, Basilus, Epiphanius, Athanasius, Eusebius, Augustine, Justin Martyr, Chrysostom, and Constantinus Magus. His conclusion of this section is that the commandment itself, being given before the fall (and therefore not ceremonial), having been codified with the other nine in the Ten Commandments (and thus necessarily moral) which Christ declared could not pass away so long as the earth endures and therefore remains binding upon all of His people, having been faithfully observed by Christ, His apostles, and the early Church, must, of necessity, remain an integral part of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ throughout every age:

How can anyone therefore reject this day with good conscience? Ought not everyone to be convinced of the eternal duration of the Sabbath, be ashamed over his unsteadfastness and grieve over its desecration, and furthermore, be stirred up to a conscientious observance? (à Brakel, 3.164).

À Brakel concludes this chapter on the exposition and defense of the Fourth Commandment by answering various other objections, but sufficient evidence exists to conclude that he was in complete agreement, in doctrine and practice, with the best and most devout minds of the First and Second Reformations. What à Brakel clearly teaches in his exposition is in perfect harmony with the summary statements of the Westminster divines:

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: 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.

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 and 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.

It is of central importance to the glory of God that the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in America devote the same energy, both in preaching and in practice, to the observance and promotion of the Sabbath as the Dutch, English and Scottish divines did in the seventeenth century. The brief discussion above has demonstrated that the leading divines of the *Nadere Reformatie*, as epitomized by Udemans and à Brakel, agreed with their English and Scottish counterparts that the Fourth Commandment was both a *moral* and a *perpetual* obligation for all men, especially those professing the Christian faith. This is not only the Godly heritage of Presbyterian and Reformed bodies in America, it is the hallmark of a consistently Biblical and confessional religion.

The challenge, of course, is how to respond to the American culture when the civil magistrate is no deterrent against the blatant disregard for the Fourth Word. And this is precisely the point at which the divines of the *Nadere Reformatie* have yet much more to offer this present generation. When Udemans published *Faith, Hope, and Love* in 1612 it was at a time when the States-General refused to enforce any Sabbatical laws. But Udemans and his companions were steadfast in *preaching* the Biblical mandate for Sabbath observance to their congregations, humbly *petitioning* the civil magistrate to enforce both Tables of the Moral Law, and *teaching* rising generations of ministers to continue to preach the whole counsel of God. Can the present-day successors to these stalwarts of the faith do any less for the glory of God?■