

Is the Westminster Confession's Doctrine of the Sabbath a Judaizing Doctrine?

A CRITIQUE OF THE FIRST MINORITY REPORT OF THE OPC'S COMMITTEE ON SABBATH MATTERS

By Geoffrey L. Willour

INTRODUCTION

It is often suggested that the fourth commandment is the most openly violated and least observed of the commandments in the Decalogue. It should not be surprising to find this among the secular and unbelieving, who profess no interest in the public ordinances of Divine worship, nor in the holy rest offered to weary souls on the sacred day. Indeed, while all men are duty-bound as God's creatures to render unto Him whatsoever worship or service He is pleased to require of them, the unregenerate lack genuine interest in spiritual things, and feel no inward compulsion to observe moral duties such as keeping the Sabbath day holy. Only the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in effectual calling can awaken such individuals from their spiritual indifference and implant within their souls the disposition and desire for holy things. But what ought to be both alarming and sad to those of confessionally Reformed and Presbyterian sensibilities is how many there are in the church today who profess faith in and allegiance unto our Lord Jesus Christ with all evident sincerity, and yet who appear almost as dismissive of the duty of observing the fourth commandment as their secular and unbelieving neighbors, except perhaps in the matter of attendance in the public assembly of worship.

I suspect that one of the major reasons for the laxity of Sabbath observance today is the widespread belief that the fourth commandment is merely a ceremonial commandment, one which was only binding upon God's people living under the old covenant administration. In this view, the Sabbath command was merely a Jewish shadow that found its substance and fulfillment in Christ, the One in whom alone believers find their salvation-rest. It is not viewed as a moral command of God, binding upon all men in all ages, including those outside of the covenant community, and including believers

living in this new covenant age. Thus, the observance of the fourth commandment is considered no more binding on the Christian conscience today than the avoidance of shellfish. Of course, while churches that adhere to the Westminster Standards teach and confess that believers find salvation-rest in Christ alone, the Standards also clearly teach that the Sabbath command is not merely a ceremonial, positive, and thus temporary command, but is in fact a *moral* command of God. Thus, it is confessed to be just as universally-binding upon mankind, generically-conceived, as the commandments in the Decalogue that forbid idolatry, blasphemy, theft, adultery, false witness, etc.

While the position of the Standards is clear, voices may be heard, even within confessional churches, opposing this Sabbath doctrine. Some even go so far as to consider this position to be a Judaizing of the gospel—a very serious accusation indeed! One such voice within the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) was the author of the first Minority Report for the Report of the Committee on Sabbath Matters, which was submitted to the Fortieth General Assembly of the OPC.¹ I am grateful for the opportunity to offer

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1. The Fortieth General Assembly of the OPC was held at Manhattan Beach, California from May 14 - May 19, 1973. The first Minority Report can be found in *The Orthodox Presbyterian Church: Minutes of the Fortieth General Assembly* (Philadelphia, PA: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church), 106–110. The entire *Report of the Committee on Sabbath Matters* (inclusive of both the Majority Report and the two Minority Reports) is in the *40th G.A. Minutes*, pp. 92–112. The members of the Committee were D. Clair Davis, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., George W. Knight III, Richard M. Lewis, and John J. Mitchell (Chairman) (see p. 106 in *Minutes*). The author of the Minority Report was the Rev. Richard M. Lewis, a minister of the word in the Presbytery of Northern California (*Minutes*, 4.), and at the time the pastor of Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California. See

a biblically-confessional critique of this Minority Report, especially since it continues to influence and be persuasive to some within the world of confessional Presbyterianism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE OPC'S COMMITTEE ON SABBATH MATTERS

The OPC's *Committee on Sabbath Matters* was erected in response to a complaint brought against the OPC's Presbytery of Wisconsin. Charges had been brought against a member of the Presbytery, who was alleged to have committed an offense in doctrine relative to the Sabbath. The complaint was filed when the Presbytery failed "to find that proof of the proposed charges and specifications would show commission of an offense" serious enough to warrant an ecclesiastical trial.² The complainants asserted that the charges, if proven true, would indeed constitute an offense serious enough to warrant a trial of the accused, and thus the Presbytery of Wisconsin had erred by not instituting judicial process in this case.

The mandate of this *Committee* is explained in the opening two paragraphs of the Committee Report:

"The *Committee on Sabbath Matters* was erected by the Thirty-sixth General Assembly "to study the extent to which the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms faithfully reflect the Scripture teaching in regard to the Fourth Commandment;" and to "act as a board of

A Ministerial and Congregational Register of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1936–2001; compiled by James T. Dennison, Jr. (Philadelphia, PA: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2001), 90. A CD of the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1936–2004, is available from the Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (607 N. Easton Rd., Bldg. E, Box P, Willow Grove, PA 19090), and may be ordered online at: <https://store.opc.org/>.

2. *Minutes, 40th G.A.*, pp. 105–106. The OPC's *Book of Discipline* describes an offense serious enough to warrant a judicial trial in the courts of the church as follows: "(1) an offense in the area of conduct and practice which seriously disturbs the peace, purity, and/or unity of the church, or (2) an offense in the area of doctrine for the non ordained member which would constitute a denial of a credible profession of faith as reflected in his membership vows, or (3) an offense in the area of doctrine for the ordained officer which would constitute a violation of the system of doctrine contained in the Holy Scriptures as that system of doctrine is set forth in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms" (*The Book of Church Order of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2015 Edition* [Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Copyright 2015], *Book of Discipline* III.7.b., pp. 99–100).

3. *Minutes, 40th G.A.*, p. 92.

4. See *Minutes, 40th G.A.*, pp. 107–109.

inquiry with regard to the matters concerning" the complaint of Messrs. Marston, *et al.*, against the Presbytery of Wisconsin. In connection with this complaint, the original recommendation of the Thirty-sixth General Assembly's temporary *Committee on the Complaint of Messrs. Marston, et al.*, and a proposed substitute to this recommendation, were referred to the Committee on Sabbath Matters. (See *Minutes, 36th G.A.*, pp. 117–119; for the text of the complaint, *ibid.*, pp. 11–14.)

"An additional mandate to the Committee on Sabbath Matters was made by the Thirty-eighth General Assembly in which an overture from the Presbytery of Southern California was referred to the committee in which it was requested to study "the question as to whether the second ordination vow requires the acceptance of the teaching of our secondary standards regarding the Christian Sabbath or Lord's Day" (*Minutes, 38th G.A.*, pp. 12–13, 31, 125)."³

A SUMMARY OF THE POSITION ASSERTED IN THE MINORITY REPORT

The position of the author of the Minority Report is that the Sabbath was exclusively a ceremonial law, binding only upon God's people living under the old covenant administration. As such, it was a "shadow" that pointed forward to, and was fulfilled in Christ and the salvation-rest He graciously provides to His believing people. Consequently, the fourth commandment is no longer binding upon believers today, who are living under the new covenant administration of fulfillment in Christ and not the old covenant administration of types and shadows. Instead of observing the Sabbath of the fourth commandment, believers today observe the Lord's Day—Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection—which the author of the Minority Report regards as the new covenant holy day, distinct and separate from the Sabbath, and thus not at all to be identified as the "Christian Sabbath," as the Westminster Standards mistakenly teach (WCF 21.7; WLC 116 & 117; WSC 59). To require believers today to observe Sunday as if it were the "Christian Sabbath," and as if such observance were an act of obedience to the fourth commandment, involves no less an act of Judaizing the gospel as the requiring of circumcision on the part of Gentile believers. Indeed, it is even a denial of Christ!⁴

In the body of his argument, the author of this Report relies almost exclusively on the New Testament,

especially Colossians 2:16–17 and related texts.⁵ In fact, he begins the Scriptural argumentation for his position with these words: “Colossians 2:16, 17 is the key passage for the understanding of the place of the Fourth Commandment in the Christian life” (*Minutes, 40th G.A.*, 106; emphasis added). Conspicuously absent in his biblical argumentation for his position is any interaction with the exegesis of such key passages as offered by the authors of the Majority Report (more on this later).

To give the reader a flavor for the argumentation used in the Minority Report, I offer some relevant quotes:

“That Christians are no longer under the obligation of keeping the Sabbath could hardly have been stated in clearer terms than the words of Colossians 2:16, 17” (*ibid.*, 107).

In reference to Galatians 4:10–11 and Romans 14:5–6:

“...there is no specific mention of the Sabbath, but it is not easy to understand how Paul could have avoided mention of the Sabbath day, if he had meant to exclude it. It might seem that this understanding of these two passages proves too much, since it nullifies all distinction among days; but the New Testament speaks of the Lord's Day, distinguishing the first day of the week from others. However, the context in both these chapters clearly deals with a Judaizing type of legalism. In such a context it would be no more necessary for Paul to mention the Lord's Day than it would be necessary for him to mention baptism alongside of circumcision in the Galatians letter.”⁶

“...the Lord's Day is a day that is distinguished from other days. It belongs to the Lord. But this is just the definition of the holy. That is holy which is consecrated to the Lord, which stands in a special relation to him. The Lord's Day, just by virtue of the fact that it is called the Lord's Day, is a holy day.”⁷

“By going back to circumcision the Galatians were denying the reality of Christ's work... The same is true of the Sabbath Day. If we keep the Sabbath in this dispensation, we are again denying Christ. We are thereby saying that we are still engaged in the cycle of six days of work and one day of rest, awaiting the performance of that work which issues into rest and awaiting the obtaining of the rest... The Lord's Day, like the Sabbath, is a holy day; but it is a day which acknowledges that Christ has come and that he has triumphantly entered into rest as the first fruits of his people.”⁸

CRITIQUE OF THE MINORITY REPORT

Having summarized both the historical context of the OPC's Committee on Sabbath Matters and the basic position asserted in the first Minority Report, we are now in a position to offer a critique of the Minority Report.

I.

The Minority Report neglects to interact with either the Majority Report or the historic Westminster-confessing tradition of interpretation with respect to its exegesis of Colossians 2:16, 17 and other allegedly anti-sabbatarian Scriptural texts.

As the reader can see from the above quotes, the Minority Report dogmatically asserts that Colossians 2:16, 17 is the “key” passage for how believers in this new covenant era are to view the fourth commandment, but then ignores the careful, contextual exegesis of this and related passages offered in the Majority Report. Given the serious allegations contained in the Minority Report—that the Westminster Standards, and thus historically-confessional Presbyterian teaching and practice

5. “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:16–17). Related texts include Gal. 4:10–11 (“You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.”) and Romans 14:5–6 (“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.”). Scripture quotations in this article, unless otherwise indicated, are from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

6. *Minutes, 40th G.A.*, p. 107. Note that the author appears to argue that the Lord's Day is to the Sabbath as baptism is to circumcision. The one category (Sabbath, circumcision) involves types signifying Christ yet to come, while the other category (Lord's Day, baptism) involves post-Advent signs of Christ having already come.

7. *Minutes, 40th G.A.*, p. 108. While the author acknowledges that the Lord's Day, like the Sabbath, is a “holy day,” how this sacred day is to be consecrated to the Lord is not clearly explained in the Minority Report. However, in all fairness, the author's main concern is to sharply distinguish Sabbath from Lord's Day, not so much to delve into the manner of observance.

8. *Minutes, 40th G.A.*, p. 109. Notice again the serious nature of this charge. To observe the Sabbath in this new covenant dispensation, as confessional Presbyterians have historically done, is just as much a denial of Christ's finished work as would have been the case if the Gentile Christians in the first century church of Galatia had embraced the teaching of the Judaizers and accepted circumcision as necessary.

on the sabbath involve a judaizing of the gospel and a denial of Christ—it was, at the very least, irresponsible of the author of the Minority Report.

In opposition to the quasi-dispensational, New-Testament-only hermeneutical approach taken by the author of the Minority Report, the authors of the Majority Report begin their discussion of the Colossians 2:16, 17 passage by explaining their own hermeneutical approach:

“A proper understanding of these verses, with their explicit mention of “sabbath,” is crucial to a right view of the Fourth Commandment today. Since Scripture has but one primary Author, *the total Scripture teaching on the Sabbath should and will “color” one’s interpretation of Colossians 2:16, 17.* Conversely, since this passage is itself part of Scripture’s teaching on the Sabbath, it must be allowed to “color” one’s understanding of the rest” (*Minutes, 40th G.A., 99; emphasis added*).

I would suggest to the reader that this hermeneutical approach taken in the Majority Report is more consistently covenantal, and shows a higher regard for Holy Scripture as a unified Divine revelation (in line with the principle of *Tota Scriptura*) than the Minority Report’s New Testament-only approach. As taught in Westminster Confession 1.9: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

After offering a brief introduction to the context of Colossians 2, the authors of the Majority Report focus on significant terms found within the Colossians 2:16, 17 passage; in particular, the terms “shadow,” “meat,” and “drink,” and the terms “feast,” “new moon,” and “sabbath,” as those latter terms are often used together in the Old Testament.⁹

Regarding the term “shadow” (“These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” - v. 17), the Majority Report explains:

“The shadow is thus a prevision of Christ’s body, the body given as the final once-for-all sacrifice for sinners.

9. See the Majority Report’s exegesis of Colossians 2:16, 17 in *Minutes, 40th G.A., 99–101.*

10. *skia* in Greek.

11. Quoted from *The Holy Bible: King James Version* (New York: American Bible Society). Emphasis added. Note that the terminology of “feasts,” “new moons” and “sabbaths” is also found in this verse.

12. *The Holy Bible: King James Version, ibid.*

There can be no elements within that shadow except such as God had ordained for the purpose in the Old Testament. Paul is not talking about man-made rules (as in verses 20–23), but is solely concerned with that Old Testament legislation designed to point ahead to the Christ to come” (*Minutes, 40th G.A., 100; emphasis original*).

It would seem clear that the authors of both the Majority and the Minority Reports would at least agree with respect to the significance of this “shadow”¹⁰ terminology. But does this passage teach that the fourth commandment as such belongs to this “shadow” category? To offer an adequate exegetical answer, one must understand the remaining terms in question (“meat/food,” “drink,” “feast/festival,” “new moon,” “Sabbath”) as Paul is utilizing those terms within the context of this passage. That is precisely what the Majority Report seeks to address next.

In tracing the Old Testament origins of the “meat” and “drink” terminology found in verse 16, the Majority Report demonstrates that these terms refer to the meat and drink offerings, as required under the old covenant. “Throughout the Old Testament, meat” and “drink,” used in conjunction, consistently refer to meat-offerings and drink-offerings” (*Minutes, 40th G.A., 100*). Ezekiel 45:17 is offered as an example of this usage: “And it shall be the prince’s part to give burnt offerings, and meat offerings, and drink offerings, in the feasts, and in the new moons, and in the sabbaths, in all solemnities of the house of Israel: he shall prepare the sin offering, and the meat offering, and the burnt offering, and the peace offerings, to make reconciliation for the house of Israel.”¹¹ Christ appropriated this terminology to Himself when He spoke of His flesh as true “food/meat” (*broxis*) and His blood as true drink (*posis*) in John 6:55, pointing to His atoning work on the cross as the fulfillment of the old covenant sacrificial system. The correct exegetical conclusion to this comparison of Scripture with Scripture is well stated by the authors of the Majority Report: “There is no other meaning for these two words in Colossians 2:16 that fits the meaning of the “shadow,” and is thus drawn from the Old Testament, except that which understands them as referring to meat- and drink-offerings.”¹² In other words, Paul’s use of the “shadow” language in the context of this particular passage has reference to the *sacrificial system* of the old covenant, which was fulfilled in the saving work of Christ.

What about the “feast/feast,” “new moon,” and “sabbath” terminology used in verse 16? It might be argued that the use of these terms shows that Paul is

not speaking narrowly to the matter of old covenant sacrifices only, but also included under the category of "shadow" the entire old covenant festival calendar. If this is the case, it is argued, Paul classifies the weekly Sabbath as part and parcel of the old covenant calendar of sacred days. However, while both sides of this issue will agree that Christ did away with the old covenant calendar of holy days, the Majority Report demonstrates that Old Testament usage of these three terms together refers to the special sacrifices that were required to be offered on the days mentioned, and not to the observance of the days as such. To quote again from the Majority Report:

"Whenever it occurs in the Old Testament, the phrase "sabbaths, new moons, and feasts" always has reference to the official sacrifices to be offered on those days in behalf of the covenant nation, and never refers to individual observance of those days. As such, the phrase points clearly to Christ, the Prince of Israel who offered himself as the sacrifice to atone for the sins of his people once for all.¹³

To the above-mentioned exegesis offered in the Majority Report, the author of the Minority Report offers no meaningful interaction, just the following assertion: "When Paul places the Sabbath among the shadows, *his meaning can hardly be misunderstood*: he is placing the Sabbath commandment within the ceremonial law which has been fulfilled in Christ (*Minutes, 40th G.A., 107; emphasis added*). Contrary to this assertion of the Minority Report, apparently the authors of the Majority Report, along with most of the exegetes and theologians within the Westminster-confessing tradition, both past and present, have indeed "misunderstood" Paul's meaning. At this point it might be helpful to offer just a few examples of how Westminster-confessing scholars have interpreted passages like Colossians 2:16, 17 and other alleged anti-sabbatarian texts.

R.L. Dabney:

"We, however, further assert, that by the beggarly elements of "days," "months," "times," "years," "holy-days," "new-moons," "Sabbath-days," the apostle means Jewish festivals, and those alone. The Christian's festival, Sunday, is not here in question; because about the observance of this there was no dispute nor diversity in the Christian churches. Jewish and Gentile Christians alike consented universally in its sanctification. When Paul asserts that the regarding of a day, or the not regarding it, is a non-essential, like the eating or not eating of meats, the natural and fair interpretation is, that

he means those days which were in debate, and no others. When he implies that some innocently "regarded every day alike," we should understand, every one of those days which were subjects of diversity—not the Christians' Sunday, about which there was no dispute."¹⁴

"Hence the apostle commands that these Jewish holy days, feasts and fasts, are not to be enforced on anybody; and he explains that they were no longer binding, because that new dispensation of which they were shadows or types had now come with its own divinely-appointed ordinances, and taken the place of others. He did not design to be understood as speaking at all of the Lord's Day, which is one of these New Testament ordinances. He means only the Jewish holy days.¹⁵

"The word "Sabbath" is never applied by a New Testament writer or by one of the writers of the primitive church to the Lord's Day or Christian Sabbath—never once. This all learned critics admit. All those early writers carefully reserve the word "Sabbath," which is a Hebrew word, to denote the holy days of the Old Testament; and when they would speak of the holy day of the New Testament they call it "first day of the week" or "Lord's day" or "Sunday." The Westminster Assembly did indeed say of the Lord's Day, "which is the Christian Sabbath." This was intended to teach an important truth which had been denied by the objectors, that *the Lord's day is to us by divine appointment what the Sabbath was to the Jews as to its main substance* (Dabney, *Discussions, 1,527, emphasis added*).

13. *Minutes, 40th G.A.*, p. 101. Passages to which the Majority Report points in confirmation of this claim include: First Chronicles 23:31; Second Chronicles 2:4; 8:13; 31:3, and Nehemiah 10:33. See also Numbers 28, 29.

14. R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1871; repr., Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust), 386. This quotation from Dabney, if divorced from the overall context of his argument, might seem on the surface to support the Minority Report's position that the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day are completely distinct and discontinuous one from another. But Dabney is arguing the Westminster position that Sunday is indeed the "Christian Sabbath," and thus a fulfillment of the fourth commandment. While Dabney, along with other confessional Presbyterian interpreters, acknowledges that certain ceremonial elements were added to the sabbath ordinance during the old covenant Mosaic administration—elements that were indeed done away with in Christ—nonetheless the undergirding moral principle of the sabbath ordinance as requiring the observance of a Divinely-ordained day of rest and worship still remains in effect, and is fulfilled in the observance of the Lord's Day, which is rightly viewed as the Christian Sabbath.

15. *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney, Volume One* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust; First published 1891; First Banner of Truth edition 1967), 527.

Charles Hodge (in response to objections to the Westminster doctrine of the sabbath based upon appeal to texts such as Colossians 2:16 and Romans 14:5):

“Every one knows, however, that the apostolic churches were greatly troubled by Judaizers, who insisted that the Mosaic law continued in force, and that Christians were bound to conform to its prescriptions with regard to the distinction between clean and unclean meats, and its numerous feast days, on which all labour was to be intermitted. These were the false teachers and this was the false doctrine against which so much of St. Paul’s epistles was directed. It is in obvious reference to these men and their doctrines that such passages as those cited above were written. *They have no reference to the weekly Sabbath, which had been observed from the creation, and which the Apostles themselves introduced and perpetuated in the Christian Church.*¹⁶

G.I. Williamson (commenting on Colossians 2:16–17, Galatians 4:10–11, and Romans 14:5):

“Now we know that there were men in the apostolic period who wanted to perpetuate Jewish religious

16. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume III: Soteriology* by Charles Hodge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Reprinted, May 1993), 332. Emphasis added.

17. G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Shorter Catechism for Study Classes, Second Edition* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1970; one-volume edition, 2003), 232.

18. Joseph A. Pipa, *The Lord’s Day* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publishing, 1997), 97. I strongly recommend this book as an excellent resource. It is written in non-technical language and is a helpful book to give to church members and inquirers who are struggling with the biblical doctrine of the Sabbath.

19. Confessional Presbyterians would do well to remember that almost every orthodox doctrine has its “problem passages.” For example, all biblical Christians confess that the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the full Deity of Christ are clearly revealed and taught in the Holy Scriptures. But these doctrines, though clearly either taught or implied in so many passages, on the surface seem to be contradicted by a number of passages. For example, John 14:28 (“...the Father is greater than I”), Matthew 24:36 (“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only”), and others. Likewise the biblically-Reformed doctrine of Christ’s particular redemption, while confessedly taught in Holy Scripture, seems on the surface to be contradicted by the universal language used in passages such as 1 John 2:2 (“He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world”), John 3:16, and others. What should the orthodox do when confronted by such “problem” texts? Certainly not abandon their confession for heterodox views! Instead, we should seek to understand and interpret these problem passages in the light of both their immediate context and the overall biblical witness, and in humble

customs. Probably for this reason, the New Testament sabbath was, from very early time, called “the Lord’s day” (Rev. 1:10). And in common speech it was the Jewish observance which was called “sabbath days.” Since the Lord’s Day—the first day of the week—was now the sabbath of the Christians, it was only natural that Paul should warn these Christians against being bound by any of these Jewish observances. For as soon as God himself changed the sabbath day from the last day to the first day of the week, the Jewish observance was no longer required. If we interpret these verses in this way, there is no conflict whatever between these verses and the known practice of the early Christian Church.¹⁷

Joseph A. Pipa (commenting on Colossians 2:16–17):

“Not only does this passage help us understand Paul’s approach to ‘days,’ it also teaches that we may not observe the Jewish (or Judaic) seventh-day Sabbath. In other words, Paul abrogates the observance of the *seventh* day, but not the moral principle involved in the Sabbath command.”¹⁸

“Is Paul repealing Sabbath observance as such, or the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath along with the other ceremonial days? We find the answer to this question as we examine the three terms Paul uses: ‘festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day (or Sabbath days).’ *These three terms are often used together in the Old Testament to describe the various ceremonial days that God’s people were required to observe* (Pipa, 98, emphasis added).

Other theologians, exegetes, and churchmen could be quoted, but the above quotations give just a sampling of the Westminster-confessing tradition of interpretation with respect to alleged anti-sabbatarian New Testament texts.

I have spent most of this article demonstrating that both the Majority Report and the Westminster-confessing tradition of interpretation undermine the Minority Report’s understanding of alleged anti-sabbatarian texts in the New Testament, especially Colossians 2:16, 17. I have done so because the author of the Minority Report builds his case almost exclusively on this specific text, and because he ignores both the exegesis of the Majority Report and the Westminster tradition. It is my hope that the above quotations will demonstrate a more than sufficient refutation to the narrow hermeneutical approach and exegesis offered in the Minority Report.¹⁹ But there are still several other criticisms of the Minority Report that should be mentioned.

II.

The position of the Minority Report is flawed in that it grounds the Sabbath ordinance in the Mosaic, old-covenant administration, rather than in creation.

The Minority Report fails to give proper recognition to the biblical witness to the Sabbath as a *creation ordinance*. Genesis 2:3 states: "So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation." It is true that the Sabbath ordinance was taken up into the old covenant administration of the covenant of grace; and therefore, in addition to being a universal moral duty grounded in creation and thus binding upon all men, it also became a special covenantal sign to Israel (Exodus 31:12–17).²⁰ It is also true that certain ceremonial elements, such as the requirement of additional sacrifices on the Sabbath (Numbers 28:9–10), were added to the basic moral requirement of the creational Sabbath in the case of Israel, and that the Sabbath became for Israel a memorial of redemption, as well as a memorial of creation (Deuteronomy 5:15). Finally, the Sabbath rest does involve eschatological and redemptive-historical implications, as Hebrews 4:4–10 makes clear. However, unless we take a simplistic, "either-or" approach to the biblical witness, none of these redemptive-covenantal-eschatological features of Sabbath observance, either under the Mosaic administration or today, do away with the basic moral principle inherent in and undergirding the Sabbath as a creation ordinance. Yahweh Himself, thundering forth the ten commandments from Mount Sinai to His covenant people gathered around the mountain, grounds the Sabbath commandment in His example at the creation (Exodus 20:11). And our Lord Christ Himself implies in Mark 2:27 that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance, intended as a blessing and duty for all mankind, when He states that the Sabbath was made for "man" (*anthropon* - i.e., mankind, generically-conceived), not merely for Israel. As John Murray stated:

"The Sabbath institution is a creation ordinance. It did not begin to have relevance at Sinai when the ten commandments were given to Moses on two tables (*cf.* Gen. 2:2, 3; Exod. 16:21–23). It was, however, incorporated in the law promulgated at Sinai and this we would expect in view of its significance and purpose as enunciated in Genesis 2:2, 3. It is so embedded in this covenant law that to regard it as of different character from its context in respect of abiding relevance goes counter to the unity and basic significance of what was inscribed on the two tables."²¹

This Murray quote leads me to my next criticism of the Report.

III.

The Minority Report does not give due weight to the inclusion of the Sabbath commandment within the Decalogue, the other commandments of which are clearly moral in nature.

The Westminster Standards clearly identify the *ten* commandments as a summary of God's universally-binding moral law. "This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written on two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man" (WCF 19.2). "The moral law is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments, which were delivered by the voice of God upon Mount Sinai, and written by him in two tables of stone; and are recorded in the twentieth chapter of Exodus: the four first commandments containing our duty to God, and the other six our duty to man" (WLC 98). "The moral law is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments" (WSC 41). The manner by which God both revealed and recorded these moral laws clearly sets the Decalogue apart from the body of ceremonial and judicial laws revealed in the remainder of the Pentateuch. God spoke the Ten Commandments with His own voice in the presence of His gathered covenant people. By contrast, the ceremonial and judicial laws were revealed to Moses, the covenant mediator of the old administration. God inscribed these Ten Commandments with His own "finger" on tablets of stone, indicating their unchangeable character and the permanence of their obligation (Deuteronomy 5:22), while the ceremonial and judicial laws were recorded by Moses on perishable material. God commanded that the stone tablets inscribed with

dialogue with the church's interpretive tradition, comparing Scripture with Scripture. Applying this principle to the present question of the Sabbath, those within the Westminster-confessing Presbyterian tradition ought to take this same hermeneutical approach when dealing with alleged anti-sabbatarian New Testament texts which, on the surface, appear to be "problem passages" for the Westminster doctrine of the Sabbath.

20. "I do not disagree that the Sabbath system of the Old Testament had a special significance for Israel, but does the covenantal purpose of the Sabbath exhaust the purposes of the Fourth Commandment? Cannot the Fourth Commandment be a moral command and also have covenantal significance?" (Pipa, p. 55).

21. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans, Volume II* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Copyright 1965), 257–258.

the Ten Commandments be placed inside the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:16), which was covered by the Mercy Seat and which was to be placed within the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle, indicating the special status of these Commandments and the need for atonement for their violation. No such special directives were issued by God for the ceremonial and judicial laws. These facts support the view that all of the commandments revealed in the Decalogue, *including the Fourth Commandment*, are permanent moral laws of God, and thus universally binding upon all men in all ages.

The great Presbyterian ecclesiologist, James Bannerman, states the matter pointedly:

“The manner of the promulgation of the Ten Commandments at Sinai indicated a difference between them and the ceremonial appointments of Israel. They were uttered by the voice of God Himself amid the most sublime indications of the presence and supremacy of Jehovah, in the hearing of all Israel, who trembled exceedingly as God spake to them all the words of His law. They were addressed directly to the people, not conveyed to them indirectly through Moses. They were graven by the finger of God Himself on tablets of stone...None of these things can be said of any of the ceremonial or political commandments given to Israel.”²²

“The manner of the preservation of the Ten Commandments, no less than that of their promulgation, indicated the marked and solemn difference put between them and the ceremonial and political laws of the Israelites. They were deposited, as the only possession it held, in the ark of the covenant; that ark with its contents was placed within the veil, in the holiest of all; to look into the ark where the law was contained, was, as the men of Bethshemesh found, visited with death; day by day the mercy-seat over the ark was wet and sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifices; and above the mercy-seat, guarding the law beneath, was the cloud of Divine glory that indicated the presence of Jehovah” (Bannerman, 1.398).

To these observations indicating the unique status of the Ten Commandments, and the significance of placing the Sabbath ordinance within the context of those Commandments, the author of the Minority Report gives no explanation.

22. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A treatise on the nature, powers, ordinances, discipline and government of the Christian Church*, 2 vols. (1869; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 1.397–398.

IV.

Finally, the position taken and assertions employed in the Minority Report, to the effect that the observing of Sunday as the Christian Sabbath involves a Judaizing of the gospel and a denying of Christ, is potentially divisive.

I would not be surprised to read such accusations against the Westminster doctrine of the Sabbath from confessional Lutherans, or dispensationalists, or other anti-sabbatarian brethren whose theological and confessional traditions stand opposed to our Sabbath doctrine. But to read a report written by a church officer in the OPC who has affirmed ordination vows which include the promise to receive and adopt the Scriptural system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards is befuddling to me. Indeed, this is a system whose Sabbath doctrine is inextricably intertwined with other central doctrines of our confessional system, such as its doctrine of the law of God. One wonders how ordained officers who embrace the position of the Minority Report could work in clear conscience within the context of a denomination and in cooperation with fellow church officers whose professed doctrine of the Sabbath would, by logical implication, make them in effect Judaizers and Christ-deniers. At the very least it would seem that a consistent adherence to the position of the Minority Report would make it difficult to cultivate a spirit of collegiality, confidence in, and mutual submission to the brethren, for how could one submit to and have confidence in fellow church officers whom one believes to be Judaizers and Christ-deniers? At its worst, the consistent embracing of the position of the Minority Report by those within the Westminster-confessing churches may have the potential effect of promoting schism. Arguably, embracing the position expressed in the Minority Report is a rejection of an important aspect of the Scriptural system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards, and thus poses a potential threat to the unity, purity, and peace of Westminster-confessing churches such as the OPC.

CONCLUSION

I would like to close this critique on a more cheerful note with a final quote from James Bannerman, who reminds us of the eschatological scope and hope signified by our Sabbath observance:

“There is the Sabbath of creation, when God the Father rested from His work of power, and called upon man to

enter with Him into rest, and to rejoice with Him in that finished work, because it was good. There is the Sabbath of redemption,—not superseding but embracing the former,—when God the Son rested from His work of grace, and once more invited man to enter with Him into rest, and rejoice with Him in the finished work, that, in a higher sense than in the former case, because it was creation restored, was also very good. And there is the Sabbath of glory yet to come, not superseding the former two, but embracing and comprehending both, when, creation restored and redemption completed, and both continued in glory, God the Spirit shall enter into His rest, and shall call upon His saints to rest with Him also, rejoicing together through eternity in the last and highest Sabbath of God” (Bannerman, 1.405).

May God in His sovereign grace grant that we all might enter into that final, eternal Sabbath rest, of which the Christian Sabbath is an emblem and foretaste. “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.” (Hebrews 4:9). Amen. ■

In Brief: Junius on the Morality of a Sabbath day (from De Politia Mosis Observatione—The Mosaic Polity)

THESIS 36: Among these that are of a mixed kind, what is moral remains, what is judicial is absolutely changed according to the circumstances, and what is ceremonial universally perishes. Mixed commandments of this sort include the observance of the Sabbath day (Exod. 20[;8-11]), the law concerning the harboring of manslayers in the cities of refuge (Num. 35[;9-34]), the purification for a homicide in which the perpetrator is unknown (Deut. 21[;1-9]), and similar such matters.

And so in this mixed kind of Mosaic laws that we call judicial or political, three parts must be distinguished—the moral, political, and ceremonial—and the law of these must be discerned individually.

The first part, and that which is the most powerful of all, is what we call moral. For if indeed this is absolutely [*simpliciter*] moral, it pertains to piety, justice, and honesty. It possesses the common law and common reason, either from the natural or divine law, and therefore it constantly remains, and it cannot be affected by any occurrence or action so that its authority is broken or bent. For eternal reason rules the reason of human beings through the natural and divine law in such a way that whatever belongs to the law—first absolutely and then according to all locations and circumstances—it would

define by absolute necessity, which no one can reasonably contradict or successfully oppose.

However, the part of the Mosaic laws that is judicial, which is absolutely judicial (for what is mixed must always be accepted), does not change in reason or substance, but first in itself it is consistent with itself, and then by analogy, according to which a judgment can be made about similar cases. But in circumstances it undergoes as many changes as possible, and varies according to time, place, persons, deeds, modes, causes, and supports—in the past, the present, or the future—as well as in public and private matters. In every human administration, those who do not temper their own counsels in such a way that they may accommodate the variety of judgments to the variety of things, will be least helpful to the republic. Or rather, they destroy it entirely by the inflexibility of their judgments because they strive for constancy or stubbornness more than understanding and discernment, without which a republic cannot stand.

The ceremonial part—whatever is on record in the laws of Moses and in the mixed genus of these laws—at this time has generally passed away and no longer obligates human beings further than in the effect of law (as they say) and authority of law. For ceremonies belong to a particular law, which law is mutable in its own nature, as we have said previously, and truly what has been changed in the ceremonies has changed in the substance and in the circumstances, indeed, especially in the ceremonies that were established as a shadow of the things to come. Now the ceremonies of the law were themselves enacted for the sake of something else, and accordingly were mutable, as we concluded previously. Also the issue for us is that these ceremonial laws existed for our sake, and once accomplished, they have been changed. And so all the circumstances not only require a change of those laws, but even demand it. As a matter of fact (to skim over the specific changes quickly) the occasion is radically different. The former time was the childhood, but this one is the adulthood of the church. If you would altogether desire one and the same administration for both times, that would be madness, not wisdom. The rationale of the place differs greatly. For at that time Canaan, Jerusalem, and the temple, by a specific institution of God, had a sacramental relation or arrangement for the purpose of displaying in the church the meaning of sacred things, but now the specific institution has been entirely removed so that God may be worshiped everywhere in spirit and in truth (John 4 [;23]). At that time persons were most often equipped with bodily and fleshly benefits and supports by the specific kindness of God and were adorned with specific prerogatives above all the nations, but now individuals are called from all nations indiscriminately, whoever has been ordained to eternal life, without the contemplation of those benefits or supports. There are also all kinds of differences with respect to

what is done. There is such a great difference in all these things: now even many of the things the Jews were commanded to do are those which Christians can by no means be commanded to do nor can they be demanded from them. What should we say about cases? Certainly there are cases common to us and the ancient Jews—such as the glory of God, a common salvation, the communion of human society in the nature of things and in the church of God—but they had particular cases that God in his infinite wisdom prescribed by his word, according to which their republic had been established in a particular way, and, for the most part, specific observations were established according to the mode of that republic. But if this might have been the only case that existed at that time, because at one time many things had been recorded and observed for the presignification of a future thing, this singular and specific case would supply more than enough of an argument for us to acknowledge that the condition of those laws is unchanged. With respect to the mode, however, there is the greatest difference because the mode of all things and actions, which we have spoken about previously, must be accommodated to the variety of things. Likewise, there is the greatest difference in the assisting supports or instruments—whatever things pertained to the establishment of that republic and church—seeing that now all those carnal and typical things have been removed and consummated in the truth that was foreshadowed in those instruments and observations. Therefore, we rightly conclude that the ceremonial (for now we have the truth and substance itself) has universally passed away. Moreover, it has passed away either with respect to its use, because it has been freely changed, or with respect to the right itself, because according to its right and necessity it had to be changed. For who would want to be tenaciously held at this time by those ceremonies? Or who would want to revive those things that God instituted at one time to foreshadow future things that have now been consummated in the truth? Or who would want to revive those things that he had accommodated to the order and mode of that republic—a republic that has now passed away by his will and judgment? But all ceremonies pertained to these two things: either to signifying the truth—chiefly a future one—or to establishing worship according to that reason by which God commanded that he be worshiped and that he had outlined for his worshipers in that republic and in his church. Therefore, since these things have been removed, we declare that the ceremonies have also been removed.

Now we come to the examples that I have adduced for the illustration of this argument. There are three, and after we have explained them we will add one more that seems in these times to be thoroughly necessary on account of its difficulty. The first example concerns the observance of the Sabbath day. God at one time sanctioned this observance by

the moral law, the judicial or political law, and the ceremonial law. Namely, it is of the moral law from the moral right when God commanded, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day ...” [Exod. 20:9-10]. That is, one of the seven is to be remembered; the day of the Lord is established as one out of the seven, which day we should spend and sanctify in the religious worship of the Lord. Good morals cannot exist—not even according to nature itself—among human beings who do not observe and sanctify to the Lord one day out of seven. But to this moral institution he adds a political one, and in addition to that instruction he added many political observances in the law of Moses, when God says, “You shall not do any work on that day, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your servant, or your maid-servant, or your ox, or your donkey” and so forth. Moses expressed this commandment by a more political rationale when he said, “so that your servant and your maidservant may rest just as you do” (Deut. 5[:14]). To this commandment was joined the most severe sanction when God said in Exodus 31 [: 14-15]: “Whoever profanes the Sabbath shall be put to death; the soul of the person who does work on it shall be cut off from among his people;” and “whoever does work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.” But in this institution there is something ceremonial: the circumscription of the day, the cause of the circumscription, and rite of observation. We call it a circumscription of the day because that day of the Sabbath was precisely defined, which the Jews to this day most pertinaciously observe. For since the Jews were commanded to sanctify this day more than any other, it had a ceremony partly of order and partly of form, which two foundations of the ceremony on certain occasions are most justly changed or even abandoned. We observe a two-fold cause of the circumscription, or why that particular day was established. The first is proper and specific: “For in six days Jehovah had made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day. And therefore Jehovah blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it,” [Exod. 20:11,] so that it would be a perpetual record of that prior work. The other is common: so that it would be a spiritual practice and exercise in the present time in order that the pious should rest, and a sign of that future rest, which will only be absolute in heaven.

Here indeed there is something mutable and something immutable, and even though good men easily understand this from the preceding things, yet for the sake of those who are less experienced in these matters we will demonstrate this distinction in this example more carefully. Therefore whatever is moral, properly and in itself, obligates immutably by a common law and common reason. And accordingly from that institution of the Sabbath we acknowledge that even if all our time is spent as religiously as possible in the duties of

piety, yet it is necessary to employ a certain one day out of seven for the common worship

of God and the exercises of true piety. This private and public duty is demanded from all human beings. Whoever behaves differently opposes the common law and common reason, which God had sanctified by his own example and authority at the time of creation.

However, whatever is absolutely [*simpliciter*] judicial or political must be distinguished in two modes. For in this genus there is found something mutable, and even something immutable that remains. First, since we have said that there are mutable circumstances in this genus, from this it consequently follows that in this time we are not in the least obligated by the part of the judgments that is posited in the circumstances. For example, we are not bound with respect to conscience by the observance of years of intermission, or years of jubilee, or similar sorts of things that the law commanded (Lev. 25). Additionally, many laws possess a particular law, that is, they are particularly for that people, that time, that region, and other related things. To this we also add several of those laws that are posited in the observance of a particular law in public rites, which now have been changed not only in the circumstances, but also in the thing itself. Of this sort is that prohibition in Exodus 35[:3], “you shall not light a fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day,” and whatever other things of this sort were established based on a ceremonial principle, object, or end, as we have shown in the preceding chapter [See *Theses* 32-33]. Second, whatever things are of a common reason and of a common law in the political genus of the Mosaic laws obligate by a common reason or by analogy. For this reason, because it was established as ceremonial, we do not wish to observe that Sabbath day that the Jews still superstitiously observe, but nevertheless we want to religiously observe and honor one day in seven, because it is of the common law and reason, which demand their own public order and polity in ecclesiastical and divine matters just as much as in legislative and human ones.

But ceremonial matters, those that absolutely [*simpliciter*] pertain to the ceremony, were long ago legislated by God with a principle of change [*mutationis lege*], and whoever prohibits their change opposes the mind of the legislator himself and the truth. However, here again it is necessary to prudently make a distinction in the ceremonial matters so that they may not all be considered to possess the same rank equally. For some of the ceremonial ones pertain to order and some to form, as we previously said. Moreover, those that pertain to order, if they pertain to the common order—for example, the convening of the assembly at a certain place and time—are not so much related to the ceremony as the polity, and because the political institutions of the common law are immutable, as we have previously shown, therefore, we do not consider this as

ceremonial, but rather as political for the church, that is, with the greatest reverence they are to provide for things pertaining to right order and what is honorable (which two things Paul most carefully commands in 1 Corinthians 14[:40]). But if the ceremonial matters concern the order of a particular law, because the particular law does not in the least apply to Christians except by analogy, we have expressly stated that those ceremonies have been rightly changed or are changeable according to their suitability for the pious, namely, whenever the laws of this sort either in their principle or object are ceremonial, or in their end necessarily have an intertwined law of change. Among those ceremonial laws that are commonly called figurative, however, the rationale is very different. For every ceremonial figure is either a record of past things, a demonstration of present things, or a presignification of future things. Those things that were at one time established by God for a record of past benefits and for the Signification of present things were indeed always mutable, but not all underwent the same necessity of change. Those things that were at one time established by God as ceremonies declaring in advance the things that would come in Christ have entirely and utterly passed away because they cannot remain active without causing the most shameful and impious abjuration of Christ—of God in the flesh revealed in these last times. And so the Sabbath, as a record of creation, has changed, but not so necessarily that it could be observed at this time without a record of creation also, if there was nothing greater involved in the observance of the Sabbath. As the present rest of all Christians, it represents the obtaining of peace, justice, and life in Christ. The Sabbath is not observed, for we obtained these benefits of Christ on another day, and they were fully completed and revealed, without a doubt, on the first day of the week (Matt. 28[:1]). On the day that Christ rose from the dead he began the new week of his reign (so to speak), and by his own example and authority he substituted the observance of the first day in place of the observance of the Sabbath among that most holy company of the apostles and in his primitive church. Indeed, to the extent that the ceremonies of the former Sabbath pertained to the signification of the future things in Christ, it has been entirely abolished. The observance of the Sabbath cannot be revived or repeated (so to speak) without the gravest sacrilege.

Franciscus Junius, *The Mosaic Polity*, translated by Todd M. Rester, edited by Andrew M. McGinnis (Christian's Library Press, 2015), 140–147. Used with permission of the publisher. This book may be purchased from Christian's Library Press, <http://www.clpress.com/publications/mosaic-polity>. See a review of *The Mosaic Polity* in *The Confessional Presbyterian* 11 (2015), 210–212. ■