

How to Handle Differences Related to “Worldly Employments and Recreations”
Report of the Study Committee of Central Carolina Presbytery
October 26, 2017

I. Introduction

Central Carolina Presbytery (CCP) has wrestled for many years with how to handle differences with the phrase “worldly employments and recreations” in our confessional teaching on the Lord’s Day or Christian Sabbath (WCF 21.8, WLC 117, WSC 60). Even in the last year, candidates with very similar views have been received in three different ways (one “no difference,” one “merely semantic” and one “more than semantic...but not out of accord with any fundamental of our system of doctrine”). Given this inconsistency, and in order to increase our understanding of the teaching of the Scriptures summarized in the Westminster Standards regarding the Lord’s Day in general and “worldly employments and recreations” in particular, on February 25, 2017 Central Carolina Presbytery instructed its Exam Committee to form a Study Committee to consider and report on this issue. This brief study is the work of that committee.

The paper contains three sections, the first regarding the historical background of the phrase “worldly employments and recreations,” the second regarding Isaiah 58:13-14, a commonly referenced passage of scripture related to this issue, and the third regarding practical suggestions for how CCP might think about handling differences to our confessional teaching. The prayer of the Study Committee is that this paper will encourage CCP in its desire to observe the Lord’s Day by refraining from “worldly employments and recreations,” that greater clarity will reduce the frequency of differences to our confessional understanding of biblical teaching, and that when differences do arise this paper will help CCP to handle them more consistently.

II. Historical background to the confessional teaching

According to the Westminster Divines, “worldly employments and recreations” are those human actions which pertain to life in this world (the present age), and spiritual employments and recreations are those human actions which pertain to life in the kingdom of heaven (the age to come).

The phrase “wordly employments and recreations” reflects the consensus of the Westminster Divines that there is a distinction between the six ordinary days of the week, and the first day of the week, which, since the resurrection of Christ is a holy day. In other words, the phrase “worldly employments and recreations” depends upon a distinction between time that is holy (i.e. sacred, set apart for the Lord and his eternal kingdom in the age to come) and time that is profane (i.e. secular, common, pertaining to the things of this age). The consensus of the Westminster Divines, expressed in the Westminster Standards, was that with the exception of works of necessity and mercy, worldly employments and recreations of other kinds were to be avoided on the Lord’s Day. In principle, this view is relatively simple and easy to understand.

However, there also was significant diversity at the Assembly when it came to defining “necessity” and “mercy,” as well as the precise nature of “worldly employments and recreations.”¹ Therefore the Westminster Divines were reticent to define these terms in the documents that they produced, leaving intentional room for ambiguity and freedom of conscience in application. Interestingly, in 1644 the English Parliament (the same Parliament that called the Westminster

¹ This diversity is illustrated easily by comparing the narrower prescriptions of Westminster Divines Daniel Cawdry and Herbert Palmer in their jointly authored *Sabbatum Redivivum* (London, 1645) with the broader prescriptions of Nicholas Bownde’s *The Doctrine of the Sabbath* (London, 1595), a work widely celebrated and endorsed by members of the Assembly.

Assembly) passed an *Ordinance for the Better Observance of the Lord's Day*, which identified many acts of necessity and mercy that were permitted expressly, including the preparation of food in both private homes and inns as well as the selling of milk in the morning and evening.² Not all worldly employments and recreations were forbidden, only those that were not “necessary” or acts of “mercy.”

It also should be remembered that the infamous *Book of Sports* was the primary engine driving debate about recreation on the Lord's Day during the years in which the Westminster Assembly was at work. First published by Bishop Thomas Morton under James I in 1617, and subsequently reissued under Charles I in 1633, in large part as a result of the influence of Archbishop William Laud, the meaning and reception of the Book of Sports is a complicated subject. One reason for this complexity is that, according to most historians of the period, the subject of the *Book of Sports* (permitted recreations on the Lord's Day) was not on either occasion the primary reason for its publication (which in fact was to assert and define the authority to answer such questions).³

In other words, in England during the 17th century, although on the surface people were debating the kinds of recreations permitted on the Lord's Day, below the surface, and often by proxy, people also were debating the nature of ecclesiastical authority and its relationship to civil authority. Historical theologians who ignore this reality often miss the fact that what appear on the surface to be expressions of disagreement about what kinds of recreations were or were not permitted are in reality disagreements about who possessed the authority to say so.

It is important to make these historical observations about how different debates intermingled, because it highlights how important it is not only to take the Westminster Assembly's prohibition of “recreations” seriously, but also to interpret its absolute nature and blunt force with a grain of salt. Indeed, the consensus of the Assembly was that the kind of organized recreations endorsed in the *Book of Sports* were violations of the Lord's Day. The lack of nuance in the expression of this prohibition, however, was shaped by their polemical context and by what they perceived as the need to react strongly to improper royal meddling with ecclesiastical affairs.

Having observed above already the kinds of employments expressly *allowed* by the contemporary Parliament, it is also worth noting the kinds of recreations expressly *prohibited*:

That no person or persons shall hereafter upon the Lords-day, use, exercise, keep, maintain, or be present at any wrastlings, Shooting, Bowling, Ringing of Bells for Pleasure or Pastime, Masque, Wake, otherwise called Feasts, Church-Ale, Dancing, Games, Sport or Pastime whatsoever; upon pain, That every person so offending, being above the age of fourteen years, shall lose, and forfeit five shillings for every such offence.⁴

Here it is clear that the emphasis falls upon corporate, organized pastimes rather than every type of recreation. There is no evidence that Parliamentary enforcement of Westminster's theology lead to the prohibition of *all* recreations. Noticeably absent from the list above are those recreations especially conducive to private worship and reflection, such as going for a walk, or those necessary for caring for small children, such as playing with them at home.

Practically speaking, how should our historical awareness of these realities shape our interpretation and application of Westminster's prohibition of “wordly employments and

² C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait, eds., *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum: 1642-1660*, 3 vols. (London, 1911), I, 420-22.

³ Kenneth L. Parker, *The English Sabbath: A Study of Doctrine and Discipline from the Reformation to the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge, 1988), 139-216.

⁴ Firth and Rait, *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum: 1642-1660*, I, 420-422.

recreations?” First, it should lead us to identify the specific kinds of recreations and employments that actually were *prohibited* by the Parliament, rather than speculating in the abstract as to what the Divines may have meant. Second, it should lead us to pay careful attention to the kinds of recreations and employments that were *allowed* expressly (cited above), as we begin to make the move to contemporary application. Third, as we progress from historical interpretation to present day application it should lead us to be careful, that in our (appropriate) zeal to spend the day focusing on public and private acts of devotion by prohibiting worldly employments and recreations, we do not prohibit unintentionally those acts of necessity and mercy which in fact are part and parcel of human existence and restful worship.

III. Exegesis of Isaiah 58:13-14

How does the phrase “doing your pleasure” (Isa. 58:13; ESV) relate to the “recreation clause” in WCF 21.8?

The Hebrew word *נָפֵץ* can mean any of the following: joy, delight, wish, matter, or business. The word occurs 20 times in Isaiah, including 4 times in chapter 58. The vast majority of these occurrences refer to God’s delight, pleasure or will. For example, it appears in Isa. 55:11, referring to the Word of God which will not return empty but will “accomplish that which I purpose.” It also regularly refers to the things that God “delights” in. It also, on one occasion, is used to refer to “precious” stones (54:12). It seems then to be a general word to describe those things in which one delights.

An important parallel to its use in Isaiah 58 comes two chapters earlier in Isaiah 56. There God addresses “the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant” (56:4). The implicit contrast is between doing things that please God versus doing those things that please humanity.

That seems to be the point in Isaiah 58:13. The phrase “seeking your own pleasure” most likely means “doing as you please,” as opposed to doing what pleases God. In other words, God was calling the Israelites not to use the Sabbath for themselves, a command comprising a number of activities, including both work and various “recreations.” God refers to the Sabbath as “my holy day,” meaning that he has set it aside from its everyday common use and has made it to be a day primarily devoted to worship.

The context from earlier in Isaiah 58 indicates that the Israelites were going through the motions of worship and religious exercises without devoting themselves to them with a pure heart. They were clinging to their sins and were oppressing their workers. Their heart was not in it. They were serving only themselves and seeking to advance their own interests.

Instead, God commands them to “call the Sabbath a delight.” One lexicon defines delight as “exquisite pleasure.” Instead of being satisfied with lesser pleasures, God calls them to seek greater ones. They are to seek God, not self, finding their greatest delight in the worship and enjoyment of him.

IV. Practical Suggestions

In order to encourage greater consistency in handling stated differences regarding “worldly employments and recreations,” our committee recommends that we as a Presbytery think about each candidate’s view in three distinct steps:

A. Step 1: Isolate the issue

The first step is to clarify a candidate’s specific difference. The issues related to “worldly recreations and employments” are often conflated with other aspects of our Confession’s teachings.

In WCF 21.7-8, our confessional belief regarding the Lord's Day includes the following elements:

WCF 21.7, As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, He hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: 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.

WCF 21.8, This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

To summarize:

- 1) Since the resurrection of Christ, the first day of the week is a holy day and the Christian Sabbath or Lord's Day.
- 2) The Sabbath or Lord's Day requires resting not only from sin but also from employment and recreation that is otherwise lawful on other days. [the specific primary issue before this committee]
- 3) The entire Sabbath or Lord's Day is to be spent in public and private worship (with the exception of works of necessity and mercy).
- 4) The Sabbath or Lord's Day requires advance preparation for its proper observance.

B. Step 2: Instruct the candidate:

Having clarified which specific aspect(s) of our confessional beliefs relate(s) to the candidate's difference, the *second step is to make sure the candidate understands the meaning of the phrases "worldly employments and recreations" and "necessity and mercy."*

- 1) The prohibition of "worldly employments and recreations" does not preclude the duties of "necessity and mercy." The committee acknowledges the need for some freedom of interpretation regarding what constitutes acts of "necessity and mercy." For example, a family with young children may of "necessity" encourage recreation unnecessary for adults (letting them work off some energy in between worship activities to help them focus). Candidates may legitimately differ on their views of the appropriate extent of such play.
- 2) The prohibition of "worldly employments and recreations" does not preclude all recreations, but rather merely "worldly" ones that are not conducive to "public and private exercises of worship." The committee acknowledges the need for some freedom of interpretation regarding what recreations conflict with public and especially private exercises of worship. For example, going for a walk may be a "recreation" that actually is conducive to "private exercises of worship." Candidates may legitimately differ on their views of the appropriate length and rigor of such a walk.

C. Step 3: Clarify the difference

After isolating the issues related to a candidate's stated difference (step 1), and making sure the candidate understands the meaning of the phrases "worldly employments and recreations" and "necessity and mercy (step 2), the *third step is to ask the candidate enough practical and theological questions to enable the Presbytery to rule on the nature of the candidate's difference* (in accordance with RAO 16-3.3.5).

The committee believes firmly that it would be inappropriate to develop a list of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" recreations for the Lord's Day, for this is precisely the sort of Pharisaism that Jesus warned against (Matt 12; Mark 3; Luke 14; John 9). Instead, we merely describe our current thinking regarding how we as a committee intend to handle stated differences regarding "worldly employments and recreations" on the Lord's Day:

- 1) That candidates be encouraged to study the meaning of the phrases "worldly employments and recreations" and "necessity and mercy" in order to avoid stating a difference with our Confession when in reality there is an acceptable range of beliefs and practices that fall under the umbrella of these terms. Understanding these terms properly may lead Presbytery to conclude that some stated differences should be considered "no difference" or even lead candidates to withdraw their differences.
- 2) That candidates who affirm that the whole Lord's Day is a holy day to be set aside for worship, and whose practice reflects these beliefs, but who nevertheless remain uncomfortable with the *language* of the Confession regarding recreations, should have their differences ruled as "merely semantic."
- 3) That candidates who affirm that worship is to be prioritized on the Lord's Day, and who also make some effort to distinguish between their activities on the Lord's Day and other days of the week, but do not prohibit or avoid all regular, organized recreations that are not "necessary" nor conducive to "public and private acts of worship," should have their differences ruled as "more than semantic but 'not out of accord with any fundamental of our system of doctrine.'"
- 4) That candidates who appear to make no difference at all between recreation on the Lord's Day and the other days of the week be carefully interviewed to ascertain whether their difference is in fact "out of accord" or "hostile to the system" of doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

V. Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the prayer of the Study Committee is that this paper will encourage CCP in its desire to observe the Lord's Day by refraining from "worldly employments and recreations," that greater clarity will reduce the frequency of differences to our confessional understanding of biblical teaching, and that when differences do arise this paper will help CCP to handle them more consistently.

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