

*The Synod of Dordt and Sabbath Observance*  
400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619)  
(28 December 2018 @ PCC in Marikina)

I. Introduction

- A. The Synod of Dordt is well remembered for its doctrinal importance.
- B. What is not well known is the fact that, like most of the other particular and general synods before and after 1618-1619 in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, the Synod treated matters that were more practical in nature, including the problem with observance of the Lord's Day in connection with the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment.

II. What was the problem with sabbath observance that the Synod of Dordt faced?

- A. The problem regarding sabbath observance was an old problem in the history of the Church.
  - 1. The church in past ages faced the serious **problem of sabbath desecration**. (Jeremiah 17:19-27, Nehemiah 13:15-22)
  - 2. The church in the past also faced the equally serious **problem of sabbath legalism**, especially in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry against the legalism of the Pharisees. (Matthew 12:1-14; John 5:1-18).
- B. The Synod faced this spiritual weakness in the context of the development of the Dutch Republic, the United Netherlands, at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- C. According to the minutes of the Synod, that problem was part of the agenda of Synod in its 163<sup>rd</sup> session.
  - 1. *"... a question is aired concerning the necessity of observing the Sabbath, which was beginning to be agitated in the churches of Zeeland:"*
  - 2. *"... It is also no secret that the godly among us, and foreigners visiting this nation from other Reformed countries, are offended by the way the Sabbath is desecrated... Moreover there are some who noticeably defy the Day of Rest in that they make an open show of their travels, hard work, and other vain dealings on the Lord's Day..."*
- D. The problem Dordt faced may be summarized by 2 questions:
  - 1. According to the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment must the NT Church to observe a day of rest on the first day of the week?
  - 2. What activities should the church perform and enjoy on the Lord's Day?

III. What answer did the Synod of Dordt adopt?

- A. The answer of the Synod of Dordt took into account and was even based upon the confessions of the Reformed Churches and its own approved Canons.
  - 1. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 38
  - 2. Canons, Head III/IV, Article 17
  - 3. Canons, Head V, Article 14
  - 4. Church Order, Article 67.
- B. On the basis of Scripture and in harmony with the Three Forms of Unity, the Synod in its 164<sup>th</sup> Session adopted its answer. Synod declared:
  - 1. *There is both a ceremonial and moral element in the fourth commandment of the divine law.*
  - 2. *The ceremonial [element] is the rest of the seventh day after creation, and the strict observance of the same day was especially enjoined upon the Jewish people.*
  - 3. *The moral [element] is that a certain and definite day be set aside for worship, and for the purpose that as much rest as is necessary for worship and for pious reflection upon it [be provided].*
  - 4. *The Jewish Sabbath having been abolished, Christians much solemnly keep the day of the Lord.*
  - 5. *This day has always been observed from the time of the apostles in the ancient Catholic Church.*
  - 6. *This day must be so set aside for worship that on it people may rest from all ordinary labors (excluding those which love and present necessity demand) together with all such recreations that hinder worship.*

- C. What should we understand about these statements of the Synod of Dordt?
1. There is a ceremonial element to the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment of the Jewish sabbath laws.
  2. There is a moral element to the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment which since the very first, seventh day of history, was that one day out of seven must be reserved for divine worship and contemplation upon the rest of fellowship with Jehovah.
  3. The synod declared that the NT Church must keep the day of the Lord, the first day of the week, holy.
    - a. The Synod meant by that declaration that the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the week must be hallowed by the NT Church for divine worship and for the pious reflection upon that divine worship.
    - b. For support of the change from the OT 7<sup>th</sup> day to the NT 1<sup>st</sup> Day, the Synod pointed to the apostolic precedent.
    - c. However, where is that precedent to be found in the authoritative Scriptures?
      - (1) **Revelation 1:10**, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and heard behind me a great voice as of a trumpet."
      - (2) **1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 16:1-2**, "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let everyone of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come."
    - d. That apostolic precedent to which the Synod appealed is one of the proof texts for the instruction of Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism concerning the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment.
  4. In addition to what the Synod had declared in the *Canons*, and in addition to what the Synod embraced in Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Synod merely declared, "*This day must be so set aside for worship that on it people may rest from all ordinary labors (excluding those which love and present necessity demand) together with all such recreations that hinder worship.*"

IV. How does the answer of the Synod of Dordt apply to our churches today?

- A. Reformed Churches used and even re-adopted these decisions long after the Synod of Dordt.
  1. For example, in 1881, the Christian Reformed Churches (42 congregations by then).
  2. In 1926, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Churches in North America
  3. In the early 1990s, Classis West of the PRCA
- B. What do these decisions and the confessions regarding the Lord's Day demand of us in the Philippines?
  1. First, you must believe the truth about whose day the first day of the week is: is it your day or the Lord's Day? The first day of the week is the Lord's Day.
  2. Second, how much time, attention, and ability do I need to give and set aside unto the Lord on the Lord's Day?
    - a. What should I be doing on the Lord's Day besides divine worship?
    - b. How much time, energy, gifts, and ability need to be given to the Lord for worship and hallowed contemplation of the Word which God has spoken through the preaching?
    - c. How much must *you* give *of yourself* to the Lord on His day?
      - (1) A little, lots, some, part, half, two-thirds, almost all, or entirely all?
      - (2) How shall you in love *give* all of yourself for a full day of worship? By faith (bond, activity of believing, and the truth) alone in Jesus Christ alone, our Righteousness and Life of the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment.
      - (3) In that true faith, you may enjoy the hope that your diligent, repentant, thankful use of the earthly NT Sabbath, in the midst of a world of sabbath desecration and profanity, will prepare you for your endless sabbath in glory which is coming very, very soon.