

1 **OVERTURE 9** from Tennessee Valley Presbytery

to AC, OC

2 “Establish Study Committee to Recommend Changes to the
3 Westminster Standards regarding the Sabbath”
4

5 **Whereas** the grounds stated in Overture 7 to the 41st 5 General Assembly of the PCA by
6 North Texas Presbytery are still of valid concern; and
7

8 **Whereas** the 41st General Assembly responded to Overture 7 in the negative with the
9 following Grounds: “It would be better if Presbyteries that have concerns or
10 questions with *WCF* 21:8, *WLC* 117 and 119 and *WSC* 60 and 61 would adopt
11 overtures proposing specific changes to the Westminster documents so that the
12 General Assembly can be clear as to the scope of the issues and whether a study
13 committee is necessary.” (*M41GA*, p. 66) In submission to the direction and counsel
14 of the 41st General Assembly; and
15

16 **Whereas** a growing number of teaching elder candidates have taken and have had approved
17 stated differences to these portions of the Westminster Standards; and
18

19 **Whereas** this reality, at least, causes the appearance of conflict between what we officially
20 confess and what we actually believe and practice; and
21

22 **Whereas** we understand the resolution of this situation will take considerable study, work,
23 and debate;
24

25 **Therefore be it resolved** that the Tennessee Valley Presbytery overtures the Forty-Third
26 General Assembly of the PCA to erect a study committee, as requested in Overture 7
27 to the 41st General Assembly, to consider changes to the portions of the Westminster
28 Standards [*WCF* 21-8; *WLC* Q&As 117, 119; *WSC* Q&As 60, 61] referred to in the
29 “Grounds” for the 41st Assembly’s response, above. The budget for such study
30 committee is not to exceed \$5,000 funded by designated contributions.
31

32 **Possible language for study committee to consider** [Strike-through for deletions;
33 underlining for new wording]:
34

35 *WCF* 21-8. This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a
36 due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs
37 beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own
38 works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments ~~and recreations,~~
39 but also are taken up, ~~the whole time,~~ in the public and private exercises of his
40 worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.
41

42 *WLC Q. 117. How is the Sabbath or the Lord’s Day to be sanctified?*

43 A. The Sabbath or Lord’s Day is to be sanctified by an holy resting all the
44 day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such
45 worldly employments ~~and recreations~~ as are on other days lawful; and making

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1 it our delight to spend ~~the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken~~
2 ~~up in works of necessity and mercy)~~ in the public and private exercises of
3 God's worship: and, to that end, we are to prepare our hearts, and with such
4 foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and seasonably dispatch our
5 worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that
6 day, including focusing on public and private worship as well as works of
7 necessity and mercy.

8
9 *WLC Q. 119. What are the sins forbidden in the fourth commandment?*

10 A. The sins forbidden in the fourth commandment are all omissions of the
11 duties required, all careless, negligent, and unprofitable performing of them,
12 and being weary of them; all profaning the day by idleness, and doing that
13 which is in itself sinful; and by all needless works, words, and thoughts, about
14 our worldly employments ~~and recreations.~~

15
16 *WSC Q. 60. How is the Sabbath to be sanctified?*

17 A. The Sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from
18 such worldly employments ~~and recreations~~ as are lawful on other days; and
19 spending ~~the whole time~~ in the public and private exercises of God's worship;
20 ~~except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy~~ as
21 well as engaging in works of necessity and mercy.

22
23 *WSC Q. 61. What is forbidden in the fourth commandment?*

24 A. The fourth commandment forbiddeth the omission, or careless
25 performance, of the duties required, and the profaning the day by idleness, or
26 doing that which is in itself sinful, or by unnecessary thoughts, words, or
27 works, about our worldly employments ~~or recreations.~~

28 29 **FOUNDATIONS:**

30
31 It is common in exams in TVP for candidates to take exception to *WCF* chapter 21, section 8
32 and *LC* questions 117 and 119 and *SC* questions 60 and 61. TVP routinely approves these
33 exceptions regarding recreation on the Sabbath without discussion. In fact, taking exception
34 to the Standards' prohibition of recreation on the Sabbath seems to have become the default
35 position of the PCA.

36
37 With this reality it seems to us that it is time to consider amending the Standards regarding
38 recreation on the Sabbath. We recognize that this is not a process to be entered into without
39 careful thought and most importantly without clear Scriptural guidance. But it is our belief
40 that it is Scripture itself that needs to be heard. Objecting to recreation on the Sabbath cannot
41 come from merely not liking the prohibition. We recognize that often we must do what we
42 might naturally desire not to do because of our faithfulness to God's Word. At times we must
43 be willing to stand against our culture because of our commitment to Scripture as God's rule
44 of faith and life. Is the prohibition of recreation on the Sabbath to be included in this
45 resistance to the prevailing winds that characterize our culture? We are not convinced that it

1 is. And we base this on what we believe Scripture commands. At the same time we wish to
2 be clear that our proposal is not intended to lessen our appreciation of the Confession and
3 Catechisms but is rather a call for *greater confessional integrity*.

4
5 This short paper will seek to address two critical questions: Is the prohibition of recreation
6 on the Sabbath expressly set down in Scripture? Is recreation forbidden on the Sabbath by
7 good and necessary consequence from Scripture? One will recognize that this is the
8 framework given by the *WCF* for understanding “the whole counsel of God” (*WCF* chapter 1,
9 section 6:

10
11 The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory,
12 man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by
13 good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which
14 nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or
15 traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of
16 the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things
17 as are revealed in the Word; and that there are some circumstances concerning
18 the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human
19 actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and
20 Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are
21 always to be observed.

22
23 It is our belief that the case for or against recreation on the Sabbath must be made from
24 Scripture. For that reason we do not enter into the historical situation that gave rise to the
25 Assembly dealing with this specific matter. We are aware of the historical context of the
26 Westminster Assembly and the positive influence of Nicolas Bownd’s 1595 treatise on the
27 Sabbath and the negative influence of King James’ Book of Sports issued in 1617 and 1633.
28 However informative this history may be in demonstrating the cultural influences on the
29 Westminster Assembly, the final appeal must be to God’s Word, which the Assembly
30 believed they were interpreting correctly.

31
32 While considering whether Scripture forbids recreation on the Sabbath, it is necessary to
33 remember the positive nature of the fourth commandment. In Mt. 22.36-40 Christ
34 summarized the first table of the Law with the words, “You shall love the Lord your God
35 with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (see also *LC* question
36 102). As we approach the fourth commandment, we are being given instruction as to how we
37 are to demonstrate our love to God as we keep the Sabbath.

38
39 First – is recreation on the Sabbath forbidden by divine command? The Sabbath command in
40 Ex. 20.8-11 and Dt. 5.12-15 begins with the instruction to remember the Sabbath day, to
41 keep it holy. This opening sentence gives the general instruction that God’s people are to
42 celebrate and call to memory the seventh day that it may be separated and set apart to God.
43 A major difference in the Sabbath day from the other six days is the restriction on work on
44 the Sabbath. In the use of *‘abad* (to labor) and *mēlā’ka* (occupation, work), the
45 commandment has in view what the Confession phrases as worldly employments. *‘abad* is

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1 the term used in Gen. 2.5, 15; 3.23; 4.2, 12 to speak of tilling the ground and in Ex. 5.18 to
2 do the work of making bricks. These examples are consistent with the use of *‘abad*
3 throughout the Old Testament, and it is plain that the word is limited to work in the sense of
4 physical labor. The use of *mēlā’ka* falls into the same category as can be seen from its use in
5 passages such as Gen. 2.2; Jer. 18.3; and Jonah 1.8. Based on the terms used in the fourth
6 commandment, it is labor, not activities in general, that is prohibited on the Sabbath.

7
8 But what about Isaiah 58.13, which the Standards use as a proof text to forbid recreation: “If
9 you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and
10 call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going
11 your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure or talking idly” (ESV)? Does this not clearly
12 forbid any form of recreation on the Sabbath? The context of the chapter is God’s critique of
13 formalism in Israel’s worship with specific focus on fasting and Sabbath keeping. Both
14 fasting and Sabbath are to be a “delight” or “pleasure” (the Hebrew reading, *hēpeš*). It must
15 be emphasized that *hēpeš* is not referring to fun and games but to the things that we take
16 pleasure in or are a delight to us. We see this usage in passages such as Is. 54.12 (“walls of
17 precious stone”); Mal. 3.12 (“all the nations will call you blessed for you will be a land of
18 delight”); Job 31.12 (“if I have withheld anything that the poor desired”); Is. 44.28 (“I am
19 the Lord Who says of Cyrus, he is my shepherd and he shall fulfill all my purpose”);
20 Is. 53.10 (“the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand”); Prov. 31.13 (“*she seeks wool and*
21 *flax and works with willing hands”); Eccl. 3.17 (“I”); Is. 58.3 (“behold, in the day of your*
22 *fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers”). It is apparent from the*
23 *wide range of usage that the meaning of *hēpeš* cannot be limited to recreation and there is*
24 *good reason to question whether this is the correct understanding of the term in Is. 58.13.*
25 *This is particularly true in light of its use in Is. 58.3, which points to a meaning associated*
26 *with work, not recreation. Given the semantic range of *hēpeš*, its usage in passages such as*
27 *Prov. 31.13, Eccl. 3.17, and its context in Is. 58, it is likely that the idea of “pursuing one’s*
28 *business” would make more sense in Is. 58.13. In summary, from the words used in the*
29 *Sabbath command and in Is. 58, we are not convinced that recreation is forbidden by divine*
30 *command.*

31
32 Second - Is recreation on the Sabbath forbidden by good and necessary consequence?
33 Is. 58.13 states that God will bless those who turn back from doing their pleasure, their
34 delight, their will on the Sabbath. Obviously that does not include the pleasure of worship
35 and serving God. It does at least mean that the Sabbath is not a day to do with as we please.
36 Does that preclude recreation? To consider this question it is helpful to think about the
37 purpose of the Sabbath as a gift of God – a sign of His goodness. Jesus taught in Mk. 2.27
38 that the Sabbath is for our benefit and as such is a sign of God’s grace. The reaction of the
39 Pharisees here is quite instructive. They “watched Jesus, to see whether He would heal him
40 [a man with a withered hand] on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him” (Mk. 3.2). The
41 Pharisees interpreted the Sabbath in terms of Law and had lost sight of the Sabbath as a sign
42 of God’s grace. Jesus’ anger at them (Mk. 3.5) is understandable. This helps us understand
43 the Sabbath command – God is interested in a proper heart attitude over against a mere
44 external obedience. In this light Is. 58.13, while consistent with the fourth commandment,
45 carries us further along so that it is not only a matter of refraining from our work on the

1 Sabbath but also not viewing the day as a “free” day in which we may pursue our
2 “pleasures” – whatever those pleasures may be. This understanding is undoubtedly behind
3 the Standards’ prohibition of recreation. But we believe that it prohibits too much. What is
4 condemned is recreation or any other thing occupying the focus of the day. We can and must
5 say that the Sabbath is not to be devoted to recreation, but that is a far different statement
6 than saying that all recreation is to be prohibited. Is. 58.13 is a control on our Sabbath
7 observance, reminding us that we are to devote the day to the worship and enjoyment of our
8 Creator and Redeemer not our own pursuits.

9
10 How do we properly worship and enjoy God on the Sabbath? We follow the example that
11 God set forth on the seventh day of creation as Ex. 20.11 instructs us – God rested. We know
12 that God did not rest because He was physically tired. This directs us away from seeing the
13 Sabbath as being intended solely for the purpose of providing a time of physical rest,
14 although since God knows how we are made (Ps. 103.14), this purpose certainly is included.
15 But the significance of God’s rest on the seventh day can be better understood from Ex.
16 31.17 – “on the seventh day He rested and was *refreshed*.” In Ex. 23.12 we read: “Six days
17 you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey
18 may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be *refreshed*. The
19 Hebrew root for *refresh* is *nāpaš*, the common term for breath or to breathe. The idea of its
20 use in the Sabbath command is that God finished His creation work and then took a breath.
21 Surely it was not to “catch His breath.” Most likely the idea is that on the seventh day God
22 ceased from His work of creation and was then able to look at, contemplate, and enjoy His
23 creative activity. To follow this pattern means that on one day of the week we can rest and be
24 refreshed in body and soul because God is the Creator. We can rest from our fear and
25 concern for our needs because it is God, our Creator, who will sustain us and supply what
26 we need. We see this at work in the wilderness wanderings when God commanded that no
27 manna be collected on the Sabbath as He would supply enough on the sixth day (Ex.
28 16.22f). We also see this in the command that the land be given a Sabbath rest with no
29 reaping or gathering every seventh year (Lev. 25.1-7). How could God command such a
30 radical agricultural policy? What answer was there for those who asked “what shall we eat
31 in the seventh year if we may not sow or gather in our crops?” (Lev. 25.20) God replies: “I
32 will command my blessing on you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient
33 for three years” (Lev. 25.21). God promises this as the Creator and Sustainer of life. Relating
34 this to Ex. 20.10, we can rest and be refreshed on the Sabbath because God is our Creator
35 and Sustainer. We do not need to fear for our own needs when God commands that we labor
36 only six days of the week. Instead we can give worship to God who supplies our needs and
37 breathe – be refreshed. Does this allow for recreation? We believe that it does as part of our
38 refreshment on the Sabbath.

39
40 The Sabbath command is to be understood not only in light of creation but also in light of
41 God’s redemption of His people (Dt. 5.15). Here we are to observe the Sabbath with
42 reference to God as our Redeemer. God brought His people out of bondage in Egypt into the
43 rest of the promised land which foreshadowed the Sabbath rest (Heb. 4). As is the case in
44 acknowledging God as Creator, keeping the Sabbath in light of God as Redeemer is an
45 exercise of faith. The Sabbath is to be a time set aside in which God is worshipped as

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1 Redeemer; it is to be a time of resting in His redemptive work. The cares and concerns of
2 this world hold no terror for us. We do not have to spend seven days laboring to insure our
3 existence and safety. We look to God's redemptive work in which He secures life for us.
4 Since God takes this responsibility upon Himself we are called to rest in Him, delight in
5 Him, and joyfully and freely give worship to Him. Can this include recreation? Recreation
6 as an exercise in freedom certainly seems appropriate to the Sabbath day.

7
8 Our conclusion is that Scripture does not either expressly prohibit recreation on the Sabbath
9 nor does it forbid it by good and necessary consequence. But we trust that in saying this we
10 have made clear that we do not believe that the Sabbath is a time for doing as we please.
11 Any activity on the Sabbath must be examined as to its consistency with the Sabbath as a
12 sign of response to God as our Creator and Redeemer. Recreation is not always a good thing,
13 for it can be abused and misused as can all God's good gifts. We recognize that far too often
14 recreation is pursued as an end in itself. Jacques Ellul's insightful quote is to the point:
15 "Obviously the Christian does not understand the holy day if on it he prefers to head for the
16 beach or the ski slopes. It is not just that he has been badly taught or does not need rest. But
17 he will not take up his freedom. He is not acting like a man who is freed in Christ. Nor has
18 he discovered that prayer and worship in fact refresh him far more effectively than eight
19 hours of play" (*The Ethics of Freedom*, p. 130). There can also be a problem with recreation
20 that does not lend itself to enjoyment of God or fellowship with other Christians. A Sunday
21 "couch potato" watching sports all day would be a case in point. If a given recreational
22 activity distorts or detracts from the significance of the day which God in His goodness has
23 given us, then that type of recreation should be stopped. But that is far different from
24 prohibiting all recreation on the Sabbath. From our study of Scripture we humbly believe
25 that the Westminster fathers got this wrong and we propose that all references to the
26 forbidding of recreation on the Sabbath in the Standards be stricken.

27
28 *Adopted by Tennessee Valley Presbytery at its stated meeting, April 18, 2015*

29 *Attested by /s/ TE Doyle Allen, stated clerk*