

**EAT THE FAT, DRINK THE SWEET, AND BE MERRY:  
A Biblical Defense for Play on the Lord's Day**

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Recently I heard student describe to a professor a Sunday church picnic with his PCA church. All was well until he happened to mention that some of them played a little volleyball after lunch. The professor then curtly responded, "It must not be a very Presbyterian church." Are we really less Presbyterian if we play a little casual volleyball with our covenant family on the Lord's Day?

Similarly, while in Scotland I came across many adults who remember Sunday as a day of great torment when they were children. Playgrounds were off-limits. Toys were locked up. Many were forced to stay inside all day. In short, they were "grounded" weekly. Why does a day that is supposed to celebrate God as Creator, Redeemer and Consummator have to feel like a prison lock-down? Again I must ask, are we really less Presbyterian if we let children "play" on the Lord's Day?

In fairness to the professor and to the parents of these Scottish saints, they were not trying to be Pharisaic, but rather to apply faithfully the teaching of the Westminster Standards. The Shorter Catechism succinctly states, "The Sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days" (Question 60). Thus, Westminsterian Sabbatarians conclude, "You are not to pursue your own pleasure in playing or recreation. Rather, you are to discover the peculiar treasure of the Sabbath."<sup>1</sup> They argue that when we involve ourselves in the ordinary stuff of life and leisure on the Sabbath, we profane the day's special sanctification and deny ourselves the blessing of partaking in even greater pleasures — spiritual pleasures. Thus, Joseph Pipa refers to the Sabbath as a "spiritual vacation."<sup>2</sup>

The Scriptures teach us that the Sabbath is a day which especially calls to our attention the works of God in creation (Gen. 2:2-3; Exod. 20:11), redemption (Deut. 5:15) and the consummation (Heb. 3:7-4:11). But while worship of God and Christ's ongoing Jubilee ministry (cf. Lk. 4:16-21) are the main substance of Sabbath observance in the New Covenant, I have become increasingly persuaded that recreation in the context of the covenant family is not proscribed. To the contrary, much in Scripture associates the celebration of creation, redemption and consummation with a nuance of playfulness. Thus, playfulness in biblical perspective may actually enhance our ability to worship and honor our Creator, Redeemer and Consummator. Therefore, the modest objective of this paper is to put forth a defense for volleyball among covenant families on the Lord's Day.

In even positing the possibility that recreation and play might be commendable practices on the Lord's Day, conservative Sabbatharians will immediately object that such thinking is contrary to the teaching of Isaiah 58:13-14, the prooftext cited in the Westminster Standards. God says,

If because of the Sabbath, you turn your foot,  
 From doing your own pleasure on My holy day,  
 And call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord honorable,  
 And shall honor it, desisting from your own ways,  
 From seeking your own pleasure,  
 And speaking your own word,  
 Then you will take delight in the Lord,  
 And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;  
 And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,  
 For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Such language as “desisting from your own ways, / From seeking your own pleasure, / And speaking your own word” has traditionally been understood by Westminsterian Sabbatharians to proscribe recreation and other expressions of play on the Sabbath. However, in the context of the whole of Isaiah 58, the issue of playfulness and recreation is not, I believe, even in view in vv. 13-14.

To examine what is in view in Isaiah 58:13-14, we must therefore step back and take a broader look at chapter 58. Alec Motyer helps us in this task by presenting what I think is the most helpful outline of chapter 58. By noting lexical affinities between the various components of the poem, he sees in it the following chiasmic structure:<sup>3</sup>

God's Rebuke (v.1)  
     Fast without God's blessing (v.2-5)  
         Lord's chosen fast and its blessings (v.6-12)  
     Feast with God's blessing (v.13-14a)  
 God's Promise (v.14b-d)

In looking at this chiasm, it is worth noting two features. First, the passage we are most concerned with, 58:13-14a, balances with 58:2-5. Second, the various components stand in an antithetical relationship with one another. Thus, in order for us to examine what God is commending in 58:13-14a, we must first examine the abuse he is contrasting it with in 58:2-5.

In Isaiah 58:2, the people of God are, by all superficial appearances, seeking the Lord. However, in 58:3b-4, it is clear that these appearances of piety are just that — appearances. Behind the facade of ritualistic purity stand a people with hearts a long way away from the Lord and his ways. Despite their pretensions to seek God's ways and presence, they really seek their own “desire.” They “drive hard” (same Hebrew verb used to speak of the Egyptian taskmasters in

Exod. 3:7) their workers. They strive with and abuse others. The rancor is such that while Israel contends that they fast to draw near humbly to God, God sarcastically concludes that they “fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist” (v.4), since this is precisely what results from their days of fasting! Suffice it to say, the oppressive results of Israel’s fasting betray their impure, unholy motives.

Yet, Israel’s sin against God is actually much bigger than merely having impure motives in her worship. Such motives reveal an attitude toward God that is fundamentally pagan. J.N. Oswalt observes that Israel’s “religious behavior is for the purpose of getting something from God. It is for the purpose of manipulating him and securing blessings that he would not otherwise give. This is nothing more than paganism.”<sup>4</sup> Canaanites were notorious for trying to excite, cajole and manipulate their gods into actions. They kept rubbing the lamp, as it were, looking for the divine genie. But note who is the master in this kind of relationship: it is surely not their god. Sadly, Israel was now following this Canaanite approach to God. Israel is not fasting to humble herself before God. She is fasting to “press God’s buttons” and put pressure on him to bless her. One indication of this reality is her arrogant indignation when God chooses not to comply (v.3a).

Thus, Israel’s wayward “worship” does not celebrate the lordship of God, but mocks it. Instead, man’s desires and his own lordship reign supreme. He is out only for himself and to use God toward his own carnal ends. Thus, J.N. Oswalt concludes, the Israelites were using formal religion “to gain ground in the dot-eat-dog struggle for power, position and possessions.”<sup>5</sup> This is the sin against which God inveighs in Isaiah 58:2-5. Is it any wonder that he was nauseated by such vain religion?

In this context, the discussion in Isaiah 58:13-14 concerning the denial of one’s own desire on the Sabbath can hardly have recreation and play as its primary focus. Nor can it have merely business and commerce in mind. Rather, God is teaching his people that he cannot and will not be manipulated by man’s greedy and carnal instincts. God will not tolerate or accept religious exercises that are primarily employed “to serve those covetous instincts that motivate all our lives far more than we care to admit.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, he cannot and will not be manipulated by anyone, for any reason. He is the Lord.

Unfortunately, Oswalt suggests that the ultimate issue in Isaiah 58 is whether religion is for our pleasure or for God’s.<sup>7</sup> This is a false dichotomy. One evidence against Oswalt is that our pleasure and delight are in view even in the God-honoring Sabbath (58:13-14). Therefore, the question of Isaiah 58 is more appropriately: Is our religion such that we find pleasure by imposing our lordship over God or by submitting ourselves to his gracious lordship? Is our joy found in currying favor with God, so that he will do what we dictate, or is it found in gratefully receiving that which He freely lavishes upon us? The difference between the unacceptable worship in 58:2-5 and the acceptable worship in 58:1-14 is not who experiences pleasure, but who submits to whom, and whose ways prevail.

If my analysis of Isaiah 58 is correct, then the question of whether recreation, play and other expressions of pleasure profane the Sabbath is not even on the radar screen. Rather, in Isaiah 58, we are being called to abandon vain efforts to manipulate God. We are being called to acknowledge joyfully that God is sovereign and to receive freely and fully the blessings he would bestow upon his people. We must address the propriety (or impropriety) of Sabbath recreation by determining from other parts of Scripture whether recreation is indeed part of the gifts our sovereign God would lavish upon us on the Sabbath day.

### **Holiness and Play**

As we consider other parts of the Old Testament, it is difficult to escape the particularly festive and playful nature of many cultic celebrations. For example, in Nehemiah 8, the exiles gathered to hear the Word of God read and expounded by Ezra and the Levites. It was one long sermon, as the Law was expounded for half a day. In response to the Word of God, the people were initially overcome with mourning and weeping (8:9). Therefore Nehemiah and the Levites admonished the people with words worthy of our consideration:

This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep... Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength (Neh. 8:9-10).

It is very important to see what Nehemiah and the Levites inferred from the fact that the day before them was “holy.” This was, if not formally so, an informal Sabbath day. And precisely because it was holy, it was to be a day of rejoicing and celebration. Mourning was not permitted. The joy of the Lord himself required that the day be characterized by rejoicing. Seldom do we, in our generation, deduce from the holiness of the occasion that it should be profoundly joyful. More often, the only thing we deduce is that it should be sober and reverent.

How is this joy to be manifested? The people are exhorted to “eat of the fat” and “drink of the sweet.” They are not commanded to eat an ordinary meal. They are not told to eat whatever is necessary to satisfy their hunger. They are told to gorge themselves on the richest of fare. They are not told to assuage their thirst with a little water, but to imbibe the sweetest wine. Thus, feasting, not merely eating, is the order of the day.

Cannot feasting be regarded as a form of “culinary playfulness” on this “holy” day? After all, we are talking about consumption well beyond sustenance. We are talking about sheer extravagance and enjoyment as derived from the good provisions of God. There is no denial of pleasure here, at least for some parts of our bodies. Therefore, if our stomachs are to know extravagance, not just mere satisfaction; and if our taste buds are to know titillating pleasure, not just tolerance; then why cannot the rest of our bodies find legitimate delight and pleasure on this holy day? After all, extravagant enjoyment of God’s creation — at least with respect to food —

seems to be commended as a condition for affirming the holiness of the day and resting in the joy of the Lord. Perhaps enjoyment of other parts of God's creation should be part of the day's festivities as well.

We are told that, in accordance with the instructions given by Nehemiah, "the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them" (Neh. 8:12). Would to God that the preaching and understanding of God's Word provoked a similar exuberance in our Lord's Day celebrations.

We find a similar commingling of worship and playfulness in David's leading of the ark into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:12-23; 1 Chr. 15:1-29). He dances and leaps with all gladness and might as the ark of the covenant makes its way into the city. Moreover, as part of the festivities the Levites and people sing and shout, accompanied with trumpets, lyres, harps, cymbals, etc. In 1 Chronicles 15:29, playfulness is worked into the picture by the Chronicler's word choice. David is described as leaping and "making merry." The Hebrew word for "making merry" (*sachaq*) is translated elsewhere as a reference to children "playing" in the streets (Zech. 8:5). While this word is legitimately translated as rejoicing or making merry, this nuance of playfulness should not be missed.

Moreover, this theme of playfulness is underscored in 2 Samuel 6 by recounting Michal's scorn for David. She would not have objected to "ordinary" worship, but she had disdain for worship that, in her mind, fell far below the "dignity" of the King. David, however, was extremely strong in his response: "It was before the Lord, who chose me above your father and above all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the Lord, over Israel; therefore I will celebrate [or "play" (*sachaq*)] before the Lord" (2 Sam. 6:2 1). Note how David defends his manner of worship. The themes of Mosaic covenant, Davidic kingship, and election all provide sufficient warrant for David to worship playfully before the Lord. It is amazing to see the weightiest themes in the Old Testament cited as the reason for playful worship of God.

More subtly, I would point out that the symphony of music David arranged should also be seen as a form of "aural playfulness." After all, psalms are not merely concerned to convey truth but to celebrate, chew on and enjoy it. Parallelism is used to double back over affirmations and add extra nuances to or just underscore the truth. Word-plays, alliteration and other literary devices are used to add extra flavor to the truth. As sung, truths are not merely spoken but drawn out, sustained, savored. And if that were not enough, the accompaniment of the instruments adds a certain emotive dimension. Is biblical song merely the conveyance of truth? Hardly. It is a festive celebration of truth. It is a reverent "playfulness" with truth.

Here again, one must ask whether such demonstrations of playfulness on one of the most holy days in the life of the Old Testament — the entrance of the ark into Jerusalem — do not provide warrant for expressions of "playful worship" before the Lord in our own day. At minimum, one thing should be clear from these two examples: playfulness was a part of ancient Israel's notions of holiness and celebration. While this does not yet provide justification for

volleyball on Sunday, it does demonstrate that playfulness itself is neither irreverent nor antithetical to a special, even holy, day of worship.

## Creation and Play

As we turn to the Bible's description of creation — the original reason given for keeping the Sabbath (Exod. 20:11) — we also detect a certain extravagance and set of values that are consistent with, or friendly to, play. First, we must note that creation, as with all of God's works, is according to his good pleasure. In the first chapter of Genesis, we keep running into the word "good" as characterizing God's assessment of each day's work (Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25). On the sixth day, when all has been created, God regards it all as "very good" (1:31).

Too many of us regard these assessments as very reserved and measured. However, other passages inform us that such divine assessments should be seen with considerable enthusiasm. For example, in Job 38:7, we read that at creation the morning stars sang together," and "all the sons of God shouted for joy."

Similarly, we find in Proverbs 8:30-31 that wisdom, as personified, was with God at creation "rejoicing" [or "playing" (*sachaq*)] always before him, / Rejoicing [playing (*sachaq*)] in the world, his earth." It is tough to fathom the wisdom of God playfully rejoicing over God's creation and the angels shouting for joy over it all. However, such passages ought to inform us that our God takes immeasurable delight — exuberant and even playful delight — in his creation. The mood in heaven during creation was not unlike that of dancing King David. It is no wonder then that the psalmist has no doubts when he exclaims, "Let the Lord be glad in his works" (Ps. 104:3 1).

God's great pleasure in creation is also evident in the sheer extravagance of creation. L. Ryken points out that the "lilies of the field," which may rise and fall without a single human eye seeing them, "exist for no reason other than they please God to be there."<sup>8</sup> Who can enjoy the wonders of the deepest ocean caves or furthest galaxies of the universe but the all-seeing eye of God? Accordingly, John Piper asks, "Why did God create great sea monsters? Just to play, to frolic in the ocean where no man can see, but only God" (cf. Ps. 104:25-26).<sup>9</sup> By infinite measure, God is the supreme "enjoyer" of creation.

At the same time, he would have his animals enjoy his bountiful work. Psalm 104: 25-26 speaks of God creating the sea and forming leviathan in part so that the animal might "sport in it." This word "sport" (*sachaq*) is the same Hebrew word used to describe children playing in the streets (Zech. 8:5) and David "making merry" and "celebrating" before the Lord (1 Chr. 15:29; 2 Sam. 6:21). What can this say except that playfulness is intrinsic to animal life! Anybody who has owned animals or studied animal behavior can attest to the fact that playfulness is instinctive. Why should God create animals with the capacity for and inclination to play? What "productive"

purpose does it serve? It serves no purpose except gratuitous enjoyment for God and for the animal.

But of all created things, human beings have the greatest capacity to play and enjoy the creation of God. Few children need help learning how to play. They may need help learning how to play with certain toys, but the instinct playfully to explore things is virtually unquenchable. As we become adults, do we lose this instinctive yearning to play? Absolutely not. Both R.K. Johnston, Michael Novak, and millions of other adults still care about what happens to their favorite sports teams.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, we can be utterly given to sports. J. Huizinga insightfully observes,

“What actually is the fun of playing? ... Why is a huge crowd roused to frenzy by a football match? This intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play.”<sup>11</sup>

Yes, playfulness touches humanity at a very fundamental level, and to ignore it by being possessed by seriousness is to become less human.<sup>12</sup>

For his intrinsically playful animals and humans, God created neither a utilitarian world nor a minimalist world. Rather, he created playful beings, and then gave them a universe of “stuff” to play with and to enjoy. Not everything is useful, productive or even necessary. He did not have to make food so delicious and varied in its flavors. He did not have to create a world with such vast arrays of color and hue. He did not have to create unseen galaxies trillions of miles away. He did not have to create thousands of species of birds and fish. He did not have to make human sexuality so deep in pleasure. And we could go on and on and on. Suffice it to say, when God is said to have created trees “pleasing to the sight and good for food” (Gen. 2:9), we are told that God created this world with a gratuitous extravagance that is not just to be utilized for industry but enjoyed in playful indulgence. The infinite beauties of sight, sound, scent, taste and touch of the world need not have any practical use; they are merely to be delightfully received.

Given a world so rich in pleasure and delight at every turn, can we celebrate the creative acts of God any more vigorously on the Sabbath than to include elements of play in our observance of it? After all, in a spirit of true playfulness, we express our sheer delight in the creation of God. True playfulness seeks not to acquire, gain or subdue the earth in any lasting way. Rather, its sole focus is to enjoy some portion of what God has given us. Do we not honor God when, in a spirit of gratefulness before him, we imbibe with fullest delight the pleasures of this world as they were intended to be enjoyed? Feasting is a celebration of food. Playfulness celebrates other aspects of creation.

What is more, playfulness can help expand our knowledge and appreciation of creation. According to R.K. Johnston, “play often times pushes the individual outward beyond his or her normally perceived world, enlarging that understanding of reality in the process.”<sup>13</sup> Science and

rational examination are not the only means of exploring reality. Rather, play can enhance one's enchantment with God's creation in ways that cannot be picked up from thinking, reading, praying, or mere conversation. It celebrates life with the whole person, not just with the mind. Thus, I would submit that a day committed to commemorating God's great acts of creation can be celebrated a little more fully when play is included.

Pipa recognizes that little children will need physical and playful outlets of energy on the Sabbath, so he advocates various efforts at directing playful energies in a constructive direction.<sup>14</sup> But why stop with little children? Surely older children and adults should enjoy creation with faculties other than their minds, taste buds and stomachs. Why can we not allow a certain measure of playfulness to quicken our senses, accelerate our heart-rate, activate our muscles, energize our adrenalin, and arouse a spirit of life and playfulness in our souls? Just like children, we too should grow in our appreciation of the goodness of God, from the heart of our innermost being to the sweat of our pores.

We have seen that in the enjoyment of God over his creation, all of heaven rejoiced, and his wisdom "played" with him in those days. We have also found that playfulness touches the animal and human spirit at a very deep level. And to such playful beings, God gave his world to be richly enjoyed, not just used. Given such a context, how can we wonder that Israel feasted and made merry at its holy festivals and assemblies? How can we wonder that they playfully enjoyed God and his truth with music, dancing and singing? Such playful enjoyment of everything God gives seems only too appropriate on the Sabbath. Given the mood of God himself as he created, the way he created us, and the way he created the world, we too should playfully enjoy the Sabbath. A little afternoon volleyball, with the brethren and before the Lord, seems pretty consistent with this attitude towards God's work of creation.

## **Redemption and Play**

A second reason given to observe the Sabbath is the redemptive work of God. Deuteronomy 5:15 says, "And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day." For us, of course, the Exodus is the great Old Testament type of redemption that would be accomplished in Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension and session. Thus, given that we are exploring whether playfulness is an appropriate element of Sabbath observance, we must ask whether a spirit of playfulness is an appropriate component of our celebration of redemption in Christ. I submit that it is.

In the Old Testament, following several paradigmatic moments of redemption and deliverance, we find a spirit of true exuberance and even playful worship. Consider Exodus 15. Following the safe passage of Israel through the sea and the destruction of Pharaoh's army, Israel bursts forth in songs of joy. We read of Moses and all Israel singing a most robust celebration of deliverance. Moreover, we find Miriam leading all of the women in the use of musical instruments

and dancing. It would be tough to deny that a certain spirit of levity and brightness characterizes this celebration. Jubilation, playfulness and reverence are woven together into one grand tapestry of praise.

In 1 Samuel 18, after David leads Israel in another paradigmatic moment of redemption — the defeat of the Philistines — we find Israel taken up in redemptive jubilation. The women enter the streets joyfully with singing, dancing and musical instruments, all hailing the victory of David and Saul (18:6-7). Indeed, the Scripture says that they sang and “played” (*sachaq*; cf. Zech 8:5; Ps. 104:26; Prov. 8:30-31; 2 Sam. 6:21). Thus, the redemptive victory of him who would become the type of Christ the King provokes powerful outbursts of festive, playful celebration.

Finally, in one other moment of redemption in the Old Testament, Israel celebrates enthusiastically its deliverance from annihilation in the Feast of Purim (Est. 9:19-22). In yet another example of true festive celebration, the Jews were to “make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor” (9:19,22). Here we find the same spirit of rejoicing and playful feasting that we saw in Neriemiah 8 above. Redemption calls for real celebration. It calls for a spirit of joy and freedom that is the opposite of the heaviness presented by the bondage and threat.

In the New Testament Jesus pushes our understanding of redemptive celebration still further. In Luke 15, Jesus takes the opportunity to give us a glimpse of how God and His angels respond to the redemption of His people. The focus of all three parables in Luke 15 — the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son — is not on the joy of the redeemed, but the joy of the Redeemer over the finding of his people. It is he who calls out to all of heaven, “Rejoice with Me!” (15:6-7,9-10). It is the father, not the prodigal son, who arranges the feast with music and dancing (15:22-25). It is the father who told the older son, “It was necessary to be merry and rejoice” (15:32). If the parable is to be pushed to the limits of its language, it suggests that God is constrained to celebrate the redemption of his people. He cannot but celebrate! And so, even as we love because he first loved us, we celebrate redemption because he first celebrates over us.

And how does Jesus present this divine jubilation? We find shouting, music, dancing, and feasting. They are “making merry.” Indeed, the word used to translate “be merry” in 15:32 is the same word used in the LXX to translate Proverbs 8:30-31, the reference to wisdom rejoicing/playing with God in the days of creation. While this Greek word is not used to translate the other occurrences of *sachaq* from the Old Testament that we have considered above, its use in Proverbs 8 does suggest that a certain nuance of playfulness cannot be ignored in the range of the word’s meaning. This nuance is confirmed by the fact that the same word is used by Luke to celebrate the “eat, drink and be merry” lifestyles of two unregenerate rich man (Luke 12:9; 16:19). Thus, it appears that the Sovereign God and his Savior rejoice over us with language that speaks of festive, playful extravagance. The suggestion seems outrageous, but it is Jesus himself who hammers the point home with three straight parables.

If God can playfully rejoice over our redemption with images of feasting, dancing and celebration, can we not rejoice over his redemptive work on the Sabbath with some measure of corresponding playfulness? To be sure, the Cross must never be trivialized. But when the weight of eternal damnation and alienation from God is lifted from our shoulders, are we not entitled to stand, jump, dance, shout, feast and run around — on the Sabbath — in our new-found liberty? From these redemptive texts we can infer that God would be pleased to see such exuberance over a gift that cost him so much. Thus, it would seem appropriate to me, in light of our peace with God and reconciliation to the people of God, to enjoy the levity of a volleyball game with others in the covenant family. What better way is there to show that, in a certain sense, our hearts are now carefree.

### **Consummation and Play**

The third facet of God's work which the Sabbath proclaims is the consummation. Even as the Sabbath calls to remembrance the past creative and redemptive work of God, the Sabbath also proclaims the expectation of the consummation which is not yet here. It presents a weekly opportunity to celebrate in anticipation of the great eternal rest which, while inaugurated with the coming of Christ, remains to be fully realized. Thus, in anticipation of this glorious end of time, we must examine whether play is an appropriate expression of consummation hope.

Even before we proceed to Scripture, it is worth noting that play intrinsically has a spirit about it which is truly compatible with an eschatological frame of mind. For example, the player must always enter another world, compete with its own rules and definitions, in order to play the game. R.K. Johnston speaks of the "as-if-ness" of the play world.<sup>15</sup> J. Huizinga goes a little further in describing the "as-if-ness" of the play world. Writing in Europe during the march toward and into World War II, he says of play, "Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life, it brings a temporary, a limited perfection."<sup>16</sup> Does not this instinctive, common-grace thirst for a better world — a perfect world — not call to mind at least the resemblance of an eschatological hope? The player engages in a temporary search for a pleasurable reality beyond the fallen, ordinary world that he knows. I would suggest that such instincts serve to expose man's innate desire for what he was created to know: the consummation joy and rest which was initially offered to him in the Garden.

Note also that in the world of play, when a player has truly given himself to the game, time seems to freeze in the here and now. There is little thought of yesterday or tomorrow; the focus is on the moment at hand. J.B. Rohrlich writes, "There is no 'time' in leisure; there is only the 'present.'"<sup>17</sup> Here again, true leisure and play can serve as an eschatological type, this time of the eternal present.

In the way true play ignites our sense of "aliveness," it also serves as an eschatological type. Engagement in a game stirs a person's soul as few things can. When a person truly enters into a state of play — mentally, physically, emotionally — a certain current of energy surges

through his system. He is outside of his own self-contained world and often feels a sense of “aliveness” as he experiences at no other time. A person can even enter into this state vicariously by watching others play (e.g. attendance at athletic contests). For some people, it may be the only opportunity to feel alive, even if they have to live it through another person.

Is this not evidence of an eschatological hope for life in the fullest sense of the word? We were created to live fully and to enjoy all things fully, but the curse of Genesis 3 has imposed death and constraint on us at every turn. Ecclesiastes reminds us all too well how death is the backdrop that shadows just about everything in life. Yet, the thirst for life, true life, throbs in our hearts with relentless power. And play celebrates and arouses those raging thirsts for abundant life within us. It affirms the rightness of those desires. For Christians, it is a foretaste of what is still to come.

The Scriptures take advantage of this eschatological dimension of play and use it several times to characterize the great consummation. For example, in Isaiah 25, the prophet speaks of the restoration in language of a great feast: “And the Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, and refined, aged wine” (25:6). Notice the adjectives: aged (twice), choice, refined. Is this a superlative feast or what! Bread and water are not in view. This feast speaks of free, gratuitous gladness and joy. It hints at play.

In Jeremiah, the restoration is spoken of in the language of playful worship and celebration. In 30:19, speaking of the restored people of God, the prophet writes, “And from them shall proceed thanksgiving and the voice of those who make merry [play (*sachaq*)].” In 31:4, God says through the prophet, “Again I will build you, and you shall be rebuilt, O virgin of Israel! / Again you shall take up your tambourines, and go forth to the dances of the merrymakers [those who play].” These images are combined with images further down in the chapter that speak of “grain, new wine, oil” (31:11), and then of rejoicing and dancing (31:13). Thus, Jeremiah is presenting the consummation in the language of festal celebrations that we have already explored above.

Finally, and of huge significance to our discussion, Zechariah speaks of the restoration in the language of a glorious day in the park. God says through the prophet,

“I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of truth, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts will be called the Holy Mountain.” Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Old men and old women will again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each man with his staff in his hand because of age. And the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing [*sachaq*] in its streets” (Zech. 8:3-5).

Here again we see the concepts of holiness (Holy Mountain) and truth (City of Truth) wedded to sheer playfulness. Until now we have been speaking primarily about celebrations in Scripture that

are worshipful with a nuance of playfulness in them — playful worship. In this prophecy, however, God’s Holy Mountain and City of Truth is inhabited by playing children while the older adults sit and look on. What a picture of the consummation! To be sure, it should not be considered apart from all of the portraits of worship in the consummation. However, combined with the images of feasting and worship, we now see that sheer playfulness is an image used to describe what we will experience in the eternal consummation. As we saw above, the concept of play has within itself features that have the resemblance of eschatological hope. Now we see that the concept of play — pure play — is used by God to reference the holy, truth-filled, eschatological rest.

Given that true play is portrayed as part of the consummate kingdom of God, and given that Christ has ushered in this kingdom even now, it once again seems very appropriate that play be a part of Sabbath observance in the New Covenant. After all, by engaging in play within the covenant family on the Sabbath day, we remind ourselves that all the feelings of life in play are but a foretaste of what is still to come. We also communicate to our children that they can in fact drool for infinitely more of what they already know, connecting the consummation to the world in which they live. And also very importantly, when we get together as a church family or as several covenant families, we communicate to the world that we have a wonderful hope they do not have. In a culture like ours that is obsessed with finding entertainment, enjoyment and true play, the church alone is in the position of being able to enjoy play to the fullest. The culture does it to escape reality. We do it in anticipation of the fullness of biblical reality. Thus, if children can play in the concourses of God’s holy mountain in the days of the consummate kingdom, I am inclined to think that we can play a little volleyball on sand or grass and confess with our playfulness, “Maranatha.”

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, playful celebration seems to be an appropriate way to remember God’s glorious work in creation. In addition, playful celebration seems to follow God’s lead in celebrating our redemption in Christ. Finally, playful celebration seems to be an appropriate way to anticipate the consummation, given that it is a Biblical type of it. In light of all this, I cannot but conclude that play is not only permitted on the Sabbath, but is put forth in Scripture as that which we should do in the days of the inaugurated Kingdom of God. Play should be an element in our overall Sabbath observance.

Can what I am suggesting be seriously abused? Only a fool would deny the dangers contained here. In Exodus 32:6, Israel made a golden calf and began to “play,” an action they would soon regret. In 2 Samuel 6:5, the fact that Israel celebrated/played before God with all its might did not stop God from judging Uzzah for touching the ark. If we play to the neglect of our central concern on the Sabbath — biblical worship — then we play at our own peril. However, just because there is risk of false worship does not mean that we do not endeavor to engage in

true worship. Similarly here, while the concept of play is explosive, that only tells us how important and therefore valuable it is when put in a redeemed, biblical perspective.

I fear that skepticism about Sabbath play among Reformed Christians may reflect an unbiblical attitude towards all things physical. God is spirit, but he loves his physical world. And for us, “real life is physical.”<sup>18</sup> C.S. Lewis provides a healthy corrective for us when he writes, “There is no use trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, the Sabbath observance I see articulated in the Westminster Standards has a tone which seems to suggest that we are looking for an escape from the physical world rather than looking for the redemption of it. We are looking for a new heaven and a new earth. Therefore the “spiritual vacation” Joseph Pipa advocates does not do justice to either the creation, redemption or consummation elements of Sabbath observance. The consummation is more than reading, praying, singing and thinking. Our Sabbath observance should also reflect our hope of a new earth, replete with feasting and playing in the streets, all before the lord.

There is one final thought I would like to put forth. Given the way that playfulness pervades God’s reaction and ours to creation, redemption and the consummation, I find myself intrigued by a big theological question: Could it be that God himself has a spirit of playfulness in his nature? Could it be that our proclivities towards play are a reflection of his image, that he just might be the ultimate player? In this context, it would be interesting to revisit the fact that Jesus came eating and drinking and was called a “gluttonous man and a drunkard” (Luke 7:34). I have already suggested that God is constrained by his own good pleasure to love play. Whatever may be said of these last musings, there is one thing I think I can say in closing: the professor who chastised his student for playing a little volleyball with his covenant family on the Lord’s Day might want to rethink his Sabbath position in light of the way God repeatedly links himself, his holiness, and his creative, redemptive and consummate work with a spirit of play.

Soli Deo gloria!

### Notes

1. Joseph. A. Pipa, *The Lord’s Day* (Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1997), 21.
2. Ibid.
3. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 478-79.
4. J.N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 497.
5. Ibid., 495.
6. Ibid., 498.
7. Ibid., 508.
8. Paul Heintzman, “Implications for Leisure from a Review of the Biblical Concepts of Sabbath and Rest,” in *Christianity and Leisure: Issues in a Pluralistic Society*, eds. Paul

Heintzman, Glen E. Van Ardel and Thomas I. Visker (United States: Dordt College Press, 1994), 179.

9. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1991), 91.

10. Robert K. Johnston, *The Christian at Play* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), viii-ix.

11. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 2-3.

12. Robert K. Johnston, 48.

13. *Ibid.*, vii.

14. Joseph. A. Pipa, 191, 194-95.

15. Robert K. Johnston, 36.

16. Johan Huizinga, 10.

17. J.B. Rohrlich, *Work and Love: The Crucial Balance* (New York: Summit Books, 1980), 72, as quoted in Robert K. Johnston, 35.

18. John Piper, 82.

19. C.S. Lewis, as quoted in John Piper, 82.

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