

CHAPTER 22

POSITION OF THE REFORMERS CONCERNING THE SABBATH AND FIRST DAY

The Reformation arose in the Catholic church - The Sabbath had been crushed out of that church, and innumerable festivals established in its stead - Sunday as observed by Luther, Melancthon, Zwingle, Beza, Bucer, Cranmer, and Tyndale - The position of Calvin stated at length and illustrated - Knox agreed with Calvin - Sunday in Scotland A.D. 1601 - How we should view the Reformers.

The great Reformation of the sixteenth century arose from the bosom of the Catholic church itself. From that church the Sabbath had long been extirpated; and instead of that merciful institution ordained by the divine Lawgiver for the rest and refreshment of mankind, and that man might acknowledge God as his Creator, the papacy had ordained innumerable festivals, which, as a terrible burden, crushed the people to the earth. These festivals are thus enumerated by Dr. Heylyn:

"These holy days as they were named particularly in Pope Gregory's decretal, so was a perfect list made of them in the Synod of Lyons, A.D. 1244, which being celebrated with a great concourse of people from all parts of Christendom, the canons and decrees thereof began forthwith to find a general admittance. The holy days allowed of there, were these that follow; viz., the feast of Christ's nativity, St. Stephen, St. John the evangelist, the Innocents, St. Sylvester, the circumcision of our Lord, the Epiphany, Easter, together with the week precedent, and the week succeeding, the three days in rogation week, the day of Christ's ascension, Whitsunday, with the two days after, St. John the Baptist, the feasts of all the twelve apostles, all the festivities of our Lady, St. Lawrence, ALL THE LORD'S DAYS IN THE YEAR, St. Michael the Archangel, All Saints, St. Martin's, the wakes, or dedication of particular churches, together with the feasts of such topical or local saints which some particular people had been pleased to honor with a day particular amongst themselves. On these and every one of them, the people were restrained as before was said from many several kinds of work, on pain of ecclesiastical censures to be laid on them which did offend, unless on some emergent causes, either of charity or necessity they were dispensed with for so doing. . . . Peter de Aliaco, Cardinal of Cambray, in a discourse by him exhibited to the council of Constance [A.D. 1416] made public suit unto the fathers there assembled, that there might [be] a stop in that kind hereafter; as also that excepting Sundays and the greater festivals it might be lawful for the people, after the end of divine service to attend their business; the poor especially, as having little time enough on the working days to get their living. But these were only the expressions of well-wishing men. The popes were otherwise resolved, and did not only keep the holy days which they found established, in the same state in which they found them, but added others daily as they saw occasion. . . . Thus stood it as before I said, both for the doctrine and the practice, till men began to look into the errors and abuses in the Roman church with a more serious eye than before they did."¹

Such was the state of things when the reformers began their labors. That they should give up these festivals and return to the observance of the ancient Sabbath, would be expecting too much of men educated in the bosom of

the Romish church. Indeed, it ought not to surprise us that, while they were constrained to strike down the authority of these festivals, they should nevertheless retain the most important of them in their observance. The reformers spoke on this matter as follows:- The Confession of the Swiss churches declares that,

"The observance of the Lord's day is founded not on any commandment of God, but on the authority of the church; and, That the church may alter the day at pleasure."[2](#)

We further learn that,

"In the Augsburg Confession which was drawn up by Melancthon [and approved by Luther], to the question, 'What ought we to think of the Lord's day?' it is answered that the Lord's day, Easter, Whitsuntide, and other such holy days, ought to be kept because they are appointed by the church, that all things may be done in order; but that the observance of them is not to be thought necessary to salvation, nor the violation of them, if it be done without offense to others, to be regarded as a sin."[3](#)

Zwingle declared "that it was lawful on the Lord's day, after divine service, for any man to pursue his labors."[4](#) Beza taught that "no cessation of work on the Lord's day is required of Christians."[5](#) Bucer goes further yet, "and doth not only call it a superstition, but an apostasy from Christ to think that working on the Lord's day, in itself considered, is a sinful thing."[6](#) And Cranmer, in his Catechism, published in 1548, says:

"We now keep no more the Sabbath on Saturday as the Jews do; but we observe the Sunday, and certain other days as the magistrates do judge convenient, whom in this thing we ought to obey."[7](#)

Tyndale said:

"As for the Sabbath, we be lords over the Sabbath, and may yet change it into Monday, or into any other day as we see need, or may make every tenth day holy day only if we see cause why."[8](#)

It is plain that both Cranmer and Tyndale believed that the ancient Sabbath was abolished, and that Sunday was only a human ordinance which it was in the power of the magistrates and the church lawfully to change whenever they saw cause for so doing. And Dr. Hesse gives the opinion of Zwingle respecting the present power of each individual church to transfer the so-called Lord's day to another day, whenever necessity urges, as, for example, in harvest time. Thus Zwingle says:

"If we would have the Lord's day so bound to time that it shall be wickedness to transfer it to another time, in which resting from our labors equally as in that, we may hear the word of God, if necessity haply shall so require, this day so solicitously observed, would obtrude on us as a ceremony. For we are no way bound to time, but time ought so to serve us, that it is lawful, and permitted to each church, when necessity urges (as is usual to be done in harvest time), to transfer the solemnity and rest of the Lord's day, or Sabbath to some other day."[9](#)

Zwingle could not, therefore, have considered Sunday as a divinely appointed memorial of the resurrection, or indeed, as anything but a church festival.

John Calvin said, respecting the origin of the Sunday festival:

"However, the ancients have not without sufficient reason substituted what we call the Lord's day in

the room of the Sabbath. For since the resurrection of the Lord is the end and consummation of that true rest, which was adumbrated by the ancient Sabbath; the same day which put an end to the shadows, admonishes Christians not to adhere to a shadowy ceremony. Yet I do not lay so much stress on the septenary number that I would oblige the church to an invariable adherence to it; nor will I condemn those churches, which have other solemn days for their assemblies, provided they keep at a distance from superstition."[10](#)

It is worthy of notice that Calvin does not assign to Christ and his disciples the establishment of Sunday in the place of the Sabbath. He says this was done by the "ancients,"[11](#) or as another translates it, "the old fathers." Nor does he say "the day which John called the Lord's day," but "the day which we call the Lord's day." And what is worthy of particular notice he did not insist that the day which should be appropriated to worship should be one day in every seven; for he was not tied to "the septenary number." The day might come once in six days, or once in eight. And this proves conclusively that he did not regard Sunday as a divine institution in the proper sense of the word; for if he had, he would most assuredly have felt that the festival must be septenary, that is, weekly, and that he must urge "the church to an invariable adherence to it." But Calvin does not leave the matter here. He condemns as "FALSE PROPHETS" those who attempt to enforce the Sunday festival by means of the fourth commandment; and who to do this say that the ceremonial part, which requires the observance of the definite seventh day, is abolished, while the moral part, which simply commands the observance of one day in seven, still remains in force. Here are his words:

"Thus vanish all the dreams of false prophets, who in past ages have infected the people with a Jewish notion, affirming that nothing but the ceremonial part of the commandment, which according to them is the appointment of the seventh day, has been abrogated, but that the moral part of it, that is the observance of one day in seven, still remains. But this is only changing the day in contempt of the Jews, while they retain the same opinion of the holiness of a day."[12](#)

Yet these very "dreams of false prophets." to use the words of Calvin, constitute the foundation of the modern doctrine of the change of the Sabbath. For whatever may be said of first-day sacredness in the New Testament, the fourth commandment can only be made to recognize that day by means of this very doctrine of one day in seven which Calvin so sharply denounces. Now I state another important fact. Calvin's commentaries on the New Testament cover all the books from which quotations are made in behalf of Sunday except the book of Revelation. What does Calvin say concerning the change of the Sabbath in the record of Christ's resurrection?[13](#) Not one word. He does not even hint at any sacredness in the day, nor any commemoration of the day. Does he say that the meeting "after eight days" was upon Sunday? He does not say what day it was.[14](#) What does he say of Sunday in treating of the day of Pentecost?[15](#) Nothing. He does not so much as say that this festival was on the first day of the week. What does he say of the breaking of bread at Troas? He thinks it took place upon the ancient Sabbath! He says:

"Either he doth mean the first day of the week, which was next after the Sabbath, or else some certain Sabbath. Which latter thing may seem to me more probable; for this cause, because that day was more fit for an assembly, according to custom."[16](#)

He says, however, that this place might "very well" be translated "the morrow after the Sabbath." But he adheres to his own translation, "one day of the Sabbaths," and not "first day of the week." He says further:

"For to what end is there mentioned of the Sabbath, save only that he may note the opportunity and choice of the time? Also, it is a likely matter that Paul waited for the Sabbath, that the day before

his departure he might the more easily gather all the disciples into one place."[17](#)

"Therefore, I think thus, that they had appointed a solemn day for the celebrating of the holy supper of the Lord among themselves, which might be commodious for them all."[18](#)

This shows conclusively that Calvin believed the Sabbath, and not the first day of the week, to have been the day for meetings in the apostolic church. But what does he say of the laying by in store on the first day of the week? He says that Paul's precept relates, not to the first day of the week, but to the Sabbath! And he marks the Sabbath as the day on which the sacred assemblies were held, and the communion celebrated, and says that on account of these things this was the most convenient day for collecting their contribution. Thus he writes:

"On one of the Sabbaths. The end is this - that they may have their alms ready in time. He therefore exhorts them not to wait till he came, as any thing that is done suddenly, and in a bustle, is not done well, but to contribute on the Sabbath what might seem good, and according as every one's ability might enable - that is on the day on which they held their sacred assemblies."[19](#)

"For he has an eye, first of all, to convenience, and farther, that the sacred assembly, in which the communion of saints is celebrated, might be an additional spur to them. Nor am I inclined to admit the view taken by Chrysostom - that the term Sabbath is employed here to mean the Lord's day (Rev.1:10), for the probability is, that the apostles, at the beginning, retained the day that was already in use, but that afterwards, constrained by the superstition of the Jews, they set aside that day, and substituted another. Now the Lord's day was made choice of chiefly because our Lord's resurrection put an end to the shadows of the law. Hence the day itself puts us in mind of our Christian liberty."[20](#)

These words are very remarkable. They show first, that by the Sabbath day Calvin means, not the first day, but the seventh; second, that in his judgment as late as the time of this epistle, and of the meeting at Troas [A.D. 60], the Sabbath was the day for the sacred assemblies of the Christians, and for the celebration of the communion; third, "but that AFTERWARDS, constrained by THE SUPERSTITION OF THE JEWS, they set aside that day, and substituted another."

Calvin did not therefore believe that Christ changed the Sabbath to Sunday to commemorate his resurrection; for he says that the resurrection abolished the Sabbath,[21](#) and yet he believes that the Sabbath was the sacred day of the Christians to the entire exclusion of Sunday as late as the year 60. Nor could he believe that the apostles set apart Sunday to commemorate the resurrection of Christ, for he thinks that they did not make choice of that day till after the year 60, and even then they did it merely because constrained so to do by the superstition of the Jews!

Dr. Hessey illustrates Calvin's ideas of Sunday observance by the following incident:

"Knox was the intimate friend of Calvin - visited Calvin, and, it is said, on one occasion found him enjoying the recreation of bowls on Sunday."[22](#)

Without doubt Calvin was acting in exact harmony with his ideas of the nature of the Sunday festival. But the famous case of Michael Servetus furnishes us a still more pointed illustration of his views of the sacredness of that day. Servetus was arrested in Geneva on the personal application of John Calvin to the magistrates of that city. Such is the statement of Theodore Beza, the life-long friend of Calvin.[23](#) Beza's translator adds to this fact the

following remarkable statement:

"Promptness induced him to have this heresiarch arrested on a Sunday."[24](#)

The same fact is stated by Robinson:

"While he waited for a boat to cross the lake in his way to Zurich, by some means Calvin got intelligence of his arrival; and although it was on a Sunday, yet he prevailed upon the chief syndic to arrest and imprison him. On that day by the laws of Geneva no person could be arrested except for a capital crime; but this difficulty was easily removed, for John Calvin pretended that Servetus was a heretic, and that heresy was a capital crime."[25](#)

"The doctor was arrested and imprisoned on Sunday the thirteenth of August [A.D. 1553]. That very day he was brought into court."[26](#)

Calvin's own words respecting the arrest are these:

"I will not deny but that he was made prisoner upon my application."[27](#)

The warmest friends of first-day sacredness will not deny that the least sinful part of this transaction was that it occurred on Sunday. Nevertheless the fact that Calvin caused the arrest of Servetus on that day shows that he had no conviction that the day possessed any inherent sacredness.

John Barclay,[28](#) a learned man of Scotch descent, and a moderate Roman Catholic, who was born soon after the death of Calvin, and whose early life was spent in eastern France, not very remote from Geneva, published the statement that Calvin and his friends at Geneva

"Debated whether the reformed, for the purpose of estranging themselves more completely from the Romish church, should not adopt Thursday as the Christian Sabbath."

Another reason assigned by Calvin for this proposed change was,

"That it would be a proper instance of Christian liberty."[29](#)

This statement has been credited by many learned Protestants,[30](#) some of whom must be acknowledged as men of candor and judgment. But Dr. Twisse[31](#) discredits Barclay because he did not name the individuals with whom Calvin consulted, and produce them as witnesses; and because that King James I. of England at one time suspected Barclay of treachery toward him. But no such crime was ever proved, nor does it appear that the king continued always to hold him in that light.[32](#) His veracity has never been impeached. The statement of Barclay may possibly be incorrect, but it is not inconsistent with Calvin's doctrine that the church is not tied to a festival that should come once in seven days, even as Tyndale said that they could change the Sabbath into Monday or could "make every tenth day holy day, only if we see cause why," and it is in perfect harmony with Calvin's idea of Sunday sacredness as shown in his acts already noticed. Like the other reformers, Calvin is not always consistent with himself in his statements. Nevertheless, we have his judgment concerning the several texts which are used to prove the change of the Sabbath, and also respecting the theory that the commandment may be used to enforce, not the seventh day, but one day in seven, and it is fatal to the modern first-day doctrine.

John Knox, the great Scottish reformer, was the intimate friend of Calvin, with whom he lived at Geneva during a

portion of his exile from Scotland. Though the foundation of the Presbyterian church of Scotland was laid by Knox, or rather by Calvin, for Knox carried out Calvin's system, and though that church is now very strict in the observance of Sunday as the Sabbath, yet Knox himself was of Calvin's mind as to the obligation of that day. The original Confession of Faith of that church was drawn up by Knox in A.D. 1560.³³ In that document Knox states the duties of the first table of the law as follows:

"To have one God, to worship and honor him; to call upon him in all our troubles; to reverence his holy name; to hear his word; to believe the same; to communicate with his holy sacraments, are the works of the first table."³⁴

It is plain that Knox believed the Sabbath commandment to have been stricken out of the first table. Dr. Hessey, after speaking of certain references to Sunday in a subsequent work of his, makes this statement respecting the present doctrine of the Sabbath in the Presbyterian church:

"On the whole, whatever the language held at present in Scotland may be, it is certainly not owing to the great man whom the Scotch regard as the apostle of the Reformation in their country."³⁵

That church now holds Sunday to be the divinely authorized memorial of the resurrection of Christ, enforced by the authority of the fourth commandment. But not thus was it held by Calvin and Knox. A British writer states the condition of things with respect to Sunday in Scotland about the year 1601:

"At the commencement of the seventeenth century, tailors, shoemakers, and bakers in Aberdeen were accustomed to work till eight or nine every Sunday morning. While violation of the prescribed ritual observances was punished by fine, the exclusive consecration of the Sunday which subsequently prevailed was then unknown. Indeed, there were regular 'play Sundays' in Scotland till the end of the sixteenth century."³⁶

But the Presbyterian church, after Knox's time, effected an entire change with respect to Sunday observance. The same writer says:

"The Presbyterian Kirk introduced into Scotland the Judaical observance of the Sabbath [Sunday], retaining with some inconsistency the Sunday festival of the Catholic church, while rejecting all the other feasts which its authority had consecrated."³⁷

Dr. Hessey shows the method of doing this. He says:

"Of course some difficulties had to be got over. The Sabbath was the seventh day, Sunday was the first day of the week. But an ingenious theory that one day in seven was the essence of the fourth commandment speedily reconciled them to this."³⁸

The circumstances under which this new doctrine was framed, the name of its author, and the date of its publication, will be given in their place. That the body of the reformers should have failed to recognize the authority of the fourth commandment, and that they did not turn men from the Romish festivals to the Sabbath of the Lord, is a matter of regret rather than of surprise. The impropriety of making them the standard of divine truth is forcibly set forth in the following language:

"Luther and Calvin reformed many abuses, especially in the discipline of the church, and also some gross corruptions in doctrine; but they left other things of far greater moment just as they found

them. . . . It was great merit in them to go as far as they did, and it is not they but we who are to blame if their authority induce us to go no further. We should rather imitate them in the boldness and spirit with which they called in question and rectified so many long-established errors; and availing ourselves of their labors, make further progress than they were able to do. Little reason have we to allege their name, authority, and example, when they did a great deal and we do nothing at all. In this we are not imitating them, but those who opposed and counteracted them, willing to keep things as they were."[39](#)

1 Hist. Sab. part ii. chap. vi. sects. 3, 5. <[Return](#)>

2 Cox's Sabbath Laws, &c. p. 287. <[Return](#)>

3 Id.Ib. <[Return](#)>

4 Cox's Sabbath Laws, &c. p. 287. <[Return](#)>

5 Id. p. 286. <[Return](#)>

6 Id.Ib. <[Return](#)>

7 Id. p. 289. <[Return](#)>

8 Tyndale's Answer to More, book i, chap. xxv. <[Return](#)>

9 Hessey, p. 352. <[Return](#)>

10 Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, book ii. chap. viii. sect. 34. translated by John Allen. <[Return](#)>

11 Quanquam non sine delectu Dominicum quem vocamus diem veteres in locum Sabbati subrogarunt. <[Return](#)>

12 Calvin's Institutes, book ii. chap. viii. sect. 34. <[Return](#)>

13 Calvin's Harmony of the Evangelists on Matt.28; Mark 16; Luke 24. <[Return](#)>

14 Calvin's Commentary on John 20. <[Return](#)>

15 Calvin's Commentary on Acts 2:1. <[Return](#)>

16 Calvin's Commentary on Acts 20:7. <[Return](#)>

17 Id.Ib. <[Return](#)>

18 Calvin's Commentary on Acts 20:7. <[Return](#)>

19 Calvin's Commentary on 1Cor.16:2. <[Return](#)>

20 Id.Ib. <[Return](#)>

21 Calvin's Institutes, book ii. chap. viii. sect. 34. <[Return](#)>

22 Hessey's Bampton Lectures on Sunday, p. 201, ed. 1866. In the notes appended, p. 366, he says: "At Geneva a tradition exists, that when John Knox visited Calvin on a Sunday, he found his austere coadjutor bowling on a green." Dr. Hessey evidently credited this tradition. <[Return](#)>

23 Beza's Life of Calvin, Sibson's Translation, p. 55, ed. 1836. <[Return](#)>

24 Id. p. 115. <[Return](#)>

25 Eccl. Researches, chap. x. p. 338. <[Return](#)>

26 Id. p. 339. <[Return](#)>

27 Beza's Life of Calvin, p. 168. <[Return](#)>

28 M'Clintock and Strong's Cyclopedia, vol. i. p. 663. <[Return](#)>

29 Hessey, p. 341, gives a clue to the title of Barclay's work. It was *Paraenesis ad Sectarios hujus temporis*, lib. 1, cap. 13. p. 160, Rome, 1617. <[Return](#)>

30 See Heylyn's Hist. of the Sabbath, part ii. chapter vi. sect 8; Morer's Lord's Day, pp. 216, 217, 228; An Inquiry into the Origin of Septenary Institutions, p. 55; The Modern Sabbath Examined, p. 26, Whitaker, Treacher, and Arnot, London, 1832; Cox's Sabbath Literature, vol. i. pp. 165, 166; Hessey, pp. 141, 142, 198, 341, and the authors there cited. <[Return](#)>

31 Morality of the Fourth Commandment, pp. 32, 36, 39, 40. <[Return](#)>

32 In fact, the story told by Twisse that Barclay is not to be believed in what he says of Calvin because he was treacherous toward King James I., who for that reason would not promote him at his court, appears to be wholly unfounded. The Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. iv., p. 439, eighth edition, assigns a very different reason. It says: "In those days a pension bestowed upon a Scottish papist would have been numbered among the national grievances." That is to say, public opinion would not then tolerate the promotion of a Romanist. But this writer believes that the king secretly favored Barclay. Thus on page 440 he adds: "Although it does not appear that he obtained any regular provision from the king, we may perhaps suppose that he at least received occasional gratuities." This writer knew nothing of Barclay as a detected spy at the king's court. Of his standing as a man, he says on p. 441: "If there had been any remarkable blemish in the morals of Barclay, some of his numerous adversaries would have pointed it out." M'Clintock and Strong's Cyclopedia, vol. 1, p. 663, says that he "would doubtless have succeeded at court had he not been a Romanist." See also Knight's Cyclopedia of Biography, article Barclay. <[Return](#)>

33 Cox's Sabbath Laws, &c. p. 123; M'Clintock and Strong's Cyclopedia, vol. v. pp. 137-140. <[Return](#)>

34 Quoted in Hessey's Bampton Lectures, p. 200. <[Return](#)>

35 Id. p. 201. <[Return](#)>

36 Westminster Review, July, 1858, p. 37. <[Return](#)>

37 Westminster Review, July, 1858, p. 37. <[Return](#)>

38 Hessey p. 203. <[Return](#)>

39 Dr. Priestly, as quoted in Cox's "Sabbath Laws," p. 260. <[Return](#)>

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