

CHAPTER 24

SABBATH-KEEPERS IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The judgment of the martyr Frith - The Reformation brings Sabbath-keepers to light in various countries - In Transylvania - In Bohemia - In Russia - In Germany - In Holland - In France - In England.

John Frith, an English reformer of considerable note and a martyr, was converted by the labors of Tyndale about 1525, and assisted him in the translation of the Bible. He was burned at Smithfield, July 4, 1533. He is spoken of in the highest terms by the historians of the English Reformation.¹ His views respecting the Sabbath, and first-day are thus stated by himself:

"The Jews have the word of God for their Saturday, sith [since] it is the seventh day, and they were commanded to keep the seventh day solemn. And we have not the word of God for us, but rather against us; for we keep not the seventh day, as the Jews do, but the first, which is not commanded by God's law."²

When the Reformation had lifted the veil of darkness that covered the nations of Europe, Sabbath-keepers were found in Transylvania, Bohemia, Russia, Germany, Holland, France, and England. It was not the Reformation which gave existence to these Sabbatarians, for the leaders of the Reformation, as a body, were not friendly to such views. On the contrary, these observers of the Sabbath appear to be remnants of the ancient Sabbath-keeping churches that had witnessed for the truth during the Dark Ages.

Transylvania, a country which now constitutes one of the eastern divisions of the Austrian Empire, was, in the sixteenth century, an independent principality. About the middle of that century, the country was under the rule of Sigismund. The historian of the Baptists, Robinson, gives the following interesting record of events in that age and country:

"The prince received his first religious impressions under his chaplain, Alexius, who was a Lutheran. On his removal he chose Francis Davidis to succeed him, and by him was further informed of the principles of the Reformation. Davidis was a native of that extremely populous and well-fortified town which is called Coloswar by the natives, Clausenberg by the Germans, and by others, Claudiopolis. He was a man of learning, address, and piety, and reasoned in this part of his life more justly on the principles of the Reformation than many of his contemporaries. In 1563 his highness invited several learned foreigners to come into Transylvania for the purpose of helping forward the Reformation."³

"Several other foreigners, who had been persecuted elsewhere, sought refuge in this country, where persecution for religion was unknown. These refugees were Unitarian Baptists, and through their indefatigable industry and address, the prince, the greatest part of the senate, a great number of ministers, and a multitude of the people went heartily into their plan of Reformation."⁴

"In the end the Baptists became by far the most numerous party, and were put in possession of a

printing office and an academy, and the cathedral was given to them for a place of worship. They obtained these without any violence, and while they formed their own churches according to the convictions of their members, they persecuted nobody, but allowed the same liberty to others, and great numbers of Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists resided in perfect freedom."5

Mr. Robinson further informs us that Davidis took extreme Unitarian ground with respect to the worship of Christ, which seems to have been the only serious error that can be laid to his charge. Davidis was a Unitarian Baptist minister, intrusted by his brethren with the superintendency of the churches in Transylvania. His influence in that country at one period was very great. His views of the Sabbath are thus stated:

"He supposed the Jewish Sabbath not abrogated, and he therefore kept holy the seventh day. He believed also the doctrine of the millennium, and like an honest man, what he believed he taught. He was considered by the Transylvanian churches as an apostle, and had grown gray in their service; but the Catholics, the Lutherans, and the Calvinists, thought him a Turk, a blasphemer, and an atheist, and his Polish Baptist brethren said he was half a Jew. Had he been a whole Jew he ought not to have been imprisoned for his speculations."6

"By what means the Supreme Searcher of hearts only knows, but by some methods till then unknown in Transylvania, the old man was arrested, and by the senate condemned to die. He was imprisoned in the castle, and providence by putting a period to his life there, saved his persecutors from the disgrace of a public execution."7

Mr. Robinson says that "many have been blamed" for the death of Davidis, "but perhaps the secret springs of this event may never be known till the Judge of the world maketh inquisition for blood." There were many Sabbatarians in Transylvania at this time, for Mr. Robinson enumerates many persons of distinction who were of the same views with Davidis. The ambassador Bequessius, general of the army; the princess, sister of prince John; the privy counselor, Chaquius, and the two Quendi; general Andrassi, and many others of high rank; Somer, the rector of the academy at Claudiopolis; Matthias Glirius, Adam Neusner, and Christian Francken, a professor in the academy at Claudiopolis.

"These," says Robinson, "were all of the same sentiments as Davidis, as were many more of different ranks, who after his death in prison, defended his opinion against Socinus. Palaeologus was of the same mind; he had fled into Moravia, but was caught by the emperor, at the request of Pope Gregory XIV., and carried to Rome, where he was burnt for a heretic. He was an old man, and was terrified at first into a recantation, but he recollected himself and submitted to his fate like a Christian."8

These persons must have been Sabbatarians. Moshem, after saying that Davidis "left behind him disciples and friends, who strenuously maintained his sentiments," adds:

"The most eminent of these were Jacob Palaeologus, of the isle of Chio, who was burned at Rome in 1585; Christian Francken, who had disputed in person with Socinus; and John Somer, who was master of the academy of Clausenberg. This little sect is branded by the Socinian writers, with the ignominious appellation of SEMI-JUDAIZERS."9

We have a further record of Sabbatarians in Transylvania to the effect that in the time of Davidis,

"John Gerendi [was] head of the Sabbatarians, a people who did not keep Sunday but Saturday, and whose disciples took the name of Genoldists."[10](#)

Sabbath-keepers, also, were found in Bohemia, a country of Central Europe, at the time of the Reformation. We are dependent upon those who despised their faith and practice for a knowledge of their existence. Erasmus speaks of them as follows:

"Now we hear that among the Bohemians a new kind of Jews has arisen called Sabbatarians, who observe the Sabbath with so much superstition, that if on that day anything falls into their eyes they will not remove it; as if the Lord's day would not suffice for them instead of the Sabbath, which to the apostles also was sacred; or as if Christ had not sufficiently expressed how much should be allowed upon the Sabbath."[11](#)

We need say nothing relative to the alleged superstition of these Sabbath-keepers. The statement sufficiently refutes itself, and indicates the bitter prejudice of those who speak of them thus. But that Sabbath-keepers were found at this time in Bohemia admits of no doubt. They were of some importance, and they must also have published their views to the world; for Cox tells us that,

"Hospinian of Zurich, in his treatise 'Concerning the Feasts of the Jews and of the Gentiles,' chapter iii. (Tiguri, 1592) replies to the arguments of these Sabbatarians."[12](#)

The existence of this body of Sabbatarians in Bohemia at the time of the Reformation is strong presumptive proof that the Waldenses of Bohemia, noticed in the preceding chapter, though claimed as observers of Sunday, were actually observers of the ancient Sabbath.

In Russia, the observers of the seventh day are numerous at the present time. Their existence can be traced back nearly to the year 1400. They are, therefore, at least one hundred years older than the work of Luther. The first writer that I quote speaks of them as "having left the Christian faith." But even in our time, it is very common for people to speak of those who turn from the first day to the seventh that they have renounced Christ for Moses.[13](#) He also speaks of them as holding to circumcision. Even Carlstadt was charged with this by Luther as a necessary deduction from the fact that he observed the day enjoined in the fourth commandment. Such being a common method of characterizing Sabbath-keepers in our time, and such also having been the case in past ages - for when men lack argument, they use opprobrious terms - the historian, who makes up his record of these people from the statements of the popular party, will certainly represent them as rejecting Christ and the gospel, and accepting instead Moses and the ceremonial law. I give the statements of the historians as they are, and the reader must judge. Robert Pinkerton gives the following account of them:

"Seleznevtschini. This sect are, in modern time, precisely what the Strigolniks originally were. They are Jews in principle; maintain the divine obligation of circumcision; observe the Jewish Sabbath, and the ceremonial law. There are many of them about Tula, on the river Kuma, and in other provinces, and they are very numerous in Poland and Turkey, where, having left the Christian faith, they have joined the seed of Abraham, according to the flesh, in rejecting the Messiah and the gospel."[14](#)

The ancient Russian name of this people was Strigolniks. Dr. Murdock gives the following account of them:

"It is common to date the origin of sectarians in the Russian church, about the middle of the

seventeenth century in the time of the patriarch Nikon. But according to the Russian annals, there existed schismatics in the Russian church two hundred years before the days of Nikon; and the disturbances which took place in his time, only proved the means of augmenting their numbers, and of bringing them forward into public view. The earliest of these schismatics first appeared in Novogorod, early in the fifteenth century, under the name of Strigolniks.

"A Jew named Horie preached a mixture of Judaism and Christianity; and proselyted two priests, Denis and Alexie, who gained a vast number of followers. This sect was so numerous, that a national council was called, towards the close of the fifteenth century, to oppose it. Soon afterwards, one Karp, an excommunicated deacon, joined the Strigolniks; and accused the higher clergy of selling the office of priesthood, and of so far corrupting the church, that the Holy Ghost was withdrawn from it. He was a very successful propagator of this sect."[15](#)

It is very customary with historians to speak of Sabbath-keeping Christians in one of the following ways: 1. To name their observance of the seventh day distinctly, but to represent them as turning from Christ to Moses and the ceremonial law; or, 2. To speak of their Sabbatarian principles in so vague a manner that the reader will not be likely to suspect them of being Sabbath-keepers. Pinkerton speaks of these Russian Sabbath-keepers after the first of these methods; Murdock, after the second. It is plain that Murdock did not regard these people as rejecting Christ, and it is certain from Pinkerton that the two writers are speaking of the same people.

What was the origin of these Russian Sabbath-keepers? Certainly it was not from the Reformation of the sixteenth century; for they were in existence at least one century before that event. We have seen that the Waldenses, during the Dark Ages, were dispersed through many of the countries of Europe. And so also were the people called Cathari, if, indeed, the two were not one people. In particular, we note the fact that they were scattered through Poland, Lithuania, Sclavonia, Bulgaria, Livonia, Albania, and Sarmatia.[16](#) These countries are now parts of the Russian Empire. Sabbath-keepers were numerous in Russia before the time of Luther. The Sabbath of the Lord was certainly retained by many of the ancient Waldenses and Cathari, as we have seen. In fact, the very things said of the Russian Sabbath-keepers, that they held to circumcision and the ceremonial law, were also said of the Cathari, and of that branch of the Waldenses called Passaginians.[17](#) Is there any reasonable doubt that in these ancient Christians we have the ancestors of the Russian Sabbath-keepers of the fifteenth century?

Mr. Maxson makes the following statement:

"We find that Sabbath-keepers appear in Germany late in the fifteenth or early in the sixteenth century according to 'Ross's Picture of All Religions.' By this we are to understand that their numbers were such as to lead to organization, and attract attention. A number of these formed a church, and emigrated to America, in the early settlement of this country."[18](#)

Mr. Utter makes the following statement respecting Sabbath-keepers in Germany and in Holland:

"Early in the sixteenth century there are traces of Sabbath-keepers in Germany. The Old Dutch Martyrology gives an account of a Baptist minister named Stephen Benedict, somewhat famous for baptizing during a severe persecution in Holland, who is supposed by good authorities to have kept the seventh day as the Sabbath. One of the persons baptized by him was Barbary von Thiers, wife of Hans Borzen, who was executed on the 16th of September, 1529. At her trial she declared her rejection of the idolatrous sacrament of the priest, and also the Mass."[19](#)

We give her declaration of faith respecting Sundays and holy days:

"God has commanded us to rest on the seventh day. Beyond this she did not go: but with the help and grace of God she would persevere therein, and in death abide thereby; for it is the true faith, and the right way in Christ."[20](#)

Another martyr, Christina Tolingerin, is mentioned thus:

"Concerning holy days and Sundays, she said: `In six days the Lord made the world, on the seventh day he rested. The other holy days have been instituted by popes, cardinals, and archbishops."[21](#)

There were at this time Sabbath-keepers in France:

"In France also there were Christians of this class, among whom were M. de la Roque, who wrote in defense of the Sabbath against Bossuet, Catholic bishop of Meaux."[22](#)

M. de la Roque is referred to by Dr. Wall in his famous history of infant baptism "as a learned man in other points," but in great error for asserting that "the primitive church did not baptize infants."[23](#) It is worthy of notice that Sabbath-keepers are always observers of scriptural baptism - the burial of penitent believers in the watery grave. No people retaining infant baptism, or the sprinkling of believers, have observed the seventh day.[24](#)

The origin of the Sabbatarians of England cannot now be definitely ascertained. Their observance of believers' baptism and the keeping of the seventh day as the Sabbath of the Lord, strongly attest their descent from the persecuted heretics of the Dark Ages, rather than from the reformers of the sixteenth century, who retained infant baptism and the festival of Sunday. That these heretics had long been numerous in England, is thus certified by Crosby:

"For in the time of William the Conqueror [A.D. 1070] and his son William Rufus, it appears that the Waldenses and their disciples out of France, Germany, and Holland, had their frequent recourse, and did abound in England. . . . The Beringarian, or Waldensian heresy, as the chronologer calls it, had, about A.D. 1080, generally corrupted all France, Italy, and England."[25](#)

Mr. Maxson says of the English Sabbatarians:

"In England we find Sabbath-keepers very early. Dr. Chambers says: `They arose in England in the sixteenth century,' from which we understand that they then became a distinct denomination in that kingdom."[26](#)

Mr. Benedict speaks thus of the origin of English Sabbatarians:

"At what time the Seventh-day Baptists began to form churches in this kingdom does not appear; but probably it was at an early period; and although their churches have never been numerous, yet there have been among them almost for two hundred years past, some very eminent men."[27](#)

1 M'Clintock and Strong, vol. iii. p. 679; D'Aubigne's Hist. Ref book xviii. pp. 672, 689, 706, 707; book xx. pp. 765, 766; Fox's Acts and Monuments, book viii. pp. 524-527. <[Return](#)>

2 Frith's works, p. 69, quoted in Hessey, p. 198. <[Return](#)>

3 Eccl. Researches, chap. xvi. p. 630. <[Return](#)>

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

5 Id. p. 631. <[Return](#)>

6 Eccl. Researches, chap. xvi. p. 636. <[Return](#)>

7 Id. pp. 636, 637. <[Return](#)>

8 Eccl. Researches, chap. xvi. p. 640. <[Return](#)>

9 Mosheim's Hist. Church, book iv. cent. 16. sect. 3. part ii. chap. iv. par. 23. <[Return](#)>

10 Lamy's History of Socinianiam p. 60. <[Return](#)>

11 "Nune audimus apud Bohemos exoriri novum Judaeorum genus Sabbatarios appellant, qui tanta superstitione servant Sabbatum, ut si quid eo die inciderit in oculum, nolint eximere: quasi non sufficiat eis pro Sabbato Dies Dominicus, qui Apostolis etiam erat sacer, aut quasi Christus non satis expresserit quantum tribuen dum sit Sabbato." De Atnabili Ecclesiae Concordia; Opera, tome 5, p. 506, Lugd. Bat. 1704; quoted in Cox's Sabbath Literature, vol. ii. pp. 201, 202; Hessey, p. 374. <[Return](#)>

12 Cox, vol. ii. p. 202. <[Return](#)>

13 Such statements respecting the observers of the seventh day are very common. Even those who first commenced to keep the Sabbath in Newport were said to "have left Christ and gone to Moses in the observation of days, and times, and seasons, and such like." - Seventh-day Baptist Memorial, vol. i. p. 32. The pastor of the first-day Baptist church of Newport said to them: "I do judge you have and still do deny Christ." - Id. p. 37. <[Return](#)>

14 The Present State of the Greek Church in Russia, Appendix. p. 273, New York, 1815. <[Return](#)>

15 Murdock's Mosheim, book iv. cent. xvii. sect. 2, part i. chap. ii. note 12. <[Return](#)>

16 See the twenty-first chapter of this work. <[Return](#)>

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

18 Maxson's Hist. Sab. p. 41. <[Return](#)>

19 Manual of the Seventh-day Baptists, p. 16. <[Return](#)>

20 Martyrology of the Churches of Christ, commonly called Baptists, during the era of the Reformation. From the Dutch of T. J. van Braght, London, 1850, vol. i. pp. 113, 114. <[Return](#)>

21 Id. p. 113. <[Return](#)>

22 Manual of the S.D. Baptists, p. 16. <[Return](#)>

23 Wall's History of Infant Baptism, vol. ii. p. 379, Oxford, 1835. <[Return](#)>

24 I know of no exception to this statement. If there be any it must be found in the cases of those observing both seventh and first days. Even here, there is certainly no such thing as sprinkling for baptism, but possibly there may be the baptism of young children. <[Return](#)>

25 Hist. English Baptists, vol. pref. pp. 43, 44. <[Return](#)>

26 Maxson's Hist. Sab. p. 42. <[Return](#)>

27 Gen. Hist. Bapt. Denom. vol. ii. p. 414, ed. 1813. <[Return](#)>

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