

The Puritans and the Sabbath

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The Puritans devoted a great deal of attention to the subject of the Sabbath. The observance of the Sabbath on the Christian day with the Jewish prohibitions may well be the unique theological contribution of the English to the Continental Reformation. Neither Luther nor Calvin felt strongly about the sacredness of the day. Both considered it sufficient to hear the service in the morning and then devote the remainder of the day to whatever activity seemed either prudent or appropriate, whether it was recreation or productive labor. England, however, faced a problem different from that of the Continent. Sundays and holy days had taken on the character of licentious, drunken orgies. Over one hundred days in every year had been set aside for the celebration of some festival. As a result, little attention was given to the hearing of services and to other efforts for the general improvement of the populace.

The source of Puritan concern is evident from the attitude with which the Bible was embraced. Two commandments in particular were being disregarded, according to the Puritans. The concern over idolatry had been largely dissipated by the defeat in 1588 of the Spanish Armada and the consequent diminishment of Roman Catholic influence. The dispute over the proper observance of the Sabbath was not to be settled so easily.

The spark that ignited the Sabbatarianism was struck on Sunday, January 13, 1583, when a scaffold holding observers at a bear-baiting pit toppled over and killed eight people. John Field, a Puritan minister, rose to the occasion and produced a tract entitled *A Godly exhortation by occasion of the Late Judgement of God Shewed at Parris Garden*. The scaffold being old, rotten, and overloaded, he granted that no real miracle of destruction could be claimed; but the fact that no piece or post was left standing upright seemed to him an indication of divine intervention.

Two years later, Parliament passed a law for stricter observance of the Sabbath. Queen Elizabeth quickly vetoed the bill, in harmony with her policy to alter nothing in the ecclesiastical government.¹

Lancelot Andrews put forth almost all of the Puritan arguments to be advanced in favor of Sabbath observance in the seventeenth century in several manuscripts prepared in the last decade of the sixteenth century. He asserted that the injunction to observe the Sabbath was a moral one. He suggested that the day was altered at the time of the apostles to commemorate such events as the resurrection and the pentecost and to indicate that the Jewish dispensation had terminated.²

Andrews' works were not published until after his death, but his ideas were circulated in manuscript form. Richard Greenham incorporated most of Andrews' ideas in his work entitled *A Treatise on the Sabbath*.

A statement indicating the attitude of both Andrews and Greenham on the proper observance of the Sabbath is offered in the following paragraph: "For seeing the Sabbath day is the school day, the fair day, the market day, the feeding day of the soul, when men purely knowing the use of it, separate it wholly from other days, they shall see, how they may recover themselves from sins already past, arm themselves against sin to come, grow in knowledge, increase in faith, and how much they shall be strengthened in the inner man."³

Nicolas Bownd, Greenham's son-in-law, took the next step and put the arguments into book form, *The True Doctrine of the Sabbath*, which appeared in 1595. It was one of the most remarkable books ever written. Only a few works have enjoyed greater influence. Bownd believed in the necessity of a radical transformation of English morality. He presented the ideas that the profanation of the day of rest tended toward the degradation of all of life and that society's only hope was to restore the day of rest to its intended sanctity. Bownd sought to elevate the Sabbath and at the same time to declare the utter impotence of the crown or the church to make any other day holy. This claim drew the opposition of Queen Elizabeth and Archbishop John Whitgift. Orders were issued in 1599 and 1600 for all persons in possession of the book to give it up. Repressive efforts proved vain, and another issue was published after Whitgift's death. Henceforth, the rigid observance of the Sabbath was a distinguishing mark of the Puritan.

The importance of the Puritan contribution on the Sabbath to later religious movements is well stated by Lyman Coleman:

The divine authority of the Sabbath, was neither recognized by the ancient Fathers, nor by Luther or Calvin, nor by the early Reformers. It was reserved for the Puritans,

to their immortal honor, first to expound and enforce the law of the Christian Sabbath, based on the authority of God's word. They better read the law of the Lord our God on this subject, and bringing it out from the enormous mass of saint's days and festivals with which the church had overlaid it, like some priceless gem disinterred from the rubbish of many generations, presented it to the gaze and adoration of the world, radiant with heaven's own lustre. The influence of the sun in the heavens is not more clear or genial than is that of the Christian Sabbath, holy unto the Lord, by God's command. With all else throughout Christendom the Sabbath is a holiday, a festival observed by common consent like other saint's days and festivals of the calendar.⁴

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By 1617, the influence of Puritanism reached a level that threatened to restrict the activities of the general population on Sunday afternoons. To stem the tide of restriction, James I published a declaration authorizing legal recreations on the Sabbath. It was entitled, *The King Majesties Declaration to His Subjects concerning lawful Sports to be used*. He pointed out three practical reasons for allowing simple recreations. James believed, first, that the cessation of simple pleasures would expose the church to the attack of the recusants, who would then have occasion to say that the church was opposed to the pleasure and happiness of the people. Second, if the people were denied the exercise of vigorous recreation, they might become unfit for fighting if a war should break out. Third, without recreation to occupy the hours following divine services, many would be tempted to tipping and drunkenness.

The Laudian Bishop, William Pierce, added a fourth objection: If men had no sports to occupy them on Sundays, they might meet for illegal religious discussion. Pierce was noted for "putting down" sermons because they hindered the sale of church ales — the riotous jollifications at which money was raised for parish funds.

As an opponent of Puritanism, James I was always anxious to respond to public feeling when it ran counter to Puritan belief. His declaration stated: "No lawful recreation shall be barred to Our good people, which shall not tend to the breach of Our aforesaid laws, and canons of our church."⁵ He gave his approval to dancing, archery, leaping, vaulting, May games and May poles, and the judicious use of ale. Bull-baiting and bear-baiting were frowned upon, and bowling was a pleasure denied to the meaner sort of persons.

John Robinson, the pastor of the Pilgrim congregation, had a high regard for the day of rest. He believed that the day was set aside by God in the Decalogue for the purpose of edification and spiritual enlightenment, that the godly should take time for worship and reflection, and that the divinely appointed time for religious devotions was the Sabbath.

Robinson presented his discussion of the Sabbath question in his work *A Just and Necessary Apology*, published in 1625, the year of his death. He recognized that the day celebrated as the Sabbath by the Christian world was not the Sabbath to which the fourth commandment of the Decalogue referred. He believed that the change from Saturday to Sunday was merely circumstantial. Further, he suggested that Christ himself had taught the Disciples all things necessary for salvation and that they had met for worship on the first day of the week. He recalled a number of biblical references to occasions of Sunday worship or gathering by the early Christian Church.⁶

The Puritans believed that the sanctification of the Sabbath should involve several aspects of the Christian's behavior and concern. The people were to rest from their toils and labors. They were to recall God's benevolences in the past. They were to grow in piety toward God and charity toward men. They were to refrain from meddling with the babble of men who gave no concern to spiritual values.

The Puritans recognized that there was nothing particularly sacred about a specific day, but that the sacredness was determined by that to which the day was devoted. They believed that the more frequently a man heard the word of God, the more affection he would have for it, just as hunger for the word diminishes among those who hear it infrequently.

The Puritans saw in the efforts of every society to establish a holy day an indication that the Spirit of God was at work everywhere. They did not believe that the Sabbath was a matter of private interpretation, to be settled by individual conscience, but rather that the sacredness of the Sabbath was a matter of divine planning. They desired to live in harmony with that plan. The influence of their thought is apparent today in the tenets of every major American religious institution. The Puritans would note with no small regret the gulf between profession and practice that characterizes the modern American church.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 JOHN STRYPE, *Annals of the Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1824) Book One, chapter 24, pp. 426-432. Strype gives Serjeant John Puckering's speech "For the Better and more Reverend observing of the Sabbath-day." This speech marks the first time Sunday is referred to as the Sabbath in Parliament.
- 2 LANCELOT ANDREWS, *A Patterne of Catechisticall Doctrine* (London: 1630).
- 3 RICHARD GREENHAM, A Treatise on the Sabbath, *The Works of Richard Greenham* (London: Felix Kingston, 1959), p. 290.
- 4 LYMAN COLEMAN, *Ancient Christianity Exemplified in the Life of the Primitive*

Christians (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1852), p. 132. Quoted by ROBERT COX, *The Literature of the Sabbath Question* (Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart; and Simpkin, Marshall and Company, 1865). This massive two-volume work is the most extensive bibliographical reference available on the subject of the Sabbath.

- 5 JAMES I. *The King Majesties Declaration to his Subjects Concerning Lawful Sports to Be Used* (London: Bonham Norton, 1618), p. 5.
- 6 *John 20:19, 26*: Jesus was raised on the first day of the week. *Acts 20:6, 7*: Paul held a meeting on the first day of the week; *2 Corinthians 16:1, 2*: the offerings were gathered on the first day of the week.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

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