
ON THE CONTINENTAL SABBATH | *From Berlin in a Letter by R.L. Dabney*¹

Your visits to Germany have made you as familiar as I am with the way the German Protestants keep, or rather fail to keep, the Lord's day. As you know, it is, except the early morning service in church, the holiday, and not the holy day. Theatres and concert rooms are then gayest and fullest. The soldiery at all barracks have a special inspection and dress parade. The bands play the loudest in the evenings. The beer gardens are the fullest. The shooting matches take place when there are rifle companies. The horses and hacks are all hired for pleasure-excursions. . . . But still we must not judge good people here, as we, with our theory of the Sabbath, would deserve to be judged, were we to do the like. The Lutheran (and to a degree the Swiss) Reformers expressly taught that the Sabbath was only a judaical and ceremonial institution, and *was abolished by Christ*. This great error still stands in their creeds, and is firmly held and taught by their divines. Hence, when they thus commit what our creed makes desecrations of the Sabbath, they are acting consistently with their creed. The thing of which they are guilty before God is, not that sin of inconsistency with known duty, which so many Americans, orthodox in profession, perpetrate: it is the sin of neglecting and studying amiss the testimony of God in making up their creed. Hence a German Christian here can do these things, to us so very wrong, without its implying a deadness of conscience and rebellion against duty, such as the same acts would imply in us. . . .

But none the less do I believe that this false doctrine of Luther and Melancthon, with its consequent loose usage of Christ's holy day, is the grand error of their reform, and the grand blight and curse of European Protestantism. I do not expect to see the chill of spiritual death broken, which practically reigns over the most of this land, nor the gospel bearing its proper fruits, until this heresy is refuted, confessed, forsaken, expunged from their venerable confessions of faith, and amended in practice. Our view is, that God's omniscience saw, that, for a moral creature such as man, a stated day, consecrated by divine authority to religious duties, is absolutely essential to man's continuing a religious being; and that for this reason God did consecrate one seventh part of our time for all ages and dispensations, even including the sinless one of paradise. Compliance with this command is a vital part of the efficiency of all means of grace. So that, in a true sense, it may be said, where there is no Sabbath, there are no adequate means of grace. The gospel cannot reign without its Sabbath.

This is terribly verified here. . . . [T]he general tendency, and the general effect of that heresy [is] ruinous.

If these views of the practical results are just, then, *the Sabbath argument* needs to be re-discussed, and re-discussed, and made prominent with the utmost clearness and logical force. We must remember that the thing which needs to be done is not merely to remind our continental brethren of a confessed inconsistency. They do not allow that it is one. They think they have a

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very good, critical argument to prove that the Sabbath is abolished. Their consciences are precisely in the state, as to their shocking delinquencies, of a Presbyterian's conscience among Episcopalians, when they should berate him for going rabbit hunting on Christmas day, instead of going to the communion. You could not make that Presbyterian see any sin in himself simply by berating him; or by lauding "our venerable liturgy and canons;" or by urging the authority of the "Church." The Presbyterian would sturdily rejoin, that the "Church" had no business with any such act of authority: that he did not believe Christ was born on the 25th of December at all: that if he was, neither He nor the Apostles had commanded Christians to solemnize his birth-day as a sacred one. The only difference is, that we are certain our anti-Christmas argument is authentic. Well: the German Lutheran (erroneously, yet) honestly thinks his anti-Sabbath criticism equally solid.

Now, with such a case, mere hortation; or boasting of our "scriptural church order;" or of our pious ancestors and how they kept the Sabbath; or mere charges of sin unsupported by demonstration; or pious outcries about America's having her old Sabbath, counts for nothing. To the Lutheran trained in his creed, it is silly and insulting. The thing which needs to be done, is to *meet and refute* the false exposition of Luther (and of Calvin too) . . . even as the great Calvinistic divines of Great Britain met it in the 17th century, and convinced the mind of British Christians impregably, that the continental reform was totally erroneous on this point; and established the opposite doctrine, (a doctrine which Calvin himself renounced with contempt as mere judaizing) like a great rock in the Westminster Standards. And I, for one, believe, that this striking contradiction between the Westminster and the Lutheran Confessions, gives us the practical, instrumental cause of the grand contrast between English and German Protestantism in their outcome. It explains why the latter has been at a standstill nearly since Luther's death, hemmed in by State lines and popery to its original area; paralysed by Rationalism; while Westminster Christianity has leavened a new continent, and is filling the world with missions.

How many of our people really know the difference of the two doctrines? How many of them know the nature of the arguments by which the true doctrine was run against—the commanding authority and astute sophisms of the great reformers? This battle of truth urgently needs to be fought over again, and fought until there is no longer a foe in the field to assert the blighting error.

What one sees here teaches him that it was a great privilege to be born an Old-School Westminster-Confession-Presbyterian, and also a great privilege to be born a citizen of a truly republican commonwealth. . . .