

SHOULD CIVIL GOVERNMENT ENFORCE THE SABBATH?

By Gordon Keddie

What is to be the role of government in relation to the use of the first day of the week? Is there any justification for laws circumscribing the use of Sunday? May non-Christians be bound by law expressly enacted to accord with a principle revealed in the Word of God? Is the state to uphold the Christian worldview in the area of public and national morality?

Differing Views Among Christians

Most Christians agree that legislation of some kind should be enacted to “protect” the Lord’s Day. There are, however, at least two different classes, each with its own motivation arising out of a distinct doctrinal conviction.

1. The so-called “blue laws” are expressive of the Puritan concept of the state once held by the Christian “consensus” of the Protestant nations of the West; the state is to uphold the law of God. Allied to this was a strong Sabbatarian understanding of the Lord’s Day; the Lord’s Day is the Christian Sabbath and is binding on all men in all ages as are the other aspects of the moral law. This category would include those of Reformed persuasion and some other evangelicals.
2. With the rise of broad evangelicalism and fundamentalism, the notion that the Lord’s Day is a completely new New Testament institution, and therefore has claims only upon believers, has gained wide currency. Some with this Dominical view would reject altogether the idea of legal action regarding the Lord’s Day, but most would favor a limited program of legislation. The non-Sabbatarian evangelical will argue, however, that the Day can only be the subject of legislation insofar as it is to be preserved as a holy day for any or all who have scruples about its observance.^[1] In other words, Sunday is to be “protected” because Christians have “civil rights” just like everybody else. The state is neutral and upholds the democratic ideal rather than the law of God.

Two Objections

An immediate objection is raised: “We live now in a pluralistic society, so how can we force our view on the majority who disagree with us? They might turn around and force their view on us!”

The first thing to grasp is that what we profess to believe, as Sabbatharians, is not “our view” but the holy and righteous and unchangeable law of God. We may only call upon men to obey God’s Word, and if what we believe is God’s Word then we can do nothing else but place His claims before the masses of unbelieving humanity.

Secondly, ponder the fact that the Sabbath-breaking world is turning round and forcing its God-denying view upon the nation. Oh, the Christian’s personal freedom to use the Lord’s Day as he wishes may not have been infringed too much, but can Christians not see that the issue is not that of personal freedom for the Lord’s people? Rather, it is that God’s holy law is being

trampled underfoot – a law which may well call Christians to sacrifice their personal freedom as they contend faithfully for it before the world! A law which calls all men to repentance and obedience!

A second objection is often made: “Enacting laws won’t make people Sabbath-keepers.”

This statement taken on its own is certainly true. Understanding the deeper meaning of the Sabbath and joyfully observing it is clearly the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s work in the heart. The true Sabbath-keeper is first a true believer in Christ and is united to Him by faith. No governmental decree brought this about or ever will. If the civil power has a duty with respect to the Sabbath, it is not that of making men believe in Sabbath observance.

As an objection, however, the above statement is irrelevant, for the legislative role is in its very nature limited to the area of external public morality, in which sphere it bears testimony to the immutable law of God. The law of the land “preaches” God’s will for public social relations. The state is to be a minister of God for good (Rom. 13:4). As such it derives its authority and standards from the Word of God, and not from the mere will of the majority – democracy is not a Christian doctrine, but a pagan Greek concept.

Christ the King

To be more specific, the state derives its authority from Christ, to whom all power in heaven and earth has been given by the Father by virtue of His (Christ’s) office as Mediator of the Covenant. Christ, the Savior of His people is also the mediatorial King over the nations, and indeed the entire creation, for the benefit of the elect and to the glory of God. He is “head over all things to the church” records the Apostle Paul (Eph. 1:22).

“If the Mediator is King of nations,” writes William Symington,^[2] “nations are the subjects of the Mediator and all duties which subjects owe to their prince must be due by them to Him.” Nations are to “have respect to the glory of Christ...in all their affairs and must...take His law as their rule.”

Christ’s Kingship Applied

Many evangelicals, who would otherwise assent to the kingly office of the Savior, balk at the idea expressed by Symington, either for the reasons we dealt with above, or on the ground of a general conviction concerning the “separation of church and state.” The latter objection has no substance, since clearly the state must uphold either true biblical religion, or some more or less anti-Christian position.

The state can never be neutral with respect to the law of God any more than an individual sinner can be. This was recognized as early as 1803 by the American Covenanter theologian, Samuel B. Wylie, who noted that the U.S.A. had established by law the religion of “liberty of conscience,” which allowed every heresy or false religion the sanction of law, rather than “the religion of Jesus alone.”^[3]

The evangelical or fundamentalist in rejecting the perpetual and universal obligation of the

Sabbath is necessarily led to an effective denial of the actual Kingship of Christ over the nations, except in some abstracted spiritual sense. Discussion of Christ's rule becomes somewhat esoteric to say the least if men and nations are not bound to obey Him and actively uphold His law as His vice-regents.

The evangelical, then, rejects what he calls, somewhat pejoratively, the "theocratic Sunday." One recent writer cites the excesses of New England Puritanism – where even church attendance was enforced by law – as characteristic of this view and attributes the view to a failure to distinguish the Lord's Day from the (Mosaic) Sabbath.^[4] The latter allegation betrays a deplorable ignorance of the Puritan theology of the Lord's Day and may be dismissed without further comment. We must, however, agree that New England Puritanism overreached the bounds of biblical warrant in its zeal for the Sabbath, but we must also point out that their practice was neither implied by the Sabbatarian doctrine they held, nor typical of the various practical applications of the doctrine of Christ's mediatorial Kingship.

At the same time, both the evangelical and the Sabbatarian (Reformed) reject the so-called "civil Sunday" which exists in our society in Britain-America where Sunday laws have survived the Christian "consensus" which gave them birth. Jewett neatly calls this the "secularized cultural deposit" left after "the vital faith of the masses" has expired.^[5] Liberalism in the churches has absorbed this idea in arguing for the Lord's Day in terms of a day of civil convenience, of which Christians take advantage to attend worship. In actual fact, the day of the week is held to be irrelevant by many. What matters is that one day in seven be set aside. This has no support from evangelical Christians, whether Sabbatarian or dominical in conviction.

The solution of the evangelical, however, is no more satisfactory than the civil Sunday. Sunday laws, we are told, will be enacted by "responsible government," but in balance with the "rights" of all the various religious groups in the community.^[6] Now this begs a few questions. Who, we might inquire, has the "right" to break God's law? To whom is government responsible? On what biblical authority does any state appoint itself the legal guardian of the antinomian and profligate?

Christ's Claims upon the Nation

Christians must emphatically reject the notion that the basic principle of civil government is the democratic ideal and must resist the current tendency, especially among middle-class Christians, to view "democracy-American style" as the Christian way to run a nation. Instead of letting Americanism color the interpretation of the Scripture, let Christians stick with the Word itself, and in the applying of it to national life allow the chips, so to speak, fall where they may.

According to the Word of God, the basic principle governing the state is clearly to the effect that it exists to uphold the law of God—to be a "minister of God for good" (Rom. 13:4). The Word also calls the church to declare that the state must raise up a testimony to Christ the King:

"God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates, to be, under Him, over the people, for His own glory and the public good."^[7]

This involves, among other things, the public upholding of the sanctity of the Lord's Day in the public sector by ensuring that it is a day in which only that business which pertains to necessity and mercy is permitted to take place.

Thus we urge for the retention and restoration of the so-called "blue laws." That this is and will remain unpopular with the body of unbelievers who make up the majority is undeniable. But then, it serves to bring before them the claims of God's Word and warn them of the curse that is attached to the commands of God with respect to those who deny them. If this makes for a "gloomy" or "dull" Sabbath, then such laws speak eloquently of the miserable eternity – infinitely gloomier – into which they shall surely pass if they die in their sins.

But to the child of God, such a Sabbath speaks of the joy of an eternity in Glory. "Let us hold fast our profession..."

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National Reform Association, Publishers of The Christian Statesman. Declaring the Lordship of Christ since 1864, editor Bill Einwechter.

[www.natreformassn.org/statesman/97/sabbath.html]

References:

- [1] Paul K. Jewett, *The Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids, 1971), 150.
- [2] William Symington, *Messiah the Prince* (Philadelphia, 1884), 230. Symington asserts the distinctively Covenanter position that the nation should be "covenanted," i.e., should bind itself in a covenant to uphold the "work of Reformation."
- [3] Samuel B. Wylie, *The Two Sons of Oil* (Philadelphia, 1850), 37.
- [4] Jewett, *The Lord's Day*, 139 (cf. 117)
- [5] *Ibid.*, 141.
- [6] *Ibid.*, 150.
- [7] Westminster Confession of Faith. XXIII.1.

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