

MISUSE OF THE TERM "SABBATH"

It is quite common, in these days, to hear the term Sabbath used to designate the first day of the week or Sunday. But such a use of the term is not only unscriptural, but calculated to mislead the people. Throughout the Bible, there is but one sacred day of weekly occurrence called the Sabbath, and that is the seventh or last day of the week. When, therefore, men talk about a Christian Sabbath and a Jewish Sabbath—a first-day Sabbath, and a seventh-day Sabbath---that so they may slyly fix the term Sabbath upon the first day, and then persuade people that all those texts of Scripture which speak of the Sabbath day are meant of the first day, they pursue a course which is unauthorized, and deserve to be sharply rebuked. There are circumstances, however, which many persons seem to regard as justifying the common practice of calling the first day by the name Sabbath. Let us examine some of them.

1. It is said that the term Sabbath signifies rest; therefore the first day, being commonly observed as a day of rest, may properly be called the Sabbath. In reply to this, it may be said, that when, by custom and common consent, any term is used to express a particular place or thing, it then becomes a proper name for that thing, and signifies only that thing to which it is applied. For instance, a tabernacle means a place of worship. Yet, in New York, where this name is used to express a particular and well-known place of worship, it would be absurd and false to say you were at the Tabernacle, and mean the Church of the Messiah. So with the term Sabbath; although the word strictly means rest, yet after the Scriptures throughout the Old and New Testaments have used this term to express a particular rest, which occurred on the seventh day, it would be foolish and deceptive to speak of the Sabbath and mean the first day of the week. It may be farther said, that if this argument be good for calling the first day the Sabbath, and if the fact of its being a rest-day makes it the Sabbath, then may the Mohammedans properly call the sixth day the Sabbath, and the fact that they rest upon that day makes it the Sabbath. Yes, and those Mexican Indians, whom Cortes found keeping the fourth. day, may properly call that day the Sabbath, and directly it is made such. Even those people in Guinea, whom Purchas describes as having a rest-day, but which, says he, " they observe not upon our Sunday, nor upon the Jews' Sabbath day, but hold it upon Tuesday, the second working day of the week," may properly call that day the Sabbath, and straightway it becomes such. Are the observers of the first day ready to rest upon such ground for calling that day the Sabbath, or to continue to call it Sabbath when there is no better ground? We hope not. And we feel bound, as those who respect the Bible, and dare not charge the Author of that Book with folly in calling the seventh day only the Sabbath, to protest against such abuse of the language of Scripture.

2. The second reason frequently urged, is, that the first day comes in the room of the seventh day, and may therefore properly be called the Sabbath. Aside from the fact that the Scriptures say not a word about a substitution of the one day for the other, it may be said in reply, that if the argument be good, then the Lord's Supper may be called the Passover, and King Solomon may be called King David.

3. A third reason alleged for calling the first day the Sabbath, is, because it has long been the practice of Christians to call it so. In answering this assertion, it may be worth while to inquire what has been the practice of Christians in this matter. Few will deny, that wherever, in the New Testament, the word Sabbath refers to a weekly religious day, it is the seventh day. When the first day of the week is spoken of, it is under its appropriate title. For nearly the whole of the first century, then, we have the testimony of Scripture that the name Sabbath belonged exclusively to the seventh day. During the succeeding four hundred years, there were large numbers, both in the Eastern church, about Constantinople, and in the Western church, about Rome, who kept the Sabbath. And when ecclesiastical councils, in the fourth and fifth centuries, began to enact laws against them, they condemned Sabbath-keeping altogether. From this it is apparent, that the idea of calling the first day the Sabbath had not then entered their minds. What day was meant when the term Sabbath was used for five hundred years later still, the learned Dr. Peter Heylyn has-told us in the following words :—" Wherever, for a thousand years and upwards, we meet with Sabbatum, in any writer, of what name soever, it must be understood of no day but Saturday." Indeed, if we search all the books which have been written on this and kindred subjects up to the time of the Reformation, we shall not find that the first day was to any considerable extent regarded as the Sabbath or called by that name. Dr. Richard Whately, Archbishop of Dublin, in a late work on the subject of the Sabbath, says, "in fact, the notion against which I am contending, [viz. that the fourth commandment binds Christians to hallow the first day of the week, and that it may properly be called the Sabbath,] seems, as far as I can recollect, to have originated with the Puritans, not much more than 200 years ago, and to have been for a considerable time , confined to them, though it was subsequently adopted by some members of our church."

So far is it from being true, then, that the first day has been universally called the Sabbath among Christians, that even now, by the best authorities upon such subjects, it is not called Sabbath at all. The Records of England up to the present time invariably call the seventh, day the Sabbath. In the Journals of the House of Lords, whatever is entered as having been done on the seventh day, or Saturday, is under the date, Die Sabbati, upon the Sabbath day. The same is true of the House of Commons. The Rules and Records of the King's Bench, and the Latin Records in the Court of Exchequer and in Chancery, do likewise call the seventh day the Sabbath. These things may be known by any who will take the trouble to examine; and they show how groundless and erroneous is the supposition to which we are replying. Indeed, in many languages the seventh day is called by a name which indicates its sabbatical character. In Low Dutch it is called reest-dagh, the day of rest. In English, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, it has its right name, the Sabbath, the day of rest.

Now let us look at some of the consequences of calling the first day by the name of the Sabbath. It has given occasion for Papists to charge Protestants with neglecting the Scriptures to follow their traditions. The Papists claim, that the change of the Sabbath is the work of their own church, and that the Scriptures nowhere warrant the keeping of the first day, much less the calling it by the name of the Sabbath. Who will deny this latter position? Again, it has led some earnest and pious men to charge the teachers of religion with "be-fooling and misleading the people." Proof of this may be found to any extent in books written on the subject in the seventeenth century. The charge is there distinctly and frequently made, of designedly using deceptive arguments.

We will not undertake to say, that those who are accustomed to speak in a manner so likely to deceive, design to do that. But we will say, that such would be the natural effect of their language. It would leave upon the minds of many an impression, that they were not only bound to pay peculiar respect to the first day of the week, but that the fourth commandment required of them such respect. For a religious teacher knowingly to make this impression, is to be guilty of directly fostering error. Nay, more; if he should call the first day the Sabbath, and refer to the fourth commandment as inculcating the duty of observing that day; or should, without direct reference to that law, express himself in such a way as to leave his hearers to suppose that it required the observance of the first day, he would be wanting in faithfulness to the truth, and exposed to the denunciation of those who add to or take from it.

No doubt many will think, that at a time when the prevailing tendency is to disregard all sacred seasons, it were better not to say these things, but to leave men under an impression that the law of God requires the observance of the first day of the week, and sanctions calling that day the Sabbath. But this prevailing disregard of the day of rest, is an important reason for urging an examination of the foundation upon which the Sabbath rests. Common prudence, to say nothing of Christian sincerity, would require us, in such circumstances, to place the duty upon its true ground. If it will not stand there, it will stand nowhere. It is a dangerous experiment to encourage or connive at misconceptions in a point like this. And even if we felt assured that it would be right, we are fully convinced that it would be inexpedient. It is exceedingly dangerous to acknowledge an unsound principle, although it may promise to conduct us to desirable results, or, at the worst, to produce no bad effects. It ought to be remembered, that it was in apparently trivial and harmless points, that those false principles were allowed, which have infused their poison into the Romish and other apostate churches — a poison which, commencing with the extremities, has worked its way rapidly towards the vitals, and diffused its effects through the whole system. It is not, then, a matter of small moment. The most important and disastrous consequences may result from baptizing a day of human invention with a name which the Scriptures apply exclusively to one appointed of God.

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