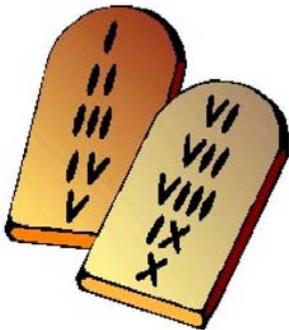




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Sabbath desecration . . . a cause for grief and a motive for prayer



Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it," Exodus 20:8-11.

The Sabbath Day or Rest Day, for that is the meaning of the phrase, was instituted at the creation by God. It was to be observed on the seventh day in commemoration of the finishing of the work of creation. After the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week, it was changed by divine decree to the first day of the week in commemoration of the finished work of redemption.

The matter is stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith, one of the subordinate standards of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, in this manner: "As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men, in all ages, He hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath." Exod. xx. 8, 10, 11; Isa. lvi. 2, 4, 6, 7; Gen. ii. 2, 3; 1 Cor. xvi. 1, 2; Acts xx. 7; Rev. i. 10; Exod. xx. 8, 10 with Matt. v. 17, 18. "This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments, and recreations, but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy." Exod. xx. 8; Exod. xvi. 23, 25, 26, 29, 30; Exod. xxxi. 15, 16, 17; Isa. lviii. 13; Neh. xiii. 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22; Isa. lviii. 13; Matt. xii. 1 to 13. (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 21, paragraphs 7 and 8.)

Sabbath desecration has become such a common feature of life in Ulster that the days of peaceful and quiet Sabbaths, when a reverence for the Lord pervaded the land and, at least in the letter, the population kept the first day of the week distinct from the other six, are almost forgotten.

I thought on these matters recently as I drove some twenty miles to preach in a neighbouring church and looked upon people building at their properties, working in their fields and travelling the roads in pursuit of business and leisure.

By no means is it a case of every farmer desecrating the Sabbath by unnecessary labours or every citizen pursuing their own interests in defiance of God. No, there is still a very



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large section of our society which reverences the Lord's Day to some degree at least. But there is a great contrast between the Sabbath activities of today and those of when I was a boy, admittedly a few years ago!

It must be said, that by and large, the Roman Catholic people are the chief offenders. There is little wonder that this is so. They have been taught that once they have fulfilled their obligations to God by attending Mass, then the rest of the day is their own to fill with whatever activities they desire. That rule used to mean that it was the Lord's Day afternoon before there was a witnessing of large scale desecration of the Fourth Commandment by the Roman Catholic population. The recent trend toward Saturday evening Mass, has resulted in the whole of the Sabbath being devoted to the pursuit of work, sport and pleasure in defiance of God. How wrong is that religion which facilitates the breach of God's Law.

Of course, this is not just a feature of the Roman Catholic church. Recently, in the Omagh area, a Church of Ireland rector sought to gather funds for an extension to his church hall by catering for those attending a vintage car rally, which took place on Lord's Day 24th August at Seskinore Forest Park. The one thing that is not extended through Sabbath desecration is the honour and glory of God, though doubtless the new extension to the hall will be duly opened by some episcopalian dignitary "to the glory of God"!

Sabbath breaking may be deemed a development of minor consequence and in keeping with modern thinking, even among some Christians. The chief reason for such a view of what is a serious sin is the anti-Sabbatarian teaching, propagated by those greatly influenced by modern American dispensationalists who would dismiss the application of the Fourth Commandment to this age. This view is held in defiance of the plain teaching of the Holy Scriptures, the irrefutable arguments of many notable writers on the subject and the providential dealings of God with His people in revival.

The moving of the Holy Ghost upon the sinner, which leads to his conversion, results in a revering of the Law of God, the Fourth Commandment most notably. The changes that conversion initiates are chiefly seen in a withdrawing from all activities not in keeping with devoting the Sabbath Day unto the Lord.

The decline of Sabbath keeping is a major blow against evangelism. That which was a weekly reminder to the whole community of eternal issues and the inevitable dawn of that day when all men shall give an account to God for the deeds they have committed, served the cause of the gospel well. Many today are hindered from attending the house of God by the increase in seven-day trading. Indeed, many large companies make willingness to work on the Lord's Day a condition of employment.

The creed of God has been replaced by the creed of greed and that with undoubted eternal consequences.

God's view of Sabbath desecration is rarely considered. It is best illustrated by the prominence God gives it when indicting His people Israel for the sins which brought about His judgment upon them in the Babylonian captivity. "If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD;



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and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it," Isaiah 58:13-14. "Thus saith the LORD; take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; neither carry forth a burden out of your houses on the sabbath day, neither do ye any work, but hallow ye the sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers. But they obeyed not, neither inclined their ear, but made their neck stiff, that they might not hear, nor receive instruction. And it shall come to pass, if ye diligently hearken unto me, saith the LORD, to bring in no burden through the gates of this city on the sabbath day, but hallow the sabbath day, to do no work therein; then shall there enter into the gates of this city kings and princes sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their princes, the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: and this city shall remain for ever. . . . But if ye will not hearken unto me to hallow the sabbath day, and not to bear a burden, even entering in at the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day; then will I kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched," Jeremiah 17:21-25, 27.

Clearly, Sabbath desecration was a major cause of the judgment that befell Israel in the 6th century BC. Sabbath breaking is a provocation to God. It is a blatant and arrogant dismissing of His person and Word. "Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I am profaned among them," Ezekiel 22:26. Such a defiance met with a terrible response from the Lord back then, and will again.

Sabbath desecration illustrates the ungodliness of the human heart and man's unfittedness for heaven. The natural heart of man delights in that which God deplores and despises that in which the Lord delights. "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be," Romans 8:7. This is why natural man hates the Sabbath as instituted by God. Man the sinner hungers and thirsts for sin. He is repelled by the atmosphere of a reverence for the God of the Bible and so tramples upon the Sabbath. He would put God from his mind rather than devote a day to remembering the Lord and His commandments. This is vividly illustrated for us by Adam and Eve running and hiding from the presence of the Lord in the Garden of Eden as one of the first acts committed after their fall into sin. "And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden," Genesis 3:8. Fellowship with God, once their delight, is now something detested.

It never seems to occur to the sabbath breaker that his activities declare him unfit for heaven. How can one who loathes the atmosphere of a weekly Sabbath possibly hope to enjoy an eternal Sabbath?

The Sabbath day is but a foreshadowing and a foretaste of heaven. "There remaineth therefore a rest (Sabbath-keeping) to the people of God," Hebrews 4:9. Heaven is a place where the atmosphere of an eternal Sabbath prevails. "Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness," 2 Peter 3:13.

He who despises the weekly Sabbath cannot enter heaven, the eternal Sabbath-keeping.



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He must be converted and his Sabbath-hating turned to delighting in the Lord's Day. Rebellion against God is replaced by a rejoicing in the Lord and all that is His, especially the ordinances of His Day.

The present-day casting away of the Sabbath testifies clearly to the great need for a true reviving of the work of God today and ought to prompt us to earnestness in this matter.