

Whither the Sabbath?

Now that “Super Bowl Sunday” (a.k.a. “the Lord’s Day”) is past, and all the understandable excitement about the game is behind us, perhaps we might now raise the awkward question, “Whither the Christian Sabbath?” Time was when American Protestants all agreed: Sunday’s 24 hours were to be “remembered” by services of worship, and “hallowed” by laying aside secular employments and recreations. Respecting Sabbatarian restrictions, the Methodists were as strict as Presbyterians, who were as strict as the Baptists, who were as strict as the Congregationalists. No work, no play, no entertainment, and no shopping was allowed on God’s holy Sabbath. Sunday was to be spent in morning and evening worship, and the time between services committed to the “holy rest” of devotional reading, naps, and works of mercy. When the fundamentalist/modernist debates raged in the 1920’s this was the one area in which they all agreed, liberal and conservative alike. The Sabbatarian consensus held until the 1960’s, and then suddenly collapsed, and how great was the fall.

Even in the best churches the best people in those churches camp out in front of the TV all Sunday afternoon to watch the games, and then rush home from evening worship in order to see the last of them. With the man in the pew, the NFL’s rout of the fourth commandment is complete. He no longer even thinks of Sunday as especially the “Lord’s day.” His conscience doesn’t bother him in the slightest.

There is a sense in which I am a realist about this. American entertainment culture is strong. People mean well but are weak. It all seems harmless. It isn’t. But it is understandable. Much more ominous is the capitulation of the churches. All across the country and all across our own city churches canceled services, moved services, and adapted services because of the Super Bowl. The philosophy seems simple enough. If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. Churches put up big screen TV’s, served chili and soft drinks, called it “fellowship,” and declared victory. A potential program failure was turned into a “success.” Instead of a handful of diehards, a crowd! Fun! Excitement! One prominent church put up *two* screens and held their evening service during half-time! A Presbyterian pastor in Seattle announces, “It’s a Super Sunday, ‘cause there’s the bowl game and ‘cause we’re in the presence of a God who’s crazy about us.” Of course.

But wait a minute. Sometimes it helps to ask ourselves some basic questions. What is a Super Bowl? It is a game. It is a child’s game played with a ball by grown men. That’s all it is. It is just one form of entertainment in a culture addicted to entertainment. It is noteworthy only in that it has become the most popular spectator-sporting event of the year. This means that it brings tremendous pressure on the church to accommodate its presence. After all, *everyone* will be watching it. But note it is not external pressure, but the internal pressure of persecution. The government is not ordering us to cancel or move services. We are not being threatened with imprisonment or death if we resist accommodation. Again, it is only a game. But *everyone* will be watching it and *everyone* wants to watch it. The only risk for us personally is that we may lose the pleasurable experience of watching a game, and be thought strange by an uncomprehending culture for doing so. The risk for the church is that merely of staging a service to which nobody comes. In other words, the pressures bearing down on us are those of 1) the

lust for pleasure, of not wanting to miss out on the fun; 2) the pressure of democratic fashion, of wanting to fit in, to conform, and not be thought different, or strange, or weird; and 3) the pressure of avoiding “failure,” of wanting to “succeed.” Sadly, these pressures have been enough. The church and its members have capitulated.

We don't show much stomach for resisting our culture. That's the real lesson of Super Bowl Sunday. If the whole Protestant church was flipped by the pressure of entertainment in the 1960's, and for *that* abandoned a 350 year consensus dating to the strict Sabbatarianism of Jamestown's "Dale's Code" (1611), what do you suppose will happen when real persecution begins? Or more subtly, what *are* we doing in the face of the pleasures and pressures of entertainment culture? Is *everyone* going to see Titanic or some other trashy teen-age melodrama? Then off go the Christians, kids and all, as well. Is *everyone* wearing immodest clothing? Is *everyone* reading sleazy novels? Is *everyone* dropping off his or her children at day-care? Is *everyone* ordaining women as ministers in the churches? Is *everyone* accepting homosexuality as normal? Is *everyone* open and accepting of all religions as equally valid? What will keep us from caving-in on these issues as well? Today's church, even the conservative Evangelical church, is thoroughly enculturated and compromised. We show no stomach for resisting the hedonistic ("Let's have fun!"), pluralistic (religions and cultures are all the same), egalitarian (men and women are the same), and relativistic (moral choices are all the same; only lifestyles differ) trends in our culture.

When Christians kept the Sabbath they controlled the culture. The reason for this is clear enough. The Sabbath is a culture-shaping ordinance. It forces work and play into six days. It imposes a one and six cycle of activity. The rest of one day requires careful planning over the remaining six. Consequently it has a sanctifying effect on all of the week, and with it, all of the culture. I don't think that we understand, and probably will not understand for a hundred years or so the loss we sustained when we abandoned the Sabbath. But what I suspect is that we surrendered the culture. When we lost the Sabbath we lost nothing less than the entire culture. The collapse of American sabbatarianism was quickly followed by the collapse of the rest of the Christian cultural platform, the moral chaos of the 1960's, and a crisis of values ever since. The NFL struggled to survive for the decades prior to the mid-1960's in part because of Christian American's resistance to Sunday sports. Sports and the malls wore down that resistance and eventually won. Our sorry counter-attack, chili-bean Super Bowl parties in place of worship services, is an embarrassment to serious Christian people, and only underscores the severity of the defeat. We're ministering to the culture, they'll say. But at what cost? At what cost? Shortcuts in ministry which put expedience before principle end up doing more damage than good in the long run. This is not the point at which to minister. It is the point at which to resist. Whither the Sabbath? It's gone, as is a lot more with it.

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