

**MESSIAH THE PRINCE,**  
Or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ.  
By William Symington.  
Sabbath Afternoon Studies: Part 29.

CHAPTER 9.  
THE MEDIATORIAL DOMINION  
OVER THE NATIONS.

(The Magistrate's Power *Circa Sacra*, & the Sabbath.)

As religion can do much for a nation, so a nation has it in its power to do something (may we not say much also?) for religion. It is admitted to be a difficult matter accurately and minutely to define the line and extent of the magistrate's power, *circa sacra*. We have before remarked, that the church of Christ is strictly independent of the state. Civil rulers, we repeat, have no right to dictate to her her creed; to institute her ordinances; to appoint her office-bearers; to control her government or discipline; in short, to interfere in any one way with either her constitution or her administration. All this we firmly maintain. Yet are there many things which, it appears to us, a Christian nation, through the medium of its rulers, has it in its power to do for the true religion.

The civil magistrate can extend *protection* to the church, in the profession of her creed, in the exercise of her worship, in the administration of her ordinances, in the enjoyment of her privileges, and in the possession of her undoubted rights and liberties. These are all capable of being outwardly assailed; but having in herself no power of defence from external attack, she is entitled to look for this to the collateral ordinance of civil government, which possesses the power required, and is under obligation to exert it for this end. Thus much is unquestionably supposed, in those who are described as 'the shields of the earth' being spoken of also as 'nursing fathers to the church,'—a character which they could ill sustain without throwing the strong arm of protection over their tender charge; as well as in the circumstance of its being specified as one end why Christians should pray for those in authority, 'that they may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.' This, we believe, will be readily admitted; but what we contend for, is, not a vague *passive toleration* of the true religion, in common with all manner of false and heretical systems, but an active, formal *authoritative protection* of the true religion, to which the others have no right, and which consequently they ought not to receive.

The nation is capable, also, through its functionaries, of giving a judicial or legal *recognition* to the true religion. The confession of the church's faith may be adopted and ratified by the state, without the state being at all chargeable with the iniquity of dictating to the church what shall be her creed. The authoritative sanction of the magistrate can add nothing,

indeed, to the evidence, or weight, or obligation, or authority of the truths to which it is appended. Nothing of the kind. Nevertheless, such an act of legal recognition or ratification serves the end, not merely of pledging the nation's honour to the defence of these truths, but of constituting an open, public, national profession of the true religion. A nation, being a moral subject of Messiah, is as much bound to make a profession of religion as any private individual whatever. Can that be a Christian nation which makes no profession of the religion of Christ?<sup>1</sup> And how can such a profession be *nationally* made but in some such way as we have supposed, namely, by the functionaries of the nation, in their official capacity, giving their authoritative sanction to the church's creed?

It is vain to plead, here, the difficulty civil rulers must feel in arriving at the knowledge of what is the truth, for this difficulty is not greater on their part than on that of the church or of private individuals, who, it is never once supposed, should be exempted, on this score, from the obligation to profess the truth. The volume of revelation cannot be what its name supposes, if its meaning is incapable of being ascertained; and, if ascertainable at all, it is as much so by one as by another, who possesses the means, and chooses to make use of them for arriving at a knowledge of its contents. Infallible accuracy, it is true, is incapable of being attained by the magistrate; but here again he is only on a level with the ecclesiastical functionary and the private Christian, neither of whom can pretend to infallibility any more than the magistrate. ► Nor is perfect accuracy, in either case, at all necessary; all that is required being that they make a proper use of the means with which they are furnished of arriving at correct views of religion, and that they pronounce according to the best of their judgment. It will be admitted, that the civil magistrate may warrantably legislate on subjects connected with the advancement of the arts and the sciences. Does this suppose him to be accurately acquainted with all these? Or would it be sustained, as a sufficient excuse for his not interfering in such matters, that he is not an artisan or a philosopher? We apprehend not; and why, we ask, should he be precluded from legislating in behalf of religion, on the ground of incompetency to judge in such matters? Has not the magistrate more easy access to the source of information on the subject of religion than to that on the arts and sciences? besides the subject being one in which he must be understood to be far more deeply interested than in the others.

It is quite a mistake to say, that the magistrate's giving his countenance to one set of religious opinions in preference to others, involves the essence of persecution. This arises from supposing that, when the government of a country expresses its approbation of a certain doctrinal creed and form of worship, it must forthwith enjoin on all its subjects conformity in their opinions and practice, and authoritatively require the subjects to believe as the rulers believe. But does this follow? The legislature does not, in any sense, dictate to the subject what his religion shall be. It only determines what system of religious belief shall be taught with the aid and countenance of the state. No means but what are moral are employed to bring the public mind into conformity with that of the rulers. Every man is left, as far as civil authority or legal coercion is concerned, to choose or reject as he sees fit. The conscience of

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1 The author here calls attention to Birks's *Christian State*, chap. 5.

every individual is left free and unfettered; no one has the slightest ground on which to set up the cry of persecution.

The magistrate can, farther, interpose the sanction<sup>2</sup> of the law with regard to the time set apart by God to the stated services of religion. We refer here to the institution of the Sabbath. To be sure, on grounds altogether distinct from the sanctions of civil authority, all who have the volume of revelation are bound to ‘remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy;’ and there can be no proper sanctification of the Lord’s day, in which there is not respect had to the paramount authority of God. But, without the interference of the magistrate, it is impossible that Christians, however well disposed, could, generally at least, have it in their power to obey, in this matter, the law of heaven. And it is surely a duty which nations, as such, owe to Messiah, to take order that there shall be a national observance of the day set apart for celebrating the resurrection from the dead of their Prince, even of Him who ‘died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures.’ [1 Cor. 15.3-4.] ► To the peaceful, orderly, and profitable enjoyment of the Sabbath, by those who are disposed to observe it, it is important that the outward observance be general; and there is no way by which this can be secured, but by the intervention of civil authority enjoining a universal cessation, throughout the land, of the business and amusements of other days. But for such interference, it must be obvious, such is the ungodliness of many and such the spirit of competition among worldly men, that every species of occupation and diversion would go forward on the Lord’s day with the same eagerness and publicity as on the other days of the week. ► There might be some who would suspend their ordinary pursuits, and, retiring into the sanctuary of their dwellings, there pursue their pious meditations and studies; but the bustle that reigned without would effectually prevent their retirement from partaking of the nature of a holy quiet, while their less scrupulous neighbours would, meanwhile, get the advantage of them in the gains of their worldly calling. There might be, and there would be, numbers, who, in spite of the sacrifices they were required to make, and the scoffs with which they were sure to be assailed, would still go up to the house of God, and seek the advantages and the delights of the solemn assembly. But, as they went and as they came, not to speak of the disturbance to which even the acts of public worship should be exposed, how should their pious feelings be hurt, and every serious and edifying reflection be dissipated, by the sounds and the sights of busy secularity, which should everywhere meet their senses!

It is vain to tell us, that the magistrate cannot enforce the spiritual observance of the Sabbath, and that the Sabbath is not kept as it ought, if kept only outwardly. This is a drivelling evasion of our argument. We know that the magistrate cannot enforce the spiritual observance of the Sabbath, and we do not ask him to do so. We know that secular authority can reach only to what is external. We know that it is the prerogative of God to touch, as it is his only to judge, the heart. But does not this hold true in other matters besides the observance of the Sabbath,—matters, too, in which magistratical interference is admitted to be lawful? Might it not as well be pleaded that the magistrate should not make laws for the protection of human

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2 The author refers here to Birks’s *Christian State*, pp. 380-386.

life, because he cannot restrain man from cherishing deadly hatred towards his brother man; or laws for the protection of property, because he cannot secure moral honesty; or laws against perjury, because he cannot impart to men a sacred regard to truth; as that he may not legislate on the subject of the Sabbath, because he cannot secure its spiritual observance? Although he cannot do this, we contend that it is still competent for him to interpose the solemn voice of law, and the strong arm of power, in order to secure to the nation a season of rest from public business and public amusements; and that, too, on distinctly religious grounds: and we ask him to do what he can do.

Some who deny to the magistrate all power whatever in matters of religion, nevertheless, admit the propriety of magistratical interference in regard to the Sabbath. But, for consistency's sake, they are compelled to maintain that the civil enactment of a day of weekly rest, proceeds on secular grounds entirely. It is, from the common consent which is understood to be given it by the people of the nation; or, because of its being necessary for the protection of property; or, as a day of mere secular rest;—it is on some such grounds as these that the magistrate is to be understood as warranted to interfere. There must be no respect to the authority of God; no regard to the spiritual ends of the sabbatical institution. It must be brought down entirely from the high and sacred ground of religion, and placed on the low basis of a worldly motive. None of these inferior grounds, however, will be found sufficient to furnish a platform broad enough, even were it firm enough, for the structure of a national Sabbath.

The ground of *common consent* will not serve the purpose, inasmuch as it is preposterous to expect that Jews and infidels would ever agree to an arrangement, which should lay them under a restraint to which they did not feel themselves compelled by their consciences to submit, and their submission to which would consequently tend to involve them in the disgrace of hypocrisy.

Neither will the *protection of property* serve the purpose. For might not the Jew, in this case, complain of being compelled to suspend his lawful employment on the *first* day of the week, in obedience to the law of the land, after having felt constrained to cease from working on the *seventh* day, in obedience to the dictates of his conscience? Nay, if the Sabbath is recognised as property, and only to be protected as such, although no man may *take* another's property, what should hinder a man, as has been acutely argued, from *giving* his property away? 'He who chooses to give up his time to his master may not surely be hindered, nor the master hindered from accepting of it.'<sup>3</sup>

But after all, the low ground of property can only, at the best, secure a cessation from *business*, while it leaves the sanctity of the Lord's holy day open to desecration by every form of amusement, provided only that those who contribute to the entertainment of others, take care to let it be understood they are not pursuing a trade. By day, the streets and avenues of the city, and the places of public resort, may be frequented by crowds, trying their skill in athletic exercises; conducting, in due form, their manly sports; witnessing feats of jugglery; listening, amid shouts of obstreperous merriment, to some low buffoon; or, perhaps, feasting on the

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3 Willis, p. 48. [Second ed. p. 31.]

deadly combat of noble animals brought together for the purpose of gratifying a *refined* taste, by tearing each other to pieces. And the evening of the day of holy rest may be spent in the fascinating dissipations of the concert, the ball, the assembly, the masquerade, or any other form of fashionable extravagance, which those who are 'lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God' may demand.<sup>4</sup>

Such are the consequences that must inevitably spring from maintaining, that civil authority can be interposed on behalf of the Sabbath on no higher ground than that it is the common property of the inhabitants of a nation. But is it so, that the day of the Lord is to be regarded and spoken of as only a species of human property? 'We absolutely deny,' says Professor Willis with becoming indignation, 'that the fourth commandment is one concerning *property*; no, not even, properly speaking, is it in part so. Except as connected with the end of serving God, the Sabbath is given to no man *as his own*. It is not merely time which no man may exact from another: it is time which no man may alienate to himself. It is neither the servant's nor the master's, except as to be devoted by both to the highest ends of their being. *Property!* why, there is another command for that, whether, in truth, it be money or time that is in question. . . . It will not do:—go where we may to seek our warrant for a law on that principle, let us not go to that sacred statute whose foremost words proclaim its sublimer objects, "Thou shalt remember the Sabbath-day *to keep it holy!*" ► Such words repel us, as, in a sort, profaning holy ground, as doing a kind of sacrilege, when we would, either in the name of an individual or society, grasp at that part of the commandment which may more immediately serve our worldly interests; and, separating it from the rest, and calling it our own, would avow that with God's part of it we have nothing to do! We know this right would not be pleaded for the individual; but if *society* can only thus approach the sacred statute, we would say, in the name of religion and of consistency, let the commandment alone! 'This is desecrating it. It is bringing it down from its lofty altitude. It is erasing from it *His* image and superscription who challenges it as his own.... *The time of the labourer is his property!* And so to this it must come in seeking to acquit a nation of the duty of recognising the whole divine law as its rule! You have to set up instead, as supreme, the *will of man!* Man will not obey such a law long, however well he loves to wield such a power. Man armed, even the ruler armed with such a power, will soon wield it either too little or too much. Public sentiment, forming upon such a standard, will speedily manifest the opposition of the natural will of man to the will of his Maker. ► The pious, the timid, will soon find enough to do to hold on in their veneration of religion and its ordinances, unseduced by the example, or undismayed by the scorn, of others. Farewell to the national Sabbath—farewell, as to most, to the Sabbath itself—when the law

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4 One is reminded of the pathetic language of Richard Baxter, about the state of things which prevailed during his boyhood. He was three years old when the Book of Sports was issued by authority of King James. 'There was no savour of Nonconformity in our family:' yet the sports were carried on, 'not an hundred yards from our door.' 'We could not, on the Lord's day, either read a chapter, or pray, or sing a psalm, or catechise or instruct a servant, but with the noise of the pipe and tabor and the shoutings of the street continually in our ears.' 'When the people, by the *Book*, were allowed to play and dance out of public service-time, they could so hardly break off their sports that many a time the reader was fain to stay till the pipes and players would give over. Sometimes the morris-dancers would come into the church in all their linen and scarfs and antic dresses, with morris bells jingling at their heels; and as soon as the common prayer was read, did haste out presently to their play again.'—Editor. [AMS].

shall avow no higher reasons than these! Farewell the holy quiet of that morn which was wont to be disturbed only by the ringing of the church bell, or the tread of the passenger repairing to the house of prayer. First blessing of our country! first friend of the poor! first among our cherished recollections, when in a land of strangers! ► Instead of the peasant and the labourer conducting their well-ordered households to the sanctuary of God, we shall see the parties of pleasure mustering for their sports;—Jew pursuing his traffic with his brother Jew;—and the company of worshippers crossed in their path by the crowds repairing to the factory; where the offered alternative of working on that day, or another being found to do the work, shall have proved too powerful for the juvenile labourer, and carried it over all the sacredness and authority of a parent’s example and precept; or shall have tempted even the willing child against his mind, and for the very parent’s sake, not to forfeit the means of dependence, perhaps for both! Nor is it the pious and the timid alone who would have reason, in the issue, to mourn the adoption of such a political theory: the irreligious themselves, brought within the mercy of human covetousness, would exclaim, ere long, Let us fall into the hands of God, but let us not fall into the hands of men!’<sup>5</sup>

If, again, the ground assumed, as that on which legislation is to proceed, is merely that the Sabbath is a day of *secular rest*, of cessation from ordinary worldly employment, it will be found that neither will this ground serve. For, apart from the authority of God and the religious purposes for which he has instituted the Sabbath, what right has any government on earth to interdict its subjects from labour for any length of time whatever, provided they themselves are willing to work? Admitting it to have such a right, how is it to fix on a seventh part of time, as the due proportion which the season of rest is to bear to that of labour? This difficulty superseded, might not the *second*, the *third*, or any other day of the week, serve the end of secular rest as perfectly as the *first*? ► Nay, if civil legislation is to have no higher end in view than to secure secular rest, the magistrate can have no higher respect for the interests of his *moral* subjects in this matter than that which he has for *beasts of burden*! Cattle are capable of sharing in all the advantages of secular rest. We are far from thinking it beneath the dignity of a Christian nation to enact laws in favour of the inferior animals: the great Lawgiver himself has not thought it beneath his dignity to do so. But foul scorn do we hold it, to maintain that God’s minister for good, when using his authority to enforce the observance of the Sabbath, is to be regarded as having no higher respect to the interests of his moral subjects than to those of the brutal tribes. We enter our solemn protest against this attempt to degrade man, by confounding him with the beasts that perish, by placing him on a level with the ox and the ass.

It thus appears that, if we depart from the high vantage ground of the moral law, if we abandon the authority of God himself, if we lay aside all respect to the religious ends of the divine institution of the Sabbath, and descend to the low motives of political expediency, we shall find that the magistrate must be completely in the dark in attempting to legislate at all on such a subject. There is nothing for him, in short, but to take his stand on the high platform of

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5 See [Michael Willis] *National Establishments, &c.*, pp. 54-60. [Second ed. pp. 35-39.] We recommend the whole section from which the above extract is taken, as a masterly exposure of the reasonings of those who take any lower ground for a national Sabbath than the moral law.

the FOURTH COMMANDMENT. Let him have respect, in all his enactments on this subject, to the best interests of ‘the strangers within his gates.’ Let him take, as his model, the lofty patriotism of the governor of old, who, when his heart was grieved at the complicated Sabbath desecration he beheld, contended with the nobles of Judah, and said, *What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the Sabbath day? If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.*<sup>6</sup>

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Discussion Questions:

1. What does Dr. Symington acknowledge to be a difficult matter?
  - A. “It is admitted to be a difficult matter accurately and minutely to define the line and extent of the magistrate’s power, *circa sacra*.” — To define the extent to which the magistrate acts concerning sacred things.
2. When we affirm that the magistrate should extend protection to the church, does this refer to a mere toleration or equal treatment with other organizations and communities?
  - A. No. It is a formal authoritative protection, which recognizes Christianity as the true religion, and distinguishes those who oppose Christ’s religion as lacking right to this protection.
3. Are civil rulers disqualified from determining what creed they should profess since they are not church officers, and are not capable of an infallible determination?
  - A. No. It is the duty of civil rulers, and all private individuals, to learn and profess Christ’s truth; and church officers are no more capable of an infallible determination than civil rulers.
4. Does the magistrate’s conduct in giving countenance to one set of religious opinions in preference to others, involve the essence of persecution?
  - A. No. The assertion assumes more than what we plead for;—and the private individual is not guilty of embracing the “essence of persecution” when he holds his own set of religious opinions.
5. What religious institution should especially have the sanction of law, as part of the magistrate’s exercising civil power “*circa sacra*”?
  - A. The institution of the Sabbath — the proper sanctification of the Lord’s day.
6. If we desire civil laws to uphold the Sabbath, have we forgotten the spiritual nature of the Sabbath?
  - A. No. Secular authority reaches only to what is external, and this is true of all the moral law of God as it is protected and enforced by the magistrate. Secular power should secure a rest from public business and public amusements, and do so on religious grounds.
7. In the sphere of labor and industry, what did Dr. Symington foresee as the consequence of eliminating laws for a Sabbath rest from public business?
  - A. It was expected that especially juvenile laborers would be carried by the force of competition to cross the authority of parents’ precepts and examples, to disregard their own knowledge of God’s law and embrace work that involves them in sabbath-breaking.
8. What ensures that the irreligious themselves will find their anti-Sabbath plan and political theory oppressive as society advances in this direction?
  - A. They will be brought to depend on the restraints found in the mercy of human covetousness, which will gradually oblige them to compete in circumstances more and more difficult, in order to please the un-sanctified hearts of worldly masters more and more demanding.

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<sup>6</sup> The author has here made a reference to Dr. Alexander’s Life of Wardlaw; remarks on Wardlaw’s Treatise on the Sabbath.