

SUNDAY IN THE PRE-REFORMATION DISPUTATIONS IN FRENCH SWITZERLAND

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Before the Protestant reformation triumphed in the territories of Vaud and Geneva, three important religious disputations, as they were called, were held, two in Geneva in 1534 and 1535 and one in Lausanne in 1536. The main theme of these debates was authority in matters of religion. Should it be the church as the Catholics affirmed or the Scripture only as the Protestants claimed? It is interesting to see that the defenders of Rome used Sunday-keeping to try to prove that the Protestants themselves recognized by their actions what they denied by their words; namely, that the church stands above Scripture.

1. Spread of Protestantism to Southwestern Switzerland

To understand the significance of these debates and the references to Savoy, Berne, et cetera, that must be made, one should keep in mind the major steps in the coming of Protestantism to that region.¹ On the eve of the reformation, Geneva was an imperial city, ruled by an ease-loving prince-bishop and several councils of the bourgeois. Astride the blue waters of the Rhone as it leaves the lake, the small city was the southwestern gate to the Swiss Plateau and derived considerable wealth from her favorable location on an important trade route. Her prosperity and the spirit of freedom within her walls made the town a favorable ground for the new ideas, but she also aroused the covetous eyes of her powerful neighbors, especially Duke Charles III of Savoy, the

¹See especially C. Borgeaud, "La Conquête religieuse de Genève," in *Guillaume Farel*, ed. by Comité Farel (Neuchâtel, 1930), pp. 298-337; Henri Naef, *Les Origines de la réforme à Genève*, 2 vols. (Geneva, 1936-68).

uncle and ally of Francis I of France.² This duke, who held territories not only south of the lake but also to the north of it, was in a position to exercise formidable pressure on the small city. To a large degree the early path to reform was determined by the struggle between the bourgeois and their bishop and the resistance of the Savoyard peril.

The economic and political pressures of Savoy led the bourgeois of Geneva to seek closer and closer bonds with the Swiss confederates, especially with Fribourg and Berne, which since the Burgundian wars had steadily expanded in her direction. The treaties of *combourgeoisie* with those cantons signed in 1526 marked the virtual independence of the bourgeois from their bishop, whose spiritual authority had been previously the main bulwark of their freedom. Shortly afterwards, the General Council, which could only be convoked by the bishop was replaced by the Council of the Two Hundred that became the main organ of the rebellion against the episcopal rule.³ The years 1528-30 saw several Savoyard aggressions against Geneva that strengthened the bonds with Berne even more and led to the stationing of Bernese troops within her walls. The reformation had just triumphed in Berne in 1528 and the presence of soldiers from that canton gave new momentum to reforming currents. From that time on, the cause of Protestantism and Bernese influence were very closely intertwined. As early as 1529 both the pope and Emperor Charles V felt the need to warn the Genevans against heresy.⁴

In June 1532 Pope Clement VII's proclamation of a sale of indulgences aroused violent emotions among the sympathizers of

² The duke had a high reputation for piety, and Luther wrote him in 1523 to ask his protection for those who preached the gospel in his states. A. L. Herminjard, ed., *Correspondance des réformateurs*, 9 vols. (Geneva, 1866-97) 1: 153. After Charles' victory over Francis I at Pavia, the Duke cast his lot with the victor and became a vigorous opponent of heresy.

³ Naef, *Origines*, 1: 10-11.

⁴ Borgeaud, *Conquête*, p. 300.

reform. Meanwhile, a schoolmaster who had begun reading the Gospels in his schoolroom was ordered by the Council of the Two Hundred to cease such exercises, but in the same edict of June 30, 1532, the General Vicar was ordered to preach the gospel in the churches according to the truth, without any mixture of fable or human inventions.⁵ Thus in the edict the major theme of the Geneva reformation had been stated: the pure Scriptures without any human addition, and that concept was proclaimed more and more loudly by Farel who arrived in Geneva late in September 1532 and by others who joined him shortly afterwards.⁶ The bishop had not the least intention to follow these instructions and in a speech to the General Council he solemnly stated that "no one should read in the French Bible or New Testament under penalty of banishment from the city."⁷ The Council replied by the command to preach "nothing that could not be proved by the Scriptures."⁸ However, to the wrath of the bourgeois, the bishop repeated on January 1, 1534, his prohibition of the reading of the Bible and the gospels.⁹

2. *The Disputation Between Farel and Furbity*

It was in that atmosphere of controversy about the use of Scriptures that the Vicar General invited a Dominican from Chambéry, Guy Furbity, doctor of the Sorbonne, to preach the

⁵ "Ad veritatem nullis mixtis fabellis- nec aliis inventionibus humanis praedicare." *Registres du Conseil* (hereafter cited as *RC*), June 30, 1532; see Naef, *Origines*, 2: 327-328.

⁶ The bishop immediately opposed their presence and after a stormy meeting Farel and his companions were banished from the city on October 5, 1532.

⁷ Naef, *Origines* 2: 44. On the prohibition of Bible reading by the laymen see *ibid.*, 2: 287-288, and *Realencyclopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, s. v. "Bibelverbot" by G. Rietschel. Shortly afterwards, the bishop, Pierre de la Baume, became involved in a plot against the leaders of the bourgeois party and left Geneva for good during the night of July 14, 1533. From that time on, the Catholic party identified completely with Savoy, while evangelicalism became synonymous with independence.

⁸ *RC*, Oct. 24, 1533.

⁹ *RC*, Jan. 1, 1534.

Advent sermons in Geneva in December 1533.¹⁰ The monk used his pulpit to hurl invectives against the Lutherans and their Bernese protectors. The latter, infuriated by the insults, used their power to force the councils to hear a religious debate between Furbity and Farel, who had returned to Geneva on December 20, 1533, under Bernese protection. The central issue of the discussion was to be "whether the prelates of the church can properly command anything which is not contained in the Scriptures."¹¹

At first the Dominican was confronted with assertions that the Bernese had found insulting. He quickly denied any intention of offending the Bernese people since he had preached only to the Genevan people, and he apologized readily. But then the Bernese pressed for a full discussion of the theological issue: the doctrinal authority of the church.¹² Furbity turned immediately to the text in Dt 17 to the effect that if there was a very difficult case, the people should go up and ask the priest to settle the matter. "In the same manner," he asserted, "the pope today is the final arbiter in questions of faith and conduct."¹³

¹⁰ Naef suggests that he was the same man who at Easter 1530 had conducted a very successful campaign against Lutheranism at Geneva. *Origines*, 2: 240-241.

¹¹ We have a record of the proceedings, perhaps the very notes of the secretary of the council, Claude Roset: *Letres certaines daucuns grandz troubles et tumultes, advenuz a Geneve, avec la disputation faicte l'an 1534. Par mon-sieur nostre Maistre frere Guy Furbiti, de l'ordre de S. Dominicque du couvent des freres prescheurs de Montmellian, alencontre daucuns quon appelle predicantz qui estoyent avec les Ambassadeurs de sa Seigneurie de Berne* [1535]. It appears that the booklet was due to Farel, although it was written ostensibly by a partisan of Furbity. See Herminjard, *Correspondance*, 3: 293-294, on the authorship of the pamphlet. Since the author does not identify the spokesman of the reformers, we shall refer to him as "the preacher."

¹² "Si les prelatz de l'eglise peuvent ordonner licitement aucune chose, qui ne soit contenue et commandée en la sainte Escripiture, a quoy ils obligent sur peine de peché mortel." *Letres*, p. 24D. I use the pencil numbering of the pages on the copy of the Library of the University of Geneva. To facilitate verification of the statements, I indicate by *A* a statement found in the upper fourth of the page, by *D* a statement found in the lower fourth of the page, by *B* the fourth above the middle of the page, and by *C* the fourth below the middle of the page.

¹³ "Par quoy il appert, que nostre Seigneur a laissé sur la terre prestres et judges, ausquelz fault obeyr et quil y a en l'eglise qui sont pour decider des

It was easy, however, for the preacher to remind Furbity of the fact that the priest was to give the answer completely on the basis of the law found in the Scriptures, a practice which the pope did not follow. If that was true in the days of the shadows of the law, how much more so should it be true now in the days of the light of the gospel! Asserting that he was a doctor of theology and knew whereof he spoke, Furbity retorted that he had proved that just as in OT times one had to obey the Levitical priest, so now one had to obey the Christian priest whom the Levitical priest prefigured.

As the discussion continued, eventually it came to the matter of Jesus' submission to his Father's will, the preacher concluding that it was clear that man may not introduce any ordinance in the church.¹⁴ At this point Furbity replied: "I am going to prove beyond question that St. Peter and the Church have the authority to make ordinances that must be held, although God did not command it and that they can change and transform the commandment of God."¹⁵ God ordered the Jews to keep Saturday as the Jews still do, he went on, "but the church through the power given to her has changed Saturday into Sunday because of the resurrection of the Lord. And we celebrate Sunday because of a commandment and law of the church, not because of the commandment of God, because if you follow God's command literally you should rest on Saturday."¹⁶ This celebrating of Sunday would be wrong were it not for the authority of the church to pass ordinances.

grandz affaires, soit de la foy, ou des meurs, comme est le pape a qui fault obeyr et tenir sa sentence." *Ibid.*, p. 26B.

¹⁴ "Parquoy assez est clair que nous devons tenir a ce que Jesus nous a laissé: qu'il n'est loysible a homme de faire autres ordonnances en l'Eglise de Dieu quelque prelat ne pasteur qu'il soit." *Ibid.*, p. 33A.

¹⁵ "Je vous prouve expressement que S. Pierre et Leglise ont puissance de faire ordinances qu'il fault tenir, combien que Dieu ne l'aye point commandé: et qu'ils peuvent changer et muer le commandement de Dieu." *Ibid.*, p. 47D.

¹⁶ "Mais Leglise a par la puissance qui luy a este donnee a change le Samedy au Dimenche a cause de la resurrection de nostre Seigneur. Et fait on feste

The preacher, in his answer, stated that all days are equally sacred and that Christians sanctify them all. They rest on Sunday to hear the Word of God and to give rest to their neighbor.¹⁷ Furbity pressed him again, saying that if it were sufficient to keep one day out of seven, then one could rest any day of the week, leading thus to a dreadful confusion. He reasserted that the text irrefutably commands to keep a specific day, Saturday, and that Sunday is kept on no other ground than the authority of the church. The preacher now answered that God wants agreement in the church and that individuals are therefore forbidden to set their own day of rest. Finally he repeated that Christians do not keep days but gather together for charity's sake.¹⁸ At that point the dinner bell rang and the discussion adjourned to the next day, when a new topic was considered.¹⁹

3. *The Disputation of Rive*

During the months that followed, the partisans of the old order resorted to many riots, but the reformed ideas gained numerous supporters. Meeting in private homes, in public squares and even in gardens, these latter advertised their meetings by stating that there the gospel was preached without the addition of any human invention.²⁰ On March 1, 1534, the crowd carried Farel

le Dimanche par le commandement et ordonnance de Leglise, et non point par le commandement de Dieu. A la lettre il fauldroit soy reposer le Samedy." Ibid., p. 48A. As a Dominican, Furbity was faithful to the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, who stated in the *Summa*: "In the New Law the keeping of Sunday supplants that of the Sabbath, not in virtue of the precept of the law (*non ex vi praecepti legis*) but through determination of the Church and the custom of the Christian people (*sed ex constitutione ecclesiae et consuetudine populi Christiani*)." 2a. 2ae. 122, 5 (*Summa Theologiae*: vol. 41, *Virtues of Justice in the Human Community*, tr. and ed. T. C. O'Brien [New York, 1972], p. 309).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 49A.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 50C.

¹⁹ Furbity was eventually sentenced to apologize for his statements in the cathedral, but once he was in the pulpit he refused to say anything like that and was thrown in jail. Ibid., p. 92C.

²⁰ Borgeaud, *Conquête*, p. 318.

to the Dominican convent where a large sanctuary was available. Soon iconoclasm set in. From his refuge at Gex, the bishop condemned the majority of the members of the Council of the Two Hundred for heresy and rebellion and called for the confiscation of their possessions. Soon after, he excommunicated the Genevans. The city was now under direct attack by Savoy, and houses on the outskirt were razed to build stronger walls while even the preachers were standing guard. At the elections of February 1535, magistrates who favored the break with Rome were elected. The time seemed ripe for the evangelicals to finalize the religious change. They were eager for a public disputation that would lead to a formal decision to abolish the mass, as had been done at Zürich (1523), Basel (1524), and Berne (1528). A former gatekeeper of the convent of Rive, Jacques Bernard, challenged the Catholics to a debate. Under the supervision and guidance of the Council the meeting began on May 30, 1535, and lasted until June 24. The Protestant debaters were Farel, Viret and Bernard, with Pierre Caroli and Jean Chappuis holding forth for Rome.

The full record of the debate has unfortunately not been preserved. We must depend upon the summary that Farel prepared, in which he provides us with only the arguments used by the spokesmen of the reformed camp.²¹ The nun Jeanne de Jussié does provide us with an account of the dispute from a Catholic standpoint in her *Levain du Calvinisme* but gives no information on the words of the defenders of her faith.²² It is in the reformers' reply that we seek some insight into the proceedings of the debate.

J. Bernard had submitted five theses, the second of which proclaimed that the church must be ruled by the pure Word of God. It must have occupied a large part of the dispute since most of Farel's opusculum is concerned with that thesis. The Protestants attacked the five commandments of the church which in the liturgy follow the reading of the ten commandments and which

²¹ *Un opusculum inédit de Farel*, ed. Théophile Dufour (Geneva, 1885).

²² (Geneva, 1865), pp. 124-129.

enjoin attendance at mass on Sundays and holidays, yearly confession before a priest, weekly and yearly fasts, and the like. The Protestants had to recognize that Moses and Elijah had fasted and that our Lord had commended secret fasting but, admittedly, without reference to sacred seasons. The concluding plea of the preachers was that one should not go beyond Jesus and proclaim a law that he has not given.²³

It is in that context of refusing to observe any law not coming from God Himself that the discussion on Sunday-keeping arose. The argument used against Furbity was repeated by the spokesman of the reformers: Sunday is not kept because it is a greater day, since all days are equal for the Christians; but it is celebrated for the convenience of common worship and also to insure rest for all. From the effort made by the reformed party to show that Sunday rest was not a commandment of the church but a commandment of God one may well deduce that the Catholic speakers, like Furbity, had tried to force the Protestants to admit that they were observing a religious ceremony for which no basis could be found in the Scriptures.

An interesting argument was introduced by the preachers: When the church states, "Rest on the seventh day," this is no more a command of the church than are the words of someone telling somebody else to help his neighbor who is experiencing great necessity. In both cases, according to the reformers, we have a command of natural law, hence a command of God.

For Rive, the evidence is somewhat more indirect than for the debate involving Furbity. But there is nonetheless rather clear indication that once again the Protestants were accused, because of their Sunday observance, of not following consistently their principle of *sola scriptura*.

²³ "Et pourtant ne fault soy eslever sur Jesus Christ ne donner loy ou il n'en a point donné." *Opuscule*, p. 24.

4. *The Lausanne Disputation of October, 1536*

From this point onward, events occurred rather quickly. In spite of a cruel Savoyard blockade, the people of Geneva on May 21, 1536, voted to live "according to the gospel and the Word of God" and to put an end to the masses and other papal practices in their territory.²⁴ Calvin arrived in the city two months later.

Up till 1536 Berne had never gone beyond warnings and remonstrances when Savoy had threatened Geneva; but on January 16 of that year it declared war on the Duke, whose armies were blockading Geneva. The campaign was completely successful and by February 2 the Bernese soldiers had broken the Savoyard ring. During the operation, much Savoyard territory located north of Lake Geneva and also the bishopric of Lausanne fell into Bernese hands. Inasmuch as the inhabitants of that region were still deeply attached to their ancient religious traditions, Naegeli, the Bernese general, gave assurance that no one would be disturbed for his religious opinions as long as no hindrance would be placed to the preaching of the pure gospel.²⁵ Berne, however, soon discovered that freedom and religious education did not bring about any quick surge of reforming spirit, and a public debate was called at Lausanne for October 1, 1536. To be sure that the local population would not be misinformed by their priests regarding the disputation, provision was made for lay representatives from all parishes.²⁶

A large crowd filled the cathedral when Farel opened the convention by a speech stating the purpose of the meeting. Then the first thesis was read: "Holy Scripture teaches no other justifica-

²⁴ RC, May 21, 1536.

²⁵ C. Gilliard, "Le Triomphe de la réformation dans les contrées romandes," in *Guillaume Farel*, ed. by Comité Farel (Neuchatel, 1930), pp. 338-347; H. Vuilleumier, *Histoire de l'église réformée dans le pays de Vaud*, vol. 1: *L'âge de la réforme* (Lausanne, 1927).

²⁶ Vuilleumier, *Histoire*, 1: 150.

tion than that which comes through faith in Jesus Christ, offered once for all, so much so that the virtue of Christ's work is lost by any offer of remission of sins through satisfaction, oblation and purgation."²⁷ The chapter of the cathedral stood to protest the whole undertaking. Such public disputation of the Catholic faith, they announced, was prohibited by canon law and by imperial doctrines. Rather than trust dogma to such incompetent judges they preferred to refer the decision to the coming general church council. Farel countered with Scriptural examples of public discussions of doctrine.

Somehow, a Dominican, Dominique de Monbouson, who had preached the last Lent, was drawn into the joust; and immediately Pierre Viret, who had already crossed arms with him, asked for the opportunity to face him. The monk quickly came to the heart of his argument: The church is before and above Scripture, so that Scripture would have no authority if it were not approved by the church.²⁸ As could be expected, Viret denied that thought vehemently and stated that since the church is made up of believers, believers come before the church; moreover, belief comes before believers, and the Scriptures before belief.²⁹ Scripture, therefore, does not owe its authority to the church but comes by the judgment of the Holy Spirit, who distinguishes between truth and error. The remark of the Dominican, that the church made many decisions long before the NT was written, led Viret to assert the perfect unity of the Old and New Testaments.

²⁷ *Les Actes de la Dispute de Lausanne 1536*, ed. Arthur Piaget, vol. 6: *Mémoires de l'Université de Neuchâtel* (Neuchâtel, 1928), p. 16. Several studies have been devoted to that dispute, including Charles Subilia, *La Dispute de Lausanne* (Lausanne, 1885); and G. Bavaud, *La Dispute de Lausanne: Une étape dans l'évolution doctrinale des réformateurs romands* (Fribourg, 1956).

²⁸ "L'église est devant l'écriture et par dessus elle, tellement que l'écriture n'auroit point d'auctorité si elle n'estoit approuvée de l'église." *Actes Lausanne*, p. 43A.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44B.

At that point Dominique de Monbouson went on to challenge the Protestant representative as follows:

If the church has no authority and can make no ordinance beyond and outside of Holy Scripture, then why do you observe Sunday and not Sabbath, as God commanded through Moses? For if you refuse to make any change in Scripture and must stop at the words and the letter, you ought to keep Sabbath like the Jews!³⁰

He concluded that if the church had the power to change the Sabbath to Sunday on her own authority, without the authority of the Scripture, she can make other rules and ordinances. Thus it is revealed that the church is above Scripture.³¹

Viret attempted to show, first of all that Sunday-keeping is not merely a church institution but that it has a biblical basis. Christians keep only a spiritual rest, the Sabbath described in Heb 4. As for a physical rest, all God commanded was to rest on the seventh day; he did not designate Monday, Tuesday, or Saturday. From Monday till Sunday there are seven days, and thus Christians keep the seventh day. In the second place, said Viret, all the days are holy for Christians and they must rest every day from their former wicked activities, letting the Spirit work in them. Thus the Jewish Sabbath is fulfilled spiritually for them. Besides, he continued, the Sabbath is kept outwardly since Christians rest in order to assemble together to hear the Word of God and celebrate the sacraments of the church and also to make sure that servants and workers will have a chance to rest, thus keeping the command to love the neighbor. The church,

³⁰ "Si l'eglise n'a point d'auctorité et ne peut rien constituer ne faire aucune ordonnance oultre et hors la sainte escripture pourquoy observez vous donc le dimanche et nonpas le sabbat, comme Dieu l'a commandé aux Juifz en la loy de Moyse" Car si vous ne voulez rien muer ne changer de la sainte escripture, mais vous arrester seulement aux motz et a la lecture, il faudroit donc que vous feissiez le sabbat comme les Juifz." Ibid., p. 47D.

³¹ "Parquoy je dyz que si l'eglise a eu la puissance de changer le sabat au dimanche de son auctorité, sans l'auctorité de l'escripture, comme nous l'observons trestous, que aussy bien peut elle faire des aultres ordonnances et constitutions, combien qu'elles ne soient pas contenues en la sainte escripture. Et par ainsi je concludz que l'eglise est par dessus et qu'elle n'est pas subiecte a la sainte escripture." Ibid., p. 48.

therefore, does nothing but what is drawn directly from the Scriptures. The reformer then went on to challenge the monk to show how the ceremonies that are called the ceremonies of the church are founded likewise on Scripture and are not contrary to its authority. He ended by disclaiming that his opponent had shown that the authority of the church stands above that of the Bible.³²

Viret had asserted that a spiritual observation was more important than a literal observation and that practical considerations (need of time to assemble together, duty to provide rest for the labors) could be taken into account in justifying a practice that did not agree fully with the words of the law. But the Protestants were not altogether consistent in admitting this kind of interpretation of the commandments. When it came to images, for instance, which the defenders of Rome argued were set up only to facilitate a spiritual worship and provide a simple and practical means to communicate some religious notions to the uneducated people, or even when it involved the fasts and Lent which were intended to curb sensuality, they objected. They could not grant what another Catholic participant, the physician Blanchefflore asserted, "Whatever is done to honor God is well done."³³ To this Farel replied that "whatever is done to honor God is well done," a sentence that is continually on the lips of the priests, is a perverse doctrine, truly repugnant to the law and commandments of God. He continued:

Therefore it is not enough to say, "I do it with a good intention, I do it for the sake of the honor of God." God must have commanded it, otherwise you waste your time and offend our Lord. If it were enough to mean well and to try to honor the Lord, all that would be needed in the way of commandments would be: "Seek good intention and go where your good intention leads you." You suggest to do all things for the honor of God, but God had clearly forbidden that we do what we think good, wanting us to do only what he commands without going to the right or to the left.³⁴

³² Ibid., pp. 48, 49.

³³ Ibid., p. 368C.

³⁴ "Parquoy n'est assez dire: je le fay a la bonne intention, je le fay en

5. Conclusion

Sunday-keeping presented a unique problem for the Protestant leaders who upheld what is commonly known as reformed Protestantism. Committed as they were to a radical biblicism, they not only wanted to discard customs that contradicted the teaching of the Bible, as Luther did, but also to abandon the ceremonies that were not clearly commanded in the Word. Thereby, they opened their flank to the accusation that in keeping Sunday they were totally inconsistent in the application of their principle since they could not provide a clear biblical command for Sunday observance, a matter which their Catholic opponents pointed out to them repeatedly. They said that all days are equally holy, which claim was countered as being contrary to what the commandment states. They argued that God meant one day—any day—which follows six days of work. This made them appear inconsistent because of their efforts to enforce strict Sunday observance. The Protestants also justified the keeping of the first day of the week on the utilitarian grounds of providing rest for servants, but they were unwilling to grant the same latitude to Rome for other practices such as images, that had grown out of well-intentioned efforts to solve practical problems of popular piety.

All in all, when it came to the question of Sunday-keeping, the Protestant representatives in the disputations had to remain on the defensive, arguing acceptance because of custom and suitability to the social environment rather than on the basis of Scriptural authority.

l'honneur de Dieu. Il fault que Dieu l'aye commandé et ordonné, autrement l'on pert son temps, et l'on offense Nostre Seigneur. S'il fust assez d'avoyr bonne intention et de faire la chose en l'honneur de Dieu, il ne failloit point d'autre commandment que dire seulement: "a la bonne intention, et fays ce que ta bonne intention porte." Fays ce que tu feras en l'honneur de Dieu, mais Dieu a expressement a defendu que ne faisons ce que nous semble bon, voulant que faisons seulement ce qu'il nous commande sans tirer n'a la dextre n'a la senestre." Ibid., p. 370C.