

# PROOF THAT THIS IS A CHRISTIAN AND PROTESTANT NATION

By Charles Hodge



The proposition that the United States of America are a Christian and Protestant nation, is not so much the assertion of a principle as the statement of a fact. That fact is not simply that the great majority of the people are Christians and Protestants, but that the organic life, the institutions, laws, and official action of the government, whether that action be legislative, judicial, or executive, is, and of right should be, and in fact must be, in accordance with the principles of Protestant Christianity.

1. This is a Christian and Protestant nation in the sense stated in virtue of a universal and necessary law. If you plant an acorn, you get an oak. If you plant a cedar, you get a cedar. If a country be settled by Pagans or Mohammedans, it develops into a Pagan or Mohammedan (Muslim) community. By the same law, if a country be taken possession of and settled by Protestant Christians, the nation which they come to constitute must be Protestant and Christian. This country was settled by Protestants. For the first hundred years of our history they constituted almost the only element of our population. As a matter of course, they were governed by their religion as individuals, in their families, and in all the associations for business, and for municipal, state and national government. This was just as much a matter of necessity as that they should act morally in all these different relations.

2. It is a historical fact that Protestant Christianity is the law of the land, and has been from the beginning. As the great majority of the early settlers of the country were from Great Britain, they declared that the common law of England should be the law here. But Christianity is the basis of the common law of England, and is therefore of the law of this country; and so our courts have repeatedly decided. It is so not merely because of such decisions. Courts cannot reverse facts. Protestant Christianity has been, is, and must be the law of the land. Whatever Protestant Christianity forbids, the law of the land (within its sphere, i.e., within the sphere in which civil authority may appropriately act) forbids.

Christianity forbids polygamy and arbitrary divorce, so does the civil law. Romanism forbids divorce even on the ground of adultery; Protestantism admits it on that ground. The laws of all the states conform in this matter to the Protestant rule. Christianity forbids all unnecessary labour, or the transaction of worldly business, on the Lord's Day; that day accordingly is a *dies non*, throughout the land. No contract is binding, made on that day. No debt can be collected on the Christian Sabbath. If a man hires himself for any service by the month or year, he cannot be required to labor on that day. All public offices are closed, and all official business is suspended. From Maine to Georgia, from ocean to ocean, one day in the week, by the law of God and by the law of the land, the people rest.

## THIS CONTROLLING INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY IS REASONABLE AND RIGHT

It is in accordance with analogy. If a man goes to China, he expects to find the government administered according to the religion of the country. If he goes to Turkey, he expects to find the Koran supreme and regulating all public action. If he goes to a Protestant country, he has no right to complain, should he find the Bible in the ascendancy and exerting its benign influence, not only on the people but also on the government.

The principle that the religion of a people rightfully controls the action of the government, has of course its limitation. If the religion itself be evil and require what is morally wrong, then as men cannot have the right to act wickedly, it is plain that it would be wrong for the government to conform to its requirements. If a religion should enjoin infanticide, or the murder of the aged or infirm, neither the people nor the government should conform their conduct to its laws. But where the religion of a people requires nothing unjust or cruel or in any way immoral, then those who come to live where it prevails are bound to submit quietly to its controlling the laws and institutions of the country.

The principle contended for is recognized in all other departments of life. If a number of Christian men associate themselves as a manufacturing or banking company, it would be competent for them to admit unbelievers in Christianity into their association, and to allow them their full share in its management and control. But it would be utterly unreasonable for such unbelievers to set up a cry of religious persecution, or of infringement of their rights and liberty, because all the business of the company was suspended upon the Lord's Day. These new members knew the character and principles of those with whom they sought to be associated. They knew that Christians would assert their right to act as Christians. To require them to renounce their religion would be simply preposterous.

When Protestant Christians came to this country they possessed and subdued the land. They worshipped God, and His Son Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world, and acknowledged the Scriptures to be the rule of their faith and practice. They introduced their religion into their families, their schools, and their colleges. They abstained from all ordinary business on the Lord's Day, and devoted it to religion. They built churches, erected school-houses, and taught their children to read the Bible and to receive and obey it as the word of God. They formed themselves as Christians into municipal and state organizations. They acknowledged God in their legislative assemblies. They prescribed oaths to be taken in His name. They closed their courts, their places of business, their legislatures and all places under the public control, on the Lord's Day.

They declared Christianity to be part of the common law of the land. In the process of time thousands have come among us, who are neither Protestants nor Christians. Some are papists, some Jews, some infidels, and some atheists. All are welcomed; all are admitted to equal rights and privileges. All are allowed to acquire property, and to vote in every election, made eligible to all offices, and invested with equal influence in all public affairs. All are allowed to worship as they please, or not to worship at all, if they see fit. No man is molested for his religion or for his want of religion. No man is required to profess any form of faith, or to join any religious association. More than this cannot reasonably be demanded. More, however, is demanded. The infidel demands that the government should be conducted on the principle that Christianity is false. The atheist demands that it should be conducted on the assumption that there is no God, and the positivist on the principle that men are not free agents. The sufficient answer to all this is, that it cannot possibly be done.

### **THE DEMANDS OF INFIDELS ARE UNJUST**

The demands of those who require that religion, and especially Christianity, should be ignored in our national, state and municipal laws, are not only unreasonable but they are in the highest degree unjust and tyrannical. It is a condition of service in connection with any railroad which is operated on Sundays, that the employee be not a Christian. If Christianity is not to

control the action of our municipal, state and general governments, then if elections be ordered to be held on the Lord's Day, Christians cannot vote. If all the business of the country is to go on, on that as on other days, no Christian can hold office. We should thus have not a religious but an anti-religious test-act. Such is the free-thinker's idea of liberty.<sup>1</sup> But still further, if Christianity is not to control the laws of the country, then as monogamy is a purely Christian institution, we can have no laws against polygamy, arbitrary divorce or "free love." All this must be yielded to the anti-Christian party; and consistency will demand that we yield to the atheists, the oath and the Decalogue; and all the rights of citizenship must be confined to blasphemers. Since the fall of Lucifer, no such tyrant has been made known to men as August Comte, the atheist. If, therefore, any man wishes to antedate perdition, he has nothing to do but to become a free-thinker and join in the shout, "Civil government has nothing to do with religion; and religion has nothing to do with civil government."

### CONCLUSION

We are bound therefore to insist upon the maintenance and faithful execution of the laws enacted for the protection of the Christian Sabbath. Christianity does not teach that men can be made religious by law; nor does it demand that men should be required by the civil authority to profess any particular form of religious doctrine, or to attend upon religious services; but it does enjoin that men should abstain from all unnecessary worldly avocations on the Lord's Day. This civil Sabbath, this cessation from worldly business, is what the civil government in Christian countries is called upon to enforce. (1.) Because it is the right of Christians to be allowed to rest on that day, which they cannot do, without forfeiting their citizenship, unless all public business be arrested on that day. (2.) Because such rest is the command of God; and this command binds the conscience as much as any other command in the Decalogue. So far as the point in hand is concerned, it matters not whether such be the command of God or not; so long as the people believe it, it binds their conscience; and this conscientious belief the government is bound to respect, and must act accordingly. (3.) Because the civil Sabbath is necessary for the preservation of our free institutions, and of the good order of society.

The indispensable condition of social order is either despotic power in the magistrate, or good morals among the people. Morality without religion is impossible; religion cannot exist without knowledge; knowledge cannot be disseminated among the people, unless there be a class of teachers, and time allotted for their instruction. Christ has made all His ministers teachers; He has commanded them to teach all nations; He has appointed one day in seven to be set apart for such instruction. It is a historical fact that since the introduction of Christianity, nine tenths of the people have derived the greater part of their religious knowledge from the services of the sanctuary. If the Sabbath, therefore, be abolished, the fountain of life for the people will be sealed.<sup>2</sup>

Hengstenberg, after referring to the authority of the church and other grounds, for the observance of the Lord's Day, closes his discussion of the subject with these words: "Thank God, these are only the outworks; the real fortress is the command that sounded out from Sinai, with the other Divine commands therewith connected, as preparatory, confirmatory, or explanatory. The institution was far too important, and the temptations too powerful, that the solid ground of Scriptural command could be dispensed with ... It is as plain as day that the obligation of the Old Testament command instead of being lessened is increased. This follows of course from the fact that the redemption through Christ is infinitely more glorious than the

deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt, which in the preface to the Ten Commandments is referred to as a special motive to obedience. No ingratitude is blacker than refusing to obey Him who for our sakes gave up His only begotten Son.” He had said before that the Sabbath “rests on the unalterable necessities of our nature, inasmuch as men inevitably become godless if the cares and labours of their earthly life be not regularly interrupted.”<sup>3</sup>

Notes:

1. A free-thinker is a man whose understanding is emancipated from his conscience. It is therefore natural for him to wish to see civil government emancipated from religion.

2. *The Sabbath and Free Institutions*. A paper read before the National Sabbath Convention, Saratoga, August 13, 1863, by the Rev. Mark Hopkins, D.D., President of Williams College, Mass. See also an able article from the pen of the Rev. Joshua H. McIlvaine, D.D., entitled, “A Nation’s Right to Worship God,” in the *Princeton Review* for October, 1859; also the article on “Sunday Laws,” in the same number of the journal.

3. *Ueber den Tag des Herrn*, Berlin, 1852, pp. 92-94; 40

— **Charles Hodge** (1797-1878), American theologian, in his *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, pp. 343-348