
Progress by Prohibition

by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Terre Haute Tribune* (March 1, 1908).

Reprinted in *St. Louis Labor*, vol. 6, whole no. 372 (March 21, 1908), pg. 7.

Some well-meaning but deluded people think that all wickedness can be overcome and the millennium ushered in by prohibition. Anything they do not happen to like is bad, according to their ethics, and forthwith is put upon their prohibition list. These people strain at gnats and swallow camels. They throw a fit over a man taking a drink at 11:30 or playing a game of cards, but they are not concerned about wage-slavery, or child-sweating, which have a thousand victims where the saloon has one.

These people are not satisfied to be permitted to spend their Sundays as they choose, but they must see to it that others spend their Sundays in the same way. According to these fanatics, practically everything in town is to be closed Sunday except the churches. This means that Terre Haute is to be converted into a sabbatarian penitentiary. The gospel of gloom will then be triumphant and the spirit of bigotry and intolerance will seek other fields to conquer.

Thirty days of this kind of punishment would be a good thing for Terre Haute. A sixty days' sentence would be still better. It would cure the community of its puritanic affliction, as it has others, for many years.

There are some of us who prefer the theaters to the church; who would rather be entertained at a play than to listen to a stupid sermon. We do not in the least object to people going to church; it is their right and purely their own affair. We simply insist upon the same right to go to the theater, or to the ball park, or wherever we choose, so long as we do not interfere with the equal right of our neighbors.

It is wonderful how tamely people will submit to this spirit of intolerance, this mean and narrow fanaticism. I know that many are opposed to it and yet such is their economic dependence that they dare not speak out for fear they may lose some "trade," or some "prac-

tice," or some "prestige," or something else upon which they depend as a means of livelihood.

It is quite the thing in this crusade to pounce upon the saloon-keeper and hold him up as a monster of iniquity. I have no brief to speak for him, but as long as the saloon is licensed by the government it is just as lawful as any other business in the profit-mongering system, and the saloonkeeper is entitled to the same consideration as any other citizen. The saloonkeeper is no more responsible for the saloon than the preacher is for the church, and the saloonkeeper is not necessarily a bad man, nor the preacher necessarily a good one. Speaking for myself, if I were hungry and friendless today I would rather take my chances with the average saloonkeeper than with the average preacher.

It seems not a little strange that this gospel of puritanism born of the same spirit which hanged witches and tortured Quakers, should be preached in the name of Jesus Christ. there is not a word in all he ever uttered to justify it, and if he happened to enter Terre Haute today as he entered Jerusalem, presenting the same appearance, having the same mission, and being followed by the same crowd, these solemn bigots would be the first to call him a hobo and demand that he be sent to the rock pile for profaning the Sabbath.

Some years ago the Sabbatarians of Texas started out on a crusade similar to that now going on in Terre Haute. They were especially wroth because the German citizens at Waco had attended a Sunday picnic. This was more than these pious guardians of the public morals could stand, and they became very excited over it, insisting that if there was anything calculated to provoke the vengeful ire of Jehovah it was a German picnic on Sunday. The late lamented W.C. Brann, the brilliant editor at that time of *The Iconoclast*, who took a special delight in flaying Pharisees, went after the bigots in the following fashion:

God has been insulted again; Gabriel has gone into mourning; Michael wears his wings at half-mast, and Ithuriel sits clothed in sack cloth and covered in ashes. The wounds on Calvary bleed afresh, the angels rend their robes, and there is weeping and wailing in the Holy City. The golden harp hath gone silent, hushed is the loud hosannah, the stertorous sob and spasmodic snuffle have supplanted the hallelujah. Saint Peter hath double barred the gate, and the Almighty leaves the universe to run haphazard while he forgets punitive thunderbolts

and lays up barbed arrows in his sagittary against the day of wrath.

The Dutch did it — and all heaven cries with one accord “Damn the Dutch.”

On a recent Sunday “we Chermans” said to ourselves: The weather is hot. We will go into the woods and make up a picnic. So we had music and beer and redbugs. We ran foot races. We sang the “Star-Spangled Banner” and “Watch on the Rhine.” We danced with the pretty girls and swung them until the roses bloomed in their cheeks and their laughter echoed through the leafy isles of the first temple of our Lord. We smoked our pipes beneath the umbrageous boughs, discussed the latest news from the Fatherland, and watched our fat babies roll and tumble on God’s carpeting of green embroidered with fragrant flowers. It was a day of pleasure, one of rest without weariness, and we came home feeling that life was well worth the living — was something for which to thank the giver of all good. But scarce had the last peal of laughter died away, scarce had the last note of music melted into the throbbing atmosphere ere the religious busybodies were upon us like a flock of unclean birds — defending an Omnipotent God from the deadly assaults of the Dutch! A Waco lodge of Good (for nothing) Templars lifted up its voice in discord at Peleus’ nuptial fete, and declared that we had “desecrated the Sabbath.” Where did this aggregation of atrabilious bigots and irresponsible meddlers absorb its misinformation? Desecrated the Sabbath how? By being happy? By enjoying to the utmost our weekly respite from grinding toil? By playing ball instead of meeting in solemn conclave to slander our betters? By dancing instead of consigning honest men and noble women to eternal damnation? By absorbing a glass of beer — when Christ made and blessed a more intoxicating tippie? Why, you small-brained, bilious-livered, acid-hearted disciples of Cotton Mather, do you suppose for one minute that the Almighty can be injured by a toot on the trombone? And if it doesn’t hurt him why should you howl? Do you really suppose that the Creator of the Cosmos flies into a rage because Hans Breitman goes to church Sunday morning, then takes his best girl to the park in the afternoon and stuffs her corset full of hokey-pokey and peanuts? If he doesn’t approve of Hans’ method of passing the Sabbath can’t he settle with him without your assistance? Has he commissioned you to see that Hans remembers the Sabbath day to keep it holy? Who are you to presume to interpret for us — quite unasked — the will of the Deity, and who would abrogate a fundamental law of this land, that of religious liberty? Are you in any wise responsible for our sins? Have you been commissioned as our religious

guides? Do we interfere with your political privileges or religious prerogatives? And is it any of your damned business what we do so long as your rights are sacredly respected? No? Then why in God's name do you persist in poking your meddlesome snouts into matters that in nowise concern you? Why don't you take something for the meddler's itch and respect that other law from the book which you are constantly hurling at our heads, "Judge not lest ye be judged?"

I have never a word to say in derogation of the Christian Sabbath; but I do insist that my observance or non-observance thereof is a matter solely between my conscience and my Creator; that I am free to determine for myself what I may and may not properly do on that day, and that every law in the statute books of American states which prohibits me from doing on Sunday what I might lawfully do on Monday is an invasion of the natural rights of man, subversive of the teachings of Christ, and a flagrant violation of the federal constitution. We have millions of good citizens — the equals morally and superiors mentally of Waco's Good Templars — who firmly believe that Christ was a fraud. We have tens of thousands of worthy people who regard Saturday as the true Sabbath. Because we chance to be in the majority shall we compel all these people to either stultify themselves or leave the country — this country of "religious liberty" — where every man is supposed to be privileged to "worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience?"

Edited by Tim Davenport

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