

# Sabbath

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

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*Christian Reflection* is the ideal resource for discipleship training in the church. Multiple copies are obtainable for group study at \$2.50 per copy. Worship aids and lesson materials that enrich personal or group study are available free on the Web site.

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## Additional Resources

These study guides are available by free download from our Web site [www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws). They integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in this issue.

### **SABBATH AS LIBERATION**

Sabbath teachings and laws go to the heart of the biblical emphases on justice and compassion. How is sabbath an enduring sign of hope that the poor will see justice and the distraught find peace?

### **SABBATH AS DELIGHT IN CREATION**

God's rest on the seventh day of creation reflects the divine pleasure in a creation finely made. When we keep the sabbath, rather than fleeing from the anxious character of our world, we adopt the vision of God's peace and joy. The question always is, "Are we in our thought and action promoting the enjoyment and flourishing of the creation around us?"

### **THE EIGHTH DAY**

When they celebrated Sunday as "the eighth day," early Christians signaled that God's new creation had begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What practices shaped their new "Sunday" way of life? How were these practices rooted in their received tradition, with its focus on gatherings and worship on the sabbath?

### **LORD OF THE SABBATH**

When Jesus heals on the sabbath, some Pharisees conclude, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others disagree: "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" How do these sabbath controversy stories clarify Jesus' teaching that "the sabbath was made for humankind" and his claim to be "lord even of the sabbath"?

### **CHANGING SUNDAY PRACTICES**

Profound cultural changes have transformed our Sundays to resemble other days of the week. What were these trends? What are the prospects for renewing sabbath keeping as individuals and congregations?

### **BOWLING ON THE SABBATH**

Helpful resources are available to begin sabbath observance. What are the pitfalls and rewards of a family's commitment to keep the sabbath today?

Another companion to this issue of *Christian Reflection* is the Summer 2002 edition of *AM/FM: Audio Magazine for Family Ministry*. This innovative audiocassette magazine for family ministry features interviews on the theme of sabbath keeping in today's families. See page 92 of this issue for more information or to request a complimentary issue of *AM/FM*.

# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**If we have put sabbath away on a shelf in our mental closet and forgotten about it, our contributors challenge us to open sabbath as a gift and a prophetic reminder of who God has created us to become. Sabbath will change our hearts and minds. As a prophetic action, it will challenge and correct our culture.**

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**M**any of us have wrapped the sabbath in old papers, put it away on a shelf in our mental closet, and forgotten about it. If we think of it at all, we remember Blue Laws and strict rules, so we are exceedingly reluctant to open sabbath for another look.

Others of us today are reopening the sabbath package, but as we might reach for an old tool: we're tired and need a breather, and remember sabbath was about resting. This holy day is reduced merely to a therapeutic appliance for recovering our strength so that we can be more productive.

Our contributors invite us to open the sabbath package. But be prepared for some jolts—seeing sabbath as a gift instead of just a law, as a celebration of whom God has made us to become, as “resting from our own works” and giving “due place to God’s works,” and as a call to justice and compassion rather than apathy.

Of course, observing the sabbath will not be easy in “our 24-7-365-rent-a-movie-and-buy-cheese-enchiladas-in-the-middle-of-the-night-culture,” in Milton Brasher-Cunningham’s colorful but apt description. Yet, “the same forces that make it difficult to keep sabbath,” reminds Dorothy Bass, “also make it a prophetic and relevant practice for our time. Exploring it anew is worth the effort.”

Opening the gift of sabbath will change our hearts and minds. As a prophetic action, it will challenge and correct our culture.

Sabbath teachings are not peripheral in the Old Testament, Richard Lowery finds in *Sabbath: A "Little Jubilee,"* (p. 9), for by echoing the jubilee traditions, they go to the heart of the biblical emphasis on justice and compassion. "Sabbath rest is God's distinctive mark," he notes, "a deep symbol of Israel's intimate relationship with the one who frees rather than enslaves, who offers lavish blessing rather than endless toil."

The early Christians, being rooted in the traditions of Second Temple Judaism, kept sabbath, but Jesus' post-resurrection appearances on Sunday were the catalyst for them to add Sunday worship to their sabbath observance. In *The Eighth Day* (p. 17) David Capes explores how they began to celebrate Sunday as the "Lord's Day" and "eighth day," the beginning of God's *new* creation. These "Sunday people" signaled "a new way of being in the world in the wake of their powerful experiences with the life, death, and new life of Jesus Christ."

Profound changes in American culture since the 1930's have transformed our Sundays to resemble other days of the week. We spend less time, in Calvin's words, "resting from our work so God can do God's work in us." Jack Marcum outlines this transformation within the Presbyterian tradition in *Changing Sunday Practices* (p. 58), but his conclusions apply to many Christian groups. "The cultural props that kept Sunday distinctive have disappeared." He suggests, "How we will treat Sunday depends upon individual Christians and congregations."

Judy Prather, in *Praying with the Rhythms of Grace* (p. 25), discovers resources for her sabbath keeping in contemplative prayer. God's patterns of creative activity—of ebb and flow, and of repetition—are echoed in these practices of prayer. Others, like the McCormick family, draw inspiration from the Jewish Shabbat rituals that they've adapted to their Christian observance. Blaine and Sarah McCormick recommitted their young family to celebration of sabbath two years ago; they report their observance is a "work-in-progress" in *Bowling on the Sabbath* (p. 66).

"When we learn to appreciate sabbath reality as the peaceful and joyous flourishing of creation," challenges Norman Wirzba in *Imagine a Sabbath Economy* (p. 31), "the prospect of daily sabbath life becomes a concrete possibility." Then we would ask about our daily tasks, ranging from feeding our children to reading a book, "Are we promoting the enjoyment and flourishing of the creation around us?"

Are we ready for sabbath economy, or the sabbath-making God? "Our 24-7-365-rent-a-movie-and-buy-cheese-enchiladas-in-the-middle-of-the-night-culture is not the place for a count the hairs, watch the sparrows, consider the lilies, take the seventh day off kind of God," observes Milton Brasher-Cunningham in *The Work of Rest and Worship* (p. 52). Yet, we must not think that sabbath is about lazy inactivity. Reminding us that Jesus healed people on the sabbath, Brasher-Cunningham says, "The call to sab-

bath is a call to paradox: active rest. For the rested soul is the one who can find and share redemption."

The gospel stories about Jesus' sabbath healings were illustrated for medieval Christians by the colorful images alongside the text in illuminated manuscripts of the Bible. In *Lord of the Sabbath* (p. 38) Heidi Hornik reviews three of these illuminations; in their own way, they teach that "the work of God's goodness . . . should never stop. This man, Jesus, is from God, and he does obey the sabbath."

*Christ at the Pool of Bethesda* (on the cover) brings up another sabbath healing episode in John 5:1-9. Hornik's *Sir, I Have No One* (p. 36) explains how Murillo's powerful image expressed and fostered the mission of the Brotherhood of Charity: "They were disciples whose lives had been changed by viewing their Lord not only visit the sick, but heal them on the sabbath."

Terry York's hymn, *Sabbath Sings a Quiet Song* (p. 43), with music by David Bolin, reminds us of sabbath inspiration in our experience of God's created order. We also provide a new musical setting for *This Day at Thy Creating Word* (p. 46), William How's text that captures the multiple layers of our joy each Sunday, "this day of light and life and grace." Then the service of worship by David Bridges (p. 48) calls us together for a time of "working at worship instead of worshipping work." Its prayers and readings are also suitable for personal and study-group devotion. Many of the suggested hymns may be found in several hymnals.

Dorothy Bass explains how the innovative Valparaiso Project is encouraging churches to retrieve historic Christian practices, such as sabbath keeping, in the interview *Opening the Gift of Sabbath* (p. 73). "People who are on religious quests, and even some who belong to congregations, think that to grow closer to God they need to look to Buddhism, psychotherapy, or other places," she notes. "I wanted to find a way to invite contemporary people into the Christian life, and also to help those already living this life to reflect deeply upon it."

Stephen Brachlow's *Keeping Sabbath* (p. 81) introduces two short books that are contemporary classics on sabbath keeping: Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* and Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time*. Both books, he finds, are "chock full of practical wisdom about creative ways to observe the sabbath" because they draw upon Christian sabbath practices deeply rooted in Jewish tradition.

Sabbath should be a time for joyful reflection upon God's work. Willow Hambrick senses this joy in the collections of Wendell Berry's poems and Molly Wolf's musings, which were written on sabbath afternoons over the years. These authors can help us to experience "a loving God 'hiding in plain sight,'" says Hambrick in *Sabbath Blessings* (p. 86). ❖



# Sabbath, a “Little Jubilee”

BY RICHARD H. LOWERY

**Sabbath may be the key to our survival, prosperity, and sanity. By celebrating a hoped-for world of abundance, self-restraint, and mutual care, the Bible’s sabbath and jubilee traditions critique the economic systems that create scarcity, overwork, and gross economic inequality.**

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**W**e face a spiritual crisis. We are overworked, stressed out, and chronically neglecting basic disciplines of spiritual growth and family nurture. The problem is personal, but its causes and effects are social and economic. On average, more family members (parents and children) are working outside the home than 20 years ago. Their absence, exhaustion, and anxiety about money for lifestyles take a toll on the family. The logic of consumption drives young and old to perpetual dissatisfaction. Our spirits hunger for wholeness.

Biblical sabbath offers a way to think and act theologically as we confront the spiritual, ecological, and economic challenges before us. By celebrating a hoped-for world of abundance, self-restraint, and mutual care, sabbath traditions critiqued ancient royal-imperial systems that created scarcity, overwork, and gross economic inequality. These traditions can serve a similar critical function today, offering words of proportion, limits, social solidarity, and the need for rest, quiet reflection, and recreation in the face of never-ending work and consumption. In our world, sabbath consciousness may be the key to human survival, prosperity, and sanity.<sup>1</sup>

## **MURKY ORIGINS, CLEAR CONNECTIONS**

Though its historical origins are unclear, biblical sabbath is linked conceptually to norms of household justice, community solidarity, and support for the poor that also find expression in the Bible’s sabbath year and jubilee traditions of debt forgiveness and slave liberation (Deuteronomy 15; Leviticus 25). Christian Sunday often is described as a “little Easter.” It is

appropriate as well to think of biblical sabbath as a "little jubilee," a weekly celebration of hoped-for release, where debts are forgiven, slaves are freed, families are reunited, and household property lost through natural or human-made disaster is returned to the family. Sabbath is an enduring sign of hope that the poor will see justice and the distraught find peace.

## **JUBILEE**

The Bible's jubilee traditions are found in Leviticus 25, a chapter connected by theme and rhetoric to the Priestly creation story in Genesis 1. Jubilee laws govern debt release, manumission of debt slaves, and return of household property lost through economic hardship. They are closely related to debt forgiveness and slave release laws in Deuteronomy 15 and to royal decrees of release or "liberty" common in the ancient world (*durarû* in the Assyrian and Babylonian language, *derôr* in Hebrew, which is translated "liberty" in Leviticus 25:10 and Isaiah 61:1). In these royal decrees of liberty, kings released citizens from taxes, military draft, and state labor obligations. They also cancelled debt and released debt slaves. These royal decrees were common throughout the ancient Near East, but they depended on the whim (which is to say, the pressing political needs) of the king. Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25 offer a unique twist on this common practice by setting it to a regular cycle. Deuteronomy establishes a seven-year cycle of debt forgiveness and limits debt slavery to six years. In the seventh year, slaves go free. Leviticus releases debt and restores household property every fiftieth year, after seven "sabbath years" have passed. Both sets of laws establish a seven-year cycle, which Leviticus 25 explicitly ties to sabbath. In a variety of ways, the ethical concerns of sabbath year and jubilee parallel the moral vision at the heart of the Bible's sabbath traditions.

## **SEVENTH YEAR AND SEVENTH DAY**

Exodus 23:9-12 explicitly links sabbath observance with a seventh year release of agricultural produce for the economic support of the poor, who are epitomized by the resident alien.

The repeated reference to resident aliens in the passage ties together seventh year and seventh day by a technique scholars call "inclusion," repeating key words at the beginning and end to create literary bookends for the material in between. The inclusion in this case consists of two key words, "resident alien" (*ger*) and "life" (*nefesh*). Verse 9 begins in Hebrew, "and a resident alien." Verse 12 ends with "and the resident alien." Verse 9 warns against oppression, because "you know the life (*nefesh*; literally, "breath") of the resident alien." Verse 12 says you should rest on the seventh day so workers in your household will be "revitalized" (*weyinnafesh*, a verbal form of *nefesh* that literally means "to breathe life into"). The "life" of the "resident alien" is the glue that binds seventh year to sabbath in Exodus 23:9-12.

Reading these laws through the life of the resident alien sets them among the norms of social solidarity that held ancient agrarian communities together. Farm life was precarious in the highlands of Palestine. Taxes, war, crop failure, and death frequently undermined the ability of families to produce enough to survive. In such cases, economically secure households gave support to struggling families, because it was dangerous for households to collapse, leaving rootless, alienated, and desperate individuals to fend for themselves. Resident aliens were especially vulnerable, since they were living away from their own kin who normally would provide emergency help. Exodus 23, like many of the laws of economic relief in the Bible, uses "resident alien" as shorthand for households at extreme risk.

Reading these laws through the experience of the resident alien also sets them specifically within Israel's sacred narrative. By reminding Israel that they were "resident aliens" in Egypt, the passage explicitly connects sabbath rest and seventh year release to Israel's liberation and covenant with God, the same rationales that govern the jubilee laws of debt and debt release (Leviticus 25:38, 42, 55; cf. Deuteronomy 15:15).

The seventh year law in this passage requires a regular release of agricultural produce for the economic support of the poor:<sup>2</sup> "you must release it and leave it alone, so the needy of your people may eat" (23:11).<sup>3</sup> Like gleaning (Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21; cf. Ruth 2), the triennial tithe (Deuteronomy 14:28-29), and the laws governing debt and slave release (Deuteronomy 15:1-18; Leviticus 25:8-55), the seventh year law in Exodus 23 provides a mechanism of support for the poor. Perhaps it was a rotating "set-aside" program, where farmers designated one-seventh of the fields and vineyards each year for use by poor households.

Seventh year release is bound in this passage to seventh day rest "so your ox and donkey may rest, and your homeborn slave may be revitalized" (23:12). Like seventh year release, sabbath has a humanitarian purpose; it is literally to

breathe new life (*weyinnafesh*) into the household's most vulnerable workers—the slave, the resident alien, and the farm animals. Rest for beasts of burden refreshed the animals but also served a human purpose by effectively stopping agricultural work. The ancient equivalent of turning off the machines and hanging a "closed" sign on the factory door, rest for ox and donkey meant a day off for human laborers.

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**Taxes, war, crop failure, and death frequently undermined the ability of families to survive. In such cases, the sabbath laws instruct economically secure households to give support to struggling families.**

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Seventh year and seventh day are joined in this passage by a passion for social justice, rooted in the identity of Israel as a nation of liberated slaves and the character of Israel's God as champion of the oppressed.

### **REST FOR WORKERS AND SYMBOL OF COVENANT**

Short versions of the sabbath law such as Exodus 34:21 address individual Israelites, without regard to economic status: "six days you must toil, but on the seventh day you must rest." But other passages, including

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**Sabbath rest is God's distinctive mark, a deep symbol of Israel's intimate relationship with one who frees rather than enslaves, who offers lavish blessing rather than endless toil.**

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both versions of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 5:14), focus the sabbath law on justice for workers in wealthy households. "You must not do any work—neither you nor your son nor your daughter nor your male or

female slave, nor your cattle nor your donkey nor any of your animals, nor your resident alien who is in your gates—so that your male and female slave will rest just like you do" (Deuteronomy 5:14). Few households were wealthy enough to make the kind of loans that would bring them debt slaves. These sabbath laws specifically address those wealthy few. The purpose of sabbath rest for "you" (the householder) is that subordinate members of the household, especially "male and female slaves," may enjoy rest. The boss must rest so the workers can have a day off.

This concern for vulnerable members of the household may also underlie the curious ban on lighting fires in some versions of sabbath law (cf. Exodus 35:2-3). Home fires most often were for cooking, a job that typically fell to women and children. The ban on lighting fires ensures that householders will not expect women to cook, while men enjoy sabbath rest. Sabbath knows no distinction of gender. Male or female, slave or free, everyone gets to rest on sabbath.

Sabbath is a unique holiday for a distinctive deity, who defines the divine-human relationship by rest, not by work. Israel's neighbors were not so lucky. In the Babylonian creation myth, for example, the gods Marduk and Ea create human beings to do the gods' grunt work. In Israel's sacred story, by contrast, humans are created to rule the earth, not as slaves to do the gods' tedious labor, but as kings and queens stamped with the image of God. Later, God "creates" Israel by liberating them from forced labor, canceling their debt, buying their freedom from slavery, and restoring their household property.

Sabbath celebrates this jubilee relationship with God. Sabbath rest is God's distinctive mark, a deep symbol of Israel's intimate relationship with

the one who frees rather than enslaves, who offers lavish blessing rather than endless toil.

### **DELIGHT IN CREATION**

Genesis 1:1-2:4a, the Bible's first sabbath story, portrays a created world fundamentally benevolent and able to produce enough to sustain prosperous human life. This theme of natural abundance is coupled, however, with a principle of self-restraint. Creation climaxes and finally coheres in sabbath rest. Sabbath is woven into the very fabric of the universe, the thread that holds the world together.

This story portrays creation as a progressive movement from watery chaos to order. "When God began to create the sky and the earth, the world was shapeless chaos (*tohû wabohû*)." *Tohû wabohû* describes something empty and wild, without shape or coherence. It typically signifies uncultivated, dangerous wilderness, a sharp contrast to the ecological and social order of land successfully farmed. This story, like other ancient creation stories, portrays this primordial chaos as a raging sea. In the ancient world, as in our own, water management was a perpetual and pressing concern. Uncontrolled rainwater can destroy crops and building. Catching rainwater, directing and slowing the course of its runoff by channels and terraces limits its destructive power and maximizes its benefit to agriculture. The Genesis story reflects this ancient agrarian reality. At the dawn of creation, the world was shapeless chaos—deep, dark, windy water, a wild and violent "cosmic soup." God creates a livable world by taming and channeling the raging primordial flood.

The writers choose the Hebrew word *bara'* ("create") to describe God's work, and use it interchangeably with *ʿasah* ("make"). Elsewhere, humans are also said to "make" (*ʿasah*) things. But in the Bible, God alone "creates".

In a slightly different form in 1 Samuel 2:29, *bara'* means "to fatten oneself." As an adjective, it means "fat."<sup>4</sup> In one form, *bara'* refers to separating fats from a liquid, skimming cream from milk. *Bara'* is an appropriate choice for Genesis 1, which portrays creation as the separating and collecting of primordial waters to allow solids to appear—sky, earth, heavenly bodies, vegetation, and living creatures. In this story, creating is like churning butter, and creation is the cream that rises to the top of watery chaos, worked and shaped by God.

In the Bible, fatness connotes wealth and health (cf. Genesis 27:28). *Bara'* describes the seven "fat" cows in Pharaoh's famous dream that symbolize seven years of prosperity (Genesis 41:2-20). It describes the rich and lavish food of Israel's enemy in Habakkuk (1:16) and the miraculous physical health of Daniel's kosher vegetarians (Daniel 1:15). *Bara'* serves as a double entendre in Genesis 1. God "creates" a "fat" world, a rich and lavish overflow of goodness that is abundant and life-giving at its very core.

The double meaning of *bara'*, "to create" and "to be fat," is reinforced

in the narrative by God's appraisal of the creative work in progress. The declaration, "God saw that it was good (*tôv*)," runs like a litany through the story. But the full meaning of *tôv* is not captured by the English word "good." *Tôv* implies joy and delight. The *tôv* refrain expresses God's intense pleasure at creation's every detail. It is God's cosmic "wow!" as creation unfolds: "God saw this as delightful!"

### **SABBATH REST, THE CROWN OF DELIGHTFUL CREATION**

On day one, when God began creating, the universe was wild and watery chaos (Genesis 1:1-2). On day seven, the world is restful and whole (2:1-4a). The opening verses of chapter 2 drive home the point by repeating in different forms a word that means "finished, complete, total, whole": "And they were finished (*calah*), sky and earth and all (*cal*) their host, and he finished (*calah*) the work he did." The theme of completion continues in 2:2b with the word *shabat*, "to rest, cease, stop," the verbal form of the noun *shabbat* (sabbath): "and God stopped/rested on the seventh day from all the work he did."

God's ability to rest is a sign of God's sovereign rule in creation. Elsewhere in the Bible, "rest" describes political stability, which is the ability of a people or king to secure order and successfully govern.<sup>5</sup> Rest signifies the successful establishment of justice and peace. It is a witness to *shalom*. God rests at the end of creation because God is able to rest. God's benevolent rule in the universe is unchallenged. Sabbath celebrates God's complete, just, and compassionate rule in the world.

The blessing of the seventh day in verse 3 brings the creation drama full circle. On the first day, God established time by creating light and starting the cycle of day and night that regulates the biological, agricultural, and social rhythms of earth. On the seventh day, God creates sacred time and signals the completion of a living, life-giving world.

Elsewhere in the story, only sea creatures, birds (1:22), and human beings created in the image of God (1:28) are "blessed." In these cases, God's blessing is coupled with the admonition to "be fruitful and multiply" (cf. the covenant blessing in Genesis 12:2; 17:20; 22:17; 26:3-4, 24). God's promise calls for the world's response. God's blessing is also God's command. To be blessed is to flourish, and to flourish is to respond appropriately to God. Blessing carries the responsibility to live a blessed life.

Sabbath, as blessed time, multiplies itself. It becomes the focal point around which all other time coheres. It shapes all the days of our life as celebrations of God and God's delightful world. It is an enduring sign of God's benevolent desire for the world's flourishing.

Sabbath rest is active, not passive. Here is the delightful twist: "rest" is a verb and "work" is a noun. You've got to work at sabbath keeping.

Sabbath is a challenge. It requires a leap of faith, humble confidence that the world will continue to operate benevolently for a day without our



labor, that God is willing and able to provide enough for good life. Too many of us try to cram eight days of work into a seven-day week. Sabbath promises seven days of prosperity for six days of work. We get more out of life than we put into it. And in the surplus is the gracious mercy of God.

### **SABBATH MANNA AND THE COMMONWEALTH OF GOD**

Exodus 16 tells the Bible's second story about the origin of sabbath. God provides manna in the wilderness to teach Israel to keep sabbath (16:5, 22-30). The story shows that God's providential care extends even to zones of chaos outside the secure, ordered world of farms and villages.

One peculiar characteristic of manna is important to note: the bread from heaven cannot be hoarded. God commands that each Israelite gather "as much of it as each needs to eat." Need is defined individually, not collectively. God's providential care is measured person by person. No one falls through the cracks. Different people collect different quantities: "some gathered more, and some gathered less." But miraculously, "when they measured with an omer, the ones with more had no surplus and the ones with less had no shortage. They all gathered exactly what they needed to eat" (16:18). God fills the basket of every single person, regardless of strength and ability. God's reliable, providential care is limited only by the actual needs of each individual.

In the sabbath-manna story, hoarding is more than a simple case of rule-breaking. It is a rejection of God's commonwealth where everyone gets enough for abundant life. It is an act of disbelief. Greedy consumption is unfaith, rooted in the blasphemous fear that God is not the liberator of slaves, the loving creator who desires abundant life for all.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The Bible's sabbath laws and stories envision a world where the "natural laws" of scarcity, poverty, and excessive toil no longer apply. These texts anticipate and celebrate a redeemed world, where those who struggle now on the margins of survival find comfort and release. They envision a better world, the commonwealth of God's desire, a world of jubilee justice, where all people live and work with dignity and freedom, caring for one another, enjoying life together, and delighting in contented rest.

This vision of wealth and well-being universally shared stands in sharp contrast to the harsh economic realities actually experienced by ancient families, and it is unlike the world most people know today. But this sab-

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bath-grounded dream of God's redeeming, sustaining commonwealth has enduring power to transform the world.

According to the creation-sabbath story, women and men bear the image of God and therefore share the power to govern (Genesis 1:26-28). If "every man is a king," as the Louisiana populist Huey Long used to say, and "every woman is a queen," as Genesis 1 would add, then no one should live like a slave, submitting "graciously" or otherwise to the dominating power of another.

Like manna, power when it is hoarded, fouls and evaporates. Power claimed and shared grows and blesses the world.

With power comes responsibility. Sabbath, a foretaste of the world as it should be, calls us to claim the power and accept the responsibility to make the world better. It calls us to examine the way we live, to make decisions that promote dignity, freedom, well-being, and life-giving power for all God's people.

Renewing the world begins in families and communities, with sabbath disciplines of delight. Having fun with friends and family honors God. Gratefully enjoying the gifts of life is proper worship. Sabbath calls us to establish boundaries, to set appropriate limits to work, to spend time in rest, reflection, recreation, and prayer. Sabbath rest affirms our dependence on God and each other. Sabbath joy helps us delight in creation and thus reflect God.

Most importantly, sabbath reminds us that we are the blessed gifts of God. Gifts communicate the giver. We are cherished signs, the very image of God who wills abundant life for all. Sabbath calls us to live that way.

## NOTES

1 This article is adapted from my book, *Sabbath and Jubilee* (Chalice Press, 2000). I thank Chalice Press for permission to use this material.

2 This passage does not refer to letting land lie fallow, as many English translations suggest. See the discussion in *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 51-55.

3 All translations are my own.

4 See, for instance, Genesis 41:2, 4, 5, 7, 18, 20; Judges 3:17; 1 Kings 4:23; Psalm 73:4; Ezekiel 34:3, 20; Habakkuk 1:16; Zechariah 11:6; and Daniel 1:15.

5 Deuteronomy 3:20; Joshua 1:13-15; 23:1; 2 Samuel 7:1, 11; 1 Kings 5:3-4; 8:56; 1 Chronicles 22:9. These references have a different verbal root, *nwh*, but the idea is the same. The verb *shabat* is used in Genesis 2:2-3 for obvious reasons.



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# The Eighth Day

BY DAVID B. CAPES

When they celebrated Sunday as “the eighth day,” early Christians signaled that God’s new creation had begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. From a rich sabbath tradition of devotion to God, prayer, and Scripture study in the synagogue, their new “Sunday” way of life gradually emerged.

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When early Christians celebrated Sunday as “the eighth day,” they signaled a new way of being in the world in the wake of their powerful experiences with the life, death, and new life of Jesus Christ. They announced that God’s creative activity was continuing through Christ. “On the very first day, they believed, God began the creation of the heavens and the earth,” writes Dorothy Bass. “Christ’s rising on another first day, centuries later, meant that God was beginning a *new* creation.... The seven-day week could not hold the fullness of [God’s creative] time, and so the first day, which embraced eternity as well as its own twenty-four hours, spilled over. The first day, therefore, was also the eighth day.”<sup>1</sup>

What practices shaped the early Christians’ new “Sunday” way of life? How were these practices rooted in their received tradition, with its focus on gatherings and worship on the sabbath? There can be no doubt that the first Christians who gathered to worship on the eighth day had inherited a rich tradition of devotion to God, prayer, and Scripture study from the synagogue.<sup>2</sup>

## THE RECEIVED TRADITION

Christian customs developed within the maternal tradition of Second Temple Judaism, the rich form of Jewish religion that emerged from the postexilic rebuilding of the Temple in 520 BC. Thus, Christians already

observed the sabbath day as holy, as a day without commerce, a day of rest. Within the Old Testament story, Moses gives the sabbath command at Mt. Sinai only a few months after God liberates the Hebrew slaves from Egypt (Exodus 20). This mandate not to work must have sounded strange in the ears of those recently liberated chattel. Their lives had been all about work. Now the God who has released the people demands that they re-

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**By letting go of their own labor in favor of God's new economy, the Hebrew people declared their absolute dependence upon God to provide for their needs. By observing the sabbath, they confessed that people do not live by the work of their hands alone.**

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member the seventh day, do no work, and allow no person or animal that is within their care to work. In the future, their lives should follow the pattern established by God in creation: six days you labor, on the seventh you rest (Genesis 1:1-2:4). This commandment, more than any, underscores their liberation and celebrates the

fact that in this new covenant with God they will be free men and women.

How challenging the transition to sabbath rest must have been for these beleaguered nomads. Yet by letting go of daily work and embracing sabbath rest, they relinquished their slavery and, more important, received the future, a future that depended not on their own work, but on the gracious and sustaining gifts of God. By letting go of their own labor in favor of God's new economy, they declared their absolute dependence upon God to provide for their needs within the land they soon would enter. By observing the sabbath, they, in effect, confessed that people do not live by the work of their hands alone, but by the bread and Word that God supplies. Beyond this, sabbath heralded an alternative world in which all persons, both king and peasant, farmer and merchant, resident alien and Israelite, stand equal before God. For six days all labor. For one day all rest. This new covenant with God offered a strange new world to those baptized in the Sea of Reeds. Not only did they leave behind slavery in a land not their own, but they embraced a God who shows no partiality and dared to imagine a society devoid of difference.<sup>3</sup>

We cannot say for certain how faithfully the covenant people, from Sinai through exile, kept sabbath. What is clear, however, is that after the exile, sabbath observance became a true boundary marker, separating Israel from other nations and making the people holy in the world. In a most significant development, the people united sabbath with corporate worship. Sabbath took on a deeper life as not only a day of rest from labor, but also the day to worship Yahweh in temple and synagogue.

Taking seriously their covenant obligation and privilege, the scribes worked out the basic regulations (*halakah*) whereby Israel would keep sabbath. For the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls, two questions were primary: “When did one cease work?” and “What constitutes work?” You were to cease work on the sixth day before the sun’s orb reached the gate of the horizon (Damascus Document 10.14). This provided a hedge around the sabbath law, because if you ceased on the sixth day, you would not be found working on the seventh. What activities constituted work and should be precluded on the sabbath? This question, of course, was more complicated. The directives included no foolish speech, no fasting, no discussion of future work, no preparation of food, no harvesting, restricted travel, wearing of clean clothes, no cruelty to animals, and no carrying of water, among others (Damascus Document 10.14-11.21). Another stream of Jewish tradition distilled its sabbath regulations into the mishnaic treatise *Shabbat*. It contains directives on how to welcome the sabbath with the lighting of lamps (2.1-7) and includes thirty-nine classifications of work (7.2ff.). Though we might frown upon these rules as examples of legalism, we can admire the fact that these covenant people had the audacity to believe that God’s Word mattered greatly and the vitality to do everything imaginable to bring their lives into accord with God’s will.

Jesus treasured the sabbath, yet also violated its contemporary practice. His presence in the synagogue on the seventh day demonstrated his endorsement of sabbath worship (Mark 1:21; Mark 3:1ff; Luke 4:16-31). Yet Jesus’ healings, pronouncements, and his disciples’ harvesting (Mark 3:1ff; Luke 13:10-17; John 5:1-18; John 9) created an ongoing conflict with scribes and religious leaders concerning how the sabbath should be observed. When confronted with the allegation that he and his disciples violated the sabbath, Jesus declared “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath” (Mark 2:28). Jesus meant the sabbath is a good servant, but a bad master. The sabbath, originally an emblem of freedom to the Hebrew slaves, had become, *in practice*, a return to Egypt and slavery. According to Jesus, sabbath worship and rest are to serve and bless humanity.

Jesus’ statement, “the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath,” surely offended his opponents. With this, Jesus laid claim to authority equal to God. He was the giver and interpreter of the Law (cf. Matthew 5:21-48).

For the earliest disciples, Jesus was indeed “the lord of the sabbath” who modeled sabbath worship, but also taught them to serve the needs of people on the sabbath by extending mercy and healing. They interpreted sabbath law in light of Jesus’ lordship and the entrance of God’s kingdom into the world. This perspective is quite evident in Hebrews 3-4. For the writer of Hebrews, Christ himself embodied the eschatological rest that still awaits the people of God, a people fashioned through faith in Christ.

The earliest disciples continued to observe the sabbath as Jesus did. The women who attended to his burial did not work on the sabbath; instead they planned to finish the task on the first day of the week (Luke 23:34-46). Throughout his mission travels, the Apostle Paul went to the synagogues and places of prayer on the sabbath (Acts 13:13-44; 16:13; 17:1; 18:1-4) with the message of Jesus. Paul made only one negative statement regarding sabbath observance: he admonished the Gentile believers in Colossae not to let others condemn them in matters pertaining to food, drink, festivals, new moons, and sabbaths. These observances, he said, are only shadows of things to come, while the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). We must interpret Paul's remarks in the context of the Judaizing controversy evident in nearly every Pauline community at one time or another. The Judaizers insisted that Gentiles live Jewishly in order to participate in the new creation community. Paul consistently opposed them. Apparently, he expected Jewish Christians to continue observing the sabbath regulations, but he did not require the same of Gentiles who entered the church. He understood the sabbath rules to be part of God's contract with Israel at Sinai, but not applicable to nations outside of Israel. Certainly for Jew and Gentile, Christ is the goal of the Law (Romans 10:4), and so now the Law, including sabbath law, must find its referent and fulfillment in the person and work of Christ.

Despite this teaching, many Gentile Christians continued to observe the sabbath.<sup>4</sup> Around A.D. 205 in his treatise *On Prayer* (23), Tertullian discussed the practice of some who kneel to pray on the sabbath as if corporate prayer on the sabbath were commonplace. In the late fourth century, the *Apostolic Constitutions* (7.23) mentioned that both sabbath and Sunday should be kept as festivals to the Lord: the first in honor of creation, the second in honor of the resurrection. One exception, it noted, is the sabbath before Easter, which should be observed by fasting as a commemoration of that day when the Creator was under the earth. In other words, sabbath joy is not to eclipse the church's commemoration of the darkness of Jesus' grave. This sabbath, indeed, every sabbath, found its true referent in God's creative work established and sustained through the Messiah.

Not all Christians observed sabbath. A growing anti-Judaism in the second century and beyond meant that some distanced themselves from Jews and their practices.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, through the fourth century there is ample evidence that some Christians, even Gentile Christians, continued to observe sabbath. Those Christians who maintained this practice took their cue from the Lord of the Sabbath, to whom the substance of the new creation belongs.

## **INNOVATION**

The energy at the center of the resurrection community demanded new

structures, including a particular time set aside to feast on the new life that early Christians found through Jesus. They gathered in homes and at the Temple (Acts 2:46; 5:42) on “the first day of the week” (e.g., Acts 20:7-12; 1 Corinthians 16:2) to break bread, pray and rehearse the Gospel. Yet the phrase “the first day of the week” rests on a Jewish way of reckoning time and soon a uniquely Christian construct emerged: “the Lord’s Day” (e.g., Revelation 1:10; *Didache* 14.1).

Christian gatherings on the Lord’s Day probably began early among Palestinian Jewish Christians and became common practice throughout the church by the mid-second century. *Didache* 14.1-3 instructed the church to gather, break bread, and give thanks on the Lord’s Day. “In every place and time offer to me a pure sacrifice” (Malachi 1:11 paraphrased) became scriptural warrant for this innovation. Sunday, like Saturday, was ordained by God as a day of worship. In *Barnabas* 15.1-9, the writer distanced himself from the Jewish sabbath in favor of Sunday, “the eighth day,” the beginning of a new world. It is a day for rejoicing because it commemorates Jesus’ resurrection, manifestations, and installation in the heavens. In his *First Apology* (67) Justin described the practice of Christian worship on Sunday: believers from the city and rural areas gathered to hear the Gospels and Prophets read, to pray, and to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Justin explained that Sunday was the day of assembly because it was the first day of God’s creation, the day of Jesus’ resurrection, and the day Jesus appeared to his disciples and taught them.

Jesus’ resurrection on Sunday provided the catalyst for the eighth day innovation in the early church. The key to this new practice did not reside in the resurrection itself, an event without human witnesses, but in the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord. These provided not only the proof of the resurrection (for alternative explanations for the empty tomb already were emerging), but also the lively expectation that the risen Jesus would be present with Christians as they gathered.

With little exception, the Gospels indicate that the resurrection appearances of Jesus took place on “the first day of the week.” On that day, Mary Magdalene and others encountered an angel of the Lord who rolled back

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**Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances on Sunday were the catalyst for the eighth day innovation in the early church. These provided not only the proof of his resurrection, but also the lively expectation that the risen Jesus would be present with Christians as they gathered for worship.**

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the stone and revealed to them the glorious truth of his resurrection. Gripped with a joyful fear, they rushed to tell the other disciples; suddenly, Jesus met and greeted them. Matthew says that these women recognized and worshiped him on “the first day of the week” (28:1-10; cf. Luke 24:1-11 and John 20:1-10). Later on the first day, Jesus appeared to the gathered disciples behind locked doors; he showed to them his wounds, commissioned them, breathed upon them the Holy Spirit, and instructed them in matters pertaining to forgiveness (John 20:19-23). On the following Sunday, Jesus appeared again to the disciples in order to prove to Thomas he had in fact conquered death. Thomas responded to the presence of the risen Jesus in confession and worship, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:26-29).

The Christian dedication of Sunday as a day of gathering and worship, Oscar Cullmann suggests, arose from those post-resurrection appearances when Jesus broke bread with his disciples.<sup>6</sup> When two disciples journeyed to Emmaus from Jerusalem, Jesus approached them and traveled with them on their way. Initially, these deeply troubled souls were not able to recognize him. He asked what they had been discussing, and they related the shocking news of Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion, and the initial reports of the empty tomb and angelic visitors. Still hidden to their eyes, the risen Jesus chastised them for their slowness to believe and he interpreted the Scriptures, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, about the suffering Messiah. He joined them at the table where he took bread, broke it, blessed it, and distributed it. Finally, in the breaking of bread, they recognized the true identity of their guest. Later that same day (the first day of the week), the two disciples returned to Jerusalem to share their story only to hear first that the Lord had appeared to Simon (Luke 24:13-35). As they were celebrating the good news, Jesus appeared again to this larger company of disciples, greeting them with “peace” and showing them the marks of his suffering. With disbelieving joy they watched as Jesus took fish and ate it in their presence. Once again the Lord opened their minds to the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. He showed them how the events of that fateful week fulfilled what was written. He commissioned them to preach his message of repentance and forgiveness to all nations and directed them to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of power from on high (Luke 24:36-49). There can be little doubt that these events, and the first Christians’ reflection on them, restructured their lives, placing Christ at the center of their devotion and establishing Sunday as the Lord’s Day, the eighth day.

The addition of Sunday worship to the weekly practice of sabbath observance resulted from the generative power of the first Christians’ experiences of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> On “the first day of the week” the risen Jesus appeared to his gathered followers, ate with them, and explained to them the Scrip-



tures. These events created an expectation that when they gathered on Sunday, the risen Jesus would be in their midst. Indeed, Matthew's record of the Lord's promise to be present where two or three gather in his name (18:20) may reflect this robust expectation. The possibility that Jesus would appear again brought the disciples back week after week on the first day, this day of new creation. The church's gatherings to read Scripture and share a meal commemorated and imitated Jesus' actions when he was with those first believers. From these early practices grew what later became the liturgy of the Word and liturgy of the Eucharist. Sunday worship, in both its form and function, originates from the recollection of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances at meals on the first day.<sup>8</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The first Christians inherited a rich tradition of sabbath observance that involved rest from labor and corporate worship in the synagogue. Their theology of sabbath rest and worship took on a distinctive Christological shape under the influence of Jesus, whom they affirmed as lord of the sabbath. As a result of Jesus' resurrection and manifestations to his disciples on the eighth day, the new community added a day for gathering to worship the risen and exalted Christ. Sunday, however, did not replace sabbath observance in the early church, nor was it a day of rest associated with the fourth command-

ment of the Decalogue. These developments took place gradually through the Middle Ages after Constantine's decree on 7 March 321, which called for judges, city people, and craftsmen to rest on the venerable day of the Sun.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, Christian believers rested on Sunday and referred to the Lord's Day as "the sabbath," attaching to the eighth day the significance which is

given to the seventh day in Jewish Law. In this new paradigm, earthly and servile work was to give way on Sunday to the more important work of God's people, worship (*leitourgia*).<sup>10</sup>

We will do well to reflect on the significance of the eighth day. The fatigue we experience in the modern world results from leaving behind the God of Moses and Jesus to embrace our own deities: materialism, consumerism, and individualism. Regrettably, our vision of ultimate things does

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**The fatigue we experience in the modern world results from leaving behind the God of Moses and Jesus to embrace our own deities: materialism, consumerism, and individualism. For us, sabbath and Sunday stand as odd and subversive pointers toward a deeper reality.**

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not extend beyond commerce and material gains. Sabbath and Sunday will stand, for us, as odd and subversive pointers toward a deeper reality.

## NOTES

1 Dorothy Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers), 55.

2 R. F. Buxton, "Sabbath" in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J. G. Davies (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 499-500.

3 Andrew Lincoln, "From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 353.

4 Richard Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church," *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 259-261, describes the dominant trend of the second century as the rejection of sabbath observance. Yet this trend gave way to a rediscovery of sabbath practice by Gentiles consciously and without coercion in the third and fourth centuries.

5 Ignatius (*Magnesian* 8-10; see also *Philadelphians* 6.1) both reflected and promoted this growing tendency. He rejected as outmoded sabbath observance and just about every other aspect of Jewish religion. Marcion attempted to discredit the sabbath by making it a day of fasting. See Bauckham, 266-68.

6 Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 9-12. See also Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (Oxford: University Press, 1991), 192-3.

7 Bauckham, 269ff. The Ebionites' practice of both sabbath and Sunday was likely normative for the Palestinian churches. See Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.27.

8 The post-resurrection appearance of Jesus at the Sea of Tiberias in John 21 contains no time reference. However, the text perhaps has trained its readers to understand this third manifestation as occurring on Sunday since the two previous appearances have taken place on the first day of the week.

9 James White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretive Sources* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 19.

10 Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Medieval Church in the West," *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 300-303.



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# Praying with the Rhythms of Grace

BY JUDY HENDERSON PRATHER

**At the heart of the creation story in Genesis 1, and in God's life-giving gift of sabbath, are patterns of ebb and flow, and of repetition. These rhythms of grace recommend practices of prayer that will help us to reclaim sabbath keeping.**

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**I**n the beginning, God created a rhythm in life. Read Genesis 1 aloud, as the poet would read it, and the rhythm is unmistakable: "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day" (1:5). This refrain echoed as the work of each day was finished, until the Creator completed all his work. The final refrain is: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (1:31).

Then God introduced a different rhythm, the rhythm of work and rest. "And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation" (2:2-3).

These rhythms of grace within the creation story give us clues for embracing and sustaining a blessed life. Like the composer of a symphony, God has woven the same rhythmic theme through his continuing creation. When we pay prayerful attention, we can hear the God-ordained rhythm all around us. Evening . . . morning. Work . . . rest. But also, inhale . . . exhale, ebb . . . flow, give . . . receive, action . . . reflection, and speech . . . silence.

Creation's rhythm is at the heart of God's life-giving gift of sabbath as well. Just as God rested after his labors, so are we to rest. "Remember the

sabbath day, and keep it holy," the fourth commandment says. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:8-10).

We partially miss the point if we see sabbath keeping as only a commandment, for it is truly a gift. The God who made us knows what we need and gives it to us. God knows that we need meaningful work, so we can make a positive difference in the world. But God also knows we must periodically pause to allow God to make a difference in us. Sabbath is permission to let go—to cease our labors and accept both our work and rest as a gift.

We also partially miss the point when we limit sabbath to one day of the week, for it is an attitude that applies to living *all* our days. True, a weekly day of rest is a vital part of the divine rhythm, and the practice of dedicating a block of time each week will fine tune us to God's presence the other days. However, sabbath keeping cannot be limited by the clock or calendar. We may encounter sabbath in brief moments of prayer within a workday, or during a season when we lie dormant for weeks, silently drawing from God's deep wisdom before another period of productivity begins.

Sabbath, in each time frame, realigns us with the divine rhythm, releases our hearts from culture's stranglehold grip, and opens body and soul to God's gentle care. Keeping sabbath is an act of profound faith. We remember that we are not in charge of the world, but we rest in the arms of the One who is.

Sadly, this sabbath rhythm is almost lost in our society. Distorted assumptions about what sabbath means, the value our society places on possessions and productivity as a measure of self-worth, and our own need to be in control are eroding sabbath practices. Keeping sabbath is even, or particularly, a problem within our congregations; every church program that provides rest for some adds to the busyness for others.

Within our noisy, fast-paced, fragmented culture, we desperately attempt as individuals to fill our emptiness and generate our meaning. Most of us are exhausted, for we have taken on too much. Sabbath keeping rightly calls us to countercultural living.

Working with a public charity, Wayne Muller regularly moves between the spacious offices of wealthy donors, the crowded rooms of social service agencies, and the simple homes of poor families. "Remarkably, within this mosaic," he notes, "there is a universal refrain: *I am so busy.*" For despite their good hearts and equally good intentions, most people do not find their work light, pleasant, or healing. "Instead, as it all piles endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enormous obligation" because busyness and fatigue make us unable to draw from the deep wisdom that is available.<sup>1</sup>

“In an age that has lost its soul, Sabbath keeping offers the possibility of gaining it back,” writes Marva Dawn hopefully.<sup>2</sup> But how can we keep sabbath? At the heart of the creation story in Genesis 1, and in God’s life-giving gift of sabbath, are patterns of ebb and flow, and of repetition. These rhythms of grace recommend practices of prayer that will help us to reclaim sabbath keeping.

### **EBB AND FLOW**

Our breathing embodies a rhythm of ebb and flow. Each time we inhale, we draw God’s life into our bodies; then we release our breath, and God takes away what our body no longer needs. Our breathing is such a common thing, yet such a miracle. In every moment of our lives, whether we notice it or not, God is breathing life into us. We draw in the fullness of life, and then we let it go, knowing that the next breath of life will be waiting for us without our earning it. Our breathing is pure grace.

“Physical breath is a very apt symbol of God’s Spirit and our spirit,” writes Tilden Edwards.<sup>3</sup> In the biblical languages, the words for “breath” and “spirit” are the same (*ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek). Throughout scripture, breath is a symbol of life, from the moment God breathed life into Adam in Genesis 2:7 to the resurrection of the faithful witnesses to new life in Revelation 11:11, when “the breath of life from God entered them.”

Slow, deliberate breathing can become for us, as embodied persons, a spiritual exercise. There is a direct correlation, Edwards explains, between rapid, shallow breathing and rapid, shallow thinking. When our lives are full and our minds are racing, we breathe quickly, sometimes almost panting. At such times, the Spirit has little room to get through

to us, and we become tired and tense. Then we may unexpectedly sigh, or almost shudder, and take in a deep breath. Edwards suggests that is the wisdom of our bodies pointing the way out for us.

Here is an exercise that you may try. Pause from reading this for a moment and notice your breath. Do not attempt to control it; just allow it to go forward. Now imagine that God is breathing into you. Adjust the position of your body to sit up straight but relaxed, so that your lungs can accept their full capacity. Place both feet on the floor, with your hands

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**Keeping sabbath realigns us with God’s rhythm, releases our hearts from culture’s stranglehold grip, and opens us to God’s gentle care. It is an act of profound faith; we remember that we are not in charge of the world, but we rest in the arms of the One who is.**

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open in your lap. Begin breathing slowly and deeply down into your diaphragm, not just into the top of your lungs as most of us do most of the time. (You may place one hand on your lower abdomen and draw your breath down into your hand so you can feel your diaphragm expanding.)

After you are feeling the ebb and flow rhythm, allow your thoughts to turn toward God in prayer. Imagine breathing in all that is of God. Then, as you exhale, imagine God taking away all that is not of God. Breathe in light . . . breathe out darkness. Breathe in peace . . . breathe out conflict. Breathe in love . . . breathe out fear. Breathe in wholeness . . . breathe out fragmentation. Breathe in rest . . . breathe out weariness.

Once you have made the connection between breathing and prayer, you will find countless ways to practice it. For example, you can breathe in God's presence and breathe out the problem that has been keeping you awake at night. You can breathe in your favorite name for God and breathe out a burden that is not yours to carry.

Or you can choose a favorite scripture and throughout the day, breathe it as a prayer. The psalms, with their parallel poetic structure, are particularly good for this. You might breathe in "The Lord is my shepherd," and breathe out "I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1). Or breathe in "Be still and know," and breathe out "that I am God" (46:10).

"Breath prayer" can be offered any time and any place; we need no additional equipment! Try it at work along with some repetitive task that you do. For example, each time you do a save or print command on the computer, breathe a prayer and your work will become easier. When a traffic light stops you on the way to a meeting, rather than curse the light for making you late, accept a sabbath opportunity. Breathe a prayer and arrive more rested at the meeting.

"Life may be brimming over with experiences, but somewhere, deep inside, all of us carry a vast and fruitful loneliness wherever we go," wrote Etty Hillesum. "And sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inwards in prayer for five short minutes."<sup>4</sup>

God's presence is literally as near as our own breathing. When we discover that, we can begin to reclaim a rhythm of sabbath rest.

## **REPETITION**

Though each moment is new and each experience unique, the Creator clearly loves repetition. We see it in the earth's seasons, through the active growth of spring and summer followed by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter, before the next spring's new growth. The gospel promises that a similar cycle will be reflected in our bodies: in birth, life, death, and resurrection. We can depend upon this repetition within the earth's life, and it gives us confidence that life is trustworthy. "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end," as the writer of Lamenta-

tions proclaims, “they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (3:22-23).

After being bombarded with new ideas, tasks, and challenges, we will become saturated, fragmented, and exhausted. When we do not stop and ask God’s guidance, we lose the ability to discern what is most important. We are driven to accomplish everything asked of us. Carefully chosen rituals of sabbath keeping can change our emphasis and ground us in God’s economy of time. With the Spirit’s help, we can discern what most deserves our time and can learn to say “no” to what is not ours to do.

Rituals may be as simple as repeating a certain scripture each morning when we first awaken, as common as speaking a word of grace before each meal, or as quiet as a cup of tea at sunset. As elegant as the cloth-covered table with our finest dishes and fresh flowers for a weekly sabbath meal, or as rambunctious as a weekly game of basketball with a few hard-working friends. Whether it is an ancient ritual practiced by the church for centuries or one we created this morning, the point is allowing its repetition to alter our rhythm and focus.

Praying the scriptures, or *lectio divina*, is a particularly helpful practice, for it involves slowing and repetition. When we pray the scriptures, we read a passage slowly until a single verse or phrase strikes a chord in our spirits; then we stop to repeat that phrase over and over. We accept the scripture thought as God’s word to us. We reflect on it, respond to it, and rest in its truth.<sup>5</sup> This practice should not replace the active study of the Bible, but it trains us to sit quietly and wait for God. When we pray this way, we trust that the same Spirit through whom the text was written will be present now and speak a fitting word to us.

#### REMINDERS

The coffee table in my living room is my “prayer table,” and I try to keep it as clear of clutter as possible. The table regularly calls me to sabbath rest just by its presence in my

home. At least once each day, I light the candle and pray, “I know you are present with me, Lord. Help me be present to *you*.” I sit in my “prayer chair,” offer a breath prayer, and then sometimes read or write in my journal. When that coffee table begins to pile up with clutter, I’m reminded that my sabbath keeping is slipping and my life needs some adjustments.

“I hurry on the inside. I hurry on the outside. Then I give talks on

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Carefully chosen rituals of sabbath keeping can change our emphasis and ground us in God’s economy of time. With the Spirit’s help, we can discern what most deserves our time and can learn to say “no” to what is not ours to do.

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slowing down," writes Macrina Wiederkehr. "I would feel like an utter hypocrite but for the fact that I can talk most passionately about that which I feel the greatest lack."<sup>6</sup> This confession could be my own. As committed as I am to sabbath keeping, I still find its practice very difficult.

Let us be encouraged by remembering that even our deep yearning for sabbath rest is the first step to reclaiming it. The next step is to open our lives to receive this good gift as we cease our labors and respond with gratitude to the rhythms of grace.

## NOTES

1 Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), p. 2.

2 Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), p. 50.

3 Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Our Lives to the Awareness of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), p. 21.

4 Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life, The Diaries 1941-1943, and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996), p. 93.

5 Among the helpful sources to learn about this way of praying, I suggest M. Basil Pennington's *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998).

6 Macrina Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p. 110.

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### **JUDY HENDERSON PRATHER**

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# Imagine a Sabbath Economy

BY NORMAN WIRZBA

The goal of sabbath teaching and law is to properly orient human desire. While we use creation in order to flourish—we must eat and work so that we can live—the character of our use should be determined by the vision of God’s sabbath delight in the creation. In other words, our daily tasks, from eating a meal to doing our job, should be informed by sabbath reality. The question always is, “Are we promoting the enjoyment and flourishing of the creation around us?”

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*Exodus 23:10-13*

God’s *menuha*, or rest, on the seventh day of creation is something more like tranquility, serenity, peace, and repose. Rather than being a leave-taking from his working days, suggests Abraham Joshua Heschel, God’s *menuha* reflects the divine pleasure in a creation finely made. It suggests God’s attunement to a creation that in the integrity of its own being promotes joy. Indeed, as we later read in the book of Job, God takes obvious delight in creatures that are of marginal or no interest to us. God cares about the calving of deer, watches them crouch as they give birth to their offspring (39:1). In a speech that devastates human pretension and narrowness, God reminds Job of the divine care for and de-



light in the great animal Behemoth, “which I made just as I made you . . .” (40:15). The sense of passages like this is that creation is not primarily for us. It exists for God, and is the occasion for God’s care, pleasure, and delight. It is a sabbath creation in which all the members of creation, including humanity, achieve their true end as they approximate God’s own tranquility and joy.

The goal of sabbath teaching and law is to properly orient human desire. While we and all else must use creation in order to flourish—we must eat and work so that we can live—the character of our use should be determined by the vision of God’s delight in the creation. The setting aside of one day in the week to commemorate and reflect upon the goodness of God’s creative power does not mean that it is only on that one day that the sabbath occurs. Rather, the day serves to correct and inspire us by recalling every day’s action in light of its sabbath goal. To observe the sabbath is not to take flight from the frantic and anxious character of our world. It is rather to acquire the perspective that will then permeate our every thought and action with the vision of God’s peace and joy. In other words, there is no reason why our daily tasks, ranging from the feeding of children to the reading of a book, cannot be informed and driven by sabbath reality. The question always is, “Are we in our thought and action promoting the enjoyment and flourishing of the creation around us?”

The Israelites understood that the *menuha* of God was not restricted only to humans. This is why the Leviticus code expressly prescribes that the land be given the opportunity to rest and lie fallow every seventh year. Not only does this give the land a chance to replenish itself, it also frees the land from the potentially constrictive demands of private ownership that would deprive animals and the poor of the goods of creation. “For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat” (Exodus 23:10-11a). When we understand that creation does not exist primarily for us, but is instead the setting in which God’s love and vitality find their concrete expression, then the right of all creation to livelihood becomes not merely a possibility but a necessity, a necessity that in some cases requires the sanction of law.

When we learn to appreciate sabbath reality as the peaceful and joyous flourishing of creation, and stop thinking of it primarily as the cessation of or temporary reprieve from our otherwise acceptable striving, the prospect of daily sabbath life becomes a concrete possibility. Rather than being relegated to one part of our schedules, sabbath observance becomes the prism through which all our thought and action receive their focus and direction.

Consider the mundane task of eating a meal. Does our eating reflect or distort the *menuha* of God? In many instances mealtime is an act of desecration, since it is premised on irresponsible and unjust food production



practices. When the integrity of plant species is usurped by biotechnology companies which modify and then patent the genetic code of seed, and when that patent is then used to legally prohibit farmers around the world from freely sharing and growing their own locally-developed crops, the tranquility of God is violated. Rather than enabling farmers to work with the created order and with each other, these biotechnology companies aim to possess and control creation (farmers included) to suit their own profit margins. When swine, poultry, and cattle are raised in massive confinement operations that promote infestation, disease, and animal stress and violence, we disallow these animals' well-being. Rather than appreciating the animal as a creature that might be the occasion for divine joy, we cram them into hostile environments and pump them with antibiotics and "food" so that we can butcher them ever more quickly and efficiently. Our eating, instead of reflecting the profound religious significance of this most intimate engagement with grace, becomes ignorant and ungrateful. We eat without care, and in our inattentiveness we consign other creatures to oblivion or want.

To be sure, our eating will require that plants and animals be killed so that we can live. But must our eating depend on practices that take only the narrow interests of efficiency and profit into account? The increasing control of food production and distribution by large corporations, and their dependence on cheap, often migrant, labor, suggests that we have let the concern of millions of creatures come under hostile and unjust intent. If we understand the creation on which we depend to be a sabbath creation we will not let it needlessly become the pawn of interests antithetical to the purposes of God. We will instead demand that the food we eat be produced under conditions that respect the integrity of creation, which means that we will work to promote those economic and political conditions that serve to insure and protect safe food for all. We will work to insure the long-term viability of the land and life forms it supports. We will, in short, demand that the food we eat be something for which we can be truly thankful rather than something over which we must express horror or sadness.

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**Sabbath observance can become the prism through which all our thought and action receive their focus and direction, when we learn to appreciate it as the peaceful and joyous flourishing of creation rather than a temporary reprieve from our otherwise acceptable striving.**

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In our work, no less than our eating, we have the opportunity to share in the peace of God. To what end do we perform our tasks? Do they serve and reflect the glory of God, and thus take fully into account the goodness of God's creation, or do they foster self-glorification? Sabbath law in the Jewish scriptures no less than the action of Jesus Christ, who proclaimed himself as the Lord of the Sabbath, suggests that the overriding aim of

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**The assumption of most advertising, now increasingly communicated in fits of screaming and yelling, is that we must have it all and that we cannot have it fast enough. We are made to feel guilty if we do not buy and consume at a ravenous pace. Within this aggressive, anxious context it is very difficult to carve out a life that expresses gratitude, delight, or peace. More likely the end result will be a life governed by stress, guilt, and worry.**

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our work is to enable the full life of others. Jesus' ministry was at all times attentive to the needs that are prerequisite to life—food, companionship, health—just as it stood in direct opposition to those forces that would maim or disfigure life—demon possession, illness, hostility, and even death itself. So too our work as teachers, doctors, lawyers, farmers, media technicians, parents, and so on, ought to promote those concrete conditions that affirm and rejoice in the creation of which we are a part.

No doubt it will be difficult for many of us to conceive, let alone practice,

the requirements of sabbath life in all the particulars of our experience. In part this stems from the present structures of social and economic life that are predicated on speed, acquisition, and consumption. The assumption of most advertising, now increasingly communicated in fits of screaming and yelling, is that we must have it all and that we cannot have it fast enough. We are made to feel guilty if we do not buy and consume at a ravenous pace, since our failure to buy translates into a failure of the stock market, which translates into a failure of pension plans, and so on and on! Within this aggressive, anxious context it is very difficult to carve out a life that expresses gratitude, delight, or peace. More likely the end result will be a life governed by stress, guilt, and worry. Though the signs of fatigue are everywhere apparent, the practice of rest or tranquility is not.

Because our present economic structures can so dominate us and cause us to live with anxiety, it may well be time for us to envision and invent a new economic order, one that takes seriously the sabbath character of

creation. It may be time, in other words, for us to extend to its practical conclusion the insight of sabbath tranquility.

The challenge before us is to create an economy that casts our possession of things in its true sabbath light. Can we think about possession in a way that is less self-regarding and more other-regarding? If we do, we will be primed to experience and enjoy the integrity and freedom of creation in a way that we have not before. We will learn that as land can belong to us, so too we belong to it and are implicated in its wholeness and health. Through our care for creation we will participate in God's own delight in a world well made.

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This photo is available in the print version  
of Sabbath.

**When challenged by the religious authorities for healing  
this lame man on the sabbath, Jesus announces, “My  
Father is still working, and I also am working.”**

*Bartolomé Estaban Murillo (1617-1682), CHRIST AT THE POOL OF BETHESDA, 1667-70, Oil on canvas,  
237 x 261 cm. National Gallery, London. Photo: The Bridgeman Art Gallery.*

# Sir, I Have No One

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

**T**he Gospel of John's story of Jesus healing the lame man on the sabbath (5:1-9) offered a dramatic narrative for Bartolomé Estaban Murillo to paint for the hospital church of the Confraternity de la Caridad (Brotherhood of Charity) in Seville.

The Spanish Baroque master captures the exact moment that the man explains his story to Jesus. The man, who has been ill for thirty-eight years, lies on his mat by the pool of Bethesda, for he believes that when its water moves, the first people to enter will be miraculously healed. (Tradition holds that an angel of the LORD descends to stir the water, as recorded in John 5:4 in some manuscripts.) But the man has no one to put him in the water when it is stirred up, and while he is making his way down, someone else steps ahead of him. He tells a story of helplessness that many, not only invalids, can understand. People continue to step metaphorically in front of, over, and on the needy and weak in our society, in opposition to God's merciful kindness shown by Jesus.

"Now that day was a sabbath," the gospel says, and steers the story toward controversy (5:9). The religious authorities offer only criticism: to the man for carrying his mat, and to Jesus for the healing act on the sabbath. But to those who would see and understand, Jesus explains, "My Father is still working, and I am also working" (5:17).

The artist, in typical baroque style, exaggerates the gestures of the main characters as if they are actors on stage conveying their emotion to even those in the back rows of the theater. The healing occurs in the foreground of the "staged" scene. Other physically disabled people are in the middleground on the right, and the pool is shown in the background. The angel of the Lord, also representing the Holy Spirit, may be found in the burst of sunlight just above the balcony of the "backdrop" portico.

Jesus offers his hand in healing to the man as he says, "Stand up, take your mat and walk" (5:8). The mat is prominently placed behind the man's back. Three disciples stand to Jesus' right and witness the healing.

The mission of the Brotherhood of Charity, who commissioned this painting and to whom the artist Murillo belonged, was to help the poor and the ill. They were disciples whose lives had been changed by viewing their Lord not only visit the sick, but heal them on the sabbath.

# Lord Even of the Sabbath

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

During the Medieval era when most Christians could not read, the sabbath controversy stories were “illuminated” for believers by the colorful images in illuminated manuscripts of the Bible. These stories and images, in their own way, proclaim that “the sabbath was made for humankind” and therefore “the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

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**A**fter Jesus heals a blind man on the sabbath, some Pharisees conclude of Jesus, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others disagree: “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” Since the Pharisees “were divided,” they turned to the blind man: “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened” (John 9:16-17). Perceptive readers of the gospel realize that once again John is thinking of spiritual blindness and sight, and now addresses them directly, “What do you say about Jesus?”

During the Medieval era (c. 550-1200) when most Christians could not read, the sabbath controversy stories were “illuminated” for believers by the colorful images alongside the text in illuminated manuscripts of the Bible. These manuscripts, which were hand copied in monasteries throughout the Carolingian, Ottoman, and Byzantine Empires and stored in *scriptoria* (libraries), were truly the collaborative works of monks, theologians, scribes, and illuminators.

*The Healing of the Withered Hand* (Luke 6:6-12), c. 980, is illustrated in *Codex Egberti*, a small book approximately 9” x 12”, produced for Archbishop Egbert, the chancellor to the Emperor Otto II. The *Codex* presents

the gospels in the order they are read in the course of the church calendar and fifty-one miniatures illustrating gospel stories.

In this story the scribes and Pharisees are watching Jesus carefully in order to accuse him of violating the sabbath law. Despite this, when Jesus sees a person with a physical ailment, he calls him over, explains to the watching scribes and Pharisees why he should heal on the sabbath in anti-



*The Healing of the Withered Hand.* c. 980. Manuscript Illumination. Reichenau School. *Codex Egberti*.

ipation of their criticism, and cures the person. The illustration shows the moment that Jesus tells the man, "Stretch out your hand" (6:10). Two Pharisees, to the left under a superscription "seniores," are talking between themselves even before the man is healed. Two disciples stand with Jesus in the middle, and one disciple raises his hand in imitation of his Lord. The lame man is using his good hand to hold up the diseased one (unlike later paintings which show Christ holding the sick hand). The illumination reflects the flat, gestural style of Byzantine art. Like the popular medium of the day, mosaics, the figures are silhouetted in black. Toes and fingers are exaggerated, and all the figures are placed on the frontal plane as if their feet may slide off into our space.

Jesus is again teaching in a synagogue on the sabbath in Luke 13:10-17. He sees a crippled woman, calls her over and says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" (13:12). The leader of the synagogue criticizes Jesus, instructing the crowd that there are six other days for work but not

the sabbath. Jesus responds, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" (13:16).



*The Healing of the Crippled Woman.* c. 1190. Manuscript Illumination. Central Rhine. *Prayer Book of Hildegard of Bingen.*

This twelfth century manuscript illumination of the story is in the prayer book of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). Hildegard wrote on theology and accounts of her visions, healed with natural objects, and found medicinal uses for plants. Bishops, popes, and kings sought her advice (she was known as "Sybil of the Rhine") during a time when women were not usually in a position of knowledge. It is appropriate that her personal prayer book illustrates Jesus curing a woman. Jesus blesses with his right hand as his left thumb barely touches the shoulders of the bent woman. The two figures dominate the pictorial field entirely; they appear to be standing on some disproportional landscape of shrunken mountains and trees.



The story of the man born blind (John 9:1-41), though much longer than the two stories discussed above, follows a similar pattern. In its first section (9:1-12) Jesus is walking and sees the blind man, whom Jesus explains was not born blind due to his parents' sins, but that God's works might be revealed in him (9:3). We, too, must do the work of God "while it is day," Jesus cryptically remarks, for no one can work at night. Since Jesus is "the light of the world," he is not teaching about when to work, but that a disciple who follows him also must do God's work (9:4-5).

The manuscript illumination below shows the next events in the story. On the left side, two disciples watch as Jesus, who has spit on the ground to make some mud, places it on the man's eyes. The blind man reaches forward to experience Jesus' right hand extended in healing. On the right, the illumination follows the narrative to the next scene: the man, according to Jesus' directive, washes his eyes in the pool of Siloam while his neighbors watch in wonder (9:7-9).

Only in the second portion of the story (9:13-35) do we learn that this miracle occurs on a sabbath. The Pharisees investigate the situation, but they cannot agree; some conclude that the healer is not from God because he does not observe the sabbath (9:16). Those who do not want to admit that the man was blind seek out and question his parents. Since the parents are afraid of "the Jews" who say anyone who calls Jesus the Messiah will be expelled from the synagogue, they reply that the man is old enough to speak for himself! The religious authorities question the man again, trying



*The Healing of the Man Born Blind.* c. 575. Manuscript Illumination. Probably Constantinople or western Asia Minor. *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis.*

to catch him in a lie or contradiction, yet he loyally maintains that Jesus is from God.

This illumination is from the *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis* (c. 575), one of the oldest and most valuable manuscripts in the world. Produced in the Byzantine Empire, probably in Constantinople or western Asia Minor, only

fifteen of its 386 surviving pages are illustrated with miniatures. (The original manuscript is believed to have been over 800 pages.) The *Codex* parchment is dyed purple; this originally symbolized the emperor and his court, but by the sixth century its associations included sacred Christian vessels and vestments. Manuscripts and paintings on purple parchment usually used gold or silver script, and were products of high quality and cost.

Each story and illumination, in its own way, clarifies Jesus' teaching that "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). Curing the sick or freeing the bound is not an unlawful work, as the Pharisees (Luke 6, John 9) or synagogue leader (Luke 13) argue, but is the work of God's goodness that should never stop. This man, Jesus, is from God, and he does obey the sabbath.

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**HEIDI J. HORNİK**

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# Sabbath Sings a Quiet Song

BY TERRY W. YORK

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Sabbath sings a quiet song in echo of God's peace.  
Sabbath prays its silent prayer that noise and self will cease.  
Sabbath hears the Spirit's voice declare refreshing truth;  
Silent waiting on the Lord, restoring us to youth.

Sabbath hears the songs of birds, enjoys the smallest bloom.  
Oceans, rivers, lakes, or streams can be a sabbath's womb.  
Sabbath in the wilderness, stark places fire the soul.  
Mountains, deserts, solitude refine and make us whole.

Sabbath worship, sabbath rest, remember and observe.  
God, the Maker, through the Son, our model as we serve.  
Sabbath moment, sabbath month, a week, a day, a year;  
one with Spirit's heart and mind, when we in faith draw near.

# Sabbath Sings a Quiet Song

TERRY W. YORK

C. DAVID BOLIN

1. Sab-bath sings a qui-et song in ec - ho of God's peace.

Sab - bath prays its si-lent prayer that noise and self will cease.

Sab-bath hears the Spi - rit's voice dec - lare re-fresh - ing truth;

The musical score is written in 3/4 time with a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). It consists of three systems. Each system includes a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff with treble and bass clefs). The lyrics are: '1. Sab-bath sings a qui-et song in ec - ho of God's peace.', 'Sab - bath prays its si-lent prayer that noise and self will cease.', and 'Sab-bath hears the Spi - rit's voice dec - lare re-fresh - ing truth;'. The piano accompaniment features a steady bass line and chords in the right hand.

si - lent wait - ing on the Lord re - stor-ing us to youth.

2. Sabbath hears the songs of birds,  
enjoys the smallest bloom.  
Oceans, rivers, lakes, or streams  
can be a sabbath's womb.  
Sabbath in the wilderness;  
stark places fire the soul.  
Mountains, deserts, solitude  
refine and make us whole.
  
3. Sabbath worship, sabbath rest,  
remember and observe.  
God the Maker, through the Son,  
our model as we serve.  
Sabbath moment, sabbath month,  
a week, a day, a year;  
one with Spirit's heart and mind,  
when we in faith draw near.

# This Day at Thy Creating Word

WILLIAM W. HOW (1871)

JOHN H. MAUNDER (ca. 1897)

1. This day at Thy cre - a - ting Word first  
 2. This day the Lord for sin - ners slain in  
 3. This day the Ho - ly Spi - rit came with

o'er the earth the light was poured;  
 might vic - tor - ious rose a - gain;  
 fier - y tongues of clo - ven flame;

○ Lord, this day up - on us shine and  
 ○ Je - sus may we rais - ed be from  
 ○ Spi - rit, fill our hearts this day with

Tune: MARTHAM  
 8.8.8.8.

fill our souls with light di - vine.  
 death of sin to life in Thee!  
 grace to hear and grace to pray.

4. O day of light and life and grace,  
 from earthly toil sweet resting place,  
 thy hallowed hours, blest gift of love,  
 give we again to God above.
5. All praise to God the Father be,  
 all praise, eternal Son, to Thee,  
 whom, with the Spirit, we adore  
 forever and forevermore.

William Walsham How (1823-1897) captures the multiple layers of our Sunday joy when we delight in God's *new* creation. Sunday echoes the first day of creation when God spoke a word and light filled the cosmos (Genesis 1:3-4, which echoes through John 1:1-4), the first day of the week when Jesus rose in victorious life over death (John 20), and those glad festival days of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit stirred the disciples' worship "with grace to hear and grace to pray" (Acts 2). The final verse is a beautiful praise to the Trinitarian God who continues to bless us on this "day of light and life and grace."

MARTHAM by John Henry Maunder (1858-1920) is a lovely, though neglected melody, which lifts out the buoyant final line in each verse. The well-known, spirited CANONBURY is another good tune for "This Day at Thy Creating Word," and some hymnals wed this hymn to the tune WINCHESTER NEW.



# Worship Service

BY DAVID G. MILLER

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## *Prelude*

### *The Summons to Worship:*

Leader: This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

**People: This is a day for peace and proclamation, for rest and reflection, for working at worship instead of worshipping work.**

Leader: The sabbath day is a holy day, consecrated by the Creator as a gift to creation. We are commanded to honor and preserve it.

**People: The sabbath day is a holy day, wherein we realize that all days are God's days; a day of rest, wherein we realize that all work is God's work; a day of peace wherein we can realize that God is our maker and our mender, too.**

Leader: Together, let us keep the sabbath.

### *Hymn of Praise:*

"O Day of Rest and Gladness"

*suggested tune:* ST. THEODULPH

### *Prayer of Confession:*

Lord of the Sabbath, hear our prayer. It is hard for us to stop working, and harder still to stop worshipping work. We confess that our busyness often substitutes for our holiness. Forgive us, Lord, and help us to be still enough to know you. Help us to understand that your sabbath is the seam between the world of work and the work of worship. Help us to know that the sabbath is what keeps us from unraveling, that it knits up the harried and makes them holy, that it even helps to heal creation from the crash. In this quiet, peaceful time, we honor you, we

rest in you, we long to know you as maker and mender. Through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, Amen.

*The Old Testament Reading: Exodus 20:1-11*

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

*Hymn of Reflection:*

"Sabbath Sings a Quiet Song"

*Terry W. York (text and tune pp. 43-45 this volume)*

*The Epistle Reading: Hebrews 4:1-11*

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

*Sabbath Prayer:*

Leader: Lord God to you, who at the end of six days of creation, hal-  
lowed the seventh day as your special possession, we pray  
three things: Help us, Lord, to know you in this sabbath time.  
From nothing you made this world and all that is in it. You  
spoke and the earth teemed with life, reproducing, reflecting  
your fullness in a commotion of joy. We rejoice in your cre-  
ativity, Lord, but on the seventh day you rested as if you had  
all the world and time. Help us to know you in that satisfied  
rest, that confident reflection, that strong and perfect peace.  
We are invited to be still and know you. And so we follow  
your command, and we cease our striving and struggling.  
Help us to know you.

**People: In this sabbath hour, Lord, hear our prayer.**

Leader: Help us, Lord, to know ourselves in this sabbath time. We of-  
ten flee the quiet, preferring the noise and commotion to your  
still, small voice. Our schedules are often so full that when we  
finally stop, we fall asleep; but even in our sleep we toss and

turn. We are restless, Lord, and need to find our rest in you. We need time to explore our inner world and time to build the sanctuary of our heart. Help us to know ourselves.

**People: In this sabbath hour, Lord, hear our prayer.**

Leader: Help us, then, Lord, to grant to each and all a sabbath rest, a margin of mercy, a place of grace. Help us to work to free others from endless labor and struggle. We pray for those locked in the grip of sickness, suffering, and addiction who are never free to rest. We pray for those tormented and overturned by the constant ebb and flow of life. We pray for those who are not at peace with themselves or with their neighbors. We pray for all who work and watch and weep today. Help us to help them, Lord. Where we cannot help, we pray your presence, speaking peace.

**People: In this sabbath hour, Lord, hear our prayer.**

Leader: Lord, this day is a gift from you, not a burden; an expression of love, not a demand of the law. We thank you, Lord, for this rhythm of rest in our life of work. We hear your heartbeat when we are quiet and we listen.

[A period of silence is kept]

We pray these things in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God.

**All: Amen.**

### *Offering*

### *Doxology:*

Lord, on this sabbath day of peace,  
in this sweet hour we now release  
our struggles and our strivings, too.  
We stop, we rest, we turn to you. Amen.

*David G. Miller* (suggested tune: OLD HUNDREDTH)

### *The Gospel Reading: Luke 13:10-17*

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

*Sung Response:*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,  
world without end. Amen, Amen.

*suggested tune:* GLORIA PATRI (Greateorex)

*Sermon*

*Hymn of Response:*

"This Day at Thy Creating Word"  
(text and tune pp. 46-47 of this volume)

*Benediction:*

**Leader:** This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad  
in it.

**People:** **We offer it back to the Lord as a tithe of time. This is our of-  
fering: a day spent focused on God, freed from our own  
concerns.**

**Leader:** Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy!

**People:** **This is the Lord's day! Let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.**

*Recessional and Postlude*

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**DAVID G. MILLER**

*is Associate Professor of English at Mississippi College and Liturgist at  
Northside Baptist Church in Clinton, Mississippi.*

# The Work of Rest and Worship

BY MILTON BRASHER - CUNNINGHAM

**We are significant because God breathes significance into our lives. Our Creator's volitional act of love gives us value. The call to sabbath—to rest and worship—is a call to be still and get to know God, to wallow in the wonder of that love, to remember that we are not defined or determined by our culture.**

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**F**ace it: God is un-American. Our 24-7-365-rent-a-movie-and-buy-cheese-enchiladas-in-the-middle-of-the-night-culture is not the place for a count the hairs, watch the sparrows, consider the lilies, take the seventh day off kind of God.

We cannot afford to let the competition get a leg up. We cannot afford to not be moving on to The Next Big Thing. We have convinced ourselves that we need to be able to buy anything anytime we want. We are the Keepers of Democracy, the Cogs of Capitalism, the Defenders of Truth, Justice, and the American Way. We are convinced we cannot stop because the world depends on us, revolves around us.

Yet the God who breathed us and our universe into existence said, "That was good," and took the day off. If our Creator does not have to be indispensable, why then do we?

The call of the sabbath is to remember the fundamental core of our faith: there is a God and we are not it. We are responsible but not indispensable. We are not even terribly significant, in human terms. The pages of human history have not left much space for the account of our lives. We are one in 6.5 billion living people, without even thinking about those who have come before, or who have yet to populate the planet. In the scope of

the expansive physical universe, we rank right up there with sand and the little plastic ring that seals the lid on the milk carton.

We are significant because God breathes significance into our lives. There is no reason for us to matter other than that God has willed it so. God's volitional act of love gives us value. The call to sabbath—to rest and worship—is a call to be still and get to know God, to wallow in the wonder of that love, to remember that we are not defined or determined by our culture.

Easier said than done. After all, we are Americans. Our culture fills every chard of silence with noise, with music, with activity. We are bombarded with the distorted "truth" that enough is not adequate, over-achieving is average, acquisitive is better than imaginative, networking is building actual relationships, and padding our resumes makes us more important. Hearing and heeding the Still, Small Voice is no easy task.

But hear what the voice is saying. The call of the sabbath is to rest, redemption, re-creation. Rest is the meaningful and sacred work of getting to know God. Rest is not the same as plopping in front of the ball game with a plate of nachos and the beverage of your choosing. God has not called us to be couch potatoes. The call to sabbath is to do more with our lives than work ourselves to death so that we can fall asleep watching reruns of "Everybody Loves Raymond," or holding our lives together all year so we can get two weeks away worrying about all we have to do when we get back home. The sabbath is a holy day, which is not the same as a holiday. It is sacred space and time.

What do you think God did on that seventh day? Slept in? Ran errands? Sat around wondering what to do for an encore? God walked in the garden at sunset, perhaps, now that there was a sun to set. The triune nature of our God points to One who infuses relationships with redemptive and re-creative power. God got to know Creation.

Jesus' activity on the sabbath was of like mind. When the Pharisees were quick to point out that he was not resting, Jesus responded that they were missing the point: meaningful, redemptive, relational work is what the sabbath is all about. What better redemptive act than to heal someone?

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**The call to sabbath is a call to paradox: active rest. Rest is the meaningful and sacred work of getting to know God. We are not called to be couch potatoes. The call to sabbath is to do more with our lives than work ourselves to death so that we can fall asleep watching reruns of "Everybody Loves Raymond."**

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If we are created in God's image, why should we not be about re-creating lives through love? The Pharisees were worried about people breaking the Blue Laws; Jesus was reminding his disciples that faith is not based on what you don't do.

The call to sabbath is a call to paradox: active rest. For the rested soul is the one who can find and share redemption.

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**MILTON BRASHER-CUNNINGHAM**

*is a writer, candle maker, and sometime supply preacher in Marshfield, Massachusetts.*



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## ❧ Other Voices ❧

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Just as society challenges Sabbath, so Sabbath challenges society. Ironically, the same forces that make it difficult to keep Sabbath also make it a prophetic and relevant practice for our time. Exploring it anew is worth the effort. This exploration will be fruitful, however, only if we resolve to help one another, in God's grace, to develop fresh forms of the practice of keeping Sabbath that make sense within the complicated circumstances of our lives.

**DOROTHY C. BASS**, *Receiving the Day*

The sabbath commandment given to men and women divides up human time. It brings interruption, interval and rhythm into human temporal experience. But of course all the other 'festal' divisions of time do this too. What is special about the sabbath commandment is, on the one hand, *the remembrance* of God's eternal sabbath of creation, from which the command to sanctify the sabbath springs; and, on the other, *the promise* of the eternal sabbath of the messianic era.... The sabbath stands in time, but it is more than time, for it both veils and discloses an eternal surplus of meaning.

**JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN**, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*

All the great motifs of our Christian faith are underscored in our Sabbath keeping. Its Ceasing deepens our repentance for the many ways that we fail to trust God and try to create our own future. Its Resting strengthens our faith in the totality of his grace. Its Embracing invites us to take the truths of our faith and apply them practically in our values and lifestyles. Its Feasting heightens our sense of eschatological hope—the Joy of our present experience of God's love and its foretaste of the Joy to come.

**MARVA J. DAWN**, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*

Furthermore we must understand that the Lord's Day was not appointed only for listening to sermons, but that we should spend the rest of the time praising God.... Because we are so occupied with our own affairs on the other days of the week, we are slow to serve God in them in the way he has assigned on the one day. The Lord's Day must, therefore, serve as a tower in which we can go up to view God's works in the distance. It is a time in which there should be nothing to hinder us or keep us occupied, so that we can employ our minds meditating on the benefits and gracious gifts he has given us.

**JOHN CALVIN (1509-1564)**, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*

Man was made for the highest activity, which is, in fact, his rest.

**THOMAS MERTON (1915-1968), *The Ascent to Truth***

According to [Aristotle], "we need relaxation, because we cannot work continuously. Relaxation, then, is not an end"; it is "for the sake of activity," for the sake of gaining strength for new efforts. To the biblical mind, however, ... the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one's lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work. "Last in creation, first in intention," the Sabbath is "the end of the creation of heaven and earth."

**ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL (1907-1972), *The Sabbath***

Overworked Americans need rest, *and* they need to be reminded that they do not cause the grain to grow and that their greatest fulfillment does not come through the acquisition of material things. Moreover, the planet needs a rest from human plucking and burning and buying and selling. Perhaps, as Sabbath keepers, we will come to live and know these truths more fully, and thus to bring their wisdom to the common solution of humanity's problems.

**DOROTHY C. BASS, "Keeping Sabbath" in *Practicing Our Faith***

The Sabbath legislation of the Old Testament is full of ecological wisdom leading to a special blessing for humankind and the Earth. As long as we see nature and our own bodies only through the dominating influence of work, we perceive only the utilitarian aspect of nature and only the instrumental side of our bodies. We find wisdom to understand nature and ourselves as God's creation when we celebrate the Sabbath/Sunday as a day of rest on which human beings and animals find peace and leave nature outside in peace. God the Creator 'finished' the creation of the world by celebrating the world's Sabbath. Through resting on the seventh day God blessed the whole creation by his silent presence.

**JÜRGEN MOLTMAN, "God's Covenant and Our Responsibility," in *The Care of Creation*, ed. by R. J. Berry**

Strange and monstrous are the longings of our pride. There is nothing which the Lord enjoins more strictly than the religious observance of his Sabbath, in other words resting from our works; but in nothing do we show greater reluctance than to renounce our own works, and give due place to the works of God.

**JOHN CALVIN (1509-1564), *Institutes of Religion***

The Sabbath is the most precious present mankind has received from the treasure house of God. All week we think: The spirit is too far away, and we succumb to spiritual absenteeism, or at best we pray: Send us a little of Thy spirit. On the Sabbath the spirit stands and pleads: Accept all excellence from me...

Yet what the spirit offers is often too august for our trivial minds. We accept the ease and relief and miss the inspirations of the day, where it comes from and what it stands for.

**A B R A H A M J O S H U A H E S C H E L (1907-1972), *The Sabbath***

Lord God, grant us peace; for you have given us all things, the peace of quietness, the peace of the sabbath, a peace with no evening. This entire most beautiful order of very good things will complete its course and then pass away; for in them by creation there is both morning and evening.

The seventh day has no evening and has no ending. You sanctified it to abide everlastingly. After your 'very good' works, which you made while remaining yourself in repose, you 'rested the seventh day.' This utterance in your book foretells for us that after our works which, because they are your gift to us, are very good, we also may rest in you for the sabbath of eternal life.

There also you will rest in us, just as now you work in us. Your rest will be through us, just as now your works are done through us.

**A U G U S T I N E (354-430), *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick**

# Changing Sunday Practices

BY JACK MARCUM

Profound cultural changes have transformed our Sundays to resemble other days of the week. We spend less time, in Calvin's words, "resting from our work so God can do God's work in us." The cultural props that kept Sunday distinctive have disappeared and sabbath keeping is no longer a 'default' mode of behavior. How we will treat Sunday depends upon individual Christians and congregations.

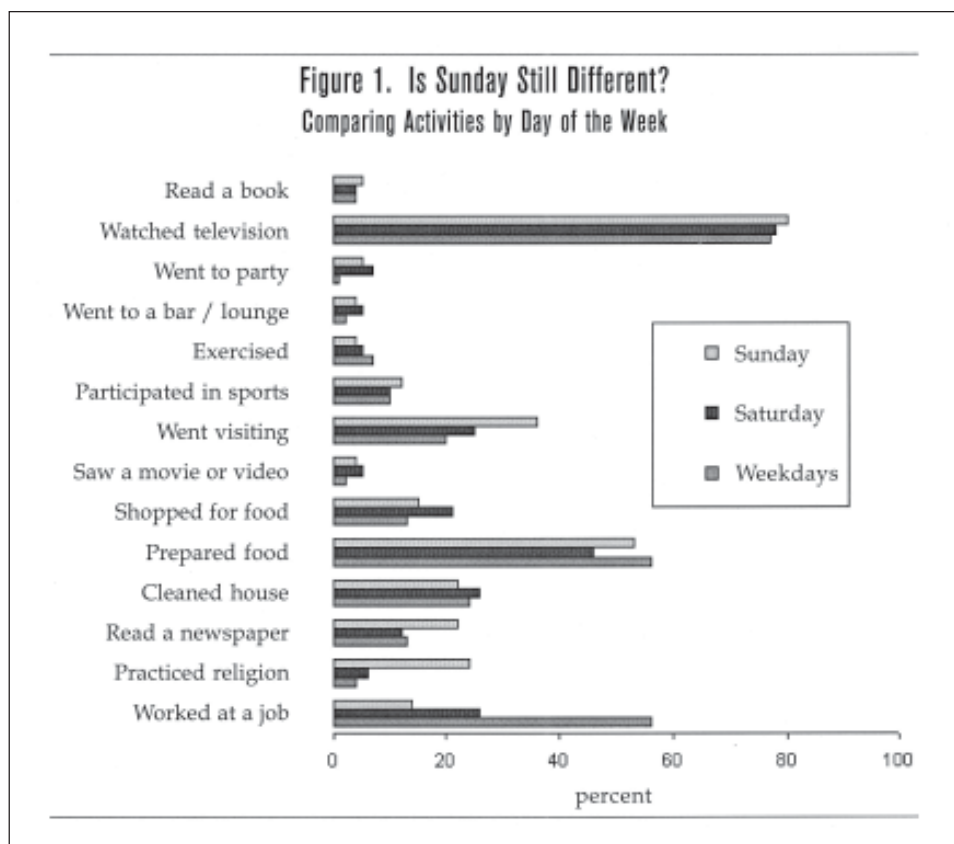
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Those North American colonists who regarded Sunday as a Christian sabbath, a day of worship and rest, would suffer culture shock if they revisited us today and witnessed the radical changes in Sunday practices. Over the last two hundred years Sunday has gradually evolved into a day when many other activities, often initially controversial, are accepted as suitable behavior for the Lord's Day. Though the course of change was far from uniform, a central theme was a broadening sense of what counts as "rest." From 1850 to 1930 the broadening scope of rest came to embrace a number of cultural, educational, and leisure pursuits, including use of libraries, visiting museums, family time and other socializing, amusements, spectator sports, and other entertainment. In more recent decades, most remaining Sunday restrictions were lifted, including the ban on commercial activities, as many states have rescinded Sunday "blue laws."

## **SUNDAY ACTIVITIES TODAY**

As a result, Sunday has lost much of its distinctiveness. A survey of U.S. adults conducted in the 1990s reveals that the percentage of the population engaging in various activities differs little between Sunday and other

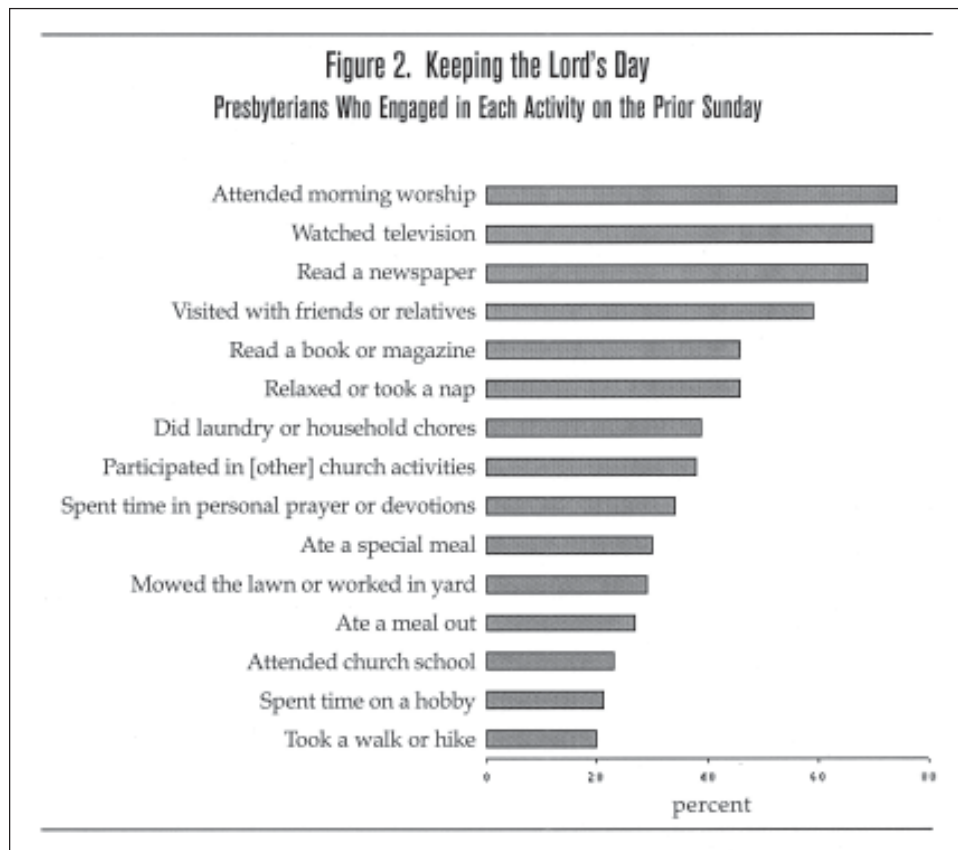
days of the week (see Figure 1, "Is Sunday Still Different?"). Yes, we still work less (where the Sunday rate is half that of Saturday and a quarter that of weekdays) and still worship more (with a rate four times that of Saturday and six times that of weekdays). Other less dramatic differences are that we read the newspaper and visit a bit more, but wash our clothes less. Notice that, in some ways, it is Saturday rather than Sunday that stands out as distinctive, with increased rates of clothes shopping, grocery shopping, and visiting bars. However, for many other activities, including



many not shown in the figure (e.g., hobbies, recreational travel, using the library, attending sporting events, going to the theater, engaging in outdoor recreation, and running errands), Sunday looks much like any other day of the week.

The lack of Sunday distinctiveness shows up in another way in this survey. Most behavioral choices look a lot alike for churchgoers and for the rest of the population. When we compare those who reported religious practices on Sunday and those who did not, there are few differences of

more than 1% or 2% in involvement rates for any of the other activities listed in Figure 1. (This comparison is not presented in a table or figure.) The only major difference is found for employment, with half as many of those who practiced religion on Sunday reporting work for pay on that day (23%) as among the remainder of the respondents (47%). Even this one exception of employment, however, may be artificial, since worship times often conflict with working opportunities.



A different survey shows in greater detail how members in one Christian denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), spent a recent Sunday (see Figure 2, "Keeping the Lord's Day").<sup>1</sup> A majority attended worship, and many others went to church (Sunday) school or other church-related events. Sizable minorities spent time in private devotions, visiting with friends or family, or just relaxing. In short, most Presbyterians spent part of their Sunday doing things that were typical of Sundays in the nineteenth century. What distinguishes current-day Presbyterians from their Calvinist forebears is the list of other activities that many of them now engage in,

from yard work to household chores. Even reading a newspaper likely would have offended church leaders in the late 1800s, when many clergymen roundly denounced increasingly available Sunday editions.

### **CHANGE THROUGH THE GENERATIONS**

No poll like that shown in Figure 2 exists for earlier decades. We can get some sense of how much Sunday behavior has changed among Presbyterians, however, by comparing retrospective reports of childhood Sunday activities from younger and older respondents to the same 1999 survey (see Table 1, “Comparing Childhood Activities on Sunday” on page 97 of this issue). For most Presbyterians born before 1930, childhood Sunday activities included morning worship *every week*, and for a majority of the rest, *most weeks*. Most participated in children’s activities at church, enjoyed a special noon or evening meal, and took part in fun activities with family *most or every week*. A large minority visited family or friends (43%) or attended evening worship (36%) either *every week* or *most weeks*. At the same time, a large majority would *never* have gone shopping, and about half would have *never* attended a sporting event or worked in the yard. Sundays in the 1920s and 1930s were very focused on church and family. Participation in commerce was rare. Mowing lawns and watching sports were activities shunned by many and infrequently taken up by the rest.

This snapshot of Sunday practices before 1930 includes the respondents’ memories of which specific activities they avoided. (These responses are not shown tabularly.) Many not only shunned watching sports, but also playing sports: 45% *always avoided* playing competitive sports, and another 27% *usually avoided* them. Attending movies was *always avoided* by 48% and *usually avoided* by another 22%. Even eating out was *always avoided* by 35% and *usually avoided* by 26%. On the other hand, these oldest Presbyterians rarely shunned playing a musical instrument (28%), playing recorded music (26%), traveling (21%), doing schoolwork (19%), listening to the radio (15%), playing games (12%), and cooking meals (10%) on Sundays during their childhood. (These numbers include the combined percentage who *always* or *usually avoided* them.)

In contrast, the younger Presbyterians born 40 or more years later (after 1960) remember much higher rates of Sunday participation in a variety of leisure, labor, and commercial activities. For example, the percentage who “went shopping” at least once in a while on Sunday during their childhood grows from 23% among the oldest group to 85% among the youngest.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the percentage who “mowed the lawn or did other yard work” on Sundays during childhood increases from 50% in the oldest group to 86% in the youngest. The proportion “attending sporting events” also increases, from 48% to 77%.

Their responses also show declines by generation in the frequency of church participation and other, more traditional Sunday behaviors. The



sharpest difference between oldest and youngest groups occurs for Sunday evening worship attendance. Among Presbyterians born before 1930, 77% attended church on Sunday evenings at least some weeks during childhood. The corresponding figure in the generation born after 1960 is 42%.<sup>3</sup> Sunday morning worship shows little change over this period when the comparison is between attending at all and never attending, since at least 96% in every generation attended morning worship at some point during childhood. Instead, the differences are found in the relative frequency of attendance among those who did participate. In the oldest group, 62% report attending morning worship *every week*, compared to 51% in the youngest group.

In this generational comparison we can see a trend toward greater freedom of choice and wider participation in a variety of once-shunned Sunday activities. In their childhood, Presbyterians born after 1960 still went to church on Sunday, but mainly to the morning service and less to evening worship and other church activities. They spent the resulting free time in leisure, household, and commercial activities. Fewer of them avoided those activities formerly shunned on Sunday, whether they participated in them regularly or not.

#### **OPTIONS AND OPINIONS**

Only in recent decades has the church acquiesced to the cultural transformation of Sunday. As late as the 1930s, Presbyterian general assemblies regularly issued statements lamenting the pattern of change and calling on the faithful to return to more traditional sabbath observance. Resistance faded noticeably in the 1940s, however. In the two largest Presbyterian denominations, general assembly actions concerning Sunday behavior became more rare after 1950 and disappeared entirely by the early 1960s. By 1969, the Presbyterian Church in the United States was conducting regular business on Sunday during its annual General Assembly meeting.

Not until the late 1990s was the subject of Sunday activities again addressed by Presbyterians at the national level. The Workgroup on Sabbath Keeping, funded with a rediscovered endowment established in 1933 to provide "income for program on the nature of the Sabbath and the importance of its observance," issued a report that was approved by the 2000 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Among its recommendations is an "invitation to . . . restore, at all levels of our common life, the practice of keeping every seventh day as the Lord's Day, a Sabbath holy to God." However, it immediately acknowledges, "in our present context, this will not be easy."

But perhaps it will not be impossible. Despite the documented changes in Sunday behavior, almost all Presbyterians (92%) had spent some time during the week prior to the 1999 survey in sabbath keeping activities, defined on the survey as "...resting from our work so God can do God's

work in us' (John Calvin). It involves those practices through which we provide God the time and space necessary to restore our souls. These include corporate worship, private devotions, and deep enjoyment of other persons and the world around us."

These Christians, on average, had spent five hours on sabbath-keeping activities in the preceding week. And here's the encouraging note: more than half were either *very interested* (20%) or *generally interested* (36%) in increasing the time they spend on sabbath keeping. More either *strongly favor* (40%) or *favor* (33%) "the church's encouraging people of faith to spend more time" in sabbath-keeping activities.

Will these good intentions translate into action? Presbyterians themselves are pessimistic. When asked whether twenty-five years from now Sundays will be *more* a time of sabbath keeping, *less* a time of sabbath keeping, or there will be *no change*, few opted for the *more* response. Only 10% indicated that they expect *more* sabbath keeping on Sunday a quarter-century from now "in the United States generally," although the percentages are a bit higher when the reference is to "Presbyterians in the U.S., generally" (18%) and "Christians in the U.S., generally" (22%). More notably, only 29% expect Sunday to be *more* a time of sabbath keeping in their own families 25 years from now.

One promising option to increase sabbath-keeping activity is to decouple the practice from Sunday. Already, 72% of Presbyterians who practice sabbath keeping (as defined above) do some of those activities on days other than Sunday. Nevertheless, when directly asked about the possibility, fewer than

one-third of Presbyterians indicated they would be either *very comfortable* or *generally comfortable* with "the idea of separating the concept of Sabbath keeping from Sunday or any other particular day of the week." Still, only a minority are *uncomfortable* with the idea—with most of

those people being *generally* (25%) rather than *very uncomfortable* (16%)—and another sizable share are *neither comfortable nor uncomfortable* (26%) or have *no opinion* (4%).

Despite these mixed opinions, proponents of increasing the time spent on sabbath keeping may find it easier to convince people to carve out small segments of time throughout the week than to persuade them to return to more traditional Sunday behavior. That's because the best explanation for

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**Convincing people to carve out small segments of time for sabbath keeping throughout the week might be easier than persuading them to return to more traditional Sunday behavior.**

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why Sundays have come to resemble other days of the week is that people wanted it that way. As opportunities to take part in other activities besides worship and rest have proliferated, people, including many in the church, have embraced them. Like many other aspects of contemporary Christianity in our culture, sabbath keeping has become

less an institutional affair, observed weekly, and more a private matter left to personal choice.

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**The decision on how to treat Sunday rests with individual Christians and congregations. The social and cultural props that kept Sunday distinctive have disappeared and sabbath keeping is no longer a 'default' mode of behavior.**

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#### **CONCLUSION**

Profound cultural changes over the last two centuries have transformed Sunday in the United States so that it is no longer a day set aside for worship and rest. Sunday retains some of its earlier distinctiveness

(in the relative concentration of religious services and absence of paid employment), but most people engage in other activities on Sunday, from household chores to playing sports, at the same rates as they do on Saturdays or weekdays. Moreover, except for church participation, this same lack of behavioral distinctiveness holds even among those people who practice their faith on Sunday.

When we trace these changes within one Christian denomination, by comparing childhood Sunday activities between older and younger generations of Presbyterians, we see that much blurring in Sunday's unique identity has occurred since the 1930s, when the last concentrated efforts among Presbyterian bodies to stem the erosion of Sunday's traditional role took place. By the 1960s, Presbyterians, both individually and denominationally, had accepted, if not embraced, the shift in Sunday's role.

The shift away from a day of worship and rest to one with greater freedom and flexibility is one example of the broader trend toward greater individuality and choice in American religious life. As the church's authority over Sunday behavior eroded, most people, even those who continue to worship regularly on that day, opted to spend more of their Sundays in various other activities.

In this context, Christians can encourage a return to more traditional Sunday activities, and even facilitate them, by articulating the need for a time of rest and worship, and by providing practical guidance. But the decision on how to treat Sunday, more than at any time in our culture, rests with individual Christians and congregations. The social and cultural props that kept Sunday distinctive have disappeared and sabbath keeping is no longer a 'default' mode of behavior. Any return to a more traditional Sun-

day profile will occur because individuals and congregations *choose* to devote a larger part of their lives to sabbath practices.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Alexis McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday: The American Sunday* (Cornell University Press, 2000), traces three centuries of change in sabbath practices in America. For more information on the Presbyterian experience of sabbath keeping, consult Benton Johnson, "On Dropping the Subject: Presbyterians and Sabbath Observance in the Twentieth Century," in Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, eds., *The Presbyterian Predicament: Six Perspectives* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1990); "An Invitation to Sabbath," a report to the 212<sup>th</sup> General Assembly by the Work Group on Sabbath Keeping, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2000; and *Sabbath Keeping: Report of the May 1999 Presbyterian Panel Survey* (Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2000). An interesting snapshot of "What did you do yesterday?" is in the "EPA Time Usage Survey 1992-1994," available as a publicly accessible database at the University of Maryland Survey Research Center ([www.webuse.umd.edu](http://www.webuse.umd.edu)).

### NOTES

1 These results are from a 1999 survey, "Sabbath Keeping," administered through the Presbyterian Panel, a national, quarterly poll of representative samples of members, elders (lay leaders), and ministers affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This survey was funded by the Frances A. Strong Fund and by general mission contributions to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I limit the discussion here to the responses of members, for convenience referring to them simply as "Presbyterians."

2 For reasons of space, only the responses of the oldest and youngest respondents are shown. In all cases presented here, however, the transition in values from oldest to youngest follows a gradual rather than a discontinuous pattern. For example, for the shopping question, the percentage participating went from 23% among those born before 1930, to 40% among those born between 1930 and 1944, to 58% among those born between 1945 and 1959, and to 85% among those born in 1960 or later.

3 The 42% is higher than might be expected, since few Presbyterian congregations have evening services. It may be that some individuals responded with reference to youth group participation, since youth groups often meet on Sunday evenings.



**JACK MARCUM**

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# Bowling on the Sabbath

BY BLAINE AND SARAH MCCORMICK

**With three young children, the McCormicks are learning that maintaining a day of rest is not easy. Their family's sabbath observance is a rewarding work-in-progress, as they probe biblical guidelines and adapt Shabbat rituals. Here is an update on their odyssey into honoring a holy day.**

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**N**ot long ago, Blaine took our two older children bowling on our family sabbath day while Mom napped at home. We felt good about this decision for a number of reasons. When the kids are out of the house, Sarah naps better. Bowling is good clean fun with Dad and that is important on the sabbath. Finally, we knew that the sixteenth century theologian John Calvin enjoyed bowling on the sabbath, and what was good enough for the Calvins is good enough for the McCormicks! So, Dad loaded Ellis and Miriam into the truck and drove to the nearest "bowling aisle," as Miriam calls it.

They were assigned to Lane One at the far end of the complex. Dad helped the children change into their bowling shoes. Blaine stayed in his street shoes, as he was not there to bowl but rather to ensure that neither of the kids dropped a bowling ball on their foot. With a little coaching and some gutter covers, both Ellis and Miriam began knocking down some pins. Thirty minutes and several celebration dances later, the delighted children called it a game. They changed into their shoes and headed to the front counter for check out.

As they turned in their shoes, the lady at the counter responded just as we suspected she would: "Thanks for coming and there's no charge today." At this bowling alley, there's no charge for the first game you bowl and no shoe charges for children younger than six. Since they bowled only

one game and Blaine didn't rent shoes, they owed no money. Owing no money is important for us on our sabbath day excursion because we have a sabbath policy of "no commerce." Since no money changed hands during this excursion, we didn't really dishonor our sabbath. Or did we?

Our answer was that we dishonored our sabbath. Was this your answer?

In this bowling episode we glimpsed the rich complexity of sabbath observance. Guidelines for sabbath keeping, we discovered, are not easy to apply and good practice emerges only after much prayerful reflection. We believe we dishonored our sabbath on this occasion because the "no commerce" policy reaches deeper than simply "Don't spend money." Behind this policy is the desire that all people should have the chance to enjoy God's sabbath rest. So, even though we did not exchange any money with the folks at the bowling alley, it's pretty clear to us that we dishonored our sabbath by bowling at a place where someone had to work so we could have fun. Had we, like John Calvin, set up our ten pins in our back yard, we could have enjoyed just as much fun without demanding work from others.

Our family continues to explore this "no commerce" guideline. For instance, it technically allows us to window shop on our sabbath day. After more reflection, however, we now resist window-shopping because it pulls us toward a consumerist and away from a worshipful focus on the sabbath.

Our sabbath observance is clearly a work-in-progress. We are always exploring and learning. We recommitted our family to sabbath keeping in January 2000 after ten years of marriage. Our oldest child was three and a half years old then and his sister had just turned one and started walking; in the years since, we have added one more daughter and a good deal of learning. We have learned that maintaining a day of sabbath rest is not easy, and that it takes a bit of coaching. So we offer to you our progress report. Please see us as real people with real children who have been known to scream throughout everything you're about to read.

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**In this bowling episode, we glimpsed the rich complexity of sabbath observance. Guidelines for sabbath keeping, we discovered, are not easy to apply and good practice emerges only after much prayerful reflection.**

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#### **HOW EXACTLY DOES THIS WORK?**

"Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy" is the commandment (Exodus 20:8). "Holy" means "set apart," so our challenge is to set apart



and consecrate the time for sabbath rest. Our family observes sabbath from approximately 6 p.m. Saturday to 6 p.m. Sunday. This timing mirrors the Jewish Shabbat, which begins at sundown on Friday, but we have moved

the holy time forward to the first day of the week to encompass our Christian beliefs.

Our family begins sabbath time on Saturday evening with a ritual. We light a sabbath candle for each of our three children as Mom welcomes the sabbath with this blessing:

“May the light of the sabbath candles drive out from us the spirit of anger and the spirit of fear and the spirit of pride. Send your blessing that we may walk in the ways of your Word and your Light. Enter our hearts this night, O Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

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## Questions & Answers

**Q: What about work-related deadlines? For example, Blaine, doesn't tax season mean a sabbath exemption for accountants?**

**A:** I have not been able to justify work even with deadlines on Monday. Learn to rest and receive. Our children are watching us.

**Q: Does the sabbath mean we're free to watch lots of sports on television?**

**A:** Being a sports bum is not the same as honoring the sabbath. If the sabbath is for receiving, with what are we filling ourselves?

**Q: Should we nap?**

**A:** Yes. Enjoy guilt-free rest.

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Then Dad reads aloud the entire sabbath commandment (Exodus 20:8-11). Often we pause to sing songs; our children's favorites are “Thy Word” and “This Little Light of Mine,” but this will change as they mature.

“Blessing of the Children,” which is a traditional Jewish practice, comes next. Starting with the oldest, each child sits between Dad and Mom and we do the following. First, we read the child's own special Bible passage over them. As parents, we have chosen a passage of Scripture that each child knows to be his or her own—Miriam's passage, for example, is Philippians 2:14-15. Next, we talk to the child about all the good things they have done this week, such as their accomplishments or sharing things with friends. We emphasize character traits in addition to deeds, saying, “We were very proud for the thankfulness (or courage, etc.) that you showed when ....” We lay our hands on the child and read a blessing over the child.<sup>2</sup> Finally, with our hands laid on their head, we pray over our child and ask God's grace upon their life.

From the Jewish Shabbat ceremony we borrow an emphasis upon all five senses. Sometimes we bring in the sense of smell at this point with the



“sabbath scent,” which is a container filled with a pleasant or pungent spice. As the jar is passed around, we talk about how our kind words, deeds, and prayers are a “pleasant aroma” to God. Another traditional sensory addition is bread dipped in honey. After we read, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103), each child gets to enjoy some strips of bread and a small dish of honey.

We read to our children a devotional story or an age-appropriate illustration about God.<sup>3</sup> The ceremony concludes with each child, beginning with the oldest, blowing out their sabbath candle.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

*Focus on being a priestly parent rather than a sabbath cop.* When we recommitted our family to honoring the sabbath, we assumed a greater measure of spiritual leadership in our home. No longer were we merely dropping off our children at church for spiritual growth; we were called to exercise a new and positive leadership as “priestly parents.” Priests, as spiritual authority figures and keepers of ritual, make things holy by blessing days and children. As priestly parents, our role is to say “Yes” to honoring the sabbath. If we fail to be priestly parents, we might become sabbath cops who merely patrol the house, saying “No” to things for being against the rules of the sabbath. Sabbath cops can create a quiet, joyless day with “no fun ‘aloud’.”

*Let your sabbath observance play a supporting role rather than a leading role.*

Many families have mission statements. Ours is a rather simple one, which reads:

“Create an intentionally Christian family culture.”

Our sabbath practice plays the role of supporting our mission rather than becoming our mission. This is a critical distinction. Remember, the sabbath is made for human beings, not vice versa. When the family’s overall mission is Christ-centered, the downward path to legalism is much

easier to avoid. Time will tell whether we will become sabbath cops as our children enter adolescence, or whether we can remain priestly parents who lead by example and speak a holy blessing onto days and people.

*Some sabbath practice is better than none at all.* One of the biggest mistakes

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**When we recommitted our family to honoring the sabbath, we assumed a greater measure of spiritual leadership in our home. No longer were we merely dropping off our children at church for spiritual growth; we were called to exercise positive leadership as “priestly parents.”**

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we can make is trying to leap from no sabbath to perfect sabbath in one weekend. This “all-or-nothing” approach is a recipe for failure and disappointment. Instead, start with easy steps and remain open to suggestions and change. We have been known to forego our opening ceremony, for

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**What plans do we have for the future? We are ready to swap notes and ideas with other Christian families who practice a sabbath. Also, we hope to learn from watching a traditional Jewish Shabbat ceremony.**

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instance, and bless the children on Sunday rather than Saturday evening. This kind of flexibility helps us to avoid legalism. We expect that our rituals and practices will change as both our children and we age.

*Bring order to your spiritual life.* Before we can bestow a spiritual blessing,

we must be filled ourselves. Priestly parents need sabbath rest in order to be effective spiritual leaders to their children. When faced with a difficult decision on the sabbath, we are learning to ask, “Does this activity bring order to our spiritual lives?”

#### **SO WHAT’S NEXT?**

We characterized our family’s sabbath keeping as a work-in-progress, for in this, as in other areas of our discipleship, we are always learning and growing. What plans do we have for the future? Almost all of our learning up to this point has come from books and personal reflection. Now that we have some idea of what we are doing, we are ready to swap notes and ideas with other Christian families who practice a sabbath. Also, we hope to learn from watching a traditional Jewish Shabbat ceremony and day.

In the next few years we plan to implement *a closing ritual*. We have no ritual way of marking the end of our sabbath time, though this would be a promising moment to exert a priestly influence on our family culture. Perhaps this closing ceremony will highlight for our children a core virtue for the new week.<sup>4</sup>

Saturday is becoming *a day of preparation* for us. As we gradually create boundaries for our sabbath, we use Saturday to get ready for rest, reflection, and receiving. On Saturday we do focused work that clears the way for reduced responsibilities during the sabbath. Taking the sabbath seriously is changing the rhythm of our work and ridding us of a good deal of procrastination.

We will try a “no technology” policy. Sure, like our “no commerce” rule, this policy will require discerning application, but there is reason to unplug on the sabbath. We are already a pretty unplugged family, with a notorious reputation for avoiding cable television. Yet sabbath is a great time to

experiment with ridding our home of all appliances. Who knows? If we don't listen to music on the stereo, maybe we will start making music of our own on the sabbath. Will our policy extend to the microwave oven? Maybe. We will find out.

Much of our reading points to the sabbath as a time of celebration and excess rather than a day of resentment and asceticism.<sup>5</sup> Holy days, which otherwise are known as "holidays," are supposed to be festive occasions when we eat especially good food or indulge in luxuries otherwise denied in everyday life. We hope to *make room for excess and celebration* in our future sabbaths.

Currently we are unaware of other families within our Christian community who are celebrating sabbaths. In the future, we would welcome the chance to *mark this holy day with other families*. We will begin inviting people over for either our opening ceremony or a shared meal on Sunday afternoon.

A family friend gave us great encouragement recently after she heard about our sabbath practices. This mother of four grown children told us that we are giving our children a great gift, for we are teaching them how to rest.

Is sabbath keeping having any impact upon our children? Several months ago we were so tired on Saturday evening that we opted to forego our sabbath opening ritual and just go to bed. On a whim, Blaine asked our son, "Ellis, do you want to have your sabbath blessing tonight?" Ellis' answer revealed an uncommon level of insight, "Of course I do. If we don't, then I won't be holy." That pretty well says it all.

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## Questions & Answers

### **Q: What about yard work?**

**A:** Blaine moves his yard maintenance to other days of the week and never mows, rakes, or trims on our sabbath. Sarah often gardens. There's a difference between yard maintenance and putting out bedding plants on the sabbath. One is work and the other is rest.

### **Q: What about the cooking?**

**A:** We simplify meals, prepare them in advance, and break out the crock-pot. We make the meals special and include the children in their preparation. Whatever we do, we don't eat out.

### **Q: What about church work?**

**A:** Doing committee work on Sunday afternoon does not help us honor the sabbath. Move the meeting to another day or resign from the committee. We've reduced our teaching commitments on Sundays.

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**NOTES**

1 We adapted this prayer from Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992).

2 See Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Blessing* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990) for a list of ready-made blessings for this time.

3 Karyn Henley, *100 Ways to Teach Your Child About God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2000) is our favorite source for illustrations.

4 See *Teaching Your Children Values* by Linda and Richard Eyre (New York: Fireside Press, 1993) for practical suggestions.

5 Marva Dawn's challenging book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), has much to say about feasting and celebrating on the sabbath, as does Josef Pieper's *In Tune with the World* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999).

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**BLAINE AND SARAH MCCORMICK** are proof positive that faithfully observing a sabbath does not mean that your children will pose for photographs. Blaine is Assistant Professor of Management at Baylor University and Sarah is a full-time mother.

# Opening the Gift of Sabbath

A CONVERSATION WITH  
DOROTHY C. BASS

**As we honor the sabbath we become alert to God's presence and recognize time as God's gracious gift. This makes sabbath keeping a prophetic and relevant practice for us, says church historian Dorothy C. Bass. When woven together with other Christian practices, it can form us in a "way of life abundant" that challenges the lifestyles of abundance in our culture.**

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**T**he pressures today which make sabbath keeping so challenging for us—busy schedules, misplaced priorities of work, competing claims on family members' time—also mean that this can be a prophetic Christian action. By honoring the sabbath we not only shape our daily lives and the ministry of our congregations in faithful ways, but also challenge the way our society views time, human work, and our lives before God.

Dorothy C. Bass, a church historian at Valparaiso University in Indiana, directs a project to retrieve a dozen central Christian practices in our churches. She talked with me about the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, the significance of Christian practices, and especially her attention to keeping sabbath in *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000).

**Bob Kruschwitz: How does the Valparaiso Project's *Practicing Our Faith* program focus on the retrieval of Christian practices?**

Dorothy Bass: The Valparaiso Project began about a decade ago with the perception that in spite of widespread spiritual seeking in our culture, many people who had been raised in the Christian tradition did not realize

that their own tradition could hold what they are looking for. People who are on religious quests, and even some who belong to congregations, think that to grow closer to God they need to look to Buddhism, psychotherapy, or other places. I wanted to find a way to invite contemporary people into the Christian life, and also help those already living this life to reflect deeply upon it. These ideas developed first in conversations with Craig Dykstra, a Christian educator and practical theologian who is Vice Presi-

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dent for Religion at Lilly Endowment. As a Christian educator, Craig believed that growth in the life of faith takes place through participation in Christian practices. As a church historian, I wanted to open up the Christian past as a vast treasure chest of resources for living the Christian practices today, when we can appropriate them critically and constructively. So we gathered a group of theologians and educators to write a book about this

way of life, which became *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Jossey-Bass, 1997). The ecumenical and interracial group of authors who wrote this book explored twelve Christian practices: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, discernment, testimony, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives to God. We tried to advocate for Christian practices in a way that is helpful for people in the churches, rather than discussing them academically, and many congregations and small groups have read and discussed *Practicing Our Faith* as a way of reflecting on their own life of faith.

As I've thought about this, the key term for me has become "way of life" rather than "practices." The practices address various aspects of our lives one practice at a time, but the point is to weave them all together into a way of living our faith each day. The result is what I call "a way of life abundant," as opposed to the lifestyles of abundance that society holds up as exemplary. Now, inviting people into a way of life shaped by Christian practices has become the Valparaiso Project's deepest mission.

**I like the practice you call "singing our lives."**

Good! That's a great example of how each one of the practices we identified addresses an area of fundamental human need, some irreducible

aspect of our created selves. If you ask, “Could human beings flourish in the full way that God intends without singing our lives?” some people would answer, “Well, I can’t sing.” But we would say, “Okay, maybe the pitch isn’t right, but can you with the breath of your body praise God?” A whole life in which the breath of one’s body—or for those who are deaf, the movement of one’s hands—cannot express one’s deepest praise and longing is a life that is not fully lived, I think. So even those who can’t keep a pitch have other ways of singing our lives to God together.

**Your new book, *Way To Live*, is especially for youth.**

Questions about how to live are so important to young people. Many have confirmed their faith or been baptized recently, but they leave the church because they don’t see anything really important to be gained by remaining part of the Christian community. So some of those associated with *Practicing Our Faith* decided to write a new book, offering to this rising generation that same invitation into the Christian life that we have issued to adults in *Practicing Our Faith*.

*Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* grew out of a wonderful process that involved eighteen adults and eighteen teens in thinking about what shape Christian practices might take in the lives of teenagers. We emphasized those just entering high school, though we believe the book will be useful to youth across the teenage years. I coedit this book with Don Richter, a Christian educator and Presbyterian minister who was the founding director of the Youth Theology Institute at Candler School of Theology. The book is coming out from Upper Room Books this summer, and it will be accompanied by a free downloadable leader’s guide and an interactive website for teens, [www.waytolive.org](http://www.waytolive.org).

I am the mother of a boy and a girl (twins!) who were part of the very exciting process of developing this book. I tell them that, thanks to them, thousands of other kids will have this resource, because it was their questions that piqued my own interest and enthusiasm for attempting this complicated project. Developing *Way to Live* included both teens and adults all along the way—and we all hope that this will inspire our readers, and Christian congregations generally, to find many more ways of sharing the life of faith between these two groups, who have so much to offer one another.

It’s been an exciting experience for us all. If a way of life doesn’t seem credible or authentic or interesting, young people are right out front with



**Dorothy C. Bass** guides the Valparaiso Project to retrieve Christian practices for a “way of life abundant.”



that. We've made the Christian practices more concrete and vivid for this age group, for example by dividing the practice we called "Household Economics" in *Practicing Our Faith* into three practices that are very important to young people: "Managing Our Stuff," "Caring for Creation," and "Work." We found the teenagers were just riveted by the question of material possessions, their own desire for them, and the way in which they distort faithful living. Looking back, I wish we had given more than one

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**On the night before sabbath, in the wonderful story of the Israelites receiving manna in the wilderness, they can go to bed knowing that tomorrow is a day of rest because of God's rhythm of provision. It's a metaphor: it shows how certain ways of living in time form a people to be alert to God's presence.**

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chapter of *Practicing Our Faith* to considering how economic life impinges on our practice of faith.

**The subtitle of *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* intrigues me. Why is it important for us to view time as a "gift"?**

Our challenge is to understand that time is in God's keeping and not in ours. We try to manipulate and master time; we

think that if we have the right laptops, communication devices, scheduling software, and so on, we can make time do what we want it to do. And this simply is not the case. Time is a given; a day really has only twenty-four hours, and none of us knows how many days we will receive during our lifetime. Any of us could die tomorrow. That's a fact about the human condition that the secular culture would rather cover up. But part of our blessedness as Christian people is to be able to live with that fact in a way that is liberating rather than terrifying or enslaving.

The Christian faith is not about trying to get outside of time; it's about serving our neighbors and knowing God within our lives that are in time.

In the wonderful story of the Israelites receiving manna in the wilderness, we see how the rhythms of time contribute to the formation of a people that is known to God and that knows God. It's very interesting how food is delivered to them, as if God is teaching them to receive each night and day in a certain way. They have to go to bed every evening with "nothing in the pantry," trusting that God in the morning will have given them manna once again. But on the sabbath, God sends no manna, having sent a double store the night before. So on the night before sabbath they can go to bed knowing that tomorrow is a day of rest because of God's rhythm of provision. For once this week, the pantry is already full. I find this a fascinating image of how certain ways of living in time can form a people to be alert to God's presence rather than to overlook that presence.



**How did sabbath keeping become central to your discipleship?**

Fifteen years ago on a Saturday night, I was out to dinner with my husband and another couple who were also teachers, and we began grouching about all the papers we would have to grade tomorrow. One person complained, "I have to grade twenty papers," the next said, "I have to grade thirty papers!" and on and on. You even could say we were boasting, not complaining, about how much work we had to do. Suddenly it hit me: if we had been speaking in this way about our intention to violate any of the other commandments, we would not have been boasting! Had we been saying, "I'm planning to steal something tomorrow" or "I'm planning to commit adultery," we would be convicted that something was wrong. But the whole idea of sabbath had become invisible in our lives; probably we hadn't thought about it since the end of Sunday school.

As Christians, we often believe sabbath is only about attending church. Yet many congregations make that hard work, too, by scheduling meetings all day long. Certainly God intends for us to worship on the sabbath, but also that we should have a day of rest. So I got interested in the sabbath mostly because I had young children at that time and I needed rest!

As I've lived my way into this practice over a longer period of time, I've become equally interested in what sabbath says about who we are and who we can become when we pause to say, "I cannot save the world by my own endeavors." It's important to notice that God is the One who keeps the world turning and not we.

**Instead of giving rules for keeping sabbath, you suggest several patterns to follow: rest from commerce, rest from worry, rest for creation, rest from work, and worship. How do we follow these?**

In regard to that first pattern, a discipline for my own sabbath keeping is to abstain from things such as using money, going to stores, paying bills, and doing tax returns. The question is, How do we live in such a way that we show that God is the Creator and Provider, and not we ourselves? Orthodox Jews do not carry money on the sabbath. That rang a bell with me, because—and this is a confession on my own part—the temptations of consumerism are what most separate me from a faithful way of life. When my mind is distracted from the needs of others and distracted from God, I'm probably thinking, "What's the next thing I'm going to buy?" I hate to admit that, but there it is. Deliberately to refrain from such thoughts, to appreciate so much that we have and even creation itself, and to receive rather than to be setting about my next project of accumulation, is a very important movement within my own spiritual life.

In the book I tell the story of my daughter being invited to go to the mall on Sunday with another family. She was eleven then and knew I didn't shop on Sundays; I said no, she couldn't go. She was just furious and stomped off to her room. But later she came out and said, "Well, we're only going to look." So I asked, "What does it do to our hearts when we are

always looking at the things we want to buy and letting the desires be kindled in us for more and more? If we were poor, how would we feel if we were ‘just looking’?” She finally really thought about this, and it was a formative experience for her. We still shop together at the mall on other days, but not very often; this planted a seed of suspicion in her heart about some of those desires that consumer culture is always trying to create in us.

About receiving and being grateful for creation, a helpful way to observe the sabbath is to spend part of the day outdoors in order to enjoy nature. We do less and less of that in our culture; in the midst of all of our technological protections from nature, it is easy to forget how integrated we are into nature nonetheless. Healing our relationship with the created world, of which we are a part, is an ingredient in a full life with God and with each other.

**So, keeping sabbath relates to other practices, such as household economics, resistance to consumerism, and care for creation?**

Each Christian practice, when fully done, leads into all of the others. Sabbath keeping opens space for hospitality, raises awareness of our economic life, honors the body, and includes a singing of our lives. It prepares us to die, because there’s a certain letting go; and it’s healing. You can start with any of the other practices and find your way to sabbath. For instance, being so fervently hospitable that one runs out of steam after a few months is not the way it’s meant to be; the practice of hospitality is supposed to incorporate a sabbath. One way that we can tell if we’re doing well with any given practice is to ask whether the other practices also have their role.

**“The [sabbath] gift of time,” you write, “is not meant to be nibbled at in bits and pieces.” Yet you also admit that some Christians must keep sabbath on days other than Sundays.**

When I go on vacation and someone sends me a postcard that says, “Have a great sabbath,” I think they’ve missed the point. When we’re taking a break in the coffee lounge in the middle of the workday, and people say, “Ah, it’s sabbath time,” I don’t think so. We need to hear the call (and this is one of the most clear things in biblical ethics) that God intends for everyone to have a day off each week.

The history of which day of the week is the sabbath is very complex. Sabbath is the seventh day within Judaism, and I respect this very much; but as Christianity developed a separate identity, sabbath became joined to the Lord’s Day, the first day. I’ve decided that happened long ago in Christianity, so I’ll go with it and not challenge it as some groups still do. But that suggests some flexibility in the Christian appropriation of what is a Jewish law. The most important thing is to incorporate all of the biblical theology associated with sabbath: it marks the culmination of creation, liberation from servitude and memory of the exodus, the day of resurrection, and God’s future breaking in upon us.

Only half the jobs in the American economy are Monday to Friday jobs.

Often the most disadvantaged are forced to work on Saturday and Sunday, and I don't wish my advocacy of this full day of rest for each person to come down with special harshness on those who are forced to work on the Lord's Day. So adaptation is necessary, but it needs to be done carefully. Two things to avoid are letting sabbath be frittered away (for when a person is forced to rest on another day, it is tempting to make excuses and not take that day fully), and keeping it alone. Sabbath is a communal venture to be shared with companions, and I hope that people would not be forced to each one take a totally different time.

**What is the role of the congregation, the worshipping *community*, in sabbath keeping?**

Simply having the word "sabbath" planted in my mind proved to be transforming. When the church offers people a language and a way of seeing the world that is clothed in biblical story, it lets them know that God is calling us to something different than this 24-7 rat race. That's one step—loudly and clearly teaching the sabbath stories and proclaiming this gift within a culture that sorely needs it.

Churches should cease being little engines of busyness themselves. Often it's the folks who are the most involved in the church who don't keep sabbath, and not just on Sundays but overall. While it's true that the busiest people I know almost always are too busy because of all they are doing for others—their students, their clients, their parishioners—it's clear biblically that God intends for even these people to have rest. If they do, it will benefit those whom they serve. Those who are very, very involved in the church should have covenants, urging one another to take time for rest. Churches should beware of filling Sundays with meetings. A friend related to me a striking story: the sabbath commandment was the lectionary subject, and just before preaching a very conventional "go to church on Sunday" sermon about the sabbath, this friend's pastor announced, "We'll have a short worship service because we have our annual financial meeting this afternoon." I think a picnic after church is in keeping with a congregation's keeping sabbath, but we should not schedule high-stress money meetings right after worship on Sundays.

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**Churches should cease being little engines of busyness themselves. Often it's the folks who are the most involved in the church that get the least sabbath, and not just on Sundays but overall.**

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Members could hold one another accountable for having a day of rest, just as they would if they were tempted to break other commandments. Many parents, for example, struggle with what to do when their children are on sports teams that compete on Sundays. We might help them see that

playing in a park league, when everybody's out there watching the kids play and getting to know each other over the years, may be a pretty good sabbath activity. I'm not against playing; after all, John Calvin himself bowled on Sunday afternoons. Play can be a good form of sabbath keeping. Problems begin when families get into ultra-competitive, long-distance commitments, however. Not only will sabbath be ignored, but also families might become over-invested in a certain part of life, irrespective of their children's true talents and interests.

**This touches the struggle congregations face in honoring sabbath together, rather than just encouraging members to "clear some time in their schedules" for their individual sabbath keeping.**

You say that sabbath is the heart of *Receiving the Day*, and I suppose that's true. Yet because of the difficulties many people have with keeping a sabbath day in this social structure, and because I do want this practice to come as a gift rather than a law, it became clear to me that I also needed to explore the other practices within the Christian tradition for faithful living in time, other than just keeping sabbath. Those sections of my book about the day and the year are not just add-ons. The daily pattern of getting enough sleep (which I violate even more than the sabbath), for instance, is really important. Christian practices for weekday life carry many of the good things of sabbath into every other day as well. And the rhythm of the church year, which brings us refreshment and leads us once again through the story of Jesus, is also a very renewing way of living in time. So, sabbath, yes, but also these other practices are important and related.

**So, sabbath connects much of our theology.**

Yes, indeed. This practice addresses that great temptation of Christian people to justify ourselves by constantly doing, doing, doing. A day of rest and worship reminds us that we do not justify ourselves and that our good works are the result of our faith rather than efforts to earn God's favor.

Let's remember that six days of work are the counterpart to the sabbath. Work is good, for it allows us to take part in God's own care of the world. Christians should be concerned about people who don't have any work at all, as well as about those who are forced to work more than six days each week. Sabbath practice has justice implications, concerning the fact that many people have so little to say about the basic economic shape of their lives. We cannot allow ourselves to be smug if we're privileged enough to be able to choose which day to take for rest. God calls us to help make the world a place where everyone can have good work and rest. ☪

#### **NOTE**

For information about the Christian practices and resources available from the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, visit the Web sites [www.practicingourfaith.com](http://www.practicingourfaith.com) and [www.waytolive.org](http://www.waytolive.org).

# Keeping Sabbath

BY STEPHEN BRACHLOW

Two contemporary classics invite us to take up creative ways of observing the grace-endowed sabbath rhythm of working and resting. As we read these books with an open heart and at a leisurely pace, we touch something of the same sabbath experience that they invite us to enjoy as a way of life.

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Two short books are contemporary classics on sabbath keeping. In their unique ways, Marva J. Dawn's *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989; 217 pp., \$15.00 paperback) and Tilden Edwards' *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1992; 148 pp., \$12.00 paperback) are theologically engaging and chock full of practical wisdom about creative ways to observe the sabbath rhythm of working and resting. They share the assumption that the full depth and richness of a sabbath-oriented way of life can only be understood through firsthand experience. That assumption, perhaps, is their greatest strength.

Neither Dawn nor Edwards write primarily *about* the sabbath, rather they make a plea for its practice. Their personal experiences with sabbath keeping are captivating and compelling. For someone like me, who believes in sabbath but never has found room within my "busy life" for consistent sabbath practice, these books are disturbing, challenging, and, in their disarming way, inviting. They kindled within me a flame of discontent about my driven, often anxious life that so obviously mirrors the high-speed, stressed-out, acquisitive culture in which we live. I also felt a deep longing for the authentically sacred time they describe so well, a time filled with much needed, holy leisure that attends to and tends the life of the soul.

Deep within our hearts we long for authentic peace and intimacy with God and others. We hear the Spirit call us to release our compulsive, self-preserving use of time, and to embrace instead the grace-endowed sabbath rest. These books reveal that inner tug at our hearts to stop ceaseless striving and to seek God's presence with prayerful, open, and receptive hearts nourished by sabbath practice.

Marva Dawn's *Keeping Sabbath Wholly* reflects her own long-standing sabbath keeping, as well as her thoughtful exploration of the theme in Jewish and Christian tradition. Clearly, from the many personal examples filling her book, she finds the sabbath day to be a steadying anchor amidst the demanding weekly schedule that she keeps as a prolific author, social activist, and popular speaker.

Her book, neatly divided into four sections containing seven brief chapters each, is highly adaptable for study groups. Each section refines her understanding of what it means to keep the sabbath *wholly* (fully, entirely) and *holy* (set apart, blessed). The first section, entitled "Ceasing," invites us to do what the Hebrew verb "*Shabbat*" literally means, "to cease and desist." In its basic meaning, the sabbath teaching is to stop the endless striving that characterizes so much of everyday life. Sabbath is about putting the tools away, shutting the office computer and FAX machine off, and letting go of our many projects for self-improvement—in short, setting aside all those things we do for productive purposes.

Sabbath is more about *being* than about *doing*. We are summoned to "be still, and know that [the LORD] is God" (Psalm 46:10), loosen our grip on the constant need to accomplish, and let our life rest in the One "in whom we live and move and have our being." A sabbath day makes room in our lives for God to be about the re-creative work of redemptive grace. It enables us, in other words, to stop "trying to be God" by our endless efforts to determine our own future (pp. 28-35). Honoring the sabbath helps us acknowledge the One in whom our future ultimately lies, a future which is not dependent on our accomplishments, but on God's unconditional love in Christ, who accepts us simply as we are.

Creating this receptive sabbath space requires preparation. For Dawn it means, for example, cooking a large pot of stew and setting the dinner table with care and attention to beauty on Saturday, all to be enjoyed in an unhurried, carefree Sunday meal with friends and family.

In the second section, "Rest," she explores our need for intellectual, spiritual, physical, emotional, and social rest. We are truly at rest only when we appreciate the sheer joy of being and the wonder of creation. So, the lethargy of exhaustion or the boredom of indolence is not sabbath rest, which always goes beyond mere ceasing productive activity, though it may include the luxury of an afternoon nap! We enter sabbath rest when we take a long walk with a friend, splash playfully about the pool with the



kids, or enjoy other unproductive, leisurely activities through which we celebrate the mystery of life.

This emphasis on joyful activity is all of a piece with her final two themes, “Embracing” and “Feasting.” Those who do not “embrace” (or purposively seek) sabbath, probably will not observe it. The social compulsion to be efficient and productive with our time is simply too great. So we need to be intentional about living the sabbath day with a light touch and in the unforced ways of grace, which, for Dawn, include our offering gifts of human intimacy and compassionate care to the sick and poor.

Dawn’s vision of sabbath is, above all, celebratory. She invites us to feast on the eternal, to join in the festivity of “a weekly eschatological party” (p. 151). Sabbath keeping is neither a private affair nor merely for personal spiritual refreshment. It is ultimately about love. Consequently, authentic sabbath practice does not remove us from the world; rather, “it plunges us more deeply into the world and its needs because it carries us more deeply into the heart of and purposes of God” (p. 146).

Tilden Edwards explores many of the same themes in *Sabbath Time*, but with a discernable difference in tone, though not substance, from Dawn’s treatment of them. Whereas Dawn, without sacrificing theological content, tends toward the effusive

exuberance of a motivational speaker in her enthusiasm for sabbath keeping, Edwards follows a softer, more contemplative path. His much slimmer volume requires slower, more thoughtful reading, especially in its opening chapters which treat (1) the need for sabbath time in the modern cultural climate of efficiency, (2) the historical roots of sabbath keeping within the Judeo-Christian tradition, and (3) the quali-

tatively different kind of time that we acknowledge in observing sabbath.

This difference in tone between Dawn and Edwards is most evident in how they motivate us to observe sabbath. Dawn exudes a passionate, evangelical fervor that Edwards, who is every bit as serious about the importance of the subject, does not share. She urges us to embrace sabbath keeping “with gusto,” and “to choose” to observe sabbath with “extra

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**Sabbath keeping is neither a private affair nor merely for personal spiritual refreshment. It is ultimately about love. Consequently, authentic sabbath practice does not remove us from the world; rather, “it plunges us more deeply into the world and its needs because it carries us more deeply into the heart of and purposes of God.”**

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intentionality and tenacity" (p. 100). Edwards, by contrast, invites us not to great effort, but to listen prayerfully for a deep-seated longing, which itself will be a gift of the Spirit, to observe sabbath. His underlying theology is, in this way, explicitly grace-centered. Despite the personal and cultural resistance to sabbath keeping we all face, he believes that when we "put ourselves ... in the quality of presence called Sabbath," the exper-

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**Keeping sabbath is a third alternative to the cultural rhythms of driven work and escapist entertainment. By grounding our true identity in the love of God, sabbath experience liberates us from the compulsive, ego-driven need to create our identity through our work in the world. Our work, then, can arise out of this affirmation as a grateful response to God's redemptive love.**

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ience carries "its own teaching power" (pp. 46, 62). Sabbath keeping is, for Edwards, free of all compulsion; it relies entirely on the unconditional love of God.

Edwards describes the rhythm of keeping sabbath as a third alternative to the cultural rhythms of driven work and escapist entertainment. Sabbath engenders an integrated, active life, which is possible because it affirms the value of "life-in-itself," independent of "achieved status" (p. 13). Sabbath rest allows

us time to attend to the voice of the Spirit within, a voice that affirms we are beloved as we are, not for what we do. In this way, sabbath keeping is formative for the way we do our work. By grounding our true identity in the unconditional gift of the One who dwells within and through Christ, sabbath experience liberates us from the compulsive, ego-driven need to create our identity through our work in the world. Our work, then, can arise out of this affirmation as a grateful response to God's redemptive love.

These two fine books are brimming with practical advice about ways to observe sabbath today. Along with numerous personal anecdotes throughout her text, Dawn offers a trim appendix on rituals to begin and end the sabbath day (pp. 212-213). Edwards offers a more detailed description of possible sabbath practices in four of his concluding chapters (pp. 98-139).

Both model their sabbath proposals on Jewish tradition, the root of all Christian sabbath customs. Their Christian sabbath day begins on Saturday evening with a version of the Jewish Kiddush ceremony, which may include the lighting of candles, prayers of thanksgiving for God's creation, blessing of children, and a special meal. It concludes at dusk on Sunday



with a brief ceremony of farewell to the sabbath, called “Havdalah” in Hebrew, in which they thank God for the gifts of the day and express their longing for the next sabbath and, in Christian hope, for the day when Christ ushers us into God’s eternal sabbath rest.

These ceremonies consecrate one entire day with a special quality of time, a time during which we honor the One in whose image we are made, through our rest, play, feasting, and leisurely time given to family, friends, and corporate worship. Since simplicity and freedom are keys to sabbath observance in our day, both authors encourage us to find sabbath practices that are appropriate for our life situations. The sabbath observance of a single adult, as Dawn knows from her experience, assumes a different form than the observance in a family with young children or teenagers, as Edwards discovers in his family life.

Marva Dawn and Tilden Edwards explore the importance of Sabbath as a nourishing spiritual resource. They should be read as much for the practices they seek to inspire, as for the wealth of theological insight and cultural critique they offer. As we take the time to read these books with an open heart and at a leisurely pace, we touch something of the same sabbath experience that they invite us to enjoy as a way of life.

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# Sabbath Blessings

BY WILLOW HAMBRICK

**In their sabbath poems and essays, Wendell Berry and Molly Wolf reveal God touching humanity in the midst of the every day. When we read their words, ordinary trees become “timbered choirs,” “the sun comes out and lights the leaves in glory,” and we are pulled “toward a great something that lies at the heart of things.”**

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**I**n our world of calendars and compromise, sabbath keeping is difficult for me as a mother of five children. Recently I was assigned a fitness training session at 11:00 on Sunday morning. When I told the instructor I attend a worship service at that time, he said, “Well, I guess that’s your problem, isn’t it?” Then there is the coach who told my daughter’s team, “I don’t want to hear from any of you about how church commitments will interfere with practice. We have limited playing fields, and no times are sacred.”

Finding even a smidgen of time for worship is difficult if our programs are running late, like at the formal banquet I attended where the host stepped up to the microphone and announced, “Since we are behind schedule, we will dispense with the prayer.”

About people who calmly dispense with prayers and disregard worship with no apparent fear or trembling, we wonder with Thoreau, “Does any divinity stir within them?” When we see the erosion of our faith traditions happening on our watch, Christians feel like remnant people “being pressed on all sides” in a profane world. We search for ways to practice our faith and to proclaim God’s truth.

When the world seems too much with me, I am encouraged by authors who stir Christian reflection through words that incarnate the sacred rhythms of creation, fall, and redemption of humankind in the midst of the

every day. Both Wendell Berry and Molly Wolf inspire me, not as overt Christian writers, but as artists whose books reveal God touching humanity. The sabbath poems of Wendell Berry and the sabbath musings of Molly Wolf help me observe the essence of sabbath: rest, remembrance, redemption, and a recommitment to Christian precepts. When I read their words, ordinary trees become "timbered choirs," "the sun comes out and lights the leaves in glory," and I am pulled "toward a great something that lies at the heart of things."

Wendell Berry's *A Timbered Choir* (Counterpoint Publishing Company, 1998; 216 pp., \$12.50 paperback) is a collection of "Sabbath Poems," so called because he wrote many of them during Sunday morning walks on his farm in Henry County, Kentucky: "Another Sunday morning comes and I resume the standing Sabbath of the woods, where the finest blooms of time return...." (p. 6). A contemplative reading of his poems removes us from the noise of our day. As we assimilate his words, our minds become a sanctuary where we can rest in the Lord of all creation.

Berry understands the importance of maintaining a strong work ethic during six days of the week, but also the Old Testament imperative for sabbath rest on the seventh day: "Six days of work are spent / To make a Sunday quiet / That Sabbath may return" (p. 29). As we pause from our normal routines, we remember the miracle of our release, as God's chosen people, from the bondage of sin and toil and this energizes us. We gratefully acknowledge that when God's grace infuses our sweat, there is joy in the harvest:

Harvest will fill the barn; for that  
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.  
And yet no leaf or grain is filled  
By work of ours; the field is tilled  
And left to grace. That we may reap,  
Great work is done while we're asleep.  
When we work well, a Sabbath mood  
Rests on our day, and finds it good. (p. 18)

We require sabbath rest to reconnect with our Creator against whom we have sinned with our indulgent and destructive ways ("This was a garden once, a good and perfect gift;" p. 16), and to whom we turn for forgiveness and redemption ("Christ dead and risen in my own flesh shall judge, condemn, and then forgive," p. 97). At times, solemn words of condemnation and healing flow from Berry's prophetic pen with "If-Then" conditions reminiscent of God's making covenant with Israel:

There are two healings: nature's,  
and ours and nature's. Nature's  
will come in spite of us, after us,

over the graves of its wasters, as it comes  
to the forsaken fields. The healing  
that is ours and nature's will come  
if we are willing, if we are patient,  
if we know the way, if we will do the work.... (p. 47)

Throughout *A Timbered Choir* the poet manifests God in nature and in the ordinary, and recognizes His hand in the divine cycles of death and resurrection, and loss and restoration: "The seed is in the ground. / Now may we rest in hope / While darkness does its work" (p. 131). He never understates the fact that we are broken people who have done "violence to the ground" (p. 46) and pray to "be delivered from the blaze that we have earned" (p. 110), but he also celebrates that as God's people, we live with the sabbath possibility of "hope outreaching wrong" (p. 59).

Crafted with care by Berry, even as one might organize a worship service mindful of its sacred rituals and traditions, each poem symbolizes God's ordered creation. The cadence of his words becomes an audible vehicle for sounds of sacred harmony; they soothe our minds and calm our spirits with the same lilting rhythm as a Shaker chant: "We join our work to Heaven's gift, / Our hope to what is left" (p. 49).

The poems flow like hymns written to blend the natural world of larkspur and bloodroot with a personified metaphysical world where "every leaf's a tongue" (p. 89) sending forth prayers to "the Holy Spirit in the air" (p. 91). Under the canopy of trees and stars, Berry invites us to worship God as Creator and Redeemer ("That Ghost who stirs in seed and tomb," p. 44), as Judge ("And death the narrow gate each one must pass Alone," p. 21), and as mysterious and gracious Lord who rises up like a Gardener shaking off the dark:

Be still. A man who seems to be  
A Gardener rises out of the ground,  
Stands like a tree, shakes off the dark,  
The bluebells opening at his feet,  
The light a figured cloth of song. (p. 43)

Wendell Berry's sabbath writing takes us into the woods where we can walk ancient paths and kneel beside still waters. If, upon occasion, attending a worship service is not an option, it is a sabbath experience to meditate upon his poems. They give God voice and song in the midst of our chaotic schedules and destructive lifestyles; and if we will respond to the pull and call of sabbath keeping, then we can receive the blessing of "a hand that reaches up out of the ground, holding a lamp" (p. 155).

In *Angels and Dragons* (Doubleday, 2001; 195 pp., \$19.95 hardback) Molly Wolf offers "a collection of vignettes drawn from life interspersed with meditations of where theology intersects with real life" (p. vii). The

most autobiographical of her books, *Angels and Dragons* takes readers through what she labels the “Big Emotional Stuff” of her life—an abusive marriage, divorce, falling away from organized church, and other “interesting times” she endured and overcame. “As I wrestled with each chunk of pain or PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder],” says Wolf, “I turned on it the light of my faith: where is God in all this? What’s the meaning here? How can I make sense of this in light of my Christian beliefs?” (p. viii). Each week she writes a sabbath meditation that she distributes by email and publishes on the Internet; many of these are collected in *Hiding in Plain Sight* (The Liturgical Press, 1998; 134 pp., \$12.95 paperback) and *A Place Like Any Other* (Doubleday, 2000; 229 pp., \$12.95 paperback).

Wolf never loses sight of the fact that in the fallen creation, we are “miserable offenders” in need of grace. Yet as she gazes out the window of her “untidy” Victorian home at “the annual milkweed miracle” displayed on the scruffy Manitoba plains, she is assured that the glory of creation “hints at what might lie beyond the River” (*A Place Like Any Other*, p. 9).

Like Wendell Berry, Wolf invites a sabbath mood by insisting that we take the time to rest and reflect: “If we give God the slightest opening, some corner of the Spirit gets lodged in us like a splinter in the skin...[and] the Spirit calls to our own inner selves saying, ‘Please let me love you.’” As we approach the God of the sabbath, the author of our lives, and place on the altar our pain, uncertainty, and potential for both good and evil, we will learn “to live with the chaos, trust in God’s purpose for us, and emerge with a new fullness of soul” (*Hiding in Plain Sight*, p. 91).

Her writing is bold, passionate, and significant even when she is writing about the mundane, the weak, and the insignificant.

“Hanging out the laundry, like cooking or doing dishes,” she explains, “permits me to slip into that state where I am actively contemplative, something that’s invaluable for a writer and a Christian” (*Angels and Dragons*, pp. 6-7). She asks important questions we all have on our minds, and then records how her “Big Deep Hurt” is transformed in an unexpected breakthrough of God’s “still small voice” as she stands in line to buy a lug wrench at the hardware store.

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**Wendell Berry manifests God in nature and in the ordinary. He never understates the fact that we are broken people who have done “violence to the ground” and pray to “be delivered from the blaze that we have earned,” but he also celebrates that as God’s people, we live with the sabbath possibility of “hope outreaching wrong.”**

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These honest meditations (which Wolf calls “bathroom theology” with characteristic humor and humility) are pathways to a sabbath experience, for she reveals the reality of her interior life, no matter how messy, and becomes transparent and vulnerable before God and her readers.

The “hardscrabble” environment of Canada with its “matter-of-fact, hard-fisted realness” shapes Wolf’s theology. Like God talking to Job, she bluntly states, “This is Canada. This is January. You expected maybe feathers?”

(*A Place Like Any Other*, p. 99). She admonishes readers to “learn to accept reality with toughness, patience, humor, and optimism,” with full understanding of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s claim that grace is neither cheap nor comfortable. “Winter is winter. What matters is what we make of it.” We must learn to accept God for who He is even in the midst of “Real Big Evil,” trusting that “God aches when we ache . . . experi-

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**As she kept the sabbath in the privacy of her own heart, Molly Wolf began to remember the sacred rituals that connected her to nature, to humankind, and to her Savior. This sure knowledge that “God is in this world . . . drawing us to himself,” nudged her back into the fellowship of the church like a “prodigal come home.”**

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ences suffering alongside us . . . and wills our healing” (*A Place Like Any Other*, p. 100).

In “an intensely living quietness” she draws near to God for rest and redemption, and learns to recognize His peace in the often “leafless” and tedious aspects of the every day:

Maybe I should stop struggling to create peace inside my own confused and buzzing self, with its huge, irresolvable contradictions of faith and faithlessness, hope and despair, flashes of joy and pain. Maybe instead I should simply let God’s companionable quietness suck all the turmoil out. . . . Maybe I’m supposed to lie back in God’s arms, chattering to God like a child instead of pretending to be the grown-up I know in my heart I’m not. (*Hiding in Plain Sight* p. 121)

When she turned her back on the institutional church years ago, Wolf maintained a remnant of her faith “that had been an ember in the ashes all along” (*Hiding in Plain Sight* p. 93). As she kept the sabbath in the privacy of her own mind and heart, she began to remember the sacred rituals that connected her to nature, to humankind, and to her Savior. These memories of who she was created to be and the sure knowledge that “God is in *this*

world...drawing us to himself" nudged her back into the fellowship of the church like a "prodigal come home" (*Hiding in Plain Sight* p. 95).

Sabbath keeping is not dependent on a place, or even a time, Wolf understands; it depends on the depth and integrity of our awareness of God in the here and now, and the feeling that we are at home and restored in his presence. Her best sabbath writing compares our spiritual journeys to aspects of nature:

We're like geese painstakingly beating our way home, one stage at a time.... It's in the course of beating our way slowly home that we make our souls—[and] create who it is that we will give back to our Creator when we come before God's judgment.... Home lies at the end. Once there, we can rest. And we will never have to journey back again. (*A Place Like Any Other*, pp. 138-139)

Molly Wolf knows her redeemer lives: in the Canadian woods, under her sink, in the green bug crawling across her computer screen, and in the interruptions of children. Avoiding despair and cynicism, she provides readers front porch rocking chairs in which they can sit down alongside her in the winter of their lives and anticipate "the promise of greenness" (*A Place Like Any Other*, p. 128). Her weekly "Sabbath Blessings" prompt self-examination, a reckoning with both the dragons and angels in our midst, and the awareness of a loving God "hiding in plain sight" and in "a place like any other."

#### NOTE

Molly Wolf begins a new series of Sabbath Blessings each year after Canadian Thanksgiving. If you would like to receive these meditations free by email, contact Molly Wolf directly at [lupa2@cyberus.ca](mailto:lupa2@cyberus.ca) or visit the Web site [sabbath-blessings.org](http://sabbath-blessings.org).

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**Table 1. Comparing Childhood Activities on Sunday**  
(referenced in "Changing Sunday Practices" on p. 61)

| <i>Activity</i>                    | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Year of Birth</i>    |                        | <i>difference</i> |
|------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
|                                    |                  | <i>Born before 1930</i> | <i>Born after 1960</i> |                   |
| Sunday morning worship             | every week       | 62%                     | 51%                    | -11               |
|                                    | most weeks       | 22%                     | 38%                    | 16                |
|                                    | some weeks       | 14%                     | 10%                    | -4                |
|                                    | never            | 2%                      | 1%                     | -1                |
| Sunday evening worship             | every week       | 23%                     | 5%                     | -18               |
|                                    | most weeks       | 13%                     | 8%                     | -5                |
|                                    | some weeks       | 41%                     | 28%                    | -13               |
|                                    | never            | 23%                     | 59%                    | 36                |
| Children's activities<br>at church | every week       | 43%                     | 28%                    | -15               |
|                                    | most weeks       | 23%                     | 37%                    | 14                |
|                                    | some weeks       | 28%                     | 30%                    | 2                 |
|                                    | never            | 6%                      | 5%                     | -1                |
| Family devotions                   | every week       | 9%                      | 2%                     | -7                |
|                                    | most weeks       | 12%                     | 6%                     | -6                |
|                                    | some weeks       | 49%                     | 39%                    | -10               |
|                                    | never            | 31%                     | 53%                    | 22                |
| Visiting shut-ins                  | every week       | 4%                      | 0%                     | -4                |
|                                    | most weeks       | 5%                      | 2%                     | -3                |
|                                    | some weeks       | 74%                     | 50%                    | -24               |
|                                    | never            | 17%                     | 48%                    | 31                |
| Fun activities as a family         | every week       | 22%                     | 16%                    | -6                |
|                                    | most weeks       | 33%                     | 51%                    | 18                |
|                                    | some weeks       | 42%                     | 33%                    | -9                |
|                                    | never            | 3%                      | 0%                     | -3                |
| Special meal                       | every week       | 48%                     | 33%                    | -15               |
|                                    | most weeks       | 37%                     | 34%                    | -3                |
|                                    | some weeks       | 13%                     | 28%                    | 15                |
|                                    | never            | 2%                      | 5%                     | 3                 |
| Visiting family or friends         | every week       | 14%                     | 15%                    | 1                 |
|                                    | most weeks       | 29%                     | 36%                    | 7                 |
|                                    | some weeks       | 53%                     | 48%                    | -5                |
|                                    | never            | 4%                      | 1%                     | -3                |
| Lawn mowing and<br>other yard work | every week       | 1%                      | 6%                     | 5                 |
|                                    | most weeks       | 4%                      | 24%                    | 20                |
|                                    | some weeks       | 46%                     | 56%                    | 10                |
|                                    | never            | 49%                     | 14%                    | -35               |
| Attending sporting events          | every week       | 0%                      | 1%                     | 1                 |
|                                    | most weeks       | 4%                      | 8%                     | 4                 |
|                                    | some weeks       | 44%                     | 68%                    | 24                |
|                                    | never            | 52%                     | 23%                    | -29               |
| Shopping                           | every week       | 0%                      | 3%                     | 3                 |
|                                    | most weeks       | 1%                      | 5%                     | 4                 |
|                                    | some weeks       | 22%                     | 77%                    | 55                |
|                                    | never            | 77%                     | 15%                    | -62               |