

SABBATH AS SACRAMENT

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Summary:

This paper presents a compelling argument to consider the place of Sabbath as means of grace. Included is an appendix with practical advice around the biblical ideas of rest and renewal.

Length: 27 pages

Sabbath As Sacrament

There are few ideas in the world of thought which contain so much spiritual power as the idea of the Sabbath.¹

"Sabbath rest is a revolutionary act"²

Introduction :

This paper proposes to examine Sabbath observance as an expression of Christian faith. Christian faith includes inward experiences such as illumination, contemplation, and mystical consciousness, as well as outward expressions that range from practical to symbolic. Within this great variety it has been traditional to refer to some phenomena which combine receiving grace from God with prescribed outward manifestations as "sacraments". A common description of sacrament is an "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace".³ In as much as the practice of Sabbath may result in blessing, grace from God, it may be thought of as sacramental. This proposal is perhaps primarily rhetorical, but whether or not Sabbath is formally recognized as a sacrament, this essay calls for its recognition both as a valuable theological symbol, and as a practical God-given provision for enjoying the fullness (body soul and spirit), of human life.⁴

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth Is The Lord's And The Sabbath, With Wood Engravings By Ilya Schor* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1963), 101.

² Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992), 52.

³ To this common motto Leanne Payne adds: "[A] rite which Christ ordained and through which we receive Him, His work and His gifts." Payne also suggests that the work of the Holy Spirit is required to effect the inward spiritual grace, and that it is possible to "perceive only the symbol" and to "fail to apprehend the Presence". Leanne Payne, *Real Presence: The Glory Of Christ With Us And Within Us* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 40. Apparently Augustine of Hippo and Hugh of St. Victor allowed for numerous other sacraments. *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds. F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1435.

⁴ Compared with the symbols of baptism (washing) and communion (eating and drinking), Sabbath may retain more of its practical function (physical resting) along with its symbolic use.

Sabbath symbolism is so vast that this essay will only examine some of its symbolic significance and explore some of its messages and implications. A few ways of utilizing and incorporating the symbol of Sabbath into personal and corporate devotion are included in an appendix.

The study of Sabbath may take many approaches. Since it relates to theological concerns that range from creation, to redemption, to eschatology, its thematic role in biblical theology is not insignificant. Controversy regarding the theology and practice of Sabbath is recorded as early as Moses' time.⁵ Perhaps industrialized western society is becoming sufficiently motivated to re-discover and re-employ the ancient benefits of Sabbath⁶ As an expression toward God it can be seen as an act of worship. As an expression toward others it can be seen as prophetic in what it proclaims and evangelistic in the way it welcomes. As an expression within the community of faith it can be seen as pastoral and pedagogical in that it nurtures and instructs. This breadth and variety of Christian ministry addressed by Sabbath call for further studies of its place in the life of God's people.

By way of sidestepping much of the controversy regarding Sabbath, this essay presumes that Christians are *free* to observe Sabbath and derive as much benefit from it as possible. The primary purpose is not to argue why Christians must, should or even may observe Sabbath. Rather this essay presupposes that Sabbath observance has potential for personal devotion and

⁵ If the manna gathering in Exodus 16:4-36 occurred before reaching Sinai, Sabbath was an issue even before the fourth commandment was formally presented. Later in the wilderness, the appropriateness of capital punishment for Sabbath violation was unclear even to Moses and required specific inquiry of the LORD (Numbers 15). The Prophets proclaimed the extent of God's displeasure by referring to the Sabbath observed by the people as an abomination.

⁶ In their respective books, Tilden Edwards, Dorothy Bass and Marva Dawn prescribe Sabbath as a cure or an antidote for unhealthy aspects of western culture. Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992). Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving The Day: Christian Practices For Opening The Gift Of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000). Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping The Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989).

corporate liturgical celebration.⁷ Sabbath is a theologically significant symbol that has both symbolic and practical rationale and may be appropriated as an expression of faith by individuals, families, and communities of faith.

Origins and Historical Developments

Attempts to place the origin of a seventh day observance in non-Hebrew settings have been inconclusive.⁸ Although most Sabbatarians⁹ tend to think of the Sabbath as being instituted at creation,¹⁰ the Genesis creation account limits its terminology to the "seventh day."¹¹ It is repeated that God rested, but human rest is not exhorted.¹² The Genesis account shows *that* the seventh day was made special by God, but seems little concerned about teaching appropriate human response to that special status.¹³

⁷ A few tentative suggestions for specific ways of observing Sabbath are included in the appendix. No attempt is made to catalogue all historic or potential elements of Sabbath observance.

⁸ Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Remembering the Sabbath: The Creation Sabbath in Jewish and Christian History" in *The Sabbath In Jewish And Christian Traditions*, eds. Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, William H. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 70-74.

⁹ The term Sabbatarian includes those committed to strict Sabbath observance whether Jews or Christians, and whether seventh day or first day observant.

¹⁰ George E. Rice, "Response to Goldenberg and Harrington" in *The Sabbath In Jewish And Christian Traditions*, eds. Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, William H. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 62. John Primus quotes Henry Sandes (1583): "If Adam in his innocence' had need of such a day . . . then we have not less but much more need of it today". John H. Primus, *Holy Time : Moderate Puritanism And The Sabbath* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1989), 44.

¹¹ Explicit equating of the seventh day with "Sabbath" is not made until Ex. 16. However the Hebrew verb שָׁבַת (sh^lbat) used in Genesis 2, indicating God's ceasing, stopping or resting appears to be related to the noun שַׁבָּת (shabb^t) Sabbath.

¹² Samuel A. Meier, "The Sabbath and Purification Cycles" in *The Sabbath In Jewish And Christian Traditions*, eds. Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, William H. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 5. It is possible to read the seventh day as the first day of work for the humans. Other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories suggested that humans had been created so the gods could be relieved of responsibility to do all the work. John H. Walton & Victor H. Matthews, eds. *Bible Background Commentary: Genesis-Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 18.

¹³ Meier, *The Sabbath and Purification*, 6.

Sabbath observance became imperative as one of the ten commandments. The general Sabbath imperatives in the Exodus Decalogue are to remember, to make holy, and to do no work. The commanded rest from work was to include foreigners and even livestock in Israel.¹⁴ Exhortation to observe Sabbath is also found at least once in each of the other books of the Pentateuch. In a reiteration of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy, it is the deliverance from Egyptian bondage that is offered as reason for keeping Sabbath rather than commemoration of the seventh day of creation. The prophets Isaiah, Amos and Ezekiel made references to Sabbath in judgment oracles and in eschatological proclamations. According to the prophets, the absence of ethical behaviour in the people engaged in Sabbath ritual rendered that observance an abomination to God, but also the desecration of Sabbath would bring divine judgment.¹⁵ Nehemiah was so concerned for proper Sabbath observance in the restored Jerusalem community after the Babylonian exile that he closed the city gates to prevent trading.¹⁶

Apart from a few examples of restricted work, details on how to remember, keep, or make the Sabbath holy are not extensive in the Bible. In light of this paucity of detail and considering its rich symbolic significance and its uniqueness among the Torah commands,¹⁷ it is understandable that additional more specific responses have developed within the Judeo-Christian heritage.¹⁸ Although priestly duties related to sacrifices were specified in Torah, details of Sabbath practices for common people arose primarily in the Mishnah. The development of interpretive traditions among Christians regarding Sabbath was complicated after

¹⁴ Exodus 20: 8-10.

¹⁵ Isaiah 1:10-20; 58:13. Ezekiel 20:12-24.

¹⁶ Nehemiah 13:15-22.

¹⁷ Anglican Bishop Lancelot Andrewes presented "a half dozen" ways that the fourth commandment was unique. Primus, *Holy Time*, 57.

¹⁸ Extensive rules and principles related to Sabbath observance have been developed by Jewish Rabbis and various Christian Sects such as the Puritans, and Seventh-day Baptists and Adventists.

Jesus' resurrection by the practice of the early Christians to celebrate the first day of the week as the Lord's Day, and for some to presume that seventh day observances had been transferred to that day.¹⁹ Even though seventh-day Sabbath observance was discouraged by some early church leaders it has persisted in various groups throughout church history.²⁰

The record of recurring disputes regarding Sabbath observance in the New Testament indicates that the development of interpretive traditions related to Sabbath were well underway at that time. It is probably incorrect to narrowly characterize Jesus' and Paul's involvement in discussions about Sabbath as presenting the "Christian" position versus the "Jewish" position. It seems more likely that they were perceived by their countrymen as participants in an in-house and ongoing debate among the rabbis. Robert Goldenberg speaks of the difference in emphasis between major representatives of such debates, Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai. "Shammai along with the school bearing his name, is described as believing that the entire week exist for the sake of the Sabbath." Only after Sabbath preparations are made is one free to enjoy the residual resources of the rest of the week. "Shammai's Hillelite opponents will not allow one's relation with the Creator to be focused so narrowly on just one day a week." The rules and character of Sabbath are "embedded in a larger system that holds the Sabbath and the other days

¹⁹ Although there are no specific apostolic imperatives to abandon seventh day observance or to replace it with Sunday observance, many Christians have assumed that New Testament indicatives showing that early Christians made special use of the first day are adequate to make the case. For studies of the transfer and combination of seventh day observance with the first day see Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday : a historical investigation of the rise of Sunday observance in early Christianity* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian university, 1977) and, D.A. Carson. ed. *From Sabbath To Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, And Theological Investigation*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). A summary of arguments related to hermeneutics is included in Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, war, and women: case issues in Biblical interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983).

²⁰ R. J. Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-apostolic Church" in *From Sabbath To Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, And Theological Investigation*. ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 255-262. Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday : a historical investigation of the rise of Sunday observance in early Christianity* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian university, 1977).

side by side."²¹ Jesus' concern for what was appropriate behaviour on a presumed distinctive Sabbath was perhaps responding to the school of Shammai; while Paul's teaching that even the distinctive status of the day could be properly questioned, but not imposed, seems closer to the concerns of Hillel.²²

For the purpose of studying historic practices, Heather McKay distinguishes between Sabbath observance and Sabbath worship. She denotes the former as mainly "cessation of work" while the latter she sees as a more deliberate "communal activity which is directed towards the attention of a specific deity."²³ She notes that in her definition, "the group's intention of the god as *addressee* of the worship is vital". Her distinction concerning worship also allows her to conclude that "there are no details of Sabbath worship for the ordinary worshipper as opposed to Sabbath observance as rest."²⁴ McKay claims that it is difficult to defend the idea of active worship at synagogues in the second temple period from the evidence available. Rather the primary biblical and extra-biblical texts, both indicative and imperative, refer to the cessation of work, but do not prescribe specific worship activities for common community members. By separating the educational functions of reading and preaching from worship she is able to conclude that by the time of Philo the "Sabbath had become a day of study and contemplation as

²¹ Citing Babylonian Talmud Besah 16a: Robert Goldenberg, "The Place of Sabbath in Rabbinic Judaism" in *The Sabbath In Jewish And Christian Traditions*, eds. Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, William H. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 39-40.

²² It is uncertain whether Paul, as the champion of the right of Gentiles not to be forced to observe Sabbath, could have foreseen a reversal of his permissive attitude toward the option for Sabbath observance, by such church leaders as Ignatius. Daniel J. Harrington, "Sabbath Tensions" in *The Sabbath In Jewish And Christian Traditions*, eds. Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, William H. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 55. R. J. Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-apostolic Church" in *From Sabbath To Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, And Theological Investigation*. ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 255. George E. Rice, Response, 65.

²³ Heather McKay, "New Moon or Sabbath" in *The Sabbath In Jewish And Christian Traditions*, eds. Tamara C. Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, William H. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991),, *Sabbath And Synagogue: The Question Of Sabbath Worship In Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 3.

²⁴ Numbers 28:9 provides details for Sabbath sacrifices by priests; the title of Psalm 92 implies that it was to be sung on Sabbath (by appointed temple singers?); Ezekiel 46 prophesies an apparently future kingdom where Sabbath sacrifices will be made by priests for the prince. McKay, New Moon, 16.

well as a day of rest, but not apparently a day of worship."²⁵ Her attempts to ascertain the way Sabbath was observed from extra-biblical sources produce limited details such as: abstention from work and trade, lamp-lighting, eating a meal perhaps with fish, and wine, but also possibly with fasting. Luke portrays Jesus and Paul visiting synagogues where it appears the Sabbath custom was to read Torah and hear teachings related to it. In spite of McKay's reluctance to connect acts of worship such as prayer to Sabbath observance in this period, it seems difficult in light of the New Testament to assert that prayer and almsgiving were not, along with the study of Torah, and meetings on matters of community concern, likely common in synagogues and perhaps by implication part of Sabbath activities there.²⁶ On the other hand there is not enough evidence to suggest that the Torah imperative for ceasing work had had been completely usurped by other activities.

The issue of Sabbath observance became controversial as Reformation Protestants tested the scriptural warrant for Sabbath against that of church tradition and papal authority. The Sabbath served in a number of ways to support the concerns of the Reformation. Strict observance could contradict Roman Catholic charges of antinomianism. Calvin's concept of appropriate human response to the "covenant of grace" called for using the law as a guide and could be expressed through Sabbath observance.²⁷ The Reformation emphasis on *sola scriptura* required that the scriptures be taught. The distinction called for by McKay between scripture study and worship contrasts with the assumptions made by English (Puritan?) reformers, such as

²⁵ McKay's study highlights the lack of historic details regarding specific Sabbath practices beyond resting and reading Torah. However, this essay supposes, contrary to McKay's definition, that both non-activity and reading may be considered deliberate acts of worship. McKay, *New Moon*, 23.

²⁶ Matthew's record of the sermon on the mount includes references to both prayer and almsgiving occurring in synagogue (Matthew 6:2-5). McKay seems unduly sceptical about the details of Jesus' Sabbath visit to the synagogue in Nazareth, suggesting they must be anachronistic details from Luke's later experience. McKay, *Sabbath And Synagogue*, 164-175.

²⁷ John H. Primus, *Holy Time*, 104-110.

John Hooper and Hugh Latimer, that preaching and hearing the scriptures were not only central to proper worship but were the primary activity appropriate for Sabbath. Latimer asserted that "the holy day is appointed to none other thing, but that we should at that day hear the word of God and exercise ourselves in all godliness", and a "day appointed of God that we should hear his word and learn his laws and so serve him."²⁸

Luther argued against seventh day Sabbatarians and "Sunday [observance] was retained by Luther not as the Christian Sabbath, but as a convenient day [to rest]".²⁹ Calvin saw less disunity between Old and New Covenants, and yet like Aquinas tried to distinguish between *ceremonial* and *moral* aspects of the Sabbath. The lack of scriptural imperative for gathering for organized worship on any particular day did not prevent many Christians from arguing or assuming that Sunday was the proper day, and that proper observance included congregational meetings.³⁰ The Quaker Robert Barclay, citing Calvin on the spiritual nature of Sabbath admits that the simple convenience of Sunday for meeting may be reason enough "without superstitiously straining the Scriptures for another reason"³¹

It seems that legalism attributed to the Puritans gave Sabbath, in the guise of Lord's Day observance, a poor reputation.³² Discernment and decisions regarding participation in appropriate sports or recreations became difficult and divisive. For some reason the Puritans seemed not as successful as rabbinic Judaism in keeping the aspects of restriction from

²⁸ Hugh Latimer quoted in: John H. Primus, *Holy Time*, 23.

²⁹ Bacchiocchi, *Remembering the Sabbath*, 81. Also, Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, 28.

³⁰ Hebrews 10:25 is frequently cited as the prime scriptural mandate for weekly congregational meetings. It may be noted however that the exhortation specifies neither frequency, regularity nor size of meeting.

³¹ Barclay's perspective contrasts with fellow Quaker J. J. Gurney, who regarding Sabbath spoke of "the moral and therefore permanent nature of that divine institution". <http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/nea08.htm>

³² Zahniser suggests that children forbidden to play on the Sabbath are trained to associate God with boredom. A. H. Mathias Zahniser, *Symbol And Ceremony : Making Disciples Across Cultures* (Monrovia: MARC, 1997), 126.

overpowering the aspects of joy, despite the latter's even more complex legal minutiae. The Puritan experiment in civic enforcement of Sabbath seemed unable to maintain what they knew to be its ideal practical and spiritual aspects. The Puritans knew that rest which was not centered on God would lead to degradation but they seemed unable to prevent it by legislation.³³

Rationale For The Sacrament Of Sabbath Observance

Sabbath observance appears motivated by various ideas: by seeing Sabbath, as a sign of covenant with God, as an opportunity for personal spiritual contemplation, for its perceived social and physical benefits or simply as obedience to God. Since Jesus taught that Sabbath was made for humans it may be thought of as a gift, indeed perhaps the first gift, from God to humans. Presuming that Sabbath was designed to be good for us, perhaps the lack of consensus on all its significance and proper uses need not prevent at least some of its benefits from being received.

The term "Sabbath" or "Sabbath observance" may be read generally or more specifically and the recovery of the sacramental aspects of Sabbath may occur differently in different contexts. Debate may continue on how to distinguish the gift of Sabbath from its wrappings. Approaching Sabbath primarily as a principle need not deny the potency of more specific applications. Whether the symbol is understood as the seventh day, or more broadly as a principle and blessing, can be expected for even the slightest appropriation of its merit.

³³ It would be unfair to characterize Puritan motives as merely "legalistic". "In a certain sense, every day was holy for the Puritan. . . . But the Puritans were realists who recognized, with a keenness unsurpassed in Christian history that religious discipline takes special time. Therefore along-side the time for vocational duty, there must be an especially sacred time for those acts of worship and devotion that are indispensable for any religion." Primus, *Holy Time*, 179.

We need rest. Approaching the sacrament of Sabbath from the perspective of human need is admittedly an anthropocentric method of doing theology.³⁴ The utilitarian approach to Sabbath is taken with caution, but recognizes that previous attempts at top down doctrine have not produced consensus. Further study and dialogue will no doubt improve understanding, particularly if it is informed by the very rest and peace symbolized by Sabbath itself.

Sabbath appears to address areas of human need even deeper than the need for physical or emotional rest. Popular naturalistic philosophy is naturally dehumanizing. The "therapeutic society" has contributed modern concepts of self, such as self-identity, self image and self-worth, which attempt to define the self in Cartesian fashion without essential reference or relationship to any "other". Industrialized consumer society tends to assign worth based on either what one produces or what one consumes. Tilden Edwards suggests that in the absence of any understanding of "givenness", human response to such a dehumanizing "isolated sense of self"³⁵ may vacillate between attempts to define ourselves by "driven achievement" or else collapse into "some form of mind-numbing private escape." Sabbath counteracts both. By the cessation of work, humans accept a creaturely identity given by God rather than one achieved by their own striving. As a symbol of the original, perfect, created order and of eschatological finality, Sabbath does not present itself as an escape from reality but as a participation in it.

In addition to human centered reasons for considering Sabbath, a number of biblical concepts provide the basis for much of the rich symbolic significance of Sabbath. The summaries of Torah instruction in Exodus and Deuteronomy provide two rationales for Sabbath

³⁴ In order for Sabbath to be truly sacramental it must involve the "Real Presence" not just an aesthetic experience. Leanne Payne, citing C. S. Lewis, warns of the potential for "the misuse of the imagination" in an "anthropocentric framework" (119-130). Any observance which is merely a "rule" which commands "no imaginative response" is apt to have "its transcendent level . . . sheared off". Leanne Payne, *Real Presence*, 137.

³⁵ Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, 13.

observance. First, because God rested and second, because Israel had been liberated from bondage. These references associate Sabbath with two great theological motifs that span the Bible: Creation and Redemption. These two ideas along with the teaching provided by the prophets and apostles (including Jesus), are the basis for developing a few proposals for understanding Sabbath symbolism. Perhaps the thoughtful and creative use of the Sabbath, as a means of grace, will not only restore a God-given biblical symbol to productive use but also enable Christian ministry to be carried out in a more holistic and competent way.

Aesthetics Of Sabbath

Although there is a natural tendency to think of holy places and holy people, Christianity shares with Judaism the prime significance of historic events understood to be God's holy actions in time. A unique feature of Sabbath is that it addresses time rather than space. Abraham Joshua Heschel observes that most of our human endeavours pertain to ordering and controlling what happens in space, but referring to the "architecture of time" he calls the Sabbath a "palace in time".³⁶ A focus on space makes us all rivals because our material selves occupy unique spaces. We may become possessive about things in space but our use of time will not prohibit anyone else's use of the same time.³⁷ Weekly Sabbath is unique even among the other seasons and festivals since it is the abstract concept of seven that regulates it rather than events in the lunar cycles or the solar seasons.³⁸ Heschel notes that Sabbath is unique in that it is recorded as the first thing made holy by God, before humans or spaces or any material things.

³⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 3-13.

³⁷ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 99.

³⁸ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 10.

Robert Goldenberg suggests that conceptions of the Sabbath are built on two ideas; "the idea that Sabbath ought to be marked by avoidance of the ordinary activities of life, and . . . the idea that such restrictions ought to be joyous. . . . [V]arious combinations of these two ideas, which could easily have been considered contradictory . . . have formed the matrix of Jewish Sabbath observance throughout history." Perhaps in contrast to later strict Sabbatarian Puritans Goldberg notes that "the rabbinic tradition by and large gave more weight to the element of joy and less to the element of restriction".³⁹ If Sabbath connotes primarily the duty to work, even the work of worshipping, some of the aesthetic essence of Sabbath is likely to be lost. On the other hand if Sabbath becomes merely an opportunity for self-centered leisure, it also will lose its sacramental nature. If Sabbath is not received as a paradox it may fail to balance joy and restrictions, freedom and responsibility. Marva J. Dawn suggests that an appropriate attitude toward Sabbath is one of embracing not just choosing. A half hearted or lacklustre approach to any sacrament will likely fail to incorporate its positive aspects into our own lives and not properly represent to the world the grace being symbolized.⁴⁰

Theological Ideas Symbolized By Sabbath

God's Rest Means The Completeness Of Creation

After six days, God's activity of creating resulted in an exceedingly good creation. Then in typical superlative fashion even God's inactivity resulted not just in goodness but in blessing and holiness.⁴¹ Although some theologians have referred to humans as the "crown of creation",

³⁹ Goldenberg, *The Place of Sabbath*, 40-41, citing Isaiah 58:13-14.

⁴⁰ Dawn, *Keeping The Sabbath*, 135-136.

⁴¹ Genesis 2:2-3. 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." Whether or not "blessing" and "hallowing" are seen as final actions before God's rest begins or are seen as the consequence of the beginning of God's resting, there is a sense of

it is probably more correct with Jugen Moltman to think of Sabbath as the "crown of creation". Being blessed by God often carries the idea of being made capable of something such as fruitfulness. The "seven day progression" from sterility to fertility is mirrored in the seven day purity rituals in the biblical priestly tradition.⁴² That the Sabbath has been blessed by God implies that it has the potential to bless others.

Sabbath As Participating In The Paradox Of Faith

The life of faith is a paradox between the initiative of God and the initiative of humans. Attempts to grasp and express it range from Pelagianism to hyper-Calvinism. C. S. Lewis spoke of the difficulty of separating God's part from the human part from the cooperative parts.⁴³ Sabbath provides a way of at least symbolically participating with divinity in both work and rest. Just as God worked for six days, we work; then just as God made the seventh day holy we are allowed to make it holy. What God has done we also do. We are allowed to love the Sabbath because it is what we have in common with God.⁴⁴ We usually think of the Incarnation as God becoming material in order to share with us the material dimension. Sabbath can be thought of as God's invitation to us to share the dimension of time.

Sabbath Symbolizes The Culmination Of History And Human Destiny

Bacchiocchi cites Augustine as seeing the Sabbath as symbolic of both the culmination of world history in "a final Sabbath rest and peace with God" and the "mystical progress of the

culmination, and the glory of completeness and finality. The seventh day in Genesis therefore speaks of the completeness of God's creation.

⁴² Meier, *Sabbath and Purification*, 7.

⁴³ Payne, *Real Presence*, 92-93.

⁴⁴ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 16.

human soul from restlessness into rest in God."⁴⁵ By resting at the end of a week we indicate our anticipation of resting with God when his kingdom comes in its fullness. We also symbolize that our spiritual formation, the creation of the character of Jesus within us, is primarily the work of God, and it may require our stillness as well as our activity.

Sabbath As A Reversal Of The Garden Temptation.

Sabbath is an ongoing token whereby we recognize the sufficiency of God's provision. Refusing to rest may indicate our dissatisfaction and a tendency to look for satisfaction in what God has not provided and to decide for ourselves what is right. In the story of the Garden of Eden it appears the humans had more than adequate food for they could eat from all the trees except one. If the first humans had remained within that limitation, not continuing to work for what was not appropriate for them in a complete creation, they could have remained in the garden. Sabbath can signify ceasing from establishing for ourselves the knowledge of good and evil. Sabbath rest recovers for us the experience of resisting the temptation to think that we know better than God how much we need. By it we restore to human experience what the first humans forsook: contentment with limitations placed on us by God.

The story of the garden indicates that even true un-fallen humanness exists within divine limitations. The contemporary fascination with achieving human potential participates in the impulse of the woman and the man toward the forbidden fruit. Appropriate humanness only exists within divinely imposed restrictions on that potential. Divine concern, both in the Garden of Eden and at the Tower of Babel, was for the limitation of human potential.⁴⁶ When humans are invited to mimic God by abstaining from work on the seventh day, they are invited to reflect

⁴⁵ Cited by Bacchiocchi, "Remembering the Sabbath, 79.

⁴⁶ Bornowsky, Babel and Eden: Patterns Of Sin (Unpublished paper 2003).

that blessedness and holiness are not the result of human striving but rather are associated with the resting of God.

A Reversal Of A Wilderness Temptation.

The story of the manna in Exodus chapter sixteen is a classic reversal of a popular folk saying that attempts to justify greed. Sabbath teaches that God does not "help those who help themselves." Rather, in as much as refusing to rest is a sign of pride, the story serves as an illustration of the principle quoted by the Apostle James that God deliberately resists the proud.⁴⁷ The story of the manna supply⁴⁸ also illustrates that God intends to provide sufficiently. This sufficiency appears to be particularly in order to allow humans to observe Sabbath. A God who allowed no rest for his people would be portrayed as a taskmaster no better than the Egyptians. That the surplus of manna which was saved for non-Sabbath days spoiled, suggests a warning against economic concepts that depend on the human capitalization of surplus. Whatever was gathered in case God didn't provide daily was gathered for corruption. Work that attempted to profit by gathering on Sabbath in violation of the rest was also futile. Either way humans who work with no regard for the cycles of providence are working for futility and waste. By stopping our own endeavours we strengthen our resistance to the temptation of greediness. By ceasing our own work we confess our confidence and contentment in what God provides through six days of work. The social costs to families and society of parents whose work consistently absents them from Sabbath with their families is beginning to be recognized. The idea that more work in aid of greater material culture improves society is being challenged. The story of manna and

⁴⁷ James 4:6.

⁴⁸ Exodus 16.

Sabbath becomes archetypical of the principle that the apparent gain from work out of sync with God becomes corrupt and corrupting.

The Way Of Renunciation (Appropriate Humanness)

There is some irony in the involvement of monasteries in the development of mechanical clocks.⁴⁹ In a lesson which perhaps teaches the importance of evaluating the ramifications of any technology, what was intended assist orderly devotion became in the industrial age a tool which facilitated treating humans like machines. Monasteries may symbolize the renunciation of worldly influence, but the clock in conjunction with the assembly line symbolizes industrial production of worldly goods for worldly gain.

Philo defended the Sabbath to the Greeks and Romans, perhaps in the only terms he felt they would understand, as a refreshment to facilitate better production during the week.

Abraham Heschel believes Philo missed the point.⁵⁰ In Genesis, Sabbath is not a pause for rest in the midst of creation, but a celebration at the completion of creation. Six days of work facilitate the celebration of the seventh not vice-versa. On the other hand although Sabbath is a rest from industry and civilization, it is not a rejection of the value of the work of the six days. Rather than the nullification of the work of civilization it is "the art of surpassing civilization".⁵¹ "On Sabbath we live as it were, independent of technical civilization: we abstain primarily from any activity that aims at remaking or reshaping the things of space. Man's royal privilege to conquer nature is suspended on the seventh day."⁵²

⁴⁹ Bass, *Receiving The Day*, 26.

⁵⁰ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 14.

⁵¹ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 27.

⁵² Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 28-29.

Sabbath provides an opportunity for the exercise of the spiritual attitude and discipline of renunciation. Evangelicals theoretically value the spiritual ideal of "letting go and letting God", but we are also tempted to suppose that the practice of such an ideal is limited to a few risk-taking saints and missionaries. We are more apt to practise the ideals of our broader culture such as self-reliance, efficiency, and hard-work. Our attempts to balance human and divine initiative may tend to leave God's role to the inexplicable as in the common exhortation: "pray as if everything depends on God but work as if everything depends on us." Sabbath appears particularly important after the industrial revolution as an opportunity for Christians to connect the idea that eternal salvation is not by works, with the idea that neither is their weekly or daily salvation. Perhaps one of the unique features of the Sabbath is that when it is both practised and comprehended, it contains its own antidote to being taken advantage of for selfish or utilitarian purposes.

Sabbath As Personal Spiritual Discipline

Spiritual life is more than ministry. Spiritual formation does not occur only through our own efforts, endeavours and work. Sabbath rest symbolizes the possibility that persons and forces beyond our own initiation and effort may be involved in our growth. When we rest on Sabbath we confirm that we do not exist by our own imagination or efforts, that our identity and worth are not dependent on our work. Such insights and values derived from the sacrament of Sabbath, related to our value as creatures, are likely to be carried over as peace and confidence into our regular work days. "The rabbinic Sabbath was thus an attempt to blend elevated religious consciousness with the strict, detailed regulation of behavior . . . that the two together form a framework for a life of piety, even saintliness." Goldenberg suggests "the key to understanding the rabbinic Sabbath is to see how abstention from labour has somehow been

connected with striving for a certain mental state or discipline."⁵³ Goldenberg's description may aptly fit the motivations of many in the various Christian monastic movements.

Sabbath Teaches Theological Ethics

Festivals and ritual observances become offensive to God when the morality of the participants is questionable.⁵⁴ Unimaginative theologians have taken the prophetic rebuke to mean the abrogation of the festivals, but it seems the plainest understanding of what makes festivals offensive is the lack of morality, justice, ethics, etc. in the worshippers. It may be argued that appropriate response is not an abandonment of the thing abused, but a repentance, correction of the attitudes, and restoration to proper use. Although the bad attitudes can turn observances into unholy abominations, the problem is apparently not the observance per se, but the attitude of the persons. Symbolic actions may remain sacramental for those with pure hearts who partake in faith.

Ecclesiological Implications

The thirty-nine rabbinical categories of restricted work are thought by some to be derived from the reiteration of the Sabbath commandment in the context of instructions to build the tabernacle.⁵⁵ In other words keeping Sabbath in the context of building implies abstaining from the work specific to building. In as much as the church is the New Testament version of the place of God's dwelling, an extension of the analogy may be appropriate. In this context Sabbath means the Church does not survive by the ceaseless efforts of her workers. How many Christian

⁵³ Goldenberg, *The Place of Sabbath*, 35-36.

⁵⁴ Citing Amos, Bass, *Receiving the Day*, 109.

⁵⁵ Robert Goldenberg does not find the association convincing. Rather he proposes the thirty-nine activities represent those which are "the indispensable foundations of civilized life as the early rabbis understood them." Summarized as food, clothing, writing and shelter, they represent preparations needed "so that the sacred day can be devoted to the higher activities which these preparations make possible." Goldenberg, *The Place of Sabbath*, 35.

pastors, church planters, evangelists, etc. remember that their ordination to the work of building the church does not revoke Jesus' invitation to rest?⁵⁶

Jesus' story known as "the good Samaritan", and his insistence that spontaneous compassionate healing be allowed on the Sabbath, indicate that appropriate observance includes embracing disruptions, in order to impart the very peace, healing, and liberation that Sabbath speaks of. Pastors and worship leaders are advised that authentic Sabbath observance in regular church meetings will anticipate and incorporate the specific into the general, exception into the rule, and the spontaneous into the planned. Even in the highly ordered Book of Common Prayer, the rubrics for the service of morning prayer allow anyone to ask the whole congregation for prayer, or offer impromptu praises and thanksgiving.

Gathering in a special place around God's word is apparently one of the most ancient activities to be voluntarily added to the biblical commands regarding Sabbath observance. It is possible that a focus on visiting a holy place may take the emphasis away from holy time. Treating worship gathering as an undesirable obligation certainly misses the point. Reluctant, unhappy people are not apt to be able to make anything holy, much less an occasion they consider as contributing to their boredom. Gathering with family and friends for informal but nonetheless special gatherings may be more to the original point of Sabbath.⁵⁷

Doxological Implications

Can we worship by doing nothing ? Heather McKay attempts to argue that the earliest Sabbath and synagogue observances involved the cessation of regular work and the study of

⁵⁶ In Matthew's gospel Jesus' classic offer of rest and yoke bearing is followed by the story of picking grain on the Sabbath. It seems Jesus and his disciples spent time on Sabbath doing the first century equivalent of picking up their welfare cheques.

⁵⁷ Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath*, 117.

Torah but were not really observances that involved worship. She is able to make the argument because she limits worship to action such as prayer or praise which directly address God. The Hebrew preposition that produces the translation "Sabbath *of* the LORD" also allows "the Sabbath *to* the LORD" as in the NRSV. It seems possible however to understand the choice to abstain from work as an offering of worship toward God.

Sabbath symbolism relates well to other sacraments popular among Christians. It is similar to baptism in that it symbolizes renunciation and renewal. It is similar to Eucharist in that it symbolizes the gift of God entering time and is celebrated with thanksgiving recognizing that what is given back to God is sanctified.

Appendix

Suggested Sabbath Observance Practices

"It is not easy to create an effective ritual."⁵⁸

Variety

Sabbath as a symbol is unique in its lack of visual or physical elements. It is not dependent on any material signs, specific postures, or other visual symbols. The symbolic enactment of Sabbath is only made visible by human action, and even here it is the lack of particular action that is the original character of the symbol. The decision by anyone to make Sabbath "holy" (special) therefore is open to the creative incorporation of a great variety of traditional and innovative elements.⁵⁹ Some of the proposals here may be adapted for use as personal observances, others may be more suited for family rituals or as congregational practices.

The most basic command regarding Sabbath is that it be remembered and made holy, that is, set apart for special purposes. The suggestions offered here comprise only a few of the many historic and potential ways Sabbath has been and can be practised. The practices proposed here range from more or less ritual to more or less practical. It is thought that there need not be antithesis between the pragmatic and symbolic, the physical and spiritual, the visible and the invisible. What is practical need not be excluded from what is sacramental.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony*, 112.

⁵⁹ Suggesting the development of truly unique personality is only possible in God. C. S. Lewis notes the monotony of the uniformity enforced by tyrants. Payne summarizes: "Christianity isn't a covenant or a law but it is a life." Payne, *Real Presence*, 75.

⁶⁰ From the scriptures, it is obvious that even appropriate religious actions are nullified by inappropriate attitudes. What is not quite as obvious to many evangelicals is that rabbi Jesus encouraged observances that went beyond the law of Moses. Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of

Rest

There is a paradox in celebrating rest by working; in marking the cessation of activity with an activity. Perhaps this is one of the unique features of Sabbath, that the appropriate sacred act is non-action. Perhaps eastern religions such as Buddhism and philosophic Taoism have more experience with the concept that creation does not depend on human activity to be sustained, and that an appropriate expression of human solidarity with creation is the cessation of human striving.

Borrowing from Judaism?

There may be some debate about whether it is appropriate for Christians to borrow symbolic actions from Judaism.⁶¹ In light of the observation that many symbols and practices accepted by Christians are of non-biblical origin,⁶² there appears little justification to eschew those which have at least been extrapolated from scripture. As noted any rituals which are approached only as outward acts or else perceived to be talismanic become less than sacramental, even those accepted as common such as communion or baptism. Christians intent on honouring God, and guided by the scriptures, are likely to sanctify with their intentions whatever creative actions they incorporate.

Some observant Jews speak of the Sabbath as a Queen or a bride. This idea allows them to prepare for Sabbath with the attitude of preparing to meet a special person, an honoured guest. The day before Sabbath therefore also becomes special as the day of preparation. In addition to

your spices-- mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. [NIV].

⁶¹ If there are questions about the use of even divinely mandated Old Testament practices, such as the Sabbath itself, and difficulty separating the so called ceremonial from moral aspect of such practices, how much more difficulty will there be in incorporating practices which developed in rabbinic but non-canonical traditions?

⁶² Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, The Sacred, And The Arts* ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

avoiding certain regular activities, examples of traditional Jewish observance include lighting candles⁶³ at prescribed times (usually related to sunset times), eating special food, praying special prayers, wearing special clothes and the exchange of blessings between family members. A candle lighting ceremony is perhaps one of the most common Sabbath practices and one easily adapted for observance in families. Even simple personal habits such as making sure one's pockets are empty,⁶⁴ or eating in a room not normally used for meals may be appropriate ways of honouring the day.⁶⁵ It may be important to include some rite that marks passage back into usual "profane time".⁶⁶ Some families pass around aromatic spices with the wish that the savour and atmosphere of Sabbath will linger through the week.

When to Observe and With Whom to Observe

Is it ironic or fitting that debate regarding the celebration of a day for marking time consists of not how to celebrate it, but when? In keeping with the apostolic injunction against judgmentalism regarding observance of days,⁶⁷ it is proposed that the principle of Sabbath, no matter how broadly understood and applied will be more beneficial than no Sabbath at all.

The obligation for God's people to gather for mutual edification has been expediently linked to Sabbath, but is not necessarily related to original Sabbath symbolism. If it is

⁶³ The rabbinic tradition of lighting candles has been adopted by many liturgical traditions for all worship days and services and thus is no longer reserved for specifically for Sabbath. Families who use candles at home only on Sabbath will find it a more "special" indicator. Marva Dawn takes special candles when she travels so she can still mark the day when away from opportunities for other rituals.

⁶⁴ Inspired by the rabbinic care not to violate the restriction on carrying a load, this may easily be transformed into a reminder to cast our burdens on the Lord. Abraham P. Bloch, *The Biblical And Historical Background Of Jewish Customs And Ceremonies* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1980), 128.

⁶⁵ Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, 132.

⁶⁶ A.H. Mathias Zahniser, *Symbol And Ceremony: Making Disciples Across Cultures* (Monrovia: MARC, 1997), 133. Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, 132-133.

⁶⁷ Colossians 2:16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. [NIV]

incorporated into one's Sabbath observance, care may be required that it does not violate primary Sabbath symbolism of freedom from the daily "grind".

Tilden Edwards has adapted many Sabbath elements of Jewish precedent to be practiced by his Christian family on Sunday. Marva Dawn speaks of the need of some to "reschedule" Sabbath observance, and Dorothy Bass offers encouragement to those who must work on normal Sabbath days to somehow mark the day as special, and to consider gathering with others in similar situations for an alternate day of rest.⁶⁸

One of the advantages of Sabbath as a symbol is that it can be appropriated at both personal and corporate levels with varying degrees of strictness and with varying associated advantages and benefits. Sabbath observance by an individual is unlikely to remain hidden in any community, but at its most basic level any individual can choose to observe Sabbath in some way regardless of the choice made by their larger community. Solo Sabbath observance may be better than no Sabbath at all. On the other hand caution is advised regarding the individualistic appropriation of any sacramental aspect of the Church. It is not just the obvious benefit of mutual encouragement resulting from observing Sabbath in groups. "Effective Christian discipling is communal"⁶⁹ The biblical practice of the life of faith always involves the aspect of community.

Sabbath for Compassionate healing.

Although "we ought at all times" to be ready to do works of charity, Jesus' insistence that compassionate healing was proper for the Sabbath, coupled with our own release from regular

⁶⁸ Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath*, 6. Bass, *Receiving The Day*, 70-71.

⁶⁹ Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony*, 22.

responsibilities, provide both motive and opportunity to embrace and be embraced by persons rather than things.⁷⁰

Silence

When the earliest significance of Sabbath as rest is considered, it is difficult to propose a corporate action that signifies inaction. Perhaps an appropriate symbolic act for a group would simply be stillness. Sitting, standing, or kneeling for a period of silence can practically express the idea of the cessation of human activity.⁷¹

Time related call to worship

Several practices have been suggested that are not limited to Sabbath symbolism but that nonetheless speak of the sanctification of time. A possible candidate for marking Sabbath or any "sacred" time in group settings is a call to worship that is apparently common in black churches.⁷² The pastor or celebrant calls the people to worship by an assertion or a question about who the day belongs to. "This is the Day the LORD has made!" It is the peoples' job to respond with at least one fresh testimony of gratitude for whatever blessings are apparent in the present day. This is an act of reflecting on the present time by recognition of God's ownership of it, and providence and gifts within the day.

Often just the sense of participating in something that is ancient provides a sense of solidarity with the great crowd of witnesses. Incorporating the festivals of the church year may achieve this sense of connectedness with historical, cosmic time, and incorporating the biblical

⁷⁰ Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath*, 22-123.

⁷¹ At least one family has revived the Puritan practice of observing silence for a period before corporate worship. Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, 124.

⁷² Citing black church tradition, Bass, *Receiving the Day*, 19.

festivals may serve even better. A simple version of using the ancient to consciously connect is simply praying the Psalms. Dorothy Bass cites the practice of Bonhoeffer to pray the Psalms in his community recognizing they were praying not just personal prayers, but thoughts that belong to God and had been used by his people for millennia.⁷³

The few suggestions here are only examples of how the potent symbolism of Sabbath may begin to be incorporated. Mathias Zahniser asserts that rituals are about helping us to live according to what we believe. They help us bond to the meaning of the gospel. His encouragement to adopt and adapt symbols and ceremonies opens the possibility for both reclaiming practices and discovering new creative and culturally appropriate ways of embracing and being enriched by the observance of Sabbath.⁷⁴

⁷³ Citing Bonhoeffer, Bass, *Receiving the Day*, 22.

⁷⁴ Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony*, 1-220.

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