

Sunday

Fall 2011
m a g a z i n e

Remember that the LORD has said, Six days you shall labor, and shall do your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.



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Over the past three years the Lord's Day Alliance has offered new, highly relevant conferences at Boston University, Wheaton College, and Fuller Theological Seminary; continued its acclaimed Lowndes Sermon Competition; formed new partnerships with organizations like the Boston Theological Institute and the Academy of Preachers; and, continued to produce *Sunday* magazine.

All of these things—and many more like them that we hope to offer—take money to build, launch and sustain.

So, we ask for your financial support by becoming a founding member of the 'Friends of the LDA' in return for your gift of \$25 or more. With your gifts of support we can continue this important ministry and expand beyond what is currently planned.

Please send your contribution today to the Lord's Day Alliance.

Thank you.

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Sunday magazine

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MISSION: The Lord's Day Alliance of the United States exists to encourage all people to receive God's great gift of Sabbath rest and to encourage all Christians to worship the risen Lord Jesus Christ on the Lord's Day—Sunday—that they may be renewed in spirit and empowered to live lives worthy of the Gospel.

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Editor's Journal AN ATTITUDE of GRATITUDE



Three years ago The Lord's Day Alliance embarked on a bold initiative. We began a process of looking at Sunday/Sabbath observance in relation to the other Ten Commandments. For example, rather than seeing the Fourth Commandment, that pertaining to Sunday/Sabbath observance, in isolation, we thought to regard such in light of the Tenth, not to covet. We did this in conference at Wheaton College in October 2009. More recently at Fuller Theological Seminary we looked at the Fourth Commandment in relation to the Sixth, "You shall not murder," and we asked about how Sabbath/Sunday observance can foster a culture of life as opposed to a culture of death.

This issue of *Sunday* picks up on the first of these integrating conferences, gathering up the remarks of three of our keynote speakers from the Wheaton Conference in October 2009. Our focus was on fostering a climate of gratitude rather than allowing for a culture of covetousness. Articles in this issue by Cliff Ragsdale, Bank of America Professor in Business Information Technology at Virginia Tech; Dorothy Bass, Director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith at Valparaiso University; and, John Walton, Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College bring the substance and excitement of that conference back to us today.

Issues of economic disparity and covetousness run through society. Shaping our economic climate are the following realities:

- 50% of all Americans have only 2.5% of the wealth – a wealth gap unseen since the Roaring Twenties. Savings rates are at their lowest since World War II (2.7%). Most people have nothing to save.
- The income tax has been so lowered for the top 1% that even Warren Buffett writes of the need for greater taxation of the wealthy (New York Times: August 14, 2011).

Set this social reality against the ballooning national debt and the struggle between covetousness and an attitude of gratitude becomes all the more harsh.

- The debt is now 89% of Gross Domestic Product, up from 51% in 1988.
- Year after year the government cut taxes and increased spending, funding overseas wars and entitlements at home in unsustainable ways.

Those now ringing the deficit alarm bell include top ranking politicians on both sides of the aisle. A year ago Alan K. Simpson, former Republican Senator from Wyoming, co-chairman of President Obama's bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform along with Democrat Erskine Bowles, North Carolina businessman who served as White House Chief of Staff for Bill Clinton, proposed bold cost-cutting measures with increased taxes in order to preserve the essential features of our social safety net while providing for the long-term financial viability of our country. However, the recent budgetary impasse surrounding raising the debt ceiling and failure to agree on a financial plan to move forward highlighted not only political gridlock but moral embarrassment.

Ryan Messmore, Research Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, has highlighted several moral principles for the American economy (see <http://cpjustice.org/content/economic-justice>). These include the need for a tax system to preserve the common good, a system that does not promote harmful behavior, one that promotes human dignity with a robust social safety net, and one that ensures the well being of future generations. These are all points with which the father of Capitalism, Adam Smith, would have agreed.

In order to create the moral climate necessary for economic life in the 21st century, we must understand such relationships as those pointed to in the Wheaton Conference, the calculus of gratitude set against the lures of covetousness, as we struggle with a common civic life against the challenges of the day.



Rodney Petersen

Rodney Petersen

Rodney L. Petersen
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Executive Director, Boston Theological Institute



the Fourth Commandment and the Tenth: Keeping Sabbath in Consumer Culture



By **Dorothy C. Bass**

I remember the moment I first experienced the allure of the sabbath, and with it the possibility that my Christian faith might be a source of guidance through the time crunch that was my life. It was a Saturday night, and a few of us teachers were sitting around a dinner table. Tomorrow would not be a happy day, we complained. Great piles of papers needed grading, and we had promised our students that we would return them on Monday. “I can’t believe I have thirty essays to read!” one of us whined. “Thirty!” harrumphed another; “I’ve got forty!” Each of us silently computed the number of pages stacked on our desks and sighed. I’ve never been sure whether we were complaining or boasting. Someone listening in might have thought we were competing to see who worked hardest, who was most indispensable, or who was most put upon by the demands of his or her job.

That’s when it hit me. “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.” This was a commandment, one of the ten laws in the basic moral code of Christianity, Judaism, and western civilization, and here we were, hatching plans to violate it. I couldn’t imagine this group sitting around saying, “I’m planning to take God’s name in vain”; “I’m planning to commit adultery”; “I think I’ll steal something.” Yes, we might occasionally break one of the other commandments (“You shall not covet” is an especially difficult one for me), but if we did, we would hardly boast. For reasons not yet clear to me, our approach to the sabbath commandment was different. We had become so captivated by our work, so impressed by its demands upon us and by our own indispensability, that it had simply vanished from our consciousness. We were all in the habit of church-going, to be sure, though sometimes we went hastily and a bit grudgingly, going to the early service to get it out of the way. But we were a long way from keeping the sabbath holy. I began to wonder what that meant, and why it mattered.

This experience propelled me to begin reading and thinking about the sabbath, and before long to become more deliberate in observing it.¹ Very early in this

process, one discipline came to stand out as particularly important. More than twenty years ago I began to abstain from the commercial economy on Sunday: no paying bills, discussing the family budget, doing tax returns, shopping, or making plans to shop. One impetus was the painful self-awareness that when my mind is distracted from the needs of others and the worship of God, I’m probably thinking “what’s the next thing I’m going to buy? Is there enough milk in the refrigerator? Don’t we need new drapes in the living room?” Many observant Jews, I knew, do not carry money on the sabbath. How might I, likewise, demonstrate in a concrete way my professed belief that God is the Creator and Provider, not I? Could I deliberately refrain from coveting my neighbor’s house and household appliances? Could I more purposefully appreciate creation and its bounty without simultaneously plotting to consume it? Could I consciously let go of the shopping list in my brain, especially during worship but also throughout the day? These seemed like important steps toward freedom for this middle-class child of the American suburbs.

To explore the relationship between the Fourth Commandment and the Tenth is to delve into the mysteries of human desire and God’s promised transformation of human desire. There is hardly a biblical story that does not involve desire in one form or another, and across the centuries the church has tried to respond, in words and in its lived patterns of life, to God’s law and God’s grace in ways that receive the transformation God promises and provides. Again and again, the church has argued about how to do that most faithfully. Vowed poverty or weekly tithes? All things in common or a frugal and generous lifestyle? Through practices such as these, lived out across centuries and continents, communities of Christian people have attempted to turn our desires to God, to respond to God’s Word, and to live out the transformation that is ours in Christ. And in the midst of such practices, some have been changed, as different habits and ways of seeing the world

take hold not only in the head but also in the body. All human beings become who we are through what we do and don’t do with members of our families and communities. And through participation in practices that are shaped as responses to God’s justice and mercy, Christian human beings are formed for the new life God has in store for us, not for our own sake but for the sake of others and all creation.

Sabbath keeping—the setting aside of one day for rest and worship, for Christians usually the Lord’s Day, the day of resurrection—is a formative practice in just this way: it is a practice that directly engages practitioners at the most fundamental level of desire. As the great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, the sabbath takes us unto “a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”² Jews and Christians alike know, at least in the abstract, that being is more important than having, that sharing is better than controlling, and that harmony is preferable to domination. But how does this knowing really take hold of us? Rabbi Samuel Dresner has put it well: “One can never truly know the inward feeling of the Sabbath without the outward form. The Sabbath is not a theory to be contemplated, a concept to be debated, or an idea to be toyed with. It is a day, a day filled with hours and minutes and seconds . . . [It is] a pattern of living.”³ Sabbath keeping lodges the knowledge of God in the actual rhythms of life, and eventually in our bones.

In Christian theology, desire is understood to be an intrinsic element of who we are as human beings. Few biblical stories get very far before desire (often distorted desire) intrudes to shape the course of events. Thus I am reluctant to say that the desires people experience today are stronger than the desires of those who have gone before us. However, the impact of consumer culture in its many dimensions on what we desire is huge, and this at least gives a distinctive shape to the coveting that goes on today. Advertising is ubiquitous, and shopping is available around the

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Rabbi Samuel Dresner

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clock, both online and in town. One of the items for sale is credit, which lures the incautious or the insatiable into spending whose perils have come more fully to light since the financial crisis of 2008. A vicious cycle of aspiration—"keeping up with the Joneses"—flames desires for consumer goods even when we have neither the need nor the room for more.⁴ Indeed, when constant growth is the assumed economic goal, unquenchable human desire for ephemeral things is seen as both necessary and good.

A consumer-driven state of restlessness leaves little room for sabbath rest. In a fascinating recent book, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, the Catholic theologian William T. Cavanaugh explores the relationship between this kind of restlessness—the insatiable desire for more and more goods that is constantly stirred in consumer culture—and the kind of restlessness Augustine famously described at the beginning of his *Confessions*, the longing of the restless heart for God. "The key to true freedom is not just following whatever desires we happen to have, but cultivating the right desires," Cavanaugh insists.

As creatures in time, according to Augustine, we are passionate, desiring creatures, and this is good. The constant renewal of desire is what gets us out of bed in the morning. We desire because we are alive. Created things, however, though essentially good, always fail fully to satisfy because they are not ultimate. They are time-bound, not infinite. Created things fall apart, and we lose interest in them over time. They die. We die. Only God is eternal. Only God stops the decay of time. In the words of Augustine's famous prayer to open the *Confessions*, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." The restlessness of consumerism causes us constantly to seek new material objects. For Augustine, on the other hand, the solution to our dissatisfaction is not the continuous search for new things but a turn toward the only One who can truly satisfy our desires. This does not require the rejection of all earthly things,

but an ability to see that all things point to God.⁵

But how are we to nurture this ability? I believe that the sabbath provides part of the answer. A Lord's Day rich in rest and worship sets human desire in a new frame—and over time provides a communal space for the transformation of desire, from the desire for things to the desire for God.

The rest of this paper will expand upon this claim. Before proceeding, though, I must offer some disclaimers.

First, the transformation of desire for which we yearn never occurs fully in this life. Further, it is God who effects the transformation, not our own good behavior even in keeping sabbath. Even so, contemporary Christians can find ways of participating more consciously and deliberately in the transformation God is bringing to pass in us and in the world. We do this by engaging in Christian practices known to other Christian communities over time, practices that open communal space in our cluttered lives for attention to the active presence of God in Christ. Sabbath is such a practice.

Second, we need to be always aware of how vulnerable even good practices are to being distorted by cultural captivities distinct to our moment in history, as well as by human sin in its many other forms. The practice of keeping sabbath, like every other practice, should be embraced only in humility. The Larger Catechism of Martin Luther includes a trenchant comment on the commandment against coveting that might well apply to pious sabbath keepers in particular: "This last commandment therefore is given not for rogues in the eyes of the world, but just for the most pious, who wish to be praised and be called honest and upright people, since they have not offended against the former commandments. . . . and therefore God expresses it in plain words: Thou shalt not covet, etc. For God would especially have the heart pure, although we shall never attain to that as long as we live here; so that this commandment will remain, like all the rest, one that will constantly accuse us. . . ."⁶

Humbly, then, I offer a few thoughts on the sabbath and the transformation of desires in a consumer culture.

Even in a society stuffed with things, coveting arises from the fear of scarcity. In opposition, Sabbath displays God's abundance, an abundance that turns out to be of a different order than the supersizing of consumer goods. For Christians at worship, one sign of this abundance is given at the Lord's Supper, where there is enough for everyone, and everyone gets the same amount. We are met in our true need, and we are fed in body and spirit. Another sign is our music—there are no limits to the number who can join in, and all our songs reminds us of the communion of saints who sing with us.⁷

In a *New Yorker* article a few years ago, the poet Noelle Oxenhandler offered a stimulating image of how a sabbathless, 24/7/365 way of life can profoundly misshapen assessments of the identity and needs of human beings. Oxenhandler asked readers to compare two institutions that exist in every town, lit by "the same shrill, twenty-four-hour light, the doors that never shut, the windowless air, and a counter or front desk manned by the same rotation of pale clerks with their free-floating body clocks." The two are the 7-Eleven and the emergency room. "What does it mean that the 7-Eleven and the emergency room are atmospherically similar?" she asks.

The emergency room is the true domain of necessity, the place where there is no drawing back before the bleeding wound, the broken bone, the last-minute contractions. But a Pop-Tart, a six-pack of Coke in the middle of the night? We have come to believe that convenience is necessity. What begins as slogan, words sprayed on the surface of things—billboards, labels, magazines—becomes visceral, and if we can't find it we feel a knot of anxiety, frustration. We are thrown back on a world that has its own rhythms, that doesn't immediately bend to meet our yen to eat a candy bar or have a shirt pressed—or even our more serious needs. . . . Our own definition of a world in order is one in which all goods and services are always immediately

available. This is the paradisiacal aspect of the mall, and it is our version of eternity: seasonless, ever-present, abundant.⁸

This meditation lays bare the bad eschatology of consumer culture. Life in the 24/7 world Oxenhandler describes "has its own rhythms" and needs. Inhabiting this world uncritically—accepting its promise that we can have what we want when we want it—forms persons in bad religion. It leads us to see the world as something that it is not.

Christian faith, on the other hand, puts us face to face with our limitations and finitude, indeed with death itself. In worship on the Lord's Day we celebrate the new life of Easter, yes—but always, also, we remember the Cross of Christ, the wounds that mark even his risen body, the human sin (our own) taken up in the Cross, and the human deaths (our own, the deaths of loved ones, and even deaths we have caused, directly or indirectly) displayed and overcome in the Cross. It is crucial always to notice and name the fact that the paradise for which we truly yearn is not foreshadowed in the mall. Rather, paradise comes only in and after brokenness, suffering, and solidarity with those in need.

A pastor I know jokes that he should rename his church "Saint John's by the mall," because that's where parishioners head the moment church lets out. He wonders how many householders—people like me—have been preparing their shopping lists during his sermons. This pastor's conclusion, and mine, is this: helping contemporary Christians to live out the freedom that is theirs in Christ requires more than proclamation. We also need concrete, communal practices within which to live out our freedom, practices like sabbath keeping.

Recent scholarship suggests that the culture of consumerism has shaped contemporary Christians and our churches at a far deeper level than we can easily see and remedy. In a fascinating history of Sunday in American culture over the past two centuries, Alexis McCrossen argues that for more than a century Sunday has been both a "holy day" and a "holiday," a day given to secular leisure. This book is not entitled "*from holy day to holiday,*"

and the story it tells is not one of increasing diversity and advancing secularism. Instead, this is a story of the increasing commercialization of everyday life—a process that was driven by fervent economic expansion and by the individual and national ambition characteristic of American culture. Cities developed, factories hummed, workers had money to spend on their day off, and a rich market for amusement parks, sporting events, and entertainment emerged. Ironically, Sunday gained symbolic status as a day free of work, even as Sunday became a day of work for the ever-larger number of workers who staffed the relaxation of others.⁹ This cycle accelerated in the late twentieth-century service economy. "Cooking anything is out," a *New York Times* columnist declared in 1996. "On my perfect Sunday, others toil for me."¹⁰

The implication of McCrossen's argument for those of us who seek the festive and restful experience of Sunday, Lord's Day, Sabbath, is this: we must come to terms not so much with the faceless secularism of mass culture as with our own consumerism—our desire, which is both intrinsic and culturally cultivated, to be served and entertained. In fact, some would say that certain Christian congregations cater to Sunday churchgoers precisely by serving and entertaining them. We might ask, is it possible that much contemporary churchgoing is itself a form of leisure activity, one choice among many in a service economy?

Indeed, in this culture of choice, consumerism increasingly sets the terms by which our desires are formed—even for churchgoing Christians. Vincent Miller, a brilliant Roman Catholic theologian who, like Cavanaugh, is relatively new on the theological scene, has written incisively about how deeply the assumptions of consumer culture now permeate American religious life as a whole. The cover of his book *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* pictures an assortment of the material things that get marketed to people of faith—tee shirts, candles, little china curios, and more. In the current context, Miller argues, churchgoing itself can become a commodity to be

The point of the sabbath, is not just to take a break. The point is to be changed—to become a people that cherishes creation as God's good gift



consumed for its entertainment value, as efficiently as possible. But the deeper argument of the book is that consumer culture has developed in most contemporary people a deeply-engrained, more or less taken-for-granted way of seeing the world that is so powerful that merely preaching against it has little effect. Consumer culture can co-opt almost anything—the cross becomes jewelry, simplicity becomes a product line, love becomes a greeting card. If the church is to engage this culture, Miller insists, and if the church is to form disciples able to resist its false promises and become witnesses to God's shalom, the church must engage consumerism at the level of practice. Doing so will mean nurturing among the community of faith practices that anchor our beliefs in our real, embodied lives.¹¹

Sabbath keeping is one of those practices, but there are others as well.¹² Craig Dykstra, a leading theologian of Christian practices, directly undercuts any consumerist appropriation of practices as feel-good activities. "Christian practices are not activities we do to make something spiritual happen in our lives," he insists. "Rather, they are patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us, and through us to others."¹³ Christian practices, far from being the isolated and isolating activities of an exclusive community, are given to Christian people so that we might become beacons and agents of God's justice, mercy, and love for all. The Christian practice of keeping sabbath does not necessarily offer balance and self-fulfillment, no matter what we time-crunched mortals might wish. Instead, it allows faithful people to practice the freedom with which Christ has set us free, expanding our capacity to understand ourselves and the world as belonging not to the gods of the market, but to God the Creator and Lord of all that is. It sets human desire in a new

frame—and over time provides a communal space for the transformation of desire, from the desire for things to the desire for God.

One Sunday at noon, my then twelve-year-old daughter received a very appealing invitation. A friend and the friend's parents wanted her to go along for an afternoon at the mall. Sunday afternoons were relaxing times for us, and at that age our kids sometimes spent them with friends. But the mall? As my daughter knew, I don't shop on Sundays. I said that she couldn't go.

"But Mom, I won't buy anything," she pleaded. "I'll just look." When I did not give in to her pleas, she stormed for a few minutes in her disappointment, first at me and then alone. But after a little while, we had one of our best conversations ever. What kinds of feelings are stirred up in us when we "just look" at the displays at the mall? We start to want things; but do we need them? Is this wanting good for us and for others? If we were poor, how would we experience the mall?

My daughter and I returned to this conversation several more times as she grew up. Neither of us withdrew from all contact with the mall by any means. I do think, however, that we helped one another to visit it equipped with a degree of spiritual independence from its gaudy promises and to grow in concern for those who are poor, for those who labor in unjust conditions, and for the earth from which consumer goods ultimately come and to which they must eventually be returned. It is this sort of independence that keeping sabbath can help to form. Although I have yet to develop the full Christian freedom for which I yearn, both my daughter and I, now in different cities, continue to accept the church's invitation to enjoy a day of worship and rest each Sunday, for this practice is one that can only grow strong and do its work in and on us when we practice it with others.

I'll end with a powerful image from Cavanaugh's *Being Consumed*. In the current cultural climate, he notes, much of what passes for Christianity "is addressed to fulfilling the spiritual needs of individual consumers of religion." Even the presence of Jesus in the Mass or at the

Lord's Supper can become "another kind of commodity to be appropriated for the benefit of the individual user," helping us to cope or offering relief from individual stress. The Sacrament resists this cooptation, however. When we receive the body of Christ (bread), we also become members of the body of Christ (the church). "The act of consumption is thereby turned inside out: instead of simply consuming the body of Christ, we are consumed by it," Cavanaugh writes. And what's more, in becoming part of this body, we discover that we are called to give ourselves away to others, loving and serving our neighbors as we have been loved and served by God in Christ.¹⁴

My friend, Pastor Susan Briehl, has written a beautiful Communion hymn that puts this insight in the mouths of the congregation as song. The final stanza is:

*Send us now with faith and courage
to the hungry, lost, bereaved.*

*In our living and our dying, we
become what we receive:*

*Christ's own body, blessed and broken,
cup o'erflowing, life outpoured,*

*Given as a living token of your world
redeemed, restored.¹⁵*

Amid the 24/7 rhythms of the global marketplace, the seven-day pattern of rest and worship invites us into the presence of God, where we and our desires are sometimes transformed. The point of the sabbath, then, is not just to take a break. The point is to be changed—to become a people that cherishes creation as God's good gift, and that opposes slavery in all its forms, and that lives in the knowledge that life is stronger than death. The point is to worship God, to receive the nourishment of the Word, and to be sent out to spend not only our money but our very selves in service to God and for the good of the world God so loves. ■

Endnotes

- 1 I have written about this topic and told some of these same stories in my book, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (Jossey-Bass, 2000).
- 2 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 3.
- 3 Samuel H. Dresner, *The Sabbath* (Burning Bush Press, 1970), 21.
- 4 Douglas A. Hicks, *Money Enough: Everyday Practices for Living Faithfully in the Global Economy* (Jossey-Bass, 2010), 35-53.
- 5 William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Eerdmans, 2008), 49.
- 6 Martin Luther, *The Larger Catechism* (trans. F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau, 1921), posted by Project Wittenberg, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/catechism/web/cat-08.html>
- 7 Note David F. Ford's interpretation of the "singing self" in Ephesians (especially 5:18-21). Ford argues that faithful singing communicates God's "abundance" and embodies the transformation that comes with salvation in Christ; see *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 107-136.
- 8 Noelle Oxenhandler, "Fall from Grace: How Modern Life Has Made Waiting a Desperate Act," *New Yorker* (June 16, 1997), 65-68.
- 9 Alexis McCrossen, *Holy Day, Holiday: The American Sunday* (Cornell University Press, 2000).
- 10 Lena Williams, "The Perfect Summer Sunday," *The New York Times* (July 7, 1996).
- 11 Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (Continuum, 2004).
- 12 My colleagues and I explore a set of such practices, including keeping sabbath, in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Jossey-Bass, 1997; revised edition, 2010). For more on Christian practices, see www.practicingourfaith.org.
- 13 Craig R. Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Geneva Press, 1999), 66.
- 14 Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 54-55.
- 15 Susan R. Briehl, "By Your Hand You Feed Your People," hymn 469 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

Forgetting Egypt and Remembering Sabbath

By Chris Hughes

Text: Exodus 5:1-9

2010 Lowndes Sermon Competition first place sermon

I want to confess to something that has become a bad habit since starting divinity school. I have married friends for the first time. And I find that more often than not, when I want to learn something about my friends' significant others, I ask one simple question, "What do they do?" – as in, "What is their job?" or "How do they support you in your crazy endeavor to pursue a theological education?" It's a harmless question and I'm just making conversation on the way to the bigger questions such as, "How did you all meet?" or "How long have you been married?" or "How loud do they snore?" These are the really important questions that tell more about who they are than just what they do. There are many reasons why I ask what they do but the fact remains that embedded in my simple question is a very deep and haunting motif in United States culture: that a human is defined by what they do.

You'll have to forgive me for this mistake but I think it might be a product of my environment. I don't know what I expected going into seminary. But I thought that it would be something like a school of Zen Mastery, where professors sit around on pillows, and meditate while students ask each other things like, "Are walls meant to keep people out or to keep people in?" Sadly, I'm here to report that this is not true and that more than anything, seminary is a constant reminder that professors are concerned with one thing only: the final product of my work. They don't care about how much thought went into it, or that I was really proud of it, or that it was the most work I've ever had to put forth in my entire life. After a semester spent writing 115 pages, reading eleven books of the Hebrew Bible, and reading about 1500 pages of spiritual formation, church/state relations, Old Testament commentary and theology, I am ready for a break from *doing*.

What is it about us that we equate humanness with this element of *doing*? Why do we ask each other what we do as if it is the bottom line in defining our entire existence? Do our occupations connect us to God, to creation, and to each other, or is this connection created some other way? And what exactly does being human really mean?

If God appeared to me in a fiery bush, I'm certain that would be one of my first questions. But it wasn't Moses'. Instead Moses asks for God's name. I think he was hoping that the name of God would somehow reveal God's character, or at least tell a little bit about God's purposes and then maybe Moses could figure out humanity's purpose based on that. And Moses gets both. 'I am who I am' or 'I will be who I will be.' God is *being*. It's as though God is saying outright, "I will not always be a shrub on fire – I will be – a slew of plagues, a pillar of fire, a strong wind that parts the seas, a booming thundercloud on top of a mountain, a soft whisper...a young trouble-making rabbi. I will be who I will be and I will be with you." God has purposes – "The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:9-10 NRSV) It's clear that whatever is going on in Egypt is against God's

purposes. It confirms Moses' gut feeling when he intervened on behalf of that Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian. Moses must have known murdering the Egyptian was wrong, but he must have also known that slavery was wrong.

And so Moses goes to Pharaoh, hoping to gather more clues for what it really means to be human. Inspired and yet timid, tracking mud all over the palace floors from his dusty sandals, Moses approaches the ruler of the most expansive, technologically advanced, and wealthy empire the world had ever seen. "Let my people go so that they may celebrate a festival to Yahweh in the wilderness." Moses, charged with the liberation of the entire nation of Israel, asks Pharaoh for a Labor Day weekend. Pharaoh refuses. He doesn't recognize this God of rest, and doesn't even recognize the name – 'I am.' And so Pharaoh does what he knows best, and punishes them to make bricks without providing the straw.

The way this chapter is written is extremely haunting. Chapter five begins, "Thus says the LORD, God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may worship me,' and it ends, "Thus says Pharaoh, 'I will not give you straw...but your work will not be lessened.'" God wants them to leave so they can rest and worship, but Pharaoh wants them to stay so they can work. To Pharaoh, the bricks are the worship. This is confrontation not only between Moses and Pharaoh, but also between God and a little g 'god,' and with the competing ideologies of *doing*, and, *being*. It's clear that Egypt represents something very wrong – where people are valued for the bricks they make, where empires are built on injustice, and where technology is used to maintain a system of oppression rather than to liberate. Pharaoh is not just an evil person with the wrong understanding of humanity. He is the product of an entire system built on a misunderstanding of our purpose. Moses goes to the most powerful political leader in the world to ask him about human purpose and is denied. That's because Egypt isn't built on some connection between God, creation, or each other. It's built on bricks, whether there is straw to make them or not.

If we're not careful, we'll think that we're too distant from Pharaoh, and that we've learned from all his mistakes. But there are Egypts all around us, and plenty of Pharaohs to rule them. We haven't moved on from maintaining our empires on the backs of slaves – we're just a lot better at hiding it. In our world today, as I am speaking, 27 million people around the world live in a state very much like slavery – some in the worst forms imaginable in child prostitution, or human trafficking. Some are working hours longer than we can imagine making the clothes on our backs, or grinding bricks into powder for construction work. Let us not forget the 1.1 billion people on our planet who made it through today on the equivalent of \$1, while the 400 richest Americans are worth an average of \$3.9 billion.

The problem with Egypt is that over time, you actually believe Pharaoh. The Hebrews get the news of Pharaoh's decree, and as Moses is leaving the palace they actually hurl insults at him for giving them more work, rather than recog-

nizing the God who has heard their cry. They forget that God had something else in mind for humanity.

God must go through the powerful and creative act of liberating Israel from oppression and bring them out to Sinai. And it is here where God begins teaching Israel a new way to be human. At Sinai, God helps them forget Egypt and remember Eden. Because there must be something in creation, something in the beginning that tells us what our purpose is. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth..."

God said, "Let there be light," and made the day and the night. God said, "Let there be a dome to cover the earth," and made the sky. God separated the dry land from the seas and filled it with trees. And there was evening and there was morning, the first, second, and third day. God said, "Let there be lights in the sky to separate the days and the nights, and the seasons, and the years." Then God made the sun and the moon and the stars. God said, "Let there be animals," – birds, and swarms of living creatures, fish, and every creature that creeps. Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image." And there was evening and morning, the fourth, fifth, and sixth day.

God calls forth life, day by day, and out of the formless void and darkness God makes paradise. It's a beautiful story and I bet you can recite it almost line by line. But I think we get lost in the familiar rhythms and we miss the peculiarities of this passage. Did you even hear it? Because I didn't hear it the first twenty years I heard this passage either. "There was evening, and morning, the sixth day." But we say that a day is morning, and then evening. Either the author doesn't know what constitutes a full calendar day, or there is something else being said about creation. In the Jewish tradition, the Sabbath actually begins on Friday evening, and ends on Saturday at sundown. Is Sabbath somehow embedded in all of creation? Did God create rhythms, patterns, and cycles for life to follow – ways for things to die and be born again, ways for creatures to gather and rest, even find harmony? God creates with a specific purpose in mind – that everything is in balance. We see this in the seasons. Trees burst forth with wonderful life on their branches in spring, and then die a vibrant death in autumn, and their trunks slumber through winter.

And finally the seventh day, God ceased to work. God blessed it, and declared it holy. "Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created." Did you hear it this time? The last stanza does not end with the familiar refrain, "There was evening, and there was morning." God does not close this day.

God finishes, and rests – the first Sabbath. God sleeps in until noon and then lounges around in his pajamas. The Heavenly Mother turns off her cell phone, unplugs the computer, and takes a walk with her kids. She takes it all in – the leaves, the grass, the joyous laughter, the simple essence of being with her loved ones. And finally God lays down on the grass and stares up at the stars until he falls asleep. By not closing this day God opens up the possibility that everything in history might know the harmony of Sabbath. If we take this seriously, and if we take it to mean that we are not just some by-product of evolutionary processes, but rather something special, something bound to the very creation from which we emerged, then we must realize that Sabbath is more than just a gathering at church. Sabbath is a reminder of what hap-

pens when we forget that we belong to God. It's a constant reminder that if we take advantage of our world, or our brothers and sisters, then we get further away from God. It tells us what it means to be a human in God's world.

I believe that's why it's here, at Sinai, where God has never been closer to a group of people, that God gives the Ten Commandments to tell Israel what it means to be human again. With the commandments, God is saying remember who you are, remember who God is, and remember that each of you is created in my image. And tying it all together in the middle of the ten is the one which reminds us most of all what it means to be human.

"Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." Six days you shall labor but the seventh you shall not do any work. I don't know exactly what 'created in the image of God' means. But I think it might be a reminder of a God who creates, and then rests, and a God who took Sabbath because God is defined by being, not by doing. I don't mean to make God sound like some drifting, wayward hippy, but I do mean to suggest that God is purposeful with Sabbath. Sabbath is a reminder. Sabbath is God saying that this is not Egypt and bricks are not what I created you for. Sabbath tells us that no matter how high we stack the bricks, with straw or without, they will crumble. Sabbath is a reminder that we are human *beings*, not human *doings*.¹

I don't always know what Sabbath looks like and I'm sure there are many tired ministers who will tell you that it is not what happens on Sunday mornings. But maybe Sabbath looks something like this: Wayne Muller writes, "Jules and Olivia are in their fifties, and even though their children are grown, they love to celebrate Shabbos. Every Friday night, before the Sabbath meal, they draw a warm bath, and together, take off their clothes to bathe. This is their ritual cleansing, part of their marriage covenant, preparation to receive the Sabbath bride. But more than this, it is also a time for intimacies, and confession...they put a hand to the other's heart, and ask if there is anything they need to say, any confession, something lingering in the heart that, left unsaid, would hinder a full and joyful Sabbath."² They do something that reminds them of who they are. They touch one another's heart and feel it beat against the bone of their chest. They sense skin, breath, heart, blood, spirit, and the entire human experience, all in one touch. They are connected to creation, and to the Creator. They are reminded that they are human beings, above all. And maybe, just maybe, they experience all the wonder and beauty of what God intended when God called us to Sabbath. Let that be our picture for Sabbath. Amen.

Endnotes

¹ Rob Bell, *Everything is Spiritual* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), DVD.

² Wayne Muller, *Sabbath* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998), 198.

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the Rights and Privileges of Christian Worship

Introduction

The fourth commandment directs people to observe the Sabbath based on God's rest in Genesis 1. Throughout human history interpreters of Scripture have struggled to work out the implications of this directive. What constitutes rest? What activities are ruled out? Part of the difficulty is that the Bible offers little detail as it tends more toward vague generalizations. Furthermore, most of the statements are negative (what one should not do) rather than positive (approved or even mandated activities).

Interpretations of the Decalogue prior to the surfacing of ancient Near East literature were very vague about the fourth commandment. The command to observe the Sabbath was generally seen as prescribing a human rest that joined with the divine, thus sharing in his rest from work on the seventh day. Alternatives are even less specific about what the Sabbath is intended to accomplish beyond simply commemorating God's acts in history. A minority position interprets the Sabbath as an expression of God's humanitarian concern for the well-being of his creatures, and to this idea we will eventually return. For several decades it was popular to posit ancient Near Eastern precursors to Sabbath observance. But it is now widely acknowledged that no such observance has yet been found. The key to understanding the Sabbath rest for people is found in the Sabbath rest for Yahweh on the seventh day of creation as the command in Exodus tells us, so we must first turn our attention to Genesis 1.

Significance of the Seventh day in the Genesis creation account

It is evident as we peruse commentaries on Genesis and consider the history of interpretation associated with the seventh day of the creation week that interpreters don't really know what to do with it. More often than not it is treated as a theological footnote extraneous to the work of creation. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it is the most significant element of the creation narrative, but we need help from the ancient world to understand how and why.

Anyone in the ancient world, Israelite, Canaanite, Egyptian, Babylonian—anyone, could have read the account of the seventh day and made an immediate observation of what would have been obvious and transparent to them: This is a temple text. We would be baffled at their assessment—what in the world would give them that idea? Easy: God rests. In the ancient world, gods rest in temples and temples were built explicitly and most importantly to provide a place for deity to rest. If deity is resting, it is a temple text. It would not be odd for this to be a temple text, because temples were viewed as central to the cosmos, symbols of the cosmos, and the control room of the cosmos. The building of a temple is sometimes the conclusion of a creation account. I have elsewhere developed the idea that in Genesis 1 the cosmos is portrayed as a temple and that the whole point of the narrative is to relate how God went about organizing the cosmos as his temple. Naturally when it is complete he takes up his rest in it. This is the most important element in the creation account because if the point is that the cosmos is God's temple, it would be evident to anyone that it cannot function as a temple if God is not in it. The other six days are only the preparation for the seventh when God's resting in the cosmic temple brings all of his purposes into reality.

The concept of divine rest can, in turn, be elucidated by the ancient Near Eastern literature. The rest, while it represents disengagement from any process of establishing order (whether through conflict with other deities or not), is more importantly an expression of engagement as the deity takes his place at the helm to maintain an ordered, secure and stable cosmos. His rest is therefore an expression of his kingship. In the Babylonian creation account Enuma Elish, the god Marduk's intentions are stated, once he has established order in the cosmos:

*A house I shall build, let it be the abode of my pleasure.
Within it I shall establish its holy place,
I shall appoint my (holy) chambers,
I shall establish my kingship.*

Neils-Erik Andreasen concludes, "We can say then that the gods seek rest, and that their rest implies stability for the world order. The gods rest because they want to see the world ordered." He sees a reflection of this same concept in Psalm 132:13-14:

*For the Lord has chosen Zion,
He has desired it for his dwelling:
"This is my resting place for ever and ever;
Here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it."*

Verses 15-18 conclude the Psalm enumerating all that God will provide from his throne as he assures the stability of the king and the people. The order in the cosmos is sustained not by God's being inactive, but precisely by his continued activity, particularly his role as ruler. Rest is an expression of his kingship.

In the OT the people work for their own benefit and provision, rather than to meet the needs of God or to do his work for him as was the view in the ancient Near East. They are directed to share the rest of God on the Sabbath, not to participate in it *per se*, but in order to recognize his work of bringing and maintaining order. His control is represented in his rest and is recognized by yielding for the day their own attempts to provide for themselves.

Understanding of the Sabbath in relation to Genesis

Given this view of Genesis 1, we get a new way to think about the Sabbath. If God's rest on the seventh day involved him taking up his presence in his cosmic temple (which has been ordered and made functional) so that he is now ready to run the cosmos, our Sabbath rest can be seen in a different light. Obviously, God is not asking us to imitate his Sabbath rest by taking the functional controls. I would suggest that instead he is asking us to recognize that he is at the controls, not us. When we "rest" on the Sabbath, we recognize him as the author of order and the one who brings rest to our lives and world. We take our hands off the controls of our lives and acknowledge him as the one who is in control. Most importantly this calls on us to step back from our work-a-day world—those means by which we try to provide for ourselves and gain control of our circumstances. Sabbath is for recognizing that it is God who provides for us and is the master of our lives and our world. We are not imitating him in the Sabbath observance, we are acknowledging him in tangible ways. God's rest is a reflection of the fact that he has brought order to the cosmos and the result of that is that he is firmly at the controls. Our rest is also a reflection of the same fact and the result is that we acknowledge that he is firmly at the controls. We will see the implications of this worked out in Deuteronomy to which we now turn.

Deuteronomy and the Spirit of the Law

As we make the transition from Genesis to Deuteronomy, it is essential that we understand what Deuteronomy is doing (its purpose) and how it is doing it (its structure). Most important to understanding the structure of the book of Deuteronomy is the logic of organization of the stipulations section (6-26). Over the centuries scholars have struggled to identify principles of organization that would give some order or logic to these chapters, but they have generally experienced only frustration in the attempt. In 1979 a breakthrough came in the landmark article of Stephen Kaufman suggesting that chapters 12-26 could be divided to correlate with the Ten Commandments. Subsequently the correlation was expanded to include chapters 6-11 and viewed not just as a literary framework, but as demonstrating an intent to address the spirit of the law. This approach offers the long-sought explanation of the choice and arrangement of the legal material and is significant for informing us about the interpretation of the Decalogue in general and the Sabbath in particular.

Categories and literary structure

Though the commandments are addressed in order from 1 to 10 in Deuteronomy 6-26, the grouping of the legal material suggests four general topical issues: authority, dignity, commitment, and rights and privileges. Commandments 1-4 address these four issues as they pertain to relationship with God; commandments 5-10 address these same four issues as they pertain to relationship among human beings.

Parallelism of #4 with #10 in Deuteronomy; Rights and Privileges

God has a right to receive honor from Israel in recognition of his work in creation (Exod. 20:11) and in gratitude for his delivering Israel from Egypt (Deut. 5:15). But that is not the limit of God's claim on his people. Because he is the source of their goods as well as of their freedom, it is appropriate for the Israelites to dedicate goods to him and to offer goods and freedom to others in his name. All the legislation of this section suggests ways that this can be done, thus moving beyond the issue of the Sabbath, which is only one example of the honor that is God's right and his people's privilege.

Commandment 4 speaks of God's right to be acknowledged as the one who is at the controls of the cosmos and our lives (shown through Creation and Exodus).

Deuteronomy 14:22 - 16:17 addresses commandment four by delineating ways that we show gratitude to God as the source of goods and freedom. As the one who controls the cosmos he provides for us and

as the one who controls history he protects and delivers his people. His control is foremost and it needs to be acknowledged.

- **Gratitude to God through the Tithes:**
Deut 14:22-29 - giving a portion of one's goods back to God in gratitude
- **Kingdom work of providing for others as God has provided for us:**
Deut 15:1-3 – no payment of long term debts expected in fallow year
Deut 15:4-11 – willingly lending to the poor
Deut 15:12-18 – six year limit to debt slavery
- **Sacrifices and Festivals that acknowledge God's role in history and agriculture:**
Deut 15:19-23 – Firstling sacrifice
Deut 16:1-8 – Passover
Deut 16:9-12 – Feast of Weeks and First Fruits
Deut 16:13-15 - Feast of Booths

As the section draws to a close we find the statement of the general principle of gratitude: No one should appear before the Lord empty-handed (Deut 16:17). These give us an idea of what Deuteronomy understands as some of the implications of Sabbath.

Commandment 10, the parallel to commandment four, admonishes against coveting – desiring something that does not belong to us; wanting that which we have no right to have. It therefore discusses what rightfully belongs to others. Just as we acknowledge God's right to our time and goods because he is in control (Commandment 4), so we acknowledge the rights of other people. The legislation surrounding this commandment suggests that the rights of individuals need to be protected. These include the right to justice, the right to basic food and shelter, the right to bear children, the right to fair treatment, and the right to a fair wage. Furthermore, it urges that rights we enjoy ought not be taken for granted.

Deuteronomy addresses the tenth commandment in 24:17 – 26:5 where its laws concern the rights of others and how we can be a source of goods and freedom to them just as God has been to us. All of the sections involve the rightful use of power or authority over others, *because it is the possession of power that makes one's covetousness and greed a threat to others.*

- **Right to Justice for the vulnerable classes:**
Deut 24:17-18 – we should not exploit our control over others
- **Right to provision:**
Deut 24:19-22 – the poor should have access to surplus
- **Right to justice in the legal system:**
Deut 25:1-3 – punishments carried out in a timely manner with appropriate restraint

- **Rights of domesticated animals:**
Deut 25:4 – ox not muzzled
- **Rights to family:**
Deut 25:5-10 – Levirate marriage
Deut 25:11-12 – right to family threatened
- **Right to fair treatment in the marketplace:**
Deut 25:13-16 – honest weights
- **How to act when God gives you REST from your enemies:**
(Deut 25:19)
- **Rejoice in all the good things the Lord God has given to you:**
(Deut 26:11)
Deut 26:1-11 – First Fruits belong to God
Deut 26:12-15 – Third year tithe to Levites

We need to acknowledge God's control and show gratitude for it. We do so by not exploiting our power over others but using our power to their good. In this way Deuteronomy's treatment of the commandments helps us to understand the spirit of the law behind commandment 10, and helps us to see that observance of commandment 10 is one of the implications of observance of commandment 4.

Summary of Implications for Sabbath observance today

The importance of Deuteronomy is that it makes clear that the law was never intended to be a mechanical list of inflexible rules. Rather, it provides entry into the whole matter of true piety and true morality. It promulgates a worldview encompassing what is entailed in an appropriate approach to God and what is entailed in an appropriate treatment of and relationship to one's neighbor. It is easy to see why Jesus endorsed the summary of the law offered by the Jewish lawyer: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,' and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself' " (Luke 10:27).

Sabbath observance plays a significant role in this endeavor. If we have to be reminded, commanded, or coerced to observe it, it ceases to serve its function. Sabbath isn't the sort of thing that should have to be regulated by rules. It is the way that we acknowledge that God is on the throne, that this world is his world, that our time and goods are his gift to us. It is "big picture time." And the big picture is not me, my family, my country, my world, or even the history of my world. The big picture is God. If the Sabbath has its total focus in recognition of God, it would detract considerably if he had to tell us what to do. Be creative! Do whatever will reflect your love, appreciation, respect, and awe of the God of all the cosmos. Worship is a great idea, but it can't be mechanical, and it may only be the beginning.

It is up to the individual to determine what his or her personal response will be in order to give the honor that is due. The more gratitude we feel toward God and the more we desire to honor him, the more the ceremonies will mean and the more we will seek out ways to observe the Sabbath. This is the thrust of Isaiah 58:13-14

"If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD'S holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

When combined with the instructions about fasting in the earlier part of the chapter, we may infer a humanitarian focus, and that could also be the thrust of some important NT statements.

In Mark 2:27 Jesus states that "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for Sabbath." One possible reading in light of the issues discussed above is that man was not made to be enslaved by the Sabbath regulations (after all, it celebrated their freedom from slavery), but that the Sabbath was meant to serve humanitarian purposes. That is, it is not for the benefit of the one who is observing the Sabbath ("God knows we need a break and some leisure time—psychological benefit"), but for the benefit of those whom the Sabbath observer might serve.

In Luke 6:5 when Jesus asserts that "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath," he then would be identifying himself as the ultimate humanitarian.

It is relatively easy to make the adjustment from doing my work on the Sabbath to not doing my work. It is significantly harder to make the adjustment from not doing my work to doing his work. Likewise it is relatively easy to make the transition from gaining profit (in terms of time or money) on the Sabbath to not gaining profit. It is much more difficult to make the transition from having no profit to incurring expense.

Conclusion

I would urge the following considerations as we seek to implement Sabbath observance into Christian worship based on Genesis, the Decalogue and Deuteronomy:

1. **Stepping back from our own attempts to control our lives** (through our "work" especially) as a means to acknowledging that God is the one truly in control (as he demonstrated at Creation and in the Exodus).

2. **Turning our attention to active acknowledgement of God** (worship) and kingdom work (service in his name)

3. **Consciously extending the Sabbath ideology to all parts of life** as we give God his due, treat others the way he has treated us (by being gracious managers and being a source of goods and freedom) recognize and protect the rights of others.

If we would desire to be Sabbath observers, there are three questions we can use week by week as we examine our commitment:

Who is in control of our lives and our world?

Is he worth it?

How is my Kingdom work coming? ■

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Editor's Note: *This transcript of Professor Walton's address to the annual conference of the LDA held at Wheaton College in 2009 is prepared without edits.*

Endnotes

- 1 Hyatt 212-13; Gispén 194-6; Wright, Keil and Delitzsch, 120-1.
- 2 Currid 41-42; Cassuto 244-246; Houtman 40-48; Childs 412-417.
- 3 Enns 418-420; Sarna 112-113; Merrill 149-151; Driver 84-86
- 4 See a helpful summary in Stamm and Andrew, 90-95.
- 5 COS 1.111, v:122-24.
- 6 Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, *The Old Testament Sabbath: A Tradition-Historical Investigation* (SBL Diss Series. Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972) 182.
- 7 Andreasen, 183.
- 8 Durham (290) and Craigie (157) come to a similar conclusion in general, but do not show any use of the ancient Near Eastern literature to get there and therefore can do little more
- 9 'ng has the sense of ultimate contentment, pampering oneself or indulging oneself to the point of experiencing ecstasy. Only other occurrence of the noun in Isa. 13:22; eight other occurrences of hithpael.

THIS I BELIEVE...

*A regular feature by members of the Board
of Managers of the Lord's Day Alliance*

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters. Psalm 23:1-2*

By **Marvin R. Jonasen**

It was Labor Day weekend 1986. The sky was blue, the air was pure, and scenery was breathtaking, as my wife, Mary, and I set out to climb 13,111-foot Mt. Dana in Yosemite National Park. Though not a technical climb, it was an extremely difficult, and exhausting climb—more than 3,000 feet in just three miles, half of which would be on loose rock and shale. As we started up the mountain we quickly realized that it would be necessary to take regular rest stops, lest we prematurely wear ourselves down and not reach the summit. As the air thinned, with each foot higher we went, rest became even more critical. The higher we went, the slower we seemed to move. At about the halfway point, feeling the intensity of the direct sun beating down on us, and starting to feel uncertain as to whether or not we could actually do it, we both started to contemplate giving up.

As we sat resting, looking out over the awesome beauty of God's creation—something which neither one of us really noticed because of our concentrated efforts to remain focused on the climb—we decided that we would continue, at least to the next ridge which was just above where we were. It was our hope that we would at least be able to see the summit, which was temporarily blocked from view by the contour of the slope we were traversing.

Upon reaching the ridge we looked out across a level area, which led to the base of the final ascent. Suddenly we felt a renewed sense of possibility, and new energy and excitement brought on by a level section in which we could re-gather ourselves for the final leg of the climb—a respite from our exhaustion, a place in which we could truly find a bit of a reprieve from the strain of the climb.

By the time we had moved across the level area and reached the base of the summit and the final leg of our journey, we were rested and ready to do what we had almost given up on. Instead, rested and ready to go, we eventually reached the summit of Mt. Dana, opening up one of the most incredible vistas anywhere. But, we could not have done it, without rest. We would never have made it, had we not stopped and taken a break and allowed our bodies and our souls a much-needed pause along the way.

As I look back on the experience, I cannot help but think how disappointed we would have been had we worn ourselves out and given up; the frustration that we would have felt if we had not paced ourselves, and rested when needed. We made it because we took time to rest. We made it because we did not let the pace of others around us dictate what we would or would not do. And, we were able to enjoy the accomplishment because we were not so exhausted that the joy of the moment would have the opportunity to allude us.

In day-to-day life, as we climb the mountains that rise all around us—the mountains of life that we ascend in search of fulfillment of our hopes and dreams—we need to remember to take a break, and sometimes with great frequency, especially on those steep slopes that challenge us and cause us to doubt our selves, and the purpose that God has given us. Indeed, it is important to stop and seek periodic renewal as much as it is to pursue our goals. For without regular moments of rest and renewal we may never reach our goals—and if we do, not know that we have because we are too exhausted to know it, or to appreciate it. At the same time, it is also important to remember that the kind of rest of which I speak—the Sabbath moments that are so desperately needed—is not a time period on the clock, or a date on a calendar, it is a place within in the human heart and soul in which God meets us where we can be led beside still waters, through green pastures, and along level paths, so that our very lives may be restored to wholeness and health for the journey ahead.

Life is full of obstacles to overcome and summits that need to be climbed, and, although many are small and don't require a lot of effort, the course of life in its totality requires a tremendous amount of effort and energy. Therefore it is critical that we make the time for regular intervals of rest and renewal. For unless we do, we may never reach our goals—and if we do, we may very possibly be too exhausted to recognize them or enjoy them.

A Sabbath moment of rest and renewal from the challenges and pressures of life is not an option, it is a necessity; something that we all need to do, no matter who we are. For amidst the gift of Sabbath is found a special kind of wholeness and healing that can only come from God—the giver of life—and there is no greater gift. ■

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Turning Loose to Sabbath

Several years ago, on a long flight from Tanzania to Amsterdam, my seatmate was Dr. Joseph Coughlin, Director of the AgeLab at MIT. We had great conversation regarding aging and retirement. I used the term, "...turning loose..." regarding letting go of my business and transitioning to retirement. I remember the words well because he repeated them back to me later in the conversation, and they really have stuck with me. Now, as I approach my semi-Sabbath (what I call retirement, the Ultimate Sabbath referenced in the book of Hebrews 4:9 as being with Jesus after the final transition), I have had to look more and more at "turning loose."

But "turning loose" to what? The Wonderful Gift of Sabbath

The wonderful gift of Sabbath is available every six days, a gift from God to all of us. Yet on occasions we somehow manage to mess it up, like the kid at the birthday party that lets everyone know he really doesn't like the presents he received. In my life it hasn't been the biggies; it usually has been the small things that have tripped me up and kept me from enjoying the gift of Sabbath. Too many times we are creatures captive to traditions, perhaps the traditions of family, church, or tribe – you name it as you will. We seem to forget about turning loose from the small things that keep us from enjoying the gift of this great "bridge" commandment, the fourth commandment standing between those that call us to honor God and those that remind us of how to regard others.

As a teenager on vacation in Rhode Island one summer I attended a Quaker meeting. After fifty minutes of silence, which nearly drove this teenager up the wall, an elderly lady rose, eyes closed (in the spirit, as they say, but not in the Pentecostal mode), and recited, "...may the words of our mouths and the meditations, etc..." She then offered a few words on how hard it is for us to change as we grow older, of how we need to continue to look to Jesus for power and modeling when it comes to change.

"Turning loose" of the traditions that keep us from enjoying His gift to us becomes harder and harder as we age and as our culture changes. Recently my state university had a football game on Sunday (with the incentive of television revenues in view). The fair number of absences in attendance from Sunday worship in our church sent a strong signal to the young people that Christian community fellowship and worship is less important than driving two hours each way for a football game. It seems to get harder and harder in our culture to honor the Sabbath, and if you try to be just slightly in obedience of the fourth commandment, for one's own good, you are in danger of being called a "super Christian, a goody two-shoes, trying to earn your way into heaven!" As if grace just didn't exist. (We were



David C. McNair is serving his first term as President of the Board of Managers having served on the Board for 15 years. McNair is the self-titled "Chief Temporary Steward" of Treetops Development. He supports important causes like Here's Life Africa, Common Bond Recovery Center, Global Outreach International, Bellhaven University, and Millsaps College. McNair is a member of Northminster Baptist Church.

created in His image, we read, with the implication that if it was good for the creator, it is good for us.) As Rick Warren put it in the opening page of his best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, "It's not about you, it's about God."

We of the Lord's Day Alliance of the United States will be celebrating our 125th anniversary in 2013, having been founded in 1888. We are not sign carriers. Nor are we out trying to close down businesses that operate on Sundays, but we know the blessings that God puts before those who live in obedience to God's will, blessings often not coming immediately and not necessarily in the form of a better profit and loss statement. We wish these blessings for others as well.

We can name more than a few businesses such as Chick-fil-A and Hobby Lobby that honor the Lord's Day and, of course, our sympathies extend to many local business persons who struggle with staying closed on Sundays and allowing employees to be in worship and fellowship. When the son of one of our local restaurateurs took over and decided to close on Sundays his dad was appalled as the business took a big hit in sales as the son stayed at home on Sundays with his family. But soon a little bit of the business, the catering part of it began to mushroom, overtaking the Sunday sales by far.

"Turning loose to Sabbath" can indeed be a valuable faith experience. Recently, a United States senator, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, wrote of his own effort to keep, in his case the Jewish Sabbath, and of the consequent blessings in his own life. In a "how-to" guide, Lieberman weaves personal and public stories with simple suggestions for keeping Sabbath. The book is animated by good will and humor with a history that goes back to the liberation experienced at Mt. Sinai many years ago.¹ We invite you to join us on the journey, a journey which includes discovering all of the blessings God has in store for you!

David McNair

David C. McNair, President
The Lord's Day Alliance of the United States

¹ Joseph Lieberman, *The Gift of Rest: Rediscovering the Beauty of the Sabbath* (Howard Books, 2011).

Reflections

Today is September 11, 2011: Ten Years After 9/11

By **Tim Norton**

Today is September 11, 2011, the 10th anniversary of the tragic day when everything changed in America. It just so happens that it's also Sunday in America.

Rising early as I have a habit of doing on Sunday—fresh coffee aroma wafting my way and calling to me to enjoy that first cup—I retrieve the morning newspaper from the driveway; turn on the television; power up my computer to check the daily Google icon; and, hear my wife stirring as she readies herself for the day.

With each move in a mostly quiet house, and with early glimpses of what becomes a gloriously sunlit, clear blue-sky day, I am reminded from my waking moment that today is no ordinary day.

Today is September 11, 2011.

Now I'm off to shave, shower and dress followed by the short drive to church. I am listening to radio broadcasts covering the day's memorial events in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington. Ceremonies in New York are hosted by that City's Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, and include the Brooklyn Children's Choir singing a stirring rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner*; President Obama reading Psalm 46—"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help..."; former President George W. Bush reading a letter written by President Abraham Lincoln in 1864 to the widowed mother of five young men lost in the Civil War; and, a moving reading of the names of all 2,983 whose names are forever memorialized at the National 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero, New York City.

Today is September 11, 2011.

At Central Baptist Church of Bearden, Knoxville, Tenn—where my friend of 18 years, Wade Bibb, is senior pastor—we are singing *Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty*, and *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*; reading a litany of assurance including the line, "the message of the church is the message of God throughout the ages, "Be not afraid"; and, hearing the Rev. Dr. Bibb's literal reading of Hebrews 13:8—"Jesus Christ yesterday and today the same; into the ages."

All of a sudden the message of Hebrews 13:8 comes alive; jumps off the page; makes its way into my heart and mind.

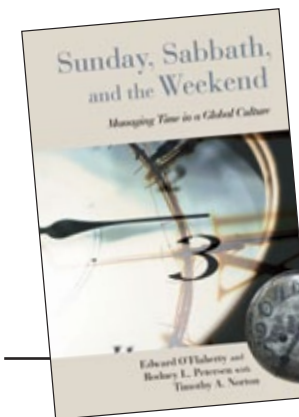
*Jesus Christ yesterday
and today THE SAME;
into the ages.*

Today is September 11, 2011.

I am not the same person as I was 10 years ago today. America is not the same as it was 10 years ago today. The world in which I live is forever changed from how it was 10 years ago today.

Yet, Jesus Christ remains the same 'into the ages.' On that I have placed my faith; my trust; my hope; and, my future.

Thanks be to God. ■



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