

Keeping Sabbath: A Neglected and Necessary Discipline

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Part 1: Theological Foundations

Introduction

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.
When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.

Eugene Peterson writes: "Many people simply can't believe that there can be a large leisurely centre to life where God can be pondered."

Lots of stories:

- #1. Pastor burnout . . .
- #2. Pastor would still be in his church . . .
- #3. Pastor thriving because a church saw the good in Sabbath-keeping and sabbaticals . . .

The inevitable comment: "I did not know how tired I was."

Two challenges in thinking about Sabbath-keeping

1. We are not quite sure what to do with Sabbath-keeping as a spiritual discipline
We are quite happy to talk about:
Scripture reading with its various means and methods
Prayer with its various means and methods
Silence and solitude

Fasting

Journaling
Serving
Worship
Community
Others . . .

But we don't talk much about Sabbath-keeping—at least until recently.

And this is related to the second challenge . . .

2. We are not quite sure what to do with #4 of the 10 commandments

We are quite happy to preach, teach, and seek to live the other 9 which have no “forms” attached. But, we are not sure how to avoid the “law” dimension of this commandment (7th day and the detailed prescriptions per the Sabbath).

We are convinced that we are not under law—that Christ has “fulfilled” (“telosed”) the law. Yet, somehow we sense that the 10 C’s in particular are supposed to come into the life of the church (most of them are repeated in the NT). As a solution we have fallen prey to a false categorization of the OT Law as civil, ceremonial and moral, the ceremonial and civil are no longer applicable, and this one seems to sneak in some civil/ceremonial into what appears to be a collection of totally moral laws. And so we are not sure how to work this one out. So we don’t talk much about it, and we are not sure how to practice it.

Thesis

I would suggest that to do Sabbath-keeping, at both the micro and macro levels, stands at the core of what it is to be the image-bearer of God, it is critical for articulating and living out the gospel of redemption and New Covenant faith, and to fail to keep Sabbath violates our God, ourselves, our friends and fellow humanity, and our created world.

Biblical and theological reflections

1. We keep Sabbath because of who we are as image-bearers of God

The pinnacle of the creation story is the creation of humankind—male and female (Gen. 1:26-27), and their creation as “image-bearers” of God (tselem and demuth). The foundational idea of both tselem and demuth is “representative,” and so, men and women are to be the representatives of God’s kingly rule and creatorship on the earth (note that the “image” idea is immediately connected with substitute or representative “dominion”). But (and here is the critical point), in establishing the kind of Creator God and King that we are to represent, the story of creation is told with a Sabbath ending. Hence, to be the image-bearer of God in the world means to be a Sabbath-keeper, even as the God we represent is one. This is reinforced by the 4th commandment to keep the Sabbath holy, because, as Moses says, God created the world in 6 days and rested on the 7th.

Now, that image was marred at the Fall. But as Christians we have had that image renewed (not perfected) (cf. texts like Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:9-10; Eph. 4:22-24). So, of all people in the world, Christians are able to represent the rule of God in the world better than all other people, including the dimension of keeping Sabbath. Hence, as part of who we are as image-bearers of God we are called to Sabbath-keeping.

2. What about the Law? Isn’t Sabbath-keeping part of the OT Law?

We have fallen prey to a misguided and facile approach to understanding the Law in categorizing it as civil, ceremonial, and moral, and that we are no longer bound to the civil and ceremonial, but we are to the moral. This approach does not work—for two reasons:

#1. In commandment 4 we find the ideas blended.

There seems to be a moral aspect to keeping Sabbath rooted in creation (the holiness and blessing of God), but then a legal aspect to it per maintaining the 7th with legal strictures.

#2. No Hebrew would ever think in those categories.

They viewed the Law as whole, and even Jesus said that if you violate one part of it, you have violated it all.

We all know that Jesus Christ has “telosed” the Law, and in doing so, the forms and structures are no longer binding—none of them (e.g. tithing, Sabbath-keeping, sacrifices). But, every law, every one of the 613, was rooted in a principle or value found in the character and kingship of God, and those values and principles come across to God’s people of all times and places. They reflect what and who God wants his people to be—at all times and places. Not one of them was arbitrary or valueless.

Jesus reveals God—the God that stands behind the 613 laws of the OC. Hence, as we reflect the values and principles of those laws we reflect Jesus.

So, the Sabbath law comes to us now as a Sabbath principle or value. No, we are not bound to legalistic 6:1 cycle per law; we are not bound to a Saturday practice. But, we are bound to the principle of Sabbath-keeping as New Covenant people, and as image-bearers of God.

3. What about Jesus’ comment about the Sabbath (via Mark 2:23-28)

“Humankind was not made for Sabbath, but Sabbath for humankind” (Mk. 2:27, cf. Mt. 12:1-8; Lk. 6:1-11; 13:10-17). Jesus is confronting the legality of the Law, and even in OC realities there was a spirit of the Law that superseded the strict legalities, and he points to that.

However, beyond this, he is reflecting what it is to be human—that at the very foundation of our humanness—rooted in being the image-bearers of God—we find Sabbath.

Further, the evangelist, Mark (and the other Gospel writers) makes sure the church hears what Jesus has to say about it! We can never think that Mark included this little story without an agenda for the church.

4. Paul and Sabbath

Colossians 2:16 (cf. Gal. 4:10). Paul is clearly interested in the legalities of the Law, and in speaking out against them.. He is not addressing anything more than this.

5. The author of Hebrews and Sabbath

Hebrews 4:1-13. This is a crucial text. Sabbath-rest is the picture of the ultimate realization of life with God. Since we believe that the kingdom has been inaugurated there is a clear implication that aspects of that Sabbath-rest need to be practiced in the now-but-not-yet kingdom. As we practice Sabbath we anticipate the kingdom yet to be consummated.

6. So then, what does Sabbath-keeping represent—biblically and theologically?

I would suggest 7 things:

#1. The release from the tyranny of (over) work

It is easy to get caught up in 7 days of work. “Work expands to fill the time available.” We know the proverb. Sabbath disallows that to happen.

Work is not bad—it is good. But, over-work becomes something other than “good.”

#2. The cessation of the need to be productive

While we sleep, creation grows (without us!). The Hebrew day started in the evening—with rest, and we join the day in the morning with creation already in progress. This counters our obsession with productivity and performance.

It also gave freedom to the slave and the animals not have to be productive—release and freedom to simply be, enjoy creation and life, and to intentionally worship and play.

#3. To bask in the blessing of God

The day is called “blessed” (Gen. 2:3; Ex. 20:11). To enjoy Sabbath is to be part of something that is called “blessed,” and to be blessed in that blessing.

#4. To consciously reflect on something holy

The day is also called “holy” (Gen. 2:3; Ex. 20:11). It is something distinct, separate, and uniquely of God. We sense that as we stop to Sabbath we separate from a non-intentional focus on God and his presence and goodness to an intentional focus (I want to be careful not to suggest that work is bad, or the other 6 days are bad—they are good. However, there is an intentionality of focus and being that makes the Sabbath practice critical for life, health, and spirituality).

#5. The celebration of redemption and release from slavery (slaves were never allowed to keep Sabbath in pagan cultures)

Israel was once enslaved. God’s people now are enslaved to cursed and fallen world. We are enslaved to sin. The NH and NE are all about reversal of all of that, and Sabbath is a reminder of the past and whisper of the future.

This is also why Sunday in some ways becomes the new Sabbath. It is the celebration of the resurrection—the event that brings about redemption and release from the slavery of sin.

#6. It anticipates the life to come

As we keep Sabbath, we anticipate the final Sabbath—with Christ forever in the New Creation.

#7. To reflect on being and not doing—a day not to get things done, but to reflect on what God has done and is doing.

Nehemiah 13:15-22. This is a fascinating (and rather humorous) story. Nehemiah understood what was going on, and why!

Theological implications for New Covenant praxis

1. No, we are not under the legalities of the OT Law—no one is taking us there.
2. But, yes, there is a Sabbath principle rooted in being image-bearers of God, and as Christians we have that image renewed.
3. Part of the curse is not to keep Sabbath.

It is an expression of autonomy from the nature of God. It is a demand that productivity is to be the ultimate good. It is a refusal to acknowledge that other people do not exist for the sake of productivity.

4. To practice Sabbath is to live out in real terms the now-but-not-yet kingdom of God.
5. Sabbath functions as multiple levels—micro to macro (weekly to decades).

The nature of Sabbath-keeping

Marva Dawn is very helpful in capturing the essence of Sabbath-keeping. She talks about the notion in four ideas:

- *ceasing
- *resting
- *embracing
- *feasting

1. Ceasing

She calls us to cease our need and demand (of others) to be productive all the time. It is a release from our attempt to be God, to control, and to falling prey to our culture.

She has a wonderful quote from Abraham Heschel:

To the biblical mind, however, labor is the means toward an end, and the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day from abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one's lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for enhancing the efficiency of his work. "Last in creation, first in intention," the Sabbath is "the end of the creation of heaven and earth." The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living.

While productivity may be a virtue, it is not the sum mum bonum of life.

2. Resting

She points us to spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual rest. But beyond that she points us to the social and character forming dimensions of Sabbath rest. It forms us socially in that it allows others to cease to be commodities, and it forms us in character in that we lose our sense of autonomy, and our personal value built on productivity.

In the work week, there is little opportunity to slow down long enough to catch the grace of God that undergirds everything. Sabbath-keeping puts us firmly in touch with God's grace again, and fully understand rest.

The text in Exodus 23:12-13 is enlightening. The term for "refresh" is to be "nepheshed"—to be "re-souled," to be re-established as living beings!

3. Embracing

In Sabbath-keeping we embrace an intentionality of belief that we truly do believe that God's values are good—values such as worship, family, play, community, trust in God, and the wholeness of life and being.

In Sabbath we embrace people instead of things, celebration instead of planning, freedom instead of schedule. We embrace giving rather than requiring, and we embrace shalom—tranquility, reconciliation, wellbeing.

4. Feasting

We pause to feast—to feast on God, others, music, beauty, food, affection, and festival. In Eugene Peterson's terms—a time to pray and play.

Some reflections on practicalities and practices

1. Intentionalize Sabbath.

Call it Sabbath, and keep it. Select it and protect it. Entering into "empty" time is hard! We have been taught that time is money, we are to "redeem" the time, and we to do ministry in and out of season—and these are good! But to embrace one without the other is to violate some very foundational realities that we have been talking about.

2. Find a form and structure that works.

This may be entire day; it may not. However, I do think the 6:1 is hard wired into our humanness. Paul seems to think that any day will work (Rom. 14:5-6).

3. Teach and preach on it

This also means that we work hard at communicating Sabbath-keeping as a practice for our people. And this means that for many of them it is not Sunday! Now we have to ask the question, "What kind of squeeze are we putting on our people—especially our leaders?"

4. Be sure Sabbath is included in ministry contracts and agreements.

This both intentionalizes and guards the practice. Be sure we have enlisted the congregation's help.

5. Be sure Sabbaticals are included in ministry contracts and agreements.

This needs to be a proactive step, not a reactive or remedial matter. In too many cases granting sabbaticals comes about when a melt-down occurs, and all too often it is too late.

This needs to be prescribed up front.

Suggestions: *one day per week as sabbath (or some form of that)

*two weeks per year (not vacation)

*a more lengthy sabbatical after a number of years

While Dawn's categories above help in guiding a sabbatical, the focus is release from the daily duties of pastoral care, leadership and mission, and in that there is a new and refreshing direction of thought and input into our lives. This brings about a ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting, which in turn brings life. Out of that life we serve and minister.

Final comment

Dawn writes:

To return to Sabbath-keeping is not nostalgia or an attempt to return to an age that is pre-enlightenment, pre-Industrial Revolution, and pre-Darwinian. Rather, it is a return to the spiritual dimension that haunts us. In an age that has lost its soul, Sabbath keeping offers the possibility of gaining it back. In an age desperately searching for meaning, Sabbath keeping offers a new hope. In contrast to the technological society, in which the sole criterion of value is the measurement of efficiency, those who keep the Sabbath find their criteria in the character of God, in whose image that celebrate life.

Further reading

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Part II: A Workable Process

Introduction

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

At the recent FEB CENTRAL Conference I did a workshop entitled "Keeping Sabbath: A Neglected and Necessary Discipline." We did not get to the discussion about sabbaticals for pastors, and it was suggested that I write something up that could be distributed through a FEB CENTRAL communication piece. Here are some initial reflections on the subject.

Why the need for sabbaticals?

All followers of Christ, as image-bearers of God, are called to the principle of Sabbath-keeping (the legal forms have been fulfilled in Christ). However, pastors (all pastors, not just senior/lead pastors), due to their unique engagement with spiritual forces and the intensity of what it is to care for a church, need regular extended rest and revitalization. This does several things: first, it helps both church and pastor see that God's work moves ahead while we "sabbath"; second, it provides a time of refreshment and energizing; third, it forces faith; and fourth, it encourages longer pastoral ministries in churches. Sabbaticals are privileges, not rights; yet at the same time they must be taken seriously as a necessary part of being the church and doing pastoral ministry well.

What is a sabbatical?

A sabbatical is defined by the Fellowship as "an extended leave for the purpose of continuing education, professional development, spiritual renewal, and revitalization of the body, mind and soul."

I would argue that we need to look at a minimum of 6 months and up to a year for a meaningful sabbatical. Sabbaticals of a few weeks or months do very little to accomplish what a pastoral sabbatical is intended to do.

What is involved?

The church needs to:

1. Study, learn and teach itself about the value of pastoral sabbaticals.

This will inevitably mean bringing someone in from the outside. For the pastor to do it himself will be seen as self-serving.

2. Include a sabbatical structure in ministry descriptions.

Whatever kind of sabbatical structure the church comes up with, it needs to be part of the ministry description for the pastor. This will normally mean establishing a set time of ministry culminating in a sabbatical.

3. Plan and budget for pastoral sabbaticals.

With the pastor gone for a period of time, there will be the need for a plan to fill the void, and budgeted money to pay for extra help (e.g. an interim pastor), while the pastor receives his regular salary.

4. Protect the pastor while on sabbatical.

Inevitably he will not be moving away, and so there is still access to him by the congregation.

5. Allow the pastor and his family to visit other churches, but also allow them to attend their own church.

Even though he may be on sabbatical, he and his family will need their church just like any other congregational family.

6. Expect a plan from the pastor.

While different from an academic sabbatical (where some kind of definitive productivity is expected), the pastoral sabbatical still needs to have a sense of direction and purpose.

7. Set up an accountability structure for the duration of the sabbatical.

Whether monthly or quarterly someone needs to be assigned to meet with the pastor to see how things are going, give advice and wisdom, and pray for and encourage him in the sabbatical journey.

The pastor needs to:

1. Facilitate the study and teaching about pastoral sabbaticals in the church.

This will inevitably mean bringing in an outside resource person to talk about this.

2. Understand and embrace what a sabbatical is.

The four R's of a pastoral sabbatical are: Rest, Refresh, Refocus, Redirect.

Resting does not mean inactivity. It is a time of release and rest from the schedule and care of the church.

Refreshing can come from several sources: a reading schedule, taking classes or courses, a pursuit of a degree or certificate, retreats, and seminars and conferences.

Refocusing comes later in the sabbatical and is a re-energizing of attention to the mission and ministry of the church.

Redirection comes from a time away and is a more objective look at the who, what, where, how and why of the present ministry.

3. Release control of the church.

Christ's church is Christ's, not the pastor's. One of the best things experienced by a church and pastor is that work moves ahead without his hand directing it. These are the faith and humility factors.

4. Create a plan.

While the sabbatical is part of a planned schedule, a structure for the sabbatical needs to be formed and submitted to the church several months ahead of time so as to give everyone a sense of its value and purpose.

5. Find a place that works well for a sabbatical.

It is probably best to move the pastor's study off site (home, rented facility, etc.).

6. Work with an accountability person.

It is essential that there is contact with a key person in the church for prayer, reporting, encouraging, and direction-giving purposes.

7. Understand that he will return to the church.

In some ways he never leaves. However, the intent of the sabbatical is to engage the four R's for the sake of himself and the church he serves.

Summary and conclusion

There are lots of other things that need to be talked about, and each church and pastor is different. FEB CENTRAL has a couple of helpful documents that churches can use as well.