

Breaking the Tyranny of Time

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I have been convinced for some time now that the major theological issue at the end of the twentieth century is the meaning of the Sabbath. Whether we are talking about clergy, congregational members, or people in the society at large, there are few realities more oppressive and dehumanizing than the crush of time. The last fifteen years have witnessed the increasing pressurization of our lives. Even our advances in technology, instead of freeing us, have served to increase the pressure. We have meetings over breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Fast food restaurants and microwaves reduce waiting. We have installed telephones in our cars so we can do business while driving. Computers force us to deal with far more information than we can comprehend and fax machines mean that we don't have to wait for the mail. Businesses are open seven days a week and often at least sixteen hours a day.

The effect of all that pressure in our society is easy to see. The market for drugs, both legal and illegal, has increased dramatically. Divorce rate and domestic violence and abuse is skyrocketing. Mental breakdowns and stress related disorders are a common occurrence. Flared tempers and inappropriate behaviors caused increased problems in business and government. Our society, in its rush to be in control is losing control and on the verge of having a nervous breakdown.

In such a society which is starving for some Good News, I would suggest we are neglecting a major resource available to us within the faith. Far too often our churches and our clergy reflect far more the influence of our society than they do the resources of our faith. To a congregation filled with overstressed and worn out people hungry to hear of an alternative to their clock driven style, does the church's ministry and the clergy's life-style point to a better idea?

Did it ever occur to you that there might be a reason why the Sabbath commandment took more words than the others to explain and is the only commandment that is explained differently in the Exodus and the Deuteronomy statements of the ten commandments? The extralengthy explanation may indicate its increased importance and it may also suggest that it was harder to explain than the others. "Thou shalt not kill" may need only to be stated, but when you say "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy," people want to know why.

In the Exodus listing of the commandments, the Sabbath is explained on the basis of creation: ". . . for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it" (Exodus 19:11). The Sabbath was not something God dreamed up at Sinai but was built into the very structure of creation. It was not a benefit of class but was rather to be

protected for servants as well as masters. It was for all of life including animals, and Leviticus extends it to land as well. All of life requires regular periods of cessation, stepping back, catching one's breath as it were.

In the hymn of creation referenced in the commandment, it says: "Thus the heavens and earth were finished. . . (all *things* were completed). And on the seventh day, God finished his work. . ." (Genesis 2:2). What was the task God had to do to complete creation after all things were finished? ". . . and he rested on the seventh from all that he had done." The final creative act was a resting or ceasing from activity.

E. A. Speiser in his commentary on Genesis suggests this indicates a reflective review (Page 7). A work is not finished until the worker has reflected on the work and drawn both pleasure and lessons from it which provide the freedom to again look forward. We usually think of resting as what takes place after work is done, but Genesis suggests that on the seventh day God finished God's work by resting. And Exodus suggests the preservation of the Divine intention in our humanity depends on us continuing that rhythm by honoring a sabbath.

The Sabbath is a principle of life, a survival technique in a world in which stress increasingly contributes to personal, family, and community disintegration. The commandment says that "the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it." The root meaning of the word to bless is the ability to propagate or create life. That is still reflected in our referring to a new birth as a blessed event. In the creation story, God blesses animals and people giving them both the ability to create new life. But God also blesses the Sabbath as if suggesting that such rhythmic stepping back was a necessary respite in order to allow new life to be born within us.

The Scriptures suggest the Sabbath is the Lord's time, the creative time of the author of all life. Thus Sabbath time is not only a cessation of activity but also a listening to the source of all creativity including the source of our identity. Keeping the Sabbath holy is to set time aside from the incessant demands of life to commune with the source of all truth that we might reconnect with the truth within us.

The biblical historian John Bright suggests the only thing that saved Israel from complete obliteration during the exile was their laws and the Sabbath (*A History of Israel* by John Bright p.330 ff). Their armies had been conquered, their government toppled, their temple destroyed, and their people deported. Like the Trojans or the Spartans, they could become but a fading memory. Yet there was the Sabbath which preserved a way of life defined by certain laws. Every seven days, the people stopped and remembered who they were and whose they were. They were a people claimed by God, living by ethics defined by God and waiting in hope promised by God. It was the sabbath that prevented them from being absorbed into the pagan culture to which they were exiled.

It is no accident that the prophets saw the violation of the Sabbath as connected with economic issues. Nehemiah demanded all commercial exchanges cease on the Sabbath. Amos accused people of being so eager to sell products that they could hardly wait for the Sabbath to be over. The word

economic comes from *oikumene* which means household manager. The Sabbath was a break in the everyday routine to remind people that they were managing God's resources and God expected a certain standard of justice. The Sabbath interrupts our managing of resources and reminds us life finds its meaning in relationships as well as productivity.

When the Sabbath commandment is stated in Deuteronomy, the reason given is not the creation story but because you were once slaves in Egypt and God freed you from slavery. The Sabbath is tied to maintaining the gift of freedom which God not only provided us but worked to restore when we lost it. If we forget the Sabbath, we can easily slip back into slavery.

In the midst of a daily struggle to survive in the wilderness, every six days the people were asked to stop struggling for a full day and simply put their trust in God, to realize that survival depended less on productivity than God. The Sabbath disrupted the slavery of time—"If I don't keep at it, I will never get my work done"—and the slavery of productivity—"If I don't keep at it, I'll never produce enough to be successful."

The Sabbath commandment acts as a transitional commandment between the first three which protect our relationship with God and the last six which govern our relationship with our neighbor. The Sabbath interrupts our "doing" time and gives us "being" time to nurture our relationship with God and neighbor. Sabbath time is meant to be playful time. Up until the fifteenth century, there were no prohibitions against recreation on Sundays. Calvin bowled on Sunday afternoons. It was a time not only to glorify God through worship but also through demonstrating trust in the providence of God by ceasing to be productive for a time.

There is an apocryphal story about the Apostle John who was once scolded for being caught playing with his followers. John told one of them who was carrying a bow and arrow to draw the arrow several times. Then he asked if the man could keep doing it without ceasing. He replied that if he did so, the bow would eventually break. John responded that the same would happen to a person's mind if tension were never relaxed (Quoted in *Sabbath Time* by Tilden Edwards).

Sadly many of us have forgotten how to play. We are either consumed by the many tasks before us or we expect to be entertained. The creative imagination that flows so naturally in child's play is replaced by the drivenness of adults who rob the world of laughter and make games into moneymaking professions.

One of the important tasks of the churches over the next decade will be to model a life-style that honors the principle of the Sabbath. The Sabbath interrupts our devotion to the clock which we have unconsciously made our Lord and restores time to its appropriate role as servant.

In addition to Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time* published by Seebury Press, previously mentioned, a very thorough study of the Sabbath has been made by Samuel Bacchiocchi in two volumes *From Sabbath to Sunday* and *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*. Both books are distributed by the author, 230 Lisa Lane, Berrien Springs, MI 49103. More recently Benton Johnson has traced the decline in Sabbath observance among Presbyterians in his

chapter in *The Presbyterian Predicament*.

In my experience, however, there is little evidence that anyone has tried to appropriate the principle of the Sabbath as a means of breaking the tyrannical grip of time over our lives. My guess is that to break the grip that time holds over us would require the wedding of some basic time management principles with a deeper understanding of the theological issues raised by the fourth commandment, along with a renewed appreciation for the significance of community. The challenge for clergy would be to engage the community in that reflection both through worship and a manner of living that tried to reflect the truth that God, not the clock, was Lord of their life.