

# Preparing for an everlasting Sabbath

## A pastor's perspective on Sabbath practice

Paul Mo

**W**hen I lived in Hong Kong and got baptized in my mid-twenties, I went to church on Sunday. I never thought about the Sabbath or what it meant to me or to the larger Christian community. After I came to Canada, during my first year here, I had to work on Sundays and I struggled with not going to church. If I was scheduled to work on Sunday, I would ask to work night shift or I would go to church on Saturday evening. Ever since that time, I realize that I cannot take for granted the opportunity to worship God every Sunday.

I visited The Mennonite Story in the Village of St. Jacobs, Ontario, and I learned that Mennonites traditionally closed their shops on Sunday because it was the Sabbath day, the holy day for God. Knowing about this practice triggered my interest in exploring the meaning of the Sabbath for Anabaptists, but I still did not dig deeply until I was asked to write this article about the Sabbath.

### Biblical background

In the Old Testament, the Sabbath commandment is the fourth of the ten, but like the command to be faithful in marriage, the

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command to keep Sabbath appears in the biblical text before it appears as one of the Ten Commandments. Sabbath observance and marriage fidelity are mentioned already in Genesis 2:3 and 2:24 respectively. In Genesis 2:1–3, the term *Sabbath* is used for the seventh day, when God finished his work of creation and rested. God blessed the

seventh day and sanctified it. In this we see that the seventh day is separated from the other six days. God is almighty; he does not need to take a rest after six days of work for creation, but he

modeled work and rest for us. It is clear that God intended the seventh day to be a blessing to humankind, physically and spiritually.<sup>1</sup>

After forty years in the wilderness, Moses reminded the Israelites that God commands them to keep the Sabbath day as a special obligation (Deut. 5:15). In addition, Ezekiel 20:12 says that “also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.”<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament also indicates the importance of the Sabbath, as Jesus regularly attended worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). But especially at two points Jesus came into conflict with the religious leaders of the Jews about the Sabbath. The religious leaders would think that the Sabbath itself is the aim, so the scribes made many Sabbath laws for the Jews to follow. “During the period between Ezra and Christian era the scribes formulated innumerable legal restrictions for the conduct of life under the law. Two whole treatises in the Talmud are devoted to the details of Sabbath observance. One of these is divided into 39 principal classes of prohibited actions.”<sup>3</sup> But Jesus claimed that he is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). He also taught that the Sabbath was made for humanity’s benefit and that humanity was not made for the Sabbath. In other words, human need is more important than the law of Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–4; Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 6:1–11).

According to *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, “The Sunday Sabbath and ritual worship thereon in the church are quite obviously a part of Christianity’s heritage from Judaism”<sup>4</sup> But in fact the Sabbath day is the seventh day of the week, which for most Christians is not a day of religious worship. Sunday is actually the first day of the week. According to Franz Delitzsch, who sees the Sabbath in another perspective, it is beautiful to know the parallel “of the creative Friday when everything was finished, and the Friday of the redemption, when Christ died with the words: ‘*It is finished*’; that is the sabbath of creation and the day of rest of Christ in the grave, as bringing up with the resurrection of Christ the now prominent and deep significance of the first Sunday, when God said: “*Let there be light.*”<sup>5</sup>

### **Sabbath renewal for our bodies and spirits**

Many Christians regard Sunday as the Sabbath, and they have

traditionally believed that Christians need to rest on this day and set aside time to worship God. This practice may have started in

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the first century because Jesus appeared among his disciples on the first day of the week and said “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21).

In “Worshipping with the Early Anabaptists,” John Oyer and Keith Graber Miller write that our Mennonite ancestors—Anabaptists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—worshiped God in secret in forests, caves, barns, and mills. Worship gave them

the collective spiritual energy to survive the persecution they faced.<sup>6</sup> After reading this article, I felt that God’s command for us to rest on Sabbath is not just for our bodies but also for our souls. First Kings 19:1–18 describes how Elijah fled to Horeb to avoid having Queen Jezebel kill him. Elijah was so confused and so unable to see a way out of his predicament that he asked God to take away his life. God let him rest and gave him something to drink and eat. After that, God appeared to Elijah and gave him some new instructions. As with the early Anabaptists, a period of retreat and rest served as preparation for the challenges he faced.

### **Stories of two couples**

I knew a couple who owned a small restaurant in a small town. They worked seven days a week and 365 days a year. They always said, “Time is money.” They said they did not need rest or a holiday because in their eyes earning money was the most important thing. Over time they made a lot of money and bought houses for their three children. Then they retired, and before long the husband was diagnosed with dementia and admitted to a nursing home. They had no more chance to spend time together enjoying the wealth they had accumulated. They had many things, but money could not buy back his health.

I have known another couple for about nine years. They were refugees, struggling with fear, worries, poverty, and hopelessness every day. With God’s grace and love, the whole family of five was eventually granted permanent residence in Canada and started their new lives here. They were baptized while they were

still refugees. Their elder daughter was baptized when she was twelve. The husband worked in a restaurant as a cook. After the couple was baptized, their daughter asked her father if he could take Sunday off to worship God with the whole family. Many people in similar circumstances would have hesitated to ask such a question or consider such a possibility. After all, Sunday was one of the busiest days of the week in the restaurant, and this man was the sole breadwinner in the family. But this man went to his boss and told him that he had become a Christian and he needed to go to church with his family on Sunday. God's grace is far beyond what we can expect, and his boss did not refuse him. He let the cook take all Sundays off. For more than five years now, this brother in Christ has worshiped God with his whole family on Sunday week after week. I have been walking with this family in their journey for nine years already. They are not rich in things but are rich with God's grace. This family is blessed because they understood the teaching of God about getting a day off, resting, and worshiping God.

### **Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?**

Seventeen years ago, like many new immigrants, I needed to work on Sundays to earn a living for my family of four. There seemed to be no alternative. Thankfully, God listened to my prayer and I found a night shift job to work from Sunday night through Thursday night so I could attend worship on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. In 2002, I was called by God to devote myself to ministry. I graduated from Tyndale Seminary in 2005. I started my ministry at Markham Chinese Mennonite Church. I have a lot of opportunities to work with new immigrants and refugees.

Because of their social status and limited job opportunities, many new immigrants have to work on Sundays, and they struggle to make ends meet. So instead of just preaching at Sunday worship, I organized Bible studies and shared the gospel with these new immigrants and refugees during the week, often on Monday, which is my day off—officially. I agree with God's command that we need both work and rest. As God's children, we need to rest on the Sabbath and worship God in obedience to his command. Many people, like the scribes in Jesus's day, will judge these new immigrants and refugees for not resting on the Sabbath. Inevita-

bly, the judgment of such scribes falls on me as well. But I always struggled with this question: Is it more important to observe the law of Sabbath than to bring people to God? To me, people's souls and eternal life are way more important than following the rules.

Many of my friends and congregation members have warned me about the risk of getting burned out. I really dislike hearing about burnout. We are called to respond to God's great love. Did we find our Lord Jesus Christ being burned out in his ministries? Did we find Paul being burned out in his ministries? On the contrary, Paul said "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

Sabbath was made for humanity for physical rest and so that we can have time to worship God. I am blessed that I have been able to observe the Sabbath with my congregation every Sunday for the past seventeen years. With the psalmist I say, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (Ps. 51:12). I feel rest in my soul, and I have to admit that sometimes I feel physically tired. But I am not burned out. I think of how Jesus uses his blood to save us, and his great love moves and touches me. Serving God is the most significant goal and task in my life. Whenever I feel physically or emotionally exhausted, God's word recharges me with full energy. Most important, I get rest in my soul when I read his words.

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### **Preparing for an everlasting Sabbath**

Sabbath to me means something a little bit different from what it means for many other Christians. When I reviewed Genesis 2:1-3, I noted that the Sabbath existed before the history of the Israelites. It is not first of all a religious practice in the Old Testament or a restriction for Christians. We can view the Sabbath with another perspective, a very positive one. Sabbath can be everlasting, and Christ is there for us (Heb. 4:9). In other words, we should not narrow our scope to focus just on the Sunday Sabbath; rather, we should look for an everlasting Sabbath as described in Psalm 95:11. We will have an eternal Sabbath when Jesus comes

again. It will be the holy Sabbath I have been looking for. I believe it will be the sweetest time I can imagine, a time when we can totally rest.

According to the Gospels, our Lord went to the synagogue regularly to worship on the Sabbath. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). The Anabaptists understood that our faith should be made visible. Jesus is our model, because we are called to be his witnesses in the world and in our daily life. God created the Sabbath for humanity; God did not create humanity for the Sabbath. God’s words are our comfort. As Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).

Worshiping God on the Sabbath is important, but it is equally important that you worship with your heart, get rest in your soul, and be refreshed with God’s words. It should not be a big concern if it is on Sunday. I worship God with my congregation every Sunday, and I worship with my whole heart and with my soul. Whether I strictly observe the Christian Sabbath is not important, because I know that there is another, everlasting Sabbath. We will enter the place of rest that God has planned for us. Working hard on the Sabbath in God’s ministry to me is a way to glorify God and not a violation of the law of the Sabbath.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1963), 735.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

<sup>3</sup> Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, 736.

<sup>4</sup> George A. Buttrick et al., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 141.

<sup>5</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888–89); quoted in *Genesis, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 1, ed. John Peter Lange et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1960), 192.

<sup>6</sup> John Oyer and Keith Graber Miller, “Worshipping with the Early Anabaptists,” in *What Mennonites Are Thinking 1998*, ed. Merle Good and Phyllis Pellman Good (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1998), 115.

## About the author

Paul Mo graduated with an MDiv from Tyndale Seminary, Toronto, in 2005 and has served Markham Chinese Mennonite Church in Toronto as pastor since 2005. He is also a member of Mennonite Church Canada’s Christian Witness Council. He is the husband of Monica Chung and a father of two young adult children.