

Living by the sign of the Sabbath

Kevin R. Drudge

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work. . . . For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth . . . , but rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the seventh day and consecrated it.”
(Exod. 20:8–11)

Few texts in the Bible carry greater moral weight than the Ten Commandments. Certainly for ancient Jews, and even for Christians of the twenty-first century, these direct commands of God prescribe human conduct with unique authority. It is not surprising then that many Christians step directly from the fourth commandment to a set of practices that set Sunday apart from the other days of the week. On the farm of my childhood, Sunday had

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a special feel about it, as we did only the essential work (feeding and milking the dairy herd), worshiped at our little country church, and enjoyed special meals and afternoon leisure. My father, always weary from the milking schedule, savoured the opportunity to nap, and we all understood that even harvest-ready crops would wait until the resumption of labour on Monday.

I do not recall ever discussing our Sunday routines, yet we knew that the hallowing of the seventh day by God set in place an ordinance that presided over the weekly rhythm of life. Neither do I recall anyone disturbing our piety in those days by pointing out that it was the seventh day that God hallowed, and nowhere does the Bible declare a definitive shift to a first-day Christian

Sabbath. We probably assumed that such a shift happened because of the resurrection of Jesus “on the first day of the week” (Mark 16:2); we supposed the hallowed day had naturally migrated twenty-four hours in celebration of the risen Lord.

That logic may work nicely for many Christians, but biblical scholars and historians are not satisfied with this simple answer. Tracing the movement from Jewish Sabbath to Christian worship on the Lord’s Day is complex indeed. Some scholars insist that Sunday worship constituted a radical new practice in the early church and was a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, not an attempt to Christianize the Sabbath or make any connection to the fourth commandment. In that case, rest was probably not part of the practice, especially where Christians had to work on the first day of the week like other labourers. Other scholars see much clearer continuity between the Jewish Sabbath practices and the Christian day of worship; they envision Sunday as the Christian Sabbath.¹

Anyone familiar with Jewish Shabbat will quickly recognize that Sunday worship is not simply a Christianized Shabbat. Yet we can also affirm important continuity between the two, including the ordering of time into a seven-day week, and the recognition of one day in seven as set apart for particular religious devotion.

Whatever side of the scholarly debate we find convincing, we cannot deny that Protestant Christianity has bequeathed to us a strong Sabbatarian piety, one that formed the special Sunday atmosphere on our farm and one that is currently getting a lot of attention in devotional literature, especially as Sabbath practice vanishes among Christians in contemporary society.² What is it that the church ought to claim and practice as we consider the biblical command to remember the Sabbath, and as we observe Jewish and Christian history pertaining to Sabbath keeping?

Remembering rest, redemption, resurrection

R. T. Beckwith provides an apt point of entry in describing the Old Testament Sabbath as a *sign*. He notes that as the rainbow had been the sign of the covenant between God and Noah, and circumcision a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, “so also the Sabbath becomes a ‘sign’ of the covenant between God and Israel.”³ As a sign, the Sabbath pointed to two powerful

community-forming realities. First, as the fourth commandment in Exodus 20 states, Sabbath rest commemorated God's act of creating and the cycle of labour and rest that God established. Second, according to the Deuteronomy 6 version of the commandments, Sabbath rest recalled God's great act of liberation in freeing the people from slavery in Egypt. Pausing one day in seven to remember who they were—a people created and redeemed by God—formed a community with a unique identity among the nations. The Sabbath served as a continual sign of this experience and awareness of life in relation to the creating and redeeming

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God. It reoriented them on a weekly basis to the foundational truth about their very being as God's people.

Herein lies a vital precedent for the church. Although Sunday worship is not the result of a direct and simple step from Old Testament Sabbath practice to the life of the church, the corporate practice of weekly rest and worship has the potential to be a powerful sign for us today.⁴ In our culture, which so

readily defines people (usually individually) according to worldly categories, the church needs to be regularly reoriented to the truth that we are God's people. We need to be reoriented from our workplace identities as makers to the truth that all life is created and sustained by God. We need to be reoriented from our identity as consumers to the truth that we are called to a way of life that fulfills God's purposes in us. And we must continually be reoriented from the compulsion to control and manage outcomes in every area of life, from personal matters to national agendas, to the truth that God is in control of history, and we are called to be partners, not managers, in God's work in the world.

In light of our need to regularly return to the essence of life as God's people, resting from our routine of labour and gathering for worship as a community of believers functions as a sign of our identity and destiny as God's people. Robert Webber has said that "worship finds us in our dislocation and relocates us in God."⁵ What a gift Sabbath keeping becomes when we catch a vision of our need and then perceive how graciously God has provided for this need from the beginning.

If it is to be a sign, the practice of rest and worship must be a corporate practice. “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people,” proclaims 1 Peter 2:10. Being a people is truly remarkable in an individualistic society, but corporate practices must be intentional in order to foster corporate identity. Just as the ancient Sabbath formed a community who recalled and proclaimed that God had created and redeemed them, the church is formed today as a new community when we regularly remember and proclaim together.

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Of course we remember and proclaim not just original creation and the liberation of Israel from Egypt but new creation and redemption for all through the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. On the first day of the week, the church remembers this pivotal event in history, and proclaims the good news that “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). In a world that screams myriad alternate messages, the church is continually reoriented to this foundational truth through the practice of withdrawing from the marketplace every seven days to gather for corporate worship.

A practice with this potential as a reorienting sign dare not be left to the whim of individuals to choose participation as a matter of convenience or personal lifestyle. There is perhaps little that causes a pastor to cringe more than the cheery announcement from church members that they will be absent from worship for several Sundays because of coaching at baseball tournaments or taking advantage of the opening of fishing season. I vividly recall working all week to prepare for worship and preaching, only to discover (especially in summer) that other events had left only a remnant to gather for Sunday worship. Worship seemed somehow cheapened for everyone when it was chosen as one activity among many options.

Further reflection has confirmed that, indeed, practices that locate us at the core of who we are as God’s people must be engaged on the basis of covenant, not convenience or personal preference. The essential reorienting power of Sabbath keeping is

preserved only when it is a practice, not a choice. Choice means it can be supplanted by more important matters, which renders it void of power to form identity and define meaning. As a weekly practice of the church, Sabbath rest and worship form the community and set it apart before God, our creator and redeemer. Nothing can supplant this identity when nothing supplants the practices that form it.⁶

How Sabbath observance transforms all days

Moreover, Sabbath keeping as a corporate practice reaches far beyond the designation of one day in seven for special observance. Sabbath transforms all days, for as Abraham Heschel has said, “the Sabbath cannot survive in exile, a lonely stranger among days of profanity.”⁷ When Israel paused on the seventh day to remember her creator and redeemer, a holy community was in formation. Sabbath keeping recalled and affirmed the goodness of a world created by God, and it brought to awareness the calling of all people to meaningful labour in God’s world (Gen. 1:27–28).

In the social and economic systems of a community formed by this story, no justification can be given for pushing anyone aside.

And none may be forced to work without respite. The fourth

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commandment in Deuteronomy bases Sabbath observance on remembering that Israel had been a slave nation and was redeemed by God’s hand. Therefore, no one was to work on the Sabbath, or to require someone else to work for them. Children, slaves, and even animals were to receive the gift of Sabbath rest. Thus the Sabbath had an equalizing function in the community. Because of what

we remember and proclaim on the seventh day, keeping the Sabbath transforms the socioeconomic activity of the other six days.

These observations have compelling implications for the practice of Christian rest and worship on the Lord’s Day. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God’s new order has broken into history, and the church is called to remember and proclaim this truth. The church can hardly proclaim God’s new order on the first day of the week while wilfully living in the old

broken order for the next six days. As Dorothy Bass notes, “A Sabbath-keeping community . . . would be a community in which injustice would not occur.”⁸ A community that proclaims God’s new creation in Christ must be a community that lives in the reality of its proclamation. A weekly day of rest and worship can only have integrity when all days are shaped by what is proclaimed on the Lord’s Day.

A Sabbath-keeping community is also freed from the tyranny of a culture of materialism and consumerism. North American society desperately needs the good news that we are more than producers and consumers of goods and services. A Sabbath day is a day to rest from nonessential work, to refrain from buying and selling, and to resolve not to worry about these things. When this rest and restraint becomes a practice, not subject to the interruption of circumstances, the church participates in and is itself a sign of life lived in relation to God who loves, provides, and orders all of life.⁹

Sabbath keeping for pastors

If this view of Sabbath keeping is accepted in the church, a matter of particular practical concern arises for those who plan and lead worship, and particularly for pastors. Many are the pastors who lament that they have no Sabbath—that is, no day of rest—because Sunday is their busiest day. Those who have high regard for Sabbath keeping often compensate by designating another day, perhaps Monday, as their personal Sabbath. Although it may be valuable for pastors to have another day for rest and rejuvenation, the case being made here hardly allows for this alternate day of rest to be considered a Sabbath. If Sabbath keeping is a corporate practice, it must include all who are part of the community, including pastors and worship leaders.

Of course, pastors have a special role in presiding over the practice of corporate worship, providing leadership to the remembering and proclamation that forms the community. Yet pastors and other leaders are also members of the church, participants who are themselves being shaped by these corporate practices. Therefore churches would do well to ensure that pastors do not have their busiest day on Sunday. It is not a day for quick church council meetings after worship to discuss pressing budget agenda.

It is not a day for people to expect pastoral attention for personal needs in the foyer before the service. Nor is it a day for afternoon committee meetings or pastoral visitation. In other words, even given their role of leading the gathered community in worship,

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pastors are members of the community that lives by the sign of Sabbath. It will be possible for pastors to be full participants in the practice of Sabbath keeping if congregations covenant to do their part, and if pastors plan well for Sunday worship, especially fostering collaboration with other worship leaders so that the task is truly corporate rather than a burdensome solo effort.

In a world that tempts us to view time as a commodity to be exploited for personal gain, the church has before it the opportunity to recover an ancient practice based in God's

own rhythm of labour and rest. Although distinctively Christian, corporate rest and worship on the Lord's Day has rich precedent in biblical Sabbath keeping. May we take hold of this gift and rejoice in being formed as a new community, a sign to the nations of who we are as God's own people.

Notes

¹For a sample of the debate, compare D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); and Roger T. Beckwith and Wilfrid Stott, *This is the Day: The Biblical Doctrine of the Christian Sunday in Its Jewish and Early Church Setting* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1978).

²For example, see Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); or Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

³Beckwith and Stott, *This is the Day*, 13.

⁴While the Sabbath commandment calls for rest, without any explicit command to worship, it seems a small step from remembering God's acts of creating and redeeming to worship. In time, synagogue worship arose in Jewish practice, and of course worship has always been central to Christian activity on the Lord's Day. Thus we make the clear connection of worship to Sabbath keeping.

⁵Comment during a public address (Winnipeg, MB).

⁶Of course, some church members do essential work such as health care during worship time. The point here is not to be rigidly legalistic but to grasp the potential of corporate practices for the church. I would encourage creativity, on a corporate level, in providing times of rest and worship for these people.

⁷Quoted by Dorothy Bass in *Practicing our Faith*, 77.

⁸Ibid., 76.

⁹ As seminary students, my wife and I practiced complete rest from all academic work each Sunday, even refraining from discussing or thinking about our assignments. It was not difficult to treasure this respite from the pressure and stress of our studies, not to mention the delight of our children when Sunday arrived. I only lamented that this was a practice of personal choice, not a truly corporate practice as I am envisioning here.

About the author

Kevin Drudge served as assistant pastor of Emmanuel Mennonite Church (Winkler, MB) from 1993–2003. After graduating from the M.Div. program at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, IN) in May 2005, he returned to Winkler, where he is working and discerning plans for future ministry. He and Rochelle are the parents of three daughters, Kayla, Hannah, and Amie Dawn.