

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
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American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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Shall We Keep Sabbath?

Kevin T. Bauder

Dispensationalists often dismiss the Fourth Commandment as an aspect of that Law from which Christians have been set free, reasoning that believers during the church age need not concern themselves with Sabbath observance. Even if they acknowledge that the other nine commandments ought to be observed today, these dispensationalists are quick to note that the Sabbath commandment is never repeated for church saints. For many, that argument is sufficient to settle the matter.

Exodus 20:8, however, must be understood in its context, and its context includes the overall story line of the Pentateuch. The Sabbath was not simply fabricated at Sinai. Rather, it was inaugurated as an aspect of creation week, and creation is when God first blessed and sanctified it (Gen. 2:1-4). In the giving of the Law, God specifically linked Sabbath observance to the natural order of creation (Ex. 20:9-10). Indeed, Israel had already been keeping Sabbath even before the Decalogue was revealed (Ex. 16:26-30).

Most Sabbatarians (Sabbath-keepers) are of two sorts: strict or modified. Both sorts of Sabbatarians wish to maintain Sabbath as a day of worship and rest. In some instances, they are even willing to enact legislation to enforce rest during the Sabbath by requiring that businesses be closed.

Strict Sabbatharians understand that the Sabbath day is, properly, the seventh day—i.e., Saturday. They are committed to a strict observance of the Sabbath, and therefore they observe Saturday and not Sunday as a holy day. Strict Sabbatharians are sometimes overt legalists, such as Seventh Day Adventists, but other times they may trace themselves to a more evangelical tradition, such as Seventh Day Baptists.

Modified Sabbatharians see the Lord's Day—Sunday—as a replacement for the Sabbath day. While they vary in the rigor with which they observe the day, they still insist that it must be characterized by worship and rest. Sporting activities, commerce, and unnecessary labor are all proscribed.

The rigors of Sabbatarianism have given Sabbath observance an unappealing image, to say the least. The popular impression is that keeping Sabbath is boring, stultifying, restrictive, unproductive, and onerous. That impression is unfortunate, for it runs directly contrary to the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. He said that Sabbath was made for humanity, i.e., that it was made as a thing that is good for people (Mk. 2:27).

What I would like to propose is a kind of “soft” Sabbatarianism. I ground this Sabbatarianism, not in the Sinai code, but in the created order. By understanding why God rested, we discover the meaning of Sabbath rest in general. Once we have done that, we find that Sabbath is not a burden but a delight.

Genesis 2:2-3 informs us that God rested on the seventh (Sabbath) day, and that He consequently blessed that day and set it apart. It would be puzzling indeed if being blessed and hallowed by God turned the day into oppressive drudgery! No, clearly God meant this day to be beneficial.

What could it possibly mean that God rested? In answering this question, we must avoid two errors. First, we must not suppose that God was tired and needed to refresh Himself after a hard week of creation. Certainly an omnipotent God could not be exhausted that easily—or at all! Second, we should not conclude that God became inactive, for the world could not survive an instant without His sustenance and Providence. God was active, sustaining His creation and upholding all things, yet somehow He rested. But how?

A human analogy may help to clarify the answer. Imagine the first hot day of spring, and imagine that your lawn needs care. You mow the grass, then mow a second time to make it look like a fairway at a golf course. You edge all the walks, trim all the shrubs, and bag all the clippings. You pull every dandelion and carefully manicure the flower beds. After several hours, you have completed your work. What is the next thing that you will do?

Nine out of ten people will get a cold drink, park a chair or lounge in the middle of the yard, sit down, and simply gaze upon what they have completed. They will enjoy the spectacle of the even green grass, the orderly shrubs, the sharply-edged walks, and the smartly-dressed flowers. They will congratulate themselves on a job well done. They will simply delight in what they have accomplished.

That, I think, is what God was doing on the seventh day. He was delighting in what He had made. He had just fashioned a perfect creation. Everything He made was very good. God had every right to congratulate Himself on the wonder of His work. He had every right to rejoice and take pleasure in it. That is how God rested.

Consequently, Sabbath rest is not primarily about avoiding exertion or remaining immobile. To be sure, when one has given six days to hard, physical labor, inactivity may come as a welcome respite. But what about the person who sits at a desk for five days out of the week? For both people, Sabbath rest is different than mere immobility.

Sabbath rest is about delighting in God the Giver and in His good gifts. This makes Sabbath activity a natural adjunct of the Lord's Day. Corporate worship fulfills a major purpose of both events as Christian people rejoice in their Savior and magnify Him.

Worship is not the only ordinate activity for Sabbath, however. In a "soft" Sabbatarianism, we may pursue any activity that leads to an occupation with God and His goodness, or that produces a sense of delight and gratitude for His good gifts. Such activities might include enjoying thoughtful conversation among friends, taking pleasure in the beauty of creation, delighting in good food, in family, and in one's spouse. There is warrant for the Sunday dinner (especially if it is prepared mostly on Saturday), Sunday visitors, Sunday naps, and sometimes even the Sunday drive.

We need such times. They refresh our bodies and restore our souls. Sabbath rest is a blessing from God, a good thing that God has instituted for our own wellbeing. While we will choose to forego activities that disturb our composure and distract our attention from God and His goodness, Sabbath rest is far from onerous. Sabbath is to our spirits what oxygen is to our bodies: we may try to live without it, but if we go too long, we will not be able to catch our breath.✘

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Morning Hymn

Joseph Beaumont (1615-1699)

What's this morn's bright eye to me,
If I see not Thine and Thee,
Fairer Jesu; in whose face
All my heaven is spread! — Alas,
Still I grovel in dead night,
Whilst I want Thy living light;
Dreaming with wide open eyes
Fond fantastic vanities.

Shine, my only Day-Star, shine;
So mine eyes shall wake by Thine;
So the dreams I grope in now
To clear visions all shall grow;
So my day shall measured be
By Thy grace's clarity;
So shall I discern the path
Thy sweet Law prescribed hath;
For Thy ways cannot be shown
By any light but by Thine own.✠

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