

Notes For Sunday, January 10, 2021

c. Reflections on the Possibility of a Christian Sabbath

Before we leave this topic, I wanted to propose a thought question for everyone to consider about the idea of observing a Christian Sabbath. Pastor asked us to think about vision this month, and I am suggesting that we consider this as part of our vision for the future.

We have seen that biblically the Sabbath is not a burdensome law but a gift from God and a delight for all of humanity. We saw that Jesus affirmed this perspective on the Sabbath and practiced acts of mercy and healing, restoring people to wholeness as a way of indicating something essential about the Sabbath. A Christian Sabbath would have to be gospel, good news, news of liberation and restoration, and I have tried to indicate ways in which it could be a real blessing for people.

The New Testament speaks of the “Law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21; cf. James 1:25; 2:8), or perhaps more accurately, the Torah of the Messiah. Often this is simply reduced to a vague command to love your neighbor, but as we have seen Jesus has a much more robust and comprehensive understanding of Torah than that. We need to think more deeply about what it means that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath and what it would mean to follow the Torah of the Messiah.

I am not at all suggesting that we simply copy what Judaism has done with the Sabbath. I have shared some aspects of the Jewish observance of the Sabbath that I think are positive and helpful. To fully consider this idea we would also benefit from looking at Christian Sabbatarian groups, like the Seventh Day Adventists.

I recognize that what I am proposing is a radical re-thinking of what we do as Christians, but I think the failure of the church in America to be a counter-cultural community warrants such radicalism. This may involve some hard work at first, rethinking how we live our lives. Discipline, training, can be hard but it is worth the effort. As I said last week, I think this needs to be done as a community. I think this is one of the things that has gotten the church in America into such serious trouble: the focus on my own private individual salvation. It would be hard to do on your own when everyone else is doing something different. The whole point of the Sabbath in the Scriptures is to create a different kind of community, one that is counter-cultural and functions as a light to the world. We could be a witness not only to the world but also to the church.

Could we use our sanctified imaginations for a moment and think about what it might look like for Christians to keep the Sabbath holy, to make space in our lives for a day that is separate, unique, to really be freed from our attachment to the things of this world? What biblical principles would we want to highlight in such an observance? How could Bethel do this? Is it even a good idea to try, or do we simply let the weight of centuries of human tradition overwhelm a biblical teaching? Pastor said that stepping out, not simply going along with the way we’ve always done things, entails risk. What are we missing in our spiritual lives by ignoring the Sabbath?

St. Augustine said that Jesus kept the Law even in his death, resting from all his works on the Sabbath before God raised him to new life on the eighth day! A paradigm for what the Sabbath might bring us.