

Sabbath People

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From its inception, the Seventh-day Adventist church has looked to the seventh-day Sabbath as one of its pillar doctrines. The Sabbath is a defining issue for Adventists, setting us apart as a denomination from others within the Christian tradition. We have enjoyed the great tradition of rest and the peace that the Sabbath brings. For many, this is the extent of the Sabbath. However, while we have enjoyed a rich tradition of the Sabbath, we must also hold to our founders' view of present truth, expanding our current understanding of the Sabbath. The Sabbath, which is so dear to us is much more than a weekly requirement of worship. But rather, it is a lifestyle of self-sacrifice and justice as Biblical theology portrays it to be.

The Sabbath and the Year of Jubilee in the Old Testament

Most Adventist conversation concerning the Sabbath comes from Ex. 20:8-11 and Deut. 5:12-15. While these are rich passages that indeed must and will be explored further, these two passages alone create an incomplete picture of Sabbath within the context of the Torah. The book of Leviticus contains some of the most prominent commands concerning the Sabbath, which can be found in chapter 25. This passage begins by mentioning that this great chapter is comprised of a series of commands that were given to Moses by God on Sinai.¹ Thus, these commands are part of the larger body of commands in which the Ten Commandments are found. Though there are many environmental ethical issues to be found within the Sabbatical year mentioned in vss. 1-7, I would like to focus specifically on the following passage concerning the year of jubilee in vss. 8-17.

As described, the year of jubilee is to occur every 50 years. Stating it in another way it was to be celebrated every "seven weeks of seven years," or as the Hebrew literally states "seven Sabbaths of seven years." Thus, the jubilee is to be a great Sabbath, more significant than the rest. As described throughout the passage, it is the year when property is returned to its original owner, the land is allowed a Sabbath to rest, and liberty is to be proclaimed to the inhabitants of the land. The Israelites are then commanded that within this year of jubilee, they are to care for the poor within their land. This is central for the topic at hand.

This great Sabbath of Sabbaths demanded Israel to live within the realm of self-sacrifice and restorative justice. It was a great call to portray the true nature of their election and indeed the true nature of the Sabbath: to bless the nations. However, it was also an opportunity for Israel to bless the rest of creation, modeling the blessings of redemption that God had shown them in the exodus. Bruce C. Birch writes that "the Exodus story is perhaps the major biblical corrective to a spiritualized notion of God's salvation. God's salvation is liberation from the oppression of a tyrant. God's salvation

¹ Lev. 25:1

issues forth in freedom within the sociopolitical order.”² Thus, as God had blessed Israel and released them from the oppression of Egypt, Israel was now charged with releasing the oppressed in their midst from oppression.

Fingerprints of this theme can be seen throughout the two texts mentioned previously; Ex. 20:8-11 and Deut. 5:12-15. In both of these texts, Sabbath rest is decreed for the aliens and sojourners among the Israelites. These strangers among the Israelites were also to benefit from the blessings of the Sabbath. Commenting on this passage Samuele Bacchiocchi writes, “The ‘stranger’ initially was a foreigner who lived in the land of Israel, but in the course of time the term was used to describe a worker or laborer or a servant. When we think of the contempt the ancient world had toward work and workers, it is not surprising to note the concern of the Sabbath for the outcast of society.”³ Sakae Kubo further elaborates on this point noting that the weekly Sabbath commands pointed to Israel’s captivity in Egypt and demanded that they not treat their servants the way that they had been treated. In addition, the Sabbath commands ultimately point to freedom from bondage.⁴

But as can be seen throughout the story of Israel, they fell short of the demands of the Sabbath and began to oppress others just as they had been oppressed in Egypt. This is evident in Isaiah’s condemnation of the Sabbath because Israel has refused to “seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, (and) plead the widows cause.”⁵ Israel did not live up to the calling that the true nature of the Sabbath placed upon them. Indeed, these failures caused many of the prophets to condemn Jerusalem herself. Isaiah describes the “faithful city” as a “whore”⁶ while Ezekiel compares it to Sodom, which was destroyed because “she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.”⁷

Though earlier condemning the in chapter 1, Isaiah lays out the framework for how the Sabbath is truly to be lived in chapter 58. The chapter begins with the people complaining that God has not acknowledged their fasting. God then answers by telling them the true nature of their fasting. “Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist.”⁸ God then tells them that the fasting that he chooses is “to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go

² Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) p. 128.

³ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: A Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1980) p. 201.

⁴ Sakae Kubo, *God Meets Man: A Theology of the Sabbath and Second Advent* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1978) p. 45.

⁵ Isaiah 1:13, 17.

⁶ Isaiah 1:21.

⁷ Ez. 16:49.

⁸ Isaiah 58:3-4.

free, and to break every yoke.”⁹ The chapter then ends with a call to keep the Sabbath as it was truly meant to be kept.

“If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or taking idly; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”¹⁰

Many times, this chapter has been used to discourage Sabbath keepers to refrain from involvement in secular activities on the Sabbath day. Even our statement of beliefs espouses this view. Commenting on Is. 58:13, the book *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* states that “devoting this day to pleasing ourselves, to being involved in secular interests, conversations, and thoughts or to being engaging in sports would detract from communion with our Creator and violate the sacredness of the Sabbath.”¹¹ While indeed there is a need for a certain *shalom* to be found on the Sabbath, it seems that this interpretation of Is. 58 is largely taken out of context. Within its own context, Is. 58 seems to be saying that turning from one’s own pleasure involves not oppressing workers.

Isaiah continues his theme of justice for the oppressed in chapter 61, culminating the discussion with the year of jubilee previously described in Lev. 25. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.”¹² Thus, the Sabbath and the year of jubilee and caring for the poor and the oppressed are themes that are inevitably connected.

The Sabbath and the Year of Jubilee in the New Testament

Progressing from the Old Testament to the New, the first and most prominent mention of the year of jubilee is found in Luke 4. Jesus uses the imagery of the year of jubilee in his discourse with the Jews in his hometown of Nazareth. Quoting from the Isaiah 61 text previously mentioned, he tells those attending the synagogue that the words of the prophet had been fulfilled that day in front of them.¹³

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright comments that this could have been due to a problem of debt in ancient Israel.¹⁴ He also notes that it is unlikely that Jesus was aiming to have the whole nation of Israel celebrate the year of jubilee because there is no evidence that Israel ever celebrated the year of jubilee.¹⁵ Rather, he was calling his

⁹ Isaiah 58:6.

¹⁰ Isaiah 58:13-14

¹¹ *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Boise: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2005) p. 296.

¹² Isaiah 61:1-2.

¹³ Luke 4:18-21.

¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) p. 294. He also notes that this theme can be seen within some of Jesus’ own parables cf. Luke 7:41-42, Matt. 18:23-35.

¹⁵ Ibid.

followers to live their lives as though the jubilee were “being enacted.”¹⁶ Thus this great Sabbath of Sabbaths is a mandate from Jesus for his followers to constantly embody the themes of the year of jubilee. Richard Hays also comments on this passage, writing that, “Luke...proclaims God’s liberating power on behalf of the poor and hungry (Luke 1:52-53, 4:18-19) and highlights the vision for a new community of believers who share all possessions in common so that there are no poor among them.”¹⁷ They were to care for the poor, needy and oppressed around them. It is evident that the early Christian church embodied this theme in Acts 4:32-37. They cared for the poor. None of them were needy, because they all gave to support each other. They were more than willing to give of all of their material possessions to answer the call that Jesus had placed on them.

This new ethic of community is strongly evident in the life of the early church. The Apostle Paul seems to have been acutely aware of the new standard for community declared by the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. This is strongly evident in his counsel to the Corinthians concerning financial interactions between members of the community.

“For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written ‘Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.’”¹⁸

Here the apostle is exhorting members of the community of the Messiah to provide for each other in their different times of need. Not only is he aware of the need for each member of the community to help each other in loosening their own bonds of oppression, he is also aware of how this ethic of community relates to the Sabbath lifestyle. Paul concludes this exhortation with an appeal to the Sabbath practices found in Ex. 16:18 in which the Israelites were permitted to gather more manna than usual in preparation for the Sabbath. In this passage, those who gathered more manna gave to those who had gathered less. And while it is certain that manna was not shared in order to fulfill the jubilee command, the apostle seems to see this practice as a true fulfillment of Sabbath keeping which does not allow one group to oppress another.¹⁹ Within the framework of the New Testament the year of jubilee is enacted by Jesus and lived out by the early followers of the Messiah.

Conclusion

The Sabbath has been a great blessing to many Seventh-day Adventists throughout the years. For many, it has been a stronghold of communion with God: a time to rest from the weary work of life and enjoy the blessings of God. But what I would like

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996) p. 464.

¹⁸ 2 Cor. 8:12-14.

¹⁹ Marva Dawn has a wonderful discussion of this passage in her book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989) pp. 124-130.

to suggest is that we have not followed the theology of the Sabbath far enough. While we enjoy the rich tradition of rest that the Sabbath has brought us, we have been far less concerned with the aspects of the Sabbath that are bound up in the jubilee year.

From God giving the law to Moses, to the call for justice from the prophets, to Jesus calling those who follow him to live as if the jubilee year has been enacted, and the witness of the early church leading jubilee lifestyles, Scripture is rich with the call of responsibility that the jubilee year requires of Sabbath keepers. The question that stands before us as a denomination is whether or not we will take up this responsibility. Are there modern day Isaiah's condemning us because we defile the Sabbath by neglecting our duty to be agents of restorative justice? Today, let us become the Sabbath people that God calls us to be. Let us begin to see our identity in the Sabbath as one that is ushering in the Kingdom of God.

