

Sabbath Reflections 1

Capitalism and Inequity versus a Gospel Mandate

Sabbath: God's Relationship with Creation: The Template for Human Society

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 111.4, *The Doctrine of Creation* (London: T&T Clark), 47ff.

2. A term popularized by the Nobel Prize winning scientist, Professor Paul Crutzen. In a year 2000 article he uses the term to mean we now live in an era when, for the very first time, all life on the planet is subject to the activity of one species – humanity. This single species has the capacity to affect the destiny of all other living species.

3. Newbigin, Lesslie, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK 1986).

4. Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth* (London: Earthscan, 2010), Chapter 3, pages 35ff. In Christian literature there is little reference to happiness, emphasis is placed on contentment.

5. Thich Nhat Hahn is a Vietnamese Buddhist Monk, now living in France and the author of 100 books, who has become very influential in the westernising of Buddhism.

Karl Barth, arguably the most influential of all 20th century theologians, said that Sabbath was the goal of God's covenant relationship;¹ a relationship which in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants focuses upon humanity, but in the creation covenant (Genesis 9: 1-17) includes all living things.

Purpose, or goal, is significant in the shaping of individual human lives, but no less is it important in the shaping of the societies, or communities, to which we all belong and which, in turn, shape us.

At the beginning of the 21st century, does Christianity have a view about an ideal human society? Such a society must deal with the reality of a global world, it must address rapidly growing inequity; and it must confront an economic system which operates as if resources are infinite and that humanity can somehow exist as if it is not part of an unfolding ecological crisis. We are currently living in a society that is in denial of this crisis. It believes that our lives can always be managed by technology and refuses to accept in the 'anthropocene era' as our era recently been called,² the future will not be determined by technology, but by human values, hopes and aspirations, whether these are healthy or unhealthy, reasonable or unreasonable, moral or immoral.

Lesslie Newbigin notes that in its roots capitalism is related to purpose or goal, and has always been influenced by the Christian aspiration for the flourishing of the individual.³ He notes that in the pre-industrial era it would have been unthinkable to increase profit without purpose. However, we have reached a point in modern western society where profit is completely detached from purpose. It is not related to wellbeing.⁴ Economics has become divorced from ethics. Indeed research data frequently indicates that once human life has been lifted out of poverty, accumulation of wealth does not relate to commensurate increase in human happiness and wellbeing. Some surveys indicate that, under certain circumstances, there is a diminishment of human wellbeing. So what is the purpose of a human society that has a rapacious appetite for exponential growth, that sets economic growth at the apex of a pyramid of worthy human aspirations, and which tells its citizens that the solution to its problems is increased consumerism – indicating that it is almost a civic duty to consume more?

The Buddhist master, Thich Nhat Hahn,⁵ says that consumerism is itself an indication of human emptiness, the loss or absence of meaning or purpose. There is no reason to think that such a view should come only from Buddhism. Jesus himself taught that external appetites would never satisfy an inner emptiness.

So, where does Sabbath fit into all of this, why is Sabbath the focus of this series of studies?

Sabbath should not be understood in the creation narrative as the last day in a sequence of seven, but as the 'day' which embraces creation and bequeaths creation with purpose. As Barth tells us, it speaks of the 'goal' for which creation was born. There is considerable debate as to the origin of 'seven' as the sacred number, but it is not unreasonable to accept that seven is the combination of 'three,' the number that represents the Divine, and 'four,' which represents the material world. 'Seven,' is therefore where heaven and earth embrace, where time is kissed by eternity. What

belongs to Sabbath belongs to the whole created order. It should not surprise us that Jesus, the one in whom heaven and earth meet, is known as the Lord of creation (the Logos), and the human face of the Sabbath God.

Dan Hardy⁶ comments that 'Creation' has always had two meanings: First, it refers to a formed and ordered cosmos; and secondly, to the primary relationship this cosmos bears to God. Sabbath, first and foremost, speaks of creation's relationship with God. The Hebrew word 'sabat' from which we gain 'Sabbath' is traditionally translated 'rest.' However, its essential meaning is not cessation, but being present to creation. In the Sabbath, God becomes present to creation. Sabbath is essentially about relationships. God is a relational God who has created a relational world. As we shall see in future studies, the blessing and hallowing of Sabbath is not blessing and hallowing of any individual part of creation, but blessing that is tied to each part's relationship with the whole.

How we relate to the whole therefore becomes fundamental to the manner in which we understand purpose and seek to form human society. Human society cannot be shaped in a manner inconsistent with the creation upon which it depends.

In Old Testament texts Sabbath is very frequently mentioned in conjunction with reference to 'New Moon' festivals.⁷ Why is this the case? The reason is that we cannot relate in a healthy manner to one another and the whole created order if we ignore essential rhythms, seasons, limitations that are embedded in creation itself. As humans, we know that our primary relationships are dependent upon trust – and trust is rooted in expectations of fidelity, while fidelity means the acceptance of limits. Why would our relationship with creation be any different?

The following studies will look more closely at the Sabbath principles which do not change, but which have to be interpreted afresh for each generation as peculiar sets of challenges are faced and lived out in a rapidly changing world.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. If 'how we relate to the whole is fundamental to the manner in which we understand purpose and seek to form human society' how do we, as individuals and as members of a community fit into such a 'whole?'
2. Where do you see essential ecological rhythms threatened, even destroyed?
3. 'Sabbath' is described not as *cessation from*, but being *present to* creation. How might this become more real for yourself and for your community?

6. Dan Hardy, *Created and Redeemed Sociality*, in *On being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, ed. Colin Gunston and Daniel Hardy (Edinburgh: T&T Clark. 1989).

7. Only 15 of the 39 books in the Old Testament make any reference to the Sabbath, 10 of these link Sabbath with new moon festivals.

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