



ECO

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Lord of Time

Living in the Rest and Reign of God

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Lord of Time: Living in the Rest and Reign of God

Theology Task Force for the creation of a New Theology Document

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Lord of the Sabbath

Introduction

Beginning the Project

Four years ago, at ECO's 2018 Synod Meeting, the church concluded a long process of study and discernment and chose the creeds and documents that would comprise its *Confessional Standards*. In the process, several confessions that had been in the previous *Book of Confessions*—the Confession of 1967 and the Brief Confession of Faith, to name two—were not included in the new collection. This led many to express their belief that a new statement of faith was needed, not only to address areas of church faith and life that were now seen to be missing and unaddressed but to state afresh who we are and what we believe at this important time.

The Synod Executive Council (SEC) considered the question of whether a new confession of faith was needed and concluded it was a complex issue involving many important questions. First, and most pressing was the question of whether a new confession is really needed. But this quickly expanded into many others: should *something* be written? What form should it take? What was its goal or purpose? What should it address or declare or include? The SEC concluded that these were good and relevant questions but the complexities and issues went beyond what the SEC was able or established to address.

Consequently, the SEC created a task force, commissioning its members to explore and address three areas or questions:

1. Does the church need some type of new theological document at this important time in its life? If yes...

2. What form should this take? Should it be an official Confession of Faith to be added to our *Confessional Standards*? Should it be a catechism (like Heidelberg), a declaration (like Barman), or a series of studies or papers on various theological and ethical subjects intended to guide the church in our time? If the task force concluded "yes!" to the first question and discerned the "what" for the second, they were to...

3. Write this document and present it to the church.

The nebulous nature of the assignment and complexities involved meant a multi-year project requiring a great deal of time. This made it difficult to assemble a task force of people having the necessary theological qualifications and the time and desire to take on such a task. After many months a group was formed and we had our first meeting in September of 2019.

The first question proved relatively easy as it took little time to agree that something should be written. The second set of questions, however, proved considerably more difficult. A

number of months and many hours of study, reflection, and deliberation were given to this set of conundrums.

We quickly concluded that whatever we might produce, we were not intending it to be in the genre of a new systematic confession of faith along the lines of something like the Westminster Confession. We felt that the weight and significance of such a document was not something our small group should decide.

We agreed that the church needed a fresh expression of the gospel, a new retelling of the ancient story for our day. Our hope (and prayer!) was to create a document that would give to the church a renewed vision of the gospel and a fresh way to declare its truths. We hoped to revitalize a sense of awe and wonder in God's goodness, the magnificence of his person, and treasure of his work. We were united in our belief that the church today, for the sake of its own faith and life and for the sake of its mission and witness, needed a renewed vision of the person and work of God. Thus, we turned to Scripture in hope of finding in its ancient words a fresh way to tell its story.

But what is "the story" of the Bible? How might it be told afresh? Numerous "storylines" have been used throughout the history of the church to unite the many passages of the Bible into a single coherent narrative. The theme of redemption, for example, is powerful and deeply rooted in Scripture. It describes our being enslaved to sin and God's work of "redeeming" (purchasing) us from this bondage and setting us free in his kingdom and household. Forensic models too have been prominent, focusing on the guilt incurred by sin and describing God's just condemnation of sin but at the cross of Jesus God bore our penalty as his own, mercifully canceling the debt of our transgression and declaring us righteous. Both are faithful descriptions of God's work to correct all that sin has wrought and restore us to himself. But neither expresses the whole of God's nature, will, and work. In these, and others like them, there are beautiful truths. But there are also biblical elements that are neglected and others that are overemphasized or over-simplified.

Was there another vista that might unveil who God is, what he is doing, and how we might appropriately respond? Was there a theme or concept, solidly biblical yet largely unrecognized or forgotten, that could weave together the many strands of biblical verses into a fresh way of seeing, perceiving, and proclaiming the story?

Over many months we explored various approaches and concepts. Some were instant dead-ends. Others initially sounded rich and filled with potential only to lead to rabbit trails or cul-de-sacs. Despite enjoyable conversations and rich study, none captivated our attention, none united the group around a common theme and story, and thus none seemed worth pursuing as the motif of this project.

A Unique and Magnificent Vista

At some point in these months of exploring potential concepts and paths, the idea of Sabbath was suggested. Nothing was said at that point as to how or why it might be the theological and biblical theme upon which our writing might be based. It came before us quietly without pretension or any obvious promise. In all honesty, for most of us, little was really known about the Sabbath, its purpose, its practice, or its hope. But it was a biblical idea worth considering and we were turning over every stone in search of a uniting and guiding theme. Thus, we agreed to study it over the next month with each person writing three-thousand words on the meaning of the Sabbath. This initial study, and then the conversation that followed, produced a sense of surprise and excitement as we realized that there was more to this “simple” commandment and concept than imagined. It became clear to us that month—and increasingly over the next twenty-four—that the gift of the Sabbath, its source, meaning, and goals, its prominence across Scripture, and its joyous and grace-filled center combine to provide a panoramic vista into the grand narrative of the Bible. Here was a theme woven through its pages from its first chapter to its last. And, thus, here was the vista we had been seeking, the fresh perspective that might unveil in surprising ways the wonders of God and his work of love and grace.

It is important at this point to understand what is meant (and not meant) by “vista” or “fresh perspective.” For this, an illustration is helpful.

Yosemite National Park is vast, covering over a thousand square miles of alpine peaks, forests of huge Sequoia trees, waterfalls dropping thousands of feet, and massive granite domes rising over valleys and meadows. Its size and magnificence make it impossible to see or experience the whole from any one perspective. And the fact is, Yosemite is best (only) known from many vantages, each unveiling its own unique part of the whole. The trail to Yosemite Falls provides stunning views of the second largest waterfall on earth. The meadow below El Capitan provides an unparalleled vista of a single cliff rising straight up for more than a half a mile. Tuolumne’s high mountain meadows and granite domes and lakes provide a very different perspective than anything seen in the valley. But each of these, despite their grandeur, remain but a small part of the whole.

But there are few places where one can see—and experience—a greater vantage. There are vistas that provide uncommon views into the vast expanse of the park. For many this is coming out of Wawona Tunnel with the whole of Yosemite Valley, from Bridalveil Falls to Half Dome, before them. Or it might be standing before the three-thousand foot abyss at the rail on Glacier Point or even the top of Half Dome with the whole Valley, an acrophobia-inducing mile below, and the high country stretching as far as one can see into the distance. From such unique vistas, one is able to see and grasp and experience the whole in ways that are simply not possible from other views. These still do not reveal the entirety of Yosemite. Nor do such vistas render other views worthless or invalid. But such vantages provide a larger view, more wholistic, inclusive, and far reaching. It allows one to see more of the whole and connect the various parts with the whole in ways that other views do not.

And so it is with the Sabbath. Through this unique vista one perceives a greater breadth and deeper unity across the whole of Scripture allowing us to see more clearly its larger, more wholistic message. At creation, God ceases from his work and invites the whole of creation into a community of rest with him. This rest in God's presence precedes all human labor and thus takes priority over, and determines the boundaries of, all human work. The Creation Narrative, culminating in the Sabbath reveals God as absolute Lord and King over all that has been made and that we are to rest and work under his reign. The Sabbath day unveils God's intent in creating human beings as relational partners and provides definition of what it means to be human as we rest in his presence and rise from this rest to work he has given. Because this rest occurs in God's presence, under his protection and care, it is a place of genuine rest. The Sabbath, as the culminating act of creation is ever forward looking, awaiting its fulfillment in the culminating act of all history. The people of God eagerly await a great Sabbath rest that remains for them in the fulness of the kingdom of God (Hebrews). Thus, Sabbath bounds all of creation, encompassing the whole history of creation within the sovereign rest of God.

Across the whole of Scripture these Sabbath images abound. In passage after passage Sabbath themes are taken up, expanded, deepened and manifested. Every declaration of God's reign and rule, every mention of his absolute sovereignty, is but a declaration of realities established with creation and honored with the first Sabbath. Every promise of God to protect us, care for us, and meet our every need and every act in which these promises manifest, are but reflections of Sabbath life in his presence. Every call to enter his presence, every declaration or manifestation of his love for humanity, is but an unfolding of Sabbath principles initially set down in the Bible's first chapter. Sabbath offers an unprecedented vista across the whole of the Bible and the great span of history as all things move towards God's intended fulfillment which itself is Sabbath-shaped.

As we step down from the heights of creation and eschatology and into the realm of history, we find Sabbath commands and practices are given as signs intended to point upward, to connect the people of God with God by regularly participating in the rest of God and offering that rest to the world.

In the Sabbath God provided his people a continually recurring vista—a means by which they might regularly look to God and entrust the whole of themselves to him. God commanded his people to cease from their labor as God had from his and because God had freed his people from slavery. This weekly command to stop work, along with commands to cease every seventh or Sabbath year, and every fiftieth or Jubilee year, was intended to draw God's people into his presence, and give his people a taste of what the promise of his full presence as King of kings would look like, as the prophets had shown¹. Sabbath served as a regular reminder that God has given himself to his people, a regular call to trust him and rest in him, and with this, a regular means to enter his presence and experience the realities of life lived under him as King and Father.

¹ Isaiah 2, 11, 55, 65; Micah 4.

All this was to take on an ever-greater depth. Micah prophesied about a coming king who would be born in Bethlehem, who would reign on the highest hill of Zion, to whom all peoples would come to learn his ways, who would make all wars cease, and give to each person possession enough to live without serving others, and so Jesus came proclaiming that this time had come and he was this king, the Lord of the Sabbath. (Luke 4).

Jesus, as Lord of the Sabbath, found that the vista of Sabbath practices had become confused, calcified, and twisted beyond all recognition. Instead of serving God's people as a sign of life with him, the Sabbath command had become a burden itself. Rather than pointing to God and his gift of rest it pointed instead to the importance of human obedience done to meet human expectations. Its center shifted from God's presence and favor to human labor by which these might be earned. The God-centered day, given as a reminder and sign that all days are God's, was recast with a human center. God's gift of Sabbath had become a means of generating supposed righteousness simply by obedience to rules and stipulations that had now been made its essence.

Jesus' life and teaching challenged this. As Lord of the Sabbath, he not only proclaimed but demonstrated that human persons were not made for the Sabbath but rather the Sabbath was made for them. In him Sabbath was redirected and restored. It became a day of healing, of restoration, of forgiveness, of renewal. Sabbath days saw the Scriptures opened,² sight restored to the blind,³ lame made to walk,⁴ made whole,⁵ and made to stand straight.⁶ The Sabbath was turned back to God and the purpose for which it had been originally given was restored in him, his presence, his love, and his work. Finally, in this man, good news was proclaimed to the poor, release given to the captives, care bestowed upon the broken-hearted, and the year of the Lord's favor burst into human existence.

But the restoration of Sabbath came not only with his teaching and life but from his death. From the high place of Golgotha upon which Jesus was lifted up to be crowned and crucified, Jesus looked down upon the enemies of God and, as Lord of Sabbath, forgave those who would break the very beating heart of Sabbath. "Surely this man was the Son of God" is what we believe all must confess when they look up and have eyes to see our king who calls "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

And though some might think this Sabbath vision died with Jesus just as it seems like the vision is dead in our world that only sees salvation through work and righteousness gained through ceaseless toil. Yet, Jesus was raised up from the dead and ascended to the great Sabbath rest from which he will reign over all things, both now, and when he returns. The crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus now is our vision and our hope, and the constant desire of our hearts. He has gone ahead to prepare us a place with him and will come again to bring his

² Mark 6; Luke 4, 13.

³ John 9.

⁴ John 5.

⁵ Mark 3.

⁶ Luke 13.

justice and Sabbath rest to all of creation. And by the Holy Spirit this future reality takes temporal form and becomes a reality in our space and time.

The many vistas of Sabbath within Scripture have shown our team that the church has too often and too long fixated on a single viewpoint, that of commandment, and that obedience to that commandment left us in the shadows. Rather than looking up to Christ, the substance, the church has often looked around to evaluate others for their obedience. Or, perhaps worse, turned inward to define their own understanding of Sabbath and what right obedience to the command might entail. But either way, the consequences are grave. Rather than freedom, Sabbath became a joyless and hopeless burden. And so many, seeing little of life or freedom, simply stopped looking at the view. Concerned with daily necessities and worldly hopes, we barely know where we can find the viewpoint to see the expansive joy and wholeness of God's good news.

Our team believes we have rediscovered—or more accurately, been given—this vista, not in the shadows of obedience to a “dead letter” but in the glorious light of God. Sabbath practices that keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, form us more and more to be like Jesus as we together give one another rest, as we show the weary world visions of the rest of God. And so, we seek for the church to become a “city on a hill that cannot be hidden,” a vista in itself to which those who live in the “domain of darkness” can see a great light.

Sabbath Realities

These last two years have brought us not only tremendous insights into the wonders of the Sabbath, but it has also revealed several realities as to how it is seen, understood, and practiced across the church. We have touched upon some already but to understand the purpose and hope behind this document a second look, from another angle, is necessary.

First, we have found that the Sabbath is almost entirely understood through the category of law or commandment, subjecting almost all conversation about Sabbath to questions of obedience and the role of the law in a gospel of grace. Sabbath is grace. Sabbath is a “shadow” of which the substance is Christ (Colossians 2:16–17). But for many, the command to keep the Sabbath means little more than a mandate to attend church (more) regularly. For many pastors, it had been reduced to the importance of taking their day off. It was common for people to define Sabbath as an outdated way to say “weekend.” And we found it common for the Sabbath to be largely remembered in terms of legalistic rules, dusty rituals, Blue Laws, and boredom. One person, after hearing one of our presentations on the Sabbath said, “I see now that most of what I’ve known and believed about the Sabbath I learned from the Pharisees!” And so it is for many in today’s church which has broadly accepted Sabbath practices as anachronistic, legalistic, and dispensable.

Because the substance of the Sabbath was lost in the shadow of the commandment, we have secondly found that the Sabbath commandment is the most quickly, most frequently, and most frivolously broken of all the Ten Commandments. The fact that its meaning and worth are

largely unknown has rendered the Sabbath—with all it summons and promises—largely ignored and forgotten. Busy weekends, kids' sports, unfinished work, and countless other perceived necessities are routinely and easily allowed to push the Sabbath Commandment—and thus Sabbath life—all but completely out of our lives. And we allow this largely without thought or concern. One pastor expressed his personal experience: "If I had broken any of the other nine commandments, I would likely lose my job and ministry. But nothing was said when I routinely broke the fourth. No questions raised or correction given. In fact, I was commended for not taking a day off and given a raise!"

But there is a third reality we have seen as we shared our discoveries. The fact that the Sabbath life and the summons to enter it are little understood and the fact that it is easily rejected, has not changed the fact that people broadly wonder if there is not something more to it that they are missing. There is a nagging sense that the Sabbath promises more and provides more than we realize. And this sense is neither recent nor limited to ECO churches.

Yet, in spite of this, the question remains: why, in the twenty-first century, should we take something so seemingly arcane as Sabbath seriously? There are (at least) three compelling reasons.

First is the simple and obvious fact that we are a rest-less people. Our lives—and thus our culture—are characterized by a frenzied busyness that touches every part of life. Relationships—with God and between one another—are stripped of meaning-full time as we flit from person to person, task to task. Our phones, once affixed to the walls of our homes, have become smart and are now adhered to our very lives filling them with nearly endless streams of calls, texts, instant messages, social media posts, and news flashes, pulling upon our attention like gravity and taking control of our time. Hours spent in the car, at work or school, shopping, laundry, dishes, and a thousand other tasks so fill our minutes that it is even hard to find time for a full night's sleep. Restless because of individualism. And all this is true for Christians and church leaders as much as anyone else in our culture. Burnout has become a common word in church and culture alike. For we are a rest-less people, out-paced, worn-out, spread thin, distracted, and desperately in need of genuine, transformative rest and a lifestyle built upon it.

Second, and more importantly, is the undeniable fact that the Sabbath holds a uniquely prominent place in Scripture! That it is one of the Ten Commandments *requires* we see it as a necessary and vital element of Christian faith and life. But its recurrence across Scripture, the surprising prominence given this commandment over others, and its role as a defining sign of being God's people only affirms and deepens its importance. Not only one of the Ten Commandments, it is also given early⁷ and the one given with the greatest amount of reasoning/justification⁸. More than any other, the Sabbath commandment is intimately

⁷ Ex. 16 where Sabbath rest—and trusting faith—are intimately entwined with the giving of manna and Israel's obedience in following God's commands regarding its collection and use.

⁸ The Fourth Commandment, as given in Exodus 20:8-11, contains fifty-six words in the Hebrew text. The next longest is the Second Commandment with forty-two. The other eight commandments average just over eight words each, with three of these having only two words each. The number of words used in the Second and Fourth commandments (roughly 60% of the words in the Ten Commandments) show not only their importance but their

connected with and grounded upon both God's work of creation⁹ and work of redemption.¹⁰ It is one of the most repeated commandments in Scripture and often used as the sum of all other commands or alone singled out as what obedience looks like.¹¹ The breaking of this command is one of the most frequently given reasons for God's judgment of his people.¹² The Sabbath is given as the means by which Israel experiences God's providential care and demonstrates, by their obedience, their trust in this care.¹³ Thus, it is the primary means by which all other commandments are fulfilled: where the Sabbath life is embraced and lived, idolatry disappears, injustice fades, and righteousness thrives as lives submit to God's reign and purpose. Indeed, no other command is more defining of God's will and work or more revealing of whether or not these have been appropriately grasped, received, and followed by God's people. It is Israel's adherence to Sabbath life that reveals that they trust God, love God, and submit to his rule and will. It is the keeping of this commandment, more than any other, that reveals Israel understands itself as the people of God whose trust is not in themselves or their labor but in God who has cared for them in the past and promises his care and presence into the future.

Third, and building upon this, the Sabbath commandment reflects theological and ethical truths at the center of faith for God's people. For the Sabbath is much more than a command. It is an understanding, attitude, and perspective shaping our whole response to God. It is a sign of kingdom reality which we enter and experience in our taking up of Sabbath life. For the Sabbath unveils with rare clarity God's purpose and intent for human life, the shape and look he desires it to take, and how this might be obediently pursued and actually entered. A bold claim, to be sure but one we believe is repeatedly affirmed by both Scripture and the central principles of our theological tradition. From the setting apart of the Seventh day in the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of the Bible in John's Revelation, from the covenant promises given Israel through Abraham and Moses to the New Covenant given in Jesus, from Israel's redemption from Egypt to our redemption from sin at the Cross, from Eden's nascent promise to its eschatological consummation, one finds Sabbath themes unfolding, swirling, and manifesting. It is difficult to think of a great theme or promise in Scripture that is not entwined, shaped, or touched in some way by the Sabbath life and its implications. Consequently, the Sabbath, with its constituent justifications, promises, and implications provides a unifying theme and clarifying insights to the whole of Scripture.

This is tremendously valuable (and needed!) in our day. For the Bible describes a very different reality, one quite foreign and strange when compared to our own. It describes all that exists as the creation of God who is so incomprehensibly great that no human mind can grasp

close relationship. This is affirmed by the fact that in the Old Testament the two most frequent reasons for God's judgment upon Israel is their idolatry and their breaking the Sabbath.

⁹ Exodus 20:11.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 5:15. The Sabbath's connection to both creation and redemption are important in itself but also in how Sabbath Day expands into Sabbath Year and Year of Jubilee which have profound implications for our care of creation and protection of the powerless, the outsider, and the sojourner in our midst.

¹¹ Nehemiah 9:14; Isaiah 56:2.

¹² Ezekiel 20:10-13.

¹³ Exodus 16:22-30.

his reality or find words adequate to describe him. But he has revealed himself—even given himself—to us making it possible to genuinely know him. Thus, we take up human words, imperfect but not inaccurate, to describe what he has made known: He is the beginning and the end, the first and last. He had no beginning but exists from everlasting to everlasting. He is before all things and through him all things came to be. In love he created human beings after his own image, in his own likeness that we might be covenant partners, living under his perfect reign and endless care, ever giving him thanks, honoring him as king, and simply enjoying him. Entering time, God gave himself to us and invited us to rest with him and have this rest and relationship transform our labor which follows. Here God reigns completely. Here we rest, live, and work beside him under his constant care and provision. And while the existential reality of it has been lost through the fall, its eschatological reality is certain and even unfolding. The Sabbath promise and goal remain and through Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, we may enter this rest and experience its reality even as we are being moved toward its fulfillment and culmination. We believe the gift of Sabbath is not only a source of renewal to the church, but also a message of hope for the world. Being intimately tied to every promise of the Gospel it provides a fresh and inspiring view into the heart of all God has done for us and an incomparable way to proclaim this Gospel in ways that are fresh, hope filled, and relevant to this frenetic and busy age.

Content of the Document

This document consists of four parts: 1) an Introduction; 2) the Scriptural Narrative through the lens of the Sabbath; 3) a brief Theology of Sabbath; and 4) An Invitation to Sabbath Life

Introduction

This first part introduces the project and our goals as we approached it. We realize that while we have been immersed in this subject for several years, the concepts and ideas we are seeking to put forth, are for many, quite new. Opportunities to present this project across the church family over the last two have made it clear that there were a number of questions, concerns, and perspectives frequently voiced. This introduction is intended to address some of these.

Narrative

We move from this preface and introduction into a narrative summary retelling of the story of the Bible with a particular eye toward Sabbath. It was written to be studied, to be rich enough that multiple readings will yield deepening insights. Each word was purposefully chosen.

The narrative is structured in an intentionally mirrored way with each section of the Old Testament (1) and New Testament (2) speaking to the same plot points, each intentionally in seven parts. This speaks to the conviction that the Old and New Testaments are ultimately about

the same thing, with the New Testament speaking to the presence of God in space and time in Jesus.

Brief Theology of the Sabbath

Following this Narrative we provide a theological vision of the Sabbath and its meaning and explain how it addresses the issues the church is facing in a world focused on individual sovereignty and authenticity. Sabbath is a revelation of the time of God, his dwelling presence, and the invitation for us to enter into his rest and give that rest to others. Sabbath is described as an ecclesial gospel in which the church's mission is to reveal and reflect the dwelling presence of God to the world.

An Invitation to Sabbath Life

The final part is an initial turn toward putting Sabbath into practice. This was written in the spirit of a group that has come to its own realization of our personal and collective failures to keep the Sabbath, largely due to our limited understanding of what it has always been about. This section seeks to honestly address failures in taking up God's Sabbath life. But this section is not just about repentance. It is a hope-filled invitation to the church to prayerfully study, courageously consider, and boldly take up a Sabbath faith and life. It is intended to spur readers and their churches on to use their collective imaginations to a new season of faithful life-together inspired by a renewed vision of what being a church means and looks like.

A Completed Document, an Uncompleted Work

This New Theological Document intentionally does not address modern moral, political, or ethical issues. Although many expressed a desire for a "new confession" in 2018 to replace the Confession of 1967 that contained explicit statements on egalitarian ministry and racial justice, this team realized that part of our problem was a lack of a shared framework for moving forward with modern problems. Our historic creeds, confessions, and catechisms are lacking in this area, and we did not find that we shared the same emphases or values to make sweeping ethical statements. Furthermore, we realized that the church is entering a new era in which its social impact is often mediated through political coalition strategies, which are inimical to stating the truth of Scripture clearly.

Thus, we desired to write a document that was squarely rooted in Scripture and had no agenda toward answering modern questions in often highly loaded terms derived from the political arena. At the same time, we desired that such a document could be highly useful in theologically reflecting on the vital modern questions our churches are encountering.

The church is struggling to address modern questions from a particularly Christian framework because our vocabulary has been stuck in a Christendom setting in which the church was generally viewed as the spiritual expression of a nation, state, or people group, and thus

could speak to the soul of a people. In a pluralistic situation, we realize that there are many preliminary unanswered questions about the church's social purpose that will need to be worked out or how evangelism and mission might be done in a post-Christian context or how discipleship might be encouraged and deepened. But we also felt that these could only be successfully and helpfully addressed from a shared theological foundation. This document is meant to present a fresh vision of God, his work for us and with us, and the foundational standards that would shape our various responses. It is from this foundation that further work may—indeed, must!—be done.

So, with this document we come to the completion of our work of laying a foundation but the beginning of the church's work of building upon it. We have hoped and prayed through the whole of this project that the ECO family, from individual covenant partners to churches, from sessions to presbyteries, would begin exploring the Bible's teaching on Sabbath and consider how we collectively might best put it into practice. We look with hope and excitement to see fresh expressions of worship, evangelism, study, discipleship. We look with anticipation to see how the church applies these truths of Scripture to the greatest questions and controversies of our age. For with all the church, we long to see our broken and sin-filled world set free from its countless wounds, tyrannies, and injustices and find genuine, transformative rest under the Grace of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Kingdom of his Son.

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory forever. Amen.

Romans 11:36

Part I

God Dwelling With Us—A Biblical Theology of Sabbath

1.1

In the beginning God created the fabric of space and time, the earth, and all creatures.¹⁴ He delighted in all he made, naming it very good.¹⁵ God finished his work and ceased from his labor on the seventh day.¹⁶ Creation was complete.¹⁷ Humanity, clay-formed, God-breathed,¹⁸ molded in God's image,¹⁹ flourished in God's free and abundant provision.²⁰ God reigned over his creation and its creatures and gave them freedom in faithfulness to him.²¹ God gave time as a gift of love to creation,²² for created relationships dwell in time. Six days were given to labor,²³ but God set apart this seventh day for himself, his Sabbath.²⁴ God's kingdom dwelled among the earth as God came near to walk with his image-bearers in the garden God created for this relationship.²⁵ God's presence and power filled creation with peace, wholeness, and abundant life. The seventh day completed the rhythms of time God infused into creation: day and night, signs and seasons, action and ceasing, and revealing that all time belongs to God. He put the man and woman there together to serve, protect, and keep the garden, plants, and creatures as those who bore witness to the goodness of God's dwelling with the creation.²⁶ God spread a fruitful feast, giving even the fruit of the tree of life to his creatures.²⁷ But one fruit God forbade—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eating it, they would die.²⁸

1.2

God lived with all his creatures, even the cunning serpent, who tempted Adam and Eve. Seeking to be like God, they decided good and evil for themselves, stretching out their hand to

¹⁴ Genesis 1.

¹⁵ Genesis 1:31.

¹⁶ Genesis 2:2.

¹⁷ Genesis 2:1.

¹⁸ Genesis 2:7.

¹⁹ Genesis 1:27; Colossian 1:15

²⁰ Genesis 2:9.

²¹ Genesis 2:16–17.

²² *Psalms 104:19, Ecclesiastes 3:11.*

²³ Exodus 20:9–11, 23:12, 31:15–17, 34:21, 35:2; Leviticus 23:3; Deuteronomy 5:13–15.

²⁴ Genesis 2:3.

²⁵ Genesis 3:8; 4:1–6.

²⁶ Genesis 2:15.

²⁷ Genesis 2:16.

²⁸ Genesis 2:17.

seize and consume what God had forbidden.²⁹ God judged his human creatures. The fruit of rebellion was death and creation was subjected to bondage, corruption, and decay.³⁰ Humans became estranged from God, from one another, and from all of creation.³¹ Sin arose to rule over those who now bore their own image.³² Earth, occupied by sin and death, was estranged from heaven, where God rules supreme.³³ People built their own domains, to provide for themselves and dwell apart from God.³⁴ Instead of free and fruitful living in God's abundant dwelling, humans earn bread through ceaseless, painful, anxious toil.³⁵ Exposed, humans created coverings to mask their shame.³⁶ Fashioning bricks with their own hands, they built the city and Tower of Babel as a home, working together to make a name for themselves. But God's judgment exposed their work as meaningless.³⁷ The wrath of God arose against the violence and injustice of rebellious humanity that caused desolation to his very good creation.³⁸ The powers of evil found their expression through humans who desired to forcibly subject all creation to their reign. The peace, wholeness, and abundant life found in the presence and power of God's reign on the seventh day was broken.

1.3

Yet God didn't abandon humanity, nor all that he had made. God continued to love and care for his human creatures, providing coverings for Adam and Eve.³⁹ God made a covenant with humanity through Noah—whose name means 'rest'⁴⁰—to rescue his creation rather than destroy it.⁴¹ God called Abram and Sarai out of their domain.⁴² God made a covenant with them, creating his people to show what it looks like when and where God dwells with his creation. God named them Abraham and Sarah, and promised to bless all the peoples of the earth through their offspring.⁴³ In faith they lived under God's reign and experienced God's blessing in the image of Sabbath rest. Yet, in childlessness, their trust waivered. Abraham and Sarah tried to provide an heir by their own hand, through their slave, Hagar.⁴⁴ Their mistrust in God's promised provision led to the exploitation of another. Yet God did not abandon the covenant he had

²⁹ Genesis 3:1–7.

³⁰ Romans 8:18–25.

³¹ Genesis 3:8–19, 6:1–5.

³² Genesis 4:7; 5:3.

³³ Colossians 1:13; 1 John 5:19.

³⁴ Genesis 4:16–17.

³⁵ Genesis 3:15–19.

³⁶ Genesis 3:7.

³⁷ Genesis 11:1–9.

³⁸ Genesis 6:5–7; Romans 1:18–32.

³⁹ Genesis 3:21.

⁴⁰ Genesis 5:29.

⁴¹ Genesis 9:1–11.

⁴² Genesis 12:1–8.

⁴³ Genesis 12:2–3, 15:7–21, 17:1–21.

⁴⁴ Genesis 16.

made. As promised, God gave them Isaac, and Jacob (whom God named Israel) after him, and more children after that.⁴⁵ Hunger drove Jacob's family to Egypt,⁴⁶ where they grew in number.⁴⁷ The ruler of Egypt, fearing their fruitfulness, enslaved them.⁴⁸

1.4

Egypt's ruler and his gods worked to prevent the sign-bearing Sabbath people of God from revealing signs of God's presence. Beaten down and heavily burdened with ceaseless toil, the Israelites made bricks for the storehouses of Egypt's wealth.⁴⁹ God saw the oppression of his people and heard their cry. But God remembered his people and his covenant.⁵⁰ Through his servant Moses, God's signs and wonders broke the dominion of Egypt. God's just wrath fell upon Pharaoh's Egypt to set his people free.⁵¹ God saved his people from his wrath with the sign of the blood of the Passover lamb, which declared their allegiance to God.⁵² God drew them out of Egypt to belong to him and to be his own people, leading them by a cloud by day and fire by night—signs of his abiding presence—and parted the Red Sea before them. He cast the horses, riders, and weaponry, all the signs of the dominion of the Egyptian kingdom, into the sea in their wake.⁵³ In so doing God set the stage for a gracious return of Sabbath that would now give rest to his people and to all creation.

1.5

Even though they had been liberated from slavery, they did not yet enter into the true freedom that only comes in God's presence under his reign.⁵⁴ From the sea, God led the Israelites into the wilderness to learn to trust him as their only leader who would provide as he dwelled with them.⁵⁵ Their first task as a rescued people was to cease from their labor. These freed slaves were used to working the fields for others. God freely gave them quail and manna to eat, new every morning. Each household was to gather only as much manna as they needed for one day. Every sixth day they gathered enough to save for the seventh,⁵⁶ for in six days God

⁴⁵ Genesis 21–50.

⁴⁶ Genesis 42–46.

⁴⁷ Exodus 1:7.

⁴⁸ Exodus 1:8–14.

⁴⁹ Exodus 1:11, 5.

⁵⁰ Exodus 2:23–25. 6:5.

⁵¹ Exodus 7–14.

⁵² Exodus 12.

⁵³ Exodus 13–15.

⁵⁴ Hebrews 4:8–11.

⁵⁵ Leviticus 26:1–13.

⁵⁶ Exodus 16.

created all things.⁵⁷ God invited his people to join his Sabbath rest once a week to show what it looks like when God dwells with his creation as its right ruler and faithful provider. They were to remember that God freed them from slavery and so they must neither enter slavery again nor enslave the creation in ceaseless labor.⁵⁸

Moses led Israel to Sinai to receive a covenant from God.⁵⁹ This prepared them to become the Sabbath people who reveal and reflect his dwelling presence, in the land of promise he would give them. Here they would be a people of promise living under his care and protection. Sabbath Day, Sabbath Year, and the Year of Jubilee were given as signs through which Israel, in trust and obedience, lived within the presence and promises of God. These promises extended to include all of creation as every seven years Israel is told to let the land rest, trust God's providential care, and experience his provision. And as Sabbath realities were received, entered, and lived all of life was transformed. Sabbath Day and Year expanded into Jubilee. The land was cared for and given rest. Justice became normative as debts were canceled, slaves set free, and lands were restored.⁶⁰ In these Sabbath realities Israel experienced something of both creation's Seventh Day and the ultimate rest God would bring to his people and all creation.

The obedient response of the people to God's indwelling presence, centered in the tabernacle where Israel would gather for worship on the Sabbath, showed a rebellious world what life looks like under God's presence and reign. God named them⁶¹ and promised to provide his people all they would need for this mission, if they kept the covenant.⁶² Amidst the many points of divine instruction (*torah*) God called his people to continue to set the Seventh Day apart each week and so make it holy.⁶³ This Sabbath practice served as a sign,⁶⁴ teaching them to remember the Creator's free provision, and showing all creation an image of life when God dwells with his reconciled creation in peace. What the tabernacle was to space, the Sabbath was to time, together revealing Israel as the people of God.

Each seventh day (Sabbath Day) was a sign pointing to the reality of God's Seventh Day.⁶⁵ Additionally, every seventh year (Sabbath Year) and fiftieth year (Jubilee) were to be set apart as ceasing years. The people of God were to stop their work and give rest to all the creation, to one another, and to the aliens and sojourners in their midst, remembering they were once slaves themselves, and that God alone brought them out with a mighty hand and outstretched arm.⁶⁶ They were to return the land to its original families, cancel all debts, free all slaves, and dwell in

⁵⁷ Exodus 20:11.

⁵⁸ Deuteronomy 5:15, 15:12–18; Leviticus 25:1–17.

⁵⁹ Exodus 19–34.

⁶⁰ Leviticus 25:8–55.

⁶¹ Exodus 6:7.

⁶² Leviticus 26.

⁶³ Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15.

⁶⁴ Exodus 31:13.

⁶⁵ Exodus 31:17.

⁶⁶ Deuteronomy 5:15.

God's creation as his creatures.⁶⁷ This would reveal God's provision and love for his creation, reveal that his covenant people belong to him, and show that they were renouncing all other allegiances and false attempts at building their own dominions.

1.6

But the people of Israel did not always witness to the reality of God's Sabbath rest. Instead of being a light to the nations through their three-fold practice of Sabbath, they imitated the nations, even worshiping the gods made with their own hands.⁶⁸ In their early days God raised up flawed, charismatic leaders to lead them as the sign-bearing people. But they kept determining for themselves what was right.⁶⁹ Eventually, they clamored for a king of their own, like the nations around them. They rejected God as their king altogether.⁷⁰ But their kings—even David, the man after God's own heart⁷¹—were flawed and imperfect leaders too. One king, Solomon, built a house for God to dwell among them. But he also conscripted God's people into forced labor for the task,⁷² turned from God's protection relying instead upon political alliances⁷³ and weapons purchased from Egypt.⁷⁴ Instead of reflecting Sabbath realities Israel increasingly reflected the values of the nations around them and even Egypt from which they had been rescued.

A civil war broke out because Solomon and his son Rehoboam oppressed the people as they had been in Egypt, dividing their united kingdom in two: Israel in the north and Judah in the south.⁷⁵ Although some kings ruled more faithfully than others, on both sides of the border the people failed to trust God to provide for them as he had with the manna in the wilderness. They neglected the signs of his covenantal presence that God gave to them. Their institutions and practices, including the Sabbath year and Jubilee, became either disingenuous and empty,⁷⁶ deformed like those of the other nations,⁷⁷ manipulated and abused,⁷⁸ or neglected and disused altogether.⁷⁹ They no longer pointed to God's loving, abundant, and peaceful reign. So God stripped them of their leadership and the signs of his local presence—the temple, its priests, its sacrifices, and its feasts⁸⁰—leaving them with only the Sabbath as the temporal sign of God's

⁶⁷ Leviticus 25.

⁶⁸ Deuteronomy 12:30, 18:8; 2 Kings 17:15; Isaiah 44:6–23.

⁶⁹ Judges 8:22–35; 21:25.

⁷⁰ 1 Samuel 8:5–7.

⁷¹ 1 Samuel 13:14.

⁷² 1 Kings 5:13.

⁷³ 1 Kings 3:1.

⁷⁴ 1 Kings 10:26; 2 Chronicles 1:14.

⁷⁵ 1 Kings 12.

⁷⁶ Isaiah 1:13; 58:3; Amos 8:5.

⁷⁷ 2 Kings 16:10–18.

⁷⁸ Hosea 7:3–7.

⁷⁹ Hosea 4:1–3.

⁸⁰ Hosea 3:4; Ezekiel 10.

presence. He sent them away into exile among the nations.⁸¹ And at last, the land enjoyed its Sabbath rest.⁸²

1.7

Even though God had abandoned the house they had built for him,⁸³ God remained faithfully present with them in exile.⁸⁴ In their years in exile among the nations God provided for and protected them.⁸⁵ Some increasingly longed to return to rebuild God's house and renew their covenant life with him.⁸⁶ With time they did,⁸⁷ and renewed their obedience to the signs of Sabbath rest.⁸⁸ But things were not like they used to be.⁸⁹ For Scripture never records the return of God's *shekinah* glory to this second Temple pointing to the promise of the Holy Spirit who would come to people from every tongue, tribe, and nation at Pentecost. So they continued to long, but this time for a leader—a Messiah, a second Adam⁹⁰—who would rule as God's representative among them, and give them true rest.

2.1

In the fullness of time⁹¹ and as the fullness of God⁹² Jesus, the Christ, came among his people, became one of them, and dwelled in their midst as the ancient Tabernacle took human form.⁹³ The Messiah—the Word they were waiting for—was from the beginning, before God spoke creation into being.⁹⁴ He is the true image of the invisible God.⁹⁵ All things were created through him⁹⁶ and for him.⁹⁷ His name was Immanuel (God with us) and he called himself “Lord of the Sabbath,”⁹⁸ for God's reign had arrived among them, in person.⁹⁹ The Messiah, the true

⁸¹ 2 Kings 17, 25:8–21.

⁸² 2 Chronicles 36:21.

⁸³ Ezekiel 10.

⁸⁴ Ezekiel 1.

⁸⁵ Daniel 3, 6; Esther.

⁸⁶ Ezekiel 40; Daniel 9:1–18; Nehemiah 1.

⁸⁷ 2 Chronicles 36:22–23.

⁸⁸ Nehemiah 10:31–33; 13:15–22.

⁸⁹ Ezra 3:10–13.

⁹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:45.

⁹¹ Galatians 4:4.

⁹² Colossians 1:19.

⁹³ John 1:11, 14; Matthew 12:6

⁹⁴ John 1:1–2; *Proverbs* 8:22–31.

⁹⁵ Colossians 1:15

⁹⁶ John 1:3.

⁹⁷ Colossians 1:16.

⁹⁸ Matthew 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5.

⁹⁹ Luke 17:21.

king, had come—but he was not what they had expected. They wanted freedom through their own dominion;¹⁰⁰ Jesus came to give the true freedom and rest that only comes in God's presence under his reign.¹⁰¹

Jesus began his public ministry reading from Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."¹⁰²

After reading these words Jesus proclaimed that he is the fulfillment of God's promised Sabbath restoration in the year of the Lord's favor, the Jubilee. He is the one in whom and through whom these promises come and are made real. He is the one who fulfills Sabbath life. He brings its realities into time and space. The Sabbath became a place of healing and restoration,¹⁰³ demonstrating that the Sabbath was created for us and not us for the Sabbath.¹⁰⁴ For Jesus came as Lord of the Sabbath¹⁰⁵ enabling us to experience its realities and true rest in God's care, presence, and love. Thus he could say,

"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."¹⁰⁶

2.2

Recalling the wanderings of Israel in which God revealed Sabbath provision, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where the evil one waited.¹⁰⁷ Just like Adam and Eve, Jesus was tempted to call God's words into question.¹⁰⁸ But unlike them, he triumphed. As the presence of God—the Sabbath reality—he refused to gain food, power, and glory by the world's means instead of God's, or to pursue the easy path of efficiency instead of the rugged road of faithfulness, or to secure God's provision, blessing, and rest by bowing to the evil one.¹⁰⁹ He trusted God to meet his every need and entrusted himself to the Father's reign and will.

¹⁰⁰ Luke 1:67–79, 24:21.

¹⁰¹ Romans 8:21; 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:1, 13; 1 Peter 2:16.

¹⁰² Isaiah 61:1–2; Luke 4:16–21.

¹⁰³ Matthew 12:10–12; Mark 3:1–6; Luke 6:6–11; Luke 13:10–17; Luke 14:1–6; John 5:1–17; John 7:22–23; John 9:1–34.

¹⁰⁴ Mark 2:27.

¹⁰⁵ Matthew 12:8; Luke 6:5.

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 11:28–30.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–12.

¹⁰⁸ Genesis 3:1–2; Matthew 4:3, 6; Luke 4:4, 8, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13.

2.3

Jesus calls a people to follow him.¹¹⁰ In Jesus, God's promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham's descendent was at last fulfilled.¹¹¹ In Jesus, a people are called to dwell with God¹¹² and join in his reign.¹¹³ God creates them anew¹¹⁴ and gives them new names.¹¹⁵ They become children of Abraham through the promise, and children of God born of the Spirit.¹¹⁶ As Jesus welcomed outsiders, he tore down the dividing walls of hostility established by human domains.¹¹⁷ He joined with their lives, ate with them, cared for them, and even protected them. Jesus revealed that the Sabbath life of the people of God includes waiting on God in prayer, submitting to the will and reign of God as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane.¹¹⁸ As the true king and the presence of God in the world, Jesus brought signs of healing and freedom on the Sabbath. He freed those under demonic oppression.¹¹⁹ He restored sight to the blind, he raised up the lame to walk, restored the hearing of the deaf, and even raised the dead.¹²⁰ Jesus miraculously fed multitudes, showing God's promise that he abundantly provides.¹²¹ Where God provided manna in the wilderness, Jesus came as the bread of life.¹²² Because these Sabbath and Jubilee actions were deemed illegal, Jesus clashed with the Jewish authorities.¹²³ They confused the signs of Sabbath observance for the incarnate reality of God's presence in front of them. They sought Jesus' death and so judged for themselves what was right.

2.4

Troubled by Jesus' show of Sabbath power that violated their understanding of Sabbath observance, the Jewish authorities and the Roman empire conspired to bring about Jesus' death. Jesus entered Jerusalem on the first day of the week to the shouts and cheers of the people. At last, he declared openly that he was the Messiah they were expecting, but instead of chariots, horses, and self-acclamation, he was humble and riding on a donkey.¹²⁴ On the night before he

¹¹⁰ *Matthew* 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 10:38, 16:24, 18:21; *Mark* 1:17, 8:34, 10:21; *Luke* 9:23, 59, 18:22; *John* 10:26, 12:26.

¹¹¹ *John* 8:56, 58; *Acts* 3:25–26; *Galatians* 3:14.

¹¹² *Revelation* 21:3; *Romans* 8:9–11; *1 Corinthians* 3:16, *2 Corinthians* 6:16; *Ephesians* 2:22, 3:17; *2 Timothy* 1:14.

¹¹³ *2 Timothy* 2:12; *Revelation* 5:10, 20:4–6, 22:5.

¹¹⁴ *Romans* 6:4, *2 Corinthians* 5:17; *Galatians* 6:15, *Colossians* 2:12.

¹¹⁵ *Revelation* 22:4.

¹¹⁶ *John* 1:12; *Romans* 8:16–17, 9:8, *1 John* 3:1–2.

¹¹⁷ *Ephesians* 2:14.

¹¹⁸ *Matthew* 26:36–46; *Mark* 14:32–42.

¹¹⁹ *Luke* 13:10–17; *Mark* 1:21–26.

¹²⁰ *Matthew* 11:4–5; *Luke* 7:22; *Mark* 3:1–5; *Luke* 6:6–11; *Luke* 14:1–6; *John* 5:1–9; *John* 9:1–14.

¹²¹ *Matthew* 14:16–21, 15:32–38; *Mark* 6:37–44, 8:2–9; *Luke* 9:13–17; *John* 6:5–14.

¹²² *John* 6:35.

¹²³ *Matthew* 12:1–12; *Mark* 2:23–3:6; *Luke* 6:1–11, 13:10–17, 14:1–6; *John* 5:16–18; *John* 9:13–16.

¹²⁴ *Matthew* 21:1–11.

died, Jesus hosted his disciples for one last meal. He stretched out his hand to provide them with the true bread of the presence, his own body and blood,¹²⁵ as the Passover lamb which saves them from the just wrath of God and frees them from slavery to the powers of evil.¹²⁶ After supper, his own disciple and friend,¹²⁷ Judas, betrayed him to those in power.

Mocked by his executioners, Jesus was crowned with thorns, given a reed scepter, and enrobed in royal purple.¹²⁸ They placed a sign over his head which declared him “King of the Jews”¹²⁹—Jesus’ enthronement reached its culmination on the cross. Rather than grasping for god-likeness, Jesus humbled himself in obedience to the Father, pouring himself out in death on the cross.¹³⁰ God had come to dwell among them, but the covenant people rejected the Sabbath shaped life of peaceful relationship with one another and creation in the presence of God. They rejected the Lord of the Sabbath and thus the Sabbath. They put to death the one who embodied the Sabbath they had been called and set apart to reveal. After his death, they laid Jesus’ body to rest in the tomb. Because it was Friday, the grieving women faithfully rested on the Sabbath before preparing Jesus’ body for burial.¹³¹

2.5

Early on Sunday morning, the women went to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body for burial. To their surprise and confusion, they found the tomb empty. After lying in death on the Sabbath, God raised Jesus to new creation life by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹³² Jesus’ death and resurrection had triumphed victoriously over the Sabbath-resisting dynamic of sin and the powers of evil, setting the stage for the final conquering of death.¹³³ Through the resurrection of Jesus the just order of creation, and of humans living in community with one another, is being restored in Christ, the true king. The signs of Sabbath, Sabbath year, and Jubilee were fulfilled. The victory of Jesus over death was but the firstfruits¹³⁴ of an abundant harvest yet to come.¹³⁵

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, the dividing veil between the space and time of Sabbath reality in heaven and rebellion on earth was torn.¹³⁶ Christ opened the way for his people

¹²⁵ Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20.

¹²⁶ John 1:29.

¹²⁷ Jesus addresses Judas as “friend” in Matthew 26:50.

¹²⁸ Mark 15:26-20.

¹²⁹ John 19:19-22.

¹³⁰ Philippians 2:5-11.

¹³¹ Luke 23:55-56.

¹³² Romans 8:11;

¹³³ 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 12-26.

¹³⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:20.

¹³⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, *Matthew 13:37-43*.

¹³⁶ Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45.

to join in the reality of the Sabbath now,¹³⁷ and so reflect the light¹³⁸ of the glory of the Lord of the Sabbath to a dark world, with unveiled faces¹³⁹ even as they suffer in the present evil age still ruled by the evil one.¹⁴⁰

2.6

After appearing to Mary Magdalene in the garden, Jesus sent the faithful women to bring the good news to his other disciples.¹⁴¹ The resurrected Jesus then sent his followers out to all the different peoples of the earth, bearing the good news that in Jesus, God is reconciling a people and the creation back into his loving presence.¹⁴² Jesus then ascended into heaven, where God reigns and dwells, to begin his ministry of intercession on behalf of his people.¹⁴³

Jesus did not leave his followers alone. The Father sent the Spirit as he had promised.¹⁴⁴ On the day of Pentecost, when the Jewish people had come to celebrate the giving of the Torah, God revealed that in Christ, God himself had done what the works of law could not.¹⁴⁵ The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus' followers like tongues of fire. They were given the ability to speak to all the different people and ethnicities who had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost.¹⁴⁶ The Holy Spirit empowered them to be Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth, preparing the people to at last become a dwelling place for God.¹⁴⁷ Through the Holy Spirit, the people could be true signs of the power and presence of God in the world, claim victory over the powers of evil, and be re-made into the image of Christ. Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, the people bear fruit that provides a foretaste of the coming reign of God,¹⁴⁸ in which all creation will dwell in the loving presence of God. The people are the body of Christ,¹⁴⁹ who prepare for the marriage feast when Jesus will come again to make his home with them, his bride.¹⁵⁰ Until that time, they are sent out into the nations bearing the signs of this good news.

¹³⁷ Ephesians 2:6, Hebrews 10:20.

¹³⁸ Luke 1:79, 2:32, 11:33; John 1:1–9, 8:12, 9:5, 12:35–36, 12:46; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Matthew 5:14; John 8:12, 9:15; Ephesians 5:8–14; Colossians 1:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:5; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 1:5–7, 2:7–11.

¹³⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:18, Exodus 34:29–35.

¹⁴⁰ Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 6:12; 1 John 5:19.

¹⁴¹ John 20:17–18.

¹⁴² Matthew 28:16–20; Acts 1:7–8; 2 Corinthians 5:20–21; John 20:21.

¹⁴³ Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25.

¹⁴⁴ John 15:26.

¹⁴⁵ Galatians 3:21–24.

¹⁴⁶ Acts 2:1–4.

¹⁴⁷ Romans 8:1–4.

¹⁴⁸ Galatians 5:16–25.

¹⁴⁹ Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12.

¹⁵⁰ Revelation 19:6–9.

2.7

Just as the Israelites waited in the wilderness before settling into the Promised Land, so do we as God's people today still wait to fully participate in God's ultimate rest and repose.¹⁵¹ The only path into God's final Sabbath rest is through the patient obedience that comes through faith,¹⁵² which waits with hope.¹⁵³ We do this with the help of each other¹⁵⁴ and God's living Word.¹⁵⁵ The reign of Christ has begun, but his people do not yet see all things put under his feet.¹⁵⁶ They wait with eager expectation for the day that Christ will come again, and justly judge the powers of evil.¹⁵⁷ God will raise the dead and overcome the corruption and decay of the present creation.¹⁵⁸ God will then unite heaven and earth.¹⁵⁹ The city of God, not made by human hands, will descend¹⁶⁰ and the Tree of Life will be planted in its midst.¹⁶¹ At last, God will make his home there and dwell face to face with his reconciled creation.¹⁶² Then they can rest from their works, as God has from his.¹⁶³ God's people will be fully united with Jesus, reigning with him under the authority of the Father, until God is all in all.¹⁶⁴ The people of God wait with eager longing until that joyous day. Until then, the people of God remain, bearing the signs of the coming Sabbath reign of God. Formed, led, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they proclaim the Sabbath lordship of Christ, through his life, death, and resurrection, until he comes again.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵¹ Hebrews 4:6-10.

¹⁵² Hebrews 3:12-19; 4:11

¹⁵³ Hebrews 11

¹⁵⁴ Hebrews 3:11-12

¹⁵⁵ Hebrews 4:11-12

¹⁵⁶ Hebrews 2:8.

¹⁵⁷ Revelation 6:9-10.

¹⁵⁸ Romans 8:21.

¹⁵⁹ 2 Peter 3.

¹⁶⁰ Hebrews 11:10,16, 13:14; Revelation 3:12, 21.

¹⁶¹ Revelation 22:2.

¹⁶² Revelation 21:3.

¹⁶³ Hebrews 4:10.

¹⁶⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:28.

¹⁶⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:26.

Part II

A Sabbath Theology—Understanding the Biblical Story

Firm Foundations

Christian theology has often been defined in response to hard questions. Nicene orthodoxy was defined in response to many controversies surrounding the nature of God as triune, the nature of Jesus as of the same substance of God, and the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son. The conclusions of Christian orthodoxy, though often challenged, have rarely been stated better and more concisely than its original formulations.

New challenges arose in Christian history that caused the orthodox church to arrive at different conclusions to hard questions. In the Reformed tradition, new statements of orthodoxy clarified the nature of grace, faith, the authority of the Word of God, and the nature of the church.

Over time, concerns grew that this orthodoxy had become intellectual statements lacking a faithful and passionate personal response. Evangelicalism emerged from a movement of people passionate for the good news of Jesus in the midst of a church that had grown to love its structures and institutional life more than reaching the lost with the message of salvation. It reclaimed the deep importance of personal spiritual devotion to Christ. More recently the person and work of the Holy Spirit has been recognized afresh as foundational to an individual believer's life and faith.

This Generation's Crisis

In our time, the church is facing an existential crisis—what do we exist for? We know what the church has stood for, but the reason for such stands has become unclear and even adulterated. In these generations, the church has become a voluntary association chosen for its ability to add value to one's private life. In these generations, the world seeks to guarantee the right to name oneself, to give oneself an identity, to hold dominion over only one's own flesh. In this world, the church has no reason to exist, Scripture no ability to speak with authority, God is only of use to aid in the selfhood of people who self-identify as Christians, and Christians are co-opted into coalitions for short term political gains.

The body of Christ is under assault from every direction, even from within. The vision of Jesus creating a people after his own image, a Sabbath people who reflect the dwelling presence of God in space and time has been conformed to the patterns of this world. Our age and culture has become defined by the very instincts that have defined human existence from ancient times. Instead of rest under God's care and peace under God's reign humanity is characterized by relentless striving for power, control, and autonomy. Humanity has long rejected God's reign and instead sought to build its own world, create its own reality, and define its own values. Sadly,

the church is not free of these pressures and temptations. Through its history examples abound, both great and small, of the church shaping its practices, values, mission, and message around its own quest for power or idea of truth.

Evangelicalism, Reformed theology, and Nicene orthodoxy have perhaps narrowed our vision as the church. We know where we should stand, but we often do not know why we are standing against the tide of history, and we have precious little time together to engage in the deep formative work of discipleship we know is so necessary in our time. After all, churches tend to focus primarily on the worship event which provides a general message to an audience, often about personal spirituality. If we were to start from scratch thinking of an institutional structure most conducive to making disciples, we might consider Jesus himself *spending time dwelling with his disciples*, and consider how we might focus on *dwelling time*, about inhabiting space and time, first with God but then, necessarily, together to sharpen one another like iron.

Vision for Movement

The answer to the existential crisis of the church is not simply to stand strong on our foundations—that's a given—but to forge a robustly biblical vision of our purpose that unites us in a movement rather than a fixed edifice. When the Jewish people went into exile, they did not take the local sign of God's presence—the temple—with them. Instead, they took the Word of God in Torah and the *temporal* sign of God's presence—the Sabbath with them. As our institutional and physical edifices struggle, we too must look to the Word of God in Scripture and rediscover the presence of God in space and time together as the *body of Christ*, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Thus, instead of re-confessing our foundations, we believe it is time to confess our mission in a way shaped by our Reformed theological foundations—using Scripture as our sole authority (*sola scriptura*), proclaiming Christ alone as king (God's sovereignty, *solus Christus*), and declaring that God alone can do the work that we participate in by our whole-life faithfulness (*solī deo gloria, sola fides, sola gratia*).

For these reasons, we have written to expand and clarify our vision of what God is doing in history. This is a vision of God's *dwelling presence in time*, a vision of a different age invading this present evil one, replete with signs that enable us to participate in that coming eternal age.

A Renewed Multifaceted Gospel Vocabulary

Sabbath is not here offered as a *replacement* for any other reading of the Bible. It is one facet among many in the rich vocabulary of the Bible. It is not *the* controlling narrative. It would be to oversimplify the gospel of Jesus Christ to make it simply about God's dwelling presence with us in time. And yet, it has also been an oversimplification to describe the gospel of Jesus Christ simply in terms of personal salvation from the wrath of God and an eternal afterlife. This

overly simple focus on personal salvation has had the effect of restricting the social impact of the gospel, by focusing a supposedly private sphere of personal spirituality or religion, in a way that has aided the forces of secularization that are themselves posing this radical existential question about the church. A personal relationship with Jesus, moral transformation, spiritual formation, and religious experience are all important aspects of a whole life, but the church has accepted a compartmentalized vision of human beings and of reality as a whole, that serves those who benefit from the domain of darkness by locking the King of kings into the hearts of private citizens.

Sabbath presents a way to richly expand and renew our vocabulary of the gospel. It offers another consistent presentation of what God is doing in his creation. And it offers a way to combat the divisions the church is experiencing as the world makes demands for allegiance to various secular visions of human thriving and justice. If we want to heal the political divisions in the church, we need a shared vision that makes our political beliefs of secondary or tertiary importance to our primary commitment to the mission of Jesus. Traditional orthodoxy and Reformed theology have not provided us with enough material to unify us around the contemporary questions that are dividing our churches. Sabbath—as a vision of our revealing what it looks like when and where God is king—can help.

Defining “Sabbath”

What is “Sabbath?” We might think that Sabbath refers primarily to a period of time—a day, year, and collection of years—as outlined in the Bible. It is indeed that. We might think of it, first and foremost, as a commandment. It has been that too. We might think that Sabbath is a principle about healthy patterns of life that include regular rest or ceasing. It’s so much more than that. Like all commandments in the Bible, it was never intended to simply focus on answering the question “What do righteous people do or not do?” or “What wise behavior will benefit my life?”

Sabbath, as outlined by the whole of Scripture, is not a spiritual discipline focused on personal formation. Sabbath is a sign. More specifically, the commandment to rest or cease from labor is a participatory symbolic action. Sabbath is not a rest we “take” but a rest that is given, whose meaning is bound up with the gift being given to all. Sabbath is a sign we receive, join, and share, and its meaning is lost if it is individualized and principled into rest-taking.

In the ancient world there was no division between symbols and reality. The temple didn’t merely symbolize God’s presence, God somehow dwelled there locally, even if the Jewish people were well aware that God could not be contained in a house built by human hands.¹⁶⁶ God is, according to orthodox Christian belief, omnipresent. There is biblical merit in stating this, for example, Psalm 139. And yet, the good news of God in Jesus Christ is the *local, temporal, physical presence of God*. Immanuel—God *with us*—is a large part of the radical good news of

¹⁶⁶ Isaiah 66:1; Acts 7:48.

the Bible.¹⁶⁷ The very giving of the Sabbath and setting apart the seventh day as holy means God has given himself to abide with us in time. Thus, the seventh day, seventh year, and the year of Jubilee are signs of joining the time in which God lives. But they are not the kind of empty signs common today, like logos or brand images that conceal more than they reveal. The practice of Sabbath signs draws us into the presence of God's time.

But God also does not *abide* with sin. God restricts his presence from rebels.¹⁶⁸ So, the Sabbath commandments do not simply point to good behavior or piety, they point to God's own rest and our dwelling with him in his "home" time. Indeed, in Christ, the good news is that we ourselves can be the dwelling *place* (temple) and *time* (Sabbath) of God in creation through the Holy Spirit. Because God does not abide with sin, and because we live as "strangers and exiles" in a "present evil age," this means the Holy Spirit draws us into God's age; he dwells within us as a body.

Sabbath is the dwelling presence of God with his creation in time.

Sabbath is first and foremost, the *time* of God. At the finishing of creation, and we purposefully use the concept of a finished act of creation, God dwelled with his creation in time.¹⁶⁹ This does not mean God was subject to the forces of time, or that God ceased to be omnipresent and eternal, or that God ceased to be in heaven.¹⁷⁰ Rather, because all time is God's he invites us to dwell with him in a time without separation from him through the practice of Sabbath. God invited creation into his time. The eternity of God overlapped with the temporality of his creation.

Time and eternity in the Bible are not an either/or category. The New Testament describes this using a specific Greek word αἰών (*aion*).¹⁷¹ We are most familiar with *aion* as "eternity" or "eternal life" as in John 3:16 (through the adjective *aionios*). But the New Testament understands time differently than we do, if we imagine that time must cease in order to experience eternity. The New Testament sees an *aion* as related to *quality* of the time rather than *quantity* (limited and progressive vs. eternal). It often refers to an "age" with certain attributes, like the "present evil *aion*" in Galatians 1:4, or "the rulers of this *aion*" in 1 Corinthians 2:8. The *aion* often refers to *who the ruler is*. Just as ancient calendars often dated years

¹⁶⁷ Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23.

¹⁶⁸ See Genesis 3:24.

¹⁶⁹ Creation as a product continues, changes, develops, transforms within the providence of God. But God does not thereby remain involved in the act of creation, of overpowering nothing (*tohu*) to create all things by the power of his Word. God's overpowering dominion is expressed in judgment over nothing in creation, over all violence in the flood, and only again at the return of Jesus when all things are judged and God renews creation.

¹⁷⁰ "Heaven" is a complicated word whose biblical meaning has often been lost or significantly overshadowed by cultural mythologies referring to it as a place of disembodied spirits, angels, clouds, etc. Heaven in the NT means "the place where God is king and his will is done."

¹⁷¹ English Bibles translate this word in multiple ways depending on context, and the Greek word does carry multiple meanings, so we shouldn't oversimplify it here.

according to who was king, so it seems the New Testament sees the various ages as pertaining to who is in charge of them.

Thus, Sabbath is the *aion* of God or heaven. Just as Jesus is the physical, spatial presence of the King and so describes his own actions as bringing and revealing the "Kingdom of heaven,"¹⁷² so too Jesus is the Jubilee of God, the "year of God's favor,"¹⁷³ the "Lord of Sabbath." So, Sabbath is the age of God's kingship. It is characterized by God's rule, and its source is from outside of this earth.¹⁷⁴ But the *aion* is also the whole creation of God. The book of Hebrews uses this word to indicate all of creation or as some English translations have it, the "universe."¹⁷⁵ This suggests that the present evil age is itself a kind of anti-creation, an artificial construction in both space and time, designed for destroying God's creation, which causes God's creation to suffer as it awaits the resurrection.¹⁷⁶ Sabbath is thus the "age of God's creation and new creation" which is contrasted with the "present evil age."

The hope of the Bible is for the end of this present evil age in final conquest by God, the victory of heaven over the rebellious forces of earth, and the renewal of his creation. These are not successive ages, they are overlapping ages. The *aion* of God is present at creation, and is invading history from its "end" or *telos*. But the *aion* of God is also invading the present evil age from within, through the people of God in whom his Spirit dwells, and especially in the person and work of Jesus Christ who gains victory over the ruler(s) of this *aion*. At some point the present evil *aion* will end and the *aion* of God will continue, which will constitute full entry into the Sabbath rest of God.

So, while the word "shabbat" in Hebrew does indeed refer to a cessation from labor, that definition only hints at its full cosmic content revealed by a biblical theology. At rest, God is himself. God is revealed to us in his external actions, but God's actions can never fully reveal who God is in himself. Nor is God made who he is by his actions. God creates and is the Creator, but God is not totally comprehended by the act of creation, nor is he changed by it. God is the Savior, but God is not totally comprehended by the act of salvation. It is the concept of Sabbath that invites God's creation and his people into his dwelling or abode that is an invitation- into the life of God beyond God's actions. This is what is indicated by the words "dwelling" and "abide." The words dwelling and abide both have a dual meaning for us in English that is worth highlighting. Dwelling with God happens *in space and in time*, and this we get to do in the faithful practice of Sabbath even in this present evil age. So also the past tense of "abide" gives us "abode." These house-words show us that the notion of the temple is insufficient if it

¹⁷² Throughout Matthew Jesus uses this phrase as an equivalent to Mark and Luke's "Kingdom of God."

¹⁷³ Luke 4:19–21.

¹⁷⁴ "My kingdom does not have its source in the world" is what Jesus means in John 18:36.

¹⁷⁵ Hebrews 1:2, 11:3.

¹⁷⁶ Romans 8:18–23.

communicates only a spatial presence. A true home is characterized also by time. To be at home with God is to abide with him,¹⁷⁷ to enter into God's *aion*—i.e. the Sabbath.¹⁷⁸

We also find in the Old Testament that the presence of God departed the temple at the exile of the people, leaving them with signs of his presence through Torah and Sabbath, in Word and time. Honoring the Sabbath is thus not about simply doing what God commands, it is intentionally entering into the dwelling-time of God, abiding with him, living in the *aion* of God, even as we remain present in the present evil *aion*. For, we do not ascend to heaven by our own works as in Babel, but God comes to us and brings his reign "down." This presence was symbolized by the temple and the Ark of the Covenant as God's throne. And yet, God is enthroned on the praises of his people.¹⁷⁹ The New Testament sees the fulfillment of prophetic promises,¹⁸⁰ that God has established his people as his throne, as his temple, as his dwelling place.¹⁸¹ This is the very eschatological vision of Revelation 21:3. Heaven does not come down and earth does not ascend, but through the Holy Spirit indwelling his people, God's presence in space and in time invades this age through his people who dwell in two spaces and in two times.

Sabbath is the Reign of God as King

Sabbath also refers to the unmediated sovereignty of God. The kingdom of God is the sovereignty of God, where God is king. This does not mean that God is not sovereign over sin and rebellion, but that he is so indirectly through his sustaining work over creation. That is, God's sovereignty over sin is mediated, not direct. If it were direct, the wrath of God would be expressed in judgment now. As it is, we do not yet see all things submitted to Christ as king, and so we see the kingdom of God is already, but not-yet. The *aion* of God has not yet judged the present evil *aion*. The inverse of Sabbath, then, is the "domain of darkness."¹⁸² Sabbath is about competing dominions. And so the concept of dominion plays into Sabbath quite well. Although God commissioned his image to have dominion with him over the creation, this dominion created domains set apart from God,¹⁸³ as we see in Cain's dominion apart from God in Genesis 4:17. This creation of separate domains, of areas sectioned off from God, constitutes our sin as intentional separation from God, both in space and time.

¹⁷⁷ John 15.

¹⁷⁸ Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel describes the Sabbath as a "palace in time." He notes that holiness in time came first—holiness in space with the tabernacle only came after the idolatry of the golden calf. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: its meaning for modern man* (NY:Farrar, Strauss, and Young, 1951), 9–10.

¹⁷⁹ Psalm 22:3.

¹⁸⁰ Ezekiel 37:27.

¹⁸¹ Ephesians 2:22.

¹⁸² Colossians 1:13.

¹⁸³ We see this with Cain's dominion apart from God in Genesis 4:17.

Naming is Dominion (What Sabbath is not)

God's people will share in the dominion of God's reign when God asserts his direct sovereignty over all creation and judges it. The people of God will judge the world with God, and even judge his angels¹⁸⁴ as citizens of God's kingdom. Sabbath points us to this future judgment and thus enjoins us to refrain from judgment now, even as Jesus himself did.¹⁸⁵ This means a refusal to participate in an essential aspect of human culture—the act of naming oneself or one's people group, and constructing an identity.

Modern culture has brought the sin of making a name for ourselves to new heights. It holds the belief that individuals have the right and duty to construct an identity and thereby to name, each for oneself. This notion of the discovered or claimed self is an expression of self-sovereignty, of a dominion that extends itself outward demanding affirmation from others and reforming the world in its own image. Modern culture, in attempting to separate individuals from group identities and unchosen group-sovereignty, has created an impossible demand of individuals creating entire worlds and worldviews on one's own in order to attain "authenticity." Authenticity is an imitation of the God who is himself at rest, who is a-se (aseity). This is an impossible *labor* because it demands that individuals know themselves by themselves without reference to others, simply by the works of one's own hands. Each person must build his or her own city and tower, walled off and isolated from all else, sustained by constant construction and maintenance. The modern world says, "I am who I am by the works of my own hand."

Naming is an expression of dominion. God named the various elements of creation. God gave Adam the task of naming the animals as an expression of his right dominion before his and Eve's sin. Cain named his son and his city Enoch, identifying his domain walled-off from God's discipline of wandering. The people of Babel desired to make a name for themselves in Genesis 11, which typifies the contrast between the gathering-building of Babel and the calling-out of Abram from the city, even as God renames Abram (Abraham), Sarai (Sarah), and later Jacob (Israel). To be a Christian is to bear the name of Jesus, a practice that links to baptism and the taking of a "Christian name."

Naming might seem tangential as a starting point for further theological reflection on contemporary issues. But because Sabbath is about the reign of God, naming serves as an example of human self-constructing work in opposition to the rest of receiving an identity from God. Only those who believe in their own aseity or self-creation and self-sufficiency can claim the right to name or identify oneself.

Sabbath observances are participatory signs in which we signify "what it looks like when and where God is king."

As people who bear the name of Jesus, our King, who dwells with us in space and in time through the Holy Spirit, we have a profound mission—to reveal God's kingdom in and among

¹⁸⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:2–3.

¹⁸⁵ See Matthew 7; John 12:47; the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13.

the present evil *aion*, to shine as lights amidst the darkness.¹⁸⁶ Our “citizenship is in heaven”¹⁸⁷ and thus we are “strangers and exiles”¹⁸⁸ in our present places and times. Our ambassadorial mission of reconciliation¹⁸⁹ is thus not just about individuals being forgiven for their sins in Jesus, but about the whole creation being delivered from foreign oppression that subjects the creation to the bondage of corruption and decay. This all-creation encompassing vision,¹⁹⁰ we believe, enables the church to unite in the vision of God’s kingship as described by Jesus in his earthly ministry, and reveal how good this is.

This is a mission—not of building, of co-creating cosmos with God, as though *sola fides* and *sola gratia* applied only to a spiritual work of salvation—it is a mission of revealing the reconciliation of all things that God is accomplishing by his power alone. We, however, get to participate by embodying the reconciling work of God. Thus, God is accomplishing his mission through us, even if not through our power. Our works alone cannot bring or build the kingdom of God—just as we cannot ascend to heaven to bring it down to earth.¹⁹¹ But our works can be the means through which God’s purposes are accomplished.

This is an *aesthetic* understanding of the gospel (“what it looks like”), not just one that speaks to truth. Truth is vital, and our historical creeds and confessions establish the truths of our faith. But God and his reign are beautiful and desirable, the very cry of our hearts and those in the world who are disillusioned by it. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of salvation that our God reigns!¹⁹² The good news of the gospel is that God is the once and future king, and that we get to taste his presence as we, together, are formed into the temple-in-time of God’s dwelling place. Thus, we must have *and be* living symbols of God’s presence—images of God, which is conformity to Christ—his body, the church.¹⁹³

The Church is about Sabbath

The gospel of Sabbath is inherently *ecclesial*. And this begins to redefine for us what the church is and can be. As representative of God’s presence in time, we *together* become the image of God in Christ.¹⁹⁴ God makes his appeal to the world through *us*.¹⁹⁵ The existential question raised by secularism, “what does the church exist for?” is answered resoundingly—to invade the present evil age with signs of God’s kingship amidst the hubris of human dominion.

¹⁸⁶ Matthew 5:16.

¹⁸⁷ Philippians 3:20.

¹⁸⁸ Hebrews 11:13.

¹⁸⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

¹⁹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:18

¹⁹¹ See Romans 10:6–8.

¹⁹² Isaiah 52:7; Romans 10:15.

¹⁹³ See Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 12:27.

¹⁹⁴ The image of God in the New Testament is Jesus Christ and we are predestined to be conformed to his image. In the context of Romans 8, this conformity to the image is not individualistic, but for the whole church.

¹⁹⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:20. Of course this is not exclusive but does seem to be primary. The rocks only cry out if the people are silent in Luke 19:40.

Sabbath is the gospel for an age where God's creation is being subjected to human dominion to its, and our, potential demise.¹⁹⁶ We are working ourselves and God's earth to death trying to make a name or identity for ourselves.

But by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we are together united to God by being made the body of Christ, the presence of God's Sabbath in the world. Sabbath thus helps us understand the work and the gifts of the Spirit. These are not for themselves or even for us alone, but for the sake of revealing what it looks like when and where God is king. The church has many signs that may reveal the *aion* of God invading this world, and the strength of this idea of the Sabbath is that we are free to use our collective imaginations to create strategies for how we can connect the dots of the beauty of God's reign for our people and our worldly context. We must show the world where it needs to go, where its true end lies. We must bear the *name* of Jesus, and his dominion, as our banner. It is up to us to practice Sabbath rightly, not through specific sabbatarian rituals like specific festivals or worship liturgies (though these can help), but through an imagination grounded in orthodoxy, rooted in tradition, but boldly inventive in participating in the revelation of God's kingship together.

¹⁹⁶ Many have begun to refer to our age as "the Anthropocene", which refers to the age where the human species radically dominates the earth. It is contrasted with the previous "Holocene" in which no species was totally dominant.

Part III

Renewed in Time—The Sabbath Shaped Life

Sabbath is a uniquely important commandment in Scripture. The Sabbath—understood in all its fullness as day, year, and Jubilee—reveals to the world a glimpse into the kingdom of God. It describes life in God’s presence and under his rule and thus how life in God’s kingdom might look. God’s Sabbath commandment and the Sabbath shaped life it brings reveals the intended shape and character of human life even as rejection of the Sabbath reveals the nature of sin and rejection of God. But the Sabbath commandment is more than merely revelatory. It is more than just a spiritual practice or discipline. This commandment moves beyond merely *describing* a different reality.

The Sabbath commandment is a *sign* that allows us to actually enter, experience, and participate in the very realities it describes. Thus, this threefold sign bears far-reaching implications for both one’s personal response to God and the corporate response of all God’s people. It gives shape to our discipleship, as this day, wholly dedicated to God, brings all days under his authority and care. It shapes the church’s witness and message as the Kingdom of God and the call to bring all people to its king are upheld as central elements of the church’s proclamation.¹⁹⁷ It gives shape to our care of others and care and stewardship of all creation.¹⁹⁸ Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, the implications of Sabbath and Jubilee bring us into the full breadth of God’s work of redeeming a lost people as well as redeeming the fullness of creation.¹⁹⁹ Thus it not only describes what the Kingdom of God looks like, it allows it to manifest and actually become visible. As God’s people we point to and even manifest in time something of his reign “on earth as it is in heaven” through our faithful practice of Sabbath life. For the yielding of this one day to God brings the recognition that all time is God’s. And where all time is lived under his reign and rule, all days filled with his love and grace, all minutes lived in his presence, human life is transformed.

For this reason, observing the Sabbath is described in the Bible as a principal means by which outsiders will know Israel’s unique relationship with God and desire themselves to enter and know its reality.²⁰⁰ To reject the Sabbath is to reject this unique relationship with God, allowing our hearts to go after idols.²⁰¹ To ignore the Sabbath is to dull our senses to his active presence, love, and care. Thus, God charges us to be a people who cherish his presence expressed through the proper ordering of our time, which allows others to experience the joy of

¹⁹⁷ Matthew 28:28-20; Acts 10:34-48; Philippians 2:9-11

¹⁹⁸ Genesis 1:28

¹⁹⁹ Romans 8:18-22; Isaiah 65:25

²⁰⁰ Exodus 31:13–17; Isaiah 56:1–9; Ezekiel 20:12; Zechariah 8:22-23

²⁰¹ Ezekiel 20:16

his rest.²⁰² This underlines the importance of allowing the Holy Spirit to enable us to creatively participate in the Sabbath sign in our own day and context.

Yet the Sabbath Commandment has become in our age the least understood and most ignored of all the commandments. It should not surprise us, therefore, when numerous examples of not obeying the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus, abound in our lives. We live in a broken world defined by our idolatrous separation from God and Sabbath life. The good work God gave us at creation has become instead relentless toil and exhausting labor. We live in a frenetic age in which rest and peace in God's presence is difficult to imagine, much less experience or see. We live in an age when the poorest among us are often the most burdened and affected by this toil. Brokenness extends through persons to affect every relationship and the whole of creation. Our day is characterized by political division, racial injustice, ecological crises, warfare, violence, economic disparity, broken families, confused sexuality, self-constructed identity, devaluation of vulnerable lives, and countless other signs of our broken relationship with God.

The intentional return of God's people to a Spirit-filled practice of the Sabbath, as a sign of God's reigning presence and the implications it unfolds, is a means by which we might find renewal in our mission, peace in our lives, and bear witness in this broken world of another reality. Our day needs, indeed yearns, to see a reality different from that which it knows. The deliberate turn to Sabbath life and God's promise of his presence and help may bring the renewal of life and mission so needed in the church and world today.

Following Christ through the Signs of Sabbath

So, in light of our lack of Sabbath observance, what do we do with the Fourth Commandment? If we affirm Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, what does this affirmation mean in the ongoing transformation of Christians through Word and Spirit? How do we move from theological truth to experienced truth?

The Ten Commandments show us what the church will become as it answers God's call. God's people have read the Ten Commandments in different ways, appropriately, at different times. In our time, we believe the Commandments warrant inspection through the lens of Sabbath practice for ourselves, our families, worshiping communities, and those among whom God has planted us.

In the First through Third Commandments, we observe the command to have no other gods but The Lord, to resist and reject all idols, and to honor the strong and powerful name of The Lord alone. His name is to be honored above all others; this is his right. It is this God and not some other god giving us the command to practice Sabbath.

²⁰² Deuteronomy 5:14. Deuteronomy makes clear that the Israelites are to rest "so that" their servants may rest as well. The ordering of our time impacts everyone around us.

As we come to the Fourth Commandment, we note it is no mere suggestion. Sabbath is a command. We are not free to disregard it. The sovereign God, who is Jesus Christ, created humans and commanded us to work six days of the week, and commanded us to rest on the Sabbath. The Sabbath command points us back to everything God does and will do rather than what we do ourselves and points forward to the character of human work. It is by grace, by ceasing from our labor, that we abide in him, and by grace that we love our neighbors as ourselves in the work that we do. By participating in and practicing Sabbath, we declare our obedience to the first three commandments and our allegiance to this God who is the Lord alone.

And in our living out the Sabbath—in the fullness of its threefold form—the following six commandments will not only be fulfilled but inevitably become a natural part of our lives. For the Sabbath also commands us to give rest to one another, to those under our care and responsibility, to the alien and sojourner, to other creatures,²⁰³ and to all creation. This lens focuses the Fifth through the Tenth Commandments, giving us a picture of what the reality of the Sabbath looks like, as we point to the presence of God and his reign in our lives. We will give honor to parents, we will not kill, steal, bear false witness, commit adultery, or covet. All of life is transformed as time is placed under God's control, shaped by his will, and lived in his presence.

All of us have sinned and fallen short of obeying these commandments. So striving to keep these commandments on our own power, we become enslaved to sin, lacking the power to obey them. But the Sabbath teaches us to not rely on ourselves, but as a new creation in Christ to rest in God's presence, promise, and power. And so God the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost to empower us, helping us in our weakness.²⁰⁴ Now we are blessed to experience holiness as a free gift because God the Holy Spirit never stops working to enable us to fulfill God's commandments. With purified hearts, we will choose to live the holiness of God's rest to a degree these commands can only hint at. And the shared life of God's people will appear before the watching world as nothing short of miraculous.

The Implications of Sabbath

We speak in terms of implication as we consider what the Sabbath means for our lives. Implication says: "You have encountered the truth. Now let the truth begin to accomplish its full work in your life. What is God wanting to do in, through, and with you, as you have encountered him in his Word and Spirit?" Implication shows the truth's inherent, logical, and necessary consequences in our lives. But it is only as we keep in step with the Spirit²⁰⁵ that these implications will bear unique fruit in our minds, hearts, and lives.

²⁰³ Exodus 20:10; 23:4-12; Deuteronomy 5:14; Nehemiah 13:15-21.

²⁰⁴ Romans 8:1ff.

²⁰⁵ Galatians 5:25.

As we contemplate a call to Sabbath observance, some initial questions may include:

- Where or how is the Triune God leading us as we reflect upon the significance of Sabbath?
- What might our lives look like if all our time was shaped around the presence, care, and reign of the Triune God?
- What is the Triune God seeking to do in, through, and with us?
- Who is the Triune God calling us to be as individual members of and as the body of Christ?
- How do we embrace the inherent, logical, and necessary consequences of the biblical story regarding the transformative power of Sabbath and the eternal significance of the Fourth Commandment?

As we consider the implications of Sabbath practice, we do well to remember that we are empowered by the Spirit on this journey of discipleship, and by his power we press on to the goal of this high calling. The rest Jesus has won for us will, in this present age, always be approximate but never static. We live, as stated earlier, in the “here and not yet” of the kingdom. We, the people of God, are the presence of his kingdom, even as we await the government of the King by his return. Individuals and congregations will address these implications in different and creative ways. There is no “one size fits all” program as we invite the world to “taste and see that the Lord is good”²⁰⁶ through the practice of the Sabbath. This does not mean that a Sabbath shaped life is a personal and subjective thing but that this command is so far reaching, important, and meaningful that all the church and all the churches cannot exhaust the meaning of God’s kingdom or the fullness of its presence.

First Implication: Rejection of our Lordship over Time

This reading of God’s Word reveals that as the church of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we have sinned by not practicing Sabbath as it describes and commands. We have not practiced the costly justice of Jubilee, we have not cared for creation as was our God-given vocation in the garden, and we have not rested as he commanded us to rest. We are complicit in a systemic withholding of God’s Sabbath blessing from ourselves and others, with sinful individual, social, and institutional patterns transcending cultures and generations. Our first response then is one of lament that in turn leads to repentance and transformation.

²⁰⁶ Psalm 34:8.

A helpful biblical example of lament unto repentance is found in Nehemiah. Ezra and his colleagues read the Law before the assembly of Israel, gathered upon the return from exile, and the people are convicted by what they hear. They have been inattentive and largely unaware of the Law, and once they heard God's Word clearly they are deeply grieved. What to do? Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites tell the people in Nehemiah 8:9–12:

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord you God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, 'Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.' And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, for they had understood the words that were declared to them.

Thus reassured, the people celebrate the Feast of Booths. They confess their sin. They reaffirm their covenant with the Lord. They learn their strength comes from the joy given by their God and dwelling in his presence.

We call the church, who bears the name of him, who on the first Sabbath Day ceased from his work and called us to rest in with him, to turn from self-reliance to obedient trust in the Lord of the Sabbath and his Sabbath-shaped life. We seek God's forgiveness for our disobedience, willful more often than not. And we seek a renewed filling by his Spirit so we might be purified of our unrighteousness, placing ever more of our lives under God's will.

The Second Implication: Life as God's Time

Knowing at different times the church of Jesus Christ has responded to those points where the gospel was being most challenged by the world, the flesh, and the devil—and done so through creeds, confessions, catechisms, and declarations—we, the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, call upon our congregations, pastors, officers, and covenant partners to return to the Lord through the practice of Sabbath. We call our covenant partners and the churches to which they belong to consider, explore, and pursue what it means to place the whole of our lives (time!) under God's control.

As we began with Scripture and its narrative of God's Sabbath through history, so we return to the Scripture in considering the implications of the call to become a Sabbath people. The principles unfolded in God's call to Sabbath throughout the Bible and the history of God's people can inspire us today as we seek to understand Sabbath in our own time and contexts. We cannot walk with the Spirit without also meditating on God's word. Therefore, we remember:

- Sabbath rest begins with creation, when God - Father, Son, and Spirit - ceased from his work on the seventh day giving himself the people he had made and inviting

them to rest in his presence.²⁰⁷ Before any tasks were assigned, all of creation participated in the gracious gift of God's rest.

- God's rest includes everyone who is near. Everyone rests, not just the leaders, or the heads of the household. All the men, women, children, servants, workers, the alien and sojourner, and the animals are given God's rest. God loves everyone and everything that he has made and cares for their well-being. Therefore God calls his people to rest together, not on the backs of others who are working.²⁰⁸ The Israelites were to remember that they couldn't rest when they were slaves in Egypt. God commanded them to be different from their slave drivers. Therefore they must give their workers rest.²⁰⁹ For no one can fully rest if others are restless around them or because of them
- All the work God commands can be done in six days.²¹⁰ Therefore, God commanded the Israelites not to bear any burdens on the Sabbath²¹¹ but rather observe the Sabbath as a day set apart for the Lord. Here we remember that the world is on God's shoulders, not ours.²¹² The success of our lives is under his control not ours. Sabbath gives God's people the opportunity to learn the difference between the vanity of building up their own kingdoms²¹³ and the works God prepared beforehand for them to do, which are done in God's Spirit.²¹⁴ Anxious, ceaseless toil will achieve nothing. The Sabbath brings rest for body and soul. God gives rest and sleep to the ones he loves.²¹⁵
- God commanded the Israelites not to do any business on the Sabbath. Sabbath is about trust in God, not trust in wealth. It is not so much a command to cease all work as to cease from relying upon our work, centering our lives upon our work, or turning to our work for fulfillment. Sabbath reminds the people of God's care for the poor, who should not be trampled by unjust business practices. The Lord of the Sabbath says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Sabbath should remind us to love our neighbors and treat them rightly.²¹⁶
- Sabbath is a time to seek God, not to remain a slave to your own disordered desires and selfish use of time. Therefore the people were not to go their own way on the Sabbath, as if it is merely a day off. This day is to be defined around the loving

²⁰⁷ Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:11.

²⁰⁸ Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14.

²⁰⁹ Deuteronomy 5:14-15.

²¹⁰ Leviticus 23:3.

²¹¹ Jeremiah 17:21-27.

²¹² 1 Peter 5:6-7.

²¹³ Ecclesiastes 2:4-11.

²¹⁴ Ephesians 2:10; 1 Corinthians 15:58.

²¹⁵ Psalm 127:1-2.

²¹⁶ Amos 8:4-6, Nehemiah 10:31.

presence of God and obedient response to his lordship. If they called the Sabbath a delight, and kept it with joy, God would bless them and make them ride on the heights of the earth.²¹⁷

- All who submit to the Lord of the Sabbath are fully included in God's people.²¹⁸ To them God's salvation and righteousness is revealed.²¹⁹ God names his people and determines their destiny.²²⁰ In Christ the walls of hostility that formerly divided us come down,²²¹ making his house a house of prayer for all peoples.²²²
- The land belongs to God. Every seven years the Israelites were to let it rest, and not work it. Whatever it produced would be enough for them to eat, including their children, servants, workers, the wayfarers and foreigners with them, and the animals. God, the creator of all things, would meet their needs. They must trust God to provide. We care for God's creation by giving it rest.²²³
- God desired that the lives of the Israelites would reflect and display the love, joy, peace, justice, and mercy that comes from living under his peaceful reign. Towards this end every fifty years would be a year of Jubilee. Jubilee was to begin with the sound of the trumpet and celebration! Each person was to go back to the inheritance God had given them. The slaves were to be set free, and the land was to recover in rest. Homes or land which had been sold, or any family member who had become an indebted servant, was to be bought back. Even if there was no one to pay the ransom, the slave must still be liberated. In Christ, for freedom we have been set free.²²⁴ In the end, we serve only God.²²⁵
- The Sabbath - day, year, and Jubilee together - is a sign that God forms his covenant people and makes them holy.²²⁶ Set apart from the world's values and toils they reflect instead the kingdom of God and what human life looks like under God's reign and under his care. In rejecting the Sabbath, we reject God and instead give our lives to idols—allowing that which is not God to shape our lives and form our identity, and give us worth and meaning.²²⁷ Because Sabbath was a key sign of the covenant, judgment and death would follow if the Israelites didn't remember

²¹⁷ Isaiah 58:13–14.

²¹⁸ Galatians 3:26–29.

²¹⁹ Psalm 98:2.

²²⁰ Isaiah 56:1–5; 62:2.

²²¹ Ephesians 2:14.

²²² Isaiah 56:6–7.

²²³ Leviticus 25:1–7.

²²⁴ Galatians 5:1; John 8:36

²²⁵ Exodus 20:3; Leviticus 25:8ff; Deuteronomy 15; Galatians 5:1.

²²⁶ Exodus 31:12–17.

²²⁷ Ezekiel 20:10–26.

Sabbath and keep it as a community,²²⁸ so too we must follow the Lord of the Sabbath or face judgment.

- Jesus declared that in his ministry and mission Jubilee had come!²²⁹ Good news is preached to the poor, liberty is proclaimed to the captives, the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the oppressed are set free, and the dead are raised - it is the year of the Lord's favor.²³⁰ Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath²³¹ and the One who brings Jubilee. Therefore, all who are weary and heavy laden who come to Jesus have rest, and receive his easy yoke.²³² Therefore, followers of Jesus display the three-fold Sabbath signs of the kingdom of God that Jesus enacted on the Sabbath.²³³ On the Sabbath, Jesus said, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." Therefore, God's work, and the work of the followers of Christ must be Sabbath-shaped. God's people experience themselves and bring to others healing, wholeness, freedom, peace, rest, justice, forgiveness, grace, and trust in the fruitful feast that God provides now and awaits us in the life to come.
- As Sabbath points to and encourages us to live in the fullness of God's kingly rule and the mighty power of God; and as Lord of the Sabbath Jesus "broke" the Sabbath by healing people physically;²³⁴ the practice of Sabbath invites us to pray that God's power might be experienced through the healing of people's bodies, hearts, minds, and spirits. Sabbath reminds us that God's healing power over all that sin has broken is no mere metaphor, but a present and available reality pointing to the wholeness that will be ours in the new heaven and earth.
- Through the gift of the Spirit, God writes the law on our hearts,²³⁵ freeing us from Sabbath-as-law, to live Sabbath-shaped lives as the true people of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit.²³⁶
- There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, when we will one day enter the fullness of God's rest and rest from our works as God has from his.²³⁷ Our participation in God's Sabbath now points us and others to the joyous kingdom to come.

²²⁸ Numbers 15:32–36; Nehemiah 13:15; Jeremiah 17:19–27; Ezekiel 20:15–26, 22:6–13; Amos 8:4–10.

²²⁹ Luke 4:16–20.

²³⁰ Luke 4:18–19; Matthew 11:4–6.

²³¹ Matthew 12:28.

²³² Matthew 11:28–30.

²³³ E.g. Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 13:10–21; Luke 14:1–6; Matthew 12:1–14; John 5:2–18; John 7:21–24; John 9.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Jeremiah 31:33.

²³⁶ Galatians 5:1–6, 13–18.

²³⁷ Hebrews 4:9.

- Therefore there is Sabbath work to do, “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind, and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.”²³⁸

Therefore we conclude with a call to renewed faithfulness to this gracious, freeing command of God through participation in the Sabbath as a three-fold sign of God’s kingdom and dwelling presence. We understand that our 21st century context is new and different. Yet through the power and creativity of the Holy Spirit applying in new ways the gift of Sabbath, we believe that God is preparing us, partners together in the Covenant order of Evangelical Presbyterians, to demonstrate before the watching world God’s goodness and care by living in his rest and providing rest to all people and to all creation.

We base the whole of this work on the belief that God has already given to his people, and specifically to the people who make up our ECO church family, everything we need to do all God calls us to do in the practice of Sabbath. Further, we believe that a faithful practice of Sabbath, whether of Day, Year, or Jubilee, will emerge from our prayerful reliance upon the leading of the Holy Spirit both individually and corporately. The result, we believe, will be beyond what any one of us can even imagine. Therefore:

We call upon the church to rise to the challenge of Jesus’ invocation of Jubilee: to seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance as we proclaim good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, set at liberty those who are oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

We call upon the church to engage in the care of creation described by the practice of a Sabbath Year. We will seek the Holy Spirit on ways to responsibly use the gifts of air, water, land, and all living things for the blessing of all and the harm of none. As envisioned by the Sabbath Year, we will strive to pass on to our children and our children’s children a world that will sustain them for lives of health and well-being.

We call upon the church to so order its life together that our people will find the support of a community of like-minded people to practice a day of Sabbath cessation and rest. We will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to discover together the transformational joy of participating in Sabbath Day, as we dwell in the presence of God and acknowledge that God alone is Lord of all.

Conclusion

Through the Holy Spirit’s power, we, the church, can free our imagination from conformity to the domain of darkness and show a weary world what it will look like when this God - our Sabbath Lord - is crowned king of all creation. So may the Spirit enable us to set up signs of his

²³⁸ Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37–39; Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:26–28; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8; 1 John 4:7–12.

reign before coronation day and cultivate plots of his revolution in the middle of enemy territory. As the Spirit provides us with opportunities, we can craft invitations to the wedding feast at the fullness of time and strew the streets with signs of his celebration, with previews and foretastes pointing the way to his eternal Sabbath yet to come.