



A CASE FOR TAKING THE SABBATH SERIOUSLY

DISCERNING CREATION'S GROANS

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Introduction: A missional case for Creation Care

The Missional Conversation makes compelling arguments for leaders to model and lead others by observing the world around them, and discerning what God is doing in their context. [1] As I have attempted to foster this kind of missional listening within my own context, I have become aware of a prominent movement that has emerged over the past few years in response to concerns about environmental degradation, and climate change. I began to explore how the Bible might inform and shape my own contribution to this conversation, and how my church might also respond. Although the missional literature often states that we must be concerned with the 'restoration and renewal of all things', [2] it tends to concentrate on human factors and relationships, relegating the care of creation as an example of what a missional practitioner may be concerned with, [3] rather than as a key issue to be wrestled with. It

seems clear from Scripture that God has set about to 'redeem all of creation', [4] and we must listen to, and get involved with those in society whom God is using to bring about His purpose. Christians have a very clear biblical mandate for caring for our environment, which includes a proper understanding of the reasons for the Sabbath, yet it seems this is often not clearly understood or lived out.

The farmer-theologian Wendell Berry builds a strong case for the connection between the care of creation and the practice of the Sabbath in his forward to Wirzba's book, *Living the Sabbath*, he states that:

"The requirement of Sabbath observance invites us to stop. It invites us to rest. It asks us to notice that while we rest the world continues without our help. It invites us to delight in the world's beauty and abundance. [...] Now in our pandemonium, it may be asking us also to consider that if we choose not to honor it and care well for it, the world will continue in our absence." [5]

[1] Roxburgh, 2010:133 "Without attending to these transformations in our environment, we will miss what is happening in our world, and our planning will continue to reach Christians from other churches rather than the people in this new world" & Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006:116; "Missional leadership is [...] about the capacity to develop a continuing relationship of awareness and understanding with the people, neighbourhood, community, social reality, and changing issues in which they are located".

[2] Maddix and Akkerman, 2013:20

[3] Maddix and Akkerman, 2013:21.

[4] Acts 3:21

[5] Berry cited in Wirzba, 2006:12



Sabbath as a distinctive practice the church can offer to society's conversation about Creation Care

The observation of Sabbath principles is featured repeatedly throughout the creation care literature, yet it remains a practice which has '... largely been forgotten by the church.'^[6] Thus, it seems that, although Sabbath provides a distinctive contribution to how society can better care for creation, it must first be rediscovered by the Church itself.

There is a wealth of literature that affirms a clear link between the practice of the Sabbath and the care of creation. Moltmann boldly states that 'the true meaning of the Sabbath is ecological.'^[7] However, this understanding has not been grasped by most Christians, and Wirzba recognises this when he suggests that it is '...one of the least appreciated aspects of Sabbath teaching.'^[8]

In my research, I used Marva Dawn's framework for Sabbath, based on the four categories of ceasing, resting, embracing and feasting, in order to better understand and address its ecological benefits. Her approach to Sabbath is both holistic and missional:

*"The best thing I can give those I love is an invitation to **cease** work and worry, to rest deeply in the grace of God, to **embrace** the values of the Christian community, and to **feast** physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually (emphasis mine)."^[9]*

Using questionnaires and interviews I explored the understanding and practice of Sabbath in my congregation, and in addition, whether there was understanding of its function to care for creation.

Summary of findings with relation to Sabbath practice Ceasing

I found ceasing to be the weakest category in practice – with very few people stopping all work-related activities, and a high discrepancy between peoples' beliefs compared to their practice. Furthermore, participants' understanding of work appeared to be generally limited to paid work, and did not include ceasing from attitudes of productivity, possessiveness, and anxiety. All interviewees exhibited some interest and concern towards creation care, however, very few recognised the significance of practising Sabbath as an act of resistance with regards to ceasing destructive consumer behaviours rooted in anxiety, which ultimately damage the natural world.

Resting

The concept of 'rest' was the dominant one associated with the Sabbath – albeit mostly focused on physical rather than emotional, spiritual and intellectual rest. Only one person was aware of the Sabbath emphasis of allowing animals and the land to rest. She said, that for this reason she tries not to use her car on a Sunday and recognised that she used less electricity as she didn't use as many appliances, such as the washing machine on the Sabbath.

Several of the younger interviewees stated they didn't have a car – and saw this as their main contribution to

[6] Dawn, 1989:67

[7] Moltmann, 1989. He is referring here to the way that the Sabbath allows us to slow down enough to appreciate the aesthetic beauty displayed in creation, in a way that is impossible on normal working days.

[8] Wirzba, 2006:142

[9] Dawn, 1989:206

creation care. However, they struggled to think of anything that helped creation to rest more on Sabbath than other days. All my interviewees did, however, note how lockdown had been beneficial for resting creation – but only one described this period as having been an “enforced Sabbath”, or like the Sabbath in character.

Embracing

Marva Dawn describes her concept of embracing the Sabbath thus: ‘... to accept with gusto, to live to the hilt, to choose with extra intentionality and tenacity’, [10] and others flesh this out, encouraging practices of fellowship, generosity, receptivity[11] and gratitude. This concept of embracing ‘counter-practices’ was one which people displayed lower levels of understanding and intentionality about, although with further probing it emerged that people had more Sabbath habits than they had realised. Few recognised that these counter-practice habits might be a means of resistance (a major theme of the Sabbath literature) to modern consumer culture, and, furthermore, an important means of self-care and creation care.


Feasting

Swoboda calls the Sabbath an ‘appetizer’ of heaven, [12] and Dawn describes it as a weekly ‘eschatological party.’[13] I found that people at my church are socially rich in their Sabbath practices. However, there was a low perception of Sabbath as a celebration, and little proactive effort to make the day special. The literature listed feasting on the beauty of nature as one of the main forms of Sabbath celebration and worship of the Creator, and that the appreciation of nature fostered a care of creation in people. Although I found it unlikely that many would have realised this link between Sabbath and creation care, I did predict that many would unconsciously do this – as we live in an area with many parks, and many members cherish their gardens. I was, therefore, very surprised to find in my survey that those from my church scored so low compared to non-church attenders in how regularly they spent time outdoors on their days off.

Conclusion and Recommendations

My findings throughout this project have been valuable in identifying specific areas which need to be addressed in practice (see Appendix E), many of which would help the church leadership to mentor and coach people into some of the critical practices and habits that form the character and identity of a Christian community,[14] to care for the world God created.

Sabbath ceasing from work creates space for missional listening, and enables us to better identify destructive practices towards all of creation that we have all become enmeshed in. It enables us to




Teaching/ availability of resources on:

- Ceasing in areas apart from paid work
- Resting in areas other than physical
- Biblical foundations for resting non-human creation
- Biblical value of celebration and how to implement this into Sabbath observance
- Sabbath as resistance - value of distinctiveness for society
- Sabbath as a discipline (currently not included in resources on disciplines that various small groups have used)



Share stories of those who do practice Sabbath:

- Their experience of ceasing
- Share ideas for resting in diferent ways (e.g. from technology)
- Disciplines that have been helpful to them
- Not restricted to members of our church, also promote value of stories from other expressions of church and examples of ‘saints’ throughout history




Staff Team and Leadership Example:

- Lead by example (currently only 5 of the 13 staff who responded to my survey claim to take a whole day off weekly).
- Instrumental due to contact with wide proportion of congregation, as well as holding positions of leadership and influence.



Accountability/ communal practices:

- Opportunity for small groups and households, as difficult to do as a whole church due to size of church.
- Provide opportunities to celebrate corporately.



Communal practices outdoors

- Different forms of worship (not limited to inside ‘worship building’).
- Showing care for creation within our locality together. e.g. litter picking.
- Teaching outdoors related to creation.

consider alternative ways of being an actionable and joy-filled practice. Furthermore, these can then be linked with Biblical examples, another missional practice,[16] to develop peoples’ understandings of the close links between Sabbath and rest for the whole of creation. These are important principles and practices which Christians offer to society as a whole, at a time when questions such as ‘how should we live?’ abound in the face of the mounting consequences of environmental degradation.

[10] Dawn, 1989:206
 [11] Wirzba, 2006:142.
 [12] Swoboda, 2018:130
 [13] Dawn, 1989:151
 [14] Roxburgh 2010:153
 [15] Dawn, 1989:151.
 [16] Roxburgh, 2010:153

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