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## Never On A Sunday: The Sabbath And The Christian Academic Library - Part 2

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# NEVER ON A SUNDAY:

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## THE SABBATH AND THE CHRISTIAN ACADEMIC LIBRARY - PART 2

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In the last issue, I set the biblical background for the application of the Sabbath concept to contemporary Christian higher education, especially libraries. My study led me to the following conclusion:

In essence, my position is that Sunday should be observed in the modern church for the same two reasons as those touching the Sabbath in the Old Testament. That is, the Sabbath should be observed as a day of physical rest, and the Sabbath should be observed by the community as a sign of the covenant between God and his people. The New Testament recognizes a future Sabbath rest based on a new covenant between God and his people. The creation Sabbath and the promise of Canaan are precursors of the eternal rest that God now offers through Christ. In effect, Jesus fulfilled what the Old Testament Sabbath symbolized theologically, but He did not obliterate the need for physical rest for the human race. I suggest that since the Sabbath as a day of physical rest antedates the giving of the Law, that its observance is still a wise thing for people to do. That is, the New Testament does not invalidate God's mandate in Genesis for a rhythm of rest for his creation.

Here, in Part Two, is the rest of the story.

### **SABBATH IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

So far I have dealt with the Sabbath as something that is primarily for individuals. I believe that there are also

Sabbath implications for Christian institutions as corporate bodies—groups of those who say they belong to God. God does not have a separate group plan, whether we are members of a Christian educational organization or a specific local church. But as a community of Christians, we are a manifestation of the body of Christ for the world. Sabbath observance enables the church to give a corporate testimony to the grace of God in the same way that Israel was instructed to bring light to the world when it observed the Sabbath as a community in the Old Testament. This corporate testimony will probably have more visibility in the culture than individualistic Sabbath observance alone.

Should Christian colleges and universities dedicate their time so that Sunday is a day to rest from labor, thus giving testimony to a covenant relationship to God as a Christian institution of higher education? Some with whom I have discussed the matter have indicated to me that observing Sunday as a day of rest is an empty gesture. It does not impress the world; it does not even impress other Christians. If this is true, I think it is unfortunate. I admit that there is a more important reason for doing what is right than to impress others—and that is to please God, even if no one notices—but God has revealed that his “peculiar” people will be noticed. Sabbath observance, then, may provide an opportunity for a verbal witness to a culture that is lost.

What is the nature of that cultural witness? Here, Wayne Muller's book, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm*



of Rest, is helpful. Muller states that our culture judges the health of the nation in economic terms. Thus, transactions that involve money—such as producing goods and services—are valued; transactions that involve the giving of time (raising children at home?) are not measured. This demonstrates the prominence given to materialistic values in our culture. Muller again: “People who have a lot of money and no time, we call ‘rich.’ And people who have a great deal of time but no money, we call ‘poor.’ A ‘successful’ life is one in which one is always terribly busy, working hard, accomplishing great things, and making a great deal of money.”<sup>1</sup> We have the opportunity to demonstrate to our culture—by observing the Sabbath—that money should not be the highest value.

Muller also argues that our culture—particularly our economic system—is built on producing discontent. In our consumer society, he says, we pursue happiness by seeking to satisfy our desires, but our desires are insatiable. “Happiness is the single commodity not produced by the free-market economy.... The lie is this: While they are promising happiness, they are really selling dissatisfaction.”<sup>2</sup> As I argued in Part One, one of the benefits of observing the Sabbath is showing contentment with what God has given us, in time as well as money.

One of the hallmarks of American culture is constant action. Americans are doers; rest is counter-cultural. Again Muller observes: “Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest, that doing something—anything—is better than doing nothing.... Even when our intentions are noble and our efforts sincere—even when we dedicate our lives to the service of others—the corrosive pressure of frantic over activity can nonetheless cause suffering in ourselves and others.”<sup>3</sup> A Sabbath culture offers time. “Sabbath is more than the absence of work; it is... a period of time to listen to what is most deeply beautiful, nourishing, or true.”<sup>4</sup>

Besides giving testimony to the grace of God and challenging our culture’s values, are there any other benefits that accrue when Christian institutions of higher education embrace a Sabbath culture? Yes! I believe that one of the most important outcomes is that the students learn to value time in a manner that more closely parallels God’s, rather than society’s, desires.

Even apart from any religious context, Richard J. Light, in *Making the Most of College*, makes an interesting point with regard to time management in academia. In studying why some college students succeeded while others struggled, he came to the following conclusion:

The critical word is time. Sophomores who had a great first year typically talked about realizing, when they got to college, that they had to think about how to spend their time. They mentioned time management, and time allocation, and time as a scarce resource. In contrast, sophomores who struggled during their first year rarely referred to time in any way.... The distinction in attitudes toward managing time translates into a distinction

between new students who prosper and those who struggle.<sup>5</sup>

As a Christian institution, we have the opportunity to help our students learn the value and use of time by using the Sabbath as a fulcrum.

We need to teach them that the Sabbath is not meant to curtail freedom, but rather is a means to free us to do what is good apart from the normal cares of the world. A good question is: If a Sabbath culture were adopted, would students observe it? In other words, how successful can we be in swimming against the cultural tide? There are those who predict that some students will continue to work, even if the university closes down. That may be true, but if honoring the Sabbath is the right thing to do, the fact that some fail is not a sufficient argument against Sabbath-keeping. There is little, if anything, that Christian universities are able to teach successfully to all students. Yet we normally do not throw up our hands in defeat.

The answer, I believe, is in positive, consistent teaching regarding the significance of the Sabbath. As with lifestyle expectations, there need to be reminders—as well as an orientation for each new class that comes on campus. We need to teach that time is a good gift of God and the Sabbath is a special day to honor God with a portion of our time—time for relationships (with God

and with others), reflection, rest, and recreation. Maybe this lineup could be called the New Four Rs of Christian education! Since many students (maybe even faculty and staff) struggle with time manage-

ment (and who has not felt the force of academic time pressure), the Sabbath can become the vehicle to inculcate a new appreciation of God’s view of time.

Marva J. Dawn states, in her book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, “I can



promise you that if you develop a lifestyle in which you spend one day as a Sabbath day without wearing a watch, you will be more able to accomplish all that you have to do on the days you wear one."<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that it was while writing her dissertation that she learned the value of Sabbath keeping—not only did it give rest, but the Sabbath allowed her to depend on God's provision. "Sabbath keeping changes our character," says Dawn. "We will be irrevocably transformed by the commitment to a special day set aside for our relationship with God...."<sup>7</sup> Could Sabbath keeping be a piece of the puzzle in our attempts to build character into our students?

In the midst of a steady diet of assignments and activities, when do we take time to think—about God, about what we are doing, about how our learning relates to our Christian life and responsibilities? Provision of regular time for reflection might even further enhance the value of a Christian education. Although I find physical exercise necessary and good, there is nothing more drab and boring, in my experience, than running on a treadmill—even in pursuit of a noble goal. Let's not make Christian education a treadmill by failing to allow opportunities for rest and reflection.

### SABBATH IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LIBRARY

The main business of a Christian college or university is educating students; the core of the university is its academic process. The job, or work, of the students—while they are in school—is to participate in formal and informal learning activities. That is why they take time and pay money to come. Other things occur, of course, on a college or university campus, but the main work focuses on the teaching/learning process. Often, the only part of the academic process that operates regularly on Sundays in a Christian institution of higher education is the library. Classes normally do not meet

on Sunday. Business offices are closed. Why is the library open on Sunday?

I would like to suggest that the reasons revolve around the concept of the library as a support service for the university. The library is generally viewed as a service agency; in American society, services (such as retail stores, restaurants, and gas stations) are open on Sundays.

Thus, it is a natural conclusion that libraries—as a service agency—should be open on Sundays. It follows the cultural pattern. The library also falls outside the two main power groups on campus: the administration and the faculty. Usually, its destiny (re work hours) is not in its own hands; therefore, it may be asked to do things that neither the administration nor faculty are asked to do—be open on Sundays. Many librarians have reported this dynamic on their campuses. But librarians, themselves, are not totally free of guilt in this matter. Some cite the demands of students for Sunday service hours as a reason to be open. "We need to be there when the students want us."

There are at least two reasons, I believe, that a closed library on Sunday is a good thing for Christian campuses. The first is that it eliminates inequity in the treatment of academic personnel. The observance of a Sabbath for the whole campus gives the library staff a common day to practice rest—since such a day is available to other academic personnel. Yes, as individuals they can have other days off, and thus not work seven days, but the fact remains that when the library as a corporate body works a seven-day week, it deprives some workers of a common day of rest.

The second result of Sunday library service, I believe, is even more serious than the first. Christian colleges and

universities are first of all educational institutions, as I stated earlier. What are we teaching students about their stewardship of time, though, when we encourage them to do their work (study) on Sundays in the library? Are we

teaching them that there is nothing wrong with the cultural standard of a week composed of seven equal

days? Do we teach them that being at a Christian school—maybe even preparing for Christian service—enables them to cut corners on God's expectations and desires?

This line of reasoning can best be grasped if the student is seen as a worker (I know that this may stretch the imagination at times, but humor me). If learning is their job, then studying is their regular work. To cease studying for a day is to cease from normal labor. By observing the Sabbath, students learn to set aside one day for rest, reflection, and service. An open library encourages students to treat Sunday like any other day, at least after lunch, and if students form a habit of working seven days a week, are they going to change after they graduate? Not usually. There will never be enough time. Old habits die hard. And where did they learn this? Sad to say, at a Christian institution.

There may be those who argue that closing the library is fine for undergraduates, but not for graduate students who attend part-time and need library time on Sunday because of their family and work responsibilities. I am not aware of any biblical warrant for such a dichotomy. Could it be that it is even more necessary for such people to set aside a day of rest, since they are juggling an ambitious schedule of work, family, and education? Practicing a Sabbath rest, in fact, may enable them to more fully do justice to all that requires their attention.

In my discussions of the Sabbath

*Often, the only part of the academic process that operates regularly on Sundays in a Christian institution of higher education is the library.*



issue with librarians, it is clear that not all agree with the position I have taken. A number take an individualistic approach; that is, as long as each person has a day off, everything is fine. The problem with that position, in my opinion, is that it ignores the corporate, or community, dimension of Sabbath observance. It is more American than biblical.

The argument most often given for keeping the library open on Sunday, though, is as follows: 1) students want the library to be open on Sunday (or need an open library to make last-minute preparations for Monday); 2) the library is a service organization; therefore, 3) the library should be open to serve its patrons when they want service. Ignoring for the moment that librarians usually do not wish to work at midnight (when there also are students who could use their services), or that students usually do not need to work on Sunday (they could have chosen to finish their work on Friday or Saturday), one of the main problems with this argument is that it confuses "means" with "ends." Opening the library on Sunday is seen as a means to the end of providing service. Is this a sustainable position?

Service is a laudable operational principle for a library; libraries are service agents. But the service principle, by itself, cannot ultimately justify all that is done in its name. Prostitution, for example, is a service that satisfies patrons' desires. Few Christians, however, would justify the practice because of the service principle. My point is that the "service" principle itself is not necessarily good or bad; it is the context that determines whether offering a particular service is a good thing. If I have accurately portrayed God's view of the Sabbath—and our responsibility toward it—in this paper, then ignoring the Sabbath, even if it is in the name of service, is falling short of God's best for us.

## CONCLUSION

What I have tried to articulate are the good reasons that exist for closing the Christian academic library—and all campus academic activities—on Sunday. The first reason extends back to the dawn of history, when God rested on the seventh day of creation, thus setting a pattern for all humanity. Our society has rejected God and his pattern for living, but we, as a Christian community, should be different. By observing the Sabbath, we demonstrate our faith in God as Creator—faith in his knowledge of us (and how we work as human beings), and faith in his provision for us even when we work only six days per week.

The second reason takes us back to the defining moments when God called out a people for Himself from all nations. The first exodus, through which God redeemed Israel from Egypt, was commemorated by Sabbath observance. In the "second exodus," God redeemed all his people, through Jesus Christ, from sin. Our society has rejected God, and continues to try to work out its own salvation. Again, we should be different by demonstrating our faith in God as Redeemer, accepting the spiritual rest he offers to us now and in the future, and commemorating the Sabbath as a sign of God's gracious gift.

A Sabbath culture is counter-cultural in the twenty-first century. It honors God with respect to our use of time. It celebrates, as a community, our relationship to Him. In Christian higher education, it communicates to the next generation (our students) God's plan for their use of time. A Sabbath culture is not a culture enslaved to quasi-legal religious restrictions—or to societal priorities. Rather, it is a culture that acknowledges grace and nurtures freedom in the use of time; it brings inner and social peace to those who practice its re-creative rhythms.

I believe that Christian colleges and universities should seek to honor God, encourage the proper stewardship of time by students, be consistent

regarding the work schedule of academic staff, and challenge the cultural practice of time management by closing the library on Sundays. This may not be the most popular thing to do, but I believe it is the right thing to do. When it comes to library hours, let's declare: Never on Sunday! \*

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), p. 99.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid. pp. 132, 136.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 1-2.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 8.
- <sup>5</sup> Richard J. Light, *Making the Most of College*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 24-25.
- <sup>6</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. xii.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 97.

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