

EDITOR'S PERSPECTIVE:

First Things: The Sabbath and the Twenty-First Century Marketplace

KENT W. SEIBERT
Gordon College

RACHEL ASHLEY
Gordon College

Any good business and businessperson appreciates the importance of prioritizing. All demands are not equally important. Given the reality of a world of scarcity, choices must be made. Which things are not just nice, but necessary? Which things should take priority? Which things are first things? The first book of the Bible begins by presenting first things.

Genesis chapter one, verse one tells us there is a God and that he creates, that he engages in productive activity. Over the course of six biblical days, he brings the physical, social, and spiritual reality of the universe into existence. God taught the Hebrews at Mt. Sinai, the original recipients of his word, these important first things: there is one God, he is the Creator of everything, and the pinnacle of his creation is people, the only thing created in his image. They also learn that after six days of productive activity, God treats the seventh day differently. He declares it holy and he rests. Certainly, God does not require rest; so his doing this points to something else.

The first six days entail productive activity; the seventh involves rest. The first six days emphasize the creation; the seventh focuses on the Creator. The first six days God describes as good; the seventh he declares holy. The first thing God describes as holy is not himself or what he has made, but time. Clearly this seventh day is special. This sanctified day of rest is what people experience during their first full day after being created in God's image.

According to Walton (2009), the Hebrews who first heard the creation narrative understood it as portraying the earth as the temple of their God, Yahweh. In the ancient Near East, temple dedications were often seven days long and, at the end, the deity would enter and take up his rest. This Yahweh did on the seventh day. The

narrative thus explains that although God is an active and creative being, his ultimate identity is not in what he does, but in who he is. His name is "I Am" (Exodus 3:14). While God obviously takes pleasure in creating and ruling his creation, it is also sufficient for him to simply be. Likewise, the beings created in his image get their primary identity from who they are, not by what they do. They are human beings, not human doings. Thus central to who they are is a balance of being and doing, a recognition that life is about more than doing and that God is ultimately the one in control. The world will not fall apart if people cease from their work.

God blesses the seventh day and calls it holy (Genesis 2:3). According to Abraham Joshua Heschel (1951), the renowned twentieth century Jewish rabbi and philosopher, people experience the fullness of life in the seventh day, or Sabbath, because in the Sabbath dwells time and in time dwells holiness. Unlike other religions that relate the existence of their deities to "particular localities like mountains, forests, trees, or stones," the God of the Bible exists in time and does not depend upon space (Heschel, 1951, p. 4). God is a spirit, not a thing.

THE SABBATH AND TIME

Heschel's (1951) primary argument for the weight of time with respect to the Sabbath depends largely on the first use of the word *quadosh* (holy) in the book of Genesis. While at the start of creation God declared the other six days good or very good, "there was only one holiness in the world, holiness in time" (p. 9). By sanctifying the Sabbath, God set her apart from the other six days. The Sabbath is entirely independent of the spatial

world and beckons people to follow her lead. The Sabbath is a day of freedom from the other six days of the week and the things of space associated with them. For Israel, Sabbath offered liberation from incessant labor and pressure to be self-sufficient. Today Sabbath offers freedom from technological imperatives and consumerist pressures as well as the desire to be self-sufficient. Although first instituted for ancient people, it is utterly relevant for twenty-first century business people.

Some Christian writers suggest that the time of the seventh day continues to today (Alexander & Baker, 2002). An “evening followed by morning” refrain follows the description of the first six days of creation. But since this refrain does not follow the seventh day, it can be inferred that the seventh day continues, suggesting that we still live in holy time. While in one sense, we always live in this time, deliberately setting aside a day each week to consciously embrace this time enables us to remember God’s holiness.

Of course for Christians, Christ is the ultimate first thing. As Paul told the Corinthians: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The death and resurrection of Christ ushers in a time when Sabbath rest and holiness are already, but not yet perfectly, available for the Christian. Further, the requirements of Old Testament law no longer hold sway.

But does this ready access to Sabbath rest and holiness mean that Christians take it for granted? Many Christians today suffer from workaholism. A recent university study reported in *Christianity Today* claims that one of the consequences of overwork among pastors is obesity (“Why Protestant Pastors,” 2015). The odds of a pastor who does not take a weekly Sabbath being obese are 50% for those who work 40 hours per week and 90% for those who work 70 hours per week. Similar information on the deleterious effects of overwork, including among businesspeople, are presented later in this special issue of the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*. Christian businesspeople are not immune. Perhaps this is a function of an increasingly secular culture where business occurs 24/7/365. Perhaps it is an unintended consequence of the recent emphasis on workplace ministry and business as mission (e.g., Stevens, 1999; Miller, 2007; Wong & Rae, 2011). Perhaps it is a function of losing sight of first things.

If the principle (not the legalistic obligation) of Sabbath is indeed a first thing, what does that imply for how Christians should conduct business today? Some initial attempts to answer that question appear in the articles

that follow. As will be shown, Sabbath has important implications for businesspeople in the areas of leisure, sustainable development, how success is attained, and, perhaps most importantly, worship.

Ultimately, the Sabbath is a precious gift, but one that has been misunderstood and under-appreciated for millennia. Part of the reason Israel was exiled was for ignoring the Sabbath (2 Chronicles 36:21). And part of Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees was due to their perversion of the Sabbath. After being confronted by the Pharisees for harvesting grain on the Sabbath, Jesus proclaims: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Immediately after that proclamation, Mark describes how Jesus heals a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath while the Pharisees looked on disapprovingly (Mark 3:1-6). The Pharisees were obsessing about work rules when a miracle was worked before their eyes. Are Christian businesspeople likewise obsessed by work when the miracle of Sabbath holiness and rest is available to them? By being consumed with work rules, the Pharisees overlooked the fact that the Messiah was in their midst. Does our preoccupation with work blind us to the fact that the Messiah is in our midst? Through their fixation on work rules, the Pharisees missed that the holy time of the Sabbath brings healing, liberation, and the opportunity to worship God and commune with him face to face. Does Christian businesspeople’s (over)emphasis on work likewise blind us to the opportunity for healing, liberation, and intimate worship available in holy time? The ancient Israelites as well as the Pharisees neglected first things. Do Christian businesspeople do the same thing?

THE SABBATH AS A FIRST THING

In his prophetic role, Christ called people to return to first things. A first thing for Christian businesspeople should be Sabbath, not work. If most of us are honest (including the two of us writing these words as well as the authors of previous *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* issues, at least as indicated by the topics of their articles), we have not made Sabbath a priority. Given the productive nature of business, this is understandable but not entirely excusable. The authors of the articles that follow begin to right this imbalance. We hope you will be as refreshed by their ideas as we have been and that they will assist you to enter what Heschel (1951) calls a “palace in time” (p. 13).

Heschel (1951) reminds people of their duty to “conquer space and sanctify time” (p. 101). While Christians’ redemption comes through Christ and not Sabbath, the

Sabbath continues to have daily value for us. In moments of silence and inwardness, people rediscover who they are as human beings. The world teaches Christian businesspeople to be like machines, fast and efficient, but the Sabbath teaches them that they are human beings, passionately loved by God. To deny the Sabbath and Sabbath principles is to deny people's status as creatures created in God's image. Indeed, the Sabbath is a divine gift from God for the sake of life and the divine relationship between God and humanity. It is time for Christian businesspeople to return to this vital first thing.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, T. D., & Baker, D. W. (Eds.). (2002). *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Why Protestant pastors need a Sabbath. (2015, March). *Christianity Today*, 14.
- Heschel, A. J. (1951). *The Sabbath*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Miller, D. W. (2007). *God at work: The history and promise of the faith at work movement*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Stevens, R. P. (1999). *The other six days: Vocation, work, and ministry in biblical perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Walton, J. H. (2009). *The lost world of Genesis One: Ancient cosmology and the origins debate*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Wong, K. L. & Rae, S. B. (2011). *Business for the common good: A Christian vision for the marketplace*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Kent W. Seibert is professor of economics and business at Gordon College where he has also served as department chair. After a career in industry, he taught at Messiah College, Wheaton College and now Gordon. He has published widely and is currently researching social entrepreneurs.



Rachel Ashley graduated summa cum laude from Gordon College in 2013 with a degree in biblical studies and political science. She has devoted many hours to the study of Sabbath and seeks to integrate her studies into her current professional role at Gordon's Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership.