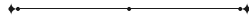


CHAPTER 1



SABBATH REST AS A CREATION ORDINANCE

INTRODUCTION

Augustine famously wrote that our hearts remain restless until we find our rest “in thee,” the Lord.¹ In a fallen world, such restlessness of heart characterizes every person’s inner life. Indeed, when one combines that restlessness with the frenetic pace of modern society, Jesus’s promise of “rest” (Matt. 11:29) proves even sweeter.

The theme of rest permeates the pages of Scripture. God rested at the end of His creative activity, and He promised the Israelites rest in their own land across the Jordan. Jesus promises rest to the weary and heavy-laden. The writer to the Hebrews uses the theme of rest as an encouragement for perseverance. Yet church history is filled with scholars debating the nature and requirements of rest and Sabbath, and how they relate to the law in general. In contemporary theology, some have focused exclusively on the fulfillment of the law, arguing that the requirement to observe weekly Sabbath rest is done away with entirely. Others, maintaining that Sabbath rest is grounded in creation and still binds believers, focus too much

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), I.1.21.

attention on a list of rights and wrongs and forget that the yoke of Christ is light.

Coinciding with those debates has been a growing interest in Reformed theology. Young people are learning of the deep theological roots that anchor their Reformed traditions. Many are investigating the Scriptures for themselves in order to validate the sabbatarian articles in their denominations' confessions. This renewed interest in the biblical calls for rest necessitates a clear biblical understanding of what is required of Christians.² Part of that clear understanding is a proper interpretation of the creation ordinances of Genesis 1 and 2. Is there any prescriptive element within God's concluding act during the creation week, His rest on the seventh day? How one answers that question has significant implications for both the church and for individuals.

PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

We will explore those implications in this book, particularly the areas of (1) weekly Sabbath rest, (2) creation ordinance, (3) biblical-theological evidence, (4) historical evidence, (5) ecclesiological implications, and (6) personal applications.

The Propriety of Weekly Sabbath Rest

First, I argue for the propriety of weekly Sabbath rest. This means that the normal pattern to be followed by humanity is a week consisting of seven twenty-four-hour days, six of which

² See, for example, Gavin Ortlund, "7 Ways to Work Hard at Rest," Gospel Coalition Blog, March 3, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/7-ways-to-work-hard-at-rest/>.

are spent in work while the other is devoted to rest.³ This rest includes implications for both the individual and the church that will be discussed and defined in subsequent chapters.

Sabbath Rest as a Creation Ordinance

Second, this book defends weekly Sabbath rest as a *creation ordinance*. For our purposes, a creation ordinance is defined as a general pattern established in Genesis 1–2 that becomes normative, but not uniformly observed, with any exceptions to the pattern contributing to the pattern’s fulfillment; moreover, the pattern must be confirmed, not negated or abrogated, by later biblical revelation.⁴ Each of these criteria will be defended in turn.

³ My default interpretation of the creation narrative is literal twenty-four-hour days. However, I do not think that a reader must agree with me on this point in order to agree with the overall thesis of this book. J. I. Packer frames the discussion properly: “Whether the six days should be understood as 144 of our hours, or as six vast geological epochs, or as a pictorial projection of the fact (the *what*) of creation that gives no information about the time (the *when*) or the method (the *how*) of creation is an interpretive question that need not concern us now. What matters for us here is that on the basis of this presentation God directs that each seventh day be kept as a day of rest from the labors of the previous six. . . . The day is to be kept ‘holy’—that is, it is to be used for honoring God the creator by worship, as well as for refreshing human creatures by the break from their otherwise unending toil.” J. I. Packer, “Leisure and Life-Style: Leisure, Pleasure, and Treasure,” in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 363.

⁴ In fact, I could find very few actual definitions for the term *creation ordinance*. Walter Kaiser defines creation ordinances as depicting “the constitution of things as they were intended to be from the Creator’s hand,” in *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 31. While Kaiser does include Sabbath rest as a creation ordinance, he does not include criteria for determining what is or is not a creation ordinance. See chapter 2 for a discussion of the historical views related to the category of “creation ordinance” and its synonyms.

A creation ordinance is a pattern that is normative; that is, all of mankind is ordinarily expected to follow the pattern.⁵ For example, Genesis 1 contains the ordinance of marriage. The pattern is that a man and a woman are to be united in a monogamous, heterosexual relationship that produces offspring. Likewise, the ordinance of work has the normal pattern for mankind to diligently work for six days and rest for one.

These patterns are not uniformly observed. While marriage is the norm for most of mankind, nowhere in Scripture is marriage demanded of anyone. Instead, the freedom to remain single is preserved (1 Cor. 7:7–8). The same is the case with work; all those who are able to work are expected to do so following God’s pattern (2 Thess. 3:10).⁶

Exceptions to the creation pattern must fulfill and contribute to the pattern’s fulfillment. People who do not personally follow the pattern should live in such a way as to promote the pattern’s normal observance. Returning to the pattern of marriage found in Genesis 1, people who choose to remain single are free to do so. However, they should live in such a way as to promote the normal pattern of healthy marriage and procreation that is found in the creation account. In terms of the creation ordinance of work, the normal pattern

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, the term *mankind* in this book will refer to all human beings, both male and female.

⁶ The basic definition of *work* used in this book will be “all that we are obliged to do to meet our physical and social needs.” Leland Ryken, *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work and Leisure* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 16. He likewise says that “in practical human terms, the primary purpose of work is to provide for human needs, both our own and those of others” (Ryken, *Redeeming the Time*, 229). According to Ryken, work “serves three main purposes in the world. It exists to provide for human needs, to fulfill our humanity, and to glorify God. These goals, in turn, are standards by which we can weigh the worthiness of work” (Ryken, *Redeeming the Time*, 231–32).

is for humans to faithfully engage in a vocation. Should someone be unable to work for some reason (e.g., a physical or mental disability), he would not necessarily be sinning by not working. However, he should live in such a way that promotes the normal pattern of work among others (e.g., encouraging others to follow the biblical pattern of work, or not unnecessarily distracting others from their work).

Finally, a creation ordinance must be confirmed, not abrogated or negated, by later biblical revelation. Certain rules or patterns found in Scripture have been done away with by later revelation (e.g., the old covenant sacrificial system). However, for something to be classified as a creation ordinance, later revelation must in no way negate the pattern. For example, the creation ordinance of monogamous, heterosexual marriage is affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4–6.⁷ Likewise, Paul affirms the goodness of the creational pattern of work in 1 Thessalonians 4:11. Again, a creation ordinance is a general pattern established in Genesis 1–2 that becomes normative, but not uniformly observed, with any exceptions to the pattern contributing to the pattern’s fulfillment; the pattern must be confirmed, not negated or abrogated, by later biblical revelation.

On the importance of the question before us—whether weekly Sabbath is a creation ordinance—British New

⁷ This does not mean that later revelation cannot give further meaning attached to the pattern. For example, Paul teaches that marriage is a picture of Christ and His church (Eph. 5:22–32). See also 1 Cor. 7; Eph. 5:25–33. While Christ does say that the human pattern for marriage will not continue in the eschaton (Matt. 22:30), the pattern will remain, albeit in a transformed way. Christ will be married to His bride for eternity, transforming and fulfilling the picture that human marriage always portrayed. See chapter 2 for more discussion on this fulfillment.

Testament scholar Andrew Lincoln writes, “If the hypothesis of the Sabbath as a creation ordinance could be established, then, whatever the temporary nature of the Sabbath as part of the Mosaic covenant, the appeal could still be made to the permanence of the mandate for one day of rest as inherent to humanity made in the image of God.”⁸ Likewise, “All the problems relating to our subject [Sabbath rest] hinge on the question whether or not the Sabbath is a creation ordinance. If the Westminster Confession is correct in stating that, by God’s design, one day out of seven is to be kept holy unto the Lord, and that this day was the Sabbath of the Old Covenant and Sunday since the Resurrection, the area of discussion is limited to minor issues.”⁹

Biblical-Theological Evidence

Biblical-theological evidence affirms that weekly Sabbath rest is a normative pattern for mankind. As will be demonstrated, God’s rest at the end of the creation week sets the pattern for the remainder of creation to follow. That pattern, though enjoined by various additional rules (e.g., Old Testament Sabbath regulations, which have been fulfilled by Christ), remains in effect until the second coming of Christ.¹⁰ The New Testament evidence, typological patterns, apostolic teachings, and early church examples all confirm this interpretation.

⁸ Andrew T. Lincoln, “From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective,” in *From Sabbath To Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 346.

⁹ R. B. Gaffin et al., “Supplement No. 5, Committee on the Sabbath Issue,” in *Acts of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod—Australia 1972* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Ecumenical Synod Secretariat, [1972]), 146–147.

¹⁰ Some might argue that the weekly rhythm of work and rest extends even into the eschaton. This idea will be addressed further later.

Evidence from Church History

There is significant evidence in church history for the interpretation of Sabbath rest as a creation ordinance. The church in the early, medieval, Reformation, post-Reformation, and modern eras contains prominent leaders who either teach explicitly that God's creation-week rest is normative, or teach in a way that would not contradict such an interpretation.¹¹

Ecclesiological Implications

The interpretation of Sabbath rest as a creation ordinance has many implications for the church, including in the areas of Sabbath as a means of grace, the corporate assembly, natural law, liberty of conscience, and social implications of Sabbath rest.

Personal Implications

Because creation ordinances are patterns for universal observance, Sabbath rest affects other aspects of life than just the household of God, including the relationship between rest and faith and legitimate or illegitimate uses of Sabbath time.

BACKGROUND

My interest in this subject grew out of a practical theology question posed by one of my pastors: "Why can you discipline a church member for lack of attendance on Sundays?" The answer was not readily apparent to me. I gave him several

¹¹ The language of "creation ordinance" is a relatively recent phenomenon. Even though previous generations did not use such language, they did believe that there are some prescriptive elements for new covenant believers that can be found in the creation account.