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Redeeming the Time: Sabbath Observance for the Christian Minister

Abstract:

In a world impacted by COVID-19, Christian clergy have reevaluated how their time is spent in response to new challenges. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, augmented by the work of Walter Brueggemann and Marva Dawn, provided guidance to focus more on the realm of the spirit and less on the physical world. This is achieved through a renewed dedication to Sabbath observance. The Sabbath is the consecrated day where both God and people find rest from their labors. Because clergy work to help others observe the Sabbath, they must be willing to think outside the box to observe their own.

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Introduction

Currently, the world finds itself coming out of the shadow of pandemic. With the removal of mask mandates and availability of COVID-19 vaccines, most lives are returning to a sense of pre-pandemic normalcy. One result of the pandemic is that people are evaluating aspects of their lives such as political beliefs and beliefs about God (Bernacer 2021) (Kowalczyk 2021: 2672). Another topic of interest in a post-pandemic world is that of time. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people found themselves with more time on their hands as they were laid off from jobs, going to school virtually, or quarantining due to virus exposure.

In 1951, Abraham Heschel, a leading Jewish scholar and ordained rabbi in the 20th century, argued against focusing on the material world and purported the spiritual importance of Sabbath observance in his work *The Sabbath*. Heschel wrote *The Sabbath* to the American Jewish community in a post-World War 2 society. The Jews were only a few years removed from the horrors of the Holocaust and its anti-Semitic evils.¹ Once the war ended, American Jews discovered a culture that gave them more opportunities than ever (Koltun-Fromm 2010: 145). They suddenly had the chance to earn greater wealth which would have implications on their priorities. If more wealth provided more purchasing power, then their priorities could shift towards ownership of possessions. Heschel wrote to reorient Jewish Americans away from the love of material things towards the love of God by adjusting their focus from the material world to the spiritual world. The way forward for their faith community was through a renewed understanding and observance of the Sabbath. As Patrick Miller has observed, the Fourth Commandment is a bridge that links the first three commandments focusing on God with the last six commandments focusing on the neighbor (2009: 117). The Sabbath is where the worship of God and the treatment of others come together. God and people both find rest on the Sabbath. People become linked to God and linked to each other through the rest the Sabbath provides, thus forming a stronger community.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused churches and other faith communities to close or meet at reduced capacities. Because of this, clergy have been faced with the need to adapt to a rapidly changing environment in which congregants are not returning to the physical worship space either through personal choice or government regulation. With these new challenges come new stresses, and pastors could be at risk for burnout if

they are not careful to maintain their own physical, mental, and spiritual health. A possible key to maintaining that health is through their own observance of the Sabbath (Speedling 2019: 1384). As Christians have a faith heritage in Judaism and the Hebrew Bible, it is important to gain a Jewish perspective on a practice that is still part of the Christian faith today. Heschel's work has value for clergy. The goal of this article is to examine Heschel's definition of the Sabbath from a Christian perspective, formulate a modern definition of Sabbath observance, and discover the implications for the Christian minister.

Heschel's Thoughts

Heschel grounded his view of the Sabbath in the separation of time and space. While they are interrelated, they are also different. Space is the material world we see around us. It is the physical world that we can touch, manipulate, and dominate. Humankind's domination of space motivated Heschel to write *The Sabbath*. One of his concerns was that as people gained power in the world of space, they would lose any desire for the world of time. Time is the moments we currently encounter, the remembrance of historical events, and the anticipation of events to come. Heschel argued that Judaism was a "...*religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.*" (1951: 8) He moved beyond the traditional use of time as a measuring device and argued it is something altogether different. It is the process of creation. A world without time, he posed, is a world without God. Heschel said:

The Bible is more concerned with time than with space. It sees the world in the dimension of time. It pays more attention to generations, to events, than to countries, to things; it is more concerned with history than with geography. To understand the teaching of the Bible, one must accept its premise that time has a meaning for life which is at least equal to that of space; that time has a significance and sovereignty of its own. (1951: 6-7)

Judaism is a religion of time whose goal is to see the sanctification of moments and events. The basis of the Jewish faith is remembering the works of God accomplished in history, specifically the history of their faith community. An important part of the Jewish faith is the celebration of festivals or feasts which occur throughout the calendar year. These feasts remember different works of God in their history as a people and culminate

in the Day of Atonement in which atonement is made for the sins of the people.

The Sabbath itself is representative of God consecrating time. Heschel recounted the first use of holiness in the Bible is in Genesis 2:3 at the end of the creation account. While the things God created are called good, only the Sabbath is called holy because God blessed that day and set it apart by resting. Thus, the Sabbath stands out from creation as time was made holy before anything else. It becomes an escape from the world of space and a refocus on the holiness of time. On the first Sabbath, peace and tranquility were created when God decided to rest. This rest is also synonymous with happiness, stillness, and harmony. Embracing the holiness of time is what allows us to receive the same peace that was created when God rested² and is expressed in *how* the Sabbath is celebrated. Heschel argued the Sabbath itself is the symbol of the Covenant in which Jews remember what God has done (1951: 82).

Heschel saw the Sabbath as a way to move beyond the desire to conquer the material world and reorient one's perspective towards God's eternal holiness. The Sabbath is both a reminder and a foretaste of eternity. Heschel argued the Sabbath is preparation for eternity and is eschatological in nature. Hope for the future is found in the Sabbath, and those who cannot observe the Sabbath in the present world cannot experience it in the world to come. Heschel thought the Sabbath and the other six days in the week were linked together and that neither could exist without the other. The longing for the Sabbath during the other six days was a form of longing for the eternal Sabbath and directed people towards coveting the things of time and away from coveting the things of space (Heschel 1951: 90-91). He saw the physical world as something that would stop humankind's progress if allowed, and the Sabbath was a way to physically and spiritually move forward as a society. He posited these thoughts on the relationship between humankind's hope and the Sabbath:

To set apart one day a week for freedom, a day to which we would not use the instruments which have been so easily turned into weapons of destruction, a day for being with ourselves, a day of detachment from the vulgar, of independence of external obligations, a day on which we stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization, a day on which we use no money, a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and the forces of nature—is there any institution

that holds out a greater hope for man's progress than the Sabbath? (Heschel 1951:28)

Though technology, money, and economic structures are not necessarily evil as Heschel described them, Heschel saw the Sabbath as a way to gain independence from the physical world. While Heschel's views here sound contrary, the goal of the Jewish religion was to find a way of being within the world while rising above it at the same time. As God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, so people have been placed in the world to live and yet not be controlled by the evil that exists in civilization. The Sabbath allowed respite from the world where one could rise up into the realm of time and leave behind the dangers, worries, and temptations of the material world.

One distinguishing hallmark of the Jewish Sabbath is the restriction of all work. Heschel engaged with the command found in Exodus 20:8 to do all work and labor in six days by posing a question: *is all our work ever really complete* (1951: 32)? He offered an interpretation that one should rest as though all their work is done and rest even from the thought of work itself. Heschel further expounded on the thoughts of ancient rabbis by reinterpreting Sabbath regulations on what work could be done. As the rabbis said only work that pertained to the construction and furnishing of the Sanctuary in the desert was acceptable (Heschel 1951: 29), Heschel posed that the Sabbath itself is a sanctuary in time and anything which helps build this sanctuary through Sabbath observance is permissible on that day. The intent of the Sabbath is not on work itself being performed. What is more important is freedom from the influence of the realm of space and anything that would detract from peace, joy, happiness, and the holiness of God.

A Christian Perspective

As Christianity's roots come from Judaism³, there is much about the Christian faith that draws from the Jewish background of Jesus (Brueggemann 2014: x). A Jewish perspective such as Heschel's on shared doctrines like the Sabbath can be beneficial for Christian theology. However, one area where Heschel differed from Christian thought is the idea of the Sabbath making one holy. Heschel said, "The quality of holiness is not in the grain of matter. It is a preciousness bestowed upon things by an act of consecration and persisting in relation to God." (1951: 79) The measurement of one's holiness does not come from their identity but from what has been granted to them.

As their relationship with God deepens, that relationship is the portal to a deeper holiness that cannot be found outside of God himself. However, Heschel went on to describe how the Sabbath imparts a refreshing of the soul and added holiness to Israel (1951: 87). Creation itself does not make anything holy just as observing a ritual does not add to one's piety. Sabbath observance itself does not guarantee that one will experience deeper holiness. Heschel stated that one's identity depends on what the Sabbath is to them (1951: 89). The Sabbath is one of many avenues to experience the presence of God.⁴ One's identity ultimately does not depend on how consistently the Sabbath is observed. Identities as people, the *who* or *what we are*, are found in Christ Himself. The Sabbath is one way in which people discover that identity. The One who declared himself Lord of the Sabbath is the One who reveals himself *through* observance of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a means to an end, not the goal itself. Christians express their devotion through worship to the God who created the Sabbath.

Additionally, Christian scholars have addressed the Sabbath and provide additional viewpoints. Two leading scholars have produced works that contribute to an understanding of the Sabbath: Walter Brueggemann and Marva Dawn. In his work *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, Brueggemann argued the Sabbath is an alternative for the Christian against current culture, similar to the Israelites in Egypt (2014: xiv). Like Heschel, Brueggemann argued the need to resist the material world⁵, but Brueggemann argued from a different perspective. He examined the Exodus story and claimed the Egyptian culture was one of endless commodity and production demanded by its gods. Because of this, the Sabbath was a way of remembering the First Commandment by resting from their own economic system once they left Egypt (Brueggemann 2014: 2). As the gods of Egypt demanded more goods to be produced, particularly bricks in the case of the Israelites, rest was something not granted to the Israelite slaves. The Sabbath was given as a reminder that the Lord was different from the gods of Egypt and valued people more than production. If God took time to cease from His work on the seventh day of creation, then His people should do so as well. Brueggemann argued:

Such faithful practice of work stoppage is an act of resistance. It declares in bodily ways that we will not participate in the anxiety system that pervades our social environment. We will not be defined by busyness and

by acquisitiveness and by pursuit of more, in either our economics or our personal relations or anywhere in our lives. Because our life does not consist in commodity. (2014: 31-32)

According to Brueggemann, the people of God are not identified by their surrounding culture which can be filled with the anxiety that comes from never having enough commodities. God's people should stand in contrast to it, and that is the goal of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a time to temporarily exit the culture's anxious production system and resist participating in it. Brueggemann further argued this anxious system coerces others to perform better in order to increase their worth (2014: 40). Because of this, the Sabbath is also a resistance against coercion. While Brueggemann limited the scope of his work to a socioeconomic perspective, it is a work that augments Heschel's argument to focus on time instead of space.

In her work *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva Dawn argued the Sabbath is a form of ceasing. However, she approached the Sabbath as way of allowing God to take care of His people "...not by becoming passive or lazy, but in the freedom of giving up our feeble attempts to be God in our own lives." (Dawn 1989: 4) This Sabbath ceasing entails not just stopping all work but, as Brueggemann also argued, ceasing possessiveness, anxiety, and enculturation. While the Sabbath is a form of ceasing, it is also a form of embracing the purposes of God and the Christian lifestyle (Dawn 1989: 101). Ceasing and embracing are mutually dependent. It is when one ceases, in a positive way, to acquiesce to the social culture that one can embrace the culture of God. In this embrace, Dawn argues, one finds rest not just for the spirit and body as Heschel says, but also finds rest for the intellect and emotions (1989: 53). In order to become fully at rest and experience the Jewish concept of shalom⁶, one should be at rest spiritually, physically, and mentally (Dawn 1989: 137). As Dawn further reasons in her companion piece *The Sense of the Call*, ceasing, embracing, and rest allow Christians to celebrate the Sabbath with an eschatological joy grounded in the work of Christ. Because of Jesus's redemptive work on the cross, death and sorrow are not permanent. The Sabbath is a feast, or celebration, that is a reminder of the joys to come for those who follow Christ.

Defining The Sabbath for the Christian Minister

According to Marva Dawn, the question of Sabbath observance is one that faces Christian ministers with little theological guidance (2006: 34). Since church services are conducted on the traditional Christian Sabbath day, ministers find themselves in a dual atmosphere of both work and worship. Ministers are responsible for all planning and execution of the service itself.⁷ It takes “work” to lead others in a church service. This raises the following question: what does a minister do for a Sabbath observance if they work to help others observe their own? Is a worship service in which the minister is working considered a Sabbath? If not, how does the minister move forward? The biblical text argues the need of rest from work as God instituted the Sabbath in the Fourth Commandment and Jesus called his own disciples away for a time of rest in the New Testament.⁸ However, little is known about how ministers practice their own forms of Sabbath observance.⁹ In order to discover how ministers are practicing the Sabbath, the Sabbath must first be defined.

When defining the Sabbath for North American culture, it should begin with the concept of time. While North American culture views time as a measuring device, Heschel's views on time are a contrast (1951: 96). The Sabbath is not about a specific ritual but the reclamation of something that has been lost to humankind: holiness in the world. The redemption¹⁰ of the realm of time begins with the consecration of time. When something is consecrated, it is set apart. The Sabbath begins when time is intentionally set aside to break away from the rhythms of the other six days of the week and, like Brueggemann and Dawn have argued, resist the culture of busyness. It is a time to depart the ordinary and reorient towards the Holy One. Heschel viewed Sabbath observance in this way:

We must conquer space in order to sanctify time. All week long we are called upon to sanctify life through employing things of space. On the Sabbath it is given us to share in the holiness that is in the heart of time. Even when the soul is seared, even when no prayer can come out of our tightened throats, the clean, silent rest of the Sabbath leads us to a realm of endless peace, or to the beginning of an awareness of what eternity means. There are few ideas in the world of thought which contain so much spiritual power as the idea of the Sabbath. (1951: 101)

As Heschel argued here, a proper Sabbath observance involves silence and rest. Heschel directed the reader to the possible outcomes: peace and a greater awareness of spiritual matters. Though literal silence and rest can be part of an observance, he posed there should be a move away from the material realm of space, silence the busyness and necessities of the other six days, and enter into a holy rest that awaits on that day (Heschel 1951: 22-23). When one's perspective is shifted away from the minutiae and demands of the other six days, then the soul can be open to the rest received from the hand of God. As God himself rested on the seventh day, so must humankind take a period of rest.

Traditional Sabbath observance in the Jewish faith has been a 24-hour period beginning at sundown on Friday and ending at sundown on Saturday with an emphasis on worship (Dawn 1989: 10). The Christian faith is similar with the worship service being a key part of Sabbath observance, but has been more fluid than Judaism with no standard observance schedule. Depending on the denomination and culture, worship services can take place on Saturday morning and evening, Sunday morning and evening, and other times. With more businesses requiring nontraditional work schedules, it is becoming difficult for Christians to attend church at all, much less observe a 24-hour Sabbath. Christians would do well to follow what they see in Genesis 2:2-3: the Sabbath should be observed as a consecrated 24-hour period. This means if it is not possible to have a full Sabbath on Sundays, then one should choose another time when the entire day can be set aside to be free from the rigors of work and schedules of the other six days. It should be a day in which the observer can change their atmosphere. As Heschel wrote, "The seventh day is like a palace in time with a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere. It is not a different state of consciousness but a different climate; it is as if the appearance of all things somehow changed." (1951: 21) This can be a challenging aspect of Sabbath observance. Because time is in short order, priorities and boundaries should be made around what one considers the most important for them. This is where it is essential for someone to recognize and understand what activities and practices benefit them the most. When these practices are utilized in a consecrated 24-hour day, then one can observe a true Sabbath.

Two major studies have been conducted to examine ministers and their own Sabbath activities. A team of researchers from Duke University, headed by Holly Hough, published a study entitled *Relationships between*

Sabbath Observance and Mental, Physical, and Spiritual Health in Clergy in issue 68 of the journal *Pastoral Psychology*. This study examined the relationship between Sabbath observance and other forms of rest to mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. The team focused on United Methodist clergy who were appointed to a lead pastor or staff position in the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Conferences. Overall, 1,316 clergy (both elders and deacons) responded. For their data, the team used a quantitative survey conducted by the Duke Clergy Health Initiative. The multi-year survey began in 2008, and the team used data from 2014 due to the evolving nature of the survey. In the survey itself, one question was directly related to Sabbath observance. Fourteen other areas related to physical, mental, and spiritual health were measured also. The team took away five major results of interest: 1.) Sabbath-keeping did not have a significant effect on mental health and physical health when other factors such as amount of sleep, vacation-taking, etc. were included. 2.) Sabbath-keeping was strongly related to better spiritual health and overall quality of life. 3.) 74.9% of clergy kept the Sabbath at least once a month. 4.) Bivocational clergy were less likely to practice the Sabbath due to work commitments outside the church. 5.) Caucasian clergy were less likely than African American clergy to observe the Sabbath. Although not without its flaws, this study broke new ground in this field.¹¹

A second study entitled *The Practice and Experience of the Sabbath among Seventh-day Adventist Pastors*, published in volume 62 of *Pastoral Psychology*, looked at Seventh-Day Adventist ministers. After demonstrating a need for addressing the lack of Sabbath observance by quoting several major mental health studies, Erik Carter conducted a phenomenological study of Seventh-day Adventist ministers in the Kentucky-Tennessee Conference. All participants understood the Sabbath to be a literal 24-hour period going from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. They worked to have personal and professional responsibilities completed by Friday evening and going to bed early to properly prepare for church responsibilities the next day. Saturday mornings were filled with church activities. Saturday afternoons were divided with some still engaging in church responsibilities and some resting at home. Saturday evenings were similarly spent with no uniform practices. Sabbath among all ministers was seen as primarily physical rest with getting as much sleep as possible, a time to enter into God's presence, and a time to reconnect with family. Sabbath for these ministers was found to be a paradox of rest and stress, and it became apparent the ministers

had difficulty with boundaries. Carter ended the study by suggesting that taking cues from one's family and vocational identity is helpful in drawing boundaries to observe a Sabbath. Additionally, the Sabbath must also be seen as setting a date with God as a day to look forward to, prepare for, and protect.

These two studies in tandem with scholars such as Heschel, Brueggemann, and Dawn lead to an unorthodox conclusion: proper Sabbath observance for clergy should take place outside the boundaries of a worship service and involve activities that bring both spiritual and physical refreshing for optimal health. Deuteronomy 6:5 says that people are multifaceted beings when they are told to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and might, or spirit, mind, and body. When any of these three is out of alignment, then they are out of alignment as people. The Sabbath is a time to minister to all three areas. Heschel proposed, "...the Sabbath is not dedicated exclusively to spiritual goals. It is a day of the soul as well as of the body; comfort and pleasure are an integral part of the Sabbath observance. Man in his entirety, all his faculties must share its blessings." (1951: 19) It is an opportunity to recognize both the here and now and the eternal. It is a chance to reject the systems of the world and embrace the systems of God. It is a redemption of the realm of time in which people live and a looking forward to the realm of eternity found in the presence of the Lord.

Conclusion

As the demands and pressures of life increase, they lead to a renewed evaluation of one's time and health. Clergy are no different in this regard. An unspoken expectation can exist within the church for clergy and volunteer church staff to meet every need and fulfill every obligation possible. Ministers can feel the need to conquer the world of space at the expense of neglecting the world of time. In other words, to-do lists can begin to outweigh spiritual needs. Work was never meant to occupy someone's thoughts every day. As seen in the creation story in Genesis 2, God worked through six days and rested on the seventh. He declared all his work good, and yet the day he rested was declared holy. The day of rest was consecrated and set apart as a special day unlike the others. This holy Sabbath day of rest is an opportunity for ministers to connect with God and form a closer bond with others. Ministers should follow this Biblical pattern and return to the consecrated day of rest for their own benefit, their

family's benefit, and the benefit of their community. While little research has been done on how ministers observe the Sabbath¹², ministers can use the insights of Abraham Heschel's *The Sabbath* along with works by other writers such as Walter Brueggemann and Marva Dawn to help form their own Sabbath observance. They could benefit by practicing a regular 24-hour period of rest and refreshment outside of the weekly worship service or services. This Sabbath should break their regular routines and focus on activities that provide spiritual, physical, and mental refreshing. Families and congregations both benefit from a minister who is intentional in ensuring Sabbath observation, and proper Sabbath observance will help ensure the vitality of loved ones and the church. Communities need healthy ministers in order to hear the Gospel and be disciplined. The minister will find the shalom that Jesus Christ offers through observing the Sabbath.

End notes

¹ Heschel experienced these terrors firsthand as he was arrested by the Gestapo in 1938 and had family murdered by the Nazis. He was deported to Poland and fled to London six weeks before the Germans invaded in 1939.

² In some ways, prophetic thinking points towards the holiness of time as well. Heschel observes the preference of "The Day of the Lord" over "The House of the Lord" in the prophetic writings.

³ The Christian Bible recognizes the canonicity of the Hebrew Bible and renames it *Old Testament*. Additionally, Jesus and his early disciples were all ethnically and religiously Jewish.

⁴ However, it is an avenue that has seen its share of neglect, particularly from Christian clergy.

⁵ Although Brueggemann's argument is similar to Heschel's when dealing with the material world, Brueggemann says little about the realm of time and the consecration of people and moments. His work is primarily focused on socioeconomic matters. This view ignores the full message of the Kingdom of God which not only includes social and economic matters but also looks at spiritual issues.

⁶ Shalom is the Jewish concept of wholeness. While the Hebrew is typically translated as "peace", the word encompasses body, mind, and spirit. When all of these areas are right with God and in alignment with each other, then shalom is experienced.

⁷ Ministers do not receive the chance to be an average church attendee unless they have taken a vacation day or entrusted the worship service to someone else for planning and execution on special occasions.

⁸ Exodus 16:23 and Mark 6:31 respectively.

⁹ In my own research, I have found little in the ways of Sabbath observance research. Two studies are presented here, but these are the only two studies I have found that survey ministers in regards to their own Sabbath observance.

¹⁰ The redemption of time is the process of seeing the world return to its state prior to the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:1-24.

¹¹ In the initial survey, the term “The Sabbath” was not defined. Using a survey in which an important variable is not defined is a critical mistake. It is important to know *how* ministers observe the Sabbath, not just if they do or do not. The Sabbath can be different things to different people, and what we call a Sabbath sometimes may not be a Sabbath in terms of how others describe it. The question was simply “How often do you observe a Sabbath?” with three possible answers being none, 1 to 2 weeks a month, or 3 to 4 weeks a month.

¹² Future research in this area is needed in order to help denominational officials understand their clergy’s overall health. The research can also help officials formulate policies and protocols for active ministers in order to maintain good health.

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