

Keeping Sabbath

BY STEPHEN BRACHLOW

Two contemporary classics invite us to take up creative ways of observing the grace-endowed sabbath rhythm of working and resting. As we read these books with an open heart and at a leisurely pace, we touch something of the same sabbath experience that they invite us to enjoy as a way of life.

Two short books are contemporary classics on sabbath keeping. In their unique ways, Marva J. Dawn's *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989; 217 pp., \$15.00 paperback) and Tilden Edwards' *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1992; 148 pp., \$12.00 paperback) are theologically engaging and chock full of practical wisdom about creative ways to observe the sabbath rhythm of working and resting. They share the assumption that the full depth and richness of a sabbath-oriented way of life can only be understood through firsthand experience. That assumption, perhaps, is their greatest strength.

Neither Dawn nor Edwards write primarily *about* the sabbath, rather they make a plea for its practice. Their personal experiences with sabbath keeping are captivating and compelling. For someone like me, who believes in sabbath but never has found room within my "busy life" for consistent sabbath practice, these books are disturbing, challenging, and, in their disarming way, inviting. They kindled within me a flame of discontent about my driven, often anxious life that so obviously mirrors the high-speed, stressed-out, acquisitive culture in which we live. I also felt a deep longing for the authentically sacred time they describe so well, a time filled with much needed, holy leisure that attends to and tends the life of the soul.

Deep within our hearts we long for authentic peace and intimacy with God and others. We hear the Spirit call us to release our compulsive, self-preserving use of time, and to embrace instead the grace-endowed sabbath rest. These books reveal that inner tug at our hearts to stop ceaseless striving and to seek God's presence with prayerful, open, and receptive hearts nourished by sabbath practice.

Marva Dawn's *Keeping Sabbath Wholly* reflects her own long-standing sabbath keeping, as well as her thoughtful exploration of the theme in Jewish and Christian tradition. Clearly, from the many personal examples filling her book, she finds the sabbath day to be a steadying anchor amidst the demanding weekly schedule that she keeps as a prolific author, social activist, and popular speaker.

Her book, neatly divided into four sections containing seven brief chapters each, is highly adaptable for study groups. Each section refines her understanding of what it means to keep the sabbath *wholly* (fully, entirely) and *holy* (set apart, blessed). The first section, entitled "Ceasing," invites us to do what the Hebrew verb "*Shabbat*" literally means, "to cease and desist." In its basic meaning, the sabbath teaching is to stop the endless striving that characterizes so much of everyday life. Sabbath is about putting the tools away, shutting the office computer and FAX machine off, and letting go of our many projects for self-improvement—in short, setting aside all those things we do for productive purposes.

Sabbath is more about *being* than about *doing*. We are summoned to "be still, and know that [the LORD] is God" (Psalm 46:10), loosen our grip on the constant need to accomplish, and let our life rest in the One "in whom we live and move and have our being." A sabbath day makes room in our lives for God to be about the re-creative work of redemptive grace. It enables us, in other words, to stop "trying to be God" by our endless efforts to determine our own future (pp. 28-35). Honoring the sabbath helps us acknowledge the One in whom our future ultimately lies, a future which is not dependent on our accomplishments, but on God's unconditional love in Christ, who accepts us simply as we are.

Creating this receptive sabbath space requires preparation. For Dawn it means, for example, cooking a large pot of stew and setting the dinner table with care and attention to beauty on Saturday, all to be enjoyed in an unhurried, carefree Sunday meal with friends and family.

In the second section, "Rest," she explores our need for intellectual, spiritual, physical, emotional, and social rest. We are truly at rest only when we appreciate the sheer joy of being and the wonder of creation. So, the lethargy of exhaustion or the boredom of indolence is not sabbath rest, which always goes beyond mere ceasing productive activity, though it may include the luxury of an afternoon nap! We enter sabbath rest when we take a long walk with a friend, splash playfully about the pool with the

kids, or enjoy other unproductive, leisurely activities through which we celebrate the mystery of life.

This emphasis on joyful activity is all of a piece with her final two themes, “Embracing” and “Feasting.” Those who do not “embrace” (or purposively seek) sabbath, probably will not observe it. The social compulsion to be efficient and productive with our time is simply too great. So we need to be intentional about living the sabbath day with a light touch and in the unforced ways of grace, which, for Dawn, include our offering gifts of human intimacy and compassionate care to the sick and poor.

Dawn’s vision of sabbath is, above all, celebratory. She invites us to feast on the eternal, to join in the festivity of “a weekly eschatological party” (p. 151). Sabbath keeping is neither a private affair nor merely for personal spiritual refreshment. It is ultimately about love. Consequently, authentic sabbath practice does not remove us from the world; rather, “it plunges us more deeply into the world and its needs because it carries us more deeply into the heart of and purposes of God” (p. 146).

Tilden Edwards explores many of the same themes in *Sabbath Time*, but with a discernable difference in tone, though not substance, from Dawn’s treatment of them. Whereas Dawn, without sacrificing theological content, tends toward the effusive

exuberance of a motivational speaker in her enthusiasm for sabbath keeping, Edwards follows a softer, more contemplative path. His much slimmer volume requires slower, more thoughtful reading, especially in its opening chapters which treat (1) the need for sabbath time in the modern cultural climate of efficiency, (2) the historical roots of sabbath keeping within the Judeo-Christian tradition, and (3) the quali-

tatively different kind of time that we acknowledge in observing sabbath.

This difference in tone between Dawn and Edwards is most evident in how they motivate us to observe sabbath. Dawn exudes a passionate, evangelical fervor that Edwards, who is every bit as serious about the importance of the subject, does not share. She urges us to embrace sabbath keeping “with gusto,” and “to choose” to observe sabbath with “extra

Sabbath keeping is neither a private affair nor merely for personal spiritual refreshment. It is ultimately about love. Consequently, authentic sabbath practice does not remove us from the world; rather, “it plunges us more deeply into the world and its needs because it carries us more deeply into the heart of and purposes of God.”

intentionality and tenacity" (p. 100). Edwards, by contrast, invites us not to great effort, but to listen prayerfully for a deep-seated longing, which itself will be a gift of the Spirit, to observe sabbath. His underlying theology is, in this way, explicitly grace-centered. Despite the personal and cultural resistance to sabbath keeping we all face, he believes that when we "put ourselves ... in the quality of presence called Sabbath," the exper-

Keeping sabbath is a third alternative to the cultural rhythms of driven work and escapist entertainment. By grounding our true identity in the love of God, sabbath experience liberates us from the compulsive, ego-driven need to create our identity through our work in the world. Our work, then, can arise out of this affirmation as a grateful response to God's redemptive love.

ience carries "its own teaching power" (pp. 46, 62). Sabbath keeping is, for Edwards, free of all compulsion; it relies entirely on the unconditional love of God.

Edwards describes the rhythm of keeping sabbath as a third alternative to the cultural rhythms of driven work and escapist entertainment. Sabbath engenders an integrated, active life, which is possible because it affirms the value of "life-in-itself," independent of "achieved status" (p. 13). Sabbath rest allows

us time to attend to the voice of the Spirit within, a voice that affirms we are beloved as we are, not for what we do. In this way, sabbath keeping is formative for the way we do our work. By grounding our true identity in the unconditional gift of the One who dwells within and through Christ, sabbath experience liberates us from the compulsive, ego-driven need to create our identity through our work in the world. Our work, then, can arise out of this affirmation as a grateful response to God's redemptive love.

These two fine books are brimming with practical advice about ways to observe sabbath today. Along with numerous personal anecdotes throughout her text, Dawn offers a trim appendix on rituals to begin and end the sabbath day (pp. 212-213). Edwards offers a more detailed description of possible sabbath practices in four of his concluding chapters (pp. 98-139).

Both model their sabbath proposals on Jewish tradition, the root of all Christian sabbath customs. Their Christian sabbath day begins on Saturday evening with a version of the Jewish Kiddush ceremony, which may include the lighting of candles, prayers of thanksgiving for God's creation, blessing of children, and a special meal. It concludes at dusk on Sunday

with a brief ceremony of farewell to the sabbath, called “Havdalah” in Hebrew, in which they thank God for the gifts of the day and express their longing for the next sabbath and, in Christian hope, for the day when Christ ushers us into God’s eternal sabbath rest.

These ceremonies consecrate one entire day with a special quality of time, a time during which we honor the One in whose image we are made, through our rest, play, feasting, and leisurely time given to family, friends, and corporate worship. Since simplicity and freedom are keys to sabbath observance in our day, both authors encourage us to find sabbath practices that are appropriate for our life situations. The sabbath observance of a single adult, as Dawn knows from her experience, assumes a different form than the observance in a family with young children or teenagers, as Edwards discovers in his family life.

Marva Dawn and Tilden Edwards explore the importance of Sabbath as a nourishing spiritual resource. They should be read as much for the practices they seek to inspire, as for the wealth of theological insight and cultural critique they offer. As we take the time to read these books with an open heart and at a leisurely pace, we touch something of the same sabbath experience that they invite us to enjoy as a way of life.



STEPHEN BRACHLOW

is Professor of Spirituality at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, in Richmond, Virginia.