

Let us not be practical!

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Dennis Meier, pastor in Hamburg, Germany (www.adventhaus.de)

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INTRODUCTION

Let us not be practical! You heard me right. 'Make it practical' is the mantra of the day, it seems to me. If there is no how-to handle on it, if it doesn't translate into doing, it can't be true. Church members complain instantly when sermons get too lofty and abstract. Church growth literature reminds us constantly to make things practical.

The Greek word *praxis* denotes action and activity. The subject of this week's Sabbath school lesson however is the Sabbath. And more importantly, the subject of this quarter is the nature of God, glimpses of God being the exact theme. So the assignment is to talk about God by talking about the Sabbath. But the first thing we learn about God in the context of the seventh day was that He chose not to be practical. He chose not to create, not to do. He chose to rest and the Hebrew word *shabbat* is better understood: to cease or stop doing something. So my first thesis is that we cannot intelligently speak about the Sabbath in a practical way. For *praxis* is the description of the six preceding days, not the Sabbath.

What other avenue then is there left for us? After all, we are Adventists. If we don't have non-Adventist Christians with whom to fight about which day should be kept, we like to spend our time with discussions about which activity should or should not take place on a Sabbath day. Ironically most of our dealings when it comes to the Sabbath has to do with *praxis*. That is why I said provocatively: let us not be practical.

Now the opposite of being practical is to be theoretical. And these days theory has gotten a bad taste. To be a theorist is to be someone not apt for life, incredibly boring and utterly unsexy. Nobody considers it a compliment to be labeled theoretical. *Theorein*, the Greek verb behind the word, however, means *to behold, to watch, to observe*. Which, incidentally, is the term employed by some translations like the NIV when rendering the fourth commandment: observe the Sabbath!

So this is what I am going to do with you: to just observe, to behold, to contemplate, for it is a discipline too much neglected.

That said we can turn full heartedly to theology, and that in a literal sense, for *theology* literally taken means talking about God. Which is the subject: talking about God by talking about the Sabbath.

A GENUINE THEOLOGY OF THE SABBATH: GOD'S FREEDOM AND LOVE

Now the quarterly takes as a leading text for this week Jesus' saying that man was not made for the Sabbath but the Sabbath for man. Although I dearly love that text and find myself throwing it into any of the typical Sabbath conversations, I have my issues with the choice of this phrase in this particular context, because once again we are just dealing with ourselves, only indirectly gathering glimpses of God. Let us therefore turn back to the very beginnings, as we turn to the very first mention of the word *shabbat* in the Bible (Gen 2,1f): *1 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. 2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 And God blessed the seventh*

day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

There is no better text to learn about God in the context of the seventh day, for God is the subject of the text.¹ He is the one that is talked about. He is the one completing, finishing, resting, blessing, hallowing.

Swiss theologian Karl Barth has painstakingly exegeted this text in his giant Church Dogmatics (III/1 and also III/4) and all I want to do is to give a summary of what he said about this verse. As far as I know he is the first to actually begin talking about the Sabbath by talking about God. The place in his dogmatics, where Barth lectures about the Sabbath is the doctrine of creation. And I turn to him because his theological thinking exemplifies what it means to observe, namely to diligently, patiently and closely read the biblical text, with sometimes surgical precision.

Two features tower prominently over the narrative of Gen 2,1.2: God's freedom and God's love.

Both are descriptions of God, of His being, His character. First, God's freedom: when the text tells us that God not only creates but also ceases from creating, it may seem dull and self-evident for us. But the gist of that statement contrasts in today's society just as well as in those back then. Just think about all those people you have heard who are uneasy with God being a person. People influenced by some kind of eastern philosophy or esoteric belief. God for them is a description of either love itself or some cosmic energy. In 19th century philosophy and theology it was fashion to speak about God as a world-principle, successively evolving and revealing itself in the course of history and the evolution of society (e.g. Hegel). If that sounds familiar to you, reconsider the phrase that God is someone who can chose to cease. Now energy cannot choose not to flow. Physics tells me that energy has a flowing-compulsion: it will always transform itself into some other form of energy. It will not just stop, it will not cease. By ceasing, Barth says, God limited himself and He revealed that He is someone who not only can do so but He wanted to do so. Only someone who is absolutely free can choose, can be active one day and inactive the next. God is free to do so. Says Barth: *A being is free only when it can determine and limit its activity* (Church Dogmatics III/1, p. 215). God is a God of freedom. Only because He is free, will He be able to free Israel from Egypt (for He knows the difference), only because He is free will Jesus be able to liberate people from bondage, diseases and sin, will He be able to choose the cross for our sake, will the Father be able to determine the moment for His return. That is the first notion: freedom.

The second is the twin-notion that goes along with freedom, namely that God is love. Again this may sound trivial for a Christian, but we needed to learn it in the first place, didn't we? And we need to hear it again and again. And every time we suffer under the apparent absence of God or don't understand His dealings in our lives, we realize that our complaints and lamentations are yet another form of doubting His love.

How does the text in Gen 2,1f talk about God's love when it does not mention it explicitly? Barth says: because God is free, He could stop creating and rested. So He set himself a limit. Why? And here comes the notion of love. I quote again (p. 215f): *Love has a definite, limited object. Love is a relationship which is itself limited and defined by its object.* This may sound philosophical at first but we can only talk about something, anything that is, if we can see its limits, if it has profile. We cannot say I love, without describing the contours of that love (whom, what). So when the text says that God rested, it implies that He is free and that, as Barth says, He rested because He had found the object of His love B the human being (or: creation, to include all

¹cf. Sigve K. Tonstad. *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*. Andrews University Press, Michigan, 2009, p. 38f.

created beings).

TWO COROLLARIES

Barth draws two corollaries from these two notions, the love and the freedom of God.

1. The first is what he calls its general meaning. We learn that God wants to be with this world, with these humans, He wants to live in the order of created time, even though He is the Lord of time. By resting on the seventh day He enters human time. He will not leave the world to its fate. He will be there in all its dealings and wheelings. In a sense He becomes human and worldly, which is a prefiguration of His incarnation. It points us forward. Jürgen Moltmann puts it this way: *He feels the world, he allows himself to be affected, to be touched by each of his creatures.*² We get to know the God of presence, not only of action. We get to know the God of intimacy, not only the one of majesty.
2. The second corollary is what Barth calls the particular meaning of the freedom and love of God exemplified in the seventh day. By particular he means that not only can we derive, distillate so to say, the notions of God's love and freedom from the text, but that His resting, His blessing and hallowing the seventh-day in particular wants to reveal these aspects: ... *the content of this event of the seventh day was the revelation of the true deity, the genuine freedom and love of the Creator* (p. 216).

CONCLUSION

Just take these few thoughts as a teaser for a theology of the Sabbath that wants to teach us the character of God. Sure, the Sabbath is a huge gift to mankind. But in it God has put much there is to learn about the Giver. And we haven't as yet started:

- we haven't talked about the healing God who in Jesus chooses the Sabbath on more than one occasions to display God's character.
- we haven't talked about the God of the prophets who is more interested in restoring broken relationship than in tradition
- we haven't talked about the God of Creation who wants us to sustain this earth
- or the God of equality who wants to tear down walls of racism, sexism and ethnocentrism
- the God of justice who with Sabbath und jubilee regulations put handcuffs on free enterprise and exploitation

Now may you take these few comments as an exercise in contemplation. Contemplation is the opposite of action. It can mean reminiscing, remembering. It can mean being instead of doing and beholding instead of manipulating. It can be discussing with friends and family the notion of who God is and how we experience Him in our lives. Sometimes it can even take on the appearance of wild speculation or just fun and humor. As long as it is not practical.

²Jürgen Moltmann. *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*. London, 1985, p. 279.