Being Productive:
Working from Rest (Part Three)

Previously in this journal (vol 22.4 and 23.1), Peter Heslam introduced and developed the theme of 'Being Productive: Working from Rest'. He made three biblically grounded arguments. First, that instead of treating rest primarily as recovery from work, we should see it as resourcing for work. Second, that instead of regarding rest merely as an earthly necessity, we should also regard it as our ultimate and eternal destiny. Third, instead of perceiving productivity solely as an outcome of work, we should also perceive it as an outcome of rest. In this third and final instalment, he suggests that, although many scholars of religion stress that the Protestant origins of today's global economy lie in Protestantism's 'work ethic', it is important to acknowledge that Protestantism also had a 'rest ethic'. We need to live out such an ethic today, he concludes, at a time when our culture is dangerously work-obsessed but our churches are almost silent about the practical and theological importance of rest.

Prevalent in many academic circles is a romantic view of the Middle Ages, in which the Protestant Reformation is perceived as a misguided iconoclasm aimed at destroying some of the best things in human society and culture, including the arts. It was, as some sociologists have put it, a 'desacralisation' or 'disenchantment' of the sacred. In stressing predestination and individual piety, believers needed to compensate for their consequent uncertainty about their salvation. They did so by creating and accumulating wealth, as wealth was seen as a sign of God's election and favour. The resulting 'protestant work ethic', argued the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), gave rise to capitalism and ultimately to materialism.

This narrative, sometimes called the 'secularisation thesis', cannot be analysed here. But the stress in the work of Protestant theologians on the importance of the 'sabbath' suggests a more nuanced view is needed. The case could even be made that Protestantism has (or had) a 'rest ethic' at least as central as its purported 'work ethic'.

Take, for instance, the leading Protestant theologian and church reformer John Calvin (1509-64). It is true that he placed great value and dignity on human work. But he does the same for rest. This is reflected in the extensive attention he gives to the sabbath in his commentaries and sermons, and in his monumental doctrinal work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In fact, in this book he does something surprising for a chief architect of the work ethic: he downplays the command to work in his treatment of the fourth commandment. This commandment reads:

> *Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.*
> (Ex 20:8-10a; Deut 5:12-14a).

Whereas Calvin treats resting on the seventh day here as a command, he treats the six days of labour as a 'given'. Put grammatically, he takes the verbs in the first sentence of this command as *imperative*, whereas he takes those in the second sentence (without support from the original Hebrew) as merely *indicative*.[1]

Three and half centuries later, another Protestant thinker - the Dutch neo-Calvinist social philosopher and statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) - also championed the value and dignity of human work. But like Calvin, he dedicates much attention to the sabbath. One example in is his extensive commentary on the treatment given to the fourth commandment in the compendium of Protestant theology known as the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563.[2]

As already noted, Protestantism is often held responsible for the desacralisation or dis-enchantment of the sacred. But Calvin and Kuyper, as leading representatives of this tradition, can be regarded as providing a sacralisation or enchantment of the secular.

Their teaching on the sabbath reflects, in fact, their attempt to dismantle the sacred/secular divide. The sabbath was not, in Kuyper's words, about 'a spiritual life on one day in the church, and then a spiritless life for six days in the world'.[3] Both for Kuyper and for Calvin, the sabbath was an opportunity

Christ healing an infirm woman on the Sabbath
James Tissot, 1886-1896
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for people to be spiritually re-equipped to re-enter the life in the world as transformative agents.

It may never be widely accepted amongst scholars that the significance of the sabbath in the teaching of Reformed theologians amounts to a Protestant 'rest ethic' that complements its 'work ethic'. But the recovery of a biblical theology of rest is a matter of urgency. For it can help address some of the pathologies associated with today's long-hours culture, such as job dissatisfaction, work-related stress, alienation, workaholism, and burnout.

It does not help that, despite the seriousness of this situation, very little attention is given to the sabbath - or even to the general theme of rest - in today's churches.[4] Some of this is likely to be linked to the fact that the Ten Commandments, so central to Christian liturgy, theology and ethics for centuries, are rarely given any sustained focus. It is also likely that overly strict and prohibitive observance of the sabbath in some circles in the past means that the sabbath is associated with legalism, dullness and boredom.

But this should not be regarded as inevitable, especially as it is in direct contrast to the celebratory associations that the sabbath has in the Hebrew Bible. It is a day of refreshment (Exodus 23.12) and of delight (Isaiah 58.13), and there is even a 'Song for the Sabbath Day' (Psalm 92). It is a day not of drudgery but of deliverance – a deliverance so radical and comprehensive that the sabbath applies to slaves, animals, children and immigrants (Ex 20.10, Deut 5.14), and can even function as a symbol of so mighty a deliverance as the Exodus (Deut 5.15).[5]

All this is reflected in Jesus' healings on the sabbath, most especially his healing of a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. When challenged by the synagogue ruler, who is indignant about Jesus healing on the sabbath, Jesus speaks the language of deliverance: 'Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' (Lk 13.16). The immediate response of the crowd on that sabbath day reflects the exuberant celebration of freedom with which the sabbath was associated: 'The entire crowd was rejoicing at [or *were delighted with*] all the wonderful things that he was doing' (Lk 13.17).

Refreshment, delight, freedom, healing, deliverance, exuberance, singing and rejoicing. What is there not to like about the sabbath, properly understood? No wonder Jesus said that the sabbath was made for humans. It is a precious gift from God. That gift, freely available in this life, can deliver us from our oppressive culture of overwork. And it is reserved for us as our eternal treasure in the life to come.

1. John Calvin, *Institutes* (1539), II.8.28-34.
2. Published in *Abraham Kuyper on Business and Economics*, edited by Peter S Heslam (Lexham, 2021), pp. 82-122. Some of Kuyper's reflections on the sabbath are published in his *Honey from the Rock* (Lexham, 2018).
3. *On Business and Economics*, p. 100.
4. This is partly why Faith in Business has focused on 'working from rest' during 2023-24. See its website (faithinbusiness.org) and recent editions of *Faith in Business Quarterly* for some of the associated outputs.
5. See Peter Heslam's God on Monday reflection 'Liberating Rest' (https://www.faithinbusiness.org/Articles/689995/Liberating_Rest.aspx).

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