

Review-article – Richard Higginson

Sabbath as Resilience: Spiritual Refreshment for a Stressed-Out World

By Kenneth J. Barnes & C. Sara Lawrence Minard (eds.)

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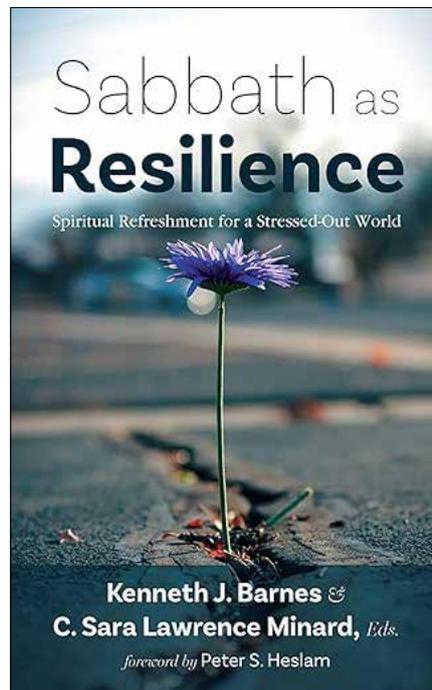
Richard Higginson finds much to commend in this book of essays about the Sabbath, fruit of a year's collaboration between the Mockler Center and Faith in Business. But he also develops some lines of Sabbath thinking that the authors leave untouched.

Regular readers of this journal will recall that the Faith in Business theme for 2023–4 was the Sabbath. Peter Heslam wrote three articles entitled 'Being Productive: Working from Rest', and Faith in Business teamed up with the Mockler Center for Faith and Ethics at Gordon–Conwell Theological Seminary. Kenneth J. Barnes, the Director of the Center, and C. Sara Lawrence Minard, the Associate Director, spoke at the 2024 Faith in Business Retreat, and both contributed articles to FiBQ.¹

It is greatly to be welcomed, therefore, that this year of thoughtful and creative activity has resulted in the publication of a book, *Sabbath as Resilience*, which is edited by Kenneth (as a friend I will call him Ken from now on!) and Sara. This provides an excellent summary of the 2023–4 proceedings, which included several monthly webinars², in an easily accessible form. It contains many well-expressed insights which we do well to heed, and I hope that readers of FiBQ will buy it.

That said, I find that my own thinking on the Sabbath diverges from the authors' insights in some respects, so this piece is more of a review-article than a straightforward review. I see it as a strength of the book that it stimulated me to develop these thoughts, and I am duly grateful.

The book begins with a preface by Peter Heslam which overlaps with much of the material found in his FiBQ articles.³ Drawing on the work of Abraham Kuyper, Peter presents the Sabbath as a key aspect of public theology with



universal social significance. He puts forward six 'contrarian'⁴ arguments about the Sabbath, namely:

- The Sabbath is not essentially a religious ordinance but grounded in creation
- Instead of regarding rest primarily as recovery *from* work it should be seen as resourcing *for* work

- Rest is the ultimate destiny of humanity (see Hebrews 4)
- Rest increases productivity or fruitfulness
- There is a strong Protestant rest ethic complementing the Protestant work ethics (as illustrated in Calvin and Kuyper)
- The Sabbath is or should be associated with freedom and joy (as in the Luke 13 story of Jesus releasing a crippled woman from her 18-year-old infirmity, which delighted the onlooking people).

Peter's preface certainly whets the appetite for what follows.

Ken Barnes then contributes three chapters of which the main one, 'The Yoke of Mammon', bears close similarity to his FiBQ article. The spur for Gordon–Conwell's focus on the Sabbath theme was a conference of Christian leaders from the church, the academy and the marketplace in 2019. This revealed a very high level of workplace and economic stress in the USA. Ken sums up the stress factors as: embedded systems exhibiting a strong resistance to change; the lack of control felt by workers; toxic corporate cultures; loneliness and isolation. He writes 'Among the concerns most commonly expressed by the conference delegates was a general feeling that



Stress in the workplace

Photo: workitdaily.com

God had not only been eliminated from economic discourse but from economic consciousness' (p.14). Christians, he reported, often feel isolated in the workplace, not least because of their beliefs and affiliations: 'It is a very brave person indeed who risks their livelihood to inform corporate culture along religiously inspired lines' (p.22). This is a very striking statement, and left me wondering why that appears – arguably – to be more the case in the US than the UK, despite the proportion of publicly professing American Christians being higher.

The outcome of stress in the workplace is that workers find it very difficult to 'switch off' and rest from their work. This is exacerbated by modern technology like the laptop and the smartphone which means that work invades our private spaces. In doing so, Ken and Sara argue, it crowds out our sacred spaces.

Five Key Themes

In chapter Four, titled 'Sabbath as Resilience', Sara joins Ken in mapping out the terrain for the remainder of the book. Sabbath as Resilience involves drawing on its power to effect **reprioritization, resistance, reimagination, renewal and redemption**. Ken and Sara sketch out what each of these might mean, and the five themes are then developed in greater depth by various scholars who

are either professors or visiting fellows at Gordon-Conwell Seminary.

Before giving an account of this next section, I would like to make an observation concerning the underlying analysis and choice of the 're' words. The description of the US work scene is overwhelmingly negative, and the five 're' words all denote an attempt to supply something that is missing or make good something that is seriously awry in people's workplace experience. But is this really the whole story? I feel that the authors have neglected a key element in the Genesis account of creation. What did God do at the end of his six days of work in creation? He looked upon the world that he had made and saw that it was 'very good' (Gen. 1:31). *His sabbath rest began by taking satisfaction in a world well made. Why don't we take a leaf out of the creator's book?*

True, the work we do will always have its frustrations; it will involve botched jobs, stuff that we regret and work impaired by our fallen corporate cultures. But it will also include fine pieces of workmanship, projects that have gone well, and teams working constructively together. It's important to take pleasure in these, to find quiet satisfaction, and to thank God for what has been achieved. The Sabbath is the ideal time to look back over the last week and do precisely that. Sadly,

there is a great temptation to rush on to the next job too quickly. Successes should be savoured and celebrated. So I suggest that this book would have been stronger if it had recognised that, and included the positive word **Review** among the blessed and divinely inspired activities that the Sabbath might include.⁵

Time as Money

Returning to the five 'Re' words on which the book does focus, I felt that the most interesting and helpful chapter was 'Sabbath as Resistance', by Larry O. Natt Gantt, who is a Professor of Law. He begins with the aphorism 'Time is money', first coined by Benjamin Franklin in the 18th century but the epitome of how 21st century Western culture views time. Time 'is commoditized – intended for productivity, efficiency, maximization' (p.79). This is especially true of Gantt's own profession, the law, where the dominant fee structure is the billable hour which lawyers charge for their time, usually in six-minute increments. Gantt thinks that monetised time contributes to the stress affecting lawyers' psychological well-being. One might well add that it contributes to the stress felt by their clients as well!

When you stop to think about it, paying lawyers by the hour is quite odd. Surely the crucial matter is



'Wait on the Lord'

Photo: gccgilbert.org

how well the job is done rather than how long it takes? The billable hour also seems to imply that all the work lawyers do is equally valuable, whereas some of the work is surely more momentous than others. In a perceptive biblical survey, Gantt points to the fact that God regards some time as special. There are key moments (unique *kairos*⁶ moments) when God acts decisively in the story of salvation. There are festivals and special days. There are times of 'waiting' on the Lord (a frequent refrain in the Psalms) which might appear unproductive, but are actually crucial to our well-being. Keeping the Sabbath helps us to build waiting into a regular discipline, to recognise *kairos* moments and to give thanks for them.

Sara Minard's chapter on 'Sabbath as Renewal' is helpful for highlighting the important of the Sabbath in providing opportunity to renew our relationships. Making the strong statement that 'We are *relationally bankrupt*' (p.117), she writes that 'Sabbath economics requires us to recognize, whether we are farmers, fishers, financiers, teachers, politicians, or scientists, that we are all asset managers, responsible for managing the assets available to each of us, including our mental and

physical health, and seeing the natural world as more than an extractive resource' (p.127). This is well said, and Sara clearly has in mind attention to our economic relationships as well as the family and friends with whom we are most likely to spend the Sabbath. But I wondered if there could have been specific mention here of the specific stakeholder relationships which dominate the world of work: employees, customers, suppliers, investors and local communities. Could the place of *reimagination* (the topic of the previous chapter by Kara Martin, another FiBQ author) involve thinking about how all those key relationships might be improved and renewed?

The Meaning of Redemption

The chapter I found most problematic was that by Jeffrey Hanson on 'Sabbath as Redemption'. Here the author draws on the thinking of the secular Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt. Arendt distinguished between labour, work, and action, believing that labour redeems work and action further redeems work. Hanson adopts this schema but adds to it a tripartite distinction of his own. So he believes that leisure redeems play and rest redeems leisure; and that at the same

time play redeems labour, leisure redeems work and rest redeems action (with the Sabbath playing a part in this). The schema is a clever one and produces some fascinating insights, while not to my mind being wholly convincing. However, my main criticism is that Hanson is working on an impoverished view of redemption, which is insufficiently biblical.

In Hanson's thinking, to redeem means to repair or to make good what is lacking. In the Bible it is much more highly charged than that. It is also much more financial. Redemption is to do with buying back; it involves cost and expense; it is highly sacrificial. Redemption entails sacrificial cost in order to change a situation for the better, the supreme example of this being Jesus's death on the cross for the salvation of the world. A different way to explore Sabbath as Redemption would have been to consider the self-sacrifice – what can feel like difficult restraint – that is part of a disciplined practice of the Sabbath. Our instinct may be not to stop, in order to get more work done – whether that is our paid work or household chores. Yet we know that periods of rest are necessary if we are to be truly productive. It is through a disciplined practice



Playing Padel

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of the Sabbath that we can ‘walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil’ (Ephesians 5:15-16 KJV).

The Modern Context

Sabbath as Resilience ends with a helpful chapter co-authored by Ken Barnes with James F. Longhurst, a pastor. James shows how he discovered the importance of the Sabbath for himself, and how he engaged with various working members of his congregation in helping them to get a better balance of activity and rest. However, an unexplored area which has come home to me in recent years is how the Sabbath applies to those of us who are retired. My life now consists of a mixture of work (meaning what is hopefully useful activity, like editing

this journal), family (offering plenty of support in a grandparent role), church (occasional preaching and leading of worship, some on weekdays) and leisure (eg playing padel and watching Bristol City). Such a congenial lifestyle is one enjoyed not only by the retired but many who have adopted the portfolio lifestyle that I have written about in my article on Charles Handy.⁷

However, one possible drawback is that each day is very much like every other day, in that most contain a combination of these different elements. It is certainly a far cry from the situation of the ancient Hebrews to whom God gave the fourth commandment, where they did six days of hard labour and were very much in need of the day of rest that the Sabbath provided. For me and others in a similar situation, the

need for rest is reduced, and the days less clearly differentiated. For those of us who have a keen interest in sport, the distractions are aggravated by the fact that major sporting events now take place on Sunday as much as any other day, and the smartphone gives us instant information about the scoring of each goal or the fall of the latest wicket. In order for Sabbath to be meaningful and restorative, I need to construct various boundaries. One is not looking at my emails for 24 hours.

What this illustrates is that the Sabbath is a precious gift, but also a task that needs to be constantly reconsidered as both our society and our personal circumstances change and evolve. And if any readers have further wisdom to offer on this topic, please don’t be shy about coming forward! 🙏

1. Kenneth Barnes, ‘Shedding the Yoke of Mammon: Economic Stress and the Gift of the Sabbath’, *FIBQ* 23:1, pp.8-13; Sara Minard, ‘The Resilience of the Rested: How Practices of Sabbath can Build Faithful Resilience and Renew our Relationships in a Distracted and Restless World’, *FIBQ* 23:2, pp.16-19.
2. All the contributors spoke at meetings of Faith in Business Monthly.
3. Peter Heslam, ‘Being Productive: Working from Rest (Part One)’, *FIBQ* 22:4, p.36; ‘Being Productive: Working from Rest (Part Two)’, *FIBQ* 23:1, p.36; ‘Being Productive: Working from Rest’ (Part Three), *FIBQ* 23:2, pp.35-36.
4. By this Peter means an opinion which opposes views that are widely held.
5. My thinking in this paragraph draws on insights shared with me by my fellow-editor John Lovatt when I first met him over 30 years ago. Thank you, John!
6. The ancient Greeks had two distinct words for time and this is reflected in the New Testament. ‘Chronos’ refers to time as the ordinary passage of days and hours. ‘Kairos’ refers to special moments of opportunity when key events happen and a human response is required.
7. See Richard Higginson, ‘Charles Handy: A Tribute’, pp. 27-29 of this issue.



Richard Higginson was Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall from 1989 until his retirement in 2018. He has recently stepped down as Chair of Faith in Business. He is a founder-editor of *FIBQ* and the author of several books, including *Faith, Hope & the Global Economy* and (with Kina Robertshaw) *A Voice to be Heard*.