

SABBATH



A New
Narrative of
Time, Rest,
*and the Work of
the Church*

GOSPEL

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InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Sabbath Gospel* by Amy J. Erickson and G. P. Wagenfuhr.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.



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A JOURNEY TOWARD REST

CHRISTIANITY IS TIRED, and most of us are tired, too. Some are tired from the frenzy of performative religion with its stages and lighting in slickly polished services. Others are tired of worn-out religious formulas and rituals in straight-back pews stuck in an outdated past. And we're all tired of tribalized factions and bloody infighting. We're tired of revolving mission statements and steady leadership failures. We're tired of small talk and of grand plans. We're tired of people who are too busy for church and churches that are too busy for people. We're weary from posturing as a group that claims unique answers but looks like everyone else.

Western Christianity has been exiled, removed from its formerly privileged status that conveyed material benefits needed to maintain institutional structures. Is Christianity tired because it has been exiled from the secular age, or is the secular age itself an expression of the tiredness of Christianity and its institutions? Either way, everyday experience suggests a looming obsolescence arising from Christianity's own exhaustion.

But you know this already. Christianity is weary because you're weary. That's likely why you picked up a book on Sabbath. And it's maybe not the first. There are lots of books on Sabbath. This book is different. That's because most books on Sabbath fail to diagnose the actual conditions of our tiredness. They end up legitimizing the exploitative structures of the world that the church too often caters to. Instead of reminding us



that God is leading slaves out of Egypt, they justify making bricks for Pharaoh.

For Christianity—or, better yet, for *Christians*—to be revived, we must renovate our understanding of Sabbath. In this book we'll touch on the notion of Sabbath as a weekly practice of cessation from paid and deliberate work. But that won't be our focus. The reduction of Sabbath to this practice—and the subsequent fixation on or rejection of that practice—is symptomatic of a deeper malaise that exhausts us. But recovering the real meaning of the Sabbath promises to refresh the church for our time.

There's another way Sabbath promises to help the church. A paradox that we will continue to unravel is that understanding the nature of its true rest is key for the church to understand its true work. We wonder whether one of the reasons that today's church is so weary is that it has been busy with the wrong kind of work. It has been doing the work of building, of laying brick and mortar, of establishing and constructing and restructuring institutions, when it should instead be about the task of sojourning, of breaking and setting up camp again and again, of seeking the city God has prepared.¹ The primary work of the church is not manufacturing, but wayfinding; not creation, but migration.² We are not architects; we are wanderers summoned to follow a Lord who calls himself the Way.³ We must go on a journey—a new exodus—to find rest from our weariness so that we can offer rest to a weary world.

Because this is a different kind of book on Sabbath, it may help to bring to it a different set of expectations than you may have carried with you. It may not quite fit the genre of whatever virtual or physical bookstore section you found it in. If it fits into any, we might call it peregrination literature (from the Latin *peregrinatio*, for “sojourning, being or living abroad, traveling about”). In this it would be joining, rather than pioneering, a well-established genre of writing. It includes authors such as

¹Gen 11:3; Ex 1:14; Num 33; Heb 11:10, 16.

²See Brian Brock, *Joining Creation's Praise: A Theological Ethic of Creatureliness* (Baker Academic, 2025).

³Jn 14:6.

Augustine, Dante Alighieri, John Bunyan, and J. R. R. Tolkien. On one level the genres of these authors vary widely, from a theology of history, to epic poetry, to allegory, to fantasy. But they share a common, animating instinct: that the human path to truth is just that—a path. That arriving at truth—*true* truth—isn't a matter of mentally grasping and assenting to a set of claims; it is more akin to a discovery of the world that also entails the development of oneself. The journey is a cultivation of not just knowledge but also character—and thus of wisdom. Such a journey not only takes time but transforms the character of time itself. What's more, peregrination books, even if read by individuals, require others: There is no city of God with a population of one, there is no tour of hell without Virgil as guide, there is no arrival at the Celestial City without help along the way, and there is no Frodo without Sam. That a journey demands both time and company, and transforms both in the process, already begins to foreshadow some of the discoveries that await us in Sabbath.

The nature of those discoveries may differ from that of other books. This book isn't going to give you a set of practices, formulas, or strategies. And in fact, we would invite you to resist the urge to evaluate or demand applications until the end. One of the main aims of this book is to outfit the church with navigation tools. Navigation tools aren't shortcuts. They help you discern what steps are in the right direction from the ground under your feet. The concepts and even the vocabulary explored in this book are aimed to help us renew our vision of what God is doing in and for the world so that we can orient ourselves toward *his* work. This book is more like a compass than a map.

So who is this journey for? We wrote this book for people who love the church—or who maybe *want* to love the church, or who maybe even *used* to love the church—but who sense, like us, that something is amiss. We wrote it for ordained pastors—like Gregory—who labor to cultivate a church of healthy, mature disciples of Jesus Christ who are ambassadors of reconciliation. We wrote it for bookish laypeople—like Amy—who long for a church characterized by robust, intimate community that bears



each other's burdens. We wrote it for fellow theologians, like both of us, who appreciate a book that can hold water theologically while nourishing a readership outside the confines of the academy.

And we wrote this book for people who are tired. Tired of how the busy pace of contemporary Western culture has colonized and infiltrated even what should be the measured and meditative pace of pastoral life. Tired by the constant noise of measures—our salaries or net worth, our social media influence or sexual appeal, our career accomplishments or children's success—by which our lives are compounded, weighed, and found wanting. Tired of participating in, propping up, or perpetuating institutions that are at best hemorrhaging and unfit for purpose, or at worst exploitative and complicit with the managerialization and atomization of community. We wrote this for those who are wearied by life both inside and outside the church of our time and place and want to hear afresh the good news of the gospel. If you're still reading, we wrote this book, we think, for you. Admittedly, we also wrote it for ourselves. But most of all, we wrote it for the people of God, for whom there still awaits a Sabbath rest at the end of time.

Mapping the Path

So what *is* Sabbath? Sabbath does not simply refer to the fourth commandment in the Decalogue but to a river valley of themes in Scripture connected by a network of tributaries and channels that, taken together, reveal a consistent whole.⁴ Sabbath is itself the journey and the destination toward rest and refreshment. Sabbath is bound to the topography of all human experience. It encompasses how we inhabit time and the character of time itself. Throughout this book, we will aim to distinguish between Sabbath as the reality of God's reign and practices or *signs* of Sabbath that point toward that reality. Sabbath might be summed up as *the immediate dwelling presence of the sovereign king of all creation with the united household of God*. We believe that the seventh day of creation

⁴Decalogue is another name for the Ten Commandments as found in Ex 20 and Deut 5.

is the enduring time in which God himself dwells, the *aiōn* of God (to use the Greek) or *’olam* (to use the Hebrew).⁵ Sabbath is less fixated on the “when” of time than on the “so what” of time. Sabbath is ultimately characterized by the Lord of time, the one who takes up the sovereign rest of ruling a dominion of peace.

Like any biblical theme, Sabbath is attached to a specific subset of words (such as *Sabbath* and *rest*) that feeds into and is fed by other words, themes, and images. Because of this, and because of the especially rich and varied nature of Sabbath, our explorations of the biblical portrait of Sabbath will sometimes take us to nontraditional and unsuspecting texts. While it remains to demonstrate these themes in Scripture, we invite readers to set aside the many presuppositions and debates about what Sabbath means—which day of the week, what can and cannot be done, what qualifies as work or rest, and so on. Our task is first to rediscover what Sabbath means in the Bible before considering what this may mean for us as the church in the present.

In the course of our journey we will encounter key terms that will be shown to be intimately related to Sabbath: *household* and the people of a *household order*, the *seventh day*, *signs*, *sovereignty* and *kingship*, and more. At times we will also choose to frame our discussion with original Hebrew or Greek words in order to try to avoid any preconceptions that might be smuggled in with more familiar English ones. Just as we might slowly appreciate the interlaced geological features of a landscape as it naturally undulates at the pace of our travel, we’ll encounter and incorporate these terms organically as our exploration unfolds.

In part one, “Starting from Where We Are,” we’ll take the crucial first steps of our journey. Chapter two, “The Dream Home: The Foil of Sabbath,” marks our departure point on our journey. Sabbath requires us to consider what it means to rest. So, to begin our journey, we ask: What *does* it mean to rest? Or perhaps better, what do we *think* rest means? Resting is

⁵We purposefully avoid the use of the word *eternity* due to its regular definition as nontime or the state of pure being/nonchange. This Platonic ideal we will critique later.

something that usually takes place at home. Home is where we literally sleep but also where we retreat from the world. In this chapter, we reflect deeply on what kinds of expectations and desires tend to accrue around the concept of a dream home. We'll discover that the notion of a dream home takes on a life of its own as a metaphor for the false gospel that rivals the gospel of Sabbath rest. We'll find that the dream home is our representation of the world, but in a form under our own control.

This false gospel of the dream home prevails today. The Bible labels it with names such as Babel and Babylon, Sodom and Gomorrah, Egypt and Rome. The desire for a dream home is a desire to rest in a structure and project of our own making. The irony is that the attempt to construct our own rest is an illusion; it leads only to restlessness, exploitation, and ultimately death. By contrast, the gospel of Sabbath is a home already built and a rest already created in which the infinite diversities of the creation are held together in relationship to their Creator. This opening theme of the home will be re-encountered throughout our book. In particular, to discuss Sabbath is to discuss matters of economy—or, as the English word *economy* etymologically means from its Greek roots—the household law (from *oikos*, “house,” and *nomos*, “law”). Sabbath forces us to ask the question of whose economy we are participating in: the household of God, or a household of our own making? In other words: Whose rest are we seeking?

In chapter three, “The Sabbath Psalm: Beginning in the Middle,” we'll launch our exploration of the story the Bible tells about the good news of Sabbath from an unlikely place: the middle. Rather than starting with theological first principles, reflecting on the nature of God in isolation, we begin with Psalm 92, the only psalm dedicated to the Sabbath. Although this psalm makes no direct reference to Sabbath practices, it shows that the biblical authors understood Sabbath as pointing to the sovereignty of God exactly where we find ourselves: in the midst of a hostile, unresting world. In other words, starting our biblical exploration of Sabbath with Psalm 92 helps us to start thinking about Sabbath in

exactly the place we find ourselves: in the middle of history and on the far side of Eden.

Part two, “Sabbath Through Scripture,” logs critical miles as we follow the trail of Sabbath through the biblical landscape. In chapter four, “Sabbath at First,” and chapter five, “A Tale of Two Times,” we’ll look at the Bible’s first pages by considering key Sabbath passages in Genesis. These reveal that while creation was originally intended for God’s abiding or resting with his creation as an expression of sovereignty, this sovereign abiding was prevented by human rebellion, an unrest that takes on a life of its own and brings about destruction and death. In these chapters we’ll consider how the Bible’s prehistory is less the story of a universal humanity than it is the story of the formation of the people of God in distinction from a rebellious, rival line of people. We’ll also consider the nature of sin as not primarily individual moral failure but a power that inhabits and distorts human structures and institutions on a collective level.

Chapter six, “Signs of the Covenant,” will consider how God responds to rebellion by equipping a covenant people for a journey toward his rest. Practices of Sabbath—ranging from weekly practices of rest through ecological and economic practices of relief in the Jubilee—serve to reveal the nature of God’s kingdom and of God’s time of Sabbath rest. In other words, signs of Sabbath are a way that God’s people participate in God’s reality, recognize his sovereignty, and reveal his character to a rival order of time.

Chapter seven, “Life in God’s Household: Lifeblood of the Old Covenant,” takes our journey to an infrequently visited holy site, to Leviticus and the character of the household of God as it is understood through the sacrificial literature of the Old Testament. Rather than dwelling in arcane ruins of a bygone temple religion, this chapter works to discern the logic of the household of God so we can rightly discern the meaning of Jesus’ own ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension as the formation of a new people vivified by the undying life and love of God, who makes himself available to human flesh.



In chapter eight, “Jubilee Time: The Lord of the Sabbath Arrives,” our journey continues into the New Testament as we consider how Jesus Christ, as Lord of the Sabbath, is reconciling a rebellious world into his eternal reign of rest by establishing a renewed economy or household characterized not by rest taking but rest giving. In chapter nine, “Recapitulated Time: Blood of the New Covenant,” we consider the life, passion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ through the lens of Sabbath and find renewed language for articulating Christ’s atoning and reconciling work. We will see that Jesus recapitulates all of human history, bringing it to its true end, thus gathering all creation to himself.

Chapter ten, “Exodus Time: Entering into God’s Final Rest,” considers eschatology (the Christian doctrine of the end of time, or last things) by exploring the nature of the final Sabbath rest for which God’s people wait. It will consider two main New Testament books—Revelation and Hebrews—that, from either side of God’s final Sabbath rest, envision God as leading his people in a great exodus out of the world’s crumbling structures of exploitation and enslavement. In the final Sabbath rest, God and humanity will no longer be mediated by constructions and institutions—or in other words, by human work. Instead they will feast on God’s generous and free abundance.

If the main chapters of the book are our biblical journey of Sabbath, then the chapters of part three, “Sabbath Now,” are our debriefing sessions before we reenter the lives we left behind. Chapter eleven, “Embassy Ecclesiology: Ambassadors of Rest,” considers how a deep appreciation of Sabbath might reconstitute the church for our time. What does it mean to be the people of God together who represent the household of God from within the order of our time? Chapter twelve, “Establish the Work of Our Hands,” suggests how our account of Sabbath might inform our approach to what we put our hands to in the present. We examine what it means to be a people who do good works, which should inform our approach to work and how we understand ourselves to be contributors of true and lasting value from within the distorted economic systems of the

world. Refreshed, we hope, from the journey, we close by calling the church to renewal.

If our journey metaphor holds true, then the map we've just sketched should be just about as exciting as squinting at the contours of a hike on the tangled fold of two-dimensional paper. The real thrill, of course, lies in the journey itself: at the opportunity to stop and marvel at a sunrise-glinted mountain, a thundering waterfall, or a rare animal that has just crossed our path. And no adventure is worthy of the name if we don't encounter the unplanned-for and the unexpected, maybe even the disastrous incident that ends up not in disaster but in a renewed understanding of life's wild unmanageability and grace.⁶ We hope the path we just outlined is but a whetting of an adventurous appetite for a full-blooded life of journeying toward the Sabbath rest of God.

A final word about how to read this book. One of its premises is that it's impossible for the gospel to be privatized. Living in the truth of the gospel must be a communal endeavor. If what we encounter doesn't join us to others in Christ, it is not the truth of Christ. This book aims to develop the household of God, not a personal ethic; it's a journey as God's people, not a journey of self-discovery. For that reason, we encourage you to travel the course of this book with others. The end of each chapter has a set of discussion questions you may wish to share. Instead of telling you what to do, this book instead will indicate what kinds of conversations you need to have. Perhaps these will also help you discern as a community what the next steps are on your collective journey toward God's Sabbath rest.

⁶A "eucatastrophe," as Tolkien coins it: "Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses the opposite—I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *euchastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function. The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending; or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist', nor 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far as *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief." J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf: Including the Poem Mythopoeia* (HarperCollins, 2001), 68-69.

The call of Jesus is, “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”⁷ The Sabbath journey leads to a rest that takes up a new and different responsibility—a yoke—supplied by Jesus himself. Let’s head in that direction.

⁷Mt 11:28-30.



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