Christian Formation in and for Sabbath Rest

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The Christian practice of keeping sabbath embodies a theology of creation, liberation, and resurrection. Keeping Sabbath forms persons and communities in faith and fosters resistance to distorted ways of living and inadequate views of human identity that implicit in the culturally dominant experience of time.

Stanley Wiersma, poet, professor and heir of the Dutch Reformed tradition, introduced a story about his Iowa childhood with a question:

> Were my parents right or wrong
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> not to mow the ripe oats that Sunday morning
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> with the rainstorm threatening?

Looking back, the poet knew the answer to the question: his parents were right. As a boy he was not so sure, however, and marshaled arguments in an effort to convince his parents that it would be all right to skip church that one time. The Sabbath is made for man, he declared. And if the law permits pulling one's ox out of a pit on the Sabbath, he reasoned from scripture with an acumen surprising for one of his age though not for one from his tradition, why would it be impermissible to save the oats that would get one's cattle through the winter? His parents did not argue. The family went to church. Together with others whose harvests were also at risk, they sang psalms more loudly than usual. As wind and rain and hail pounded "that House," the minister "made no concessions on sermon length," even though his parishioners could hear little above the racket. When the electricity failed, they sang the last hymn in the dark. Then they rode home past their flattened oats. "God was testing us," said Dad at dinner; "I'm glad we went." "I wouldn't have missed it," Mother agreed.

Wiersma's poem is a reflection on the formative impact of that morning on his own character. Later lines suggest that in adulthood he was not nearly as strict an observer of Sabbath as his parents had been; his own moral stands emerged in relation to other practices, particularly through resistance to racial segregation. Yet he acknowledged that his parents' Sabbath observance was at the root even of this, and he was grateful that they had bequeathed to him "an important pattern defined as absolutely as muddlers like us can manage." That pattern—and the poem's title—is "Obedience."[1]

In this essay I shall consider Sabbath observance as an element in forming and nurturing the faith of Christian persons and communities—a potential that was apparently fulfilled in Wiersma's case and to which his poem gratefully testifies. Sabbath keeping first arose within Judaism, where it continues as a vital and definitive practice. Indeed, the power of this practice to shape and nurture peoplehood and identity is encapsulated in a Jewish folk saying: "The Sabbath has kept the Jews more than the Jews have kept the Sabbath." In somewhat different form, this practice also offers to Christians a set of activities (or nonactivities), done together week after week and century after century, that enact central Christian beliefs, shape specific patterns of communal life, and impart openness to the grace of God. Engaging in this rich and complex practice can shape persons and communities in distinctive ways and foster a way of being in the world that spills over to affect an entire way of life.

"People come to faith and grow in faith and in the life of faith by participating in the practices of the Christian community," the Presbyterian educator and theologian Craig Dykstra has argued in his book *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices.*[2] Those who have embraced the practice of Sabbath observance have not done so in order to induce Christian growth; they have rather been moved by obedience, or by exhaustion, or by attraction to the beauty of the Sabbath and the life-patterns that emerge among those who observe it. Moreover, Christian theologians historically have agreed that claims of direct causality between practice and faith are dubious and have denied that engaging in specific behaviors can instill or increase God's gift of faith. Even so, it is clear that Christians are called to a shared way of life as church in and for the world. The approach developed in Dykstra's work and in the work he and I have done together and with other colleagues emphasizes *practices* as the corporate patterns of responsiveness to God that comprise this way of life.[3] Within the shared way of life to which Christians are

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[1]Sietze Buning (Stanley Wiersma), "Obedience," in *Purpaleanie and other Permutations* (Orange City, Iowa: Middleburg, 1978) 53–54.

[2]Louisville: Geneva, 1999, 44.

[3]See "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," by Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). That essay and the present one build on the approach to the Christian life introduced in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), which sets forth twelve constitutive practices: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, discernment, testimony, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives to God. *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002), sets forth a similar approach. For more information about these and other publications, see www.practicingourfaith.org.

called, participation in practices that reflect and respond to God's grace in Jesus Christ become, as Dykstra says, "habitations of the Spirit," creating "an environment . . . in which people may come to faith and grow in life in Christ."[4]

SABBATH OBSERVANCE AS A PRACTICE

A Christian practice is a complex pattern of human activity, engaged in with others over time, in and through which life together takes shape in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ. In contrast to a single "act" or even an ongoing "activity" or "discipline," a Christian practice (as Dykstra and I use the term) is encompassing enough to address a need that is fundamental to human existence as such—in the case of Sabbath observance, the need for rest and communion with God—in ways that reflect God's purposes for humankind. Thus, we contend, Christian practices bear the embodied wisdom of God's people about living in ways that reflect and respond to God's love for the whole world.

Practices are necessarily social in character. Like the young Stanley Wiersma and those with whom he worshiped during the storm, one learns them with and from others. Moreover, as social human activities, practices are historical in both senses of the word: they exist within time and space and so take on different characteristics in different settings, and they endure over time, having emerged from centuries of enactment and experimentation to be freshly negotiated in the present. Every Christian practice has roots in biblical history and theology and has taken a variety of specific forms over the centuries and across the continents. Each practice arises from a "living tradition" that has taken shape over time as Christians in a wide range of contexts have argued, in words and actions, about the implications of Christian faith for Christian living.[5] And so each practice has a future as well as a past, as new generations bear it into new historical circumstances in specific forms that have not yet been imagined. Within history each practice is always lived imperfectly, and sometimes even in such a distorted manner that it becomes repressive or even harmful. Thus faithful engagement in any Christian practice requires practitioners again and again to confess and repent of the sin that distorts their practice and to receive the new life God makes available, within the practice, to them and to the world.

For Christians, the living tradition that has shaped the practice under consideration here emerged along the boundary between Judaism and Christianity. The centrality of Sabbath observance in God's covenant with Israel has grounded nearly three millennia of Sabbath observance among Jews. It continues to stand at the heart of Jewish life, and

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[4] *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 41, 63.

[5] On "living tradition," see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 221–23. The understanding of practices developed here began with, and is still deeply indebted to, Alasdair MacIntyre's concept of social practices (in *After Virtue*, 187–88), but it differs from MacIntyre's untheological view by locating the norms of practice not internally but in the responsive relationship of Christian practices to God.

Christians have much to learn from Jewish practitioners. At the same time, although the Christian practice relies on Jewish practice historically and theologically, it also marks a point of difference between the two traditions that has sometimes resulted in harm to Jews or disdain for the status of their enduring covenant with God.

The earliest Christians were Jews who observed the Sabbath on the seventh day of each week and then celebrated the resurrection of their Lord on the subsequent day. As Christianity spread among the gentiles and became distinct from Judaism, however, Christian communal life came more and more to emphasize the Lord's day, the first day of the week, the Christians' day of worship. In 321 C.E. the emperor Constantine declared this day to be the empire's official day of rest, thereby spawning a politics of time that has exercised influence on the calendars of the West ever since. This imperial act expressed what had become and would remain a collapse of the Sabbath into the Lord's day in dominant Christian culture. Apart from some relatively small bodies of dissenting Christians, the first day of the week has been widely accepted by Christians as the day of rest and worship mandated by the Sabbath commandment throughout the intervening centuries.[6]

SABBATH IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

The sabbatarian pattern—six days of work, followed by one of rest—is woven deep into the fabric of the Bible. In the very first story of Hebrew and Christian scriptures, God creates for six days and rests on the seventh, blessing that day and making it holy. In this way, the Christian theologian Karl Barth has suggested, God declares as fully as possible just how very good creation is. Resting, God takes pleasure in what has been made; God has no regrets, no need to go on to create a still better world or a creature more wonderful than the man and woman. In the day of rest, God's free love toward humanity takes shape as time shared with them.

Later, the story of how God led the people of Israel through the wilderness reflects the same seven-day pattern (Exod 16). After bringing the children of Israel out of Egyptian slavery, God sends them manna and commands them to gather enough each morning for that day's food alone. Mistrusting, they gather more than they need, but it rots. However, on the sixth day they are permitted to gather enough to last for two days. Miraculously, the extra manna does not rot. Those who trust God go to sleep on the evening of the sixth day glad that they already have enough for the morrow and relieved of that night's worry as well as the next day's work. Those who do not trust arise on the seventh morning to gather more but find none. God is teaching them, through their own hunger and nature's provisions, to keep the Sabbath, even before Moses receives the commandments on Sinai.

The Sabbath commandment (fourth for those in the Reformed tradition, third for

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[6]This paragraph and the next section are based on my chapter "Keeping Sabbath" in *Practicing Our Faith.*

Roman Catholics and Lutherans) is the longest of the ten and in some ways the most puzzling. Unlike any of the others, it takes quite different form in the two passages where the Ten Commandments appear. Both versions require the same behavior—work on six days, rest on one—but different reasons explain this demand. Each reason reflects and comes to sustain one of Israel's core beliefs about God's relationship to humanity.

The Exodus commandment to "remember" the Sabbath day (Exod 20:8–11) is grounded in the first creation story in Genesis. The human pattern of six days of work and one of rest follows God's pattern as creator; God's people are to rest on one day because God did. In both work and rest, human beings are in the image of God. At the same time, they are not God but God's creatures, who must honor God by obeying this commandment.

In Deut 5:12–15, the commandment to "observe" the Sabbath day is tied to the experience of a people newly released from bondage. Slaves cannot take a day off. Free people can. When they stop work on each seventh day, the people will remember that the Lord brought them out of slavery, and they will see to it that no one within their own dominion, not even animals, must work without respite. Sabbath rest is a recurring testimony against the drudgery of slavery. Together, these two renderings of the commandment summarize the most fundamental stories and beliefs of the Hebrew Scriptures: creation and exodus, humanity in God's image and a people liberated from captivity. One emphasizes holiness, the other social justice. Sabbath crystallizes Torah's portrait of who God is and what human beings are most fully meant to be.

Across many centuries, observant Jews have explored with their minds, hearts, and actions what it means to keep a day holy, to refrain from work, to honor God's creativity and imitate God's rest, and to experience the end of bondage. Following Exodus 31:12–17, in which God makes the Sabbath a sign of irrevocable covenant with the people of Israel, Jewish leaders have emphasized its special place in Jewish life and heard in its rhythm the structure that has kept Jewish identity alive amidst terrible adversity. Many centuries of debate and cultural change have shaped the law and liturgy of contemporary *Shabbat* observance, which varies considerably from one branch of Judaism to another. Infusing the practice as a whole, however, is a theology of creation and exodus, of holiness and liberation.

Jewish liturgy and law say both what should be done on *Shabbat* and what should not. What should not be done is "work." Defining exactly what that means is a long and continuing argument, but one classic answer is that work is whatever requires changing the natural, material world. All week long, human beings wrestle with the natural world, tilling and hammering and carrying and burning. On the Sabbath, however, observant Jews let it be. They celebrate the created world as it is and dwell within it in peace and gratitude. Humans are created too, after all, and in gratefully receiving the gift of the world they learn to remember that ultimately it is not human effort that grows the grain and forges the steel. By extension, all activities associated with work or commerce are also prohibited. Indeed, one should not even think about them.

What should be done? Specifically religious duties do exist, including communal worship at synagogue. But the holiness of the Sabbath is also made manifest in the joy people expect to experience on that day. It is a good deed for married couples to have sexual intercourse on *Shabbat.* Taking a walk, resting, talking with loved ones, reading—these are good too.

Christians are fortunate when Jewish friends invite them to come to a Sabbath meal on a Friday evening or Saturday afternoon. However, Christians cannot keep Sabbath as Jews do, because Christians believe that the most full and reliable knowledge of God comes not through the perpetual covenant God made with the Israelites at Sinai but through Jesus Christ. At the same time, Christians continue to honor the Mosaic commandments and stand in spiritual and historical kinship with the Jewish people, of whom Jesus was one. Christian Sabbath-keeping affirms the Sabbath commandments and the convictions about the character of the human relation to God that undergird them, echoing the grateful relationship to the Creator that Jews celebrate each Sabbath and the joyful liberation from drudgery experienced by the slaves who left Egypt. But Christians also celebrate on the weekly day of rest and worship Christ's victory over the powers of death. For Christians, this victory makes of each weekly day of rest and worship a celebration of Easter.

From the earliest days of the Christian community, Sunday, the day on which the disciples had first encountered the risen Lord, became a day to gather, eat together and rejoice. It was not in those years a day of rest, however; these gatherings happened after the work day was over, and for several decades Jews who acknowledged Jesus as Messiah continued to observe *Shabbat* as well. But these were years when Sabbath observance was changing for Jews as well as for Christians. After the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., the rabbis who reformulated Jewish practice for the new situation placed great emphasis on the Sabbath as a lasting sign of God's unique covenant with Israel. So Jewish observance became more strict during this period. At the same time, Christianity was developing a separate identity from Judaism, and many people who were not Jewish were joining the church. Gradually, Christians of Jewish background stopped attending synagogue and observing Jewish law. Over the years, Sunday became their one-day-in-seven for both rest and worship.

The Gospels say that Jesus observed the Sabbath, though he ignored some laws that other teachers thought should restrict healing or eating in specific situations of need. "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath," he says in Matthew's gospel (12:12). Later, Christians continued to treasure the Sabbath commandment, along with the other Ten Commandments. They also came to believe, however, that its meaning had changed within the new creation God began with Christ's death and resurrection. The holy day from now on, therefore, was not the seventh but the eighth, the day on which the future burst into the present. The appropriate response was to celebrate each Sunday with a feast of communion—one that looked back to Jesus' passion and resurrection and forward to the great banquet that would occur at the end of time. The result has been centuries of Sunday worship, usually crowned by the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

A Sabbath lasts all day, not just for an hour or two of corporate worship. In the practice of keeping Sabbath, concrete activities (or non-activities) become elements within a faithful way of life. Sabbath observers practice stepping off the treadmill of working and spending. They develop the capacity to disengage from consumer culture and to coexist in gratitude with nature and other people within the plenty of God's creation and anticipate the future God intends for the world. Christians who wish to explore this practice need to have a rich and realistic debate about what specific forms Sabbath practice might take today. In his book *God in Creation*, for example, the theologian Jürgen Moltmann notes the ecological significance of Sabbath and urges Christians not to drive cars on that day.[7] Others relinquish shopping, e-mail, or the use of money. Within the complexities of contemporary culture, no specific plan will be accessible to all, and it will be important not to turn the Sabbath into a day that reeks of condemnation rather than gift, as has sometimes occurred. Criticism and confession are ongoing demands in this as in every other aspect of Christian faith.

As we consider the practice of Sabbath-keeping and its potential for Christian formation, there is good reason to wonder what future the crucial yet endangered practice of Sabbath observance may have in American culture during these frantic years of the early twenty-first century. In a society where parents and children are often more willing to spend Sunday morning on a soccer field than in Sunday school or worship (much less both Sunday school and worship), is there even any point in recognizing a potential we may not be able to pursue? The Iowa farm of Wiersma's boyhood provided a very different context for Sabbath observance than the contexts inhabited by most of those who will read this essay, and some may be tempted to be nostalgic about how much easier engaging in this practice was then than now (but for the loss of the oats). Overall it almost surely was easier, if only because during the Great Depression there were few opportunities to do things other than worship and rest on Sunday, especially on a farm in the midst of a strict and ethnically-bounded Christian community. On the other hand, there has rarely been a time when awareness of the human need for Sabbath has been greater, or the church's call to address that need more urgent.

DISTORTED TIME, DISTORTED WAYS OF LIFE

Most contemporary Americans are caught in an alternative set of practices for living in time that affects many dimensions of their lives. Somehow, although they have been taught that they should use time well, it now feels to many people like time is using them. Salaried professionals are pressured (and learn to pressure themselves) to give their all and more, while wage earners are lured or forced into long hours of overtime work. Those with chil-

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[7]Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 296.

dren hope against hope to fulfill their parental duties in small amounts of "quality time" and often feel overcome by the demands of parenting, housework, and paid work. Even leisure is something we are now expected to do strenuously, working out harder (an interesting phrase for a leisure activity) and vacationing more extravagantly. We live in "an economy and society that are demanding too much from people," says Juliet Schor in her book *The Overworked American*.[8] Recent research has confirmed that on average Americans work more hours than those in any other developed country, in spite of large increases in productivity during recent decades.[9] Thoughtlessly, it seems, Americans have chosen to take the economic surplus that immense productivity provides not in time but in more and more consumer goods. Other wealthy nations have made the opposite choice. At the same time, paradoxically and unfortunately, work is not well distributed. Segregation of class and age erode the worth and usefulness of too many people and leave them with time hanging heavy on their hands. The economy and society that expect too much of some people offer empty hours to others through unemployment or in long years of unnecessarily isolated retirement.

The overwork that afflicts so many and the isolation or lack of work that afflicts many others are only two of the conditions that highlight the contemporary need for a renewal of Sabbath practice in some form. Another reason looms beyond these: the time contemporary Americans do have is losing its shape. Within the rhythms of the global marketplace, work, shopping, and entertainment are available at every hour. As a result, work and family life are being thrown into new and confusing arrangements, not only among the technological elite, but very widely indeed as the United States moves steadily toward a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week, 365-days-a-year economy. Meanwhile, the free time people do have comes as fragments best fit for channel-surfing. It is not the lack of time but rather its formlessness that is troubling in this scenario. One can see human lives becoming ever more fully detached from nature, from community, and from a sense of belonging to a story that extends beyond one's own span of years.

The time crunch, the round-the-clock rhythms of postmodernity, and America's growing sleep deficit are by now well documented. Yet Christian ministers and educators are only beginning to grapple with the implications as they seek to form persons and communities to live out their faith in the world. Christian leaders are realizing that it is necessary to be creative when scheduling worship and educational events, to be sure, and they are also becoming aware of their own yearning for Sabbath. What is still unexplored, however, is the power of the emerging patterns to foster views of human beings and God that challenge some of the basic beliefs of Christianity. Within distorted practices of living in time, distorted views of self, world, and God also emerge. Persons are formed in faiths that are false.

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[8]Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), xv.
[9]*Take Back Your Time: Fighting Overwork and Time Poverty in America*, ed. John de Graaf (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003).

The poet Noelle Oxenhandler has offered a stimulating image of how this pattern of time—this 24/7/365 way of life—can profoundly misshape assessments of who human beings are and what they need. Oxenhandler's point of departure is a comparison between two institutions that exist in every town, lit by "the same shrill, twenty-four-hour light, the doors that never shut, the windowless air, and a counter or front desk manned by the same rotation of pale clerks with their free-floating body clocks." The two are the 7-Eleven convenience store and the hospital emergency room.

> What does it mean that the 7-Eleven and the emergency room are atmospherically similar? The emergency room is the true domain of necessity, the place where there is no drawing back before the bleeding wound, the broken bone, the last-minute contractions. But a Pop-Tart, a six-pack of Coke in the middle of the night? We have come to believe that convenience is necessity. What begins as slogan, words sprayed on the surface of things—billboards, labels, magazines—becomes visceral, and if we can't find it we feel a knot of anxiety, frustration. We are thrown back on a world that has its own rhythms, that doesn't immediately bend to meet our yen to eat a candy bar or have a shirt pressed—or even our more serious needs. . . . Our own definition of a world in order is one in which all goods and services are always immediately available. This is the paradisiacal aspect of the mall, and it is our version of eternity: seasonless, ever-present, abundant.[10]

This meditation lays bare the bad eschatology of consumer culture. Life in the 24/7 world Oxenhandler describes "has its own rhythms" and needs. Inhabiting this world uncritically—ignoring the rhythms of nature and their disruption by genuine needs—forms persons in falsehood.

A second powerful image is from a law review article by Cathleen Kaveny, a professor of law and humanities at Notre Dame, that explores the deep logic of a system that shapes both the work life and the self-understanding of lawyers: the regime of billable hours. "What does it mean to sell a lawyer's services by the hour (or, increasingly, in six-minute increments)?" Kaveny asks. "What view of the nature and purpose of time is embedded in the world-view of billable hours? More importantly, what view of the shape of a lawyer's life, of a *human life*, is fostered by that world-view?"[11]

Brilliantly and systematically, Kaveny answers these questions and shows how the experience of life within this system teaches a number of things about what it means to be human that are, to Kaveny, distortions of a true (to her, a Catholic Christian) view. The world-view of billable hours, she argues in a far more intricate and compelling way than can be summarized here, teaches five lessons: (1) human time is not intrinsically valuable but rather of worth only so far as it is productive; (2) human time is first and foremost a commodity with an identifiable monetary value; (3) every hour is financially equivalent and thus worth the same amount as every other hour, regardless of claims from family or tradition that mark some hours as especially precious ones; (4) lawyers live in an endless,

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[10]Noelle Oxenhandler, "Fall from Grace," *The New Yorker* (June 16, 1997) 68.
[11]M. Cathleen Kaveny, "Billable Hours and Ordinary Time in Professional Life," *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 33:170–220; quotation from 181.

colorless present; and (5) they are therefore unable to participate fully with loved ones who live by other patterns, and so become increasingly isolated from community. Kaveny applies her argument directly to lawyers, in the hope of awakening them to their own unhappiness and fostering change or resistance. I note, however, that similar arguments could be made regarding the world-view imposed on the lives and self-understanding of the hourly wage earners who clean the lawyers' offices, especially when this work constitutes a second or third job because financial need requires that every hour be put to use.

Kaveny is deeply concerned that "time viewed in this way tends to isolate lawyers from their colleagues, families, and communities, as well as to exacerbate their own self-alienation."[12] To this view she contrasts the Roman Catholic view of time—which is embedded in a system not only of doctrine but of liturgical and devotional practices:

> Here, time is perceived to have intrinsic value rather than merely instrumental value. Time is viewed not as a commodity valued in terms of its ability to satisfy human desires, but as a prism that is revelatory of the way those desires should ideally be directed (i.e. toward fellowship with God and one another). It is not fungible, but marks points of unique importance in the lives of individual persons and the broader community. It is not an endless, flat extension, but an integral spiral that encompasses decisive moments, including reversals of direction, as it moves toward an ultimate goal, which is evoked by the metaphor of the kingdom of God. Finally, at its very core, time on a Catholic view does not lead to isolation, but calls for the creation of community on many levels and among many different persons.[13]

As both Oxenhandler and Kaveny argue, how time is organized and understood creates a formative framework for human life as a whole. Because coordinated timing enables people to do things together, it is an indispensable basis of community and shared purpose. Moreover, how persons live within time says a great deal about who they think they are and what they take their deepest needs to be. So thinking about the patterns of time necessarily leads to reflection on an entire way of life.

Contemporary distortion of how human beings live in time are driven by economic, technological, cultural, and social forces. It is encouraging to note that scholars and social reformers are beginning to address many aspects of the problem.[14] But the contemporary problem with time is also profoundly spiritual, and it is even more profoundly theological. Without a sense of time's importance at this level, it seems unlikely that hard-pressed people will find the strength to resist and restructure dominant patterns.

What time-stressed contemporary people most need is not more time but time of a different quality, time that is beyond price, time that has shape and substance, time that

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[12]Ibid.
[13]Ibid, 214.
[14]Selections from recent scholarship and reform proposals are gathered in *Take Back Your Time*.

need not be wrestled with each day as if it were an enemy, time that is the habitation of blessing. This kind of time is available, even in the age of the clock and the Internet, in the practice of keeping Sabbath, and also in the other practices Christian people have inherited and invented over time that embody their community's deepest beliefs regarding time, practices that cling to the contours of the day, the week, and the year.[15] These practices give a certain qualitative shape to the rhythms of human life, not extending the time human beings are given nor strengthening their mastery of it, but reminding practitioners, again and again, through words and actions, that time is a gift of God. In the midst of these practices, Christians also find companions with whom to celebrate this gift, companions with whom to conspire in sharing it and the other gifts of God for the good of all.

Sabbath observance is not meant to be a replacement for time management (which has merit in its place), and it may not even bring balance and personal fulfillment. Instead, Sabbath observance fosters a difference that permits faithful people to practice the freedom that is theirs in Christ and to expand their capacity to understand themselves and the world as belonging not to Father Time, with his pocket watch or digital readout, but to God the Creator and Lord of all.

CHRISTIAN FORMATION THROUGH SABBATH OBSERVANCE

"'New life in Christ,'" observes Craig Dykstra, "is made available to us in community, and such community carries on its life through certain 'practices' that are constitutive of the shape of its life together in the world."[16] When the Christian community gathers to hear God's Word and feast in the presence of the Risen Christ, the shape of life together in the world becomes apparent. When families and friends pass time enjoying one another, appreciating the beauty of the created world, and giving thanks, the shape of Christian life together in the world comes into view. When Christians pause to notice the inequitable distribution of work and reward in society and resolve to advocate for change so that all may have a day of rest, the shape of life together in the world and for the world is disclosed as permeated with justice and mercy. Sabbath offers relief from the regime of 24/7/365, to be sure, but it entails much more than taking a break. Finally, slowly, by the grace of God, this practice can change those who enter it, as they imbue the content the practice bears and are formed in Christ.

Within a Christian practice, Dykstra and I have argued elsewhere, practitioners acquire "a profound awareness, a deep knowing," because Christian practices as we understand them are "imbued with the knowledge of God and creation."[17] Participation is thus an indispensable dimension of formation through this and other practices. Insofar as a community's participation in a Christian practice is attuned to the presence of God, active in the life of the world, participating in the practice increases practitioners' knowledge not just of the practice but

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[15]I explored not only sabbath but also daily prayer and the liturgical year in *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), which includes more attention to the distortion that can befall Christian observance of these practices and more suggestions of possible ways to practice them in the contemporary context.

[16]*Growing in the Life of Faith*, 40.

[17]"A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," 24.

of the God to whom the practice responds, as well as knowledge of their own identity in relation to God. Christians who keep holy a weekly day of rest and worship may acquire within this practice an embodied knowledge that the world does not depend on their own capacity for ceaseless work and is not under their control. Keeping Sabbath, Christian practitioners come to know in their bones that creation is God's gift, that God does not intend that anyone should work without respite, and that God has conquered death in the resurrection of Christ.

This knowledge is not merely embodied, however. There is also great value in becoming articulate about the theology implicit in a practice and learning to reflect critically with it and upon it. Biblical texts, sermons, hymns, theological texts, and everyday conversations all contribute to this process. Learning to discern and negotiate the specific contours of faithful practice in conversations with others in particular social contexts is especially important. Education for Christian living thus necessarily includes a critical dimension—one that in the present context must take the time crunch that presses in upon many North American Christians with great seriousness. Inventiveness, awareness of others, and sound knowledge of society and culture are essential. For example, those considering how more fully to embrace Sabbath should give close attention to the economic pressures that make a day of rest far more possible for some than for others. Formation of this kind will foster longing for a system where all people have work at a living wage and time for rest and worship also.

The power of the Christian practice of Sabbath keeping to form and transform challenges the present economics of time on both the social and the personal levels. As with every practice of the Christian life, what is most needed is ministry that helps a living tradition find faithful embodiment in very particular places, each place unique in culture, class, history, and ethos.

CHRISTIAN FORMATION FOR SABBATH REST

Many of those who habitually bow to the pressures of the culturally prevalent economy of time seem to live in the hope that they can save up all their Sabbaths for retirement. This strategy is mistaken, however, and not only because it leads these persons to miss the present experience of Sabbath, or because it entails disobedience to the commandment, or because it abandons resistance to insidious cultural and economic patterns. The idea of reserving Sabbath until one has time for it or until other demands recede denies the reality of human mortality.

"The point of most human practices," writes Dykstra, is "mastery over some set of forces that contend with one another, control over what threatens to run out of control, the creation of order in the face of chaos"[18]—a description that many overworked Americans

might well think fits their experience of trying to get everything done. But Christian practices have a different point, Dykstra continues, because they are grounded in a story whose fundamental truth is that "the everlasting arms of a gracious and loving God sustain the universe."[19] To master the capacity to observe the Sabbath no matter what, or to suffer guilt after failing to do so each week, is pointless. In this as in everything else, Christians rely on the grace of God. This, more than anything, is the source of Sabbath's potential as persons and communities are formed and transformed by Christ. To keep Sabbath is to practice receptivity, to open ourselves to the grace of God and to offer in grateful return only ourselves. Within this practice, the Christian community tells the truth: we will never finish all that we want or need or have to do, but God loves us anyway. Pausing for Sabbath rest, we take time to remember also our love for God.

The fact that we do so only imperfectly is but one more reminder of our need. The poet George Herbert acknowledged this when he called rest "The Pulley" by which God hopes to draw humanity to himself. Creating humankind, God pours out upon "the first made man" every blessing but withholds the "jewell" of rest.

> Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
>
> If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
>
> May tosse him to my breast.[20]

Mastering the practice of Sabbath keeping in this life is not the aim of Christian formation in and for the Sabbath. The aim is to know the grace of God in Christ, through grateful acceptance of a gracious practice that has been borne by a living tradition to a culture that sorely needs it. Yet even in accepting it, contemporary Christians will experience as well the truth of Augustine's ancient testimony to God: ". . . our hearts are restless until they rest in you."[21]

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[18] *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 75–76.
[19] Ibid.
[20] "The Pulley," in George Herbert, *The Poetical Works of George Herbert* (New York: D. Appleton, 1857) 203–4.
[21] Augustine, *Confessions*, I.I.