



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 16 [MB Confession of Faith]

Work, Rest and The Lord's Day

PASTORAL APPLICATION

Work and rest are major issues for the North American church. We are a society driven by a deep-seated need to be busy, either with economically profitable activity or with recreation. Our self-image is tied to this need to be busy: we are useful, worth something, when we are productive. Our values and priorities regarding time use are shaped by the drive to busyness. Therefore the Confession of Faith sees the importance of biblical teaching regarding our work, our need for rest, and our observance of the Lord's Day.

Work

A major component of our lives is the work we do. John Redekop, in an article in *Faith Today* (Sept/Oct 1989, 18–23), estimates that the “average working Canadian spends some 88,000 hours on the job from the first day of full-time employment until the retirement celebration.” He concludes that “most of us spend almost 40 percent of our waking time at work.”

But biblically speaking, work is more than just time spent “on the job.” Work includes taking care of one's household (providing food, shelter, security, stability), providing the infrastructure so that society can function (government, health care, transportation, commerce, etc.), and exploring the breadth of creation (science) and the heights of human culture (the arts). It is important for the church to communicate that all types of work are honorable as ways of living responsibly. The executive, the mechanic in the garage, the stay-at-home mom or dad—all these ought to be helped to find the God-given dignity and purpose of their work. One congregation has celebrated this by having a “Labor Day” Sunday in which everyone is to come to church in their week-day work clothes. (Of course, that would only work if it weren't already the normal practice!) Testimonies and teaching focused on the world of work would be appropriate for such a day. Another church had an adult Christian Education series focusing on the world of work. People who worked in different jobs were interviewed with the following three questions: “What are the greatest rewards of your work?” “What are the larger or global forces that affect your occupation?” “How do you integrate your faith and your occupation?”

In our teaching, it can help us if we distinguish between our “vocation” and our “occupation.” Our occupation is what takes up our time: business, housekeeping, professional duties, the farm, school, and so on. Our vocation, on the other hand, is our “calling” from God (1 Cor. 7:17). It is God's uniquely tailored will for our spiritual growth, within a certain set of occupations and roles. Our calling, our vocation, is to become Christ-like in whatever we do; our occupations form the stage on which this transformation takes place. Sometimes, our vocation will lead us to change occupations: some have moved out of the military, or out of a business with unethical practices, or into full-time pastoral work, as a result of following the call of Christ. We want all Christians to understand that they have a calling, a ministry. Ray Bystrom is helpful as he describes vocation in his first of a ten-part series on “Ten Words For Those Who Work” (*Marketplace*, 24/6, p 11). He says, “a sense of God's calling in one's life should prompt all God's people—not just clergy and missionaries—to do the very best, whatever their trade, job, occupation or career (Col. 3:23). As Martin Luther King once said, ‘If you are called to be a street sweeper, you should sweep streets as Michelangelo painted or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. You should sweep streets so well that the host of heaven and earth will say, Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.’”



Ministering to Those Out of the Work Force

What about those who aren't in the work-force? Churches ought always to be careful that we do not rank people according to their occupation (James 2:1-5). We tend to place a lot of value on what we do: "I am what my job says I am." And we unconsciously take a second step: "I'm worth what my job says I'm worth." This is a dangerous assumption that needs to be firmly resisted by the church. We must learn to find our worth not in what we do, but in who we are in God's sight. Especially in communities with high unemployment, or where there are people with disabilities that keep them from working, or with a lot of retirees, it is important that we project the message that all people have dignity in God's eyes, regardless of their job situation.

How can we effectively pastor these people? We can be careful that our first question to newcomers isn't automatically, "So, what do you do?" Furthermore, we should make sure that Paul's word in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 ("Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" NRSV) isn't directed at those who can't work, but at those who refuse to work. As to the situation of the unemployed, there are several things that the church can do. First, we must be careful to recognize the emotional and financial stress that the unemployed will face. It is the role of the church to remind the unemployed that their value as a person is not tied to having a paying job. Without minimizing the pain of unemployment, the church can offer the person who is temporarily out of work opportunities for meaningful service within the community. Second, persons with disabilities are often marginalized in the workplace. It is the role of the church to witness for the worth of these people and to take the lead in seeing to it that people with different abilities are afforded opportunities for meaningful labor. Third, if we accept the work of God as our model, we will not view our work as primarily a means to an enjoyable retirement. Rather, the most fulfilling retirement is one filled with activity (work) that is less driven by immediate needs and more by our interests and abilities.

Work and Meaning

A further challenge arises from the apparent meaninglessness of some modern work, a futility that many people experience as a trap, even a kind of slavery. Some may perform jobs which are repetitive or seem to lack larger value, or sell products that appear to have little ultimate significance. Others may suffer the stress of trying to achieve higher productivity with lower compensation. Many modern pressures can make work seem meaningless or even sinister. This is a true challenge for the church that seeks to bless and dignify the Monday to Saturday world. Ecclesiastes is a helpful starting point, both as an empathetic expression of this meaninglessness, and for its eventual conclusion: delight in the daily blessings (food and drink, 3:13), and persevere in serving God the Creator (12:1,13). Christians should be helped to go further than this. Through the guidance of the Spirit, dreary occupations can be transformed so that they, or the relationship-building that they permit, become spiritually-focused activities, such as the fishermen whom Jesus called to start "catching people" for the kingdom (Mark 1:17). Whatever the job, Christians are called to work honestly and well, knowing their performance and attitude serve as a witness to God.

Rest

As a denomination with its roots in northern Europe, Mennonite Brethren tend to display what has been called the "Protestant work ethic": industriousness, frugality, and a general reluctance to pause and enjoy the fruits of labor. At present, many North American Christians are indistinguishable from their non-Christian counterparts in their obsession with work at the expense of rest and leisure. While there is truth to the proverb that "idle hands are the devil's workshop," we miss the blessing of rest when we equate idleness with rest and leisure. Scripture reminds us that we were created with a need for both work and rest. Never was rest secondary to work. Rest and work, when held in proper balance, provide the God-ordained rhythm of life that is necessary for life in the kingdom of God. In his book *Margin* the physician Richard Swenson, challenging his readers to a restored balance and margin for stressed lives, says "it is at Sabbath time we suspend dominion work and instead worship the dominion-Maker."

We want to make sure we have a clear and biblically sound understanding of "rest." Rest is not just inactivity (which might seem a chore to many people). Rest is what allows for the renewal of body and spirit, and is therefore something uniquely individual. At the same time, the biblical Sabbath laws teach us



that rest should have a corporate dimension, since the whole household (the socio-economic unit of family, workers, livestock) is included in the Sabbath command (Exod. 20:10). We suggest that this kind of rest should be visible both in our social and spiritual households: our homes and our churches.

Families have chosen to celebrate Sabbath in different ways, such as in a special meal with time set aside for prayer and Scripture reading, or with a special family night. (See Carol Brazo, *No Ordinary Home*, for an inspiring window into Christian Sabbath-keeping; Eugene Peterson's chapter on the Sabbath in *Working the Angles* is also helpful.) Further, we ought to be careful that we do not practice the discipline of rest at the expense of the balance of our time. It doesn't work to cram seven days' worth of work into six, so that we can say that we are "taking one day off" each week. That runs against the grain of the biblical concept of rest as a discipline and a sacrifice. Part of the blessing of a period of rest is to show us that we are not in control, that we are dependent on God and His providence. The ideal Christian life is not a hurried life; it is a life where leisure and perspective are an active part of the fabric of every day, every hour; not just during one day in seven.

The Meaning of Sabbath

We stand to learn something from a Jewish understanding of the Sabbath. In Jewish tradition, the Sabbath rest is seen as a "sensual" time: a time to delight, through all the human senses, in the goodness of God's creation. The Sabbath rest gives opportunity for intimacy with God. Jewish tradition says that God loudly announced the Ten Commandments to Moses—all except the Sabbath command. This one he whispered, because the Sabbath is for intimacy with God. Pious Jews will recite from the Song of Solomon to welcome the Sabbath, first because Solomon's poem celebrates the sexual intimacy which is the climax of the creation story, and second because the Sabbath is seen as a wedding celebration between God and His covenant people. This perspective helps us as Christians to understand the sensual and life-giving blessing of biblically appointed rest.

Whatever form it takes, whatever activities it includes or excludes, we want to make sure that the primary intentions for the Christian's period of rest are upheld: a sacrificial expression of thanksgiving to God and trust in God, a time of blessing and peace, an opportunity to delight in the goodness of God's world. The same holds true for a congregational (or smaller group) commitment to observe a Sabbath rest. This kind of rest takes discipline and submission to the group consensus as to how it will be observed. As the discipline of rest is internalized, the blessings become primary, and the Sabbath rest is allowed to have its way with us as God intended: for spiritual, emotional, and physical renewal.

The Lord's Day

There are two main pastoral issues that arise when it comes to the Bible's teaching about the Lord's Day. First, how (and when) should we observe it? Second, what is the connection between the biblical teaching of Sabbath rest and the Lord's Day? We will be helped if we discuss the second question first.

The biblical Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day are not to be equated. That is, we do not observe the Lord's Day as if it were literally a Christian Sabbath. While many Christians may hold to that practice, we must reject it as inconsistent with an Anabaptist approach to the Bible (in the same way that Anabaptism rejects the notion of baptism as a Christian [infant] circumcision, church leaders as the Christian equivalent of Old Testament priests, a church building as the counterpart of the Old Testament temple, or a Christian nation and its wars as functionally equivalent to Old Testament theocratic Israel). The Lord's Day may be the occasion for us to practice principles which we derive from the Sabbath, but it is not a Sabbath in the Old Testament sense.

What about the "sanctity" of the Sabbath? (Gen, 2:3, Exod. 20:11). Are we not in danger of desecrating something which God blessed at the beginning of creation? We have to say, first of all, that God's blessing was placed upon the seventh day, not the first, and therefore a strict practice of the sanctity of the Sabbath would lead us to observe Saturday (or more specifically, Friday sundown to Saturday sundown), as do Jews, Seventh Day Adventists, and a few other groups. The actual "sanctity" of the seventh was never, Scripturally speaking, transferred to a different day.



But two things changed with Jesus. First, he proclaimed himself to be the Lord of the Sabbath, and therefore to have a greater status and authority than Sabbath observance itself. Second, he appointed with his resurrection the first day of the week as the day on which the New Creation broke into this world system. The question of “sanctity” was pressed further at Pentecost, when the first believers were “all together in one place” on the first day of the week (Acts 2:1). The Holy Spirit, who is the source of all divine sanctification, was poured out onto a people. Thus God’s blessing and sanctity are now seen above all in a sacred people, the messianic community of the Spirit, and not in sacred times or places. While the seventh day may still be sacred, the Church is more sacred in God’s eyes. When a church is divided because it cannot agree on whether or not a certain activity is “permitted” for a Christian on Sunday, this division is more grievous to God than any perceived “breaking” of a Christian Sabbath.

All of this goes to say that we do not look to the Sabbath law as our primary source for understanding what the Lord’s Day is about. We look to Jesus, the power of his resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit. And so we return to our original question: How should we observe the Lord’s Day?

It is best to celebrate the Lord’s Day on the first day of the week, Sunday, as has been the practice from the earliest days of the church. To do so is a significant theological statement: we say that history matters. Celebrating Sunday as the Lord’s Day says that we believe that God intervened in history, that the transcendent Lord of the universe intersected with this broken planet on a particular Sunday morning centuries ago. It says that we are part of an unbroken line of descent from another supernatural event, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which signified the birthing of the true people of God. We know from personal experience that we don’t need to observe a friend’s birthday on the particular day; but it feels more appropriate to do so. In the same way, it is most appropriate to celebrate God’s greatest acts in history on the day they really happened.

The New Testament communities of faith assembled on the Lord’s Day. It was, we may say, a spiritual family gathering, for the purpose of encouraging and prompting people “toward love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24). Our practice of “going to church” derives from this assembling of the saints, and thus the church-related gathering is an important part of celebrating the Lord’s Day. We will want to make sure that our church gatherings do indeed reflect the New Testament concerns for what can and ought to happen when God’s people gather (see Article 6, Nature of the Church, and portions on worship in the pastoral application of Article 1, God).

Alternative Days

For most of us, Sunday provides a good opportunity to practice the discipline (and receive the blessing) of biblical rest. Because of this, we have chosen to say in our confession that believers limit their labor “to work of necessity and deeds of mercy.” For some, however—those who work in “essential services” such as health care and public safety, for instance—Sunday rest may not be an option. These people ought to be encouraged to find other ways of practicing the discipline of rest, and urged to consider ways they can honor Jesus (and thus the Lord’s Day) through their occupational services. Pastors and others who invest heavily in Sunday activities often feel that Sunday is definitely not a day of rest. Churches should ensure that their workers can practice a biblical rest. Churches should make sure that their pastors, especially, are able to take necessary sabbatical rest (both weekly and longer term) in order to maintain a God-honoring and healthy pattern of work.

Some congregations hold their main church gatherings on days other than Sunday. How do we evaluate this? First, the New Testament is clear that the day is not of primary significance (Rom. 14:5-6). Any day can honor the Lord. The motive for non-Sunday services is generally given as outreach and flexibility. Wise church leadership will, we suggest, distinguish carefully between these two motives, because “flexibility” is a two-edged sword that can both enhance and cripple a church’s outreach. It will enhance it, of course, by allowing more people to come at more convenient times, and often with a choice of the kind of church gathering being offered.

But such flexibility can also cripple a church by masking a possessiveness of one’s time. It can permit a major area for discipleship, submitting one’s time-use to God, to go untouched. If a midweek gathering is used so that people can “get in” their hour or two of church, leaving them free for a weekend at the cottage, we



would do well to discern what impulses and motivations lie behind this. An attitude that says “the weekend is my time” tells us that there are some spiritual issues which need addressing, issues of stewardship and submission to Jesus. We ought also to be on guard against idolizing the modern gods of recreation and sports. Unchecked enthusiasm for sports and recreation can weaken commitment to gathering with the family of God.

Some will respond, “But isn’t it better for people to come to a midweek gathering than not go at all?” The answer, obviously, is yes. But the healthy church will not ignore potential concerns in this area— just as it will not ignore the condition of those who might “religiously” attend Sunday morning service but live ungodly lives for the rest of the week.

Gifts of Work and Rest

The pattern of work and rest is a gift from God the Creator. Work is part of our divine calling or vocation. Rest is a spiritual discipline that needs to be recovered. The Lord’s Day is best observed as a time for worship, fellowship, and service. While legalism can destroy the spirit of biblical Sabbath teaching, the divine plan of work and rest is the model for productive and sustainable Christian living.

Bibliography

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