

Living the Sabbath

by Norman Wirzba (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, Michigan) 2006.

A response by Joe Carlson

The next book down on my vertical bedside library was this one, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*. As of right now, this has been the clearest and most well written book that I have read concerning my ongoing topic of living faith, lives that speak the faith the tongue confesses. It is often that we say one thing, albeit sincerely and honestly, and have no clue how much our actions contradict what we say we believe. For example, we say we trust God for all things, but how often do we struggle for personal control over our life's direction? We say we love our neighbor, but how often do we actually talk to them, and meet their needs as New Testament living would have us do? It is easy to speak, but hard to do. Norman Wirzba approaches this discussion through the lens of the Sabbath. As Christians we are defined as a Sabbath people, a nation of worshippers, *homo adorans*. The Sabbath is central to who we are as the people of God, for it is in the Sabbath, our day of rest, our day of renewal, our day of formal worship, that we are made new, we are made whole, and we are refashioned in the image of Christ. The Sabbath then serves not as an escape from the world, but rather as the means God has chosen for the transformation of it. He has called us to make disciples of every nation, teaching them to obey His commands, baptizing them in the strong name of the Trinity. This is Word and Sacrament, which is found nowhere outside of the Church. The Sabbath is therefore, again, not just an event. It is a paradigm for living. If worship is a once a week duty, it is not of God. Did He save us simply to acknowledge Him once a week for two hours, while we sing songs that we think are cool and fun, and give us emotional jollies? Is that what the end of salvation is? Not at all. But it is frighteningly close to the image we present to the world. It is no wonder pagans think Christians are idiots. It is also why the Christian Church in America is not heavily persecuted. We have become safe. We have become so weak, that we have ceased to be a threat to the predominant culture. The Christian Church in Sudan, China, and Bolivia don't worship God out of convenience. They certainly don't worship God because everyone else does. And they don't worship God because they have emotional holes in their otherwise good, sentimental hearts. They worship God because they know Him to be real. Real in the face of horror. Real in the face of death. Real in the face of pain and suffering. Real, Sunday through Saturday. Do you think their idea of God is limited to two hours on Sunday morning? If they did, do you think their respective governments would give two licks for what they believed? Who cares what you do on the weekends, as long as you bow to Caesar during the week. It seems to me that we have a lot to learn from our so-called impoverished, weaker brothers.

Living the Sabbath is broken into two parts. Part one deals with the theology of the Sabbath, Part two, with the practical out-workings of the Part one. His central questions are these: How did God make the world to work? How is the Church supposed to act as a nation of royal priests, in restoring life on earth to the image of this original design, if we are even supposed to at all? Wirzba sees at the center of these questions, the nature and character of our worship. He says,

Just as God's *shabbat* completes the creation of the universe – by demonstrating that the proper response to the gifts of life is celebration and delight – so too should our Sabbaths be the culmination of habits and days that express gratitude for and joy in the manifold blessings of God...It makes sense, therefore, to think of Sabbath observance as one of our most honest and practical indicators of authentic religious faith...Our Sabbath commitment bears witness to whether or not we have brought our habits and priorities in line with the ways and intentions of God. (13)

Our Lord, the eternal Word, created the world in six days. Or so we say. It might be better for us to start saying that in seven days, the Lord created the heavens and the earth. The distinction is important. In the six day view, rest on the seventh day becomes similar to falling down onto the couch after mowing the lawn. God worked and worked and worked, and finally got the opportunity to just sit down and rest His feet. We often think this way, and even if we don't actually say it aloud, this is the testimony we bear. Sundays are my goof off days. It's my go-to-the-lake-and-drink-cheap-beer day of rest. Even if I go worship in the morning. Now we even have the convenient option of singing our duty songs Saturday night, so we can have the entire day off, and do whatever we feel like doing. This has become our view of Sundays. And it is simply wrong. Here is where the seven-day creation pattern gives a more biblical picture. God created the world in six days, true. But he created rest on the seventh day. Rest is a creation, just like trees, and waterfalls, and earlobes. If it wasn't, God would have been subjected to it, the resting on the seventh day being a necessity, because He was tuckered out. But no, the rest that is the seventh day was created for us, as a gift. It is part of the created order. It has purpose, just like everything else. It was made to glorify God, just like everything else. When Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, He did not mean it was made to give us a day to screw around on. It was made to give man a weekly opportunity to sit at the feet of his God, and be fashioned in His likeness. We are given six days to work, and be faithful and to employ our gifts as God has given us ability and opportunity to do. We are given one day of rest and the opportunity to say no to the labors of the other six days. But just as we are to obey God and honor Him in our six days of work, so we are to obey and honor him in our one day of rest. It is on this day that God walks with His people. On this day, we commune together in participation of the same Table. We ascend into the Holy of Holies, unveiled, able to stand in clothes of white, purchased by the blood. This is the day of Worship, of Communion. It is this day, this formal act of Worship that defines our lives. As believers in Christ, our lives are shaped by the faithful, or unfaithful, nature of our Worship. It gives shape to our lives of worship, Monday through Saturday. Who we are on Sundays is who we are the rest of the week. And because the rest of the week puts flesh on what we say on Sundays, the opposite is also true. Who we are Monday through Saturday will give true testimony to validity of what we say on the Lords Day.

But is this a bad thing? Why have we come to think of Worship as unpleasant, insignificant duty? Is not the seventh day of the week a blessing? Is it not good? Does it not hold the very essence of Joy and Delight? How can the lake and cheap beer hold a candle to the glory of the presence of the Most High God? How can a football game even hope to compare to sitting at the table and fellowshiping with Christ Jesus, the Word of God, through whom and for whom all things were made? Is it possible we think yard work will be more beneficial to our souls than the Spirit of God transforming our lives, conforming us to His image? No. Our list of priorities is thoroughly screwed up. It is backwards and upside down. The Sabbath needs to become for us something more than simply a biblical category, under which we file the term rest, or Sunday. It needs to become real to us. It needs to have dirt under the fingernails. It needs to sweat and flex and move. It needs to smell and taste glorious. Wirzba again, "When we become a Sabbath people, we give one of the most compelling witnesses to the world that we worship a God who desires our collective joy and good," (15). The opposite also is true. When we disregard the Sabbath, or think of it as duty or unpleasant chore, we declare to the world that God is a stingy and demanding killjoy, out to ruin everything, even your weekend. The quicker we realize how we communicate this, the better. It is one of the most damaging and destructive ideas the Church has ever adopted. We need to come to realize the great joy and delight is readily available at the fount of God's goodness, if only we would obey Him, and relinquish the reigns, giving up the idea that we are masters of our own fate, captains of our own souls. Then and only then, will God share with us true and real joy, lasting, solid joy that causes mountains to shake their ridges with giddiness, the oceans to rise up and clap their hands in laughter, and the skies to shed their tears in praise.

Losing our Way

This first chapter sets the stage for how he is going to argue for a Sabbath centered life. He begins by contrasting the world in which we live, and the world God created us for. Our rampant self-centered consumerism, has accomplished wonders, and done much to destroy the briefest thought that God is the one who blesses and bestows all things in the first place. The world we live in here in modern America, is a 24/7 nightmare, an unceasing grind, has become such rat race, that there is not time for rest, or joy, fellowship or communion. Our technology is making it easier and easier to limit and diminish our personal, face to face interaction with our community and neighbors, let alone the members of our own family. Our technology has enabled us to be in control of much of our lives. Our cars get us where we want to go, regardless of time or weather. Our computers allow us to purchase items regardless of location or language. Our supermarkets allow us to buy foods regardless of seasons and harvests. We can get what we want, when we want it, wrapped in the package we desire, and usually costing us exactly what we think appropriate. We have eliminated our need for dependence on anyone or anything other than our own mental facilities. This is why knowledge is power. If you know how to do something, you are enabled to drive your life in the direction you want it to go. If you don't know something and are dependent on others, you are considered weak, and ordered back to college. To trust in a God we 'can't even see' for our every good, and to give Him the glory and credit for all things, is downright laughable, if not simply sad. Christians therefore are pitied, by a world that takes care of itself. But we are not fools. We know that their 'independence' is a lie. Ask them to start breathing on their own, without the help of involuntary muscles like lungs. Ask them to call down the rain to produce even the most basic of foods. Ask them to make the moon travel around the earth, giving us tides, enabling ecosystems that have consequences all the way up the food chain. We know that they couldn't take two steps, let alone even exist at all, if God was not continually holding all things together, even their petty, ungrateful lives. But lest we judge, and be judged, let us remind ourselves how often we think of our dependence. How often do we thank God for the grace of sunshine and wind, heart muscles and olfactory senses, friends and fellowship? How often do we take life for granted, jumping into the rat race with both feet, popping our heads up for breath, once every seven days. We say, "At least we know to breathe one day a week." But this is not the life God has for us. He has given us life to enjoy, to relish, to savor, to share, to live. This means to acknowledge and glory in our complete and utter dependence on Him. It means to be anxious for nothing. It means to pray without ceasing, and give thanks for all things. Giving thanks for all things means all things: the flat tire on the way to work, the cranky clerk at the grocery store, the rainy day you wanted to be sunny. Do we give thanks for all things? Do we rely on the goodness of God alone for all things? "Do we truly believe ourselves to be children of God and members of creation, and thus able to trust in God's beneficent care and provision?" (20).

Again, the Sabbath is a gift to us. It is the final creation, created on the seventh day, for our good. Biblical Sabbath thinking produces for us a framework, a paradigm, from which we answer Schaffer's question, "How should we then live?" The Church has always been another city, The City, the City of God pitted against the City of Man. As such it has its own culture, its own speed, its own purpose and direction. Its call is to fulfill the both Great Commissions. The second we know, to make disciples, baptizing and teaching. But the first great commission is often neglected by Christians. It is the original commission, to be fruitful and multiply, and have dominion over the earth. The creation mandate still stands today. True, Jesus' command to the disciples parallels and is a spiritual fulfillment of the command He gave Adam and Eve, Noah and his family. In all three instances, God handed to man the world, fresh and ripe. In all three, man is commanded to take this new creation, and subdue it, cultivate it, and fruitfully multiply over the face of it. Just as Adam and Noah stood looking over a fresh world, ready to physically subdue it, and bring forth fruit out of the ground, so the twelve stood on a hill,

overlooking a fresh world, ready to spiritually subdue it, and bring forth fruit out of the soul. Obviously we don't forget that it is God in both cases who gives increase and growth. But we are called to subdue and plant, and have dominion. My point is however, that the second commission fulfills, but does not replace the first commission. We are still called to be lords of creation, to use it and have dominion over it. It is part of who we are. In fact it is not whether we will do it, but how well we will do it, that becomes the question. We will take dominion, no matter what. But will we do so faithfully as God would have us do, living Sabbath-ly, giving rest and bestowing grace as our Maker has done with us? Or will we grasp and grab, demanding our rights, our just deserts, our hard earned monies, even at the expense of all involved, from green earth to brown cow to blue collar?

The silly thing is that a life spent grasping and demanding at the expense of others is so petty, so insignificant, and so shallow that is impossible to truly enjoy. You will never stop worrying about someone ripping you off, or hitting you up, or bettering you at your own game. We think of this as being the quintessential human achievement, dying with the most toys. But this is not God's definition of being human. Humans are image-bearing lords and ladies, servant kings and queens, created to tend and care for a garden, creating for all a pleasant and blest place to live. Our gardens have shifted shapes, but the call is still the same. We are to mimic our Creator. He gives, we give. He loves, we love. He considers the needs of others as more important than His own, as must we. This is Sabbath living – bestowing on others, meeting the needs of creation, doing so with joy and love, seeing in this act, the fulfillment of God's purpose for us on this earth. "Sabbath life is a truly human life – abundant life, life at its best – because it is founded in God's overarching design for all places (Sabbath celebration completes the creation of the universe) and all times (Sabbath worship is the week's fulfillment and inspiration)" (20). At the heart of this is thanksgiving. If we are truly grateful, how can we receive from God with one hand, and demand satisfaction from our neighbor with the other. It is high hypocrisy. Our thanksgiving must be all-encompassing. It is then that our lives become living sacrifices. It is then that the world will look and give praise to God, for the nature of our love for one another is so unnatural to the fallen world's eyes, that it is clear that it does not originate within us. God alone is the author of such love. It is "when our work and our play, our exertion and our rest flow seamlessly from this deep desire to give thanks to God, [that] the totality of our living – cooking, eating, cleaning, preaching, teaching, parenting, building, repairing, healing, creating – becomes one sustained and ever-expanding act of worship" (21). Our attitudes of thanksgiving or bitterness will travel through every aspect of our lives. There is no category immune to it. No matter what we do, we do it as who we are.

We have lost this sense of totality in our modern Christian thinking. We think that our obligations (there is that duty word) to our faith consist of Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. It does not go past the safe areas where Christians can be Christians without fear of offending someone. We can turn it on when needed. But we were not redeemed to offer parts of our lives back in worship. We were not redeemed to give us one more club to be a part of. We were redeemed so that the entirety of our lives would be radically transformed, that everything would be reoriented, and that our mind, body, and spirit would be given new life, and new direction. If we are to be lovers of God in a fallen world, we need to recapture this sense of totality. We cannot divide our affections, we cannot serve two masters.

The Meaning of the Sabbath

"From a Scriptural point of view, Sabbath observance is a matter of life and death," (30). Wirzba spends his time in this next chapter talking about the historical context, and historical meaning of Sabbath keeping. We all know the fourth commandment concerning this topic. "Remember the Sabbath day,

and keep it Holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it," (Ex. 20:8,11). This reference to creation in the command reminds the children of Israel that this is something fundamental to the created order. This is not some capricious or random ordinance. It is intrinsic to the makeup of this world.

Often we grow up hearing the story of creation, and upon reaching the end of day six, we feel as though we have reached the end. Creation ended with the creation of man. But this is not reading the text thoughtfully. You might say, "What else did God make? He didn't do anything but rest on the seventh day?" Here is the point. God doesn't need to rest. Creation did not tucker Him out. It was not exhausting work for Him, so much so that He need to have a lie down, after six days of toughing it out. Not at all. Our good Father continued to create even on the seventh day, as he created rest for us. He made six days for us to work, and made one day for us to rest. But what does this rest mean? How are we to respond to and have dominion over this aspect of creation? One thing it means is that creation is incomplete without rest. Creation is unfulfilled or deficient without Sabbath. It is an essential, integral part of this life. There is no work without rest, nor is there rest without work. But what does this rest mean, or look like? In our escapist, amusement-centered culture, we often think of rest as simply ceasing to work. Rest is sitting in an armchair, with a can of beer in the hand a football game on the tele. But God did not rest on the seventh day so that we could have an excuse to be lazy, or unproductive one day a week. "God's rest or *shabbot*...is not simply a cessation from activity but rather the lifting up and celebration of everything," (33). Wrapped up in the seventh day is God's pronouncement that creation was very good. It is in this light that rest becomes the 'lifting up and celebration of everything'. In resting on the last day of creation, God enjoyed and reveled in it. This kind of rest is unique to our God. The Triune God of Scripture delights in what His hands have made. In giving us this created day of rest, He invites us to delight in it as well. Through this delight we commune with Him, and come to understand Him more fully. "Without [Sabbath] creation, though beautiful, would be without an all-encompassing, eternal objective, which is to participate in the life of God forever. And so what Sabbath [rest] does is give us a positive vision of the world's goodness, a vision in which there is no fear, distrust, or strife. There is rather a celebration of, and a sharing in, God's own experience of delight," (33).

It is interesting that throughout Scripture, God promises to bless this type of living, and yet we prefer, in our modern society, to trust in our own mechanisms for prosperity and delight. For example, in the business world, we think that closing our stores on Sunday is a quaint and sentimental nod toward the good old days, when economic pressures were less complicated and demanding. It doesn't cross our minds that God might actually be faithful to His promises to "make [us] ride on the heights of the earth, [and be fed] with the heritage of Jacob [our] father," (Is. 58:14). We convince ourselves that we must do everything in our power to put a buck in the till. God has, again, been relegated to spiritual matters that pertain to club activities on Sunday. But that is not Sabbath living. That is not our God. Our God wants our complete trust, our complete surrender of how we think the world needs to run. But this means letting go of the reins. And we are rarely capable of doing this. But unless we do, we will only drive ourselves into the ground, for that is the only direction we in our own strength know how to go. "To forget or deny Sabbath is thus to withhold our lives from their most authentic purposes in God. It is to claim that our worrisome ways are better or count more than the intentions of God. It is to put ourselves at the center of creation – the very definition of sinfulness – rather than God's own delight," (34).

Why we grasp at our own independence is beyond comprehension. It is the first and final sin, the sin of human pride. Satan knows to attack us in the exact spot, and all temptations find their root in this. It is

the Temptation of the Garden. “Do you need God? Do you really need Him to live? Can you not experience richness and joy apart from His dictatorship?” We since have been tempted in every form to believe this very lie. But it is lie, for we forget the One who created air for us to breathe, lungs to take advantage of this fact, automatically, without our need to constantly pay attention. He created sunshine that chemically changes plants that grow in created dirt, and this produces food that keeps our bodies alive. The list is endless with examples that testify of our complete and utter dependence on God for all of life. The Spoken Word of God holds all of life together, and when we rise and proclaim ourselves great, as Nebuchadnezzar did atop his palaces, we spit in the face of God. All is gift. And gift demands gratitude, for it acknowledges that it did not originate in us. This gratitude has one natural and blessed expression: Worship. As Wirzba says,

Worship is the natural, near inevitable, outgrowth of a life that no longer esteems itself to thrive through “the might of my own hand” (Deut. 8:17) but instead through the grace of God. When we worship, we give our full attention to God, acknowledging that if left to ourselves alone our world would crumble and fall. God is worthy of our praise and thanksgiving because God is unfathomably generous and kind, having created a world worthy of our unending joy and delight. (36)

We were created as worshiping beings, as priests, leading the world in praise, bringing the Creator to the creation, and the creation to the Creator. We come before the Almighty with open, uplifted hands, both ready to give, and to receive. This was the original call of our elder brother Israel. They were called to be a nation of priests to the gentiles, to be God’s light in the darkness, salt in a flavorless world of unbelief. They would minister to God, and bring before Him the praise of the people. In turn, their lives would be testimonies to the everlasting and steadfast love of the Lord. Through them, the God of Abraham proved to the nations of gentiles that He in fact was God over all God’s. The God’s of the river, the mountains, and the sea could not stand in opposition to this God of all life. One particular testimony was the act of Sabbath. The ancient, predominately agricultural world, scoffed at the idea of resting one day in seven, especially during the harvest. Their lives depending on the take each year, the thought of not spending every minute of every day finishing this task, was ludicrous. But God said no. Six days you shall work, and the seventh is to be declared a holy day. On it you shall do no work, neither you nor your servants, nor your beasts of burden. Engrained into the very fabric of their week was a reminder that we do not control our lives. It is not the harvest that sustains us, but the goodness of God. This leaving the unharvested crops one day a week demands faith that the God of all will not allow those crops to spoil. This faith forces farmers to rely and trust in God’s ability to take care of them.

Worry and doubt [are] byproducts of a fundamental doubt of the goodness of God, a suspicion that maybe God’s grace is limited or not enough...Sabbath rest is thus a call to Sabbath trust, a call to visibly demonstrate in our daily living that we know ourselves to be upheld and maintained by the grace of God rather than the strength and craftiness of our own hands. To enjoy a Sabbath day, we must give up our desire for total control. We must learn to live the generosity of manna falling all around us...As we cease from our steady toil, we learn the valuable lesson that the whole of creation does not exist exclusively for us and to meet our desires. Creation belongs to God. It is at its best when it fulfills God’s intentions for it. We are at our best – we most exhibit the image of God – when our work aids those intentions and when it supports and maintains the generosity of God. (37-38, 40)

The root of it all is this: we are not our own. We do not exist in a state of independence. Rather we are interdependent beings all supported by the living, breathing, shining, growing, rippling, and crashing Word of God. It is here, in the joy and laughter of God’s creation, that we find our meaning.

From Sabbath to Sunday

Put succinctly, in the person of Jesus the Sabbath aspirations that heretofore guided the Israelites now find a most visible and compelling expression. If we want to see, feel, hear, taste, and touch what God's delight in creation concretely amounts to, we can do no better than to consider the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. As the early medieval pope Saint Gregory the Great put it: "For us, the true Sabbath is the person of our Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ." (43)

Many believers do not even realize that sometime in the first century AD, Christians began meeting on Sunday, instead of on Saturday, which was the Jewish Sabbath. From Creation on, the people of God celebrated the Sabbath on Saturday, which was, and still is, the seventh day. It was on Saturday that God created rest. It was on Saturday that God commanded our elder brothers to cease from all work, and to keep it holy; to turn back their feet from doing their own pleasure, and to call the Sabbath a delight. But if this was the day on which rest was created, which for thousands of years bore the name of Sabbath, then why have we all grown up worshipping on Sunday? The answer to that question is fully and completely one Name: Jesus. Wirzba notes, "Just as the Sabbath represents the climax or fulfillment of creation, so too Jesus reveals what God's intentions for life have been all along" (43).

To understand this we must remember on which day Christ made all things new. It was on the First Lord's Day, on the morning after the Sabbath, that Mary and the others came to visit the tomb, and found it empty. It was on a Sunday that our Lord was raised from the dead. And we find in this act, the central hope that we have, that the dead can be made alive. Death now is conquered. There have been two events in history that bear the authority to change everything, to reorient all things to themselves. The first is the birth of Christ, which has changed even our calendars. We live in the year we do, because Jesus was born in a manger over 2000 years ago. The second is this day of resurrection, this day of new birth. It too has changed our calendars. We now worship our God on this first day of the week, instead of the last day, as did our elder brothers, the Jews of the Old Covenant. They looked forward to their salvation, they anticipated it, much like they anticipate the Sabbath throughout the week. Their mindset was "Salvation is coming, our Rest is coming, our eternal Sabbath is coming." This was pictured for them in the structure of their week. Saturday, being the last day, was always before them, in front of their schedules. They continually moved toward it. In the world Christ has transformed, we have the honor of looking back at our salvation. Our mindset is, "Salvation has come, our Rest has come, our eternal Sabbath has come in the Person of Jesus." This is pictured for us in the structure of *our* week. Sunday, being the first day, the day of resurrection and new life, is always where we start, and move out from. Our days start here, and move out into the world. We start in Christ, and take Him to the nations throughout the rest of the week.

It would be foolish to say that Jesus abolished the Jewish Sabbath, just as it is foolish to say that He came to abolish the Law. Rather he came to fulfill both the Sabbath, and the Law. In both cases his fulfillment meant a transformation. Which makes sense, for in the birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, the whole world was made new. Therefore the Sabbath has not been exiled to the realm of ancient historical practices. Much to the contrary, it has been re-born in the very person of Christ, and on His day of resurrection. Seen this way, it is inevitable that Sunday has become the new Sabbath. It is the day of rebirth, of new life, of the hope of our eternal rest. Paul tells the Colossians,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,

that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col 1:15-20)

The world has been recreated, and once again, it takes place in a garden (Jn 19:41). As God, in and through and for the Word, created the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1, so again, God, in and through and for the Word, recreates the heavens and the earth in John 20. It is why John tells us in his vision, the one sitting on the throne declares "Behold, I am making all things new." All things, whether on earth or in heaven, are being reconciled to God, making peace by the blood of his cross.

So here we are now. We live and move and have our being in the new creation. This does not mean that the world will not be finally and completely transformed at the end of days. It simply means that the transformation has already begun. Just as our own bodies being in the end fully and finally transformed into the incorruptible does not contradict the truth that we are undergoing transformation this side of glory, so it is with all creation. What are the means God uses to bring about this transformation of all creation? It is clearly the Church, the new Israel. As Peter says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, *that you may proclaim* the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10). We are a nation of priests, and what do priests do? They go proclaim, and make disciples of all the nations, teaching them to obey all that they have been commanded. Why? Because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to our Lord Jesus Christ, and Lo, He is with us always, even to the end of the age.

This is why it is inevitable that our Sabbath be transformed and reborn into the day of rebirth and transformation. Every week we celebrate a "little Easter." How is celebration marked if not by and through feasting? As Isaiah says,

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.
It will be said on that day,
"Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us
This is the Lord; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." (Is 25:6-9)

The central symbol of this feast is of course the Table that Christ Himself sets before us. It is at this Table, a Table we sit at every week, that we partake of the rich food of the body of Christ, and the well-aged wine of His blood. It is here that bread and wine become a feast of joy and resurrection, because "He has swallowed up on this mountain, the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations." How does God accomplish this, if not through sending His Church to the nations, making disciples of them, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey Christ? It is to this purpose the Sabbath has been reborn. We come to worship, to start the week in Christ, in public, as a public proclamation that Christ indeed sits on His Throne. It is this reality that we take to the nations Monday

through Saturday, proclaiming that the veil of death has indeed been cast off in the person and work of Christ. It is also how we must live locally, in the context of our local communities. If we do not live unto our neighbor as if death has been cast off, how will we ever be effective on the national scale? Living Christ to others starts where you are, and moves out. It starts in your own home with your own loved ones. Then it continues out to your neighbors, your community, your town, your city, your county, your state and so on. Salvation is not just a personal event. It happens in space and time, unto space and time. Our personal salvation recreates the world of our existence and reorients the time through which we pass. It gives us new purpose and new direction. It is not simply a blue ribbon that we attain, and pin onto our bulletin board of personal achievements. Wirzba again,

[We] need to move beyond the highly individualistic notion of salvation that many of us assume – that Jesus is significant because of the salvation he makes possible for individual believers... The work of Christ extends to and links up with the whole of creation...Christ, in other words, does not take us out of creation to save us, but rather saves us precisely by enabling us to enter more fully and more harmoniously into it, and then to find in this deep immersion the reality of God. (45)

Wirzba continues,

We do not live alone or as rugged individualists. We need each other and depend upon the sympathy and support we provide to each other. In a very real sense, the health of human living, its success and fulfillment, depends upon the health and wholeness of the many relations that bodily existence requires...All wholeness, in the end, is a reflection of a gracious God who cares for us all by showering us with the gifts of bodies, food, and community. To be healthy in any way whatsoever is, whether we appreciate it or not, to bear witness to God's continuing involvement in the maintenance and wholeness of creation. If we are attentive, our whole lives should be one long act of thanksgiving and praise. (46-47)

This long act of thanksgiving and praise is our Sabbath life. It is Sunday living itself out Monday through Saturday. To return to the Table, it is why it is called Communion. It is a public celebration done in Community. The table was never meant to be an individual experience, the same way salvation is never an isolated event. The Body of Christ is the new humanity. We are the new creation, recreated in the garden of the empty tomb. This is our hope and our rest. It is our eternal Sabbath.

Sunday, far from being the obliteration of Sabbath teaching, represents a profound rearticulation of God's overarching purpose and plan for creation. Sunday is our day of joy, for here we remember our memberships one with another and commit ourselves to the health and wholeness – the salvation – of physical and social bodies, of communities and creation, made possible by Christ's resurrection power and redeeming love. (51)

The Practice of Delight

We have looked at what the Sabbath is, why it is, and when it is. It remains, among other things, for us to look at what we do with it. As Francis Schaeffer historically asked, "How should we then live?" It seems that it would be obvious that with all that has been said, the Sabbath would make some difference in our daily routines. But what does that difference look like? What should it look like? Wirzba comments,

Sunday is the day when Christ's followers most visibly gather to pledge their allegiance to the ways of Jesus. Yet the activity of being a church, the work of discipleship and hospitality, is not confined to that one day... The real test of our allegiance and commitment occurs in the everyday, as we work with colleagues, raise our kids, care for our elderly, construct our built environments, tend to our lands and

waters, and do our shopping. These are the places where the feast of the “new creation” is either realized or not. These are the times when Christ’s resurrection power comes to fruition or not. (49)

The difference that sets believers apart from unbelievers is the presence of real and solid joy, or delight. The life of the believer thus becomes one long string of moments defined by joy. It is only in joy that we can know rest. It is this life of joy and rest that becomes the strongest apologetic to an unbelieving world. It is when communities of believers truly dwell with one another in joy and rest that the new culture of Christ begins to grow, and that the City of God begins to take shape and distinguish itself from the city of Man. This is what Jesus means when He says, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). We find our basis for delight in the two creations discussed above. The first creation gave us fingers, and taste buds, eyes and ears, and a sense of smell. To interact with creation through the senses is one of God’s ways of showering us with His love and joy, the delight He finds in creation. The second creation, the recreation in Christ, gives life to those senses, granting the sensors and understanding of Who and Where this all comes from, and what it is all for. It is in the rebirth that we are able to take joy in what we sense, because we realize through the Spirit, that God Himself takes joy in it. As Wirzba explains,

[In] expressing delight we show our joy and great pleasure in the gifts of God. To take delight is finally to relish the goodness and beauty of God’s work and to see in each other the trace of God. It is to recognize and appreciate that we are all gifts to each other and that our mutual welcome forms the basis for convivial life together. This is why the exercise of delight readily slides into acts of praise and thanksgiving. How can we not be thankful or express praise once we are aware of the countless kindnesses that feed and inform our living? (53)

It is on this food that humans choke. Our sinful, self-important nature continually wants to deny the need of God, or the relevance His work has on our lives. We want to argue that we are self-sufficient, able to take care of ourselves. We build monuments to our achievements; honor great pioneering men as if they were gods; dedicate entire seasons to the pursuit of our own athletic abilities. Simply put, we are full of ourselves. But true joy can only be found when we realize that life can only be sustained from the outside. At the basic level, we need food, and that food comes from outside of us. It comes from others dedicating their lives to growing food and harvesting it so that we can eat it. This should be cause for joy. Others are doing things that I have no talent for, and no time for as my gifts allow me to do only certain things. This is the essence of community. We live mutually dependant on one other to do the things we are trained or gifted in doing. Taking another step back, we are completely dependent on Another for the essentials of life such as breathing, eyelids, heart muscles, rain, sunshine, soil, emotions, etc. We have a fundamental dependence on the Creator of all things, who sustains all things and holds all things together by the power of His Word. Have you ever considered what keeps cells, the building blocks of everything, what keeps them together? What binds us together, bodily? What is the adhesive that keeps our bodies (and every solid thing) from simply falling apart? In every way possible we are dependent on others, and especially on God. This means that others and the Creator of all have our real needs in mind. Now God alone does so unselfishly. We keep others’ needs in mind so that we can serve our selves. But interdependence is still a reality, vertical as well as horizontal. This is the basis for true joy, for joy is founded in gratitude. When we come to our senses (in a very real way) and realize, by God’s grace, that we live because of others, and become grateful to those who bless us in this distinct way, we will find joy. Real gratitude begets real joy.

It is at this point that we must realize that everything, and I mean *everything*, that comes our way is a gift from God. If God is sovereign, and He must be, then everything that happens is from Him. If this is so, every moment of every day is a moment defined by who God is, and what He has from eternity past decided to do. Now if Who God is is love, and what He has from eternity past decided to do is save you,

then what defines every moment must be gift. But the key here is to recognize that what God thinks is gift and what we think is gift is not always the same thing. Wirzba states,

Because delight is ground in the love of God, our capacity for delight is not to be identified with our ability to experience personal pleasure...Saying that delight is not be identified with pleasure does not mean that delight is without pleasure. Clearly what God delights in is also pleasing to God. The reason we don't begin from the perspective of pleasure, however, is that its focus is too much on ourselves...The goodness of creation does not narrowly depend on the possibility that it is good for me (this was one of the important lessons learned by Job) but more broadly on the affirmation that a good and loving God made it...God's goodness, how and why it appears the way that it does, is in the end a deep mystery to which we must submit with appropriate humility. (58)

The gift is not a gift because it is something we like, or think we need. Often our moments are full of things we don't like and feel like we have never needed in our life. But that is because we place our goals and priorities at the center and see life revolving around them. But gift is defined by God giving it. If God gives it to you, it is a gift. Another word for it is Grace. If God gives you life it is grace. If God gives you joy, it is grace. If God gives you pain and suffering, are His gifts no longer gracious? If not what are they? Ungracious? Does Scripture give us a picture of an ungracious God? Never. Everything that comes from Gods hand must be and is gift, or grace. The fact that He made us at all is grace. It was unnecessary. We are abundance. We are overflow. We are not needed in any way. Therefore we ourselves, simply by existing, are an expression of grace. It follows then, that everything we are given, hard and easy moments alike, are all expressions of grace as well. Any attention an unnecessary creation receives at all must grace, it must be gift.

Remember Who our God is. He is Love. He has promised us Life, and Joy, and Peace and Rest. If these are the things He has promised us, and we take His faithfulness for granted, then anything and everything we experience, every moment easy and hard, has Love, Life, Joy, Peace and Rest as the goal. We alone misinterpret the hard moments, believing God to be either not sovereign over all things, impotent against the forces that caused this unpleasantness, or to be an unloving grouch, out to make our lives miserable. Both interpretations stem from keeping ourselves at the center. If we believe our personal happiness to be the be all and end all of creations purpose, then of course, hard times will throw a rock into the gears. However, if we step back and acknowledge God's purposes for the redemption of His people, and the transformation of the World to be at the center of every moment, we will be in a frame of mind to interpret the hard times as grace. We will see God bringing us through rotten things to mold us and fashion us, to remove the dross from our lives. Does the silver or gold cry out as the refiner turns up the heat to an unpleasant temperature and scraps it with a sieve removing the impurities? It won't if it realizes that what is being removed is more dangerous than the unpleasant situation it currently finds itself in. And if the metal believes that anything the refiner decides to do is gift, its first thought toward the intensified heat will be one of gratitude.

We can only understand creation, all of what God is doing in this world, if we see at the center of all purpose salvation, the establishment of the City of God, and the transformation of the World through it. If that fills the vision of our understand of the meaning of life, then anything that fills our moments will understood through that lens. It is then that joy in the midst of sorrow and pain is conceivable, and indeed very possible. God is not here solely to give us individuals personal happiness. We as Americans need to get this lie out of our heads. God is far bigger than that. He did not die on a cross so that we could own lots of stuff, and play golf twice a week. If we confess this selfishness, and understand God's intentions, and see how we as His children play a role, then we can be used of Him to accomplish those purposes of salvation. It is then that we learn to love not only the purposes but the methods as well. To

love the hard times as well as the easy, for it is the hard times that force us to depend on Him. It is then that we will have the same mind as Christ as Paul encourages the Philippians:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. *Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.* Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (2:1-11)

As we truly see the needs of others as more important than our own, then there is no suffering or pain that will hold us rapt, no hard time that will lead us to misery or despair. It is only then that we can “trust that the ways of God are shaped through and through by love...Without this affirmation we cannot pronounce the “amen” that signifies our willingness for things to be as God wishes” (61). This immediately points out our discontentment. We are often not willing to pronounce with God an “amen” to what He does in our lives. We grumble and complain about this and that, things that hold no eternal significance. And it is precisely because we don’t trust our God to be Loving. But if we submit ourselves to God’s plan in humility, we find we have discovered the true joy we have sought all along. For true freedom and true joy is found when we submit to the role we were created for. Wirzba concludes,

Saying “amen” we now see, takes us to the heart of Sabbath celebration, because there can be no true celebration, no true worship, without acknowledgement of and submission to the ways of God...As a community of worship, we try to make sure that our praise and thanksgiving are not tainted by the assumption that we could live better if we were in charge...Authentic celebration and worship take the focus off us so that God, as the giver of every good and perfect gift, can be praised. As we recognize that life comes from God and does not depend on our own frantic or stressful exertions, we can finally enter into that deep rest and contentment that constitutes life at its most complete and authentic pitch...In the words of Michael Hanby, “Only a joyous people can sustain pointless activity, festivity, and rest. Only a people who can sustain pointless activity, festivity, and rest can be joyous.” Delight makes rest possible, for in its practice we have given up the need to secure the world and our existence by our own hands or in terms of our limited (often arrogant) rational accounting...The practice of delight is the life we perform under the inspiration and full acknowledgment of God’s gracious presence in the world, a presence that lets us know we are loved and that invites us to extend this same love to others. (62-63)

The Decline of Delight

If everything said previously is true, why is it so hard to have joy? Why is it next to impossible to be content? While at the fundamental level, these are issues of the heart, and the Spirit’s work of transformation is the only ultimate cure, there are factors which distract all of us, even if we are born again, and already trust God on some level. These distractions are manifestations of our culture’s ideology and philosophy. We have been steeped in them for so long, it is difficult for us to step out of our own box and make some objective observations. Regardless we will attempt such a discussion.

If we trace back through history, attempting to discover the root of our current modern ideology, we will come knocking on the door of the Enlightenment: that great and noble period of history when all

rational and productive thought was shot to hell. It was at this point in our history that God was demonstrably dethroned, and the human ability to think was declared king. Cogito Ergo Sum, I think therefore I Am, became the chief cornerstone, upon which the monolith of modern thought was built. At first God was not done away with. He was simply relegated to a category of thought. If our mind is autonomous, then our thoughts are our slaves. Therefore everything we think must be organized and categorized for them to make any sense. Slaves must be kept in order, and half starved for them to be broken enough to obey. It was during this season of bright light that man began thinking in terms of systems, and organizational file folders. God followed hard upon the heels of Frankfurter, and was replaced quickly by Herring, as the alphabet dictated. God became a proposition, as did Truth, and Salvation, and Redemption. Christ Himself became a statement, no longer to be the Living Word. Thinking and Reasoning Man felt empowered by this categorization of the Holy One. He felt as if he were finally in control of his destiny. The mind of man became the end of all discussion. It was the decider of all fate. God no longer held any power as an omnipotent being, and consequently became ornamental. The church bought into this just shy of hook, line, and sinker. We produced Systematic Theologies. Not evil in themselves, by no means. But the effect they had was (is) undeniable. The writers of said theologies no doubt had the right priorities, and honored God for who He is, and gave Him thanks. But the damage that has been done to those of us downstream is tremendous. We have an extremely difficult time thinking about certain terms such as salvation, or redemption or the Church apart from the category they belong to. We have trouble imposing on Scripture the categories we have come to take for granted. This led to narrow and selective interpretations. These interpretations led to practices that completely misunderstood the nature of God. Three hundred years after the "Enlightenment" the church had developed into a somewhat spineless entity. Having been steeped in the Ornamental God for so long, their hope was in a savior whose reality was simply emotional and spiritual. All physical and real dimensions were under the power of scientific reason, and systematic thought. God was a God of the heart, and a God of love and of lovely feelings. But He had no real power to change lives. It was not without reason that Nietzsche rightly observed that God was Dead. Now obviously he was wrong on one level. But from one perspective, he rightly understood what the world had come to. It no longer needed God. God was useless. If all He was was an emotional deity that made the world look pretty, but had no use in the world of politics, or science, or mathematics, or history, or music, etc., then what need was there for such a god. The industrial revolution galvanized in the mind of man that he could accomplish anything he set his mind to. This further galvanized the belief that God was no longer a necessary being. Evolution explained our origins, Industry explained our future, Politics explained our reason for living. The church even bought into this, explaining away messy portions of scripture like Genesis, and the Gospel's resurrection account. Nothing applies to us, but the stories are nice. It is no wonder that the following century was the bloodiest the world had ever known. All these philosophies of the enlightenment came to their logical conclusions in one massive worldwide holocaust. The reasoning goes like this: The Mind is autonomous. If the mind is autonomous, then I am in control of my thoughts. If I am in control of my thoughts, then I am in control of my actions, for they are simply outworkings of my thoughts. If that is true, then morality is based on the common good. If the common good is determined by thinking individuals that believe their own desires are autonomous, those individuals will become kings. Those kings will determine what is good for all, based on what is good for themselves, for self is the god we must bow to. Religion therefore becomes a superstitious necessity for the appeasement of less powerful minds. The God of Scripture ceases to exist, otherwise my whole house of fog and cards would blow over in the wind. If God is dead, and morality is relative to a common good determined by a few stronger, faster thinkers, Evolution makes perfect sense, for survival of the fittest is the reigning paradigm. Now we no longer bear the image of God, having been reduced to the byproduct of billions of years of mistakes. Now you have an interesting situation. God is dead, morality is determined by the fittest, who have their own interests at heart, because Self must be

worshipped; the world has no meaning because it is simply evolving from one mutation to another. There is nothing but antiquarian and superstitious rules and guidelines keeping the stronger from taking from the weaker. Throw into the equation the new inventions of the industrial revolution and emblazoned wills of self worshipping dictators and you have the makings of the 20th century.

What happens then? How are we here? Between the wars the entertainment industry introduced itself. People were really suffering, and so people needed escape. The church offered no real hope. After all they had discovered that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, the scriptures weren't really written by God, and that science really makes more sense than stories so full of unscientific ideas. No, liberals were taking the honest roots of evangelicalism and turning them into safe and endearing stories, morality tales that you didn't have to listen to if you didn't want to. But humans have an innate feeling that there is something better out there than the war, death, and destruction that was everywhere. So the entertainment industry boomed, and continues to do so to this day. Hollywood is both a world of escape and pulpit for escapist ideologies. Add to that the increased segregation brought on by suburbia, freeways, the internet, cell phones, drive through windows, and self checkout lines, and what you have is a fairly dysfunctional society, that no longer knows how to relate to people, care for the needs of others, or is connected in any way with those who provide the fundamental necessities of their life.

Now I admit, there are some sweeping generalizations here mentioned, and much of what has been good has been left out. God reigns on high, Christ sits on the throne, and the Holy Spirit is at work in this world to bring the nations to their knees. That is happening, and the Church has been growing ever since the Son of Man was seen coming on the clouds of heaven. There is nothing here that should give those who trust in God any reason to despair. By no means. But what this brief outline shows is just how deep our paradigms go. We have been affected by 500 years of philosophy and we don't even know it. The effect that this has had has been tremendous. One concrete example: Many (I do not say all) would rather be amused by flashing lights and sentimental music and predictable plot lines, than sit down and talk with real human beings. Many would rather talk to someone through some mediated form than by means of a face to face encounter. Why is this? We want to escape real life interaction. We don't want to deal with the person next to us. Why? When we do, we are forced to recognize our dependence on them, and this is too much for us to do. Why? Because self is god, and must be worshipped. If self must be appeased, and self doesn't want to acknowledge its dependence, self will dictate that our actions limit our exposure to situations that will make our interdependence dreadfully clear. Wirzba describes the situation this way:

We are so caught up in the worlds of consumption and commodification, the spectacle and the political language of spin, that we no longer know who we are, where we are, and how our living is made possible...Especially in a time of widely professed belief in God, we need to acknowledge that the patterns of our dominant culture pronounce and encourage practical atheism. In a time of practical atheism people are cut off from deep relationships with others, which means that we are cut off from God's life-giving and life-sustaining ways at work in those relationships. Having lost our contact with God, we turn to religious beliefs or pious sentiments that are forced, hollow, or merely ornamental. Though we desperately search for moments of peace and joy, we do not find them, for the structures of our living keep us trapped within a graceless world of our own or someone else's devising. (74-75)

It's not surprising that this is the case. Relational living is tricky. It's messy, and often can be painful. Others don't always acknowledge your god, Self. They have their own idol in their hearts that they bow down to. And so relational living is tolerated, if not avoided altogether. But, turning to more hopeful words, Jesus Christ purchased us and gave us new hearts, so that we may learn how to live relationally. For we were created to live in community, and our bodies (our whole person) find complete satisfaction in such an arrangement. Outside of vibrant Christian living, a life that sees Christ in others, and seeks to

bless them in their need, we become bored with life. Outside of Christian living we become disinterested in others, and unimpressed by the role others play in our lives. But Christ came to restore humanity to true culture, to true community. In the City of God we find our true roles as servants, and find that true servanthood defines culture. It is only in culture and community that we can find hope and peace and rest during the hard times of pain and suffering. It is by buoying each other up in the grace and gift of God that we can together turn our faces toward Him and receive His mercy and joy.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

Pain and Suffering

As Christians we are servants of a dying world, a world ravaged by the fall, ravaged by sin. A world that is full of injustice, pain, misery, suffering, and despair. Real life is hard. Real living is difficult. However, what we fail to see is that, though the pain is real, and not to be made light of, the despair is of our own making. The problem lies in how we understand the world: the presuppositions we carry concerning ourselves, our 'natural and inalienable rights' that we feel should naturally be a consequence of all the good we do in this world where there are so many worse sinners than us. Wirzba is quick to point this out, and reduce the problem to its core:

Especially in an era of individualism, we are readily tempted to reduce suffering to whatever impedes our freedom or brings us displeasure and discomfort. Think here of the common complaint that life does not go as we planned or expected. It is easy to interpret events as evil or to claim that the world we live in is rigged against our personal success. But is it really? The problem with this anthropocentric, even egocentric approach is that it assumes that the whole of reality should be geared to the satisfaction of our narrow wishes. This assumption is deeply at odds with the creation narrative that proclaims God's [Sabbath rest] as creation's ultimate goal, and with the experience of Job, who learns through his pain and suffering that the goods of this world are not tailored to his interests and that the scope of God's concern extends far beyond humanity to include all of creation. Our best efforts to establish an accountant's ledger of good and evil will often miss the mark. (79)

As Christians, we are servants of a dying world. Our purpose is to be a light, a city on a hill, leading the way for people who are fallen, broken and full of despair, bringing them to a place where pain and suffering are given meaning, and context. As Christians, we offer the only way of understanding pain and suffering that leads to hope and peace. It is simple. If there is no God, there is no final justice, where all that is evil and bad will be punished. More than that, if there is no God, there is no such thing as "evil and bad". There is no fixed, absolute standard upon which to base any system of morality. Again, if the individual is king, and the independent mind is the final authority, you have simple chaos. If self and self's desires are the standard upon which we build our moralities, our ethics, the basis for whether we do this or that where it regards others, then all is relative, and whether I shoot you in the head or bring you flowers doesn't matter. They are potentially both equally valid actions consistent with the standards established by the reigning authorities: me, myself, and I. In this system, there is no hope for utter and final judgment, and all past atrocities simply become meaningless instances of the individual's right to choose. If Darwin was right, why was Hitler wrong? In this system the death camps of 1940's Poland become no better or worse than Mr. Rodgers Neighborhood. Both are equally valid expressions of the individual's right to choose. And the freedom of the individual to choose as he or she desires, is, as we

know, a “natural and inalienable right”. Pain and suffering therefore become meaningless adjectives, unable to hold any real significance.

There are, obviously, major problems with this way of thinking. First, it simply isn’t true. There is a God and He laughs at those who think and act otherwise. Second, it is inconsistent with how the natural mind works. Even pagans understand that what Hitler did was wrong. They understand pain to be painful, and suffering to be difficult. They are real experiences, the meaning of which transcends culture and language and time. This is so because all human beings bear the image of God, and in so doing know, deep down, the difference between good and evil. We know instinctually that shooting your neighbor deserves judgment and some form of justice. And so the disconnect becomes clearer. We want justice and desire punishment for the breaking of moral and civil law. We want the standards that make it possible to determine what is right and what is wrong. These are necessary for any civilization to endure and achieve peace. We want standards that apply across the board, and are a higher authority than our individual freedom to choose. We want the standards, but we don’t want the One who gives the standards, because He Himself is the Standard. So we are left with an inconsistent and dysfunctional society, heading inevitably toward dissolution. A house that is built on sand, no matter how stable it looks, and how close the builders copied the blueprints of the house built on rock, that house will fall. It may take longer for the siding to deteriorate because it borrowed materials from the other house, but it will, and must fall.

As Christians, we are servants to a dying world, a world whose foundation is sand; a society whose moral fiber is borrowed; a people who are blind to the ridiculousness of a Standardless-standard. But their blindness is self-inflicted. They suppress what they know to be true. A real problem arises, though, when the Church, who is not suppressing what she believes, acts in such a way as to offer no hope and no peace. We, as the Church, do this when we minimize the reality of pain and suffering. We know that our God is a God of love, and believe that He has created a world full of joy and delight, and trust that He desires our good in giving us Sabbath rest. But when we minimize pain and suffering, or define the offending events as random, meaningless acts, we betray a heart that does not trust God. We minimize pain by defining it as every instance in which we don’t get what we want. It is at these times that life becomes “hard”. Things are not going our way, and so we bring out our sheets of sanctimonious sackcloth. But this understanding of pain rests on the conviction that our needs, our desires, our wills and choices are the standard to which life must obediently play out. If this is our hermeneutic to interpreting life, then there is no room left for serving others. We need therefore to recover a biblical definition of pain.

The problem in the Church arises from our wanting to protect the holiness of God. There are two available options. Either God is a bystander, watching random and unfortunate acts occur, or He is sovereign, and the author of life, the difficult parts as well as the joyful ones. In the first instance, He is not really God at all, and so therefore if pain is the result of randomness, who cares. What does it matter, for there is no real god able to redeem or give meaning to the pain? But in the second, there is a Father who has created us for a reason. He has fashioned us and breathed life into us, so that we may glorify Him, and share His love with others. It is with this interpretive key that we unlock the meaning of pain and suffering in our lives. When we truly experience hardships, not the disappointments that come from our desires not being fulfilled, but from physical or emotional trials, we are being equipped for communal living. If the whole focus of life is outward, and not inward, every circumstance, and every experience is imbedded with an outward trajectory. The question should not be, “Why am I going through this?” Rather our inquiries should sound like, “What does this trial equip me to do as I live in fellowship with other people who will eventually face similar situations?” And more importantly, “How does this trial create in me and in my life an ability or opportunity to bring glory to the Author of all

things, even this trial?" The real problem with pain is not that we experience it, but that we do nothing with it. In attributing it to blind forces of chance, we surround ourselves with purposelessness, and continue to feed the lie that what matters is our own comfort and security. As such pain and suffering become forces that need to be combated, like enemies. We must work hard to fend off the antagonistic attacks of hardships. But, as Wirzba notes:

Pain and suffering should not be cast as "problems" that need to be "explained" or "solved," eliminated because they represent an affront to the world we would choose or make for ourselves. In fact, it is a mistake to look for a "solution," since this becomes an excuse to avoid the communal disciplines of care and constancy that enable us together to bear, absorb, and grow through each other's hurt. (79)

It is at this point that we see the connection between pain and suffering, and Sabbath rest. At first these two might seem to be at odds with one another. If all things in our life are meant to have an outward teleology, then certainly the Sabbath rest God has created for us must be seen in the same way. If Sabbath rest is God's intention for all of creation, then our pain and our suffering play a part in achieving that end. This is true because the foundation for Sabbath Rest is the Cross of Jesus. Ultimate Pain and Ultimate Suffering was endured for the joy of Sabbath Rest. This act of the God-Man Jesus at once gave meaning to pain and gave purpose to suffering. In the cross of Jesus, and in the daily crosses we ourselves bear, we see Sabbath rest being brought to others. We see Him serving the dying world.

The dying world we inhabit is a system based on violence and death. A world in which the wills of every citizen compete for supremacy can have no other outcome. Wirzba comments,

Christ's resurrection, as the revelation and overcoming of our death-wielding ways, makes possible a new kind of life, restoring creation to its original intent of participating in God's own life of joy, peace, and [Sabbath rest]. The resurrection, in short helps us know what Creation is ultimately about as a forgiven and reconciled existence formed in grateful acceptance of gift upon gift. (83)

All of life is a gift from the hand of a Father who knows far more about 'what is good for us', and 'what we really need' than we ever could. As Christians, we are servants of a dying world. In picking up our cross daily, we are given the tools to appropriately understand the pain we experience, and are given the grace to come along side others and bear their burdens as well. Wirzba continues,

This humbling realization enables authentic thanksgiving and praise. It is also the basis upon which to build practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. Once we learn to appreciate our own lives and those around us as gifts from God, we do not need to enter into bitter struggle and inflict various forms of pain and suffering upon each other. The many relations that feed into our being and literally constitute it can now be embraced and celebrated as so many forms of manna from heaven. (83)

Our natural, unredeemed instinct is to find fault in others for our suffering. The Cross breaks this cycle by exposing the fact that true fault lies in ourselves. We are the fallen race of God-haters, worthy of the flood waters of judgment. But God in His grace has given Sabbath rest to us, His adopted children, through the sacrifice of Jesus. This means two things: first, "we have no right to expect a painless life, because Christ Himself did not" (83). "If the world hated me, they will also hate you." Secondly, we have been lavished with rest, and when we least deserved it. In this we too have been given the ability, and the responsibility to give rest to others. This is done primarily when they need rest, or in other words, when they are suffering. Sabbath rest, again, does not mean escapism, or relaxation. It means a full awareness of who God is, what it is exactly that He has done for you, and a willingness "to be transformed by the suffering of God Himself, and then from the perspective of this transformation welcome the whole creation with humility, care, gratitude, and the overall aim of celebration" (88).

We must not minimize the reality or the depth of pain that suffering brings. We must understand its full weight. Therefore we must not see it outside the context of a God who Himself endured the full weight of suffering and loss, and in so doing gave rest, peace, wholeness, and joy to the very people whose suffering He bore. To minimize pain and suffering is to minimize the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is to remove completely the hope that we have; hope that was given to us so that we might bring it to a dying world.

In Conclusion: Isaiah 58

1 "Cry aloud; do not hold back;
lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 Yet they seek me daily
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that did righteousness
and did not forsake the judgment of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they delight to draw near to God.
3 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no
knowledge of it?'
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own
pleasure, and oppress all your workers.
4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the Lord?
6 "Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'
If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking
wickedness,
10 if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
11 And the Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.
12 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many
generations; you shall be called the repairer of the
breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.
13 "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,
and call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;
14 then you shall take delight in the Lord,
and I will make you ride on the heights of the
earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob
your father, for the mouth of the Lord has
spoken."

Here in these verses we find grave warnings that the Church in these modern times should take to heart. In verse 2 we see an organized religion that has all the trappings of faithful worship but none of the substance. They seek the Lord daily, delighting to draw near and know the ways of the Lord. They even have the appearance of a righteous nation in their religious delight. But in fact their heart is far from the Lord. Verses 3-4 describe the problem. In the day of their fast, on their holy days, they seek their own pleasure, they oppress their neighbor, they quarrel and fight among themselves. Verse 5 confirms it. The Lord asks rhetorically if what He desired was simply outward piety. "Is this what I wanted you to do? Sit all day looking holy, while your heart is far from me?" No. This is not Sabbath Rest. The Lord continues with a vision of true rest and delight. Verses 6-7: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" The central idea of Sabbath Rest lies in this: Does our rest bless others and bring rest to them? Do we do unto the least of these, that which we would do unto Christ? Only then will our "light...break forth like the dawn." Only then will He say, when we cry out, "Here I am." His promises continue. It is promised rest that will overwhelm us in the day of gloom and darkness. In scorching lands, our desires will be satisfied, our bones made strong. In the deserts of pain and affliction we will be like a watered garden, an unfailing spring of water. In the day of trouble we will stand secure. This is what it means to turn our foot from doing our own pleasure on the Sabbath, on the Holy day of the Lord. "If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted," then we shall know what it means to honor the Sabbath, to take delight in the Lord, and honor His holy day. It is shrouded in this promise, that, if we do this, turning from our own ways, then we will ride on the heights of the earth, and be fed with the heritage of our fathers, "for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

One need not think very hard to see how this concept of God's holy day applies to the rest of life. If Worship is the center of who we are as a people, if cultus is at the middle of culture, then how we view the Sabbath will determine how we see the other six days. If the center of who we are as Christians is giving to others (be it rest, mercy, food, housing, clothing, a cold cup of water, etc), then this is what defines us. It is the mark of the Master. The call to delight in the day of the Lord is not simply a call to mind your p's and q's in church. It is a trumpet call, heralding a new way of living. It is resurrected life that God calls us to. It is a life that has denied itself, and has committed itself to others. Our lives are not our own. Again, does our rest bless other and bring rest to them? This is our new modus operandi. This is at the center of who we are as Christians. As we honor God and delight in Him and in His gospel, joy will inevitably overflow into our weeks, and into our neighborhoods; joy that sees the needs of others as more important than our own. Joy that overflows into love and peace, kindness and goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. This is true rest. This is living the Sabbath.