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Michael E. Cafferky

Southern Adventist University, mcafferky@southern.edu

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Keeping Sabbath During the Week

Would Sabbath-keeping be less meaningful if, on the other six days, our work disrupted human well-being or otherwise failed to honor the Sabbath Giver?

By Michael E. Cafferky, DBA, MDiv

More than 350 undergraduate and graduate students are pursuing business degrees at Southern this year, with emphases ranging from accounting to long term care administration. Whether the class is part of an associate's degree or a capstone course in the MBA program, it's exciting to engage with students on the biblical foundations of business, a topic many of them have never considered. As Seventh-day Adventists, nowhere is there more freedom for that than in discussing the relationship between Sabbath and sustainability, an industry buzzword with deep biblical implications.

Adventists often refer to Sabbath as a test of loyalty to God. This test, as presented by some, comes down to which day of the week to keep for Sabbath: the first or the seventh. An unintended implication of this may be that once a person commits to the correct day of the week for worship, that is the extent of worship loyalty. But as important as the correct day of the week is for worship, Sabbath (at a much deeper level) also refers to our entire relationship with God. People rest from human efforts to achieve salvation while sharing in the commitment to a set of moral principles designed to foster flourishing life.

In other words, Sabbath is a miniature representation of the entire relationship with God that applies all week, not just one day in seven. Therein may lie Sabbath's test for us on a daily basis.

Sabbath Roots: Creation and Covenant

The Bible describes God as committed to all creation. He sustains it by His power. Therefore, creation has inherent value which must be honored not only on one day of the week during Sabbath worship, but also all week long while work is done. Wholeness in the biblical sense describes our

relationships with each other and our relationship with the Earth. To be genuine, worship on the Sabbath must be tied with worship of the Creator during the workweek; otherwise, Sabbath loses some of its meaning.

The Sabbath command rests at the center of the Ten Commandments. Obedience to its precepts is as much a response to grace as to a duty born of loyalty. The close relationship between Sabbath and our full relationship with God is described in terms of Sabbath being a sign. It is even spoken of as a covenant itself:

"You must observe my sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy... celebrate it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant" (Exodus 31:13-16).

But, think about it: Sabbath would cease to be a sign of our relationship with God if the principles of that relationship were applied only on the day of worship but ignored the other days of the week. The relationship is for all week long!

King David described the purpose of the Ten Commandments as to foster flourishing life of well-being in all dimensions, all week. This is described in the Bible as shalom, often translated into English as the word "peace" (Psalm 119:165). In our response to God's grace, by limiting the economic dimension of our own self-interest, God

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Global (Godly) Goals

Whereas the United Nations frames its goals in the language of sustainable development, Christians see biblical principles of Sabbath and Shalom as motivators behind each admirable benchmark for a better tomorrow.

U.N. Commission Goals for 2030

Theological Roots in Sabbath/Shalom

1 ERADICATE POVERTY

Creation envisions bountiful prosperity for all. Covenant relationships comprehend reducing poverty.

2 END HUNGER

Creation provides a sustainable system of reproduction of food sources. Humans can increase the Earth's carrying capacity. Covenant relationships encourage working together and sharing the abundance.

3 PROMOTE PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

Creation describes the foundation of respect for physical health, life, and well-being. Covenant relationships are structured so that flourishing life is fostered, leading to shalom for all ages.

4 PROMOTE ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Creation occurred by the wisdom and power of God. Covenant relationships are fostered as we learn and share with each other the wisdom of ways in which the benefits of shalom can be experienced.

5 ACHIEVE GREATER GENDER EQUALITY

Creation establishes the interdependence between men and women. This raises the value of females beyond the bare minimum set by the United Nations. Covenant relationships must include all within the community.

6 ENSURE AVAILABILITY OF WATER

Creation comprehends the vital importance of water as the life-giving fluid necessary for existence. Covenant relationships recognize the interdependence that all persons have with each other and with the water.

7 ENSURE ACCESS TO ENERGY

For humans to fulfill the commission to have dominion over and care for the Earth and all living things, energy must be expended. Covenant relationships must be considered so that the impact of energy does not create toilsome labor, injustice, or harm to creation.

8 SUSTAIN ECONOMIC GROWTH

Creation and covenant both envision humans working in community toward the greater good of a flourishing life.

9 BUILD RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE

Shalom must be achieved by concerted effort. Building a resilient infrastructure requires entrepreneurship, moral leadership, and organization. Organizing requires making long-term covenant commitments.

10 PROMOTE PEACEFUL, INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

Creation and covenant both envision communities where justice is spread throughout. Justice is a life-giving stream, the foundation for decisions regarding the use of this Earth and its resources.

makes room for us to enjoy the other dimensions of shalom in the community (Psalm 34:14). Sabbath under this way of thinking, connected with shalom, is extended to providing rest for the land, not simply people. The land and its resources cannot endlessly be exploited. Humans are expected to have dominion over the land but also to serve it and not hold the land in bondage (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15).

The concepts of sabbatical and the year of Jubilee also illustrate that

Sabbath is an expression of physical justice toward the land as well as social justice toward the poor. It is something more than one day of the week for worship. Working together with God, humans have a responsibility to make right the injustices that have oppressed people and the Earth.

Well-being at the community level involves giving generously to those in need; however, this cannot be experienced if members of the community continually prey upon the willingness of others to help them. Borrowing in biblical times was discouraged, but there are rare occasions when loans are necessary. Only by fulfilling the responsibility to repay debts—in conjunction with loaners periodically releasing others from debts—could prosperity be promoted.

Every day at work, believers are asked to be faithful to the deeper principles of well-being in order to bless others. This comes out in how we structure our organizations, the kinds of values we emphasize in our organization, the organizational rules we establish, the kinds of strategic commitments we make to the communities we serve, and how we relate to key stakeholders such as employees, customers, and suppliers. One example of how these Sabbath principles are a test of loyalty to God can be described in terms of the popular idea known as “sustainable development.”

Sustainable Development: A Test of Loyalty

At the risk of oversimplifying the ideas, embedded in the term “sustainable development” are two concepts: 1) caring for the Earth in such a way that both present and future generations can benefit from its bounty while justice is preserved (sustainable); and 2) the wise use of resources for the purpose of



Having a “Shalom” birdhouse in your city, such as this one on public property at the four-way stop leaving campus, is a small but telling indicator that community leaders are thinking about issues of peace and sustainability.

fostering flourishing life for all, including the most vulnerable (development).

These somewhat competing interests need to be managed together rather than separately. For example, if poverty and hunger are not drastically reduced, these evils will have an unhealthy domino effect, causing social unrest and migration of people. As a result, physical and political safety of food and communities are threatened. Yet, by caring for the Earth in a sustainable way, we increase its capacity to the benefit of all.

The deeper Sabbath principles are further illustrated and expanded upon in this article’s table (see prior page), which compares some goals from the United Nation’s Commission on Sustainable Development with their spiritual counterparts. As co-workers with God, Sabbath-keepers have a role to play in contributing to the achievement of these goals. The goals of the U.N. Commission reflect problems highly resistant to even internationally organized efforts. Progress thus far in each major world region has been limited. If Sabbath-keepers abdicate our role in these processes, are we not at risk of failing a test of loyalty to our full relationship with God?

Contributing to solutions for sustainable development problems is a test born of Sabbath principles that gets to the heart of the very purpose of business. To what extent will Sabbath-keepers participate? Sabbath-keepers training to become business leaders might come to see their role as much larger than finding career success.

Success in business is indeed important, as it contributes to the development dimension of sustainable development. But the larger purpose of business, when seen through the lens of deeper Sabbath principles, becomes one of fostering flourishing life. We can serve the people closest to us while keeping in mind how those the farthest away from us, as well as those coming after us, also are impacted. ■

Michael Cafferky holds the Ruth McKee Chair for Entrepreneurship and Business Ethics at Southern. He is the author of eight books including his most recent, Business Ethics in Biblical Perspective: A Comprehensive Introduction. Visit southern.edu/columns to access a lengthier, annotated version of this article, originally published in The Journal of Biblical Integration in Business (Volume 18, Issue 1).