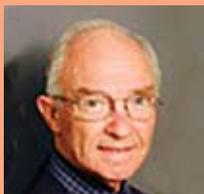




Fritz Guy



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numerous scholarly articles and of the book *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith*, published in 1999 by Andrews University Press.

S *habbat Shalom*: In view of the fact that the Sabbath was a biblical command made centuries ago, what does the Sabbath mean to Christians in the twenty-first century?

Fritz Guy: To answer this question, we need to think back to the beginning of the biblical Sabbath. According to the Torah, the ancient Hebrew Sabbath was a recognition of God as the one Supreme Reality, the Creator and Source of everything else. The Sabbath was an affirmation of the actual ultimacy of God in relation to all other reality and the experiential ultimacy of God in the Hebrew community and individual life. This was—and is—the Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment, “a Sabbath to the Lord your God.”

The biblical Sabbath is a symbol not only of the relationship of humanity to God as the Ultimate Reality, but also the relationship of God to humanity (both collectively and individually) as an Empowering Presence. “The Sabbath came into being for the sake of humanity,” he said, “not humanity for the sake of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28, translation supplied). On various occasions Yeshua

called attention to the existential, experiential value of the Sabbath as a day of healing and liberation. He insisted that what had been accepted as an obligation could in fact be experienced as a gift.

Here in the modern (and post-modern) world of the twenty-first century, we need, more than ever, both the initial and the later meanings of the Sabbath.

Shabbat Shalom: What do you mean by that?

Guy: Well, here in the so-called “developed world” we live in the midst of almost total pre-occupation with what somebody has called “the three A’s”—attractiveness, accomplishment, and affluence. These concerns have become, in effect, our modern idolatries, and they are as insidiously damaging as any idol or foreign god that ever seduced the ancient Israelites. But the Sabbath comes to us every week as a reminder and experience of the ultimacy of God. The Sabbath means that what is most real is what we value most intensively and most comprehensively.

In this way, the Sabbath is a protest against every sort of political, economic, and spiritual tyranny. Indeed, it is a far more radical protest than Karl Marx ever imagined in his campaign against the exploitation of the laboring classes. It is not only a protest against the tyranny of labor that creates wealth for others; it is also a protection against the internal tyranny of labor that creates wealth for ourselves. It is a protection even against the tyranny of labor that serves our desires for various kinds of social or professional status. And these desires and idolatries of ours are effectively facilitated by the commercial mass media, whose reason

for existence is to increase our desire to be (or at least seem to be) attractive, accomplished, and affluent.

So in the twenty-first century, the gift and experience of the Sabbath is more valuable than ever. It helps us keep our priorities straight in spite of the busyness of our lives and the aggressive bombardment of the media. The Sabbath offers time for being rather than doing—time to turn off the television, mute the cell phones, and unplug the Internet, so that we can be more fully and authentically human. It is time to enjoy the relationships that matter most, and time to remember how greatly we are blessed and how much we are loved.

“The Sabbath was committed to you, and not you unto the Sabbath” (Mekilta on Exodus, 31, 13).

Shabbat Shalom: How is the Sabbath important to Seventh-day Adventists?

Guy: There is, of course, an obvious way in which the Sabbath is important to Adventists. Because it is their day for public worship, it is the most visible evidence of their identity as a community of faith. Although there are other Christian sabbatarians (such as Seventh Day Baptists and the Seventh Day Church of God), the Adventists are the most numerous and best known. And there is something more. Not only do they claim the Sabbath as an essential part of their Adventist identity, but they think of it as an essential part of their

mission in the world. Just as the medical community has an ethical obligation to communicate as widely as possible all its advancing understandings of medicines and procedures that promote physical and mental health, so a sabbatarian community has an ethical obligation to communicate as widely as possible the contribution of the Sabbath to spiritual health and fulfillment. The news of the Sabbath is just too good to keep to themselves.

But there is a major irony here—an irony that is seldom recognized. Too often the Sabbath is experientially important in a negative way. The community for whom it is significant as a symbol of spiritual identity frequently makes the mistake of over-scheduling the Sabbath. They fill it with so many good activities and projects that the day turns out to be one more demand for accomplishment—just as hurried, harried, and hassled as the rest of the week. Interestingly, the Sabbath commandment, which those who grew up keeping Sabbath memorized in elementary school and have recited more times than they can remember, does not say that for six days we work for ourselves and on the Sabbath we work for God. It says that on the Sabbath we “shall not do any work.” The Sabbath is, as I said before, first of all a time for being—for remembering, affirming, actualizing, and enjoying the relationships that provide the fundamental meaning and value of our existence. The Sabbath is not a *limitation* of activity but a *liberation from* activity.

Shabbat Shalom: Is the spiritual value of the Sabbath available on any other day?

Guy: Actually, yes and no.

“The Sabbath was given to you, but you were not given to the Sabbath” (Betzah, 17).

Certainly a person can find physical rest and spiritual renewal on any day of the week—Sunday, Tuesday, or whenever. And chronologically and scientifically, the Sabbath is just the same as the other six days of the week. The weather is not more pleasant, birds do not sing more sweetly, and flowers do not bloom more profusely or more fragrantly just because it is Sabbath. There is no “natural”—that is, astronomical—basis for the week and its Sabbath, as there is for the day, month, and year.

And that is just the point. The foundation of the Sabbath is its biblical symbolism. But it is never correct to think of the Sabbath as “merely a symbol.” Symbols, as the German-American theologian Paul Tillich pointed out in the middle of the twentieth century, not only point to a reality that is greater than themselves, but also participate in the reality to which they point. A country’s flag is not properly described as “merely a symbol.” Neither is a wedding ring or an anniversary. And neither is the Sabbath.

So the seventh-day-ness of the Sabbath is important. It is not an “optional extra.” You can, if necessary, have a birthday celebration on a different day: a “substitute birthday.” But it’s not quite the same.

Among all the various kinds of symbols, the Sabbath is distinguished in important ways. For one thing, it is temporal rather than material; it is a sacred time rather than a sacred place or object. It can be experienced anywhere and under any cir-

cumstances; it requires no ritual objects (although they may well be useful when they are available). For another thing, it is the one kind of sacred time that figures prominently in both biblical Testaments. There were, of course, other sacred days in classical Judaism—*Pessah*, *Yom Kippur*, and *Hanukkah*, for example—but these have never been observed by Christians as the Sabbath has been. And, of course, there are the Christian sacred days of Christmas and Easter, but these have no positive meaning in Judaism, and they are not specifically designated as sacred in the New Testament. The Sabbath, however, has been, in one way or another, spiritually and theologically important to both Jews and Christians for millennia.

The Sabbath has been both a hallmark and a bulwark of Jewish identity. As a symbol of creation, the seventh-day Sabbath is enshrined in the heart of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20), and as a symbol of liberation it is similarly enshrined in the book of Deuteronomy (chap. 5). The Sabbath figured prominently in the mission and message of Yeshua. As symbol, it was a specific and intentional part of the life of Yeshua, who is the Christian’s model of spirituality and morality. It is the only Christian sacred day for which there is explicit scriptural instruction. The modern neglect of Sabbath time has evoked a quiet revival of interest across the Christian theological spectrum—Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical.

Shabbat Shalom: Does the Sabbath have any other theological significance for us today?

Guy: Yes, indeed. It functions as a sort of theological capstone, integrating a number of religious beliefs. It refers to God as the Beginning, the Creative Source of all reality; it anticipates the future consummation of all reality in the presence of God; and it illuminates the meaning of everything in between. It is a symbol of grace. No one ever “earns” a Sabbath, even by the most diligent use of one’s time and energy during the preceding six days, any more than one earns one’s existence. The arrival of the Sabbath, like the birth of every human being, is a gift. It is not earned, and it cannot be paid for. In this way, the Sabbath is a symbol and experience of love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

The Sabbath is a great equalizer. The ancient Sabbath was for children as well as adults, for the household slaves as well as free citizens, for aliens as well as citizens. It is socially, culturally, and economically inclusive. Differences are not denied, but they are transcended. The universality of the Sabbath is a reminder of the universality of God’s love and respect for all creation.

Shabbat Shalom: What does the Sabbath mean to you personally?

Guy: In addition to what I have already suggested, I have appropriated the Eastern religious notion of “nonattachment.” The Sabbath is a day when the attachments that so often define our selfhood—social, professional, economic, or religious status—along with our worries about maintaining them, are irrelevant

and inoperative. Because it is a time of nonattachment, nonhurry, and nonstress, the Sabbath can be a time of unique fulfillment and enjoyment.

Much of my life all week long is devoted to religion in one way or another, chiefly in theological study, reflection, and writing. But during Sabbath time I don't do theological "work," although I often enjoy theological "play." That is, on the Sabbath I don't try to meet deadlines; I don't try to "accomplish" anything in particular. Instead, I do theology the way I envision doing it in the context of eternity: with no time pressure at all—simply for the joy of doing it.

Sabbath time is time for good conversation, which is, I am convinced, one of the most fully human of all our activities—listening with openness, speaking with honesty, not trying to score points or make an impression or even solve problems, just learning from and with each other in a context of serenity and trust.

So Sabbath time is the best kind of time there is. It is not an interruption, or even an interlude in the ongoing process of life. It is life at its best.

Shabbat Shalom: When and how do you prepare for the Sabbath? How do you make Sabbath time unique?

Guy: When a person understands the meaning and value of Sabbath time, "preparing" for it is mostly a matter of eager anticipation. I want to "unclutter" Sabbath time as much as possible—which means planning ahead and "clearing the deck" in the same sort of way one plans ahead for favorite guests. Family rituals, such as lighting candles, singing hymns, and reading Scripture, are

a good transition from ordinary time to Sabbath time and back again—a kind of spiritual hug at the beginning and end of a visit from someone you love and admire, and whose presence you thoroughly enjoy.

At the same time, I try to remember that when a friend comes to visit, the important thing is the conversation that happens when we are together. If something isn't perfectly arranged, that may be a source of minor

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regret, but I know that my friend is coming not to inspect the premises but to spend time with me.

In anticipating the Sabbath, I try to plan for three kinds of experience. I want some time for good, unhurried conversation—for being with people who are personally close and important to me. I also want some time for being alone, for reflection, for remembering the goodness of life, the world, and God. And I want some time for worship not only with people who are like me (for instance, upper-middle class, suburban, culturally mainstream, intellectually interested), but also—and especially—people who are quite different from me (in age, ethnicity, culture, interests, and lifestyle). These kinds of experiences don't just "happen"; that's why intentionality and planning are essential.

Shabbat Shalom: Are there any books about the Sabbath that you would especially recommend?

Guy: Absolutely. And I would certainly want to mention, first of all, a book that has been extraordinarily valuable to my students, colleagues, and friends, as well as to me personally—namely, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, written more than fifty years ago by Abraham Joshua Heschel (1951). This insightful little book has done more to enhance the experience of the Sabbath for more people than any other book I know of. One of my cherished possessions is an autographed copy that was generously sent to me by Professor Heschel himself.

Some helpful Christian books about the meaning and experience of Sabbath time are *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness* by Samuele Bacchiocchi (1980); *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* by Marva J. Dawn (1989); and *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* by Wayne Muller (1999). All of these books are still in print and available online from amazon.com and other booksellers.

A couple of heavier, more theological Christian interpretations of the Sabbath that have been widely influential are Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3/1, pp. 98-99, 213-28 (1958) and 3/4, pp. 47-72 (1961), and Jürgen Moltmann's *God in Creation*, pp. 276-96 (1985). Both of these theologians focus on the Genesis portrayal of creation.
