

HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE THEOLOGY OF REST

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ABSTRACT: Human Dignity and the Theology of Rest.

The connection between the biblical concept of rest and the biblical understanding of the dignity and value of human life may not be obvious for all. However, an exploration into the Sabbath rest as commanded in the Old Testament reveals that it is deeply tied to anthropology that values man not because of his ability to be productive or his usefulness to God. Such an utilitarian approach to rest would condition times of rest with their impact on productivity. Instead, the present paper endeavors to prove that a biblical theology of rest is based on a biblical theology of human life as having intrinsic value in itself, even when it fails to be functional or productive.

Keywords: *human dignity, theology, anthropology, rest, Sabbath.*

Introduction

Human dignity is a popular concept, in the public as well as the academic discourse, with entire conferences, journals and books devoted to it. However, despite its current traction, in its essence, it is hardly a novel value. For the philosopher, Aristotle and Kant are main points of reference in the discussion of human dignity. Therefore, „within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, man’s dignity consists in his reason, in mind: what is best,

most excellent, in man is, according to Aristotle, mind"¹, while the theologian, prefers to focus on how, „after classic Greek dignity, Christian dignity came with a theological root.”² Even more, the authors of the present paper would argue, the Christian view of dignity has not only a theological root, but even a theological trunk and branches, and implications in diverse areas, including ethical issues like euthanasia, right to life³, or death penalty. One of these branches of the theological root of human dignity is the object of this research: the theology of rest, and its ontological discomfort with productivity as an indication of human value.

The current paper will, therefore, examine a theological perspective on Sabbath rest with an emphasis on the underlying assumptions of human dignity and innate value of the human life that stem from a biblical anthropology.

Rest in the Pentateuch

The concept of rest greets us from the first pages of the Scriptures, with God resting post-creation and deciding that every seventh day would henceforth be a day of rest. Therefore, any theological discussion about rest needs to include a discussion about the Sabbath.

A very significant theological concept, the Sabbath is also a sign of the covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 31:12-18), a holy day sanctified by God (Genesis 2:2-3), a day of worship, a day of remembrance of the deliverance from Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:12-15), and the list could go on. Nevertheless, these elements pertaining to the theological significance of the Sabbath will not be addressed further in this paper, unless they have a contribution to understanding the Sabbath as a rest day.

The first mention of a day of rest that should follow after a six days work period appears in the creation narrative, more specifically, in Genesis 2:1-3, where we read, „Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in

1 Alice Ramos, „The Dignity of Man and Human action”, *Acta Philosophica*, vol 10, 2001, p. 315.

2 Camilo J. Cela-Conde, Atahualpa Fernandez, Marly Fernandez, Manuella Maria Fernandez and Lucrecia Burges, „Nature and human dignity”, Laboratorio de Sistemática Humana Universidad de las Islas Baleares, unpublished work, p 1.

3 E. A. Sârbu, *Particular Types of Suicide: Euthanasia and „Slow Suicide”*, (Chișinău: Editura Print Caro, 2016). p. 13-21.

all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done" (NIV). It is obvious already, from the study of this text in Genesis 2, that this day of rest is extremely important – not only as an act accomplished by God, but also as a day whose importance He emphasizes by sanctifying it and blessing it. Also, it is generally considered by theologians that the centrality of the creation is a basis for the main theological ideas.⁴

In fact, it is of no small importance that the theology of man (anthropology) and the theology of rest both originate in the creation narrative, and that they are creation day neighbors. This connection will be explored in depth further on in the paper, since it supports the understanding that theologically, rest exists only because man is valuable in himself, as a creation in the image of God, not as source of productivity.

Returning to Genesis 2:2, it is stated that, „By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.” Although there are theologians who consider the statement that God finished His work on the seventh day to be problematic⁵ – because the Creation work had ended on the sixth day – it is also possible that this indicates the need for rest as the final crowning act of labor. Kaiser believes that „God made the seventh day holy as a perpetual memorial to the fact that he had completed the entire universe and all that was in it. His «rest» was to be symbolic for man, both in his own rhythm of work and cessation from labor and for his eternal hopes. So decisive was this ending that the writer also abruptly stops his narration of events; he does not conclude with the expected «And there was evening and there was morning, a seventh day.»”⁶

This cyclicity of the day of rest – six days of work are always followed by a day of rest – is found in many, if not all, biblical passages that refer to the Sabbath. Among these, the passage from Exodus 16:22-30

4 Jeffrey W. Baldwin, „The Sabbath: A Biblical-Theological Study” (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992), p 8.

5 E.A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, vol. 1, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 7.

6 Walter C Jr Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008), p 28.

stands out, and here we have the first occurrence of the term Sabbath. „He said to them, «This is what the Lord commanded: „Tomorrow is to be a day of sabbath rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.”» So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. «Eat it today,» Moses said, «because today is a sabbath to the Lord. You will not find any of it on the ground today. Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any»”(Exodus 16:23-26).

This text emphasizes once again that the rhythm of working for six days and resting on the seventh is – in Moses’ understanding – a rhythm decreed by God and which the Israelites must observe. It should be noted that even the fact that the Israelites find themselves in an unusual situation (in the wilderness, with manna as their only source of sustenance) is no excuse for ignoring the pattern of the seventh day set aside to cease all work. On the contrary, God meets their need for food both through the double portion of manna He gives them on the sixth day of the week, and through His supernatural intervention to prevent the alteration of the manna. The need for food is real, but through God’s intervention, they do not have to choose between meeting the need for food and the need for rest.

This is meant to communicate to them some very important things about God – that He is a good, caring God, but also that He is an all-powerful God who does not operate on an economy of finite resources, but on an economy of abundant generosity. They are also to understand from this something about themselves as representatives of mankind in relation to its Creator: that their value is not found in what they can do for God, in what they can achieve for Him. Theirs is not an earned value, but one embedded in their being, and in consequence, they are not to be slaves to work.

God’s expectation that the seventh day of the week be reserved for rest becomes indisputably clear with the formulation of the Decalogue and the inclusion of the Sabbath mandate among the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20:8-11: „Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens

and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

If the first mention of the day of rest, that of Genesis 2, emphasizes God’s action to rest, bless, and sanctify the seventh day, and in the second mention of Exodus 16 we see how the people comply with God’s specific requirement not to perform a certain set of works on the seventh day, Exodus 20 makes it clear that observing the Sabbath as a time of rest with weekly repetition is a commandment to be observed. „The Sabbath was introduced to remind the people of Israel of a divine timetable. This timetable, the seven-day week, is to be followed on earth. This is followed by a social concern, workers need a period of regular rest, which is provided for everybody – animals, servants, and aliens.”⁷

This cyclical rhythmicity of the day of rest reveals to us a dimension of God who reveals Himself to be a God of time, as much as of space. In a world where the gods were often tied to a physical space – be it their temple or a certain territory beyond whose borders their powers declined – God reveals Himself to the Israelites not only as the One who has power over the entire Universe as Creator, but also a God of time, observes Heschel, a Jewish theologian who dedicated his life to the study of the Sabbath.

While the deities of other peoples were associated with places or things, the God of Israel was the God of events: the Redeemer from slavery, the Revealer of the Torah, manifesting Himself in events of history rather than in things or places. [...] Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time. [...] One of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the word *qadosh*, holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine. Now what was the first holy object in the history of the world? Was it a mountain? Was it an altar? It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word *qadosh* is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: „And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness.⁸

7 D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), p. 26.

8 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath, Its Meaning for Modern Man* (The Noonday Press, 1994), p. 19.

With the text of Exodus 20, the Sabbath rest takes on a new dimension. If until then the day of rest found its roots in creation and in God's act of resting, with the appearance of the Ten Commandments, it also becomes a symbol of the special covenant between God and man. „At Mount Sinai, Yahweh made known his will, the Decalogue, to the other party of the covenant, Israel. The Decalogue reduces to its most significant essence a comprehensive body of instruction for the Chosen People. The Fourth Comandment in Exodus 20:8-11 [...] validates the Sabbath institution in terms of the pattern of creation described in Gen 1:1-2:4.”⁹ But this commandment is reiterated many times in the Law of Moses: in Exodus 23:12; 31:12-17; 35:1-3; Deuteronomy 5:12-15; and thus to the day of rest is added the dimension of a sign of God's covenant with the people of Israel and a reminder of their salvation from the slavery of Egypt.

Exodus 31:12-17 speaks of the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant between God and Israel, a sign that they are His people, „Say to the Israelites, «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.»” Deuteronomy 5:12-15, however, connects even more specifically the observance of the Sabbath with the remembrance of God's deliverance from Egypt: „Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”

Whereas the original comandment was grounded in the order of creation and had humanitarian concerns, in the later renewal of the covenant it was grounded in the order of redemption and had a theological purpose. Sabbath serves as a lived-out sign, an active reminder. Each time an Israelite rests on the seventh day, he asserts

9 Winton U. Solberg, *Redeem the Time: The Puritan Sabbath in Early America*, First Edition. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 8.

his status as a free person, remembers his former bondage and acknowledges I AM as the God who redeemed him.¹⁰

In the Mosaic covenant, then, the cessation from work, followed by rest repeated every seventh day, functions as a practical lesson in both God's character and His works – both in creation and redemption – as well as an opportunity for remembrance of landmarks in the religious history of the people of Israel. Israel rests one day out of seven because God rested on the seventh day, and everything related to the nation of Israel, from their rhythm of life to their very existence is deeply connected to Him and it is due to the actions of God. Therefore, „as a God-appointed regent over all creatures, man (and especially the Israelite) must permit them also to rest, whether they be family members, slaves, foreigners or even lowly animals.”¹¹

It is particularly relevant for the thesis of the current paper to see how Sabbath rest points to freedom from slavery (an later will point to the freedom in Christ), and therefore to freedom from work as a tyrannic value. This freedom (which, it is important to notice, is granted, not earned) makes no sense if the creature set free is mainly valuable in terms of its utility to the owner. Such a case would lead the owner to an increase in manipulation techniques, aimed at expanding productivity. Only when man is seen as an object of love rather than as a means of production is freedom an option, and being the object of God's love is deeply connected to the intrinsic value of the human life.

Rest as absence of work and presence of enjoyment

Observance of the Sabbath implies, in the texts of the Old Testament, both a negatively defined aspect – the absence of work – and a positive one, that is, to rest. Next we will examine both the non-work aspect of the Sabbath and how its observance impacted the productivity of the people of Israel (and thus, by extension, their survival as a nation).

A first observation related to the aspect of cessation of work is that, during His rest, God ceases the work of creation, but without entering

10 Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), p. 422.

11 Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), p. 340.

into a state of inactivity, because He maintains and keeps in existence all that He had created in the previous days.¹² This aspect is necessary for a complete and clear understanding of the elements that define rest from a biblical perspective – specifically, rest does not imply total inactivity, but the cessation of at least some activities.¹³ Furthermore, Bruce Waltke also notices that „*Sabbat* in the phrase *yom hassabbat* (Sabbath Day) is debatably related to the verb *sabat*, to cease. «To make holy» connotes to cease work in order to set the day aside for I AM. Nevertheless, the priests offer sacrifices (Num. 28:9; Matt. 12:5) and circumcise infants on the Sabbath (John 7:22), and Israel’s army marches on this holy day (Josh. 6:3-4).”¹⁴

So the prohibition to work does not require total inactivity, but rather the cessation of certain actions. However, these activities are not firmly and exhaustively defined.

What constitutes rest and work? In the Torah there are only two explicit prohibitions concerning work on the Sabbath. No fires were to be kindled in Jewish dwellings (Exod. 35:3), and no one was to leave their place (Exod. 16:29). However, more can be inferred from other texts. For example, Moses instructed the people to bake and boil the manna and put it aside until morning (Exod. 16:23-24), hinting that cooking was not fitting for the Sabbath. A man found gathering sticks on the Sabbath was stoned to death (Num. 15:32-36). The carrying of a burden or bringing it by Jerusalem’s gates was prohibited (Jer. 17:22). Nehemiah closed the city gates to the merchants who were to profane the Sabbath by carrying their goods and selling them (Neh. 13:15-22). Most important is the Torah’s placement of the laws concerning the Sabbath directly adjacent to the instructions for the tabernacle (Exod. 31), implying that each of the many varieties of work associated with tabernacle construction was prohibited on the Sabbath.¹⁵

Thus, it seems that a common feature of all these types of work is that they are part of either everyday domestic activities – such as cooking

12 Walter C Jr Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, n.d.), p. 76.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 76.

14 Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* [...], p. 420.

15 Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), p. 698.

or lighting the fire – or of the field of professional activity. It is possible that the prohibitions were not spelled out more precisely because it was understood that the day of rest must be defined by a cessation of work performed by various individuals or groups, whatever they may have been. With economic and even technical development, Israelite society was expected to experience a new flow of trades and new ways of exploring the occupational area, and a set of concrete prohibitions would have reflected the professions and economic or domestic activities at the time when they were verbalized. By specifically avoiding an exhaustive list of activities incompatible with the spirit of the Sabbath, the Israelites were forced to internalize and act upon the spirit of the Sabbath law, not its letter. Unfortunately, it is interesting to contrast the scarcity of specific prohibitions in the biblical text with their subsequent proliferation, in the inter-testamental period, by Jewish religious leaders, evidence of human legalistic tendencies.

However, the Sabbath is not only a time to restrict work in an atmosphere of tense piousness. The Sabbath is joy and delight in life, as beautifully worded by Dan Allender.

The Sabbath is not merely a good idea; it is one of the Ten Commandments. Jesus did not abrogate, cancel, or annul the idea of the Sabbath. In the Ten Commandments, the fourth (Sabbath) is the bridge that takes us from the first three, which focus on God, to the final five, which concentrate on our relationships with others. The Sabbath is a day of delight for humankind, animals, and the earth; it is not merely a pious day and it is not fundamentally a break, a day off, or a twenty-four-hour vacation. The Sabbath is a feast day that remembers our leisure in Eden and anticipates our play in the new heavens and earth with family, friends, and strangers for the sake of the glory of God.¹⁶

Theologically, this approach of rest as a source of delight is a reflection of the character of God, Who is Himself a source of joy and who needs not be stingy with His resources. Far from being a constraint, observing the Sabbath sets one free to be unproductive, to be an enjoyer of life rather than a tool for achievement.

Limiting working hours would normally lead to a drop in productivity that a frail nation like Israel could hardly afford. The biblical response to

16 Dan B. Allender, *Sabbath: The Ancient Practices*, ed. Phyllis Tickle (Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. 5.

this fear is multidimensional, and deeply rooted in a biblical anthropology of human dignity.

On the one hand, God recognizes that declining productivity may be a legitimate fear, and responds by directing the Israelites' eyes to Himself as the Caregiver, Originator and Sustainer of life, and thus, ultimately, the One who will make the weekly rest a source of blessing, and not of loss, for those who obey this commandment. „True Sabbath rest is about learning a new rhythm to life where we celebrate the sovereignty of God, enjoy the liberation of the Gospel and truly trust the salvation Jesus gives. That's why Psalm 127 v. 2 says, „It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for He gives to his beloved sleep.”¹⁷ God can make up for the work that believers lose when they rest, as One who has infinite resources at His disposal and whose nature is to desire the good of His people.

Moreover, some theologians are of the opinion that God's blessing on the seventh day, the day of rest, confers on it the same fertility that His blessing conferred on the vegetal, animal and human world.¹⁸ Current research also shows that reducing the amount of time allocated to work and increasing the time spent with family, especially with kids and teenagers, is an important prevention tool which can be used for keeping them apart from risking and harmful behaviors like substance use,¹⁹ suicidal thoughts,²⁰ anomie and deviant behavior,²¹ while religiosity and religious activities like Scripture reading, attending church or prayer has been acknowledged to have an important role in an individual inner balance,²² improving his/her relational or social integration.

17 Adam Mabry, *The Art of Rest* (The Good Book Company, 2018), p. 40.

18 Baldwin, „The Sabbath: A Biblical-Theological Study”, p. 10.

19 E. A. Sârbu, O.I. Bunaciu, D. Mariș, D. (Editors), *The Substance Use and Social Factors in Bucharest 2012-2013*, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Risoprint, 2014), p. 102.

20 E. A. Sârbu, „Prevenirea conduitei autodistructive a adolescenților, prin regândirea mitului timpului de calitate petrecut cu familia”, în P. Runcan, R. Runcan (Editors), *Puterea de a fi altfel*, Colecția Puterea de a fi altfel, (București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică R.A., 2014), pp. 3-12.

21 E. A. Sârbu, B. Nadolu, R. Runcan, M. Tomiță, F. Lazăr (2022) „Social predictors of the transition from anomie to deviance in adolescence”, *PLOS ONE* 17(6): e0269236. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0269236>, accesat la data de 10.08.2022.

22 E.A. Sârbu, F. Lazăr, A.F. Popovici, „Individual, Familial and Social Environment Factors Associated with Religiosity Among Urban High School Students”, *Rev Relig Res* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-021-00466-x>, accesat la data de 10.08.2022.

On the other hand, paradoxically, the rhythm of six days of work and rest on the seventh can lead to increased productivity. Constant work leads to exhaustion and premature wear and tear, whether of the individual, the machinery or the soil, and a break can prevent this. In fact, the social science which focuses most on rest is organisational psychology, and the goal of most research within this field is an increase in productivity.

New Testament rest as relationship

It is not only the Old Testament that wages war on the low view of human dignity that is implied in an utilitarian perspective on human life. Looking at rest in the New Testament, we find three passages that are particularly relevant to the discussion on hand.

First, in Mark 6 we find Jesus at the height of His ministry, surrounded by multitudes that crave the food and healing He had been providing. In this He is assisted by his disciples, who soon become exhausted with the magnitude of the work: „The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat”, he said to them, „Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:30-31). Despite the endless needs of the masses, Jesus does not use His disciples as a means to an end, as free labor to be abused and then discarded.

In fact, His concern for the disciples’ rest is all the more surprising if we think that if there ever was a time in history to give it your all, that was the time. If there ever was a leader who would be justified in squeezing every last drop of energy of his men, and treat them as tools in accomplishing a goal, that would have been it. The mission that Jesus was on was unparalleled in history, and yet, not even in a time such as this does He shift His focus from caring for His disciples to using them. This is yet another reflection of the value that human life has in Christian theology – a value that is in stark contrast to an utilitarian view.

The same underlying concern for human life is apparen in the famous verse in Matthew 11:28-30: „Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” God operates from an

economy of abundance and does not need to overburden His servants in order to increase the amount they produce. The burden is easy, the yoke is light, because the Master does not need the extra work, and also because those who work are children first, and workers second.

It is interesting that here Jesus he contrasts the „heavy yoke” of his contemporary society with his „easy yoke” (vv. 29–30). He may have been referring to the Roman taxation system or to religious demands that were impossible to meet, but „either way, empire or religion that colludes with empire, the requirements of acquiescent conduct were heavy. And Jesus, who resisted such a yoke, offered an alternative life of discipleship. Thus in our text, discipleship may concern the love of God and the love of neighbor, practices readily alternative to «making it» in the economic world of command performance.”²³

In a world where one is judged by what they can accomplish, Jesus brings a perspective based on unconditional love, not the ticking off of a to-do list. This perspective reflects His character and the values of His Kingdom – relationship and sacrificial love. The high value of human life is what is at the core of the Christian understanding of rest, as well.

Human dignity – a foundation for the theology of rest

Despite the posited positive impact of Sabbath-keeping on productivity, this utilitarian approach must be treated with caution by the Christian theologian, as it clashes with a biblical anthropology. Seeing rest as a necessary stop on the way to sustained efficiency is a position vehemently denounced by Abraham Heschel, as being an incorrect and misleading understanding of the biblical Sabbath.

Here the Sabbath is represented not in the spirit of the Bible but in the spirit of Aristotle. According to the Stagirite, „we need relaxation, because we cannot work continuously. Relaxation, then, is not an end”; it is, „for the sake of activity,” for the sake of gaining strength for new efforts. To the biblical mind, however, labor is the means toward an end, and the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one’s lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day

23 Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, 1st edition. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), p. 15.

for the sake of life. Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work.²⁴

His statement that „the Sabbath is a day for the sake of life” is deeply rooted in an understanding that human life is valuable in itself, not in correlation with its usefulness. While usefulness is a very common and sometimes unspoken value – especially when seen in relation to others, the community, good causes or even serving God – it is imperative, in the opinion of the author, that it be always seen in the context of human dignity.

Thus, as we peel away the theological layers of the concept of rest, we come across an important facet of biblical anthropology, which is the innate value and dignity of the human life. Without understanding that human life has value as a function of its creation in the image of God, all that is left is a usefulness-based mindset which allows for rest only inasmuch as it increases the success of subsequent labors. Theologian Robert Pyne writes about a theology of humanity and says, „People are unique not because they think differently than chimpanzees (though they probably do), and human lives are valuable not because they contribute to a better world (though they probably do that too). People have inherent dignity and unique value because they have all been made in the image of God.”²⁵ He also goes on to confess that since his son was born with Down syndrome and other health challenges, his feelings are colored not only by his theology, but also by his experience. However, when he comes in contact with people who think lives like his son’s aren’t worth saving, he admits:

My temptation as a proud dad has always been to talk about the things that Steve enjoys doing, how quickly he learned to read, or how sincerely he loves the Lord, to try to convince others that his very happy life was saving. On the other hand, my job as a theologian is to say simply this: His life was worth saving because he has inherent dignity as a human being in the image of God. The same is true of little boys who will never learn to read and those whose lives don’t look happy at all.²⁶

As evidenced by his words, even theologians are prone to falling into

24 Heschel, *The Sabbath, Its Meaning for Modern Man*, p. 22.

25 Robert Pyne, *Humanity and Sin* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 69.

26 *Ibidem*, p 70.

the trap of appealing to the usefulness and functionality of a life to prove its value. Although this is most dangerous in the context of bioethics, it does interact with an understanding of rest. If human life is only as valuable as it is useful, then rest is only as valuable as it contributes to human usefulness and productivity.

Theologically, however, rest is in fact a reflection of God's rejection of the idea of productivity as the ultimate goal of human existence. This position comes in strong antithesis to human utilitarian tendencies, and is based on the relational nature of God.

The Sabbath is a time to celebrate and enjoy what has been done the previous six days. It is a reminder that God does not value humans by their ability to produce. We are not machines. We have worth apart from what we produce. It is a difficult lesson. [...] „Sanctification of time” and „contemplation of the eternal sphere” are foreign phrases.[...] God's command is that on the seventh day we cease from work, cease from producing, cease from being participants in the functioning of the economy. We learn that we are not cogs in the machine – Instead, we emulate the God who works six days and rests on the seventh.²⁷

Thus, we might say that this biblical anthropology of innate value of human life permeates the doctrine of rest as seen in the Sabbath commandments. However, if the doctrine of rest implies a certain doctrine of man, there is yet another layer implied, and that is a certain Theology Proper, or a certain doctrine of God. When we talk about the value of human life as independent of its functionality or usefulness, we can only do so when we see God as Creator of man and relentless in His determination to redeem him, all based on His character – full of love, faithful, and benevolent towards the crown of His creation.

It is beyond the scope of the present paper to explore the depth of the interaction between a doctrine of God and rest, as interesting as that may be. However, one aspect that stands out is the way God Himself presents Himself as different from the gods of the other nations. This is apparent all throughout the Old Testament, where He is contrasted with various deities of other ancient people, depending on the idol *du jour* of the Israelites. In this dynamic a particular attention is given to the episode in

27 Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p 421.

which they are set free from Egypt, where God sends a targeted message about how inconsequential Egyptian deities are through the ten plagues. This doesn't end there, though – reiterating the commandment of keeping the Sabbath after they have been set free is another way of God emphasizing that He is unlike to the gods of Egypt. His values and methods are polar opposites to the values and methods of Egyptian gods. Brueggemann beautifully states that:

The narrative matrix of YHWH, the God of Israel, is the exodus narrative. This is the God „who brought you out of the of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (v. 2). Thus the Sabbath commandment is drawn into the exodus narrative, for the God who rests is the God who emancipates from slavery and consequently from the work system of Egypt and from the gods of Egypt who require and legitimate that work system [...] They [...] are confiscatory gods who demand endless produce, and who authorize endless systems of productions that are, in principle, insatiable. Thus, the mention of “Egypt” brings the God of Israel into the orbit of socioeconomic systems and practices, and inevitably sets this God on a collision course with gods of insatiable productivity.²⁸

In relation to the human race, God is not primarily a Sovereign or master who, like the ancient gods, needs human worship. He is first and foremost the Creator and therefore the Father, who not only does not need what people can give Him, but He comes to meet their needs. That is why, in salvation history, His focus is on relationship, not performance, and work without rest shifts the spotlight from relationship back to performance. Thomas Morten eloquently writes: „There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence.”²⁹ An exclusive focus on performance is aggressive to the human soul, and God is the One Who presents Himself as the „still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12), gentle and mindful of the fragility of His creation.

As a commandment of God, periodical (weekly) rest is aligned with

28 Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, p. 2.

29 Thomas Morten, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, n.d.), p. 73.

His character, underlying not only the need to stop focusing on fulfilling the daily needs, but also to focus on the spiritual needs as well. Therefore, rest reflects an active interest and concern for the welfare of man as the object of God's affection and redemptive efforts.

Conclusion

Beginning with the creation narrative, the mandate for rest has permeated the history of mankind. It is not only a temporal connection that binds man to rest, but an ontological one.

The doctrine of Sabbath (meant as putting away one day of the week for rest and focus on the spiritual needs, rather than on material ones) is a central part of the biblical doctrine on rest, and as it unfolds throughout Scripture, it reveals both a prohibition to work and an encouragement to enjoy life and delight in God and in His creation. Both of these aspects – reflected in various ways – convey God's primary focus on man's relationship with Himself and the community, in antithesis with the world's focus on the productivity. Man's chief end is not to increase the number of cattle so that sacrifices may be increased; nor to increase the number of converts, although both might have been (or still be) honorable secondary goals. Man's chief end, as the Westminster Catechism says, „is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”³⁰

Although some theologians and social scientists alike rush to point out the benefits of rest and its positive impact on productivity, increasing the output of man's work is perhaps one of the side advantages of resting, but definitely not its main goal. This is made evident in the insistence that man observe the sabbath even in times of crisis, when rest would be detrimental.

Without a high view of human value, Sabbath rest as presented in the Scripture would not exist. The entire edifice of weekly pause from work and enjoyment of life is only firm when the foundation is an anthropology of innate dignity, of human value that transcends and is indeed even completely separate from human usefulness. In this lays the depth and beauty of the Christian theology of man: we do because of what we are, we don't earn the right to be because of what we do. And that's why we can say

30 The Westminster Larger Catechism edited by Berenice Aguilera, *independently published*, 2019, p 3.

that our Sabbath is Christ, not only for this life, but also for the whole eternity.

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