

# Festival of Fellowship

by Roy Branson

The Sabbath was never a haven of solitude, but always an invitation to fellowship. When man first entered the seventh day, he was accompanied by “every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28). God and His creation were closer than they would ever be again. Man and woman could “hear the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen. 3:8). They could feel the breath of God’s presence.

Eden was not a refuge for mystics. Instead of private intuition, there was conversation. God directed man and woman to oversee “every beast of the field and every bird of the air,” which the Lord God brought “to the man to see what he would call them” (Gen. 2:19). God did not draw mankind into a mystical oneness with Him. Rather, there was a walking and talking in the garden, the giving and accepting of responsibility. Eden was the joy of fellowship.

The garden of delight became the setting for tragedy when human fellowship wrongly became opposed to fellowship with God. The result of man’s decision was not the creation of evil matter or of demons, but of lone-

liness, separation from God and alienation from the land and God’s other creatures. Work became labor, responsibility turned to drudgery. When “the Lord God sent him forth from the garden to till the ground from which he was taken,” man was doomed to turn even against himself. “The flaming sword which turned every way,” made man an exile from fellowship (Gen. 3:23, 24).

Yet, the Sabbath remained — not a garden, but a moment of delight, not a place to touch divinity, but a time to feel God’s atmosphere. It became a day to remember God, and “all the work that he had done,” a day to fumblingly restore some measure of fellowship with God and His creatures. In remembering, human beings could maintain some sense of their origins, of who they were and what was important. The Sabbath provided a time to experience freedom from the demands of a creation that had become burdensome, a time once again to relish all God’s creatures. Eden was lost, but the Sabbath remained to knit all people with God and creation.

By the time of the exodus from Egypt, space had become an enemy. The alienation from the soil included all that could be fashioned from the soil: palaces, temples and burial places. Huge buildings in space demanded not fellowship, but slave labor. The ground from which man had been formed

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was about to swallow him. Instead of delighting in God's creation, he drew back in fear.

Into this chaos, God entered to restore some semblance of creation's original freedom and fellowship. With a mighty hand and outstretched arm, God released the Hebrews from the dust into which they were being ground. Man was not created to be a beast of burden. Man was made to be free, to converse, to walk and talk in the cool of the day.

The conversation could not be so intimate as in Eden. The distance between God and man had to be bridged with thunders, lightnings, trumpet blasts and smoke. God's first words heightened the sense of His transcendence. First, Yahweh commanded that there could be no other gods. He would countenance no pretenders. Second, He would not allow idols or images. Third, Yahweh would not accept casual and disrespectful use of His name.

In another sense, God was clearing away barriers to His presence. He was rejecting all lesser divinities, spirits or revered ancestors as avenues of communion with Him. Nothing in space — neither buildings, nor kingdoms, nor even deities — was to separate Him from His people. The Sabbath was the alternative to the pagan pantheon. It was a moment when God would be transcendent to human tampering, yet remain present with men. In the Sabbath, man could know God directly, not through incantations, bloodletting or sacrifice of children, but in time shared completely.

**A**s at creation, God did not come to isolated individuals, but to a community. In Eden, He came to the whole creation, but creation, in the form of man, broke that relationship. God did not locate another place for close fellowship with human beings, but He did find a time, the Sabbath day, and a community, Israel.

A day was an appropriate way to restore fellowship. As Abraham Joshua Heschel says:

Every one of us occupies a portion of space, takes it up exclusively. The portion of space which my body occupies is taken

up by myself in exclusion of anyone else. Yet no one possesses time. There is no moment which I possess exclusively. This very moment belongs to all living men as it belongs to me. We share time; we own space. Through ownership of space, I am a rival of all other beings; through living in time, I am a contemporary of all other beings.<sup>1</sup>

Time can be shared. God can be invisible and still share a day with mankind; He can share a day with one person and still share a day with

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others. More than that, by sharing a day with many, God can bring all together without crowding any out.

God's restoration of fellowship began with Israel's liberation. Still, God's freeing Israel from tyranny did not free them for fellowship. Before the Sinai experience, Israel was still only a collection of wandering, former slaves. Dissension separated one from another, and discussions turned into strife. But the presence of God transformed freedom into fellowship. By restoring the Sabbath, Yahweh brought out of chaos a new creation: the people of God.

Israel's common relationship to Yahweh brought them into fellowship with one another. Sharing a Sabbath with God and other human beings combined in them a reverence for God with a respect for others. The covenant between God and Israel created solemn obligations among people. No one could ever remember the Sabbath and forget either God or fellow men. For one day in the week, the fellowship of Eden was restored.

The Sabbath is the arch holding together the structure of the law. Coming as it does between the outline of commitment to God

and obligations to fellow men, the Sabbath commandment is the hinge of the two tables of stone. Sabbath fellowship is to renew covenant promises to both God and man. "The people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant" (Ex. 31:16).

Of course, Israel did not consistently keep the perpetual covenant. When Israel divorced worship of God from obligations to one another, God sent the prophets as His spokesmen. Jeremiah, at God's bidding, stood before the temple in Jerusalem where Sabbath worship took place and mimicked the invocations of the pious worshipers. Their clichés were a mockery of God's covenant commands:

Do not trust in these deceptive words:  
"This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord" (Jer. 7:5).

Behold you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say "We are delivered" — only to go on doing all these abominations? (Jer. 7:8-10)

The Sabbath should have reminded Israel that worship of God and justice to fellow men go together.

Through the prophets, God announced that Sabbath fellowship burst the bounds of human convention. Isaiah received a special message for those often regarded by Israel as outside the covenant community. The Sabbath was a time when they too could enjoy fellowship with God, when they could know in the present that they would delight in a future fellowship. In the Sabbath, God drew *all* men to Him:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me, and  
hold fast my covenant . . .

And the foreigners who join themselves to  
the Lord . . .

Everyone who keeps the Sabbath, and  
does not profane it, and holds fast my  
covenant —

These I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of  
prayer . . . For my house shall be called a  
house of prayer for *all* peoples (Isa. 56:3-8).  
Clearly, the prophets saw the Sabbath as  
more than a weekly restoration of a past gar-  
den of delight. They looked on the Sabbath  
as a fellowship that was to include all people  
in a covenant of Sabbath joy.

**T**he fulfillment of the covenant did not come at Sinai or in the prophets. The fullest entrance of God into fellowship with man was the life lived with and for human beings — the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

The first three chapters of Matthew dealing with Jesus' life, from His birth to early ministry, are full of references to Jesus' coming as vindicating the words of the prophets and the covenant they renewed. Matthew's first reference emphasizes that as God fellowshiped with human beings in the Sinai covenant and in the prophetic word, so now more completely, in the words of Isaiah, Jesus is "Emmanuel, God with us" (Matt. 1:22; cf. Isa. 7:14). Luke praises Jesus' coming with hymns taken from the prophets. Such central parts of Christian worship as the angel's *Annunciation*, Mary's *Magnificat* and Simeon's *Nunc Dimitis* are all rephrasings of prophetic passages.

The culmination of these hymns and blessings celebrating the incarnation of Christ was Christ's inaugural Sabbath sermon. Jesus announced that He was the embodiment of the prophetic word — the Word that had renewed the covenant. To restore humanity to fellowship with God, the covenant must be reestablished. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus announced:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to preach  
good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the  
captives, and recovering of sight to the  
blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the  
Lord.

(Luke 4:18, 19; cf. Isa. 61:1, 2 & 58:6)

Nothing could be more dramatic in the long history of the covenant than Jesus' simple statement following this reading: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). No wonder the people thought He spoke as one who had authority. God would not forget His covenant, or His people. Truly the prophetic, covenant Word "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

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Jesus' public ministry, beginning on that Sabbath day, emphasized the message of the prophets: fellowship with God means fellowship with mankind. It is impossible to share a day with God and simultaneously oppress the sick, the broken and the maimed. Immediately after reporting the inaugural sermon, Luke begins his account of Jesus' healing miracles which took place on the Sabbath. Seven times during his ministry Christ performed miracles on the Sabbath, each time establishing that the God of the Sabbath — of the covenant — was the God who fellowshiped with all people, no matter how poor or oppressed.

In His ministry and nature, Christ united the divine and the human. Many theologians have struggled to establish the nature of Christ in spatial terms. Orthodox Christianity, after a painful period of discussion, agreed that Christ was not partly divine and partly human, but wholly God and wholly man. It has not always been easy to grasp this concept, but the Sabbath, a temporal symbol, provides a fresh perspective. People cannot divide time. They exist fully in the Sabbath, yet share it completely with God.

Each week, in experiencing the Sabbath that is indivisible, people know a Christ whose time and existence were wholly God's and wholly man's. No wonder that Christ's Sabbath actions for human beings were directed to God, and worship of God propelled Him back toward His fellow human beings.

Yet, the ministry and nature of Christ's incarnation did not alone renew God's fellowship with humanity. It was the death and resurrection of Christ that allowed fellowship with God to be a perpetual covenant. The triumph of the cross over usurping powers not only freed mankind from the tyranny of death and fate, but also guaranteed that God and man would not ultimately remain separated. In the Sabbath, a person is renewed by participating in Christ's Sabbath rest from the cross. "We should," as Jonathan Edwards says, "have sympathy with Christ in His joy. He was refreshed on this day; we should be refreshed as those whose hearts are united with His."<sup>2</sup>

Christ conquered the rebellious principalities, powers, dominions and authorities and became the "head over all things for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23). It is supremely important that Christ did not merely come to earth, have some visions, speak a few wise sayings and depart. Rather, Christ, like Yahweh at Sinai, created a new covenant community. He chose the twelve and sent out the seventy. He prayed that they would "love one another . . . by this all men will know that you are my disciples" (John 17:6; 13:35). The Word that was made flesh and dwelt among us was not a secret saying, a private word to scattered individuals, but a public ministry. The death and resurrection created a community which lived, flourished and became the body of Christ, the new testament of God in the world.

The church embodied Christ in its communal celebrations of God's redeeming and reconciling acts. The special days and actions of the Christian church recreated for human beings the quality of God's acts of liberation and fellowship. Revered theologians of the Christian church, such as Augustine and

Calvin, so appreciated the Sabbath as a memorial and foretaste of God's reconciling work that they named the Sabbath, along with baptism and the Lord's Supper, a sacrament. Calvin states that in the Sabbath "a very close correspondence appears between the outward sign and the inward reality."<sup>3</sup> Thus, "the Sabbath was a sacrament, since it was visible figure of an invisible grace."<sup>4</sup> Like the other sacraments celebrated by the Christian community, the Sabbath is a memorial of past relationships with God, a present awareness of God's presence and a promise of God's future full and perfect fellowship with liberated and redeemed mankind.

A closer examination of the parallels between baptism, the Lord's Supper and the Sabbath heightens the appreciation of each. Baptism, Paul believed, recreated the experience of two past events. As Israel in the exodus entered the water as slaves and emerged free from the oppressing Egyptian armies, so sinners enter the waters of baptism and emerge free from sin (I Cor. 1:1, 2). Baptism is also a reenactment of Christ's burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:3, 4). Moreover, in rising from the water, as Christ rose from the grave, the baptized are promised that they will be part of the future, permanent resurrection. Thus, baptism points back to Israel and Christ, as well as forward to the Second Coming (Rom. 6:6). Likewise, the Sabbath fellowship is not only with redeemed Israel and a risen Saviour, but also with a returning Lord.

The Lord's Supper also draws participants into fellowship with God. Christians sometimes forget that the Lord's Supper (or Last Supper) was indeed a meal, the Passover meal, memorializing Israel's redemption from Egypt. Along with baptism, the Lord's Supper points back to Christ. He was the perfect paschal lamb around which a new Israel, a renewed covenant community, was forming. As Christians partake of the Lord's Supper, they renew within themselves God's unique act of salvation in Christ. They enter into the special fellowship Christ's act creates. Just as baptism points to the future, so also the Lord's Supper invites Christians to look forward to the heavenly marriage

supper with the Lamb. Jesus told His disciples at the Last Supper, "I shall never eat again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:16).

What baptism is once in a life, and the Lord's Supper quarterly, the Sabbath is every week — a sacrament of God's redeeming fellowship. Like baptism and the Lord's Supper, the Sabbath stretches man's experience back into the past, to the creation and the redemption of Israel. Sabbath fellowship is the fellowship of man saved from nonexistence and slavery. It includes the stranger within the gates, the prisoner, the blind and the oppressed. The Sabbath points back also to Christ's ultimate act of redemption and reconciliation, His conquering the powers and principalities of evil through His death on the cross. Each Sabbath is a baptism into His death and burial rest and a reviving to a newly refreshed life. Each Sabbath is also a holy communion, a fellowship with Christ, who shares human time and shares Himself.

As baptism and the Lord's Supper refer to the past and anticipate the future, so the Sabbath points to God's past and future fellowship with mankind. The renewing companionship of Sabbath rest assures man that he will be a part of that coming perfect community. The friendship relished in and with Christ on His holy day is a promise of the approaching great Day of the Lord. The Sabbath rest is a weekly baptism into Christ, a holy communion with God the Saviour.

**S**abbath fellowship creates the desire for a more intimate relationship with God. Creation week moved to the crescendo of the final day and communion with God. The Sabbath was not a peaceful interlude, but the climax of creation. The seventh day has always drawn man forward. Celebration of the Sabbath pointed the prophets' vision toward the triumph of the Last Day. Christ Himself identified the Sabbath with the messianic age. Because of His victorious Sabbath of the passion week, Hebrews says "the promise of entering His rest remains" (Heb. 4:1). The church has continued to anticipate in the completion of each week the culmination of history. John Calvin taught the Reformation

that "the Lord through the seventh day has sketched for his people the coming perfection of His Sabbath in the Last Day."<sup>5</sup> In eighteenth-century America, Jonathan Edwards preached that the Sabbath, "a pleasurable and joyful day," was "an image of the future heavenly rest of the church."<sup>6</sup>

The climax towards which the whole creation groans is not an escape for individual souls. God is not merely rescuing isolated individuals, but fulfilling a covenant with His people. The day of the Son of Man is a day when every eye shall see Him: "For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in His day" (Luke 17:24). That "future, perfect eternal Sabbath of the Last Day" is no more a private rest than was Eden or the exodus.<sup>7</sup> Hebrews promises that "there remains a sabbath rest for the *people* of God" (Heb. 4:9).

For the believing community, Sabbath rest cannot be Sabbath apathy. Entering the Sabbath does mean one can rest in Christ's completed work of redemption. "Whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from His" (Heb. 4:10) and is released from trying to achieve salvation through diligent effort. But the quality of Sabbath rest is not listless indifference. Christ's work gives the people of God the assurance to make the Sabbath a day of celebration. The Lord's return is certain. Each Sabbath can already participate in the victory of the Great Day of the Lord.

Heschel states that "unless one learns how to relish the taste of the Sabbath while still in this world, unless one is initiated in the appreciation of eternal life, one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come."<sup>8</sup> For centuries, Israel has welcomed the Sabbath in holy festivity. The coming of the Sabbath is the arrival of an honored guest, a queen to be met in the palace of time with beautiful robes and graceful dances, the entering of a bride sanctified to the people of God.

For Christians such as Karl Barth, joyful anticipation is intrinsic to the Sabbath. History's "last day," he believes, "will be a Sabbath day," a time of freedom and joy, of fellowshiping in "the rest of God Himself."<sup>9</sup> In the words of de Quervain, "The joy of Sabbath is . . . the superabundant joy at the blessings which have already been given and joy in expectation of new acts of God, at the coming salvation."<sup>10</sup>

The Sabbath continues to have the power to draw human beings out of their alienation and despair into a community created by the mighty acts of God. The Sabbath is an exodus from chaos and slavery and death, a sacred meal shared with the victor who conquers through the gift of His body. It is a weekly marriage supper with the Lamb, a baptism into the resurrection of the world. On this day, time past and time future enter into time present. The Sabbath is a prism, a multifaceted jewel, refracting throughout our lives the fullness of God's glory.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's and the Sabbath* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), p. 99.

2. Jonathan Edwards, "Sermon XV: The Perpetuity and Change of the Sabbath," unpublished, p. 6.

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), p. 396.

4. Calvin, *Commentary on Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Meyers (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1948), p. 400.

5. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 396.

6. Edwards, p. 6.

7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, vol. 3, bk. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), p. 57. Barth indicates his indebtedness to Calvin for this phrase. See *Institutes*, Book II, Chapter 8, Section 30, cited above.

8. Heschel, p. 74.

9. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, bk. 1, p. 218.

10. A. de Quervain, "Das Feiern der Gemeinde," *Die Heiligung* (1942), p. 353. Quoted in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, bk. 4 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), p. 51.