



BEING, HOLINESS, AND FREEDOM: *On the Sacramental Character of the Sabbath*

BY DARYLL WARD

In the August/September issue of the journal *First Things*, Albert Mohler explains, “Why I am A Baptist,” in part by noting that Baptists do not believe that baptism and the Lord’s supper are sacraments, they are rather “ordinances,” practices commanded by God.¹ Charles Scriven has frequently made the important point that we Adventists are lower-case baptists. Indeed, it was a Seventh-day Baptist who bequeathed to the Millerites the practice of recognizing and honoring the Sabbath. Moreover, we Seventh-day Adventists share the Baptist designation of these rites as ordinances and not sacraments. It could, therefore, be reasonably concluded

that the proposal I advance in this paper is misguided at best, slightly daft at worst. Perhaps it is. But my love of the Sabbath, my conviction that it is holy, and my concern that its celebration is degenerating in our midst prompt me to offer witness to the character of the Sabbath, the character which cannot be discerned so long as the Sabbath is understood primarily as the litmus test in some great controversy or as definitively a matter of obedience to a divine command.

Whatever other significances the Sabbath may have, they all derive from its character. In so far as the Sabbath is not holy, it does not exist. Since it is holy, every human

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being has the possibility, in the Sabbath, of enjoying the freedom to be with and for the one who cannot fail to be, the beauty of whose holiness is infinite.

However, recognition, honor, and celebration of the Sabbath is rendered thoroughly problematic by the secularization of our culture's consciousness, a phenomenon that exhibits itself in the status accorded individual or collective autonomy in construction of reality, and far more profoundly than that, in forgetfulness of the one from whom all that is originates.² Sacramental realism in the form presupposed here rejects the individualism, nominalism, and nihilism that are, in part, definitive of secular consciousness. The faithful are not immune to the secularization of their experience. They may even have greater difficulty in discerning the invisible in the visible because their spiritual formation has given them some degree or other of appreciation for the infinite difference between creatures and the Creator. A vivid sense of divine transcendence can evacuate common experience of any sense of the divine. Paradoxically, religious sensibility can kill spiritual awareness. It can give birth to practical atheism. In spite of the threat the command to remember poses of translating enjoyment into compliance, that command may serve to disrupt our practical atheism and enable reception of communion with that which exceeds the ordinary.

In his widely appreciated, thorough, and creative book, *Sacramental Theology*, Herbert Vorgrimmler, the prominent Catholic colleague of Karl Rahner, writes that

“sacramental thinking” is a way of understanding. The word “sacramental” in this sentence is broadly conceived. It refers to the faith experience that tells us that a reality perceptible

to the senses, an external object or event, is “more than,” “deeper than” the surface reveals at first glance. The word “sacramental” was consciously chosen, in reference to a point of view proper to Christian faith, because the deeper, interior reality that makes use of the external as its mediator is the reality of the transcendent God.³

Awareness of depth in the mundane is attested in the religious and scientific truism “there is more to reality than meets the eye.” One might consider the whole Christian tradition (in all of its variations) regarding sacrament as a witness to transcendence and attempts to both enjoy and understand it. The importance of this conviction regarding plenitude may be appreciated by noting that one way to distinguish faith from its negation is to understand faith as a conviction that there is difference, that not everything there is, is alike, God being the one and only one who is truly different. As Vorgrimmler's recent work attests, in its sacramental thoughts and practices, the Church confesses that the one who is different is present and the presence of that one is liberating.

Holiness is one name fitting the infinite divine difference, a difference expressed in the familiar contrast between the sacred and profane: in other words, the difference between what is not the same and what is the same. The church's audacity in announcing the presence of holiness in the mundane arises in the first instance from its experience of the embodied living one who was crucified, and in the second from the Nazarene's declaration accompanying the gift of the Passover bread, “this is my body.” The majority in the church hears that declaration, “this is my body,” as assurance that there is more to the eucharistic bread than meets the eye.

The being that is bread, not just any bread, only the eucharistic bread, is incarnate being itself. Sacramental presence is possible because of difference and its presence differentiates the otherwise undifferentiated.

Claims to have had an experience of holiness tend to excite controversy. Witness to the holiness of the Sabbath provokes conflict. Similarly, the theology of the Eucharist remains contested. How the divine is present in the Eucharist has divided and continues to divide the Christian church, and Adventists remain divisive in our insistence that the seventh day of the week is holy. The divisions are signs of the gravity of the affirmations involved. It can escape notice, when adverting to the divisions in the body of Christ, that there is unity in the conviction that how one understands the supper is of critical importance.



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Adventists were, for some time, all but alone in their provocative insistence that how one understands the Sabbath and whether one enjoys it are also of critical importance. Happily, that is no longer the case, as a growing number of voices are calling everyone to discover the liberating grace available in the Sabbath.⁴ Oddly, these calls insist on the obligatory nature of the commandment, while claiming quintessential, individualistic, modern autonomy in naming what day is Sabbath. Timothy Keller, famous founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, “sabbaths” on Tuesday. A. J. Swoboda, author of the book *Subversive Sabbath*, “sabbaths” along with friends on Wednesday. Liturgists do not consecrate the elements of the supper and individuals are infinitely incompetent to consecrate the Sabbath.

Confusion about what gives the Sabbath its holiness ensures that one cannot and therefore will not fully participate in it. One purpose of the present proposal is to highlight the fact that, absent an accurate understanding of the sacramental character of Sabbath grace, its loss is all but assured under the pressures of secularization. The degeneration of Sabbath observance among Adventists, which treats the day as leisure time and a ready opportunity for good works we are unwilling to do on our own time, exemplifies such loss. Similarly, diminution of the conviction that God is present in the bread and wine has resulted in relative indifference to enactment of the supper. Recall the *quarterly* celebration of non-sacramental communions.

What, then, does offer us an accurate understanding of the character of the Sabbath? The effort of the Church to understand the supper discloses what is ultimately important. Despite deep conviction that what happens in the celebration of the Lord’s supper must be properly conceived, it has proved impossible up to the present for

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the Body of Christ to unify around an understanding of the Lord's body. The challenge is, of course, two-fold. One must attempt to faithfully *bear witness* to what happens when we "eat this bread and drink this cup," and one must attempt to facilitate *unity of understanding* regarding what happens. With the exception of our Baptist brothers and sisters, there is unity in a confession of specific divine presence in the Supper. What divides is what can and must be said regarding understanding that presence. Universal agreement obtains in the conviction that divine presence is what is of ultimate importance.

Divine presence, then, is constitutive of sacramental character. How can divine presence be discerned? There are several widely accepted criteria for recognizing sacramental character. A sacrament must be instituted by Christ. A sacrament is, in the words of Augustine, "a visible form of an invisible grace." And finally, a sacrament is efficacious for salvation.

Provided that one understands the crucial importance of framing a Christian doctrine of creation on the basis of the Johannine testimony to the creatorship of the incarnate Logos, one can take Jesus's declaration that He is the Lord of the Sabbath as authorization for understanding Genesis 2:3 as scriptural revelation of Dominican institution of the Sabbath. So long as one is clear that the content of the term God is supplied by the incarnation, one can affirm that the one who was born in Bethlehem, reared in Nazareth, crucified and resurrected in Jerusalem, did indeed institute sanctity of the Sabbath as the crown of His gift of the creation. The Sabbath meets the first test of sacramental identity in that it was instituted by the Lord.

The Sabbath meets the second test of sacramental identity as well. A day is as surely a spatio-temporal reality as bread and wine are. Moreover, the specific tangible character of the Sabbath actually protects against a misunderstanding of sacramental identity, namely that the liturgist is the sanctifier of the sacrament, a misunderstanding not countenanced in the official teaching of any Christian communion. Unlike the production and consecration of bread and wine, the Sabbath appears independently of any immediate human agency. Neither priest nor lay person consecrates the Sabbath. It arrives consecrated by the Lord's announcement of His sovereignty over and in it.

Scriptural authorization of understanding holiness as specific divine presence is found in the story of Moses at the burning bush. Exodus 3:1-7 reads as follows:

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

That God can be locally present, divine omnipresence notwithstanding, is widely attested in Scripture in the many stories of divine epiphanies and definitively and most extensively in the incarnation of God in the Palestinian Jew, Jesus, in the first thirty years of the common era. What has proved intractably contentious is how to fittingly confess local presence.⁵ And the focal point of that conflict about confession is what can and must be said about *how* Jesus Christ is present. It is instructive to notice that the disputing parties do not contest *that* Jesus Christ is locally present in the Eucharist. For some, the locality of presence is the event of celebration, but that confession just as surely insists on local presence as confession that the bread and wine change and the change is the advent of divine presence. It is not just any celebration in which Christ is really present. It is in the celebration of the supper.

The most durable and widely used conceptual means of confessing how Christ is present is the doctrine of transubstantiation. The concept offers admirable clarity about how the body of Jesus is literally present in the bread and the blood of Jesus is literally present in the wine. The admirable clarity is owed to Aristotle's categories created

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by him to answer the question about individuals, “what is it?”, and to specify how the answer to that question is related to change in particular individuals. But the doctrine does not merely adopt those categories, since the substance for Aristotle is that which endures through change, while the substance affirmed in the doctrine is precisely that which does change. The doctrine of transubstantiation is then a lovely example of Christian faith spoiling philosophical Egypt. Furthermore, the doctrine satisfies a thoroughly normal curiosity about how it can be that the bread and wine do not appear changed to the senses and yet they are confessed to be transformed into the body and blood of the Lord.

Unfortunately, the more that curiosity is indulged the more problematic the teaching becomes. Indeed, the clarity has proven to be a vulnerability for sustaining faith that the Lord is present in the Supper. If one cannot imagine a distinction between what a thing is and the particulars of its existence, a facility apparently lost to both modern and post-modern sorts of minds, then one will not be able to deconstruct a particular individual in order to intuit a substance differing from the form of its appearance. In that case, the concepts employed to facilitate intellection of divine presence make discernment of it impossible because, to borrow a phrase from Denys Turner, the concepts have migrated off of the semantic map. If they did not migrate off of the semantic map, they would be an occasion of committing the quintessential sin of exchanging the Creator for the creature. There is no univocity of language about the perceptible and God.

As with the Roman Church’s teaching on birth control, so, with the doctrine of transubstantiation; the sizable majority of contemporary American Roman Catholics report that they do not believe the bread and wine are

the body and blood of Jesus.⁶ I wonder if the majority of American Adventists do not believe the Sabbath is holy in the sense that the day is literally a different kind of day from the other days of the week. My guess is, if asked they, like their fellow Catholic Christians, would deny that there is anything literally different about the Sabbath. We should greet the degeneration of Catholic conviction regarding the presence of the Lord in the sacrament with the same sort of sadness that is fitting with respect to Adventist failure to discern the transcendent in the Sabbath as literal and not merely as an echo in the form of a religious rule.

Even superficial consideration of the concept of transubstantiation leads me to conclude that the conviction that the Sabbath is literally holy should not seek to express itself in a specification of properties of the day that constitute its holiness or that supply the means of discernment of its character.

The third characteristic shared by the sacraments is that they are salvifically efficacious. Again, we may learn from sacramental teaching regarding the Eucharist. The experience of holiness, of being itself, of God, in the eucharist is received through an act of obedience to the command, “this do in remembrance of me.” It is precisely the remembering of Jesus that imparts to the experience of being, consciousness of liberation. The story of Jesus is the record of abundance, the fullness of being, that liberates from sin, suffering, and death. Obedience to the command to remember is already the beginning of liberation from the alienation of disobedience that is isolation of the self in itself, isolation that is an act of denial suppressing consciousness of difference. As Jesus taught, it is just in the loss of the self in submission to the command to remember that infinite being is given to

the self. Importantly, and herein is a profound truth of sacramental faith, it is not the obedience that returns the self to itself. Rather the possibility of obedience is created in the gift of holiness which commands remembrance. “This is my body” precedes “this do in remembrance of me.” If holiness were not given, remembrance could not exceed nostalgia. Experience of the transcendent God uniquely present in the Sabbath is likewise not an achievement of obedience. It is the reception of a gift.

The Sabbath is salvifically efficacious through the power of its saving grace, which is the presence of the holy. The Sabbath commandment enshrines grace in the law.⁷ The command is to cease from work. One cannot work on the Sabbath and taste its liberty.⁸ And one cannot make not working a work of observance and taste the liberty available in it. The life of Jesus reveals both that the human condition is corrupted by sin, suffering, and death, and that the will of God is to liberate humanity from the conditions of its bondage. The Sabbath offers the experience of liberation now. Indeed, the saving grace of the Sabbath is, in an important sense, superior to, more fundamental than, the saving grace of the Eucharistic food. Those who do not exist cannot eat. The Sabbath is the gift of being from the one for whom time is the inalienable possession of every possibility. The one who never fails to have time gives time to us. To be is to have time. To not have time is not to be.

This ontological character of the Sabbath, that in it the God who is the one who cannot fail to be, allows us to participate in the necessity of His being, has psychological significance as an experience of liberation. All our work is exertion devoted to possession of being, something which sin makes us negate, which suffering makes us regret, and which death finally takes from us. Sabbath gives us being and calls us simply to be. We are able to rest from the labor of clinging to being because the God of creation shares being, which requires no labor, with us.

It is to be expected that if one were to accept the central claim of this paper stated in summary form in the preceding paragraph, then one might seek to achieve explicit awareness of the liberating divine presence defining the Sabbath. In other words, they might seek to realize the real presence of God. A note of caution can be sounded with reference to C. S. Lewis’s autobiography, titled *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis came to attribute his period

of atheism in part to his agonizing efforts at prayer when at boarding school. Every night he would kneel by his bed and seek a “realization” of the presence of God. He would not allow himself to sleep until he had achieved a realization. He exhausted himself by this practice and dreaded bedtime as a result. Eventually he quit praying. We may learn from him. Just as we cannot supply a delineation of the specific divine presence in the Sabbath, so we also cannot master that presence in a realization of its truth. We may keep the Sabbath holy, because it is holy. Remembering that gives us liberty now from the labor of being.

Endnotes

1. R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Why I am a Baptist,” *First Things*, no. 305: 48.
2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Belknap, 2018) may be the definitive study of this cultural phenomenon.
3. Herbert Vorgrimmler, *Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 27.
4. See Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017); Joseph Lieberman, *The Gift of Rest: Rediscovering the Beauty of the Sabbath* (Howard Books, 2012); Judith Shulevitz, *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time* (Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011); A. J. Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Nonstop World* (Brazos Press, 2018).
5. It is very important to recall that the same set of issues inhere in the task of Christology. Appropriately, therefore, a recent proposal advances the idea that the incarnation be the model for understanding the Eucharist. See James M. Arcadi, *An Incarnational Model of the Eucharist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
6. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/>
7. My wife, Adele Waller, taught me to see that the Sabbath is the grace in the law.
8. A word to the doers of good works on the Sabbath, deck builders, house painters, street sweepers, and performers of elective surgery, to name work friends of mine have engaged in on the Sabbath that they justified with reference to Jesus’s claim that His father worked, and He works, on the Sabbath; when you can speak, and by speaking produce the fruits of your labor, then I will have no quarrel with your “working” on the Sabbath as Jesus worked.



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