

Sabbath

AIMS AND OUTCOMES

- to help participants understand the Biblical practice of 'Sabbath'
- to think about the place of Sabbath and rest in their lives
- to share their thought and experiences

RESOURCES

- Use this Leader's Guide to structure the session and inform your input.
- Download the Powerpoint presentation (produced by LICC and used with permission) from the AMD website.
- Copies of the hand-out for each participant.

Make sure you have a working version of the presentation before the session and that the technology and the space you plan to use are appropriate for your audience. With very small groups it may be possible to use a printed out copy of the presentation.

SESSION PLAN

THINK ABOUT IT

Are you busy? How do you fit everything into life?

Ask everyone in the group to say whether or not they are busy, and how they manage to fit everything into life. Appreciate the variety of answers. Note if anyone says they make a point of not working or not doing the usual things on one day of the week.

I wonder whether you are busy. If not, I suspect you may be the exception that proves the rule, for we all seem to have so much to do and so little time in which to do it. Our response to this predicament is often to attempt to *overcome* our busyness: we take action. Some people take courses in time management to learn to make better use of their time. Others try to do more, becoming paragons if not of virtue, then of frenetic activity.

This reaction contrasts strongly with the fourth commandment (Jewish and Reformed traditions; third commandment in Roman Catholic Church), which reads like this [SLIDE]:

¹² Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴ But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵ Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day (Deut 5.12–15).

Before looking at the implications of the commandment, I should start with a very obvious but important point: Sunday may not be a Sabbath rest for you. When I speak of the Sabbath, therefore, you must not just think of Sunday, quite possibly with all the usual round of activities, but of another day when you are able to rest. With this clear, let's look at the significance of the Sabbath in a little more detail.

THINK ABOUT IT

Look at Deuteronomy 5: 12-15. What do you notice about the *reasons* for the Sabbath?

There are a number of reasons that Deuteronomy gives for keeping the Sabbath.

A. A MOMENT TO REMEMBER

[SLIDE] First the Sabbath is a ***moment to remember***. By resting on the seventh day

[SLIDE] we remember that *God* created the world. We remember that whilst we work, we do not create our world but that it has been given to us by its creator. So often, we find it easier to continue with our self-absorbed activity rather than stop and wait in faith. But by doing so, of course, we can miss the point of everything we have been created to be. It is for this reason that Jesus said the 'Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath' (Mark 2.27).

On the Sabbath we remember something else, too: [SLIDE] we remember that God has rescued his people. The commandment itself refers to the exodus deliverance. And the salvation from Egyptian oppression was a constant point of reference for prophets and priests as they sought to lead God's people in God's ways. As Christians, of course, we remember the rescue effected by the death and resurrection of Jesus; the Sabbath is an opportunity to stop our activities and remember our great salvation.

THINK ABOUT IT

What do you do on your 'day off' to help you remember what God has done?

What would you like to do to help you remember what God has done?

B. OUR PRESENT DISCIPLINE

[SLIDE] The Sabbath, though, is also a ***present discipline***. The purpose of the Sabbath is to keep a day apart for God. [SLIDE] On the one hand, the Sabbath involves not doing things: it is a rest from all the activity that so consumes our time and energy. This is not only personal rest, for it involves the whole household. There is a social and economic dimension to Sabbath that ensures others are not exploited; and it is salutary to think that if we create a society that forgets this then we may end up as the exploited ones. On the other hand, Sabbath is not only a refusal to work, in principle an intrinsically worthwhile activity, it is a positive rejection of something negative: [SLIDE] the Sabbath is an opportunity to say 'no' to idolatry. Idolatry is simply putting something else in the place of God, and although modern forms are not expressed in rituals to ensure the earth's fecundity they are no less extensive



or insidious. Among other things, idolatry occurs when we depend upon ourselves rather than God. In this sense, egoistic self-love, perhaps expressed in frenetic activity, is idolatrous. The discipline of Sabbath rest can save us from going too far down the wrong track: it can save us from ourselves.

THINK ABOUT IT

What do you think are the implications for you and the Church of the point that the Sabbath was as much to do with the economic, social and political dimensions of life as with the spiritual? Do we recognise how closely linked the two aspects are?

What do you find hard about stopping your usual round of activities? How could you help yourself gain some of the benefits of a 'Sabbath rest,' even if a full 'day off' is impossible (e.g. for a full-time carer).

C. A SIGN OF OUR HOPE

[SLIDE] Finally, the practice of Sabbath observance is *a sign of our hope*. In novels and films the end is when everything becomes clear and the loose ends are tied up. The Sabbath rest declares that the end of the story in which we are players will come not as a result of our activity but because of God's action. For this reason, [SLIDE] early Christians conceived the Lord's Day as the eighth day of the week, a day for celebrating God's new creation. Our resting is a sign, both to ourselves and to those around us, that our hope is placed firmly in this hope instead of our ability to overcome obstacles to the more efficient or effective use of time.

The Sabbath is a space in which to remember what God has done and what he will do, but it is a practice that requires discipline, even courage, especially since God does not seem to operate to our timescales. For this reason, the psalmist says not only [SLIDE] 'Wait for the LORD' but also 'be strong, let your heart take courage' (Ps. 27:14). Waiting can be work; but it is neither the sort of work required legalistically to fulfil some imposed requirement, nor the self-absorbed work of frenetic activity. Instead, it is a sign to us and others of the goodness of God.

An anecdote from the life of William Wilberforce provides us with an example of the benefits of Sabbath. At one point in his political career he faced the prospect of becoming a government minister and, according to words he penned in his journal, he 'was for a little intoxicated, and had risings of ambition'. Yet Wilberforce was convinced of the benefits of Sabbath rest, and spent Sunday in quiet contemplation. By the evening he was able to write: [SLIDE] 'Blessed be God for this day of rest and religious occupation, wherein earthly things assume their true size and comparative insignificance; ambition is stunted'. As for Wilberforce, our natural, fallen ambitions take their proper place when God takes his. Sabbath space that is set aside for God is also a place from which temptations can be confronted; and the nature of temptation is that discipline is required if it *is* to be confronted.



THINK ABOUT IT

Have you any experiences of stopping doing something and then realising that you were on the wrong track?

How might stopping doing things be a sign of our Christian hope? Have you any stories of this in your own experiences?

Sabbath rest is a moment to remember, a present discipline, and a sign of our hope in God. It is both an ethical issue—something its place in the Ten Commandments highlights—and a part of the mission of the people of God. In many ways it encapsulates the Church's call to be living witnesses. Our ability to fulfil this charge will depend on God himself, as it always has. For this reason we should conclude our consideration of Sabbath with prayer.

PRAY ABOUT IT

Take some time to pray for each other regarding 'a day of rest'
Also pray for any other concerns.

You may wish to conclude with the following prayer. Originally penned in 1691, the sentiments and aspirations of Richard Baxter's oration remain as relevant today as when they were first prayed [SLIDE]:

Keep us, O Lord,
while we tarry on this earth,
in a serious seeking after you,
and in an affectionate walking with you,
every day of our lives;
that when you come,
we may be found not hiding our talent,
nor serving the flesh,
nor yet asleep with our lamp unfurnished,
but waiting and longing for our Lord,
our glorious God for ever.
Amen.