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Sabbath—A Biblical Understanding of Creation Care

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AFTER JESUS' FIRST major conflict with his contemporary Jews, he proclaimed: 'The Son of Man is thus the Lord of the Sabbath.'¹ Thereafter, he repeatedly challenged his opponents on their interpretation of and practice on the Sabbath day and eventually allowed himself to be killed in this apparently earthly cause. In bringing about Jesus' resurrection, God has accepted both the person of Jesus as well as the cause he has taken up—the Sabbath cause. In his death and resurrection, Jesus the man has shown himself to be Christ, the redeemer of the cosmos.² The Lord of the Sabbath will take God's creation forward from the very beginning to the very end.

The Old Testament Sabbath cause is

a system of mutually reinforcing institutions aimed to bring God's creation in all its dimensions to the fullness of the Sabbath of God. The Sabbath day for man points him to a future in which he is ultimately in harmony with the works of his hands, as God was in harmony with every part of his creation after his six days of creative work. The Sabbatical year urges man to come into harmony with nature through knowledge and consequential respect and love. The Jubilee brings man into mutuality with other people and consummates this and the former two Sabbatical institutions under God.

Through Jesus' earthly actions and his death and resurrection, the above Old Testament institutions have been transformed into a new set of institutions comprising the Lord's Day, the church and the Kingdom of God. Henceforth, the redemption of God is being extended far and wide through these New Testament institutions. His creation is moving forward to the final Sabbath.³

1 Mk. 2:23-38, also Mt. 12:1-8; Lu 6:1-5.

2 Christopher Fung, 'Sabbath, The Alpha and Omega of God-Man Partnership', *Asia Journal of Theology*, 20:2, October 2006, 455 and 20:1, 182-204.

3 Christopher Fung, *The Institutions of Hope, Evangelical Review of Theology*, (2008) 32:3, 238-356.

I The Sabbath-Kingdom

1. Sabbath and the Crucifixion

Christianity is founded on God's work in history, hence understanding Jesus' role in God's overall scheme must start from his life and earthly reason for his death.⁴ That Jesus was crucified because he acted on a different interpretation of the Sabbath and challenged his Law-abiding contemporaries on this is abundantly clear from the records of this most frequent (at least five separate events) and intense conflict recorded strategically in all four Gospels. His opponents considered Sabbath practice as the decisive criterion by which to judge whether a person is from God.⁵ In these struggles, Jesus uniquely took the initiative, was unusually provocative and uncharacteristically ostentatious, and extremely intense. Every single incident here concerns the healing of a person with a debilitating sickness on the Sabbath Day and each of these sicknesses

prevents the sufferer from working for him/herself.

The aftermath of these encounters is a continually aroused opposition by the Jews at large and the Pharisees in particular—bent on destroying (killing) Jesus. These murderous efforts resulted from the first recorded intense conflict that Jesus had with the pious Jews who went as far as seeking cooperation with their sworn enemies, the Herodians. These purposely-fanned conflicts continued late into Jesus public career with unabated intensity.⁶

Not only has Jesus knowingly stoked so much anger among his opponents leading to his murder, he fully understands the implications of and the reactions to his actions, but nevertheless accepts them and persists in his actions as if to ensure that he would be killed because of this.⁷ Jesus clearly wants the earthly reason (why people killed him—the 'because' that he has accepted) to inform and determine the redemptive reason ('for' in dying for our sins), thus linking in this very act the earthly and the heavenly, the material and the spiritual causes.⁸

The Sabbath day for man is modelled on God's Sabbath in which God rested to enjoy, appreciate and love the fruits of his labour—his multi-faceted creation. Every component of his creation was good in itself, but when put to-

⁴ Most scholars have not given due attention to the most biblical reason of Jesus's death (Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974), 87, 183; John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 8, 103, 33; Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 334-339, yet all would agree that this is most important (Moltmann, *Crucified*, p. 96, 189); Kung, *Christian*, p. 439; p. 551; C.G. Montefiore (1921-22) 'The Religious Teaching of the Synoptic Gospels in Its Relation to Judaism', *Hibbert Journal* 20:437).

⁵ Jn. 9:16; Geoffrey Chapman, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Burns and Oates, 1994), 80; Kung *Christian*, 207-208; Donald Alfred Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 132.

⁶ Lk. 13:10-16; Lk. 14:1-6; Jn. 5; Jn. 9; C.E. Graham Swift in *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer, A.M. Stibbs, D.J. Wiseman, 1970), 858.

⁷ Jn. 7:19-23; Kung, *Christian*, 320; Ernest Findlay Scott, *The Crisis in the life of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 124.

⁸ Yoder, *Politics*, 53; Kung, *Christian*, 335.

gether with other parts to play its role in the whole creation, becomes even better.⁹ Completed creation is not just good, but very good!

It is this completeness, the completion of goodness and the goodness of completion, that God celebrated during his first Sabbath. Upon the Israelites' deliverance from their slavery in Egypt, at the point where they could begin to work freely and be responsible for their actions, God initiated the Sabbath Day for the Israelites¹⁰ (as a prototype of blessing) so that they could likewise celebrate their works periodically and look forward to their completion at the end. The vision is for the builders to live in the houses they build and the planters to enjoy the grapes of their own vineyard with no one to scare them or take away their fruits.¹¹ Individuals are thus to celebrate their own Sabbaths as God did at first.

Riding on the Sabbath Day is the Sabbatical Year in which man is enjoined to produce from the land what he wants the land to provide, but only during six years out of every seven. The remaining year in the seven-year cycle is for man to learn from the land what it can spontaneously provide without man's coercion and to get sustenance from there. The land rather than man is the intended beneficiary of such practice.¹² By forcing man to go beyond the sphere of his own knowledge to understand God's providence through nature, Sabbatical year observance is

continuing the work God initiated with Adam to name the animals.

This repeated Sabbatical Year is a pointer to a future redemption of nature, necessitated after the land was cursed because of man's rebellion. This curse on nature is now to be reversed by the same agent—man—that brought it about. Through this, man will progressively appreciate the prowess and potentiality with which God has imbued nature and embark on a journey of learning, respecting and loving God's intelligently designed creation. The resulting mutuality between man and nature is Creation's glorious freedom.¹³ To calm man's doubts, God provides a safety net in the abundance of produce from the land in the sixth year in case man's efforts at relying on nature temporarily fail him.¹⁴

Consummating the above Sabbath institutions is the Jubilee which calls men to become reconciled with each other through provisioning each person with what is necessary to reach the destination pointed towards in the Sabbath Day.¹⁵ The original provision for each person and household which can change through the ups and downs of life is now reset for all on their individual and collective journeys towards the Sabbath. The Jubilee culminates the seven-year cycles of the Sabbatical years and together with the refreshed community is ultimately accepted by God as complete, hence named the favourable year of the Lord. Yet the cycle continues, signifying its own incompleteness, and pointing to a greater

9 Gen. 1.

10 Ex. 20:9-11; Dt. 5:12-25.

11 Is. 65.

12 Lev. 25:1-7.

13 Rom. 8:18-22.

14 Lev. 25:20-22.

15 Lev. 25:8-55.

future.¹⁶

These three intertwined institutions form a system in which the individual persons, nature and the community all converge towards the ultimate destiny intended by God. Through the Sabbath Day modelled on the very actions of the Creator in his Sabbath, God is leading the individuals forward to his future, one week at a time. Man in turn is to lead nature forward to the final rendezvous in which God, man and nature all come together in harmony and love, one Sabbath of years at a time.

With nature fully supporting men at the end of the Sabbatical year journey, and with each person finding fulfilment in the fruitful works of his hands, men have all the prerequisites for the final steps and thus are now called to respect God and act justly towards each other, thus completing the foundation for God's acceptance of his entire creation. Individuals, nature and the entire human community can now resonate together in joyful unison to the praise of the Creator, while journeying onward and upward, one Jubilee cycle at a time.

Yet, this mesmerizing vision never caught on.¹⁷ The Israelites reluctantly implemented the Sabbath Day through burdensome regulations rather than observing its spirit, but never quite progressed to the last two institutions. This resulted in unchecked greed, which further blossomed into all forms of misbehaviour against nature and each other, bringing upon themselves the destruction of their two kingdoms

and their own exile as the fulfilment of the warned-against punishment from God.¹⁸ Thereafter, there were no new instructions from God except the promise that God would write his law directly into his people's hearts so that they would not have to teach each other to obey God's words.¹⁹

2. Jesus and the Sabbath

When Jesus appeared on the scene, the three Old Testament Sabbatical institutions were transformed through his life, work, death and resurrection.

Unflinchingly and unrelentingly he took an unyielding stand on the practice of the Sabbath in the most frequent, public, and intense conflicts he had with his foes. He thereby personified his earlier statement that the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath, and he stood the traditional understanding and practice on their heads.²⁰ When this action became the basic reason his crucifixion, he had vested upon himself the cause of the symbiotic Sabbath institutions. In resting in the grave on the first Sabbath day after the Passover, Jesus has taken the Old Testament Sabbatical institutions with him to the tomb, thereby burying them with himself; upon his acceptance by God²¹ for resurrection on the first day of the week, he has given the old Sabbath institutions a new form. What seemed to be Jesus' challenge of a purely Jewish custom has now, through the lens of his death

16 Fung, *Hope*, 242.

17 Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation, An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM, 1985), 289; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.15.3.

18 2 Chr. 36:21.

19 Jer. 31:31-34.

20 Kung, *Christian*, 208.

21 Kung, *Christian*, 382-383.

and resurrection, become the cosmic struggle for God's Sabbath.

In preparing his disciples for his new creation, Jesus had one last meal with them in which he used the bread and wine—taken from creation—to symbolize his body broken because of our sins and his blood shed to redeem mankind. He instructed his disciples to repeat this in remembering him i.e. proclaim his death until he comes.²² Between the Lord's death and his coming stands the resurrection of Jesus.

When Jesus did rise again on the third day, his disciples started to remember him, as instructed, through the bread and wine. The person Jesus they remember is now indisputably the Christ, proven by his resurrection,²³ hence 'Jesus Christ'. The framework of Sabbatical time now determines when this is observed. The last day of the week, namely the Sabbath, means completion of one's labour in the working cycle. The first day of the week is the beginning of a new creative cycle. Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week signifies not only a new creative cycle, but a whole and totally new creation, on par with the first creation of God.²⁴

3. Early Church and Sabbath

Given that this new creation is what his followers look forward to when Jesus comes, and following the Sabbath example of a periodic observance, his disciples soon adopted the practice of

remembering their Lord on the first day of every week,²⁵ now aptly called the Lord's Day. Knowingly or otherwise, the disciples are repeating what God did in instituting the Sabbath for man, but with an added dimension. God freed the Israelites from their slave masters so that henceforth the fruits of their labour could accrue to them on earth. The Lord's Day signifies that the redeemed man is protected from the all-out robbery of another slave master called death, all because of Jesus' prototypical resurrection.²⁶

The shift in time reference between Jesus' followers and the Jews cannot be overstated. The Jews saw the Sabbath as solely resting on God's creation and missed the dimension that each person is to move forward to his own destination in the Sabbath, hence the very rigid rules to bind man to the past. By contrast, in the Lord's Table at the core of the Lord's Day, the disciples look forward to the Lord's coming by holding on to the foundation his death and resurrection laid. Rather than locking his followers to that moment in history, Jesus in his death becomes the springboard to God's future through his resurrection, a future that all his followers earnestly seek. His disciples' first-day-of-the-week choice completes the transformation that Jesus initiated in overthrowing the woefully inadequate backward-looking concept of the Sabbath and ushers in the intended hope-filled Sabbath consummated in the Lord's Day.²⁷

²² 1 Cor. 11:26.

²³ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus, Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 107-111.

²⁴ 2 Cor. 5:17; Wright, *Challenge*, 175-176.

²⁵ Acts 20:7.

²⁶ 1 Cor. 15:58; N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 192.

²⁷ Kung, *Christian*, 216.

4. Sabbath and Nature

The real Sabbatical year rids man of his anxiety about fickle nature through a gradual learning and inuring process, thus freeing and enabling him to follow God's intention of justice among men expressed in the Jubilee. Jesus continues this by preaching how God's design in nature can be trusted to remove our anxiety.²⁸ In the process, redemption has started to dawn on nature and all man's anxiety-driven destruction of nature should eventually cease. Yet Jesus has not only physical creation in mind for redemption. When he acknowledged that he, the Jesus who lived within God's very creation, is the Christ and upon this impossible-sounding truth he would build his church, his intention to bring redemption to the entire creation is proclaimed, and the church is his agent.²⁹

The human Jesus is now declared the cosmic messiah, the redeemer of creation. Hence Satan's attempt to thwart Jesus' move and limit the scope of redemption through Peter's very-human logic was immediately rebuffed. Henceforth, Jesus proceeded without regrets to Jerusalem to meet his fate at the hand of his accusers.

Like the transformation of the Sabbath day into the Lord's Day through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the church was born by burying the Sabbatical Year with Christ and resurrecting it with an expanded mission to include not only nature, but the entire creation, as fitting for the cosmic Jesus Christ. The cosmic Christ³⁰

is inextricably also the earthly Jesus and is thus the cosmic Jesus Christ, a fit founder of his church. At the centre of this expectant community—the church—is the Lord's Table through which the church, the body of Christ looks forward to the consummation of creation through a redemptive process. Nature is an indispensable part of this consummation. The time orientation in the Sabbatical-year-transformed church is now irrevocably locked into a hope, the hope of creation's fullness.

5. Sabbath and Kingdom

Jesus inaugurated his ministry by proclaiming the Jubilee.³¹ Thereafter, he preached only the Kingdom of God, signifying that the Kingdom is the continuation and fulfilment of the Jubilee cause in the Old Testament. A main feature of the Jubilee—to restore hope to man—is neatly encapsulated in the beatitudes³² in which the promised Kingdom (first and last of the eight 'blessed are') brackets the middle six blessings which are each a reversal of one of the common miseries and undesirables of the current situation, something which the Jubilee tries to address and redress in a more rigid institutional form.

The first beatitude simply lays down the prerequisite for these middle blessings—to have such an insatiable longing for the Kingdom that one feels absolutely inadequate (poor), and the last beatitude points out the way to the Kingdom which leads through much persecution because of one's righteous stand. From there, the teaching on the Kingdom expands in all directions to

28 Mt. 6:25-33.

29 Mt. 16:15-23.

30 Col. 1:19-20.

31 Lk. 4:18-19.

32 Mt. 5:3-11.

paint a rather amorphous yet enticing picture of the mystery of God's work in this world. Though the Kingdom narratives elude our easy pigeonholing, the centrality of God, and man's response, in the Kingdom are unmistakable.

During the last meal Jesus had with his disciples, he looked forward to his Father's Kingdom in which he would drink the vine anew with his followers.³³ All the multi-faceted Kingdom teachings are now focused on the coming of God's Kingdom which has been transformed into the City of God, the New Jerusalem that will come down to earth and in which God's presence will be perpetual.³⁴ In it, all the longings of the Jubilee will be more than satisfied. Tears and death are done away with and the handiwork of man—the glory of the nations—will be brought in to decorate the City. Man, hitherto lowly and unclean, is now recognized together with his works³⁵ through his resurrection as being in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Through the first and last beatitudes, namely the desire and sacrifice for the Kingdom, respectively, the middle six beatitudes have now become reality. The ultimate Sabbath for man, the goal that the successive Sabbath days point towards, is now fulfilled just as God consummated the individual 'good' of each day of Creation into the 'very good' of the last day. The new creation Jesus' resurrection initiated is brought to fruition in this City built

upon the twelve exquisite foundation stones of God through the hope and consequential work enjoined by the successive Lord's Day remembrances. The remembrance of the future in Jesus Christ has guided men forward and indeed brought about that future in partnership with their Lord.³⁶

6. Sabbath and the Redemption of Nature

The work of the church is now completed in the redemption of nature.³⁷ Out of the throne of God flows a river which nourishes the Tree of Life to bear fruits for our enjoyment and put forth leaves to heal the nations. Absent are the hoeing and pruning, or mutilation, by man. The curse on the land because of man's sin³⁸ is reversed. What God wanted man to do and indeed helped him do—to know nature as in naming the animals—which was carried through to the Sabbatical year despite the Fall, is now brought to fruition through the church. The redemption nature looks forward to, i.e. harmony in freedom and freedom in harmony with mankind, is now reality. The spontaneous constructive mutuality between man and nature becomes nature's salvation.

This mutuality is necessarily part and parcel of the earth resurrected men inherit, the City of God. Both nature and humans are glorified together in this final Sabbath of Creation.³⁹

33 Mt. 26:29; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:18.

34 Rev. 21.

35 Rev. 21:24-26; Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 176, 177.

36 Yoder, *Politics*, 242.

37 Rev. 22:1-3

38 Gen. 3:17-18; 4:11-12.

39 St. Augustine, in closing the *City of God* (New York: Doubleday, 1958, translated and abridged by G. G. Walsh et. al.), XXII:30, 544.

God the Alpha is now God the Omega. The tortuous and chequered history of mankind, with all its excruciating and inexplicable sufferings and consequently those of nature, are justified in this final triumph.⁴⁰ Nature's groaning is wiped away along with man's tears. The beauty of man's work now sits alongside the mighty display of nature. God's presence is through all and in all when he proclaims: It is done. The prayer we have uttered so many times—'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'—is now fully answered.

Jesus' Sabbath's actions unfold the Decalogue⁴¹ in a three-fold division with the Sabbatical hope (future of man in creation; 4)—flanked by faith (God-man; 1-3) and love (man-others; 5-10), thus unifying God's demands for man seamlessly between the Old and New Testaments. On the foundation of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, creation is inching towards the Sabbath-Kingdom through man's growth in faith, hope and love.

Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, fulfils the Law⁴² and becomes the Lord of the Sabbath.

II Lord of Sabbath as Leader of Creation Care

Of all the battle fronts that Jesus could have opened with the Jews, why has he uniquely chosen the Sabbath cause? Any cursory comparison with other enjoined observances would show that the Sabbath cause, seen through its institutions, is in a class of its own.

First, the Sabbath does not derive its origin from history (e.g. the Passover celebrates redemption in history), but from an event that birthed history—creation. This unparalleled super-historicity qualifies it to be taken up wholly by the only super-historical Creator.

Second, the reference of other observances are in nature, e.g. the month linked to the solar-lunar cycles ...etc.; but the Sabbath replaces this by God's reference in creation—seven days, seven years and its multiples—which are not found in, but imposed on nature, thus bringing a rhythm into nature according to God's super-natural acts of creation.

Third, while all other biblical observances punctuate continuous time (*chronos*) without demanding anything in between observances, the Sabbath places demands on both—six days you shall work. Without work, there is no Sabbath and without the Sabbath, work becomes meaningless and unbearable toil. Work enables the Sabbath and the Sabbath redeems work. Together, they give existence a meaning. This process-goal balance, emphasized by the exact periodicity, is fitting for the God-man partnership in continuous creation.

Fourth, even before Jesus re-oriented the misunderstood Sabbath towards God's future (God's first Sabbath, being what the six days of Creation were looking towards) he sets the paradigm for a purposeful, future-looking pursuit by man towards his ultimate abode together with the rest of God's creation. With Jesus' actions on the Sabbath, the Sabbath points unmistakably to the final rest for all of creation.

Fifth, depending on one's under-

40 Ellul, *City*, 162.

41 Ex. 20:1-17, Dt. 5.

42 Mt. 5:17.

standing of time, periodicity can mean two things: either endless recurrence in circular history, or incremental movement towards a goal in linear history. God created and is bringing his work forward to a fitting conclusion. Thus periodic Sabbath observance, while constantly reminding creation of incompleteness, is simultaneously working itself out of existence through each of its cycles. Incompleteness is giving way to its opposite in the onward march of God's Sabbath.⁴³

Sixth, the general rule of biblical festivals is to have participants re-enact some events in which their forebears participated. This anchors the celebration in reality to save it from the ravages of unchecked fancy. But instead of the past, the Sabbath, though fully a biblical festival,⁴⁴ is oriented to the future. Thus man's Sabbath observance is a call to participate in the future—that grand rest of all creation. How one chooses to labour during the six working days gives meaning to the interlude of 'thou shall not work'. As opposed to re-enacting the humanly impossible—the foundation God laid in the past, Sabbath observance hands our posterity a future according to God's grand intention. This is what humans can take pride in. The Sabbath seeks god-oriented participation of all who are made free and creative.

Finally, man's temptation in any participation is to gain control to decide the future. Yet man's Sabbatical participation recognizes the foundation God lays and the final super-structure

in God which must fittingly be consummated by the same Creator and Covenantant. Thus participatory hope is not an oxymoron. Rather, it rescues man's hope from passivity, redeems man's control instincts from idolatry and humbly offers both to the giver of them all. In the festival of all festivals which God consummates, the intended partner of God during the journey—man—also receives his covenanted glorification together with all of creation.

III Framework of Creation Care

The overarching reach and orientations of the Sabbath-Kingdom bring the heavenly into the mundane, the eternal into the temporal, the spiritual into the material and vice versa. No wonder Jesus, the incarnated Creator, naturally picks the fight of his life on the Sabbath cause when it was hijacked and distorted. In this a comprehensive framework for Creation Care is displayed. Seven aspects of this framework are described below.

1. Bible-based

In the Bible, God reveals himself as creator before he reveals himself as the covenanting God. The consummation of his creation is the Sabbath, which leaps right out of the first section of the Bible—God rested. It then continues right through the Bible, in God's commandments at a very critical juncture in biblical history—the Israelites' miraculous deliverance and the giving of the Law, together with the very grave consequences for its breach. Not only is there a Sabbath day, but a whole set of institutions is enjoined. These are

⁴³ Compare the opening time of the city's gates in Ezek. 46:1 with Rev. 21:25.

⁴⁴ Lev. 23.

to be observed at different intervals and touch on all aspects of creation. The prophets refer to the Sabbath as a guide as well as the ultimate state people can look forward to. The Sabbath is the Old Testament hope (*eschaton*), and consistently so.⁴⁵

Somewhat surprising to New Testament believers, the consistent testimony of all four Gospels is that Jesus took the Sabbath issue with deadly seriousness and tenacity. When people think the Sabbath has passed away, like the rules of hand-washing and unclean food,⁴⁶ with the closing of the Old Testament era in Jesus' death and resurrection, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reverts to the Kingdom's Old Testament equivalent—the Sabbath.⁴⁷ Thus the Sabbath theme runs right through the Bible from the beginning to the very last page where the salient features of the Sabbath reappear in an even more elegant and sublime form.

The periodic Sabbath points forward and upward to a final reconciliation between humans, creation and ultimately God—the final Sabbath. But like the trunk of a tree, this *eschaton* is supported by its Sabbath roots that run deep and strong in the Bible: freedom, creativity, responsibility, forward-lookingness (hope), and satisfaction in the fruits of one's labour (reward). With God revealing his plan for and expectation of his work so clearly in the Bible, the believers' care for creation is necessarily firmly centred.

2. Jesus Christ-centred

The Bible presents Jesus Christ holistically, with the centre of his earthly actions informing his theology. When this basic respect for Bible interpretation is granted, the 'Son of Man is consequently Lord of the Sabbath' claim takes on its intended meaning. According to the Old Testament, Jesus' enigmatic self-designation, Son of Man, conflates the notion of simply a man (*Ben Adam*, derived from the earth—*Adamah*), with an apocalyptic being who will come to establish an everlasting Kingdom.

Jesus' many sayings well illustrate these two elements.⁴⁸ Inasmuch as one can infer the nature of this Son of Man from these sayings, from the actions Jesus promised and the treatment he received,⁴⁹ only two incidents forthrightly spell out who this Son of Man is. First, midway through Jesus' career, he asked his disciples who people say the Son of Man is, and the accepted answer is that he is Christ, the Son of the living God.⁵⁰ Yet the earlier, most consistently recorded⁵¹ is that this Son

⁴⁸ Dan. 7:13 vs. 8:13 and the numerous references to Ezekiel in his book. Among the many Son of Man references in the NT, some clearest pointers to Jesus' humanity are Mt. 20:28, Mk. 10:45, Lk. 7:34, 9:58 and to the apocalyptic judge are Mt. 9:6, 24:27,30,44, 25:31, Mk. 14:62; Lk. 21:27,36, 22:69.

⁴⁹ James Jones, 'Jesus: Savior of the Earth' in *The Green Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 1-65-71.

⁵⁰ Mt. 16:13-36.

⁵¹ When Jesus asked who people said he was, only Matthew, among the three records in the Synoptics, indicates Jesus used the 'Son of Man' self-designation. This compares unfavourably with the concerted use of Son of Man in all three synoptics when Jesus declared himself Lord of the Sabbath.

⁴⁵ Ex. 12:20; Lev. 25; Num. 15:32-36; Is. 56.

⁴⁶ Mt. 15:1-11; Mk. 7:1-2; Acts 10:15.

⁴⁷ Heb. 4.

of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath.

This unique and direct teaching coming from Jesus builds a bridge between the flesh and blood Jesus and the coming glorious and powerful ruler, and consequently sets in motion a process that leads from the beginning to the end. The ambiguous tension⁵² inherent in this Son of Man, and later in the Christian understanding of Jesus (man) being identified as Christ (God), is totally resolved in the dynamic Lord of the Sabbath. What are seemingly contradictory (e.g., evil in God's good creation) and hitherto unrealised and seemingly unrealizable (e.g. ultimate justice) will all work out together for the good of God's creation towards the final Sabbath.

When the Lord of the Sabbath acted repeatedly according to this self-claim (healing the sick on that consecrated day) to drive home his message, the seminal reference for all subsequent actions of his followers is set. Creation is moving forward, following its Lord.⁵³

The death Jesus so earned for himself through his corrective actions on the Sabbath was seen to be accepted by God in his resurrection. Jesus Christ, now enthroned Lord of the cosmic Sabbath, rejects man's nebulous repository of unfulfilled longings for God's work, euphemized as the cosmic Christ,⁵⁴

and lays out clearly his expectation of creation through the Old Testament's Sabbath institutions which he buried and resurrected in a new form. This fittingly enables the Lamb that was slain to open the book of creation's destiny.⁵⁵ The many superficial dichotomies—temporal vs. eternal, material vs. spiritual, heavenly vs. earthly—that have plagued attempts to mainstream creation care—have now been removed in this biblical Jesus Christ.

3. Redemption enabled

No theology of creation care can avoid dealing with man's freedom since man's abuse of his freedom in his treatment of nature is the antithesis of creation care. Only mankind among all creatures has the sentient freedom that can turn destructive. Yet the seemingly logical choice to robotize man cannot be entertained⁵⁶ since God's Sabbath calls first for man's love of his work which can spring only from man's free choice. Without man's freedom, the finality is not complete,⁵⁷ hence anti-Sabbath.

The only option open to God is to redeem this freedom so that it can be exercised properly towards the final end. In Jesus' choosing to be sacrificed for the Sabbath cause, and the subsequent vindication in his resurrection, freedom to follow the Lord to the Sabbath and enjoy its wholesome fruits is proclaimed to all aspirers to the Sabbath-Kingdom. With these, the way-

52 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1950), 313.

53 Ernst Kasemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 123f.; Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 321.

54 It is unfortunate that the Cosmic Christ has been hijacked by pantheism, e.g. Matthew Fox, *The coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 133.

55 Rev. 5:5.

56 Moltmann, *Creation*, 188, 77-78, 224; Kung, *Christian*, 393, 251.

57 Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 64.

ward steward is once again set to do the only work ever assigned him⁵⁸ with the guarantee that he will not be short-changed by eternal estrangement from God, his own work and all creation, if he chooses the side of the victor.

As opposed to viewing humanity's role as two parallel tracks⁵⁹—creation and redemption—the Lord of the Sabbath sees only one task (the original task of caring for God's creation) and one hurdle (sin) to overcome which Jesus did through his sacrifice and eventual triumphal redemption. Creation care is the purpose of man's redemption.

4. Reality respecting

Some have laid the blame for the global environmental crises on the desecralisation of nature in the process of birthing the modern scientific outlook which objectifies nature.⁶⁰ To undo the purported damage, two views have been considered: pantheism and panentheism with Christians rejecting the former as unbiblical. The latter makes use of the biblical space for God's immanence and indwelling and argues for some non-articulable interpenetration between divine substance and material substance with the aim of re-inspiring in us a sense of awe and respect towards nature.

While this may be poetically pleas-

ing,⁶¹ its practical worth is non-existent.⁶² Yet the Lord of the Sabbath sees God's creation as his prized handiwork, his object of appreciation, and love which he, working together with his appointed stewards, is going to bring to even greater perfection. During this journey, man regards nature objectively to know, love and appreciate it as God did in his first Sabbath. Divine-mundane interpenetration is nothing but a distraction⁶³ from this wonderful and rich relationship.

This vantage point makes room for meaningful investigation of nature which no person should disparage without first resolutely and personally disavowing any benefits from science. Treating nature as the other party does not mean any less respect or love for it if it is modelled after God's loving action, in the same way as marital relationship—between two mutual objects—is to be modelled after God and the church.

God has constituted man after his image as an insuppressibly creative entity and left room for man to mould creation according to the Sabbath goal. In that finality, humankind will have created a niche⁶⁴ for itself through initiating nature into the extra-natural

58 Moltmann, *Creation*, 228.

59 John Stott *The Lausanne Covenant—An Exposition and Commentary*, Lausanne Occasional Paper 3, 1975, <http://www.lausanne.org/all-documents/lop-3.html>.

60 Lynn White Jr., *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, *Science*, 155, (1967) 1203-1207.

61 Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: an Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

62 Schwarz, *Eschatology*, 205.

63 Moltmann, *Creation*, 13-17. John B. Cobb Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology, based on the Thought of Alfred North Whitehead*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) (2nd ed); McFague, *Body of God*, 99-129.

64 Moltmann, *Creation*, 46; Schwarz *Eschatology*, 206.

rhythm⁶⁵ of the Sabbath, while simultaneously loving and respecting God and nature. While being harmoniously nurtured by nature, man will find himself standing above and beyond nature⁶⁶ in an 'in nature, but not of nature' symbiotic-yet-transcending existence as the consummate steward. Man is placed between God and nature, not as the centre, but as the caring leader of creation towards God's finale.

While inching forward, mankind is guided by the Sabbath institutions to defeat repeatedly the evil Siamese twins of human's and nature's impoverishment,⁶⁷ both resulting from man's ignorance and guilt. Unjust wealth distribution and environmental degradation are to be anathematized and continually reversed through concrete actions. Thus the Sabbath intention synergises the totality of existence towards the intended destiny of God: man's and nature's fullness. Only through man understanding and respecting the reality of God, man himself, nature and the inter- and intra-actions therein can creation—both man's and God's—move forward without inviting more demons than were cast out. The Sabbath-Kingdom institutions are an unchanging reference by which man can truly actualise himself through his work in God's creation.

5. Present-future coherent

Among the dichotomies the Lord of the Sabbath overcomes is also one between present efforts and future rewards which has placed an erroneous obstacle towards creation care. To put it succinctly, our current efforts at improving our earthly material situation, in some popular views, do not register on God's scale for the future, not because they are insufficient, but because the future is not material but spiritual with no commonality⁶⁸ between them.

Some misunderstandings in the Bible⁶⁹ seem to have deepened this. Yet, a strong rebuttal⁷⁰ comes from Jesus Christ himself who, true to God's consistent demand, has healed the sick on the Sabbath to enable the healed to work freely for in-kind rewards, as God was rewarded in-kind for his six days of creation through the Sabbath. Capping this is of course Jesus' consequential bodily resurrection into this material world. Even the resurrected Jesus remains *Adamah*, requesting and eating food.⁷¹ Reaping what is sown within God's creation is now guaranteed by God the Father, through his Son and mediated to us through the Holy Spirit.

With the core actions and fate of Jesus speaking so loudly, the rest of his

65 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath Its Meaning for Modern Man* (n.p.: HarperCollins, 1979), 10; Moltmann, *Creation*, 285.

66 Moltmann, *Creation*, 190. For the opposite view point, see J. Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976); John B. Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 142.

67 Rachel Roach, *Dried up, drowned out Voices from the developing world on a changing climate* (Tearfund 2005).

68 Schwarz, *Eschatology*, 289; Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 241.

69 Popular misunderstandings include Rick Warren *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 34. Mt. 6:18-19; Lk. 16:9; 1 Cor. 15:44 are often misconstrued; see Wright, *Surprised*, 152-156; Wright, *Challenge*, 144.

70 A common approach is in Rom. 8:20-22, e.g. Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 163-164.

71 Lk. 24:37-42.

words and works and those of his disciples as they interpret him must fall into line with this basic present-future continuity.⁷² All teachings on stewardship, ruling for God, reversal of fortunes of the oppressed and oppressors, coming of the Messiah, the Kingdom coming to earth, the saints co-reigning with God and God reigning forever and the like would be completed only by this demonstrated continuity. Labouring will continue.⁷³

How would the present and future be bridged in actual fact, and the details of that continuity⁷⁴ remain one of the deepest mysteries of the cosmos, unless the prototypical bodily resurrection of the Lord of the Sabbath gives this an appropriate down payment and demonstration. God's future is and will remain mysterious; in this is creation's participatory hope.⁷⁵

6. Vision led

Among all the clamouring for solutions to the many inter-linked global crises, what does biblical faith have to offer? Visions to go forward to pursue more advanced technologies, ideologies and political organisations are pitted against the opposite calls to return to some fabled good old days when damage to nature was less rampant and man less dehumanised. Yet Jesus' Sabbath challenges—all forward look-

ing—have argued against any backward move,⁷⁶ not to mention that going back is not only undesirable, but impossible, given mankind's unwitting fulfilment of God's call to fill the earth and to understand creation (initiated in naming the animals). Undoing those would mean genocide and intellectual suicide.

Yet that does not leave more 'advanced' science and politics as our saviours. On the contrary, all these would-be saviours are inadequate, thus fakes and must be judged as such. The true Saviour, through his Sabbath challenge, has centred hope in both the Old and New Testaments as a unifying virtue organically cementing faith and love as universal and unchanging guides into God's future.

Trite as this may sound, faith, hope and love constantly bring mankind back to where his central concern must be and rejuvenate his movements when he has lost his way in the maze of self-proclaimed salvations. Faith, hope and love are non-quantifiable virtues which must rein in and arbitrate any concrete proposals.

These virtues must also be pursued holistically for any positive movement; emphasizing one at the expense of the other two has and will lead to disasters⁷⁷ as history has repeatedly taught. The Sabbath institutions, taken together and consummated by their Lord, show the need of the interpenetration of the three virtues. Hope

⁷² Wright, *Surprised*, 161-162.

⁷³ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1964), 319-320, 399; Heschel, *Sabbath*, 27-28; Ellul, *City*, 180, 188, 178.

⁷⁴ Mt. 5:4-9; Rev. 21:17; 24; 26; 1 Cor. 15:58; He. 2:5.

⁷⁵ Fung, *Hope*, 254.

⁷⁶ Cox, *Secular City*, 95; Moltmann, *Crucified*, 106; Schwarz, *Eschatology*, 284; Moltmann, *Hope*, 123.

⁷⁷ Heb. 11:1; 1 Cor. 13:7; Moltmann, *Hope*, 18; Schwarz, *Eschatology*, 368.

for all creation—epitomized in the Sabbath cause—requires the guarantee of faith in the one and only unfathomable Saviour of the world. This is to be further buttressed by the love that must pervade the final Sabbath-Kingdom under God in all dimensions, including nature. Hope calls us to rise above individual concerns and present gloom to situate ourselves within God's coming Sabbath-Kingdom,⁷⁸ faith believes our seemingly ineffectual submission to God will bear fruits and love of all God's creation will enliven and beautify our journey ahead.

7. God consummating

History can be construed as God dealing out his responses to mankind to bring his creation to the omega point, the Sabbath-Kingdom. What God seeks is justice for himself, understood as fitting reward—'let there be' followed without fail by 'there was', culminating in his first Sabbath. This direct causality was disrupted when man rebelled against God. Thereafter God has been seeking a fuller Sabbath that includes man in God's creation. This Sabbath reference defines justice for all⁷⁹—man, nature and God himself through broadening the meaning of justice to include amoral nature (eco-justice) by reference to the moral God's ultimate demand in the Sabbath. Any move away from God's wholesome creation would then be sharply felt⁸⁰ by the Lord of the Sabbath as a painful body blow against his ultimate perfection.

The critical act of reversing the injustice committed against God, i.e. redeeming creation by first redeeming the fallen steward through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, succeeded. All the brokenness inflicted on God's creation is and will be mended through the transformed stewards following their Lord. Despite the battles still raging and some setbacks, the war is won. Redeemed humankind can henceforth look forward to that final Sabbath-Kingdom of God,⁸¹ man and creation, through the Lord's Table remembrance. Elements of this bountiful earth, the bread and wine, are held up as a telescope to catch a glimpse of the renewal of God's entire creation when Jesus Christ returns.⁸²

IV Enabling Mosaic

By appropriately resting theological superstructure on the historical foundation of the Bible, a vivid earthly-yet-cosmic picture of the Bible's central character—Jesus Christ—naturally emerges with creation care at its core. After redeeming the wayward steward, the Son of Man reemphasizes (not re-assigns since it was never abrogated) for man his only original role of stewarding creation with due respect for its multi-faceted reality.

By placing before creation an all-encompassing yet consistent *eschaton*, the Lord of the Sabbath guides mankind forward by three empowering virtues—faith, hope and love—to meet God's aching demand for justice and completeness. This superstructure sits

⁷⁸ Schwarz, *Eschatology*, 207; Cox, *Secular City*, 95.

⁷⁹ Yoder, *Politics*, 215; Rom. 3:21-22.

⁸⁰ Moltmann, *Creation*, 77, 258.

⁸¹ Moltmann, *Creation*, 197.

⁸² 1 Cor. 11:23-26; Moltmann, *Hope*, 310.

comfortably within orthodox Christianity without ever needing to speculate on or borrow from other obscure attrib-

utes of God. Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega as claimed.

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