Secular sabbath vs. Christian traditions

By Adam J. Copeland

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Next week the Project F-M will be hosting a theology pub on this topic: Sabbath 2.0: Should We Ever Fully Unplug? These events draw a pretty diverse crowd of 20/30-somethings, from those who regularly attend church to atheists, from pastors to the spiritual but not religious. As the convener of these gatherings, next week I'll be particularly interested in considering how the theological notion of sabbath relates to the 24/7 nature of secular digital life.

In this vein, two recent popular press articles on sabbath (though they didn't call it that) are well worth reading.

In the *NY Times,* Pico Iyer writes on "The Joy of Quiet," discussing exclusive resorts that offer the allure of NO Internet or cell phone service. Particularly striking was Iyer's visit to a Benedictine monastery where he met a MTV employee who brought his son on trips there to get away from it all.

In Slate, Katie Roiphe reflects in "Can We Really Unplug: The illusion of Internet freedom" on the popular Freedom software that locks you off the Internet for the length of your choosing.

(I've written on sabbath and technology in previous posts including Sabbath 2.0 and Saturday: Secular Sabbath or Christian Cop-Out?")

Interestingly, in the church circles I observe, teaching and preaching about sabbath-keeping has gone out of style. The positive read of this is a healthy response to an over-zealous piety that can come with too much emphasis on keeping sabbath. The negative possibility, however, is that in a society where culture is about more-and-more-faster-and-faster, the church has neglected its task of preaching about the joy and benefits of practicing sabbath (and its task to acknowledge the struggles related to it as well).

So do the Iyer reflection and Roiphe's piece (and [Mark Bittman's](#) [[here]](#) [before it](#)) mark a cultural shift in which today's main advocates of sabbath (or "quiet," "rest," "time away" whatever you call it) approach it from a spiritual but not religious perspective?

How can Christians — pastors and others alike — add their voice to the conversation in ways that welcome others? Off the top of my head, this process of dialogue comes to mind:

1. for Christians, and all, to acknowledge the challenge of today's fast-paced uber-connected life and with it a desire by many to find periods of shelter from the hubbub
2. for Christians to listen to those who seek and find this sabbath rest from non-Christian perspectives including those that are totally secular, and those from other religious traditions
3. for Christians to plumb the depths of their own tradition and find a clarity as to what sabbath is all about (from the commandment to Jesus' nuanced disregard for it)
4. for Christians to claim — in humility and while admitting the challenges — how living out their notions of sabbath is both faithful and life-giving for them

My instinct is that, when it comes to finding breaks from digital life — time to realign our lives towards what is good and right — the church has a lot to learn from those who practice "sabbath" without much notion of religion. I hope the conversation starts soon.

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