

## Book Review

**A.J. Swoboda.** *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Non-stop World.* Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018. 256 pp.

The *Subversive Sabbath*, as the subtitle indicates, is mostly a semi-popular and pastorally written book which aims to suggest to readers the surprising power Sabbath observance can bring to busy 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians. “How is the Sabbath *subversive?*,” asks the author, and answers by effectively giving the gist of the book: “Sabbath is an alternative lifestyle that goes against everything our world knows” (p. xi). Thus, the pragmatic orientation of the book is established from the beginning.

This is actually not surprising, since A.J. Swoboda is a physician and at the time of writing the book was a church pastor. Currently Swoboda holds a position as assistant professor of Bible, Theology and World Christianity at Bushnell University in Eugene, Oregon. He is an established writer and editor of ten books and holds a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from the University of Birmingham for a work on green Pentecostal pneumatology.

The book is organised into four main parts: “Sabbath for Us,” “Sabbath for Others,” “Sabbath for Creation” and “Sabbath for Worship.” Each of these parts contain three chapters. The titles of individual chapters reveal that the discussion in them will be oriented to real issues that individuals, families or society as a whole face and struggle with in the contemporary world. For instance, Part 1 contains material about time, work and health, Part 2 offers discussion on issues like relationships, economy and technology (one chapter) and the marginalized, Part 3 on creation, land and animals, while the last (Part 4) is concerned with witness, worship and discipleship. Already from this brief overview of how the book is organised and the topics structured, it is evident that the book really wants to “sell” the Sabbath idea of rest to the reader. The book does not start with a biblical-theological part which would lay down foundations, but rather theology and biblical material is dispersed across the book. The strength of such an approach is evident – it is a book for a reader and her or his concerns.

The approach of the author is sympathetic, personal and pedagogical. He writes well and the material is easy to follow. The argumentation in individual chapters is solid, containing a mixture of biblical material, theological discussion and illustrative narratives. On the other hand, the book does not really break any new ground in Sabbath studies. Probably the strongest contribution of the book is its holistic emphasis on the Sabbath, respectively the holistic impact Sabbath keeping has on one's physical and mental health, to economic, ecological and faith benefits. Another positive element in the approach of the book is that it brings together a range of well-known theological voices on the Sabbath and incorporates them into the discussion. Thus, names like Bruggemann, Moltmann, Heschel, Barth and Bonhoeffer appear frequently on the pages of the book.

Yet, there is an interesting silence of Seventh-day Adventist voices in the book. Apart from Bacchiocchi (in chapters 1 and 12) and Kendra Haloviak (in chapter 10), other voices are not heard. This may come as a surprise, since Seventh-day Adventists have not been silent about the Sabbath ever since their inception. Certainly, a mention of Sigve Tonstad's *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* would merit a discussion, especially since the objectives of both books overlap. What also adds to the research perplexity in the book is that the author openly confesses that he is "writing about something far outside" the scope of his scholarship (pp. xii–xiii) and hence heavily relies on several lesser known authors such as N. Wirtzba, T. Edwards, J. Schulevitz, M.J. Dawn and S.H. Dresner.

While Seventh-day Adventism is mentioned in the book on pages 56 and 57, it is in the context of them being "[t]he world's healthiest religious group" who live "ten years longer than North American life expectancy," because they "actually take a Sabbath." However, the comment about Seventh-day Adventists' Sabbath keeping on page 56, which is characterised as one of leaning "towards rigidity (Sabbath can *only* be Saturday)" becomes crucial for understanding the concept of "Sabbath" the author has in mind throughout the book. Swoboda does not work with the concept of a seventh-day Sabbath being Saturday. He works with the concept of Sabbath as such, regardless of whether it is Saturday or Sunday. What matters from the point of view of the book's thesis is that one accepts the Sabbath as God's gift and begins to practice it. If we do it, then it will have a host of positive benefits on our individual, family and societal life. "Sabbath is a gift we do not know how to receive" nor

“how to enjoy” it (p. x). The book is a pastoral (more than theological) invitation to taste the Sabbath and put it to the test by trying it out. This becomes the bottom line in the book’s argumentation. Thus, the book for sharp Adventist ears will not add much scholarly novelty in the Sabbath studies field. This is a semi-popular book without broader academic discussion and importantly without substantive biblical-theological sections. The book was published by Brazos, a popular division of the Baker Publishing Group, and hence it was not meant to be used as a top academic resource about the Sabbath. Still however, the book will prove to be a useful reference on the Sabbath topic for interested Bible students and pastors.

Ján Barna, Ph.D., is principal lecturer in Systematic and Biblical Theology and director of the undergraduate programme in Theology at Newbold College of Higher Education, UK. E-mail: [jbarna@newbold.ac.uk](mailto:jbarna@newbold.ac.uk)