

The Sabbatical

Genesis 2:2 first introduces the Sabbath, when God rested on the seventh day after creation. *'Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.'*

This later became a guiding principle for the Israelites (Exodus 20:8), where they were to *'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy'*. The importance of this day of rest was not primarily for pleasure, but for a cessation of activity. It also gave opportunity for concentrated times of worship.

The 'Sabbath year' was an extension of the Sabbath day. This applied to letting a field run wild one year in seven. The avoidance of cultivating and ploughing the field during that seventh year rejuvenated the ground for further crops in the ensuing years to come. It was a natural process of restoration. Mention is also found in Scripture, whereby slaves were released and set free during the Sabbath year (Exodus 21:2–6).

In New Testament times, the importance of the Sabbath day was strongly enforced by the Pharisees. Jesus stepped outside their expectations and was criticised for that. Note, however, that Jesus was not against the observance of the Sabbath, but He was strongly against a legalistic observance that brought people into bondage. *'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath'* Mark 2:27.

Modern day application

The value of a sabbatical, an extended period away from regular duties is clear today, especially in helping professions and roles that involve sustained, intensive interaction with others, which can lead to fatigue and frustration. For pastors, a sabbatical provides space to explore new ideas, pursue further study, and engage in restorative activities, including spending more time with the Lord. Without replenishment after years of emotional expenditure, burnout is inevitable.

During an extended time away on sabbatical, a pastor may (but not necessarily) journey through three stages before returning and taking up duties again. The first stage will be one of relief. With the constant burden of pastoring removed, it brings a temporary sense of well-being. Secondly, the pastor may experience a sense of almost despair, especially at the thought of returning and taking up duties again. These feelings are common and may last for much of the time away. This derives from an accumulation of emotional and nervous tension. It is a time when he may doubt his call to ministry, especially when thoughts about difficult people and seemingly hopeless situations torment his mind. People urge pastors to forget about the church and enjoy themselves before they go on sabbatical, but for the sincere pastor that is almost an impossibility. The last stage is where, hopefully, the pastor has a sense of renewed call and a desire to return to ministry. In fact, he may not fully feel the benefit of his time away until he has returned to routine pastoral duties again.

Points to consider

1. Time and length of the Sabbatical.

It is useful to have a sabbatical every seven years, although some churches accumulate time, one week each year, enabling a pastor to have a sabbatical after five years.

Again for maximum benefit, a prolonged time away from the church is desirable. It should be for three months, especially if the pastor has been ministering for seven years in the same pastorate.

2. The church's preparation for the sabbatical.

It is best for the pastor to negotiate a sabbatical with the church at their appointment as pastor rather than at a later stage.

In planning a sabbatical, either lay leaders or others on the church staff should take over the pastor's leadership role. Some denominations sometimes invite an outside pastor to fulfil pastoral responsibilities until the sabbatical is finished.

3. Finances.

There are several alternatives:

- The pastor is to arrange his own support.
- The church is to give him leave on partial or full salary (this may need to be budgeted for over several years).
- Sometimes a church will pay for expenses incurred while on sabbatical, such as travel expenses and conference fees but not give the full salary.

4. The church will benefit from the renewed vision and strength that comes through a sabbatical provided it is used wisely.

5. Activities while on a sabbatical.

Although the pastor may attend a conference during that time it is essential that there is a 'willed passivity', a time when there is silence, reflection, and relaxation. He must not feel guilty about this.

6. Accountability.

A sabbatical is not an extended holiday unless the pastor is close to burnout. He should give an account to the church leadership of his intended activities while away and a report on them upon return. Occasional positive letters to the congregation remind them they are still loved.

7. If pastors should have the opportunity to have time out after several years, then lay people heavily involved in ministry should also have that opportunity. The leader and the pastor can work out the replacements needed together. It may just be a few weeks out, while remaining in the church, or the church could pay for key leaders to attend certain conferences which they may not otherwise be able to attend.