

**MBS TEXTE 162**



MARTIN  
BUCER  
SEMINAR

8. Jahrgang  
**2011**

*Thomas K. Johnson*

**Sabbath, Work, and  
the Quest for Meaning**



Pro mundis

**Pro mundis**

# Table of Contents

## Inhaltsverzeichnis

Sabbath, Work, and the Quest for Meaning .....	3
Annotation.....	7
The Author.....	7
Impressum .....	8

This text was a sermon at the Evangelical Reformed Church of Lithuania  
(Vilnius congregation) on June 21, 2009.

# Sabbath, Work, and the Quest for Meaning

Thomas K. Johnson

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. ... I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.” Albert Camus (1913–1960) in “The Myth of Sisyphus.”<sup>1</sup>

“Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.” The Fourth Commandment in the Decalogue, Exodus 20:9–10.

When Camus penned these probing words about the meaning of life, he was speaking on behalf of many people in our time. That is probably why he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. His words interpret the experience of many: “Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday – according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the ‘why’ arises.”

For Camus, who was an atheist when he wrote these words, both the problem of meaning in life and the solu-

tion arose out of “absurdity,” the unexplainable contrast between our daily free choices and desire for significance and a world that seems to be an endless, impersonal, uncaring chain of causes and effects that has no interest in our human struggles. According to Camus, there can be no fixed or given meaning to life if God does not exist. His solution, in the words of a character from one of his novels, is to try to become “a saint without God,” that is, to live humanely, as a protest against blind, impersonal nature.<sup>2</sup> In this way, one can create meaning. Camus’ hero is Sisyphus from classical mythology, who was condemned to spend his life pushing a rock up a large hill, only to let it roll down again. But rather than being miserable, Camus thought Sisyphus could be happy, and if I understand Camus correctly, Sisyphus could be happy precisely at the point when he glanced back at the stone rolling down the hill.

In response to Camus and our other neighbors who have many similar questions, it is proper for us to turn to the biblical book of *Ecclesiastes* and say that though it sometimes seems that “all is meaningless” (*Eccl.* 1:2), yet meaning is

found in relation to God (*Ecc. 12:13*). It is also good for us to respond to our neighbor's questions about meaning with the powerful words of the *Westminster Catechism* (Q. 1.), "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever." In addition, we should use the Fourth Commandment in the Decalogue to address the question of meaning and purpose in life, "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God (*Ex 20:9–10*). On a weekly level we can and should experience meaning in the transition back and forth between worship and the work of the other six days.

The Sabbath commandment is God's call for us to recognize very practically that he has the right to structure our time – six ordinary days and one holy day. The Sabbath commandment is also God's call to recognize that he is the one who establishes the *meaning* of our time. Like Camus, many of our neighbors think they have to decide or create the meaning of life. In the Sabbath commandment God tells us both the meaning of our lives and how we experience that meaning. But Camus may have an extremely helpful observation, that meaning or happiness may come in "looking back." This is what I would call the transition between Sabbath and ordinary days.

When God created Adam and Eve he said, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature

that moves on the ground." (*Genesis 1:28*) Christians have often called this verse the "cultural mandate," though we could also call it the "developmental mandate." God's purpose was that Adam, Eve, and their children would become sub-creators working God's good creation. They were to develop families, farms, and communities, and all the learning and organization needed to make families, farms, and communities possible. All of this social, cultural, and economic development would have the glory of God as its center and focus. Worshipping and glorifying God was supposed to be the meaning and purpose of all that people do, in work and family, in society and culture.

The fall into sin distorted and disrupted everything. Instead of wanting to honor God, our first parents wanted to become like God (*Genesis 3:5*), which may mean to get rid of God or replace God. This new motivation then spread to all that people do in work, family, and culture. This new, sinful motivation came to prominent expression at the Tower of Babel (*Genesis 11*), which was an attempt to build a whole new culture and society, including all its families, farms, businesses, education, and organizations, without God. All these elements of culture and society were to find meaning and motivation in worshipping humanity in place of God. This sounds surprisingly like late modernity.

When God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, he once again called them to work in his good creation as his

sub-creators. “Six days you shall labor.” However, unlike Babel, all the work of developing families, businesses, and communities was intended to lead to the Sabbath – the public worship of God. The six (not five or seven) ordinary days were to be a constant reminder that God created us and our world. After six days of diligence, the week was supposed to culminate and reach its climax in the Sabbath, by worshipping God in public community. The Sabbath was intended to give meaning and direction to the work of the six days. Honoring the Creator was intended to be the motivational center of all the effort, planning, and creativity needed to develop farms, families, businesses, and communities. In the Old Testament, the meaning of life is found in the transition between work and worship, between holy day and ordinary days. Diligent work makes a proper Sabbath possible, and Sabbath worship gives meaning and direction to the activity of the week’s work. The Old Testament would teach us that we should work, in the family, business, or community, with a view to worshipping God, and we should worship God with a view toward working for God. Work leads up to worship, and worship gives purpose to work. In this way our lives will be filled with the proper meaning, doing all for the glory of God.

With the coming of the New Testament, the meaning of the Sabbath has been further enriched. God chose to raise his Son from the grave on Sunday – the first day of the week; therefore Luke seems to speak for the whole first

generation of Christians when he said, “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread.” (*Acts* 20:7) The Sabbath had been transformed into the “Lord’s Day.” In this transformation, our Lord took along the central meaning of the Old Testament Sabbath and added to it a celebration of his resurrection. For us, each Sunday is not only a Sabbath, but also a miniature Easter. Each week we are to celebrate not only the goodness of creation; we are also to rejoice in the resurrection and redemption. This enriched meaning of the Sabbath also enriches the meaning of the ordinary days of the week. The work of the normal six days finds its basis in both creation and redemption.<sup>3</sup>

The story of the Bible begins in the Garden of Eden (*Genesis* 2 and 3) and ends in the Holy City (*Revelation* 21 and 22). This makes it look as though the cultural or developmental mandate that God gave to Adam and Eve will remain in force into eternity. Our eternal hope is probably not to sit on a cloud and play a harp; in eternity we should expect to finally fulfill God’s purposes in creating humans – that of being an entire society doing everything in every sector and dimension of life for the glory of God. When we fully receive all the benefits of Christ’s resurrection in eternity, benefits that will transform our bodies, souls, and society, we will be able to engage in all the activities of the Holy City as fully restored people, fully human in every way God intends.

Every Lord’s Day is a celebration of Jesus’ resurrection; therefore, it is also a

celebration of the coming Holy City that he will bring by the power of his resurrection. As the meaning of the Sabbath is enriched by the New Testament, so also is the meaning of the other days of the week enriched. We believers should see ourselves as the citizens of the coming City of God. Every Lord's Day is God's reminder and promise of who we will be in eternity. This promise, which stands at the beginning of the week, should shape the meaning of the rest of the week. Unlike Sisyphus, we are not doomed for eternity to roll a stone up a hill, only to let it roll down again. Whether in the home or in business, in school or in the community, we are citizens of the City of God, practicing and preparing for the real life to come. Part of the meaning of our lives today is to point forward to the coming eternal city, and we do this by the way we participate in the full range of normal activities on Monday through Saturday. So far as we can, we should think, talk, and act like citizens of the coming Holy City of God.

Camus used the ancient myth of Sisyphus to question the meaning of six days of ceaseless toil every week. Strangely, in that essay and in the retelling of the myth, Camus explicitly mentions every day of the week except Sunday. As an atheist, he could not understand Sunday nor see that Sunday is the clue to the meaning of the other six days. And yet, Camus noticed that meaning is found at the point of "looking back," the transition from one phase of life to another. The Fourth Command-

ment suggests that the right transition to provide the experience of meaning is the continuous transition between work and worship. This Sabbath lets us not only worship God in gratitude for the goodness of creation; it also reminds us that the purpose of the ordinary days of the week is to glorify him at home and work, in school and society. This Lord's Day let us not only celebrate Christ's resurrection and the resurrection he has promised to us; it also gives us pause to consider how to live and talk differently because we are citizens of the coming City of God. The transition between Sabbath and work is the answer to the meaning of life – one of the great problems of our time. The combination of hope, gratitude, joy, and purpose can drive every thought of meaninglessness and suicide from our minds.

# Annotation

## Anmerkungen

<sup>1</sup>This essay by Camus can be found in many good anthologies of texts in philosophy.

<sup>2</sup>The character is Tarrou from Camus' novel *The Plague* (New York: Modern Library, 1948), 229.

<sup>3</sup>The way some cultures and nations have made Sunday the last day of the week reflects a loss of the sense of newness which Christians celebrate

by making the day of resurrection our primary day of worship. The way in which entertainment has become the primary weekend activity shows that entertainment can easily become a worship substitute as part of the unavoidable quest for meaning.

# The Author

## Über den Autor



Thomas K. Johnson received his Ph.D. in ethics from the University of Iowa (1987) after being a research scholar at Eberhard Karls Universität (Tübingen). He has an ACPE from Missouri Baptist Hospital (St. Louis, 1981), a Master of Divinity (*Magna Cum Laude*) from Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, 1981), and a BA (*Cum Laude*) from Hope College (Michigan, 1977). He is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America. Since 1994 he has served the International Institute for Christian Studies and is now IICS Professor of Theology, Philosophy, and Public Policy. He was a visiting professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, 1994–1996. (UHU is a dissident, anti-Communist university, forced into exile by the Belarusian dictator in 2004.) Since 1996 he and his wife have lived in Prague, where he taught philosophy at Anglo-American University (4 years) and at Charles University (8 ½ years). He is MBS Professor of Apologetics and Ethics (2003) and Vice President for Research (2007). His wife, Leslie P. Johnson, is director of the Christian International School of Prague.

# Martin Bucer Seminar

Berlin • Bielefeld • Bonn • Chemnitz • Hamburg •  
Pforzheim • Ankara • Innsbruck • Prag • Zlin • Zürich

## Studienzentrum Berlin

Martin Bucer Seminar, Breite Straße 39B, 13187 Berlin  
E-Mail: berlin@bucer.de

## Studienzentrum Bielefeld

Martin Bucer Seminar, Eibenweg 9a, 33609 Bielefeld  
E-Mail: bielefeld@bucer.de

## Studienzentrum Bonn

Martin Bucer Seminar, Friedrichstr. 38, 53111 Bonn  
E-Mail: bonn@bucer.de

## Studienzentrum Chemnitz:

Martin Bucer Seminar, Mittelbacher Str. 6, 09224 Chemnitz  
E-Mail: chemnitz@bucer.de

## Studienzentrum Hamburg

Martin Bucer Seminar, c/o ARCHE,  
Doerriesweg 7, 22525 Hamburg  
E-Mail: hamburg@bucer.de

## Studienzentrum Pforzheim

Martin Bucer Seminar, Bleichstraße 59, 75173 Pforzheim  
E-Mail: pforzheim@bucer.de

Website: www.bucer.de  
E-Mail: info@bucer.de

## Study centers outside Germany:

Studienzentrum Ankara: ankara@bucer.de  
Studienzentrum Innsbruck: innsbruck@bucer.de  
Studienzentrum Prag: prag@bucer.de  
Studienzentrum Zlin: zlin@bucer.de  
Studienzentrum Zürich: zuerich@bucer.de

Martin Bucer Seminary is not a university as designed by German law; the seminary simply offers courses and lists taken in a final diploma. Whitefield Theological Seminary (Florida, USA) and other schools outside of Europe accept all legal responsibility when recognising these courses as part of degrees awarded to students. Much of the teaching is achieved through Saturday seminars, evening courses, extension courses, independent study, and internships.

The work of the seminary is largely supported by the contributions of donors. North American supporters may send contributions to our American partner organization, The International Institute for Christian Studies. Checks should be made out to IICS, with a note mentioning MBS and sent to:

## The International Institute for Christian Studies:

P.O. Box 12147, Overland Park, KS 66282-2147, USA

## EU:

IBAN DE52 3701 0050 0244 3705 07  
BIC PBNKDEFF



## Publisher:

Thomas Schirmmacher,  
Prof. Dr. phil., Dr. theol., DD.

**Editor:** Ron Kubsch

## Editorial Committee:

Thomas Kinker, Titus Vogt,  
Prof. Dr. Thomas K. Johnson

## Contact:

mbsmaterialien@bucer.de  
www.bucer.de

## MBS-TEXTE (MBS-TEXTS)

Pro Mundis

## Es erscheinen außerdem folgende Reihen:

(The following series of MBS  
Texts are also being published:)

Reformiertes Forum  
(Reformed Forum)

Theologische Akzente  
(Theological Accents)

Geistliche Impulse  
(Spiritual Impulses)

Hope for Europe

Ergänzungen zur Ethik  
(Ethics)

Philosophische Anstöße  
(Philosophical Initiatives)

Vorarbeiten zur Dogmatik  
(Preliminaries for a Systematic  
Theology)