

Alden Thompson's response to Sigve Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*.
ASRS, November 2010

My response to Sigve Tonstad's book has been shaped by a unique two-fold exposure, first by the ear, then by the eye. Because my wife Wanda reads significant books out loud to us while I do the kitchen clean-up after meals, I first heard the entire book by ear. Both of us were astonished at how readable this scholarly tome actually is. And we marveled at Sigve's beautiful prose, not written in Norwegian, but in English! Its soaring, lyrical vision was inspiring and exciting.

Because of the powerful devotional experience triggered by hearing the book, when I sat down to read it critically in a more traditional academic manner, I almost felt that I was committing a sacrilege. The book throbs with a deep-seated love for the Sabbath and an unshakable conviction that in Jesus we see a powerful testimony to God's faithfulness. The whole book is driven by Sigve's conviction that we are called to speak well of God. A buoyant commentary on Psalm 92, a Song for the Sabbath Day, carries the reader through to his vibrant conclusion. Passionately melding the first and the last books of the Bible together, he declares in his very last sentence: "We will have to set out for the sound of God's singing if we wish to know the spirit of the seventh day and the reality to which it points" (p. 515).

Intending to give us a cradle-to-the-grave vision of the Sabbath's meaning within the context of a cosmic conflict, Tonstad surveys the biblical scene in both testaments. He explains gaps in the historical data, interprets key passages, and in the Old Testament, explicitly privileges Isaiah over Nehemiah as he builds his case for recovering the meaning of the Sabbath. He is thorough in his treatment of the Gospels and of controverted Sabbath passages in the epistles.

In the post-biblical era, he documents the swift demise of the Sabbath within Christianity, arguing that an intense hostility toward Judaism and a dominant preference for Greek other-worldliness, combined to ensure that the Sabbath would virtually disappear from Christianity. The soul was important, earthy people and an earthy creation were not. Here Tonstad is thorough, vivid, almost polemical, and devastatingly effective.

In terms of content, I hope our conversations will take seriously what he leaves out and explore his reasons for doing so. He clearly wants to overwhelm the shadow side of Scripture with irresistible goodness as seen in Jesus. "I do not call you servants any longer... but friends," says Jesus (John 15:15). But even Jesus gives us another view: "So you, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done'" (Luke 17:10). In the Epistles, Paul is even more brutal, offering the wayward Corinthians a choice of stick or gentle love (1 Cor. 4:21), and urging, "Drive out the wicked person from among you" (1 Cor. 5:13, NRSV). Whatever happened to 1 Corinthians 13 where love is patient and kind (1 Cor. 13:4)?

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear," John declares (1 John 4:18, NRSV). But does God's love also include bone-shattering fear, Sinai-style? "If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer we shall die!" exclaimed the people (Deut. 5:25, NRSV). "You talk to Him," they implored Moses. "We can't take any more" (cf. Deut. 5:27).

God's response? "They are right in all that they have spoken," he told Moses. "If only they had such a mind as this, to fear me and to keep all my commandments always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever" (Deut. 5:29, NRSV). In this context "fear" is clearly raw terror, not just gentle respect and reverence. And the Lord said the people were right.

Why is it that Sigve never mentions that vivid Sabbath incident where the LORD himself commands the death penalty for picking up sticks on the Sabbath? "The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him outside the camp." (Num. 15:35, NRSV).

I am in wholehearted agreement with Sigve's overall thrust and his theological perspective. A cosmic conflict where God doesn't just smash his enemies, but wins the hearts of his created beings, is Adventism at its best, the Gospel in his purest biblical form. But I do think we need to take more seriously the role of "fear" in winning broken people to God in a world where evil still reigns.

In chapter 26, "Confrontation of Signs," the next to last in the book, Sigve painstakingly develops the story of the cosmic conflict, focusing primarily on the book of Revelation. Contrasting "God's Story" and "The Dragon's Story," he admits that a first reading of Revelation is not likely to yield the message he believes God wants us to hear. "Only on the second or subsequent passage through the text," he concedes, "will the reader be attuned to the panoramic character of the author's story-telling ways" (p. 470). Is it providential that the more gentle picture only wins through after hard work and much effort? We wrestle not against human forces only, declares Paul, but "against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12, NRSV). It may be that because the Dragon is such a clever character, the cosmic conflict is not at all obvious, especially in much of the Old Testament. The story of Satan's rebellion "has been repressed rather than destroyed," Sigve quotes approvingly (p. 51). I would go further and argue that the absence of Satan is providentially linked with the needs of fallen people. Sigve does not want "divine sovereignty" to control the interpretation of "God's Story." I don't either. But given the ravages of sin, rebellious creatures may need a strong dose of divine sovereignty to get them started on the path toward the kingdom.

A great multitude in our world cannot read, and host of others will not read. Such people may be the ones most likely to respond to a fear motivation, the kind that was so effective at Sinai. A vision of divine sovereignty is precisely what they need. And that is the apparent reading of much of Scripture.

Sigve's view is closer to ultimate truth, I believe. But it can only win its way through with much hard work. In other words, until the Lord returns, pastors and university teachers will never run out of work. We cannot simply solve the riddle once and for all and expect the world to see it clearly.

In the end, however, I would affirm the importance of a book like this, indeed this very book, where goodness overwhelms evil. And there are clear biblical precedents for such deliberate shaping of the message. When the Chronicler retold the history of God's people, for example, he simply left out all the sordid incidents that marked the lives of David and Solomon, Israel's great kings. Even the story of Bathsheba disappears without a whimper. Why? Because the people needed a good news version to shake them out of their discouragement and lethargy.

So Sigve's good news version of the Sabbath is following a clear biblical pattern. And I will continue to revel in the power of his vision and the beauty of his prose. But by God's grace a chorus of voices with differing perspectives and emphases will complement his, so that the church can indeed reach every "nation, kindred, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6, KJV) and every shape and flavor of people among them. Those who cherish the Sabbath can expect to nurture that kind of diversity. Thus Isaiah's prophecy and John's vision will both become a reality. "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples," exclaims Isaiah in one of Sigve's favorite prophetic chapters (56:7). In Revelation, a great multitude from all nations are "standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, palm branches in their hands," celebrating the good news that "Salvation belongs to our God" (Revelation 7:9-10).

I am grateful that Sigve has done such wonderful work in sharing his vision, God's vision, with us.