
How to Keep the Sabbath

by Charles Scriven

One day my friend John Brunt overheard some Adventist college students discussing their childhood experiences of the Sabbath. They also—and this was remarkable, since the students came from many different places—remembered a common body of Sabbath rules. These rules were not written down in a formal code but were widely known, an Adventist oral tradition:

- Hiking, even vigorous hiking, is permissible on Sabbath.
- Swimming is taboo, though wading is permissible, so long as the water goes no higher than the knees.
- Running and playing are permissible, but no ball may be used; the use of a ball violates the Sabbath.

Rules such as these are familiar to most of us. Similar rules were familiar in Jesus' day as well. The rabbis considered the whole law to be a gift from God—including the Sabbath, which was to be both treasured and protected. Indeed, in the time of Jesus the idea had arisen that a fence needed to be built around the Sabbath in order to preserve it from violation. This fence, made up of protective rules, was what Jesus confronted when some Pharisees objected to his disciples' plucking heads of grain on Sabbath. Jesus answered that God made the Sabbath for us, not us for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27, RSV). He took the Sabbath to be a day to celebrate creation and liberation, a day to remember God in joy and gratitude. To him it was ridiculous to counter this festivity with

regulations that sabotaged the Sabbath's basic purpose.

In light of our own Adventist "oral tradition" it may suddenly dawn on us that Jesus' disagreements with the Pharisees strike close to home. We too have tried to build a fence of rules around the Sabbath. We have wanted to protect it, to "guard its edges," and have become, many of us, preoccupied with the question of rules.

John Brunt tells another story. It is about his daughter Laura who was a little girl when the incident occurred. The Brunt family was sitting together at the breakfast table on a Sabbath morning. Laura suddenly, out of the blue, remarked: "I don't think people ought to chew gum on Sabbath." Here was a family that had tried very hard to make Sabbath a festive day, and the remark was surprising. When her father asked why she believed this, Laura replied, "I don't know. I just think it would be a good rule."

It's hard to know why this would be a good rule, unless nothing enjoyable should be done on the Sabbath. From the Gospel of Mark, chapter two, however, we know that this isn't so. We know that the Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath. That is, God gave us the Sabbath to enhance life, not detract from it. At the time Laura made her remark about chewing gum, she still, despite her parents, saw the Sabbath in negative terms. But because the Sabbath is celebration time, a festival, a rule against chewing gum on Sabbath would be a bad rule. The question still remains whether there are any rules at all. Are there any guides for Sabbath conduct? Any regulating principles? And if there are, what are they, and what should be our attitude toward them?

Consider three biblical passages. The first, Leviticus 23:3, reads as follows: "Six days shall

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work be done; but on the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no work; it is a sabbath to the Lord in all your dwellings.”

The “rest” element of Sabbath experience is meant, of course, to be liberating, to deliver us from the slavery of routine and the evil of drudgery. But Leviticus says also that the Sabbath is a “holy convocation.” What does this mean?

Sabbath observance is not a burden; it is liberating. On Sabbath we must rest from our normal business and celebrate with God. The whole thing is ruined if we don't discipline ourselves to make it special.

Scholars tell us that Leviticus was completed during the time when the Jews had synagogues as well as the temple in Jerusalem. The “holy convocation” referred to here was a religious gathering, a public meeting like (or something like) our own Sabbath morning church services. To the Jews, then, this verse was a call to worship. To those outside Jerusalem and far distant from the temple, it was a call to attend the synagogue on Sabbath.

We know that Jesus himself attended the synagogue on Sabbath—“as his custom was,” Luke tells us (4:16). Together with Leviticus, this suggests that if there are some rules we can reject—such as the chewing gum rule—that does not mean we can reject all rules. The heritage of Scripture shows that part of the very meaning of the Sabbath experience is worshiping together. Sabbath *means* being together in praise of God and remembrance of what God has done. We can think of this as a rule—or if you prefer—a guideline for Sabbath conduct.

The next passage, also from the Old Testament, is found in Isaiah 58. Here, in verses five and six, God says to Israel, “Your fasting doesn't impress me. What I really want,” God continues, is for you to “loose the bonds of wickedness,” to “let the oppressed go free,” to “share your bread with the hungry,” and “bring the homeless poor

into your house.” One thing that strikes us right off is the straight-out rebuke of religious ritual without moral commitment.

It is just a few lines after this, in verses 13 and 14, that the subject becomes the Sabbath. God will bless you, the words declare, if you honor the Sabbath and call it a “delight.” The best-known translations speak of turning back from seeking “your own pleasure” on the Sabbath, but this is misleading. The point is not that we should refrain from everything pleasurable. Instead, we should refrain from doing just anything we please, and in particular (so the commentators say) refrain from doing our business, from pursuing gain, on the Sabbath. This is rather a day to focus our thoughts upon God—and to experience delight as we do so.

Some scholars think this part of Isaiah was composed after the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon. If it was, it came into being at a time when the Sabbath had become a day of genuine religious joy. Sabbath observance was not a burden; it was liberating, freeing the believer to meet with God and celebrate God's goodness.

Embedded in all this, I think, is another guideline for Sabbathkeeping. It is that on Sabbath we must rest from our normal business and celebrate with God. The whole thing is ruined if we don't, just as Christmas would be ruined if we treated it like an ordinary weekday. There would not even be a Christmas if we did this. And there wouldn't be a Sabbath either; not if we didn't discipline ourselves to make it special.

So we have two guidelines before us now: (1) Worship together, and (2) Rest from normal business. This brings us to a third passage of Scripture and a third guideline. In Mark 3:1-6, Jesus, immediately following his controversy over the plucking of the wheat grains, plunges into another confrontation with the rabbis over Sabbathkeeping.

Mark's story concerns the healing of the man with the withered hand. As usual, Jesus went to the synagogue on Sabbath and while there, seems very deliberately to have made a scene. The rules forbade medical work on the seventh day except in dire emergencies. The rules even said (or said by the time they were written down) that sub-

stances normally usable on Sabbath could not be used medicinally on that day. It was thought, for example, that a toothache could be relieved by sucking vinegar. Although taking vinegar was normally permissible on Sabbath, taking it to relieve pain was specifically forbidden. Yet when Jesus saw the man with the withered hand he said provocatively, "Come here."

The rabbis now had something to watch. Then Jesus asked, "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" The issue, Sabbathkeeping, had become clear. So, with everyone looking on—and silent—the rabbis refused to answer the question. Jesus healed the withered hand. Thereby he broke the conventional rules of Sabbathkeeping. Verse six records what happened next: "The Pharisees went out, and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."

With this and other Sabbath miracles and sayings, Jesus challenged the whole rabbinic system of rules and rituals. Rules had become a preoccupation. The story of the Pharisees' objections to plucking wheat on Sabbath suggests that the rules were undermining the blessing Sabbath was meant to be, undermining the joy of the day. The story we have just considered suggests that, besides this, the rules deadened the sense of responsibility to help others. Jesus was saying, The Sabbath is not only for worship and rest; it is also for deeds of kindness, for healing acts.

Here, in fact, is the third guideline we may extract from the passages we have read: on the Sabbath we must take redemptive action; we must do redemptive deeds. We are not, of course, excused from this on the other days. It is just that according to Jesus it is never wrong to help someone, never wrong to do a kindly deed. The Sabbath is a day for worshipping together in praise of God and remembrance of God's deeds. It is a day for resting from our normal business, from the pursuit of a livelihood.

But this does not keep it from being at the same time a day of opportunity for service. That is why it is perfectly acceptable on Sabbath to teach the children in Sabbath school. And that is why it would surely be just as acceptable on Sabbath to mow a shut-in's lawn, or teach English to an

immigrant, or open the Community Services Center. The Sabbath, Jesus taught us, is a day for doing good. People matter more than rules; people matter more than ritual.

What it comes down to is this: no more for Jesus than for the author of Isaiah 58 is the Sabbath an end in itself. The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath. Ellen White herself, in the book *Medical Ministry*, p. 251, said that "true sympathy between man and his fellow man is to be the sign distinguishing those who love and fear God." Well, the Sabbath serves the end of true sympathy between us and our fellow human beings; it directs us to God and away from the commerce and clatter of the weekdays, so that we can become whole and be servants to one another and servants in the wider world.

So what do we know now about how to keep the Sabbath? We know three things: we are to worship together; we are to rest from normal business; we are to do deeds of kindness.

But is that it? What about the details? Can the water go higher than our knees? Can we toss a football back and forth? Can we buy food in a restaurant?

Do on Sabbath only what is compatible with restful celebration. Scrap your diet for a day; eat ice cream. If you jog grimly, from a sense of duty, don't do it on the Sabbath; if you jog because you love to, then do so.

After the debacle Jesus had to cope with, it's best to stick with the broad outlines, the general principles of Sabbathkeeping: Sabbath is for worship, celebration, service. The details are for us to work out in our own small circles, in our families, among our friends.

Though detailed lists of rules may be pernicious, we still wonder, naturally, about which specific activities to countenance on Sabbath. When observing the Sabbath, consider these four points:

First, if on Sabbath anything goes, then Sabbath ceases to be special; we gain an ordinary day and lose a festival. It is important to make distinctions. "Friday night" is not like any other night. Start it with worship, or if a conventional worship scares you or repels you, begin the Sabbath with the lighting of a candle, a special meal, or a special way of giving thanks. And all the way to the end of the Sabbath, carry the uniqueness through—creatively and positively.

Second, do on Sabbath only what is compatible with the praise of God and the remembrance of God's deeds. For me, at least, it's hard to see how downhill skiing would qualify, or watching football on the tube. These are all-consuming activities, at odds with the contemplative spirit of the day. But cross-country skiing might qualify, and so might a TV documentary about Mother Teresa, say, or Amnesty International.

Third, do on Sabbath only what is compatible with restful celebration. Scrap your diet for a day; eat ice cream. If you jog grimly, from a sense of duty, don't do it on the Sabbath; if you jog because you love to, then do so.

Fourth, never lose sight in all this of the reasons for Sabbathkeeping; never lose sight of what it is you are trying to preserve.

This reminds me of what my wife Marianne said once. We happened to be talking about the Sabbath while rushing through some last-minute cooking—after Friday sundown. Feeling suddenly repentant, Marianne said: "It's not that God will punish us for this, it's that we cheat ourselves."

Her remark illuminates our whole attitude to Sabbathkeeping. A gift has come to us, the gift of the Sabbath. God is not waiting around to zap us at the first sign of our misusing the gift, but if we do misuse it, we dishonor the Giver—by cheating ourselves out of the songs and prayers together, out of the restful celebration, out of the opportunity for deeds of kindness.

But if, on the other hand, we treat the Sabbath well, if we honor it, if we stop and remember in the doing, then we will find wholeness. The Sabbath will cease being merely a collection of rules and become what God intended the Sabbath to be, a jubilee of the world.