

# BIBLE

## Sabbath Justice | BY KENDRA HALOVIAK

### Introduction

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work,  
but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God.

In it, thou shalt not do any work.

Thou,  
nor thy son,  
nor thy daughter,  
(nor) thy manservant  
nor thy maidservant  
nor thy cattle,  
nor the stranger that is within thy gates.

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth,  
the sea  
and all that in them is,  
and rested the seventh day.

Wherefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it" (Exod. 20:8–11).

Seventh-day Adventists are Sabbath-keepers.

Exodus 20:8–11 is one of our favorite passages in all of Scripture.

Because my parents helped me memorize it in the King James Version before I could read the words, I find it very difficult to recite it in any other translation.

Seventh-day Adventists are Sabbath-keepers.

It's right in our name.

We believe in the seventh-day Sabbath.

Many of us can argue the Sabbath's ongoing validity using Bible texts in both the Old and New Testaments.

Seventh-day Adventists are Sabbath-keepers.

But after we've finished arguing the issue of the correct day of worship, *what does it mean* that we are Sabbath-keepers?

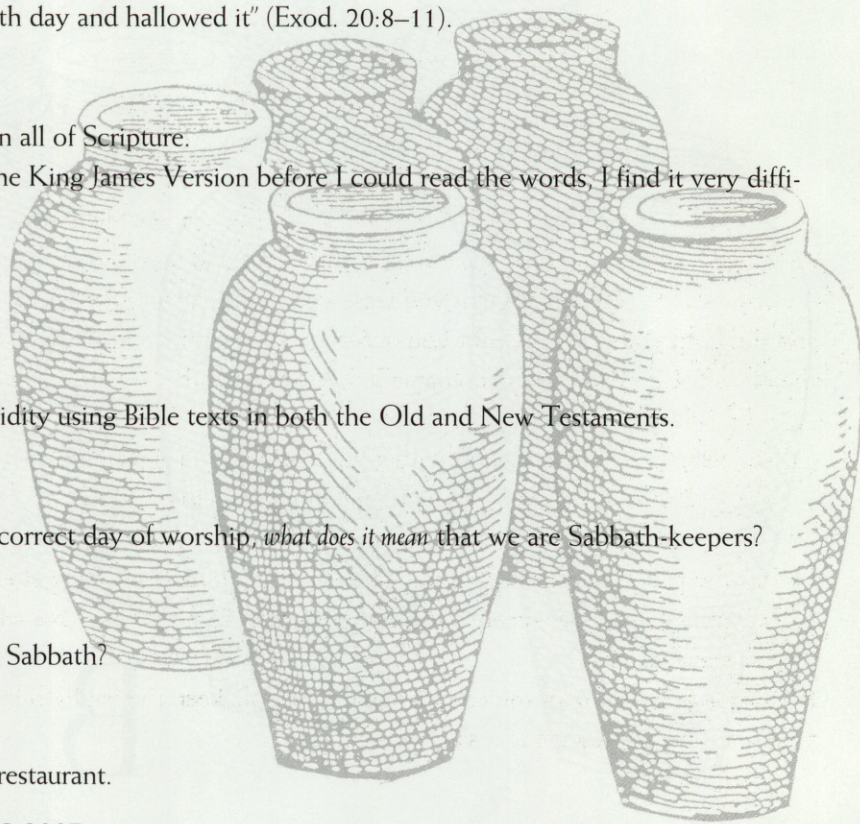
Q. That we don't eat out on Sabbath?

Q. That we *used* to not eat out on Sabbath?

Q. That we feel a bit guilty when we eat out on Sabbath?

I've heard the argument:

It is far more work to fix a meal than to go to a restaurant.



As one who has witnessed my mother make countless Sabbath meals for family and guests...the logic seems valid. However, the commandment spends much *less* time talking about work...and much *more* time talking about equality on the Sabbath by emphasizing all those who are forbidden to work:

You—your children—your slaves—strangers—even your animals.

The Sabbath hours eliminated the social distinctions created by work:

By definition, a manservant and maidservant worked on behalf of his or her master.

Sons and daughters did whatever work a parent asked.

Animals were kept, fed in order to do hard work.

Strangers in town were probably there precisely to find work and food for their families.

But...

The Sabbath commandment remembered creation...

before there were slaves in Egypt or anywhere else...

before there were strangers trying to find food...

before Adam thought he was more valuable than Eve...

before Eve believed him....

The experience of Sabbath regularly reminded Israel of creation as God intended.

When...“it was good.”

In the second giving of the Sabbath commandment, found in Deuteronomy 5, social equality is further emphasized:

“Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.

Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God;

you shall not do any work—

you,

or your son,

or your daughter,

or your male or female slave,

or your ox or your donkey,

or any of your livestock,

or the resident alien in your towns,

so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,

and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm;

therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:12–15).

On the Sabbath, your slaves rest with you...as does the resident alien living in your towns...

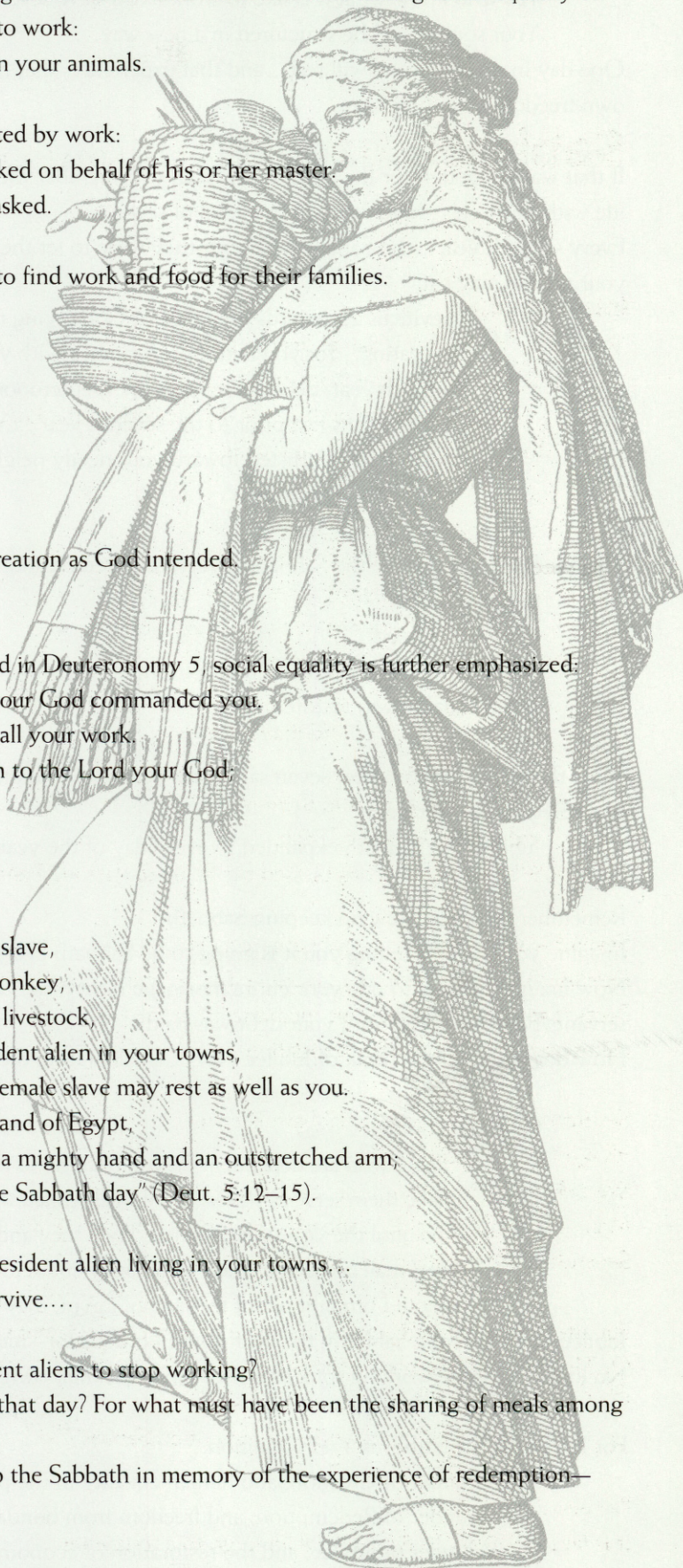
...those who must work night and day just to survive....

They, like you, rest.

Q. How would it be possible for the slaves and the resident aliens to stop working?

Q. What must this have meant for social interactions on that day? For what must have been the sharing of meals among diverse social classes?

In *Deuteronomy's* telling of the commandment, people keep the Sabbath in memory of the experience of redemption—freedom from oppression and slavery in Egypt.



The second giving of the Sabbath commandment says:

You who know what it is like to work like a slave seven days a week...

Your society will be structured in a new way...

One day in seven *everyone* will rest...and that experience, that built-in cycle to your lives...is a regular reminder of your own freedom from bondage...

If that wasn't enough for the children of Israel to remember the huge difference between life in bondage and exile and life with Yahweh...there were other cycles of seven...

Every seventh year...the Sabbatical Year...they were to let their *fields* rest...why? Exodus 23:12... "so that the poor of your people may eat."

Leviticus 25 records the voice of God saying that all the food from my land during the Sabbath year is for eating...for you and those who live with you—slaves, hired hands, bound laborers. Also, on the seventh year, debts were forgiven. Deuteronomy 15 anticipates the people's reactions to the poor who ask for loans just prior to the seventh year...Yahweh's voice repeats over and over: "do not be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward your needy neighbor...but, rather, open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

The weekly Sabbath, like the Sabbatical year, renewed creation...

the land rested

slaves were freed

bound laborers were able to return to their own property

social equality was restored.

Then there was Jubilee! After seven sabbatical years—the fiftieth year—was a celebration of liberty throughout the entire land! *Everyone* was set free.

Jubilee was Sabbath expanded to every day of the year!

Remember how you grew up keeping Sabbath?

Imagine your parents telling you it is going to be Sabbath every day for a year!

Now imagine having to pay your entire mortgage right now...and if you couldn't, you and your family would become servants/bound laborers until your debt was paid.

How does your family think of Jubilee year? Of celebrating the equality of the Sabbath every day?!

Scripture continues:

"If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold." (Lev. 25:39–42)

Jubilee, the year-long Sabbath, the year of the Lord's favor—meant the restoration of economic equality. Debts gone. No longer servants working someone else's land, but their own land returned to them, regardless of how it had been lost.

For Israel, the Sabbath was a rich tradition...

...a reminder of Creation, and human equality in the presence of the Creator

...a reminder of Redemption, and freedom from bondage

...a reminder of Jubilee, and the restoration of economic justice.

Generations after Israel received these commands....

It was a Sabbath day.

Jesus was in the synagogue of his hometown.

Sometimes it's strange to return to the church of your childhood after you have been away for awhile.

Seeing the kids you remember playing with, sitting there with kids of their own...

Seeing your Sabbath School teacher or Pathfinder leader from years earlier...

Noticing how some families are sitting in the same rows...

Feeling a lump in one's throat at certain now-empty seats....

It was Sabbath. Jesus was home. And he stood to read from Isaiah's scroll, chapter 42... This scene is found in Luke 4:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

Then, after rolling up the scroll, Jesus says:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

Jesus claims that Isaiah's vision of the ultimate Jubilee Year had been fulfilled that very Sabbath!

Jesus proclaims:

Today is Sabbath—the day that celebrates life as it was created to be.

Today is Sabbath—the day that celebrates life free from oppression!

Today is Sabbath—the day that celebrates life restored from economic injustice!

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"!!

In Luke's Gospel, this scene is the *first* time Jesus entered a synagogue on the Sabbath....

Chapter 13 is the last time he does.

"Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God." (Luke 13:10-13)

The unnamed woman is bent over.

For eighteen years she has known only restricted movement. Able to see people only at a slant, never eye-to-eye.

Q. Did she have some disease? Something some of us can relate to—osteoporosis... or arthritis?

Q. Or, had she experienced so much backbreaking work that her body retained the scars?

Theologian Megan McKenna reflects on this woman in light of women and men she encounters in her travels:

"On my first trip to Japan, I noticed older men and women so stooped and bent that they were unable to stand up... [I]t wasn't until I traveled to the countryside that I realized these were farmers who had grown up in the rice fields, bent over and hand-sowing, weeding and reaping the rice harvest. They had spent their lives standing in wet fields raising the staple food of a densely packed nation."<sup>1</sup>

That Sabbath, when Jesus was in the bent-over woman's synagogue, he did not ignore her... in fact, he stops teaching as soon as he sees her.

Immediately he says: "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

She is “set free”—“released”—like her ancestors, the slaves in Egypt, she experiences freedom, restoration!

Later in the story, when the crowd witnesses these events, the people rejoice at the “wonderful things” that Jesus was doing...the word for “wonderful things” is found only here in the New Testament...a word associated with the mighty acts of God during the Exodus! (Deut. 10:21; Exod. 34:10).

Freedom. Redemption. End of oppression.

When the woman stands up straight for the first time in eighteen years...

she immediately bursts forth in praise to God.

For the first time in the story, she has a voice!

But another's voice will dominate the story for a time....

“But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.” (Luke 13:14)

Wait! Says the leader of the synagogue.

Your timing is off.

The day will come for restoration and wholeness...for standing up straight and having a voice...for equality.

Be patient.

Wait until the proper time.

The Church isn't ready right now....

She *bad* waited...for eighteen years.

For eighteen years she had found ways to survive as a bent-over woman.

She even remained committed to regular attendance at her synagogue.

But then Jesus sees her...and his convictions concerning the Sabbath shout: the time is NOW!

Jesus can live no other way!

For Sabbath is the day of restoration, healing, wholeness, equality...new creation! Jubilee!

The day for everyone's voice to be heard.

Only three times in Luke will Jesus use the term “hypocrites”...this is one of them:

“But the Lord answered him and said, ‘You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?’” (Luke 13:15–16)

The Sabbath day is to celebrate release from Satan's bondage!

That is precisely how one keeps the Sabbath!

Notice who has caused the bondage...Satan.

Satan is the one who binds and disfigures and diminishes people.

When we are bound up and bent over that is Satan's doing, not God's.

From the perspective of God's kingdom, it is tragic when *any* child of Abraham is kept bound on the Sabbath....

Bound and bent over because of childhood scars...

Bound and bent over because of prejudice...oppression...injustice....

From the perspective of God's kingdom, it is tragic when any child of Abraham is...

Bound from entering certain rooms or vocations...

Bound from praising God...from preaching...from using God-given gifts...

That is Satan's doing, not God's.

God's kingdom is about setting people free...and helping them stand up straight...

To be able to look others in the eye again...

To have a voice....

The bent-over woman is a daughter of Abraham...a child of the covenant promise.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, as the fulfillment of Jubilee, keeps Sabbath the way God intended it to be kept....

Jesus was a Sabbath-keeper.

His Sabbath convictions made him act for restoration and justice when he saw a bent-over woman.

In the face of tragedy and injustice, Sabbath-keepers act.

When women in Baghdad and the Sudan are bent over holding their babies, rocking in sorrow...

Sabbath-keepers respond...sending relief and demanding justice.

When men and women in Pakistan and India and Guatemala are bent over trying to identify loved ones from the rubble that was a home, Sabbath-keepers join Doctors Without Borders and relief agencies in caring for the hurting.

When homes and hopes are washed away in floods, Sabbath-keepers rebuild homes and hopes....

When children are forced to become sex slaves in key tourist locations around our globe, Sabbath-keepers go to Capitol Hill and demand that the United States do something to stop such evil.

When a bent-over person enters our sanctuary or our counseling center or our classroom, Sabbath-keepers respond with networks of care and professional support.

Sabbath-keepers teach people to read...and hold peace conferences...and make quilts for babies with AIDS...

...because Sabbath-keepers know that all oppression, all that keeps people bound and bent over is of Satan.

But the Kingdom of God is about new creation...freedom...Jubilee....

It is about freeing bound people...helping them stand up straight and recover their voices.

One hundred sixty-one years ago, Advent believers wept because October 22 had come and gone and they were not in the presence of God.

It was a "great disappointment" not because they were wrong about a date.

It was a "great disappointment" because they longed for God's presence.

They longed to experience God's new creation....

Where every tear would be wiped away....

Death would be no more....

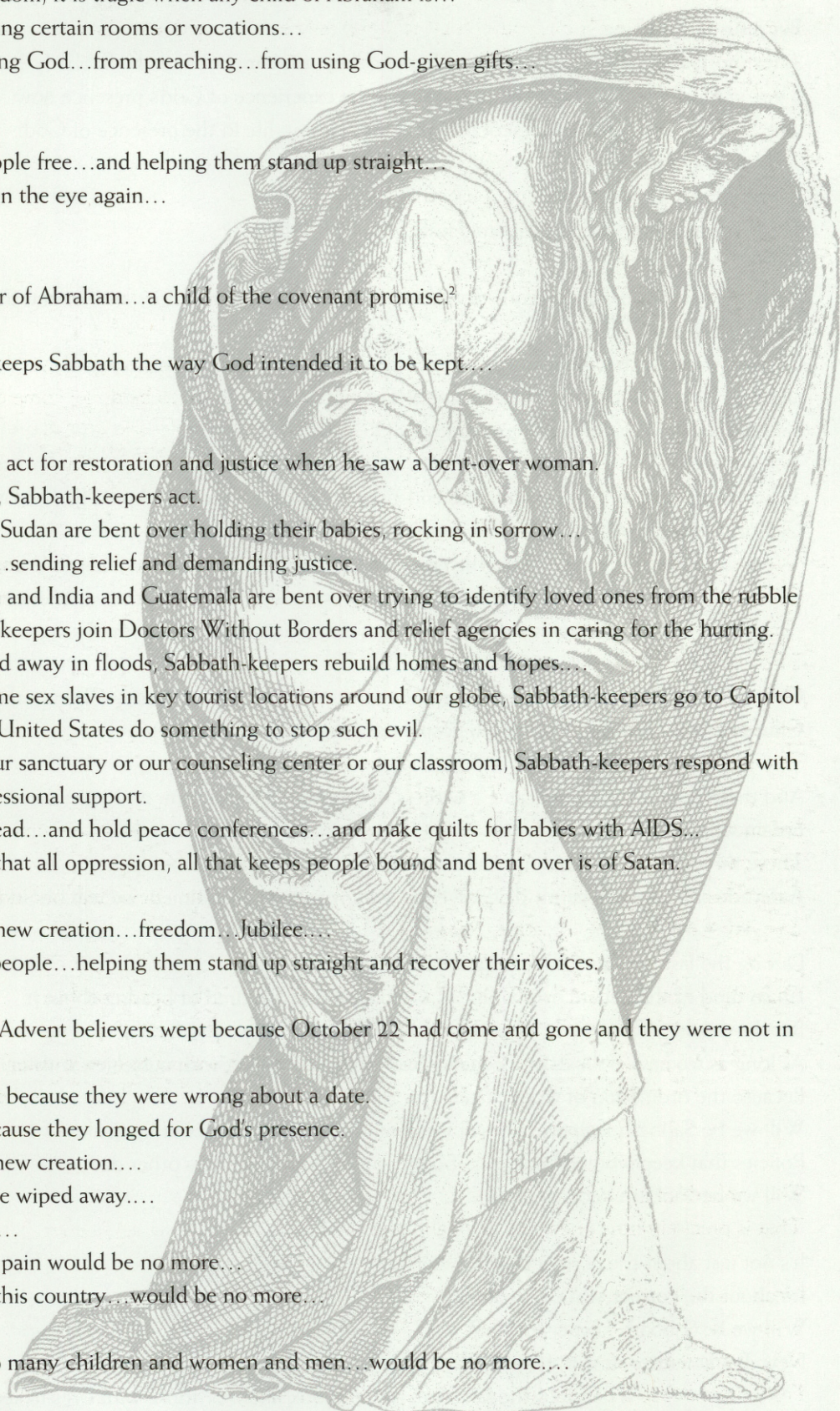
Mourning and crying and pain would be no more...

the injustice of slavery in this country...would be no more....

wars would be no more...

the sickness suffered by so many children and women and men...would be no more....

Those early Advent believers knew that God's presence would end death forever...and families would be reunited in a



new kingdom of peace and justice....

There would be a global restoration...the ultimate Jubilee.

But Jesus didn't come.

After those days of weeping at God's absence, they came to embrace the Sabbath tradition.

They gradually realized that the Sabbath was the experience of God's presence now.

The Sabbath was a weekly experience of new creation—life in the presence of God.

Day of celebration.

Day of restoration.

Day of social and economic justice.

Sabbath convictions led Seventh-day Adventists into this nation's cities and around the world as voices for bent-over men, women, and children....

For if the new earth will be a place of new creation—peace, justice, restoration....

and the Sabbath anticipated new creation! Then....

Sabbath-keepers live the new creation now!

Ten years ago, three Seventh-day Adventist congregations—one in Takoma Park, Maryland, and two in Southern California, proclaimed—in harmony with their heritage...

If we believe that the new earth will be a place of equality and justice and peace because of God's presence...

And if we believe that God is present with us now in the experience of the Sabbath...

Then *now* is the time to live as communities of equality and justice and peace before God.

On two Sabbaths in 1995, Seventh-day Adventists at La Sierra University Church, the Victoria Church, and the Sligo Church ordained women pastors to gospel ministry.

And these three churches became a witness to the rest of Adventism: no longer can it be said that Adventists don't ordain women...we *did* and we *do*.

These three local congregations call their denomination to remember its heritage.

A decade ago, three Seventh-day Adventist congregations proclaimed: we will be Sabbath-keepers!

During the last decade, I have occasionally heard people say:

I'm so tired of the debate over women's ordination. I'm just tired of hearing about it.

But the debate will continue until the church we love is true to itself.

As long as we have policies of inequality, we will be in conflict with ourselves, with our own convictions as Adventists....

Because the ordination of women issue is a Sabbath issue.

Will we be Sabbath-keepers? Or will we continue to have policies of inequality?

Policies that keep women bent-over, bound on Sabbath and every other day?

Will we be Sabbath-keepers or not?

It's not just about the correct DAY of worship....

It's about the correct WAY of worship!

Will we be Sabbath-keepers or not?

New Testament professor, Frances Taylor Gench, says:

"What does the kingdom of God look like? For those with eyes to see, it looks like a woman standing up straight in the midst of the community of faith, praising God."<sup>3</sup>

- Q. Do you see it?  
 Q. Do you see the kingdom of God? The new creation breaking through?  
 Q. Do your eyes see the new creation when a bent woman stands up straight?  
 Q. Do you see it?  
 Q. When male pastors, when Sabbath-keeping male pastors, hand in their own credentials, asking for the type of credentials carried by their female colleagues....  
 Q. Do you see it?  
 Q. When women are released from only serving daily meals, and serve the Lord's Supper....  
 Q. Do you see it?

"What does the kingdom of God look like? For those with eyes to see, it looks like a woman standing up straight in the midst of the community of faith, praising God."

- Q. When women pastors stand in baptistries and serve the precious people they have studied Scripture with.  
 Q. Do you see it?  
 Q. When the Southeastern California Conference ordains pastors—men and women pastors—together... do you see it?  
 Q. Do your eyes see the kingdom of God? The new creation?  
 Q. When women and men study together in our School of Religion—Greek and Revelation and the Prophets and preaching and how to give Bible studies....  
 Q. Do you see it?

If Seventh-day Adventist are Sabbath-keepers

- We must embrace Sabbath justice.
- We must embrace equality...  
and freedom from all that oppresses....
- We must embrace economic restoration.
- We must help bent-over women and men and children stand up straight....
- We must hear their voices....

If Seventh-day Adventists are Sabbath keepers...

- We must embrace Sabbath justice now...  
even as we anticipate the eternal Sabbath... global Jubilee....

If Seventh-day Adventists are Sabbath keepers...

- We must embrace Sabbath justice.

Amen.

## Notes and References

1. Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 99.
2. *Ibid.*, 89.
3. *Ibid.*, 91.

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