

Really? *God* Told
You That?

What Ellen White
Meant by "the Shaking"

Thou Shalt Not Work
on Sabbath—Except...

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THE SURPRISINGLY
SUBVERSIVE
SABBATH





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The Forgotten Sabbath Commandment

By Loren Seibold

MOST BIBLE READERS KNOW THAT THERE IS redundancy in the Bible. Matthew, Mark, and Luke cover roughly the same territory, and significant portions of 2 Kings and Isaiah repeat each other word for word. Some may be surprised to learn, however (probably because the Torah beyond Genesis is a bit of a slog, so we rarely read it through to the end) that the all-important Ten Commandments appear more than once. Most of us are familiar with Exodus 20, but many are not aware that an almost identical version appears in Deuteronomy 5 and that a listing also appears in Leviticus 19.

I say that the commandments recorded in Deuteronomy 5 are *almost* identical because one difference is significant and should be of particular interest to Seventh-day Adventists: the Sabbath commandment. Both versions start out with a command to observe the Sabbath by refraining from labor, followed by a list of those who are covered by the command. (There's a reason, as you'll read elsewhere in this magazine, that the list specifically mentions servants, guests, and domestic animals; it is intended to be a day off for everyone, regardless of their status.)

Differing Emphases

Each version ends with a reason for keeping the Sabbath, but the reasons are significantly different.

Exodus traces the foundation of the Sabbath commandment back to Genesis: we should rest on the Sabbath because "in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them." By repeating Genesis, Exodus 20 emphasizes two things. First, that God is the Creator, and second, that choosing the correct day in the sequence of the days matters.

Deuteronomy 5, surprisingly, doesn't mention Creation at all. It reminds the target audience of an event that happened not in the distant past, but in the lives of many of them: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (verse 15).

A textual scholar would undoubtedly explain the reason for the difference between these parallel texts better than I could. I am only pointing out that we Adventists have used the explanation for the Sabbath as recorded in Exodus almost exclusively, in preference to the one found in Deuteronomy, and that has steered our Sabbath theology in a particular direction.

When Exodus roots the Sabbath in Genesis, it seems to tell us that *identifying the right day and keeping it* is what's important. I see an inescapable note of "Do it because I said so."

By contrast, Deuteronomy says that Sabbath is *in memory of what God has done for his people*. To the point: Deuteronomy's Sabbath is a celebration of God's setting human beings free.

Sabbath Legalism

A good case could be made that the Sabbath, more than any other doctrine, has shaped Seventh-day Adventist understanding of salvation.

First, we were punctilious about the right day in the sequence of the week, which note is sounded doubly loudly in Exodus 20:11. Early on, we declared ourselves to be on God's side in this, as opposed to the masses of Christians who kept Sunday and were damnably wrong for it and would be lost because of it. The Sabbath wasn't just necessary to salvation, but also to our mark of superiority over other Christians.

Could emphasizing Deuteronomy's version of the fourth commandment help to correct our legalistic lean?

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It got its real force in that direction from its use in our eschatology. The Sabbath wasn't merely our own ticket into heaven, but some of us thought that our keeping it was the reason Jesus deigned to return at all! We, said some of us, are actually drawing Jesus back by keeping the Sabbath—part of living lives perfect in every detail.

Second, we added Sabbath requirements that existed in neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament. By a creative and frankly unforgivable misinterpretation of Isaiah 58, we expanded the no-work rule to include no pleasure, as well. How did generations of Adventist Bible scholars miss that “pleasure” in the context of this chapter wasn't about watching a football game or going swimming, but was about making your employees work on Sunday while you prayed and fasted?

Those who accept Jesus through faith need have no more doubt about their coming to our Promised Land than the children of Israel did of coming to theirs. That is the best reason to rejoice in our Sabbaths.

The Old Testament only says that the Sabbath was for rest. It makes no requirement for church attendance. (Historians say that assembling for worship on a particular day has its roots in the Jewish synagogue experience during the *diaspora*, rather than in the Hebrew scriptures.) Isaiah 58 even mocks self-righteous believers' spending the Sabbath fasting and weeping.

Thus, we Adventists expanded the burdens of the Sabbath, as if unaware of Jesus' words that it was made for our benefit and enjoyment, not to oppress us (Mark 2:27).

Because of its unique place in our identity, Adventists were more invested in the Sabbath than in the other commandments. Oh, we claimed to value all of them, but we felt especially strongly about the one that Ellen White saw God shine a spotlight upon.¹

At its best, the Sabbath is an opportunity for family togetherness and spiritual contemplation. But Sabbath in many Adventist homes has mostly been about what

we *didn't* do. I believe that attitude of negative obedience shaped many of our responses to God. Adventists didn't just *believe* things or *do good* things. What was important was that we *didn't do* things: we didn't work on Sabbath; we didn't eat pork; we didn't worship on Sunday. Salvation revolved around *not doing* things that others, who were not as good as us, *did*.

In short, the Sabbath helped to shape us Adventists into rule followers, not unlike the Pharisees. I don't think it's too strong to say that for generations, we intentionally ignored the Pauline concept of righteousness by faith. Many of my generation were raised to believe that righteousness by faith was just an abstract theological notion, not something Christians lived. My academy Bible teacher, who fancied himself a bit liberal, told us that Christ's righteousness *might* fill in should we fall *a bit* short of perfection, but we'd need to have tried really, *really* hard—and who knew if you'd tried hard enough before you died?

In other words, Christ's righteousness earned by his death on the cross wasn't something Adventists could count on—unless you would also “be ye therefore perfect.” That's why Adventists had to “discover” righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ in the 1970s and '80s. Before that point, many of us were unaware that the Bible described Christian salvation as hopeful and liberating.

A Redemptive Understanding

Perhaps I'm hoping for too much, but I wonder: could emphasizing Deuteronomy's version of the fourth commandment help to correct our legalistic lean?

Let us admit that personal freedom hasn't been a strong note for Seventh-day Adventists. Obedience has been our prime directive: do what God wants you to do, so that God will bless you.

Yet, isn't Deuteronomy 5:15 a celebration of a bigger freedom than that? The whole nation of Israel was set free from bondage by the redemptive act of God, just as we Christians, spiritual Israel, are redeemed by the redemptive acts of Jesus Christ.

It was Jesus who explained salvation as freedom from spiritual slavery: “A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son is part of the family forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free” (John 8:35-36, NLT).

Creation vs. Re-creation

When a baby is conceived, grows, and is born, it is a miracle. God is in that baby's creation every step of the way. It is astonishing that everything works as well as it does.

But this is also true: no baby ever chooses to be born. It is a gift of God, and the baby didn't participate in the decision. Nobody asked me if I wanted to be here. I just one day became aware that I existed. Fortunately, I was met on the outside by people whom God had designed to love me and care for me, and those people fed me and kept me safe and warm and helped me along to adulthood.

Somewhere in that process (in my case, very early), I made my own decision to acknowledge God and accept Jesus. Additional new beginnings throughout my life—education, employment, marriage, and marvelous friends—have made me a quite different person than I was when I left my mother's womb.

So, while it is wonderful to remember that God is my Creator, I also need to remember what God did for me *after* my creation. I didn't have much knowledge of or voice in my creation; however, I do have knowledge of and voice in and gratitude for all the ways God has shaped my life subsequently.

The ancient Israelites were God's creation. He not only gave each individual life, but he selected Abraham as their progenitor to give them a corporate identity. What was most fresh in their minds was what he did for them by releasing them from slavery. After they'd been in Egypt a couple hundred years, little still marked them as God's people. They'd lost a clear knowledge of their original identity. After all, they'd been slaves—to others, and probably to themselves. (That can happen to us human beings, as you know: we are sometimes more enslaved to ourselves than we are to others, in desires and habits and entrenched life patterns.)

For those people to become God's free people again, they needed almost a sort of re-creation. A new beginning. They had to see God act in their lives and give them a chance to start over and become all he intended them to be.

That's what happened in the exodus from Egypt. God brought the Hebrews out of slavery and led them across the wilderness. They experienced a rebirth as God's free people, they remembered it, and they were (or were supposed to be) grateful.

A New Sabbath

God tells the people in Deuteronomy, Here's the reason to keep my Sabbath: not just that you were created, but that you were re-created. Not just that I gave you a biological beginning and a family identity, but that I blessed each of you individually with a brand-new *spiritual* beginning.

That's the pattern for all lives. When we accept God through Jesus, he gives us confidence. He helps us mark his tracks where he walked us across the sands of our lives. He comes near to us with the assurance of prayers heard, and he promises us that no matter what happens while we live, eternal life lies on the other side.

Those who accept Jesus through faith need have no more doubt about their coming to our Promised Land than the children of Israel did of coming to theirs. That is the best reason to rejoice in our Sabbaths.

Freedom, Not Bondage

I have had Christians tell me that the Seventh-day Adventist Sabbath, like the Jewish Sabbath, is a mark of legalism, of bondage to God. Deuteronomy 5 would argue the opposite. The Sabbath isn't a mark of bondage, but of freedom—and let no one tell you otherwise.

Sabbath reminds us to say: “Thank you, Lord, that even though there was nothing I did to deserve it, you interceded, so that by believing in you, I can claim eternal life as my own. I claim your promises to give me peace in times of suffering, knowing that on the other side, all manner of things will be well.”

I have met Seventh-day Adventists who act as though they are enslaved to the Sabbath. They take it as a terrible duty. Some of us were raised under (and I use that preposition intentionally) such Sabbaths—crushed under them, held down by them. I'm not sure how we hope to make anyone love salvation by turning the Sabbath into bondage.

The commandment in Deuteronomy says to keep the Sabbath because of being set free from the Egyptians. It says to us, Keep the Sabbath because you have been freed from enslavement to sin, enslavement to legalism, enslavement to the criticisms of small-minded people, even from enslavement to church doctrines and demands!

Let Sabbath be a reminder of what God has done for us, not of what we have to do. **AI**

¹Ellen G. White, “A Vision” (Apr. 7, 1847).

“Thou Shalt Not Work on Sabbath—Except...”

By Daniel A. Mora

“HAPPY SABBATH, WELCOME! Where are you from?” My greeters stood at the entrance to a room at the Adventist university in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where I’d been directed for the Sabbath School lesson.

I was on the campus for a South American Division symposium and had been chosen to present a research paper as a representative of the college in Venezuela where I was studying theology. Including buses and connecting flights, I had traveled for 32 hours but had gotten there early for a wonderful adventure: to meet old friends and get acquainted with students and professors from other universities.

At the end of Sabbath School, just as we were leaving the auditorium, I saw a young man watching us from an adjacent door. He was resting his jaw on his overlapping hands, which covered the handle of his broom. He was evidently a student doing janitorial work. While we were dressed up, he was in his cleaning uniform, waiting for us to come out so he could tidy the meeting space we had just used.

This was a South American Division event, and the organizers naturally wanted everything to be clean and well-ordered. The cleaning staff, cooks, security guards, and service personnel had been put on alert.

Yet, seeing him there struck me as contradictory. I approached the young man and thanked him. What else could I say? “Happy Sabbath” would have been inappropriate, because for him it was not a day of rest, but of work.



Double Standards

“The weight of your meal is 400 grams, plus beverage. Please swipe your card to pay,” said the lunch cashier at the Adventist university cafeteria, to the student who had come directly from Sabbath services. If that same student had paid for his meal at a restaurant outside the university, it would have been a violation of the Sabbath. But if she had refused to swipe the student’s card, since it was Sabbath, would the cashier

have been able to keep her job?

In many parts of the world, the church demands that members refrain from their regular work on Sabbath, *even if they do the same work as employees in Adventist institutions*. A single mother who is the sole source of support for her children could be disciplined by the church if she worked a shift in her usual workplace on Sabbath as a cleaner, cashier, secretary, or cook.

Many Adventist lay volunteers also work hard on the Sabbath: coordinating Sabbath activities, teaching classes, providing music and programs, fulfilling deacons’ responsibilities, and counting the tithes and offerings. Sabbath is, in fact, the day that most of the money that allows the church to function is handled!

Sabbath Workers

One Sabbath, as we arrived at the Adventist bookstore offices, two people were waiting for us: a woman in charge of orders and collections, and also the literature department director, who helped

us gather some books. We quickly loaded boxes into the car and sped to a church, where a book sale was to be held at sunset.

These two individuals were, of course, employees. The woman told me that she had two children, and she’d had to leave them for her mother to take to Sabbath School and church, so that she could do her bookstore job.

At the afternoon meeting, the pastor and the leader of the literature department spoke about how important it was for everyone to buy books—beginning the moment the sun sank beneath the horizon. A good salesman, the publications director noted that the two men with him on the platform did not have hymnals, and he urged the church to buy more hymnals—which, of course, he had brought with him to sell—so that the members “are not babbling like these two who were singing next to me.”

I learned as a pastor’s son that many denominational employees work harder on Sabbath than on any other day of the week! Pastors and administrators rush from place to place, doing work on the Sabbath. Of course, we appreciate the teaching, leadership, and pastoral care they provide; however, I believe that since the church considers the work of some of its employees essential on Sabbath, it should give the same leeway to other church members whose frontline status may demand work shifts on Sabbath.

The Way of Sacrifice?

We Adventists often invoke the principle of sacrifice in keeping the Sabbath, as if that means true faithfulness. We lay out inflexible normative positions that regulate members’ Sabbath conduct. I have heard pastors in my part of the world say: “If you want to please God, quit your Sabbath job! The Lord will provide.” That’s a burden that even our Adventist institutions are not able to bear!

Adventists feel that we have good biblical arguments to prove the true Sabbath. The Sabbath was the day God blessed and sanctified at Creation, and Sunday observance is a human invention. Yet, we dangerously overreach in using the Torah to support a position that the Sabbath is unbreakable.

We create rules to prohibit inappropriate behavior (according to our criteria) on the Sabbath, and in some parts of the world, we discipline members if those rules aren’t observed. But at the same time, our institutions and their employees are granted unlimited license to “break” the Sabbath. Jesus addresses this hypocrisy thus: “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Matt. 23:4, NIV).

We highlight Jesus’ saying that “the Son of Man is Lord

even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28, NIV) to validate our Sabbath presuppositions and prohibitions. Yet the Son of Man himself placed radical limits on Sabbath observance. His teaching can be summed up in one question: Is the Sabbath above human needs?

Importance of Context

In our obsession with biblical inerrancy, Adventists may fail to contextualize the principles of the Sabbath.¹ It is possible to extract great principles from all parts of Scripture and apply them to our lives, but Jesus’ teachings would suggest that we err when we apply the Torah intact to the present day.

Jesus’ major discourse on the Sabbath was a response to criticism from the Pharisees, who pointed out that his disciples were snacking on heads of wheat that they rubbed out in their hands as they walked through a field on Sabbath. This was technically “harvesting,” according to Jewish law (Mark 2:23-24, NIV).

The Pharisees were biblically correct: the Torah says, “Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; in plowing time and in harvest you shall rest” (Exod. 34:21, NKJV). Provision was usually made on Friday for Sabbath’s meals: “Tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake today, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains, to be kept until morning” (Exod. 16:23, NKJV). One possible punishment for breaking the Sabbath in the Torah was the death penalty (Exod. 31:14-15).

Jesus did not contradict the legal position of the Pharisees, but he did contextualize the Sabbath laws and, in effect, limited them, as shown in two examples.

David in the Sanctuary

Jesus reminds the Pharisees of a story in 1 Samuel 21, where David and his men arrived very hungry in the town of Nob. David approached Ahimelech the priest and told him a lie: that he was there on King Saul’s orders. He asked for provisions to feed himself and his men. (That lie, by the way, later cost the life of the priest and his entire family, who did not know that King Saul was looking for David and his men.)

It was not lawful for these men to eat consecrated loaves; the Torah decreed that this food was reserved only for the Levitical priests (Exod. 29:33). Yet, David took the temple bread to feed himself and his men.

Jesus’ logic was simple: If David and his men were not condemned for eating consecrated bread when they were hungry, then neither should Jesus’ disciples be condemned for harvesting a bit of wheat on Sabbath to fill their stomachs.

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Adventism's Sabbath herald, writes: "Such a preposterous view of God is totally unwarranted because the justification given in the text for David's action is not that he was King David, but rather that 'he and those who were with him' were 'in need and ... hungry' (Mark 2:25). In other words, it is human need and not position that takes prior claim over the law."²

As to what constitutes a valid need, Bacchiocchi says: "The Scripture provides no graduated scale of human needs to determine when action is justified. The principle enunciated by Christ is, 'the Sabbath was made on account of [*dia*] man' (Mark

I believe that just as the church survives by having its essential employees work on Sabbath, the same leeway should be given our members who must work shifts on Sabbath.

2:27), that is, to ensure his physical and spiritual well-being. This means that the welfare of human beings is not restricted but guaranteed by proper Sabbath observance. To require that the disciples deny their physical needs in order to keep the Sabbath would mean to pervert its intended function, namely, to be a day of delight and not one of privation."³

Sabbath-Breaking Clergy

Jesus also correctly pointed out to his critics that "on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless" (Matt. 12:5, NKJV, cf. Num. 28:9; Lev. 4:8-12). Each Sabbath the priests worked hard slaughtering animals for sacrifice, cleaning and cutting up carcasses for the altar. These activities were meant to express the redemption of the sinner, and Jesus described them as "profane" work that doesn't disrespect the Sabbath.

This principle is still true of modern clergy. Think of the pastor who must drive from church to church, making visits and doing baptisms or even weddings—on the clock, earning a salary the entire Sabbath day. Sabbath is often the most intense day of work for a pastor, who in a sense is breaking the Sabbath commandment every week!

The examples Jesus gave to the Pharisees were not intended to invalidate the Sabbath or nullify it, but to set limits for when human need conflicts with Sabbath prohibitions. As Bacchiocchi says, "The letter of the law cannot be applied indiscriminately, but must be interpreted discriminately when applied to specific cases... it is not the authority to abrogate or substitute the Sabbath commandment but rather to reveal its true divine intention."⁴

The Spirit, Not the Letter

Jesus appealed to the essence of the law, not just its letter. He presented in his teachings and parables real situations that forced the Pharisees to confront the insurmountable contradictions between human needs and a too-rigid interpretation of the law.

What, then, is the *spirit* of the law? Jesus used this same answer in his different interpretations of the law: "What I ask of you is mercy and not sacrifice" (Matt. 12:7, personal paraphrase, cf. Hos. 6:6).

Many Adventists worry about a final judgment, where God will judge each according to a strict letter of the law, as in "You worked on the Sabbath; you are condemned." However, mercy focuses not on condemnation (Heb. 4:16; Luke 1:50; Rom. 15:9; Jude 1:21), but on motive. While the Pharisees provided a condemnatory sentence based on the letter of the law, Jesus defended the actions of his disciples based on their motive for picking wheat on the Sabbath: they were hungry.

Is the Sabbath above human need? Jesus' answer is a resounding no! "The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27, NLT), he famously said. The spirit of the Sabbath is not to cause human suffering, but to give peace and relief. To condemn a believer because his activities or actions "break" the Sabbath, without considering his motives or the needs he may face, is not in accordance with the gospel.

Just as we apply mercy when considering the financial needs of the Adventist institution and its employees, we should also extend it to every Sabbath-keeper. **AT**

¹ On the notion that the Scriptures are without error, see Frank M. Hasel, "¿Hay errores en la Biblia?" *Revista Adventista*; Marcos Paseggi, "Por qué los adventistas no son fundamentalistas," Adventist News Network. On the danger of decontextualizing Scripture and attempting to impose an ethic frozen in time, see Matthew Quartey, "God Is Inerrant and Infallible: The Bible Is Neither," *Spectrum* (Apr. 18, 2019).

² Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: A Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today* (1988).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

The Sabbath: Holy or Hollow?

By Gugulethu Nyoni

OF THE 28 FUNDAMENTAL BELIEFS OF the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Sabbath doctrine is one of the two outstanding distinctives—so important that it's referenced in our name. Our church says: "The Sabbath is a day of delightful communion with God and one another. It is a symbol of our redemption in Christ, a sign of our sanctification, a token of our allegiance, and a foretaste of our eternal future in God's kingdom."¹

This is a nice statement, but it seems to me that something is missing: I find no mention in Fundamental Belief No. 20 of what Scripture gives as the Sabbath's core purpose, which is to serve as a symbol and practical example of social justice and care for others.

Socio-Economic Justice

Across the Torah, God employs the language of law and covenant to define our relationship to others and our relationship to Godself, to communicate a strong sense that the world has been ordered by God according to just laws. "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne" (Psa. 89:14, NKJV), says the psalmist. Adventists know that the Sabbath was established and "hallowed" when God rested after his creative work, at the end of Creation. In both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, God expands upon the meaning of keeping the Sabbath holy. Holiness is, surprisingly, defined by the parameters of labor (six days) and rest (seventh day). Rest is offered to the people, their guests and servants, and even to the domestic animals.

Writes Rolf Jacobson: "Notice that the commandment as a whole addresses the basic justice issue of the work week. Think of the Sabbath as the first labour law on the books."²

God also establishes a sabbatical year (Deut. 15:1-6) as the climax of his ideals for a holistic rest and restoration. Here,

the emphasis is on community members who were condemned to bound labor, most likely as a result of falling into an unbreakable debt trap. Slaves were forgiven and released. Debt forgiveness was required. The land was to lie fallow and allowed to "rest," too.

Under the heading of Sabbath, God restores relationships to their divinely gifted state, where everyone has enough to live and function as productive members of the society, breaking the cycle of poverty, degradation, and exploitation that long-term indebtedness establishes.

The purpose of the sabbatical year was a substantive restoration of one's neighbors to their socio-economic status in society, as well as recognition of their right to access the resources they need to live in dignity and security.

Throughout Scripture, we find that God never intended for his children to observe the empty statutes of a God who does not care to attend to their needs.

A Merely Pietistic Sabbath

Isaiah 58 is often cited by Adventists about the sin of "doing your own pleasure" (verse 13) on the Sabbath. As Olive Hemmings has made clear, this is a misinterpretation, for the "pleasure" they are doing is defined in the passage as economic injustice.³ While the owners think they are pleasing God by "bowing one's head like a reed" and "lying in sackcloth and ashes" (verse 5, NIV), they are keeping their employees at work, making money for them: "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers" (verse 3, NIV), interrupting their fasting and prayer, God adds, only long enough to get angry and strike the workers if they don't produce!

While religious Israel is careful about the liturgy and rules of Sabbath observance, God says that the fasting he desires is "to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set

the oppressed free and break every yoke” (verse 6, NIV). The worship God requires is “to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood” (verse 7, NIV).

Jesus also had run-ins with religious leaders who had lost sight of the Sabbath’s redemptive purpose and reduced it to a meaningless legalistic yoke. Both Matthew 12 and John 5 describe the Jewish leaders’ murderous fury when Jesus restored people to health on Sabbath! In Matthew 23:23 (about tithing the garden herbs while treating people unjustly) and Mark 7:11-13 (about employing a legal loophole to break the fifth commandment, regarding care for one’s parents), Jesus shows how even systematic benevolence was degraded into systematic exploitation.

Faith That Works

James defines faith in practical terms and casts love as practical godliness, the outworking of a living faith in God. “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:14-17, NIV).

What the apostle advocates is not faith by works, but rather faith *that* works.

The book of Acts presents the compelling case of a people who exemplified God’s vision for his

church. “Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need” (Acts 4:34-35, NKJV).

Unlike the modern church’s tendency to program and project isolated acts of service, this church wove the thread of

While the state carries the burden to deliver public goods at a macro level, the church has a critical role to play in the distribution of resources and socio-economic opportunities at the micro level.

collective well-being into the day-to-day fabric of communal life. Sabbath observance and fellowship for the early church was a consummation of substantive socio-economic communion and fellowship that sustained the group of believers.

Christian Justice

Christians generally uphold the biblical axiom that all humanity is equal before God. What we miss is that the practical implication of equality before God means access to a good quality and standard of life—in other words, justice. This includes equal access to education, healthcare, and other services that sustain livelihoods.

Some argue that matters of social welfare are a concern of the state. While the state carries the burden to deliver public goods at a macro level, the church has a critical role to play in the distribution of resources and socio-economic opportunities at the micro level. Local congregations labor at the coalface of socio-economic ills that affect their members and the communities within which they exist. The importance of this role cannot be overemphasized, given the grim levels of inequality in our global society that is plagued by the hegemony of neoliberalism.

The conversation Jesus had with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-27) revealed that the material problem of society is not necessarily a lack of resources, but an issue of distribution. Therefore, the injunction to the “capitalist” young ruler can be interpreted as, “Please do your part to level the playing field.”

The ministry of Stephen and other deacons (Acts 6:1-7) illustrated this crucial function. Deacons were supposed to ensure an equitable distribution of food among the Grecian Jews and Hebrews in the church. We should not miss the fact that, unlike the typical janitorial and disciplinary work of deacons in the modern church, their task in the formative early-church setting was to ensure social justice.

A Hollow Sabbath

The emptying of the Sabbath I describe here is not happenstance. Yi Shen Ma observes: “Many of my fellow Adventists tell me, ‘As long as we confess our faith in Christ, all will be well when he returns.’ Our church’s preoccupation with doctrine and not social justice is a direct reflection of the Constantinian use of political and even military force to create an orthodoxy.”⁴

Citing prophetic theologian James Cone, Ma asserts: “Christian churches that are overly concerned with apocalypse and life after death often end up serving the unjust system.”

We have held onto the Sabbath doctrine but lost its meaning and purpose. What is left of its observance is like the value of an aspirational rhapsody, a saccharine memorial to a principle that actually has never been practiced in our lifetimes. We distract ourselves from acute emptiness with the busywork of endless talk, and we drown our irrelevance in the opium of boisterous song—Sabbath in and Sabbath out.

The leftover aspects of corporate worship that we still uphold, though beautiful and meaningful, are ultimately barren. The congregational fellowship we have on Sabbaths is superficial; it is not driven by a vibrant ecosystem of shared resources and opportunities, as demonstrated across the various instructive settings in the Bible.

In the early church model, programs constituted just one dimension of a thriving ecology of practical godliness. In the contemporary church, we focus primarily on programs and conduct spasmodic welfare experiments that are, at best, an anecdotal footnote to what should be our core business.

In the contemporary vestiges of Sabbath observance, communal singing is not backed by communal living. Holy communion is not backed by economic communion. Although we congregate weekly, we come together primarily as a collective of individual units. In our oversized church gatherings, we mistake congestion for social cohesion, familiarity for fellowship. We come together not as a formidable landmass, but as an archipelago; like islands in an

archipelago, we are close but isolated. We are not one, but individuated fragments of a nonexistent whole who happen to converge quite often.

After the incurable church-hopping, exuberant singing, and colorful fanfare of sterile and performative corporate worship, we recoil—each to a somber confinement of solitary comfort or, in other cases, to the chronic misery of our disjointed devices of survival.

Throughout Scripture, we find that God never intended for his children to observe the empty statutes of a God who does not care to attend to their needs.

Renewing the Sabbath’s Purpose

Ma admonishes: “A faith that focuses on personal salvation and a future heaven actually denies the soon coming of Christ. It is a Constantinian Adventism. A faith that devalues this life for the next ignores the Hebrew prophets who spoke truth to power. It denies the Jesus who liberated the marginalized. This goes beyond individual charity to the poor, which does nothing to change their conditions. Those who merely wait for the return of Christ are denying their own responsibility. They wash their hands, as Pontius Pilate did, ignoring their connection to the matrix of power.”⁵

The necessary transformation must entail a review of the organizational and financial models of the church. Unlike denominational judicatories, individual

churches are the only part of the overall structure that has a point of contact with local communities. Honoring the core meaning of the Sabbath will mean a restructuring that lets the local church discharge its biblical function as the storehouse with which is to dress the naked, feed the hungry, and shelter the homeless.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fact that most local churches had hardly any material means to sustain their members and the community. In most countries, churches were shut down because they were considered nonessential sectors of society. This was a mortifying indictment of the relevance of our church in society.

Without this Sabbath-inspired paradigm shift, the church will continue to grope in the dark for elusive revival and reformation, connecting the dots of a nonexistent pattern. Without the shift, we will continue to wallow in the misinformed nostalgia of an old-time religion we can hardly decode.

Undoubtedly, we will continue to remember the Sabbath day, but we would give it a greater influence if we’d fill its hollowness with justice. **AT**

¹ “What Adventists Believe about the Sabbath,” online at www.adventist.org/the-sabbath/.

² Rolf A. Jacobson, “Oppression Interrupted: The Sabbath and Justice,” *Word & World*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2016), p. 108. Online at digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/108.

³ Olive Hemmings, “Isaiah 58:13-14,” *Adventist Today*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Fall 2017). Online at atoday.org/why-doing-your-own-pleasure-has-nothing-to-do-with-swimming-on-sabbath/.

⁴ Yi Shen Ma, “Constantinian, Colonial Adventism,” *Spectrum Magazine* (Dec. 21, 2011). Online at spectrummagazine.org/article/news/2011/12/21/constantinian-colonial-adventism.

⁵ *Ibid.*

HUMAN FREEDOM AND SABBATH REST

BY STEPHEN CHAVEZ

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT, “REMEMBER THE SABBATH BY keeping it holy” (Exod. 20:8, NIV), is remarkable for several reasons.

Primarily it is notable because it was delivered to people who had, until recently, been slaves. The command, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work.... On [Sabbath] you shall not do any work” (verses 9-10, NIV), must’ve been totally foreign to their experience. Slaves, by definition, exist to serve the will of their masters all day every day. They had no paid time off, no sick leave, no personal days. Their identity was “slave.” “Slave, do this.” “Slave, take this over there.” “Slave, bring me that.”

The idea that slaves had an identity apart from their masters must’ve taken some getting used to. No longer controlled by someone else, they now had to control themselves. In the wilderness they were reminded of the sacredness of the Sabbath by the miracle of manna, which appeared six days a week, but not on Sabbath. During their sojourn, they had no doubt about which day was the Sabbath or what they were *not* supposed to do on that day. God told Moses, “Anyone who desecrates it is to be put to death; those who do any work on that day must be cut off from their people” (Exod. 31:14, NIV).

The unfortunate example of that injunction concerned a man found guilty of gathering wood on the Sabbath. “The assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the LORD commanded Moses” (Num. 15:36, NIV).

Clearly, God intended the Sabbath to be taken seriously. Don’t work, or else! The severity of the punishment demonstrates the grave nature of this act of rebellion.

Old Testament Practice

Although the Old Testament has no further record of persons executed for breaking the Sabbath, keeping the day holy was a fundamental theme of biblical prophets. Ezekiel, for example, quotes God as saying, “I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.” And, “Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God” (Ezek. 20:12, 20, NIV).

God wanted his people to know that merely not working didn’t make them holy. The Sabbath made them holy by creation and then by deliverance. In Exodus 20, the Sabbath is linked to God’s creative power—a historical fact. In Deuteronomy 5, the rationale for observing the Sabbath is the historical fact that God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Keeping the Sabbath was a sign of gratitude for what God had *already* done. Creation was a gift; deliverance from slavery was a gift. Sabbath rest was the tangible symbol of God’s grace.

Too Much Sabbath?

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all cautioned about being careless in Sabbath-keeping by turning the Sabbath into just another day to conduct business. After the Babylonian captivity, Nehemiah commanded that Jerusalem’s gates be closed every seventh day, to prevent the Jews from desecrating the Sabbath—implying that the captivity was somehow related to their unwillingness to rest in obedience to the fourth commandment.

Faced with the accusation that carelessness about keeping the Sabbath was at least partially responsible for one of the greatest disasters to befall the nation, they made sure that Israel, in theory, would never break the Sabbath again. They put safeguards in place, so that even if the safeguards were breached, the commandment itself would remain unbroken. This gave rise to restrictions to “protect” the Sabbath from being violated. These restrictions mandated how far it was appropriate to travel on the Sabbath and what could be carried without its being considered a “burden.” As well-intentioned as they were, these restrictions took the rest out of Sabbath-keeping and replaced it with obligation.

During his ministry, Jesus often found himself bumping up against these rules. He rightly pointed out that the Pharisees were guilty of robbing the Sabbath of rest, its primary purpose. To reinforce the revolutionary nature of the Sabbath as a day of rest and restoration, Jesus healed a man with a shriveled hand (Matt. 12:9-14). He also healed a disabled woman (Luke 13:10-17), an invalid at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15), and a man born blind (John 9:1-34). He even defended his disciples when they were caught “harvesting” grain (Mark 2:23-28).

Each time, the scholars scolded Jesus—and those who were healed, saying that they should come to be healed on a day other than the Sabbath. Jesus had to remind the teachers of the law, “The Sabbath was made to serve us; we weren’t made to serve the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27, MSG).

Adventist Rebellion

When Adventists rediscovered the seventh-day Sabbath after the Great Disappointment, their greatest burden was to prove that “the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10) was Saturday, not Sunday. In 1873, one of the first “scholarly” books to come off Seventh-day Adventist presses was *History of the Sabbath and First Day of the Week* by John N. Andrews.

In the face of almost universal pushback, Seventh-day Adventists put forward the revolutionary idea that 99 percent of Christendom worshiped on the wrong day of the week. They further posited that those who fell for this deception were being influenced by the fourth beast of Daniel 7, who would “speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws” (verse 25, NIV). From there it was a quick hop to the beast of Revelation 13 and the dragon power behind it. The beast and its image “forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads” (Rev. 13:16, NIV).

Worship on the seventh day of the week was the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s declaration of independence from centuries of human tradition. It was an act of rebellion against those who worshiped on the first day of the week, making Adventists more Protestant than those who, they believed, would create an “image to the beast.”

What Happened Next

Unfortunately, Adventists veered from talking about Sabbath rest and freedom to talking about the beast and his mark and conspiracy theories about Sunday laws and the papacy. Evangelistic brochures and posters featured hideous beasts and representations of the Ten Commandments but revealed little about the Lord of the Sabbath and the rest he offers both as Savior and role model. Sabbath observance became more a test of loyalty and less a symbol of love and gratitude.

Sabbath-keeping here took a markedly legalistic turn. Adventist prayer meetings and academy Bible classes became obsessed with the Sabbath—not just which day was the true Sabbath, but proper Sabbath behavior. Some delighted in quoting: “If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight ..., and if you honor it by ... not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD” (Isa. 58:13-14, NIV).

Although they wouldn’t say it in so many words, the implication was that the Sabbath is a delight if you don’t enjoy it. Church bulletins included “sunset calendars” so that people wouldn’t be guilty of doing their own pleasure after Friday sunset and before Saturday sunset.

This may explain why walking was good but riding a bike was bad. Wading in a lake or stream was good, but only up to your knees; anything beyond that was, well, a “pleasure.” A nature hike, good; skin diving, bad. And those Adventists in other parts of the world who played football (soccer) on Sabbath? They didn’t honor the Sabbath as much as we did.

This was why generations of Adventists watched intently for the sun to set each Sabbath afternoon so they could finally have some fun.

What I’m wondering is this: When generations of Seventh-day Adventists rebelled against the legalism of Sabbath-keeping, to what did they turn? And did they find rest?

What Now?

We can hardly imagine that Sabbath when our first parents watched the sun set in the company of their Creator. The children of Israel, in the vast expanse of the wilderness of the Sinai, newly released from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, couldn’t possibly have imagined all of the distractions and temptations we face today.

How should those of us who live in 2023 regard the Sabbath? And how is Sabbath observance for those who live in undeveloped parts of the world different from ours? They can put

down their tools and not work for 24 hours, whereas even though we can close our office doors and put away our tools, do we ever escape the emotional burdens imposed on us by family, career, and ever-more-complex societal demands?

This process of rediscovering Sabbath rest differs, by necessity, from person to person. A couple with small children must find their Sabbath rest differently—and perhaps more creatively—than would a retired couple, or a university student away from home for the first time. Those who spend the week doing manual labor will find Sabbath rest in ways unlike those whose work puts them into daily contact with people who have complicated personal issues. Properly practiced, Sabbath rest is intended to restore us completely—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

God Didn’t Tire, But We Do

Instead of focusing on Sabbath behaviors and debating which are acceptable or unacceptable, we’d do well to go back to the beginning. God rested on the seventh day of Creation, not because he was tired, but because he was finished. Adam and Eve’s first 24 hours in existence coincided with that first Sabbath, indicating that before they could learn how to work, they had to learn how to rest. This “temple in time” was God’s message that life is a gift, that God is the giver of all good things. While society’s relentless drumbeat is “more, more, more,” Sabbath rest invites us to be satisfied and enjoy what we have.

When toxic religion maintains that we’ll never be good enough, we find acceptance in the One who said: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, ... and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30, NIV).

When Jesus rebelled against the crusty, oppressive human traditions that had grown up around the Sabbath, he, in effect, reinstated the Sabbath as a gift, a day of rest. Its little bit of Eden is directly related to the struggle we face against evil. When synagogue rulers became indignant because Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he replied, “Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (Luke 13:16, NIV).

The Sabbath is a gift, not an obligation. It’s about grace, not about works. To keep the Sabbath holy in the 21st century requires a conscious decision—not just to *not* work, but to focus on those things that matter most—to respond to God’s invitation, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psa. 46:10, NIV). **AT**

THAT WE ARE ENOUGH

BY REBECCA BARCELÓ

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING CLASSES I took in college was Intro to Advertising. We read about products that had succeeded in the marketplace, as well as those that had failed. We learned about the psychology of marketing to the five senses—which, by the way, is why the bakery is often located close to the door in grocery stores!

And, of course, we studied in-depth the contours of a good advertisement.

In order for us to create our own advertisements, the professor divided the students into teams and assigned each team a product. It was our job to come up with an advertisement storyboard for that product and present it to the class.

“Remember,” he added, “the best advertisements generate a psychological need and then present the product as the solution.”

I froze. My teammates pulled out their supplies and started working, but I was lost in thought as the professor’s words echoed in my head. *Generate a psychological need and then present the product as the solution?*

I suddenly felt alienated from the class. I realized that I had spent the last six weeks learning the psychology of color, product placement, sound, and how to target beliefs and perceptions in human beings—all in order to sell inanimate products for money. It struck me that I now was being asked to *create an insecurity* in a woman that would be soothed by a hair product. How to make a father *question his provision for his family* based on the kind of car he drove. How to fan the flames of *comparison and deficiency* by sending the message that without a certain product, one’s identity is not complete.

What may have started as “getting the word out” about a new product has now turned into a meticulously researched, focus-group-tested, psychologically

manipulative messaging campaign predicated on convincing you that you (and what you possess) are not enough.

Don’t Rest; Get More!

This message dovetails nicely with the follow-up narrative, which is that to be worthy or get enough, you must work even harder and spend even more of your resources. Rest is equivalent to laziness, and laziness is a character flaw that is easily corrected by filling stray gaps in your schedule.

In the fourth commandment, God introduces his people to a new narrative. The story is not inflicted upon them, but rather, serves as a gentle reminder of their journey and true identity. He reminds them that their identity is not in being machinery to a process or in meeting daily quotas of bricks. They are not defined by competition, achievement, production, or acquisition.

This unsustainable cycle continues to the point where you judge your daily value by the defining question on your pillow, “What did I accomplish today?”

I find Matthew 12 to be an interesting snapshot of Jesus’ perspective toward the Sabbath. Verse 1 reads: “At that time, Jesus went through the grain fields on the

Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them” (verse 1, EHV). I always imagined that Jesus was heading through the grain fields *on the way* to heal the sick and feed the needy. *On the way* to preach in the synagogues or overturn some tables, or *on the way* to do whatever things a busy Messiah does.

I figured that the disciples were just trying to keep up and had to grab some fast food in their rush to get there. At least, that’s what my life usually looks like.

A Relaxed Messiah

However, it seems that these verses *are* the story. In verses 1-8, Jesus and the disciples are simply spending some time in the grain fields, doing some snacking and maybe some talking. Nothing is happening until the Pharisees come in to interrupt the calm. The Message Bible says it this way: “One Sabbath, Jesus was strolling with his disciples through a field of ripe grain.”

Strolling? Does the Messiah have time to stroll?

Commentators say there is no reason the Pharisees would ever be caught in a grain field on the Sabbath. So, why were Jesus and the disciples in a place of work during Sabbath hours? They had to have been there long enough for word to get out to the Pharisees that they had some reprimanding to do.

All of this to say that here, in these few verses, we have an example of Jesus spending a Sabbath in community and leisure with his disciples, relaxing in the grain fields. He

is possibly discussing the funny thing that Peter said yesterday, or listening to John’s latest poems, or talking about what kind of fish James caught last week.

Jesus is simply *being*. He is secure enough in his mission, his value, and his identity to sometimes just *be*, without worrying that it all will fall apart.

He tells the Pharisees that they have missed the point of the Sabbath day. The Sabbath was made for humans, not the other way around. The Sabbath is about mercy, not sacrifice. Six days we sacrifice and live in the expectations of this world,

If it feels hard to spend a day thinking that we are intrinsically valuable apart from our accomplishments, it’s because we spend six other days hearing that we are not enough.

but the seventh day is the day of mercy, when we lean into the value that God has already given us, and we rest. This is a lesson we need to be reminded of again and again—weekly, in fact, since it’s easy to forget.

Reprogramming of Slaves

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the story of the Exodus, where God must reprogram the Israelites after their time in slavery. If the Israelites had access to the Creation story recorded in Genesis 1 and 2, they may have grown up hearing about the Sabbath. We can suppose it was among the oral traditions and rituals they’d inherited.

What we know for certain is that at the time leading up to the Exodus, the Hebrews mentally lived in the context of slavery. If they knew about the Sabbath, they may not have had the ability to practice it for themselves and their families.

As slaves, all that mattered was productivity. Their worth was defined by whether they met their quota of bricks each day. They fell asleep thinking of ways to speed up processes, cut corners, and appease their taskmasters. They woke up in the mornings with the pressure of fear that they might have rested longer than they should. They were told that their true nature was one of sloth and laziness—that without the watchful eye of their taskmasters, they would not be worthy of their keep.

Egypt, though one of the richest kingdoms in the world, was driven by the principle of scarcity. If the slaves took time to rest, Pharaoh’s storehouses may not have had enough. They always needed to produce more. Pharaoh’s demand for wealth pervaded the social environment with constant anxiety, driven by the fear that the whole economic system might fail. The Hebrews’ neighbors were not neighbors, but competitors who could take their spot on the production line at a moment’s notice if anything were to happen to them. The people were replaceable and had to strive to stand out, to outwork and outshine those around them for the sake of protecting their spot and keeping bread on their tables. If a fellow worker fell into the mud pits during the day or died under the crushing stone obelisks, it was unfortunate but was considered the cost of doing business. Pharaoh’s storehouses must be filled.

God Steps In

When the Israelites begin their trek to the Promised Land, they take their production anxiety with them. Their minds and bodies may carry the distant memory of a Sabbath, but they have not had the freedom to exercise it in their everyday lives. It simply does not fit the context in which they have lived.

This is where God steps in. Through an uprooting of everything they know—their lifestyle, their routine, their identity, their workplace—a revolution begins, and God pulls them out of the fake construct that Pharaoh had created for their lives.

Walter Brueggemann puts it this way in his book *Sabbath as Resistance*: “The Israelites come to the mountain of Sinai to acknowledge regime change. The plagues of the Exodus mark the terrible and revolutionary change between an old empire dedicated to Pharaoh, and a new christening into holistic life with God as Ruler.”

Mount Sinai is where the Israelites are inducted into a new way of life. Here the Sabbath is reintroduced as the crown jewel of God’s expectations for them—the bridge between the commandments about loving God and the commandments about loving others.

In the fourth commandment, God introduces his people to a new narrative. The story is not inflicted upon them, but rather, serves as a gentle reminder of their journey and true identity. He reminds them that their purpose is not to be machinery as part of a process or to meet daily quotas of bricks. They are not defined by competition, achievement, production, or acquisition.

No, they are creatures made in the image of God, whose inherent dignity reflects the worthiness of justice, mercy, and compassion.

An Unanxious God

God reminds them that he, the God of all creation, is not an anxious God. When he rested on the seventh day, it was in the full knowledge that the universe was a beautiful, functioning system that did not need his constant worry for its upkeep. It was a sustainable system that allowed rest and renewal for all of its participants.

The Sabbath is a great equalizer, where all within it deserve to rest together, no matter what their labor has been the other six days of the week.

Unlike Pharaoh, God is not an anxious presence, but a presence of peace, providing enough for the needs of even the sparrows and the flowers (Matt. 6:26-30).

God reminds them that their neighbors are not threats or competitors, but family—an extension of themselves. The Sabbath exists to honor this time and space for community, so that they would have time to commune with their Maker and to rest—not only alone, but alongside their sons and their daughters, their servants, their animals, and even the foreigners within their gates. In a world where “there’s no such thing as a free lunch,” God presents a different type of economy. Isaiah 55:1 (NIV) says: “Come,

all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”

The Sabbath is a great equalizer, where all within it deserve to rest together, no matter what their labor has been the other six days of the week. Brueggemann says it this way: “The Sabbath commandment looks back to the emancipating God of the exodus who delivered from the restless productivity of Pharaoh and looks forward to a possible neighborliness in which striving for commodities in community-destroying ways is prohibited. Sabbath is an arena in which to recognize that we live by gift and not by possession, that we are satisfied by relationships of attentive fidelity and not by amassing commodities.”

If it feels hard to rest on the Sabbath, it’s because we have been trained to feel shame for our tiredness. For our creatureliness. For our humanity. If it feels hard to take a day listening to a still small voice, it’s because our ears have been deafened by the noise around us. If it feels hard to spend a day thinking that we are intrinsically valuable apart from our accomplishments, it’s because we spend six other days hearing that we are not enough.

The Sabbath is a mercy that God has provided to nurture us and remind us of our worth in his image. To remind us of the importance of our neighbors. And to remind us that unlike the insatiable gods of this world, to him, we are always enough. **AT**

ARE WE CELEBRATING AN INSIDE-OUT SABBATH?

How a New Church Plant Is Using Sabbath as a Framework for Social Justice

BY CHRISTOPHER C. THOMPSON

WHEN I WAS A KID, SOME RECORDING ARTISTS WORE THEIR clothes inside out. I chuckle as I remember this, but in fact, it sparked a short fashion trend. (I never even considered trying it—my mom wouldn't have allowed it.)

In the same way that Jacob W. Davis, the 1871 inventor of blue jeans, would likely cringe if he could see his clothes being worn inside out, I imagine that God must shake his head at seeing how far removed our ideas about the Sabbath are from the way he intended the day to work. It's as if people have turned the Sabbath inside out.

Sanctity of the Sabbath

I first learned about the Sabbath as a little boy, and its veracity and validity were never a question for me. However, not until I was well into my teenage years did I become convicted about the sanctity of the Sabbath. Since I was a fairly talented athlete and played three sports in high school, my teammates regularly begged me to compete on Sabbath. My basketball coach asked me, "Can't you get a letter from your pastor or something like that?" I replied: "That's not quite how it works. This is my decision."

This was to my mother's credit: knowing the pressure that was mounting, she had handed me a Bible that was open to Isaiah 58:13-14. It said: "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (NIV).

It was the first time I'd seen the text, and I felt astounded as I read it. Here's what was clear to me: God was challenging me to do things according to the divine plan. That plan resonated with me. If I would commit to doing that, then success was mine.

I had big plans. I had dreams and goals and aspirations for fame and fortune and success on the basketball court. I didn't

want to disrespect the divine blueprint handed to me. I decided that it was more advantageous to pursue my plan using God's blueprint rather than to do things my own way.

To this day, I appreciate that my mom shared that text with me. It was a significant turning point in my life and a watershed moment in my spiritual development. I made a principled decision based upon the Word of God.

Context and Pretext

Now, nearly 30 years later, I have the benefit of significant training in biblical interpretation and exegesis. As a practical theologian with a solid 20 years of handling the Scripture as a professional, I know that my perspective about that text when I first read it was terribly limited.

There's an old saying that relates to biblical interpretation: "Text without context is pretext." I've amended the saying to this: "Text without context is usually a proof text."

When considered in context, those Bible verses my mom showed me have a much more profound and universal application than I understood at the time.

Isaiah 58 begins by addressing fasting. Pious people ask God: "Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?" (verse 3, NASB).

God responds: "Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD?" (verse 5, NASB).

God isn't happy with sanctimonious fasting. In fact, the text suggests that the Jews were fasting to show outward piety, while simultaneously mistreating their labor force! "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers," says God (verse 3, NIV). How is this in any way a spiritual act?

Fasting isn't starving ourselves from food to look righteous—or pretending to be spiritual, which is precisely what these believers were doing in Isaiah 58 and why God reproved them. Instead,

fasting is setting aside something that is as essential as the food we eat so that we can make room for the One who is most essential.

A Starving Sabbath?

Some of us were taught about the Sabbath as if we were starving ourselves. It was all sacrifice. Don't do this. Can't do that. Don't go here. Can't go there. It was such a long list of don'ts.

We set aside nearly everything and were taught to make room, but what were we making room for? In my experience, since church is an all-Sabbath event in my culture, it was simply to go to church and sit all day. All of that has begun to look to me now almost like piety for piety's sake. It is wearing our theological Sabbath jeans inside out. It is missing the Sabbath's actual purpose and function.

God doesn't desire blind obedience, just so that the world will see that we're compliant. Although Isaiah 58:13-14 has served as an inspirational challenge for some for generations, it appears clear to me now that in context, this chapter isn't about simply abstaining from work for piety's sake.

Justice and Mercy

God gives principles to us so that we might be aligned with his heart. I'm fairly confident now, from reading Isaiah 58, that sitting sanctimoniously in our houses or quarantining ourselves in marathon-length church services is not what God had in mind. The text says that true fasting is not about just abstaining from food or performing religious rituals, but also doing acts of justice and mercy to relieve others.

The true spirit of the fast is abstinence with mindfulness of the cares and needs of those who are marginalized. In verses 6-7 (ESV), God defines the desired Sabbath fast as loosening the bonds of wickedness, undoing the straps of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free, breaking every yoke, sharing your bread with the hungry, and bringing the homeless poor into your house.

So, when in Isaiah 58:13-14 God instructs people to honor the Sabbath by refraining from pursuing their own interests and pleasure, I believe he's saying that we honor him and celebrate the Sabbath when in service to the community around us. It is in justice and mercy, in alleviating the suffering of others and bringing about greater equality and dignity for all, that we make room for God.

Proper Sabbath observance in Isaiah 58 suggests using it as a time to advocate for the needs of others—volunteering at a soup kitchen, visiting the sick or elderly, or participating in advocacy for social justice causes.

Sabbath in Action

We recently established a new church plant in my hometown of Beaufort, South Carolina. From the beginning I was determined to create a Sabbath worship framework that prioritized compassionate and committed involvement in the community. For example, we have our Bible study (Sabbath School) on Friday night to make space for spending the Sabbath morning hours in some form of service to the community.

At 11 a.m. on a recent Sabbath, I attended a meeting where an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) representative talked with community members about strategies for combating laws that limit freedoms for the most vulnerable Americans. Then, I attended a 2 p.m. rally where city and county leaders led a memorial for Tyre Nichols. At that rally, the police chief announced reforms that the local police force are instituting to ensure that this type of tragedy doesn't happen in our city. Afterward, I talked to the police chief, two city council members, several residents, and the mayor about a youth initiative we're working on.

Next, I went to church for worship at 3 p.m.

I know that some Adventists might think I'm breaking the Sabbath. A fellow Adventist pastor even preached a sermon to his congregation to disparage what we're doing! People are looking at us funny because we changed the traditional worship schedule. But they're the ones with their jeans on inside out. By using the Sabbath as sacred time for service, we promote justice and mercy, we make room for God, and we demonstrate our commitment to work toward a better world for everyone.

So, while some might see this as breaking the Sabbath, I believe that when Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27), he meant that not only do I rest from my secular pursuits, but other people around me benefit as a result!

While in one sense we fast from buying and selling on Sabbath, we do so in solidarity with people who are impoverished and cannot afford the things they need. When we observe Sabbath with this type of fast in mind, we are reminded of the destitute among us and the injustices that exist in the world. We become more sensitive to the suffering of others and more aware of our own responsibility to advocate for those who are oppressed.

We hope that what we're doing in our new church plant makes the Sabbath a living representation of the power of God and the gospel. I'm optimistic that in our new church community, we're returning to what God intended us to do with the Sabbath. I'll keep you posted. **AT**



IS THE SEVENTH-DAY SABBATH CHRISTIAN?

By Desmond Ford

Editor's Note: This piece was originally written for Adventist Today's July/August 1996 issue.

MANY OF MY FRIENDS DISAGREE WITH ME ON THIS TOPIC, AND some of them are certainly brighter than I am. My convictions in these few pages, however, were hard won. I did not inherit the doctrine of the Sabbath. I accepted it reluctantly, in the face of pressures of culture, church, family, and employment. Many years later when my friend Robert Brinsmead gave up Sabbath observance and wrote at length against it, I reviewed the whole matter and consequently published *The Forgotten Day*.

This rest day has had no rest from controversy over the centuries. Researchers are surprised at how many hundreds of articles and books Christians have circulated on the subject of the Sabbath. The most scholarly anti-Sabbatarian book of recent times, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, reminds us that those who think the question can be easily settled don't understand the

theological vastness of the issues involved. As its editor, D. A. Carson, points out, "It is one of the most difficult areas in the study of the relationship between the Testaments and in the history of the development of doctrine."¹

Some Christians see no reason for making the question such a topic of debate. To them it seems obvious that at least nine of the Ten Commandments have been binding for everyone from the beginning of time and will be binding forever. Did God, they ask, slip in one temporary commandment intended only for Jews for only a short time? These believers see no reason for humans to put asunder what God has joined together. All ten of the commandments, they conclude, are valid for all mankind forever.

Other Christians, not so theologically simplistic, contemplate the Sabbath commandment's "decisive material significance," "radical importance," and the "almost monstrous range" of this law. They link it with the doctrines of God, of revelation, of God's eternity and humankind's temporal well-being, of the biblical

conception of Creation as the setting for the covenant, and of the New Testament fulfillment of the divine purpose in redemption.²

Indeed, Swiss theologian Karl Barth goes so far as to claim that "the Sabbath commandment explains all the other commandments, or all the other forms of the one commandment. It is thus to be placed at the head." He quotes Alfred de Quervain approvingly: "Where the holy day becomes a day of man, society and humanity wither away and the demons rule."³

The Bible and Sabbath

The Bible refers to the seventh-day Sabbath by name approximately 149 times. The New Testament contains proportionately more references than the Old. While quantity must not be confused with quality, the statistics are nevertheless impressive when compared with the paucity of references to the Lord's Supper and to baptism in the New Testament, or to circumcision in the whole of Scripture.

It is further validating that biblical commentaries and theological articles written during recent decades contrast significantly with similar works of the 19th century. Most earlier works assumed that the shift from Sabbath to Sunday had church approval and apostolic support.

Scholars no longer take this assumption for granted. Modern Gospel commentaries, for example, freely admit that Christ was not opposing the Sabbath, but rather the Pharisaic perversions of it. The book edited by Carson acknowledges that Christ kept the Sabbath law. It also says that the book of Acts suggests that the first Christians continued to keep the Sabbath, as later church history frequently documents: "The Sabbath was an institution too central to Judaism for it to have been tampered with without provoking hostile reaction and persecution, but there's no record of persecution on this account. Instead, the early Jewish Christians appeared to have taken advantage of Sabbath observance to preach Jesus the Messiah."⁴

There is really only one text in the whole Bible capable of being interpreted as a negative reference actually naming the Sabbath, and that is Colossians 2:16. Christians are thus left with the option of judging the approximately 149 references by the one, or else judging the one by the 149. And let us remember that Scripture repeatedly admonishes us that "in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established" (2 Cor. 13:1, KJV).

As scholars such as Eduard Lohse and Fred O. Francis have pointed out, the issue discussed in Colossians is not primarily *nomos* [law], found well over 100 times in Galatians and Romans

but not once in Colossians. Rather, the issue is a pre-gnostic "philosophy falsely so called," or deceptive philosophy, having to do with "human precepts and doctrines" about "self-abasement and severity to the body" and "worship of angels" (see Col. 2:8, 18, personal translation). Such manmade regulations mentioned in the context of Colossians 2:16 had to do with fasting on holy times and were quite unrelated to the Torah.

Colossians 2:16 is asserting that no one be allowed to make rules and regulations for believers concerning the way in which they observed holy times. The text takes for granted the observance of the times, but it rejects ascetic practices on such times. The verse no more wipes out all Sabbath-keeping than it wipes out all eating and drinking (referred to in the same verse).

Some interpret Paul's relative silence on the subject to mean that the fourth commandment is irrelevant for Christians, but that silence can mean that he took it for granted. The Old Testament revelation sometimes ignores the Sabbath for centuries, but scholars admit the Jews observed it during those years. Besides the fact that historical books that cover hundreds of years do not specifically mention the Sabbath, the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon do not mention it either. Yet, no one doubts that the readers and writers of those books observed it.

Admitting that Scripture (with the exception of Col. 2:16) endorses the seventh-day Sabbath, some have resorted to arguments on the covenants to dispose of the institution. But it has seemed to many that the best theologians have recognized for a long time that all of the covenants of Scripture were merely topical variants of the one great everlasting covenant. Therefore, it is erroneous to draw hard and fast distinctions between the covenant at Sinai and the new covenant, as if to suggest they were in essential opposition. (Sinai was a replay of the Abrahamic covenant—see Psalm 105:9-11, which is quite clear on this matter.)

The word "new" in relationship to the covenant actually means "renewed," as with the "new" earth and the "new" heart. According to Hebrews 8:8-12, the essence of the law proclaimed at the Exodus is now written in the heart. 2 Corinthians 3 is certainly not suggesting that idolatry, blasphemy, disobedience to parents, murder, adultery, theft, lying, and covetousness, as well as Sabbath-breaking, have been sanctified by the cross. No, it is merely saying that all law (even New Testament law) becomes the ministration of death if people teach it without the message of the gospel and the Holy Spirit.

Personal Rationale

So far, I have attempted to address some broad but significant arguments that come up in discussions about the Sabbath. I would like to add my personal, four-step rationale for Sabbath-keeping.

The primary duty of life is worship (Matt. 4:10). If our attention to worship is right, all else will be right. All unrighteousness grows out of ungodliness (Rom. 1:18). Unless there is a set time for important duties, they become “buried under the stuff,” like Saul.

Unless God names the time for worship, all other suggestions stand without authority—the necessity, therefore, for the fourth commandment.

We are creatures of time and, as such, require regular change for mental, physical, and spiritual health. Thus, we have summer and winter, day and night, work and rest. Even the primitive pagans saw the necessity for holy days, and the wisest philosophers such as Plato endorsed the practice.

The Sabbath of Scripture harmonizes perfectly with the nature of humankind and is rightly called a “delight,” or as the Hebrew says, a “luxury.” Twentieth-century Christians living in a world of speed, information, and demands on their time have every reason to be grateful for the special church day, the family day, the rest day, “the holy of the LORD, honourable” (Isa. 58:13, KJV).

I challenge any reader to conceive of a greater blessing that God could have bestowed upon his family of believers than the permission to free themselves from all secular activities and anxieties for one whole day. What could be better than having a day to be spent in adoration of him, in fellowship with one another, and in Christian service? The day of God leads to the house of God and thus to the word of God, which tells of the Son of God who offers all the salvation of God. Why should believers now need this blessing less than did the faithful in ancient times?

Eden’s Eternal Sabbath

Some hold that the Sabbath is mentioned in Genesis 2:1-3 only to foreshadow the time when it would be given to Israel as a requirement. They maintain that the real origin of the Sabbath was when God sent the manna thousands of years later. I contend that thorough exegesis does not support this view. The following eight comments explain my viewpoint.

1. All admit that the resting spoken of in Genesis 2:1-3 is set forth as transpiring on the first seventh day, and there is no evident reason for separating the resting from the blessing by a space of millennia. Indeed, many scholars have seen the theological purpose of Genesis 1 to be a prelude to the climax of instituting the Sabbath in the first verses of chapter 2.

2. In Genesis 1:20, 22, 24-26, and 28, we read that God

immediately blessed the work he did during the first six days of Creation week. Genesis 2:2-3 seems to be an obvious parallel to these verses, and, as such, his blessing and sanctifying of the Sabbath must have taken place immediately, as well.

3. In the fourth commandment itself, we have another parallel between what took place during the first six days of Creation week and what transpired on the seventh day. Note the tense in Exodus 20:11 (KJV): “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth ... and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it.” All four verbs are in the past tense. No one disputes that the first two apply to Creation week. The correlation of divine acts clearly indicates that the blessing and the hallowing took place at the same time as the resting. The last phrase, “and hallowed it,” has no significance unless the Sabbath was proclaimed and set aside for human beings at Creation. The Hebrew term in this passage occurs repeatedly in Scripture to denote a public proclamation.

4. The fourth commandment affirms that the seventh day was already the Sabbath at the time God hallowed it, not thousands of years later.

5. The information in Genesis chapters 2-4 established the fact that humans were both workers and worshippers. They needed a special time for rest and adoration of the Creator. Why should this need be denied until Sinai?

6. There is no instance in Scripture of a memorial being instituted thousands of years after the event it memorialized. The Passover, for example, began at the time of the deliverance it symbolized. Exodus 16 further supports the Edenic origin of the Sabbath. The reference addresses the Sabbath as if the Israelites already knew what it was. The language is far too casual to be the first introduction they had to such an important institution. (Compare it with the introduction of Passover in chapter 12.) The main theme of Exodus 16 is the provision of manna, not Sabbath observance.

7. The author of Hebrews 4 distinguishes between the “rest” of Canaan and a Sabbatical rest “entered into” from the time when “the works were finished,” that is, from Creation. The argument of this section of the chapter is that “from the foundation of the world,” a spiritual experience of rest has been offered to believers. Both the rest of the first Sabbath and the rest from pilgrimage in Canaan are symbols of the blessing offered to those who cease relying on their own works and trust instead in the finished work of Christ.

8. The moral nature of the Sabbath command indicates it originated in Eden. The test of an eternal moral law is whether or not it grows out of relationships between God and humanity.

All agree that the other nine commandments grew out of God’s relationships with man and woman and were binding on humanity from the time of Creation. Certainly, the Sabbath grows out of God’s relationships with humanity also. The fact that we are God’s creation is the foundation of all worship and morality. If people had faithfully observed the Sabbath from the beginning, there would never have been an atheist or a pagan.

Placed in the Center

It is interesting to discover that in the original Hebrew text, the center of the Ten Commandments is the phrase “the seventh day is the Sabbath.” Furthermore, the stated reason we are to remember this day is that God made heaven and earth. This is certainly not a Jewish reason. The commandment does not include any ceremonial features or rituals such as sacrifices. It merely invites humanity to rest from secular activities and to hallow the day that God has appointed.

Additionally, wherever the New Testament alludes to the Decalogue, it takes for granted that it is still in force (Ephesians 6).

Only the fourth commandment explains the right of the Creator to legislate. It alone gives the foundation of all worship and obedience. Without this commandment, the law could have been the product of any pagan deity or wandering nomad who claimed to be God. Only the fourth is prefaced by “Remember...” It is the most detailed, lengthy, and comprehensive of the ten and amounts to one-third of the Decalogue.

The first table of the commandments tells us whom to worship, how to worship (not with images, but in spirit and in truth), the approach of worship (reverence), and the time for worship. Do not Christians need all of these still?

Even the placement of this law is important. Those who wish to eradicate it must clamber over three other obviously eternal laws if they come from one direction, or clamber back over six other obviously eternal laws if they come from the other direction. It is fenced in by divine inspiration and divine proclamation.

A law proclaimed by God himself and written with his own finger can be abolished only in as definite a manner as he first gave it. Such a retraction does not exist. Also, observe that the only positive commandments, the fourth and the fifth, refer to the two institutions of Eden that are the source of all the ten.

Jesus and the Sabbath

Christ himself kept the Sabbath in life as well as in death. The only whole day he spent in the tomb was the seventh-day Sabbath. During his life he risked his whole ministry to show how the Sabbath should be kept. He did for the Sabbath what he did for

the other nine commandments: he freed it from unscriptural distortions. He worked seven miracles on the Sabbath and proclaimed it a day to celebrate God’s redemption.

Form criticism reminds us that the Gospels preserved only details that were relevant for the church after the cross. And they had many references to the Sabbath.

Consider the amazing range not only of people concerned in the Sabbath miracles, but also of the arguments Jesus used to explain his actions. The miracles included men and women, young and old, and people in church (synagogue), at home, and in other settings. In defending his reforms, Christ argued from the Sabbath’s beginning in Eden (Mark 2:27), from the Sabbath laws of the Old Testament, from Old Testament history, from the later prophets, from God’s providential working, from everyday experience, from human reason, and from his own Lordship. In addition, he appealed to conscience (see Mark 2:27-28; Matt. 12:3-12; Mark 3:4; Luke 13:15-16; Luke 14:3; John 5:16-17; 9:13-16.)

Furthermore, in his last sermon when he referred to both the fall of Jerusalem and to the end of the world, Jesus admonished the disciples to pray regarding Sabbath observance at a time of persecution and crisis (Matt. 24:20).

We have no record of any other institution that Christ labored so hard to defend and perpetuate as the seventh-day Sabbath of the fourth commandment. How could he have done more?

The Sabbath as Parable

Now we come to perhaps the most important point of all. The Sabbath is an acted-out parable of the blessings of the gospel. Our physical rest on the seventh day is but the sign of the rest of heart we have all week long because of the finished work of Christ. “We who have believed do enter into rest” (Heb. 4:3). Just before the New Testament’s first allusion to the Sabbath, we have Christ’s great invitation to receive his rest that results from faith in him and in his finished work (see Matt. 11:28-30).

The Sabbath of Judaism, with its oppressive laws and its rituals applying to sacrifice and temple, has gone forever. So have the additional laws that surrounded most of the Ten Commandments as found in the Torah. But the Sabbath of Eden remains. It was for the first man and woman; it is for the last man and woman, and it is for every man and woman of all time. 

¹ D. A. Carson (ed.), *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (1982), p. 17.

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. III/4: The Doctrine of Creation* (1932), pp. 49, 57.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴ A. T. Lincoln, “From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective,” *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*, edited by D. A. Carson (1982), p. 365.



Really?

God Told You That?

By Raj Attiken

WHEN I HEAR SOMEONE SAY, “GOD TOLD ME...,” A SILENT ALARM goes off inside of me.

Over the years, I have seen many decisions made, projects initiated, campaigns launched, goals set, and directives issued in the name of God. Not everything has turned out well that individuals have claimed the voice of God directed them to do. God-directed marriages have sometimes failed; jobs haven’t materialized; investments have crashed; projects have flopped; businesses have gone belly-up.

In a remarkable number of instances, following directions from heaven seems to have been an ill-advised strategy.

I was once at a department store and overheard two ladies in the aisle next to me talking about faith and spirituality. I was particularly intrigued when one of them said to the other, “I don’t go anywhere unless God tells me to; I only go where he asks me to go.”

Curious to see who these ladies were, I moved in their direction. Just about that time, the lady who had been talking asked a passing stock clerk where in the store she could find a certain item. “We don’t sell that here,” was his reply.

“Oh,” she said as she started toward the door, “then I should go elsewhere to get it.” Did God send her to the wrong store? Or was what she believed was a message from God not from God?

The home page of an Adventist conference website recently focused on an ambitious baptism goal that the conference had set for its pastors and churches. This goal was described multiple times as “God’s vision” for the conference. Since it was God’s goal, the conference claimed that he would guarantee its success if people did their part to reach it.

Phrases such as “God calls us to...” or “God has asked us to...” or “God wants us to...” are frequently seen in Adventist publications and preached at Adventist gatherings. They imply that what is being required or requested has come as a mandate from God. When a leader launches an initiative and labels it “God’s plan” or announces a goal as “God’s goal,” the implication is that these should not be questioned or challenged.

Attributing It to God

Over the years, I have met a few people—a very few, to be sure—who have claimed with certainty that they heard God speak to them audibly. The voice usually brought a message that they personally needed at the time: a message of encouragement, of direction, of affirmation, of comfort.

Since I have never heard the audible voice of God myself, I am left to wonder about this phenomenon. Is this what the prophet Isaiah meant when he said, “Right behind you a voice will say,

‘This is the way you should go,’ whether to the right or to the left” (Isa. 30:21, NLT)?

What I have found to be more common is for people to *attribute to God* the impressions they form about issues or things that happen to them. People seem to want to believe that God is communicating to them through what they intuitively know, or are impressed to know, or discover in the confluence of events or in the voices that surround them. Here, human intuition is considered to be the action of God on our minds. God is also seen as “speaking” to us by orchestrating the events that happen to us and around us to our benefit.

People find God’s messages fleshed out both in the everydayness and in the crises of their own experiences. God’s messages come through the variety and complexity of events and through the harmonies and disharmonies of what happens to them. They come in the sometimes glorious and at other times gut-wrenching experiences of people.

Trying to understand the meaning of what one might consider a message from God through the events of life is precarious business. At times individuals think they know the meaning of the messages, but at other times, as with Jacob and his dream of a ladder from heaven, the best that can be said is, “Surely God was in this moment, and I was not aware of it” (Gen. 28:16, personal paraphrase).

How God Speaks

I grew up hearing Bible stories of God speaking to Adam and Eve, to Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, and others. God also spoke through dreams, visions, angels, and other forms of revelation. In the Gospels, the voice of God was heard at the baptism of Jesus and on the Mount of Transfiguration. God is said to have spoken to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, to Peter in a vision, and to John in Patmos. Should we not expect God to continue to speak to us today?

I have concluded that if God sends messages today, they must be something personal to our lives. The meaning of the message is the meaning it has for the one to whom it is given. American author and theologian Frederick Buechner, in his book *Listening to Your Life*, compared God’s messages to us with the Hebrew alphabet, which has no vowels. He proposed that “God’s words to us are always veiled, subtle, cryptic, so that it is left to us to delve their meaning, to fill in the vowels for ourselves, by means of all the faith and imagination we can muster.”¹

God speaks to us in such a way, Buechner suggests, not because he chooses to be obscure, but because, unlike a dictionary word whose meaning is fixed, the meaning of an incarnate word is the

meaning it has for the one to whom it is spoken—the meaning that becomes clear and effective in our lives only when we ferret it out for ourselves.

When Elijah had his mountain experience, he expected to hear God in a wind, an earthquake, or even a fire (1 Kings 19:11-12). Instead, God’s message came to him as a “still small voice” (KJV). I have seen the Hebrew phrase used here also translated as a “gentle whisper” (NIV) or as “the sound of sheer silence” (NRSV). I find in that translation a possible key to hearing God’s voice today.

The discipline of listening for God today is the discipline of listening to life. It is the exercise of discerning what life wants from me in all its ups and downs, its mysteries and loose ends, and in the rough-and-tumble of my personal experiences. It

I see a difference between the role that the Hebrew prophets played and a church leader today claiming to hear God’s voice about an institutional goal, plan, or project.

is the challenge of relating to life as an adventure of “living-as-listening.” It is the attentiveness to hearing God speak in a voice that has no words. Faith is the gift of reading signs of the presence of God, but caution might be appropriate when we see what we think are “burning bushes” (Exod. 3:1-4). The voice we hear could be our own.

A Danger to Clergy

But isn’t “speaking for God” one of the roles of a Christian pastor or leader, just as it was of the Hebrew prophets? Isn’t prophecy, or speaking for God, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit endowed upon the church (Eph. 4:11)? The writers of the Old Testament books portrayed the prophets as announcing that they had been directed by God in the messages they delivered. Jesus validated the ministry and messages of these prophets. How the messages came to the prophets is not described by the writers.

They may have heard the actual voice of God. More likely, it seems to me, they were so in tune with the heart of God that they

knew where God was leading the nation and what God desired of the people. They seem to have carried a painful burden on behalf of truth and justice, which they associated with the God of Israel. They found the hypocrisy, corruption, and deceit of their times intolerable and were compelled to speak out vehemently against them. They must have been so certain that God's heart ached over injustice and oppression that they could confidently claim to speak for God, even without hearing the audible voice of God directing them in their messages.

I see a difference between the role that the Hebrew prophets played and a church leader today claiming to hear God's voice about an institutional goal, plan, or project. Leaders today wrap themselves in the prophet's mantle for good rhetorical reasons:

Trying to understand the meaning of what one might consider a message from God through the events of life is precarious business.

the use of prophetic language not only endows the person's thoughts with unquestionable religious validation, but also adds enormous weight to what a person wishes to impose on someone. If leaders invoke God's name on an institutional project they feel strongly about, those hearing it could feel an obligation they wouldn't otherwise feel.

People are often urged to "step out in faith," even when the proposal holds little theological, ethical, economical, or organizational sense. The value of theological education is not that it gives one special privilege to hear God's voice, but that it gives the person tools for interpreting Scripture and exploring and teaching biblical themes.

It seems to me that to imply you are speaking God's will because you're a pastor is a practice bordering on blasphemy. Such manipulation could well be a violation of the third

commandment: "You must not misuse the name of the LORD your God" (Exod. 20:7, NLT). Jesus admonished against even saying, "By heaven!" because heaven is God's throne" (Matt. 5:34, NLT). Another danger here is that it can lead people to believe in a God who is manipulative.

Through Jesus

While I remain ambivalent about how we hear God's voice today, I am settled in the confidence that the voice of God was heard in its clearest form in the person of Jesus Christ. My efforts to hear God's voice today should focus likewise on Jesus.

In the Old Testament, God's messages to individuals and prophets were aimed at guiding, instructing, reproofing, and leading people to prepare for the arrival of the Messiah and the restoration of the kingdom. The author of Hebrews presents Jesus as the complete revelation of God. "Long ago, God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. ... The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God" (Heb. 1:1-3, NLT).

Jesus is greater than all persons and previous means of divine revelation. Whereas God spoke through burning bushes, angels, donkeys, visions, dreams, and prophets, now he has spoken to us in Jesus. Since the revelation of God is complete in Jesus, nothing more can be added. Jesus is enough! Whatever is said can only be an echo of what has already been revealed.

My task then, is to contemplate Jesus, "the champion who initiates and perfects our faith" (Heb. 12:2, NLT). I should seek to know all I can about the God revealed in and by Jesus.

In the moments of life when many of us genuinely long for God to guide us, a personal word from God would be very welcome. We would love to say, as Samuel did, "Speak, your servant is listening!" (1 Sam. 3:10, NLT). However, unlike in Samuel's case, what we hear back is the sound of thin silence—a voice speaking without words. This Voice has already spoken, and the message is: "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." **AT**

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations* (1992), p. 4.

Re-Evaluating Ellen White's Misunderstood Idea of the Shaking

By Matthew Korpman

WITHIN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST Church, a common conception is that Ellen White, one of the denomination's three founders and a 19th-century female theologian, warned of a singular time in the future when a theological "shaking" would occur. The *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* describes it as "a period preceding the second coming of Christ when many members leave the church because of indifference, satanic deceptions, and the pressure of circumstances."¹ Douglas Morgan adds that Adventists have traditionally responded to this idea by reinforcing belief structures to prevent apostasy.²

In Desmond Ford's historic Glacier View manuscript, he noted that "we find her [White] applying ... the shaking ... to events associated with 1844—but also she applies the same themes to the end of the world yet future."³ This is representative of what he called the "apotelesmatic principle," implying a general duality to the concept of prior application and future expectation.⁴ On the other hand, Robert Ouro denies Ford's claims and argues instead that "the shaking ... is one continuous event, not several distinct events."⁵ In his opinion, the reason for the two references is that the shaking never ended.

Both Ford and Ouro appear to have missed the mark, though. By comparing all possible references to the word "shaking" (as well as associated ideas) in Ellen White's written corpus, one discovers an even more nuanced theological concept.

It Keeps Happening

White appears to have understood the shaking as a *continually repeating event*; in other words, it was never a singular event that was either repeated once or merely unending. For example, in 1850, she stated that a shaking had commenced.⁶ In 1860, she wrote that the previous shaking had ended and another one "must soon take place."⁷ One year later, in 1861, she said she believed the newest shaking had finally come.⁸ This shaking apparently lasted until 1864, when she had a vision confirming that they were in the midst of

To understand the shaking as a theological concept, we must focus on Ellen White's use of image or metaphor in her writings.

a new shaking.⁹ When speaking in 1881 of the shaking, she did not describe it as current, but as something past.¹⁰ She wrote to church workers in 1887 that "this is the shaking time."¹¹ Then, in 1889, she said that God's people were "entering" a different shaking time.¹² In 1897, she spoke of the shaking time as having not come yet, implying that the past shaking had finished and another had yet to begin.¹³ Again, in 1900, she referenced that the believers were already well within another shaking time.¹⁴

Ellen White's son W. C. White wrote in 1913 that the previous shaking had long since ended and that some feared another would come before the final one.¹⁵ Many within Adventist circles are already

familiar with the end-time final shaking, which is predicted to come at the very end of Earth's history.¹⁶

Ellen White's Understanding of the Shaking

To understand the shaking as a theological concept, we must focus on Ellen White's use of image or metaphor in her writings, which means that we take into account a host of her statements that have not been previously associated with the doctrine, but clearly are relevant. She wrote in 1892 that "If the pillars of our faith will not stand the test of

Throughout her writings, [Ellen White explained] that the shaking repeated itself throughout history, with the purpose of "refining" and "purifying" the church.

investigation, it is time that we knew it."¹⁷ Using the imagery of a violent earthquake that shakes the foundations of faith itself—not only at the individual level, but also the institutional—she wrote: "If every idea we have entertained in doctrines is truth, will not the truth bear to be investigated? Will it totter and fall if criticized? If so, let it fall, the sooner the better. The spirit that would close the door to investigation of points of truth in a Christlike manner is not the Spirit from above."¹⁸

Here, the idea of a shaking is synonymous with the concept of questioning. Honest questioning, truth-seeking, and doubting of tradition are the source of the earthquake. However, this shaking that leads to the possibility of actual doctrinal loss is not to be feared, but rather, welcomed. She warns, "There is no excuse for any one in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without an error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people, is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation."¹⁹

White developed this idea further throughout her writings, explaining that the shaking repeated itself throughout history, with the purpose of "refining" and "purifying" the church.²⁰ She references the period of the apostles following Pentecost as a time of shaking, brought about by their message.²¹ Likewise, she gives the Reformation as a historic example of a shaking that God accomplished through Luther, directed at the Roman Catholic Church.²² She writes that during such an event ("religious crisis"²³), "everything that can be shaken will be shaken, that these things which cannot be shaken may remain."²⁴ This process is "of God," she says, and "blows away multitudes like dry leaves."²⁵ In this sense, she describes it also as an adversity that "purges" the church.²⁶ Yet, for an event that sounds so dramatically harmful, she suggests that "a shaking among the people" can also yield sweeping reform and salvation for thousands who otherwise are heading toward ruin.²⁷

Reasons for a Shaking

White suggests a number of reasons why a shaking occurs in the church.²⁸ The first possibility is because the church is in error in its beliefs and requires a correction. Sometimes this event is merely precipitated by "the introduction of false theories," typically implying that those who fall are those who read Scripture only on the "surface," who are "anchored nowhere" and are like shifting sand.²⁹ Sometimes it occurs merely because of various tribulation and persecution related to preaching ideas contained in Scripture (and perhaps ignored by the majority of the church).³⁰ The fourth possibility is that a *terrible shaking* must occur whenever ministers are exalted, praised, or "extolled as almost infallible"³¹—or if people within the church wish to hear only "smooth things" and "peace cried in their ears," even though the reality is opposite.³² In this sense, their rejection of reality requires the divine, ultimate Reality to reject *them*.

In a piece she wrote for publication in the *Review and Herald Extra* on Christmas Eve of 1889, White remarks that some individuals who fall during such a faith-shattering event are those "who have been standard-bearers" and who "sounded in proclaiming the truth."³³ She adds that "in the time of shaking, they have been unable to stand," and moreover, have shockingly even become the enemies of faith. She argues that although they spoke as great apologists at one time, this hid the fact that they didn't truly belong to the community of faith at all.

She also cautioned, however, that the shaking brought with it a danger that the shaking itself was trying to eliminate: idolatry. She warns that people can abuse the process of a shaking by transforming the idea itself into another way to elevate the self or ego (adopting a new idol

instead of becoming humbled by the shortcomings of our own knowledge (and allowing old idols to die). This might happen, she suggests, when a fundamentalist or singular mentality forms, leading "ministers... [to] feel that they have some wonderful advanced ideas, and unless all receive these, they will be shaken out and a [new] people will arise to go forward and upward to the victory."³⁴

White notes that within this potential for an idolatry of the ego comes the ability to make an idolatry out of not only ourselves, but our very theological beliefs.³⁵ She writes: "Away with this egotism."³⁶ In that same letter discussing the shaking, she warns Edwin Jones in 1890 that anyone who claims that one must share all the same ideas as another, in order to be part of the church, is in fact working under the influence of the devil. She cautions against overemphasizing the time of trouble and a coming shaking of God's people, directing ministers instead to stress only simple beliefs that are agreed upon, to encourage unity, and to allow people to respect their differences. She discourages strict orthodoxy and implores church members to "not become narrow ... [but] let your mind broaden."³⁷

W. C. White, Ellen White's son, later wrote that what will "hold us steady" during an earthquake of faith is to retain "the simple confidence that the Lord is going to do for us tomorrow what he did for us yesterday."³⁸ Let us trust God to get us through any future shaking events and know that every time we believe too self-assuredly that we have the truth, the Source of all truth is ready to humble us. At a time today when so many in the church who speak of the shaking are conservative or often-times conspiracy-prone, seeking to hold rigidly to their assumptions about what *they* think is the truth or "old landmarks,"

this "broader" vision of Ellen White's vision for the shaking is clearly needed and beneficial. **AT**

¹ Don F. Neufeld (ed.), "Shaking Time," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Commentary Reference Series, Vol. 10 (1976), p. 1339.

² Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (2001), p. 184.

³ Desmond Ford, *Daniel 8:14, the Day of Atonement, and the Investigative Judgment* (Glacier View Manuscript, 1980), p. 9. Accessed 04/08/2023 from <https://www.desford.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Dr-Desmond-Ford-Daniel.8.14.pdf>

⁴ Ford, *Daniel 8:14*, pp. 367, 411, 559.

⁵ Robert Ouro, "The Apotelesmatic Principle: Origin and Application," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, Vol. 9: No. 1 (1998), p. 340.

⁶ Ellen G. White, "To the 'Little Flock,'" *The Present Truth*, Vol. 9 (1850), pp. 71-72.

⁷ White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2 (1860), p. 284.

⁸ E. G. White to Brother Ingraham, Letter 32 (1861); E. G. White to Lucinda Hall, Letter 5a, (Apr. 5, 1861).

⁹ White, "Communications to Elder M. Hull," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 8 (1864), p. 62. Cf. reprint in White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (1868), p. 429.

¹⁰ White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 4 (1876), p. 89.

¹¹ E. G. White to Howard Miller, Letter 5 (June 2, 1889).

¹² E. G. White to J. D. Rice, T. H. Gibbs, and J. N. Loughborough, Letter 2 (1887).

¹³ E. G. White to W. C. White, Letter 141 (May 5, 1897).

¹⁴ E. G. White to A. G. Daniells, Letter 131 (Oct. 14, 1900).

¹⁵ W. C. White, "Confidence in God," *The General Conference Bulletin* (June 1, 1913).

¹⁶ E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 5 (1882), p. 81; cf. E. G. White to Brother and Sister Starr, Letter 107 (May 7, 1897).

¹⁷ E. G. White, *Gospel Workers* (1892), p. 127.

¹⁸ E. G. White to W. H. Healey, Letter 7 (Dec. 9, 1888).

¹⁹ E. G. White, "Christ Our Hope," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 50 (Dec. 20, 1892), p. 785.

²⁰ E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 4, op cit.

²¹ E. G. White, *Special Testimony to Battle Creek Church* (1896), p. 154.

²² E. G. White, "Effectual Prayer," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 17 (1884), p. 258. White also writes that "the voice of Luther ... shook Europe as with an earthquake" ("Romanism the Religion of Human Nature," *Signs of the Times*, Vol. 16 [1894], p. 243) and states that this shaking was worldwide (*Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 4 [1884], p. 168) and that it "shook the very foundations of the papacy" ("Luther Summoned to Augsburg," *Signs of the Times*, Vol. 25 [1883], p. 289).

²³ E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 4, op cit.

²⁴ E. G. White, Letter 5 (1899), op cit.

²⁵ E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 4, op cit.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ E. G. White, "The Temperance Work," *Review and Herald*, Vol. 91, No. 43 (Oct. 15, 1914), p. 3.

²⁸ In E. G. White, "To the 'Little Flock,'" (1850), pp. 71-72, Ellen White suggested that if people did not donate money, they would be shaken out of the church. This odd, rather questionable reason for a shaking was recorded at the beginning of her ministry, when she was barely over the age of 20, and was not repeated in later years.

²⁹ E. G. White, Letter 141, 1897, in *Manuscript Releases*, Vol. 11 (1990), p. 206.

³⁰ E. G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 4, op cit.

³¹ E. G. White, "Christian Integrity in the Ministry," Manuscript 15 (1886).

³² E. G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 2, op cit.

³³ E. G. White, "An Address in Regard to the Sunday Movement," *Review and Herald Extra* (Dec. 24, 1889), p. 3.

³⁴ E. G. White to Edwin Jones, Letter 15a (May 19, 1890).

³⁵ E. G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 4 (1884), p. 399.

³⁶ E. G. White, Letter 15a (1890), op cit.

³⁷ E. G. White, *Review and Herald Extra*, op cit.

³⁸ W. C. White, "Confidence in God" (1913), op cit.



NEWS BRIEFS

BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who don't mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.

SDA Leaders Propose 28 More Fundamentals

SILVER SPRING, Md. — After much contemplation and argument, a group of Seventh-day Adventist leaders has proposed adding 28 additional fundamental beliefs to the church's current list of 28. Below are the proposed new beliefs (a.k.a. commandments), as reported by BarelyAdventist:

1. We believe that haystacks are the most perfect food ever created.
2. We believe that every church should have a resident pet (preferably a cat called Ted).
3. We believe that each member should bring a signature potluck dish to church events.
4. Thou shalt always double-knot thy shoelaces, lest thou trip and fall on the Sabbath.

5. We believe that anyone caught skipping church to watch football be subject to immediate church discipline.
6. We believe that *The Great Controversy* should be turned into a Broadway musical.
7. We believe that sanctuary pews should come equipped with built-in massagers.
8. We believe that church elders should pass a pie-baking test before being ordained.
9. We believe that church greeters should keep a basket of mints on hand to offer any worshippers who haven't brushed their teeth.
10. We believe that since napping is a spiritual discipline, every Adventist needs a designated "nap room" for Sabbath afternoon naps.
11. We believe that the best way to end a church service is with a group sing-along of "Lean on Me."

12. We believe that church potlucks should always include at least one vegetarian lasagna.
13. We believe that all Adventists should have a vegetable garden in their backyard.
14. We believe that church members should keep a "potluck survival kit" in their car at all times.

15. We believe that Adventists should create their own dating app called "Seventh-day Swipes."
16. We believe that the best way to evangelize is to hand out free samples of haystacks on street corners.

17. Thou shalt not wear white after Labor Day.
18. We believe that putting corn on pizza is an abomination.
19. Thou shalt always put the toilet seat down.
20. Thou shalt not wear Crocs to church.

21. We believe the correct way to hang toilet paper is with the end coming over the top.
22. Thou shalt not use Comic Sans in any church-related documents.

23. We believe it is a sin to wear socks with sandals.
24. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's avocado tree.

25. We believe that the best way to spread the gospel is through memes.
26. Thou shalt distance thyself from David Koresh.
27. We believe it is better to arrive 30 minutes early to church than one minute late.
28. We believe the Heritage Singers deserve a Grammy Award.

Seminary Relocates to Facilitate "Courtship"

BERRIEN SPRINGS, Mich. — One of the newer buildings on the Andrews University campus has been completely abandoned. All Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary classes have been moved to Marsh Hall, the nursing building on campus. Seminary administrators said that the move will "facilitate streamlined courtship between single seminarians and nursing majors."

Seminary leadership said the move was "urgent and 100% worth it," since everyone avoids walking through the seminary building otherwise. However, nursing majors are circulating a petition to move the School of Nursing into the former seminary building.

Contributors



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Good News for Everyone



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Yes, we tell the truth about our church—historical and current. But our purpose isn't to show off how much we know. What we really want to do is to hold the Seventh-day Adventist Church accountable to giving what the Bible calls “good news” of salvation—for everyone, not just a few who believe certain approved things.

Denominations, when they get self-important, operate in ways that aren't necessarily about good news. They want to

stay in control. And if that means repeating the same old partial truths over and over again, that's what they'll do. If it means using guilt and fear to manipulate people, they'll do that, too. If they must spend the money we give them on self-promotion and hiding things we should know, well, that's all part of the game.

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Loren Seibold
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