

Proper Sabbath-Service Behavior

Points to Remember

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I would like you to turn to I Corinthians 14.

I Corinthians 14:40, 33 Let all things be done decently and in order.
For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the
churches of the saints.

A couple of years ago, John Ritenbaugh gave an announcement that actually shocked me. It was with regard to the noise problems that we had been experiencing on the teleconference hook-up. John suggested, at that time, that it might be our fault—that the problems we were having might have been a punishment for sin. A specific sin, which he mentioned, was the irreverent treatment of the Sabbath by some brethren, and perhaps all of the brethren, specifically during the time of Sabbath services each week.

Hopefully, if you remember that announcement, every member immediately gave thought to their treatment of the Sabbath time, and especially the time during Sabbath services. Hopefully, every member who heard that thought about their own behavior and the behavior of their children on the Sabbath, and whatever shortcomings they recognized, that they were able to make the necessary changes.

I gave this split sermon that I am giving today as a sermonette in Victoria and Portland, and I also wrote an article on it for the Forerunner in 2000. I apologize for the repetition, but I believe that it bears repeating today. Recently, I do not know whether you have noticed it, but on the hook-up and on the roll call we have been having transmission problems.

We have had bad line noise here in Victoria and in Portland. We have had unpleasant interruptions from the AT&T operator. We have had a member, on an unmuted phone line, bellowing at her children during services. We have had echoes where people have been leaving their speakers on from their computer while they are dialing in for the roll call. These may sound like little things, but it can spoil the whole hook-up. I ask myself, have we been slipping back into an irreverent treatment of God's Sabbath day? Has our behavior, on God's Sabbath day, been questionable?

I would like to review some guidelines with regard to the proper behavior specifically during the Sabbath, but especially at Sabbath services, during the Holy days and the Feast as well. Even if you are not in a group setting for Sabbath services, even if you are "home alone," this still applies to you.

This is not a set of do's and don'ts that we gleaned from some archaic pharisaical church manual. These are just common rules of manners and decorum which the apostle Paul calls

decency and order. These are standards that have been accepted and practiced in God's church for many, many years.

Human nature is something that Mr. Armstrong used to talk about quite a lot. It tends to be forgetful and self justifying. Mr. Armstrong often said that the human nature in us wants to be right, but it does not want to *do* right. He said that it wants to be perceived as doing right. It does not want to be perceived as doing, or being, wrong. Human nature has a quirk amongst God's people that I have noticed over the years. People think that if a certain rule, doctrine, or standard is not reviewed from the pulpit frequently they tend to assume that it is no longer in force.

Most of the brethren years ago met in congregations of multiple hundreds. In many ways we think of those as the "golden years." Even here, in Victoria, we had three hundred and eighteen brethren back in the 80's. We met in large congregations and we accepted the church standards without complaint. In effect, you might say, the church said to us back in those years, "take it or leave it," and, in most cases, we took it.

We came each week to services "tubbed and scrubbed," dressed in our Sabbath best. We knew the regular format for church services. We knew exactly when to fellowship, when to be quiet, when to stand up, when to sit down, when to sing, when to expect a sermonette, announcements and a sermon. On the Holy days, we accepted the fact that there were going to be two services, and we prepared for them. Perhaps we had a potluck, or some of the brethren went out for lunch. We had a Holy day offering and we had special music.

Today, our local congregations are down to a very small level—the 20's, 30's and teens. Many of our scattered groups are much fewer and may telephone in from their living rooms or their basements. That is the best that they can do because they are many miles away from other members. The Church of the Great God makes no apology for maintaining the church of God format and standards that we have used and accepted for many years. If we are not careful, our small group size can become an excuse for a lack of formality and a lack of respect for our Great God. A small group size, and even if you are on your own, is no excuse whatsoever for improper manners, improper appearance, and for improper behavior on God's Sabbath day.

Let me ask you a question. If the President of the United States came to your Sabbath service, or, here in Canada, if the Queen of England came to our Sabbath service, how would you dress? How would you appear before the Queen or the President? How would you behave in their presence? Queen Victoria sometimes went to the homes of the "common people" and visited them. Those people, if they knew that she was coming, put on their very best.

Matthew 18:20 For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

Jesus Christ is present at our church services. Can I ask you a question? "Is the Son of God less important than President Bush or Queen Elizabeth?" I do not think so.

Our living rooms and our humble meeting halls are not magnificent temples, cathedrals or palaces, but Jesus said that He would be in attendance with us where two or three of His people

are gathered together. And, I am sure that He is right there even if you are on your own.

Since the scattering of the church there has been some erosion of respect for the longstanding Bible-based standards, traditions and customs of God's church. There has been an erosion of respect for the proper formality of services. Somebody might come back and say, "Well, the Bible does not say that I must go by these standards". They might say, "The Bible does not say that we must use the traditional church service format," or, "The Bible does not say that we should have two services on the Holy days". All proper decisions and right decisions of the ministry are supported by God.

Matthew 16:18-19 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Did Jesus only give that authority to Peter? No. He repeats it later:

Matthew 18:1,18 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

We can extend that from the disciples, who were the very core of the early church, to the leaders in God's church today. So, today's church standards are bound in earth and in heaven. The church format we set up many years ago, but these standards are not harsh, not unreasonable, and not difficult to follow. Nobody is asking you to wear old fashioned styles, something like the 18th and 19th Century styles that the Amish and the Hutterite communities like to do.

Let me take another approach to this. If I were to come to your house, and you politely asked me to take off my shoes to keep your carpets clean—what if I refused because of my own selfish preference and I said to you, "The Bible does not say that I must take off my shoes when visiting fellow brethren."? Of course, you would be justified to tell me that "these are the rules and standards of my house, and if you are not willing to abide by them, do not bother coming."

We want people to come to our services, but we want people to come to services who want to be here. We want them to fellowship with us in peace, and not in an argumentative way. We want people to come to Sabbath services who will accept and practice the standards that are extant here in the Church of the Great God.

The ministers and the deacons in God's church are not policemen, and they have no desire whatsoever to police everything that you do. However, we do have a very stern responsibility from God to maintain this peace, decorum, decency and order at God's Sabbath services and other church events. At home, standards might vary regarding proper Sabbath conduct, but during services, and before and after, we must err on the side of decorum, peace, quiet, decency and order. We come together each Sabbath day and on God's Holy days to worship

God, to learn from Him, and to fellowship together with an attitude of God's way of give.

With all that in mind, I would like to briefly give you twelve points for proper behavior at Sabbath services. We could add more into these.

1. Plan to be at every service. Do not miss services for trivial reasons. Of course, we do not want you to come if you are sick. Again, someone might come and say, "Well the Bible does not say that I must be there at every service." But, the Bible *does* say this:

Hebrews 10:24-25 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

You cannot consider one another if you are not there. We cannot exhort one another if we are not there.—"So much the more as you see the Day approaching." Do we have to be at services? We could hear the sermon later by getting a tape, or we could listen on the internet. That specific Sabbath maybe you needed more than the sermon. Maybe you needed the sermonette that was being given locally.

Maybe you needed the fellowship. Maybe you needed to give to others, or to exhort others, or maybe you needed to sing those hymns and to learn the words of them, and to be inspired by those words. Maybe you needed something in the announcements. Try and be there at every service. When you are planning your Sabbath schedule each week, try and leave a little time margin for unexpected emergencies, traffic or whatever might go wrong. Try to be not just on time for services, but try and get there just a little bit earlier.

2. Listen! Be attentive, and listen to the sermonette and the sermon. Again, we attend Sabbath services to learn from God, and to learn about God. Jesus Christ already said that He would be present with His brothers and sisters when we gather together. He will inspire the teaching through His Holy Spirit.

I am not sure whether this is an accurate number, but we have at least twenty eight different speakers, and that makes things very interesting. All of those speakers try to make their messages interesting, informative and diverse, and there is really something for everybody there. Listen and hang on to the words. Listen to the announcements. Note any changes in times and locations for Sabbath services, or any other church activities. Maybe you can pass on any changes to the brethren who are not in attendance because of sickness. Please listen to the prayer requests. We have brethren in different parts of the world who are in dire straits, and they really need our prayers.

James 5:16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

If you do not know who is sick, how can you pray for them? God listens to those prayers of compassion and intercession for our brothers and sisters.

On another note here, in a group Sabbath service setting and at the Feast, try and choose a seat that is close to the front and then you will be less likely to be distracted by children or any other noise. Leave the back seats for those with for parents with young children and others that may have some special needs. If interruptions take place, the front is the best place to be able to concentrate on what is being said.

3. Do not interrupt others. Do not be the individual or do not let your family initiate or permit any disturbance to other brethren. Do not shuffle. Prepare your books and your children's activities before services, not during the first hymn or the beginning of the sermonette. It is very distracting for the song leader and the sermonette man, and it is rude and disrespectful as well. At the end of Sabbath services do not start putting your books away when the speaker says, "And for my final scripture...."

When you are at home on the hook-up, if you do not have a speaker phone with a mute button (they are not very expensive), go out and buy one. We have had situations where the mute facility has not worked or we have not pressed the right button and then all kinds of noise comes across the line. So, pick up a little speaker phone with a mute button, and use that mute button. If you are streaming on the internet, and if you are going to dial in for the roll call, do that—but please make sure that you turn off your computer speakers, otherwise that causes a tremendous echo through the phone line.

4. Sing! Why are some of us ashamed of singing songs of worship to the King of the universe? There is nothing to be ashamed of. It is an affront to our Great God to mumble the words of the songs or, even worse, to stand there with our lips tightly closed. The scriptures encourage us to sing praises to God.

Psalms 95:1-2 Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.

Heartily hymn singing is spiritually good, both for us and for God as well. When we sing heartily, you can think of it as an enjoyable offering to

God the Father and to Jesus Christ. When you are singing those hymns think about the words; otherwise, those hymns just become vain repetitions, and Jesus Christ warns us about that. Sing to God with gusto and do not be ashamed at all.

5. Keep the hall tidy. Make sure that the children pick up papers and any mess that they have made on the floor or the seats. It is your parental duty, and it is very helpful to those that have to do the tidying up at the end.

6. Teach your children to stay quiet during services.

Proverbs 22:6 Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.

We can start training our children when they are little tots and they will get used to that. And, as they grow older, they will respect God's Sabbath and they will respect God's services. Parents of little children can prepare them daily, not just on the Sabbath. They can prepare them at home for quiet Sabbath service behavior. It is not a bad idea to take the little ones to the restroom ten minutes before the start of services. Do not let them wander in and out of the hall once services have started. This is unnecessary, in most case, unless they have bladder problems, and it is distracting and annoying for other members.

7. Try to time the baby's nap for during the service period. We used to do something called "blanket training." Most of the members with children remember that. It is something that you do at home every day. It is really not asking the impossible. Many church parents have been in the same circumstance that you young parents are now. We have been there, done that, and it can be done. Training the children for a quiet two hours in services is not cruel and unusual punishment. As a parent you will save yourself a lot of in and out during services.

8. Appropriate toys and activities. Please do not bring rattles or other noisy toys to services. Parents might think that it is quite cute and quite humorous if the baby is down there on the floor squeaking his rubber ducky, but others, I can assure you, certainly will not appreciate it. Please do not allow your older children to repeatedly click their pens, tear pages out of books, or crumple paper. I am not being picky here, but these are things that I have suffered through at the Feast and it really can be distracting.

If your children can read they should be able to follow the messages to a certain extent and they should, at quite an early age, be able to look

up scriptures. I am not going to set an age for that is up to you. If they are unable to do so and you want to bring other books, please bring appropriate books for God's Holy Sabbath day. Do not let them bring wizard books, demon books, ghost stories, or violent stories. I have seen these at services. Do not let them bring detective or space adventures to services. This is God's Sabbath. It is God's day. It is God's service, and we need to keep Satan out. We probably should not have some of these books in our houses at all.

9. Use the mother's room and use it properly. If your child cries or makes any other loud or annoying noise, take him out right away. Please do not try to tough it out with the thought he will soon quiet down and fall asleep. Then, ten or fifteen minutes go by and he is still making noise. Please be considerate and spare a thought for the other members who are trying to listen to the message.

The mother's room is for feeding babies and for quieting the babies and the older children too. It is not a play area. Please do not let your children run around or play loudly in there. There might be other parents in there and, while one mother is trying to get her baby quieted down, other children running around are going to wake the babies and disturb them.

10. Discipline if necessary; but, if you need to do that, please go to a totally private place. Please do not discipline in the restroom in a public building, like a hotel. That is not a private place.

11. Do not let your children wander outside the hall during services, either alone or in groups. This is especially important for the safety of younger children, but it applies to the teens too. Your children belong in the meeting hall with you. This rule is for the proper respect and worship to God. It is for the good example to the community of the church, and for the comfort and peace of mind of all members.

12. Do not let your children sit unsupervised. This includes teens and pre-teens. The length of the Sabbath service period is only two hours long. This is not an unreasonably long time, and during that time it is not appropriate to pass notes, whisper, or giggle. There is lots of time to fellowship with your friends before and after services. I hate to say it but there are parents who have seemed to have given up training their children, and they have actually trained themselves to tune out the noise and misbehavior of their own children. It is an awful thing to be around a family where the children are making noise and the parents are sitting there as though nothing is going on. If you have another member's child sitting with you, it is your responsibility to make sure

that they behave properly and quietly.

Generally with regard to children, we need to make an extra effort to teach our children to refrain from disrespecting God on His Sabbath and from disturbing those who desire to worship God as He commands.

This is not limited to children; it goes for adults as well. We must examine our own standards and behavior at Sabbath services and make any necessary adjustments.

Let us go back to where we started. Please burn these words into your memory and practice them.

I Corinthians 14:40 Let all things be done decently and in order.