

CHURCH *of* GOD

A WORLDWIDE ASSOCIATION, INC.

EATING IN A RESTAURANT ON THE SABBATH

Study Paper

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INTRODUCTION

There is no question that the Sabbath is a holy day, and God's command to faithfully respect the holiness of the Sabbath serves as the spiritual foundation for our understanding of how to observe the Sabbath. It is important to us—and to God—that we honor Him in its observance. Instead of providing a detailed list of acceptable and unacceptable actions, God has chosen to reveal the basic principles of Sabbath observance that can be consistently applied as we encounter new situations and opportunities. He has left it to us to apply proper judgment—to have our senses exercised to discern both good and evil (Hebrews 5:14)—based upon the instructions and principles He has revealed.

This study paper was prepared by the Doctrine Committee of the Church of God, a Worldwide Association. Its purpose is to provide an explanation of the teaching of the Church on the question of whether it is a sin to eat in a restaurant on the weekly Sabbath or an annual holy day.

This paper offers a thorough study of relevant scriptures and principles and provides a brief historical perspective of our teaching. The conclusion is consistent with previous doctrinal statements: It is not a violation of God's Sabbath command to eat in a restaurant on a Sabbath or annual holy day.

If one decides "for conscience' sake" that he cannot eat in a restaurant on the Sabbath, we would encourage the individual to be true to his conscience. Each should live according to his faith, while promoting peace and harmony in the Church as a whole. There is certainly no command that one must eat in a restaurant on the Sabbath. However, we believe that Scripture supports the Church's historic teaching that it is not improper or sinful to do so.

EATING IN A RESTAURANT ON THE SABBATH

God's concluding act of the creation week was to "sanctify" (Hebrew *qadash*, which means to set apart and treat as sacred) the seventh day as a day of rest and worship. In doing so, God established the seven-day weekly cycle and reserved the seventh day as holy time set aside for His purposes (Genesis 2:1-3). God knew that mankind would require physical rest and rejuvenation on a regular basis, even though He had no such needs.

How we observe the Sabbath—respecting what God made holy—is very important to Him. In Exodus 20:8-11 the command is given to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, which includes refraining from work and worshipping God as the Creator.

God's holy days are listed in Leviticus 23. Verse 3 repeats that the Sabbath is to be a day of rest and adds the instruction that there should be a "holy convocation" (a sacred assembly). The Hebrew word translated "feasts" means an appointed time, place or meeting (*Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*). In other words, there is to be a Sabbath worship service, which provides the opportunity to be instructed and exhorted in our understanding of God's Word, as well as to build relationships with other believers.

God inspired Isaiah to write, "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isaiah 58:13-14). A promise is made to those who properly observe and enjoy the Sabbath—those who, as the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* puts it, "esteem the Sabbath a pleasure because it leads you to God and not a burden because it leads you away from your everyday life."

Although the wording is not specific, Isaiah's admonition in principle prohibits involvement in most forms of entertainment and personal business, which should be done on the other six days of the week.

Ezekiel and other prophets wrote that, among other reasons, ancient Israel lost God's blessings and protection, suffering invasion and enslavement, because they did not hallow, but rather profaned, God's Sabbaths (Ezekiel 20:21-24).

After Jesus' death, the apostle Paul continued meeting with and teaching both Jews and gentiles on the Sabbath (Acts 17:2). The author of the book of Hebrews reminds the readers that a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God (Hebrews 4:9, New Revised Standard Version). The Greek word for "rest" is *sabbatismos*. The majority of scholars agree this means a "Sabbath rest" or "Sabbath observance" (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, revised and edited by Frederick William Danker based on Walter Bauer's work).

The Sabbath is one of the cornerstone doctrines of the Church of God. That the Sabbath is to be observed is an indisputable belief, practice and teaching of the Church.

While the command to observe the Sabbath is clear, God has not chosen to address the details of practical application, instead requiring us to “judge with righteous judgment” based upon the principles He gives. Naturally, believers want guidance on how to keep the Sabbath, because they want to honor God in the way that He deserves and expects.

This paper addresses a specific question about Sabbath observance that surfaces frequently: Is it permissible for a Christian to eat a meal in a restaurant on the Sabbath?

Traditional Church teaching

The teaching and practice of the Church on this subject has been consistent for more than 60 years: It does not violate the Sabbath to eat a meal in a restaurant.

Herbert Armstrong’s belief and practice is well-documented and is important to Church teaching on this matter.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, before there were many Church of God members or local congregations, baptizing teams of ministers traveled across parts of the United States and England in response to requests for counsel and baptism. Often the only options available for housing and food on the Sabbath in many areas were motels and restaurants. Mr. Armstrong often provided the traveling ministers with a little extra money so they could relax and eat a nice meal in a restaurant on the Sabbath.

In 1970 an article titled “*Rejoice in God’s Sabbath!*” was published by the Ambassador College Graduate School of Theology. The following statement appears on page 5 under the heading “*Procuring Food on the Sabbath*”:

In Matthew 12:1-5 Christ clearly showed that it is not wrong to procure food on the Sabbath *if* one is without food and is hungry. If for some reason you are caught away from home on the Sabbath, it is not wrong to eat a meal in a restaurant or cafeteria. Some people living in today’s gigantic metropolises do not have cooking facilities. There would be nothing wrong for such people to buy a meal on the Sabbath.

Mr. Armstrong addressed this question in a Bible study in Pasadena, California, on Oct. 23, 1982, on the topic of how to keep the Sabbath, stating:

Now if you go out to a restaurant on the Sabbath, that restaurant is going to be there and that food is going to be prepared whether you go or not and the other people are going to be working anyway. They don’t keep the Sabbath. They pay no attention to that. Now I had never thought until this evening when the question was brought up to me about whether it’s wrong to go to a restaurant to eat. I know when I travel, I have to do it or do without. And so I do.

The 32-lesson *Ambassador College Bible Correspondence Course* (question 3, p. 14, 1985) affirms that Jesus showed in Matthew 12:1-8 and Mark 2:27 that it is permissible to obtain food on the Sabbath if one is hungry. (This passage is explained in more detail in this study paper.)

In 1988, two years after Herbert Armstrong's death, the Letter Answering Department (LAD) of the Worldwide Church of God published the following letter to answer the question:

Dear Friend:

Thank you for your question concerning whether it is proper to eat in a restaurant on the Sabbath.

The Church has long taught that it is not wrong to eat out on the weekly Sabbath occasionally or on the annual Holy Days, depending upon one's circumstances and preferences.

Those waiters, waitresses, chefs, and the like, who may serve in a restaurant, are not our "servants" in the way described in the Fourth commandment. They are the employees of the owner of the restaurant. They would be working regardless of whether or not we ate there. God does not hold us responsible for their working on the Sabbath just because we use their services—unless we were the only ones who ever ate in that restaurant on the Sabbath. Obviously, we make up a very small portion of the customers served in restaurants on the Sabbath or Holy Days.

Further, eating out occasionally on the Sabbath can enhance spiritual fellowship with brethren and allow family members more time to be with one another.

Both the *Correspondence Course* and LAD letter clearly indicate that the Church has followed a consistent policy on this question throughout the past several decades.

Building on the foundation of the above-cited scriptures and precedents, this paper analyzes biblical examples and principles to review the Church's long-established teaching that it is permissible to eat in a restaurant on the Sabbath. This paper also addresses in more detail a number of questions concerning the Church's teaching:

- When we eat in a restaurant, are we causing others to work for us and thereby causing them to break the Sabbath?
- Does Nehemiah's strict Sabbath observance teach the principle that a person should not eat in a restaurant on the Sabbath?
- What do we learn from Jesus' explanation of the disciples eating from the grain field on the Sabbath and David eating showbread on the Sabbath?
- Does the instruction to Israel to not build a fire on the Sabbath have anything to do with our preparation of food on the Sabbath?
- What is the "preparation day," and what does it have to do with our Sabbath observance?

Do we cause others to break the Sabbath?

Central to the issue is the question of whether by eating in a restaurant a Christian causes others to break the Sabbath command.

Exodus 20:8-11 states that no one should work or be required to work on the Sabbath. God gave mankind six days to work (verse 9), but the seventh is a day of worship and rest. "In it you shall

do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates” (verse 10).

The application of the command in our time is straightforward. Everyone who is part of the household of a believer is to refrain from work. Parents are not to require their children to work on the Sabbath. Business owners who observe the Sabbath are not to require their employees (“your male servant nor your female servant”) to work for them on the Sabbath.

But notice that the command deals with those over whom the head of a household or business has control. As children in the household grow older, they must eventually decide for themselves whether they will keep the Sabbath—as must all adults.

The point is that employees of a restaurant in which a member may eat on the Sabbath are not part of the member’s household. The Church member has no control over the decision of another person to work on the Sabbath. Whether a Church member eats in a restaurant has nothing to do with the employee’s decision to work. The restaurant will be open on the Sabbath and the employees will be working whether or not the members eat at the establishment.

Do others “work” for us on the Sabbath?

In today’s world our lives are so interconnected and interdependent that it is impossible to avoid relying on people who work on the Sabbath. One would have to almost totally withdraw from the world. No one is expected to do that.

Paul makes a clear statement in 1 Corinthians 5 that in society there will be regular contact with those who have chosen to live apart from God’s laws: “I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world” (1 Corinthians 5:9-10).

Christians must choose to obey God while living in a disobedient world. God holds Christians responsible for the choices they make, but He does not hold them responsible for the choices others make.

Virtually everyone relies on utilities provided to their homes: water, electricity, natural gas, telephone, Internet service—all provided by people who work on the Sabbath to produce and deliver these resources. Many Christians have a newspaper delivered (much of it composed and printed on Friday evening), and in some communities refuse is collected on the Sabbath. Those who drive to Sabbath services are likely to encounter law enforcement, traffic directors or toll collectors. If they attend in a crowded inner city, they may have to use a subway, bus or taxi or pay a parking attendant.

As part of Sabbath observance, believers are to assemble together on the Sabbath for a holy convocation. In today’s world, that involves travel and renting of halls. In many cases the congregation is required to pay a janitor or custodian to be on duty during the rental time, in addition to using electricity for lighting, sound equipment and heat or air conditioning.

It is virtually impossible to live in our own homes or provide for the needs of a congregation on the Sabbath without some expenditure of funds and benefiting from the efforts of those who work on the Sabbath.

Summary—do others “work” for us?

If a Christian eats a meal in a restaurant on the Sabbath, the staff is no more working specifically for him or her than are utility workers, bus drivers or parking attendants. The restaurant management hires employees to serve the customers; the staff is not employed by the customer. The customer does not have authority to hire or fire or any of the other powers an employer has over employees. Similarly, the custodian or janitor is the employee of the establishment rented for Sabbath services.

If people choose to work on the Sabbath, the amount of work performed is irrelevant. For example, a food server is not closer to observing the Sabbath if he serves only 36 customers as opposed to 40. In that sense, there are no degrees of keeping or breaking the Sabbath.

To suggest that a food server is the employee of a customer would logically lead to the conclusion that those who deliver newspapers, pick up trash on the Sabbath, work at the water plants or work at the power plants producing electricity are also employees of the consumer. If such individuals are truly our servants in the biblical sense of that word, it would be hypocritical for a Christian to use *any* goods, utilities or services on the Sabbath or a holy day. To be consistent, Sabbath observance would require the believer not to use any utilities or services of any kind on the Sabbath.

Therefore, if a Christian eats a meal in a restaurant on the Sabbath or a holy day, he is not forcing or requiring a person to break the Sabbath. Those who are blinded to the truth of the Sabbath are not being held to the same degree of accountability on that issue at this time. On these issues, judgment is on the house of God (1 Peter 4:17).

When members of the Church of God go to an area to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, most must rent lodging to stay in for the time they're there, including the Sabbaths and holy days. The establishments must add extra help to serve the members during the Feast—including on the Sabbath and holy days. The presence of members requires a number of people to be on duty and to do more work on these days than they normally would. However, none of this causes those people to become Sabbath-breakers! The workers would either be on duty or they would be doing some non-Sabbath/holy day-type activity anyway.

Three times a year the faithful Israelite was commanded to go where God placed His name and keep the feasts. He saved the Festival tithe for this purpose. Multiple thousands kept these feasts in Jerusalem, some coming from very distant lands. If the distance was too far for the Israelite to transport the tithes of his crops and animals, he was allowed to convert that into money and take the money to spend on the observance of God's feasts. Acts 2 describes how people came from faraway nations to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. Joachim Jeremias describes the huge sums of tithe that came into Jerusalem to be spent on food, drink, lodging and gifts during these festivals (*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 1975, p. 102). It seems very likely that some of this was spent on Sabbaths and holy days.

Christ sent the 12 into all the world to preach first to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:6) and then to the gentiles. Is one to believe that in their distant travels they never rented a room or purchased a meal at the inn on any Sabbath or holy day?

Example from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah

Two passages in Nehemiah specifically refer to buying and selling on a Sabbath. Some have understood Nehemiah’s instructions to the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem following their captivity in Babylon as precedent for forbidding eating in a restaurant on the Sabbath. That is an inaccurate conclusion, based on an attempt to equate widely differing circumstances.

More than a century after the house of Israel had been taken captive by Assyria, God used the Babylonians to punish Judah for their descent into idolatry and Sabbath-breaking. Jeremiah had been inspired to show that this time of punishment would last for 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11-12). Upon the fall of Babylon to the Medo-Persian Empire in 539 B.C., Cyrus the Great allowed a number of the Jews to return to the ancient land of Judah to rebuild the temple and city of Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4).

Around 80 years later, after much persecution from their enemies and difficulty in the rebuilding of the temple, Ezra came to Jerusalem with a number of others to move things forward in the rebuilding of the city and its walls. He had the backing of the Persian king, Artaxerxes. Arriving from Babylon in the year 457 B.C., he found his people turning away from the laws of God. Ezra was a priest and an expert in God’s law. He exhorted the Jews to put away their foreign wives (who were influencing their Jewish husbands to participate in pagan religious practices) and return to the laws of God. Their repentance was shallow and short-lived.

After another 12 years had passed, Nehemiah, who lived in Babylon and served King Artaxerxes as cupbearer (butler or servant), heard of the sad condition of the Jewish people in Judah and asked the king for permission to visit his people and complete the work on the walls surrounding Jerusalem. The king not only gave him permission but appointed him governor of the land of Judah with authority to deal with the problems confronting the Jewish people.

After Nehemiah’s crew finished the wall around Jerusalem, Ezra led the returnees in a celebration of the fall holy days (Nehemiah 8) and then summarized a history of their people’s erratic faith in obeying God. The leaders entered a covenant to obey and serve God faithfully in the future (Nehemiah 9:38).

The covenant included a pledge of obedience to the divine law, to forgo marriages with the heathen, keep the seventh-year land Sabbath, forgive the debts of their brothers and discontinue business transactions on the weekly and annual holy days (Nehemiah 10:29-39).

Regarding a stricter observance of the Sabbath, Nehemiah 10:31 reads: “If the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain [“victuals,” King James Version] to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day.”

The Hebrew word for “wares” is *maqqachah*, which primarily refers to things taken through purchase. See *Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* (1979). *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (2003) states that Nehemiah 10:31 is the only place in the Old Testament that this word is used and states that it means “wares” or “their wares.”

Verse 31 of Nehemiah 10 also speaks of grain or victuals. The Hebrew word here is *sheber* and means grain. Its parent noun is related to *shabar*, meaning “to break,” which may be an analogy of grain that is threshed (broken).

Clearly Nehemiah 10:31 is referring to items sold in a market—merchandise and containers of grain. It is clear that both Jews and foreign merchants were bringing their crops and merchandise to Jerusalem to sell to the Jewish residents on the Sabbath and holy days. *This is a critical point:* The Sabbath had become a major market day to buy and sell their merchandise.

Nothing is said here about the purchasing of a meal on the Sabbath.

Sometime later Nehemiah returned from a trip to visit the king of Persia and found that many of the people had violated their agreement. He found them working in the fields, harvesting and threshing their wheat, gathering and treading grapes on the Sabbath. They would then bring this merchandise into Jerusalem to sell, carrying on their daily business ventures on the Sabbath. Like before, they were again using the Sabbath as a major market day.

They were motivated by greed, the desire to make money on the Sabbath. Also, some were intermarrying with their pagan neighbors. Nehemiah, having authority as governor, punished them. He assigned guards (to work on the Sabbath) to enforce his order that the markets remain closed (Nehemiah 13:15-25).

The “treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves” was for the purpose of selling those items along with the other merchandise, as the last part of verse 15 shows. Much more than food was being sold here, as verses 16 and 20 indicate. This was clearly a full-fledged oriental market with merchants hawking clothing, jewelry and all kinds of goods; haggling prices with the crowds of shoppers; and creating the kind of tumult that characterized all such markets. The holiness of the Sabbath was completely lost in the chaos. Nehemiah was angry and shut down their markets. *This is a crucial point:* Their circumstances were not the purchasing of a meal in a restaurant.

If one feels Nehemiah’s example pertaining to Sabbath observance should be followed exactly today, should not one also feel obligated to follow Nehemiah’s actions on the other things he did here?

Are Christians to threaten outsiders who do business on the Sabbath with physical violence, forcing them to obey God? Of course not! It is obvious that Christians can’t and shouldn’t do all that Nehemiah did, which only further illustrates the uniqueness of the circumstances of his day.

Should Christians arm themselves with weapons, as Ezra and Nehemiah did? Some of these actions do not apply directly to Sabbath observance, but they demonstrate how one must be careful in drawing principles from some of the things done under the Old Covenant or in Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s time as specific guidelines on how to keep God’s Sabbath and holy days today.

Not everything in Nehemiah or the Old Covenant was intended as an exact set of guidelines for Christian conduct today. For example, in Exodus 16:29 the Israelites were told to not go out of their places on the Sabbath.

Yes, God's laws are to be kept. The Sabbath is holy; we should marry within the faith, tithe, etc. But a believer does not stone his neighbors who commit adultery and/or break the Sabbath. Nor do believers run them out of the subdivision if they don't fast on the Day of Atonement. Believers don't take branches from trees and build booths at the Feast of Tabernacles, nor require people to separate who have married outside the faith or pull out their hair.

Nehemiah was in a unique position. The merchants in Nehemiah's time were *knowingly* defying the Sabbath, and Nehemiah *had the authority to enforce* Sabbath and holy day observance. His actions are not intended as an exact set of guidelines for Christian conduct today. In our world a Christian is under the authority of the civil government and cannot *enforce* any of God's laws. Even though we observe the Sabbath and holy days, we cannot require others to do so.

As a footnote, it is worth noting that even Nehemiah's zeal and somewhat extreme measures to move the Jewish remnant back to the ways of the true God had little lasting effect.

Summary—example from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah

Christians today are a minority group seeking to live righteously in a world that rejects most of the laws of God, especially the Sabbath. In our time the Church is widely scattered, which often requires traveling many miles on the Sabbath to attend services. Ministers and members alike must drive long distances, which could result in the need to purchase fuel on the Sabbath, which, again, would require an attendant to be available at the gas station.

The key to using good judgment about how to keep the Sabbath lies in understanding the basic principles of the Sabbath law, not by taking specific instructions from Old Testament passages that relate to very different and even unique situations.

Nehemiah's telling Jewish merchants that they were disobeying God to prepare and sell merchandise on the Sabbath gives us a lesson for today. It illustrates the importance of keeping the Sabbath holy by not treating it as an ordinary day for marketing or shopping. The nation was being restored to the worship of the true God after having been in captivity. The Sabbath and the festivals were the law of the land; Nehemiah was the duly constituted governor whose responsibilities included enforcing these laws. These factors do not exist today. The issues Nehemiah dealt with do not equate to the question of eating a meal in a restaurant on the Sabbath.

Teachings of Jesus

In Matthew 12:1-8 the Pharisees accused Jesus of allowing His disciples to violate the Sabbath when they were hungry and gathered grain to eat. By citing two scriptural examples, Jesus explained that they had not broken the Sabbath command. These passages illustrate the need to apply godly judgment about what should and should not be done on the Sabbath—principles that can be applied to deciding whether to eat in a restaurant on the Sabbath.

The disciples in the grain field

Matthew 12:1-2 says, "At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, 'Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!'"

What the disciples did violated the Pharisees' teaching, but their actions did not violate the law of God. The Pharisees' tradition defined what Jesus' disciples did as "harvesting and threshing grain" on the Sabbath when, in fact, they were only gathering a small amount to eat. It is another example of Jewish oral traditions conflicting with God's intentions (compare Mark 7:1-13).

Interestingly, Jesus did not directly answer the Pharisees' accusation but, instead, illustrated two greater principles. First, He emphasized the importance of applying God's commands based on love and mercy rather than judgment and condemnation. Second, Christ illustrated the importance of learning to make appropriate judgments based on Scripture.

The literal meaning of the word "work" (in Hebrew and in English) includes any level of exertion. It isn't possible to live through the Sabbath or any other day without putting forth some kind of exertion or effort. Technically, there was some "work" involved in stripping the grain from the stalk, rubbing it in their hands to remove the husks and then blowing away the chaff so they could eat the grain. The narrow, technical argument behind the Pharisaical tradition was that stripping the grain was harvesting, rubbing it was threshing, and blowing away the chaff was winnowing. But, according to Jesus, this small amount of effort required to address their hunger was not a sin. His comments implied that the Pharisees' judgment was wrong.

The Jewish religion in Jesus' day had redefined the intent of the Fourth Commandment so poorly that, by their definition, He was guilty of working when He healed on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14). Jesus cited instances where the Pharisees themselves had judged that physical effort was allowed on the Sabbath: watering cattle (Luke 13:15), rescuing an ox that had fallen into a ditch (Luke 14:5) and circumcision (John 7:22). There is no scriptural exception to the prohibition of work on the Sabbath that specifically allowed these efforts, but Jesus did not disagree with their judgment. He agreed that certain kinds of effort were permissible within the command to not work on the Sabbath—including the gathering of food when hungry. Yet He showed that their judgments were inconsistent.

Jesus illustrated that "effort" on the Sabbath should be understood within a greater context of God's law. In their self-righteousness, pride and hypocrisy the Pharisees misapplied God's law by their rule that condemned the kind of picking of grain that the disciples did.

The same account is recorded in Mark 2:23-28. In verse 27 Jesus stated that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. That is, the Sabbath was created to benefit mankind, not to be a day that people "serve" by being saddled with unnecessary rules and limitations.

Jesus invoked His authority, asserting as Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28) that His disciples were guiltless [without sin] in the picking of grain on the Sabbath. He wasn't forgiving them, for they hadn't sinned. Nor was He allowing them to break the Sabbath because they were hungry. They were *guiltless*, Jesus said (Matthew 12:7). They had not violated the Sabbath command.

Jesus would undoubtedly have guided the disciples differently or made other provisions if picking and eating the grain were a sin. Jesus could have had them prepare a lunch because it was going to be a long day. Or His disciples, healthy young men, could easily have missed a meal without risk of starvation. He had miraculously fed 5,000—surely He could have fed 12. But instead, when they became hungry, Jesus allowed them to gather some grain from the field.

David and the showbread

When the Pharisees condemned the disciples for doing so, Jesus' response was, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?" (verses 3-4)?

Why did Jesus use the example of David and his men? One reason could be that the Pharisees would have known fresh showbread was placed in the tabernacle and the priests ate the old showbread on the Sabbath. But does Jesus' statement imply that what David did was sinful? Is the lesson here that the disciples had indeed broken the Sabbath, but Jesus allowed it because they were hungry?

Notice Leviticus 24:8-9: "Every Sabbath he [the high priest] shall set it in order before the LORD continually, being taken from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy to him from the offerings of the LORD made by fire, by a perpetual statute."

The Levites were responsible for preparing the showbread each Sabbath: "And some of their brethren of the sons of the Kohathites were in charge of preparing the showbread for every Sabbath" (1 Chronicles 9:32).

Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament states, "Finally, to some of the Kohathites was committed the preparation of the shew-bread, which required to be laid on the table fresh every Sabbath" (2006, comments on 1 Chronicles 9:32).

Unger's Bible Dictionary adds that the loaves of showbread "were renewed every Sabbath to be eaten by the priest exclusively (and that in the sanctuary only), and were then replaced by fresh loaves (1 Sam.21:6), which had been prepared overnight by the Levites" (1967, p. 1063, "The table of showbread").

The placing of "hot bread" in its place could only occur on the Sabbath, and it was to be eaten on the Sabbath.

According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, "The cakes themselves were eaten by the priests on every Sabbath day, as being among the 'most holy' sacrifices" (1947, vol. 4, p. 2767, Shewbread).

In his book *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Jesus Christ*, Alfred Edersheim states, "The shewbread was eaten during the Sabbath, and in the Temple itself, but only by such priests as were in a state of Levitical purity" (p. 157, ch. 9 under the heading "The showbread itself").

David asked Ahimelech, the high priest, for five loaves of bread, or whatever could be found (1 Samuel 21:3). Then notice how the priest answered David: "There is no common bread on hand; but there is holy bread" (verse 4). The old bread, according to the law, could only be eaten by the priests; but in this case, Ahimelech had inquired of the Lord what he should do, and then he gave the bread to David and his men (1 Samuel 22:10). What was eventually given to David and his men was the old showbread. "So the priest gave him holy bread; for there was no bread there but

the showbread which had been taken from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread in its place on the day when it was taken away” (1 Samuel 21:6).

An argument could be made that David and his men had no right to the showbread. But the high priest, after inquiring God’s will, used his judgment to make the decision that the circumstances warranted giving the old showbread to David and his men. Yet Christ’s reference to this as an example of acceptable Sabbath behavior shows that He condemned neither the high priest nor David for this unusual act.

This is a critical point: Christ took this example from God’s law, not from the oral traditions, showing that when the need for food arises on the Sabbath, there are some allowances for meeting that need that do not violate God’s law.

Jesus continued with another scriptural example: “Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple” (Matthew 12:5-6). The priests and Levites worked on the Sabbath, performing numerous duties, including the heavy work of slaughtering, cutting up and burning the prescribed sacrifices and offerings and, of course, the replacing of the showbread.

As “Lord of the Sabbath,” Jesus knew full well that the Levites worked on the Sabbath. Was He implying that it is all right for believers to do their regular work or job on the Sabbath? Of course not! The Sabbath commandment covers this plainly. But using this example shows that even righteous servants of God sometimes do what could be argued as “work” on the Sabbath.

The examples Jesus cited should not be taken out of context. He was using them to show the Pharisees the error in their narrow traditions about acceptable Sabbath behavior and the need to apply sound, personal judgment to the obedience of God’s law.

In Matthew 23:23 Jesus made a similar point to the Pharisees. This time they were obsessing over precisely tithing on tiny herbal seeds and leaves while overlooking the intent—the weightier matters of the law (justice, mercy and faith). As with the Sabbath, Jesus upheld obedience to the law; but He emphasized we are to learn the higher principles of justice, mercy and faith. Obedience was not to be based on ritualistic traditions that required little thought or reasoning.

Those traditions took away from the individual’s responsibility to think, reason and come to godly conclusions about matters of obedience that require good judgment. The examples of the disciples in the grain field, David and the showbread, and the priests working in the temple on the Sabbath illustrate the principle that certain types of effort required to eat away from home on the Sabbath are acceptable in the context of the intent of the Sabbath law.

Even so, judgment must be applied. There are times when eating in a restaurant on the Sabbath would be appropriate and conducive to observance of the Sabbath. We should understand that eating in a restaurant is not in itself a violation of Sabbath observance. But it should contribute to and enhance our observance, not detract from it.

The bigger picture

It is significant that most of the examples of Jesus' conduct on the Sabbath are lessons in Sabbath-keeping. Do they not teach us the spirit of the law—how to do good deeds on the Sabbath and how to make the Sabbath a joy without taking away from the holiness of the day?

These examples are instructive to those who seek to meet the challenges of keeping the Sabbath in this contemporary culture.

To illustrate the principle of mercy in eating and healing on the Sabbath, Jesus used several examples of what was practiced in the Jewish culture then that were not specifically addressed in the Old Testament, the Scriptures used by the people at that time.

The feeding of hungry animals on the Sabbath is not specifically addressed in the Old Testament scriptures. Animals can “survive” without eating for 24 hours (see Jonah 3:7). Leading the ox from its stall and drawing water on a Sabbath involves a certain amount of work (Luke 13:15), and pulling an ox from a well on a Sabbath involves work (Luke 14:5, New International Version). But these are acts of mercy and kindness, as well as illustrations of good judgment that are appropriate within the intent of the Sabbath law. Where is it found in the Old Testament that it is permissible to water an animal or lift it out of a well on the Sabbath? Yet those things were not condemned even by the most rigorous Pharisees.

Certainly harvesting was forbidden on God's Sabbaths (Exodus 34:21), yet there was nothing in the Scriptures that prohibited the plucking of grain for a meal on the Sabbath.

What alternatives did the disciples have other than to eat from that which they gathered on the Sabbath? Couldn't they have packed something extra to eat before leaving or just done without until the Sabbath was over? Should Jesus have forewarned them that they would likely be out past lunchtime? Should the disciples have prepared twice as much food on Friday to avoid this scenario? Obviously, there were other alternatives, but they saw no need to take them.

Where can one find that it is allowable for anyone other than the priests to eat the showbread? Yet Christ brought up the example of David doing so in defense of what His disciples did on the Sabbath. Christ did not condemn the actions of the priest in allowing David and his hungry companions to eat the old showbread. He showed it to be an act of kindness, of mercy—and one of acceptable judgment. That is the spirit of God's law. It harmed no one; it showed no disrespect for God. All were guiltless, without sin according to Christ.

Christ's disciples probably could have foregone their snack, just as David and His men probably could have done without if they had not eaten the showbread. Were this not permissible on the Sabbath, Jesus would have brought it to their attention.

The situations believers face in today's world are not exactly the same, so how would Jesus Christ expect us to apply the principle in our Sabbath conduct? If in traveling to a church service one gets sleepy, does he break the spirit of the Sabbath law by stopping to get a cup of coffee?

Would Christ condemn families who lived on opposite ends of a church circuit for sharing a meal on a Sabbath afternoon in a restaurant before returning home? Some say that it is not

necessary or essential to go to a restaurant to eat on the Sabbath. One could make other arrangements or skip eating. Matthew 12 shows the shortsightedness of such an approach.

The ox in the ditch

Some say that eating in a restaurant on the Sabbath should be based on the “ox in the ditch” principle; and therefore, it should only happen occasionally, if at all. What did Jesus mean when He introduced the phrase “ox in the ditch”? This circumstance is mentioned only twice in Scripture. Both times Jesus was speaking of a genuine emergency in the context of healing—neither instance had anything to do with eating.

- Luke 14:3-5: “And Jesus, answering, spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’ But they kept silent. And He took him and healed him, and let him go. Then He answered them, saying, ‘Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?’”
- Matthew 12:10-12: “And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’—that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, ‘What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.’”

In each of these two cases there was an emergency. When the life of the donkey, ox or sheep was in jeopardy, the Pharisees agreed that it was permissible to “work” to set them free.

The Pharisees had ruled that it was legal to take an action on the Sabbath that kept an injury from getting worse, but doing anything to help it heal was considered “work.” Thus it was legal to bind up a cut to stem the bleeding, but pouring wine and oil on the cut to help it heal could not be done until the Sabbath was over. (See William Barclay’s *Daily Study Bible: New Testament*, 2003, notes on Matthew 12:10, and see page 515 of Alfred Edersheim’s *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*.) Jesus publicly rejected their sanctimonious foolishness. In fact, the attitude behind this way of thinking angered Him (Mark 3:5).

Clearly, neither the disciples nor King David and his men were facing an emergency. Yet Jesus explained that they had not sinned in their circumstances.

Is stricter better?

The Pharisees made the mistake of thinking that stricter standards of Sabbath-keeping made them more righteous. Their legalistic approach stands in stark contrast to how Jesus kept the Sabbath, with love and mercy as the foundation of His motivation.

Can one become so literal and strict on a law that another law is violated? As cited earlier (Matthew 12:7; 23:23), Christ spoke of justice, mercy and faith not as a justification to break His law, but to emphasize the spiritual intent of His law of love and mercy.

The Sabbath is one of the 10 Commandments. It is extremely important that we keep it holy. In doing so, we show our love and respect for the Creator God. It is also important that we do not make it a burden by adding restrictions that are not commanded by God.

God warns that no one has authority to add to or take away from His words (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Proverbs 30:6; Revelation 22:18-19). Adding to God's instructions does not make one more righteous. It is just as wrong as being lax in obedience to His laws. In Proverbs 30:5-6 Solomon wrote, "Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar."

Building a fire on the Sabbath

A related question is whether it is permissible to "build a fire" on the Sabbath to warm or prepare a meal.

The only reference to this in Scripture is in Exodus 35:1-3. Does this instruction prohibit the building of a fire on the Sabbath? "These are the words which the LORD has commanded you to do: Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath of rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your dwellings on the Sabbath day."

Are we prohibited from turning on a light, starting a cooking stove or setting a thermostat? Is God more pleased when His people eat cold food and sit in the dark for 24 hours every Sabbath? Are no fires to be built at all, including the spark that ignites the fuel of a gasoline- or diesel-powered vehicle?

Note this statute appears in the context of the instructions for the building of the tabernacle and all its furnishings. Those instructions begin in Exodus 25 and conclude in Exodus 39. The people were asked to bring offerings of cloth, skins and metal to be used in its construction. It was an exciting thing to participate in the building of the tabernacle for their God. But this physical labor was not an excuse to work on the Sabbath. Moses gathered all Israel to remind them that God had given them six days for work, but that the Sabbath was a day of rest (Exodus 35:1-2). Moses reminded them they were not to build a fire for construction purposes on the Sabbath. The verses that follow addressed the contributions of the children of Israel, which included gold, silver and bronze (verse 5).

He then asked those who had skills to volunteer to work with the things that had been contributed for the tabernacle. Bezalel, of the tribe of Judah, is specifically mentioned as having a gift from God in working with the metals donated by the Israelites (verses 30-35). Part of his work would have required a hot fire to melt down the metals to shape into whatever form was needed.

The word "cast" is first mentioned in Exodus 25:12, "And you shall cast four rings of gold." This word is from the Hebrew word *yah-tzak* or *yasaq*. The basic meaning of the word is to pour out a liquid. It is used about 50 times in the Old Testament. About one-fourth of those times refer to the casting or pouring of molten metal.

In the 15 chapters of Exodus that give instructions on the building of the tabernacle, the casting of metals is mentioned a number of times (Exodus 25:12; 26:37; 36:36; 37:3, 13; 38:5, 27). Again, the word means pouring; and here refers to metal that has been melted, heated by a fire. In the middle of these instructions is the command to not build a fire on the Sabbath.

The clear meaning of “fire” in this context is an industrial fire for the purpose of working on the tabernacle on the Sabbath. God was not prohibiting a small fire used to provide warmth or to warm or prepare a meal.

The preparation day

Since the Sabbath is such an important day and one that we are to “keep holy,” it’s clear that we should prepare for it. The commandment tells us to “remember” the Sabbath day, not just to observe it. The word “remember” implies that the Sabbath is central to our lives and is on our minds continually. In a sense we are always preparing for the next Sabbath, although certain preparations can only be made the day before.

The concept of preparing for the Sabbath is introduced when God provided Israel with manna during their time in the wilderness. God instructed them to gather an amount sufficient for each day except on the sixth day, when they were to gather a double portion.

Exodus 16:23-24 states: “Then he said to them, ‘This is what the LORD has said: “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.”’ So they laid it up till morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not stink, nor were there any worms in it.”

Moses instructed the Israelites to gather two days’ worth of manna (verses 23, 25-26). The miraculous proof of the Sabbath was that it was still fresh the next morning (verse 24). Whenever they kept any manna overnight on any other day of the week, it would stink and breed worms (verse 20).

Verse 23 does not clearly state whether the manna for both Friday and the Sabbath were prepared on the sixth day. The word “today” is not in the Hebrew text. They were told to bake and boil what they would and set aside what remained until morning. There is no specific indication whether the manna that was set aside was already prepared. There is no direct command to prepare two days’ worth of manna on the sixth day.

Notice this explanation in the *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* on Exodus 16:22-26:

On the sixth day of the week the quantity yielded was twice as much, viz., two omers for one (one person). When the princes of the congregation informed Moses of this, he said to them, “Let tomorrow be rest (*shabaatown*), a holy Sabbath to the Lord.” They were to bake and boil as much as was needed for the day, and keep what was over for the morrow, for on the Sabbath they would find none in the field. They did this, and what was kept for the Sabbath neither stank nor bred worms.

The Expositor’s Bible Commentary takes a different view, stating, “The seventh day was to be a day of cessation or ‘rest’ (v. 23); therefore, food preparations for the morrow were to be made on the sixth day.”

Exodus 16 does not tell us whether it was required that all food for the Sabbath must be prepared on the sixth day of the week. Certainly, based on principles we have seen in other passages,

heavier meal preparation, when possible, should be done ahead of time to reduce the amount of effort necessary on the Sabbath.

Even though the Sabbath is a day of rest, there is nothing in this account that would lead us to believe light meal preparation or the heating of food on the Sabbath is improper. Thanks to modern kitchen appliances, we can warm or prepare food with much less effort than it would have taken in Israel's time. Food preparation was permitted on the annual holy days (except the Day of Atonement). However, it was limited to "that which everyone must eat," i.e., for that day (see Exodus 12:16).

There is historical evidence of Jewish tradition of special preparations for the Sabbath on the sixth day of the week. Josephus makes reference to the preparation day when he quotes a letter in which Caesar speaks of fair treatment of the Jews: "Caesar Augustus, high priest and tribune of the people ordains thus: ... that the Jews have liberty to their own customs, according to the law of their forefathers ...; and that they be not obliged to go before any judge on the Sabbath day, nor on the day of preparation to it, after the ninth hour" (Josephus, Ant. XVI, vi. 2). A footnote pertaining to this section adds, "This is authentic evidence that the Jews, in the days of Augustus, began to prepare for the celebration of the Sabbath at the ninth hour on Friday." We might conclude, however, that such time allowance may have been simply to avoid detaining a Jew into the Sabbath day.

Over the years, many Church of God members have used the sixth day of the week and the day before an annual holy day for the heavier tasks of preparation.

Even though by tradition, we refer to Friday as the preparation day, there is no scripture that assigns that designation to the sixth day of the week. It is interesting to note that there are only six places in the Bible that mention a "Day of Preparation" or "Preparation Day," and all those refer to preparation before the first holy day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and not the weekly Sabbath. (See: Matthew 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:14, 31, 42.)

Yet out of respect for the Sabbath, many families today prepare much of the food for the Sabbath on Friday. Clothes are ironed, and cars are fueled and prepared for trips to church services. However, there is no scriptural command that states these things can only be done on the sixth day. In today's culture, with both husbands and wives in many families working five days a week, the Sabbath preparation or some Sabbath meals for those families might be quite different. The Sabbath is special and holy time. The day before is not sanctified or set aside as *the* preparation day for the Sabbath. It is a regular work day.

The principle is that we should be so oriented to keeping the Sabbath that we prepare for it. Due to individual circumstances, some may prepare for the Sabbath one or several days in advance. The point is not to create a "semi-holy day" out of the day before the Sabbath, but rather to illustrate that the Sabbath itself is not a day for doing regular work.

Judging others

No two people will keep God's Sabbath in exactly the same way. The command itself is clear enough: "The seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work." But how do we apply the principles of turning "away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, ... not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor

speaking your own words”? Can we observe the Sabbath properly without falling into the Israelites’ trap of violating the basic command or the Pharisees’ pitfall of trying to define exactly and precisely what should or should not be done on the Sabbath?

As mentioned at the outset, God has not chosen to reveal every detail about how we observe the Sabbath. In some areas He provides specific instruction, and in other areas we base our observance on biblical principles. Different cultures and backgrounds affect how people view many aspects of life, including what is viewed as acceptable in our personal service to God.

Paul spoke of Christians who were called into the Church in Rome from different cultures. Some did not believe they should eat meat, and others felt that some days were better or more effective for fasting than other days. Others felt those ideas were spiritually immature. Paul said that some were weak in the faith. No doubt each of these believed the other to be wrong, to be the weak ones.

The apostle Paul shows that while what some were practicing was “doubtful” (Romans 14:1), it was wrong for others to judge them or to create a potential offense (stumbling block). He reminded them not to judge others, but rather to let Christ judge those areas that, to us, might be unclear. Therefore, based on this principle, Christians should not condemn one another with regard to whether or not they eat in restaurants on the Sabbath.

There are certain Sabbath-keeping dynamics that are not specifically addressed in Scripture. Still, God holds us accountable for living our lives according to our individual faith and understanding (Romans 14:22-23) and to refrain from condemning each other over minor differences of belief and practice.

The Church recognizes that there might be some whose consciences would bother them if they were to have a meal in a restaurant on the Sabbath or a holy day. While the Church will continue to make decisions based upon its current understanding, the Church respects the convictions of those who choose not to prepare food or eat out on the Sabbath. No one should ever feel constrained to violate his conscience in this matter.

Conclusion

Three points should be made clear:

1. It is not sinful to eat in a restaurant on the Sabbath.
2. It is not wrong to refrain from eating in a restaurant on the Sabbath.
3. It is wrong for members to judge others for their decision on whether they choose to eat in a restaurant on the Sabbath.

The decision to eat in a restaurant on the Sabbath is a matter of *how* to keep the Sabbath, not *whether* to keep it. There is no disagreement about the Sabbath being holy.

Herbert Armstrong’s teaching and practice on this subject can be traced as far back as the late 1940s, and he consistently taught that eating in a restaurant on the Sabbath was permissible. This subject has been examined by conscientious and capable ministers many times throughout the modern history of the Church, and the conclusion has always been the same.

The Church of God, a Worldwide Association, teaches that it is not a sin to eat in a restaurant on the Sabbath. If members choose to go to a restaurant for food and fellowship on the Sabbath, they are not doing something that Christ would judge as being evil, but that which is acceptable and appropriate.