

Human Reasoning and Dining out on the Sabbath

Several years ago, a frequent visitor of *Blow the Trumpet* provided us with a copy of a letter he received from a leading Church of God organization. The letter addresses the issue of dining out on the Sabbath and was sent to him in response to his question regarding whether this practice was in keeping with the Scriptures. He provided the letter to us because he believed it relied more on human reasoning than Biblical understanding. In reality the letter appeared to be little more than a desperate attempt to justify a practice that TOTALLY contradicts God's law.

Our intent in this article is not to personally attack the author of the letter or the COG he represents (neither of which are identified), but rather to examine the arguments being presented in light of the Biblical record. As you read the letter ask yourself if it honestly reflects the wisdom of the Lord of the Sabbath or, is it just another stream of logic bent on proving something found nowhere in God's word. We suggest you read its arguments on your knees and sincerely ask the Great God of heaven if this is how He intended His law to be understood? In other words imagine this argument being presented before God Himself for His judgment. After all, it is His wisdom that should be sought.

Although the letter addressed other issues, we only included the portion that pertains to dining out on the Sabbath. We then divided it into segments with each segment addressing a certain point. At the conclusion of each point we have posted our response.

The Letter: Part I

THE CHURCH OF GOD
Address Withheld

Dear Sir (Name withheld),

You also asked about going to restaurants on the Sabbath. The subject of whether or not it is appropriate to dine out on the Sabbath is one that has confused many of God's people. In their sincere desire to please God, some seek specific guidelines of "do's and don'ts" on this and other matters. Remember, God's Way is one of balance. True Christianity is not "yardstick Christianity." Concerning the matter of eating at restaurants on the Sabbath, please understand that it is fine to do so—but again, in balance. Just don't overdo it. Unfortunately, there are various "independent ministries" who complicate this issue, advocating the avoidance of restaurants on the Sabbath and Holy Days. Egregiously "straining at gnats," such "teachers" attempt to bind Pharisaical codes of conduct on those who would accept their interpretations of Scripture and follow them, in areas where the Bible teaches no such thing.

Our Response:

One of the most frequent accusations leveled against those who refuse to dine out on the Sabbath is that such people practice "yardstick Christianity." Some leaders in God's Church have even referred to this practice as "straightjacket Christianity." Those who advance this argument contend that these "yardstick Christians" create a strict list of "do's" and "don'ts" to regulate their spiritual lives, much the

same as the Pharisees did during Jesus' time. Furthermore, they are often accused of making a great deal out of small points such as whether it is acceptable with God for His people to dine out on the Sabbath. In other words, they "strain at gnats."

But is this true? Are those who refrain from going to restaurants on the Sabbath or holy days being pharisaical? Are they simply trying to do God one better when it comes to righteousness? Or, are these believers diligently striving to honor God and His Sabbath law? Remember that the Protestant world also hurls the same accusation at God's Church today. They argue that keeping the Sabbath at all is nothing but legalism and reflects a pharisaical mindset. Why shouldn't we believe them too?

The Biblical Record

When one reads God's word regarding the Sabbath, there appears to be a great deal said regarding what He desires of His people. One might even call His instructions a list of "do's and don'ts." The following are just a few examples.

1. Don't work (Ex. 20: 8, Dt. 5:13-4)
2. Don't compel servants to labor on your behalf (Ex. 20:10, Dt. 5:14-5)
3. Don't compel strangers to labor on your behalf. (Ex. 20:10, Dt. 5:14-5)
4. Don't compel your livestock to labor (Dt. 5:14)
5. Don't compel your family to labor (Ex. 20:10, Dt. 5:14-5)
6. Don't prepare meals (Ex. 16:23-5)
7. Don't go outside your place (Ex. 16:29)
8. Don't gather your daily food (Ex. 16:22-3)
9. Don't engage in business (Neh.10:31, 13:15-21)
10. Don't do your own pleasure (Isa. 58:13)
11. Don't speak your own words (Isa. 58:13)
12. Don't think your own thoughts (Isa. 58:13)
13. Do assemble with God's people (Lev. 23:1-3)
14. Do call the Sabbath a delight (Isa. 58:13)
15. Do call it honorable and holy (Isa. 58:13)

This appears to be a fairly comprehensive list. Furthermore, it was not created by those who refrain from dining out on the Sabbath. Every one of these "do's" and "don'ts" was given by God Almighty through His servants. It is this standard that drives those who refrain from dining out on God's Sabbath. Furthermore, it is abundantly clear to us that if these instructions were truly honored by all of God's people today we wouldn't be having this debate.

What about moderation?

With respect to dining out in "moderation," our question is: Can any of the above "do's" and "don'ts" be done in moderation and balance? For example: Can we occasionally go to our job on the Sabbath? Can we go shopping once in awhile? Can we speak about sports or the latest movies with our friend after services, if we "don't overdo it"? Do we have to call the Sabbath a delight all the time? And what about meals? Can we cook food on the weekly Sabbath if we only do it periodically? Can we compel others to labor for us if it is only done infrequently?

How would the Lord of the Sabbath answer these questions? Here is a clue. See the list of God's "do's" and "don'ts" above.

Furthermore, here is our question to those who dine out on the Sabbath, even if only in moderation: Where in God's word does it suggest that His people can go out into a place where the Sabbath is being desecrated and avail themselves of this sin? Is there even one example where this was done by God's people with His full acceptance? Did Jesus ever go to an inn on the Sabbath? Did He ever buy anything

on this day? What about the disciples? Did they ever do anything remotely close to purchasing a meal on the Sabbath? Certainly moderation was a principle then just as it is now. Wasn't it?

It is hard to believe this argument would carry much weight with God. Can you imagine telling Him, "Well, yes Father, I did go out into the world on your Sabbath and patronized their businesses, but only in moderation"? Furthermore, can you imagine God's reaction if the children of Israel planned to gather manna on the Sabbath, but only on occasion? After all, how could it be wrong if it was done in moderation and balance?

Everything we read in God's word tells us that the Sabbath is sacred. It is God's holy day. It is so pure that it is not to be contaminated by that which is profane. The services performed by restaurants on the Sabbath are immensely profane and shout out their contempt for this HOLY time. God's people can try to rationalize their behavior on the Sabbath if they wish, but the weight of scripture is clearly on the side of avoiding this practice altogether.

The Letter: Part II

However, this is not a complicated issue, and it is resolved by considering several principles, which, if properly understood, greatly simplify this matter.

First, it is important to keep in mind that the weekly Sabbath is a feast day, and God does not expect us to skip meals on His feast days. There may be times when it would not be good to go out (due to inclement weather, traffic constraints and other such things that can take away from proper enjoyment of the Sabbath). However, since "the Sabbath was made for man," it is not wrong to periodically plan to dine out in a relaxing, peaceful setting with family and/or other brethren on that day.

Our Response:

The observation that God does not want us to skip meals on His Sabbath misses a greater point. Here is a better question God's people should ask themselves: Does God really expect me to go hungry on His Sabbath if I don't adequately prepare on the sixth day? Answer: YES!

And he said unto them, This is that which the LORD hath said, To morrow is the rest of the holy Sabbath unto the LORD: bake that which you will bake to day, and seethe that you will seethe; and that which remains over lay up for you to be kept until the morning.

And they laid it up till the morning, as Moses bade: and it did not stink, neither was there any worm therein.

And Moses said, Eat that to day; for to day is a Sabbath unto the LORD: to day you shall not find it in the field.

Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, in it there shall be none.

And it came to pass, that there went out some of the people on the seventh day for to gather, and they found NONE. (Ex. 16:23-27)

The Sabbath: A Gift to Man

But what about the fact that God made the Sabbath for man? Doesn't this mean that man may use it as he sees fit? After all, isn't it his?

Imagine if God asked the author of this letter why he goes to restaurants on the Sabbath and this was the answer he gave: "Father, the Sabbath was made for man therefore, it is not wrong to plan an occasional meal with brethren at a fine restaurant." Does this sound like a Biblical argument or human reasoning? If the author's point is correct why would it be wrong to go to the beach or a movie on the Sabbath? After all, the Sabbath was made for man.

Simply because the Sabbath was made for man does not mean man may do with it as he sees fit. The Sabbath belongs to God. It is His day. It is called the "Sabbath of the Eternal" not the "Sabbath of man." God created it for man as a way for His human family to know Him. Furthermore, it pictures a great hope that will soon come to this world. That hope is God's Kingdom.

It would seem to us that those who look to that Kingdom with great anticipation would strive to act it out every Sabbath. If they did act it out, they certainly would not be going to restaurants on this day because when God's Kingdom comes restaurants will not be open on the Sabbath.

The Letter: Part III

It is important to consider the atmosphere of the establishment: Is it elegant and uplifting? Is music played and, if so, what kind? Is the air clouded with cigarette smoke? (If the establishment caters to those who smoke, this is something you should consider.) Are there wall-to-wall televisions? Will you be surrounded by loud, boisterous conversation?

If the atmosphere is conducive to a continuance of edifying fellowship with other brethren, in keeping with the intent of the Sabbath day (to rest from our day-to-day activities and to learn more about God and His ways), then it is perfectly fine to plan such a gathering. But if it were to last several hours – due to extenuating circumstances or certain cultural traditions – you would be in danger of breaking the Sabbath.

Our Response:

We find it interesting that in the first segment of this letter the author argues that those who refuse to dine out on the Sabbath are bound by a self imposed list of "do's" and "don'ts." However, in this segment it appears that he has crafted his own list of rules pertaining to when or where it would be acceptable to dine out on the Sabbath. For the most part his standard is driven by the atmosphere provided in the restaurant.

Although this argument may appear to reflect a godly wisdom, it omits something critically important to the scriptures and the God Who inspired them. This author contends that you can determine if a restaurant is an appropriate place to dine on the Sabbath simply by employing your physical senses. In other words: what does it look and sound like. The fact of the matter is that appearances can often be deceiving. And when it comes to dining out on the Sabbath they most definitely are. To illustrate this point consider the following:

Suppose that this elegant restaurant was a gathering place of numerous prostitutes. However, these "ladies of the evening" are not the typical "hookers" one might see on street corners in sleazy parts of town. These particular women are high priced "call girls" with very influential clients. Each of these ladies is highly educated. Most have graduate degrees and may speak several languages. They enjoy the opera

and are well versed in literature and the arts. They can converse intelligently about politics and philosophy. Additionally, they command as much as \$10,000 an evening for their services. To put it mildly they are very sophisticated. But they are prostitutes nonetheless. Furthermore, at this particular restaurant they are everywhere—engaging in their craft, making contacts and networking. Add to that, dining with these very expensive “escorts” are men whose wives are at home with their children totally unaware that tonight their husbands will be spending some “quality time” with someone else.

Now here is our question. Is such a place conducive for honoring God’s Sabbath? Or would you recommend that God’s people choose another place to dine?

Most would have to admit that such a restaurant is not an appropriate place to dine on the Sabbath or any other day for that matter. After all, regardless of how you want to slice it, God’s law is being trampled on with impunity by its patrons. Furthermore, adultery is a capital crime in the Bible. It attacks the very core of decency.

Now some may argue that such a hypothetical situation doesn’t exist. And even if it did God’s people would be unable to detect such behavior. After all, discretion is the stock and trade of such “ladies.”

This may be true so lets try a different example—one a bit more real.

Suppose you and your family are at another fine restaurant on the Sabbath and everyone there is desecrating God’s holy day right before your eyes. At every table this sacrilege is taking place. Work is being done. Business is being transacted. The conversations all around you (even if you can’t hear them) relate to the profane world. Even an occasional round of “Happy Birthday” is being sung by attentive servers. Is this a place that is conducive to keeping God’s day holy? Furthermore, should God’s people actually pay to be in such a place? In other words, should they do business with it, on God’s Sabbath no less? Remember that profaning the Sabbath is also a capital crime in the scriptures.

Why do we do it?

The reason most people in God’s Church dine out on the Sabbath is either 1) they never think about what is taking place all around them or, 2) they don’t regard what is being done as an egregious sin. Tragically, we have become desensitized to what is really occurring at restaurants every Sabbath. By never questioning what they do on this day, we never have to question what we do.

The bottom line is this. You can no more find a restaurant elegant enough to offset what is taking place in it every Sabbath than you could find a cathedral elegant enough to offset what it is doing every Sunday. No matter how fancy it is, no matter how exquisite its atmosphere, it is still POLLUTING what God Himself made HOLY! Here is the question we should ask ourselves. What does God Almighty think of what is taking place at this fine eatery every Sabbath and holy day? Furthermore, what does He think about His people availing themselves of this sacrilege?

The idea that the atmosphere at a restaurant on the Sabbath can somehow rehabilitate what God’s people are doing there is born out of human reasoning. God commands His people to come out of this world, not seek out a nice spot in it and think they can benefit from its sin.

The Letter: Part IV

Consider: When a family makes plans to dine out on the Sabbath, the wife is able to better enjoy the Sabbath, because she does not have to make preparations for a meal. (Not to mention the time required to even lightly clean up after a meal). The time that would have been spent doing so on the preparation day can be utilized in other ways – both in physical and spiritual preparation for the Sabbath.

Our Response:

Once again imagine this argument being presented to God Almighty. Essentially what is being expressed is this: "Father, I occasionally take my wife out on the Sabbath so that she will not have to prepare meals on Your day. Additionally, this will make it possible for her to prepare spiritually for your Sabbath on the sixth day. This certainly could not displease you."

Does this argument sound like it is driven by godly wisdom or human reasoning? If you believe the former, consider the following.

Imagine if this identical argument was being advanced by the children of Israel as they wondered in the wilderness. One of them might have said, "Father, I went out to gather manna on the Sabbath because I wanted to lighten the burden my wife has to go through every Saturday." How impressed do you think God would be with his argument?

When the author of this letter suggested that by going to a restaurant on the Sabbath his wife could spend the sixth day preparing "spiritually," he offered a very interesting defense. Here he suggests that in place of preparing the Sabbath meal on the sixth day, his wife could dedicate that time to something very godly. This reminds us of a similar argument advanced by a COG member who justified not removing leaven from her home prior to God's spring festival. She argued that she chose to prepare for the feast "spiritually" instead.

What the author of this letter omits in his answer is that when God gave His instructions concerning the "preparation day," He specifically addressed the preparing of food (See: Ex.16). His reason for doing so was because He did not want food being cooked on His Sabbath—either by them or anyone else. This is because God's Sabbath is HOLY! Despite this fact many of God's people today think nothing of having meals prepared by unbelievers on this day. Only this time they rationalize that because restaurant personnel would be working anyway it is somehow okay with God to place their order.

When God's people argue that going to a restaurant on the Sabbath helps them to better enjoy this day, they are actually judging the very God who created it. If they really believed this argument, why wouldn't they dine out every Sabbath?

The Letter: Part V

Also keep in mind that this was not an issue that ancient Israel had to deal with. It is an issue (like so many others) requiring that a judgment be made. Mr. Armstrong ruled that it was permissible to do so, and set the example of occasionally dining out on the Sabbath himself.

Our Response:

Imagine advancing this argument to God Almighty. It might sound something like this: "Father, I genuinely want to obey you, but when it comes to dining out on the Sabbath Your word is silent. It just is not something ancient Israel had to deal with."

It is difficult for us to believe this claim based on the power of God's instructions to Israel as they wondered in the wilderness. There, the Eternal gave His people three specific instructions concerning food and His HOLY Sabbath. First, God forbade the Israelites to go out and gather food on the seventh day. When some actually engaged in this practice He was furious! Notice what God said.

"How long refuse you to keep my commandments and my laws?" (Ex. 16:26-28)

Our question to the author of this letter is this: What did God mean when He gave this instruction? And what application does it have for God's people today?

The second instruction God gave to the children of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness was to prepare their Sabbath meal on the sixth day (Ex. 16:23). Furthermore, at no time did He suggest that they could commission others to prepare it for them on His Sabbath. He actually indicated that the preparation day was given to "prove" the Israelites and to test their obedience (Ex. 16:4).

Our question to the author of this letter is the same as before: What did God mean when He gave this particular instruction? And what application does it have for God's people today?

The scriptures also reveal that God gave His people a third directive that relates directly to this issue. The Great Creator and Architect of the Sabbath instructed the Israelites to not go outside the camp on the seventh day. God revealed this specific aspect of His command because the Israelites went outside the camp to obtain food on the Sabbath (Ex. 16:29). Furthermore, as was mentioned earlier, God was furious with this and He made that fact abundantly clear.

Once again we have some familiar questions for the author of this letter: What did God mean when He gave this instruction? And what application does it have for God's people today?

We believe the point God was making with these three directives was that the Israelites were not to leave the community where God's people were camped on the Sabbath. Furthermore, they had no need to do so. God had already provided food on the sixth day. Additionally, He instructed His people to prepare their Sabbath meal on what is appropriately referred to as the "preparation day." Now consider this. If God prohibited the Israelites to go outside their camp to acquire food on the Sabbath, why would He permit that practice today? The answer is HE WOULDN'T!

At this point, it is interesting to note that the only way God's people today can avail themselves of a restaurant's services on the Sabbath is to go outside of "their place." They must literally go out into a business establishment where God's Sabbath is being profaned and avail themselves of this sin by purchasing its goods. Does anyone honestly believe this is where God wants His people to be?

In reality, those who dine out on the Sabbath are breaking every aspect of God's command with respect to eating. Consider what they do. 1) They acquire food on the Sabbath. 2) They have it prepared for them on the Sabbath. And 3) they go outside the community of faith to procure the food as well as to consume it. Despite this fact, many believe God somehow condones this practice because the sin would be taking place anyway. Is this how the Holy one of Israel intended His law to be understood? Or, is this just more human reasoning disguised as godly wisdom?

The Letter: Part VI

The question arises: Aren't we making work for people, requiring them to break the Sabbath? Consider the fact that most restaurants are open for business on the Sabbath, whether we choose to dine out or not. By dining out, we are not creating work for them in which they would not otherwise be engaged. Just think of the many dining establishments that we would not patronize by eating at just one. Do they close for the day because we are not there? No. Do their employees get to enjoy the day off simply because we are not there? No. In other words, they will not be keeping the Sabbath, whether we dine there or not. We are not causing them to break the Sabbath. They are not our personal "menservants" or "maidservants" (Ex. 20:10), but rather the employees of the establishment, from whom they will receive a paycheck whether we choose to dine there or not.

Our Response:

Once again, imagine this argument being presented before God Almighty. It might sound like this: "Father the reason I occasionally go out to a restaurant on Your Sabbath is that it does not go against your command. I realize that people are waiting on my family and me, but they are not 'my servants' and the command only addresses my servants not someone else's servants. Furthermore, they would be working anyway. My absence from the restaurant wouldn't change anything. Therefore, I'm not causing them to break Your Sabbath."

Perhaps the most popular argument advanced by people attempting to justify going to restaurants on the Sabbath is that those working in the restaurant are not their servant – and the command only refers to "your servant." Therefore, because those who work in restaurants are actually the servants of the restaurant managers, God's people are not responsible for the labor being performed.

But is this what God meant when He gave Israel his great moral law? In other words can you imagine telling God that the following is what He meant when He gave the fourth commandment?

Keep the Sabbath day to sanctify it, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work: but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God: in it you shall not do any work, you nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant. However, you may compel someone else's manservant or maidservant to labor on your behalf, provided they genuinely desire to work. (Dt. 5:13-14)

Regrettably, this is exactly what many leaders in God's Church are teaching His people today. Furthermore, they are advancing this argument as an appropriate explanation of God's Sabbath law.

Here is our question to those who teach such things: What did God mean by the word "your" in the ninth and tenth commandments? If one applies the logic of this letter to all of God's law, a true Christian could actually lie and covet as long as they did not do so to their neighbor. This is because those commands only say "Your neighbor" as well. Does anyone really believe God would be impressed with such semantical arguments?

Regrettably, the author of this letter fails to understand God's purpose for commanding the Israelites to free their servants from labor on the Sabbath. That purpose was powerfully conveyed by God when He gave the original command. The Great Lawgiver told the Israelites, and He tells His people today, "You were once a slave in the land of Egypt" (Dt. 5:15). By the way, those who work in restaurants are still slaves in spiritual Egypt today.

The question God's people should ask themselves is: Would God want me to go back into spiritual Egypt and avail myself of the same bondage I was once in? The answer should be obvious. Furthermore, you may not be able to prevent restaurant personnel from laboring on God Sabbath, but you most certainly can prevent them from doing so for you.

The Letter: Part VII

Also consider that those who argue that eating out on the Sabbath creates work for restaurant employees would probably not hesitate to utilize the services of certain emergency service personnel on the Sabbath in the event that they, their family members or their personal property were endangered by circumstances beyond their control. Similarly, they would probably see no wrong in procuring "roadside assistance" on the Sabbath in the event of mechanical difficulties. (What would be their alternative?) Obviously, such emergency workers are also paid for the services they provide, and they would work on the Sabbath regardless of whether or not we enlist their aid. (Although

some may view such circumstances as an “ox in the ditch,” it must be understood that the workers involved would be working – i.e., “breaking the Sabbath” – whether or not that ox was in the ditch. The “ox” belongs to the Christian, not to the workers.)

Our Response:

Here, the author of this letter is absolutely correct in his assessment of those who refuse to dine out on the Sabbath. We would not hesitate to seek help from the secular world in the event of a genuine emergency. Furthermore, we would not hesitate to offer it either. In other words, if our neighbor’s house caught fire, we would be WORKING as hard as we could to help him put it out—on the Sabbath or any other day.

The amazing thing about this particular argument is that the one offering it believes it stands as proof that it is somehow acceptable with God for him to dine out on the Sabbath.

However, imagine presenting this argument to the Holy One of Israel. It might sound like this: “Great God in heaven I love Your law and Your way. I celebrate your Sabbath every week and rejoice in doing so. I occasionally dine out on Your Sabbath because I know You wouldn’t oppose me doing so. After all, if it is not wrong to avail myself of worldly labor in the event of a genuine emergency, why would it be wrong to avail myself of worldly labor for my occasional pleasure. I know you understand this. Why can’t all of Your people be like Me?”

How impressed would the one true God be with this reasoning? Does it reflect His wisdom or man’s?

The Letter: Part VIII

When considering these factors (and much more could have been said), it should be clear that dining out on the Sabbath is not something that God forbids. Christ said that “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). God created the Sabbath as a BENEFIT (see Psalm 103:2), not as a burden (1 John 5:3). It gives God’s people time at the end of each week to rest from their day-to-day routines, allowing them to focus more on His Plan and to learn more about His ways. When we keep the above principles in mind, having a meal at a restaurant on the Sabbath can serve to make the day even more enjoyable.

We hope that this has proven helpful. If we may be of further service, please let us know.

In Christ’s service,

Name Withheld
Personal Correspondence Department

Our Response:

If this last point is true, what will God’s people do in the millennium when restaurants will be closed on the Sabbath? Will they just have to sacrifice a little enjoyment on this day? Or, is the whole idea that going to restaurants somehow enhances the Sabbath totally contrived?

The belief that going out into this world and purchasing its services on the Sabbath somehow making God’s day more enjoyable, is not only the product of human reasoning, it is grossly arrogant. Who are we

to tell God that His Sabbath is for our enjoyment? This is the same approach countless professing Christians employ in defense of a host of practices that God condemns.

The plain truth is this: God is the source of all true joy. If we listen to Him as opposed to leaning to our own understanding, we would experience that joy—a joy that comes from celebrating God's purpose for His Sabbath—not our own purpose.

God's word admonishes His people to "call the Sabbath a delight." It does not say to "make the Sabbath a delight." Why? because the Great Creator of Heaven and Earth has already made it so. God's people should delight in this holy time because it reveals one of the greatest mysteries ever imagined by our Creator. This day pictures a time when God's will is going to be restored to this earth. At that time all mankind will "remember the Sabbath and keep it HOLY."

And you can bet they won't be doing so at a restaurant.