

How do Members of the United Church of God Observe the Sabbath Day?

Questions have arisen from allegations of purported “Sabbath breaking” in Latin America.

In striving to “contend earnestly for the faith “which was once for all delivered” (Jude 3), ministers and members of the United Church of God hold as a major tenet of belief the observance of a seventh-day Sabbath. The precious knowledge of the Sabbath and its intent for humanity (Mark 2:27) was one of the critical doctrinal pillars restored at the founding of the United Church of God in the mid-1990s. Indeed, it remains one of the core stated Fundamental Beliefs of the Church today: “We believe that the seventh day of the week is the Sabbath of the Lord our God. On this day we are commanded to rest from our labors and worship God, following the teachings and example of Jesus, the apostles and the New Testament Church.”

Recently some questions have arisen from allegations of purported Sabbath-breaking by members in Chile. Before those are addressed directly, let us review some critical elements of worshipping God on the seventh day, including Sabbath teachings from the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ.

While the command to abstain from regular work appears clear for the majority of Church members, there remain areas of observance that are not fully defined and sometimes require an administrative decision from Church leaders. Jesus Himself raised and answered certain issues about the attitude and intent in which we observe the Sabbath Day.

The instituting of the seventh-day Sabbath of course took place at the beginning of human history, where God Himself “rested [and]...blessed the seventh day and sanctified it” (Genesis 2:2-3). The direct command to observe the Sabbath day is specifically later codified in the Ten Commandments: “Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy. 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 do no work” (Exodus 20:8-10).

Habitual violation of the Sabbath day was one of the reasons that God allowed ancient Judah to be led into Babylonian captivity. As the prophet Jeremiah warned, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day...nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers’” (Jeremiah 17:21-22).

So we have a clear and direct command from God concerning the Sabbath day. The United Church of God fully embraces and teaches this command, following the example of Jesus and the first century Church.

While the command is clear, the global implications of observing it occasionally require a decision as to intent, purpose and application. For example, for Church members living closer to the north or south poles of the planet, the sun may never fully set. If Church members were to adopt a possible Pharisaical approach, they would potentially end up observing the Sabbath for weeks at a time! This of course is not the intent.

Jesus Himself taught much about the spiritual intent of the Sabbath, declaring Himself to be Lord of the Sabbath (and in effect making the Sabbath the true “Lord’s Day”) (Matthew 12:8). For those Christians who would attempt to define Sabbath-keeping in a rigid legalistic way, Jesus Himself pointed out that “the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless” (Matthew 12:5). He of course refers here to the fact that the priests were required to perform a

considerable amount of heavy labor on the Sabbath and Holy Days, stoking huge fires and slaughtering animals for the required sacrifices. On the Day of Atonement, a considerable amount of manual labor was required by the priests to complete an elaborate and complex sequence of animal sacrifice, even though the priests would be fasting on the day. The sacrifice of a 1,000-3,000 pound bull, as well as several other animals, was no easy task.

Other exceptions, as Jesus taught, involved minor surgery (in the form of circumcision), the rescue of farm animals and, of course, doing good on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:12). Christ was very clear about what God expects from observing the Sabbath: “If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (Matthew 12:7). Teaching about Sabbath observance during His last Feast of Tabernacles during His earthly ministry, Christ warned about a legalistic approach that could make the Sabbath a burden instead of a joyous experience worshipping God. When it came to fulfilling the Sabbath Day, Jesus taught that His Church should use spiritual discernment: “Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24). Are we pure in intent and do we have our whole being focused on worshipping each and every Sabbath?

Accordingly, there is no question as to the ever-lasting command from God—confirmed by Jesus—that we are to abstain from regular work and create time and space in our lives for direct worship of God on the seventh day. Observing this command makes us directly stand out from others in the world who embrace another day, or no day at all.

Today in the 21st century, sometimes the nature of certain acts on the Sabbath may not be clear from the biblical record. For example, can a physician who is a member of the United Church of God render medical aid in an emergency situation (including the laborious act of re-setting a broken bone)? From the direct example of Jesus, we know that this is a permissible act. What about other instances, such as driving long distances to attend Sabbath services?

Christ Himself warned of adopting a Pharisaical attitude, judging others whom we think may be acting in a fashion that breaks the Sabbath. Recently, such an unfortunate situation appeared when a Church family in Chile came under fire from newly invented charges that cast doubts on the integrity of the members, the United Church of God, *an International Association*, and some of its leadership.

The following information is being provided to counter these unproven allegations. As these allegations have been unfortunately and maliciously repeated on Internet forums, some have wondered whether a doctrinal change could be in the making regarding the Sabbath. Certainly, nothing of the sort is true, nor is it even possible under the current bylaws and operating principles of the United Church of God. A few facts easily dispel all the rumors and also validate the permanency of our Church’s Sabbath doctrine.

Regarding this specific situation, here is an overview: A member family in Chile founded an infant day-care business in 1997. They observed the weekly Sabbath and annual Holy Days before that time, and have continued to do so since then. On Friday evenings during winter months the sun sets 19 minutes before the government-regulated closing time of 6 p.m. Fully intending to keep the Sabbath in a responsible and accountable way, the family used some UCG documents to find a good-faith solution to their problem. Seeing precedent, these members left work in advance of the start of every Sabbath, and did not work on any Holy Day to comply with God’s holy Sabbath command for every Sabbath and Holy Day.

In the first 12 years of operating their facility in this manner, no pastor or minister ever commented on how the day care center and associated school was conducted with regards to its owner's observance of the Sabbath and Holy Days. Following a full decade of observing the Sabbath and Holy Days using this approach, during a meeting in 2009 an unexpected statement about their operation was made—yet no discussion or follow-up was made at that time, nor has the Church ever formally reviewed how the family conducts their business concerning Sabbath observance in the shortened daylight periods of the winter. While the family maintains a strict Sabbath and Holy Day policy, some recent questions have prompted them to now formally ask the Church to review it and make suggestions on how to improve it.

The family states that they have never personally worked on a Sabbath or Holy Day, in accordance with their personal beliefs and the Church's long-time teachings. Clearly, their situation involves government law that does not allow their type of facility to close 19 minutes before sundown on the shortest day of the year, nor on Holy Days that fall on weekdays. Only recently has their good-faith Sabbath-keeping solution come into question. Consequently, they are reassessing the situation and have requested direction from the Council of Elders.

On Holy Days, the business relies on non-member employees to care for the children, which is similar to other situations involving businesses owned by Church members.

In this case the family involved has now become the target of vicious rumors, with Internet jurors rushing ahead to pre-judge, slander and condemn anyone associated with the situation—and this before their request for input and guidance has even been heard and responded to. The driving motivation seems to be a need to quickly discredit the Church and certain leaders, rather than proper concern for the family or the Sabbath.

It is indeed unfortunate that such a case has become a lightning rod for dissent and uninformed and unproven allegations. Perhaps if we listen to this married member couple describe their situation, we can get a sense of the issues they are seeking input about.

When they were asked about the circumstances of their business, they responded as follows:

“Both of us are certified teachers from the University of Chile and began working in public schools and with great effort faithfully kept the Feast days (normally without pay), since on those days they don't generally permit vacation time, yet we never failed to keep the Sabbath and Holy Days.

“In 1997 we decided to start a day care center with just 10 children and my wife quit her job working in a public school. We run the day care center, which now has 300 children (from 1 to 7 years old), only from Monday to Friday, from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. On the Sabbath, the day care facility does not operate. In the winter, when the sun goes down about 20 minutes earlier than 6 p.m., darkness still begins around 6 p.m. and we leave at 5 p.m. Some parents do pick their children up later than 6 p.m., but there are no classes or business operations during that time.

“So the issue we have is with the two to five Holy Days that fall during the week days each year. On those days we do not work, we do not personally operate the facility nor earn any money from it. We rest on those days, keep them holy and attend services. Also, we reduce the activities to a minimum on those days at the day care center because the Chilean government requires by law we keep it open during the weekdays.

“According to the Chilean law #19,864, article 3, it says: ‘Child Care Centers are those educational institutes that take care of children during the day, until they begin their basic education, and provide an integral education.’ To fulfill this task we have to conform to the statute N° 19,864 which states the Department of Education establishes the regulations for forming day care centers and the programs for the basic teaching of day care centers. This day care program is strictly bound by the School Calendar and the decrees from the Department of Education that regulate our operations and establish we can’t close ‘unless it is an emergency’ (Article 5, decree N° 7895 of Dec. 10, 2009).

“So we are governed by these regulations, and although we own the day care center we can’t alter the operation of the center from Monday to Friday—because even though we run a private day care center, we have to abide by the law and the norms that are established and are strictly enforced by the government. Again, all activities and classes from Monday to Friday are from 8:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. We never work on the Holy Days and leave our work at 5 p.m. on Fridays and the same is the true for the beginning of the Holy Days. We have never missed a Holy Day or a Sabbath in all our years and keep it holy by resting, not working and faithfully attending services. We have an agreement with the staff, none of which are members or keep the Sabbath, that they completely run the facility and receive the income of those days instead of us.

“Through the years, we didn’t discuss the issue of the Holy Days while Mr. Mario Seiglie was our pastor, and neither with Saul Langarica for the first six years of his tenure and we just rested and regularly attended all the Sabbaths and Holy Days. We thought it was a private matter on how we resolved this issue. It must also be stated that we were never suspended for this matter. It was never mentioned as a reason for the suspensions. The subject was broached in 2009 and 2010 by Mr. Langarica, but no decision was made about the matter.

“We have thought that our situation is similar to what is mentioned in two sections of the UCG papers on Sabbath keeping. First, the one titled, ‘People Working in the Medical Field Who Keep the Sabbath,’ which says, ‘If, however, you are referring to people who own a care home, other principles apply. There are certain routine chores that would need to be done on the Sabbath in these homes, just as in a private home. Some examples of routine chores would be meal preparation and clean up, as well as making beds; however, we recommend that these activities be kept to a minimum... By comparison, the farmer in ancient Israel would need to feed his livestock on the Sabbath. He would not, however, plow or plant a field—that is, undertake work that could and should be done on other days of the week. The two principles that guide us about the Sabbath are that it is a day on which we congregate with others in God’s Church to worship Him, and that it is a day on which we rest from our regular work.’

“We read in another paper, ‘Remember the Sabbath to Keep it Holy,’ this same principle. ‘Today, judgments may need to be made regarding dairy farmers, ranchers, physicians, nurses, nursing home operators, home health care workers, and others as to how to observe the Sabbath command in their circumstances. Yet we must be consistent in our application. We should teach Sabbath observance from the strength of biblical principle and not from exceptions to the rule. The principle is clear—all that is in a believer’s direct control should be allowed to observe the Sabbath rest.’”

“This, we believe, is our situation, since we do not have ‘direct control’ over this issue of closing down the child care center during the weekdays. Yet, we don’t use this as an excuse to work or not rest on those few days during the year, since we do control our own lives and so do rest, do not work, do not make money on those days and do attend services and worship God on those Holy Days.

“We have submitted our case to the Doctrine Committee, but the chairman of the Doctrine Committee indicated the right procedure is to first present our case to our pastor and then to the regional director in the way we keep the commandment to observe the Sabbath and the Holy Days, so they can guide us in what to do. In this way we can remove any doubt about the purity of our motives and of our conscience that some criticize and misinterpret with only partial information or through third parties that have defamed us and have no idea what we actually do.

“We have started the process to review our case in the appropriate manner and with the right authorities, and ask people to refrain from passing judgment on our situation. If it is decided we are doing things wrong the way we keep the Sabbath and Holy Days, we respectfully solicit their counsel and guidance on the matter to have it corrected.”

After reading the family’s concerns about how they keep the Sabbath, how can one say they are working on the Sabbath themselves? How can one accuse Church leaders of advocating breaking God’s holy Sabbaths? How can one infer that United Church of God, *an International Association*, is “changing its Sabbath doctrine”?

The answer is, of course, that it is completely unwarranted to derive such unfounded conclusions.

Perhaps more importantly, how would you want to be treated by your brethren if someone had a similar concern about you?

Hopefully, as their spiritual brothers and sisters, we should be supporting their efforts to properly keep the Sabbath holy. In this case there is no intentional Sabbath-breaking, nor collusion involving friends, family or ministers, no condoning of Sabbath-breaking and certainly no trace of any doctrinal change. Rather, they and we are all part of a spiritual body that is striving to obey God more fully and lovingly encouraging each other as we grow (Ephesians 4:16).

This topic provides a good reminder that society sometimes brings complexities to one’s application of God’s laws. The issue above is typical of issues that have arisen since biblical times when judgments were sought from Church leaders about applying God’s law in their particular day and age (i.e., 1 Corinthians 10:25-33). Today, leaders of the Church continue to be asked how to apply the law of God to different situations that arise with our members around the world. Members are encouraged to seek pastoral counsel in matters of uncertainty, just as the members in Chile are doing.

For further information on this topic please refer to the booklet: *Sunset to Sunset, God’s Sabbath Rest* and other official United Church of God documents.