

Proper Behaviour During Sabbath Services

Some time ago during his announcements, our pastor made a shocking announcement.

He suggested that the recent telephone hook-up problems might be our fault! A punishment for sin – a specific sin!

Now, for those readers who are not familiar with our mode of Sabbath service, because of the scattered nature of our congregations, the sermon is broadcast each Sabbath afternoon to all areas via teleconference call and via Internet RealAudio "streaming." During the weeks preceding the writing of this article, the transmission quality was deteriorated.

In his announcement, the pastor suggested that part of the cause of the recent problems with the telephone transmission might have been due to some irreverent treatment of the Sabbath Day by some of the brethren. Perhaps *all* of the brethren! And, more specifically, during the time of Sabbath services.

I would expect that virtually every church member who heard that announcement immediately gave some thought to their treatment of Sabbath time and to the behaviour of their children during Sabbath services. Hopefully, the members recognized any shortcomings on their part, and immediately made the necessary changes.

But human nature tends to be very self-justifying. Herbert W. Armstrong – our former Pastor general – often said that the human nature in us wants to *be* right.... but it doesn't want to *do* right. It wants to be *perceived* as doing right. It does not want to be perceived as doing or being wrong.

A review of the guidelines

Let us review some guidelines for proper behaviour during Sabbath services. These are not a set of do's and don'ts that are written down in some pharisaical church manual. They are common rules of manners, decency and decorum that have been generally accepted and practiced in the church of God for many, many years.

Among God's people, it seems to be a quirk of human nature that if a certain rule, standard or doctrine is not reviewed from the pulpit on a regular or frequent basis, we can tend to assume that the item is no longer in force. This is just the reason why we need the weekly Sabbaths and the annual Holy Days – to tweak our imperfect memories.

Once upon a time, most of us regularly met in congregations of multiple hundreds. We came each week "tubbed and scrubbed" and dressed in our Sabbath best. We had a regular format. We knew when to fellowship, when to be quiet, when to stand up, when to sit down, when to sing, when to expect a sermonette, a sermon, the announcements... and so on. Our local congregation is now reduced to a mere thirty – and that is on a good day, if everyone turns up. And we are one of the larger CGG congregations! Many of the groups we hear on our teleconference roll-call each Sabbath are much fewer in number than ours, phoning in from someone's living room or basement. Nevertheless, with one modification (the roll-call and telephone/Internet hook-up), we have been able to maintain the regular church service format we have used for all these years. Why change a good thing?

For those who find it necessary to listen in from their living room, it is, unfortunately, the best they can do under the circumstances. But this living room format can, if proper safeguards are not put in place, become short on proper formality and respect for God. The necessity of living room meetings is no excuse for poor manners, sloppy dress, or disruptive behaviour – neither on the weekly Sabbaths, nor when the family does eventually have the opportunity to attend a formal church service. The parents have the responsibility to prepare their children for proper behaviour during services – even if they only get to practice it for eight days during the course of a year at the Feast of Tabernacles.

We realize that our living rooms and humble meeting halls are not magnificent cathedrals. But when His people are gathered there, God Himself is also in attendance:

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

Two things that have been hard hit in the years since the break-up of the church are the respect for the authority of the church leadership, and the respect for some of the long-standing, Bible-based traditions and customs of the church. Since the early nineties, the words and deeds of the ministers and any others who have stood behind the podiums of the land, have been closely scrutinized by their audiences. Considering what has happened in the church, it is right that the members should prove all things:

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. (I Thessalonians 5:21)

Perhaps if we had have been adequately proving all things all along, we would not be in the situation we are in now! But this does not mean that we should lose proper respect for God, for the office of His true ministers, or for the proper formality of Sabbath services.

I don't know if you have a deacon or an elder in your local congregation or group. If you do, he will agree with me when I tell you that he has been ordained to serve God's people. He knows that he does not possess the authority or the responsibility to tell off parents or children for misbehaviour or disrespect during Sabbath services. The responsibility he *has* been given is to maintain peace and decorum during the three or four hours that you come together for church services. He has no desire to police these things. In fact, he cannot police them without the backing and support of every parent... and every other adult in the congregation. Surely there is not one of us that wants to attend a church in which anarchy reigns! The order of proceedings is unavoidably broken up enough, each week, by delays necessary for the phone-in, without adding to the upset with behaviour that we know to be wrong.

It is understood that standards can vary somewhat – yes, even among the brethren – about what is proper and what is improper conduct on the Sabbath – before and after as well as during services. But if we are going to err, we must err on the side of the conservative, the peaceful, and the quiet. God is making it increasingly clear to us that, even within God's family, it is still necessary for each and every Christian to have his own individual relationship with God. We say that we enjoy fellowshiping with those who believe the same as we do. This is good. But it is also logical that each and every Christian, with his or her unique background and experiences, will have a somewhat different detailed set of beliefs than any other. If we put together these concepts of differing details of belief and standards of behaviour, however, and take them to the very extreme, every one of us would be fellowshiping alone each week. There are many of our brethren around the world who have done just that!

When we come together on a Sabbath Day or a Holy Day to worship God and to fellowship together, we must come in the attitude of God's "way of give." For the few hours that we are together, we must overlook our minor differences. But again, we must err on the side of peace and quiet. Here are some points that will help towards proper behaviour for Sabbath services:

Plan to be at every service

Do not miss a service for trivial reasons. We have heard this scripture many times lately:

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25)

When planning your Sabbath morning, please try to leave a little margin for unexpected emergencies. Do you really *have* to be at services? Well, maybe you could hear the sermon on a tape or on the Internet soon after the service is finished. But perhaps it was not just the sermon that you needed that particular week that you stayed away for trivial reasons. Perhaps it was the sermonette, the fellowship, the giving to somebody else, the hymn singing, or the announcements that you really needed that particular week.

Listen!

Please be attentive. We attend Sabbath services to worship God and to learn from Him and about Him. Because He inspires the teaching, the messages are diverse and interesting.

Please listen to all the announcements. Take note of any changes in the times and locations of services and other activities. Take note of the prayer requests. There are brethren out there who are in very dire straits and who really do need our prayers:

Pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. (James 5:16)

Choose a seat as close to the front as possible, where you will be less likely to be distracted by any disturbing movement that might be taking place in the hall. Aside from this reason, it is better to leave the rear seats for special-needs brethren and for parents with young children. If and when interruptions do take place, strive to concentrate hard on the messages.

Do not interrupt others

Don't *you* be the individual or let *yours* be the family guilty of initiating or permitting any disturbance to the other brethren.

Please don't "shuffle"! Get your books and your children's' activities ready well before services – not during the first hymn or during the first few minutes of the sermonette. This can be very distracting for and disrespectful to the song leader or the sermonette man. At the other end of the service, please don't start putting your books away as soon as the minister giving the sermon says, "And for the final scripture..."

Sing!

A whole sermonette could be devoted to this subject. Why is it that some seem to be ashamed of singing songs of worship to the great God? How can this be? Hymn singing is nothing to be ashamed of! Rather, it is a shame and an affront to God to stand there – mouth closed and looking around the hall during the singing of hymns! We are repeatedly encouraged to sing praises to God:

O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. (Psalm 95:1-2)

In psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart. (Ephesians 5:19)

Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms. (James 5:13)

Hearty hymn singing is spiritually good for us. Also, it is an offering that is enjoyable to our heavenly Father and to Jesus Christ. Please think about the words you are singing. Otherwise your hymns are just vain repetitions:

But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. (Matthew 6:7)

Sing to God with gusto, and don't be ashamed of doing so!

Keep the meeting hall tidy

Make sure your children pick up any papers and any other trash they have left on the floor or seats. Apart from being your parental duty, this will be helpful to those who tidy up after services.

Teach your children to stay quiet during services

I would like to repeat myself for emphasis here. Some brethren no longer have the regular opportunity to enjoy formal Sabbath services throughout the year and, by necessity, spend most Sabbaths at home. So, when they do come to services, the children are unprepared for the quiet behaviour that is necessary for a peaceful and orderly two hours.

Parents who cannot attend services regularly should make a point of training their children to sit quietly and respectfully while they are listening to the telephone transmission at home. If you are listening to the weekly transmission at home, that *is* your Sabbath service.

Take your young children to the rest room ten minutes before services begin. Older children should take themselves! Please do not let your children wander in and out of meeting room repeatedly once services have commenced. Not only is this totally unnecessary in the vast majority of cases, it is distracting and annoying for other members who are sitting in the seats around you and your family.

Bring appropriate toys and activities to services

Please do not bring rattles or any noisy toys for young children. You may think it's cute and humorous when Baby is squeaking his Bunny during services, but those around you who are trying to listen to the sermon certainly will not. Do not allow children to repeatedly click pens, tear pages out of writing books or to crumple paper. Children who are unable to follow along with the sermonette and sermon should bring appropriate books for the Sabbath. Not ghost stories, gory or violent tales (which probably should not even be permitted into your home – never mind into Sabbath services). This is God's day and God's service. Let's keep Satan out completely!

Try to time babies' sleep time for the service period

Many of us have been in the same circumstances as the church's young mothers and fathers – so please do not be embarrassed. We understand that this is not always easy to plan but, whenever you can manage it, you will save yourself a lot of going in and out of services.

Use the mothers' room

If your baby or older child cries or makes noise, please take him (or her) out right away. Do not try to tough it out in the hope that he will soon quieten down and fall asleep. Again, please do not be embarrassed. We have been through it and we know how it feels. But please be considerate and spare a thought for the other members who are trying to listen to the message.

Do not hesitate to discipline your children, if necessary

But please do it in a totally private place – even though it may take you out of services for a longer period than you would prefer. The rest room is *not* a private place.

Do not let your children wander alone or in groups outside the meeting hall during services

This is especially important for the safety of younger children, but it applies to teens as well. Your children belong in the meeting hall with you. This rule is proper for our respect and worship towards God, for the church's good example to the community, and for the comfort and peace of mind of all church members.

Do not let your children sit unsupervised at services

Neither alone nor with other children. Again, this goes for teens and pre-teens. The two-hour periods for church services are not appropriate times for children to pass notes, fellowship and giggle. They have lots of time for those activities before and after services. Although some parents may have trained themselves to tune it out, such behaviour is annoying and distracting to other adult members. If you have another person's child or children sitting with you, it is *your* responsibility to make sure that they are behaving properly and quietly.

Let us all make an extra effort to teach and control our children so that they will refrain from disrespecting God on His Sabbath Day and from disturbing those who desire to worship Him as He commands. But let us not limit this to our children. We adults also need to be examining our own behaviour at Sabbath services and to be making any adjustments that might be necessary. As God commands us, through the apostle Paul, in I Corinthians 14:40:

Let all things be done decently and in order.

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