

# Proper Sabbath-Service Behavior

by Staff

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It is unfortunate that complaints about inappropriate behavior at church services are so common. Whether it is boisterous children, giggling and note-passing teenagers, a too-affectionate couple, someone constantly going in and out of the hall or a snoring "listener," poor church behavior is distracting and disrespectful. No group—big or small, in a rented hall or a member's home—seems to be immune to this persistent problem.

Is Sabbath-service behavior merely a matter of common courtesy, or does it suggest something more spiritual? When we contemplate anything in terms of the Sabbath, we need to remember that God calls it "My holy day" (Isaiah 58:13). This means that improper behavior during the worship service is not just impolite—it is irreverent!

Lately, the Church of the Great God's Sabbath services have been interrupted by inconsiderate speech and other noises over the telephone conference call. Ministers have reminded the church that the service occurs during holy time and that its chief purpose is the worship of Almighty God. It is hoped that every church member who heard this immediately gave some thought to his treatment of Sabbath time and the behavior of his children during services.

When corrected, a converted mind will recognize its shortcomings and make the necessary changes. Human nature, however, tends to be self-justifying. Herbert Armstrong often said that the human nature in us wants to *be* right, but it does not want to *do* right. It desires others to *perceive* it as doing right, not as doing or being wrong, but it resists actually doing what is right.

## Traditional Services

Because this problem is so frequent and widespread, it is a good idea to review the guidelines for proper behavior during Sabbath services. These are not a set of "dos and don'ts" that are written down in some Pharisaical church manual. They are generally accepted standards of manners, decency and decorum that have been practiced in the church of God for 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or doctrine is not reviewed from the pulpit on a regular or frequent basis, we can tend to assume that the item is no longer in force.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, we 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 congregations, however, are now reduced to a handful of members. Nevertheless, with one modification (the roll call and telephone hookup), we have maintained the traditional church-service format we used for all those years. Why change a good thing?

For those who must listen in from their living room, it is, sadly, the best they can do under the circumstances. Yet, if proper safeguards are not instituted, this living-room format can 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 behavior—neither on the weekly Sabbaths, nor when the family does eventually have the opportunity to attend a formal church service. Parents have the responsibility to prepare their children for proper behavior during services—even if they only get to practice it for eight days during the year at the Feast of Tabernacles.

We realize that our living rooms and meeting halls are not magnificent cathedrals. But when His people are gathered there, God Himself also attends: "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). The opening prayer frequently beseeches God to be there in spirit.

Two things that have been hard hit in the past decade are respect for the authority of the church leadership and for some of the long-standing, Bible-based traditions and customs of the church. The words and deeds of the ministers and any others who have stood behind the pulpits and podiums of the church have been closely scrutinized by their audiences. Considering what has happened in the church, it is right that the members should "test all things" (I Thessalonians 5:21). Perhaps if we had been adequately "testing all things" all along, we would not be in this situation now! Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should lose proper respect for God, His true ministers or the proper formality of Sabbath services.

Any deacon or elder will agree that he has been ordained to serve God's people. He knows that he does not have the authority or the responsibility to "tell off" parents or children for misbehavior or disrespect during Sabbath services. The responsibility he *has* been given is to maintain peace and decorum during the three or four hours that we come together for church services. He does not want 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, not one of us wants to attend a church in which anarchy reigns! The order of proceedings is unavoidably broken up enough, each week, by delays necessary for dialing in, without adding to the upset with behavior that we know to be wrong.

## **Proper Conduct**

Standards can vary somewhat—yes, even among the brethren—about what is proper and improper conduct on the Sabbath, before and after as well as during services. But if we are going to err, it must be on the side of the conservative, the peaceful and the quiet.

God has made it clear that, even within His Family, it is necessary for each Christian to have his own individual relationship with Him. We say that we enjoy fellowshiping with those who believe the same as we do, and this is good. But because each Christian has a unique background and experience, the details of his or her set of beliefs will be somewhat different from other's.

If we combine these concepts of differing standards of behavior and details of belief, however, and take them to the very extreme, each of us would be fellowshiping alone each week. There are many of our brethren around the world who have done just this! And this is not good, as Hebrews 10:25 shows.

When we come together on a Sabbath or holy day to worship God and 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. Again, we must err on the side of peace and quiet (I Corinthians 14: 33). The following points will promote proper behavior during Sabbath services:

***Plan to be at every service.***

Do not miss a service for trivial reasons. Remember that it is an appointment with the Almighty God. Would He accept your excuse? Malachi 1 explains that God is not pleased in the least with petty justifications.

Do we really *have* to be at services? Some justify staying home by saying that they could hear the sermon on a tape or on the Internet soon afterward. However, perhaps we do not need just the sermon the particular Sabbath we stay away for trivial reasons. Maybe participating in the fellowship, filling another's need, listening to the sermonette, singing hymns, or hearing the announcements is what we really need that particular week.

Also, when planning your Sabbath morning, try to leave a little margin for unexpected emergencies. Delays on the road, a flat tire or any number mishaps could make you run late. No harm comes from arriving early for church.

***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. Most of the time, they are applicable to a majority of the brethren.

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. We have brethren who are in serious difficulties and truly need our prayers. Praying for one another binds us together and truly helps in healing (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. Besides this, it is better to leave the rear seats for brethren with special needs and parents with young children. When interruptions do take place, strive to concentrate hard on the messages.

***Do not interrupt others.***

Do not be the individual or allow your family to be guilty of initiating or permitting any disturbance to the other brethren. Many times, such interruptions are simply inconsiderate behavior: talking, crinkling candy wrappers, getting up and down and so forth.

Also, please do not "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 songleader or the sermonette speaker. At the other end of the service, please do not start putting your books away as soon as the minister giving the sermon says, "And for the final scripture. . . ."

### ***Sing!***

A whole article could be devoted to this subject alone. Why do some seem to be ashamed of singing songs of worship to the great God? 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 praises! The Bible repeatedly encourages us to praise God in song:

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

» . . . speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father. . . . (Ephesians 5:19)

» Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. (James 5:13)

Hearty hymn singing is spiritually good for us. Our heavenly Father and Jesus Christ enjoy hearing such an offering. While singing, we should think about the words of the hymn—otherwise they are just vain repetitions, which Jesus warns us to avoid: "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—there is no good reason to be ashamed of it!

### ***Keep the meeting hall tidy.***

Make sure you and your children pick up any papers and other trash left on the floor or seats. Apart from being your parental duty, this will help those who clean up after services.

### ***Teach your children to stay quiet.***

We repeat this here for emphasis. Some brethren no longer have the regular opportunity to enjoy formal Sabbath services throughout the year and, by necessity, spend most of them at home. When they do come to services, the children are often unprepared for the quiet behavior that is necessary for a peaceful and orderly two-hour service.

Parents in this situation 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, and it should be treated with the same reverence and decorum as would be expected in an auditorium with hundreds of people.

Take your young children to the restroom ten minutes before services begin. Older children should take themselves! Please do not let your children wander in and out of the meeting room repeatedly for water or trips to the bathroom once services have commenced. This is distracting and annoying for other members seated nearby and shows a lack of respect for God.

### ***Bring appropriate toys and activities.***

Please do not bring rattles or any noisy toys for young children. Some may think it cute and humorous when Baby squeaks his bunny during services, but others who are trying to listen to the

sermon certainly will not. Do not allow children to click pens, tear pages out of notebooks or crumple paper. Just because a child is not speaking does not mean he is quiet.

Children who cannot follow along with the sermonette and sermon should bring appropriate books for the Sabbath—not ghoulish, gory or violent tales (which probably should not even be permitted into your home—and certainly not in Sabbath services). This is God's day and God's service, so we should attempt to keep Satan out of it completely!

Also, it is inappropriate to eat and drink during church services, unless a person has a health problem that demands it—and even then it should be done discreetly. The principle that Paul gives the Corinthian church regarding the Passover service in I Corinthians 11:22 applies equally to Sabbath services: "What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God . . . ? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you." If a person needs a drink to soothe a dry throat, he should quietly leave the room, get a drink, and return to his seat.

***Train babies to sleep.***

Many older adults have been in the same circumstances as the church's young mothers and fathers—so please do not be embarrassed if your baby occasionally fusses during services. However, training your baby to take his nap at the same time during the week as "church time" will greatly decrease such occurrences. With today's frantic pace, this is not always easy to plan, but it will save a great deal of going in and out of services. And maybe even a little embarrassment.

***Use the mothers' room.***

If your baby or older child cries or makes noise, please take him out right away. Do not try to tough it out in the hope that he will soon quiet down and fall asleep. Again, do not be embarrassed. Many of us have been through it and know how it feels. Nevertheless, please be considerate of the other members who are trying to listen to the message.

***Do not hesitate to discipline your children, if necessary.***

If a child is rebellious or does something worthy of punishment, his parents should not put off discipline because of the service. If it is postponed, he will soon learn that he can get away with a great deal during services. Discipline him in a private place—even though one must remain out of services for a longer period than one prefers. The public restroom is not a private place.

***Do not let your children wander.***

This is especially important for the safety of younger children, but applies to teens as well. Children belong in the meeting hall with their parents. 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 in attendance.

***Do not let your children sit unsupervised.***

Children should sit neither alone nor with other children without adult supervision. Again, this applies to both teens and pre-teens. The two-hour period of church services is not an appropriate time for children to pass notes, fellowship and giggle. They have lots of time for these activities before

and after services. Although some parents may have trained themselves to tune it out, such behavior annoys and distracts other adults. In addition, if you have another member's child or children sitting with you, it is *your* responsibility to make sure that they behave properly and quietly.

Let's all make an extra effort to refrain from disrespecting God on His Sabbath day and from disturbing those who desire to worship Him as He commands. None of these suggestions is difficult to put into practice, and frankly, they are courtesies all converted members should know and practice. We should therefore take the apostle Paul's advice in I Corinthians 14:40: "Let all things be done decently and in order."