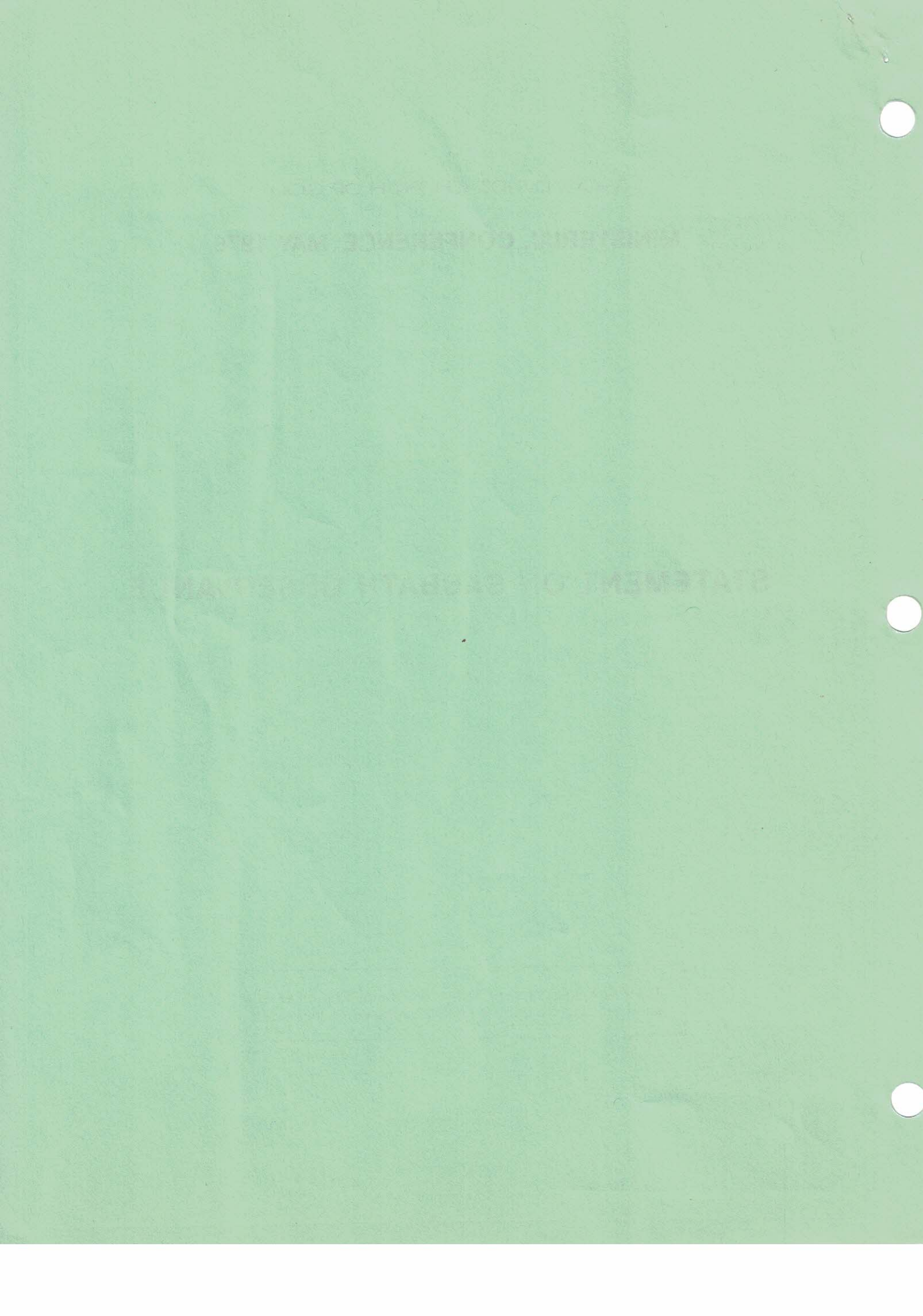


WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD

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STATEMENT ON SABBATH OBSERVANCE

The following statement of the Worldwide Church of God
supersedes all material heretofore published on this subject.



STATEMENT ON SABBATH OBSERVANCE

The question to be addressed here is not whether to observe the Sabbath day--but how. In recent months, a number of questions have been raised by the field ministry concerning business and recreational activities on the Sabbath day.

It is essential, at this point, that we realize that it is not the responsibility of the Church to create a Talmud of do's and don'ts for Sabbath observance. The Church teaches the broad principles and the members apply them in situations as they arise. The Church cannot "pontificate" on every last situation that may be encountered. Each member must be educated and encouraged to make personal value judgments according to his own character and conscience within the general guidelines provided by the Church.

It is the duty of the ministry to teach the profound spiritual meaning of the seventh day from a biblical perspective. We must teach both what the letter of the law says and what the spirit of the Sabbath law is.

The Meaning of the Sabbath Day

It should be emphasized at the beginning that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (cf. Mark 2:27). God created the Sabbath day to serve man--not vice versa. Man was not intended to be enslaved to a period of time. Sabbath observance should not be allowed to become an end in itself. Rather, the day is to serve and help those who observe it. The Sabbath was created, as Christ pointed out, for the service of mankind.

In the beginning, the Sabbath was rendered "holy time" by God at creation.

"Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation" (Gen. 2:1-3, RSV).

That period of time defined broadly as "evening and morning" was blessed and hallowed. To hallow or sanctify is to make holy or set apart for holy use. When originally defined, the days of re-creation week are defined only in the

broad terms of "evening and morning," not specifically from the moment of sunset to sunset. It is the individual's responsibility, whatever the local geographic configuration or latitude, to determine as best he is able the meaning of "evening" which begins a day. Scandinavians certainly have more need of a broad meaning of "evening" than do people who live in the tropics.

It was a day upon which God "rested"--that is, ceased from His labors of creation--"and was refreshed" (Ex. 31:17).

The example is clear. God rested. Man should rest from his weekly labors also. When man observes the Sabbath day, he is imitating his Creator and commemorating the creation itself.

The Israelites were instructed to cease from their usual food-gathering labors on the seventh day as God Himself had set the example (Ex. 16:28, 30). The day was to be a time of "solemn rest," a "holy sabbath" (verse 23).

In the giving of the Decalogue at Sinai the command concerning the Sabbath became the "fourth commandment." The Israelites were instructed to keep the seventh day holy: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it" (Ex. 20:8-11, RSV).

The theocracy of Israel was primarily an agrarian society. "Work" most often meant farm labor of one kind or another. That is why the commandment includes cattle or oxen. In context it is clear that labor which involved planting, plowing and harvesting is what was being forbidden on the seventh day.

There is a parallel between this kind of labor and the work of God at creation--thus, the discussion of creation in verse 11.

As the community of Israel developed sophistication within the context of a national theocracy, the implications of the fourth commandment extended into other areas. In the special "sabbath covenant" section (Ex. 31:12-17) the command to rest applied to "any work" (verse 14).

In short, the Sabbath is a day when God's people cease from their usual work-day labors as did God. The fact that we are imitating God's example when we do so shows our special relationship with God--it shows that we are "His people!"

Isaiah 58 sheds more light on the meaning of the Sabbath day in Israel. "If you turn back your foot from the sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the sabbath day a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; then shall you take delight in the Lord..." (Isa. 58:13-14, RSV).

In short, the Sabbath is God's day. It is a day devoted to God and to godly activities. It is holy. It is hallowed. It is a day to be honored. It is a time to "delight in the Lord" as opposed to one's own mundane business affairs.

Note: It should be carefully noted that the term "seeking your own pleasure" does not, in the Hebrew, have reference to personal enjoyment. The word "pleasure" is khephets in Hebrew. In the Jewish translation it is rendered "thine own business."

The New English Bible makes the meaning clearer than either the King James version or the Revised Standard Version:

"If you cease to tread the sabbath underfoot, and keep my holy day free from your own affairs, if you call the sabbath a day of joy... if you honor it by not plying your trade, not seeking your own affairs..."

This translation shows the true intention of the words "thine own pleasure!" The Hebrew term rendered "pleasure" is often translated "desire" or "purpose" in other passages (cf. Eccl. 3:1, 17; I Kings 5:8, 9, 10, etc.). The Jewish translation speaks of "pursuing thy business" and "thy wonted ways." The Hebrew khephets is not addressing the question of pleasurable activities that are illegal on the seventh day! If pleasure were not present, how could the day possibly be a delight?!

This passage of scripture has been erroneously applied to such activities as television viewing, swimming, listening to music, marital relations, and even reading the weekly comics in the newspaper! Of course, any of these activities could violate the spirit of the Sabbath day if they are abused or overdone. They are not, of and by themselves, wrong. Any activity which interferes with or detracts from the joy,

rest and spiritual intention of the day could be wrong. If an activity works against the spirit of the Sabbath, it is wrong, no matter what it is.

The main concern of most scriptures pertaining to the Sabbath is that one should not pursue his usual business or work activities on that day. One should have more of God and less of himself in his thoughts on the Sabbath. It is a day to honor God, to remember His creation, and to rest.

Obviously then, it should not be a day of violent physical activity of any kind--work or play. It is a day of restfulness. It's a time to unwind and draw close to God.

One's own thoughts of business, money-making, buying and selling, or one's job, should be minimized. The cares of the week are left behind. It's a day to "take it easy" and worship God. This is the spirit of the day.

This background should help put things in perspective. Jesus provided additional insight into the intention of the weekly Sabbath when He said, "...it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:12).

He was speaking of such things as healing, or pulling a stranded animal out of a ditch and similar activities.

Jesus was expounding the spirit of the day in these examples. By the "ox in the ditch" example, He showed that it is not that all physical activity is wrong--only that kind of labor which is involved in earning a living or doing business. Pulling an ox out of a ditch could involve considerable expenditure of physical effort! Yet it was not wrong because it was "doing good."

It's a matter of catching the spirit of the law and ordering one's priorities aright. If we can do good for a domestic animal--how much more a human being who is of infinitely more value? (cf. Matt. 12:9-14).

The sect of the Pharisees had missed the point of the Sabbath law. They thought that virtually all physical effort, except for a very limited amount, was wrong. Christ showed that it is not the effort, but the kind and direction of the effort that is important.

Doing good--serving people who are in dire need--is not wrong on the Sabbath day. Serving one's own business interests is wrong.

With these basic guidelines in mind it should be evident that the individual must evaluate each situation that confronts him as it arises. He (or she) must ask several basic questions: Will this activity violate the spirit and intent of the Sabbath day? Is it clearly wrong? Can I do it in faith?

If there is doubt in the person's mind, he should not do it (Rom. 14:23). If it is questionable, it is probably best to avoid it. If it would offend his conscience--or that of others in the Church--he should avoid the activity. Paul said, "I will eat no meat while the world stands if it cause my brother to offend."

This type of conditioning provides the members of the Church with the basis for personal decision-making. It is not the duty of the ministry to spell out and "rule" on every last kind of activity in the human realm! It is our job to teach the law, and the spirit of the law. It is the individual's responsibility to interpret that teaching in the light of his or her own situation.

By way of clarification, the following examples may be taught:

It is obviously out of step with the spirit of the Sabbath day to participate in violent physical sports activities. Can one "keep the sabbath holy" while charging down a football field or basketball court? In competitive sports one must go "all out" to the point of exhaustion to win. The Sabbath is a day of rest.

The Sabbath would not be a day to dig up the garden or plow, or harvest in a major way. But there is nothing wrong with pulling a few carrots or stalks of celery for a fresh salad.

One should not do the entire week's shopping on Saturday. But, if the baby needs milk, and you're out of it, there is nothing wrong with picking up a quart or two. There's a principle here.

As a rule, Christians should avoid getting into situations where Sabbath observance becomes difficult. As we have always said, it is best to remain far from the edge of the cliff. Why get into borderline situations in which there is a hairline between keeping the Sabbath and violating it? This is especially true concerning business matters. Partnerships with non-Church members can be difficult in this respect.

Motel operation presents many problems. Business involving emergency services can be awkward. (For example, suppose you operate a towing service?)

Members should be advised to use vision and foresight in planning business ventures that could present problems in the future. They should be encouraged to avoid awkward and difficult situations.

We should remember that Israel was a self-contained, controllable, theocratic community. In today's world, Christians cannot control the circumstances of their environments except to a very limited extent. We are sent into the world (John 17:18). We must co-exist with a world that does not generally obey God. Our situation is quite different from that of ancient Israel!

Often, we are presented with difficult choices. In the developing nations, for example, certain activities are compulsory by law. Those failing to comply can be shot or imprisoned!

In certain parts of Europe, it is possible to lose custody of one's children if one does not send them to school on the Sabbath. If this were to happen, parents would have no control over their children whatsoever. They would still end up going to school! It is better to allow them to attend school that half-day than to lose them altogether! Of course, it is not ideal--but it is the best thing to do under the circumstances.

If a man is to be imprisoned and taken from his family who rely upon him to provide for and support them, it is better that he perform a public service without pay (e.g., garbage disposal), if the law requires it, than to allow this to happen. God places heavy emphasis on a man's responsibility to provide for his own family in the New Testament. Those who fail to do so are considered "worse than infidels!" (I Tim. 5:8).

Let's remember--THE SABBATH WAS MADE FOR MAN--NOT MAN FOR THE SABBATH!