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Principles of Sabbath Observance

Eating Out on the Sabbath

*Prepared by the Doctrine Committee
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Eating Out on the Sabbath

The issue of eating out on the Sabbath has been raised occasionally over the years. Clearly Christianity involves personal choice for conscience sake. The apostle Paul took the position that he would not eat meat if it would cause someone to stumble. To eat or not to eat meat was a conscious choice that he could make. The act itself was not a matter of sin.

“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble” (1 Corinthians 8:13). There was no reason to force or cause someone to feel badly if he for conscience sake felt he could not eat meat that had been offered to an idol.

In the book of Romans Paul offers a statement about conscience. “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

What does the Bible tell us about Sabbath observance and specifically eating out in a restaurant on the Sabbath? Is eating out in a restaurant a violation of the Sabbath? This paper will analyze the scriptures and biblical principles covering Sabbath observance in regard to this topic.

Biblical Background and Jewish Oral Law

The Sabbath is referenced in 61 verses in the Old Testament and 55 verses in the New Testament. Since there is no “thus saith the Lord” on eating or not eating in restaurants on the Sabbath, we must interpret the scriptures and look for principles that will apply. There are two methods for determining how we approach Sabbath observance—(1) direct biblical command; and (2) biblical example.

The issue of eating out on the Sabbath revolves around the concepts of commerce (doing business on the Sabbath) and causing others to work. There are two sections of Scripture that reference “buying” and “selling” on the Sabbath—Nehemiah 13:15-21 and Amos 8:5. These are the two primary sections that are used by those who believe that eating out on the Sabbath is a violation of the Sabbath command. Consider that out of 116 verses, there are only two that directly address the issue of commerce and the Sabbath.

In addition to the biblical account of Sabbath keeping, in the Jewish community there exists the oral law, to be interpreted by the Sanhedrin. Of course the Sanhedrin disappeared over 1,700 years ago, but its influence is still felt today. The oral law (now written in the *Talmud*) contains 39 categories of forbidden work on the Sabbath. Some of these are specified in the Bible, but not all, yet they were enforced by the Sanhedrin during the time of Christ. As in all matters, we must be careful to separate biblical fact from tradition. In his book *Sabbath—Day of Eternity* Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan writes this about commerce on the Sabbath:

The Sanhedrin legislated a prohibition against all forms of buying, selling, trading and other commerce for a variety of reasons. The Sabbath must be a day when all business stops.¹

¹ Kaplan, Rabbi Aryeh, *Sabbath—Day of Eternity* (Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America: New York, New York) 2002.

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This was legislated in the oral law which developed over many years, but much of the development occurred in the period of time between the two testaments (400 B.C. to A.D. 100). When the Old Testament ends there is no Sanhedrin, but when the New Testament begins it is a thriving institution. The Sanhedrin wielded much power during this time when it came to Sabbath observance. The prohibition against carrying (one of the 39 categories of work) was used by the Sanhedrin to deny any sort of commerce.

This category absolutely forbids all carrying in the street. Even such trivial things as a key or a handkerchief must be left at home. Certainly pocketbooks, purses, wallets and keychains may not be carried. The only things one may carry outdoors are things that are actually worn.²

The power of the Sanhedrin was uncontested. They were the authors and final arbiters of Jewish law.

During the time of the Roman persecutions, it became very difficult to maintain the academies where the Oral Torah was taught, and it was feared that it would be forgotten and lost. Because of this, it was finally put into writing some 1700 years ago to form what we call the Talmud.³

The Talmud itself says that the laws of the Sabbath are only alluded to by a hairsbreadth in the Written Torah, but rise like mountains in the Oral Law.⁴

This body [the Sanhedrin] had a twofold authority. First of all, it was the keeper of the Oral Torah, and was charged with its interpretation. As such, it functioned as the supreme court of Jewish law. Secondly, it had the authority to legislate religious law. Since this authority was derived from the Torah itself, it was as binding as Biblical law. Once legislation was passed, it could only be repealed by the Sanhedrin itself. Such legislation was most often aimed at maintaining the spirit, as well as the letter, of the law.⁵

A prime rule given to the Sanhedrin was to “make a fence around the Torah.”⁶ Jesus Christ did not support the many rules and regulations developed by the Sanhedrin to legislate Sabbath observance. He denounced many of these traditions (Mark 7:9, 13). This should give us reason to pause when it comes to Jewish rules and regulations concerning Sabbath observance.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Chagigah* 1:8 (10a), *Tosefos Yom Tom ad loc.*

⁵ Kaplan, Rabbi Aryeh, *Sabbath—Day of Eternity* (Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America: New York, New York) 2002.

⁶ *Avos* 1:1.

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Nehemiah 13:15-21

To understand this section of Scripture, we need to understand what was going on at the time. Ezra had arrived in Jerusalem from Babylon in 457 B.C. (the seventh year of the king). The temple had been built earlier, but things were in disarray by the time Ezra arrives. He oversees a correction of the people in the area of marriages to strange women. The Jews had begun to marry the people in the surrounding areas. Ezra put an end to this during his time in Jerusalem, but it did not last.

Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer (or special assistant) when he heard of the difficulties in Jerusalem. The king gives him his leave to travel to Jerusalem to resolve the problems that exist. He is named governor for Judea. This was now the 20th year of the king or 13 years after Ezra had gone to Jerusalem. He finds things again in disarray. The temple was not being maintained, the wall had not been rebuilt and Jerusalem was a broken-down city. Nehemiah brings about another reform, similar in some ways to the one brought about by Ezra. He also set about to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. They finished building the wall in 52 days, in spite of the many obstacles that were put before them (Nehemiah 6:15).

After the wall was rebuilt, another reform was instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra read from the law to the people (Nehemiah 7) and the people responded positively. After this, Nehemiah proposed a covenant for the people. This covenant agreement is outlined in Nehemiah 9:38 through 10:29.

“And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it. Now those who placed their seal on the document were: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah and Zedekiah...” (Nehemiah 9:38 to 10:1).

There were seven distinct expectations for the Jews in this covenant (Nehemiah 10:29-39):

1. Obedience to “God’s Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God” (Nehemiah 10:29).
2. No marriages with the inhabitants of the land.
3. Any wares brought into Jerusalem would not be purchased by the Jews on the Sabbath day or any Holy Day.
4. Land was to rest in the seventh year and all debts forgiven according to the year of release.
5. There was to be a temple tax to take care of the upkeep of the temple.
6. The Levites were to receive the tithes and the firstfruits.
7. The Levites were to contribute a tithe of the tithe to the temple.

Some of these can be found within the “law of Moses,” but some go beyond the law itself. In the case of the Sabbath, this is the first mention of a prohibition concerning commerce on the Sabbath. Jewish scholars contend that it was the first time the issue of buying and selling on the Sabbath was even addressed.

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The prohibition was against setting up a market on the Sabbath or a Holy Day. There is no mention of eating or not eating on the Sabbath. The Jews had made the Sabbath a secular day in which it was acceptable to go to market. Going to market was an all-day activity. In most ancient societies (as well as in several areas of the world today) a whole day was set aside as the day for market because it took so much time. This was the intent of Nehemiah's agreement. **Don't make the Sabbath a market day or a day to do your weekly shopping.** It was no doubt a gradual thing among the Jews. But by the time of Nehemiah, the Sabbath had become a full-blown market day. This was wrong and did not allow for the proper keeping of the Sabbath. The agreement was that no "wares" or merchandise be bought by the Jews on the Sabbath. We are dealing with more than food items in this case. Proof that this was a market day and required the whole day can be found in the example of the traders who lodged overnight outside the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 13:20-21). They didn't lodge outside the walls every day. This was one day in the week when all the traders came to the city and not an everyday occurrence. The lesson here is that the Sabbath should not become our shopping day. This example, of and by itself, does not prohibit eating out in a restaurant. Eating out in a restaurant is not the same as doing your weekly shopping for all your household items.

Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem and returns to the king for "certain days" (Nehemiah 13:6). Later when he returns to Jerusalem he finds that virtually all the agreements reached previously had been abandoned. This grieved him immensely. He cried out to God to remember him for the good he had done and not the end result that he saw in Judah (Nehemiah 13:14).

Nehemiah saw the evil that was being done by the high priest in giving a room in the temple to Tobiah. He became so angry that he threw all his belongings out of the temple area. He then reopened the treasuries for the tithes.

He saw people treading grapes on the Sabbath—working in clear violation of the Sabbath command (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). They were loading up their produce and bringing it into Jerusalem to sell. They had again made the Sabbath a market day. All of these activities mentioned here (Nehemiah 13:15-17) dealt with a market day. This is not a restaurant nor does it have anything to do with eating a meal. It was a market day! Notice the items mentioned here: wine, sheaves, grapes, figs, provisions (corn and other items of sustenance), fish and "all kinds of goods." The Sabbath had become the one day in the week for going to market. This was a clear violation of the agreement that had been reached prior to Nehemiah's departure.

There is a huge difference between opening up a market or going to market on the Sabbath day and eating a meal in a restaurant. Nehemiah was appalled when he saw the temple in disarray, no tithes in the storehouse and the Sabbath being used as a market day. He set about to rectify this problem.

Nehemiah shut down the market on the Sabbath, but the foreign traders still came. So he closed the gates and set guards around the city to keep them out. It is interesting to note that Nehemiah expected individuals to "work" on the Sabbath. He set up guards (Nehemiah 13:22) and he threatened to do bodily harm to the foreigners who lodged outside the wall (Nehemiah

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13:21). Nehemiah's reaction to those who violated the Sabbath came in a time when the civil power controlled the keeping of the Sabbath. We do not live in such a time today. Obviously there are aspects of Nehemiah's conduct that cannot be applied directly to our lives today.

In addition to Nehemiah's reforms related to the Sabbath, there were other reforms expected of the Jews. Nehemiah was highly agitated that many of the Jewish children did not speak Hebrew, but spoke the language of Ashdod (Nehemiah 13:24). He was so upset that he "struck some of them and pulled out their hair" (Nehemiah 13:25) and made them swear that they would not allow their children to intermarry with the neighboring people. What should we learn from this example? How can we apply this to our lives today? Should we attack people and pull their hair out if we don't agree with their conduct?

The principles we should learn from Nehemiah 13 are respect for the Sabbath and that one should seek to marry someone of like faith. Everything that was done in Nehemiah 13 cannot be applied directly to our lives today. Notice the following activities from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

1. Setting guards with weapons (swords and spears) on the walls of the city. Should we carry weapons? Can a Christian carry a weapon and be a security guard? Can a Christian work on the Sabbath as a security guard?
2. Threatening to do bodily harm to those who lodged outside Jerusalem waiting to do business with the Jews on the Sabbath. Should a Christian threaten bodily harm toward someone who attempts to break the Sabbath?
3. Attacking people because of the manner in which they were raising their children and pulling out their hair. Is it permissible for a Christian to attack another Christian over his approach toward child rearing?
4. Forcing people to divorce who were married to a foreigner (this was in the case of Ezra). Should the Church demand that everyone who is married to a foreigner be expected to divorce upon entering the Church? Or should the Church insist that everyone who is married to a non-believer be forced to divorce prior to becoming a member of the Church?

We must be careful when extracting principles that we do not jump to conclusions in our comparisons to modern-day life when civil law is not in the hands of Sabbath keepers. One cannot transfer the events of that day to our day. Nehemiah 13 is not about eating out in a restaurant. This was not the problem. The Jews had turned the Sabbath into market day and were selling all kinds of wares. This wasn't just a food market. The Sabbath had become the primary business and shopping day of the week in Jerusalem. This was contrary to the spirit of the Sabbath commandment. There was no direct statement made in the law regarding business or going to market on the Sabbath. Nehemiah took the law and applied it in principle to the activities of the Jews. When there is no "thus saith the Lord," then we must study the law and extract principles that apply to our day.

Additionally it should be noted that these restrictions were only in Jerusalem. What about the other cities in Judea? What about inns where people lodged and ate while traveling? If

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someone was on the road, traveling in Judea on the Sabbath day, could he get a meal at one of the inns along the way? How were these principles applied in the other cities of Judea? We must admit that we simply do not know the answers to these questions. There is no mention in Scripture of the other cities in Judea during the time of Nehemiah.

Amos 8:5

Amos is referencing a similar type situation to that of Nehemiah 13. The discussion is about business and is not applicable to eating out in a restaurant.

“Saying: ‘When will the New Moon be past, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may trade wheat? Making the ephah small and the shekel large, falsifying the scales by deceit’” (Amos 8:5).

In this case the Israelites had become corrupt in their business dealings. They wanted to continue their businesses on the Sabbath and they were deceitful when they did conduct business. In this verse they can hardly wait until the Sabbath is over so that they can go back to their deceptive practices. The whole society was corrupt.

The Sabbath Commandment

There is nothing in the Sabbath commandment about eating in a restaurant or not eating in a restaurant. This was not an issue that needed addressing in the time of Moses. One must be careful in developing rules for Sabbath observance that are outside the bounds of what God has given. The Pharisees were condemned by Christ for adding to the Sabbath command. They developed 39 categories of work that were forbidden on the Sabbath. Christ did not accept their explanation of what was permitted and what was denied on the Sabbath.

Christ was condemned by the Pharisees for healing on the Sabbath. Christ and His disciples were condemned by the Pharisees for plucking grain and removing it from the head on the Sabbath. This was harvesting and required too much work, according to the Pharisees.

Matthew 12 has two examples of Christ’s rejection of the rules that had been established about the Sabbath. His disciples were “hungry” and they plucked the heads of grain. They removed the grain from the head, which was considered work by the Pharisees. Christ clearly stated that the disciples did nothing wrong by satisfying their hunger on the Sabbath. He proclaimed that He was “Lord of the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:8). He then proceeded to heal people who were sick on the Sabbath. Christ clearly showed that it is a mistake to develop your own rules for Sabbath observance unless there is clear biblical support. The Pharisees had the biblical command that did not allow work, but they took it to a level that God never intended.

The following verses summarize the Sabbath in the Old Testament:

1. Genesis 2:2-3. God rests on the seventh day, which is called Shabbat.

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2. Exodus 31:13, 16; Ezekiel 20:12. There is a Sabbath covenant. The Sabbath is a sign of the people of God.
3. Exodus 16:4-36. Manna was not to be gathered on the Sabbath.
4. Exodus 16:23. The principle of the day of preparation. God instructed Israel to prepare on the sixth day so that no unnecessary work would be performed on the Sabbath day. Specifically the command addresses baking and boiling. To bake food or boil food required much work. The ovens of ancient times required an extremely hot fire to produce enough heat to bake something. And the same was true of boiling. There is no problem with having a fire for heat or to warm something prior to eating. The whole concept of cooking for your family required a day of preparation in order to avoid breaking the Sabbath.
5. Exodus 16:29. People should not move about unduly. "Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day."
6. Exodus 34:21. No labor is to be performed to give both humans and animals an opportunity to rest.
7. Exodus 35:3. No fire is to be kindled on the Sabbath. This was in reference to fires for work and/or baking/boiling. A fire for warmth was not a problem.
8. Numbers 28:9-10. Special sacrifices were required on the Sabbath.
9. Nehemiah 13:15-22. The Sabbath must not be treated as a market day.
10. Exodus 31:14; Numbers 15:32-36. The penalty for violating the Sabbath was death.
11. Isaiah 58:13-14. Observing the Sabbath with proper reverence brings great blessings. We are not to do our business (work) on the Sabbath. The Bible in Basic English translates verse 13: "If you keep the Sabbath with care, not doing your business on my holy day; and if the Sabbath seems to you a delight..."

In the New Testament Christ gives insight into Sabbath observance. He violates many of the rules that were established by the Jews, but He never broke God's law. Christ provides the following principles:

1. The Sabbath was made for man. It is a tool for worshiping God and not an object of worship.
2. Christ is Lord of the Sabbath. He was the One who created all things, including the Sabbath.
3. Healing and doing good are permissible on the Sabbath. Even though the Jews viewed this as a violation of the Sabbath, Christ proclaimed this to be acceptable to God.
4. Eating is good on the Sabbath, even if it requires you to pluck the ears of grain and remove the seed. One doesn't have to go hungry on the Sabbath.
5. The Sabbath command is still in place today. The Sabbath pictures the millennial rest that God promises to His people (Hebrews 4).
6. Emergencies (ox in the ditch) justify "work." When one has a legitimate emergency (life or death, illness, accidents, etc.), he is not condemned for doing what is necessary to meet the challenge of the emergency.
7. As the priests in the Old Testament "violated" the Sabbath and were held guiltless, so there are those today in the Church who must "work" in serving on the Sabbath.

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Conclusion

There is much to learn about the Sabbath. It is a wonderful gift that God has given us to use in worshipping Him. Generally, in our day and age, the tendency is to take the Sabbath for granted. More people seem to be too liberal with the Sabbath as compared to those who are too strict. The Church encourages its membership to take the Sabbath seriously and not to allow so many liberties that the Sabbath becomes just another day.

We must make better use of the day of preparation so that we avoid activities on the Sabbath that would profane the day. We must do a better job of scheduling our travel so that there is no unnecessary travel performed on the Sabbath. All of these fit in quite nicely with the biblical principles regarding the Sabbath day.

Eating in a restaurant doesn't violate the principles as given in the Bible about the Sabbath. In fact, to eat in a restaurant after Sabbath services with our spiritual family can be one of the highlights of a person's week. In many small congregations the entire group goes out together after services, either for lunch or dinner. It is a wonderful way to spend a portion of the Sabbath. Of course, we also need private time together with our families in the home. And we need the fellowship of a Sabbath service to fully appreciate the meaning of the day. The key in all these areas is one of balance. Even a good thing can become a curse if it is used inappropriately.

What about specific questions regarding eating out in a restaurant?

1. Isn't it wrong to have someone serve you in a restaurant? Are they working for you?

The answer to both questions is "no." The waitresses, waiters, cooks, etc., in a restaurant are not your servants. They do not live in your household. This was the principle given in Exodus. Those who live under your roof or are under your control were not to work on the Sabbath. This cannot be applied to a waitress unless you have control over her and can force her not to work. There are even occasions where someone under your roof cannot be forced to keep the Sabbath. An example would be a son or daughter who is older, yet chooses to live at home. Many people today have 25- and 30-year-old children living at home. Should you force them to keep the Sabbath? Can you forbid them from working? Wisdom must dictate who is considered part of your household and, therefore, under your control.

If you are the sole owner of a business, you should close it down on the Sabbath day. But the people who work for you still don't keep the Sabbath. They may choose to work a second job for another employer or they may choose to do other activities that would not be in keeping with the Sabbath. If you don't go to the restaurant, the waitresses will still be working. You are not causing them to work by eating out in the restaurant nor are you causing them to break the Sabbath.

If you conclude that a waitress is working for you, then the same logic could be applied to those who work at the power plants producing electricity for you (and

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others) and those who work at the water plants or those who work in the hospitals. According to this logic, Sabbath observance would require that you not turn on electricity or use any water in your home on the Sabbath in order to be consistent. What if you need to take public transportation to get to services on the Sabbath? You will need to pay the taxi driver or purchase a subway ticket. In the Church we rent halls on the Sabbath for services. In some cases we are required to have a janitor present. If one believes he is “doing business” by eating in a restaurant on the Sabbath, then, in principle, this would also be a problem. What about garbage collection that takes place on the Sabbath in some neighborhoods? What about people who rent a home or apartment? The rent does not cease on the Sabbath. These examples and questions support our position that eating in a restaurant does not violate the Sabbath.

2. Aren't you participating in a business transaction when you eat out on the Sabbath?

You most certainly will be expected to pay for the meal that you consume on the Sabbath. This is not running your business on the Sabbath. It is simply paying for the meal you received. There is nothing in Scripture that declares this act to be a violation of the Sabbath. It is actually less work for many to eat in a restaurant and pay for the meal than it is to have a group of people in your home to eat on the Sabbath. Even if you work diligently to prepare everything the day before, there will still be work involved when one entertains others in his home.

There are other areas that would be affected if one takes the position that eating in a restaurant on the Sabbath is a violation of the Sabbath. For example, when one goes to the Feast of Tabernacles, would we expect him to check out of his hotel room on Friday evening and not return until Saturday evening in order to keep from violating the Sabbath? By staying in a hotel on the Sabbath you are being served and you are being charged for that service. An entire staff of people is on duty 24 hours a day to serve your needs.

Another area of concern would be a nursing home or a hospital setting. A fee is charged for the meals in both locations and someone has to serve those meals. Are members of the Church who live in nursing homes or find themselves in a hospital over the Sabbath violating the Sabbath by eating their meals? We do not believe they are.

There are many other things that can be said about this issue, but the conclusion of the Church is that eating out on the Sabbath does not violate the Sabbath command. Whether one eats out on the Sabbath or does not eat out is a personal choice. But it must not become a point of division within the Church.

If, after looking at all the scriptures on this subject, an individual feels compelled not to eat out in a restaurant on the Sabbath, the Church respects his position. We simply ask that he keep it as a personal decision and not make any effort to persuade others of his view. To attempt to persuade others would be divisive (1 Corinthians 14:26). All things should be used for the purpose of edifying or building up and not tearing down.