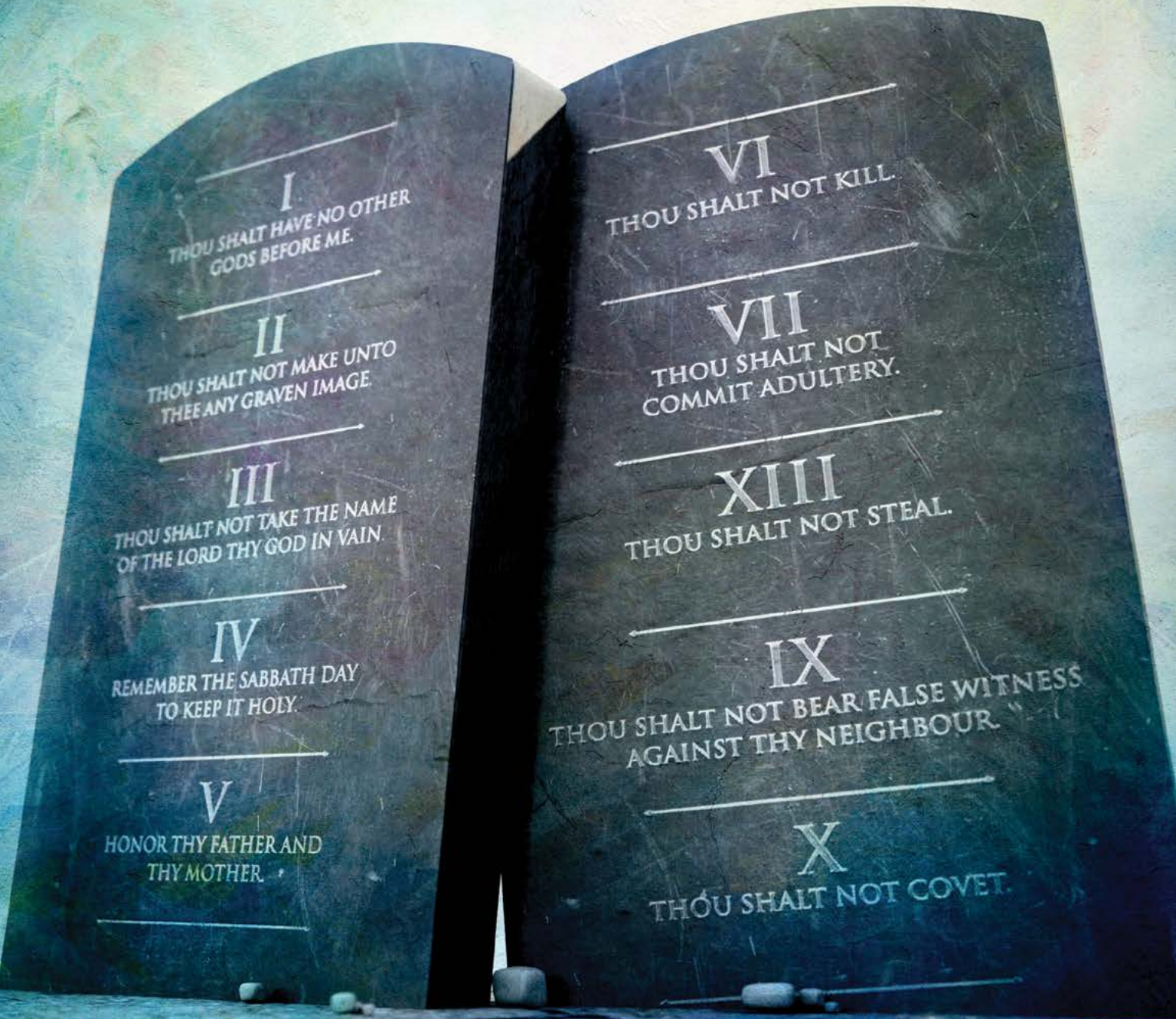




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INTERNATIONAL  
JOURNAL FOR PASTORS



I  
THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER  
GODS BEFORE ME.

II  
THOU SHALT NOT MAKE UNTO  
THEE ANY GRAVEN IMAGE.

III  
THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME  
OF THE LORD THY GOD IN VAIN.

IV  
REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY  
TO KEEP IT HOLY.

V  
HONOR THY FATHER AND  
THY MOTHER.

VI  
THOU SHALT NOT KILL.

VII  
THOU SHALT NOT  
COMMIT ADULTERY.

XIII  
THOU SHALT NOT STEAL.

IX  
THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS  
AGAINST THY NEIGHBOUR.

X  
THOU SHALT NOT COVET.

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## A larger heart

**S**tanding in line at a photo-printing shop in Manchester, England, I saw it: a beautiful poster advertising a family life seminar at a local synagogue.

"Sounds really appealing!" I commented to the rabbi having the poster printed.

"Oh, you wouldn't be able to attend," he said. "It's only for Jews."

I tried to establish common ground. "I am doing a doctorate in family life education. This would really interest me."

He wasn't buying it. "It's only for Jews."

Finally, I blurted out, "I am a Seventh-day Adventist minister. We honor the seventh-day Sabbath!"

He looked at me and said these words: "You cannot select which principles of the faith you will honor and which you won't. It's a complete package, not a smorgasbord."

I did not agree with his application—I felt we should share. But I had to agree with his aspiration—that people of faith embrace the totality of the biblical message. James said, "You can't pick and choose in these things, specializing in keeping one or two things in God's law and

ignoring others" (James 2:10, *The Message*). I realized the need to be faithful.

### Contributing to the whole

It was perfectly clear to the disciples—the other was wrong. He was performing a religious act similar to theirs but in a different way. The disciples believed they had it right, so the only question to be answered, then, was how to silence other voices on the topic. The Master's reaction? "Jesus wasn't pleased. 'Don't stop him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath slam me. If he's not an enemy, he's an ally'" (Mark 9:39, *The Message*). Allies! Jesus said these were not competing voices; they were complementary voices. Each was contributing something to the whole. I realized the need to be charitable.

Samuele Bacchiocchi's landmark publications on the Sabbath have been followed by other authoritative works.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there has been a growing interest in the topic among Christians of many persuasions.<sup>2</sup> We must applaud new insights into making "the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable" (Isa. 58:13, NKJV). But the



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SCAN FOR AUDIO

Sabbath is more than a balm for stressed-out leaders. Too often, the healthful benefit of the commandment is emphasized at the expense of Jesus' finished work of Creation and Redemption. The Lord has given us a memorial of His crucifixion. It's called Communion (1 Cor. 11:26). He has given us a memorial of His resurrection. It's called baptism (Rom. 6:4). And in the Sabbath, God has given us a memorial of His Creation (Exod. 20:11). It is not one day I select from the seven for my own purposes; it is "*the Sabbath of the LORD your God*" (Exod. 20:10, NKJV; emphasis added). I cannot pick and choose.

### Discovery of truth

In our joyful discovery of truth, then, first, let's be *faithful* to the biblical text. When I bumped into Matthew 15:9, my teenage life took a different turn. " 'And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men' " (NKJV). Let's have the heart to choose divine commandments over human traditions.

Second, let's be *charitable* to those whose faith walk may be close to ours but not identical. Professor Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, with her emphasis on grace, maintains, "It would be an

irresponsible Christian who did not listen to her sisters and brothers in other parts of the church universal."<sup>3</sup> The Seventh-day Adventist Church has been blessed and shaped by sisters and brothers in other parts of the church universal.<sup>4</sup> Let's have the heart to learn from each other.

How can we see each other as allies? Scripture says, " 'The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart' " (1 Sam. 16:7, NIV). Ultimately, seeing the bigger picture has one requirement—a larger heart.



- 1 Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977); Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1980); Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009).
- 2 Cf. Robert Morris, *Take the Day Off* (New York, NY: FaithWords, 2019). See "Resources" on page 30 of this issue.
- 3 Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 12.
- 4 George E. Vandeman, *What I Like About . . . the Lutherans, the Baptists, the Methodists, the Charismatics, the Catholics, Our Jewish Friends, the Adventists . . . Rescuers of Neglected Truth* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1986).

# Leading worship:

A biblical command





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SCAN FOR AUDIO

**A**m I wrong or is there a growing restlessness over worship in our churches? In every church I have been a part of at least one voice has complained that the worship assembly was too boring, too predictable, too formal or informal, too unpredictable, or too unsettling. If the voice became a chorus, the leadership might tinker with the order of worship—another song or two here, a prayer there—but the restlessness [continues].” So begins Dwight Robarts’s review of the late Wheaton College professor Robert E. Webber’s classic, *Worship Old and New*.<sup>1</sup>

We are aware that the love and worship of God is the most important command. Jesus stated categorically, “For it is written, “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve”” (Matt. 4:10).<sup>2</sup> The execution of that worship, however, so often remains objectively unsatisfying and subjectively unfulfilling. A common mistake in the planning of worship is to assume that traditionalism and conservatism are measures of spirituality. Robarts concludes that the solution to the unease lies less with tinkering with aspects of liturgy and more with grasping “the biblical and theological underpinnings of what the church does in public assembly . . . Biblical worship arises from a sense of the majesty and mystery of God.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Webber recommends “a turning away from all shallow and uninformed approaches to worship.”<sup>4</sup>

In making decisions about what to include or exclude in the worship service, the guiding question of the worship committee or worship leader must be, “How is God honored in the use of gifts, talents, or creativity in worship?” A diverse and capable worship committee can help mitigate monotony and lack of creativity in services. It can also assist in preventing the worship service from degenerating into cultural or personality exclusiveness. Creativity should be encouraged. Methods change over time, from culture to culture, and from personality to personality, but

the focus on the glory of God alone must remain unchanged. Managing this process calls for humility, a spirit of grace, and prayerful consultation with the Word of God.

## The worship experience versus worship service

There is a distinct difference between the worship service and the worship experience. The *worship experience* is a mystery that the Holy Spirit administers. A holy transformation takes place that brings about a conviction, a conversion, and a sanctification that transcends emotionalism and lies outside the control of human leadership (cf. Ps. 22:3). On the other hand, the worship service is within the control of human management, prayerfully creating an environment for meaningful interaction to take place between the human and the divine.

God created the worship experience and the worship service (Exod. 25:8). He came down on Mount Sinai and spent 40 years supervising their implementation. God has given the execution of the worship service to us to manage, as illustrated by the details in the building of the temple and the extensive instructions given to Moses. Worship must be done with the appropriate attitude: reverence, humility, and earnest devotion, prayerfully focusing on the glory of God alone. God did not outsource these instructions—He gave them Himself.

The history of Israel documented in books such as Judges, the Samuels, the Kings, and the Chronicles shows the people's relationship to worship as revealed to Moses. What made David very special to God was that his heart was committed to glorifying God. He was always in prayer; many of his prayers were eventually placed into the assemblage of the Psalms.

## Leading the worship service

I propose seven elements to be included in a well-planned worship service.

*1. Praise.* Music was created primarily to ascribe glory and praise to God. When the music service is done properly, the glory of God fills the hearts of the worshipers. This is the reason for the joy and gladness that sometimes result in the lifting of hands, amens, and even shouts that cannot be logically explained at times. God "inhabits the praises of [His people]" (Ps. 22:3, MEV).

*2. Prayer.* Prayer is not so much about how we sound and the words we use; it is about making meaningful contact with heaven. This cannot

always be controlled by human eloquence. Sometimes "the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. 8:26). When God's name is invoked, it is time for the worship leader to guide the congregation to take their proverbial shoes off their feet, for the place where they are standing is holy ground (Exod. 3:5). Methods of doing this vary by culture, tradition, personality, education, and experience.

*3. Proclamation.* There is a distinct difference between a sermon and a speech. A speech is the speaker's opinion, while a sermon is a declaration from God, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Worshipers congregate with an attitude of spiritual expectancy: "Is there any word from the LORD?" (Jer. 37:17). The preacher must fill that expectancy with the response, "The word of the LORD came to me saying" (Jer. 1:4). The role of preaching is to move the congregation away from the human agenda and on to God's agenda. When the distinctive focus of the preacher is on the Cross as the apex of God's soteriological and eschatological agenda, authentic preaching is happening.

*4. Testimony.* The story of the converted woman at the well who ran into town and led the entire village to the Lord by her testimony is a template that could be used in the worship service. After the Lord had moved mightily in her life, she could not contain herself; she had to testify to everyone: "Come, see a Man" (John 4:29). Her joyful testimony led an entire village to surrender themselves to Christ. God is always moving in the lives of a plethora of individuals, and sharing their experiences can strengthen and even convert others within the congregation. Personal testimony gives witness of God's power as being real and active today among us and provides a balance to theology. People can argue with theology but not with a personal testimony.

*5. Stewardship.* We are not authors or owners of ourselves; there is a Creator who made the heavens and the earth, the seas that all that in them is (Ps. 146:6) and rested on the Sabbath day (Gen. 2:2). Stewardship is a call to worship God with our time (Deut. 5:12), talents (Matt. 25:14–30), treasure (Mal. 3:10; Lev. 27:30), and temple (1 Cor. 6:19). Faithful stewardship can only be practiced from a heart that acknowledges the Creator and knows the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

*6. Fellowship.* Fellowship is demonstrated in the book of Acts (chapter 2) as an integral part of the



# The role of the worship leader and the participants is to ensure that the implementation of these elements of worship is focused exclusively on the glorification of God.

worship experience. Humans are social beings—they need camaraderie. Each time individuals are publicly acknowledged and invited to greet one another, it is an invitation to fellowship. An example of a fellowship service is the baby dedication, which many relatives, friends, and coworkers attend to support their loved ones. This opportunity can be used to expand the friendships and membership of God's church by praying together, helping one another, and listening to and sympathizing with one another. It is about building togetherness. This could be another reason why God, in the formation of the Hebrew culture, insisted that part of their distinctiveness as His peculiar people was to go out of their way to be kind to strangers (Gen. 18:1–8).

7. *Service.* Worship does not end with the benediction; rather, it begins. “You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out” (Deut. 28:6, NIV). Some churches have on their doors, “Enter to worship, depart to serve.” Properly planned worship services will lead worshipers to ask God to provide opportunities for them to represent Him in service. This is done as an act of devotion and worship to Jesus Christ, who left heaven to serve us. At the end of the worship service, the worship leader can creatively encourage worshipers to go out and be of service to their neighbors.

It is to be noted that while seven elements are suggested as part of the worship service, each element, or a combination of elements, can stand by itself in worship depending on the objective of the worship exercise. In a fully comprehensive worship service, all elements can be explored.

## Implementing the worship service

The role of the worship leader and the participants is to ensure that the implementation of these elements of worship is focused exclusively on the glorification of God. The knowledgeable worship leader guides the planning of the worship service to be inclusive and creative. Spiritual gifts are placed within the congregation by God (Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:8–10, 28–30; Eph. 4:11) and, when carefully employed, can enrich the worship service. If the use of a gift does not conflict with the Word of God, it can be used. The worship committee decides on the use of gifts in worship when the question Is Christ being glorified (Luke 9:49, 50)? is answered. Once their gifts are identified and persons are asked to participate in the worship service, they should be guided to devote themselves to prayer, reading the Word

throughout the week, and preparation before carrying out their task.

The climax of worship, both as a service and an experience, will be realized in heaven. Then there will no longer be a need for a temple, for God and Jesus Christ Himself will be the temple (Rev. 21:22). In this worship experience “all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues” (Rev. 7:9), “from one New Moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, shall come to worship before [the LORD]” (Isa. 66:23).

The book of Revelation is an eschatological narrative of what worship will look like in the new heaven and the new earth. While we wait for the New Jerusalem that is coming, where worshipers will sing the song of Moses and the Lamb, we are commanded to “Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (Rev. 14:7). This clear reference to the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:8–11), informs us that we have the privilege of practicing properly planned worship here on earth as a prelude to worshipping in heaven.



- 1 Dwight Robarts, “Worship Old and New, Robert Webber,” *Leaven* 1, no. 1 (January 1990), 57, <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol1/iss1/14>.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the New King James Version.
- 3 Robarts, “Worship Old and New,” 57.
- 4 Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 3.

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THE  
**NEW**  
**COVENANT**  
OF EXODUS

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

**W**hile the concept of the new covenant is well testified to and expressed in the New Testament, it is directly mentioned only once in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 31:31–34). Yet a careful reading of the book of Exodus indicates that the new covenant was actually declared and offered to God's people as they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai and is therefore deeply embedded in God's approach to His chosen people throughout history. While two excellent recent studies on God's covenants explore the concepts involved admirably, neither study locates the new covenant in the Sinai setting.<sup>1</sup>

### Jeremiah and Moses

As with any biblical text, the context of Jeremiah 31:31–34 is important. Jeremiah, who apparently introduces the idea of a new covenant, prophesied that when the sins of Israel had reached a certain point, God would have to allow them to return to captivity reminiscent of the Egypt experience, although this time in Babylon. William Holladay noted the marked references, allusions to, and echoes of Exodus in the book of Jeremiah.<sup>2</sup> Of special note is the fact that both Moses and Jeremiah were reluctant to accept their call from God, because they believed that they could not speak well (see Exod. 4:10; Jer. 1:6).

Robert P. Carroll also noted similarities between Exodus and Jeremiah and observed that although Jeremiah does not employ the word "covenant" in his other discourses, he used many covenantal concepts, such as son, bride, or wife.<sup>3</sup> However, one significant point of difference is that whereas Moses was called to "my people, the sons of Israel" (Exod. 3:10, RSV), God summoned Jeremiah to be a "prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5, RSV). Of particular note, as it is found in the same chapter that introduces the idea of "new

covenant," is Jeremiah 31:2, 3 which reads, "Thus says the LORD: 'The people who survived the sword *found grace in the wilderness*; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from afar. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you'" (RSV, emphasis supplied).

### The "old" covenant of Sinai

After a description of the dire plight of the Israelites in Egypt in Exodus 1 and the abortive attempts of Moses to come to their rescue in chapter 2, attempts which leave him apparently stranded in the wilderness with no ability to do anything for his people, the narrative reveals what God is about to do. "During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew" (Exod. 2:23–25, ESV). So, the covenant with Abraham was the basis for God's intervention to rescue Israel from Egypt.

Thus, the incredible story of Israel's Passover and exodus from Egypt and God's typological salvation of His people was clearly the result of covenantal promise. And that is unmistakably the background God alludes to in His preamble to the Ten Commandments, a preamble often sadly omitted from what is regarded as the core of the Old Covenant: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2, ESV). Here, we see that loving deliverance came before the law.

But, as the narrative unfolds, we learn that the people of Israel clearly thought God was presenting them with an agreement between equals, and although they liked, appreciated, and were very

grateful for what God had done in rescuing them from Egypt, they honestly believed they were capable of holding up their side of the contract. Three times they declared, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do” (Exod. 19:8; see also 24:3, 7, ESV).

After a series of social and religious regulations clearly designed to radically differentiate the culture of Israel from that of the surrounding people groups (something contemporary Christians could note), the Sinai covenant was impressively ratified in a ceremony that involved rereading the words of the agreement and sacrificing an unspecified number of bulls whose blood was literally thrown over the people (vv. 3–8) to indicate that the covenant had indeed been “cut,” or ratified. The ceremony ended with the amazing experience of 74 men ascending Mount Sinai and “seeing” and eating with God, or more precisely, seeing God’s feet and the pavement on which they rested (vv. 9–11). Moses then left the people in the charge of Aaron and Hur while he returned to God to receive instructions about the sanctuary in which the God of the covenant was actually planning to dwell among His covenant people (Exod. 25:8).

### The “new” covenant of Sinai

The enormous tragedy of the molten calf episode only 40 days after the ratification of the covenant (because the people could not cope without a visible leader [Exod. 32:1]), the subsequent loss of Moses’ temper, and the shattering of the tables of the covenant and then Moses’ amazing offer to sacrifice himself for the reinstatement of his people (Exodus 32; 33) are well known. Commentary author Peter Enns makes an insightful comment: “The Christological dimension of this interchange between God and Moses is obvious. . . . Moses’ offer is not simply a flash forward to the time of Christ. Rather, at the very inception of the sacrificial system it is a glimpse into the heart of the heavenly reality to which the sacrificial system points.”<sup>4</sup>

The whole covenantal agreement of Exodus 19 to 24 was irretrievably destroyed, demolished by Israel’s failure. Interestingly, throughout his commentary on the golden calf episode, Jewish scholar Benno Jacob refers to Abraham’s failure in Genesis 16, which occurs between the “two” covenants that God made with him.<sup>5</sup> God apparently backed out of the arrangement with Israel but mercifully offered to send an angel with the people so that they could still proceed to Canaan (Exod. 32:34; 33:2, 3).

Moses, however, was not satisfied, and neither were the now very contrite people (vv. 4–6, 12–16). Israel’s leader pled to see God, clearly hoping that a face-to-face encounter would soften God’s refusal to continue with “His people.” God first (and significantly) asked Moses to make a new set of stone tables (Exod. 34:1) and agreed that He would show Moses His glory.

After Moses was hidden in “the rock” (highly symbolic), there follow words that the Old Testament professor James Bruckner says that it is “hard to overemphasize the importance of [Exod. 34:6, 7],” which he regards as the center of the book of Exodus,<sup>6</sup> words that are the clearest description of God’s character in the whole Bible. “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation’” (Exod. 34:6, 7, RSV).

Echoes of this splendid passage and its message of forgiveness frequently appear throughout the Bible, including the New Testament (e.g., John 1:14; Matt. 1:21; and John 1:29). Moses’ response to this incredible revelation is to make haste to bow and worship (Exod. 34:8). These beautiful words introduce an entirely new concept into the previously agreed-upon covenant. The people had thought they could, in their own ability, keep their side of the agreement, but they failed miserably. Now it is revealed that the only way the agreement can continue is through the new and amazing concept that God will actually forgive them. Jacob makes a beautiful comment on Exodus 34:5–7: “God took the guilt upon Himself and let it sink into the fire of His holiness and love. He bore it out of the world.”<sup>7</sup>

Exodus 34:10 clearly shows that this is not a simple renewal of the previous covenant, as commonly assumed. “And he said, ‘Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels [miracles], such as have *not been created* [Hebrew *nibaru*, related to *bara*; “to create,” as in Genesis 1:1] in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome [fearful, amazing] thing that I will do with you’ ” (Exod. 34:10, ESV; emphasis added). Terence Fretheim also recognizes this and notes, “What God is doing for Israel is an act parallel to the creation of the world! . . .

“This suggests that verse 10 does *not*, strictly speaking, refer to a renewal of the covenant of chapters 19–24. . . . At least one decisively new element in this text is not present in chapters 19–24. . . . This is a *new* covenant grounded in a new act of God on behalf of Israel. God places the relationship with Israel on a new footing. It is now grounded in . . . undeserved divine forgiveness for an apostate people.”<sup>8</sup>

It is also highly significant that the Bible presents *bara*, “to create,” as an activity belonging to God alone, whereas the word *asa*, meaning simply “made,” applies to the things humans “create.” Of course, God had forgiven the people many times earlier for their repeated grumbling and complaining, but clearly, it took a disaster as horrendous as the golden calf failure to force them to see that their status with God depended entirely on His mercy and forgiving love, His *hesed*. God did not lower the standard. Exodus 34:11–26 clearly reiterates a summary of the same laws given earlier but now covered by divine, forgiving grace.

It is worth noting that years later, when Moses reports these stupendous events to the new generation of Israel about to enter the Promised Land, he uses the word “fire” (Hebrew *esh*) no less than 14 times to describe the events around the giving of the Ten Commandments (see Deut. 4; 5). But when describing the situation after the golden calf episode (Deuteronomy 9:13–29), the dominant word becomes *love* (Hebrew *ahab*), repeated seven times in chapters 10 and 11, and also seven times in chapters 6 and 7 (including one instance of *hesed*, steadfast love). Most significantly, in this passage, Moses encourages Israel to circumcise the foreskins of their hearts (Deut. 10:16), a very New Testament, new covenant, concept.

### Jeremiah’s old new covenant

So, when Jeremiah talks about a new covenant, he is not introducing a new concept but simply reminding Israel of their desperate need for God’s forgiveness, as after the golden calf, of their need to be reinstated into their relationship with God. The only difference between the new covenant of Sinai and that of the New Testament is a powerful demonstration of just how much it actually cost God to provide for Israel’s (and our) forgiveness. At Sinai, after the golden calf incident, Israel knew with absolute clarity that the covenant between them and God was utterly dependent on His mercy and His gracious forgiveness. The whole Sinai covenant itself amply demonstrates this.

### And now?

But as history demonstrates, many, if not most, in Israel succumbed to errors that are just as easy to make today. People may mistakenly consider themselves able to conform to God’s standards in their own strength, a tragic misconception that the Gospels reveal regarding the leaders of Israel. The astonishing behavior of the ardent keepers of the law who destroyed the only One who could take away their sins (John 1:29) is a powerful reminder that we must recognize just how great is our need and that, as our Savior Himself said, without Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5). But it is just as tragic for people to presume on God’s mercy and think His love will automatically forgive any behavior and thus block the Holy Spirit’s transforming power in their lives.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ declares, “Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (14:12, RSV). The commandments and faith are both needed. The new covenant, located in both testaments, weaves together law and grace. Jesus said, “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18, ESV). And we will always need God’s amazing grace.



- 1 Skip McCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained? What the Old and New Covenants Reveal About the Gospel, Law, and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007); Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2020).
- 2 William Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Fresh Reading* (New York, NY: Pilgrims Press, 1990), 14–20.
- 3 Robert P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1981), 46, 217.
- 4 Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 589.
- 5 Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*, trans. Walter Jacob (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1992), 984.
- 6 James Bruckner, *Exodus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 300.
- 7 Jacob, *Second Book*, 978.
- 8 Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 308; emphasis in original.

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## Another look at the third commandment

**B**ecause the Ten Commandments are so central to Christian faith, it is essential to understand exactly what they command. Among the Ten Commandments, spoken directly by God Himself, is the third commandment, which reads: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain” (Exod. 20:7, NKJV). Unlike the other commandments, this one, when read in common English, seems to contain a vague phrase, “takes

His name in vain,” which may mean something different to different people.

What does this commandment really mean?

### What’s in vain?

Many Christians today interpret commonly used phrases, such as “Oh God,” “Oh my God,” or “Oh Jesus,” as taking God’s name in vain. This interpretation is based on the assumption that the commandment deals with the uttering of God’s name. While the use of these phrases is

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unfortunate because more reverence should be given to the Father and the Savior, there is more to the text than just using God's name lightly. The third commandment mentions only one name: "LORD," Hebrew: *Yehovah*.

"You shall not take the name of the *LORD* [*Yehovah*] your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7, NKJV; emphasis added). In Exodus 20:7, the Hebrew word *shem* is written in its singular form, שֵׁם. A plural of שֵׁם is שְׁמוֹת, which does not occur in the commandment. In the Masoretic text, the words *shem* and *Yehovah* are written as follows: הַיְהוָה אֶת־שֵׁם־ (the-name-Yehovah). If the meaning of the third commandment has to do with the misuse of a name, it is referring to only one name: *Yehovah*.

As consistent with the information above, if the meaning of the third commandment has to do with misuse of God's name, many Christians can pat themselves on the back because they do not have a custom of misusing it. In fact, it seems that the same goes for the vast majority of people, regardless of whether or not they are Christians. Today, many non-Christians do not even know the name *Yehovah*, and it is safe to assume that some of those who may have heard it do not even realize that it is God's name. However, understanding the third commandment as referring to God's people rightly versus falsely representing God has profound implications.

So, what's "in vain"? Understanding another Hebrew word, *shav*, translated in the third commandment as "vain," may be helpful in answering this question. This Hebrew word signifies vanity, falsehood, emptiness, lying, or worthlessness of conduct. In fact, Bible translators used different English words to translate the Hebrew *shav* in another commandment of the Decalogue. In Deuteronomy 5:20, we read, "'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor'" (NKJV). The Hebrew *shav* is translated here as "false." The same English word has been used to translate *shav* in other passages, such as Exodus 23:1, "'You shall not circulate a false [*shav*] report'" (NKJV), and in Hosea 10:4, "They have spoken words, swearing falsely [*shav*] in making a covenant" (NKJV).

## To a Hebrew

The Hebrew word translated in modern English Bibles as "name" is *shem* (H8034). This word is found in another passage in the book of Exodus: "Then Moses said to the LORD, 'See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people.' But You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight' '" (Exod. 33:12, NKJV). Considering God knows every person's name, the phrase "I know you by name" must have meant something different to a Hebrew than just an identifier or a tag. Consistent with the meaning of other biblical passages described above, it seems that the phrase "I know you by name," in this context, really means "I know who you are" or "I know what you are like."

An interesting example of the use of "name" is found in Acts 2:21: "'And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved' '" (NKJV). Are we saved by the name or by the Person whose name is Jesus? Also, let us consider Acts 21:13: "'What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus' '" (NKJV). Was Paul ready to die for a name or for the Person Jesus?

Clearly, as expressed in the Scriptures, names have a much different meaning in the Hebrew culture than they do in many modern, especially Western, cultures. Is it possible that the third commandment is not really referring to the way we are to use the name(s) of God but to Him as a Person and who He is? But what would it mean to refer to God, as a Person, in vain?

## What's in a name?

In the Bible, names had significance. A name may have reflected a character, personality, reputation, or authority. Biblical names may have also commemorated events and feelings.

For example, "And Adam called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20, NKJV). " 'But your name shall

be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations' ” (Gen. 17:5, NKJV). “ ‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed’ ” (Gen. 32:28, NKJV). In each case, the name carried a specific meaning.

Two other passages shed additional light on the issue. “Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation’ ” (Exod. 34:5–7, NKJV). The passage begins by saying that the Lord proclaimed His own name. How did He proclaim His name? He did not say “My name is Jehovah” or “My name is Hayah” or “My name is El Shaddai.” No, instead, He proclaimed His own attributes. That is, He described who He is.

A similar idea is expressed in several New Testament passages. “ ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us’ ” (Matt. 1:23, NKJV). At times, no name is provided, rather just attributes that describe the character of the One being discussed. At other times, a personal name is given that has a specific meaning. It can be translated into something that represents the character or attributes of the one being discussed. In some circumstances, an event in someone’s life would bring about a new name, as in Jacob’s situation. Another example is in the book of Daniel, where the four young people, after being taken captive, each received a new name. Revelation mentions that we will receive new names in heaven.

### Only one name

We have many biblical examples of God’s people misrepresenting God. One can argue that more than half of the written history of the Jewish people during the Old Testament era constitutes violations of the third commandment. In fact, there is a biblical confirmation of this statement found in Ezekiel 36:22, 23: “ ‘Therefore say to the house of Israel, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name’s sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. And I will sanctify My great name, which

has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘when I am hallowed in you before their eyes’ ” (NKJV). Since the Jewish people of that time had a profound respect for the name *Yehovah*, it seems that the profaning of God’s name referred to in Ezekiel had to do with the way they lived.

The interpretation of the text found in Ezekiel is confirmed in a statement made by Paul: “You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For ‘*the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,*’ as it is written” (Romans 2:21–24, NKJV; emphasis added). Clearly, those Paul was speaking about were not proclaiming “*Yehovah, Yehovah,*” as they were stealing or committing adultery. The nature of blaspheming God’s name in this passage has to do with the hypocritical life of God’s followers.

### The challenge

Thus, when the Hebrews who gathered by Mount Sinai heard God speaking the third commandment, they understood it as, “You shall not falsely represent the LORD your God.” Such understanding seems consistent with the usage of the Hebrew *shem* and *shav’*. It carries much deeper meaning than a merely careless use of words. It challenges God’s people to carry out the requirements of His Word in their lives.

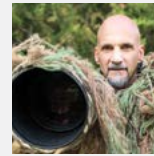
Jesus said, “ ‘If you love Me, keep My commandments’ ” (John 14:15, NKJV). As Christians, we carry Jesus’ name. We are His followers to the extent that we follow what He says. John declared, “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:3, 4, NKJV). Throughout our lives, we either honor His name by following the commands in His Word or misrepresenting His name and character through our words and actions. Profaning God’s name results in breaking the third commandment. Living a life consistent with God’s commands results in people glorifying our Father in heaven. There are no other alternative paths. Which do you choose? 🗣️

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## Trusting the wind

**A**ny successful white-tailed-deer hunter (by camera or weapon) will proclaim an undeniable truth, “You’ve got to know and trust the wind.” Over the years, I have learned this lesson all too many times, especially by failing to give my utmost attention to the faintest gust of wind and the direction in which it was blowing.

Since the white-tailed deer is one of the wariest creatures on the planet, only a tiny sniff of the human scent and their upturned pure-white tail will quickly reveal the reason for their name. The deer quickly retreating into the woods never saw me, but it trusted what the wind brought to its attention: my scent. However, the day I captured this trophy buck proudly scanning the autumn landscape, the animal could not see or smell me. Why? Because I put full trust in the wind’s direction and selected a location to prevent an approaching whitetail from detecting my scent.

Recently, as I quietly sat along a narrow stream winding its way through the forest, the slightest trickle of the moving water broke the silence of the otherwise quiet afternoon. It was the sweetest of sounds, and my pursuit of peace for that day seemed fulfilled until I felt a gentle wind touch my face. At that moment, an amazing stillness came over me, and I truly recognized God’s presence. I immediately began pondering the many ways the Bible describes the Spirit of God as wind.

### The Spirit of God

I think of the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit is described as a violent and rushing wind. In contrast, I thought of John 20:22, when Jesus appeared to His disciples and breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. The imagery in both of these examples is striking: one is fierce and loud, and the other is the gentle breath of Christ. We all experience and recognize the presence of God in various ways. For me, on that day, it was a simple gust of wind greeting my cheek.

Like the wind, the Spirit of God is invisible and beyond our ability to see. But the presence of wind can be noted all around us. From swaying

treetops to sailboats dashing across the water, the results of wind are real. In the same way, Scripture assures us that God’s Spirit fills and fuels our lives. Whether it’s a forceful gale as on the Day of Pentecost or the quiet breath of Christ, it’s still the very presence of God in our lives. I believe it’s important to be open and willing to allow the Spirit of God to lead us. For many, this is a scary proposition, and I get it! But the more we trust the spiritual winds of God’s guidance, the easier it becomes to rely on where these winds may lead. The payoff for trusting the wind in the pursuit of whitetails can be huge; however, trusting the spiritual winds of God can be life-changing. 🍷





# Breaking or Freeing?

Jesus, the Sabbath,  
and John 5:18



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**J**ohn 5:18 is typically translated, “For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him [Jesus], because he was not only *breaking* the sabbath . . .” (NRSV; emphasis added). This reading, found in both the King James and the New King James versions of the Bible, naturally leads to a question: Did Jesus really break the Sabbath?

A more context-sensitive translation of the Greek verb *luō* in this verse yields a fundamentally different message about Jesus’ relationship to the Sabbath. The translation is as follows: “This is why the Jews sought to kill him; not only was he *setting free* the sabbath . . .”<sup>1</sup> Can this translation, which receives little serious attention from translators and commentators, be justified? Would not this translation, if valid, solve a theological problem that otherwise portrays Jesus, our sinless sacrifice, as having sinned?

### Setting free

The standard New Testament Greek-English lexicon<sup>2</sup> offers five definitions of the verb *luō*; the first four are the most relevant to John 5:18:

1. “to undo someth. that is used to tie up or constrain someth., *loose, untie*”
2. “to set free someth. tied or similarly constrained, *set free, loose, untie*”
3. “to reduce someth. by violence into its components, *destroy*”
4. “to do away with, *destroy, bring to an end, abolish*”<sup>3</sup>

The six occurrences of *luō* in John’s Gospel are best distributed among these four definitions as follows

1. John 1:27 “I am not worthy to *loose, untie* the strap of his sandal”;  
John 11:44 “*loose, untie* him [Lazarus from his burial wrappings] and let him go.”
2. John 5:18 “[Jesus] was *setting free, loosing, untying* the Sabbath.”
3. John 2:19 “*destroy* this temple and in three days I will rebuild it”;  
John 7:23 “a male is circumcised on Sabbath in order not to *destroy* [a component of] the law of Moses.”
4. John 10:35 “and Scripture is not liable to be *brought to an end, abolished*.”

There is, then, linguistic justification for translating *luō* in John 5:18 as “setting free.” The next step to justify this translation will be to locate the passage in its cultural and religious setting.

## The healing

John 5 records Jesus’ visit to the pool of Bethzatha while in Jerusalem during a major religious celebration.<sup>4</sup> Because the pool was believed to be a place where divine healings happened, many of the city’s sick waited under the five porticos surrounding it in hopes of healing. Among them was a man who had been ill for 38 years (John 5:5), a significant number of years for the Jewish people. The wilderness wandering of their Israelite ancestors—from when they first refused God’s command to enter the Promised Land until they finally did enter—lasted 38 years (see Deut. 2:14).

Jesus, seeing the sick man, asked, “Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:6). What a strange question. Of course, he wanted to be made well. Otherwise, why spend so much time near that healing water?

However, instead of answering Jesus’ question, he started explaining why he was still unwell: “I have no human to help me into the pool! Someone else always gets into the healing water before me!” (v. 7). Could his statement be understood not only as a summary of his personal experience but also as an echo of his Israelite ancestors’ 38 years in the wilderness, “waiting” to enter the waters of the Jordan River to reach the Promised Land?

If so, was Jesus really asking the unwell man whether he, unlike his Hebrew ancestors, was ready to surrender fully to God’s will in order to experience that longed-for healing? And was he ready to stop the “it’s not my fault” self-talk in an attempt to explain his malady? Jesus does not address the man’s attempt to account for his situation. Instead, He utters a brief command: “Stand up, pick up your bedroll, and start walking!” (v. 8).

## Stand up and start walking

The command “Stand up, pick up your bedroll, and start walking!” has a sacred history. Jesus was quoting and adapting God’s command to “stand up and start walking” that He uttered at crucial moments in the history of the Hebrew people.

For instance, God twice commanded Abram to “stand up and start walking” toward the land that He had earlier promised to him and to his descendants as part of the formation of a new

people (Gen. 12:1; 13:17). God commanded Elijah to “stand up and start walking” to Zarephath near Sidon while famine devastated Israel (1 Kings 17:9, 10). He twice commanded Jeremiah to “stand up and start walking” to carry out his prophetic ministry (Jer. 13:6; 18:2). Ezekiel was commanded to “stand up and start walking” as God prepared him to speak to his fellow Hebrews in Babylonian exile (Ezek. 3:22). God directed Jonah two times to “stand up and start walking” to Nineveh, both before and after the detour in the belly of the big fish (Jonah 1:2; 3:2).

## A protective hedge

This rich biblical background of Jesus’ command to the unwell man would have been familiar to him and those nearby who overheard it. Because of its biblical history, Jesus’ command would have been understood to carry a double message: First, be healed! Second, go on a God-assigned mission, testifying to the genuineness of your healing and to its Source—Jesus. The unwell man’s healing and his obedience to Jesus’ command were immediate: “The man was made well; he picked up his bedroll, and he started walking!” (v. 9a). And he lived healthily ever after? We are not told; the narrative turns our attention away from him to something else—the calendar: “It was Sabbath that day” (v. 9).

For Jewish people of Jesus’ day, especially in Jerusalem, life during Sabbath was controlled and micromanaged to a level of detail far beyond what God specified in Exodus 20:8–11. Why such micromanagement when the Sabbath commandment itself is relatively brief? This process began five centuries earlier, after the Babylonian captivity, when some of those captives and their offspring returned to their Judaeian homeland. Many acknowledged what the prophets had warned them about: their Babylonian captivity was due to the Hebrew people’s multigenerational indifference to God’s will as expressed in the Ten Commandments and related law, including the Sabbath.

In an effort, then, to prevent this tragedy from happening again, Jewish religious leaders developed a “hedge around the law” to guard against violations of the Ten Commandments. If enough detailed regulations were in place, like a protective hedge, they would help ensure that the people did not violate those laws. That was the idea, anyway. This expanding hedge of regulations was transmitted orally from generation to generation and, eventually, was preserved in writing, the Mishnah,<sup>5</sup> about a century after Jesus.

## The Sabbath hedge?

How this detailed “hedge around the law” attempted to protect the fourth commandment is seen in its list of 39 kinds of “work” prohibited on the Sabbath. The 39th of those prohibited Sabbath kinds of work is titled “one who carries out an object from domain to domain.”<sup>6</sup> This distinction between “private domain” and “public domain” impacted most of the Mishnah’s Sabbath carrying restrictions. What a person was permitted to carry in a private home on the Sabbath would be prohibited in public. In other words, Mishnah law was directly involved when the newly healed man at the pool, at Jesus’ command, picked up his bed and carried it from the “private domain” of the pool’s portico into the “public domain” of the street.

Jewish rabbinic authorities disagreed about what could or could not be lawfully carried on Sabbath. For example, according to one, a Jew helping a Gentile lift a load onto his donkey on Friday afternoon would be guilty of breaking the Sabbath if that Gentile did not reach his destination and remove the load before Sabbath began. But others declared that the helpful Jew would not be guilty of breaking the Sabbath, even if the Gentile did not unload the donkey before Sabbath.<sup>7</sup>

Within this labyrinthine system of law, what about a man carrying his bed? Carrying a bed on Sabbath was permitted, so long as it was done by two persons “because neither performed a complete prohibited labor.”<sup>8</sup> It was permitted on Sabbath to carry a sick person on a bed. Perhaps it was Sabbath when men carried a paralytic on a bed and lowered him through the roof into Jesus’ presence (Luke 5:18–20). If so, while the men did not break rabbinic Sabbath restrictions by carrying the paralytic, they certainly did when they hoisted him onto the roof, pulled away the tiles, and lowered him through the opening!

Had Jesus directed a disciple or bystander to help the healed man carry his bed, Jesus’ opponents would have had no ground for accusing the man of Sabbath breaking. But Jesus instructed him to carry it himself, without help. Jesus’ opponents would have been waiting in anticipation for the healed man, carrying his bed, to leave the “domain” of the portico and step into the “domain” of the street. That first step onto the street, according to Mishnah law, broke the Sabbath. As soon as the healed man stepped onto the street, they confronted him: “It is Sabbath, so it is not lawful for you to carry your bed” (John 5:10)!

## Breaking or freeing the Sabbath?

In this context, then, we come to the question implied in the title: When Jesus commanded the healed man to pick up his bed and start walking, was Jesus *breaking* the Sabbath or *setting free* the Sabbath?

When read in the light of its linguistic, social, and religious contexts, John 5:18 declares that by healing the crippled man and sending him on his way, carrying his bed as a witness to the extent of God’s healing power—Jesus was not *breaking* the Sabbath. Rather, by “doing these things on the Sabbath” (v. 16), Jesus was *setting free* the Sabbath from an unbiblical, unhelpful, anxiety-producing, man-made restriction. In addition to *setting free* the Sabbath, Jesus also reissued God’s ancient command to His people to “stand up and start walking” to carry out the mission that He assigned them.

If this argument is correct, then the common translations of John 5:18, about Jesus “breaking the Sabbath” (which, if true, would have serious consequences for Christian theology), unfortunately miss the point of the text completely.<sup>9</sup>



- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are the author’s own translations.
- 2 Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), abbreviated BDAG.
- 3 BDAG, s.v. “*λυῶ*.”
- 4 In some ancient manuscripts, the pool is named “Bethesda” and in others “Bethsaida.”
- 5 Mishnah quotations and explanations are from the Sefaria website, [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Shabbat](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Shabbat).
- 6 Mishnah *Shabbat* 7:2.
- 7 Mishnah *Shabbat* 1:7.
- 8 Mishnah *Shabbat* 10:5.
- 9 *Editor’s note*: The Common English Bible reads, “For this reason the Jewish leaders wanted even more to kill him—not only because he was doing away with the Sabbath . . .” (John 5:18). This clearly was not Jesus’ mission, as He stated, “Don’t even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven’t come to do away with them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17, CEB). The Amplified Bible reads, “This made the Jews more determined than ever to kill Him, for not only was He breaking the Sabbath [from their viewpoint] . . .” (John 5:18, AMP, parenthesis included). The Expanded Bible ends the verse with this parenthetical statement: “Both breaking the Sabbath and blasphemy against God were punishable by death; Ex. 35:2; Lev. 24:16” (John 5:18). Jesus was either guilty of both—or neither.

Share your thoughts on this article by writing to [ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org](mailto:ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org).

# Address your sins

**T**wo well-known movies tell the story of Moses: *The Ten Commandments* and *The Prince of Egypt*.<sup>1</sup> As one might expect, both movies take significant liberties with the biblical text. While grateful for biblical themes which emerge, we know better than to rely on Hollywood for biblical history.

The apostle Paul states, “Study and be eager and do your utmost to present yourself to God approved (tested by trial), a workman who has no cause to be ashamed, correctly analyzing and accurately dividing [rightly handling and skillfully teaching] the Word of Truth” (2 Tim. 2:15, AMPC). To understand the Bible, therefore, we need to study it for ourselves. Otherwise, we might never learn about some of the most important events in Moses’ life—such as when God sought to kill him.

## An odd story

Why would God want to kill Moses, His chosen messenger to Pharaoh? It is not that Moses had intentionally offended God or schemed to get the job. The record actually states that Moses did everything he possibly could to get out of being God’s messenger, offering multiple excuses about why God should send someone else. Throughout the conversation with Moses at the burning bush, God made it abundantly clear that He was sending Moses, even if Moses did not want to go (Exod. 3:10).

Exodus 4 reports that God gave Moses several powerful signs to show Pharaoh that He meant business, and He arranged for his brother Aaron to soon meet him on the desert journey. And then things took a strange turn. “At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him [Moses] and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and touched Moses’ feet with it and said, ‘Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!’ So he [the LORD] let him alone. It was then that she said, ‘A bridegroom of blood,’ because of the circumcision” (Exod. 4:24–26).<sup>2</sup>

Oddly, immediately after this event, the narrative continues as though nothing had happened. This point is put into the background. In fact,

most people have forgotten it or hardly noticed this diversion from the main narrative. Moses afterward meets his brother, Aaron, and together they appear before Pharaoh.

In many ways, the story makes much more sense without the awkward interlude where God almost kills Moses. Nevertheless, this incident is recorded in Scripture, so it’s worth examining.

## The covenantal sign

We have limited information about Moses’ family life. He married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, and their firstborn son was named Gershom (Exod. 2:21, 22). They had a second son, Eliezer, whose name appears only later in Exodus (Exod. 18:2). Nevertheless, we know that both sons were born in Midian before Moses went back to Egypt because Exodus 4:20 says that Moses brought his sons with him to Egypt. We also know that Moses failed to circumcise one or both boys.

Circumcision was an important sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and was typically performed eight days after a male’s birth (Gen. 17:11–13). This rule was meant not only for Abraham but also for all his male descendants—Moses and his sons included. The consequence for ignoring this command was severe. Uncircumcised males were cast out from God’s people because they had broken the covenant (v. 14).

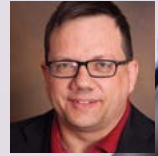
Moses could not claim ignorance. All Israelites knew the importance and necessity of circumcision. Failing to circumcise his sons, then, was negligence of the highest order. It meant disregarding God’s law. Moses was signaling to all the people and to God Himself that the covenant between God and Abraham was not a significant one. It brought the wrath of God—and Moses had no excuse.

## Neglecting the covenant

However upset Zipporah had been with Moses, to save his life, she hastily circumcised at least one of her sons on the spot (the text mentions only one son). Circumcision is difficult enough when done on an eight-day-old. One can only



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SCAN FOR AUDIO

imagine how awkward and painful it was for an older boy and how unpleasant it must have been for his mother to do it. No doubt when Zipporah called Moses a “bridegroom of blood,” it was not a term of endearment.

God could not simply overlook Moses’ sin. No such sinful person could lead the Israelites out of Egypt and later deliver God’s law to them at Mount Sinai. A glaring problem like this needed to be dealt with right away, and God was prepared to use severe measures to get His point across. And the lesson for us, today?

### Being right with God

Suppose God calls you to an important and highly public ministry. Perhaps you will be called

to enter pastoral ministry or become a Bible professor. Whatever it is, James 3:1 provides this sober reminder: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Public ministry is a serious calling; you had better make sure, then, that you are right with God before embarking on it.

If you are going to be in a public ministry role, make sure you do not have any glaring sins that could bring you and your organization into ill repute. For example, before promoting biblical principles of family life, make sure you are not unfaithful or abusive in your own family. Before becoming a Bible instructor, make sure you are not cheating on your taxes. Before accepting a



## LETTERS

### Hope in Jesus

I was quite taken by your cover picture and your picture on page 7 in the November issue of *Ministry*. Outstanding pictures showing grief! If I could put a title on each picture, they would be, cover picture: “Silent Grief.” Page 7 picture: “Overflowing Grief.” By the way, the article “A Funeral Homily Beyond the Usual” (Lawrence Downing, November 2021) was very good as well!

My wife and soulmate for 65 years just passed away three months ago. That’s probably why I’m tuned in to these pictures and articles on grief. God bless you all.

—James H. Diehl, general superintendent emeritus, Church of the Nazarene

Thank you for printing “A Funeral Homily Beyond the Usual” by Lawrence Downing.

I agree that it is so meaningful to meet grieving families, along with children and grandchildren, to hear their stories and then incorporate their words in one’s remarks. I also picked up a couple of new questions from your article, Larry.

—Judy Crabb, retired chaplain, Saint Helena, California, United States

I just read the article “A Funeral Homily Beyond the Usual” (Lawrence Downing, November 2021)—outstanding information. I’m a funeral director and chaplain for a large funeral home in Kansas City, and I have conducted thousands of funeral services. Most ministers get a very poor rating from us; they tend to use the funeral to preach doctrine, convert, or judge the people in attendance. Most never refer to the departed or even talk to the family before conducting a service.

Please, pastors, trash your canned funeral outlines and give families the gift

of significance. Make it personal or leave it to us, the professionals.

—Michael Collins, by email

### Friends in Jesus

I have been a Presbyterian pastor for more than fifty years and have served a Methodist congregation for eight years. I don’t remember when I started receiving your magazine, but I always look forward to the articles. During lunch today, I was reading the story from Todd R. Bishop (“Living With an Eternal Purpose,” November 2021). I could not stop crying as I read the powerful story of his ministry with the college football team and what happened when a young player was murdered. All of us would do well to be such an effective witness.

—Jim Bell, by email

I want to stop from the busy schedule of a pastor and



pastoral role, make sure you are not negligent in paying or robbing God in tithes and offerings. Just as Moses had no business leading the Israelites out of Egypt if he could not bother to circumcise his own son, you have no business leading God's people if things in your life are not right with God, therefore disqualifying you from public ministry.

God might not meet you at a lodging place to kill you, but you can be certain that He knows all of your sins. "Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known" (Luke 12:2). Now is the time to address your areas of weakness and correct the things you were supposed to have done a long time ago but did not.

Not surprisingly, this story of God seeking to kill Moses was in neither *The Ten Commandments*

nor *The Prince of Egypt*. However, the account is in the Bible, so we, especially as ministers, would best take heed to its message. "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (James. 4:17).



- 1 A version of this article appears in *The Naked Man Flees: Timeless Truths From Obscure Parts of the Bible*, self-published (2020) by the author.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the English Standard Version.

Share your thoughts on this article by writing to [ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org](mailto:ministrymagazine@gc.adventist.org).

send a thank you to your *Ministry* team. Through the years, your magazine has been an inspiration and, at times, an encouragement not to give up when things in the world, and the denomination I was called to serve in, seem to turn their backs on the way, the truth, and the life.

For forty-six years, I have served the Lord in the United Methodist Church, and I know it has not been in vain. Please keep reaching out beyond your own denomination and touching lives as you have mine.

—Richard D. Auten, DMin, Friendship United Methodist Church, Denver, North Carolina, United States

We are honored to have you as a faithful reader and contributor. May God richly bless you.—Editors

## Victory in Jesus

Davidson Razafiarivony's article "Two New

Jeruselems" (November 2021) is theologically relevant, timely, and true to Scripture. Congratulations also to *Ministry* for publishing it. In the '60s, I studied for the ministry. I still remember content, such as, You cannot make types to walk on all four legs in the antitype; God's plan number 1 failed due to Israel's disobedience, thus making way for plan number 2, where all God's covenant promises are now applicable to the Christian church; you can apply Old Testament prophecies to post-Calvary events—but only as New Testament prophets so use (often limited) or make reference to them.

Too many times, we use Old Testament prophecies in ways that cannot be substantiated in the New Testament.

—Eric Winter, retired minister, South Pacific Division

The article by Denis Fortin ("A Book About Jesus")

in the July 2021 edition of the *Ministry* magazine is a very thoughtful, inspiring, and hopeful one. As I read through it, I felt come alive the blessed hope in Christ Jesus as the only One who will bring us total and final victory over Satan, the originator of all of the powers of darkness and sin.

The message of this article brings peace to my heart, irrespective of whatever tribulation that may come my way. More so, I just love the style or pattern of writing. So simple but loaded with information. It is indeed a concise but very powerful summary of the entire book of Revelation. It is an appetizer to a detailed study of the book of Revelation.

Much more grace, Dr. Denis, and great blessings on the *Ministry* magazine team.

—Prosper Chukwudi Onwumelu, district pastor, Rivers West Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Nigeria



## Congregations respond to pandemic with extraordinary social outreach

HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT, UNITED STATES

The Hartford Institute for Religion Research has released its second report examining how US congregations are navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Findings show that most churches are embracing new and innovative ministry opportunities.

One congregation, for example, helped fund a food truck to provide a mobile food bank for a low-income community. Another launched a Memory Café, which provides a monthly social opportunity for anyone with dementia and their care partners. Another of the survey respondents said their church went from a monthly sandwich-making ministry to feeding up to 1,200 people per week.

This report includes 38 Christian denominational groups with 820 responses. The survey shows that since the pandemic began, 45 percent of congregations have made permanent changes to their community outreach, and more than half (54 percent) started a new ministry or expanded and increased an existing one.

Photo: Bob Smietana



Volunteers unload a Northern Illinois Food Bank truck at St. Anne's Episcopal Church.

"In this difficult time, congregations have shown extreme resiliency by adapting and finding new ways to address the changing needs of their communities," said Dr. **Allison Norton**, coinvestigator of the study. "By intensifying community connection and social outreach, churches are largely meeting new challenges." [Sarah Brown, newsletter of Hartford Institute for Religion Research]

1 "Congregational Response to the Pandemic: Extraordinary Social Outreach in a Time of Crisis," Hartford Institute for Religion Research, <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/research/national-survey-research/extraordinary-social-outreach-in-a-time-of-crisis/>.

## Vaccines, freedom, and loving our neighbor

ST. ALBANS, UNITED KINGDOM

The Trans-European Division of Seventh-day Adventists (TED) hosted a COVID-19 symposium on January 19, 2022, to address key coronavirus pandemic concerns, including the use of vaccines and personal liberties.

Moderated by **Patrick Johnson**, TED ministerial secretary, speakers included **Ganoune Diop**, director of the General Conference (GC) public affairs and religious liberty department (PARL),

**Jennifer Woods**, GC director of government affairs and associate PARL director, **Peter Landless**, GC health ministries director, and **Carlos Casiano**, professor of microbiology, molecular genetics, and medicine at Loma Linda University.

The consensus was that while the Seventh-day Adventist church promotes and lives a potent, grace-filled health message, our policies should express our code of ethics, including how we treat others and solidarity with our neighbors, with a moral imperative to care. In the context of a public health emergency, vaccinations go hand in hand with the Adventist health emphasis. They do not antagonize but complement each other.

The speakers concluded with the admonition to “examine everything carefully” (1 Thess. 5:21, NASB). Not everything on the internet is true. We must be critical, informed thinkers before making inferences. We must ask, What is the premise of a claim, to avoid being victims of conspiracy theories. Becoming discerning thinkers is especially important in a post-truth world. View symposium at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7mnJVasK0s>. [David Neal/TED News]



Photo: Adventist HealthCare

## Church leaders meet with the president of Estonia

TÜRI, ESTONIA

**P**astor **Andres Ploompuu**, president of the Estonian Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, was among religious leaders who met with **Alar Karis**, the president of Estonia. Among various topics, the mental health of youth and children was discussed. Church leaders shared an overview with the president of the activities and initiatives that different denominations have taken in the area. Ploompuu stated, “I emphasized

that often the role of the churches in maintaining a good mental-health balance is overlooked. We always try to engage young people in different activities to help and boost their mental health.”

Estonia’s president inquired about the relationships between different denominations. “It was nice to hear all of the heads of different churches proclaim that we have good relationships while we all have our own mission. It was a day of building bridges,” added Ploompuu. “The president was exceedingly friendly, and it was obvious that he really was interested in hearing about the role of churches in our society.” [Averonika Beekmann/TED News] 📺



Photo: Maitis Tammet-VPK



## Four ways churchgoers' expectations shifted during the pandemic

**P**astor, what did your church do in the pandemic era that you plan to continue when the pandemic draws to a close?

With growing vaccination access and worshipers returning to church, now is the time for pastors to think about how they can keep ministering to people whose expectations of church changed during the pandemic.

This expectation shift comes from recognizing that churches can use twenty-first-century methods to pursue their mission. Throughout the pandemic, modern (read: digital) methods have helped churchgoers reach new levels of connection with their church and find a deeper relationship with God.

That does not mean that churches should stay exclusively online, but it does encourage pastors to consider and continue creating both in-person and digital ways for people to belong in your church outside of weekly in-person services.

Here are four ways church attendees' expectations have shifted—and what you can do to keep reaching and shepherding people without burning out.

### **1. People expect to get a better understanding of your church online**

Research suggests that around 13 percent of American Protestants left their church during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Some are looking for another church or have been waiting until after the pandemic to look.

The pandemic drastically changed the way people search for churches because people

can now get a much better sense of a church's priorities, style, and leadership through its online presence. Now, potential visitors are looking online to find even more information about the church—and to get a taste of what it would be like if they attended in person.

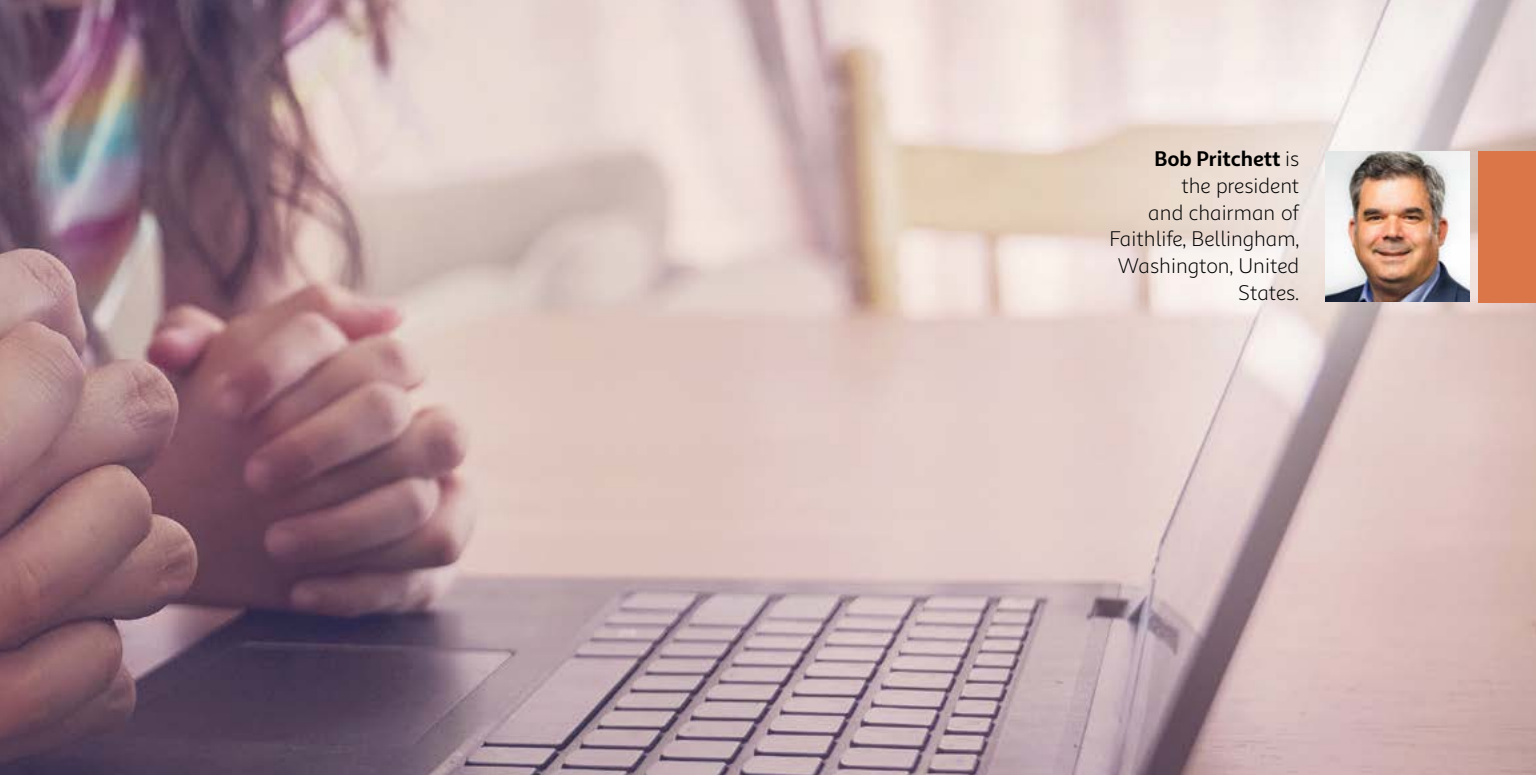
People are looking for a church website that's up-to-date and intended for visitors, not just regular attenders who already know the church lingo. They want to experience the worship service via livestream, which can help them feel more comfortable visiting in person. They also want to see how your church engages the outside world via social media. And they want updates on what's happening at your church—and how they can jump in when they are ready.

Digital tools like auto-updating websites, social media scheduling, and livestreaming software can help keep a church's online presence from becoming too time-consuming. And when it comes to digital communication, a little bit of effort can go a very long way to reach potential visitors.

### **2. Being involved and disciplined beyond weekly services**

In the past, people were generally content to set aside a couple hours each week for worship services and small groups. But the pandemic threw off many people's regular rhythms—everyone is more plugged in and eager to connect with others.

Research reveals that Americans' time on social media rose in 2020. "As many as half of



**Bob Pritchett** is the president and chairman of Faithlife, Bellingham, Washington, United States.



US adults said they were using social media more, according to some research sources. All of the major social platforms also reported strong increases in engagement.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, some churches gave their attendees digital ways to stay connected with their church community. Online church communities offer private forums where people can get bite-sized updates and discuss things they’re learning in Scripture. They help churches encourage spiritually enriching relationships without requiring much additional work from pastors. They also give pastors a chance to share responsibility for content moderation with trusted lay leaders or volunteers.

### **3. People expect new levels of access to pastors and church leaders**

During the pandemic, many pastors had to find new ways to meet with people, so video calls, emails, and direct messages became the norm.

Relying on a broader range of communication methods gives pastors a way to spend time with more people in their congregation. When people are sick or injured, pastors can pray with them via a video call. When people are traveling, pastors can still check in and see how members are doing. Because there’s no commute time, pastors can catch up with more people in the limited time they have.

Altogether, digital communication methods and in-person meetings can help pastors become more available to their congregation, narrowing the gap between the pulpit and the pew.

### **4. Giving to church to directly support community needs**

During the pandemic, the distinct needs of each community became far more pronounced. With job loss, school closures, homelessness, and food insecurity, churches had a unique opportunity to offer specific care to people in need.

Even before the pandemic, church members already looked to their church to find vetted, effective organizations to support. But after being faced with an even greater need during the pandemic, people want to know that their church is financially supporting causes in their community and around the world. Furthermore, they want to donate to their church’s benevolence funds.

### **No going back**

As pandemic restrictions are relaxed, it may be tempting for your church to settle into the way things were. Make a determined effort to ensure you are embracing the lessons learned during the pandemic—so your church can continue to minister to people with new expectations and hopes for their post-pandemic spiritual growth.



- 1 Ian Lovett, “More Americans Left Religion During the Pandemic,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/more-americans-left-religion-during-the-pandemic-11639494003>
- 2 Debra Aho Williamson, “US Social Media Usage,” eMarketer, June 2, 2020, <https://www.emarketer.com/content/us-social-media-usage>.



## Take the Day Off: Receiving God's Gift of Rest

by Robert Morris, New York, NY: FaithWords, 2019.

There was a time when many in the Christian world were opposed to the Ten Commandments in general. And there was a time when many in Christendom were opposed to the Sabbath commandment in particular. Author Robert Morris, the senior pastor of Gateway Church, a multicampus church in Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, indicates a change in sentiment. "Right in our New Testament, the author of Hebrews declares that a Sabbath rest is 'still waiting for the people of God.' . . . That means there currently is a rest that you and I can and should enter" (7, 8). "I had come to the realization that honoring the Sabbath is on the same list as not killing people. There is no logical or biblical reason to honor one and disregard the other" (12). "God declares the observance of the Sabbath to be a 'perpetual covenant.' Perpetual means there's no expiration date on it" (97).

Morris elevates the healthful benefit of the Sabbath, sharing how goal-oriented and success-driven ministry led him to the brink of collapse, to be saved only by the good news of the Sabbath. "Our good, gracious, loving Father God designated the Sabbath for good. He wants us to enjoy it. Rest is part of God's good plan for you. A Master Designer created you that way" (25). "One of the powerful and important aspects of a full day of unplugged, disconnected, undistracted Sabbath rest is that you can actually hear God" (144, 145). "Look again at the promises of the Lord regarding the Sabbath—provision, abundance, refreshing, wisdom—and remember that He gave you this day as a gift" (147).

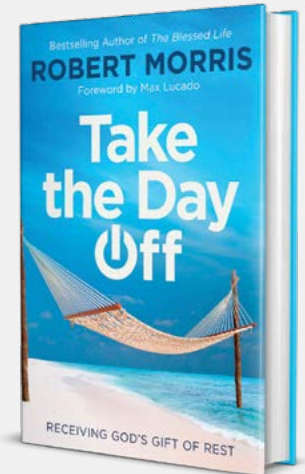
Morris touches on the Creation aspect of the Sabbath. "God had very explicitly commanded that the seventh day of the week be set aside for rest because He rested from His creative labors after the sixth day. . . . The Seventh-day Adventist denomination felt so strongly about it, they put it right there in their name!" (19). Yet Morris stops short of endorsing the seventh-day Sabbath. He actually states, "It doesn't matter what day of the week that is. I picked Monday as my weekly

Sabbath" (20). I believe Morris has embarked upon a journey of truth and God has not finished with him, or any of us, yet.

Indeed, Morris affirms the Sabbath of the fourth commandment. "It seems we often act as if we believe that we should keep nine out of the Ten Commandments. For some reason, the fourth is the only one that we think we can freely ignore without incurring negative consequences for ourselves and others. We say, 'That's legalism! That's not for today.' As I learned, the wisdom embodied in God's fourth commandment *is* for today" (12). If Morris continues his study of the Sabbath, he may yet follow on to see the beauty of the seventh-day Sabbath uniquely calling us to remember Christ as Lord through His creation.

*Take the Day Off: Receiving God's Gift of Rest* is a wonderful example of new Sabbath insights being made by Christians from different backgrounds. But the undoubted strength of the book lies in the author's transparency regarding his pastoral stress. Light for his path lay in a willingness to admit he may not have it all together and an openness to receive new truth. The book contains an unintended illustration of this.

Morris enumerates that between 500,000 and 670,000 Americans died between 1918 and 1920 in the Spanish flu pandemic. He then says, "Thankfully, in the century since those terrifying days, science and technology have gone a long way toward eliminating those kinds of appalling death tolls by disease" (xvi). The book was published in 2019. Little did Morris know that COVID-19 was just around the corner. Truly, "the path of the just is as the shining light, that shines more and more unto the perfect day" (Prov. 4:18, MEV). Light for our path lies in a willingness to admit we may not have it all together and an openness to receive new truth. 📖



Jeffrey O. Brown, PhD, is the associate editor of *Ministry*.



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