

May 2025

Dear Brethren:

We are all aware of the significance of Sabbath keeping within God's Plan for humanity. The Sabbath first came into being when God Himself rested on the seventh day after six days of creative work (Genesis 2:2). That same Sabbath rest was commanded for man as a blessing from God (Mark 2:27), and it pictures the glorious rule of Jesus Christ soon to come upon this earth for one thousand years (Revelation 20:4). The Sabbath is so significant that God made it one of the fundamental pillars of the Law—the fourth of His Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8–11). God also revealed that proper Sabbath keeping is, in fact, *the sign* between God and His faithful children (Exodus 31:13; Ezekiel 20:12, 20).

For all of these reasons, proper observance of the Sabbath is a hallmark of the faithful of God, and it absolutely will be part of our "final exam" for salvation. Anyone who claims to love God and to be a true Christian, but who yet dismisses or diminishes the importance of dutiful Sabbath keeping, will never have a place in God's Kingdom. It is that serious.

With that in mind, what actually is required in order to keep the Sabbath as God commands?

### **Basic Elements of the Sabbath Command**

What is God looking for, specifically, in our treatment of His Holy Sabbath?

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it (Exodus 20:8–11).

God requires that we make the seventh day, each week, different from the other six days. The Sabbath is holy, and the first element that we must implement is to cease from our normal labors, to rest from our usual mundane activities. That principle was further amplified by God's inspiration through Isaiah to reveal how we can gain God's special favor:

If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, *from doing thy pleasure on my holy day*; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, *not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words* (Isaiah 58:13) [emphasis mine throughout].

But is this all? What else does God require in order to count us as being faithful Sabbath keepers? Leviticus 23 lists all of God's Holy Days, including the weekly as well as the annual Sabbaths. Besides the command to rest, they all have something else very much in common:

Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, *an holy convocation*; ye shall do no work therein: it is the sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings. These are the feasts of the LORD, *even holy convocations*, which ye shall proclaim in their seasons (Leviticus 23:3–4).

### **Convocation is Critical**

Besides cessation from servile work on these Sabbaths, we are commanded to participate in some type of *convocation*! This word, from the Hebrew, means a public meeting—an assembly. This shows that to hallow the Sabbath, it is not enough just to take off from work—to sit around at home in your bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. God made His Sabbaths to be a time for *formal assembly*. But for what purpose?

Three times in a year shall all thy males [heirs] *appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose*; in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles: and they shall not appear before the LORD empty (Deuteronomy 16:16).

First, we see that these annual *convocations* are not just some man-appointed retreats or political conclaves. The point of the public assembly is *to meet with God*! God is the One who calls the meeting, and then He commands that we appear to commune *with Him*. Second, it is also required that we come to *the place that He has appointed* for the meeting.

This principle is confirmed by God's instruction concerning the solemn Passover service. Even though the original Passover in Egypt was kept by every family staying at home with lamb's blood painted upon their doorposts (Exodus 12:3–13), afterwards, this *annual memorial* was ordained by God to become *a holy convocation*, a group meeting in a designated place:

Thou mayest not sacrifice the passover within any of thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee: But *at the place which the LORD thy God shall choose to place his name in*, there thou shalt sacrifice the passover at even, at the going down of the sun, at the season that thou camest forth out of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 16:5–6).

The same provision is true, as well, for all weekly and annual Holy Days. The very concept of a *holy convocation* involves dutiful children choosing to pick themselves up and travel to meet with God—to commune with Him—in a pre-arranged place, at a pre-determined time. Just notice the specific commands for each of God's holy Sabbaths listed in Leviticus 23. Every single one of them is established with the inclusion of a holy convocation.

### **But Traveling Is not Restful!**

How can we *rest* on the Sabbath Day if we have to travel to attend a church service, perhaps at great distance from home? God never said that keeping His Sabbaths would not require effort or the expending of physical energy. It does indeed require physical exertion to dress up in our best and then travel to participate in a formal meeting with God in His appointed place. This can sometimes involve *hard work*, but the point is, it is not *servile work*! The kind of work that we are commanded to rest from is *our own, personalized striving after the necessities of this physical existence*. That is specifically what God calls *servile work*, as opposed to *holy work* (read it in all of Leviticus chapter 23). God gave us six days each week to pursue all of those cares of this life which are required to provide for personalized needs and wants. But on His Sabbaths, He commands us to direct our *full energies* toward work which focuses upon Him, including our willingness to appear in a special assembly in His presence.

But some will cite Matthew 18:20 as a justification for having their own "church service" at home: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Does this really imply that if you have at least two people in one place on the Sabbath—like a family at home together, or else two baptized members choosing to meet up someplace—that this qualifies as a "designated place" to meet with God? Hardly! And yet, this concept has been promulgated within greater *Church of God circles* for decades. It is cited often by those seeking to justify "keeping" the Sabbaths without ministerial oversight. But what is the truth of it?

The entire context of Matthew 18 is Christ's instruction to *commissioned ministers*—the Apostles in particular—who would be given responsibility by Jesus Christ for taking care of His flock—the Church! The chapter begins with the disciples selfishly

obsessing over who would be greatest in the Kingdom. Jesus turns the entire topic away from selfish ladder-climbing to instruct them about the need for ordained ministers to sacrifice their time and energies *for the benefit and care of the church*. Everything addressed from verse 5 to verse 20 is a list of *managerial responsibilities* required in wisely administering the business of the church, to keep peace among brethren, and to provide a positive environment in which they can learn to love and serve God.

In verse 20, who are these "two or three" gathering together in Christ's name? Are they laymembers of the church gathering among themselves for a Sabbath service at home? Not at all! Sabbath service protocol is not even the topic! Christ is telling the faithful ministry that when they have difficult decisions to make to resolve disputes within the assembly—especially involving the potential need to put someone out of the fellowship—then wherever they gather for a ministerial conference to make such decisions in His name, *He will be in their midst*, guiding them to do the right thing for the whole Church. Read the entirety of that passage, and it becomes clear. Anyone who attempts to lift out verse 20 as *stand-alone authorization* to create a Sabbath service wherever they choose is missing the boat entirely. The proof is especially evident by the context of verses 18–19:

Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven (Matthew 18:18–19).

Is this saying that God gives authority to *every baptized member* of the Church to make decisions for the whole Body of Christ, as long as at least two of them agree on something? How ridiculous. Why do most acknowledge that verses 18–19 are speaking of ministerial authority given by Christ to a chosen ministry for administrative purposes, but then try to lift out verse 20 as if it addresses a totally different topic? How absurd! Verse 20 describes *a meeting protocol* for ordained ministers to use to fulfill the duties delineated in verses 18 and 19. Any other interpretation is a wresting of the Scriptures.

But how then are those *commanded assemblies* for holy Sabbaths to be fulfilled? How can brethren appear in God's midst unless He tells them somehow where He will be? If it is not just wherever two or three of us agree to get together, how does God tell us what to do?

## God's Authority in Appointing Assemblies

God tells us when and where to meet Him by the very same authority we just read about in Matthew 20:18–19. God gave human ministers absolutely *no authority* to tamper with His revealed Laws. God defines what is right and wrong, not man. Jesus Christ gave only *limited authority* to His ministers, and regarding doctrine, they are permitted to teach only that which He Himself commanded to them as being true (Matthew 28:20). Then what is this *specific authority of binding and loosing* that Christ definitely delegated in Matthew 20:18–19?

It includes, especially, the making of *necessary administrative decisions* for managing group assemblies! If God commanded that we appear before Him in a convocation, some way, somehow, decisions have to be made to confirm those physical meetings. God did not choose to provide each one of us with a weekly message delivery service, as by an angel. No, He delegated that authority through *lawfully-ordained ministers*. When one of Christ's true ministers "makes the call" to pick a meeting place and a time for assembly, then *God accepts that human appointment*—binds in heaven what has been bound upon earth—and then *acts Himself* to appear in that particular place, at that prescribed time, to meet with the faithful.

This is a hard saying for many in God's church today who hate the concept of *church government* and prefer instead to practice their Christianity "on their own." This command of God to meet Him *in a place which He shall choose* upends the whole notion of claiming that they do not really need a human ministry. In practicality, someone must collect the tithes in God's name, use God's money to serve an organized religious work, and someone also must publish *where and when to meet God* to fulfill the Sabbath command in full. The fact is, God did it this way *intentionally* to force each one of us to step out in faith to "pick" where God is working.

If you fail to convoke with an assembly of church members on the Sabbaths because you reject "organized religion" in general, watch out! God indeed did organize His Church—give specific instructions for its practical operation today—and give authority to someone, somewhere, somehow, to speak in His name and to fulfill those physical requirements for the group. Likewise, if you are failing to convoke in a church service because you simply do not know where God truly is working, that is not a sustainable position, long term. If you are not sure, you are not sure. But, God expects each one of us to *search out* where a faithful assembly is located, and then *to act to make ourselves part of it*. Sitting on the sidelines because of chronic indecision is not acceptable. Again, you cannot fully keep the Sabbath unless you are *convoking with God in His appointed place*.

How long will you sit at home, claiming uncertainty as your excuse? What are you doing to *try the fruits* of the various groups and determine where God truly is working? Christ promised that He would be present somewhere, even all the way until the end of this age (Matthew 16:18; 28:20; 24:45–46). If Jesus did not lie, then He has preserved a formal structure in which to fulfill all of our Christian duties, including Sabbath keeping. Kicking the can down the road is not acceptable to Him. God wants you to *find out where He is*, and He has made it possible for you to do so (John 7:17; Deuteronomy 13:1–4; John 10:2–5). Once we eliminate the excuses, it requires a *leap of faith* to act upon our obligations and then to *show up* to meet God.

This *convocation command* is very likely the reason that God says Sabbaths are *the sign* between Him and His people. Only those who have *searched out* the true Church and are actively participating in holy convocations are fully keeping those Sabbaths. And the only ones doing that are ones who have accepted godly church government and are holding to the true Faith which Jesus Christ revealed.

### **Historical Considerations**

But, if I am sincere and earnest in seeking to obey God in keeping His Sabbaths, how can I do so when there is no designated place appointed by God in my local area?

This indeed is a very serious issue that affects a great number of God's faithful people in this world today. When God's work through Mr. Armstrong and the Radio Church of God was still in its infancy (1930s–50s), there were few congregations and few ministers to serve diverse locations. Brethren listened to the radio broadcasts and studied church literature that was sent to them by mail. Until the church began to ordain ministers and to deploy them across the country (and around the world), sincere brethren were prevented—through no fault of their own—from *fully keeping* the Sabbath through holy convocation. By the 1960s, there were local congregations in many areas, and brethren finally were able to do so. But after the apostasy from Truth which took place in the early 1970s—rejecting God's revelation of doctrine through Mr. Herbert Armstrong—the faithful sheep once again became scattered. For the past fifty years, there has been only *a very small remnant* holding fast to Christ's revealed doctrines (Isaiah 1:9). During these decades, there have been few brethren—and even fewer ministers—faithfully defending the original teachings (such as a Monday Pentecost and the sanctity of marriage). That remnant is indeed small and scattered. How can each one of them fulfill the Sabbath command to convoke? The answer is that most of them have been unable to do so, just as it was in the early years of the twentieth century! They simply live too far away from any other brethren during much of the year, and there are definitely no local ministers to serve the majority of them.

## Practical Necessities

With that reality in mind, are these sincere members of God's true Church breaking the Sabbath command because they are *physically prevented* from convoking in an official assembly from week to week? Indeed, no. As Mr. Raymond Cole stated to us over many years, you can avoid *breaking the Sabbath* by resisting servile work and instead focusing upon God, but just never forget that you can never *fully keep* the Sabbath without convoking in a bona fide assembly. For these many who would eagerly assemble if it were possible, God does not count them as being Sabbath breakers. But Mr. Cole's real point was to remind us all that this is not a *comprehensive excuse for missing out on all assemblies!*

For, even if you cannot assemble during much of the year, you definitely can assemble at some (perhaps many) of the annual Holy Days, especially the Feast of Tabernacles! Why? Because God makes the Second Tithe available to fund long-distance trips for annual Holy Day observance. Second tithe cannot be used for keeping normal weekly Sabbaths, but it absolutely can be used for *any and all annual Sabbaths*, especially the fall Feasts. Unless you are impaired by legitimate physical disability (or some unusual restriction upon your movements), then God expects you to plan for and to attend His commanded Feasts.

Mr. Cole's statement—that we can avoid *breaking* the Sabbaths, but never *fully keep* *them* without convocation—was to caution us against thinking that the scattered nature of the Church today gives us license to omit convoking altogether. Furthermore, even if you live too great a distance from a regular place of convocation for weekly Sabbath services, is it truly impossible for you to attend *at least some of them* during the year? Perhaps you do not have the personal funds or the reliable transportation needed to attend *every week*. But is it really true that you cannot attend *any week*? This ministry will never judge your personal circumstances. That is not our job. We will give each of you the *full benefit of the doubt*. But God is your Judge, and He knows whether you have a legitimate reason to eschew convocation on His Sabbaths. We each need to be assessing our personal status before God, because what God thinks is all that matters. Mr. Cole's admonition to all of us was a warning against being too complacent or dismissive about holy convocations. Do not be too quick to give yourself an excuse to "just sit at home" week after week. And again, as far as those annual Holy Days are concerned, there is even less excuse for failing to appear.

## What Makes a Designated Place?

On the other hand, some of our brethren are very sincere in wanting to fulfil the convocation command, even if they do not have a church group anywhere near them during the year. They do indeed make sure to show up for the Feast of Tabernacles, and perhaps

also for other annual Holy Days, but they would also like to be "given credit" as much as possible during the year for *fully keeping* the weekly Sabbaths. This is commendable!

Many agree with the principle that God's faithful ministry must approve a meeting place, so that God will "bind that appointment." The problem arises when the ministry is asked to "sign off" on appointing designated places in circumstances that are really not appropriate. For instance, a member and his wife—who normally have a designated meeting place at home for weekly Sabbaths—are traveling on a special business trip or family vacation for several days, including over a weekly Sabbath. There will be no other brethren with which to meet. By the way, such trips are just fine in God's eyes (by Mr. Armstrong's original teaching), even though there will be no one else to meet with for that particular Sabbath. But, cannot the minister give approval to make their hotel room away from home a designated place? After all, there will be two baptized members there (husband and wife)?

The short answer is, no. While it would make us happy to do so, that would violate the real intent of what a designated place is all about. Just multiply the principle: If that circumstance would warrant ministerial approval, why not make the homes of *all scattered brethren around the world* designated places as well, since they sincerely cannot convoke with a larger group? This dilemma would never have emerged if not for Mr. Cole's clarification about holy convocations being required to *keep fully* a Sabbath. Sincere brethren want to *keep fully* every Sabbath, so it makes sense that we would be asked to approve more and more "designated places." But there must be some kind of a guideline—a formula—for the ministry to use in making these decisions, to make sure that we are not violating the spirit of the law that God has given to us.

No such written formula was ever passed down to this ministry from either Mr. Armstrong years ago, or else by Raymond Cole before he died in 2001. What follows, then, is an *administrative guideline* developed, over time, to attempt to give some kind of structure to these important decisions.

To begin with, the "ideal" designated assembly includes the following elements:

- A gathering for "multiple members" in an area needing a formal meeting arrangement; not just one family (or household), or for a very few members.
- An ordained minister present to lead the group, including a "live" sermon during the service.
- A meeting that is open to any and all church members who might possibly want to travel to attend, even at great distance.
- It is a convocation that might be appointed to be ongoing, week by week, or conversely, a one-time occurrence, based upon a special ministerial visit to a particular local area.



These elements are "ideal," but all are not specifically required in order for this ministry to approve a gathering.

For instance, we have a number of weekly Sabbath services which we consider to be *formal designated places*, that do not have an ordained minister in regular attendance. But they do have a "lead man" appointed, who functions under the auspices of the ordained ministry. This lead man has delegated authority to make all local arrangements for the meeting (including the service location in either a rented hall, a home, or moved from week to week to fit the needs of the group), to keep order in the assembly, and to make sure that the convocation is conducted according to all church protocols. If a local area has such an appointed man whom we trust can do this job, then we might approve it as a designated place of worship. Without a minister there to teach, a lead man who is not ordained for that purpose cannot do the preaching, but the group can use a pre-recorded sermon, ideally a recording assigned by the ministry for that particular Sabbath. Also, although larger groups are certainly a blessing, we can and do designate some gatherings of only two or three members as "designated places," if all of the other conditions can be met.

### **Challenging Circumstances and Exceptions**

What about clusters of our members who would love to be considered as having a designated place, but do not meet enough of these specific formal criteria? For instance, a single or extended family with two or more baptized family members, but no other church members in the local area? What about an area having two or three baptized ladies, but no baptized men to lead? Can these be approved as formal designated places? The answer is, no, *but with qualification*.

In practical terms, these kinds of gatherings absolutely have this ministry's approval for Sabbath gatherings. If we did not give it approval, it would force such individuals to desist from getting together on the Sabbath to sing, to pray, or to listen to a sermon together. That is not our intent! There are many of you who have received approval from this ministry to get together on the Sabbath and share a "service." You are not doing anything wrong, and it is hopefully a blessing to share that fellowship with others on the Sabbath. But these kinds of meetings are probably best thought of as *informal designated places*, or *authorized informal gatherings*. Well, isn't that just parsing words and making things more complicated than they need to be? Why can they not just be counted as formal designated places, as are the others? Again, refer back to the list of criteria above, which speaks to the *key elements* of any true place of convocation *to fully meet* the standard that we were taught for the church. These more informal gatherings are *very much approved for the blessing of our scattered brethren* (and it is strongly recommended that any such gathering being OK'd by the

ministry). But if they lack a baptized lead man, for example, or enough members beyond a single family/household, it is simply *not the same by comparison* to one of our formal church meeting sites.

Such informal gatherings can still be conducted in a *formal way*, including dressing in church attire, offering opening and closing prayers, and singing hymns together. But, never begin to treat these gatherings as substitutes for attending at a truly *designated place*, when possible. What we want to avoid is a single household being granted approval to hold a service on Sabbaths, but then begin to count their own little gathering as an official place to meet for all Holy Days as well. Convoking before God, especially for annual Holy Days, should include willingness to make extra sacrifices to travel to appear before God. Please always keep that distinction in mind.

What if an *approved informal group* has special visits by other baptized members on a particular Sabbath? This is fine also, as long as the number of proposed visitors does not create a challenge to orderliness, nor the ability to enforce church protocols. Always be safe and seek ministerial advice if there are any doubts at all. If one is traveling and would like to know if there are brethren with which to meet (either informally or else in a bona fide designated place), how can one get that information? Feel free to contact one of the ministers, who can share information on the location of our members and meeting places.

Now then, in some cases, one of our ministers makes a visit into an area and spends the Sabbath with one of these small, informal groups. In that instance, for that particular weekly Sabbath, the gathering does become an official, *formal designated place*. Even though it is a "one off" meeting, it contains all of the elements on the list, especially by the presence of the ministry.

What about allowing other baptized members at a distance to use digital technology to "participate" in a Sabbath service with another small group? This question introduces *a whole new set of challenges* that never existed in the historical church. Because of new technology, it is now very easy to use video conferencing on smartphones to share audio and video to conduct decentralized meetings: this is standard practice for many business meetings, as well as for many family communications. If there are not enough members to be qualified as a formal church group, by allowing other baptized members to "tap in" on this Sabbath service from afar, can that now be counted as having *a virtual group* which can be given "designated place" status?

The first point is, we do not have a problem with allowing someone, under approved circumstances, to link digitally into one of our church Sabbath meetings, so that he can hear the sermon message. But, this is not a substitute for showing up in person! We have done

this primarily when a minister is visiting a local congregation (as in a foreign country), and one particular member lives hundreds of miles away from the others in that same country, and is unable to be there in person. But, because they are part of the greater congregation of the group, including attending with them in person during the Feast of Tabernacles, for instance, we have allowed them to listen in over the phone to the live sermon for that particular special visit.

But, we absolutely will not approve using modern technology artificially to assemble "formal groups" out of geographically-scattered brethren. The root of the command for Sabbath convocations requires appearing in *the place* where God has placed His name. The concept of an actual "place" will never be redefined in light of human technology. A *place* will always be a single geographical location on the map. Therefore, while it is fine for brethren to use technology to connect, and, with approval, even to listen to a pre-recorded sermon together, do not conflate these kinds of digital connections with actual "convocation."

What about offering a prayer over such a digital conference? In one of our *formal designated places for Sabbath convocation*, someone "tapping in" on a digital link to hear the message should never be asked to offer a prayer for the meeting "over the phone." Listening in is different than participating formally. But, in the case of one of those informal family/household groups—which is not really considered a formal church convocation—we would not be opposed to baptized family members offering prayers using digital means. Just be careful not to blur the lines in understanding what a true holy convocation requires!

## **In Summary**

The intent of this *Letter* has been to reconfirm the significance of every element required to keep God's Sabbaths properly, with special emphasis upon the command to convoke in a place where He will choose to place His name. The very most important elements are the same guidelines that we have been taught for over seventy years in God's Church through the twentieth century.

At the same time, we also have attempted to provide some *practical guidelines* necessary for a small and scattered remnant body to make personal and collective decisions in fulfilling these basic commands today. We look forward to a time in the future when God will begin to recover many of His beloved sheep out of this great spiritual wilderness of the world. When that happens, perhaps there once again will be many local congregations that will count as designated places for Sabbath meetings. Until then, the few and the scattered today need a means to make good personal decisions before God concerning proper Sabbath keeping. The ministry likewise must make administrative judgments to assign formal places

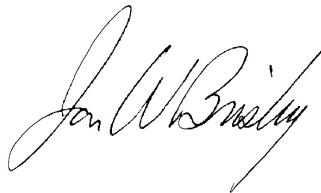
for convocation in God's name. He has promised to "back up" our ministerial appointments, but such decisions must always be made with thoughtful care to uphold the underlying *spirit of the Law*.

The advent of modern communication technology introduces a whole new list of opportunities *and complications*, requiring today's ministry to make new administrative judgments that were never needed in generations past. With God's inspiration and guidance, that is what we are attempting to do. This current summary of criteria has been derived from many real-life decisions we have had to make in recent years on a case-by-case basis, to answer pointed questions by sincere brethren. But rather than make only knee-jerk, disjointed decisions, case by case, we are seeking to formalize the important concepts into a formula which can be used by our ministers and laymembers alike, to bring about a little more organization and unity of thought.

If any of you have any additional questions regarding your own circumstances, please let us know, and we will seek to guide you in your quest to fulfil God's commands and to receive His grace and favor.

It is a pleasure to continue to be granted the chance to serve the faithful children of God in this age, and God helping us, we will do that job in the name of Jesus Christ with wisdom and love.

Yours with very sincere love and regard,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jon" being the most prominent.

Jon W. Brisby