

Analysis of “Observing the Sabbath” Paper

This paper was distributed to the United Church of God by Dennis Luker, President and Melvin Rhodes, Chairman of the Council of Elders, September 17, 2010. It was later pulled, although the firestorm of questions it generated continues. As this analysis will show, there are valid reasons for concern.

In the aftermath of this paper being published an outcry has arisen among members and ministers alike concerning the implications, based directly on what is stated, of the Sabbath-keeping practices in the United Church of God. Further concerns have risen concerning the tone of the paper, the manner in which it was put forward without going through the Doctrine Committee, and the subsequent withdrawal of paper along with the reasons given.

Despite the denial that this paper indicates any intent to change doctrine, many recognize that doctrinal change can come about through “watering down” the standards previously set. Given our recent history of doctrinal upheaval, members and ministers are understandably guarded whenever they see indications that could happen, whether or not it is intentional. Denials to the contrary of such intent do not cancel the concerns about what is clearly stated by the leadership of the church in this paper. Yet it seems that some do not recognize these legitimate concerns and those who raise questions about this paper, or ministers who have to answer members’ questions honestly about this paper, are being portrayed as stirring trouble.

Following is an analysis of the paper that shows why many are upset and believe this departs from our carefully established (not “Pharisaical,” “rigid” or “legalistic”) explanation of appropriate Sabbath-keeping. Significant quotes are pulled from the paper, and comments given to explain the concerns or objections.

Quotes and comments

1. Quote from DL/MR Paper: “For example, for Church members living closer to the north or south poles of the planet, the sun may never fully set. If Church members were to adopt a Pharisaical approach, they would potentially end up observing the Sabbath for weeks at a time. This, of course, is not the intent.”

Comment:

- This is a considerable diversion from the issue at hand. The questions surrounding Sabbath observances in the extreme areas of the earth have not been as foolish as to “observe the Sabbath for weeks at a time.” They have been about how and when to determine the appropriate time to start the Sabbath when the sun neither sets nor rises for long stretches. Setting up a construct such as this to “review some of the critical elements of worshipping God on the seventh day” quickly raises red flags as to the logical integrity of this paper.

2. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “For those Christians who would attempt to define Sabbath-keeping in a rigid, legalistic way, Jesus Himself pointed out that the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless” (Matthew 12:5).

Comment:

- Jesus Himself was not addressing “those Christians...” in Matthew 12. He was addressing the Pharisees. What follows in this paper concerning the situation in Chile casts again members and ministers who question it as having a Pharisaical approach – “rigid, legalistic.”

3. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “Other exceptions, as Jesus taught, involved minor surgery (in the form of circumcision), the rescue of farm animals, and, of course, doing good on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:12).”

Comment:

- These are obviously one-time or occasional events. The ox-in-the-ditch scenario is obviously an emergency, and much different than something that takes place every Sabbath for a stretch during the winter (in Santiago in 2010 there were 12 Sabbaths that began before 6:00 p.m.), and on many Holy Days year in and year out.
- To cast circumcision as “minor surgery” seems to be an attempt to liken it to practicing medicine. In fact, this was a ceremonial rite practiced by the priests, with spiritual symbolism. The February, 2003, United News article “Remember the Sabbath to Keep It Holy: Business Questions,” states: “Also, in John 7:22-23 we read, ‘Moses therefore gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?’ The Jews had judged that the work that needed to be done to circumcise a male child also took precedence over the complete rest usually observed on the Sabbath, and Christ did not disagree.” This section of Scripture should not be likened to the situation concerning the Chilean members and their school being opened on the Sabbath. Circumcision occurred once in a Jewish man’s life—not every Sabbath during the winter every year.

4. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “What about other instances, such as driving long distances to attend Sabbath services?”

Comment:

- This has never been a comparable issue. This is not working at your job or running your business, as the case in question.

5. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “Christ Himself warned against adopting a Pharisaical attitude, judging others whom we think may be acting in a fashion that breaks the Sabbath. Recently, such an unfortunate situation appeared when a Church family in Chile came under fire from recently invented charges that cast doubt on the integrity of the members, the United Church of God, *an International Association*, and some of its leadership.”

Comment:

- For anyone who questioned this situation, they are all already categorized as adopting a Pharisaical attitude.
- “Newly invented?” This was brought up over a year ago. “Invented” makes it sound bogus, like the issue was made up. It doesn’t matter when it came up, and this only detracts from the issue.
- Based upon this statement, are we now to conclude that questioning anything anyone does on the Sabbath is being judgmental?
- What is causing people to doubt the integrity of the United Church of God, *an International Association* and some of its leadership is the Sabbath paper that contradicts previously published papers stating that it is wrong for owners of businesses to ask or allow their employees to work for them on the Sabbath—not what one family does in Chile.

6. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “The following information is being provided to counter these unproven allegations.”

Comment:

- How else are we to read what follows other than it is being offered, as clearly stated, to prove the people are right? What is being countered? The allegation that this is breaking the Sabbath!
- What “allegations?” Apparently there are many. If Mr. Luker and Mr. Rhodes want to counter the idea that the Sabbath doctrine is being changed, fine. But lumping all of the allegations under the same attempt to disprove there is no wrong-doing whatsoever clearly sends the message that all the concerns raised are wrong.

7. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “A few facts easily dispel all the rumors and also validate the permanency of our Church’s Sabbath doctrine.”

Comment:

- “...*ALL* the rumors.” In other words, we are told that what follows is going to show that *ALL* that is being said about this case is wrong. And, the conclusion drawn from the tone of the paper, as well as specific statements (below) show that was indeed the attempt.

8. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “A member family in Chile founded an infant day-care center in 1997.”

Comment:

- Note: This is in the early days of UCG, well before the Sabbath policy papers were published in 2003. Compare to the statements made later in quotes 10 and 17.

9. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “On Friday evenings in winter months the sun sets 19 minutes before the government-regulated closing time of 6 p.m.”

Comment:

- The crux of the argument that follows is that the government makes us keep the center open on the Sabbath and Holy Days. So? The government does not make them own and operate this business! The argument seems to be that they justify this by the argument that “the government makes me do it.” This smacks of obeying man rather than God because they are not slaves to the government – they have a clear choice in this matter. This is not essential care giving. They are not running a health care facility such as a nursing home or Alzheimer’s facility. They are not running a dairy farm where cows must be milked.
- The Council may, after considering all the factors, render a decision that upholds their practice. But to the common understanding of many ministers and members, this contradicts the directives given in the previously approved Sabbath position papers.
- This also raises a yet-unexplored concern: does this potentially set a legal precedent that could jeopardize other members who could fall under “government requirements?” Any official statements such as this paper should be carefully weighed in those terms.

10. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “Fully intending to keep the Sabbath in a responsible and accountable way, the family used some UCG documents to find a good-faith solution to their problem.”

Comment:

- What documents? They made this decision in 1997. No sources are cited except for the papers published several years later in 2003.
- They admit that this was “their problem.” If they knew it was a problem, did they get counsel? From who? What was the decision? What was the basis for any decision?

11. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “Seeing precedent, these members left work in advance of the start of every Sabbath, and did not work on any Holy Day to comply with God’s Sabbath command for every Sabbath and Holy Day.”

Comment:

- These are Mr. Luker’s and Mr. Rhodes’ words, not the members. This makes a dogmatic statement that the way they handled this was complying with God’s commandments. The judgment, made by two men and apart from the Doctrine Committee and Council of Elders, is already made here in advance of the Council! A reader could conclude nothing less than that the Chilean members have already been judged as keeping the Sabbath properly.
- By this reasoning, it is okay to run your business, as long as you leave it before sundown, if the government requires.

12. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “In the first 12 years of operating their facility in this manner, no minister or pastor ever commented on how the day-care center and associated school was conducted with regards to the owner’s observance of the Sabbath and Holy Days.”

Comment:

- Were all the ministers and pastors asked for their side of the story, or to confirm this statement? A certain level of responsibility is laid on the ministry by this statement,

apparently without giving them a chance for any input. We don't know what took place or why or how this developed. This imputes fault with the ministry as well.

13. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "While the family maintains a strict Sabbath and Holy Day policy..."

Comment:

- If it is "strict," why is this even being called into question, why are they even asking the church "to review it and to make suggestions on how to improve it?" The entire question is not about their strictness, but the lack of strictness!

14. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "Clearly, their situation involves government law that does not allow their type of facility to close 19 minutes before sundown on the shortest day of the year, nor on Holy Days that fall on weekdays."

Comment:

- Is it clear? Do we know the full extent of the law? They quote a section of the Chilean law but legal issues always raise a number of questions that can only be determined by lawyers and judges. Yet Mr. Luker and Mr. Rhodes make this judgment and present it to the entire ministry and church membership without apparently asking and obtaining answers to several necessary questions. For instance:
 - Did the members in Chile ever consult a lawyer before opening their business?
 - Did they make legal inquiry to see if the government makes any allowances or exemptions for religious reasons?
 - Did Mr. Luker and Mr. Rhodes themselves investigate to seek legal counsel in Chile before exonerating them?
 - And what about Jews and Seventh Day Adventists? How do they deal with this issue?
- All the questions above are not the core issue concerning Sabbath keeping, but they are certainly pertinent to discovering whether or not good-faith efforts were made to thoroughly investigate the options.

15. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "Only recently has their good faith Sabbath-keeping solution come into question."

Comment:

- Why is their explanation characterized positively as "good faith," but questions about it are cast as "Pharisaical?"

16. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "On Holy Days, the business relies on non-member employees to care for the children, which is similar to other situations involving businesses owned by Church members."

Comment:

- What other situations?

- This statement flies in the face of the Council-approved statement titled “Sabbath and Business”:

You asked whether it was proper for a Church member who owns a business to hire employees for his business to work on the Sabbath and/or the Holy Days.

God commands us to keep the Sabbath day holy. We are to labor and do all of our work in six days, “but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God” (Exodus 20:10). God instructs us not to work, breaking down His instruction into details: “In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you” (Deuteronomy 5:14). Running a business on the Sabbath, even if you as the owner do not work on that day, creates several problems for a Christian.

In light of God’s law, as a business owner we should not employ people to work on the Sabbath and/or the Holy Days. In addition to the reference above in Deuteronomy, Exodus 20:10 gives instruction to the people of God that neither “you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates” should work on the Sabbath. If one is to be diligent regarding his servants and even strangers, then the same principle could be applied to employees. The issue is one of control. In the case of servants or family members living in the home and under the control of the owner or head of the family, it was expected that they would keep the Sabbath. In the case of a business owned by a Christian, where the Christian has the controlling interest in the business, the same principles would apply. It would be inconsistent to believe in the Sabbath and observe the Sabbath, but keep a business that you own open on the Sabbath. This is certainly not being a light to the world (Matthew 5:14). If you believe that the Sabbath is truly a holy day, then you should not open a business you own on the Sabbath.

Due to your ownership and your position as an employer, you would be the responsible party in a business that operates seven days a week and therefore on the Sabbath and Holy Days. Since it is the view of the Church that this would be a violation of God’s law, a Christian should not be involved in such business ventures unless he is willing to close on the Sabbath and Holy Days. We realize that ownership may not give absolute control in all situations. If you have any questions, we would advise you to seek further clarification before making a decision to buy or sell a business of this nature.

17. Quote from DL/MR Paper: “In this case the family involved has now become the target of vicious rumors, with Internet jurors rushing ahead to prejudge, slander and condemn anyone associated with the situation, and this was before their request for input and guidance has even been heard and responded to.”

Comment:

- In practical fact Mr. Luker and Mr. Rhodes' paper also rushed ahead to prejudge the situation, before their request was heard by the appropriate body, the Council of Elders and the Doctrine Committee.
- Their paper to the Church has created more stir and problems for the entire church and ministry than the family's situation ever could have, because many members were completely unaware of the discussions taking place on private Web sites!
- If some people were putting out vicious rumors, why not speak to the problem of rumor-mongering and gossip? Why defend the family over their Sabbath problem in such a manner that created the questions about where you stand doctrinally?
- Mr. Luker and Mr. Rhodes have the responsibility of elevating this matter to a whole-church issue and by their defense have stirred up many members and ministers! The Doctrine Committee protested strongly, not only that due process was not followed, but also that the committee members have serious doctrinal concerns about the content of the paper. However, it doesn't take a Doctrine Committee member to see the problems presented in this paper, and "trouble-makers" cannot be blamed for instigating the strife this paper has stirred.

18. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "The driving motivation seems to be a need to quickly discredit the Church and certain leaders, rather than proper concern for either the family or the Sabbath."

Comment:

- This lumps all people who had concerns about this situation into a terrible light, judging everyone as having terrible motives.
- How do the authors know that everyone concerned about this situation did not have concern for the family or the Sabbath?
- "Seems to be..." indicates that the justification for writing a paper such as this to the entire church and ministry is an unproven assumption.
- Is the MR/DL paper therefore an indication of a rush to judgment, painting with a broad brush people who have genuine concerns?

19. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "We thought our situation is similar to what is mentioned in two sections of the UCG papers on Sabbath keeping."

Comment:

- Did this not raise some question in the minds of Mr. Rhodes and Mr. Luker? The members began their school in 1997 – these papers were not written and approved by the Council of Elders until December, 2002, and were not published for the Church until in the February, 2003, *United News*. That is some five to six years after choosing to begin their business!
- The members cite one quote an article in the February, 2003, *United News*, to justify their position, but failed to quote the following statements in the same article:
 - "He did not want His people to continue regular business through others—even if those workers are currently unconverted."

- “If a Christian operates a business on the Sabbath and has others work in his or her place, what is he teaching others about the Sabbath?”
- “In Numbers 15:32-36 we have the example of a man who was discovered working on the Sabbath by gathering sticks. He disrespected holy time and thereby disrespected God by not using the preparation day properly and by not resting on the Sabbath. It was judged that he should be put to death. Would it have been acceptable for this man to hire an unconverted person to pick up his sticks for him on the Sabbath? No. The principle is that God desires His people to rest from their work and for their workers to be able to rest as well.”
- “To hire another person to work on what we know is holy time sends a very confusing message to that person. It conveys, "I rest on this day, but it is not important for you to do so." What gospel are we preaching by our personal example? Are we saying, "The Sabbath is holy for me, but I feel that it is fine for you to break God's law and work as my employee"?"
- “If we own a business, it is not acceptable to have our employees working while we enjoy a restful Sabbath day. An employee, therefore, should not be classified as roughly equivalent to a "manservant" since such a servant was a household slave. Yet, it is clear that God intended that everything under the control of the believer—sons, daughters, servants, slaves and animals—have the opportunity to rest on the Sabbath. This principle clearly extends to employees. They likewise should not be working for a Christian who understands that the time during the Sabbath is holy. We cannot force unbelieving employees to rest on the Sabbath, but we should not hire them to labor for us on that day.”
- “Therefore, the Church of God teaches that a believer should not hire employees to work on the Sabbath and Holy Days. It does not set the right example of respecting holy time; it does not teach them the holiness of the Sabbath; and it does not give employees the benefit or option of rest during holy time. Employees working on the Sabbath place the member business owner in a position of responsibility. Employing others on the Sabbath also brings into question our motivation for owning a business that is open on the Sabbath. Is it just to make money? Does this lead to other problems?
- Therefore, as a Church we recommend that members who own businesses close them on the Sabbath from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset in order to observe the commanded Sabbath rest. We encourage them to have faith that God will bless them for respecting His holy time and setting the right example for others. *UN*”
- Anyone reading this article cannot fail to conclude that some extremely relevant quotes were selectively included or overlooked. Why?
- Why did the Chilean members fail to quote the section in the same *United News* titled, “Business Owners and the Sabbath” or even refer to that article? That article is far more applicable to their situation than the paper of the “Caregivers and the Sabbath?” We cannot know why the members did not quote this, but the point is that Mr. Rhodes and Mr. Luker should have investigated this much more thoroughly before writing and sending this paper to the entire church. Why didn’t Mr. Rhodes and Mr. Luker quote this section?

- The biggest problem is not so much with the members and their asking for the Council to review their case, as it is with the paper Mr. Rhodes and Mr. Luker wrote, which by all appearances is merely a defense of the members' position!

20. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "After reading the family's concerns about keeping the Sabbath, how can one say they are working on the Sabbath themselves?"

Comment:

- That comment misses the point. *They* are not working themselves—the question is about allowing *others* to work on the Sabbath in a business that the members own! The Sabbath commandment concerns not only your responsibility to avoid work, but also your responsibility as an employer to see that your employees avoid Sabbath (and Holy Day) work, too!

21. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "How can one accuse Church leaders of advocating breaking God's holy Sabbaths?"

Comment:

- Some may be accusing, but others are not – but they are seriously calling into question what this paper implies. They are asking, "Why does it not comply with the previously approved position papers the Council approved? Why does it exonerate the family by justifying their position?"

22. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "How can one infer that the United Church of God, an International Association, is 'changing its Sabbath doctrine'?"

Comment:

- "Inference is the process of drawing a conclusion by applying clues (of logic, statistics etc.) to observations or hypotheses; or by interpolating the next logical step in an intuited pattern." Anyone who is trying to be careful about preserving the doctrinal integrity of the Church could infer nothing less!
- Assuming there is no intention of changing doctrine, it should also be noted that doctrine (and especially the *practice* of doctrine) can also change by compromise, watering down standards, and being careless in judgment. In fact, it is probably easier for doctrinal change to creep into the church via poor practices rather than overt change.

23. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "The answer, of course, is that it is completely unwarranted to derive such unfounded conclusions."

Comment:

- Much to the contrary, there are many justifications for the chorus of concerns. Even if there were no justification beforehand, this paper from Mr. Rhodes and Mr. Luker has itself raised a number of red flags about doctrinal integrity.

24. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* "Hopefully, as their spiritual brothers and sisters, we should be supporting their efforts to keep the Sabbath holy."

Comment:

- Yes, if this means supporting by pointing out to them the doctrinal position paper on operating a business on the Sabbath.
- Yes, if this means supporting by advising them to seek appropriate legal counsel to see if the government authorities make exceptions for religious reasons.
- NO, if supporting means selectively quoting sections of the Sabbath statements to justify their previously-established practices!
- NO, if supporting means automatically supporting the tone of this paper, as well as its literal statements!

25. *Quote from DL/MR Paper:* “Rather, they and we are all part of a spiritual body that is striving to obey God and lovingly encouraging each other as we grow (Ephesians 4:16).”

Comment:

- By their own admission in the sections of their paper that you quoted, they were suspended from the church for reasons other than how they observed the Sabbath. This was the second time for them to be suspended. Although the circumstances are not mentioned in the paper, something is clearly amiss about this. Why were they suspended? What are the issues with that? Are we all truly part of the same spiritual body “lovingly encouraging each other?”

Conclusion:

Both the tone and direct statements in this paper send a clear message that Mr. Luker and Mr. Rhodes have exonerated this family from any wrong-doing concerning their Sabbath-keeping. In doing so, they have raised serious questions in the minds of many as to their position, or the church’s position, on Sabbath-keeping. They have raised serious questions as to how careful the leadership of the church is when it comes to seeking wide counsel, especially that of the Doctrine Committee and the Council of Elders, on matters as serious as this. They have raised serious questions about acting independently on such serious matters, which causes concerns about what other types of advice and counsel they may have given in cases that are not as publicly known as this one.

Papers from the president and chairman to the entire church carry a lot of weight. Given the evidence above, the fact that this one caused significant upset and unrest among the ministry and members should come as no surprise. Neither should those who are upset be cast as rebellious or trouble-makers. Rather, the authors should openly and honestly accept their responsibility for their statements, and their role in elevating it to the level of turmoil we currently see.