

The Restoration of the Perpetual Covenant to Hallow the Sabbath Day

Mary Jane Woodger

Mary Jane Woodger is a professor of Church history
and doctrine at Brigham Young University.

The commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy is as ancient as the earth itself, dating back to the Creation of the world, when after six days of labor the Lord rested from his work (see Genesis 2:2–3). God then commanded Moses on Mount Sinai, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). Then in 2015 for the first time, a Churchwide “local and regional leadership training” was conducted where leaders received “instruction on the topic of strengthening faith in God by observing the Sabbath day with greater purpose.”¹ This emphasis on keeping the Sabbath day holy was initiated in a general conference address given by Elder Russell M. Nelson (who is now President of the Quorum of the Twelve) in April of that same year. Elder Nelson explained, “The Sabbath was given as a perpetual covenant, a constant reminder that the Lord may sanctify His people.” With the restoration of all things, this covenant was made between the Lord and his people once again. As Elder Nelson said, “It has been renewed in these latter days as part of a new covenant with a promise” (see D&C 59:9–16).²

Part of the New and Everlasting Covenant Restored by Joseph Smith

President Brigham Young made the following observation that the Sabbath day was indeed part of the new covenant:

As to keeping the Sabbath according to the Mosaic Law, indeed, I do not; for it would be almost beyond my power. Still, under the new covenant, we should remember to preserve holy one day in the week as a day of rest—as a memorial of the rest of the Lord and the rest of the Saints; also for our temporal advantage, for it is instituted for the express purpose of benefiting man.³

Brigham Young saw the commandment to hallow the Sabbath day as a part of the new and everlasting covenant revealed by our Father in Heaven in this dispensation, and other apostles and prophets agreed. For instance, Elder John W. Taylor of the Quorum of the Twelve declared that Sabbath-day observance was “part and parcel of the new covenant God has made with his people in the latter day.”⁴

Prominence of the Sabbath Day in General Conference Addresses

The repetition of this commandment has become commonplace among Latter-day Saints since 7 August 1831 when section 59 of the Doctrine and Covenants was revealed. The word *Sabbath* has been used 2,715 times in general conferences from 1850 to October 2015. As shown in the graph below there have been times when there has been an increase in counsel about Sabbath-day observance. Though General Authorities seldom give justification for emphasizing the Sabbath day in their general conference addresses, some reasons may be deduced for a heavier emphasis of this topic at one time more than another. One explanation is that cultural trends often preclude General Authority inclusion. For instance, stressing Sabbath-day observance between 1880 and 1900 coincided with a move away from agrarian life to urban living. With this shift came more opportunity for Latter-day Saints to be gainfully employed on Sundays, and, therefore, this new way to break the commandment was addressed. Another increase in General Authority

attention to this subject took place from 1920 to 1940. This intensification is parallel to the advancement of Latter-day Saint participation in more Sunday sports and movies. It can also be observed that during World War II and the Great Depression, the topic of keeping the Sabbath day holy was advanced often but never linked to these events in leaders’ talks.

Some General Authorities have included this subject in their addresses more than others. More than any other Apostle, Joseph Fielding Smith spoke about keeping the Sabbath day holy. During his inclusion in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the amount of times the Sabbath day was mentioned in general conference was frequent, especially when compared with the decades immediately before and after his apostleship. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith explained his reasons for constantly speaking on this topic:

We have, been taught to observe the Sabbath day from the beginning, and to keep it holy. And many other commandments, which we hear reiterated from the stand, . . . God has given unto us, that we might grow nearer unto him and be built up in the faith and strengthened. No commandment, at any time, has He given us, that was not for our comfort and blessing. They are not given merely to please the Lord, but to make us better men and women, and worthy of salvation and exaltation in His kingdom. We know our duty; we know what is required of us, and that the Lord will not hold him guiltless who, understanding these things, will go contrary to that which he has been commanded.⁵

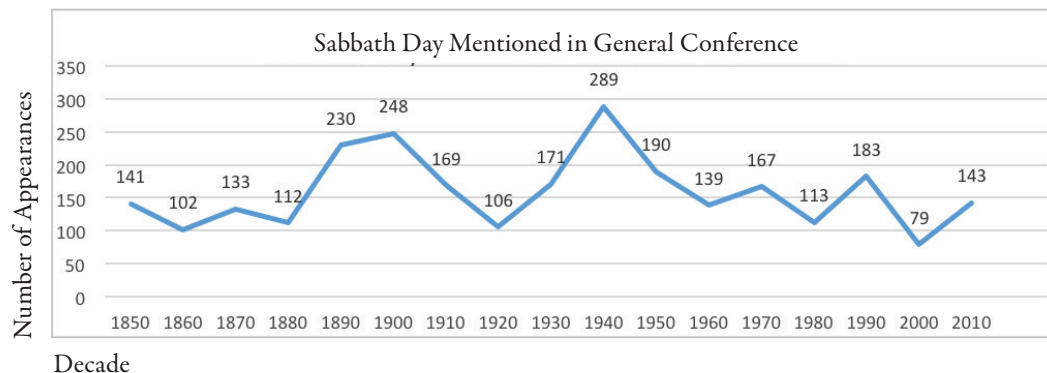
The recent emphasis on the Sabbath day, however, is incomparable to any other era. With just being halfway through the 2010s decade, there are already 143 uses of the term “Sabbath day” in general conference. If this trend continues, the current decade will have more said about the Sabbath day in general conference than any previous decade. With the current emphasis of Sabbath-day observance, one is hard pressed to find a cultural parallel for this constant inclusion or a prominence of any particular leader speaking on the subject. Elder M. Russell Ballard gave this brief explanation for the current importance given to keeping the Sabbath day holy: “We felt that it was urgent that we strengthen the faith of our people. The world seems to be getting a little . . . more difficult. . . . We’re hoping that home

activities will be more centered on learning and knowing more about the life and ministry of the Savior and the great plan of happiness that our Heavenly Father has given us to live by.”⁶

From Rules and Regulation to a Sign of Devotion

Though an underlining message in all general conference addresses about keeping the Sabbath day holy is consistent—to love God and act in a way that shows our love, respect, and honor for him—the interpretation, counsel, and instruction concerning the Sabbath day has not been constant throughout the history of the Church. A pattern can be observed with the various counsels about Sabbath-day observance that replicates ancient patterns of counsel that went from providing specific regulations and rules to inviting the inward adoption of gospel principles. Though each generation can be seen as having unique circumstances that make counsel vary by some degree throughout the years, the pattern still exists. From the beginning of the Church to present day, the theme of “Keeping the Sabbath Day Holy” has evolved in its role, prevalence, and usage by prophets.

This evolution of the Sabbath day principle in the latter days closely follows the progress that took place from the institution of Mosaic law to Christian practice. President James E. Faust of the First Presidency said, “The Mosaic injunctions of Sabbath day observance contained many detailed dos and don’ts. This may have been necessary to teach obedience to those who had been in captivity and had long been denied individual freedom of choice. Thereafter, these Mosaic instructions were carried to many unwarranted extremes which the Savior condemned.” Elder Faust reiterated that in our generation, “God has recognized our intelligence by not requiring endless



restrictions. Perhaps this was done with a hope that we would catch more of the spirit of Sabbath worship rather than the letter thereof.”⁷

Just as the Savior tried to turn people’s hearts to the Sabbath instead of restricting them to Mosaic rules, so too can this change be seen in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Counsel given in general conference has progressed from detailed specific dos and don’ts to a broader view of the covenant of keeping the Sabbath day holy as a sign of our devotion written upon our hearts.

Scriptural Foundation

General Authorities consistently used two Sabbath-day scriptural passages to link Mosaic law to the new and everlasting covenant. Most often, they would first cite the Sabbath-day passage from the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labor, 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 20:9–11)

General Authorities reiterated that this fourth commandment was a perpetual covenant that had never been rescinded. Most especially the first three prophets of the twentieth century, Joseph F. Smith, Heber J. Grant, and George Albert Smith, repeated the commandment given on Mount Sinai. George Albert Smith was adamant that the commandment was still binding on latter-day Israel. He also declared, “If the people of the world had observed the Ten Commandments from that time until now, we would be a much different world. There would be millions of people who would live longer than they have lived and be happier.”⁸ The preceding generation of General Authorities also spoke authoritatively about the fourth commandment. For

instance, then Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith was very clear that the Saints should not believe that the commandment to keep the Sabbath day was part of the law of Moses that had been done away with in Christ. He informed, “The Decalogue was older than Moses, it continued after Moses passed away. The Lord has reiterated these commandments, he has renewed them and commanded us in our day to observe them and keep them sacredly and holy.”⁹ Mid- and latter-twentieth-century General Authorities, including Sylvester Q. Cannon, Spencer W. Kimball, N. Eldon Tanner, L. Tom Perry, James E. Faust, and Russell M. Nelson, also referred to the Decalogue.¹⁰ Moreover, Elder James E. Faust observed, “The divine law of the Sabbath has been emphasized repeatedly over the centuries more than any other commandment.”¹¹ Elder L. Tom Perry said that our treatment of the Sabbath day could be compared to those of former generations. He suggested, “One way to measure ourselves and compare us to previous generations is by one of the oldest standards known to man—the Ten Commandments.”¹²

In 1949, President J. Reuben Clark Jr. explained that the reason this Mosaic law became so rule- and regulation-oriented was because it was one of the hardest commandments for the children of Israel to keep. He explained:

Ancient Israel found that one of its most difficult commandments to observe was that of remembering the Sabbath day. After they were led into captivity, they were among a people who knew not the Sabbath which they knew, and very soon they began to partake, as we are partaking (and let me say it is amazing how we follow round the clock of earlier peoples in our wanderings, or beginning of wanderings from the early tenets as they were taught to us) of the sins of those among whom they lived. It came to be, as it is with us, that not alone was the matter one of laboring on the Sabbath, but it was also one of recreation on the Sabbath. So rather trivial regulations (as they seem to us) were made by captive Israel in order to prevent ancient Israel from breaking the Sabbath.¹³

President Clark’s observation also explains why in the early days of the modern Church there was much more specificity in the counsel given on hallowing the Sabbath day.

The other scriptural passage that General Authorities most often use in counsel to keep the Sabbath day holy comes from section 59 of the Doctrine of Covenants. In almost every case, when a modern Apostle has spoken of the Sabbath day, passages or at least wording from this scripture block was included in his address:

For verily this is a day appointed unto you to rest from your labors, and to pay thy devotions unto the Most High;

Nevertheless, thy vows shall be offered up in righteousness on all days and at all times;

But remember that on this, the Lord’s day, thou shalt offer thine oblations and thy sacraments unto the Most High, confessing thy sins unto thy brethren, and before the Lord.

And on this day thou shalt do none other thing, only let thy food be prepared with singleness of heart that thy fasting may be perfect, or, in other words, that thy joy may be full (D&C 59: 9–13).

This passage of scripture became the basis of counsel given over the history of the Church. Section 59 has been referred to in general conference addresses regarding the Sabbath day more in the twentieth century than even in the nineteenth century when it was first received.

Working on the Sabbath

It is noteworthy that the Sabbath day is one of the first things that President Brigham Young spoke of upon entering the valley. This incident has been brought up by Joseph Fielding Smith, LeGrand Richards, George Albert Smith, and Gordon B. Hinckley in general conference.¹⁴ President Hinckley described what happened:

On July 24, 1847, the pioneer company of our people came into this valley. . . . The next day, Sabbath services were held both in the morning and in the afternoon. There was no hall of any kind in which to meet. I suppose that in the blistering heat of that July Sunday they sat on the tongues of their wagons and leaned against the wheels while the Brethren spoke. The season

was late, and they were faced with a gargantuan and immediate task if they were to grow seed for the next season. But, President Young pleaded with them not to violate the Sabbath then or in the future.¹⁵

On that first Sabbath in the Salt Lake Valley, President Brigham Young told the brethren that they must not work on Sunday and that they would lose five times as much as they would gain by it.¹⁶ He was adamant from the very outset that the Latter-day Saints of his generation keep the covenant of hallowing the Sabbath day.

Pioneers did not have to worry about specific counsel regarding shopping, attending sports, or going to the theater on Sunday, but they did have a lot of work to do in order to survive in a new land, especially with planting crops. Brigham Young, in trying to teach the Saints about keeping the Sabbath day holy, encouraged them not to work on the hallowed day. At one point, he even criticized one Latter-day Saint “because he planted some potatoes on the Sabbath day before he came to church.”¹⁷ Not working on the Sabbath has been constantly addressed throughout all generations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. President Wilford Woodruff also warned about farming on the Sabbath: “I do not believe that any man, who has ever belonged to this Church and kingdom, since its organization, has made anything by attending to his farm on the Sabbath. . . . The Spirit of God does not like it, it withdraws itself from us, and we make no money by it.”¹⁸

The idea that working on the Sabbath would not prove to be beneficial was mentioned repeatedly over the years. For instance, President George Albert Smith said, “I want to say that you lose every time you violate the Sabbath day, you lose more than you can gain, no matter what you may think you are going to gain.”¹⁹ Likewise, President David O. McKay declared, “The farmer who makes his boys go out and haul hay, even when a storm is coming, is doing his boys an injustice. It would be much better to let that hay be destroyed than to deprive those boys of a sense of coming nearer to the Eternal Spirit, and partake of the sacrament.”²⁰

As Latter-day Saints progressed from an agrarian society to an urban one, counsel changed in relationship to working on the Sabbath day. In 1978, President Spencer W. Kimball was pleased to report that in his extensive travels he found “many thankful people who forgo the Sabbath

day profits.” Then in a new turn of counsel, he cautioned Latter-day Saints to not make others work either. He taught, “Businesses will not be open on the Sabbath if they are not patronized on that holy day. The same is true of resorts, sporting events, and recreation areas of all kinds. Pursuit of the almighty dollar is winning, it seems, over the Lord’s commandment, ‘Keep my Sabbaths, and reverence my sanctuary’ (Lev. 19:30).” President Kimball continued, clarifying that keeping the Sabbath requires more than sacrificing worldly pleasures. He said, “It is not enough to refrain from movie-going, hunting, fishing, sports, and unnecessary labor on the Sabbath.”²¹ Elder Mark E. Petersen of the Quorum of the Twelve taught, “If we are to do none other thing on Sunday but to devote the day to holy purposes, what is our situation if we willfully choose to operate our businesses on the Sabbath, or if we patronize such Sunday businesses, or if we go to places of recreation on Sunday?”²²

Inappropriate Activities on the Sabbath

The quote above brings up another repeated Sabbath-day counsel: many recreational activities are not Sabbath-day worthy. The concern for young people and their activities on the Sabbath day was a constant in the addresses of the Brethren. For example, President Joseph F. Smith spoke of “gangs about the streets, using obscene language, throwing rocks at and scuffling with each other, going riding, walking, fishing, hunting, &c., on the Sabbath day.”²³ He warned, “One of these evils is a growing tendency, especially on the part of our youth, to pay but little attention to, if not to ignore, the observance of the Sabbath day. The Sabbath is a day of rest and of worship, designated and set apart by special commandment of the Lord to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and we should honor and keep it holy. We should also teach our children this principle.”²⁴

Some Latter-day Saints began to think that if they attended their religious meetings on Sunday, then they could do anything else they wanted to do and still be honoring the Sabbath. The Brethren became very clear that this was not the case, and they would pay a price for such actions. President George Albert Smith cautioned that with such behavior, “the Spirit of our Heavenly Father will withdraw from them.”²⁵ As sports and media entered the lives of Latter-day Saints, General Authorities also spoke of these aspects

of life being incongruent with Sabbath-day worship. In the 1970s, shopping on Sunday became a topic of concern. President Spencer W. Kimball said, “We call attention also to the habit in which many buy their commodities on the Sabbath. Many employed people would be released for rest and worship on the Sabbath if we did not shop on that day. Numerous excuses and rationalizations are presented to justify the Sunday buying. We call upon all of you to keep the Sabbath holy and make no Sunday purchases.”²⁶

Regulation- and Rule-Bound Counsel

In going from Mosaic regulation to heartfelt devotion, there were many steps along the way in the counsel from General Authorities. One sees in early Church history the listing of many dos and don'ts of what Latter-day Saints could or could not do on the Sabbath day. One interesting incident from Elder George A. Smith shows the extreme strictness that was going on in Sabbath observance. One time when he was visiting a stake, he found local leaders debating about whether or not Latter-day Saints could even discuss the subject of temporal welfare on the Sabbath. Local leaders were telling their congregations that they should not speak of such things as “donations, emigration, teams, building meeting-houses, or of Tithing,” on the Sabbath. After learning of this particular stake's eccentric restrictions, Elders George A. Smith and Ezra T. Benson occupied the whole Sabbath day “in telling how to make bread, build cities, make farms, fences, and in fact we told them how to do every useful thing that we could think of.” They “asserted that a certain amount of temporal preparation was necessary in order that a man might enjoy his religion.”²⁷

Specific rules such as the one discussed above were often given late into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For instance, President Joseph F. Smith censured listening to secular music on the Sabbath.²⁸ Latter-day Saints were encouraged instead to “[sing] the songs of Zion.” In 1900, Elder Francis M. Lyman gave a list of appropriate Sunday activities, saying, “The Sabbath day should be occupied in our home temples, in home study, in home reading, in home prayer.” He also suggested that “the fathers and mothers will, perhaps, find themselves pretty well ‘stumped’ at times to know just exactly how to handle the little ones; but they must not be wearied.”²⁹

Elder John Henry Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was very decisive in his list of dos and don'ts. He counseled that the Sabbath day “should not be spent in visiting neighbors, in mingling with one another upon the streets, or in going to pleasure resorts.” Instead, the Saints “should seek to study the Scriptures at home, and equip ourselves by communion with the Spirit.”³⁰ Even as late as 1 September 1928, the First Presidency published an editorial in the *Deseret News*, which commanded specifically that “Latter-day Saints may not go on Sunday to movies, to baseball, football, or basketball games, or to any other kind of commercial entertainments, or engage in avoidable commercial activities, or go hunting, fishing, golfing, or skiing on this day.”³¹

In 1949, the subject of Sunday music was broached once again, but the regulation was tempered when President J. Reuben Clark Jr. of the First Presidency suggested that Latter-day Saints could “listen to good music in the home,” but they were not to “go joy riding, nor to beach parties, nor on picnics!”³² On the subject of watching movies, he instructed, “There is a great difference between looking at a good movie in your home and going to a movie house, a very great difference. But the home movies we look at should be of a kind that teach things specified in the revelations as in order in the house of prayer.”³³

Twenty years later in 1969, then Elder Spencer W. Kimball published *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. Within this volume, he gave lists of what to do on the Sabbath, unlike his predecessors who had listed what not to do. He wrote:

Abstinence from work and recreation is important but insufficient. The Sabbath calls for constructive thoughts and acts, and if one merely lounges about doing nothing on the Sabbath, he is breaking it. To observe it, one will be on his knees in prayer, preparing lessons, studying the gospel, meditating, visiting the ill and distressed, sleeping, reading wholesome material, and attending all the meetings of that day to which he is expected. To fail to do these proper things is a transgression on the omission side.³⁴

As the prophet, President Spencer W. Kimball was still giving lists to the Saints. In 1978, President Kimball's list of appropriate Sabbath activities also included "studying the scriptures, attending church meetings to learn and to worship, writing letters to absent loved ones, comforting the sorrowing, visiting the sick, and, in general, doing what the Lord would have us do on this, his holy day."³⁵ President Kimball's administration instituted the consolidated meeting schedule. As the prophet, he made it clear that the extra hours on the Sabbath day that were now available from a reduction in meetings should be spent with families: "Therefore, take time to be together as families to converse with one another, to study the scriptures, to visit friends, relatives, and the sick and lonely. This is also an excellent time to work on your journals and genealogy. Do not neglect those among us who do not now have the blessings of living in traditional families. These are special souls who often have special needs. Do not let them become isolated from you or the activities of your ward or your branch."³⁶

Counsel to Attend Church Meetings

One thing that was absolute that did not change over the span of generations was that Latter-day Saints were instructed to attend Church meetings on the Sabbath. Especially in the first two decades of the twentieth century, this counsel was renewed repeatedly. Elder Hyrum Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in October 1906 reported that some "sacrament meetings and Sabbath meetings [were] not as well attended as they should be."³⁷ Elder George Albert Smith also spoke in general conference about low attendance and cautioned, "Men and women who go from year to year without partaking of the Lord's Supper, gradually lose the Spirit of our Heavenly Father; they forfeit its companionship where they have had opportunity to participate in that blessing, but have failed to take advantage of it. The Sacrament is of great importance. The Lord Himself ordained that we partake of these emblems."³⁸

In 1907, President Anthon H. Lund of the First Presidency talked about the great expense the Church was incurring in erecting meetinghouses and tied it to the importance of Sabbath worship: "We hope that the people who are so willing to build meeting houses will also be willing to use them . . . on the Sabbath day." He then warned, "Unless the Saints attend their meetings

it will be hard for them to keep alive in the Gospel."³⁹ Nine years later, he talked of ways to make the meetings more attractive through music and defined that it was "[the Saints'] duty in attending their meetings" and to listen to what is said.⁴⁰

Often quoting section 59, General Authorities told Latter-day Saints to go to the "house of prayer" and renew their covenants so they could keep "unspotted from the sins of the world."⁴¹ In October 1916, Elder Rudger J. Clawson also encouraged Saints to go to church. He warned that it was not enough to "remain at home upon the Sabbath day, even to read, or to read good books, or to read the scriptures, when they ought to be in the house of prayer, in the house of worship, in the house of the Lord, where they are commanded to go."⁴²

In 1936, Elder Richard R. Lyman of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles outlined the purpose of Sunday meetings as follows:

We do not go to our places of worship for the purpose of acquiring scholarship; we do not go there to learn history or mathematics or science. The purpose of our going to our sacrament meetings is to worship. We cannot get faith by logic any more than we can get learning by simply longing for it. Partaking worthily of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is an important and fundamental part of that worship, and it is this intense and genuine worship, this prayerful spirit that will bring . . . light and inspiration.⁴³

Attending Church meetings was the most important thing to do on the Sabbath, and, according to President Kimball, resting did not mean "indolent lounging about the home all day or puttering around in the garden, but a consistent attendance at meetings for the worship of the Lord." Agreeing with what Elder Lyman said above, President Kimball told the Saints they should not expect to go to Sabbath meetings to be entertained or amused, but should go to worship. He was clear that worshipping during the sacrament meeting was the responsibility of the individual member: "If the Sacrament meeting is a failure to you, you are the one that has failed. No one can worship for you; you must do your own serving of the Lord."⁴⁴

In the April general conference of 1946, Elder Marion G. Romney said that it was of overwhelming importance to have regular attendance

of sacrament meetings and also gave a promise to the Saints if they would go to church. He promised, “If we will increase our attendance from about twenty percent to forty percent, we shall double our spiritual power for righteousness in the world.”⁴⁵

Individual Internalization

As time went on, counsel from General Authorities in relationship to Sabbath-day observance became more internal, less rigid, and inexplicit. This type of instruction appeared sporadically and then with more and more frequency. In April 1915, President Joseph F. Smith began to give this type of counsel: “God made or designated the Sabbath day for a day of rest, day of worship, a day for goodly deeds, and for humility and penitence, and the worship of the Almighty in spirit and in truth.”⁴⁶ Here, specific rules were not mentioned. Latter-day Saints were not told exactly what goodly deeds to do, only to do them. President Francis M. Lyman of the Quorum of the Twelve also gave some very general counsel when he instructed that on the Sabbath, Latter-day Saints should “refrain from all labor, from all secular and improper pleasures, and spend the day in the service and worship of the Lord.”⁴⁷ Again, the Saints were told to spend the day in service and worship but not told what that entailed. Listeners in general conference had to internalize what such instruction meant for each one of them in their individual lives.

A few years later in 1923, Elder James E. Talmage simply told the Saints that they were not obeying the law if they were idle, and he instructed, “We should be active and in service, but Sabbath-day work should be directly the service of God and not the secular and wage-earning service of man.”⁴⁸ This vague counsel left it up to the individual to decide what “service of God” entailed. Presiding Bishop Sylvester Cannon was aware that many Latter-day Saints did not want this new type of counsel; instead, they wanted a list so that they could justify doing something if it was not included as being unacceptable by the Brethren. In general conference of 1926, Bishop Cannon gave a broad definition of what was appropriate without defining specific activities that would break the Sabbath:

Many people question at times how we should observe it, or what it is that might be considered as breaking the Sabbath. Surely anything that interferes with the spirit of peace conformable to the Sabbath is breaking the Sabbath. There should be nothing that interferes with our worship or that causes our minds to be diverted, nor any act of ours that causes our minds to be detracted from the spirit of that day; but in all of our acts upon that day we should exercise and devote our minds and thoughts to those things that shall help us to grow in faith, in righteousness and in good works.⁴⁹

Except for these sparse examples cited above, most other counsel for Sabbath-day observance was very explicit. It was not until the 1980s that most of the General Authorities gave counsel that was broad and self-determined. For instance, in 1991 Elder Marvin J. Ashton of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gave direction about each Latter-day Saint’s personal involvement with the Sabbath. He instructed, “Sometimes the freedoms and blessings of the Sabbath can be lost by attitudes that allow selfishness and lack of personal involvement in tried-and-true patterns. Sabbath days can be lost an hour at a time. Sabbath days can be lost an outing at a time.”⁵⁰

Sacrament Spirituality

Though the counsel of the last two decades of the twentieth century took on a more general, less detailed tone, one constant was always present in teachings about hallowing the Sabbath: the sacrament was to be the preeminent activity for Latter-day Saints on Sunday. Whereas earlier attending Church meetings had been of great importance, what was done during the sacrament became the focus in the twenty-first century. The sacrament service even became more internalized as the years went by. By way of illustration, Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles mentioned in 2006 that he remembered that when he was a little child, beautiful music was played during the passing of the sacrament. He then explained that this practice was stopped because the Brethren wanted the minds of the Latter-day Saints to focus on the atoning sacrifice of the Lord and Savior, Jesus

Christ. Elder Ashton then gave some individually prescribed counsel suggesting that during the administration of the sacrament, Latter-day Saints set aside the world. As he put it, the sacrament should be a “period of spiritual renewal as we recognize the deep spiritual significance of the ordinance offered to each of us personally. If we were to become casual in partaking of the sacrament, we would lose the opportunity for spiritual growth.”⁵¹

Elder L. Tom Perry gave entire talks on the importance of the sacrament in 1984 and 2006. In 1984 he explained, “Partaking of the sacrament [is] basic for our observance of the Lord’s day.”⁵² He spoke of the power of the sacrament on each individual by telling the story of a poor woman who faithfully went to church every week. Her husband, however, did not. Week after week, she urged him, but he wouldn’t go. “Finally, tiring of her pestering, he said, ‘Give me one good reason why I should go to church.’ Her reply was, ‘I can’t explain to you why I go. All I can tell you is that I go in empty and come out full.’”⁵³ As illustrated in this story, counsel about the sacrament was now about thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, rather than behavior and actions.

This type of counsel was very pronounced in the general conference held directly after the Sabbath-day leadership training. In October 2015, three General Authorities all gave the same kind of counsel that concentrated on emotions and spirituality. Elder Claudio R. M. Costa of the First Quorum of the Seventy disclosed:

While pondering on the Sabbath day I felt a deep gratitude for the blessing and privilege of being able to partake of the sacrament. For me that is a very solemn, sacred, and spiritual moment. . . . The sacrament is . . . a time for Heavenly Father to teach us about the Atonement of His Beloved Son—Our Savior, Jesus Christ—and for us to receive revelation about it. . . . It is a time for us to reverently ask God for this knowledge. And if we do, I have no doubt that we will receive this knowledge, which will bless our lives beyond measure. I love the Sabbath, the sacrament, and what they mean.⁵⁴

Elder D. Todd Christofferson concurred when he pointed out, “The wards and branches of the Church offer a weekly gathering of respite and renewal, a time and place to leave the world behind—the Sabbath. It is a day

to ‘delight thyself in the Lord,’ to experience the spiritual healing that comes with the sacrament, and to receive the renewed promise of His Spirit to be with us.”⁵⁵ In addition, President Henry B. Eyring said, “You know from the words of the sacrament prayer how that promise is fulfilled . . . ‘that they may always have his Spirit to be with them.’ . . . For that reason alone, it is easy to see why the Lord’s servants have tried to increase our desire to worship God in our sacrament meetings. If we partake of the sacrament in faith, the Holy Ghost will then be able to protect us and those we love from the temptations that come with increasing intensity and frequency.”⁵⁶

Devotion and Personal Application

In 1991, Elder James E. Faust made a very clear demarcation that Sabbath day doings were no longer going to be defined by the Brethren. That responsibility now was clearly the auspices of each Latter-day Saint. He acknowledged:

Where is the line as to what is acceptable and unacceptable on the Sabbath? Within the guidelines, each of us must answer this question for ourselves. While these guidelines are contained in the scriptures and in the words of the modern prophets, they must also be written in our hearts and governed by our conscience. . . . It is quite unlikely that there will be any serious violation of Sabbath worship if we come humbly before the Lord and offer him all our heart, our soul, and our mind. (See Matt. 22:37.) . . . What is worthy or unworthy on the Sabbath day will have to be judged by each of us by trying to be honest with the Lord. On the Sabbath day we should do what we have to do and what we ought to do in an attitude of worshipfulness and then limit our other activities.⁵⁷

Here Elder Faust clearly placed keeping the covenant of hallowing the Sabbath Day in the realm of personal accountability. Though some Latter-day Saints were clamoring for another list of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” activities, Elder Faust placed Sabbath-day decisions squarely on the shoulders of each individual.

In 1999, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles made it clear that specific rules about the Sabbath were a thing of the past.

He stated, “Teachers who are commanded to teach ‘the principles of [the] gospel’ and ‘the doctrine of the kingdom’ (D&C 88:77) should generally forgo teaching specific rules or applications. For example, . . . they would not provide a list of dos and don’ts for keeping the Sabbath day holy.” Elder Oaks was clear that once teachers have “taught the doctrine and the associated principles from the scriptures and the living prophets, such specific applications or rules are generally the responsibility of individuals and families.”⁵⁸ Sabbath-day instruction had covered the same path that the children of Israel had trod. They had gone from rules and regulations to devotion and personal application.

Elder Quentin L. Cook described the result of this new form of Sabbath counsel in October 2015 general conference: “For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, honoring the Sabbath is a form of righteousness that will bless and strengthen families, connect us with our Creator, and increase happiness. The Sabbath can help separate us from that which is frivolous, inappropriate or immoral. It allows us to be in the world but not of the world.”⁵⁹

Conversely, in 2015, then Elder Russell M. Nelson used his own life experience as a pattern for what had happened Churchwide in Sabbath-day counsel. He disclosed that as a youth he had participated in the Mosaic approach to the Sabbath where he had studied others who had a compiled list of things to do and things not to do. He then explained how the Sabbath day later became internalized in his life:

It wasn’t until later that I learned from the scriptures that my conduct and my attitude on the Sabbath constituted a sign between me and my Heavenly Father. With that understanding, I no longer needed lists of dos and don’ts. When I had to make a decision whether or not an activity was appropriate for the Sabbath, I simply asked myself, “What sign do I want to give to God?” That question made my choices about the Sabbath day crystal clear. Though the doctrine pertaining to the Sabbath day is of ancient origin, it has been renewed in these latter days as part of a new covenant with a promise.⁶⁰

The Sabbath as a Delight and Sign of Our Devotion

With the current emphasis of Sabbath-day observance by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, a new way of looking at our part of the covenant of hallowing the Sabbath has taken place. Recent apostles have talked about how living the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy is an individual commitment that signifies our love for the Lord. Detailed dos and don’ts of keeping the Sabbath day holy are no longer taught. Moreover, Elder Nelson challenged Latter-day Saints to write this perpetual covenant in their hearts.⁶¹

As General Authority counsel has evolved from Mosaic rules to inner strength, Elder Nelson described the difference that following such counsel has made in the lives of Latter-day Saints: “A sacred Sabbath truly is a delight.”⁶² Likewise, Elder Quentin L. Cook also pronounced the improvement that had come about with the direction members had been given about hallowing the Sabbath day. In the October 2015 general conference he disclosed:

In the last six months, a most remarkable change has occurred in the Church. This has been in response of the members to renewed emphasis on the Sabbath day by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve and to President Russell M. Nelson’s challenge to make the Sabbath a delight. Many members understand that truly keeping the Sabbath day holy is a refuge from the storms of this life. It is also a sign of our devotion to our Father in Heaven and an increased understanding of the sacredness of sacrament meeting. Still, we have a long way to go, but we have a wonderful beginning. I challenge all of us to continue to embrace this counsel and improve our Sabbath worship.⁶³

The reason that General Authority counsel has changed from a list of dos and don’ts to suggestions in recent trainings is unclear. Many reasons can be postulated for this transformation. Recently it was pointed out that General Authorities did not want to prescribe what to do and not to do on

the Sabbath.⁶⁴ One reason might be that Latter-day Saints are now living in a time when they use agency more wisely to make decisions on their own. Another cause for this lack of specifics might be that Latter-day Saints will qualify for even more blessings as they individually receive their own revelation about appropriate Sabbath-day activities. One thing, however, is clear as we study the evolution of counsel on this subject: unlike the previous generations, the responsibility has now shifted from leaders to individual members to find out what the Lord would have them do.

Promises and blessings have expanded as this new responsibility has been given. As Elder L. Whitney Clayton of the Presidency of the Seventy described, “The day would become sweeter for them individually, sweeter for them as families, sweeter for all the members of the Church. Their faith would be deepened, their ability to move ahead in life with confidence and optimism and happiness at home and at church and in every situation would be amplified by their having turned to the Lord more fully on the Sabbath Day.”⁶⁵ As Latter-day Saints embrace Sabbath-day counsel that emphasizes inner strength, spirituality, and devotion rather than temporal rules, Sabbath worship will become a delight and a sign of each Latter-day Saint’s devotion.

Notes

1. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Church Leaders Call for Better Observance of Sabbath Day,” News Release, 30 June 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-leaders-call-for-better-observance-of-sabbath-day>.
2. Russell M. Nelson, “The Sabbath is a Delight,” *Ensign*, April 2015, 129–32.
3. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 6:277–8.
4. John W. Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 10:113.
5. Joseph Fielding Smith, in Conference Report, October 1916, 70.
6. “Church Leaders Call for Better Observance of Sabbath Day,” 15 July 2015, www.lds.org/church/news/church-leaders-call-for-better-observance-of-sabbath-day?lang=eng.
7. James E. Faust, “The Lord’s Day,” *Ensign*, November 1991, 35.
8. George Albert Smith, in Conference Report, October 1935, 119–20; Smith, in Conference Report, October 1950, 7.
9. Joseph Fielding Smith, in Conference Report, October 1935, 14.
10. Sylvester Q. Cannon, in Conference Report, October 1928, 48–49; Spencer W. Kimball, “Why Call Me Lord, Lord, and Do Not the Things Which I Say?,” *Ensign*,

- May 1975, 7; N. Eldon Tanner, in Conference Report, April 1970, 64–65; L. Tom Perry, “Obedience to Law Is Liberty,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 87; Faust, “The Lord’s Day,” 33–35; Russell M. Nelson, “Self-Mastery,” *Ensign*, November 1985, 30.
11. Faust, “The Lord’s Day,” 33.
 12. Perry, “Obedience to Law Is Liberty,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 87.
 13. J. Reuben Clark Jr., in Conference Report, October 1949, 107–8.
 14. Joseph Fielding Smith, in Conference Report, October 1938, 38; LeGrand Richards, in Conference Report, October 1947, 73; George Albert Smith, in Conference Report, April 1947, 161; and
 15. Gordon B. Hinckley, “An Ensign to the Nations,” *Ensign*, November 1989, 51.
 16. Hinckley, “An Ensign to the Nations,” 51; and Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 6:277–78.
 17. Joseph Fielding Smith, in Conference Report, October 1938, 38.
 18. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 21:191.
 19. George Albert Smith, in Conference Report, October 1948, 188.
 20. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, October 1956, 90.
 21. Spencer W. Kimball, Conference Report, October 1953, 52.
 22. Mark E. Petersen, “Remember the Sabbath Day,” *Ensign*, May 1975, 49.
 23. Joseph F. Smith in Conference Report, September 1871.
 24. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1901, 1–2.
 25. George Albert Smith, in Conference Report, April 1923, 77–78.
 26. Spencer W. Kimball, “God Will Not Be Mocked,” *Ensign*, November 1974, 6.
 27. George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:60.
 28. Francis M. Lyman, in Conference Report, October 1900, 77.
 29. Francis M. Lyman, in Conference Report, October 1908, 58.
 30. John Henry Smith, in Conference Report, April 1906, 83–84.
 31. Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, April 1949, 29.
 32. J. Reuben Clark Jr., in Conference Report, October 1949, 110.
 33. J. Reuben Clark Jr., in Conference Report, October 1949, 110.
 34. Faust, “The Lord’s Day,” 34, originally found in Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969, 96–97.
 35. Kimball, “Hold Fast to the Iron Rod,” 6.
 36. Spencer W. Kimball, “Rendering Service to Others,” *Ensign*, May 1981, 45.
 37. Hyrum M. Smith, in Conference Report, October 1906, 43.
 38. George Albert Smith, in Conference Report, April 1908, 34–35.
 39. Anthon H. Lund, in Conference Report, October 1907, 9.
 40. Lund, in Conference Report, October 1916, 10.
 41. Lund, in Conference Report, October 1916, 10.
 42. Ruder J. Clawson, in Conference Report, October 1916, 36–37.
 43. Richard R. Lyman, in Conference Report, April 1936, 99.
 44. Spencer W. Kimball, in Conference Report, April 1944, 145.
 45. Marion G. Romney, in Conference Report, April 1946, 40.
 46. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, April 1915, 10.

47. Francis M. Lyman, in Conference Report, October 1908, 57.
48. James E. Talmage, in Conference Report, April 1923, 141.
49. Sylvester Q. Cannon, in Conference Report, April 1926, 93.
50. Marvin J. Ashton, "Strengthen the Feeble Knees," *Ensign*, November 1991, 71.
51. L. Tom Perry, "As Now We Take the Sacrament," *Ensign*, May 2006, 41.
52. L. Tom Perry, "And Why Call Ye Me, Lord, Lord, and Do Not the Things Which I Say?," *Ensign*, November 1984, 18–19.
53. Rick Walton and Fern Oviatt, eds., *Stories for Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1983), 112, as cited in Perry, "And Why Call Ye Me, Lord, Lord, and Do Not the Things Which I Say?," 18–19.
54. Claudio R. M. Costa, "That They Do Always Remember Him," *Ensign*, November 2015, 101–3.
55. D. Todd Christofferson, "Why the Church," *Ensign*, November 2015, 109.
56. Henry B. Eyring, "The Holy Ghost as Your Companion," *Ensign*, November 2015, 104.
57. Faust, "The Lord's Day," 35.
58. Dallin H. Oaks, "Gospel Teaching," *Ensign*, November 1999, 79.
59. Quentin L. Cook, "Shipshape and Bristol Fashion: Be Temple Worthy—in Good Times and Bad Times," *Ensign*, November 2015, 41–42.
60. Russell M. Nelson, "The Sabbath Is a Delight," *Ensign*, May 2015, 130.
61. Nelson, "The Sabbath Is a Delight," 129–32.
62. Nelson, "The Sabbath Is a Delight," *Ensign*, May 2015, 132.
63. Cook, "Shipshape and Bristol Fashion," 42.
64. "Church Leaders Call for Better Observance of Sabbath Day."
65. "Church Leaders Call for Better Observance of Sabbath Day."