

# Bowling on the Sabbath

BY BLAINE AND SARAH MCCORMICK

**With three young children, the McCormicks are learning that maintaining a day of rest is not easy. Their family's sabbath observance is a rewarding work-in-progress, as they probe biblical guidelines and adapt Shabbat rituals. Here is an update on their odyssey into honoring a holy day.**

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**N**ot long ago, Blaine took our two older children bowling on our family sabbath day while Mom napped at home. We felt good about this decision for a number of reasons. When the kids are out of the house, Sarah naps better. Bowling is good clean fun with Dad and that is important on the sabbath. Finally, we knew that the sixteenth century theologian John Calvin enjoyed bowling on the sabbath, and what was good enough for the Calvins is good enough for the McCormicks! So, Dad loaded Ellis and Miriam into the truck and drove to the nearest "bowling aisle," as Miriam calls it.

They were assigned to Lane One at the far end of the complex. Dad helped the children change into their bowling shoes. Blaine stayed in his street shoes, as he was not there to bowl but rather to ensure that neither of the kids dropped a bowling ball on their foot. With a little coaching and some gutter covers, both Ellis and Miriam began knocking down some pins. Thirty minutes and several celebration dances later, the delighted children called it a game. They changed into their shoes and headed to the front counter for check out.

As they turned in their shoes, the lady at the counter responded just as we suspected she would: "Thanks for coming and there's no charge today." At this bowling alley, there's no charge for the first game you bowl and no shoe charges for children younger than six. Since they bowled only

one game and Blaine didn't rent shoes, they owed no money. Owing no money is important for us on our sabbath day excursion because we have a sabbath policy of "no commerce." Since no money changed hands during this excursion, we didn't really dishonor our sabbath. Or did we?

Our answer was that we dishonored our sabbath. Was this your answer?

In this bowling episode we glimpsed the rich complexity of sabbath observance. Guidelines for sabbath keeping, we discovered, are not easy to apply and good practice emerges only after much prayerful reflection. We believe we dishonored our sabbath on this occasion because the "no commerce" policy reaches deeper than simply "Don't spend money." Behind this policy is the desire that all people should have the chance to enjoy God's sabbath rest. So, even though we did not exchange any money with the folks at the bowling alley, it's pretty clear to us that we dishonored our sabbath by bowling at a place where someone had to work so we could have fun. Had we, like John Calvin, set up our ten pins in our back yard, we could have enjoyed just as much fun without demanding work from others.

Our family continues to explore this "no commerce" guideline. For instance, it technically allows us to window shop on our sabbath day. After more reflection, however, we now resist window-shopping because it pulls us toward a consumerist and away from a worshipful focus on the sabbath.

Our sabbath observance is clearly a work-in-progress. We are always exploring and learning. We recommitted our family to sabbath keeping in January 2000 after ten years of marriage. Our oldest child was three and a half years old then and his sister had just turned one and started walking; in the years since, we have added one more daughter and a good deal of learning. We have learned that maintaining a day of sabbath rest is not easy, and that it takes a bit of coaching. So we offer to you our progress report. Please see us as real people with real children who have been known to scream throughout everything you're about to read.

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#### **HOW EXACTLY DOES THIS WORK?**

"Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy" is the commandment (Exodus 20:8). "Holy" means "set apart," so our challenge is to set apart

and consecrate the time for sabbath rest. Our family observes sabbath from approximately 6 p.m. Saturday to 6 p.m. Sunday. This timing mirrors the Jewish Shabbat, which begins at sundown on Friday, but we have moved

the holy time forward to the first day of the week to encompass our Christian beliefs.

Our family begins sabbath time on Saturday evening with a ritual. We light a sabbath candle for each of our three children as Mom welcomes the sabbath with this blessing:

“May the light of the sabbath candles drive out from us the spirit of anger and the spirit of fear and the spirit of pride. Send your blessing that we may walk in the ways of your Word and your Light. Enter our hearts this night, O Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

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## Questions & Answers

**Q: What about work-related deadlines? For example, Blaine, doesn't tax season mean a sabbath exemption for accountants?**

**A:** I have not been able to justify work even with deadlines on Monday. Learn to rest and receive. Our children are watching us.

**Q: Does the sabbath mean we're free to watch lots of sports on television?**

**A:** Being a sports bum is not the same as honoring the sabbath. If the sabbath is for receiving, with what are we filling ourselves?

**Q: Should we nap?**

**A:** Yes. Enjoy guilt-free rest.

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Then Dad reads aloud the entire sabbath commandment (Exodus 20:8-11). Often we pause to sing songs; our children's favorites are “Thy Word” and “This Little Light of Mine,” but this will change as they mature.

“Blessing of the Children,” which is a traditional Jewish practice, comes next. Starting with the oldest, each child sits between Dad and Mom and we do the following. First, we read the child's own special Bible passage over them. As parents, we have chosen a passage of Scripture that each child knows to be his or her own—Miriam's passage, for example, is Philippians 2:14-15. Next, we talk to the child about all the good things they have done this week, such as their accomplishments or sharing things with friends. We emphasize character traits in addition to deeds, saying, “We were very proud for the thankfulness (or courage, etc.) that you showed when ....” We lay our hands on the child and read a blessing over the child.<sup>2</sup> Finally, with our hands laid on their head, we pray over our child and ask God's grace upon their life.

From the Jewish Shabbat ceremony we borrow an emphasis upon all five senses. Sometimes we bring in the sense of smell at this point with the

“sabbath scent,” which is a container filled with a pleasant or pungent spice. As the jar is passed around, we talk about how our kind words, deeds, and prayers are a “pleasant aroma” to God. Another traditional sensory addition is bread dipped in honey. After we read, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103), each child gets to enjoy some strips of bread and a small dish of honey.

We read to our children a devotional story or an age-appropriate illustration about God.<sup>3</sup> The ceremony concludes with each child, beginning with the oldest, blowing out their sabbath candle.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

*Focus on being a priestly parent rather than a sabbath cop.* When we recommitted our family to honoring the sabbath, we assumed a greater measure of spiritual leadership in our home. No longer were we merely dropping off our children at church for spiritual growth; we were called to exercise a new and positive leadership as “priestly parents.” Priests, as spiritual authority figures and keepers of ritual, make things holy by blessing days and children. As priestly parents, our role is to say “Yes” to honoring the sabbath. If we fail to be priestly parents, we might become sabbath cops who merely patrol the house, saying “No” to things for being against the rules of the sabbath. Sabbath cops can create a quiet, joyless day with “no fun ‘aloud’.”

*Let your sabbath observance play a supporting role rather than a leading role.*

Many families have mission statements. Ours is a rather simple one, which reads:

“Create an intentionally Christian family culture.”

Our sabbath practice plays the role of supporting our mission rather than becoming our mission. This is a critical distinction. Remember, the sabbath is made for human beings, not vice versa. When the family’s overall mission is Christ-centered, the downward path to legalism is much

easier to avoid. Time will tell whether we will become sabbath cops as our children enter adolescence, or whether we can remain priestly parents who lead by example and speak a holy blessing onto days and people.

*Some sabbath practice is better than none at all.* One of the biggest mistakes

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we can make is trying to leap from no sabbath to perfect sabbath in one weekend. This “all-or-nothing” approach is a recipe for failure and disappointment. Instead, start with easy steps and remain open to suggestions and change. We have been known to forego our opening ceremony, for

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instance, and bless the children on Sunday rather than Saturday evening. This kind of flexibility helps us to avoid legalism. We expect that our rituals and practices will change as both our children and we age.

*Bring order to your spiritual life.* Before we can bestow a spiritual blessing,

we must be filled ourselves. Priestly parents need sabbath rest in order to be effective spiritual leaders to their children. When faced with a difficult decision on the sabbath, we are learning to ask, “Does this activity bring order to our spiritual lives?”

#### **SO WHAT’S NEXT?**

We characterized our family’s sabbath keeping as a work-in-progress, for in this, as in other areas of our discipleship, we are always learning and growing. What plans do we have for the future? Almost all of our learning up to this point has come from books and personal reflection. Now that we have some idea of what we are doing, we are ready to swap notes and ideas with other Christian families who practice a sabbath. Also, we hope to learn from watching a traditional Jewish Shabbat ceremony and day.

In the next few years we plan to implement *a closing ritual*. We have no ritual way of marking the end of our sabbath time, though this would be a promising moment to exert a priestly influence on our family culture. Perhaps this closing ceremony will highlight for our children a core virtue for the new week.<sup>4</sup>

Saturday is becoming *a day of preparation* for us. As we gradually create boundaries for our sabbath, we use Saturday to get ready for rest, reflection, and receiving. On Saturday we do focused work that clears the way for reduced responsibilities during the sabbath. Taking the sabbath seriously is changing the rhythm of our work and ridding us of a good deal of procrastination.

We will try a “no technology” policy. Sure, like our “no commerce” rule, this policy will require discerning application, but there is reason to unplug on the sabbath. We are already a pretty unplugged family, with a notorious reputation for avoiding cable television. Yet sabbath is a great time to

experiment with ridding our home of all appliances. Who knows? If we don't listen to music on the stereo, maybe we will start making music of our own on the sabbath. Will our policy extend to the microwave oven? Maybe. We will find out.

Much of our reading points to the sabbath as a time of celebration and excess rather than a day of resentment and asceticism.<sup>5</sup> Holy days, which otherwise are known as "holidays," are supposed to be festive occasions when we eat especially good food or indulge in luxuries otherwise denied in everyday life. We hope to *make room for excess and celebration* in our future sabbaths.

Currently we are unaware of other families within our Christian community who are celebrating sabbaths. In the future, we would welcome the chance to *mark this holy day with other families*. We will begin inviting people over for either our opening ceremony or a shared meal on Sunday afternoon.

A family friend gave us great encouragement recently after she heard about our sabbath practices. This mother of four grown children told us that we are giving our children a great gift, for we are teaching them how to rest.

Is sabbath keeping having any impact upon our children? Several months ago we were so tired on Saturday evening that we opted to forego our sabbath opening ritual and just go to bed. On a whim, Blaine asked our son, "Ellis, do you want to have your sabbath blessing tonight?" Ellis' answer revealed an uncommon level of insight, "Of course I do. If we don't, then I won't be holy." That pretty well says it all.

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## Questions & Answers

### **Q: What about yard work?**

**A:** Blaine moves his yard maintenance to other days of the week and never mows, rakes, or trims on our sabbath. Sarah often gardens. There's a difference between yard maintenance and putting out bedding plants on the sabbath. One is work and the other is rest.

### **Q: What about the cooking?**

**A:** We simplify meals, prepare them in advance, and break out the crock-pot. We make the meals special and include the children in their preparation. Whatever we do, we don't eat out.

### **Q: What about church work?**

**A:** Doing committee work on Sunday afternoon does not help us honor the sabbath. Move the meeting to another day or resign from the committee. We've reduced our teaching commitments on Sundays.

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**NOTES**

1 We adapted this prayer from Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992).

2 See Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Blessing* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990) for a list of ready-made blessings for this time.

3 Karyn Henley, *100 Ways to Teach Your Child About God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2000) is our favorite source for illustrations.

4 See *Teaching Your Children Values* by Linda and Richard Eyre (New York: Fireside Press, 1993) for practical suggestions.

5 Marva Dawn's challenging book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), has much to say about feasting and celebrating on the sabbath, as does Josef Pieper's *In Tune with the World* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1999).

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**BLAINE AND SARAH MCCORMICK** are proof positive that faithfully observing a sabbath does not mean that your children will pose for photographs. Blaine is Assistant Professor of Management at Baylor University and Sarah is a full-time mother.