Sabbath Observance in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic: 
Are the Challenges of Physical Observance of the Sabbath Hurting the ‘Mark of a True Church’ 
Among the Adventists? 
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Abstract 
The study of the nature of the church1 is very significant to the body of Christ. Often, when this subject is introduced, Christians tend to ask: which is the true church and how can it be identified? Most churches claim to be the only ‘true church’ based on their teachings and this has continued to divide the body of Christ across the centuries. The Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church has maintained the physical observance of the Sabbath to be one of the marks2 of identifying the ‘true church,’ yet the church fathers described the church as One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. The SDA uses the Sabbath worship as a mark of identifying a ‘true church’ alongside the four attributes; and on the other hand, those churches that do not worship on Saturday regards the SDA’s emphasis of worshipping on Saturday as ‘worshipping the day’ rather than the almighty God. Besides this, misunderstandings have been encountered between the SDA and the so-called Sunday churches concerning the issue of what constitutes the true Sabbath. The study employs the dialogical-ecclesiological design in its bid to understand the contestations between the SDA and the ‘Sunday churches’ and in its building on the premise that dialogue is critical in our endeavor to find a new understanding and re-interpretation of the Sabbath, as one of the marks of a true church. The crucial question remains: can the observance of physical Sabbath be considered as one of the key marks of knowing the ‘true Church’?

Key words: Sabbath Observance, COVID-19 effect on the Church, Seventh Day Adventist, Marks of the True Church

1.0. Introduction 
In attempting to locate the problem under consideration in this article, it is worthwhile to concede that the SDA church emphasizes the physical observance of the Sabbath as a mark of a true

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1 The church is understood to have two natures; the visible and invisible. The church which is visible here on earth is like an organizing army in a fight, called to combat evil darkness. The invisible church was to be understood as triumphant, a church of overcomers which is perfect.

2 The marks of the church (one, holy, catholic and apostolic) were proposed by the Nicene council(s) in AD. 325 to clarify the key tenets of the Christian faith; this was in response to the widespread adoption of Arius’ doctrine which was maintained that Jesus was a creature; a godlike creature but not God.
church. In the context of the Covid-19\(^3\) pandemic, it has proved impossible to fulfill this requirement. This prompts the church to re-interpret its understanding of the Sabbath and certainly revisit her hermeneutical standpoints.

\[\text{2.0. Evidence of the Problem}\]

\[\text{2.1 Demonstration of the claim}\]

On 25\(^{th}\) March 2020 the government of Kenya shut all churches, mosques and other places of worship as the country experienced the spread of corona virus. Through the ministry of health, the government banned all the worship gatherings, as it was feared, as is currently, that this is one of the means by which the virus spreads. The SDA were not spared from these restrictions; and as a result, they had no option but to close all their churches together with their counterparts whose main worship takes place on Sundays rather than Saturdays. This posed a major challenge to the stout members of the SDA church since they could not physically observe the Sabbath as is their tradition. All her members were thus compelled to stay at home and observe the Sabbath there. Following the presidential order, the church remained closed for a period of six months; a phenomenon that ended albeit temporarily all ecclesiastical gatherings. This put the SDA in a theological catch-22 situation, as her canons of worship and general and physical observance of the revered Sabbath were in dilemma.

\[\text{2.2 Government Punishment to those breaking the covid-19 law}\]

The government had issued a warning against opening up worship and prayer centres. On 13 June 2020, 100 SDA worshippers were arrested in Kitale, Trans Nzoia County after they refused to obey government instructions on church closure. The hundred SDA worshippers were arraigned in court and later locked in quarantine for fourteen days.\(^4\) Elsewhere fifty seven (57) worshippers of Mitume SDA in Migori county were on Saturday of 25\(^{th}\) April 2020 arrested after they were discovered congregating despite the government prohibition on church worship. This made the Saturday physical observance of Sabbath impossible since all the avenues of gatherings were locked by the ruthless arm of the law. The fifty-seven worshippers were later taken to a designated place of quarantine for fourteen days; this sent a strong message of warning to other congregational groups, forcing them to stay at home on the Sabbath day.

\[\text{2.3 Problem on Administrations of Sacrament}\]

During this time of corona pandemic, the SDA church had no option but to conduct virtual worship which raised a problem on administrations of sacraments; baptism and Lord Supper. Brian Flanagan noted that “in this time in which we are not able to encounter Christ in the assembly or the Eucharist, we always have the opportunity to encounter Christ in the vulnerable. The covid-19 crisis presented the SDA church with a great challenge to new paradigm for the observance of Sabbath. The civil leadership had stopped the physical gatherings of worshippers in churches and religious authorities endorsed the ban. In response, the SDA adjusted its physical observance of Sabbath to

\[^3\] Covid-19 is a viral respiratory infection which was first experienced in Wuhan China in 2020 and later entered the Kenyan country December, 2020.

\[^4\] People believed to have come in contact with an infected person were kept aside for a period of 14 days designated by the ministry of health to know their status.
virtual worship. The church switched to online worship on internet platforms. By doing this, the SDA went on ministering to her members in teaching the word and in prayers. Although the SDA nurtured her members through preaching and prayers, the administration of Eucharist and baptism became a challenge. The sacraments are kinds that require one’s presence; they do not get administered in any other form. The sacrament can never be administered through online platform. The practical question still remains, how can the bread and wine in a televised service make the Eucharist?

In administering the Eucharist, the Pastor or the clergy is required to lay hands upon the bread and wine hence it is not possible to consecrate the Eucharist through the internet. As a result, the SDA church has been forced to suspend the celebration of Holy Communion until the lift of ban by the government. In addition to this, the SDA church has encountered the challenge of conducting open baptism in times when there is an order against public gatherings. How can holy Eucharist and baptism be conducted in absence of physical congregation?

Ernest Sandeen stated that “the spiritual sacrament is an option that every church needs to take.” He went ahead to note that it is possible to administer spiritual communion when a member desires to partake the Eucharist, but cannot eat the body and drink the wine. Sandeen maintained that the celebrant assures the member that they have been blessed with all the benefits of communion, even though the person has not physically taken the sacrament by mouth. Sandeen insisted that the observation of Eucharist celebration online or live stream program, enable spiritual participation and reception even if physical celebration is not there. Although Sandeen argues for spiritual reception by mere observation, this option seemed not to be realistic. Sandeen emphasized this point by saying that “while the Holy Communion may be one of the avenue where members meet Christ and partake his body, it is not the only one; members can encounter the presence of Christ in his word and through prayer.”

The SDA members tarried without the Sacraments as there was a total ban by the government to congregate as a way of preventing the spread of corona. It seemed a temporary solution to preach to members through online and live streaming from the television but the ritual of baptism and Eucharist proved impossible. When partaking of the sacraments is not possible, members can still “take a moment and uplift their thoughts and minds.” Soar David contends that members could still make that moment holy and sacred in their heart by turning to their savior for spiritual nourishment without necessarily taking the emblem. He encouraged the SDA members to meditate on God’s grace which has appeared to all humanity and out of this they will experience Christ’s warmth and love around them.

2.4 SDA DURING DARK AGES

Ellen G. White one of the leading SDA theologian states that “the dark ages was a period of terrible persecution which spanned a period of 1260 years from 538 AD to 1798 AD as it was prophesied in Revelation 12:14.” Ellen White noted that it was a period of spiritual darkness in the sense that no

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6 Ernest Sandeen, *The roots of fundamentalism*.
9 Soar David. *A history of Christian church*.
10 The darks ages are understood by the SDA church as those days when Catholic Church led by Pope and bishops forced all Christians to forfeit their faith and subscribe to theirs. Failure to consent, attracted punishment and in extreme cases, death penalty. The SDA termed this period which is believed to be between 538AD to 1798 AD, as spiritual darkness.
Christian was permitted to worship God in his own conscience but only through the dictates and authority of papacy.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, John Andrews points out that “anyone caught adhering to the true Sabbath of God and His commandments written in the holy bible and not following the papal decree, was tormented, persecuted or killed.”\textsuperscript{13} For Andrews the Sabbath keepers’ forefathers went through the horror of being hanged on trees, burned alive and being fed alive to hungry lions because of worshipping God faithfully and refusing to keep the false Sabbath which was part of papal system. This led the Sabbath keepers out of their traditional place of worship and went into hiding for many years. Shea Williams observes that “although the Sabbath church seemed to be extinct, the church existed spiritually.”\textsuperscript{14} Thus physically the church was not visible but the faithful observed Sabbath in their hearts.

The Sabbath keepers were sought in every place by the papal authority for not paying homage to the papal system. Ellen White pointed out that “far from the monuments of human pomp and pride the people assembled, not in magnificent churches or grand cathedrals, but everyone in his or her own hideout.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus we see the Sabbath keepers of the time being obstructed again to enjoy the physical observance of the Sabbath as a united congregation. In the secret places however, families and individuals gave praises and thanksgiving to their God for providing them an asylum from the wrath and cruelty of those in authority. Moreover, the old impressed the mind of the young with principles of heaven, teaching them day by day how to give their thoughts to God though not meeting in the church. Here we see the Sabbath keepers in the hideout failing to observe the Sabbath physically; nevertheless, they uplifted their hearts to God every time they deemed it was on Sabbath. They embraced the Sabbath rest spiritually, tuning their heart and mind to total worship.

\subsection*{2.4.1. The Virtual Church}

This refers to the online church where ministers and clergy use modern technology to preach, pray and nurture their followers. Again, the virtual church is a gathering of religious believers facilitated through the use of online video stream, audio stream and or written messages with the intention of allowing the worship service to take place using the internet. More to this, we note that in virtual church the flock is entirely separated from the clergy physically hence making it almost impossible to exactly know whether the members are still following their minister. This can be brought about by two main reasons; one the members may not be connected to internet or they do not know how to use the digital technology. Secondly, the flock is at liberty to wander from one net to another and may end in a different link not necessarily that of their usual congregation.

In an attempt to explain what a virtual church is, Jay Kranda states that internet church, online church, cyber or digital church refers to a wide variety of ways that Christian religious groups can use the internet to facilitate their religious activities, particularly prayers, discussions, preaching and worship services.\textsuperscript{16} Kranda went on to explain how many congregations have live-streamed their services on the internet, typically offering a pretty static view of the worship hour. For such churches, the pandemic meant a scaled down version of the same, often with just a sermon beamed out. Churches connected and involved people despite the challenges.

\textsuperscript{12} Ellen White, \textit{Testimony for the church}.


\textsuperscript{15} Ellen White, \textit{Testimony for the church}, p.534.

When the ban was imposed by the government through the ministry of health of not opening the church, all churches including the SDA opted for the virtual gatherings as a way of reaching their members. However, SDA maintains that for one to be in a true church, Sabbath must be observed physically; meaning that on Saturday members must congregate for worship. Based on the SDA claim of visible observance of Sabbath, the virtual church fail to meet the requirement held by SDA that physical observance of Sabbath is one of the marks of identifying the church.

The virtual church fails to meet the requirement put by SDA church because it has proved impossible for members to gather on Saturday to observe the Sabbath physically. Every member is observing Sabbath at his or her home. On Sabbath some of the rituals celebrated are Eucharist and baptism which are not practical through virtual worship. It is not normative for an SDA pastor to administer the Lord’s supper via online platform as it is an elaborate practice that may not naturally flow if administered in that format. For an SDA to participate in the Lord’s supper, the member has to look for a partner to wash his/her feet. In other words, it takes two or more people to participate in the Holy Communion. This cannot be achieved through virtual worship. On Sabbath, the SDA makes arrangements for water baptism. This is a requirement for a new believer, as this is the norm for one who is to join their respective congregations. This cannot be possible through a virtual church. If the current situation remains thus, the SDA will never get new members. From the above discussion, the SDA requirement of physical observance of Sabbath as a mark of true church is negated or disapproved by the practice of a virtual church, hence the mark of identifying the true church based on physical Sabbath keeping is put under a huge test.

2.4.2. Dialogue as a Solution

Many churches went for virtual worship when the ban was imposed on all congregations in the country. As a result, the SDA like any other church was not left behind and opted for live streaming of their services. This did not seem to solve the challenge that was affecting the physical observance of Sabbath which to SDA defines the true church. Since the claim of physical observance of Sabbath by SDA did not seem to stand as a mark of true church due to closure of churches during the time of COVID-19 pandemic, it is significant to introduce the aspect of dialogue as a new solution to the existing problem. According to Ismail Raji al-faruqi, “Dialogue is the removal of all barriers between men for a free intercourse of ideas where the categorical imperative is to let the sounder claim to the truth win.” More to this, Resane Thomas defined dialogue as “a consultation which highlight differences and seek ways of coming closer together through new understandings, reinterpretation or correction of misunderstandings and healing of divisions.”

4.1. Application of Dialogue in solving the problem

Dialogue is a good tool to resolve problems and misunderstandings that have remained in tension despite the many trials and efforts made by different denominations under Christian faith to find a common ground. Dialogue is necessary since it brings to realization that no church exist without

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17 Physical observance of Sabbath is the insistency of going to church on Saturday where you meet with other fellow brethren. Bible discussions, prayers and sermon are conducted.


20 The dialogue here is used as a methodology; total strategy whose primary work is to show the entire “howness” of the study towards solving the existing problem.
the other and we do not exist only because of ourselves but we are there for one another. Again, the dialogue provides a chance to mend all separations, wrong understanding and wrong information.

Dialogue, as a tool, will be employed to discuss and give chance to the two nature of Sabbath: visible and invisible. In visible, we mean the literal physical observance of the Sabbath where a member is required to attend the service on the designated day which happens to be on Saturday for SDA. On the other hand, the invisible means the spiritual observance of Sabbath with the conviction that true observance of Sabbath is only found in Christ. The dialogue will give an opportunity to SDA claim of physical observance of Sabbath as a mark of identifying the true church and also the non-Sabbath keepers’ spiritual observance of Sabbath not in a day but resting in Christ.

### 4.2 Physical and Spiritual Observance of Sabbath

#### 4.2.1 Physical Observance of Sabbath

The SDA has been advocating for the physical observance of Sabbath as one of the requirement to be fulfilled by all Christians. The SDA understands and interprets the physical observance of Sabbath as a mark of identifying the true church. For SDA, no Christian can claim to have a relationship with God without observing and remembering the Sabbath since it maintains essential connection between humankind and God, protecting them from vain worship. John Andrews pointed the physical observance of Sabbath as “a direct witness that we have the ordained rest from heaven given during creation and we have trust in God that he is our salvation and foundation of our hope in past, present and future.”

Another argument put forward by SDA in favor of physical observance of Sabbath is that God wrote the Ten Commandments with his finger on the two tablets of stones. The first tablet contained four while the second tablets carried six; at the center of these laws, God put that of Sabbath signifying its importance. The Sabbath was also to be understood as very significant since it was the only command among ten that carried the emphasis of remembrance bringing the attention to humanity of its importance lest they forget. This law of Sabbath was meant to teach the Israelites that God was the only creator to be worshiped and that he was exalted above all false gods. The Sabbath requirement found in the fourth commandment was a way of protecting humanity from Satan’s scheme of making sure that they will come to forget this law of Sabbath since by doing so, they will be forgetting their maker.

Quoting Isaiah 66:23 “that in those days’ month after month and every Sabbath, all humanity will be coming to worship God when he will make the earth and heavens to be new,” the SDA relates Sabbath and eternity. This was an indication that since creation of Eden, Sabbath has always been there and it will continue to be celebrated when this earth passes away after the second coming of Christ. Shea Williams noted that “Sabbath was the only institution the redeemed was to take from this world to the new earth when sin and curse have been completely destroyed.” In chapter 66:23, Isaiah the prophet of God was in a position to see the holy Sabbath of creation not only in this sinful world but also in the new heavens and earth. The physical observance of Sabbath is again understood by SDA as a sign of covenant. God wanted to make a lasting covenant with the children of Israel; he had brought them out of Egypt for them to offer a true worship which was to be emulated by other nations like the Canaanites, Moabites and the surrounding nations. The children of Israel were to be special people,

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different from all others showing that God was really their father. The Sabbath command became the sign of that covenant between God and the nation of Israel.

In Nehemiah 9:6-15, Jesus is recorded as the one who made everything we see and it was he that spoke with the church in the wilderness at Mt. Sinai when making known to them his laws and statutes not forgetting the Sabbath. The SDA argues that the hands that hanged on the cross nailed during crucifixion were the same that were involved in scribing the Ten Commandments in the two tablets of stones and in the center of these commandments, he placed the Sabbath. The SDA have been teaching how Christ upheld the physical observance of Sabbath without any trace of abolishing it rather he gave an example related to Sabbath keeping reform. Christ destroyed all the teachings and traditions of Jews that were associated with the holy day of Sabbath. There is no trace that Christ dishonored the requirements of the Sabbath; the Jews trampled down the holy day but when Christ came, he took it to a higher note as it was intended from the beginning. He came to show humankind the blessings attached to Sabbath so that they could gladly own and obey it to the fullest.

The physical observance of Sabbath has also been linked with sanctification. According to SDA church, God desired to see His Church pure and holy and one of the institutions that God set apart to achieve this sanctification was that of Sabbath. As Gibbons James put it, “after creation, God wanted the observance of Sabbath to be a mark of his changing power, a sign of pureness and sanctification.” In Exodus 31:13; cf. Ezekiel 20:20, the Lord told the children of Israel that he wanted to sanctify all of them as long as they kept the Sabbath faithfully. Based on the above discussion, the SDA church takes it as a proof that God uses Sabbath to sanctify the church and that when God created humanity, he wanted to set them apart for a holy purpose just as the Sabbath. From this, the SDA concludes that being truthful to the Sabbath will automatically lead the church to total sanctification and that all who keep and obey faithfully the Sabbath of the fourth commandment will gladly keep the whole law hence sanctified through the keeping of Sabbath.

God requires the church to be very loyal to the laid down laws that govern his sovereign kingdom without wavering. In the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve some restrictions on how to eat the fruits; this was a test of loyalty. Just as the tree of knowing good and evil was placed in the middle of Eden, so the law of Sabbath is placed at the center of Ten Commandments and the loyalty of humanity will be put into test based on the Sabbath command. Andrews Lincoln taught that the human race will be classified into two categories (Revelation 14:12, 9); those who keep the Sabbath of the Lord and those who follow the beast. The only mark that can show that the church is loyal to God’s truth is that of observing and remembering the Sabbath found in the Ten Commandments.

Christ’s righteousness is of great importance to any church to avoid legalism. The SDA church maintains that there is no good reason unto why Sabbath needs to be observed except that the Lord has spoken. Its only by the foundation of God’s righteousness can the church clearly get the knowledge

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24 The SDA understands sanctification as that aspect of being totally different from all other nations who were deemed to be pagans. The sanctification is achieved through physical resting of Sabbath and dietary laws.
27 The beast according to SDA is any kingdom or church that teaches that Sabbath is not on Saturday and that the Sabbath was abolished. For SDA, beast may comprise the Sunday churches that pay less attention to physical observance of Saturday as the Sabbath day.
28 Legalism is the act of trying to earn salvation by works. This goes further to holding the commandments and laws as a mean of salvation. The Pharisees and scribes during the time of Jesus recited the Law of Moses since they thought it was the mean of earning salvation. Jesus rebuked them. (Mark 7:7, 8).
of keeping the Sabbath. Gerald Thomas taught that Christians who truly observes the Sabbath show their acceptance to the will of God in their faith instead of their own righteousness. Looking on how Sabbath relates with Christ, the SDA viewed it to serve as a reminder to the children of Israel that they were saved from Egypt to go and have a rest in Canaan, making them special from their neighbors. Similarly, the observance of the Sabbath is a mark of salvation from original sin to God’s kingdom, making the elect to be different from the non-believers. For SDA, the Sabbath always whispers assurance of rest to burdened hearts and mind, bringing the notion of getting real rest of salvation in Christ. Achieving true Sabbath rest calls us to stop working our own salvation since God has provided it in Christ.

The physical observance of Sabbath is very important to the SDA church since they retrace it right from apostolic times. In attempting to dig deeper, we find that Sabbath was kept by Adam down to Moses, prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah to apostles like Peter, James and Paul. In Acts 17:1, 2 when Apostle Paul went to Thessalonica where Jews used to gather for worship, he went into the synagogue as his culture was and taught them for three continuous Sabbaths from the scripture. After hearing what Paul had taught, the Gentiles requested him to come again in the next Sabbath, for which he consented. This was a clear indication that Paul respected and observed the physical Sabbath as it was commanded. Paul used to make tents during the six days of working but on the Sabbath day, he attended the worship service where he taught the Jews and Gentiles from the scripture; he never dishonored the Sabbath but kept it.

The Apostles respected the physical observance of Sabbath which is seen recorded in Acts 16:13. The Apostles went looking for Sabbath keepers and when they found them, they joined in keeping the Sabbath as it was commanded. In that town, there was no organized group that kept the Sabbath, so Paul with others who obeyed the word of God met alongside the river to uplift the law of Sabbath. When Christ died, the Apostles went on with his burial preparation but when the hour of Sabbath approached, they stopped all the burial preparations and entered into Sabbath rest as it was commanded (Luke 23:56). From the New Testament account, Christ and his apostles continued to respect the physical observance of the Sabbath.

4.2.2 Spiritual Observance of Sabbath

Non Sabbath keepers felt the requirement of physical observance of Sabbath was not necessary in today’s Christ church since it was to be spiritualized. Christians are in no way commanded to keep the weekly Sabbath as they are covered by the law of Christ which does not entail the keeping of Sabbath. The Sabbath law was in effect only to Jews who were under the Law of Moses and that God did not require any other group to have physical Sabbath rest. For the advocate of spiritual observance of Sabbath, the Sabbath commandment distinguishes itself in the sense that it is so unique from the other nine; it evidently shows that it was meant for Jews but not Christians. The other nine in the Decalogue are too general such that they can apply to anyone but the Sabbath is so particular and applicable only to Jews community.

In fact, Martin Collins note that “the Sabbath was made for man (Mark 2:27) to ensure that man has the right kind of life; both physically and spiritually. The body needs a rest, but even more than that, the mind needs to be energized. It needs to be filled with the word of God and to be energized by

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29 This is the notion that physical Sabbath observance is no longer a requirement in the New Testament churches since it was meant for Jews. It goes ahead to maintain that, all who have accepted Jesus as Lord and saviour, have entered his rest and no other external rest is required.
fellowship with God.”  

Collins further taught that because God rested after six days of labor, the Sabbath is also our day of rest and a memorial of creation. He wants us to remember, not only what He did in the physical creation, but also that His spiritual creation continues in us now. When God blessed and sanctified the seventh day, He made it holy, set apart for God’s use. Only God can make a day holy and He does this by putting Himself, through His Spirit into it.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) explained the eternity of Sabbath in a different perspective. For Augustine, Isaiah 66:23 shows the difference between the two types of worship; one is the type of worship which is spiritual and only found in Christ and the second is the type of worship which is carnal under the law of Moses. Augustine went on to show that there are two phases of observing the Sabbath; the Jewish Sabbaths full of festivals celebrated under the law of Moses and the never ending Sabbath which we rest in Christ every time we allow Him in our hearts. More to this, Sabbath rest under the rule of Christ is quite different from that of weekly in a sense that in Christ, there will be a continuous and interrupted Sabbath without fixation of days and regulations; offerings, celebrations and joy will be continuous from time to time in unbroken series.

The Sabbath commandment as a part of the Decalogue had an abiding validity as the norm of Christian morality. However, the Sabbath is spiritualized in the sense that it is not about keeping the day and literally refraining from work but being in the presence of God; Jesus fulfilled the law and glorified it by making it spiritual rather than just physical. In another dimension, we see that all of the Ten Commandments still apply but are magnified spiritually. A good example is that of the seventh commandment where mankind was prohibited adultery but it is now adultery (even if no physical) to even look on a woman to lust after her. The Sabbath did not lose it significant but we observe it in the liberty and spirit of Christ which is brought about by resting from our own efforts to keep the physical law for our salvation and trust on Christ and only Christ to walk in his doctrine.

The spiritual Sabbath observance advocates have been arguing that the true Sabbath is not the physical keeping of an outer day since this was just but a symbol. For them, the true Sabbath is that state of mind in which we rest from external thoughts and doings, giving ourselves up to deeper meditation or to spiritual matters. According to Scott Bessenecker, “spiritual Sabbath is achieved when we enter into the calmness of our interior consciousness, issue relating to God and his commandment and more to this, fellowshipping with him.”

Athanasius (297-373) taught that the view of Sabbath as a perpetual covenant was a misconception which has misled for a long time. For Athanasius, the Hebrew word “perpetual” can also be used to mean “lasting into the indefinite future” not a must forever. Athanasius picked an example in the bible where similar words are employed to describe priesthood in Israel, which God later brought to an end about two thousand years ago. From this, the physical Sabbath was not to be seen as a mean of God’s covenant since it only through the blood of Christ which was shed on the Calvary can one claim to have entered into God’s covenant but not Sabbath. In Luke 4:16, Christ is recorded observing the physical Sabbath when he attended the synagogue on the Sabbath day. This did not carry a big weight since Tertullian (160-220) taught that “Jesus observed and kept the physical Sabbath because he was a Jew and the Law of Moses required him to do so from birth.” The advocates of spiritualized Sabbath quote Colossians 2:13, 14 interpreting it to mean that after the death of Christ, the Law of Moses

31 John Chrysostom. The Sabbath in history and prophecy (Evanston: Harper Publisher, 1914)
33 Scott Bessenecker. An invitation to spiritual rest
together with that of Sabbath was abolished. Much more the physical Sabbath requirement ceased in Christ since he is the truth; in him all images and symbols vanishes. Christ is the reality at whose coming all shadows are done away with. Romans 6:8 teaches that we were buried with Christ so that by his death we may die to the corrupt nature of our flesh and this cannot be done or limited to one physical day but throughout our life until filled with God’s power. Gerald Thomas remarked that “superstitious keeping and observance of physical Sabbath must remain far from Christian community.”

Christ came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17) but not to abolish it, then Christians have their Sabbath fulfillment in Christ who invited the heavy laden to get rest from him. John Chrysostom (349-407) taught that the Church was not to compel her members to observe the Physical Sabbath since by doing this, the church openly demonstrated that she feared the law as if it was binding; and if the law is still in power, it must be the whole not in segment, nor in only one commandment of Sabbath. Chrysostom argued that if the whole law is effective, then the righteousness which comes as a result of faith has got no place in Christendom. Again Chrysostom asked a question, “If the church advocates the keeping of Sabbath, why not also the requirement of circumcision and offering of animal sacrifices?” From this the conclusion came that if the law was to be faithfully observed, it must be kept and observed in full or not at all. Physical Sabbath was not regarded as a sign of Sanctification by the group which advocated for spiritual resting in Christ. The account of creation did not show any records that Sabbath was meant for man. God blessed and sanctified the Sabbath for himself and not for man, and the real purpose of Sabbath was to preach and hear the message. Sanctification takes place every day and hour when God’s word is preached and heard, occupation in holy words, deeds and lifestyle; physical Sabbath day by itself needs no sanctification since from creation was made holy. True sanctification comes from the word of God which sanctifies everything and everyone, this means that every time the word of God is preached, read or meditated upon, humanity, day and our works are sanctified; therefore, the process of sanctification sorely lies in the word of God.

No Christian is obliged to observe physical Sabbath so as to be counted as a righteous person. The only righteousness which is acceptable before our God is that emanating from the faith of Christ. Abraham a man who was counted to be righteous and a friend of God were nowhere recorded to be an observant of physical Sabbath. Again Lot without observing the physical Sabbath was delivered from Sodom and all the humankind who lived before Abraham and Patriarchs, who were before Moses, were accorded righteousness without observing the physical Sabbath and the Law of Moses. In Hebrew 4:10, God is promising the church for a total rest. This rest which God invites the church to enter is of spiritual nature that whispers assurance of rest to burdened hearts and mind, bringing the notion of getting real rest of salvation in Christ. Achieving true Sabbath rest calls us to stop working our own salvation since God has provided it in Christ. When Christ willingly gave his life on the cross, he took the death that was ours, he became our substitute; the Sabbath rest is not supposed to be a form of legalism but rather an everlasting mark that our rest is in Christ’s salvation. For a church to achieve total rest which will continue in eternity, the Christians must enter into rest as God did. On daily basis,

35 Non-physical Sabbath keepers believe that all the ceremonial laws which were in effect during the Old Testament, ended on the cross when Christ was crucified. These laws included that of Sabbath, circumcision and all kinds of animal sacrifice and offering. (Colossians 2:14-16).
36 In Hebrew 4:10, we see God inviting the Israelites for another rest though they were keeping the physical Sabbath. Joshua had led them to Canaan but something was missing in their faith; they rested the physical Sabbath mechanically, out of compelling spirit from their leaders. They did not fully understand the real meaning of rest. Here we see God promising them a rest in Christ for every -one who will believe, listen and obey His voice.
God invites the church to a spiritual rest that is reserved for us when we accept his salvation. True Sabbath rest which is meant for God’s church is achieved only when sin is put aside to live a Godly lifestyle; and all who have accepted and believed Jesus as their Lord and savior have entered into spiritual rest.

Physical Sabbath cannot be observed or kept as a means of salvation; for the scripture calls men and women of faith as ‘friends of God’ even without necessarily factoring on the ritual of circumcision or even keeping the Sabbath. For instance, God commended Adam and his offspring Abel for offering him a sacrifice without observing the physical Sabbath (Hebrew 11:4). More to this, Noah unobservant of Sabbath was freed and saved from a great flood not forgetting Enoch who was described as a righteous man (Genesis 4:24) and unobservant of physical Sabbath yet God translated him from this sinful world into heaven. This is an evident that the contemporary church can please God without the heavy burden of keeping the physical Sabbath.

5.0. Practical Implications

The SDA has been advocating the Sabbath to be considered as a mark of identifying a true church. In their discussion, they maintained that for a church to qualify to be true, Saturday Sabbath must be observed. According to their understanding, the observance has to be physical or literal observance. On the other hand, the churches that characteristically hold elaborate worship services on Sundays view the Saturday Sabbath as not a binding requirement to Christians since it was to be observed spiritually but not necessarily physical observance. For Anthony Headley, the church has two natures; visible and invisible just like Sabbath. This means that it should be observed both physically and spiritually. Headley went on to teach that since divine mysteries have dual natures; as in the case of visible and invisible, the church and the sacraments and so on, Christ himself was fully divine and fully human, the Sabbath also can be said to have dual nature; it is both visible and invisible.

This dual nature of divine mysteries points to the importance of the dual nature of the Sabbath. The Sabbath promised to the triumphant church in heaven will in fact be a rest in God and not a physical rest and therefore, the foretaste of such a Sabbath here on earth should be both physical as well as spiritual. It should be physical because we are physical beings and also spiritual because we are spiritual beings. Jesus in the Lord’s Prayer teaches us to pray, “May your (God’s) will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mat. 6). This clearly teaches us that the spiritual Sabbath as it shall be in heaven has its foretaste here on earth. Also, we can argue that the Sabbath as we have it here on earth (physical) was premeditated in eternity in heaven and actualized here on earth physically but at the end it shall go back to its ideal state (spiritual). Arguing for a purely physical Sabbath here on earth devoid of spiritual aspect is to deny it its full essential being or nature. And to argue for a purely spiritual Sabbath here on earth is also to deny it its true nature of duality. Therefore, the Sabbath is both spiritual and physical; it has to be observed both in physical state and in spiritual state while still here on earth. The above view eradicates anxiety among the faithful who would be worried that their faith has been compromised by not attending the Sabbath physically or laying more emphasis on physical observance of Sabbath.

5.6. Conclusion

The Seventh Day Adventist church has been advocating for physical observance of the Sabbath as a mark of the true church. This position may appear far-fetched and hence impossible especially during the era of COVID-19 pandemic where all churches and places of worship were closed down by the Kenya’s ministry of health in March 2020 and afterwards. The membership of the SDA, like any other members of the other churches in Kenya, had no alternative apart from staying at home on the so called Sabbath day; as no physical observance of the Sabbath was realized. Considering that Sabbath is seen to have dual natures: visible and invisible, the findings of this article, have brought in the view that the Sabbath can be sufficiently observed either physically or through other ways that uplifts the spirituality of the membership. Further, the article has ushered in a ‘disclaimer’ and/or proviso that as much as we attend the Sabbath physically, we should be there spiritually so that if pandemic like COVID-19 comes again, spiritual observance will be fulfilled in equal measure. Certainly, the observance of the Sabbath needs extraordinary faith and obedience to God; for it’s not only about the physical rest, but to live our lives by faith and in total dependence on God. Clearly, Sabbath is not only about physical rest but it’s also about entering God’s rest, as we put our trust in God’s immeasurable providence.

References