

HOLY CONVOCATION

A Divine Imperative

Dr. Daniel Botkin

*Some keep the Sabbath going to church; I
keep A staying at home, With a bobolink for a
chorister, And an orchard for a dome.*

-Emily Dickinson

STAYING HOME ON THE SABBATH

Some people think like Emily Dickinson. They want to keep the Sabbath by just staying home. However, people who keep the Sabbath without a holy convocation are not really keeping the Sabbath. They may be abstaining from working and from buying and selling, which is good. However, abstinence from working and buying and selling is not the only thing required to keep a Biblical Sabbath. According to the Bible, Sabbath-keeping also requires the assembling of ourselves together with others for a holy convocation. The Bible makes this very clear in Leviticus 23. (See the Hebrew and Greek Word Study on the next page.)

The New Testament Scriptures warn us about "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (Heb. 10:25). Assembling together for worship and fellowship can be done on any day of the week, but the Sabbath is the one day of the week on which we are *required* to assemble together. The Book of Hebrews was written to Hebrew disciples. That's why it's called Hebrews. These Jewish believers had been familiar with Sabbath-keeping all their lives. They knew which day of the week it was, and they knew that Sabbath-keeping required assembling with others for worship at the synagogue. The word *synagogue* can even be seen in this command to assemble in Hebrews 10:25. The Greek word translated "assembling" is *episunagoge* (επισυναγωγή)- The ep/- prefix is the preposition which points us in the direction of our destination, and the *sunagoge* tells us where our destina-

tion is: in the synagogue, the place of worship.

Unlike these First Century Messianic Hebrew disciples, most people in today's Messianic community did not grow up keeping the seventh-day Sabbath. Most of us came out of the Sunday church system. Because we did not learn Biblical Sabbath-keeping in our childhood, we have to learn it as adults. Learning to keep the Sabbath is like learning a foreign language. It is more difficult for adults than it is for children. This is because adults have already established regular modes of thinking and habitual patterns of behavior from years of experience. Adults become set in their ways, or, to put it in linguistic terms, "fossilized."

INTERFERENCE & TRANSFER OF PREVIOUSLY LEARNED HABITS

Foreign Language (FL) learning can show us some things about learning to keep the Sabbath. Linguists who study how people learn a FL point out that one of the things that makes FL learning so difficult for adults is Native Language (NL) interference (also called NL transfer). A young child who has spoken his Native Language for only a few years can learn a Foreign Language as easily and as naturally as he learned his Native Language (if he is equally exposed to the FL), because the young child's mind has not yet fossilized. An adult, on the other hand, has already established linguistic patterns in his mind. His mind has unconsciously locked into the linguistic rules that govern his Native Language. When he tries to learn a Foreign Language, he discovers that the FL (or TL, Target Language) is not always governed by the same linguistic rules of grammar, word order, sentence structure, inflection, etc. If he wants to learn to speak the TL, he must try to ignore the rules which govern his NL. This is easier said than done. An

English-speaking adult who has always placed adjectives before nouns may find it difficult when he is told that the TL requires him to place the adjective after the noun - and to also make sure the adjective form agrees in number and gender with the noun that it modifies (something which English does not require).

Our NL interferes with our learning of a FL when we transfer the linguistic rules of our NL to the TL. A similar phenomenon occurs in learning to keep the Sabbath. If we grew up going to church on Sunday (our NS, "Native Sabbath"), we are apt to transfer the rules of Sunday-keeping to the seventh-day Sabbath (our TS, "Target Sabbath"). In other words, we will view Saturday in much the same way that we formerly viewed Sunday, and we will conclude (usually erroneously) that we are keeping the seventh-day Sabbath - just like some foreign students I have met who thought they were speaking English.

If all we have done is to transfer a half-hearted allegiance from one day of the week to another day of the week, we are not keeping the Sabbath. This is not to imply that all Sunday Christians are half-hearted in their faith. They are not. However, most Sunday Christians *are* halfhearted in their observance of Sunday as the Sabbath. Sunday is viewed as the one day of the week when a good Christian ought to go to church, but if he occasionally misses for some minor, petty reason, it's no big deal. And if he works or buys or sells after the Sunday morning church service, no one accuses him of Sabbath-breaking. That would be considered legalistic. Besides, most Christians see nothing wrong with buying or selling or even working on Sunday, as long as the person attends a Sunday church service. The fact that restaurants are crowded with church people every Sunday afternoon speaks volumes about the contemporary

Christian view of Sunday.

Many, probably most, Messianic believers came out of churches that view Sunday in this way. After coming out of the Sunday church, they transfer the rules of their NS ("Native Sabbath," i.e., Sunday) to their TS (Target Sabbath," i.e., Saturday). They think it's okay to buy and sell after the Saturday morning service. And they think it's not necessary to attend a holy convocation every Sabbath. They think that attending once in a while is sufficient, just enough so they still "feel connected" to the local body. This is not Sabbath-keeping. It is Sabbath-breaking, because it ignores the commandment about having a holy convocation.

There are times when unforeseen circumstances of an urgent nature come up, of course. Things like sickness, infirmity, bad weather, and family emergencies sometimes prevent us from attending the holy convocation. In a serious emergency, we might even have to buy something. If the ox falls in a ditch on the Sabbath, it is not a sin to get it out. These are the exceptions, though, and we are not talking about the exceptions. We are talking about people who stay home on the Sabbath when they could attend a holy convocation in a local assembly in their area.

THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN VIEW OF SUNDAY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SEVENTH-DAY SABBATH-KEEPERS

Seventh-day Sabbath-keepers of previous generations probably did not have to deal with this problem of NS ("Native Sabbath") transfer as much as we do, because faithful Sunday Christians of past generations actually treated Sunday as a Sabbath. (See the information about Sunday "Blue Laws" on the next page.) Until a few decades ago, virtually all Bible-believing Christians were in universal agreement that God wanted Christians to keep the Sabbath. They were not in universal agreement about *which day* (Saturday or Sunday), but they all agreed that Christians should keep the

HEBREW & GREEK WORD STUDY

"Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, Concerning the feasts of Yahweh, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are My feasts. Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, an holy convocation: ye shall do no work therein: it is the sabbath of Yahweh in all your dwellings." (Lev. 23:2f)

In the KJV, the Hebrew word *mikra* is translated "convocation." In modern English the word *convocation* evokes visions of formal, solemn, high-church assemblies in Episcopal churches. However, the general, primary meaning of *convocation* is "the act or process of convoking." The verb *convoke* simply means to call people to assemble together for a meeting. The *con-* prefix ("with" or "together") provides the "togetherness," and the *-voke* (related to words such as *vocal* and *voice*) provides the "calling."

Therefore a convocation is an assembly of people who have been

called to come together for a specific purpose. In the context of the Sabbath, that purpose is for congregational worship.

The word *convocation*, though rarely used in modern English, is an excellent choice for translating the Hebrew word *mikra*. The stem of *mikra* is the verb K-R-A, which means "to call," often in the sense of proclaiming or calling out. The verb is used in the well-known phrase "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." This is why Strong's Concordance correctly defines *mikra* as "something called out, i.e. a public meeting..."

The Greek New Testament word translated "church" also carries the idea of calling. The church is the *ekklesia*, the "called-out" assembly. The *ek-* prefix means "out of and the rest of the word provides the "calling." We are a called-out people who have been called to assemble together every Sabbath for worship.

Sabbath. Even if they called it "the Lord's Day" instead of "the Sabbath," they still believed that the principles of Sabbath-keeping should be transferred to Sunday. I am old enough to remember a time when virtually all businesses and stores and restaurants were closed on Sundays. No sporting events or school activities were held on Sundays. Everything, even gas stations, closed down for the (Sunday) Sabbath.

I believe the reason the Church has gotten away from keeping Sunday as the Sabbath is because there is no Biblical basis for keeping Sunday as the Sabbath. Preachers have to really twist the Scriptures and yank them out of context to present the case for a Sunday Sabbath. Even with their twisted Scriptures, they can only present it as an alleged custom, not as a commandment, because there is no Biblical authority for a Sunday Sabbath.

The positive result of this is that

more and more Christians are coming to realize that the seventh day of the week is the only possible day that can rightly be called the Sabbath. The negative result is sloppy Sunday-keeping, which results in sloppy seventh-day Sabbath-keeping. People decide to start keeping the seventh-day Sabbath, but they treat Saturday no differently than they formerly treated Sunday. If they bought and sold on Sunday, they buy and sell on Saturday. If they attended Sunday morning services sporadically, they attend the Saturday holy convocation sporadically. If they sometimes stayed home from Sunday services because they were tired, or wanted to clean their garage, or wanted to watch a football game on TV, they will stay home from the Sabbath services for these same reasons.

If we truly believe in keeping the Sabbath, we are obligated to keep it as *the Sabbath*. This means not only abstinence from working, buying, and

selling. It also means attending a holy convocation.

Even if we are out of town on the Sabbath, we are still obligated to honor the Sabbath. I tell people in our congregation that if they are out of town on a Sabbath, they should try to find a Sabbath-keeping congregation and attend their holy convocation. Messianic and Sabbath-keeping directories (in printed form or online) can help you find fellowship on the Sabbath. If no congregation can be found in your area, at least gather your family together in the motel room (or wherever you are) and have a time of prayer, Bible reading, singing, etc. Regardless of where we are, we should at the very least have a time of worship and fellowship every Sabbath. Many families who live in rural areas, isolated from other believers, have learned to do this. Modern technology also makes it possible for isolated people to use teaching tapes and videos or to go online for fellowship in chat rooms. It's not as good as fellowshiping with others in person, but it's better than nothing.

WHAT ABOUT EXODUS 16:29?

Some seventh-day people stay home on the Sabbath not out of rebellion or laziness, but because of a sincere but erroneous understanding of Exodus 16:29. "See, for that Yahweh hath given you the sabbath, therefore He giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days; abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day."

Some people believe that the above verse *requires* them to stay home on the Sabbath. There are several reasons why this understanding is erroneous. Let's look at some of these reasons.

First of all, we must remember that in order to understand the Biblical view of any particular subject, we must look at everything the Bible says about that particular subject. We must get "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). If we base our understanding of a topic on one single verse, isolated and divorced from its context, and ignore

SUNDAY "BLUE LAWS"

The following excerpt is from Don Voorhees, *The Book of Totally Useless Information* (New York: MJF Books, 1993), p. 151f.

"Blue laws or Sunday laws are government imposed restrictions on the sale of certain products or services on Sundays. They have their origins in early colonial American legislation requiring puritanical standards of Sunday observance on the part of the general public. Blue laws were the first printed laws of the New Haven Colony in Connecticut. They are called blue laws because they were originally bound in blue paper.

"The first 'Sunday' laws in what is now the United States were enacted in Virginia in 1617. They called for the punishment of persons failing to attend Sunday church services, with a fine payable in tobacco. The Virginia militia was authorized to force colonists to attend Sunday Anglican church services.

"Other colonial blue laws included the prohibition of work, travel, or recreation on Sundays, as well as many other restrictions, including such mundane activities as cooking, shaving, cutting hair, sweeping, and making beds. It was also illegal to have sexual intercourse on the Sabbath. The Puritans believed that a child was born on the same day of the week as it was conceived. Therefore, a woman who bore a child on a Sunday was fined for violating the blue law nine months earlier. [Editor's note: Sarah Edwards, the wife of the famous Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards, gave birth to eleven children. Six of them were born on Sundays, causing tongues to wag. -DE] In fact, mothers were forbidden to kiss their children on Sundays!

"New York State punished blue law violators with a fine of six shillings and eight pence or two hours in the stocks. Massachusetts law even forbade men and women from wearing lace or precious metals on Sundays.

"In the nineteenth century, laws requiring Sunday church attendance began to disappear because they 'violated citizens' rights to religious freedoms.' The other restrictions, however, including those banning sporting events and travel, continued...."

everything else the Bible says about that topic, we are almost certain to come to an erroneous conclusion about that topic.

If Exodus 16:29 were the only thing the Bible said about the Sabbath, one might have an argument for staying home on the Sabbath. However, that is not the case. The Bible contains approximately 150 verses about the Sabbath, and these verses must be taken into consideration if we want a Biblical understanding of what God expects of His people on the Sabbath.

The Bible must be interpreted in a way that makes different passages harmonize with one another and not contradict one another. If Exodus 16:29 is viewed as a commandment for everyone to stay home on the Sabbath, then we have a major problem with contradictions. First of all, this view contradicts God's command to have a holy convocation on the Sabbath (Lev. 23). If everyone

just stays home, it is obvious that there can be no community gathering for congregational worship. Secondly, it is obvious from the Scriptures that God's people did not stay home on the Sabbath. They left their homes and went to the synagogues to worship. In the Gospels, Yeshua went to the synagogue every Sabbath "as His custom was" (Lk. 4:16). In the Book of Acts, the Apostles went to synagogue every Sabbath, and they even expected Gentile believers to do so. (See Acts 15:21 in context.) Even where there was no synagogue building available, Jews left their homes and gathered in public places on the Sabbath: "And on the sabbath, we went out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made; and we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither" (Acts 16:13). Also in Old Testament times people left their homes and gathered for worship on the Sabbath. This can

be inferred from the statement made by the husband of the Shunammite woman as she was leaving to go see the Prophet Elisha Her husband said, "Wherefore wilt thou go to him today? It is neither new moon nor sabbath" (2 Kings 4:23). This is clear evidence that it was normal for people to leave their homes and assemble with others on new moons and Sabbath.

To arrive at the correct understanding of Exodus 16:29, we must consider two things. First, we must realize that it cannot be understood as a commandment to stay home on the Sabbath, because this view contradicts many other passages about the Sabbath. This view even makes Yeshua into a Sabbath-breaker, because He did not stay home on the Sabbath. It was His custom to leave home and go to the synagogue.

Secondly, we must look at the context of Exodus 16:29. God had just started giving manna to the children of Israel. They had gone out and gathered manna six days in a row, gathering a double portion on the sixth day of this first week of miraculous provision. On the seventh day, Moses warned them not to go out looking for manna, telling them, "Today ye shall not find it in the field." Some people went out manna-hunting anyway, which angered the Lord. It was in this context that Yahweh ordered the people to "abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day." The obvious meaning (and the only one which does not contradict the rest of Scripture and make the Messiah into a Sabbath-breaker) is that the people were not supposed to leave their tents to go *looking for manna*. But they could certainly leave their tents to assemble for worship after the Tabernacle had been constructed and set up. In the same way, we should not leave our homes on the Sabbath for the purpose of earning our daily bread. But we can and should leave our homes to assemble with others for worship. God's people have done this since Biblical times, and if we want to keep the Sabbath wholly holy, we will do the same.

FURTHER EVIDENCE THAT SATURDAY IS DEFINITELY THE 7TH DAY OF THE WEEK ^THEREFORE THE SABBATH

-Daniel Botkin-

When I studied Russian years ago, I learned that the Russian word for Saturday is *subбота*. I had studied Spanish in high school, and I remembered that the Spanish word for Saturday was *sabado*. I recognized in both of these words the striking similarity to *sabbath*, and I suspected that there might be other languages that had similar-sounding words to designate Saturday. If so, this Hebrew-derived S-B-T/D word root would be linguistic evidence that Saturday has always been the true and universal Sabbath in the seven-day weekly cycle which God instituted at creation.

This spring my suspicions were confirmed by an article in *The Sabbath Sentinel*. The article, reprinted from the very first issue of *The Sabbath Sentinel* m 1950, is titled "Universality of the Biblical Sabbath Confirmed by the World's Ancient and Modern Languages," written by George A. Main, who was the Secretary of the Bible Sabbath Association. The writer presents a listing of the words for both Saturday and Sunday in fifty major languages, along with the additional meanings of those words in their respective languages.

In most of the languages, the words used to designate Sunday mean "one" or "first," which indicates that Sunday has been universally regarded as the first day of the week since ancient times. None of the words used for Sunday mean "sabbath" or "rest." On the contrary, in some of the languages the words used for Sunday mean "market day" or "business day." (Consider 1 Corinthians 16:2 in light of this information. See also *Gates of Eden* 7-2, "A Sunday Sabbath in 1 Corinthians 16:2, An Example of Eisegesis.")

In all fifty languages that the writer lists, the words used to designate Saturday are obvious cognates of the Hebrew *shabbat* (TOO), SH-B-T). Sometimes the SH- becomes S- or Z- or the -B- becomes -P-, or the -T becomes a -D or -TH. The reason for this is understandable to anyone with a little basic knowledge of linguistics. Many languages do not have the SH sound, and must use the closest-sounding letter they have, usually S or sometimes Z. The B and T sounds also vary from language to language. When two sounds differ in only one regard, linguists refer to them as minimal pairs. The only difference between minimal pairs like S-Z, B-P, or T-D is whether the sounds are "voiced" or "voiceless," i.e., whether or not the vocal cords vibrate. Put your fingers on the sides of your Adam's apple when you make these sounds and you can feel the vibrations of voicing with Z, B, and D, but not with S, P, and T.

The writer of the article in *The Sabbath Sentinel* does an excellent job of summarizing the impact of this linguistic information:

"In our study of the many languages of mankind we not only find that in the majority of the principal languages the last, or seventh, day of the week is designated as Sabbath, but we also learn that there are no languages which designate any other day than the seventh day as 'day of rest.'

"From these facts we may conclude that not only those people who called the last day of the week 'Sabbath,' but all other peoples and races, as far as they recognized any day of the week as Sabbath, rested on the seventh day. In fact, it was recorded by the great historian, Socrates, that in his time the whole known world, with the exceptions of only Rome and Alexandria, observed the seventh day of the week."

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