

# What Defines a Holy Convocation?

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The Bible requires God's people to have a holy convocation on the weekly Sabbath as well as the annual holy days. Most assume this means that believers must convoke with a congregation in a public building in order to obey God's command to keep these days holy. A prevailing conviction maintains that as long as two or more are gathered together the convocation is a legitimate Church service. Some go as far as to claim that people are sinning if they do not attend such an assembly with others. This article will explain exactly what a holy convocation is and how we can be confident that we are keeping God's Sabbaths holy.

## ***Why this Article?***

We are living in troubled times. There is currently no legitimate apostle God is using to keep congregations unified and on track. As a result, the Church of God is scattered and broken. Many ministers have become lax in their approach to teaching God's law. Correcting wrong behaviors in the Church has taken a backseat to trying to make people feel content with their group. The result has been a continuous flow of "safe sermons" in attempts not to ruffle the feathers of those who are liberal in their approach to God's law. Such sermons are far from harmless. They have propagated the lukewarm attitude that has infected the Church at the end of the age (Rev. 3:15-16). All of this has been disheartening to those who are zealous and forced to constantly hear only milk of the word when it is solid food they need (Heb. 5:13-14).

Some ministers misuse their authority resulting in spiritual abuse of brethren. Members have been kicked out of their congregation for simply asking questions about proper Sabbath observance. Other ministers have made false claims in an attempt to validate themselves while disparaging other church leaders. Several pastors have gone so far as to claim that their organization is the only true Church; using this as a scare tactic to gain or retain members and tithes.

Many congregants have been mistreated by their own brethren. Faithful Christians have witnessed friends or entire congregations stray from the truth. Others have found themselves falsely accused and wrongfully put out as a result of brethren and ministers not correctly applying Christ's instructions found in Matthew 18. At the same time, brethren have been told that they MUST attend with a specific organization or they are sinning.

These are just some of the reasons that many brethren have been spiritually damaged while attending with a particular group. The Eternal Church of God has been asked on numerous occasions what people should do. What is a faithful Christian to do when they are faced with false doctrine, persecution, or lethargy within their congregation?

## ***A Holy Convocation***

We would like to make it clear that the Eternal Church of God believes in assembling with those of like mind on the Sabbath. We encourage brethren to gather together on the seventh day as well as the annual feasts. These are times when much can be gained and shared. However,

we are bound by the truth and therefore strive to honestly state what the Scriptures do and do not say.

With this in mind, consider that God repeatedly stated that the weekly Sabbath and annual Feasts are holy convocations (Exo. 12:16; Lev. 23:3-36; Num. 28:18-29). The English word “convocation” comes from the Hebrew word *miqra* which means:

Something called out, that is, a public meeting (the act, the persons, or the place); also a rehearsal: - assembly, calling, convocation, reading (*Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, H4744).

When used in the context of a holy day, convocation means to come together on the days that God has sanctified or proclaimed to be holy. It can also refer to a public meeting including priests and congregants as well as their respective place of assembly. This word includes people that are called for the purpose of reading the Holy Scriptures.

While this term includes people who assemble for a Church service, it does not indicate that God requires every believer to attend with those who are abusive or to make ourselves subject to doctrinally false settings. Instead, the term requires acknowledging the holy day, and convoking with God who is holy. He is the one who causes the meeting to be a holy convocation. For example, we live in an age where no edifice can be considered God's temple. Nonetheless, God requires His people to acknowledge specific days as holy convocations, and He makes the following obligations clear:

**The Sabbath** – “You shall do no work *on it*; it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings” (Lev. 23:3).

**The First and Last Day of Unleavened Bread** – “No manner of work shall be done on them; but that which everyone must eat—that only may be prepared by you” (Exo. 12:16). “On the seventh day there *shall be* a sacred assembly to the LORD your God. You shall do no work *on it* (Deu. 16:8).

**Pentecost** – “You shall do no customary work *on it*. It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations” (Lev. 23:21).

**Trumpets** – “You shall have a sabbath-rest... You shall do no customary work *on it*” (Lev. 23:24-25).

**Atonement** – “You shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all... It is a sabbath of solemn rest for you” (Lev. 16:29-31).

**The First day of the Feast of Tabernacles** – “You shall do no customary work *on it*” (Lev. 23:35).

**The Eighth Day** – “It is a sacred assembly, *and* you shall do no customary work *on it*” (Lev. 23:36).

It is clear that in every case where a holy convocation is mentioned no ordinary work or pleasure is to be done. We are to rest from our regular routine on these days and focus on the various facets of Almighty God and His ways. So important are His Sabbaths that God only

permits cooking food on the annual holy days with the exception of the Day of Atonement (Exo. 12:16; 16:23).

After studying every precept regarding these days, we find that there are only three times each year in which God commands all of His people to assemble. These are known as the pilgrimage feasts including the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deu. 16:16). This understanding may be contrary to what most have been taught or have long believed. Nonetheless, God's main concern is that we stop our personal work as well as discontinue seeking our own pleasure on the days that He has designated as being holy. On all of these days we are to focus on that which is holy—God!

In this context, consider what makes God's Sabbaths holy. Is it those who attend, or is it God who sanctified the seventh day? The answer is obvious. God is the only One with the authority and the ability to set something apart for a holy purpose (Gen. 2:3). Therefore, the Sabbath is not made holy simply because believers meet with other believers. As Christ related:

The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

The Sabbath is not sanctified by men. It was set apart and made holy by God who designed it to be a time for us to turn from regular activities of daily living and focus on Him. The Sabbath and annual holy days are not holy convocations simply because we meet in a certain place or with a specific group. These days are holy convocations when we meet with the Holy God. His requirement is that we convoke with Him.

It is important to consider the structure of the society when God gave these instructions to convoke to Israel. There were no synagogues for believers to meet in. There was only the Tabernacle in the wilderness and later the Temple in Jerusalem. Synagogues were not instituted until after the Diaspora of 538 B.C.

After the House of Judah was freed by the Persian king they settled in areas all over the globe. Fearing that they might lose their identity, language, and culture by assimilating with gentiles in these foreign countries, the Jews built places of meeting wherever they went. Before that time, God's people had only one place for official assembly—the Tabernacle and later the Temple in Jerusalem. These structures were never designed to hold thousands of people every Sabbath. Most Israelites only traveled to the Temple three times a year (Deu. 16:16).

The vast majority were scattered throughout the land of Canaan many miles from the only location of official religious services. However, God instructed Israel to allot housing, property, and tithes to Levites who would dwell within each city. It is likely, therefore, that the general populous got together in small groups on the Sabbath. Some of these gatherings would include a local priest, but not all would have a priest present. Furthermore, tens of thousands were farmers and ranchers who lived outside populated communities and had no access to a priest. It is certain that such individuals assembled in their homes and with family or friends during God's Sabbaths. If someone were isolated they would convoke with God alone.

This puts the issue in perspective. When God stated that His Sabbaths were to be holy convocations and no work was to be done, that is what He meant. Wherever His people might be, they are to convoke with Him on his holy days. God did not require those living dozens of miles from the temple to travel to Jerusalem every week.

Thus, God's Sabbaths are holy and we are to convoke, but there is no specific location or minimum attendance for this convocation. The Scriptures indicate that even one person can meet with God on the Sabbath wherever he or she might be. A few New Testament examples of this

include Aquila and Priscilla who met with others in their own home (1Cor. 16:19). The Apostle Paul also worshiped God on the Sabbath while confined to a rented dwelling (Acts 28:30).

### ***Are Two or More Required to Assemble?***

Some have thought that Matthew 18:20 designates the minimum number of people required for a holy convocation, but this is not the case. When this verse is read in its context we see that Christ was not talking about a church service or an assembly on the holy days. He explained what is required for elders to make a judgment regarding conflicts between brethren. Notice what the Savior stated to the men who would become His apostles:

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that “by the mouth of two or three witness every word may be established.” And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. **Again I say to you** that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them (Matthew 18:15-20).

Christ explained what should be done when brethren are in conflict. They are to make at least two attempts to resolve the issue between themselves. If an agreement cannot be reached, the matter can be taken to the Church leadership who then must follow these guidelines in order to make a righteous judgment.

If a matter is taken to the Church, two or more witnesses must testify. In addition, two or more elders must be involved in making the judgment and they must both agree in order for the judgment to be binding. This is what Christ meant when He said, “if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask” and “where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” Christ was not instituting criteria for Sabbath services. The Savior related how disputes between brethren must be handled. When they are performed according to His word, He will personally be involved “in the midst” of the decision. It will be bound or loosed in heaven, meaning it will have Christ’s approval, and must be adhered to by both the plaintiff and defendant. The Eternal Church of God has produced an extensive free booklet on this subject titled *The Truth about Matthew 18*.

This is the meaning of Christ’s instructions found in Matthew 18. Christ explained the process for resolving conflicts within the Church. He was not declaring the number of attendees for a holy convocation.

### ***Assembling Ourselves Together***

Another question has been asked regarding a statement in the book of Hebrews where the author seems to be speaking of brethren congregating on the Sabbath:

Let us hold fast the confession of *our* hope without wavering, for He who promised *is* faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, **not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together**, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:23-25).

After the New Testament Church was established, both Jews and Gentiles assembled in synagogues to hear the Scriptures read and edify one another (Acts 15:19-21). Christians benefited from these meetings. Over time, however, both Jews and Christians were targeted for persecution. In fact, the book of Hebrews was written shortly before the fall of Jerusalem when the Levitical priesthood would be disbanded. Temple services would have continued until the day it was invaded, but Christians assembling in large numbers would have been uncommon during that time. Most gatherings would have taken place in private residences. Adam Clarke's commentary makes reference to the "assembling" mentioned in the book of Hebrews stating that it included gathering in homes:

Whether this means public or private worship is hard to say... it is as likely that it means here private religious meetings, for the purpose of mutual exhortation: and this sense appears the more natural here, because it is evident that the Church was now in a state of persecution, and therefore their meetings were most probably held in private. For fear of persecution, it seems as if some had deserted these meetings, as the custom of certain persons is. They had given up these strengthening and instructive means, and the others were in danger of following their example (*Adam Clarke's Bible Commentary on the Bible*, Heb. 10:25).

While the instruction in Hebrews may include assembling in groups, it does not make a distinction between Christians gathering in public forums or if a private residence is sufficient. It is also unclear if the author was referring to fellowship during the weekly Sabbath, the annual holy days, or simply casual gatherings where brethren can converse, build relationships, and perhaps share a meal. These are "feasts of charity" that Jude wrote about (Jude 12).

It is our impression that all of these types of assemblies are appropriate gatherings for those of like mind. Nonetheless, we cannot claim that Hebrews 10:25 requires people to travel to a place where others are assembling for a Church service on the Sabbath. The context makes it impossible to specify one way or another when in fact all forms of association are likely included.

What is certain regarding this passage in Hebrews is that God's people were beginning to isolate themselves. This mirrors the circumstances we are facing at the end of the age. God's people have been scattered by itching ears and divisive shepherds (2Tim. 4:3; Eph. 4:14). As Ezekiel prophesied, even lay members have played a role in the growing divisive atmosphere (Eze. 34:17-22). Consequently, there has been a tendency of some to simply avoid fellowshiping with others. Regardless of the reason for an individual's isolation, the tenth chapter of Hebrews makes it clear that this attitude can be harmful to a Christian's growth. As the author continued:

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The Lord will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were

made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly **while you became companions of those who were so treated** (Hebrews 10:26-33).

It appears that the author is speaking of those who refuse to be associated with brethren. Not because they are attempting to remain faithful to God, but because they are withdrawing from the Church and returning to a life of sin. Those who withdraw are not only separating themselves from the Church, but from God. Therefore, these verses are not speaking of those who are striving to be faithful and have decided to leave a particular congregation because of watered down or false doctrine.

An official Church service presided over by one or more elders every Sabbath is recommended. It can be a wonderful way for God's people to hear inspired messages that expound on the Scriptures. We can enjoy Christian fellowship and develop camaraderie (Eph. 4:11; 1John 1:7). It can also be a way to stay on track. As the famous proverb states, "iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17).

However, our studies on this subject have led to the conclusion that public assemblies on the Sabbath are encouraged, but not commanded. Congregating outside of one's home is not required to keep the Sabbath holy. Again, the intent of the Sabbath is primarily to have fellowship with God and convoke with Him.

Consider that the early New Testament Church consisted of sparsely populated groups throughout the Middle East and Asia Minor. It was common practice for people to meet in their homes. Acts 20 gives an example of Paul speaking to a group of believers in an upper room all night long. Though this particular gathering did not occur on the Sabbath, it is indicative of the general practice of that time that has continued to this day. Christians gathered in various locations in both small and large numbers. Many convoked with God from their homes.

Thus, it is the policy of the Eternal Church of God to encourage brethren to meet with others whenever possible. Nevertheless, people are not sinning if they feel a need to convoke in their home. They are not violating the Sabbath commandment if a minister has told them that they are not allowed to attend with a particular group.

Consider the example of Diotrephes who was a New Testament minister who went off track. This man thought highly of himself and deprecated the Apostle John while putting out members of the Church who did not agree with him (3John 1:9-10). What were faithful individuals to do? Were they sinning because they had nowhere to attend? Were they breaking the Sabbath if they kept it alone? Should they have gone along with false teaching and pastoral abuse for the sake of fellowship? Absolutely not!

Therefore, if there is no group meeting in your area, if you are being persecuted by your congregation for faithful beliefs, if the group you could meet with is toxic to your spiritual growth, then it might be best to continue convoking with God on the Sabbath in a way that is acceptable to Him. Still, we must strive to seek fellowship with like minded brethren whenever possible as was done in times past.

Thankfully, many resources are available for home groups and personal study such as prerecorded sermons, live services on the internet or on the telephone, articles, books, and booklets. These can all be utilized to keep the Sabbath holy at home.

Even if we find that we are alone—we are not alone. God is with us. There is no minimum number for a meeting to qualify as a holy convocation. By nature of its design, the seventh day is the holy convocation and God's presence in it is what makes it holy. Every Sabbath, no matter where we might be located on the earth, we can convoke with the Creator of

the universe whether we are part of a group or not. As long as we are faithful, we will always be members of the body of Christ.