

The Sabbath Done Away? In No Way!

Colossians 2: 16-17 Does Not Teach Us to Avoid Keeping God's Sabbaths

Among certain Scriptures that detractors of God's word sometimes use to claim that God's laws concerning the keeping of the Sabbath and Holy Days are done away, Colossians 2:16-17 often is quoted. So, here is the Scripture (NKJV):

“So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.”

A cursory view of these words might lead a person to think that if you are not to be judged by someone in regard to your observing these days, then you are free to keep whatever days you wish to honor Christ: Sunday, Christmas, Easter, or any other day you may deem proper. Is this view correct? Let us take a quick look at these verses and understand what is being said.

1. The word “substance” in verse 17 is translated from the Greek “soma,” which means “body,” and is so translated everywhere else the word is used in Colossians: Colossians 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15. The translators of the NKJV did not faithfully render the word body in verse 17, leading to confusion in understanding the meaning of the phrase. The phrase should read:

“... but the body of Christ.”

The verb “is” is inserted, but is not in the original Greek. We see then that the body of Christ, the church or ecclesia, is to do the *judging* (*krino*, “distinguish or decide”) regarding festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths, not one's personal opinion or that of some religious entity or corporation. The act of judging (verse 16) is to be carried out by the ecclesia (verse 17), and they will confirm the truth of Scripture that these days are commanded for us (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 20:8-11; Leviticus 23; Luke 4:16, etc.).

As an aside, the new moons of verse 16 are Biblical markers which indicate the beginning of months for the Hebrew calendar. These days were never declared to be sacred Sabbaths, or are listed among the annual sacred festivals.

2. The annual festivals, new moons, and weekly Sabbaths are “shadows” [“sika,” metaphoric allusions to the spiritual reality of these things] of future events. These days unveil God's plan for mankind and even picture spirit-realm realities, as did the Tabernacle, the priesthood, and sacrifices, “... who serve the copy and shadow (sika) of the heavenly things ...” (Hebrews 8:5).

3. The culture of the Greeks and those in Colossae was ascetic (a religious doctrine that one can reach a higher spiritual state by rigorous self-discipline and self-denial), mixed with pagan traditions, as referenced by Paul in the following verses of Colossians 2:

Verse 8. Philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world

Verse 15. Principalities and powers

Verse 18. False humility, the worship of angels, puffed up in one's fleshly mind

Verses 20-22. Regulations of the world — do not touch, do not taste, do not handle — things that perish with using according to the commandments and doctrines of men

Verse 23. Self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body

With this view on life, the criticism of those outside the ecclesia would be to judge those who kept the feasts in a joyous, festive manner as being unrighteous. In their asceticism they would look down upon these converts to the truth and wonder why, instead of feasting on these appointed feasts, they should not be fasting!

4. Besides being ascetic, the culture of the Greeks also was immersed in gnosticism. This philosophy was a syncretic, esoteric system of mystical religious and philosophic doctrines, stressing *gnosis* (a knowledge of spiritual things, especially secret and superior knowledge based on an elite law) as essential to salvation; matter was viewed as evil, and ideas of mythology, ancient Greek philosophy, ancient religions, and even Christianity were combined. This philosophy refused to recognize Jesus as supreme and the author of salvation.

Throughout Colossians 2, Paul punctuates the divinity and essentiality of Jesus Christ as the way to salvation as he points out in verse 3 (in Him are all treasures of wisdom and knowledge), verse 9 (in Him the fulness of Deity lives), verse 10 (we are complete in Christ), verses 11 and 12 (He is the true circumciser and baptizer), verses 13 to 15 (He raises us, forgives us, and defeats our enemies, and verse 19 (Jesus is our Head).

By making these assertions, Paul is pulling down the pillars of gnosticism as he focuses on the necessity to avoid vain philosophies. He is not denouncing the need for faith, proper philosophy, baptism, proper eating and drinking habits, self-control, and the correct respect of angels, but placing these in the context of Jesus Christ, to be observed and judged in obedience to Him, not mixed with Greek mythology, philosophy, and religion.

I should also mention a commonly misunderstood verse just before the ones we have been addressing. This is verse 14 of Colossians 2, which says, in context with verses 13 and 15:

“When you were dead in your trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our trespasses, having canceled the debt ascribed to us in the *decrees* [*dogma*, ‘decree, ordinance’] that stood against us. He took it away, nailing it to the cross! And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the *cross* [*stauros*, ‘stake or post’].”

Some detractors of the need to keep the laws and commandments of God will claim that when Jesus was crucified on the tree, the commandments “died” with him. Nothing could be further from the truth! With repentance, baptism, the laying on of hands, and the giving of God's spirit to wash away all sins and make of these Colossians new creatures, these newly converted people had their sins metaphorically “nailed to the stake” and removed from them. The removal of sin does not remove the law, but rather we know that sin is defined by the law (I John 3:4). Christ removed the penalty of death by forgiving our sins through His sacrifice on the tree, and as a consequence of that forgiveness we strive to put away sin, not continue in it.

These points all reveal that the words of Colossians 2:16 and 17 in no way say that the Sabbath and annual festivals are done away. Rather, in context they say the exact opposite: these Biblical holy days, as revealed in Genesis 2:2-3 and Leviticus 23, were kept by Jesus Christ and the early ecclesia (Luke 4:16; Acts 20:16; 27:9; etc.) are to be kept by God's people even today! What a great and merciful Creator God we have who has not left us without hope in a world filled with so much hopelessness!