

# **The Sabbath and the New Covenant**

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## **Sabbath: Nailed To The Cross?**

### **Colossians 2:14-17 Revisited**

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"Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of any holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ" (Colossians 2:14-17).

In this day of the "sound-bite," we biblical expositors have our work cut out for us. When the passage is tough, requiring serious thought and expression, the attention of our listeners wanders, eyes glaze, and we quickly reach for an easier explanation. I believe that desire for the "easier explanation" is part of the reason Colossians 2:14-17 still suffers occasional exegetical abuse. Understandably, we who hold both the law and the Sabbath in considerable esteem approach the passage with some uneasiness, since Paul's figure of nailing something to the cross (verse 14) is in close proximity to a Sabbath (verse 16) and some sort of law (verse 14). So, to protect two of our most revered pillars, we tend to interpret this passage with certain presuppositions firmly in place. However, in this exposition we will focus sharply on the Colossian context before making contemporary applications.

Colossians 2:14-17 is not a passage with a transparent meaning. Even a good English translation is not enough to resolve all the doctrinal and theological difficulties. In fact, this is one of those passages in which a few of the finer points of the original language gives us a real boost to our interpretive task.

### **The Context**

The first phrase that gives rise to some contention is cheirographon tois dogmasin, translated in the KJV as "handwriting of ordinances." Other translations include "Certificate of debt" (NASB), or "bond written in ordinances" (RV), or "the bond which stood against us with its legal demands" (RSV). Since the words occur nowhere else in Scripture, lexical definitions must be carefully guided by the immediate context.

The context begins with 2:12, where Paul speaks of being "buried with Him in baptism." The result of that "burial baptism" is resurrection to a new life and cleansing from sin. Paul refers to that cleansing with two participle phrases that are parallel, the second repeating the thought of the first. The first of those two phrases is "having forgiven us all our trespasses" (verse 13, RSV). The parallel and repetitive phrase is "having cancelled the bond [cheirographon tois dogmasin] which stood against us" (verse 14, RSV). Both phrases mean essentially the same thing, the second simply repeating in different terms what it meant for him to forgive our sins. Thus forgiveness of our sins has resulted in the cancelling of the bond that was against us.

It is primarily the KJV translation of verse 14 ("handwriting of ordinances") that has led some to interpret the phrase as referring to the various Mosaic rituals and ceremonial "ordinances" that largely ceased to have relevance after Christ died on the cross. So if some law was nailed to the cross, it would have to be the ceremonial law, since the moral law was not made "void" by the cross (Romans 3:31).

However, Paul rarely makes the neat division between the ceremonial law and the moral law that we are often quick to make. In fact, his references to the ceremonial laws are rare. When he does use the word "law" (nomos), he most frequently has in mind the moral law in general and often the Decalogue in particular. Of course, in our passage he doesn't use the word "law" at all, which is why we have to be so careful to reason from the context to understand his meaning.

In a strikingly similar passage in Ephesians 2:14, 15, Paul tells how Christ has brought peace, not just between Jew and Gentile, but between all humans and God, by nullifying the "law of commandments in decrees" (ton nomon ton entolon en dogmasin) (see New Jerusalem). Here the word "law" is linked with the word dogmasin, the same word translated "ordinances" in Colossians. The context of both Colossians and Ephesians indicates that something more than ceremonies was involved.

One thing is very clear: when Paul elsewhere refers to the impact of the cross for the Christian, he does not limit his reasoning to abolishing the ceremonial law. For Paul the most important thing that ended at the cross was the condemnation brought about by our sin. That condemnation arose out of a broken moral law. As he says in Romans 7:7, "if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin" (RSV). In other words, it is the broken law that stands before us and condemns us, which is all the moral law

can do for those who have broken it. But as Paul says in Romans 8:1 "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (RSV). Or, as in verse 3, "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son . . . condemned sin in the flesh" (RSV).

To put it another way, the moral law could point out sin, but could not forgive it. So God had to intervene, or we would stand forever condemned by that law. At that point, the "principalities and powers" that Paul mentions in Colossians 2:15 would triumph over us. But now, as a result of the cross, that picture has changed, and the powers have been defeated. And that happened when the condemnation of the moral law was figuratively nailed to the cross. The NRSV smoothly translates it: "erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross." Thus He made "peace by the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20, RSV).

### **The Moral Law After The Cross**

This interpretation does not mean that the moral law itself did not survive the cross. It is one thing to say that the demands of the law have been met in Christ. It is quite another to say that the law has been abolished in Christ. Or to put it differently, the law serves at least two functions; as an objective description of God's character and expectations, it stands forever; as an unbending standard that condemns our failure to keep it and thus drives us to Christ, it has a temporary function. It is this last aspect that Paul has in mind when he uses the "nailed to the cross" figure.

But an even more problematic phrase follows in verse 16. The first word, *oun* ("therefore"), is a small but crucial word that closely connects what follows with what has just preceded. So then verse 16 begins with Paul saying, "Consequently, on the basis of what I have just established, don't let anyone pass judgment on you in the following matters." In other words, Christ's death not only did away with our guilty indebtedness to the law, it also took away the basis of criticism from those who would pass judgment on the Colossian Christians. But just what was the nature of this "passing judgment"?

### **Passing Judgment**

Some have suggested that Paul's counsel was not directed against the false teachers, but only against the believers listening to them and acceding to their criticism.<sup>(15)</sup> Such a view has Paul saying, "Pay no attention to their criticism, since your practices are above reproach." We Sabbatharians like that suggestion, since it leaves our day of worship firmly in place. But our peace of mind cannot be bought so easily. In this verse Paul mentions five different details of religious ritual that have been called in question: food and drink and then the three tightly connected "feast days, new moon, Sabbath day." Are we to believe that Christ's death simply did away with the basis of criticism so that now we can continue not only all food and drink rituals, but also the rituals of feast days and new moons?

If Paul had stopped with the first two words, "food and drink," that interpretation might fit. But after Paul listed these five things he referred to at least some of them as a "shadow" (*skia*) compared with the "substance" (*soma*), which is Christ. Surely this last phrase emphasizes flawed practices, not just some heretics' demanding attitudes about perfectly acceptable practices.

### **Food And Drink**

But we must look more carefully at Paul's list of five. First, with reference to "food and drink" (*brosis/posis*). These words have suggested to some that the issues at stake had to do with Mosaic food and drink offerings that were abolished by Christ's death. But the Greek words *brosis* and *posis* don't equate easily with anything Mosaic.

For example, throughout the Septuagint and the New Testament *brosis* and *posis* are never used with reference to meal and drink offerings. Furthermore, *thusia* is the technical word for sacrifice or offering, and given Paul's Hebrew background, he must have known the correct word for meal offering. Similarly, *posis* was never used for any kind of drink offering, because *spendo* was the term that meant "to offer a libation or drink offering."<sup>(16)</sup> However, even if the verse is speaking of ceremonial offerings, *posis* suggests something incongruous, since the Mosaic law contained no prohibition respecting drinks except in the rare case of a Nazarite vow or the case of drinking from vessels made unclean by the dead body of an animal. <sup>(17)</sup>

It should also be noted that these two words have action endings, which means they would normally be translated "eating and drinking" rather than "food and drink." Accordingly, they probably refer not to Mosaic rituals, but to more general ascetic prohibitions being advocated by some Colossian false teachers. Such an interpretation harmonizes well with other references here to strict asceticism that go beyond anything Jewish or Christian. For example, in verses 18, 20, 21, and 23 Paul scorns those who delight in "self-abasement and worship of angels," and decries those who are submitting to stringent negatives, such as "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch"! Such behavior appears to be devotional, but in fact has no value (verse 23, RSV). The point is, whether this "eating and drinking" referred to mistaken asceticism or harmless eating practices, the cross has freed us from the criticism.

### **The Issue Of Sabbath**

In the phrase "festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths" (heortes, noumenias, sabbaton) in verse 16 (NRSV), the identity of the Sabbaths has occasioned considerable debate. This phrase is found nowhere else in the New Testament, but occurs five times in the Septuagint (2 Chronicles 2:4; 31:3; Nehemiah 10:33; Ezekiel 45:17; Hosea 2:11). Each time, speaking of the burnt offerings other than the daily offerings, the reference is to the Sabbaths (weekly), new moons (monthly), and appointed feasts (yearly). At times the order is reversed, but in each case, "new moon" is in the middle, thus making a logical sequence from weekly to yearly or vice versa. The implication is that the Sabbath being described is the weekly Sabbath.

Another point to consider is that the ceremonial Sabbaths were part of the annual feasts to which the word heortes referred. Accordingly, when Paul here refers to "Sabbaths," if he meant the ceremonial Sabbaths, he was needlessly repeating himself. In that case he would be saying, "Let no one pass judgment on you in regard to a feast day/ceremonial Sabbath, or in regard to a new moon, or in regard to a ceremonial Sabbath," a statement neither logical nor likely.

Sometimes the assertion is made that the plural form of the word "Sabbath" here indicates something other than the weekly Sabbath. But the plural form is used several times for the weekly Sabbath, including in the heart of the fourth commandment.

Whatever Paul is suggesting about this Sabbath day, he is not addressing the age-old Saturday versus Sunday debate. Verse 17 makes clear that for the Colossians there is a more substantive issue at stake, and it is only when we keep focused on the immediate Colossian context that we can correctly resolve the difficulty.

Much has been written about the many-faceted Colossian heresy, its Gnostic tendencies, asceticism, Judaism, and distorted Christianity. But the single most recurring element that dominated Paul's concerns was the low view of Christ that characterized the heresy. It is not incidental that the strongest statement regarding the deity of Christ in the entire New Testament is found in Colossians 1:15-20. Repeatedly Paul stressed the all-sufficiency of the risen Christ (1:15-20; 2:6-11, 19, 20; 3:1-4, 11), which brings clarity to his use of "shadow" and "body" in verse 17.

The word "shadow" has often been interpreted as if it meant to "foreshadow" something to come. But without exception, when the word "shadow" (skia) is used in juxtaposition with "body" (soma), the meaning is emptiness contrasted with substance or reality. By these two words Paul addressed several aspects of Colossian worship practice that had one thing in common; they are Christ-less and for that reason, empty. Some practices were ascetic and empty; others were Jewish types and now empty. The Colossian weekly Sabbath, while not a Jewish type, was empty in two ways. First, like all their other rituals, it was without Christ, and for Paul, a Christ-less Sabbath was an empty Sabbath.

And second, Paul saw emptiness in the Jewishness that had become attached to the weekly Sabbath. When the Sabbath commandment was given the second time in Deuteronomy 5, its observance was directly linked, not to God's having created the heavens and the earth (Ex. 20:11), but to God's delivering Israel out of Egypt. Therefore, for that reason, "the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Deut. 5:15, RSV).

Over the years the Sabbath had become so identified with the regulations of Judaism that even Jesus' attempts to purge them were only marginally successful. Among the Colossians, a ritualized Jewish Sabbath had emptied the day of Christ, its true substance.

It is plain from the argument that the Sabbath is here regarded not as it was primevally (Gen. 2:3) "made for man" (Mark 2:27), God's benignant gift for His creatures' bodily and spiritual benefit; but as it was adopted to be a symbolic institution of the Mosaic covenant, and expressly adapted to the relation between God and Israel (Ex. 31:12-17); an aspect of the Sabbath that governs much of the language of the Old Testament about it.(18)

In positive terms, only a Sabbath stripped of its Jewishness can be filled with Christ, its true substance. The Colossian Sabbath, kept without Christ "not holding fast to the head" (2:19, NRSV), is still linked to shadowy Jewish ritualism instead of being a genuine rest in Christ as described in Hebrews 4:9. The fact that Paul did not carefully spell out the kind of Sabbath keeping he advocated should not surprise us. Paul often rebuked what he considered foolish practices without giving, in that context, detailed instruction on proper behavior. Furthermore, his own practice of teaching and preaching Sabbath after Sabbath was so well known he probably felt it slightly absurd to spell out in detail what they had seen him doing every Sabbath.

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