

Colossians 2: 16-17

Notice the following passage which some people cite to supposedly prove that Christians do *not* have to observe God's Sabbath and annual holy days: "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival ['holyday'—KJV] or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (Col. 2:16-17).

Gnostic Heresies

To understand what Paul is speaking of in the passage above, it's vital to consider the *context* of that passage. What we will now see is that, basically, the entire 2nd chapter of Colossians is devoted to Paul's refuting certain *heresies* that were being taught to Christians in the town of Colossae.

By looking at various verses throughout the chapter, we will now see some of the heresies taught by these false teachers.

In verse 18, we see that they taught the "worship of angels." Similarly, they taught their followers to call for *help* of "principalities and powers," as alluded to in verse 15, where Paul said that Christ has "disarmed principalities and powers."¹

In Colossae, one basic heresy seems to have been that Christians could reach God only through the mediation of angels. In fact, **most** first century Jews believed that virtually *everything* had "its angel." In the apocryphal *Book of Enoch*, the stars have their angels, each of the four seasons has its angel, each of the 12 months has its angel, and each day of the year has its angel.²

This *Book of Enoch* also spoke of "angels of power and angels of principality." And *compare* that phrase to Col. 2:15, which speaks of "principalities and powers."

Consider also the apocryphal work *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. This book lists 7 "orders" of angels---the highest of which are called "thrones" and "powers." Again, this is very similar to Paul's mention of "principalities and powers."²

So, who were these heretical teachers that Paul was preaching against? They were the **Gnostics**---the same group which the Apostle John warned against.

Gnosticism was a blend of "Jewish legalism, Greek philosophic speculation, and Oriental mysticism."³ "Christian gnostics...adopted the complicated teaching of a sphere of psychic **intermediaries** (aeons) between God and earthly things."⁴ The Gnostics taught that it is presumptuous for a Christian to think that he can reach God *directly* (or through just the *one* Mediator, Christ). They said that we must *humble* ourselves and start *lower* down on the scale,² and then move through an ascending scale of angels.

Yet, Paul condemned this self-imposed humility, along with their purposeful neglect of the body (which will be discussed later). Paul said that these things did **not** amount to *true* humility. He spoke of their "*false* humility" (verses 18 and 23).

The word "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek word "gnosis," which means "knowledge." The central teaching of these Gnostics was that *secret knowledge* could enhance one's religion---and, in fact, that one's very salvation depended upon *having* this secret knowledge.^{1,5}

"...in the first and second centuries A.D. it [Gnosis] came to mean an esoteric knowledge of higher religious and philosophic truths to be acquired by an **elite** group of intellectually developed believers..."

[The] thing common to all types of gnosis is the effort to *transcend* rational, logical thought processes by means of **intuition**.”⁴

So, the Gnostics relied upon “intuition” for their vital, secret knowledge. In other words, they just *made up* teachings that they regarded as “secret knowledge.” They made up “mysteries” and “philosophies.”

The Apostle Paul condemns their teachings. He warns the Christians in Colossae to not follow “a person [who] goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his *unspiritual* mind puffs him up with **idle notions**” (verse 18, NIV). He says, “Let no one *defraud* you” in these teachings (verse 18, AMP). “Now this I say lest anyone should *deceive* you with persuasive words” (verse 4). Paul says that this secret knowledge is nothing more than “**hollow and delusive speculations**, based on traditions of **man-made** teaching” (verse 8, NEB). He calls it a “*self-made religion*” (verse 23, NASV). Paul says that the *more important* knowledge is that “...of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden **all** the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (verses 2-3).

Now notice something else that these false teachers were trying to teach the Christians in Colossae. Gnostics oftentimes taught **asceticism**, and such was the case here. “Asceticism” was the belief that the body---as well as all physical *pleasure*---is **evil**. It was taught that only by practicing rigorous self-denial and extreme abstinence (and even self-torture) that one can attain a high spiritual state.

Notice verse 23: “These things indeed have an *appearance* of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and **neglect of the body**...” Regarding this phrase “neglect of the body,” a marginal rendering is “*severe treatment* [of the body], **asceticism**” (The Ryrie Study Bible³).

Now notice verses 20 to 21: “...why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to *regulations*—‘Do not touch, do not *taste*, do not handle’[?]” These “regulations” of not “touching, tasting or handling” were, in fact, regulations of *asceticism* (or extreme self-denial).

“Many Gnostic practices came from a *Jewish* sect known as the **Essenes**.”⁶ The Essenes would not eat (or even touch) oil, wine, or meat.² (Similarly, in the 14th chapter of Romans, Paul spoke of some who practiced strict vegetarianism [no meat]---as a *supposed* means to be “more spiritual.”) The Essenes “could prescribe *times* [such as certain days of the week] and conditions for the use of *other* foods; it could also regulate the *amounts* so as to protect the members from the *evils* of luxury or excess.”²

Yet, Paul refers to these things as “commandments and doctrines **of men**” (Col. 2:22). This self-imposed, extreme self-denial gave them feelings of spiritual superiority---that they had risen *above* fleshly desires---and were in a *separate* category.²

The Essenes vowed to *impart* their teachings only to those who underwent rigorous initiation.²

Verses 16 and 17

With all the preceding information in mind, we can now better understand what Paul is speaking of in verse 16. He says, “Therefore let no one judge you **in food or in drink**.” This phrase “in food or in drink” should actually be translated “in eating or in drinking”---says the *Expositor's Greek Testament* (W. R. Smith, vol. 3, p. 530). Here, Paul is **not** referring to the issue of clean and unclean meats. Rather, he is referring to the heretical, ascetic teachings of abstinence from such things as oil, wine, and all meats (as alluded to in verse 21). If he *was* referring to clean and unclean meats, then why did he say to let no one judge you in **drinking**? “As for drinking, there is *no* prohibition in the Old Testament that would affect

anyone but a priest (Leviticus 10:9) and a Nazarite (Numbers 6:3). An *ascetic* teaching, however, such as that of the Essenes, could prohibit wine and milk.”²

Continuing in verse 16, Paul says, “Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink [in eating or in drinking], or regarding a **festival** [‘holyday’—KJV] or a new moon or **sabbaths**.” Here, Paul is *warning* the Colossian believers about these Gnostic teachers who “were telling the Colossian believers *how* to eat, *how* to drink, and *how* to observe the annual, monthly and weekly days. **They were telling the believers that if you really want to be saved, if you want to reach perfection, you have to eat in a certain way, drink in a certain way and observe the annual, monthly and weekly [holy] days in a certain way.** They were laying down the *dogma*—that is the Greek term used—the rules and regulations [or ‘ordinances’].”¹

In all probability, the Colossian believers were being judged for eating and drinking---and for rejoicing---during the Sabbath and other holy days.⁶ Again, ascetics believe that physical pleasure---rejoicing---is evil!

Furthermore, and to repeat, many Gnostic practices came *from* a Jewish sect known as the Essenes. And, “according to first-century Jewish historian Josephus, they [these Jewish Essenes] kept the Sabbath so *strictly* that they would not even take care of bodily functions during it⁷....No wonder the Gnostics were unhappy at Christian *rejoicing and feasting* on God’s weekly and annual Sabbaths!”⁶

“Paul, therefore, told the Colossian converts not to let these outsiders judge [or dictate to] them as to how they were keeping these days, ‘which are a shadow of things to come’ (v. 17)...[and] notice that Paul said they **ARE** a shadow---not **WERE** a shadow, Thus, [these days] are *still* to be kept”!⁶

But why did Paul call them a “shadow”? Because that’s what they are! Each of the *annual* holy days pictures (or *foreshadows*) some aspect of God’s plan of salvation. Likewise, the weekly Sabbath (the 7th day) *foreshadows* the coming Millennium---the final 1,000 years of God’s 7,000 year plan. This 7th 1,000 year period (unlike the 1st 6,000 years) will be a period of rest---a 7th day Sabbath rest---a rest *from the sin* that characterized the first 6,000 years. Yes, both the weekly and annual holy days are shadows!

(Incidentally, as for Paul’s reference to “new moons” in verse 16: Christians today still observe the New Moon *in the sense that* we accept the *lunar-solar*, Hebrew *calendar* as the means for determining the dates of the annual holy days.⁶)

So, Paul says that the holy days and Sabbaths “are a shadow of things to come, but **the substance is of Christ**” (verse 17). Why does he say, “the substance is of Christ”?

The Greek word translated as “substance” is *soma*. *Every other scripture* in the New Testament where this word occurs, it is translated “body.” In fact, the KJV translates it in *this* verse as “body”: “but the body *is* of Christ.” And consider that the KJV has the word “is” in *italics*, which means that this word was *not* in the original text---it was *added* by the translators, who were trying to make the verse make sense (according to *their* understanding). So the phrase is actually: “but the body of Christ.”

So what does this phrase “body of Christ” refer to? It refers to **the Church**---just as it does in the following two scriptures: “Now you **are** the **body of Christ**, and members individually” (I Cor. 12:27); “For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the **body of Christ**” (Eph. 4:12). (And in both these scriptures, the word “body” is translated from the Greek “soma,” which is used in Col. 2:17.)

With that in mind, let’s now look at verses 16 to 17 to see what Paul was actually saying: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a 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” (KJV). Paul is saying that Christians should let no man but---or *except*---the true ministers of the Church (the body of Christ) judge

us as to *how* we observe these holy days. Let no man---no outsiders---judge or instruct you as to *how* you keep the days. Let *only* the Church---God’s true ministers---judge or instruct you in these observances.

Regarding the practices mentioned in verse 16 (eating, drinking, holyday observance), scholars *in the past* have almost always said that Paul was *condemning* these practices---*condemning* the keeping of the holy days. “Today, scholars come out [saying], ‘No, no, no. It’s *not a* Pauline condemnation; it’s a Pauline approbation [approval]!’Just the opposite of what was formerly taught....Which merely goes to show how sometimes even sincere people, even sincere scholars, have been misled, jumped to conclusions that were totally unwarranted. Today, there is a whole new realization that Paul was far more *supportive* of the observance of the biblical calendar [observance of the holy days] than we have ever imagined.”¹

Verses 13 and 14

We’ve now covered most all of chapter 2, except for verses 13 and 14: “And you, being dead [‘When you **were** dead’—NAS] in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh [a reference to the fact that they were Gentiles], He [Christ] has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having **wiped out the handwriting of requirements** that was against us [‘Blotting out the *handwriting of ordinances* that was against us’—KJV] , which was contrary to us. And He [Christ] has taken it out of the way, having **nailed it to the cross.**”

What is Paul referring to that was nailed to the cross? He is *not* referring to God’s law or the Ten Commandments, as many people assume. Rather, he was saying that what was nailed to the cross was our “notes of guilt”---our “record of sin”---“the record of our **debt.**”

Now, one might wonder this: *Why* did Paul insert these two verses (13 and 14) into chapter 2, since the *subject* of chapter 2 is that of Paul refuting certain Gnostic heresies being taught to the Colossian Church? *Why* did Paul insert his comments contained in verses 13 and 14?

The answer can be seen by reading verses 20-21: “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle’[?]” Here, “Paul [in effect] says, ‘*Why do you feel so insecure? Why are you trying to seek salvation by submitting yourself to all of these rules and regulations? Don’t you realize that God and Christ have forgiven you [as shown in verses 13 and 14], and yes, more than that, He has even canceled, erased, nailed to the cross the record of your sin...*’”¹

Conclusion

Clearly, the passage in Colossians 2:16-17, in *no way* implies that Christians do not need to keep God’s Sabbath and annual holy days. Upon close examination of the context of this passage, we see that this passage actually *supports* the keeping of these days! It supports the *proper* observance of these days.

References:

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