

“You observe days” (Galatians 4: 9-10)

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The writings of Paul have long been used to try to justify the *false* contention that the Sabbath and annual holy days of God have been done away. One such passage written by Paul is found in his letter to the church in Galatia.

Prior to examining that passage in Galatians chapter 4, let's first understand that there were two key *challenges* to the church in Galatia. The *first* challenge was Judaism.¹ Some, who were judaizers, *falsely* taught that the Galatians needed to be circumcised. Judaism (which is a *perversion* of the religion of the Old Testament) said that “righteousness” was *defined by* circumcision and by ritualistic worship. Yet, Paul summarized his argument *against* this Judaistic teaching by stating, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything...” (Gal. 6:15).¹

The church in Galatia was composed *mostly* of members from a gentile (rather than a Jewish) background.^{2,3,4} However, Galatians chapter 4 *begins* by addressing the *minority* of the Galatian church who were Jewish converts to Christianity.

Paul himself was a Jew. So when he addressed these Jewish converts, he used the term “we.” An example of this is seen in verse 3 of chapter 4, where Paul says, “Even so **we**, when **we** were children...”^{1,5} (Incidentally, the “bondage” spoken of in verse 3, refers to the bondage of Judaism.)

Verse 5 shows that *through* Christ's sacrifice, the Jewish converts were redeemed from being “under the law”—i.e., redeemed from being under the **penalty** of the law—redeemed from the *death penalty*, a penalty which *all* mankind has incurred because of our sinning.⁶ (See the article “*What Does it Mean ‘Not Under the Law’?*”)

Yes, Paul *began* chapter 4 by speaking to the *Jewish* Christians (addressing them as “we”); then, in verse 6, he begins addressing the *gentile* converts, and addresses them as “you”—as is clearly seen in verse 8, where Paul says, “But then, indeed, when **you** did not know God...”^{1,5}

So, now Paul begins addressing the *second* of the two challenges in the Galatian church—**paganism**, which was brought in by the *gentile* converts.

One school of thought is that the problem in Galatia was actually *not* a dual problem of Judaism and paganism, but rather *one* major problem—**Gnosticism**! This may well have been the case, in light of the fact that it is well known that Gnosticism was the problem addressed by Paul in his letter to the *Colossian* church—and the Colossian letter was written only about ten years after this Galatian letter, and the province of Galatia was less than fifty miles from Colossae.²

Yet, regardless of whether the problem in Galatia was Gnosticism *or* that of a dual problem of Judaism and paganism, the fact remains that the Galatian church was composed *mostly* of **gentile** converts—which is the *key* to understanding the main passage in question, Gal. 4: 9-10.

Before proceeding, let's consider some *proofs* that this church in Galatia was *mostly* gentile converts.

Galatia Mostly a GENTILE Church

Notice Paul's statement in chapter 2: "...when they saw that the gospel for the **uncircumcised** [gentiles] had been committed **to me**, as *the gospel* for the circumcised [Jews] *was* to Peter" (verse 7). Now, verse 2: "And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which **I preach among the Gentiles...**" Finally, notice verse 9: "and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that **we should go to the Gentiles** and they to the circumcised."

Even elsewhere in this letter to the Galatians, Paul *likewise* made it plain that those being addressed were uncircumcised—i.e., Gentiles (Gal. 5:2; 6:12).

PAGANISM of the Gentiles

The *gentile* converts in Galatia, prior to their conversion, had always engaged in *pagan religious practices*.

For example, Lystra was a city in Galatia.² In Acts 14: 8-18, we read the story of Paul healing a crippled man in that Galatian city. After the healing, the Galatians there began worshipping Paul and Barnabas *as the pagan deities Hermes and Zeus!* (verses 11-13). "...they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from **sacrificing** to them" (verse 18).

Furthermore, going back to Galatians chapter 4, Paul makes it plain that prior to their conversion, those Gentile converts had *not known* God: "But then, indeed, **when** you did not know God, you served those which by nature are **not** gods" (verse 8). This refers "clearly to the **idols of paganism**, which, in typically Jewish idiom, Paul terms 'no gods'" [*The Expositor's Bible Commentary (NIV)*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976, vol. 10, p. 475].

Paul Condemns PAGAN Observances—NOT observance of God's Holy Days

Now that we've firmly established that the Galatian church consisted mostly of *gentile* converts—converts who previously engaged in pagan religious practices—let's now resume our examination of chapter 4.

We saw that Paul *begins* his address to the gentile converts in verse 6 (and he continues addressing them through at least verse 12). So, let's now examine this section of chapter 4 that is the *focal point* of our discussion.

Notice verse 10: “**You observe days and months and seasons and years.**” Is Paul, here, condemning the converts in Galatia for observing the Sabbath and annual holy days? That’s what most people today believe! Yet, the following five points will reveal otherwise:

(1) Notice that verse ten does **NOT** say, “You observe the Sabbath and annual holy days.” It does *not* say that! In fact, **nowhere in the entire book of Galatians** do we find the words “Sabbath,” Sabbaths,” “holy days,” “festival,” “feast,” or any such related word.²

(2) Note that Paul was condemning these converts for **returning** to their previous practices. That is clearly seen by reading verses 8-10: “But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how *is it that you turn again* to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire **again** to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years” (Gal. 4: 8-10).

Yes, Paul was condemning them for turning *again* to their former practices; and we’ve already seen that their former religious practice was that of paganism! They were *returning* to pagan religious practices, including the observance of certain days and months and seasons and years. (Later, we will look at some of those pagan religious days.)

(3) In chapter 4, Paul speaks quite a bit on the subject of *bondage versus freedom* (as he also does in chapter 5, verse one). In fact, we just read in verse 9 of chapter 4 where Paul said that they desired *again* to be in **bondage**.

So, what was this “bondage” that Paul was referring to? “Hence he [Paul] would be thinking of a *demonic bondage* in which the Galatians had indeed *been held* prior to the proclamation of the gospel...The ultimate contrast to freedom in Christ is *bondage to Satan and the evil spirits*” [The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (NIV), Zondervan, 1976, vol. 10, p. 472... *in their comments on Galatians chapter 4*].

Also, notice that the following passages speak, **not** of being in bondage to God’s law, but of being in bondage to sin and Satan: Rom. 6:16; II Peter 2:19; John 8:33-34. Likewise, Paul says that “we should no longer be **slaves of sin**” (Rom. 6:6)—and compare that to his comment in Gal. 4:7, where he says, “you are no longer a **slave** but a son [of God].”

No, Paul was *not* speaking of bondage to God’s law. The Apostle James spoke of God’s law as “the perfect law of **liberty**” (James 1:25). And what did the Apostle John say? He said that “His [God’s] commandments are **not** burdensome” (I John 5:3).

(4) Paul, just a couple verses later, in verse 12, urges the Galatians to become *as he was*: “I beg of you, brethren, become as I am...” (NASB). So, *instead* of observing these days and times spoken of in verse 10, Paul says that they should do as he did—and the Bible plainly shows that Paul **kept** the Sabbath and the annual holy days! [See the article “Is the SABBATH Command in the New Testament?”—see sub-heading “(4) I Cor. 11:1” in that article.]

(5) Regarding the passage in question, Paul condemned the Galatians for observing “days and months.” There, he could not possibly have been speaking of the Sabbath and holy days, since there **are no** “months” that God’s law commands to be observed!

However, there *were* “months” observed in pagan religious practices. For instance, the so-called Greek gods had certain *months* set aside as sacred: April and Oct. for Apollo; February and June for Zeus; January for Bacchus; and many others. Furthermore, certain *years* were set apart for idolatrous feasts.⁵

Also, notice that in verse 10, Paul condemns them for keeping “seasons” (or “**times**,” as it’s rendered in the *KJV*). Again, God’s law does **not** command the keeping of “times.” In fact, the keeping of “times” is **prohibited** in God’s law! “There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or **an observer of times**, or an enchanter, or a witch” (Deut. 18:10, *KJV*). “Ye shall not eat any thing with the blood: neither shall ye use enchantment, **nor observe times**” (Lev. 19:26, *KJV*).

The observance of “times” was a heathen practice, often associated with *astrology*.^{1,5} A fourth century Catholic bishop named Chrysostom admits that these superstitious “times” were *pagan* customs practiced even in his day (in the fourth century) by those who professed Christianity. He said, “Many were superstitiously addicted to divination...In celebration of these **times** [they] set up lamps in the marketplace, and crown their doors with garlands” (*Bingham’s Antiquities of the Christian Church*, pp. 1123-1124).^{1,5}

These pagan observances also took note of many supposedly “lucky” and “unlucky” **days**.¹ And, compare that to Paul’s condemnation of certain “days” being kept by these gentiles. Even today, these practices persist in such superstitions as “fear of Friday the 13th” and the following of one’s horoscope, which predicts good and bad “days.”¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be very plain that in Gal. 4: 9-10, Paul is **not** condemning the observance of God’s holy days. Rather, he is correcting those *gentile* converts who were *returning once again to their pagan practices* of observing days, months, times, and years.

Notes:

1. Astrological observance: In *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, it **twice** mentions “astrology” in its discussion of Gal. 4: 8-11.

2. “You observe...**years**”: “The *assumption* of **non**-Sabbatarians is that the ‘years’ referred to here [in verse 10] are the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. However, the Jubilee year was not being observed *anywhere* in Paul’s day, and the Sabbatical year was not being observed in areas *outside* Palestine (*Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 14, page 582, and *Jewish Encyclopedia*, page 666, ‘Sabbatical year and Jubilee’). Since Galatia is in Asia Minor, far *outside* Palestine, it is **highly unlikely** that this refers to the Sabbatical and Jubilee years.”²
3. For *further* information on point number 5 above, see p. 12 of reference number 5 below.

References:

1. “Questions & Answers,” *Tomorrow’s World*, May-June 2002, p. 9, Living Church of God
2. “Does Galatians 4 condemn Sabbath and Holy Day observance?” Scott Ashley, *In Transition*, July 21, 1995
3. “Glory to the Newborn King?” Thomas E. Robinson, *The World Ahead*, Nov.-Dec. 1997, Global Church of God
4. “The Sabbath in the New Testament—COMMANDED or CONDEMNED?” L. Leroy Neff, *The Good News*, August 1983, Worldwide Church of God
5. “Which Days Should We Observe?” *The Good News*, June-July 1986, Worldwide Church of God
6. Personal Correspondence Department letter #137, Living Church of God