

## **Are The Sabbath And Holy Days Done Away?**

**by Earl L. Henn (1934-1997)**

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For centuries, people have tried to find ways of convincing themselves and others that Christians are not required to observe the Sabbath and holy days. One of their favorite scriptural targets in this quest is Colossians 2:16-17. Some teach that a heretical group of Judaizers in the Colossian church was trying to enforce obedience to Jewish practices such as the laws of clean and unclean meats and of observing the holy days. Under such a scenario, they say, Paul is telling the Colossians that they did not have to do these things, and further, they did not need to be concerned about what others were judging and saying about them.

The distortion of this portion of Scripture stems in part from a misunderstanding of Colossians 2:14, from which many deduce that the law was done away and nailed to the cross. (For a detailed explanation of Colossians 2:14, see the June 1995 article on this topic.) They reason that Paul is saying in verse 16, "Therefore [since the law is done away] don't let anyone condemn you for eating unclean meats or not observing the Sabbath or holy days." Consequently, they interpret verse 17 to mean that Paul lightly dismisses the Sabbath and holy days as unimportant symbols of future events, while emphasizing that the only truly substantive Christian need is belief in Christ. From this, they conclude that we should not concern ourselves about these days because, since Christ died, their observance is not required.

### **The Setting of Colossians**

What is Paul actually saying in these often misunderstood verses? To understand these scriptures clearly, we must first consider the cultural and historical background of the people to whom Paul was writing. The Colossians had been significantly influenced by pagan philosophies that taught that perfection could be achieved through self-denial and abstinence from pleasure. As a result, Colossae tended to be an ascetic community which adhered to a religion of severity, and its citizens thought anyone who was religious should behave as they did.

Many of the people who had come into the church had brought their pagan philosophies with them, and they soon began to have an adverse influence on the entire congregation at Colossae. Paul corrects the people in the church who were doing this in Colossians 2:20-23:

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," which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

Apparently, some of the people had begun thinking that this self-imposed asceticism could somehow contribute to their salvation and had begun turning away from trusting in Christ. They had more faith in their unchristian works. Paul warned them about this in Colossians 2:8: "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ."

God had called the people in the church at Colossae out of their pagan, ascetic way of life, and they had begun to learn how to enjoy life in a balanced manner as God intended. This included eating meat, drinking wine, and enjoying food and fellowship when observing God's Sabbath and festivals. Apparently, the people enjoyed getting together and fellowshiping so much that some even observed the new moons, festivals which God does not command to be observed but had become a tradition under the Old Covenant.

Because the converted Colossians were learning how to enjoy life as God intended, the people in the community began to look down on them and condemn them. In addressing these problems, Paul reminds the Colossians that they are complete in Jesus Christ; they have no need for the pagan philosophies of this world. "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power" (Colossians 2:9-10).

In verses 11 through 14, Paul shows how Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins and now our past sins, brought about by conforming to the ways, practices, and philosophies of this world, are completely blotted out and nailed to His cross. He reminds them that Christ has completely conquered all of the evil spirits who continue to rule this present, evil world and who inspire the pagan philosophies that had so influenced the Colossian society: "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (verse 15).

With these powerful words of encouragement as a background, Paul explains in verse 16 why they need not be bothered by the attitude of the Colossian society toward their practices and way of life in the church:

Therefore [since Jesus Christ is your Lord and Master and has conquered and has control over all of the evil powers in this world], let no one judge you [call you into question or condemn you] in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths.

In other words, do not worry about what the people in the community think about your enjoyment of eating good food, drinking wine, and joyously celebrating the Sabbath and the festivals. Christ has conquered the world and all of its rulers, so we do not need to be concerned about what the world thinks about us.

In verse 17, Paul mentions that the Sabbath and holy days are "shadows," symbols or types, of future events in the plan of God. The Sabbath is a type of the Millennium when Jesus Christ and the saints will rule the world for a thousand years. The holy days symbolize various steps in the plan of God and remind us annually of God's great purpose in creating mankind.

### **"The Substance Is of Christ"**

The last few words in verse 17—"but the substance is of Christ"—is a mistranslation brought about by failure to understand the true meaning of what Paul was saying. It is a classic example of how translators sometimes interpret the Bible when they translate the original Greek into English.

A literal translation of the last few words of Colossians 2:17 reads, "but the body of Christ." What is the body of Christ? I Corinthians 12:27 supplies the answer: "Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually." The body of Christ is the church! The exact same Greek expression that is translated "body of Christ" in I Corinthians 12:27 (*soma Christou*) is used in Colossians 2:17.

Now the full meaning of what Paul is saying becomes clear. He tells the Colossians that they should not let any man judge them or call them into question about these things but rather *let the church make those judgments*. He is pointing the members to the example of the spiritual leaders of the church who set the tone and pattern of worship on the Sabbath and holy days, exhorting them not to worry about what anyone in the community thinks about them.

A similar exhortation is given in verses 18 and 19:

Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase which is from God.

In these verses, Paul again warns the Colossians that they should not allow the pressures of the society in which they lived have any influence on their beliefs or practices and repeats his exhortation for them to look to the church alone for their spiritual nourishment and growth.

So we see that, far from doing away with the observance of the Sabbath and holy days, Colossians 2: 16-17 is one of the strongest proofs that the early church kept these days and that Paul taught the Gentiles to keep them!

We can learn two important lessons from these scriptures:

- that we should not be concerned about what people in the world think about our way of life in the church, and
- that we should observe God's holy days with joy and thanksgiving for His deliverance from this present, evil world.