

SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (Pt. 8)

Paul and the Sabbath (B)

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PAUL'S DIRECT TEACHING ABOUT THE SABBATH.

So, given that preaching the Gospel of Christ on the Sabbath to Jews in their synagogues was Paul's missionary *custom*, what was his official *teaching* on Torah-observance, including keeping "the Sabbath holy"? How can we determine whether or not Paul was in those synagogues to keep the Sabbath as part of his own Torah-observance as well as for evangelism? There is only one place to go ... his doctrinal epistles.

COLOSSIANS 2: 16-17 ... A KEY TEXT!

Surprisingly, there is only one text where Paul actually uses the word "sabbath" in all of his epistles. Needless to say, this one text has become the castle from which promoters of Sabbath-observance have charged forth into battle for their cause. Is this heroic exegesis for the truth, or does it turn out to be like Custer's last stand?

Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day --- things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Col. 2:16-17).

I think it a fair comment, that anybody who came to this text without any prior knowledge of the issues being debated would understand Paul is drawing a comparison. He is comparing a shadow with its substance. A shadow implies there is a body, but while it resembles the body, it is both insubstantial and an imperfect representation of that body. Therefore ---

Whatever is in the category of **food or drink or in respect of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day** is **all** to Paul, **a mere shadow** of the **substance (literally "body")** which **belongs to Christ**.

Whatever Paul means by his list, **collectively** they are **a mere shadow** because Christ has come. Jesus is the fulfillment, the substance, the body, the reality of *the entire list*, which includes the *Sabbaths*.

So how is this obvious comparison between the inferior shadow and Christ as the substance circumvented by those who say his list does not include the weekly Sabbath?

THE PLURAL 'SABBATON'

As one would anticipate, there are a number of strategies. To begin with, the word "Sabbath" in the Greek text is in the plural form (*sabbaton*). It is argued therefore, that Paul is not referring to the weekly Sabbath, but to the seven annual "sabbaths" in Israel's festive calendar. ¹

However, just because the word "sabbaths" is plural does not mean it can't have a singular meaning. Anybody with a rudimentary knowledge of the Greek, or anybody with access to a Greek lexicon, knows that the plural is often used with a singular intent. "Sabbaths" usually refers to the weekly Sabbath. ²

Let me give three brief examples to prove this: **a). Jesus went on the Sabbath** (plural *sabbaths*) **throughout the grainfields (Matt. 12:1).** **b). On the Sabbath day** (plural *sabbaths*) **we went outside the gate to a river side (Acts 16:13).** **c). Is it lawful on the Sabbath** (plural *sabbaths*) **to do good (Lk. 6:9)?** The context demands that in none of these cases are the 7 seasonal or "annual sabbaths" in view. In each case the plural "Sabbath days" *must* be translated as singular (and there are many more such examples that

¹ The seven annual Sabbaths included the Passover, Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), Pentecost, Tabernacles, and were special or "high" sabbaths.

² The plural *sabbaton* as a matter of fact, often refers to the singular and weekly sabbath in the Ten Commandments.

might be cited). In each of these 3 examples, one particular Sabbath day is in view ... the weekly Sabbath. As Professor Anthony Buzzard scythingly asks;

To many committed **weekly** sabbath (Saturday) keepers we ask: Are you telling us that out of the 64 times the Greek word *sabbaton* is used in the New Testament to designate “the sabbath” (or very occasionally, “week”), it means something entirely different **only in Colossians 2:16-17**? That sounds like a desperate cry to protect a precarious position.³

Look. The simple, unarguable lexical fact is that *Sabbaton*, though plural in form, is used to delineate a single Sabbath day --- the weekly Sabbath. So, if we can't get rid of the weekly Sabbath from **Colossians 2: 16** that way, what other way is left to the one wishing to evade the clear impact of the text? How can we explain away that, the observance of the Jewish calendar including the weekly and seasonal Sabbaths, is now **a mere shadow** in view of the coming of Christ?

WHEN DOES “WHAT IS TO COME” COME?

Another argument marshalled for the continuing relevance of the weekly Sabbath is to say the Sabbath will be kept in the coming Messianic Age. Therefore, since the Sabbath is going to be kept in that future Age, it must have lasting relevance ---we are going to keep Sabbath *then*, why not *now*? Why not continue to keep the prophetic shadow that anticipates the final and full glory yet to dawn at the return of Christ when Sabbath will be kept?

This argument entirely misunderstands the comparison between the shadow and the substance. The old covenant law was given to lead Israel to their Messiah. Israel was to faithfully keep the Sabbath and all her covenantal obligations until the substance arrived. That's what Paul means by saying, **these things** ---dietary and calendar rituals --- **are a mere shadow of what is to come (v. 17)**.

This is confirmed by a parallel verse from **Hebrews 10: 1; For the Law since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near.**

The idea here, is that the levitical sacrifices under the Mosaic Law foreshadowed **the good things to come**. This makes the point beautifully and convincingly --- the old covenant rituals were repetitive and temporary outlines for Israel looking forward to, anticipating, their fulfilment in their coming Messiah.

Thus, the **mere shadow of what is to come** in **Col. 2:16** refers to the *future from Israel's point of view*. The old covenant convocations pointed forward to Messiah, and he has now arrived. So Paul cannot be talking about keeping the Sabbath in the still coming future Kingdom Age for one obvious reason; he says **the substance has already come**, and **the shadow is already out of date!**⁴

WHO ARE THE JUDGES?

Another attempt to make Paul say the weekly Sabbath is not included in the shadow concerns the identity of the accusers; just who are the ones passing judgment on the Colossian Christians? When Paul says, **“Let no one act as your judge ...”** we must ask who are these “judges”?

The consensus amongst most commentators is they are Jewish ascetics, and I see no textual reason to differ. If this is indeed the case, then those putting pressure on the Christians were saying, “Unless you keep the Jewish days including weekly Sabbath, months and annual feasts, you cannot be fully fledged members of the Messianic community.”

But, if you are wanting to circumvent this commentary, how do you skirt around what seems so obvious? Well, for starters, you can narrow down the audience Paul is addressing. It's been suggested, Paul is only giving his

³ Anthony Buzzard, *Focus on the Kingdom, Vol. 14 No. 10* Restorationfellowship, July, 2012, p 1

⁴ We will further develop this question in the next article.

advice to the *Gentile* Christians at Colossae --- and not to a mixed church audience composed of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Putting it simply, the argument goes like this: Imagine you are a Gentile Christian who has recently accepted Christ. Your new lifestyle means you no longer attend the old pagan festivals and days and holidays. This is a matter of surprise and even contempt to your old Gentile circle of family and friends. But even worse, you have now replaced those old pagan days, months and carnivals with the Jewish boundary markers such as keeping the Sabbath, and you no longer hang out with your old circle outside the church.

An old Gentile friend might say something like this; **“So Rufus, we see you have now become a Christian? What on earth possessed you to join that restrictive Jewish Messianic sect? Everybody knows the Jews’ dietary restrictions --- you know, ‘Handle not, taste not, touch not’. And why are you now keeping the Jewish feasts and indeed, the weekly Sabbath of all things? Why would you want to give up the freedoms you once enjoyed in your past pagan society for those odd Jewish practices?”**

In other words, those who suggest Paul is addressing the Gentile Christians in Colossia, make him to mean, “Don’t for a moment be tempted to go back to your old pagan ways. When your Gentile neighbours poke fun at you because your new faith in Messiah means you now observe the Jewish regulations and calendar including Sabbath-keeping, just remember that the substance is Christ himself. Don’t let those old pagan arguments pull you back into the shadow of that which has come for you in Christ.”

On this argument, Paul is actually encouraging the Gentile Christians to keep practising their new-found Torah rituals --- which really are the old Jewish calendar days, months and years --- and to not revert to their pagan rituals! Don’t go back to your Gentile past!

You can see how this ingenious suggestion actually turns the traditional reading of Paul’s warning on its head. The ruse is accomplished --- the audience has been narrowed! Paul is no longer addressing a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Doesn’t this sound too clever by half?

Now it has to be said, there is legitimate discussion as to who the perpetrators of the pressure being exerted upon the Colossian believers were. Most commentators say the judges were most likely Jewish ascetics trying to get these new Christians to become Torah-compliant. Few scholars take the view the judges were the pagan Gentiles. But of course, we have learned the majority is not always to be trusted.

At the end of the day, my own personal view is that it doesn’t really matter who these judges putting pressure on the Gentile Christians were. What we can say for certain, is that they practised some kind of syncretism that tried to marry Greek **philosophy (v. 8)** with Jewish practices such as **circumcision (vs. 11,13)**. Paul describes this mix of Jewish asceticism and pagan philosophy as **empty deception, according to the elementary principles of the world (vs. 8)**.

ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES OF THE WORLD

To fully unpack the term **elementary principles of the world** would be beyond the scope of this article. Sufficient to say it is used negatively and pejoratively. For instance in **Galatians 4: 9, the elemental things** are said to be the old pagan values and practices which are described as **weak and beggarly elements**. Here the *immediate context is addressed to the Gentile Christians in Galatia!*

So, in **Galatians** Paul does ask Gentile believers why they would want to go back to be enslaved all over again to those old pagan ways? Why **observe days, and months and seasons and years (Gal. 4:10)?** Now, the careful reader will observe that Paul’s description of the pagan calendar to these Gentile Christians differs significantly from his wording in **Colossians 2:16**.

In **Colossians 2: 16** Paul’s warning is couched in classic Jewish terminology ... **“Let no one act as your judge in regard to eating and drinking or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day ...”** But in **Galatians**

4:10 Paul's warning to a different audience is couched in classic pagan terminology ... **days, and months and seasons and years** (Gal. 4:10). It's obvious he is not going to tell Gentiles not to go back to keeping Sabbath!!

But is this all that can be said about this same phrase **the elementary principles of the world** as found in both the letter to the Colossians and to the letter to the Galatians (Col. 2: 8 cf. Gal. 4: 10) ? Not at all!

The term **the elementary things of the world** also appears a few verses earlier (Gal. 4:1-5). Here the context indicates a mixed ethnic audience is addressed. Jewish believers certainly are included. Read carefully!

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elementary things of the world. But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

There is no way to escape this context: Paul says that before the coming of Christ, the Jews --- he includes himself by saying **we** --- **were children** under the old covenant Law. **We** were **held in bondage under the elementary things of the world**. He explains that when God sent His Son, that he came to **redeem those who were under the Law!** Here he **defines the elementary things of the world as being the old covenant Law as given to Israel!?!** (Why not read that last sentence again?)

When we put both **Colossians** and **Galatians** together, the parallel message is that at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter whether you are a Gentile believer or a Jewish Christian, to go back to your former rituals of diet and calendar observances, is to go back on Christ himself.

Even the Mosaic law, when viewed as an enslaving force, is reckoned as among the elements of the world and hence is declared null and void. Thus "the elements of the world" may be said to cover anything in which sinners place their trust apart from the living God revealed in Christ; any such object turns into a god, and the sinner becomes its slave. ⁵

J.B. Lightfoot argues that in **Galatians 4** Paul is speaking of the ritualistic aspect found **both** in Judaism and in the pagan religion formerly practiced by the Galatians; these two **have so much in common that a lapse into Judaism can be regarded as a relapse to the position of unconverted Heathenism**. Judaism was a system of bondage like Heathenism. Heathenism had been a disciplinary training like Judaism. ⁶

We may conclude with certainty then, that in **Colossians 2: 8**, **the elementary principles of the world** is a reference to the philosophies and traditions of men --- whether those of Jewish origin under the old covenant Law, or philosophies of Gentile origin. And what is being said in **Colossians 2:16** is that Christians should have nothing to do with the world's rules, whether of Jewish origin in the Law or of pagan values, because they are determined by the elemental spirits and forces that rule behind the scenes. ⁷

Christ's work on the cross has spelled the end of all such systems. Through his death those old **elementary principles of the world** have been **cancelled out [for] the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us** is now **taken out of the way, having nailed it to the cross** (v. 14).

What is this **certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us**? I suggest it may be categorically said to refer to the old Deuteronomic Law and decrees that bound Israel to God. How may we be so sure of this? Because there is a parallel passage in Paul's letter to the **Ephesians** which definitely has the same context and almost identical words as this **Colossians** two passage.

⁵ New International Dictionary of new Testament Theology and Exegesis, Vol 4. Revision Ed. Moises Silva, Zondervan, 2014 under *stoicheion*. (Bold emphasis mine).

⁶ J.B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians, 10th ed.*, 1890, p 173 (Bold emphasis mine).

⁷ Both Jesus and Paul speak about the "traditions of men" being inimical to the word of God (**Mk. 7: 13; Gal. 1:14, etc.**).

A COMPARISON WITH EPHESIANS 2: 14-16 CONFIRMS THIS INTERPRETATION!

For he [Christ] himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in his flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in himself he might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace.

As indicated, both passages have the exact same context, namely, how the death of Christ has brought into being **one new man**, which is a euphemism for the new international church of Christ. The context concerns how Jew and Gentile have been “reconciled” and enjoy unity in a new identity because **the barrier of the dividing wall** --- which is defined as the Law of Moses’ **commandments and ordinances** --- has been cancelled.

Therefore, what Paul calls the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us in the **Colossians** text, he calls the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, in the **Ephesians** text. *These are terms of equivalence*, with the implication being, that since Christ’s death has abolished the Law, we are to **let no man act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect of a festival new moon or a Sabbath day --- things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.**

We may conclude then, that this argument that Paul is only addressing the Gentile Christians in Colossae to not let their old circle of pagan friends and family stop them from practising Torah as Paul himself was free to do, falls far short of the full scope of Paul’s instruction to both Jewish and Gentile Christians. This is why he uses the all-inclusive warning, “**Let no one judge you ...**” Whether from Jewish pressure or Gentile perpetrator, *nobody* is your judge in dietary or calendar observances.

There is simply no way of avoiding this simple truth. Amongst other Jewish practices, the necessity for the new testament church to keep Sabbath has been cancelled by Christ’s death. The teaching is that the Sabbath --- along with other Jewish dietary and calendar observances --- is in comparison with the substance that has now arrived in Christ himself, **a mere shadow** whose relevance is no longer binding on the Christian!

Paul, once the champion of the Torah of Moses now champions the Torah of Christ. In defence against those who were saying, “Yes, we agree with Paul. Jesus is the truth *but* it is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses”, he says, “No! **You are complete in Christ.** All those old covenant signs have done their job. They pointed forward to **Christ the substance.**”

THE KICKER!

But there is yet another important fact to consider. Those who wish to remove the weekly Jewish Sabbath from **Colossians 2:16** fail miserably for one additional obvious reason:- The list of calendar observances in **Colossians 2: 16** --- **festival, new moon and sabbath(s)** --- is **taken directly from the Old Testament!**

There are in fact ten, possibly eleven, examples where **annual feasts, new moons, and sabbath(s)** (i.e. weekly, monthly and annual observances) are listed together as being the complete calendar of Israel. Which is to say, this trio of Israel’s calendar-keeping is considered to be a single system standing as code for the entire Law.⁸

Let’s just look at one example which illustrates our point;

And it shall be the prince’s part to provide the burnt offerings, the grain offerings (food), and the drink offerings (drink), at the feasts (festivals), on the new moons, and on the sabbaths, at all the appointed feasts of the house of Israel (Ezek. 45:17). *Paul’s word order in Colossians is exactly the same!*

Thus, in **Colossians 2:16** the apostle uses an established sequence of terms from the Old Testament. Every Jew understood this calendar trio to be code for their covenant obligations under Moses. Thus, the apostle Paul when contrasting the new covenant that has now arrived in Christ is able to say the **festival, new moon and sabbath(s)** together are **one single shadow** of the old Law! Israel’s weekly, monthly, annual calendar taken all

⁸ I Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 8:13;31:3; Ezra 3:5; Nehemiah 10:33; Isaiah 1:13, 14; Ez. 45:17; 46:3; Hosea 2:11.

together were a type, a foreshadowing, a prediction, a prophecy, an anticipation of the Messiah himself who fulfills the lot. Mosaic Law, including the diet and the calendar are **one mere shadow** of Christ himself. ⁹

FURTHER CONFIRMATION

We looked earlier at **Hebrews 10: 1: For the Law since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near.** This passage concerns how the old sacrificial system as practised by the Levitical priests could never bring in the full and the perfect state that we now have in Christ. Christ offered one sacrifice to sanctify us forever (**Heb. 10:14**).

But let's not miss the parallel that **Hebrews** has with **Colossians** regarding the theme of the Law being the predictive outline (i.e. shadow) of **the good things to come and** [how they were] **not the very form** [or substance] **of things.** Hebrews says the continual Levitical sacrifices were only a shadow. Colossians says the Jewish calendar observances including Sabbath were only a shadow. The language in both verses is identical.

One of the objections Jews had to the Christian insistence that Jesus is our new high priest, was that Jesus was from the tribe of Judah (the kingly tribe) and not from the tribe of Levi (the priestly tribe). Hebrews answered this objection by showing that the prophet had already predicted Messiah would be from an entirely new and different order altogether ---he would be **after the order of Melchizedek** who *preceded* Levi, therefore has priority. ¹⁰

The writer to the Hebrews explains, **For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also** (**Heb. 7: 12**). That is, with the advent of the Messiah, **there has been a change of Torah also!**

Thus, the old **elementary principles** are obsolete for, **If that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second ... [so] when He said, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear** (**Hebrews 8: 7, 13**). As we highlighted in the last article, a change of the ship's direction, so to speak, was taking place.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The only time the apostle teaches anything directly about the Sabbath *per se* is in this critical passage of **Colossians 2:16-17**. In these verses the apostle draws a vivid contrast between the Jewish trio of **festival, new moon or a sabbath day** and the arrival of Jesus Christ. The Jewish dietary and calendar markers of that old covenant are likened to a **mere shadow** when compared to Christ himself who is the substance of those prophetic sketches.

Those who insist that **Colossians 2: 16-17** does not include the weekly sabbath (Saturday worship) have to bend all the rules of context, language, and grammar to exempt their theory! They also fail to see the seamless whole in the wider fabric of Scripture that says God's promised good things have already arrived in Christ. It just cannot be convincingly argued that **Colossians 2: 16-17** does not say the weekly Sabbath is **a mere shadow** --- along with all of the other sacred dietary and calendar events of Israel's Law --- that has finally been eclipsed by the arrival of our glorious risen Lord Jesus who now sits at the right hand of the Father on high for us.

To continue to try to keep the Sabbath is to lapse back under the control of **the elementary principles of the world**, from which Christ came to redeem us. Those who sally forth trying to defend weekly Sabbath-keeping really are taking a crazy last stand like the doomed Custer!

⁹ Dale Ratzlaff shows that, in the Old Testament references which list the terms found in Col. 2: 16, as the yearly sabbaths are *never* called "sabbaths" but *always* called "fixed festivals", "appointed feasts", "annual feasts", etc. While some of the "appointed feasts" are *elsewhere* said to be "a sabbath rest" (Lev. 23), they are *not* called by the term "sabbaths", probably to avoid confusion with the weekly Sabbath. For this reason the term "festival" in Col. 2:16 *must* refer to the annual "sabbaths", leaving the word "Sabbath day" for the weekly Sabbath. (*Sabbath in Christ*, Life Assurance Ministries, Az. 2003, p 195

¹⁰ For full argumentation read **Hebrew 7**.