

Explaining Colossians 2:16

by Institute of Religion (CGI Jamaica)

FOCAL TEXTS

Col 2:14-17 "...having canceled the *written code*, with its regulations, that was *against us* and that stood opposed to us; *he took it away*, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having *disarmed the powers* and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. 16 *Therefore* do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. 17 These are a shadow of the things that *were* to come; the *reality, however, is found in Christ.*" NIV

COMMON INTERPRETATIONS

- The written code refers to the *Law of Moses*.
- The written code refers to the *Ceremonial Law*.
- The Sabbath & Feast days were requirements under the ceremonial law, the ceremonial law is now cancelled, why keep the Sabbath then?
- Vs. 14 shows that the Sabbath was against us, it was too burdensome, too many regulations, so, it was crucified with Christ.
- Vs. 16 tells Christians that the Feast Days, Sabbaths & the dietary laws are all done away with.
- The term "*shadow of things*" connotes something negative: A shadow is merely an imperfect reflection of a body, a shadow points to a solid reality; Proves that all these mentioned rituals are meaningless; Shows how distant those who keep the Sabbaths are from Christ, they have not only missed the mark, but also the messiah!
- Shadow of things that *were* to come... The use of the past participle „*were*’ shows that all these things are of the past. They played their role but since Christ came (*the true reality*) the shadows are no longer relevant and no longer needed. To live in the past means to deny the present, why are you denying Christ, why return to the basic principles of this world?
- Sacrifices were always offered during the observation of a feast day, never on the weekly Sabbath! This therefore proves that the feast days were tied to the sacrificial system. Since sacrifices are no longer required, the feast days have now been annulled. Therefore, Colossians 2:16 does not speak against the weekly Sabbath, but rather, to the abrogation of the feast days. (7th Day Adventists view)

CGI ASSERTIONS – NUTSHELL

- Colossians 2 has nothing to do with the abrogation of the Feast days, Sabbaths or dietary laws.
- Paul wrote to the church in Colossae to combat the spreading gnostic & ascetic philosophy, he wrote to establish *the supremacy* of Christ, and that God did indeed come in the flesh.
- Opponents incorrectly assume that the written code meant *only* ceremonial laws. What is the justification for saying ceremonial laws when the bible just stated „the written code“(grk. *Cheirographon*)
- “*Shadow of things*” is not to be seen in a belittling/derogatory manner.
- “Shadow of things that *were* to come” The greek word (*esti*) translated as ‘*were*’, should have been translated as ‘*are*’.
- The words eat & drink (grk. brosis & posis) can & should have been translated as “eating & drinking”.
- Col 2 does not abolish the feast days, it establishes it.
- Sacrifices were also offered on the weekly Sabbath (Num. 28:9-10). This refutes the SDAs claim.
- The view held by the C.G.I is that the ones who were keeping the Sabbath were the ones being judged (condemned) by the ascetics.....Essentially it equates to the following statement: ***I am keeping the Sabbath & feast days, eating, drinking & rejoicing,,, so why are you judging me?***

PROVING OUR ASSERTIONS

To properly defend Col 2:16 we need to be cognisant that the argument did not commence with verse 16, neither did it end there. A rule of thumb is to always recall that the original manuscripts were never divided into

chapters or verses, it was one continuous epilogue, or in this case, *letter*. This is pivotal to the understanding of scriptures, always note both the preceding and successive texts of any verse before forming an opinion, it is the best way to obtain the gist of what the writer was aiming to communicate.

Now with that said, let us consider which interpretation given for Col 2:16 would best fit into the entire chapter/book of Colossians. Was it abrogating the Sabbaths or combating Gnosticism?

Let us first define Gnosticism then re-examine scriptures.

SUMMARY OF GNOSTICISM

The doctrine of Salvation by knowledge. Gnosticism gets its name from its claim of higher knowledge (Grk “gnosis”) which it promised to its disciples. This spawned from a belief that the world was made by a demiurge (an evil „lesser”god), and in order for humans to obtain salvation they had to avoid physical pleasure (*asceticism*) and come to understand some secret/mystic knowledge.

The following may be regarded as the chief points in the Gnostic systems:

- A claim on the part of the initiated to a special knowledge of the truth; a tendency to regard knowledge as superior to faith and as the special possession of the more enlightened, (for ordinary Christians did not possess this secret and higher doctrine.)
- The essential separation of matter and spirit, matter being intrinsically evil and the source from which all evil has arisen;
- An attempt to solve the problems of creation and the origin of evil by postulating a *demiurge*, i.e., a creator or artificer of the world distinct from the supreme deity, and emanations extending between God and the visible universe (the demiurge for the Gnostics being the God of the OT, an inferior being infinitely remote from the Supreme Being who can have nothing to do with anything material);
- A denial of the true humanity of Christ; a docetic Christology which considered the earthly life of Christ and especially His sufferings on the cross to be unreal. (*Since the flesh is evil, there is no way God could've come in the flesh.*)
- The denial of the personality of the Supreme God, and also the denial of the free will of mankind;
- The teaching, on the one hand, of asceticism as the means of attaining spiritual communion with God, and, on the other hand, of an indifference that led directly to licentiousness;
- A syncretistic tendency that combined certain more or less misunderstood Christian doctrines and various elements from oriental, Jewish, Greek, and other sources; [Source: *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)*]

Angel worship was also a fundamental aspect of Gnosticism. This took many forms, including celebration of special days and other religious customs based on astrological concepts of time.

EXAMINING COLOSSIANS

Now that we have highlighted some of the Gnostic beliefs let us re-read Colossians and ask: What was Paul’s primary focus? Was it „Sabbaths”or Gnosticism?

- As early as **Col 1:9** we see Paul making allusions to spiritual wisdom, knowledge and understanding.
- **Col 1:15-29** Notice key phrases about *flesh, body, mystery, wisdom, powers & principalities*...notice also how Christ is heralded as being fully God and that he had a *physical* body. (recall that the Gnostics did not believe that God could come in this evil flesh)
- **Col 2:2-3** Once more allusions are made to mystery, wisdom & understanding. Christ is seen as the one through whom you can attain all these wonderful mysteries & wisdom.
- **Col 2:8** “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” NIV ——— Even if the Sabbath is abolished, can we honestly call it deceptive philosophy or human tradition?
- **Col 2:9-12** Christ *who came in bodily form* is being exalted once more.
- **Col 2:14** “having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.” NIV — Notice there is no mention of Sabbath, Feast Days or Law, all that was stated is ‘the written code’. What is this written code? Research has shown that the term *cheirographon* was used to denote either a “certificate of indebtedness” resulting from our transgressions or a ‘book containing the record of sin’ used for the condemnation of mankind.

The Greek word translated “handwriting” is cheirographon, and this is the only place the term is used in the Bible. cheirographo means a handwritten record of debt, or what we would today call an ‘IOU’. This word was used to designate a *record book of sin*, meaning a written account of our sins. It is assumed that what was nailed to the cross was all record of our sins that ‘was against us’, ‘which was contrary to us’.

Consider alternate bible renderings of this same passage:

NASU “having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”

TLB “and blotted out the charges proved against you, the list of his commandments which you had not obeyed. He took this list of sins and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ’s cross.”

NLT “He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ’s cross.”

Recall my initial premise, all of this was one letter written to the Colossians. In **Col 2:13** we read that Christ’s death blotted out „*ur trespasses*’— (not the laws that were being trespassed). Did Paul suddenly change the subject in the next verse?

Consider the ancient practice illustrating what some say is the curse of the Law: Num 5:20-23 But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and you have defiled yourself by sleeping with a man other than your husband” here the priest is to put the woman under this curse of the oath — “may the LORD cause your people to curse and denounce you when he causes your thigh to waste away and your abdomen to swell. 22 May this water that brings a curse enter your body so that your abdomen swells and your thigh wastes away.”

- **Col 2:16** “Let no one, then, judge you in *eating* or in *drinking*, or in respect of a feast, or of a new moon, or of Sabbaths, which are a shadow of the coming things, and the body [is] of the Christ” — Young’s Literal Translation— In light of the abundant evidence pointing to Gnostic philosophy it should now be obvious that the ones doing the judging were the *ascetics*. The Jews had a practice of observing both the weekly & annual Sabbaths celebrating with eating and drinking, it would be natural that those who adhered to an ascetic philosophy would frown upon this type of feasting and „gratifying of the flesh’. It is also noteworthy that the Greek words (brosis & posis) translated as food and drink in most bibles actually means eating & drinking. It has nothing to do with meat and drink offerings as some assume. It also has nothing to do with the laws governing clean & unclean meat... Think about this: If this text is about the dietary laws, then it should be easy for us to list at least two *unclean drinks*,,, after all the text did say ‘food & *drink*.’. Therefore the most logical assumption is that the ones doing the judging were the ascetics.
- **Col 2:17** “These are a shadow of the things that *were* to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” NIV. The greek word (*esti*) rendered as ‘*were*’ here should have actually been ‘*are*’. Paul said they “are a shadow of things to come,” indicating they have a future fulfillment.

NKJV Col 2:17 “...hich *are* a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ”

NASU Col 2:17 “...things which *are* a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ”

This future fulfillment is made clear as ‘*are*’ it is in the present-active tense and means ‘to be’ or ‘is’. For Paul to have meant that the Sabbath and festivals were fulfilled and became obsolete in Jesus Christ, it would have been necessary for him to say they “were a shadow” and to have used an entirely different greek word (such as *eien*). Further notes: Compare Eph 2:7 “ages to come”, Heb 2:5, “the world to come.”... „hadow of things to come” is therefore not to be seen as something derogatory, but rather as a pointer to things which are to come.

- **Col 2:18** “Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.” — Notice: False humility & Angel worship...if Paul was advocating an end to the Sabbath why change the subject so suddenly? Hear an alternate rendition: Col 2:18-19 “Don’t let anyone declare you lost when you refuse to worship angels, as they say you must. They have seen a vision, they say, and know you should. These proud men (though they claim to be so humble) have a very clever imagination. But they are not connected to Christ, the Head to which all of us who are his body are joined; for we are joined together by his strong sinews, and we grow only as we get our nourishment and strength from God.”—TLB.

- **Col 2:20-23** The **Living Bible** sums this up rather nicely for us: “Since you died, as it were, with Christ and this has set you free from following the world’s ideas of how to be saved — by doing good and obeying various rules — why do you keep right on following them anyway, still bound by such rules as 21 not eating, tasting, or even touching certain foods? 22 Such rules are mere human teachings, for food was made to be eaten and used up. 23 These rules may seem good, for rules of this kind require strong devotion and are humiliating and hard on the body, but they have no effect when it comes to conquering a person’s evil thoughts and desires. They only make him proud.

Notice the phrase **Human Traditions**. Can any of the Lord’s command, even those that are permanently done away with (sacrifices, circumcision) be called human traditions? Notice even the term „ard on the body“,, all of Colossians seems to be hitting out at Gnosticism & asceticism.

CONSIDERATIONS & CONCLUSION

If Colossians 2:16 was primarily concerned with instructing the new gentile converts that Sabbath & feast Days were abolished, why would the apostle Paul be making all these allusions to angel worship, voluntary humility, self-abasement...tc. Why would anyone, for that matter be writing a letter with the aim of refuting certain well indoctrinated ideologies, customs & practices use only three sentences to try to accomplish such a task.

If you were given the task to convert an entire group to accept Wednesday as the Lord’s Day of worship, would use three or four sentences to prove your point? Highly unlikely, yet, opponents of the Sabbath would want us to believe that these three unclear & highly debated sentences abrogate a commandment issued by God himself. Are you willing to risk your salvation based on a few misrepresented texts?