

# THE “SABBATH” JUSTIFICATION USED TO KEEP THE FEASTS

(Colossians 2)

## Jewish Prejudice

In Colossians 2:16 Paul is warning these new Gentile converts about Jewish and Greek influences that undermined Christ/Christianity.

- Jewish zealots were agitating many ancient practices (like circumcision) and observance of feast days.
- Many of these were either theocratically assigned or anticipated the Cross/Christ.

It was so difficult for the Jews to break with the past that many became “judges” and “moralists” against new believers. In Paul’s letter to the Colossians:

In the first words of 2:16 he tells them:

- “Let no man therefore judge you.”
- They weren’t to be swayed by Jewish criticism about past practices.
- Their focus was to be on Christ and what He had done (Colossians 1–2:7).

This builds on what he had previously said:

- “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Colossians 2:8).
- Be rooted instead and established in the faith of Christ (2:7).

First it might be helpful to share two points:

1. The “don’t let people judge you” is not in the context of being criticized for keeping the feasts or Sabbaths, it is not to be criticized by those keeping them when they shouldn’t have to.
2. Secondly, the Greek word *sabbaton* can mean not only the seventh day but a “week” and a “typological” Sabbath (see Appendix I).

Paul becomes more specific – don’t let anyone criticize you over:

1. Meat or in drink
2. Relative to a holy day
3. A new moon
4. Or a Sabbath

## The Grouping of Words

Should these be seen as individual items or collectively?

- Those who keep the seventh-day Sabbath isolate the word Sabbaton and the added “days,” claiming it refers to the seventh-day Sabbath.
- To justify this they quote Matthew 12:5, 12:10; Mark 3:4; Luke 4:31, 6:2, 9 and Acts 17:9, showing Sabbath [days] can only refer to the seventh-day Sabbath.
- This unfortunate argument then leads to a defense of the Sabbath and, in turn, justification for the holy days, etc. previously noted in the verse: “Thus – the feasts were not done away with.”

When these are brought together (I Chronicles 23:31, II Chronicles 2:3-4, 31:3; Ezekiel 45:17; Hosea 2:13), scholars feel that they signal a collective message that refers to “special days” – mainly the feast sabbath days.

- Paul is emphasizing that they are not obligatory.
- Those who say they are, are wrong.
- “When we note that the three terms together, sabbaths, new moons, and feasts, [it is] in fact a regular Jewish way of speaking of the many festivals of Jewish religion.”<sup>1</sup>

The Essenes claimed special revelations regarding these (CD 3:14-15, 1 QS 9:26-10:8), showing the fierce moral identity the Jews had regarding the feasts.

- Thus, it was easy to criticize or judge those who didn’t continue to observe the events.
- The Jews were making unacceptable claims against their heritage and not the new Christian faith.

Paul didn’t condemn the observance of the feasts. He condemned those who made it a religious requirement!<sup>2</sup>

- “Do not let others pass judgment on” is the concern.
- He previously addressed this spirit (Romans 2:1, 3; 14:3-4, 10, 13; I Corinthians 10:29).

“Though it was not wrong for *the Jews*, trained from his infancy in the law, for a period of transition to observe some of these customs as mere *customs*, having nothing whatever to do with salvation, it was certainly wrong to ascribe to them a value which they did not have, and to try to impose them upon the Gentiles.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Dunn, James D. G.; *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (William B. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> O’Brien, Peter T.; *Word Biblical Commentary* (Thomas Nelson Publishers; Nashville, TN), vol. 44, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Hendricksen, William; *New Testament Commentary – Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Baker Academic; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 124.

## The “Transition Order” Concept

The Apostle could have stopped here and the extent of this part of his correspondence to these believers would have been clear.

- But he was in the middle of elevating Christ, the Cross and resurrection.
- The Jewish ceremonial tasks were to be revisited as “transitory.”
- The dietary laws were tied to the feasts, and the feasts themselves were history.

“Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ.” Colossians 2:17).

- This describes the ground for his counsel.
- The keeping of the feasts must not be a matter of religious dogma – they are only of a “transitory nature.”
- Paul is making very clear that there are “two ages” – one was a time of foreshadowing. Now the era of reality or antitypical has come!<sup>4</sup>

This suddenly becomes a strong warning that by continuing these celebrations could be a denial of the all-sufficiency of Christ!<sup>5</sup>

- Those who put this in a proper perspective
- With a query that borderlines on a contemptuous concern is this:  
“Why regard as indispensable ordinances as to eating, when the One foreshadowed by Israel’s manna is offering himself as the Bread of Life (John 6:35, 48)? How can the observance of the Passover (cf. Ex. 12) be considered a means unto spiritual perfection when ‘our Passover has been sacrificed, even Christ’ (I Cor. 5:7)?<sup>6</sup>

These feasts were prophetic shadows. They prefigured major events surrounding the first and second adjunct.

- The “keeping” of the feasts is at the heart of Paul’s discourse.
- The grouping of the ordinances focuses on the anticipated/already occurred Messiah.
- What is done from then on must be referenced to the reality of Him, grace, the transforming mission of the Spirit.

There are many who dogmatically view the verb tenses (both in present tense) (“things to come” – really mean “what exists”). The NIV says it the best in its intent:

“These are a shadow of things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” (Colossians 2:17 – NIV).

---

<sup>4</sup> O'Brien, *op. cit.*, quoting Schulz and Schweizer, p. 140.

<sup>5</sup> Henderickson, *Op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

- They were of a “transitory order.”
- Thus, they have lost their bidding force (thus, the KJV and RSV are ambiguous and incorrect).

**It's All to be Focused on Jesus**

Paul dramatically ends this argument in a Christological aura.

- The substance of our worship and thinking belong to Christ.
- He is the body – everything leading up to Him was only passing shadows.

Shadow		vs	Body
	Type	vs	Antitype
	Imagery	vs	Reality

Christ is the “new order” – the reality that these rites only pointed to:

- Crucial is another implication:
  - The shadow can no longer constitute a norm for judgment!
  - Everything is normative to the standard of Jesus.

Prophecy Research Initiative © 2012–present