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MINISTRIES

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Let No One Judge You: Sabbaths, Festivals, and Foods (Colossians 2:16-17)

Should Christians keep God’s commandments concerning the Sabbath, festivals, and foods? Well, that depends on who you ask. If you ask Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—the answer would be yes. In Matthew 5:17-20, Yeshua said that the whole Law of Moses will endure as long as heaven and earth exist and urged his followers to obey and teach even the least of the commandments. It stands to reason, then, that Yeshua expected Christians to keep the commandments concerning the Sabbath, festivals, and foods.

However, not everyone agrees that we should keep these commandments. Many modern teachers say that these commandments are no longer binding because of what Paul wrote in Colossians 2:16-17. Here is what Paul said:

Colossians 2:16-17

[Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.](#)

John MacArthur’s commentary is representative of the way that many modern teachers interpret these verses. He writes...

The false teachers were telling the Colossians that it was not enough to have Christ; they also needed to keep the Jewish ceremonial law...The dietary laws, festivals, sacrifices, and Sabbath-day worship were all things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. A shadow has no reality; the reality is what makes the shadow. Jesus Christ is the reality to which the shadows pointed...Any continuing preoccupation with the shadows once the reality has come is pointless.

—John MacArthur, Colossians & Philemon, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1992), 119.

In other words, according to MacArthur, Paul said that if you violate the food laws and do not keep the

festivals and the Sabbath, you should not be judged. Those practices are merely shadows. And now that the substance—that is, the Messiah—has come, the shadows are “pointless.” This would be the standard antinomian reading of these verses. Antinomianism, which literally means “against law,” is a doctrine that states that Christians are freed from the obligation to obey the Law of Moses (Encyclopedia Britannica, “antinomianism,” britannica.com/topic/antinomianism).

But does Paul really imply that these aspects of the Law of Moses are pointless? Does Paul think that Christ made these commandments irrelevant?

Many might be surprised to learn that a growing number of Christian New Testament scholars challenge this antinomian reading of Colossians 2:16-17. For instance, Brian Allen recently wrote a paper on this passage that was published in the *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* (See Brian Louis Allen, “Removing an Arrow from the Supersessionist Quiver: A Post-Supersessionist Reading of Colossians 2:16-17,” *JSPHL* 8 [2018]: 127-146).

In his paper, Allen examines this passage while investigating the Greek language and the history of the period. He demonstrates that the Colossians were not being judged for *failing* to keep commandments like the Sabbath and festivals. Rather, they were being judged for *keeping* them. In this teaching, we will highlight several points from Allen’s paper and the works of other scholars that support this interpretation.

Did Paul’s Readers Keep the Sabbath, Festivals, and Food Laws?

Why were Paul’s readers in Colossians being judged? Was it because they were neglecting the commandments concerning food, festivals, and the Sabbath? Or were they being judged because they were *keeping* these laws? If we just read Colossians 2:16 by itself, we could interpret it either way. So, do we have any good reasons to prefer one interpretation over the other?

Well a good place to start might be to ask whether Paul’s readers would have kept these commandments to begin with. It is also worth exploring whether Paul’s opponents would have kept these commandments. If Paul’s readers were not keeping these commandments and his opponents were, then MacArthur’s interpretation would make sense. That is, Paul’s opponents, who keep these commandments, would be judging Paul’s readers, who do not keep them. But if Paul’s readers *were* keeping these commandments and his opponents were not, then the opposite would make more sense—that is, Paul’s readers were being judged for *keeping* them.

Let’s start by establishing who Paul’s readers were. Paul’s audience at Colossae consisted mainly of Gentile followers of the Messiah (Colossians 1:21; 2:13). It is commonly assumed that Gentile believers at this time would not be keeping these commandments. But what does the New Testament say? Did the early Christians, particularly Gentile Christians, keep the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws?

It is important to keep in mind that Christianity started as a sect of Judaism. All of Yeshua’s original followers were Jewish, and they all kept the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws. Even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, was a Torah observant Jewish teacher. When Gentiles started putting their faith in Yeshua and following him, they did not join an entirely new religion. They were joining a messianic sect of Judaism.

Did Paul stop following these Torah commandments after he started following Yeshua? There is no evidence that he did stop. In fact, the New Testament points in the opposite direction. In the books of

Acts and 1 Corinthians, we see that Paul himself remained fully Torah observant (Acts 21:24) and continued to keep the Sabbath and festivals (Acts 13:14, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4; 20:6, 16; 27:9; 1 Corinthians 16:8). As Justin Hardin writes:

Paul was not at all critical of the Jewish calendar, but even continues to orient his life around it.

—Justin Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult: A Critical Analysis of the First Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 120

So, we know that Paul himself continued to keep these laws. But what about the Gentile believers whom Paul taught? Did they also observe the Sabbath and festivals? Well the Book of Acts repeatedly mentions Gentiles attending synagogue services on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14-15, 26, 43-45; 14:1; 16:13-14; 17:1-4, 10-12, 17; 18:4). And in Acts 15:20-21, after instructing the new Gentile followers of the Messiah to keep four basic laws initially, the apostle James implies that these Gentile believers would continue learning and keeping the rest of the commandments as they attend synagogue services every Sabbath to hear the Law of Moses preached:

Acts 15:19-21

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

So, it seems that the apostles expected Gentile believers to have an ongoing relationship with the Messianic Jewish community and to learn and keep the Torah, which would include the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws. The scholar Eyal Regev explains the significance of these verses:

The implications are that since the Torah is proclaimed and studied in the synagogue on a regular basis, the God-fearing Christians would gain further knowledge and adhere to Jewish law after being accepted into the (Jewish-) Christian community. The legal obligations of the Apostolic Decree may have been an invitation to observe Jewish law.

— Eyal Regev, “The Gradual Conversion of Gentiles in Acts and Luke’s Paradox of the Gentile Mission,” in *Law and Narrative in the Bible and in Neighbouring Ancient Cultures*, ed. F. Avemarie and K. P. Adams (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 361.

Additionally, Paul explicitly instructs the Jewish and Gentile Christian community at the church of Corinth to celebrate the festival of Passover/Unleavened Bread:

1 Corinthians 5:8

Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Some have tried to downplay the significance of Paul’s instruction to the Corinthian believers here. They argue that Paul’s use of figurative language—such as connecting Yeshua with the Passover lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7) and leaven with malice and evil—indicates that he was instructing the Corinthians to celebrate the festival only in a *spiritual* sense rather than literally. But there are several reasons to think that the Corinthian community *literally* celebrated this festival.

First, as we see in Acts, the Corinthian house church was next door to the local Jewish synagogue, and the ruler of that synagogue was also a founding member of the church of Corinth (Acts 18:7-8). Thus, the Corinthian congregation remained connected to the broader Jewish community, which observed Passover.

Second, toward the end of his letter, Paul makes a passing reference to the festival of Shavuot or Pentecost. This indicates that the Corinthian community was well aware of the biblical calendar and organized their plans around it. As David Rudolph explains:

The passing comment—“But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost” (1 Cor 16:8)—suggests that the Corinthians knew when Pentecost would occur. Moreover, since Pentecost is calculated by counting fifty days after “the day after the Sabbath” during Passover week (Lev 23:15-16), Paul implies that the literal day of Passover was not insignificant to the community.

—David Rudolph, “Passover in Corinth (1Cor 5:7-8),” *Verge* 2:9 (2010), 4.

Third, historical evidence shows that, during the second century AD, many of the predominantly Gentile congregations in Asia and Asia Minor celebrated Passover on the 14th of Nissan—the same time Jews celebrated it—in accordance with the biblical calendar (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1; 5.24.1; Athanasius, *Syn.* 2; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70.9.8-9; 10.3-5; Theodoret, *Haer. Fab. Comp.* 3.4; See David Rudolph, “The Celebration of Passover by Gentile Christians in the Patristic Period,” *Verge* 2:3 (2010), 4).

The Gentile congregations in the West also celebrated Passover. However, around 135 AD, they started keeping it on a different date—the Sunday following the 14th of Nissan (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.23.1). 135 AD was around the time when the emperor Hadrian forced all Jews, including Jewish followers of Yeshua, out of Jerusalem (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.5-6). During this time there was growing conflict between Jews and the Roman empire, and Gentile Christians faced a lot of pressure to dissociate from Jews. This might explain the alternative date for Passover that emerged around the same time in the West. This Sunday celebration eventually evolved into what is now called “Easter” in the West.

In any case, long after the time of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we see that Gentile believers were still observing some version of Passover. They celebrated a *literal* festival. Hence, we have very good reasons to think that Paul’s instruction to the Corinthian church to “celebrate the festival” would have been taken literally.

One final piece of evidence we’ll look at is the Didache, an early Second-Century text specifically addressed to Gentile followers of Yeshua. In the Didache, the author employs uniquely Jewish terms for the days of the week—“second day,” “fourth day,” and “Preparation day” (i.e., Friday)—all of which revolve around marking the Sabbath (Didache 8:1). As Brian Allen writes:

[W]hy would the author(s) of the Didache use specifically Jewish calendrical designations for the days of the week if the audience was not functioning within that calendar system? It is practical to suppose the Didache’s audience adopted the Jewish religious calendar.

—Brian Louis Allen, “Removing an Arrow from the Supersessionist Quiver: A Post-Supersessionist Reading of Colossians 2:16-17,” *JSPHL* 8 (2018), 135

Additionally, the author of the Didache explicitly encourages his readers to keep as much of the Torah as they can, which implies obedience to the Sabbath and festivals (Didache 6:2). As the scholar Pierluigi

Lanfranchi writes:

[F]or the Didachist the ideal believer submits to the complete observance of the Law: “For if you can bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you cannot, do as much as you can” (6:2). It is very unlikely that “the entire yoke of the Lord” did not include Sabbath, one of the central pillars of life under the covenant.”

—Pierluigi Lanfranchi, “Attitudes to the Sabbath in Three Apostolic Fathers: Didache, Ignatius, and Barnabas,” in *Jesus, Paul, and Early Christianity: Studies in Honour of Henk Jan de Jonge*, ed. Rieuwerd Buitenwerf, Harm W. Hollander, and Johannes Tromp (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 248.

Finally, according to some scholars, the author of the Didache also specifically instructs his readers to observe the food laws as best they can. In chapter 6, the author writes, “Concerning food, bear what you are able” (Didache 6:3). As the scholar Kurt Niederwimmer writes:

This refers obviously to the commandments and prohibitions regarding food in the Old Testament and Jewish tradition. The Didachist requires that they be kept to the extent that it is possible for each individual.

— Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 123

So, the New Testament and the Didache provide plenty of evidence that Gentile believers in the first and early Second Centuries were observing the Law of Moses, including the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws. Hence, there is good reason to doubt the common *assumption* that Paul’s predominantly Gentile audience in Colossae did not keep these commandments—especially since many of them likely participated in the Jewish synagogue services before being introduced to the Messiah. As Brian Allen writes:

It is probable that the early Gentile followers of Jesus in Colossae were initially drawn to the synagogues and the praxis of Judaism prior to their introduction to the Messiah. Accordingly, they would be accustomed to the Jewish calendar and practice to some extent.

—Brian Louis Allen, “Removing an Arrow from the Supersessionist Quiver: A Post-Supersessionist Reading of Colossians 2:16-17,” *JSPHL* 8 (2018), 137

So, through their association with the Jewish synagogue, it is likely that many of the Gentile believers at Colossae would have been familiar with the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws. Given everything else we’ve learned, it’s reasonable to suppose that the Gentile followers of the Messiah in Colossae observed these commandments in Paul’s time.

However, this is only half of the equation. We also need to know who was judging the Colossian believers. Were these judgmental people keeping the commandments themselves, or were they not keeping them? That is where we will turn our attention next.

Who Was Judging the Colossian Believers?

Before we delve into the identity of Paul’s opponents in Colossians, we should note that the way Colossians 2:16-17 is often translated into English can be misleading. We will discuss the translation of these verses in greater depth later. However, there is one observation that can help us better understand

what Paul's readers were being criticized for. In many English translations, Colossians 2:16 often conveys that Paul's readers were being judged concerning matters of "food and drink." However, a more accurate translation of the Greek would be "eating and drinking" (BDAG, "βρώσις": act of partaking of food, *eating*; BDAG, "πόσις": act of drinking, *drinking*). This rendering is reflected in the Young's Literal Translation:

Colossians 2:16 (YLT)

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.

Why is this significant? Because understanding what the criticism was about helps us identify who Paul's opponents were. They criticized Paul's readers for "eating and drinking." A few verses later, Paul goes on to directly quote his opponents' criticisms:

Colossians 2:20-22

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— **"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"** (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?

So, the false teachers in Colossae were trying to impose "human precepts and teachings" upon Paul's readers, commanding them "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch." The commanded Sabbath and festivals are not "**human precepts and teachings**," so those could not be what Paul's opponents were trying to impose upon his readers. Rather, they were trying to impose *human* restrictions on eating and drinking. As Allen writes:

It is vital to realize that food and drink in v. 16 do not refer to Levitical dietary instructions. Rather, their mention is actually a clue that ascetics were criticizing the Colossians for their lavish feasts during Sabbaths, festivals, and new moons, times that were not normally associated with fasting and affliction.

—Brian Louis Allen, "Removing an Arrow from the Supersessionist Quiver: A Post-Supersessionist Reading of Colossians 2:16-17," *JSPHL* 8 (2018), 137

So, who were Paul's opponents, and what human precepts were they promoting? The human precepts and teachings that Paul describes in verse 21 closely resemble those of the ancient Cynics. The Cynics were philosophers who criticized people for drinking wine and enjoying festive foods. For instance, writing in the fourth-third century BC, the cynic philosopher Crates said this to his young followers:

Accustom yourselves to eat barley cake and to drink water, and do not taste fish and wine. For the latter, like the drugs of Circe, make old men bestial and young men effeminate.

—Crates, *Epistle* 14 (Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977], 64-65)

The Cynics criticized not only wine and festive foods, but also comfortable beds and clothes. Here is another teaching from Crates to his young followers:

Accustom yourselves to wash with cold water, to drink only water, to eat nothing that has not been earned by toil, to wear a cloak, and to make it a habit to sleep on the ground. Then the baths

will never be closed to you, the vineyards and flocks fail, the fish shops and couch shops go broke, as they will to those who have learned how to wash with hot water, to drink wine, to eat without having toiled, to wear purple clothing, and to rest on a couch.

—Crates, *Epistle* 18 (Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977], 69)

(See also Diogenes, *Epistle* 37)

The Cynic's disdain toward bodily comforts is further seen by how Crates reacted when given a tunic woven for him by his wife Hipparchia. He writes a letter rebuking her:

I am returning the tunic that you wove and sent to me because those of us who live a life of perseverance are forbidden to wear such things...Renounce such pursuits and try to be of greater benefit to human life.

—Crates, *Epistle* 30 (Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977], 80-81)

In another letter, he continues to rebuke his wife for making him this tunic:

Some have come from you bringing a new tunic, which, they say, you made so that I might have it for the winter. Because you care for me, I approved of you, but because you are still uneducated and not practicing the philosophy for which I have tutored you, I censure you. Therefore, give up doing this right now, if you really care, and do not pride yourself in this kind of activity.

—Crates, *Epistle* 32 (Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977], 82-83)

Commenting on the Cynics' philosophy concerning eating, drinking, and bodily comforts, the scholar Troy Martin explains:

Cynics practice an extreme asceticism that not only forbids eating but also touching or handling commodities not naturally produced. Cynics divide all consumer goods into durable and non-durable (perishable) commodities. The durable goods are those produced naturally by the processes of nature. These goods are sufficiently and consistently supplied to meet human need. Non-durable goods are those that depend upon human skill and civilization for their production. These goods are limited by the extent of human labor, and their supply may be disrupted by cessation of human effort, war or embargo. Durable goods are close at hand and easily obtained; non-durable goods are not easily accessible. The former consumer goods are permitted; the latter are prohibited according to Cynic teaching. Consequently, Cynics reject non-durable goods like wine, cakes and gourmet foods as well as clothes, shoes and houses. Durable commodities permit them to drink water, eat natural foods, go barefoot, sleep on the ground and wear only a single cloak.

—Troy Martin, *By Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 65-67

Besides criticizing the drinking of wine, eating of festive foods, and enjoyment of comforts, the Cynics also condemned the use of calendars. As Martin writes:

Cynic sources contain few references to time because the Cynics disregard time beyond the hours of the day, and these hours are only of relative usefulness. Instead of organizing their lives according to a system of time, they prefer to live day by day...Contentment and happiness for the Cynic means ignoring temporal constraints. The anti-cultural Cynic movement disparages the cultural phenomenon of time. This Cynic attitude toward time promotes a pungent critique of the Christian regulation of communal life by a religious calendar. The Cynic considers this practice a useless waste of effort that detracts from the true pursuit of morality and happiness.

—Troy Martin, *By Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 131-132.

Considering these features of Cynic philosophy, a follower of these beliefs would certainly object to the celebration of the Sabbath and festivals, which often involved wine and festive foods.

Additionally, Paul describes eating and drinking during the Sabbath, festivals, and new moons as “a shadow of things to come” (Colossians 2:17). Although the NIV has “shadow of the things that were to come,” this is misleading (Brian Louis Allen, “Removing an Arrow from the Supersessionist Quiver: A Post-Supersessionist Reading of Colossians 2:16-17,” *JSPHL* 8 [2018], 138).

The Sabbath, festivals, and new moons are not a shadow of things that have already happened. These celebrations point to a *future* hope that believers are looking forward to—the age to come. We see this connection between the celebration of the Sabbath and festivals and the age to come in Isaiah:

Isaiah 66:22-23

For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD [YHWH], so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD [YHWH].

So, the Sabbath, festivals, and new moons point to a future hope beyond this present life—they are shadows of the age “to come.” This hope for the future flies directly in the face of Cynic philosophy. Since in the minds of the Cynics hope could potentially lead to disappointment, having hope for the future was seen as a threat to obtaining true happiness and contentment. As the Cynic philosopher Crates writes:

But if he is ignorant of these principles [that is, the teachings of Cynic philosophy], he will never cease from being dependent upon vain hopes and from being constrained by desires.

—Crates, *Epistle* 35 (Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977], 89)

(See also: Diogenes, *Epistle* 22; Anacharsis, *Epistle* 4; Troy Martin, *By Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique* [England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], 123)

It is perhaps not a coincidence that, throughout Colossians, Paul repeatedly emphasizes the future

“hope” that believers possess (Colossians 1:5, 23, 27; 3:1-2, 4). Contrary to the Cynics, Paul does not believe that Christians should just be content to live in the present fallen world. The Messiah has given us hope for the future. We look forward to the new heavens and new earth, where all people will worship from Sabbath to Sabbath (Isaiah 66:23). And the joy we experience during the Sabbath and festivals foreshadows this future hope.

Before we move on, there are two additional clues in Colossians that lend support to the theory that Paul’s opponents were Cynics. For instance, Paul describes the philosophy of his opponents as one that emphasizes “[severity to the body](#)” (Colossians 2:23). The Cynics were known for focusing on the severe treatment of the body as the means to happiness. For instance, the Cynic philosopher Diogenes writes to Antipater the following:

You find fault with my way of life on the grounds that it is toilsome and will be cultivated by no one because of its austerity. But I purposely increased its intensity, so that whoever imitates me might know not to enjoy any luxury at all.

—Diogenes, *Epistle* 14 (Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977], 108-109)

Similarly, Crates teaches his students the following:

Take care of your soul, but take care of the body only to the degree that necessity requires, and of externals not even that much. For happiness is not pleasure, on account of which we need externals, while virtue is complete without any externals.

—Crates, *Epistle* 3 (Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977], 54-55)

In a letter to his wife Hipparchia, Crates characterizes Cynic philosophy as enduring the unbearable:

It is not because we are indifferent to everything that others have called our philosophy Cynic, but because we robustly endure those things which are unbearable to them because they are effeminate or subject to false opinion. It is for this latter reason and not the former that they have called us Cynics. Stand fast, therefore, and live the Cynic life with us.

—Crates, *Epistle* 29 (Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977], 78-79)

Paul also describes the philosophy of his opponents as “[according to the elemental spirits of the world](#)” (Colossians 2:8, ESV). Other translations have “[elementary principles of the world](#)” (NASB, LSB) or simply “[elements of the world](#)” (CSB, DRB). This phrase is much debated, but scholars have shown that, in the first century AD, this phrase specifically referred to the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire, which were believed to be the basic elements that constitute the universe (See Eduard Schweizer, “Slaves of the Elements and Worshipers of Angels: Gal 4.3, 9 and Col 2.8, 18, 20,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 455-468).

According to Paul, his opponents’ philosophy is based upon the elements that make up the cosmos. And the Cynics often appealed to the elements to support their philosophical teachings. For instance, in his letter to Aynander, the Cynic Diogenes says that one needs not thank one’s parents for being born

because, ultimately, nature and the “blending of the elements” is the cause of one’s existence and character:

One need not thank one’s parents, either for the fact of being born, since it is by nature that what exists came into being; or for the quality of one’s character, for it is the blending of the elements that is its cause.

—Diogenes, *Epistle* 21 (Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977], 114-115)

In summary, the philosophy and human teachings of Paul’s opponents in Colossians bear a strong resemblance to those of the ancient Cynics. The Cynics criticized people for drinking wine and enjoying festive foods, which matches Paul’s description of his opponents judging his readers for “eating and drinking.” They also condemned the use of calendars and expressions of hope for the future, aligning with Paul’s description of his opponents judging his readers regarding festivals, new moons, and the Sabbath, which foreshadow the age to come. Additionally, the Cynics rejected bodily comforts and emphasized the severe treatment of the body, reflecting Paul’s description of his opponents’ promotion of asceticism and “[severity to the body](#).” Finally, the Cynics’ philosophy was based on the elements that they believed made up the cosmos, which matches Paul’s description of his opponents’ philosophy as being according to the elements of the world.

So, Paul’s opponents seem to be adherents of Cynic philosophy. And if that is the case, they would not be observing the Sabbath and festivals. In fact, they would think that celebrating these days was immoral. Hence, in Colossians 2:16, they would be judging Paul’s readers for *keeping* the Sabbath and festivals, not for neglecting them.

Judge The Body of Christ

So, Paul tells his readers to let no one judge them for eating and drinking and celebrating the Sabbath and festivals because the joy experienced during these times foreshadows the ultimate joy that believers will experience in the age to come. But there is a peculiar clause at the end of verse 17 that is worth exploring in greater detail:

Colossians 2:17

[These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.](#)

(See also: NIV, NASB, RSV, NET)

We mentioned earlier that Colossians 2:16-17 can often be translated in a misleading way. For instance, as we discussed earlier, “food and drink” in the ESV and other translations of verse 16 is better translated as “eating and drinking.” This final clause in verse 17 also has some issues. What follows in this teaching will get a little technical, but bear with us because it will have significant implications for understanding this passage.

The first problem with how verse 17 is translated in the ESV is the word “substance.” Other translations have “reality” (NIV, NLT, NET). In Greek, this word is σῶμα, and it just means “body.” Paul uses this word 91 times in his letters, and not once does he use this word to signify “reality” or “substance.” He uses this word to mean either a person’s physical body or the corporate “body of Christ,” that is, the church. There is no textual reason to think that σῶμα should be translated as anything other than “body”

in Colossians 2:17 (See Sang-Won Aaron Son, “τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ in Colossians 2.17,” in *History and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr. E. Earle Ellis for His Eightieth Birthday*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2006): 222–338).

The second problem is the insertion of the words “belongs to.” Other translations will say something like “is”: “but the body *is* of Christ” (KJV). These words do not appear in the Greek text of this verse. If we translate this clause literally, it reads “but the body of Christ” (τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ). Since there is no verb in this clause, translators must insert a verb that they believe is grammatically implied. Since the final clause of verse 17 begins with the conjunction “but” (δὲ), translators often take the approach that Paul is contrasting the idea of the Sabbath and festivals as a “shadow” with the idea of Christ as the “body.” Hence, the Sabbath and festivals are shadows, *but* the body is of Christ.

However, several scholars have shown that the final clause of verse 17 (“but the body of Christ”) is actually connected to the beginning of verse 16 (“let no one judge you”). So, the contrast or antithesis would be, “let no one judge you...but the body of Christ.” (Troy Martin, “But Let Everyone Discern the Body of Christ (Colossians 2:17), *JBL* 11/2 (1995): 249-255; See also Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath among Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 135).

This means that the implied verb in the final clause of verse 17 is “judge.”

Not only that, but the subject of the verb in the second part of the contrasting statement is modified. In other words, we should understand there to be a contrast here between what *no one* should do and what *everyone* should do. So, this verse means that no one should judge you concerning your eating and drinking, etc., but everyone should judge the body of Christ (Troy Martin, “But Let Everyone Discern the Body of Christ (Colossians 2:17), *JBL* 11/2 (1995), 254).

So again, the antithesis between “**let no one judge you**” in verse 16 and “**but the body of Christ**” in verse 17 indicates that the implied verb in verse 17 is “judge.” Moreover, based on the antithetical structure of this passage, the subject of the verb “judge” in verse 16—that is, “no one”—should be understood as “everyone” in verse 17. In support of this reading, we could look at a parallel verse found in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 10:24

Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

In this verse, the verb “seek” is implied in the second clause, and the subject shifts from “no one” to “everyone.” Hence, we interpret this verse as, “let no one seek his own good, but [let everyone seek] the good of his neighbor.” This is the same thing we see in Colossians 2:16-17.

Given these grammatical points, we can understand Paul to be saying the following: “Let no one judge you...but let everyone judge the body of Christ.” Hence, we should translate Colossians 2:16-17 as follows. This is Troy Martin’s translation:

Therefore do not let anyone critique you by your eating and drinking or by your participation in a feast, new moon, or Sabbaths, which things are a shadow of future realities, but let everyone discern the body of Christ...

—Troy Martin, “But Let Everyone Discern the Body of Christ (Colossians 2:17), *JBL* 11/2

Now that we've determined a proper translation, how should we *interpret* Paul's instruction to "let everyone judge the body of Christ"? As Martin's translation shows, the Greek word that is translated as "judge" can have either a positive or negative nuance—hence, he uses the words "critique" and "discern." When Paul instructs the Colossian believers to judge the body of Christ, we should understand this more in the sense of discern, perceive, or observe. So, Paul is telling his readers not to worry about the criticisms of their detractors, but instead to discern or perceive the body of Christ. The body of Christ should be their concern and focus, not the judgment of their critics. What does Paul mean by the "body of Christ?" Here, as we'll explain in a moment, he seems to mean the literal resurrected body of Christ. The point is that, if Christ is risen, then there is a kingdom coming. And the festivals, Sabbath, and now moons that Paul's readers are observing foreshadow that coming kingdom.

This interpretation aligns with what Paul says a few verses earlier. After warning the Colossian believers not to be taken captive by the vain philosophy of their critics (Colossians 2:8), he reminds them of the Messiah's resurrection by which the Colossian believers were forgiven and given new life and hope (Colossians 2:9-15). So sandwiched between Paul's warnings about his opponents, Paul reminds his readers of Christ's resurrected body—the basis of their hope. Additionally, in chapter 3 of Colossians, Paul says this:

Colossians 3:1-4

If then you have been raised with Christ, **seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**

Here, Paul tells his readers not to be concerned with "**things that are on earth,**" but instead seek "**the things that are above, where Christ is.**" This parallels Paul's instruction in Colossians 2:16-17. Although Paul's readers are facing criticism from others, Paul encourages them not to worry about being criticized and instead focus on the resurrected body of Christ. Paul wants his readers to set their minds on the hope they have for the future, rather than being bothered by the criticisms that they endure on earth.

Conclusion

Although many believe that Colossians 2:16-17 indicates that the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws have been abolished, the evidence contradicts this antinomian reading. The New Testament and early Christian literature such as the Didache provide solid evidence that the early Gentile Christians would have observed the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws alongside Jewish believers during Paul's time. Moreover, Paul's opponents were likely adherents of Cynic philosophy. Hence, they would not have observed these laws and, in fact, would have objected to the feasting and joyful anticipation associated with the Sabbath and festivals. Finally, a grammatical study of this text indicates that Paul was not contrasting the Sabbath and festivals with Christ. Rather, he was contrasting the judgment of the critics with the body of Christ and encouraging his readers not to worry about the judgment of critics and instead discern the resurrected body of the Messiah, who is the source of their hope.

Far from diminishing the value of the Sabbath and festivals, Paul is encouraging his readers to continue keeping the Sabbath and festivals because these days celebrate the fact that there will be an age to come. Therefore, in light of the evidence, interpreters should stop using Colossians 2:16-17 to support the idea that the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws are "pointless" because that is literally the opposite of what

these verses say.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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