

## COLOSSIANS 2 AND THE HOLY DAYS

When many of us came into contact with the church and started learning about God's truth a lot of us had at least one friend who tried to convince us out of what we believe. When I learned about God's truth as a teenager I had one school friend who followed a famous mainstream televangelist at the time.

When he found out about my interest in "Armstrongism" he did his best to try and convert me out of it. One book he gave me in the process had all these "biblical" counterarguments against various doctrines of cults which we were lumped into. In trying to debunk the keeping of the holy days certain verses in the middle of Colossians 2 were interpreted a certain way to say that we shouldn't keep the Holy Days.

I would like to go through this small passage of Colossians 2 and go through whether it supports or disproves the Holy Days as claimed by many people.

As we read this passage I am going to suggest some edits to certain words and phrases in the text. One edit will be a more accurate translation and the others will be synonyms to what is in your translation but once we put these edits in and go through the verses again at the end of this little mini study you will find that the Bible's reading of these verses will be very clear and self-explanatory just from reading it.

The verses that are used to discredit the holy days are verses 14 to 17 of Colossians 2. Critics of the holy days have basically three arguments against the holy days. One uses verse 14 and the other two use verses 16 and 17.

Let's now take a look at those verses one by one and let's start our mini Bible Study a verse back in verse 13. Starting from verse 13 we read:

"And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."

The King James Version renders verse 14 as "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us". The use of the word "ordinances" here in the King James has led many Protestant critics of the holy days to claim that these ordinances are the ceremonial laws in the book of Moses which have been nailed to the cross and we are no longer obliged to keep its laws.

The handwriting of requirements or ordinances is said here to be against us. If these ordinances were Old Testament laws they might be obsolete but they wouldn't be against us.

The King James translation "handwriting of ordinances" is a poor translation. The handwriting of requirements or ordinances is from the Greek cheirographon dogmaison. The Greek phrase "cheirographon dogmaison" should be more correctly translated as a "written record of lawbreaking". A cheirographon dogmaison was a specific legal document. In ancient times the accuser would present the cheirographon dogmaison to the middle of

the court room. It was this written record of our lawbreaking not Old Testament laws that was nailed to the cross.

Jesus has nailed our written record of our lawbreaking to the cross. The charges against us – the record of our breaking of God’s holy law demanding the death penalty – has been nailed to the cross NOT the keeping of any of God’s laws.

For those who like to mark up their Bibles my first suggested edit if your Bible says “the handwriting of ordinances” in verse 14 is to change that to “the written record of our lawbeaking”.

Let’s continue on from verse 15:

“Having stripped rulers and authorities, He made a show of them publicly, triumphing over them in it. Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or in respect of a feast, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath.”

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Let me quote a typical explanation of this passage by those who reject the holy days. This is from the booklet called “What Scripture Says About the Annual Festivals” put out by Grace Communion International formerly known as the Worldwide Church of God:

The clearest point in the whole passage is that we shouldn’t let people judge us regarding these things — not other Christians, not even people in our own fellowship. Salvation doesn’t depend on our observance of dietary rules or specific festivals. Christ is the judge, and we are to obey him rather than human traditions.

Does this verse imply that we can be saved whether we keep these days or not? Yes. That harmonizes well with the principle Paul gave in another situation (Romans 14:4-6). Some people regard the day as special to the Lord, and others regard it as optional, also basing their belief on their desire to obey the Lord. Each should be fully convinced, bringing every thought into submission to the Lord, but we are not to judge each other, since Christ is our Lord and our Judge.

Is this what the passage really means or is this taking this passage out of context? We’ll see shortly that this explanation is not taking into account what Paul says in other verses in this chapter.

For those who like to mark up their Bibles you might like to make a note next to verse 16 of the other verses in Colossians 2 that give the proper context of what Paul is warning about here in verse 16. Now the verses that explain the context for verse 16 are verses 8 and verses 20 through to verse 23. You might want to write next to verse 16 – see verses 8 and verses 20 to 23.

The first thing we need to understand here is the Colosse in Asia Minor or Turkey was a church that had a mixture of Jewish and Gentile members.

In verse 6 and 7 Paul says:

“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.” So he urges them to continue in what they have been taught in their local synagogues from the scriptures.

Then in verse 8 he tells them of the false teachings to watch out for: “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.”

He tells them to resist philosophy and the traditions of men. Now this is hardly a description for Old Testament festivals even if they were no longer required to be kept. He would never insult Old Testament laws, even those of sacrifices that were no longer to be kept, by calling them philosophy or traditions of men.

Now let's go down to verse 20 where Paul gives further detail of these false teachings that he is warning them about. He says:

“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.”

Paul here is very clearly describing Gnostic beliefs which all biblical scholars are well aware of were in vogue at this time. These Gnostics practiced asceticism which was an austere self-discipline that included abstaining from various foods and drink and fleshly pleasures. In our modern day context it would be a little like some people pushing that everyone should be vegetarian and never drink alcohol even though such restrictions are not found in the Bible.

This is why Paul says “let no one judge you in food or in drink” in verse 16 and why the phrase “neglect of the body” is used in verse 23. He describes this worldly asceticism as doctrines of men and as self-imposed religion not ever coming from God.

Let's read verses 15 and 16 again with that perspective of people pushing abstinence of certain foods and drinks that God never forbid. From verse 15 it says:

“Having stripped rulers and authorities, He made a show of them publicly, triumphing over them in it. Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or in respect of a feast, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath.”

Some critics were saying you shouldn't celebrate the sabbath and holy days in a festive way eating certain foods and drinking alcohol. Paul says it is good to celebrate as Christ triumphed over the forces of evil at the cross and Paul says don't let others criticise the manner in which you keep the sabbath and holy days. He never said not to keep those holy days.

In the UCG booklet "God's Holy Day Plan" on page 61 explains verse 16 this way:

The heretics condemned the Colossian church for the manner in which the Colossians observed the Holy Days. Notice that they didn't challenge the days themselves. It was the physical enjoyment of them — rejoicing and feasting — that provoked the objections of these false teachers... Paul was telling the Colossians to ignore these heretics' judgments and criticisms about their enjoyment of the eating and drinking aspects of God's festivals.

My second suggested edit is in verse 16. If your Bible says "in respect of" or "regarding a festival" I would suggest replacing that with "the manner in which you keep a festival"

Continuing on with the next verse, verse 17 Paul goes onto say: "For these [talking about the sabbath and the holy days] are a shadow of things to come, but the body [or substance] is of Christ."

In the Grace Communion International booklet I referred to earlier it explains verse 17 this way in its attempt to say that the holy days are no longer required to be kept:

"Festivals, new moons and Sabbaths are shadows pointing to the reality, which is Christ...Just as in the case of circumcision, when we have been given the spiritual reality, we are not bound by physical worship rules."

This explanation ignores one fascinating little gem in verse 17. Paul says about these days that they "are a shadow of things **to come**." How can these things be done away with by Christ's sacrifice if what they picture hasn't happened yet such as the prophesied end-time events pictured by the latter festivals of the Feast of Trumpets through to the Last Great Day?

Notice what the Encyclopaedia Britannica says about the early New Testament Church of God:

The sanctity of special times [referring to Easter and Christmas] was an idea absent from the minds of the first Christians... [who] continued to observe the Jewish festivals, though in a new spirit, as commemorations of events which those festivals had foreshadowed" (vol. 8, p. 828, 11th edition).

The early church believers kept the Jewish festivals with a new spirit commemorating events they foreshadowed such as Christ's sacrifice as well as those end-time events to come when Jesus Christ will in future set up the Kingdom on this earth.

The irony of celebrating events yet future that we look forward to really struck home to me when a co-worker asked me about the meaning of one of these days and as I was saying it I was struck by how strange it must sound that I was celebrating something that was yet to happen.

My third suggested edit if you are marking up your Bible is to cross out “things to come” here in verse 17 and write in “of future events”.

Let’s now read verses 13 to 17 again but this time with the suggested edits which should make this passage very clear and self-explanatory:

“And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the written record of our lawbreaking that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

“Having stripped rulers and authorities, He made a show of them publicly, triumphing over them in it. Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or the manner in which you keep a festival, or a new moon, or the sabbath. For these are a shadow of of future events, but the body [or fullness or substance] is of Christ.”

So, in conclusion, Colossians 2 has nothing to do with doing away with the Old Testament holy days but was a warning about rejecting and ignoring the criticisms of Gnostic heretics who wanted them to follow their austere regulations of not eating, drinking and enjoying themselves on the holy days that the Colossians were themselves keeping.