

Did Paul Attack the Old Testament Law in Colossians 2:14-17?

Eric V. Snow, sermonette, 8-29-09, Ann Arbor, MI, UCG-IA

Did Jesus' sacrifice nail the Old Testament law to the cross? Even when we obey the Old Testament law, is it against us?

Because the Sabbath and Holy Days are shadows of future events in God's plan for humanity, did Christ's coming fulfill them? To be more specific, did the Apostle Paul tell the Colossians not to observe God's law? In a mere four verses of the book of Colossians, did Paul obliterate the Sabbath, the Holy Days, the clean/unclean meat distinction and the whole Old Testament law?

Outside of the book of Galatians, it seems that people who teach that Christians no longer need to obey God's law find one of their happiest "hunting grounds" in Colossians 2. But as we'll see today, that's not what Paul taught here.

**S.P.S. So today, I'll show that
Colossians 2:14-17 does not abolish the
Old Testament law for Christians.**

Today, you'll get a "2 for 1" deal from me, since two difficult Scriptures appear so close to each other.

Col. 2:8-15

This chapter's general context is important for understanding verse 14: What is Paul attacking? Is it "Judaizers" who wish to impose circumcision on gentile converts to Christianity?

Verse 8, 20, "elementary principles" (NASB), "rudiments" (KJV), "principles" (NKJV): The Greek word here is "stoicheia." It's crucial to understand this Greek word in order to interpret this chapter correctly. What this word exactly means in this context has long been argued about. The Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich Greek-English lexicon (pp. 768-769) says "elements (of

learning), fundamental principles” of basic education is one (possible) meaning. It could also refer to the basic “elemental substances” or “stuff” that the universe is made of. Some scholars believe it refers to the “elemental spirits” which ancient religious teachers associated with the heavenly bodies. After all, the planets are named for false pagan gods, right? People in the ancient world used to look up at the sky, at the stars, at what we call “outer space” today as divine, as a realm of the gods, as spiritual. Hence, “stoicheia” also was used to refer to the heavenly bodies, like stars, planets, the moon, etc.

Given this chapter’s context, Paul wasn’t denouncing Judaizers but gentile outsiders who were judging, even confusing, the Colossians. Apparently an early form of Gnosticism was influencing or at least bothering the Colossian Christians.

Verse 14: “Cheirographon.” The KJV was translated centuries before scholars better understood this word. It means (B-A-G, p. 880): “A (handwritten) document, specif. a certificate of indebtedness, bond.” KJV’s “handwriting of ordinances that was contrary to us” could be confused with a description of the OT law, unlike the NASB’s translation.

*Jesus’ sacrifice cancelled the debt of our sins, not the law itself. This is a common confusion among many in the Protestant world.

Col. 2:16-17

“Let no one”—refers to people outside the church, i.e., the Gnostic heretics who are in religious bondage to the elementary spirits or heavenly bodies supposedly controlled by them.

As Green's "Literal Translation" shows, it was about "eating" and "drinking," not just "food" and "drink."

The scholar Douglas De Lacey ("Sabbath to Lord's Day," p. 182) explains the correct meaning of this text: "As most commentators agree, the judge is likely to be a man of ascetic tendencies who objects to the Colossian eating and drinking. The most natural way of taking the rest of the passage is not that he also imposes a ritual of feast days, but rather that he objects to certain elements of such observation."

So instead condemning Christians for observing the Sabbath and Holy Days, ironically this text actually proves that the Colossians were observing them!

V. 17

KJV is best here: "Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ."

Hmm. They “**ARE**” still shadows of things to come, even after Christ came? Christ’s arrival didn’t “fulfill” them and thus abolish them? The fall Holy Days not “fulfilled” by this definition. So then, was the Passover “fulfilled,” and thus abolished, but not the Day of Atonement, since it portrays in advance a future event? Shadows become memorials. The moral law was not abolished because Christ obeyed it, like the laws vs. murder and adultery.

What verb should be inserted into the last clause of verse 17? Where should it be put? That’s up to the translators, and their general biases are obvious.

Col. 2:16-18

“Body of Christ” is the Church (cf. I Cor. 12:27): Ascetic Gnostic, i.e., outsiders, shouldn’t judge how church members observe these days, eat, drink, etc. But “the body of Christ [judges it]” is better, serves as a contrast to verse 16’s point.

So in conclusion, Colossians 2:14-17 didn't sweep away the Old Testament law for Christians. Paul in these verses taught that Christ's sacrifice cancelled the debt of our sins and that we shouldn't let outsiders judge how we observe God's Holy Days and Sabbath. Ironically, when properly understood, the verses that supposedly abolish God's law, Sabbath, and Holy Days actually prove they are still in force!