

## *Colossians 2:16-17*

Whatever else these verses refer to, they undoubtedly do refer to believers and sabbath-observance:

Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

We are not talking about ‘the ceremonial law’. As I have explained, the threefold division of the law is unwarranted, lacking any scriptural proof, simply assumed and imposed upon Scripture. The notion came from Thomas Aquinas.<sup>1</sup> When Scripture speaks of the law of Moses it means the entire law. This point, though general, is relevant and highly significant.

Coming to the particular, the apostle’s command in Colossians 2:16-17 rules out this ‘ceremonial law’ escape route so much liked by sabbatarians.<sup>2</sup> Paul exhorts the Colossian believers not to let anyone impose any shadow of the old covenant upon them. Believers, he declares, are not obliged to keep any old-covenant rules, commandments and laws concerning diet, feasts or days, including sabbath-observance.

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<sup>1</sup> This is generally assumed. Aquinas certainly systematised it. But whoever was responsible, it wasn’t the Holy Spirit in Scripture. See my *Christ* pp100-104,392-400.

<sup>2</sup> Using their terminology, do sabbatarians think that the fourth commandment is partly moral and partly ceremonial, and so shuffle ‘the seventh day’ aspect off into the ceremonial, and thus feel free to dispense with it? Parker lists a number of Reformers and Puritans who took that line (Parker pp97-98). If so, as Parker went on, quoting John Sprint’s work of 1607: ‘However... there were three “points of difference [about this] among the godly learned”. These concerned whether keeping the seventh day or any other was part of the moral law, whether the first day of the week was established by divine truth and tied to the conscience, and whether the Lord’s day might be changed again to another day’. What do today’s sabbatarians think of this? And what are the scriptural grounds for their choice?

This is his point. This is what he says. Under no circumstances must believers allow themselves to be brought into bondage.

Let me develop this a little. The ‘judging’ is almost certainly an act of condemnation, of disapproval, not approval. Paul told the Colossians not to let themselves feel threatened by those who disapproved of their attitude to food, drink and Jewish days, including sabbaths, nor let themselves be pressurised into keeping such.

In light of this, to think that Paul would happily countenance, let alone advocate, sabbath-keeping, is hard to swallow – especially when he immediately dismisses the practice, calling it by its proper name: a shadow. This is a point of the utmost importance. It is the crux here. What, in this context, is a shadow? The word ‘shadow’ is used by artists to denote either a rough outline of an object which they mean to draw or paint, or its silhouette. The sabbath was one of several old-covenant shadows of Christ, all of which were fulfilled in him.

And the New Testament is explicit, unequivocal: how wrong it is to give up the substance and go back to the shadow (Col. 2:17). How strongly Scripture speaks against it (Heb. 8:1 – 10:18). It would be akin to offering sacrifices. Consequently, it is unthinkable that Paul should countenance sabbath-observance for believers. Believers have Christ, they are in Christ, and Christ is in them – they must not cling to the shadow. This of course is because salvation in Christ is the true and only rest; the sabbath was merely a shadow of it. Who would want the shadow when he has the real thing? To go to the shadow when the reality is here is an insult to God!

As for the apostle’s use of ‘sabbaths’ in Colossians 2, the plural does not in any way leave the concept of the weekly sabbath separate and intact from his command. See, for instance, the use of ‘sabbaths’ in Exodus 31:13-14 and Ezekiel 20:12-26. The weekly sabbath, most definitely, is involved. This is borne out by the way in which the various versions translate the plural of Colossians 2:16:

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** (NIV).

Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or **a sabbath** (ESV).

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or **a sabbath day** (NASB).

Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of **the sabbath days** (AV).<sup>3</sup>

These versions are right. The Greek lexicons speak of the plural standing for the singular.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it will not do to try to shunt the apostle's words into 'festivals, in addition to the weekly sabbath'. In any case, even though there were other sabbath festivals, Paul was talking about the whole lot – including the weekly sabbath. All are gone. All of them! None should be kept by believers. Believers should no more keep a weekly sabbath than keep a festal or annual sabbath.

Notice further that these verses (Col. 2:16-17) also refer to food and drink, which have nothing whatsoever to do with Christ, 'for the kingdom of God is not food and drink' (Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8). In all this, the verses refer to the old covenant – to Jewish festivals, ceremonies, diet and, especially, days – 'a new moon' and 'sabbaths' (2 Kings 4:23; 1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 31:3; Ezra 3:4-5; Neh. 10:32-33; Isa. 1:13-14; Ezek. 45:17; 46:1-6; Hos. 2:11) – things which were 'a shadow' of Christ. They were a part of 'the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us' which has been fulfilled, removed and abolished in Christ (Col. 2:14; see also Eph. 2:15). The only time the new moon is mentioned in the New Testament is here in Colossians 2:16,

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<sup>3</sup> The italics means it was added by the translators. Literally – rightly – the AV reads 'the sabbath'. This is why I have had to highlight the phrase in bold.

<sup>4</sup> Compare the strengthening of the concept of 'the law' by the omission of the definite article. See my *Christ* p26.

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where we are told it has nothing to do with believers. Believers should keep none of these days, not a feast day, new moon or sabbath. This is what Paul was saying. The sabbath (as a day) has been fulfilled and abolished, since it was a shadow representing and pointing forward to Christ, the true sabbath (Heb. 3:7-19; 4:1-11). Believers should not keep the sabbath. Christ is our sabbath. We should not cling to shadows. Nor should we allow anybody to impose them on us. This is the plain teaching of Colossians 2:16-17. Sabbatarians are flying in the face of apostolic teaching, attempting the very thing Paul denied and forbade.