

A PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF COLOSSIANS 2:16

Wyn Laidig, 2013

TheSabbathGathering.org

Note: It is probably better to read this passage in the ESV, rather than the NASB or NIV (as well as some other translations) which have more translation issues and biases, some of which I'll mention below.

Colossians 2:16 (ESV)

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.

Remember Paul's mission is primarily to Gentiles, not Jews. The Colossians, living in Asia Minor, are predominantly Gentiles living in a very pagan land. They are living under great pressure of their fellow Romans, who are pushing them to conform again to their pagan culture. Perhaps some are being drawn away, back into the practices of the pagans around them, of their former lives. These are the traditions of men and the elementary principles of the world which are opposite the teachings of Messiah:

Colossians 2:8 (ESV)

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

Note that the elemental spirits of the world are according to human tradition. This cannot be referring to Torah. Torah was not human tradition, but communicated by God himself. And certainly Paul would never consider the Torah to be an "elemental spirit of the world".

Paul goes on to explain to the Colossians that their sins are totally forgiven through Messiah. He is saying that they don't need to participate in pagan rituals. There is nothing to be gained by that. Messiah did it all for them already. The debt of their sins has been totally cancelled.

Therefore, Paul goes on to argue, don't listen to those around you who are critical of your Godly practices. Don't succumb to letting them pass judgment upon you because you hold to keeping Torah. The believers were no doubt living very differently from the pagan world around them, and being criticized for it. They didn't participate in the drunken "guild feasts" or eat the meat sacrificed to the idols as part of the worship ceremony. Instead, they kept the Sabbath. They ate and drank different things, no doubt keeping the dietary laws of Torah. They would have celebrated the beginning of each new month as instructed by Torah. They would have kept the Appointed Times (see for example 1 Cor 5:8). So Paul says don't let anyone judge you for keeping these Godly observances:

Colossians 2:16–17 (ESV)

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.

Why does he say to not let anyone judge them for keeping these days? Because they are a shadow of things to come! They are important special days, with meaning, that foreshadow things to come – the substance of which is Messiah.

Note the word translated "but" that begins the last clause: "but the substance belongs to Christ." The "but" is the Greek particle **de** which is a general particle that can be commonly translated as *either* "and" or "but":

δέ (de) one of the most common Greek particles, used to connect one clause to another, either to express contrast or simple continuation. When it is felt that there is some contrast between clauses—though the contrast is often scarcely discernible—the most common translation is 'but'. When a simple connective is desired, without contrast being clearly implied, 'and' will suffice, and in certain occurrences the marker may be left untranslated. (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. 2000. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*.)

In this particular passage, there is no need to translate this word as “but”. The more common translation of **de** is actually “and”. There need be no implied contrast between the first clause and the second. Rather, it seems that the second **builds upon** the first. Translating **de** with the more normal meaning of “and” captures this **continuation** better.

The NASB does a poor job with this verse since it adds the word “*mere*”, as well as translates **de** as “*but*”:

Colossians 2:16-17 (NASB)

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— things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

The word “*mere*” isn’t there in the Greek, and leads the reader to discount the former clause as being insignificant. Both the “but” and the “*mere*” work together to give the reader a false understanding of contrast and insignificance that is not there in the Greek.

The NIV adds even more negative bias, again not in the Greek, translating “these are a shadow of the things that **were** to come – the reality, **however**, is found in Christ.”

Colossians 2:17 (NIV)

These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

The “**were**” makes it sound like it already happened, but that’s not what the Greek says. It says literally “a shadow of things about to come” – in the future. Then the NIV adds “the reality, however, is found in Christ”. This is poor translation which communicates thoughts that are not present in the Greek.

In summary, when you read the Text correctly, with no bias, you see that Paul is saying that the Godly observances are both shadows of what is to come AND the substance of Messiah. We know from looking at the appointed time how all of those are truly shadows of the Messiah. He is the true substance that these days represent.

So the truth of this passage is that Paul is really **commending** the Gentile believers for keeping the Sabbath and the other Appointed Times, and telling them not to let anyone “judge” them for doing so. Furthermore, they should be keeping these special days because they are symbols of what is to come (events relating to the end times and the fellowship and enjoyment of the presence of the Father for all eternity) and also symbols of the Messiah Himself.

This conclusion is further justified by examining the context shown in the remainder of Colossians 2. Here Paul makes it clear that he is addressing false teaching associated with asceticism, which he specifically mentions in Col 2:18 and Col 2:23. Also in Col 2:21, we note that “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” refers to the ascetic teachings of denying one’s self. Asceticism is the opposite of celebration. This is the essence of the conflict with the Appointed Times, Sabbaths, and “new moons”.

The Appointed Times (except for Yom Kippur), the Sabbaths, the beginning of each month – all these were times of great feasting and celebration. This is in direct contrast (total opposition) with the teachings of asceticism, which Paul addresses as being human philosophy and elementary principles of the world, rather than the teachings of Scripture.