

# The Sabbath in Colossians 2?

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## Introduction

Colossae was primarily a Gentile city, but it also had a substantial Jewish population. The church there was not one that Paul raised up, nor is it likely that he ever visited this city. Chap. 2 of Paul's epistle to the Colossians covers a range of subject matter, so there is a question what his focal point is. However, there is no question what the focal point of the modern debate is. It is vs. 16, and within that, the word "Sabbath(s)" (*sabbatōn*). In this paper I challenge the assumption that Paul mentions the weekly Sabbath in Col 2.

The nature of the Colossian errors used to be a matter of dispute, but to-day there is widespread agreement about their outline, though there are still obscure details which are a matter of controversy. Evidently it was a syncretist movement of a Jewish-Gnostic character which had followers in Colossae. It is characterized by two traits:

1. A theory about the "elements of the world" (*stoicheia tou kosmou* 2,8 20), i.e., the angelic powers; so Paul speaks of "religion of angels" (*thrēskeia tōn aggelōn* 2, 18). These elements of the world are a series of stages of intermediate beings in which the "fullness of the Godhead", the Pleroma, dwells (cf. 1, 19; 2, 9). They were also the cause of creation (cf. 1, 15-17). According to the false teachers they exercise power over men who are subject to them through birth and destiny. To gain reconciliation with God it is not enough to honour Christ, these beings also must be worshipped. This error is called "philosophy" (2, 8), a name which implies that it is derived from a cosmic theory, that is a Gnosis.

2. The obligation to observe a number of prescriptions about cleanliness, to celebrate certain days, and to refrain from particular foods and drinks (2, 16 21 sqq.). This asceticism was probably enjoined and practiced because of the angelic powers; it was clearly influenced by Jewish legalism (cf. especially Sabbath, new moon 2, 16; circumcision 2, 11); however, neither circumcision nor the observance of the Mosaic Law were actually imposed though both were held in high esteem.<sup>1</sup>

The problem was two-fold and so it would be reasonable to assume that Paul addresses both points – the Jewish one and the Gnostic one. These got blended in practice, but in theory the two were quite distinct. Judaism was not an ascetic religion, but Gnosticism was.

In regard to where Gnosticism came from, and when, its attitudes toward materiality remind me of Plato, with his ideal forms where nothing real is perfect. Only the concept of a circle can be perfectly circular. Once you draw it, it's not really round any more. It might look round, but somewhere – you might not be able to see it – there's a little imperfection that prevents it from being perfectly so. For Gnostics, however, it wasn't just that the world was imperfect. It was deeply and inherently evil.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1958), p. 415-16.

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnosticism>.

## Structure

Verses 1-5 are a general introduction to the chapter as a whole. Vss. 6-10 correspond to vss. 20-23 and within this framework, vss. 11-15 and 16-19 are separate sections. There are two things here. One is clearly Jewish in origin (circumcision, dietary restrictions, feast days), the other is Gnostic ("philosophy," "basic principles of this world" [vss. 8, 20], "an appearance of wisdom," "harsh treatment of the body" [vs. 23]). It was an unlikely combination. For a rough overview of the content of vss. 6-23 see table 1 (below).

Table 1  
Structural Overview of Colossians 2:8-19

Verse	Negative	Positive
Introduction		
6-7		Receive Christ, continue to walk in Him
8	(a) Hollow and deceptive philosophy, (b) which depends on human tradition and (c) the basic principles of this world	Christ
9		Christ, the fullness of the Deity
10	Every power and authority	Christ
Verses 11-15		
11	A circumcision done by the hands of men	The circumcision done by Christ
12		Buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God
13-14	<sup>13</sup> (a) When you were dead	(d) God made you alive with Christ
	(b) in your sins	(e) He forgave us all our sins
	(c) and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature	<sup>14</sup> having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross
15	the powers and authorities	the cross
Verses 16-19		
16	Food and drink	
	Religious festivals, New Moon celebrations, sabbaths	
17	These are a shadow of the things that were to come	The reality, however, is found in Christ
18-19	False humility and the worship of angels	He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.
	Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.	
Conclusion		
20-21	The basic principles of this world	
	Its rules: <sup>21</sup> "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"?	
22	Human commands and teachings	
23	An appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body	
	Sensual indulgence	

In table 1 notice certain relationships. The term "basic principles of this world" occurs both in vs. 8 (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*) and vs. 20 (*tōn stoicheiōn tou kosmou*). "Human tradition" (vs. 8) corresponds to "human commands and teachings" (vs. 20). In the context of the proposed fact that Plato might be casting a shadow over what eventually became Gnosticism, what Paul is talking about here is not "the tradition of the elders" (Matt 15:2; Mark 7:3, 5) but "philosophy" (vs. 8), which is something altogether different.

Judaism knew nothing of philosophy in the Hellenic sense of the term. Philosophy looks within and builds one idea on another to achieve a rational synthesis; Scripture has to do with revelation from an outside source. In this framework Scripture and philosophy were logical opposites. Some Jews (e.g., Philo) were philosophers, but this was not because they studied Scripture; it was because they studied Plato, which breathes an entirely different atmosphere from that of Scripture. Recall also that Gnostics were fundamentally ascetic in their outlook, whereas Judaism was not. Here is the context for what Paul calls "harsh treatment of the body" (vs. 23). Such Gnostic concepts were popular among Gnostic Jews and Gnostic Christians, but they have nothing to do with Scripture. The harshest thing Jews did was occasional fasting.

### Verses 11-15

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ,<sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.<sup>13</sup> When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,<sup>14</sup> having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.<sup>15</sup> And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col 2:13-14)

*The passage.* In vss. 11-15 we have references to Jewish influences at Colossae. Notice the word "circumcision" (twice in vs. 11) and "uncircumcision" (vs. 13). Nor is it just the mention of the word. The concept of circumcision, in which a small bit of the flesh is cast off literally, is here compared with burial and resurrection ("buried" [vs. 12], "dead in your sins," "alive with Christ" [vs. 13]), where the reference is to Christian baptism with its symbolism of putting aside the entire former life and rising to a new life in Christ. "He forgave us all our sins" (vs. 13), in which we were formerly dead.

Table 2  
Verses 13-14

Verses	First Part (Vs. 13a)	Second Part (Vss. 13b-14)
13-14	When you were <i>dead</i>	God made you <i>alive</i> with Christ
	in your <i>sins</i>	He forgave us all our <i>sins</i>
	and in the <i>uncircumcision</i> of your sinful nature	having canceled the written code, with its <i>regulations</i> , that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross

Notice the word "sins." This corresponds with "uncircumcision." Stephen at his defense before the Sanhedrin said, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" (Acts 7:51). In his mind, having "uncircumcised hearts and ears" meant resisting the Holy Spirit, i.e., persisting in sin. So the two occurrences of the word "sins" and the word "uncircumcision," all in vs. 13, have to do with refusing to obey God. Through the death of His Son on the cross God cancelled this guilt. But what does this have to do with the "written code" Paul speaks of? Does this code contain a definition of sin? That's not what Paul says. He says it contains "regulations" and that it was "against us" (vs. 14).

Does defining sin increase our guilt? In a sense, yes (see 1 Cor 15:56), by increasing our awareness of guilt and bringing it home to our minds. In another sense, no. The law does not make us guilty. Sin makes us guilty. The law merely tells us what sin is. And this is good. It is to our advantage to know, so we're not constantly being caught on points we didn't know about. If this is so, then the law itself is not against us. Sin is against us. The guilt that results from sin is against us. The covenant curses are against us. The law which tells us about these things is not against us, because "through the law we become conscious of sin" (Rom 3:20). This in turn leads us to Christ so as to receive forgiveness (see Gal 3:24). By telling us what God wants and doesn't want, the law is not against us, but rather works to our advantage.

So what "written code" had "regulations" and "was against us," or "stood opposed to us" (vs. 14)? Consider two possibilities. The ten commandments were written on stone and the tablets kept inside the ark of the covenant in the second apartment of the sanctuary. But there was another book *beside* the ark – a copy of Deuteronomy – and this contained both regulations and a list of covenant blessings and curses in chaps. 28-30.

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. <sup>16</sup> For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. <sup>17</sup> But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, <sup>18</sup> I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. <sup>19</sup> **This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you** that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live <sup>20</sup> and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Deut 30:15-20)

"Death and destruction" (vs. 15). "You will certainly be destroyed" (vs. 18). "You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess" (vs. 18). "Death" (vs. 19). "Curses" (vs. 19). Do such things stand "opposed to us"? In Deut 30:19 heaven and earth "witness against you." In Deut 31:26 it's "this Book of the Law."

"Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God. There it will remain as a witness against you" (Deut 31:26)

That's a handwriting – a handwriting of ordinances. Do any of the terms we have been discussing ("death," "destruction," "destroyed," "curses") occur in the ten commandments? No. But they are all here in Deuteronomy. Consider that clause, "You will not live long in the land

you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess" (Deut 30:18). In the fifth commandment God says, "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Exod 20:12). This is the exact opposite of the covenant curse in Deuteronomy. "You will not live long . . . ;" "so that you *may* live long . . . ." Paul is not talking in Col 2:14 about the ten commandments – the constitution of God's government – but about the covenant curses that would follow from breaking them. Christ nailed the curses and regulations to the cross. For that matter, He also nailed the covenant blessings to the cross. The one cross has both blessings and curses inseparably attached to it in Christ. In regard to Christians and the covenant blessings, consider passages such as the following.

So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Gal 3:9)

He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. (Gal 3:14)

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. (Gal 3:14)

*Discussion.* The exact expression "against us" (*hupenantion humin*) occurs only here, but in Greek translation the word *hupenantion* by itself occurs in two other passages (Job 13:24; 33:10). Both times the word "enemy" is used.

Why do you hide your face and consider me **your enemy** [*hupenantion soi*]? (Job 13:24)

Yet God has found fault with me; he considers me **his enemy** [*hupenantion*]. (Job 33:10)

The corresponding Hebrew expression is *l'ôyēb* ("as an enemy"), which occurs in these two verses and also in Isa 63:10 and Mic 2:8.

Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became **their enemy** [*l'ôyēb*] and he himself fought against them. (Isaiah 63:10)

Lately my people have risen up **like an enemy** [*l'ôyēb*]. You strip off the rich robe from those who pass by without a care, like men returning from battle. (Micah 2:8)

This raises the question who or what the enemy actually is. In Job's case, he had done nothing wrong to deserve the testing he underwent, but when we are punished, it's for our sins. The source of the problem is squarely on us.

For our offenses are many in your sight, **and our sins testify against us**. Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities: (Isaiah 59:12)

Although **our sins testify against us**, O LORD, do something for the sake of your name. For our backsliding is great; we have sinned against you. (Jeremiah 14:7)

When we get ourselves into trouble and God's blessings seem far away, it is not because He is our enemy, or because the law is our enemy, but because we have started

acting again like His enemy. When Paul says, "He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross" (Col 2:13-14), here is the context for his saying so.

The covenant curses are one part of this, but another is circumcision, mentioned earlier in the same paragraph. Circumcision is mentioned only twice in Deuteronomy (10:16; 30:6), but a number of times in the other books of the law (Gen 17:10 and elsewhere; Exod 4:26; 12:44, 48; Lev 12:3). Circumcision followed Paul's ministry like a dark cloud. He had to deal with it everywhere he worked. When Paul speaks of "regulations" in Col 2:14, circumcision has got to be one of them.

*Summary.* The change that took place at the cross is not a change in God. He is still holy now just as He always was before. Nor is it a change in His law. That's holy too (see Rom 7:12). It's a change in us, giving us a new relationship with both God and His law. This change is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, we would all be lost. God did not send His Son into the world so He could justify changing His attitude toward us, but so we could have a different attitude toward Him. He does not change. His law does not change. These things in and of themselves were never the problem, so how could changing them be a solution?

### Verses 16-19

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.<sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.<sup>18</sup> Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.<sup>19</sup> He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. (Col 2:16-19)

*Resources.* The defining research on Col 2:16 is by Ron DuPreez. His book has gone through a number of editions.<sup>3</sup> Any of them are worth studying, but the latest edition was produced by Andrews University Press and is by far the best. The title of the most recent edition is *Judging the Sabbath: Discovering What Can't Be Found in Colossians 2:16*.<sup>4</sup>

I won't try to replicate every feature of DuPreez' argument here. If you ever come across a copy of his book you'll see why. It is exhaustively complete. But the bottom line is, if you want to understand Col 2:16, start with the text of Col 2, then study DuPreez.

*The passage.* If we were to take Paul's word *sabbatōn* entirely out of its context, this could be a reference to the seventh-day weekly Sabbath. The same word occurs ten times in the New Testament and is translated both "Sabbath" (Matt 28:1; Luke 4:16; Acts 13:14; 16:13) and "week" (Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7). Syntactically such an interpretation would be possible, but is this the best explanation? Only if there is not one better. In this case, there is.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, *Sabbath Put to Rest: A Scriptural Study of Colossians 2:16* (Berrien Springs: LithoTech Graphic Services, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2008.

In Col 2:16 the word *sabbatōn* is mentioned along with two other terms – *heortēs* "religious festival" and *neomēnias* "new moon celebration." If we want precedents for Paul's usage, it is not enough to find examples of the third term. We must find examples of all three terms used together in comparable ways. Three-part groupings of terms similar to the list Paul uses occur in Num 28:1-29:40; 1 Chr 23:30-31; 2 Chr 2:4; 8:12-13; 31:3; and Neh 10:33-34; Ezek 45:13-17, and 46:1-15. Of the eight, Ezek 45:13-17 comes closest and might be said to provide a parallel, but it is not the best parallel because there is one better, and besides, Ezekiel includes terms not in Paul's list. But the sequence is right. The other seven passages give the references to time in ascending order (Sabbaths, monthly festivals, yearly festivals), rather than descending order (yearly festivals, monthly festivals, Sabbaths) as Paul has them. In other words, in the other seven passages the sequence is backwards.

There is one other thing to notice. In all eight passages the context is positive, i.e., the biblical writer is talking about what should be done on the Sabbaths, New Moon celebrations, and festivals referred to (or in the case of Ezek 45:13-17, the festivals, New Moon celebrations, and Sabbaths). In Colossians Paul is not speaking positively, nor is the writer he draws on in writing what he does. The wording found in Col 2:16 comes not from any of the above eight passages, but from Hos 2:11.

I will stop all her celebrations [Hebrew *kol-m'šôšā*]: her yearly festivals, her New Moons, her Sabbath days – all her appointed feasts. (Hos 2:11)

Here there are only three terms (in Greek translation *heortas*, *noumēnias*, and *sabbata*), the sequence of the terms is identical to Paul's,<sup>5</sup> and the intent is negative. Each of these facts strengthens present hypothesis that Col 2:16 is modeled on Hos 2:11.

Hosea's wording is a bit odd, however, for two reasons. He says "all her celebrations," but then uses a term that only refers to part of them. Not all of the annual convocations were festive. So how could the term "celebrations" (*māšôš*), or "festivals," to refer to "all" of them? On the other hand, since he uses the term *hag* (*haggāh*) to refer to "yearly festivals," why would he leave out both Trumpets and Day of Atonement, which are never called *hag*? At this point something in Hosea's choice of words doesn't seem to add up.

There were two distinct groupings of annual convocations in ancient Israel. One group (group A: Passover, Pentecost) is called *hag* "festival" (Hosea's term above), the other (group B: Trumpets, Day of Atonement) is never called *hag*. Trumpets and Day of Atonement are called "sabbaths," Passover and Pentecost are never called "sabbaths." Tabernacles occupies middle ground, since in Lev 23:39 it is called both *hag* and "sabbath" (thus we could say [+*hag*, +"sabbath"]), but Passover and Pentecost are consistently [+*hag*, -"sabbath"], while Trumpets and Day of Atonement are consistently [-*hag*, +"sabbath"]. The first group (plus Tabernacles) are joyous, the last two solemn. The first group (plus Tabernacles) are pilgrim festivals,<sup>6</sup> the last two solemn "rest" times.<sup>7</sup> Group B events (plus Tabernacles) are called "sabbaths," group A events are never called "sabbaths." Hosea was carefully aware of such distinctions. Thus our

<sup>5</sup> I give these terms in Greek translation to emphasize their connection with Col 2:16, where Paul is of course using Greek.

<sup>6</sup> Hebrew *hag* is linguistically cognate with Arabic *hajj* – a term that describes the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca.

<sup>7</sup> See summary in *Judging the Sabbath*, pp. 146-47.

first assumption should be that, even if his choice of words remains puzzling to us, he knew what he wanted to say and used his words correctly.

Consider one additional fact. The Sabbath was not intended to be somber, but joyful. Through Isaiah God says we should call the Sabbath "a delight [*óneg*]" (Isa 58:13). That would fit with Hosea's word *māsôś* "celebration." But bear in mind that the people Hosea was writing to had gotten some things wrong. That's why he was writing to them. For them the Sabbath was not a time of joy, as intended, but a bother (see Amos 8:5). So why does the prophet use the term *šabbāt* (*w<sup>e</sup>šabbātāh*) in Hos 2:11? Answer: He wasn't referring to the weekly Sabbath.

As I reconstruct the situation, the word *šabbāt* in Hos 2:11 refers to the group B events of Trumpets and Day of Atonement, which had been transformed into times of empty levity. People came, had a good time, and left without ever considering the deep meaning God was trying to convey. Everything was turned backwards. The Sabbath, which ideally would have been joyful, had become a drudgery, and the solemn convocations of Trumpets and Day of Atonement had become merely a time to get back together with friends. So Hosea's expression (*māsôś*) is well chosen, the people really were celebrating Trumpets and Day of Atonement, rather than thinking about what those days signified and denying themselves through fasting and prayer. This is one reason why God was disgusted with His people at this time in history. In this model all the pieces fit perfectly, but notice that the explanation falls apart if we take *šabbāt* to mean Sabbath. It looks like "Sabbath," but there's a saying: If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. We look at the word and "Sabbath" is the only thing we can think of, but this is not what Hosea had in mind. He was talking about the group B events of Trumpets and Day of Atonement, and later on, in Col 2:16. This is also what Paul had in mind.

What Paul says, based on the above passage from Hosea, is best understood as being laid out in chiasmic form (ABA'). The convocations referred to are respectively yearly (group A), monthly, and yearly (group B). It would be possible to claim that the arrangement is linear (ABC) rather than chiasmic, and that the occasions referred to are respectively yearly (groups A and B), monthly, and weekly. But is this really possible? Group B convocations are never called *ḥag* "festival." They were not festive. Paul was not creating a paragraph out of thin air. He was drawing inspiration from an Old Testament passage. If so, the passage in question has got to be Hos 2:11.<sup>8</sup> This is the only which lists the convocations in the same order Paul uses and speaks of them negatively. The real point to notice, however, is that if Paul has Hos 2:11 in mind, he's not talking about the weekly seventh-day Sabbath when he uses the word *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16.

*Discussion.* If Hosea and Paul were both talking about the weekly Sabbath, what would this imply? The Sabbath was a constant reminder that God is the Creator of all things. Is this awareness optional? It is the basis for all true worship and a wall of protection against every form of idolatry. It is unlikely that God would threaten to remove a knowledge of the one fact that, more than any other, had the potential to protect Israel from idolatry. This is not what He's talking about in passages such as this one.

"Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands." (Malachi 1:10)

<sup>8</sup> Hosea is a book he cites frequently. See Rom 9:25 (Hos 2:23), 26-28 (Hos 1:10); 1 Cor 15:4 (Hos 6:2), 55 (Hos 13:14); 2 Cor 9:10 (Hos 10:12 LXX); Eph 6:17 (Hos 6:5);



He was disgusted with Israel and weary of their sacrifices, not because they kept the Sabbath, but because they often neglected to honor Him in a manner befitting His status as Creator.

"Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king," says the LORD Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations." (Mal 1:14)

## Discussion

The following three items are consistent with the idea that Paul has in mind something other than the weekly seventh-day Sabbath when he says what he does in vs. 16. These factors are respectively spiritual, grammatical, and contextual in nature.

### Spiritual things

If someone wants to come to Christ, but finds the Sabbath inconvenient, should we set the Sabbath aside so that such a person can come on his or her own terms? No. The Sabbath is not on the same level as circumcision. Before setting the Sabbath aside we should understand the significance it has on a spiritual level.

The Sabbath is a time when God approaches us, as He approached Adam and Eve (at the very most pleasant time of day), and invites us to spend the next day with Him. His presence has a sanctifying influence (see Exod 31:13; Ezek 20:12, 20), but even if it did not, God's presence – in the person of His Son – is the one element of Sabbath keeping that holds the biggest draw for the believing worshiper. This is the attraction. So if a person comes to Christ, and is drawn by Christ, why should spending a day with Him be distasteful? It may be that taking a whole day with Jesus would be inconvenient, depending on one's work schedule or whatever, but how much does Christ mean to us? Does it really make sense to say that someone can be drawn to Jesus but repelled by the idea of spending time with Him? It doesn't make sense to me. We are drawn to Him or we are not. Our willingness to undergo a minor inconvenience of this sort seems to be a reasonable way of knowing whether our hearts are really with Him.

The issues we are coming to now are spiritual ones. When we enter a faith relationship with Christ, we rest in confidence that what He has done – and is still doing – on our behalf is sufficient to meet all our needs. Because it is sufficient, and because it doesn't need to be added to, we can rest in the knowledge that He has already provided everything for us. We can say we believe this with or without the Sabbath, but this is what the Sabbath signifies on a spiritual level. At issue is the nature of our relationship to God. Our part of the relationship has to do with faith. We believe Him. His part of the relationship has to do with grace. He accepts us. He sends grace to us and we send faith to Him. Resting on the Sabbath is a beautiful way of signifying that we believe this.

There has always been a physical component in Sabbath keeping (as in, take a rest), but people have not always realized the depth of meaning that this implies. If some have missed this, the fact is unfortunate, but their failure does not change the nature of the meaning they failed to see. It is especially now, after the cross, that the spirituality of the Sabbath can be most

clearly perceived, because now we are able to look back and see what Jesus has done for us on the cross. On a spiritual level keeping the Sabbath – on the seventh day of each week, for a full twenty-four hours – is a public acknowledgement that we have found inner peace in a loving, trusting, confiding relationship with Jesus. We no longer need to worry, because we have everything we need in Him (see Matt 11:28-30). If this is true at all, it is true every day, and yet God asks us to demonstrate the fact on one particular day, and He tells us which one that is – the seventh day, the one we now call Saturday. This is not some difficult. It's not hard to take a rest, and it shouldn't be hard for a Christian to spend quality time with Jesus.

## Grammar

Notice that, as translated by NIV, the English words "a Sabbath" (vs. 16) are singular, while the corresponding Greek word *sabbatōn* is plural. This is not bad translating. There's a linguistic reason for the apparent discrepancy,<sup>9</sup> but in any case the word for "Sabbath" is often written as a plural in Greek,<sup>10</sup> even when the intended meaning is singular. So if the translation is singular in other passages, why shouldn't it be singular here? The reason why it should be considered plural here is the same as the reason why it should be considered singular in other passages, i.e., context.

What grammatical implications follow from using the English words, "a Sabbath"? Do they imply there is only one Sabbath, or only one type of sabbath? Not really. Consider an example. What meaning would our words convey if we said that a certain object was "a book"? The words are singular, but do they imply there is only one book, or only one type of book? Not at all. Instead they indicate that the object we're thinking of is a member of a larger class of objects, each of which can be called "a book." Saying "a book" requires us to believe there are many books, not that there is only one. So a singular English gloss does not bring out the meaning that those who argue for it might wish. Paul speaks of "a religious festival," "a New Moon celebration," and "a Sabbath day." There are many religious festivals, many new moon celebrations, and many sabbaths.<sup>11</sup>

The plurality of the word "These . . ." at the beginning of vs. 17 is consistent with what we have just said. "These are a shadow of the things that were to come." These religious festivals are a shadow, these new moon celebrations are a shadow, these sabbaths are a shadow. The intent is contextually plural, and in Paul's third term (*sabbatōn*) it is grammatically plural as well. No one denies that this Greek plural can be translated as a singular where context requires, but if the context does not require singular meaning – if instead it requires plural meaning, as I believe the present context does – there is nothing in the plurality of the Greek term which would require us to translate it other than what it is, i.e., a plural.

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<sup>9</sup> Basically the explanation has to do with a misunderstanding. Hebrew *šabbāt* ends in a consonant, but Aramaic *šabbatā*, despite the final aleph, ends with a vowel sound. Greek neuter plurals often end in *-ta*, so when Jews started speaking Greek after their exile in Babylon, where the language was Aramaic, the word *šabbatā* came over into Greek as *sabbata*, and this sounded like a neuter plural. So in their minds *sabbata* seemed plural, even though it came from an Aramaic word that was singular.

<sup>10</sup> See [http://www.historicism.org/Documents/Grk\\_Sabbaton.pdf](http://www.historicism.org/Documents/Grk_Sabbaton.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> If the meaning of the word *sabbatōn* in context is plural, as I contend, it should not be capitalized in translation. The only reason for capitalizing the word is to imply that Paul is speaking of the one very special Sabbath described in the fourth commandment, by contrast with all the others in the law of Moses. But this is the opposite of what Paul has in mind.

## Context

In regard to the matter of context, forms of the word *sabbaton* (neuter singular) / *sabbata* (neuter plural) appear 68 times in the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> The Greek word is singular 43 times, plural 25 times. In the singular the term is translated "Sabbath" 40 times, "week" three times. In the plural it is translated "Sabbath" 19 times, "week" six times.<sup>13</sup> Of these 68 examples, only the 19 plurals which are translated "Sabbath" are of interest here. In 18 cases context indicates that the weekly seventh-day Sabbath is in view. Only in Col 2:16 is there a question as to the meaning. While these numbers document what type of meaning occurs most frequently, they don't make another type of meaning unavailable where appropriate. Context must be the arbiter.

The context for the plural Greek word *sabbatōn* in Col 2:16 can only be supplied by the words that accompany it. Here is the entire phrase: *en brōsei en posei ē en merei heortēs ē neomēnias ē sabbatōn*, "by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day" (NIV).

It would be circular to include *sabbatōn* as part of the context for its own use, so we confine ourselves to the other terms used along with it. In English translation these are: "what you eat or drink" (there's nothing about these things in the ten commandments), "a religious festival" (nothing about this either), "a New Moon celebration" (or this). So what is the context for the remaining term, "a Sabbath day"? Not the ten commandments. The Greek word *sabbatōn* in vs. 16 is not just plural in form, but in meaning as well, and speaks of something that is ceremonial in nature.<sup>14</sup>

## Covenant Relationships

In Col 2:11-15 Paul is talking primarily about circumcision and draws a comparison between circumcision and baptism. What circumcision was for the Jew, baptism is for the Christian. It symbolizes the putting off, not of a token amount of the flesh, but the whole being in spiritual death, burial, and resurrection to a new life in Christ. Thus, baptism is the means by which one enters into covenant relationship with God under the new covenant, just as circumcision was the means by which one entered into covenant relation with God under the old covenant. Under the terms of the new covenant, as given in Jer 31:31-34 and repeated in Heb 8:8-13 and 10:15-18 (quoted).

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: <sup>16</sup> "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." <sup>17</sup> Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." <sup>18</sup> And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. (Heb 10:15-18)

<sup>12</sup> Actually there are two other examples that could be included. The reason why they have not been counted already is that one has an unusual prefix (*prosabbaton*, Mark 15:42) and the other has an unusual suffix (*sabbatismos*, Heb 4:9). When these are included with the 68 others, there are 70 examples of the word *sabbaton/sabbata* in the New Testament.

<sup>13</sup> See [http://www.historicism.org/Documents/Grk\\_Sabbaton.pdf](http://www.historicism.org/Documents/Grk_Sabbaton.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Greek *sabbatōn* is a genitive plural – or not. The genitive plural of *sabbata* would certainly be *sabbatōn*. I'm not denying this. But Hebrew *ÁabbCet™n* (Lev 16:31; 23:32)

Notice the connection between covenant relationship and forgiveness and sin. Notice also that the new covenant does not contemplate removing the law, as many try to do on the basis of Col 2:14. Instead God puts it in our hearts and writes it on our minds. Which of the commandments would we like to break? If there's one we have in mind that we would especially like to get rid of, God has not yet been able to write it on our hearts and the new covenant has not yet been fully implemented in our hearts and minds. Writing something on our hearts is not the same as doing away with it. Nailing something to the cross, also, is not the same as doing away with it. Think for a moment. Something really was nailed to the cross on crucifixion Friday. This is not just something we say. It wasn't a metaphor. But dying on a cross, and being fastened to it with nails, does not remove Jesus from our lives, but makes Him forever the center of our hearts' worship and devotion.

In Col 2:16-19 the first clause has to do with time, just as the second does. "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" (vs. 16). The connection between eating and drinking and time has to do schedules for fasting. The Didache (an early Christian document) tells us that, whereas Jews fasted on the second and fifth days (Monday and Thursday), Christians should fast on the fourth day and Preparation (Wednesday and Friday).<sup>15</sup> Fasting, pilgrim festivals, New Moon celebrations, solemn feasts . . . these were the accoutrements of Judaism. Does the Sabbath fit here – in company with circumcision in the preceding section? Actually not.

Circumcision in the Bible is exclusively Jewish, but correctly understood, there is nothing Jewish about the Sabbath. The Sabbath came into being in the timeframe of Adam. Adam was not Jewish. When God created the world, there were no Jews. Circumcision came into being thousands of years later in the timeframe of Abraham. The time between Adam and Abraham is greater than that between Jesus and our own day and time. Coming as it does from the time of creation, the Sabbath applies to all mankind. This fact explains Jesus' choice of words in Mark 2:27.

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man [*to anthrōpon*], not man [*ho anthrōpos*] for the Sabbath. <sup>28</sup> So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27-28)

People go to great lengths to show that the Sabbath was made for the Jew, and Jesus had a perfect opportunity to confirm this view in the above passage, but He didn't. The Greek word used here is *anthrōpos*, means "man, human being," not Jew. Anthropology is not the study of Jews. The Sabbath was not made for Jews. It was made for "man," i.e., all mankind without distinction. Nothing Paul says in Col 2 denies this.

Paul is writing against a mixture of errors – some Jewish in origin, some Gnostic. The Jewish points he condemns are truly and fairly Jewish, and he does clearly condemn them. But none of this has anything to do with the Sabbath of the fourth commandment.

## The Sabbath in Colossians 1

If we want to find a context for the weekly Sabbath in the book of Colossians, the best place to look for it is not chap. 2, but chap. 1. Consider the following passage.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0714.htm>, chap. 8.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For [*hoti*] by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. <sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:15-20)

The reason why Christ is "the firstborn over all creation" is that "by him all things were created" (vss. 15, 16). This is what the word "For" (*hoti*) means at the beginning of vs. 16. "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him" (vs. 16).

Other passages that say the same thing include John 1:1-3 and Heb 1:1-3. Here is the context for Mark 2:27-28 (quoted above) and the parallels for that in Matt 12:8 and Luke 6:5. Here is the reason why I personally keep the Sabbath, i.e., because God created the world through His Son, and the reason why Jewish Sabbath keeping must and will always be radically different from Christian Sabbath keeping. If Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, that fills the day with Him and gives it one set of meanings, whereas if one rejects Christ's claim to be One with the Father (see John 10:30) and the active Agent of creation, that type of significance is unavailable.

It is true that the Sabbath was made for all mankind, and yet it is especially the Christian, not the Jew, who should have the clearest concept of what the day means and welcome it most warmly. All its meaning revolves around Christ. God made the world and all it contains through His Son. So why is the Sabbath so unwelcome?

R. A. Torrey states, "The Sabbath obligation is plainly and explicitly and unmistakably declared not to be binding upon the Christian. There is nothing in the whole New Testament plainer than this. Look at Col. 2:16, 17."<sup>16</sup> Walter Margin concurs, "In the light of this Scripture [Col 2:16] alone, I contend that the argument for Sabbath observance collapses."<sup>17</sup> Misguided zeal. Is it cult-like to remember that God created the world? Is it cult-like to acknowledge that He did this through His Son?

## Conclusion

Passages such as Col 2:8-23 are surely among those that Peter had in mind when he wrote the following:

His [Paul's] letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Pet 3:16)

<sup>16</sup> *Ought Christians to Keep the Sabbath?* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1899), p. 29. Quoted in du Preez, *Judging the Sabbath*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), p. 576. Quoted in idem, p. 2.

If the passage we have been discussing is not difficult, we do not have the right understanding of it. If our interpretation is facile – such that we merely set the Sabbath aside and go on – we are not seeing things as Peter saw them, or as Paul saw them. Paul was not writing against the constitution of God's government. He was writing against later Jewish and still later Gnostic practices.

As regards the Sabbath, God never promised to write the ten commandments on our court houses, but He did promise to write them on our hearts. If we wish to set aside what God is trying to write on our hearts, we are at cross purposes with Him. There is no rest in such an arrangement (see Acts 26:14).

Things can be seen in a wrong light. Obeying God is not evidence that a person has fallen from grace, but rather that His laws are written on the heart. It is really true, as Peter says, that some things Paul writes are hard to understand. It is also true that some of them have been roundly misunderstood.