

Colossians 2 and the Law

Does Colossians 2:14 negate Yahweh's law?

A popular church doctrine says that we are no longer required to obey the Ten Commandments or any law found in the Old Testament. Some preachers even call their message "New Testament Christianity," implying that theirs is a modern creed that leaves behind those archaic, Old Testament laws that bring mankind into such bondage.

The message from many pulpits today is not one of obedience to Yahweh's laws, but rather an emphasis on our Creator's love and the grace made available through His Son. Parishioners are told, "Feel good about yourself" or "The best things in life can be yours for the asking, so just believe." Messages based in human psychology and inspirational double-talk are common fare. But where have decades of no-law teachings led? To a society that knows little about standards of right and wrong and believes in no absolutes. The resultant toll in human suffering has risen proportionate to the success of anti-law doctrines.

Almost without exception Biblical passages often quoted as doing away with Yahweh's law are in a context teaching OBEDIENCE to His laws. His laws and statutes have a purpose: they are given to mold us into the image of His pattern Son, Psalm 19:7, Matthew 12:50. With such a sublime and important role, why the opposition to His laws—His way of life?

We all should strive to be open to understanding Bible truth and be as the noble Bereans who *"received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."* (Acts 17:11)

What About Colossians Chapter 2?

For some, Colossians 2 poses a huge obstacle in their way to observance of Yahweh's law. Does this chapter do away with the need for law? Or is that a forced interpretation? Understanding the situation prevailing at the time Paul wrote this epistle reveals the clear answer and explains why Paul wrote to the Colossians in the first place.

These brethren were once Gentiles, converted from a heathen religion. Colosse had been under the influence of Greek culture and later the Romans ruled the area. Both cultures influenced the lives of the people in the Colosse area. This is especially true of the Greeks who are noted for their schools of logic and philosophy, influential even today.

At the time the letter to the Colossians was written, the Colossians were being misled by influences from their pagan past and a contemporary teaching called Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a heresy of the first two centuries of the Assembly. Its central tenet was that the spirit was entirely good and matter or the physical was completely evil. This notion gave rise to the teaching that salvation comes by the escape from our evil bodies through special knowledge (hence *gnostic*, meaning "knowledge") and ascetic practices.

Because the physical was inherently evil, the body was brought under subjection through physical deprivations. And because matter was considered evil—and not the breaking of Yahweh's law—one could break the law and not sin.

Paul had convinced a few Hellenized people at Colosse to turn from their pagan ways and faithfully follow the Redeemer of Israel. He was urging them to keep their spiritual vitality alive and pure, and not allow it to suffocate under paganistic, philosophical, and man-made traditions dominating their society.

The situation of these converted Colossians is very similar to ours today. They also were in the minority in their religious beliefs. They were always in danger of being swept downstream by the torrent of seemingly superior intellectual bias that was contrary to the true message of the Bible.

Paul's letter reveals a concern that these people would be in danger of falling for human reasoning and rhetoric, which ridicules the Bible's formula for living a spiritual life. *"Be careful, lest any man [person] spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit ["pretensions," **Goodspeed**] after the tradition of men, after the rudiments [elementary teachings] of the world ["following the material ways of looking at things," **Goodspeed**] and not after the Messiah..."* Colossians 2:8.

Paul warns them about not allowing their minds to be captured by intellectualism and high-sounding nonsense (*Phillips*). Delusions and philosophical speculations passing for fact would trip up many and separate them from Yahweh's Word.

This passage does not refer to Yahweh's Commandments. His laws are not "after the tradition of men," nor are they "after the elementary teachings of the world." Paul can only be referring to pagan worship of idols, former heathen customs, and materialistic philosophies. *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament* says rudiments of the world refers to ceremonialism practiced in asceticism, pagan symbol mysteries, and initiatory rites.

Whose Handwriting and Ordinances?

Having laid this foundation and heeding Paul's warnings not to be sidetracked in pursuit of Bible truth, let us examine the pivotal verse 14, erroneously used to teach that the law has been abolished: *"Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His torture stake,"* Colossians 2:14.

Exactly what is meant by "blotting out the handwriting of ordinances?" Nominal religion teaches that the handwriting of ordinances spoken of here is Yahweh's commandments, statutes, and judgments. But aren't these the same devices of man that verse 8 speaks of? Are Yahweh's ordinances against us? Are the laws of Yahweh now blotted out, forever done away? If so, then there is no more law to break. If there is no law, there is no sin (1John 3:4). If there is no longer any sin, then we don't need a Savior!

On the contrary. Yahweh's laws are for our good, Deuteronomy 10:12-13. Psalm 19:7 says the law is perfect and it converts the human being. Yahshua says if we love Him we will keep His commandments, John 14:15. Paul tells us that the law is holy and the commandment is holy, just, and good, Romans 7:12.

The preceding verses 11 and 12 explain to the Colossians that through baptism into Yahshua's Name (a type of circumcision) we are made spiritually alive and forgiven of all our trespasses. Verse 13 continues: *"And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, has He quickened [made alive] together with Him [Yahshua], having forgiven you all your trespasses."* Here Paul is countering the Gnostic idea that the physical is inherently evil by explaining that the flesh was redeemed by Yahshua. At the same time he shows that the Judaic teaching of physical circumcision was circumvented in Yahshua's redemption.

To understand properly the meaning of Colossians 2:14, we need to look at two pertinent words as defined in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance Greek Dictionary*:

Handwriting—No. 5498, *cheirographon*, neut of a comp. of 5495 and 1125; something *handwritten* ("*chirograph*"), i.e. a *manuscript* (spec. a legal document or bond [(fig.)]:—handwriting

Ordinances—No. 1378, *dogma*, from the base of 1380; a *law* (civil, ceremonial or ecclesiastical):—decree, ordinance.

The manuscript or legal document that was contrary to us was "handwritten" by man. It does not refer to laws or commandments found in the Bible! "Handwritten ordinances" are MAN'S documents, his decrees and his edicts.

'Dogma' a Man-made Rule

Strong's Concordance shows that the underlying Greek word for the English word ordinances is No. 1378, *dogma*. It is a civil, ceremonial or ecclesiastical law, translated decree or ordinance. In each of the five places the Greek *dogma* is used, it refers to man-made rules and regulations. It has nothing to do with Yahweh's Commandments! Let us examine each of the four other times the Greek word *dogma* appears to see whether it means Yahweh's laws or man's:

- Luke 2:1: *"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree [dogma] from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed."* This could just as well have been translated, *"...there went out an ordinance from Caesar..."* It was Caesar who wrote the ordinance, it was not from Yahweh. The emperor of Rome was the author of an ordinance to raise money by taxing his subjects.

- Acts 16:4: *"And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees [dogma] for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem."* The decrees referred to here consist of the four-point summary of the decision reached in Acts 15 at the council held in Jerusalem to settle the question about what behavior should be followed by the Gentiles who were converted to Yahshua. The decision is summed up in Acts 15:20 and 29, namely, that the Gentiles should 1) abstain from pollutions of idols, 2) from fornication, 3) from things strangled, and 4) from blood."

These four prohibitions were to eradicate the extant pagan custom of 1) worship of idols, 2) temple prostitutes, 3) eating flesh that had not been drained of blood, 4) ingesting animal blood alone. Notice, the next verse says, *"For Moses of old time has in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day."* (Acts 15:21)

In other words, Gentiles are to be circumspect especially over these four points, which, as former pagans, they had practiced prior to their conversion. These heathen ways they were to avoid, but were expected to join with the Jews to hear Moses being preached each Sabbath, thus they would continue learning the laws given to Israel.

- Acts 17:7: *"Whom Jason has received: and these all do contrary to the decrees [dogma] of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one [Yahshua]."* Plainly these are the decrees (dogma) of Caesar and have nothing to do with the laws of Yahweh. They deal with the question of observing Caesar's dogma.

- Ephesians 2:15: *"Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, [even] the law of commandments [contained] in ordinances [dogma]; for to make in himself of twain one new man, [so] making peace."* Paul is explaining that Yahshua's death took away the enmity, the hatred, the animosity between Jew and Gentile that the man-made ordinances (*dogma*) produced. The hatred was to dissolve with the removal of these added human laws that separated Jew from Gentile.

The entire second chapter of Ephesians emphasizes that the Gentiles formerly were outside the covenants and promises given to Israel. Now they are made nigh by the blood of Messiah, verse 13. We Gentiles can now become a part of Israel by being grafted into the Abrahamic promise through Yahshua.

Where the Jews had regarded the Gentiles with hatred, and the Gentiles the Jews with scorn, now they were unified in the common worship of Yahweh through Yahshua the Messiah who by His sacrifice made a new man, a new person of the former antagonists.

The middle wall of partition spoken of in verse 14 evidently refers to the four-foot-high wall in the Temple by which the court of the Gentiles was separated from the Jews. Now that wall was broken down and the Gentiles had the same access to worship Yahweh as did the Jews.

There is nothing in Scripture concerning establishing this wall of partition. It came about through human performance. See Bullinger's **Companion Bible** note on Ephesians 2:14 for a good explanation of the wall of partition. This has now been broken down and Jew and Gentile are today one in Yahshua.

- Colossians 2:20: "*Wherefore if you be dead with Messiah from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are you subject to ordinances?*" The Greek word for ordinances here is *dogmatizo*, which carries the sense of being controlled by dogmas (man-made customs).

Paul raises the question that if the Colossians because of the Messiah were dead to these rules, and thus no longer influenced by the rudiments of worldly notions and practices, then why are they allowing themselves to be placed under such rules of man?

These were comparable to ancient ascetic observances like those seen in India. The caste system does not allow even the shadow of a lower-caste Hindu to come near a high-caste person. He refrains from touching certain things already touched by a lower-caste Hindu in order to remain ceremonially clean.

Significantly, the Bible uses several other Greek words that are also translated ordinances but have an altogether different meaning and connotation. They are: *diatage* = thorough arrangement; *dikaioma* = a judicial appointment; *ktisis* = any made thing; *paradosis* = a giving over. These latter Greek words have no bearing upon Colossians 2:14 and never appear there.

Man's Added Worship Is Worthless

Colossians 2:21-22 expresses the key point Paul is trying to get across in this chapter: "*Touch not; taste not; handle not: which all are to perish with the using:*) after the **COMMANDMENTS and DOCTRINES of MEN.**" Paul is speaking of the ascetic attitude of being aloof and separate (do not touch, taste or handle). The food and drink that have been forbidden by the ritualists are destined for corruption. They are part of the corruptible order of this world, but the believer seeks that which abides forever.

- Colossians 2:22 proves conclusively that the word ordinance (*dogma*) refers to man-made rules and customs, "*which all are to perish with the using; after the commandments and doctrines of men.*" These commands are not divinely given, but spring from the precepts and instructions of man's dogma. Followers of the Messiah are destined for immortality, a world without end. His worship has meaning

Man's teachings have a "show of wisdom in will-worship," continues Paul in verse 23. **Weymouth** translates this verse: "These rules have an appearance of wisdom, where there is self-imposed worship." By afflicting themselves in self-imposed punishment of the body to purify the soul, they appear pious and holy. "Humility and neglecting of the body" in verse 23 is translated also as severity to the body, or torturings of the body.

This ascetic discipline of the body is a ritual much like is seen in India where one lies on a bed of nails or sits cross-legged and stares up at the sun. This, says Paul, does not subdue fleshly passions, but elevates man's pride. It does not change the heart.

The "handwriting of ordinances" is man's attempt to punish the body to arrive at a Nirvana. Punishing the body and inflicting pain is a pagan attempt to purify one's self in an effort to rise to higher levels of spirituality.

Colossians chapter 3 continues with this theme. All the former pagan customs and bodily punishments Yahshua took out of the way through His death on the tree. Now as we arise from the watery grave after being immersed into the Messiah's Name, we become a new person as our sins are washed away.

His sacrificial death was so much greater than any of the pagan practices that were obliterated by being symbolically nailed to the tree. Now we understand that our spiritual growth comes through obedience to Yahshua as the Head of the body, and not by torturing ourselves.

Saints, Not the Unconverted, to Discern

Paul really puts down man's attempts to raise his spirituality by human means, as he wrote, "*And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.*" (Col. 2:15) That is to say Yahshua is triumphant, and has overcome worldly, hostile rulers and evil princes, even those demonic spirits by His death on the tree, and has triumphed by His resurrection. He is the only way to victory; man's puny attempts to establish righteousness are futile.

"*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]: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body [is] of Messiah.*" "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]: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body [is] of Messiah." (Col. 2:16-17) Paul goes on to say that the believer should allow no MAN to judge in food, drink, concerning a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbaths that foreshadow things to come. We are not to let anyone outside the Assembly to make a decision or rule relating to a holy day or new moon or Sabbath. Yahweh's Word, the Bible, has already instructed us on these days and how and why we observe them.

Notice that verse 17 reads, "Which are a shadow of things to come, but the body *is* of Messiah." The word "is" does not belong there. It is in *italics*, showing that it was added by the translators. The meaning and sense of the verse is that outsiders have no business evaluating our Biblical observances. Only the "BODY OF MESSIAH" is to judge, to make determinations regarding those things.

The Body of Messiah is composed of those who have studied Yahweh's Word and can make a distinction in what is right and proper and what is not in harmony with Yahweh's Word. The unconverted cannot. Now read verses 16-17, skipping the verb *is*. ("is to judge" at the end of verse 17 is understood.)

Join us in keeping Yahweh's commandments as we seek His Kingdom to come, where His will shall be done, Matthew 6:10. May His spirit empower us to do His will.

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