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Did the Apostle Paul Abolish the Sabbath?: Colossians 2:14–17 Revisited

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Colossians 2:14–17—the apostle Paul’s only direct reference to the seventh day Sabbath—has long been used as evidence that Paul abolished the observance of the biblical Sabbath. In view of the nature of the fourth precept of the Decalogue and the weight of evidence drawn from the entire Bible, Seventh-day Adventists reject this position. In recent years, however, some ministers who have left the Adventist ranks for various reasons now argue that the Sabbath command functioned as a ceremonial type to foreshadow the spiritual rest we may now have in Jesus Christ.¹ Consequently, the observance of the Sabbath is no longer obligatory. The textual support for their argument is essentially Col 2:14–17 and Heb 4:1–11.

The Origin of the Bible Sabbath

The Godhead worked together in the creation of our earth (Gen 1–2). The NT observes that the Son served as the active agent to bring all things into existence (John 1:1–3, 10, 14; Col 1:16–17; Heb 1:1, 2). With regard to the origin of the Sabbath, the evidence is plain. God the Son set aside the seventh day of creation to be the Sabbath for the human family by His example and fiat. “He **rested** the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then [He] **blessed** the seventh day and **sanctified** it, because in it He rested from all His work which [He] had created and made” (Gen 2:2, 3).²

It is evident that the Godhead intended the Sabbath to be both a universal and a permanent institution for mankind. Jesus endorsed this view many centuries later when He told the caviling Pharisees: “The Sabbath was made for man [Gk. lit. “**the** man,” i.e., mankind], and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Obviously, the Sabbath was not a type or shadow of ceremonial instruction, because sin did not exist in

¹ Evidently we have no more need of physical ceasing from labor!

² Biblical citations are from the NKJV unless otherwise noted; emphases mine.

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the earth at creation. The Sabbath as a day of rest focused on creation and the Author of creation. The fourth precept of the Decalogue underscores this fact: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. . . . For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and **rested** the seventh day. Therefore the Lord **blessed** the Sabbath day and **hallowed** it” Exod 20:8–11).

New Dimensions of the Bible Sabbath

Satan’s rebellion in heaven and his seduction of our first parents on earth led to hurtful consequences. When man sinned, God intervened with a plan designed to save sinful humanity—a gracious plan laid in eternity to meet such an emergency (for example, see 1 Pet 1:18–20). Hence, it is necessary to recognize that both Testaments of the Bible teach at heart the **same** gospel, namely, salvation from sin through faith in God-provided redemption, even if most who offered sacrifices had little inkling that this redemption would ultimately come by way of a heaven-sent Sacrifice. The writer to the Hebrews declares: “For indeed the gospel was preached to us [Christians] as well as to them [Israelites]” (Heb 4:2). God intended Israel to learn about the gospel through the sacrificial rites and other rituals of the sanctuary system, just as Abraham learned it earlier through its simpler mode. Jesus said, “Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). Because he knew about substitutionary atonement through sacrifice (Gen 22:8), the patriarch would have known exactly what John the Baptist meant when he declared to a later generation of Abraham’s descendants: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

The changes brought about by the entrance of sin caused the observance of the Sabbath to take on certain new dimensions not needed in a sinless creation. The patriarchal record is too brief to take note of these, but we find them in Israel’s early history.

A Day of Assembly/Worship. “There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, **a day of sacred assembly**” (Lev 23:3, NIV). The later institution of the synagogue developed this practice more fully (see Luke 4:16).

A Sign of Salvation. “Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a **sign** between Me and you . . . that you may know that **I am the Lord who sanctifies you**” (Exod 31:13). Many centuries later God reminded the Jews in Babylonian captivity of what He had done for their ancestors: “Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a **sign** between them and Me, that they might know that **I am the Lord who sanctifies them**” (Ezek 20:12).

“To sanctify” in the above contexts means more than simply to separate Israel from the pagan nations. It meant that God would separate them from their sins—would forgive and transform them by His grace. God’s objective for His

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people was clear: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 19:2).

Lexicographers define the participle used in the above texts to mean, “God, keeping his people pure and sacred.”³ To establish the observance of the Sabbath as a sign of God’s sanctifying power emerges as a natural step from the Sabbath as a memorial of God’s creative power, since it refers to God’s re-creative grace. As the apostle Paul describes it: “Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a **new creation**; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor 5:17). Ellen White has phrased it in this manner: “The Sabbath given to the world as the sign of God as the Creator is also the sign of Him as the Sanctifier. The Power that created all things is the power that re-creates the soul in His own likeness. To those who keep holy the Sabbath day it is the sign of sanctification. True sanctification is harmony with God, oneness with Him in character.”⁴ “The Sabbath is a sign of creative and redeeming power.”⁵

True, worshiping Israelites who participated in the gospel rituals with understanding and observed the Sabbath from their heart were assured of God’s saving grace. By faith in God’s promises they found spiritual peace. For them, the Sabbath was not a foreshadowing of a future spiritual rest, but a sign of a present reality, a present experience in grace. The observance of the Sabbath did not drop away as an unnecessary relic of the past. Rather, their love for God for saving them bound them more fully to God through this sign of divine grace.

A Sign of Creatorship and Authority. The first biblical passage to identify the Sabbath as a sign of God’s creative power is Exod 31:12–17. It is in the same passage that defines it as a sign of His sanctifying power (v. 13). “Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath. . . . It is a **sign** between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed” (vs. 16, 17). By observing the Sabbath, the believing Israelite publicly acknowledged the full authority of his Creator. “Hallow My Sabbaths, and they will be a **sign** between Me and you, that you may know that I am the Lord your God” (Ezek 20:20).

Centered in the Ten Commandments. The content of the Ten Commandments was apparently known orally from the time of Adam’s fall and onward. This is implied in the book of Genesis by references to specific sins and the apostle Paul’s sweeping statement: “for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20), and sin truly abounded in the Antediluvian world (Gen 6:5, 11).

At Sinai God personally proclaimed the Ten Commandments and arranged their sequence. The first four precepts dealt with man’s duty to God; the last six with his duty to his fellow beings. God is referred to as Yahweh in three of the

³ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), 873.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 6:350.

⁵ ———, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), 250.

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precepts. But it is in the fourth—the Sabbath command—that He also identifies Himself as the Creator. In this manner the fourth precept functions as the seal to the document, certifying the authority behind the whole. Its permanence is further emphasized by the fact that God Himself inscribed the Decalogue on “tablets of stone” (Exod 31:18). Obviously, the Sabbath was intended to function as a permanent moral command to maintain a clear distinction between the Creator and His human family.

Reminder of Israel’s Former Slavery. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses repeats and explains the instructions God gave the nation at Sinai. When presenting the Sabbath precept, he links it to their former bondage in Egypt. “And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut 5:15).

The Sabbath and the Sanctuary System

Moses deposited the tablets of the Ten Commandments in a golden ark that stood in the Most Holy Place of the Sanctuary (Exod 40:20). Israel regarded the ark with the Ten Commandments, its mercy seat lid, and attached cherubim as a symbol of God’s heavenly throne (cf. 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; Ps 80:1; 99:1). From this perspective it is easy to see why the ark with its contents of the moral law was the hub to the wheel of Israel’s ritual services. The Decalogue (including the Sabbath precept) served as the **foundation** of the Creator’s throne, defining His will and His standard of righteousness. On the other hand, the gospel rituals taught Israel the divine way to find forgiveness and pardon when they realized their sinfulness and transgression against God’s will. In this manner the moral law, that is, the Decalogue and the gospel rituals, were **joined together into one plan of salvation**.

When the typical rituals of the gospel came to their end as type met anti-type, the Ten Commandments—the foundation of God’s rule and an expression of His character—naturally continued to function. God’s will for mankind doesn’t change. This fact can be seen in the central vision of the book of Revelation (Rev 11:19–14:20). The scene is introduced in this manner: “Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the **ark of His covenant** was seen in His temple. And there were lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail” (Rev 11:19). This heavenly scene indicates that the final events will focus on God’s fulfillment of His covenant with His people and their fulfillment of the covenant they swore in return, represented by the Ten Commandments (the contents of the ark), and that the following references in the scene to God’s commandments are dealing with the Ten Commandments (Rev 12:17; 14:7; 14:12) and thus include the Sabbath precept.

It is only natural that with the coalescing of the Ten Commandments with the ritual portrayals of the gospel into one system, that the Sabbath would take

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on some aspects of the rituals. For example, in addition to the daily morning and evening sacrifices, the priests offered two extra lambs (Num 28:9). Probably because the Sabbath became a day of assembly and worship, it was sometimes listed with the ritual days of assembly. The following are examples:

The Levites served “on the **Sabbaths** and on the **New Moons** and on the **set feasts**” (1 Chron 23:31).

Offerings were made “on the **Sabbaths**, on the **New Moons**, and on the **set feasts** of the Lord our God” (2 Chron 2:4).

Offerings were made for “the **Sabbaths**, the **New Moons**, and the **three appointed yearly feasts**” (2 Chron 8:13, 16).

Offerings were made for “the **Sabbaths** and the **New Moons** and the **set feasts**” (2 Chron 31:3).

“The **New Moons**, the **Sabbaths**, and the calling of **assemblies** . . . Your **New Moons** and **your appointed feasts** My soul hates” (Isa 1:13, 14).

“Her **feast days**, Her **New Moons**, Her **Sabbaths**—All her **appointed feasts**” (Hos 2:11).

“When will the **New Moon** be past, that we may sell grain? And the **Sabbath** that we may trade wheat?” (Amos 8:5).

Finances were arranged to provide the sacrifices for “the **Sabbaths**, the **New Moons**, and the **set feasts**” (Neh 10:33).

The prince provides offerings at the **feasts**, the **New Moons**, and the **Sabbaths** (Ezek 45:17).

The arrangement of the Israelite sanctuary that combined the moral law of the Ten Commandments with the rituals into one system did not thereby turn these precepts into temporary rites, nor did the obligation to obey the Ten Commandments cease when the system ceased. The system illustrated the great themes of the Godhead’s plan of salvation and offered spiritual rest experientially right then in OT times. Nevertheless, it is important to note that both the moral law and the ritual rites also had a forward-looking perspective. The moral law convicted the sinner, while the gospel rituals, faithfully entered into, assured him of forgiveness. This faith stood in the place of faith in the coming Redeemer typologically represented in the rites, “for it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Heb. 10:4).

According to the apostle Paul, “the law” (the whole Jewish system) had a definite historical purpose. It functioned as a “tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal 3:24). Naturally, this historical function ceased with the advent of Christ—the Antitype of the gospel rituals. The temple and rituals fell away as Christ’s atoning death and subsequent priesthood in the heavenly sanctuary took their places (Heb 8:1, 2). But the Ten Commandments never ceased to be the foundation of God’s rule and authority in the earth, expressing His will and being a transcript of His character.

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The Sabbath and the Colossian Heresy

The apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians (written during his first imprisonment in Rome) did not address the more common problem of grace versus works that troubled the churches of Galatia and Rome. The apostle himself had not worked in the area of Colossae (1:4, 7–9; 2:1). Apparently, Epaphras, one of the apostle's helpers, had been instrumental in developing a group of believers in this location (1:7; 4:12, 13). He had now come to Rome to request Paul's help in dealing with a heresy troubling his church.

The "Colossian Heresy" has been described as "an early and simple form of Gnosticism."⁶ The expression (derived from the Greek word for "knowledge," *gnosis*) alludes to an erroneous system of belief that early invaded the Christian church. Salvation could be obtained only through a mystical knowledge of certain secret beliefs. Up until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi or Chenoboskion "library" of Gnostic writings in Egypt (1945), most of the information about these beliefs came from the writings of the post-apostolic church fathers. It is now known that many systems or sects of Gnostic thought functioned in the second and third centuries. All were syncretistic in nature—combinations of ideas drawn from many different sources, such as Greek, Jewish, Parsic, philosophies, religions, theosophies, mysteries, etc.⁷

Gnostic speculations about origins concluded that all matter was evil; hence, gnosticism perverted even the elements of Christianity it adopted.

Christ is not the Savior who saves His people from their sins, and who gives them unceasingly, through union with Himself, deliverance from the power of sin. He is only one of the *aeons* [semi-divine beings mediating between God and man], though the highest of them [some said the lowest]. He is an originated being, not God. Thus Gnosticism has no place either for the creation of the universe by God, or for the incarnation and work of Christ. Once the essential evil of matter is granted, the possibility of Christ's having assumed a true human nature is excluded, simply for the reason that the world and human nature are originally and necessarily evil. Thus, as already seen, a form of Docetism is being espoused.⁸

With our present understanding of its nature, we can see the beginnings of this strange perversion growing in the apostolic age. For example, near the close of his life, the apostle Paul warned his successor, "O Timothy! Guard what was

⁶ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:733–35; brackets added.

⁷ For an extended discussion of Gnosticism, see *Ibid.* (1982), 2:484–90. For other useful works, see Francis D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1957), 6:54–9; Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 1:128–44; Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, rev. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 51–5; Colin Brown, *Christianity & Western Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 70–82.

⁸ *ISBE*, rev., 2:488 (col. 2).

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committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and vain babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called **knowledge** [*gnosis*]—by professing it, some have strayed concerning the faith" (1 Tim 6:20, 21).

A few years later the apostle John warned the churches not to receive the Gnostic doctrine of docetism. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits. . . . Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God" (1 John 4:1–3; cf. 2 John 7).

A third, more detailed reference to this heresy is given in Colossians. It consisted of a Hellenistic "philosophy . . . according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ" (2:8). This "philosophy" involved a worship of angels and other astral powers (2:15, 18–19), although such worship was forbidden by the Scriptures (Exod 20:2; Matt 4:10; cf. Rev 22:8–9). In addition, it adopted a very strict code of asceticism (2:20–23). The severity of these practices reflected the beginnings of the notion that the material body was evil and needed to be mortified and punished. "These tendencies were identical with the more fully developed Gnosticism of later days."⁹

In Colossae the false teachers also added to their mix the Israelite sanctuary system. The apostle mentions circumcision and ritual eating and drinking, summarizing the worship system in an admonition: "Therefore let none judge you in food or drink, or regarding a festival, or a new moon or sabbaths" (vs. 16–17). "The Gnostics would take any doctrine that they found valuable, without any regard for its origin or for the context from which it was taken."¹⁰

In this case the typical shadow system of worship was out of date, "obsolete" (Heb 8:13). The Saviour had already atoned for human sin and had ascended to heaven years before. When the apostle stated that the Israelite sanctuary system was "a **shadow** [*skia*] of things to come, but the **substance** [*soma*] is of Christ," he seems to be describing to these Gentile Christians **God's original intention** for the sanctuary system—namely to prepare His people to recognize the function of the coming Saviour (cf. Heb 10:1). But their heresy misused the system and degraded the Christ.

This latter fact may be clearly inferred by the apostle's strong polemic to uphold Christ's supremacy, "that in all things He might have the preeminence" (1:18). Note the following passages:

"He [the Father] has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (1:13–14).

"He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God. . . . For by Him [Christ] all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 487 (col. 1).

¹⁰ Gonzalez, 129.

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whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist” (1:15–17).

“For in Him [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him who is the head of all principality and power” (2:9–10).

“[H]olding fast to the Head from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase which is from God” (2:19).

“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God” (3:1).

By the light of this background we can see that Paul is referring to the **misuse** of the outdated sanctuary system. As we have noted earlier, the moral law of the Ten Commandments functioned as the driving force behind the gospel rituals. The precepts and principles of the Decalogue convicted sinners of their sins; the sacrificial rites showed them how to find forgiveness and change of heart through faith in God and helped them feel sure they had received it. Thus, the Decalogue specifying the moral precepts of God's will and the typical rituals demonstrating the plan of salvation in type were combined together in one sanctuary system.

The Sabbath precept always belonged to the Decalogue as its seal. It had an important place in a system of typological shadows, but it was not itself shadowy, but the thing itself. Always it drew the believer back to creation. After humanity's fall, it took on the nuance of a sign not only of faith in the Creator, but also as a sign of God as the believer's Sanctifier or Saviour.

Because it became one of Israel's special days for assembly, it was only natural that the Sabbath came to be listed with the ritual assemblies and to have extra offerings attached to its observance (see the list of nine OT passages cited above). We may infer from these listings that the expression (festival, new moon, sabbath—or the reverse) formed a common “shorthand” to summarize Israel's worship system. Thus, in a few words the apostle could refer to the Jewish cultus: “Let no one judge you in food or 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” (2:16, 17). The apostle is not attempting to classify all elements of the sanctuary worship as **shadows**. The Ten Commandments were a moral code, the adaptation of God's will for the moral guidance of the human family. It was never intended to be a code of temporary shadows. Paul's argument is that the **sanctuary system—as a system**—was “a shadow of things to come.”

Moreover, in the light of the growing heresy, we can see that in Col. 2:16–17 Paul is referring to the Gnostic misuse of the outdated sanctuary system. It is not the true use of the sanctuary, but the Gnostic misuse of it. It is not the true observance of the Sabbath, but the Gnostic misuse of it, that the true

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Christian need not be concerned about. Let no man judge you about not observing the Gnostic Sabbath.

When the sanctuary shadow system ended and the gospel ritual types met their antitype in Christ, then the whole system ceased from its historic function. The moral Law of the Ten Commandments remained, however, to define the Creator's will in the New Covenant (cf. Jer 31:31–34; Heb 8:8–12). Thus, the seventh-day Sabbath continues to be obligatory. For the Christian believer—as a spiritual Israelite (Gal 3:25–29; 6:15, 16)—it too is a double sign of God's creative power/authority and saving grace.

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