

# WHAT IS THE "Handwriting of Ordinances"?

Many wonder about the meaning of Colossians 2:14-17. Has God's Law been done away? Did Jesus blot out the Ten Commandments? Here is proof from the Bible making PLAIN these often misunderstood verses!

A GREAT deal of confusion seems to surround the meaning of Colossians 2:14-17. Some believe these verses prove the Ten Commandments have been abolished. But is this true? Did Christ blot out the Law?

Colossians 2:14 says Christ blotted out the "handwriting of ordinances that was against us." This could not refer to the Law of God. God's Law is not contrary to us. "The law is holy and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (Romans 7:12).

In Colossians 2:16, Paul is thought by many to have abolished the days God made holy.

Again consider! Is it logical that Paul would have commanded the Gentiles in Corinth and elsewhere to observe God's festivals (I Cor. 5:7-8), and then contradict himself by telling the Colossians not to observe them? Yet many make Paul just that inconsistent!

For example, Paul's plain statement of verse 16 is misunderstood and stretched to say that God's Holy Days are done away. "Let no *man* therefore judge you . . ." Does this say "God has abolished these holy days"? Look at the verse again. It says, "Let no *man* . . . judge you" concerning these matters. To judge is not to abolish. Paul is warning the Colossians not to let any man judge them about certain matters.

But what are these "matters"?

## Beware of Philosophy

Now consider Colossians 2:8: "Beware lest any *man* spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit . . ." The scripture does not say the Law of God.

Continuing: "After the rudiments [fundamental beliefs] of the world, and not after Christ." The evil doctrines

Paul is condemning were of the *world*. He is *not* referring to God's Law. The world then was a GENTILE world. It was a pagan Roman world, filled with foolish and vain traditions.

To what specifically was Paul referring? Clearly, to pagan ascetic beliefs commonly known to the heathen by the name "philosophy." Paul used this very word in Colossians 2:8, "Beware lest any man spoil you through PHILOSOPHY and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments [or basic concepts] of the world, and not after Christ."

"Philosophy" included the doctrine that one could pay for his own sins by denying himself the pleasures of the body. It was a pagan doctrine which denied the need of a Saviour. It was called "philosophy" because the pagan philosophers were responsible for its introduction.

## Gentile Colossians Were Ascetic

The early Catholic writers used this same expression in their day to mean "asceticism." Read it for yourself: "It was very common . . . to call an ascetic mode of life 'philosophical,' or 'the life of a philosopher' . . . The growing sentiment had its roots partly in the prevailing ideas of contemporary philosophy, which instinctively emphasized strongly the dualism of spirit and matter . . ."

"The Neo-Platonic philosophy of the times, through its doctrine of the purification of the soul by its liberation from the body or sensuous things, taught celibacy and ascetic practices generally" (from pp. 252 and 546 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, edited by Schaff and Wace).

Those who followed this philosophy were stern ascetics. Apparently, they severely judged the true Christians for the least infraction of ascetic behavior. They did not like to see the Christians freely eating meat good for food, or drinking wine moderately, or doing anything in respect or relation to the keeping of the weekly Sabbath and the annual festivals. That is why Paul wrote: "Let no MAN therefore judge you in meat, or in drink [margin — for *eating or drinking*], or in respect [any part or portion connected with the observance] of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days" (Col. 2:16).

The original Greek in verse 16 for "meat, or in drink" — *en broosei* and *en posei* — means "in eating and in drinking."

Again, there is no mention of the abolition of God's Law or His Holy Days. The scripture tells us the Colossians WERE keeping those days. In fact, the very criticism the Colossians were receiving in relationship to the observance of these days *proves* they WERE keeping them.

The once-pagan Colossians never kept these Holy Days of God before! They were heathen prior to conversion. Now that they had learned the Gospel, they were keeping holy the days God made holy. And Paul is warning them *not* to return to or be influenced by their old pagan ways — the ways of those who hated God's Law and His festivals.

## What Did They Foreshadow?

Now notice Colossians 2:17. "Which are a shadow of things to come . . ." Or, better translated, "which foreshadow things to come." Did these Scriptural

days foreshadow things to come? Indeed!

Do the weekly Sabbaths foreshadow good things to come? Indeed they do! Not only is the weekly Sabbath a memorial of creation — but it also foreshadows the seventh 1000 years, and the millennial rule of Christ.

In speaking of the seventh day of the week, in Hebrews 4:4, the Apostle Paul goes right on to show that the seventh day foreshadows God's thousand-year millennial rest. But does that do away with the weekly Sabbath? Not at all! "There *remaineth* therefore a rest [margin — keeping of a Sabbath] to the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). Sabbath keeping is a TEST OF OBEDIENCE (Exodus 16:4, 5, 22-31). No one shall enter into an eternal rest unless he first, here and now, is willing to enter into the rest of each Sabbath, each seventh day of the week. And that is exactly what the Colossians were doing — observing the weekly Sabbaths.

In like manner the annual festivals were instituted as memorials of events which also foreshadow the plan of God. They were given to the Church in order to keep the Church in the knowledge of that plan.

Only one festival has been entirely fulfilled in type — the Passover. Yet Jesus said that each year we are to celebrate it again: "THIS DO in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

If you would like to know more about God's festivals and their true meaning for us today, write in for the free booklet, *Pagan Holidays — or God's Holydays — Which?*

### *Weekly Sabbaths Are Not Annual Sabbaths*

Some claim that Colossians 2:16 refers "to annual feasts, new moons and annual sabbaths" — not to the weekly Sabbaths.

This is not true! Whenever the expression "sabbath days" is used with "holydays" and "new moons," the weekly Sabbaths are always meant! There is no exception. Read I Chron. 23:31; II Chron. 2:4; 31:3; Neh. 10:33.

Notice that in all these verses the weekly Sabbaths are referred to IN THE

PLURAL just as in Colossians 2:16. Colossians 2:16 includes BOTH weekly AND annual Sabbaths! If it abolishes one, it abolishes the other. But as it establishes one, so it establishes the other as New Testament practice.

"Let no man therefore judge you . . ." in these matters, said Paul, "but [rather] the body of Christ" (Colossians 2:17, last part).

This verse has troubled many. Yet it should not. Notice that the word "is" in the King James Version is in italics. It does not appear in the original. The original Greek says only: "the body of Christ." What is the body of Christ? How does Paul use this expression in Colossians?

Turn to chapter 1. In verse 18 we find that Christ "is the head of the body, THE CHURCH." See also Col. 2:19.

The true Church of God is the body of Christ. Just as the Spirit of God once dwelled in the earthly body of Jesus Christ so now the Holy Spirit dwells in each member of the Church and together the members constitute one body, doing the very work Christ did. The Church is therefore Christ's body today! And Christ is the Head as the husband is the head of the wife (Ephesians 5:23).

No man is to sit in judgment of a true Christian's conduct, Paul is declaring in Colossians 2:16-17. Man does not determine how we should live. But it is the responsibility of the Church — the body of Christ — to determine these matters! The Church is to teach how to observe the festivals — to explain the meaning of self-control, etc.

So these little-understood verses ought to be translated clearly: "Let no man therefore judge you . . . but [rather let] the body of Christ [determine it]." Greek scholars recognize that the first expression "let no man" demands that there be a subsequent expression which tells *who* is to do the judging of the matter!

The converts had apparently forgotten who was their Judge. They were concerned about these ascetics who were condemning them. In some cases, there was a danger of some of the brethren lapsing into their former adherence to this ascetic philosophy.

Paul was writing this to combat the idea and straighten the Church members out. Paul tells us this in verses 20 to 23 of this same chapter!

### **Sinful Pagan Customs**

"Wherefore if ye" — the Gentile converts — "be dead with Christ from the rudiments [fundamental principles or ideas] of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances?" (Verse 20.) ORDINANCES! Notice it. But which ordinances?

The answer is in the next verse: "(Touch not; taste not; handle not; which are all to perish with the using;) AFTER THE COMMANDMENTS AND DOCTRINES OF MEN?"

There you are! They were ascetic human traditions Paul was striking out against, not God's laws. Continuing: "Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in *will worship*" — pagan asceticism — "and humility, and neglecting of the body" — appearing outwardly humble and self-denying, but inwardly self-righteous — "but are of no value against indulgence of the flesh" (last part from Panin translation).

Did you catch it? These practices were pagan ordinances, or customs of men — based on the commandments and doctrines of pagan speculative philosophy. They were heathen ordinances, heathen customs forbidding people from touching, tasting and handling those things God allows. We see the same customs today: don't dance, don't drink, etc., in today's "Christianity"!

### **Handwriting of Ordinances**

But what about the peculiar expression in Colossians 2:14, called "the handwriting of ordinances"? What does it mean? The original inspired Greek for "handwriting of ordinances" is not even referring to Moses' laws! In fact this is not a proper translation. The original Greek for the expression "handwriting of ordinances" is *cheirographon tois dogmasin*.

It does not mean a code of laws.

The Greek word for "handwriting" originally referred to "a note of hand, or writing in which one acknowledges

that money has either been deposited with him or lent to him by another, to be returned at an appointed time" (from Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*).

It came later to refer to any acknowledgment of debt. We all owe a debt to God because of sin. That is the meaning of the word "handwriting" here — an acknowledgment of debt.

The *Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* by Parkhurst gives the meaning of *cheirographon*: "Anything written with the hand ... a bond, note of hand ... it signifies a sort of note under a man's hand, whereby he obliges himself to the payment of any debt." In other words, a note of debt or a note of guilt.

The same lexicon shows that *tois* can be translated "from."

*Dogmasin* simply refers to law (see *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*). In this case it refers to the laws of men as previously shown.

The whole expression tells us the Colossians had incurred a note of sinful guilt as a result of following pagan ordinances.

But how was it originally incurred? What did the Colossians do that brought on that debt of sin? The answer is in verse 13. What was blotted out were *trespasses* (verse 13, last part) incurred through following sinful ways and ideas of the world — and letting human nature take its course.

#### Christ Paid for Our Sins

When Christ shed His blood in our stead, He thereby blotted out all our sins by paying for them in full with His own life. It is SIN which was blotted out. Notice Acts 3:19, "that your SINS may be BLOTTED OUT." "Have mercy upon me," cried David, "blot out my TRANSGRESSIONS . . . Hide thy face from my SINS, and BLOT OUT all mine INIQUITIES" (Psalm 51:1, 9).

The note of guilt is the record of our sins. People sin by obeying the traditions and customs of men which causes them to break the commandments of God (Matthew 15:1-3; Mark 7:7-9).

This "handwriting of ordinances" — this note of sinful guilt — was nailed by Christ to the stake or cross. Christ who knew no sin was *made* to be sin for us (II Cor. 5:21). That is, He took our sins on *Himself!*

In Galatians 3:13 we read, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree."

When Christ was impaled or crucified on the cross or "tree," He was made a curse by taking *our sins*. The Law was not a curse. But sin due to *breaking* of God's Law put a note of debt on our heads. This note of sinful guilt due to following ways contrary to God's Law was against us until Christ lifted the curse from us.

The Law was not nailed to the stake or cross — Christ was (John 19:17, 18). The record of our sins was nailed to the stake in His body (I Peter 2:24).

Now we all can better understand Colossians 2:14. Notice this verse again as it stands in the King James Version. "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 cross."

As we have seen, it does not say "the Ten Commandments." It does not read "law of Moses," or "works of the law." It reads "handwriting of ordinances."

#### Sins Blotted Out

Let's now see how the context of Colossians proves how this "handwriting of ordinances" refers to the record of our sins. Colossians 2 explains: "In whom [Christ] also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in *putting off the body of the sins* of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ" (verse 11). Paul elsewhere reveals we are to be circumcised "in the heart."

Christ conquered sin in the flesh. If we surrender ourselves to Christ, He will enter into us through His Holy Spirit and clean us up, conquer our sins — circumcise our hearts or minds spiritually. He enables us to completely cut

away sin out of our lives — enables us to bury all our past sins in the water of baptism, as you read in Colossians 2:12: "Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God" — faith in God's ability to supply us with the Holy Spirit and raise us from a dead past to new life just as He "hath raised him [Christ] from the dead."

"And you," Paul continues, "being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh" — these people were, prior to conversion, uncircumcised Gentiles — "hath he [the Father] quickened together with Him [Christ], having *forgiven you all trespasses*" (verse 13).

God forgives sin. These Gentile converts had sinned. They had been following the foul, heathenish practices of the world about them. They had been trying to pay for their own hurt consciences by penance, by asceticism. But they hadn't found forgiveness.

Now things were different. They had really been forgiven. They were no longer bound to their past sins. Christ had *defeated* sin. Colossians 2:15 shows how.

"And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it." The principalities and powers referred to here are the same as the "spiritual wickedness [wicked spirits] in high places" mentioned in Ephesians 6:12.

By making possible the forgiveness of sin, Christ defeated the purpose of Satan. He made it possible for human beings to qualify for the Kingdom of God.

Remember, in conclusion, there were only two things nailed to the stake at Golgotha: 1) The physical body of Jesus and 2) the "note of guilt" — the record of our sins which Christ paid by Himself in this sacrifice of His own life.

Therefore, NO LAWS, of ANY kind were nailed to the stake — spiritual, legal, ceremonial, sacrificial or any other. □