

Have the Ten Commandments Been “Nailed to the Cross”?

Did the apostle Paul abrogate the commandments in Colossians two?

A classic example of misinterpreting Paul’s “difficult” writings is found in Colossians 2:14, 16-17, and stems from an extremely poor translation of the Greek text. Unfortunately, this particular misunderstanding has led millions to believe that all the laws and commandments were “nailed to the cross” when Jesus was crucified. As we will see, the Protestants’ false interpretation is exactly the *opposite* of what Paul actually wrote and meant.

First, we will examine the *KJV* translation of each of these key passages, beginning with verse 14: “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.**”

From this obscure translation, people presume that the phrase “handwriting of ordinances” constitutes the laws and commandments of God. Therefore, they assume incorrectly and conclude that the Ten Commandments were “nailed to the cross.”

In the Greek, “handwriting of ordinances” is *chriographon tois dogmasin*—which literally means “handwriting in decrees or dogmas.” In the New Testament, *dogma* always refers to “decrees” written by men (Luke 2:1; Acts 16:4; 17:7; Eph. 2:15). Nowhere in the entirety of the Bible does *dogma*, “decrees,” refer to any part of the law of God. Therefore, this phrase in verse 14 has nothing to do with biblical law.

But what does the expression “handwriting of ordinances” actually mean? As we will see, the phrase refers to a *written account* of one’s sins, called “a note of debt.” In his epic book *The Two Babylons*, Alexander Hislop writes concerning this pagan, Greek religious practice, which the converts in Colosse had undoubtedly formerly practiced (the practice was also found in ancient Chinese religion): “A work of some note on morals, called *Merits and Demerits Examined*, [describes how] a man is directed to keep a [written] debtor and creditor account with himself of the acts of each day, and at the end of the year to wind it up [in summary]. If the balance is in his favor, it serves as the foundation of a stock of merits for the ensuing year; and if against him, it must be liquidated by future good deeds [justification by works]. Various lists and comparative tables are given of both good and bad actions in the several relations of life; and benevolence is strongly inculcated in regard first to man, and, secondly, to the brute creation. To cause another’s death is reckoned at one hundred on the side of demerit; while a single act of charitable relief counts as one on the other side” (page 147).

Thus, the phrase in Colossians 2:14 should be translated as “note of debt against us *with the decrees of our sins*”—or a symbolic listing of our sins against God. Our sins and the *debt* of our sins were nailed to the cross when Jesus Christ was crucified and died. Upon true repentance of sins to God the Father, Jesus Christ blots out the “note of debt” through the remission of our sins. Jesus Christ, Who knew no sin, was made sin for us. He was nailed to the cross as a sin offering for the sins of the whole world. **The “note of debt” of our sins was symbolically nailed to the cross, NOT the commandments of God which stand forever.**

When verse 13 is included with the correct translation of verse 14, the true meaning of what Paul wrote becomes clear: “For you, who were *once* dead in *your* sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has *now* made alive with Him, having forgiven all your trespasses. He has **blotted out the note of debt against us with the decrees of our sins**, which was contrary to us; and He has taken it away, having nailed it to the cross.”

Therefore, the actual meaning of these verses has nothing to do with nailing the law to the cross, as falsely believed by millions of professing Christians.

The True Meaning of Colossians 2:16-17: The erroneous distortion of these two verses has caused Protestantism to denounce the observance of the biblical Sabbath, holy days and clean and unclean meats more than any other passage in the New Testament. Consequently, it has caused ministers and laymen alike to “rummage” through the New Testament in search of other passages to substantiate this misinterpretation—resulting in a myriad of additional false interpretations and beliefs that appear to bolster their practices of Sunday-keeping and observing occult holidays. When one *casually* reads these verses, it does give the *appearance* that such an interpretation may be correct—but such is not the case.

In the *KJV*, Colossians 2:16 reads: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*” —verse 17—“which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ.”

To add further confusion to this doctrinal puzzle, the *New International Version* savaged verse 17 with the following mistranslation: “These are a shadow of things that **were to come**.” In so doing, they reinforced the false idea that, since Christ has already come, the things that were “to come” have been fulfilled. Thus, they cling tenaciously to their mistaken belief that the life, death and resurrection of Christ has “terminated the laws and commandments of God.”

However, the Greek preposition the *NIV* translators mistranslated as the English past tense phrase “were to come” is actually a **present tense**, articular active plural participle, *toon mellontoon*, which is impossible to translate as a past tense completed action. An honest translation can only reflect the present tense, continuous, ongoing meaning of “the things to come,” or “the coming things”—which can only mean the continuous unfolding of prophecy and the plan of God.

Importantly, we know the Colossian church was composed entirely of Gentile converts. Paul preached “the mystery among the Gentiles” (Col. 1:27), and refers to their spiritual circumcision of the heart through Jesus Christ—their conversion—in contrast to their physical condition of “uncircumcision” of the flesh (Col. 2:13).

As we find in Acts 19, Gentile converts forsook their pagan religion and worship of Greek gods and goddesses, though they were met with resistance and ridicule. And in the case of Paul, he was threatened with death because he gave up Judaism. Likewise, when the Colossians were converted, their lives were completely changed. They abandoned their past pagan religious practices, forsook the idol temples, and ceased to participate in pagan religious festivals and days of worship. Instead, they observed the seventh-day Sabbath; and as Paul taught in all the churches, they were faithful to the holy days and festivals of the true God.

This caused those *outside* the church to make judgments against the Colossian brethren for having abandoned their former religious philosophy and worship of angels. When we understand the circumstances with which Paul was dealing when he wrote Colossians 2:16-17, then the true meaning of the passage becomes clear.

An Analysis of Colossians 2:16-17

Here is an accurate translation of the original Greek:

Col. 2:16—“Therefore, do not allow anyone to judge you in eating or in drinking, or with regard to a festival, or new moon, or *the Sabbaths*” —verse 17—“which are a foreshadow of the things that are coming, but the body of Christ.”

1) The first phrase—“**Therefore, do not allow anyone to judge you...**”—means that because they were now converted and had changed their lives to believe and obey the gospel, and were now keeping the laws and commandments of God instead of their former pagan ways, **therefore**, they were not to let anyone *outside* the Church judge them

because of their new way of life.

2) “...**in eating, or in drinking...**” When they were pagans they ate all meats—clean and unclean. After conversion they no longer ate unclean meats (I Tim. 4:1-5). Likewise, they no longer engaged in drunkenness as in the past, which was also part of their pagan religious practices. Now, because they had changed their ways, they were to ignore the judgments and criticisms of those outside the Church.

3) “...**with regard to a festival, or new moon, or *the Sabbaths*...**” Rather than showing that the Colossians were being judged for rejecting the festivals and Sabbaths of God, this phrase means the exact opposite. As former pagans they had never observed any of the biblical festivals and Sabbaths before their conversion. Therefore, those outside the Church were not judging the Colossians because they were no longer keeping these things, rather they were judging them because after their conversion they were, indeed, keeping them.

4) “...**which are a foreshadow of the things that are coming...**” This important phrase shows that true Christians—those obeying God’s way of life—will have an understanding of coming events in prophecy as the plan of God unfolds.

5) “...**but the body of Christ.**” This phrase can reflect two meanings. First, since the Colossian brethren were being judged by those *outside* the church for their new, converted conduct, any judging concerning these matters should only be done in and by the Church, which is “the body of Christ.” Second, this phrase can also mean that the *reality* of observing God’s Sabbath and holy days can be found only in the “body of Christ”—the Church—not from *outside* the Church. In other words, the true knowledge and meaning of such days can be found only in the churches of God. As Jesus said, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them [outside the Body of Christ—outside the true Church of God] it has not been given.... But blessed *are* your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you, many prophets and righteous *men* have desired to see what you see, and have not seen; and to hear what you hear, and have not heard” (Matt. 13:11, 16-17).

Colossians Two Divided into Elements A and B

The entire chapter of Colossians two is a *contrast* between the way of God through Jesus Christ and the way of pagans with their religious philosophies and worship of fallen angels. When the verses of this chapter are divided into these two contrasting elements, the true meaning and full intent of what Paul wrote becomes clear. Below, the verses of Colossians two are divided into:

A. Things relating to Christ and God the Father and the Christian way of life.

B. Warnings against paganism, religious philosophy and the worship of fallen angels.

A. “Now I want you to understand what great concern I have for you, and *for* those in Laodicea, and as many as have not seen my face in *the* flesh; that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love unto all riches of **the full assurance of understanding**, unto **the knowledge of the mystery of God**, and of *the* Father, and of Christ; **in Whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**” (verses 1-3).

B. “Now I say this so that **no one may deceive you by persuasive speech**” (verse 4).

A. “For though I am indeed absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. Therefore, **as you**

have received Christ Jesus the Lord, be walking in Him; being rooted and built up in Him, and being confirmed in the faith, exactly as you were taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving” (verses 4-7).

B. “Beware lest anyone takes you captive **through philosophy and vain deceit**, according to **the traditions of men**, according to the **elements of the world**, and not according to Christ” (verse 8).

A. “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and **you are complete in Him**, Who is the Head of all principality and power; in Whom you have also been circumcised with *the* circumcision not made by hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, by which you have also been raised with *Him* through the inner working of God, Who raised Him from the dead. For you, who were *once* dead in *your* sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has *now* made alive with Him, **having forgiven all your trespasses. He has blotted out the note of debt against us with the decrees of our sins**, which was contrary to us; and He has taken it away, having nailed it to the cross. After stripping the principalities and the powers, He made a public spectacle of them, *and* has triumphed over them in it [through His crucifixion and resurrection]” (verses 9-15).

B. “Therefore, **do not allow anyone to judge you** in eating or in drinking, or with regard to a festival, or new moon, or *the* Sabbaths, which are a foreshadow of the things that are coming, but the body of Christ. **Do not allow anyone to defraud you of the prize by doing his will in self-abasement and the worship of angels, intruding into things that he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his own carnal mind and not holding fast to the Head...**” (verses 16-19).

A. “[T]he Head from Whom all the body, being supplied and knit together by the joints and bands, is increasing *with* the increase of God. Therefore, **if you have died together with Christ from the elements** [see Gal. 4:8-10] **of the world...**” (verses 19-20).

B. “...**why are you subjecting yourselves to the decrees of men as if you were living in the world?** *They say*, ‘You may not handle! You may not taste! You may not touch!’ **The use of all such things leads to corruption. It is according to the commandments and doctrines of men**, which indeed have an outward appearance of wisdom **in voluntary worship of angels, and self-abasement, and unsparing treatment of the body**, not in any respect to the satisfying *of the needs* of the flesh” (verses 20-23).

When the chapter is taken as a whole—and one examines Paul’s contrasting admonitions—it becomes obvious that Paul did not abolish the dietary laws of clean and unclean meats, the annual festivals or the weekly Sabbath, or adopt a pagan calendar. Moreover, none of God’s laws were nailed to the cross. Rather, Paul is clearly affirming that the Gentiles in Colosse were to continue to observe God’s laws and commandments as they had been taught. Paul was instructing the Colossians to disregard the criticisms and harsh judgments of those *outside* the Church, because the observance of God’s Sabbath and holy days are a continuous foreshadowing of events yet to occur in God’s plan. By being faithful and keeping these commandments of God, they would always be worshiping the true God, be built up in Jesus Christ and never lose the understanding of God’s plan. By true obedience to God the Father and Jesus Christ, they would never again be deceived by vain philosophies and decrees of men, nor would they be seduced into the worship of fallen angels—Satan and his demons.