

Chapter 14

Paul and the Sabbath

In all of Paul's epistles, the word "Sabbath" is used only once. Perhaps this should tell us something — at the least, that the Sabbath was not a major part of his message. He did not have to answer lots of questions about it. He was not telling slaves what to do about it; he was not instructing anyone in how to keep it right. He was simply letting stand the typical Jewish understanding of the Sabbath — that it was given to the Israelites and was not required for Gentiles. The reason he could say so little about it, is because neither Jews nor Gentiles thought it applied to Gentiles.

Here's what he did say about the Sabbath: "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. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Colossians 2:16-17).

The larger context

Paul begins his analysis of the Sabbath with a "therefore." There is a logical connection between what he has said before, and the conclusion he gives in verses 16-17. This should alert us to back up and examine the context. Let's start in verse 1, where Paul explains his concern for the church: "I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (verses 1-3).

Apparently the Colossian Christians wanted to understand mysteries, to have wisdom and knowledge — but they were so eager to have *special* teachings that they were listening to *false* teachings. But Paul's sufferings and labors were evidence that he was teaching not for his own benefit, but to benefit others. He is the one who had the true wisdom and the true understanding of the mysteries of Christ. "I

tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is" (verses 4-5). Paul is not worried that these people will abandon Christ — but they do need some doctrinal guidance.

"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (verses 6-7). The Colossian Christians had already been taught about Christ, and what they had already learned was enough. They needed to continue in that, and strengthen that, rather than trying to add strange doctrines to it. Christianity is not a search for the mysterious and the exotic — it is a simple faith in a Savior who died for us. It does not need to be complicated with extra requirements.

Not human philosophy

"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (verse 8). The ancient world had a wide variety of religious ideas and philosophies. Many of them offered special mysteries for the select few. Others were taught by traveling philosophers who tried to show how sensible and practical their ideas were.

In contrast, Paul taught salvation through a crucified man. He taught that God existed in this man who was killed, and that God had brought the body back to life. (Most other religions taught that physical bodies were inferior and not worth saving.) Paul taught that this Christ would return on some future day to bring all bodies back to life and to judge the entire world.

In other words, Paul's gospel did not depend on human wisdom — in some ways it went against human wisdom. It did not depend on principles that most people already agreed with. It did not depend on

clever arguments. It depended on Christ alone, on who he was and what he had done.

Gospel wisdom is backwards. Most religions try to figure out what people's problems are, and from that, figure out what they need to solve those problems. But the gospel has a reverse logic. It begins with what Christ has done, and from that, it see what the human problem is, and what it is that we need to be saved from. Once we see that the answer is Christ, we are better able to ask the right questions.

Life with Christ

"In Christ," Paul writes, "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority" (verses 9-10). If we have Christ, we do not need any other ideas added on. Christ is superior to everything else, and all Christians have fullness in Christ, and he is fully God. Through belief in Jesus Christ, we are already joined to God. Paul is saying that Christ is not only supreme, but also fully sufficient. We don't need to add anything to him. Paul then begins to explain the practical significance of this.

"In Christ you were also circumcised..." (verse 11). On several occasions, Paul argued against people who said that Christians ought to be circumcised and to obey the laws of Moses. It seems that someone wanted the Colossian Christians to be circumcised. That isn't necessary, Paul responds, since you have already been circumcised spiritually, through your faith in Christ.

How were they circumcised? "...in the putting off of the sinful nature." Physical circumcision could only symbolize the removal of sin, but Christ performs the reality in our lives, making the symbol unnecessary. Through Christ, the sinful nature is cut off. The reality has been achieved, so the ritual is not needed. When we have Christ, we have enough. We do not need to add physical circumcision. Ritual laws are to be fulfilled in Christ, not in the flesh.

Paul further adds that Christians have "been buried with him [Christ] in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ" (verses 12-13). These are the results of faith in a Savior who is fully divine. The old person, corrupted by sin, is dead and buried. Paul is speaking spiritually and figuratively. Through faith in Christ, we are united

with him, and what he has done is effective for us. He died for us, for our sins, so that our sins are no longer counted against us. He has paid for them.

In the death of Christ, our sinful self (spiritually uncircumcised) received the wages of sin. And in the resurrection of Christ, we also live with new life. What God did in Jesus Christ, he also did it for those who have faith in Christ. One practical significance of this is that our sins are fully forgiven. We do not need to do anything extra to kill them, pay for them or make up for them.

Fully forgiven in Christ

Paul elaborates this point — the heart of the gospel — when he writes that Jesus Christ "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" (verses 13-14). The "written code" comes from a Greek word used for a note of debt. Paul is using this monetary illustration to again make the point that our sins are effectively and completely taken away in Christ. Those sins have no power over us; sins cannot impose regulations about what we have to do, because they were removed on the cross of Christ — gone. Christians do not need extra rules to deal with sin — we have Christ.

"Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (verse 15). Paul again uses the phrase "powers and authorities," probably referring to something the false teachers were teaching. Perhaps they were saying that Christians should do something to please or get help from some mystical powers. Paul is saying that Christ has conquered them all. When we have Christ, nothing else has power or authority over our lives.

The power called sin has no authority over us. We do not need special rituals to break that power — what we need is Christ, who has already triumphed over that power. And he has done it in public. There is no special secret involved. All we need is faith in Christ, and our old sinful self is considered dead, and our new life is with Christ. Christ is the reality.

Don't be swayed by others

Paul begins the next verse with the word "therefore," because it is a logical result of what he has just said. Because our sins are fully removed in Christ, we should "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” (verse 16).

The false teachers were saying that food and drink would somehow help people deal with sin in their lives. Whether they were saying a person had to avoid certain foods, or that a person had to eat certain types of foods, does not matter. Food and drink have no power to take away sin. Whether we keep the Sabbath or not, we should not let other people make us feel guilty regarding the Sabbath. Nor should we make others feel guilty. We should not let others make us think that we will lose our salvation if we don't comply with their ideas. The Sabbath is neither forbidden nor required.

A problem in the translation?

In Colossians 2:16, the word “Sabbath” is plural in the Greek manuscripts. Some people have therefore claimed that it refers to annual Sabbaths rather than the weekly Sabbath.

However, the Bible often uses the plural word Sabbaths to refer to the weekly Sabbath (Matthew 12:1; Acts 16:13, etc.). Further, the combination *festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths* is found several times in the Old Testament (1 Chronicles 23:31; 2 Chronicles 2:4; Nehemiah 10:33, etc.), and the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament uses the same Greek words as in Colossians 2:16.

In all these passages, the plural word Sabbaths refers to the weekly Sabbath. Since the annual Sabbaths are in the annual festivals, there would be no need to have two words for the same set of days. The same is true in Colossians 2:16. Some people were criticizing what the Colossians did on annual, monthly, and weekly days. We cannot “do away” with one category (such as new moons) while trying to keep the others. All three are in the same category.

Paul is saying that we are fully forgiven in Christ, and we should therefore not let anyone judge us or criticize us about what we eat and drink. Of course, we cannot prevent what people think about us, no matter how careful we are. What Paul is saying is that we should not accept their judgments — we should not believe that our standing with God depends on food and drink regulations. Similarly, because we are fully forgiven in Christ, we should not let others judge us with regard to festivals, new moons or Sabbaths. These, like circumcision, were part of the Jewish religion. Apparently the false teachers of Colosse included a mixture of Judaism in their heresy.

How could people in Colosse observe festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths? They could not do any of the sacrificial rituals in Asia Minor. Even Jews in Jerusalem did not think of sacrifices when they thought of how they observed the weekly Sabbath.

Ordinary Jews observed the weekly and annual Sabbaths by not working. The false teachers were saying that this cycle of annual, monthly and weekly observances would help Christians deal with sin in their lives — and Paul says it's not true. Abstaining from work does not help anyone deal with sin. It does not forgive past sins, nor does it give power to avoid sin in the future.

The logical connection between verse 15 and verse 16 is this: Sin was dealt with completely by Jesus' crucifixion, and as a result, we should not let others judge us by what we do or don't do on various days of the calendar. The logical connection between

these two verses also shows that Christ's death on the cross changed something about the Sabbath, something about the Christians' approach to the Sabbath. Christians were not to be judged by anyone regarding the Sabbath.

Those days “are a shadow of the things that were to come” (verse 17). The Jewish worship days were a shadow, or a silhouette, of things to come. Paul does not elaborate about whether these days had any predictive value. He does not say how the new moons were shadows. He does not comment on how accurate a picture these days gave. He could see, however, that most of the people who kept such days did not accept Jesus as the Christ.

The contrast between “shadow” and “reality” is found also in Hebrews 10:1 — the sacrificial laws were a shadow of the

good things that were coming (same Greek word and tense as in Colossians 2:17) — they are not the reality. Just as the sacrifices were shadows that pointed to Christ and were superseded by him, the old covenant worship days were also shadows that pointed to Christ. Now that he has come, the days are no longer standards by which we are judged. The proper standard is Jesus Christ. At the last judgment, the definitive question will not be about days, but about faith in Jesus Christ. His coming has made an enormous difference in the way God's people should worship in spirit and in truth.

No matter what Paul meant by shadow, no matter whether the things to come are past or future, the result is clear: these days had no effect on sin. We should not let others judge us regarding any portion of these days — nor should we judge others. As far as sin is concerned, these days are irrelevant.

Christ is the reality

Paul then makes this contrast: “the reality, however, is found in Christ.” The Greek literally says “but the body of Christ.” This part of the verse has no verb, so we need to add one. Translators usually add the verb “is,” because Greek often omits the verb “is.” It was also common in Greek to contrast shadow and body as terms for picture and reality. The meaning is simply that food, drink and days are shadows, but the reality is Jesus Christ. Christ deals with sin in reality; foods and days can do it only in picture. Paul is saying that Christ is important; the shadows are not.

But some have suggested that we should add a different verb: Don’t let anyone judge you by food and days, but [let] the body of Christ [judge you]. It is true that Paul sometimes uses “the body of Christ” to refer to the church, but Paul does not say that we should let the church judge us. He has just explained that our sins are fully forgiven in Christ; he is not going to reduce that idea by saying that we should let the church judge us. This is not in his thought or in the context. His point is that Christ is the reality that foods and days could only hint at.

Moreover, of those people who say that we should let the church judge on this matter, most have ironically *rejected* the judgment that the church has already given regarding foods and days.

Beware restrictive philosophies

Paul ends this chapter with a warning about those who teach that religion consists of restrictive rules: “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” (verse 18).

The false teachers, in addition to ideas about circumcision, foods and days, seem to have had some strange notions about angels. They claimed unusual visions. They claimed humility, but it was a wrong sense of humility, since they were leaving Christ out of the picture. “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” (v. 19).

Paul repeats one of his main points: “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’?” (verses 20-21). The Christian life is not

based on worldly wisdom. Things that sound good to religious people are often wrong. We do not live by those regulations, but by Christ.

We do not need regulations to help us deal with sin — we have Christ. These restrictive rules “are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (verses 22-23).

Rules about avoiding certain foods, or avoiding work on certain days, may sound good and wise. They might make it look like we have self-control, but they cannot break the power of sin. Only Christ can do that, and he has done it fully and effectively on the cross.

Dealing with different opinions

We have seen in Colossians 2, in the only place that Paul mentions the Sabbath by name, that Paul did not teach Gentile Christians to keep the Sabbath. He told them instead that the Sabbath was not an area in which we should be judged.

And he tells the Roman church, which contained both Jews and Gentiles, “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5).

The Roman church contained both Jews and Gentiles. When Paul mentions that some people think certain days are better than others, he is apparently referring to Sabbaths in a gentle way. That is a day that some of them would prefer over others. (The vegetarianism that Paul addressed here was a daily life-style, not a restriction placed only on certain days.)

At a time when most Jews said that Gentiles did not have to keep the Sabbath, Paul did not think it necessary to tell the Romans Christians that one particular day is sacred or superior. He left it to individual conviction.

The old covenant was very particular about which days should be kept. How could Paul take such an indifferent attitude to the concept of special days? Apparently something significant had happened — the most significant event in history: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Because of that event, days are no longer a matter for judging behavior.

Paul’s main point in Romans 14 is that one Christian should not judge another, including

opinions about any supposedly better days: “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (verse 4). “Each of us will give an account of himself to God” (verse 12).

There will be a final judgment. But does this mean that we should live in fear of the last judgment, keeping the Sabbath “just in case,” observing new moons “just in case,” and other restrictions “just in case”? If a person does these things reverently, “to the Lord,” they may be acceptable, helpful habits. But they cannot be made requirements on other Christians. And they must not be done in fear, for that stems from a *lack* of faith. Our salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, not by performance of various rules.

Paul’s conclusion is clear: “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way” (verse 13). For every obstacle we put in front of people, we will be judged. When teaching requirements, we must be cautious.

It is good to be obedient, but we must not think that our obedience earns anything toward salvation. Paul warned the Galatian Christians strongly that faith in Christ is sufficient for salvation. Faith leads us to walk by the Spirit, and that means a life-style of love, joy and peace, etc. Faith does not mean a superstitious observance of circumcision or old covenant laws “just in case” they are also necessary.

We are called to faith — confident that the sacrifice of Christ cleanses us from all sin — not to fearful bondage to religious traditions and human rules. Such rules may appear to be religious and they may have the form of godliness, but they do not have the power to transform the heart, which is the focus of Christianity. Rules can become more important to some people than having love for neighbor. The rules can deceive people into thinking that they are right with God merely by keeping the rules. At least that’s what they did with some Pharisees.

Don’t focus on externals

The Galatians had been Gentiles in pagan religions before they were saved by faith in Christ. But Judaizing heretics were apparently teaching them that, although they had started with Christ, they needed to complete their salvation with circumcision and a commitment to the old covenant (Galatians 5:3). Such a teaching must be condemned! It makes Christ of no value (verse 2).

The old covenant law was slavery, Paul said (Galatians 4:24-25; 5:1; note also the “we” in 4:3), just as paganism was (Galatians 4:8). The Galatian Christians had gone from one childish slavery (paganism, with its many external rules) to another (the old covenant, with its external rules)!

The false teachers taught circumcision and old covenant laws — a Jewish way of life (Galatians 5:3). When they taught “days and months and seasons and years” (verse 10), it is likely that they were teaching the Jewish calendar with its days, months, festival seasons and sabbatical years. Such requirements were “weak and miserable principles” (verse 9), since they can never earn us salvation, nor are they required *after* we are given salvation. Christians may keep such days if they want (as many Jewish Christians did), but they should not teach that such days are required under the new covenant.

Something more significant than the Sabbath

Don’t observe days as if they are necessary, says Paul — and he does not add anything that would exempt the Sabbath. In his teaching about days, Paul either ignored the Sabbath commandment, or said it was unnecessary. But how could he ignore any law, such as circumcision or any number of other ritual laws?

Because something more significant than the old covenant has come — something more important than manna has given us life.

The old covenant worship days were shadows or silhouettes, just as the sacrifices were, and now the Reality has come (Colossians 2:16-17; Hebrews 10:1-2). The law — the entire old covenant — was in force until Christ came (Galatians 3:25; Hebrews 9:10).

The old covenant was an administration appropriate to a carnal nation. The new covenant is administered in a different way. God’s moral law is the same, but it is administered in different ways at different times for different peoples and different purposes.

We must recognize the continuing validity of God’s law — but we must recognize that the New Testament gives us a more complete picture than the Old Testament does. We must interpret old laws from the perspective of the new situation Jesus Christ brought. The spiritual purpose of the Sabbath is still valid, but the spiritual purpose is *not* in the avoidance of work on a specific day. The spiritual purpose is to point us to Christ. Now that we have come to Christ,

the pointer is of such diminished importance that (whether we understand its function or not) Paul can say that it is not a matter on which Christians should be judged.

The Sabbath pointed an unconverted nation to its Creator. It gave them frequent reminders of him, just as the temple and its sacrifices did. But now that the Creator is living in us, we do not need pointers in the same way. Just as we abide by the spiritual purpose of circumcision through repentance and forgiveness — completely ignoring the physical details that the old ritual required — we abide by the spiritual purpose of the Sabbath when we have faith in Christ. We can see this a little more clearly in Hebrews 4, which we will analyze in our next chapter, but the conclusion is made necessary simply by Paul's indifferent attitude toward old covenant days. Something so significant has happened that the weekly Sabbath is no longer a matter on which God's people are to be judged.

Our needs are not identical

However, the practical aspects of the Sabbath are still practical. We still need time to worship, and we need time devoted to God. If we work seven days a week, we will not only wear ourselves out, we will probably also drift away from God and starve ourselves spiritually.

We must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, not only for our own benefit but for the benefit of the entire community of faith. "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

We should come to worship services to encourage others, to give words of praise and thanks to the Lord. Christians should not use liberty for self-destruction. They should not take their liberty to excess. There is value in setting aside a day for worship, a time in which we do not allow secular duties to intrude, a time for building family cohesion and building the community of faith.

We need to set boundaries for ourselves. But the New Testament does not specify when this ought to be done, nor exactly how much time it must involve. Therefore, we cannot demand that others must do precisely as we do. Christ gives us liberty not for selfish pleasures, but for service to others (Galatians 5:13). We must be grateful for our

freedom and use it to build others up, not to put stumbling blocks in their way. We must not allow our freedom to become offensive to others; neither can we be enslaved by their erroneous ideas.

Ephesians 2: peace between Jew and Gentile

Let us study one more chapter in which Paul discusses the old covenant laws. It's a helpful chapter, for it makes the basis of our salvation very clear. Ephesians 2 takes us from death to life, from hostility to peace. This chapter also shows us that there is an important connection between God's grace and human interrelationships.

Paul begins by telling his readers: "You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live" (verses 1-2). All humans start in a state of spiritual death, whether we have many transgressions or only a few. A life not oriented to God is dead. Paul is talking about average people, socially respectable people. When they "followed the ways of this world," they were following the devil — "the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient" (verse 2). In living the way they thought best, they were unwittingly imitating the devil and disobeying God.

Christians did it, too: "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (verse 3). We lived with no thought other than to take care of our desires, and as a result, we were objects of wrath — under the judgment of God (Romans 2:5).

Spiritual life

But God's wrath is not the end of the story: "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4-5). The judge of all humanity is full of mercy, and even when we were guilty and without excuse, he forgave us. Insofar as we sin, we are dead, but as much as we are in Christ, we are alive.

Life in Christ is much more than the physical existence we are familiar with — our new life has a different quality to it, a heavenly quality, an eternal quality. When we become Christians, our identity changes. We become new people. The old self dies, and a new person lives. We died with Christ, we were buried with Christ, and we also live with Christ.

“God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (verse 6). Those who have faith in Christ are seated with him in glory. It is so sure that Paul can say that it has been done. God did this “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (verse 7). God’s grace is already at work in our lives, but the extent of his grace will be revealed with much greater clarity in the future.

Paul then summarizes the way God is working: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (verse 8). In Greek, the words grace and faith are feminine, but Paul uses a neuter form of the word *this*. Paul is not saying that faith is a gift of God, or that grace is a gift of God — they are, but here Paul is saying that all of salvation is a gift of God. None of it comes from ourselves — “not by works, so that no one can boast” (verse 9). No one can brag about having faith or works. Since God has done it, he gets all the credit. Our basis of salvation, our boast, is in Christ and not in ourselves.

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (verse 10). Even our good works are a result of the way God is working in us. He created us for his purpose, to do his will. Paul expects believers to be obedient. He says that we used to be disobedient, but that in Christ we are created anew, so that we might have a different foundation for how we live. This new life is a *result* of our salvation, not the cause of it. Our works should be good, but they can never be good enough that we deserve to be saved. We are saved by grace, by God’s mercy and love, through Jesus Christ.

Unity in Christ

Paul then begins to address a practical matter within the church: the tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers. Because we are saved by grace and because we are saved for good works, our attitudes and behavior toward one another ought to change.

He begins by writing to the Gentiles: “Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (that done in the body by the hands of men) — remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without

God in the world” (verses 11-12).

The Jews looked down on the Gentiles, calling them “uncircumcised.” This insult was a reminder that the Gentiles were not in the covenant of Abraham and not included in the blessings promised to him. Although circumcision was a human work, it reflected a spiritual reality. The Gentiles were separated from Christ, God, hope and promise. But that has now changed: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (verse 13). Once they were separated from Christ; now they are united with him. Once they were excluded; now they are included. They have hope, and they have God, through the death of Jesus Christ.

“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one” (verse 14). What “two” is Paul talking about? He is talking about Jews and Gentiles. The peoples who used to be in different spiritual categories are now united in Christ. The Jews were just like the Gentiles in being spiritually dead; the Gentiles are now like Jews in that through Christ they are members of the people of God.

Jesus has made the two peoples one by bringing the outsiders in, by bringing the Gentiles just as close as he does the Jews. Through Christ they both have the promises, the citizenship, and the hope, and they have God. Where there was rivalry between Jews and Gentiles, Jesus has made peace, because both peoples are equally saved by grace and no one has any reason to feel superior.

Abolishing the law

How did Jesus make peace between Jews and Gentiles? It is because he “has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (verse 14). And what was the wall that created hostility between Jews and Gentiles? Paul answers this question when he says that Jesus destroyed the barrier “by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations” (verse 15).

The wall of hostility was the law, which had commandments and regulations separating Jew from Gentile. This law defined who was on which side of the barrier, it said who had the promises and who belonged to the people of God.

Some of the Jews had created laws that made the Jew-Gentile hostility worse, but Paul is not talking about human-made laws. Christ did not need to abolish those laws — they had no spiritual authority in the first place, and Paul is talking about

barriers in connection with God. He is talking about spiritual realities, not human traditions.

Paul is talking about laws that divided Jew from Gentile in the sight of God, laws that had to be abolished by the cross of Christ (verse 16). Jesus did not have to die to eliminate human regulations. Rather, he died to bring an end to the old covenant. Ephesians 2 is in agreement with what we read in Acts 15, 2 Corinthians 3, Galatians 3-4, Colossians 2 and Hebrews 7-10.

The old covenant came to an end with the death of Jesus Christ. The old covenant had defined Jew and Gentile, creating the distinction, and Jesus made the two peoples one by destroying that divider. Jesus abolished the old covenant with its regulations and commandments. The people of God are no longer defined by old covenant laws. The Sabbath, an old covenant law given only to the Israelites, is no longer required. It was part of the barrier that Christ destroyed on the cross.

Christ's purpose, Paul says, "was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (verses 15-16). Before Christ, there were two kinds of people: spiritually dead Jews and spiritually dead Gentiles. Both peoples needed to be reconciled to God, and this is what Christ did on the cross. The result is a new people, a people who are alive in Christ, alive to God.

"He came and preached peace to you who were far away [Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [Jews]. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit" (verses 17-18). Paul is proclaiming equality for Gentile believers and unity of all Christians. People of different ethnic groups, people of different denominations, are one in Christ.

One building

"Consequently, you [Gentiles] are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (verse 19). Through Christ, we are members of God's family.

Paul then shifts to a different metaphor: "Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (verse 20). Moses is not our foundation. The apostles and prophets are — and Paul is probably speaking of New Testament prophets, as he does in Ephesians 3:5. But even more important than this foundation is the fact that "Christ Jesus himself [is] the chief cornerstone." He is our primary point of reference.

"In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:21). Our unity is in Christ, and as we are growing in him, we are a place of acceptable worship. Worship does not depend on a day — it depends on Christ in us.

Review 14

- Paul uses the word Sabbath only in Colossians 2:16, where it is called a shadow, like new moons and annual festivals.
- We should not let anyone make us feel guilty about the Sabbath — Christ is sufficient for our salvation.
- Christ's death changed *something* about the Sabbath and festivals. Days are not the standard of judgment.
- Laws and rules cannot break the power of sin.
- Question: In what way can laws and rules deceive us?
- The Sabbath was one of the regulations that separated Jews and Gentiles, and it was abolished on the cross (Ephesians 2:15) to unite the two groups in Christ.

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