

The Sabbath in Colossians 2:16

Adapted from Richard J. Griffith, "The Eschatological Significance of the Sabbath," ThD diss., Dallas Seminary, 1990, pp. 164-171

"Of all of the statements in the New Testament, these verses most strongly refute the Sabbatarian claim for observance of the Jewish Sabbath."¹ Colossians 2:16 expressly forbids observance of the Sabbath day, which served as a mere shadow of what was to come, that reality being in Christ (v. 17). Chafer summarized Paul's argument thus, "Having the Substance, the believer is warned against turning to the mere shadow."² Throughout Paul's ministry, he fought the continued encroachments from Judaizers who sought to place believers under the yoke of the law. Such was the situation with the church at Colosse, which was confronted with infiltrators whose teachings were destroying the believers' freedom under the gospel message and thus threatening a relapse back into Judaism.

Some argue that Colossians 2:16 points not to the regular *weekly* Sabbath but *yearly and monthly* Sabbaths (i.e., "ceremonial" sabbaths). This is the official Seventh-day Adventist position affirmed in the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*:

SDA's . . . have usually held that since the context deals with ritual matters, the sabbaths here referred to are the ceremonial sabbaths of the Jewish annual festivals "which are a shadow," or type, of which the fulfillments were to come in Christ; that although the sequence of terms might appear to class the Sabbath with the ceremonial holy days, the rhetorical form cannot outweigh the facts established elsewhere in the Bible, that the types and symbols extending only to Christ do not include the Sabbath of the Decalogue.³

The eminent Seventh-day Adventist scholar Nichol also claims that Colossians 2:16 refers to the ceremonial or annual, not weekly, sabbaths.⁴ Nearly all Adventists⁵ and even several non-Adventist⁶ scholars follow this reasoning. They say that the underlying assumption of this argument is a distinction between the so-called "moral" and "ceremonial" aspects of the Law⁷ and the belief that the designation of a weekly σαββάτων as a "shadow" (σκία; 17) is inappropriate:

Paul can hardly be referring to the seventh-day Sabbath of the Decalogue, for the Sabbath is not a shadow of anything, it is the reality. Further, although to some extent the Sabbath points forward to

¹M. Martin, 162.

²Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:108.

³SDAE, s.v. "Sabbath," by Neufeld, ed., CRS, 10:1110-1111.

⁴"If Paul here was referring to the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue, then the only conclusion to reach would be that in the Christian Era there is no weekly holy day of rest. And does Christendom, in general, believe that? No. The sternly enforced Sunday laws of the different Christian lands . . . provide . . . proof . . . that a weekly holy day is proper, right, and Scriptural" (Francis D. Nichol, *Answers to Objections*, 165; cf. 49, 166-70, 190). Unfortunately, rather than dealing with the textual evidence, Nichol appeals to a recent practice arising from the time of the Puritans which considers Sunday the "Christian Sabbath." This imposing of tradition upon exegesis is unacceptable.

⁵Others include Kenneth H. Wood, "The 'Sabbath Days' of Colossians 2:16, 17," in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, 338-42; Paul Gier, "Sabbaton in Col. 2:16," *AUSS* 19 (Autumn 1981): 195-210; Donald F. Neufeld, "Sabbath Day or Sabbath Days," *Review and Herald* 148 (April 15, 1971): 13; and especially the official statements of the Adventist movement in *Questions on Doctrine*, 131, and the *SDABC*, Nichol *et al.*, eds., 7:205-6.

⁶Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, 6:294; A. R. Fausset, "Colossians," *JFB*, 6:448; Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, 1070; John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians*, 1:477-88; Glenn N. Davies, "The Christian Sabbath," *RTR* 42 (May-August 1983): 39; de Lacey, "The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus," 182-83.

⁷Wood, "The 'Sabbath Days' of Colossians 2:16, 17," 338. The lack of biblical support for such a distinction has already been addressed earlier in this chapter.

the promised rest in Christ (see Hebrews 4), it does not obtain its primary significance from "things to come" but from an event in the past—the creation of the world in six days (Gen. 2:2, 3; Ex. 20:8-11).⁸

Therefore, most Adventists believe that ceremonial sabbaths must be in view since the weekly Sabbath looks *back* to creation while ceremonial sabbaths look *forward* to their fulfillment in Christ.

A second line of reasoning is also used to take away the force of Colossians 2:16. Even if Paul *is* referring to the weekly Sabbath, some Adventists claim that his concern is with a *ritualistic observance* of the day "as part and parcel of the works-righteousness concept of rabbinical Judaism,"⁹ not a prohibition of Sabbath observance itself. Likewise, Wood claims that the verse indicates that "sabbaths have no value for salvation."¹⁰ A modification of this ritualistic observance view sees not the Jewish Sabbath in view but rather pagan "sacred days" based upon astrological movements.¹¹ O'Brien believes that the Sabbath *is* in view but that Paul prohibits observing it with the wrong (astrological) motive.¹²

A third argument aimed against the meaning of weekly Sabbath here is the use of the plural form "sabbaths." Some believe that this form indicates ceremonial sabbaths.¹³ Bacchiocchi acknowledges that the plural form (σαββάτων) is used for the entire week (LXX Ps. 23:1; 47:1; 93:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; Acts 20:7), so he suggests that it more appropriately refers to weekdays rather than to the Sabbath.¹⁴

Can these interpretations be sustained? Is Paul speaking here of ceremonial sabbaths, ritualistic observance of the Sabbath, pagan sabbaths, or even weekdays? As most scholars recognize, the best evidence is that Colossians 2:16 condemns all forms of Sabbath-keeping, including observance of the weekly Sabbath.¹⁵

The ritualistic observance is excluded because all the practices mentioned are deemed types. Surely, Paul would not refer to empty, ritualistic Sabbath worship as a (divinely ordained) type. Pagan sabbaths also must be excluded for the same reason. The apostle would not say that a heretical,

⁸Wood, "The 'Sabbath Days' of Colossians 2:16, 17," 33; *SDABC*, Nichol *et al.*, eds., 7:205-6.

⁹*SDAE*, s.v. "Sabbath," by Neufeld, ed., 10:1110.

¹⁰Wood, "The 'Sabbath Days' of Colossians 2:16, 17," 339.

¹¹Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Herm, 115-16. Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Appendix: Paul and the Sabbath," in *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 339-69, seems to indicate this view as well as the ceremonial view.

¹²Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word BC, 139.

¹³Clarke, 6:294; Barnes, 1070.

¹⁴Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 360; *id.*, *The Sabbath in the New Testament*, 116-17.

¹⁵T. K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, ICC, 264; Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 3:224-25; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 113-15; Canright, *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*, 282-97; H. M. Carson, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC, 72 ("weekly festivals"); John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, 176-77; Charles J. Ellicott, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Philippians, the Colossians, and Philemon*, 168 ("weekly festival"); William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, NTC, 123-24; Henry Allen Ironside, *Lectures on Colossians*, 91; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, 127-28; J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 260; Martin, 162-66; Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," *EBC*, 11:204; Kenneth Wuest, *Ephesians and Colossians in the Greek New Testament*, in *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, 1:210; Rordorf, 135; Congdon, 344-47. William Barclay claims that the verse prohibits Gnostic and Jewish weekly sabbaths (*The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, DBS, 145).

astrological observance was now to be abolished because of the appearance of its antitype. Paul warns the church not to allow others to convince them of the necessity of observing Jewish holy days, irrespective of motivation.

The annual ("ceremonial") sabbaths cannot be the referent. All non-weekly Sabbaths are already mentioned in the verse as they are included under "religious festivals" (ἑορτῆς), so another designation for yearly and monthly Sabbaths in the same phrase would be redundant.¹⁶ This same list of holy days in descending order of time is repeatedly used in the Old Testament, and in each case, the Sabbaths refer to the weekly day of rest and worship. The law for daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly offerings is explained in Numbers 28–29¹⁷ and then listed in this exact order many times elsewhere in the Old Testament.¹⁸ These are the same celebrations mentioned in Colossians 2:16, which argue convincingly against the Adventist claim that they are peculiar celebrations associated with the Colossian heresy. The contention that ceremonial sabbaths must be in view because the weekly Sabbath looks back at creation (not forward to something) is unwarranted. There is no reason the day cannot have both a retrospective and prospective viewpoint. Indeed, the present tense of τῶν μελλόντων ("which are to come") in Colossians 2:17 indicates that the festivals of verse 16 are typological of things *still* forthcoming.¹⁹

Further evidence that the weekly Sabbath is in view stems from the New Testament usage of the word σαββάτων. This word is used sixty times in the New Testament in both the singular and plural, always referring to the seventh-day Sabbath.²⁰ While Adventists themselves admit that fifty-nine times it refers to the weekly Sabbath, they still insist, based upon "context," that Colossians 2:16 remains the only use of the word for ceremonial sabbaths.²¹ Such alleged contextual evidence is lacking. It appears that the usual meaning for σαββάτων has been abandoned to maintain a moral/ceremonial dichotomy within the Law. Bruce adds, "When the Sabbath is mentioned in the OT or the NT with no contextual qualification, the weekly sabbath is intended."²²

Finally, using the plural also does not argue for the ceremonial Sabbaths; it is simply a Hebraism.²³ As such, the plural is commonly used in Scripture with a singular sense for the weekly Sabbath.²⁴ The

¹⁶See Congdon, 344-47; Ironside, *Lectures on Colossians*, 91.

¹⁷Numbers 28:3-4 (daily), 9 (Sabbath), 11 (new moon), 16, 26; 29:1, 7, 12 (five annual feasts).

¹⁸1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 8:13; 31:3; Neh. 10:33; cf. opposite order (parallel to Col. 2:16) in Ezek. 45:17; Hos. 2:11. The new moon and Sabbath are adjacent in several texts (Amos 8:5; Isa. 1:13; 2 Kings 4:23; Ezek. 46:3), which provides additional weight for the Sabbath referring to the weekly day.

¹⁹This eschatological meaning is further explored in the final chapter.

²⁰Canright, *Seventh-day Adventism Renounced*, 285.

²¹Wood, "The 'Sabbath Days' of Colossians 2:16, 17," 339-40.

²²Bruce, *Colossians*, 115, n. 105.

²³Both the singular and plural forms indicate the weekly Sabbath in the New Testament: the singular σαββάτον and plural σαββάτων both stem from the Hebrew שַׁבָּת whereas the plural σαββάτα stems from the Aramaic (ܫܒܬܐ; cf. Acts 17:2; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 95, 105; cf. James Hope Moulton, Wilbert Francis Howard, and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 4 vols., 2:128, 153; George Benedict Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament*, 177); "σαββάτα, though plural, means 'a Sabbath day,' being, in fact, a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic, and from its form mistaken for a plural" (Abbott, 264; cf. Lightfoot, 260).

²⁴Exod. 31:13; Lev. 19:3; Isa. 56:4; Ezek. 20:12; Matt. 12:5, 10; 28:1; Luke 4:16; Acts 13:14. The misleading translation "sabbath days" (KJV) in Colossians 2:16 does not reflect this usage. Adventists themselves admit that the plural often refers to a succession of weekly Sabbaths (Francis D. Nichol, ["D. F. N." in article] "Sabbath Day or Sabbath Days?" *RH*, 15 April 1971, 13; *SDABC*, Nichol *et al.*, eds., 7:205); nevertheless, for the most part most of them follow the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* teaching that it refers to the ceremonial sabbaths (cf. *SDABC*, Nichol *et al.*, eds., 7:205-6).

translators of the Septuagint also felt free to employ the exact plural form (σαββάτων) in their translation of the singular שַׁבָּת in the Decalogue itself (Exod. 20:8; Deut. 5:12), as well as in many other passages where the singular weekly Sabbath is in view.²⁵ Also, assuming Bacchiocchi's "weekday" view, one must wonder how Paul would be condemning the church for improperly using weekdays, especially in light of the Jewish emphasis in the book. Further, Bacchiocchi never explained how "weekdays" serve as a type.

Since the weekly Sabbath must be in view here, it remains to ask what Paul says about it. His primary purpose is to warn the Colossians not to let anyone judge them regarding the day's observance. In other words, Paul cautions the church members against anyone convincing them of the necessity of Sabbath observance.²⁶ He does not declare Sabbath observance wrong *per se* since Paul's attitude about Sabbath-keeping "is that it, like many other things, does neither harm nor good."²⁷ However, he does forbid the required observance of the day. This is because the Sabbath served as a mere shadow, whereas Christ is the substance (v. 17).

²⁵For example, τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῶν σαββάτων in Exod. 35:3; Num. 15:32; 28:9 and simply τῶν σαββάτων in Isa. 58:13 (cf. Alfred Ralfs, *Septuaginta*, 2 vols.).

²⁶C. I. Scofield, ed., *New Scofield Reference Bible*, 1194. See also the many sources at footnote 15.

²⁷De Lacey, "The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus," 182-83.