

# Colossians 2:16: Who was Paul Defending?

MP [messianicpublications.com/ian-hodge/colossians-216-who-was-paul-defending/](http://messianicpublications.com/ian-hodge/colossians-216-who-was-paul-defending/)

6/18/2015



“So don’t let anyone pass judgment on you in connection with eating and drinking or in regard to a Jewish festival or Rosh-Hodesh [new moon] or Shabbat [sabbath].” —[Col. 2:16](#)

Along with Luke’s account of Peter’s vision in Acts 10, this section of Paul’s letter to the Colossians is the other alleged proof that the Old Testament “ceremonial” laws are no longer a moral requirement for those who follow the Messiah.<sup>[1]</sup>

But also along with the Acts 10 passage, interpreters tend to read their predetermined view into this portion of Scripture. In the case of [Colossians 2:16](#) , the predetermined view says Paul declared that the dietary and ceremonial laws were merely a matter of individual choice. You may, or may not, choose to keep them. No one is to be your judge in these matters.

In order to understand this issue, it helps to ask a critical question: Who was Paul defending in this passage? Is he defending the Torah-keeping Christians from accusations by non Torah-keepers? Or is he defending the non Torah-keepers from the accusations of the Torah-keeping crowd? And importantly, what criteria or what *standard* would Paul have used in order to figure out which group he *should* be defending?

Here’s the issue: until you figure out your interpretive guideline for the New Testament, all you do is make the New Testament subject to what biblical scholar Cornelius Van Til called “the growing ethical consciousness of man.” When you read the Old Testament, the Torah’s permanence is made known. Read passages like Deuteronomy 29 (see verse 29) or Psalm 119 if you’re unsure. When you come to the New Testament, the opening Gospel makes no attempt to change this view of the Torah. Read [Matt. 5:17ff](#) if you’re not convinced.

“But!” it is sometimes alleged, “it was the Apostle Paul (and the writer to Hebrews if it wasn’t St. Paul) who has told us that we are no longer *obligated* to keep certain aspects of the law—the Torah—as a matter of sanctification.”<sup>[2]</sup> We now have freedom of choice. God has untied us from at least *some* parts of his Torah, and New Testament Christians are no longer bound to the dietary laws, new moons and sabbaths, for example.

Is that, however, what this passage in Colossians is teaching us? Because if it is, there’s an interpretive problem a mile wide, and there is no way to bridge the gap. Let me repeat: Jesus, speaking in the Old Testament *insisted* on the perpetuity of the Torah. “But you are near, O LORD, and all your commandments are true. Long have I known from your testimonies that you have founded them forever” ([Psa. 119:151](#) , [152](#) ). Jesus as God

incarnate repeated the same principle in his Sermon on the Mount.<sup>[3]</sup>

By what *principle* of interpretation, then, can it be said that St. Paul disagrees with what God has *previously stated quite clearly*. Paul calls himself an ambassador, representing Christ the King. And ambassadors do not make up the rules; they report what they are told to report. And nowhere—I repeat, *nowhere*—in Scripture, is there any indication that the unchangeable God indicated to Paul that it is *now* time to change the rules. Any suggestion of changed rules is a fabrication imposed upon the text. Or, more to the point, if you really believe in the inspired Word of God, then on what *principle* of interpretation can it be said that God changed his mind on the Law?

## Let no one judge you? .... Even God?

What would happen if you decided to derive your principle of interpretation from the word of God itself: namely, the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings of the Old Testament? What would happen if you also held to the literal words of Jesus the Messiah when he said that not the least jot nor tittle has been done away with and then re-read this passage in Colossians?

The first thing you would note is Paul's terminology. He says "don't let *anyone* pass judgment on you concerning eating, drinking, new moon and sabbaths." Does the word 'anyone' here *include* God? Because if it does, not even God can now pass judgment on these issues. If no one, including God, is permitted to pass judgment on these issues, does that mean that you are now a law unto yourself on these matters? That's the outcome if you follow the popular teaching on this verse.

Such an interpretation throws you back to Eden and the tempter's suggestion to Eve: "Don't let anyone pass judgment on you concerning eating. You are free from any obligation to God in these matters. You just have to make up your own mind on issues such as which food you might eat."

Here you begin to see the problem. New moon and sabbath issues are no longer interpreted by Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. Instead, they are interpreted, to paraphrase Van Til, by *the autonomous and growing mind of man*; which apparently, *already* freed from the law, is somehow capable of answering this question without the aid of divine revelation: "Should I obey the new moon and sabbath laws of the Torah?"

Would the rabbinic scholar Paul, who was enlightened on the Damascus road about the unity of the Old Testament and the person of Jesus the Christ, the "living Torah," go against what he knew God had *already* said in the Scriptures? Would he now turn the clock back to Eden and repeat the tempter's lie: "Don't let anyone pass judgment on you concerning food matters. Eat the fruit and you will be like God *determining for yourself* what is right and wrong"? (see [Gen. 3:5](#) )

Unlikely.

And you can see how preposterous such an interpretation would be if you hold to the *principle* that the New Testament documents must be interpreted in the light of the Old Testament. Any other principle simply loosens man to interpret Scripture by his subjective ethical consciousness. Man may know that the new moon and sabbath regulations were the right thing for the Old Testament Saints, but now Modern Man, more enlightened and with new insights, can determine for himself rules about new moons and sabbaths.

What people are suggesting is that Colossians really reads like this: "Don't let anyone—including God—pass judgment on you in connection with eating and drinking or in regard to a Biblical festival or *Rosh-Hodesh* or *Shabbat*."

Now see if you can answer the opening question, "Who was Paul defending?": the Torah-keeping Christians who were being accused of keeping God's instructions, or was Paul defending the pagan idea that new moon and sabbaths were simply a matter of opinion?

"Let no man tell you." But what if that man is repeating what is already in Scripture? Can *that* man tell you what to do? The correct answer to this question is that it is not the man who is telling you what to do; he is merely the

spokesperson—the ambassador—for God. And to the extent that man is faithful to the Scripture, then it is God telling you what to do, not the spokesperson.

In other words, the teacher, Paul, is being a consistent Old Testament instructor at this point. Let no *person* tell you what is right, but if that is extended to “don’t let God tell you,” then there is a real problem here. After all, what does God say about diet, new moons, and sabbaths? Read the Torah and find out.

There is, then, *nothing* in Paul’s words that indicate he was reversing or changing the law of God. But what else should you have expected? When he was accused of going against God’s Law by the chief priest before Felix, St. Paul could declare in his defense (Acts 24):

*<sup>11</sup>As you can verify for yourself, it has not been more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Yerushalayim; <sup>12</sup>and neither in the Temple nor in the synagogues nor anywhere else in the city did they find me either arguing with anyone or collecting a crowd. <sup>13</sup>Nor can they give any proof of the things of which they are accusing me. <sup>14</sup>“But this I do admit to you: I worship the God of our fathers in accordance with the Way (which they call a sect). I continue to believe everything that accords with the Torah and everything written in the Prophets.*

Did you notice the words: “I continue to believe everything that accords with the Torah and everything written in the Prophets”? *Everything* written in the Torah. Everything.

In other words, Paul’s defense against the accusations of the Jewish priest was that he was a consistent practitioner of the Torah. And he claims his accusers could produce no proof to the contrary.

Let’s now go back to Colossians and see what else Paul says there. If you step back to verses four and eight in the same chapter, you will get a better perspective and understanding of Paul’s comment in verse 16. Twice he has already used the idea of ‘no one.’ “I say this so that *no one* will fool you with plausible but specious arguments” (v.4). Again, “Watch out, so that *no one* will take you captive by means of philosophy and empty deceit, following human tradition which accords with the elemental spirits of the world but does not accord with the Messiah” (v.8). In either instance of his use of ‘no one,’ is there any hint that he is including the Messiah in his broad identification? No one means *no human person*. Paul never in the slightest indicates that the Messiah is *no longer* to tell you what to do. That would destroy the Sovereignty of God, taking away his Lordship.

## A Fantastic Claim

It’s a fantastic claim about the apostle Paul that is made by the popular interpretation of the passage here. Paul, who declares himself to be an ambassador, or emissary, of the Messiah, Yeshua, is granted a privilege that is not granted or even evidenced for any other human writer of Scripture. Paul alone is attributed with the authority to *change* the Messiah’s statements found in [Matt. 5:17-18](#) . This makes Paul a greater authority than the writer of the Torah, Moses, and greater than the writer of Psalm 119, King David. No other biblical writer even dared to change any aspect of Torah, not even Jesus the Messiah when he was on earth. Yet we are told that St. Paul, and he alone, had more authority as an ambassador than did the King of kings when he spoke on the Mount.

It’s important to note that [Colossians 2:16](#)  is just an expansion of Paul’s comments in verses four and eight. Don’t let *anyone* fool you or take you captive with dumb arguments that sound great but carry no authority, he exhorts. Beware of philosophy and empty deceit. These are plausible but specious arguments. In the same manner, don’t let *anyone* tell you about food and drink, new moons and sabbaths. Now if St. Paul is opening the doorway to an abandonment of the Torah in verse 16, then he is doing the same thing in verses four and eight. But if he’s doing that, he can no longer legitimately contrast these things over against the Messiah. In other words, to suggest that St. Paul is saying that the Messiah is no longer to sit in judgment over you makes a nonsense of everything else Paul says here and elsewhere. As the philosophers like to say, this is incoherent.

You find the same idea from St. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians (chapter 10). There he says, “We demolish arguments and every arrogance that raised itself up against the knowledge of God; we take every thought captive and make it obey the Messiah.” There’s the Messiah again. It is *Him* you are to obey. And if that’s Paul’s theology in his letter to the Corinthians, he is hardly likely to advocate rejection of the Messiah’s words, “If you love me, keep my commandments” ([John 14:15](#)) to the Messianic followers in Colossae.

The issue is ultimately tied to your view of God. If he is the self-exhaustive one who speaks an infallible and unchanging Word, you need to maintain this as the key interpretive principle. “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,” said Jesus. This means the way to the Father is through Him and Him alone, and not the words of St. Paul. And no amount of theological juggling can escape the meaning of the Messiah’s words, “I did not come to abolish . . .” ([Matt. 5:17ff](#)). It was Paul’s calling to be an *ambassador* of the Messiah, and there are no reasons to entertain the idea that he dismissed any aspect of the Torah. Paul confessed that Jesus is both Savior and Lord.

The popular interpretation of Colossians causes the Messiah in the Scriptures to contradict himself. The Messiah cannot have said that *he* gave up judgment of ethical matters such as diet, festivals and sabbaths and at the same time also said, “I did not come to abolish. . . .”

It should come as no surprise, then, that St. Paul was simply defending *the Messiah* in all of his letters, especially his letter to the Colossians. That is, defending the Messiah who identified himself as Lord of creation, through whom alone was the entryway to God. This is the Messiah who was given the ministry of reconciliation ([2 Cor. 5:18f](#)), so that Paul could declare in the context of his great statements on justification, “Does it follow that we abolish *Torah* by this trusting? Heaven forbid! On the contrary, we uphold the *Torah*” ([Rom 3:31](#)).

The popular interpretation of [Colossians 2:16](#) is thus an *abstraction*. The verse is taken out of its historical context and given a meaning quite independent of not only what Paul is saying in this letter, but is given a meaning quite the opposite to everything that is enormously clear in Scripture. “I did not come to abolish. . . .” How much clearer could the Messiah be on this very important issue?

But this poses yet another question: “If we are to obey the Messiah, how will he communicate to us?”

## Does Jesus speak *through* the Scriptures or *without* them?

In this question you find one of the great theological debates of today. Does the Messiah speak through the Scriptures, or does he speak directly to us through the Spirit without Scripture? Your doctrine of revelation is at stake here. It has been held by Christians throughout the ages that the Scriptures (both the “Old” and “New” Testament) are the ultimate revelation of God.<sup>[4]</sup> The popular interpretation of [Colossians 2:16](#), however, causes this doctrine to break down, since it causes Paul to not only contradict himself (e.g. [Rom. 3:31](#)), but also contradict the instructions of both the Son and the Father.

So, was Paul defending non-Torah-keeping people who told the Christians that it was now OK to “do their own thing” in relation to diet, new moons and sabbaths? In which case, he would have been saying that the Messianic followers should adopt the advice, “don’t listen to man *or* God; listen to yourself.” Or was Paul defending and encouraging the Torah-keeping followers of the Messiah to ignore the criticisms they were receiving from gnostics who sought to take these believers captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy? (cf. [Col. 2:4](#), [8](#), [18](#), [22-23](#)) “Don’t listen to these men—let no man tell you. Rather, listen to God.”

Now answer the question: Who was Paul defending?

This is really a simple issue. Either Paul was not telling the truth about himself in his defense in front of Felix,<sup>[5]</sup> or else other people are misinterpreting his words in Colossians.

### See also

- Cornelius Van Til, “Confessing Jesus Christ” in John H. Skilton, ed., *Scripture and Confession* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 217-246.

- [Acts 10: Peter's Conversation With God](#)
  - [Sermon on Romans Chapter 3.](#)
- 

## References

[1] See my article "Peter's Conversation with God: A Lesson in the Perspicuity of Scripture" here: <http://messianicpublications.com/ian-hodge/peters-conversation-with-god/>

[2] For a brief overview of the difference between justification and sanctification, see: <https://carm.org/justification-and-sanctification>

[3] See especially [Matthew 5:17ff](#) 

[4] I know there is debate about apocryphal books, but these are in addition to the 66 books accepted by most Christians.

[5] See [Acts 24:11-14](#) , quoted earlier.

*\*This article originally appeared on [BiblicalLandmarks.com](#) and is reproduced here with permission.*

Copyright © 2017 Messianic Publications, All Rights Reserved.