

Q & A #2

Question: I've heard people use Colossians 2:16, 17 to prove there's no longer anything special about the seventh-day Sabbath. A friend who has a Greek study Bible pointed out that the word translated "sabbath" in these verses is the same word used in the Bible for the seventh-day Sabbath, not the word used for the Jewish ceremonial feast days.

Answer: I'll begin by quoting the verses in question:
"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."

The Greek word translated "sabbath" in Colossians 2:16 is *sabbaton*. This is the same word, whether singular or plural, that's used for "sabbath" everywhere else in the Greek Old and New Testaments.(1) Nothing in the word itself indicates whether it refers to the weekly Sabbath or ceremonial sabbaths.

Some commentators have argued that because *sabbaton* in Colossians 2:16 is plural, it refers to the weekly Sabbath. Perhaps this is what your friend had in mind. However, the plural of *sabbaton* is used elsewhere in the New Testament for a single weekly Sabbath.(2) Whether *sabbaton* refers to weekly or ceremonial sabbaths cannot be decided on the basis of the Greek form of the word. It has to be determined by the context. So let's examine the context.

First, notice that Paul began by admonishing the Colossian Christians to avoid judging each other about certain issues. While I don't believe Paul had in mind the weekly sabbath (the reasons for which I will explain momentarily), his advice applies nicely to the present controversy over whether Sabbath should be celebrated on the first or the seventh day of the week. This doesn't mean we can't have convictions about the day we keep. It means we should avoid questioning the Christian experience of those who differ with us.

Paul mentioned two points in Colossians 2:16 that can help us decide whether the sabbath(s) he referred to was the weekly Sabbath or the yearly ceremonial sabbaths of the Hebrew tabernacle ritual. The first is that "sabbath" was the last of several issues the Colossian Christians apparently were judging each other about. The others were choices of what to eat and drink, religious festivals, and new moon celebrations.

Second, Paul said all of these "are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." So Paul wasn't just talking about what people ate and drank at their regular meal time. He had in mind eating and drinking that foreshadowed Christ. He also had in mind the observance of religious festivals and new moon celebrations that pointed forward to Christ.

We know, of course, that the ceremonial law required the Jews to bring a variety of food and drink offerings to the temple as a part of their worship.(3) It also mandated the observance of various holy days through-out the year,(4) and the new moon was to be celebrated on the first day of each month.(5)

All of these were indeed "a shadow of the things that were to come," that is, of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. That's why Paul said "the reality . . . is found in Christ." When Christ came, He fulfilled all these shadows or types, including

animal sacrifices, and they ceased to exist. This is consistent with the statement in Hebrews that the entire sanctuary ritual was “a copy and *shadow* of what is in heaven.”(6)

The weekly Sabbath has never been a shadow of anything. The fourth commandment presents the weekly Sabbath as a memorial of Creation: “In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore [or “that's why”] the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.”

Even at the time the Ten Commandments were given, Creation was an event in the distant past and not a shadow of Christ, whose coming was still future. This rules out the sabbath in Colossians 2:16 being the weekly Sabbath.

On the other hand, all of the ceremonial sabbaths pointed forward to Christ, just as Paul said. Thus, in Colossians 2:16 Paul was referring to the yearly ceremonial sabbaths of the Hebrew tabernacle service, not the weekly Sabbath of the fourth commandment.

Answer is written by Marvin Moore, editor: *Signs of the Times Magazine*.

Footnotes:

1. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic but was translated into Greek a couple centuries before Christ.
2. See, e.g., Matthew 28:1.
3. See, e.g., Leviticus 7:12-18 (food offerings) and 23:13 and Numbers 15:10 (drink offerings).
4. Leviticus 23:4-44
5. Numbers 10:10; 28:11
6. Hebrews 8:5, emphasis supplied.