

Colossians 2:13-15 in the Navajo Bible

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Nihí ádił nida'ayotłzhígíí ɓaą, áádóó niha'át'e' doo nahji' eelgizhígíí biniinaa dasinoonáá nít'ée', nidi doo ákóó ádaahdzaa yéę t'áá altso Diyin God nihá yóó'iidíí'á, áádóó Christ bił hinááh ánídaníhidlaa. ¹⁴ Jó, bik'eh hoogáańi bik'ehgo nihik'iji' naaltsoos siłtsoozígíí tsin ałnãoszid ɓaąhji' Christ bił o'oolkaalígíí bee Diyin God éí naaltsoos yik'i ní'deezoh. ¹⁵ Naat'aanii danilíinii áádóó bídahólníihii doo daat'íinii t'áá altso Christ hak'eh deesdlí'go íishjáá áyiilaa. (Colossians 2:13-15)¹

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Colossians 2:13-15)²

Introduction

Paul starts by referring to things that have been written down ("the written code"). Many things have been written down. That's what the word "Scripture" means. Today it means an "authoritative writing," or a "sacred writing," but at first it just meant "something written." Whatever the written code is in Colossians 2:14 is, it is "against us" and stands "opposed to us." Just here is a point that will require spiritual discernment, because many things that would benefit us are things we don't like. Because we don't like them it might seem they are against us, when actually we are against them.

Notice that just as the written code was "against us" (*nihik'iji' naaltsoos siłtsoozígíí*), the cross is against it (*éí naaltsoos yik'i ní'deezoh*). Different idioms are employed, but we have the same post position stem in both cases (*nihik'iji' < -k'i*, *yik'i < -k'i*). This is just something that catches the eye when reading the passage through in Navajo, drawing out a possible parallel between the two clauses, but it does show that the things eventually nailed to the cross in vs. 16 have some connection with the cross. There is an element of time in the relationship between them. The one looks forward to the other. As such, they compete with each other. When the one comes, the other is displaced. But we will come to that in another paper.

As is so often the case, Paul is saying more here than we think at first. Saying a "written code" was nailed to the cross is a metaphor, of course, but one thing that really was nailed to the cross was Jesus. So there are some things to think about as we study this passage.

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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Three Paired Sets of Terms

In the context of vss. 16-17, what Christ nailed to the cross were certain ceremonial restrictions having to do with food and drink (not just food), and the obligation to celebrate certain feast days. If God took these regulations away at the cross, then no Christian living after that time has ever sinned against them. They are no longer an issue. But in vs. 13 Paul says, "He forgave us all our sins." So there's a question as to the relationship between the sins of vs. 13 and the regulations of vss. 14 and 16. If what God took away was the only thing Christians could possibly sin against (i.e., writings which have continuing validity), then what does Paul mean by saying they were taken away? On the other hand, if they really are gone, how can we be guilty of sinning against them? As I say, this passage gives us plenty to think about.

Written code / regulations

When he speaks of "the written code" in vs. 14, is Paul referring to the entire Old Testament? Some might wish to say so, but that's painting with too broad a brush. What Paul has in mind are things that tell us what to do. That's why he mentions "regulations," or as the Navajo so nicely puts it, *bik'eh hoogáatii* (lit., "according to it [or them] things proceed"). We're not talking about all of Scripture here, but only those portions of it that tell us how to live. Nor are we talking about all rules of every kind (see Luke 6:46), but only those that are "against us" and that stand "opposed to us." Which ones are these?

Deciding exactly what Paul has in mind could be confusing. If God has told people how to live, would there not be benefit in what He says? And if there is benefit, would His instruction not be for us instead of against us? When we discipline our children it's not fun for the child, but we do it because we want the best for them. We are not against them when we do this. Just the opposite. So why would God's instructions to us on how to live be any different? Are they "against us," or "opposed to us," just because we don't like what they say?

Against us / opposed to us

Actually, there are many passages of the Old Testament that tell us how to live and for that reason are to our benefit. So we will need to make some distinctions. Let me take one example of instruction that many are guaranteed not to like, because they don't follow it, but which would benefit them if they did. In this regard, there's both good news and bad news. We'll start with the good news.

He said, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you." (Exodus 15:26)

Unpopular blessings. What a wonderful promise, that God will remove all the diseases from those who obey Him which afflict those who don't! Well, this might be a wonderful promise, but it will only benefit those who follow the instruction that comes along with it. Here's the instruction:

And the pig, though it has a split hoof completely divided, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. (Leviticus 11:7)

Wait a minute! That's just for the Jews! We're under the new covenant. All those dietary restrictions are a thing of the past. We have all heard such arguments, and yet what do they mean? That after the cross pigs no longer have parasites? That after the cross our bodies have a new ability to withstand the diseases that these parasites cause? Why did God say what He said about pigs? Did He have a reason in mind, or was He merely being arbitrary? If He had a reason, wouldn't it make sense to find out what it was? Could it be that there is still benefit to be gained by obeying what God says about food? I think there is. But the only way to benefit from anything God says, on any topic, is by obeying it. Let me share some reasons for obeying this particular bit of instruction. I forewarn you, some of what follows will not be pretty. But try to follow the argument to its conclusion.

Have you ever watched pigs eat? I have. A pig will eat anything that fits in its mouth. Pigs don't eat at tables. Where do they eat? They eat where they are. Where are they? Usually in pig pens. Is there anything else in a pig pen besides pigs? Another way of asking the same question is, when you finish walking through a pig pen, what do you have to wipe off your feet? That's what's in a pig pen. When you feed a pig, where do you put its food? You put it where the pig is, i.e., in the pen. So when you feed a pig there are two things in the pen. Some of it is what goes in, and some of it is what comes out. How do pigs keep these two sorts of things separate? They don't. Their waste keeps being recycled along with their food. When a parasite infects an animal, it has to enter the animal's body in some way. Can you see how the situation I've described might open the way for pigs to be infected by parasites? These include,

large white worms ascarids (*Ascaris suum*), red stomach worms (*Hyostromylus rubidus*) and whip worms (*Trichuris suis*). Pigs can also get ring worm, which although [it] needs treatment, is of little economic significance, however it can be passed to humans. The sow becomes the source of potential infection to piglets. The threadworm (*Strongyloides ransomi*) is important in the piglet. The life cycles of all are direct from eggs in faeces to adult in the intestine.³

This is an example of instruction from God that many are sure not to like (those who eat it tell me pork tastes really good), but the instruction is not against us. We're against it. It is instruction that would benefit us if we followed it. As such, there is no reason to take it away. Some will argue that at the cross all this changed. We can eat anything we like now. Doesn't Peter say so in Acts 10?⁴ Doesn't Paul say in Colossians 2:16 that no one should judge us for what we eat and drink? He says this, but within a context. If you disagree, then eat pork. For my part, I want to be free from all the diseases God put on the Egyptians.⁵

Attractive things that would not be a blessing. If everything God says is a blessing, as I've been trying to show above (even His curses are blessings in one way or another), how can anything He says be "against us"? And yet some of it is. Paul says so. To understand what Paul means, we're going to have to make some distinctions that might have slipped past before.

³ See <http://www.thepigsite.com/diseaseinfo/150/internal-parasites-worms-etc>.

⁴ Actually Acts 10 says no such thing. In Acts 10 Peter sees a vision of a sheet let down from heaven with all sorts of unclean animals in it. Three times he was told to kill and eat, but he refuses, saying he has never eaten anything unclean before in his life (see vs. 9-16). The meaning of the vision is made clear in the next chapter (see Acts 11:1-19). God was teaching Peter not to call Cornelius unclean, but to go and share the gospel with him. The vision of the sheet has nothing to do with food.

⁵ One way to understand Colossians 2:16 on eating and drinking is that Paul was talking, not about what to eat, but about when to eat it. The Jews had a regular schedule for fasting, which would fit perfectly in the context of what Paul says in the rest of the verse about feast days.

Some portions of Scripture point forward to Christ. They show what He would do when He came. One example of this involves animal sacrifice. When a person sinned in ancient Israel, s/he would bring a lamb, or some other clean animal like a goat, and sacrifice it before the Lord. This showed that Jesus would one day come and die for our sins. Sacrificing a lamb was an object lesson, or shadow, that pointed forward to what Jesus would do for us on the cross. This fact explains why John the Baptist mentioned a lamb in the following passage.

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29; see also vs. 36)

Israel had many other things that showed them what Jesus would eventually do when He came to this earth. In fact, there wasn't much they did which did not have this kind of teaching value. Everything about Israel was an illustration of some sort pointing forward to Jesus.

In every page, whether history, or precept, or prophecy, the Old Testament Scriptures are irradiated with the glory of the Son of God. So far as it was of divine institution, the entire system of Judaism was a compacted prophecy of the gospel. To Christ "give all the prophets witness." Acts 10:43. From the promise given to Adam, down through the patriarchal line and the legal economy, heaven's glorious light made plain the footsteps of the Redeemer. Seers beheld the Star of Bethlehem, the Shiloh to come, as future things swept before them in mysterious procession. In every sacrifice Christ's death was shown. In every cloud of incense His righteousness ascended. By every jubilee trumpet His name was sounded. In the awful mystery of the holy of holies His glory dwelt.⁶

If all of this ceremony and pageantry pointed forward to Jesus, it's not hard to see how it would be attractive to people, and also why Paul would not want us to get wrapped up in observing such things. The fact is that a religion with so many things to do could compete with simple faith. It could draw our attention away from Jesus Himself to all those interesting things that pointed *forward* to Jesus. Actually, this fact provides a reason why we should study the history of Israel and its ceremonies. They are inseparably linked to the cross. We should study these ceremonies for what they can teach us about Jesus. Unfortunately, the Colossians weren't thinking this way. They just liked what they saw. And the fact is that Judaism attracted people. They were drawn to it. As Paul says in another place,

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. (Romans 9:4)

At the same time we have statements making a different point, that Jewish laws were burdensome and hard to keep. For example Peter, at the Jerusalem council, says,

"Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?" (Acts 15:10)

What Paul says in the passage we're studying here might be on this level, i.e., that Judaism gave people many things to do – perhaps too many things. But not all of these went

⁶ Ellen White, *Desire of Ages*, pp. 211-12.

away at the cross. Consider that the document endorsed by the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 had only four stipulations, and that three of these had to do with food. According to James,

. . . we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. (Acts 15:20)

What was that part about "blood"? What James is including here are the kosher laws (see Leviticus 3:17). The kosher laws? In the New Testament? Yes, in the New Testament. If you eat pork, you are obligated by a ruling of the *New Testament*, not the Old, to prepare it in a kosher manner, i.e., by draining off all the blood. No Christian I know of does this, but the principle is there nonetheless. Let me say just one more thing about the Jerusalem council before going on. The rulings of this council are not a complete guide to Christian living. They are a summary of points requiring special emphasis under the circumstances. For example, the council condemns adultery, but not murder. Does this mean murder is alright now? I hope no one will think so. Again, the council's rulings were given within a context.

We need to maintain a sense of proportion as we study these things. The early church did not do away with all scriptural regulations. Some remain. The problem is that, human nature being what it is, what we need most is likely to be what we want least. What Paul wants the church to be free from is anything that would draw its attention away from Christ. Anything that does this has the effect of separating us from Christ, and for that reason is against us. It stands opposed to us. But a rule that does not separate us from Christ is not against us, it does not meet Paul's qualification, and it need not be taken away – even if we don't like what it says.

Discussion

What is the specific connection between the things Paul has in mind and the cross? If they existed to show what would happen on the cross (Passover), and immediately after the cross (Pentecost), then the cross was their topic from the beginning. They are inseparable from the cross – nailed firmly to it. We can't talk about them without talking about it. The things nailed to the cross in vs. 16 did not begin their association with it when the event occurred, but were always linked to the cross by the nature of their inherent significance. That's why they fall when Christ dies. And that's also why we can, and should, still study these ceremonies for what they tell us about Jesus. But their time has passed. It would be wrong to turn the clock back, as it were, and continue using these things to look forward to Christ, as though He had not already come. He has come. And so we go on. The Ten Commandments, on the other hand, have no connection with time. They rise above it, applying in all times and to all peoples – even to those who don't acknowledge their authority. Nor can we pick through, keeping what we like and rejecting the rest. We obey the commandments, not because they please us, but out of loyalty to God.

Our God is the God of all mankind. As such, He wants you to be the kind of person you want your neighbor to be. When we keep the commandments, that benefits those around us and these also are people God cares about. There's more here to think about than ourselves. So no, Christ did not die in order to change the Ten Commandments. He died to change us. Instead of changing His commandments from good to bad, He changes sinners from disobedient to obedient. The Ten Commandments were good before and they are good now – a description of what Jesus is like, and of what His Father is like. They do not stand against us (even though we might stand against them) and God has not taken them away.

Discussion

One commandment in particular that some wish God would take away is the one in which He invites us to spend the seventh day of each week with Him. But that's exactly the commandment we should have the least problem with! Don't Christians love Jesus? That's what a Christian is, i.e., a person who loves Jesus. Does it detract from Jesus in some way to spend time with Him? Does spending time with Jesus harm us spiritually? If not, the commandment is not against and we should keep it. Why would God take away a commandment that draws us closer to Him? He would have no reason to do that

Some say that Sabbath keeping is work. I've never understood that. The word "Sabbath" means to stop, or pause, or rest. How is resting the same as working? It's only work if you don't want to do it. But again, why wouldn't any Christian want to spend time with Jesus? The pre-existent Christ, in union with the Father, is the One who created our world (see John 1:1-3; Hebrews 1:1-3). His creative work is what the Sabbath celebrates. Because He worked, we can rest. So when we keep it, we honor Him.

Keeping the Sabbath as it should be kept is on the same level as Mary sitting at Jesus' feet (see Luke 10:39-42) – listening to Him, spending time with Him, enjoying His company as long as possible. Anyone who loves Jesus as Mary did, and would enjoy spending forever with Him, will be given the opportunity. But if we can't spend a day with Him here, how could we spend forever with Him there? Any time with Jesus is too much for those who don't love Him, but for those who do, any time with Jesus is too little. At issue is the quality of our relationship with Him. And if the commandments serve as a warning when we break them and drive us to Christ for forgiveness and healing, then they are not against us at all, but for our benefit..

In another paper I discuss the next two verses after the ones we are studying here.⁷ The question there is whether Paul specifically singles out the Sabbath of the fourth commandment as something God has set aside. People think so, but it is not so. Read the paper to learn my reasons for saying this. When I starting studying the passage (Colossians 2:16-17), what I learned surprised me. I think it will surprise you too. Read the paper.

Conclusion

God has not removed all restraints for Christians. Wishing He would, betrays a spirit of lawlessness. No, God still wants and deserves our obedience. In removing the "written code" at the cross, God did not obliterate all Scripture. That's not what Paul was saying. Let us not go beyond him in our interpretation. Nor did He remove all "regulations" from the written code. He did take away certain things that were "against us" and that "stood opposed to us" by potentially interfering with faith. It is an important distinction. Even after the cross God reserves the right to tell us what to do. Indeed, after the cross we are even more deeply in His debt than before. And if we love Him, as we reflect on these things, we will delight in doing what He commands.

⁷ See <http://www.thebooklet.org/Documents/Papers/NavBibleCol0216-17.pdf>.