

Feasts in the Bible

Over the years as the pastor of the Saint Paul First SDA Church I have encountered many members and friends of the church who through their teachings and practice demonstrate they believe that the Old Testament (OT) laws concerning the feasts are still binding on Christians today. Others in the church believe that this is not the case, that Christians are not obligated to keep the feasts because these are a part of the ceremonial law that was nailed to the cross. At times these two positions have collided in our church. Because we have been experiencing yet another collision it seemed appropriate to me to spend some quality time studying this matter out from three sources: the Bible, the writings of Ellen White, and the official doctrinal statements of the SDA Church. What follows is the fruitage of that study. This article is written in an attempt to bring clarity to the subject of whether or not the Bible teaches that all people of all time are to keep the feasts. In future articles we will look at the writings of Ellen White and the official doctrinal statements of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on this topic.

As with every study I like to begin with the words of Jesus, who just before His ride into Jerusalem, just before His crucifixion at the hands of the Jewish leaders, just before the unseen hand would rip the curtain of the temple clear through from top to bottom, and right on schedule according to the prophesy of Daniel 9:27 predicting the end of sacrifice and offerings, said "your house is left to you desolate." Matthew 23:38.

But when it came to the Ten Commandment law He said, "until heaven and earth pass away, not one jot, not one tittle will pass from the law until all is fulfilled." Matthew 5:17, 18.

What follows is the biblical research outlining the implications of these statements especially on the practice of the feasts. We will start with the New Testament (NT) writings.

From the NT

No discussion of the NT passages about the feasts in particular, or the law of Moses in general, would be fruitful or complete without an understanding of the issues handled at the Jerusalem Council in AD 49 as recorded in Acts 15, and the aftermath we see played out throughout the writings of the Apostle Paul.

The story in Acts 15 goes like this: as the Apostle Paul and Barnabas were ministering the gospel to the Gentiles on their first missionary journey through the Province of Galatia they got into hot water when some of the Jewish brethren (Judaizers) kept insisting all the converts to Christianity needed to be circumcised "according to the custom of Moses," otherwise they "cannot be saved." Acts 15:1.

The apostle's group disagreed, but was unable to convince the legal zealots. The Apostle Paul, not wishing to see the infant churches he had just planted become divided and destroyed so quickly, assured his opponents they would take it up at a council meeting in Jerusalem. Their trip to Jerusalem saw an amazing work of God for the Gentiles and upon arrival the Apostle Paul began telling all the wonderful things God had done to open the gospel to them. In Jerusalem some Christian converts of the Pharisees (Judaizers) again objected,

“It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”
(Acts 15:5)

This verse demonstrates it wasn't just the particulars of the ceremonial law, but the whole of it that was at stake. With the desire to settle the heated debate, the church leadership immediately assembled, heard testimonies, and studied the matter out very carefully and thoroughly. They concluded,

Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and keep the law’—to whom we gave no such commandment—it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. (Acts 15:24-29)

Notice the words of verse 24 regarding those who were troubling and unsettling the Gentile believers with the words “You must be circumcised and keep the law.” Whether the Gentiles were to be circumcised in particular, or keep the law of Moses in general was *the* issue of the first century church. And the conclusion of the church leaders was that the only things necessary, the only things obligatory for the Gentiles from the laws of Moses is summed up in these four commands, “abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.” Of course this is not to say, this is all that is required of the Gentiles, for certainly the Ten Commandments were obligatory to all mankind, as were the golden rule and the great commission of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). These however were not in question. But “of the law of Moses”, four were binding upon all.

Where did the church leaders get this idea from? From Moses himself. Leviticus 17 and 18 identify four things that are binding upon both Jews and Gentiles. They just so happen to be: abstaining from things offered to idols (17:8, 9), from blood (17:10-12), from things strangled (17:12-15), and from sexual immorality (18:26).

Thus the leaders at the Jerusalem Council could assert of their counsel, “with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written.” (Acts 15:15).

Armed with this decision of the apostles, the elders, and the prophets, Paul, Barnabas, Silas and others set out to revisit the churches of their previous journeys and to settle the matter. The next 20 years or so would prove to be a long and drawn out battle between the Judaizers who felt and taught that all the laws of Moses were still binding on all believers, and the leadership of the Christian church which taught only four were binding.

We see the Apostle Paul addressing this issue to the churches in many of his letters: Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, both letters to Timothy, and Hebrews.

Our study of Paul will begin in Colossians 2:13-17.

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

From the outset it becomes essential to identify exactly what is meant by the "handwriting of ordinances which was against us". Whatever it is, wiping it out removed any obligation to keep those ordinances (v. 16). Further, these ordinances were the shadows which the substance of Christ replaced (v. 17). As we will see from the clues in the passage, the "handwriting of ordinances that were against us" are the ceremonial laws of Moses. To get there we must turn our attention to Deuteronomy 31:24-27 to learn about the handwritten ordinances of Moses.

So it was, when **Moses** had completed **writing the words of this law in a book**, when they were finished, that **Moses commanded the Levites**, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying: "Take **this Book of the Law**, and put it **beside** the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there **as a witness against you**; for I know your rebellion and your stiff neck. If today, while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the Lord, then how much more after my death?"

Four points are important here. (1) Unlike the Ten Commandments which were written by the finger of God, Moses wrote the ceremonial laws. (2) Unlike the Law of God which was inside the ark of the covenant, the law of Moses was placed beside the ark of the covenant. (3) This book of Moses' law was a witness *against* the Levites (and Israelites) to counter their waywardness and hard-heartedness (see also Acts 15:10). (4) These laws were for the Levites who were charged with executing the rituals of the sanctuary. Handwritten ordinances regarding the temple rituals, which Moses wrote and which stood against them; these four points connect the passage in Colossians 2:13-17 with the ceremonial laws of Moses.

There is still further evidence that the ceremonial laws are in view in Colossians 2:13-17. In the phrase "handwriting of ordinances" a word is used that connects this passage to Ephesians 2:15. The term *δογματων* (*dogmaton*) or "ordinances" is used both here and in Ephesians. In his discussion on circumcision versus uncircumcision in Ephesians 2 Paul states,

[Jesus] having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances (*δογματων* - *dogmaton*), [has created] in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both [circumcised Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles] to God in one body through the cross." Ephesians 2:15, 16.

The ordinances (δογμάτων) that were abolished here were the "law of commandments contained in ordinances", in particular the ones relating to circumcision (v. 11). These were part of the ceremonial law. These ceremonial laws, all of them, were "abolished" by Jesus when he died on the cross. We conclude this because the word "law" in the text is in the singular: "the law of commandments, contained in ordinances" was abolished. The idea here expressed is that the whole thing, not just portions of it, not just some of the laws (plural), but the whole of the ceremonial law (singular) was abolished...the whole ritual system.

At this point it becomes necessary to be absolutely clear on what is meant by "abolish". The Greek word for "abolish" is translated "to render inoperative, abolish, annul, bring to an end, do away with, fade away, nullify, pass away, release, remove, render powerless." Though the writer is addressing some of the particulars of the ceremonial law in the context of this passage, in verse 15 he asserts that the ceremonial law, the whole thing, with all of its regulations, has been rendered inoperative. It has been annulled, terminated, brought to an end, removed.

For further attestation to the assertion that Moses' ceremonial laws are in view in our passage we look again at Colossians 2:13-17. May we not affirm that the ceremonial laws of Moses contain the regulations about meat and drink offerings, annual festivals, new moons, and ceremonial sabbaths (v. 16)? Is it not accurate to say these were all shadows that pointed forward to Christ (v. 17)? If we are honest, we must agree...the "handwriting of ordinances which was against us" refers to the festal ceremonies in particular, and the ceremonial law in general. The word "therefore" in v. 16 makes this connection unmistakably clear.

...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. . . . Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths.

The further connection of v. 16 with v. 17 makes it even clearer, that these festivals and ceremonial sabbaths are "shadows of thing to come". The writer of Hebrews connects these "shadows" to the sacrifices, priesthood, temple, and annual celebrations (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1-3).

Knowing what it is we are dealing with in Colossians 2:13-17, we are now ready to understand what it means that the ceremonial law was "wiped out", "taken out of the way", and "nailed to the cross". Let's look at these terms individually.

The term for **wiped out**, is rendered variously, removed what was previously written, blotted out, wiped away (i.e. using lime), whitewashed, obliterated. In other words, these laws were written down, but now they are erased.

The term for **taken it out of the way**, is rendered, removed it from its place, taken it away, lifted it up and carried it off, physically removed it. They once were beside the ark of the covenant, but are no longer there.

The term for **nailing it to the cross**, carries the metaphorical meaning of bringing it to its ignominious death. As with felonious criminals in the Roman system, crucifixion is about

making public spectacles of them (v. 15). It's about showing the populous that both man and God have rejected them. When Jesus died on the cross, he not only removed our sin, not only our condemnation and curse, but he removed this law that stood against us...i.e. the ceremonial law containing the shadows (Col. 2:17; Hebrews 8:5; 10:1-3; Deuteronomy 31:24-27), as expressed in the meat and drink offerings, the feasts, new moon festivals, and the ceremonial Sabbaths (v. 16). That law has been erased, carried off, terminated, brought to its permanent and shameful end.

It. As with Ephesians 2:15 in Colossians 2:14 the word "it", referring to the ceremonial law, is in the singular...meaning the whole thing, the entire ceremonial law; not portions of it, all of it. From beginning to end, the whole of the ceremonial law in its entirety. Nothing remains. It is completely gone. This same idea is expressed by the writer of Hebrews.

Hebrews 10:1-9

For **the law**, having **a shadow of the good things to come**, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same **sacrifices**, which they offer continually **year by year**, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. **But in those sacrifices** there is a reminder of sins **every year**. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come—In the volume of the book it is written of Me—To do Your will, O God.' " Previously saying, "Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the law), then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God." **He takes away the first that He may establish the second.**

The "law" in question here is the ceremonial law, dealing with the sacrifices, the priests who offered them, and the annual festivals and ceremonial sabbaths during which they were offered. Again, here as in Colossians 2:16, 17, these are called "shadows of things to come" (v. 1). These all are "taken away" (put to death), thus making way for the superior Jesus Christ (v. 9).

These festal celebrations are specifically addressed again in Galatians 4:9-11.

But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.

Being addressed here specifically are the ceremonial sabbaths, annual festivals and new moons of the law of Moses. That these are the festivals of the law of Moses and not pagan festivals, as some attest, is clear from the immediate context where Paul cites the law of Moses at Sinai (Galatians 4:24-25). In the larger context of the letter to the Galatians, Paul is addressing other ceremonial laws as well besides the festivals: like circumcision (Galatians 2:3; 5:2, 3, 6; 6:12-15), and ceremonial uncleanness by eating with Gentiles (2:11-13). And all of this is part of a larger dialogue within the Christian community involving the whole of the ceremonial system (Acts 15 especially verses 1, 5, 20-21, 24, 29), a controversy which started in the province of

Galatia. This issue of the laws of Moses is addressed throughout Paul's letters (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 10:25-29; Galatians, Colossians 2:13-17; Hebrews 8-10) because it was being hotly contested across the entire first century church (Acts 15:1, 2; Romans 14:1).

Galatians 3:1; 4:9-11, 20

We have identified the problem of the OT ceremonial observances in the book of Galatians. The terms used to describe these practices in relation to the ceremonial laws are very negative throughout the book.

Those who practice them are **foolish** and **bewitched** (3:1, 3), the elements of the ceremonial law are **weak** and **beggarly** (4:9), bring us back into **bondage** (2:4; 4:9) and are **vain** (2:21; 3:4; 4:11), practicing them makes the cross of **no effect** (3:17), those who promoted the ceremonial laws were **troubling the saints** and **perverting the gospel** (1:7), these made Paul **afraid** (4:9-11), and made him **doubt** the experience of those he was writing to (v. 20). These terms are anything but complimentary towards feast-keepers.

Let's now return to Hebrews 8-10. There are several passages worth highlighting that speak to the end of the ceremonial laws.

Hebrews 8:8-10 - The new covenant that Christ has made with His people is **not according to the covenant He made with the Israelites at the time of the Exodus**. The new covenant is different; it is not about rituals and ceremonies as prescribed by Moses. It is the internalization of the Ten Commandment Law of God written on the heart and in the mind by the Holy Spirit (8:10; 10:15, 16).

Hebrews 8:13 - In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first **obsolete**. Now what is becoming **obsolete** and growing old is ready to **vanish away**.

"Obsolete" suggests an end. "Growing old" suggests no longer relevant. "Vanishing away" suggests disappearing from the scene. Some have suggested that if the ceremonial law was "becoming obsolete" and "growing old" that it wasn't yet at the time of the writing of the book of Hebrews (AD 67-69), some 30+ years after the cross and by extension are thus still in effect today...still vanishing away, still becoming obsolete. But this verse states it unequivocally, "He **has made** the first obsolete". When Christ died he made the first law obsolete. The Levitical system was done away with at the cross. This work is already done.

Then what does the writer mean by "*becoming* obsolete" and "*growing* old"? It is suggested here he means becoming obsolete in practice, because the practice of the feasts was ongoing in the first century, though hotly contested among Christian believers during the time between the cross and the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 31-70, see Acts 15). Even though the early church was processing the transition between feast-keeping and non-feast keeping, the truth is the requirement of the feasts, because they are part of the ceremonial law, had ended at the cross.

Hebrews 9:10-11 - the ceremonial law would be "imposed **until** the time of reformation"; i.e. until Christ would be established as high priest (v. 11). After that, by implication, it would no

longer be imposed (i.e. be in force.) Christ was seated on His throne at His ascension to heaven. Therefore the earthly ceremonial Mosaic law is no longer in force.

Hebrews 10:9 - He **takes away** the first (from the context of Hebrews 8-10 - the ceremonial laws of priests and sacrifices, of meat and drink offerings, of temples and feasts) **that** He may **establish** the second.

The Greek term employed here for "take away" means to slay, put to death, abolish, abrogate. He terminates the first so that He may initiate the second. They cannot co-exist, the old and the new. The old is removed, and then the new is established. The old ceases, so that the new can begin. In other words, we no longer sacrifice animals because Jesus offered himself as our sacrifice. We no longer have an earthly priesthood, because Jesus our high priest ever lives to make intercession for us, and has opened for us all a way to the Father. We no longer participate in the temple services because Jesus has entered the temple made without hands. And we no longer observe the feasts because Jesus is our Passover, our Unleavened Bread, our Pentecost, our Trumpeter, our cleanser of the sanctuary in the Day of Atonement, and the One who is preparing a place for us in heaven, wherein is our true tabernacle.

That. So that, and then, in order that. This is the purpose of removing the old, *in order to* establish the new. The first is out, *in order that* the second might be in. The second cannot be established while the first is in effect.

What is missing from the feast keepers' list of stipulations is any instruction from God as to what to do with the feasts when the sacrifice, the temple, and the priesthood are done. The implication is clear...the feasts are done as well.

From the OT

The belief that the ceremonial festivals and sabbaths are of a temporary and limited nature comes from the OT itself. For example in Deuteronomy 16:16 the command was given to celebrate three of the feasts (Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Tabernacles) at the temple in Jerusalem. Further, the command is given to the Israelites *not* to celebrate the Passover in their homes and villages but in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:5-6). The fact that the stipulations concerning these feasts could change is an indication that they are not eternal. During Israel's exile to Assyria, Hosea asks the rhetorical question, now that they were away from Jerusalem,

What will you do in the appointed day, and in the day of the feast of the Lord? Hosea 9:5.

The obvious answer was...nothing. The feasts were taken from them during their Assyrian captivity (Hosea 2:11). The reasoning is if they cannot celebrate the feasts as stipulated at the temple in Jerusalem, they must not celebrate the feasts at all. And for us, now that the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed since AD 70 any observance of the feasts after this date would be done in accordance with the traditions of man, not the commands of God. In fact the feasts would be carried out in defiance to the direct commands of God who forbade their observance apart from the temple and outside of Jerusalem.

The OT asserts throughout its pages that the ceremonial system was built around animal sacrifices. Sacrifice was the reason the festivals were established (Exodus 12; Leviticus 16:3, 5-7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 25, 27; 23: 8, 12, 16, 18-20, 25, 27, 36, 37). In Leviticus 23:37 in particular it couldn't be plainer. Summarizing the purpose of all the feasts and ceremonial sabbaths the Lord states...

These are the feasts of the Lord which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, *to* offer an offering made by fire to the Lord, a burnt offering and a grain offering, a sacrifice and drink offerings, everything on its day.

The Hebrew word "to" means for the purpose of. The festivals were instituted for the purpose of sacrifice. In Leviticus 23 sacrifices are stipulated for each of the festivals. With the Passover and Day of Atonement in particular the sacrifice was the central part of the ceremony. Apart from the sacrifice these holy days have no function or meaning whatsoever. According to Daniel 9:27 when He would die on the cross, Messiah the prince would bring an end to sacrifice. By ending the sacrifices Christ ended all the ceremonies attached to them.

Absence of testimony. In the absence of any testimony as to what to do with the feasts when the sacrifice is removed from them (i.e. the practice of some of replacing the sacrifice with a bone), and because the feasts were established for the express purpose of sacrifice (Leviticus 23:37), then it stands to reason that when the sacrifices ceased, so did everything connected with them: the offerings, the priests, the temple, the feasts, the whole ceremonial law itself (Hebrews 7:12-10:9, Colossians 2:13-17).

Circumcision and the Feasts

To participate in the Passover one had to be circumcised (Exodus 12:48). The Israelites during their sojourn in the wilderness for 40 years did not participate in the Passover, the celebration of their deliverance from Egypt, because they had wanted to go back to Egyptian slavery. God forbade them from observing the Passover for 40 years. He also forbade them from receiving the sign of their deliverance...circumcision. But even though the feast was not to be kept and circumcision was not allowed as evidence of God's divine displeasure, the Sabbath remained an ongoing requirement. Regardless of the fact that God had for a time rejected them, He still required their obedience to the moral law, but in this case not the ceremonial law. When Joshua led them into the Promised Land, the first thing he was instructed to do was to circumcise the males (Joshua 5:2), in order to prepare them to celebrate Passover (5:10). Circumcision and Passover go together. When in the NT the Jerusalem Council determined that circumcision was no longer a binding requirement upon the believer (Acts 15:24, 1 Corinthians 7:19), it effectually acknowledged that the Passover was not binding either.

The Temple and the Feasts

Deuteronomy 16:16 requires that at least three of the feasts be kept before the face of the Lord, which would eventually be set at the temple in Jerusalem (Isaiah 33:20). It is further stipulated, the Passover was no longer to be kept in the home (verse 5), but at the place the Lord prescribed

(i.e. the temple). Without a temple, the only prescribed location acceptable for the feasts has been removed. There is no law stipulating what to do if the temple is no longer available (i.e. go back to celebrating the feasts in homes.) Further, the Day of Atonement involved cleansing the temple (Leviticus 16:16, 17, 20, 33). It simply cannot be celebrated when and where there is no temple, or when they are not in the proximity of the temple. To celebrate the feasts without following the instructions as to their observance, is to replace what God instructed with man's instructions: a move Jesus calls vain and empty (Mark 7:6-9).

Flexibility in the Dates of the Feasts

Further testimony in the OT suggests that even the dates of the feasts are not strictly required. While it is true the dates for the feasts were set in Leviticus 23, the date for at least one of the feasts could be changed under certain circumstances. If one were made unclean by contact with a corpse, for example, or if one needed to go on a long journey during the times of the feast of Passover, the feast could be celebrated one month later (Numbers 9:6-11). In Hezekiah's case they both delayed the feast by a month, and extended it by an extra week (2 Chronicles 30). The reasons cited for the change? They did not have enough consecrated priests, and the people in the lands around had not yet assembled in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 30:3). Keep in mind even though these reasons were not stipulated in the Law, this whole arrangement pleased the Lord (2 Chronicles 30:27).

The significance of this is that it places the laws of ceremonial uncleanness, the laws concerning the priests and the temple, and even the inconvenience of a long journey away, over the importance of the stipulated dates of the feast of Passover.

No such accommodation is provided regarding the morally obligated seventh-day Sabbath. No matter where the believer was, or whether they were ceremonially clean or unclean, whether the Lord was pleased with the people or not, the Sabbath was to be kept since it has no geographical, national, racial, ceremonial, or temporal limitations. One could not choose another day of the week to be a holy rest day simply because one's business took them away from Jerusalem, or for some other reason they were unfit or unavailable for corporate worship on the Sabbath.

Conclusion

In summary the stipulations governing the observances of the festal calendar are such as render them of temporal and not eternal benefit. They are for the Jews, who are circumcised, and not everyone. They should be practiced in Jerusalem in connection to the sanctuary services, not just anywhere. Their very purpose is to have an occasion for sacrifice, which is done away with in Christ. For these reasons and more the annual festivals, new moons, and ceremonial sabbaths are no longer binding since Christ entered the heavenly temple made without hands, with an eternal sacrifice, with his own blood, and with a better ministry. He removed the binding nature of the Levitical law, replacing it with a better law.

For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. Hebrews 7:12.

The words of this verse are the death knell to the argument for keeping the OT feasts. It is not a change *in* the law, but a change *of* the law. The feasts of the Levitical law, along with the sacrifices they stipulated, the priesthood they employed, the temple where they were celebrated and the circumcision required to participate in them, the whole of that law is changed out, since these were all shadowy figures pointing us to the far superior reality of Jesus Christ.

The Levitical ceremonial laws are not eternal like the moral laws of the Ten Commandments. And unlike the Ten Commandments, the ceremonial laws because of Christ have been fulfilled. And as we have just noted, not just fulfilled, but changed out, ended, replaced. This termination of the ceremonial laws in general, and the feasts they stipulated in particular was attested in both the OT and the NT. This is what the whole Bible teaches. And, as we will see in future articles, this is what we officially believe and have always taught as Seventh-day Adventists, and is in complete harmony with the testimony of Ellen White.