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COLOSSIANS 2:16 AND ISAIAH 66:23

Recently the following question was sent to me:

QUESTION:

My question has to do with the mention of new moons in Colossians 2:16 and in Isaiah 66:2. As you probably are very well aware, some people argue as follows:

If you want to use Colossians 2:16 and Isaiah 66:2 as 'proof texts' for the position that God commands New Testament Christians to keep the Sabbath and the Holy Days (both mentioned in Colossians 2:16, Sabbath only mentioned in Isaiah 66:2), then you must, to be consistent, be willing to admit that God also commands New Testament Christians to keep new moons as required holy observances. You can't in good faith choose to emphasize the Sabbath and the Holy Days, and de-emphasize the new moons.

If you argue that Colossians 2:16 indicates that Paul had taught Gentile converts to keep the Sabbath and the Feast Days, you must also argue that he taught them to keep the new moons, and be prepared to keep them now yourself. Further, if you want to argue that Isaiah 66:23 is proof that New Testament Christians must now observe the Sabbath because all flesh will keep it following the return of Christ (and God changes not) then you must also admit that it is proof that New Testament Christians must now observe the new moons, because all flesh will come to worship God on the new moons after the return of Christ (and God changes not).

Please share with me how you would respond to this argument. Thank you.

ANSWER:

Let's look at this subject without considering what anyone may or may not "argue", since you are seldom able to convince people who really want to "argue".

I observe the Sabbath NOT because of Isaiah 66:23 or because of Colossians 2:16, but because Exodus 20:8-11 instructs me in no uncertain terms to observe the Sabbath, as does also Exodus 31:13-17. And I observe the Holy Days because Leviticus chapter 23 instructs me in no uncertain terms to keep both, the weekly Sabbath and also the annual Holy Days. These are very clear commands from God and Isaiah 66:23 and Colossians 2:16 have nothing to do with that.

God says: "DO THIS!" and therefore I try to "DO"!

So even if Isaiah 66:23 and Colossians 2:16 were not a part of the Bible, I would still feel compelled to observe the Sabbath and the annual Holy Days. Those two Scriptures are simply not the foundation for my obedience to God in regard to this matter.

Next, Matthew 5:17-18 makes quite clear that the laws of God are as binding today as they were in Old Testament times. I will NOT get involved in FOOLISH arguments (see 2 Timothy 2:16, 23; etc.) with people who are looking for ways to justify their claims that God's laws from the Old Testament are done

away.

THINK NOT that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. (Matthew 5:17-18)

The Greek word here translated as "to fulfill" is "plerosai", the aorist active infinitive of the verb "pleroo", which means "to fill to the full". The Greek word here translated as "to destroy" is "katalusai", the aorist active infinitive of "kataluo", which means "to overthrow, to throw down". Jesus Christ was presenting A CONTRAST in this verse, and "to fulfill" must mean THE OPPOSITE of "overthrowing". Jesus Christ came to fulfill the law perfectly, NOT "in place of us keeping the law", but as AN EXAMPLE FOR US TO FOLLOW. Any arguments to the contrary in this regard are plain foolishness.

Now the reason why I do NOT keep new moons today is because NOWHERE IN THE BIBLE did God ever instruct His people to "KEEP" new moons IN A RELIGIOUS WAY. Therefore it follows that nobody really knows "HOW" such new moons should be kept. And nobody knows whether it should be the invisible molad or the first faint crescent at Jerusalem or the first faint crescent in whatever locality one happens to be that should be kept ... assuming that God had in fact instructed us to "keep" new moons.

THERE IS NO COMMAND ANYWHERE IN THE BIBLE TO KEEP NEW MOONS! Therefore "to command" the observance of new moons at this point in time is nothing more than an ordinance of men. We are not supposed to make up our own commandments based on nothing more than DEDUCTIONS we reach from something some people may have done at some time (e.g. the people in Ezra's time made booths at Tabernacles time [see Nehemiah 8:15-17] ... but NOWHERE in the Bible is there an instruction that we are in fact TO BUILD booths ... you can check Leviticus 23:40 very carefully, and "taking" branches "ON" the first day [not before!!] is NOT the same as an instruction "TO BUILD").

We are not to make commandments, supposedly "of God", based on deductions. Thus, I do NOT keep Purim (see the Book of Esther) because NOWHERE does God command us to keep this festival, which the Jews themselves decided to institute. I have no objections to Purim, but neither do I feel it is commanded for us in God's Church to observe.

Regarding the two Scriptures you mentioned:

Colossians 2:16 is about the present, and Isaiah 66:23 is about the future. Don't mix these two things up. Each is in a different context.

In NT times printing had not yet been invented and there were no newspapers or magazines, etc.. Also, there were NO DIARIES available, which you could conveniently check every other day. The calendar of the Roman Empire was the Julian calendar, which totally ignored the new moons. There was no way that God's people could have observed the Holy Days with only the Julian calendar at their disposal.

Thus in Paul's time the "OBSERVANCE OF NEW MOONS" was the only practical way for God's people to keep track of the passage of time in terms of new moons ... you knew that the seventh new moon of the year (starting to count with the first new moon in the spring) was the Holy Day of Trumpets. Without diaries available to them, it would have been impossible for God's people to know when to observe all of the annual Holy Days UNLESS they kept a very careful track of the passage of the new moons, because nobody in the Roman Empire was providing that information.

So they "observed" new moons, not because they are commanded by God (which they are NOT!), but as a defence against losing track of the passage of time in relation to when to observe God's Holy Days.

In Paul's world new moons were "the diaries" of Christians, to keep track of the annual Holy Days.

There is nothing wrong with getting together on new moons. It is very much like the Church (or even a given local congregation somewhere) deciding to have weekly Bible Studies ... here on a Tuesday, there on a Wednesday and somewhere else on a Thursday, etc.. And the Church members in those given areas should make every effort to attend those local Bible Studies ... BUT THEY ARE NOT COMMANDED BY GOD!

Note also that Paul did NOT COMMAND the Colossians to observe new moons. In Colossians 2:16 Paul is simply commenting on something they WERE doing ... he simply told them not to worry about the judgmental attitudes of other people in their community, who would latch onto anything they could possibly criticize about the new religious habits of these recently converted Colossians. Notice ...

LET NO MAN therefore JUDGE YOU in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath [days]: (Colossians 2:16)

When you carefully study this epistle, then you get the distinct impression that this congregation in Colossae had not been established by Paul himself. That is why in his opening (in verse 4 of chapter 1) Paul speaks about "HEARING about their faith in Christ" ...

Since WE HEARD OF YOUR FAITH in Christ Jesus, and of the love [which ye have] to all the saints, (Colossians 1:4)

So Paul was not speaking about things he himself had taught them; he was simply encouraging them to continue doing the things they had been taught by OTHERS.

So yes, the members of God's Church in Colossae "observed" new moons very faithfully (whether they got together and had a Bible Study on those days, or whatever else they may have done?) because that was their lifeline to keeping God's Holy Days on the correct days. It wasn't a matter of them walking down to the nearest Jewish synagogue and asking the man in charge there: "By the way, when is the Day of Trumpets this year?" The Christian Church in Colossae was not associated with the Jewish Church in that part of the world. They were SEPARATE religious organizations and the Colossians THEMSELVES were responsible for keeping an accurate track of the passage of time. Furthermore, the Colossian Christians already had enough problems with those who wanted them to accept any number of Jewish customs ... and which Paul warned them against. So they would NOT have looked to the Jews for any "help".

Let's now look at Isaiah 66:23.

Isaiah 66:23 is about a time AFTER the return of Jesus Christ. After Christ returns MANY things will be changed. He will initiate "the restitution of ALL THINGS" (see Acts 3:21). But at this present point in time we CERTAINLY still have to work with an IMPERFECT CALENDAR!

An annual cycle of 365 days plus 5 hours plus 48 minutes plus 46 seconds is IMPERFECT! It has a DEFECT! When God speaks about "a year", then God means 360 days! Not 365 days plus 5 hours plus Similarly, the present lunar cycle has a defect. As viewed here from this Earth, it is 29 days plus 12 hours plus 44 minutes. These two imperfect cycles (the cycle of the Earth around the sun and the lunar cycle around the Earth) make it impossible to have a PERFECT calendar at this point in time.

I do not believe that during the millennium Jesus Christ will rule over this earth for 1000 years based on

an annual cycle of 365 days plus 5 hours plus 48 minutes plus 46 seconds! Such a cycle is not really compatible with the PERFECT government Jesus Christ will head and which will institute the PERFECT way of God over this Earth. The 1000 years Jesus Christ will reign over this Earth will be based on a PERFECT annual cycle ... because the restoration of ALL things will have taken place.

I believe that "the restitution of all things" at the return of Jesus Christ will also include a change in the length of the year (back to exactly 360 days, a figure God repeatedly uses in Revelation when referring to years) and a change in the length of the lunar cycle to exactly 30 days. Only in that way will Christ restore a perfect year, which will consist of EXACTLY 12 months, each of which will have EXACTLY 30 days, and each of these months will start EXACTLY on the new moon, and with a solar eclipse, probably for the area surrounding Jerusalem. I don't believe that Jesus Christ's 1000 year rule will include any "LEAP" years! There will never be 13 months in a year during Christ's reign! The number "13" would detract from the PERFECTION which will characterize the reign of Christ.

The prophecies tell us that during Christ's reign the natures of animals will be changed ... the lion and the wolf and the bear will all be harmless to human beings (see Isaiah 11:6-9). There will be MAJOR changes to the surface of this planet Earth ... islands will "flee" and mountains will not be "found" (see Revelation 16:20). It will all be part of "the restitution of all things".

And why should it seem strange that the annual cycle and the lunar cycle will also undergo changes in this process of restitution?

It is in the context of Christ's rule over this Earth that we have the statement in Isaiah 66:23 about new moons.

And it shall come to pass, [that] FROM ONE NEW MOON TO ANOTHER, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD. (Isaiah 66:23)

When Jesus Christ came at His first coming, He instituted a totally new ordinance. We understand that He CHANGED the emblems of the Passover service from the physical lamb which was eaten in OT times, to the unleavened bread and the wine, to represent His broken body and His shed blood. But He also ADDED the footwashing ordinance. This was not something from the OT Passover observance; it was something totally new.

Similarly, I don't question that Jesus Christ will introduce some instructions for human beings which were not a part of what was required before His second coming. His second coming will usher in totally new circumstances, unlike anything that mankind has ever experienced. Any added instructions will be for the benefit of human beings. They will NOT in any way be in conflict with any other instructions from God ... no more than the added "footwashing" instructions for the Passover are in conflict with any of God's previous instructions for the Passover.

So once Jesus Christ has established a perfect annual cycle with perfect months, then Isaiah 66:23 indicates that the 12 new moons each year will be ADDED as additional days of worship for mankind to observe during the rule of Christ. Today Jesus Christ is not yet ruling, and so today "all flesh" is not yet required to appear before Jesus Christ on the new moons. Today only one of those 12 new moons is a day we are commanded to observe (i.e. the Day of Trumpets); and today there are sometimes of necessity 13 new moons in a year.

As far as "God changes not" is concerned: the argument presented at the start of this letter totally misapplies this statement.

LISTEN! GOD HAS ALWAYS CHANGED SOME THINGS!

Here are some examples:

- A) First God places Adam and Eve in a perfect garden. Then God expelled them. God changed their environment.
- B) First God had made the soil very fertile. When Adam sinned, God changed this ... and "thorns and thistles" came into existence (see Genesis 3:18).
- C) When Cain killed his brother Abel, then God placed a further curse on the soil (see Genesis 4:12). This changed things even more.
- D) When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He told them that He would bring them into "the Promised Land". But when Israel continued to sin, then God CHANGED this to only letting Israel cross the Jordan River 40 years later.
- E) When God first brought Israel out of Egypt, it was not God's intention to give them a detailed set of ritualistic and sacrificial laws. But after they had sinned, God changed this, and then gave Israel the sacrificial laws. See Jeremiah 7:22-23. Paul explained that these laws were "added" (see Galatians 3:19).

This shows that sometimes God ADDS something because of transgressions, while at other times God may ADD something because of faithful obedience (added blessings).

- F) I have already shown that Jesus Christ ADDED the footwashing ceremony to the Passover observance. That certainly was a change.
- G) Likewise, the unleavened bread and the wine at the Passover represent a change God introduced.
- H) Ezekiel 33:13 makes very clear that God may CHANGE something He may have said before.

WHEN I SHALL SAY TO THE RIGHTEOUS, [that] HE SHALL SURELY LIVE; if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity, all his righteousnesses shall not be remembered; but for his iniquity that he hath committed, HE SHALL DIE FOR IT. (Ezekiel 33:13)

Similarly ...

Again, WHEN I SAY UNTO THE WICKED, THOU SHALT SURELY DIE; if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right; [If] the wicked restore the pledge, give again that he had robbed, walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity; HE SHALL SURELY LIVE, HE SHALL NOT DIE. (Ezekiel 33:14-15)

The point is that God may make a statement; but when conditions change (i.e. people change and either stop or start sinning) then God will also change what He may have said earlier.

- I) After the time of the Great White Throne Judgment period, God will CHANGE the heavens and the Earth. There will then be a new heaven and a new Earth. God has already planned to change those things.

J) God may change the way He deals with transgressors. At the time of Noah God drowned all but eight human beings. After that episode God said that He would not do that again.

In the millennium God will change to another way of dealing with people ...

And [though] the Lord give you the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, BUT THINE EYES SHALL SEE THY TEACHERS: (Isaiah 30:20)

After the return of Jesus Christ God will never again leave people without access to those who can teach them the truth. That will represent a change from the way things are in this present world.

So it should be quite clear that Malachi 3:6 is not a carte blanche statement that God never changes anything. Let's look at the statement more closely ...

For I [am] the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. (Malachi 3:6)

In the previous verses God has been speaking about "purifying" and "purging" the priesthood (Malachi 3:3). The point is that there are sins which need to be repented of by people, and then forgiven by God and totally rooted out of existence. By rights the "sons of Jacob" deserved the death penalty for their transgressions against God.

In Malachi 3:6 God is saying that He would not exact this (ultimate) death penalty, because He had promised to forgive sins upon genuine repentance. And it is BECAUSE God accepts genuine and whole-hearted repentance ... that "THEREFORE YE SONS OF JACOB ARE NOT CONSUMED" ... which is what by rights they should be (as should we all!).

People seem to invariably quote the first part of Malachi 3:6 as if it was an independent free-standing statement! IT IS NOT!! The first part of this verse is merely A PREAMBLE TO THE SECOND PART OF THIS VERSE. God is here saying: "BECAUSE I don't change something (or in SOME ways!), THEREFORE you are not consumed!"

So exactly what was God trying to convey to us when He made this statement here in Malachi 3:6?

God was saying:

"I know you all deserve to die for your sins; but if you will repent, then I will forgive your sins. You can depend on that. I am absolutely reliable. If you fulfill the conditions I have set before you (like: I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing ...) then you can absolutely depend on Me to spare your life and to take care of you. That is something in which I will not change."

The whole first statement ("for I am the LORD, I change not") is made for the explicit purpose which is introduced by the word "THEREFORE" ("therefore you sons of Jacob are not consumed").

But God is not speaking in this verse about never changing some instructions He may give, or changing some requirements He may set. The instructions God gives us for the Passover have changed. The requirements God has for us today have also changed ... they are far stricter than for people in Old Testament times (the spirit of the law versus the letter of the law).

And there is absolutely nothing to prevent God from CHANGING, or modifying, or adding to the instructions for mankind in the time when Jesus Christ will rule in person here on Earth as King of kings and as Lord of lords. So IF God chooses to also require human beings to appear in worship before Jesus Christ on the new moons during the millennium, then that has nothing to do with Malachi 3:6, nothing at all!

Understand also that when God gives an added instruction, then God Himself has not really "changed"; He has simply amplified or expanded His instructions to us.

I hope this helps you to see Colossians 2:16 and Isaiah 66:23 from a clearer perspective.

Frank W. Nelte