

Feasts A Bible Study

Seventh-day Adventists are divided regarding whether or not the Bible enjoins the keeping of Passover, Pentecost, etc., on 21st century Christians.

Those that advocate that we should keep these feasts view several well-known scriptures differently than other Seventh-day Adventists.

This class typically views Col. 2:16, for example, as teaching that we should not let anyone condemn us for our keeping of the feasts or of the Sabbath.

I am not of this class. And my Biblical reasons are several:

1. The Feast are spoken of, in the New Testament, as “Jewish” decades after Ac 15.
2. Colosians 2 parallels Hebrews 9 and Ephesians 2 in such a way as to preclude a pro-feast reading.
3. Romans 14 parallels issues in Christian Passover keeping.
4. Old Testament prophecies show the feasts to be ceremonial rather than moral.
5. Paul’s keeping of the feasts (as Acts 18:21) harmonizes well with 1Co 9:20.
6. Ellen White’s input, though supplementary, points to no feast/statute confusion
7. 1 Corinthians 5 points to a spiritual keeping, much as today we are to keep the Day of Atonement by regularly searching our hearts and putting away our sin.

Besides these seven fundamental reasons, there are a number of sundry facts that lead away from a modern calculation and keeping of the feasts. This study will examine a few of these.

Point 3, regarding Romans 14, certainly indicates that there is no harm to be derived from a Christian keeping of the feasts. And as such, this paper is not a condemnation of the practice, but rather of the teaching that would confuse minds regarding their Christian duties.

Jewish Feasts

There are a number of New Testament references to the feasts that indicate the feasts were spoken of by first century Christians as being for “the Jews.” John wrote his gospel account several decades after Acts 15 (where the church settled the issue of Christians keeping “the Law of Moses.”)

Joh 2:13 And the Jews’ passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem,

Joh 5:1 After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Joh 6:4 And the passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh.

Joh 7:2 Now the Jews’ feast of tabernacles was at hand.

Joh 11:55 And the Jews’ passover was nigh at hand: and many went out of the country up to Jerusalem before the passover, to purify themselves.

Imagine the chagrin of Seventh-day Adventists if there were similar Biblical references to the Seventh-day Sabbath.

Fake 2:13 And the Jews' Sabbath was at hand
Fake 5:1 And there was a Sabbath of the Jews
Fake 6:4 And the Sabbath, a regulation of the Jews, was nigh.
Fake 7:2 Now the Jews' Sabbath was nigh at hand.
Fake 11:55 And the Jews' Sabbath was nigh at hand.

John, when writing about the Seventh-day Sabbath (see Joh 5:9; 7:22-23; 9:14) uses no such language.

Colosians 2

The primary passages on feast day keeping, in the New Testament, point away from a New Testament obligation to keep the feast.

Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross . . . 16 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: Col 2:14, 16.

Adventist in the 21st century vary in how they understand this passage.

One class view the "handwriting of ordinances" as the ceremonial laws contained in a book lodged in the side of the ark. For this class the passage teaches that these laws are no longer binding and that we have no obligation to keep them. And as an example of these laws, Paul mentions the national feasts.

Another class view the "handwriting" as a record of our sins. They observe the verse before (v.13) and argue that contextually, the passage is a reference to Jesus paying the debt for our sins. And verse 16 they view as prohibiting the condemnation of feast-day keepers. "Don't let anyone condemn you for your feast-keeping."

If the first view is right, then this is the most direct New Testament passage bearing on our subject. If the latter view is right, then the latter verse of the passage is still significant.

There are, however, several good reasons to take the view of our pioneers.

First, the passage parallels Hebrews 9 in thought and development.

9 [The Holy Place] was a figure for the time *now* – YLT present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as

pertaining to the conscience; 10 Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation.

Both passages speak about “ordinances” having an end at the cross. Both speak of meats and drinks and various washings. Both are written by the same author. And Colosians introduces the passage with a reference to spiritual circumcision (Col 2:11, 13), while Hebrews is all about the spiritual application of the sanctuary rites to the Christian religion.

10 And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: 11 In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: 12 Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. 13 And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; Col 2:10-13.

Besides this apparent parallel between Col 2 and Heb 9, observe that we are “forgiven” in verse Col 2:13 in connection with our conversion. When are sins blotted out? At the cross? No, no. In the judgment, during the times of refreshing. Ac 3:19. Currently. This reason itself is sufficient to preclude the second view – the record of our sins was not blotted out when Jesus died.

More than these two reasons, consider the parallel between Colosians 2 and Ephesians 2.

Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; 15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: Eph 2:11-16.

As in Colosians 2, uncircumcised Christian persons are addressed in Ephesians 2. Jesus’ blood, as in the Colosians 2 passage, does something here. It brings Gentiles and Jews together. It “abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances.” This was done “by the cross.”

These three reasons – the parallel to Hebrews 9 (meats, drinks, washings, ordinances) with Colosians 2 (meats, drinks, washings, feasts); the timing of the blotting out of sins (at the cross our sins were not even written yet); and the parallel with Ephesians 2, are sufficient to determine the meaning of Colosians 2.

But there is one more argument that will have force with some. Ellen White plainly states that the first view is correct. It is no honor to the courage of a theologian that he boldly takes a different position than a prophet in reference to scriptures.

There are many who try to blend these two systems, using the texts that speak of the ceremonial law to prove that the moral law has been abolished; but this is a perversion of the Scriptures. The distinction between the two systems is broad and clear. The ceremonial system was made up of symbols pointing to Christ, to His sacrifice and His priesthood. This ritual law, with its sacrifices and ordinances, was to be performed by the Hebrews until type met antitype in the death of Christ, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. Then all the sacrificial offerings were to cease. It is this law that Christ "took . . . out of the way, nailing it to His cross." Colossians 2:14. But concerning the law of Ten Commandments the psalmist declares, "Forever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in heaven." Psalm 119:89. And Christ Himself says, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law. . . . Verily I say unto you"--making the assertion as emphatic as possible--"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. Here He teaches, not merely what the claims of God's law had been, and were then, but that these claims should hold as long as the heavens and the earth remain. The law of God is as immutable as His throne. It will maintain its claims upon mankind in all ages. {PP 365.1}

Romans 14

Romans 14 indicates that weak-faith Christians were honoring some day that strong-faith Christians were not honoring. And the weak-faith Christians were eating only "herbs", apparently in connection with the keeping of the day. Strong-faith Christians were purposely not honoring the day (this was how they honored Christ). The evidence for keeping/not keeping was apparently ambiguous enough that both parties could be conscientious, ambiguous enough that the issue amounted to a "doubtful" one.

The Passover was a day that men honored by eating "herbs."

The Passover was a day that men who had given up sacrifice would honor by eating only "herbs."

The Passover was a day that Jesus had instituted the Lord's Supper – a continuing New Testament ritual.

The evidence from scripture is plain that Romans 14 is about Passover keeping.

And church history establishes that the keeping of Passover by large segments of degenerate Christianity persisted for several centuries. It eventually divided the eastern and western Catholic churches. It is kept today – though by a different name and infected with paganism and date-recalculation as have been the other rites of these large faith groups. Easter is the historically "orthodox" keeping of Passover.

(It is apparent in Romans 14 that the alternative to eating "herbs" in Romans 14 is "not eating herbs." See Rom 14:3, 6. This issue is Passover keeping, not vegetarianism.)

Romans 14 concludes with a Salvational truth. Conscience is sacred. A man convinced that God requires him to honor the Passover should honor it. If that man dishonors the day, that man is condemned – not for the violation of a non-binding command, but for violation of the first commandment. He is judged for treating his Master’s instructions, as he understood them, lightly.

The whole logic, then, of the chapter is evidence against the mandatory keeping of the feasts by persons that understand well.

Old Testament Indications

The Old Testament shows that the feasts were ceremonial rather than moral. (Simple consideration of the rituals shows the same.)

If a wicked man is confronted with the choice of “kill” or “not kill”; or with the choice “commit adultery” or “not commit adultery;” he will have a better life, better relationships, less guilt, if he chooses well. Obeying the Ten Commandments is the right thing to do, even for wicked men.

God would never say “I am tired of these men being faithful to their wives.” Even scoundrels should be honest. No one should steal. This is the nature of moral laws – they are universal. Whether or not a subject has faith, obedience is preferable to transgression.

Not so with ceremonies. To take part in the Lord’s Supper, for example, without discernment of its meaning is an act of sacrilege. To sacrifice a lamb without considering the meaning of the rite is little more than cruelty to animals.

1Co 11:29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.

Isa 1:11 To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.

This is the nature of ceremonies. As symbols they have value only when they serve to teach.

And this is the nature of the feast days according to Isaiah.

Is 1:13 Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. 14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them.

(The parallels in these two verses, along with their topic, also help us identify the “Sabbaths” of Colosians 2 as the “appointed feasts.”)

And what if some power wished to change the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday? The Bible would condemn such arrogance as an effort to “change times and laws.” Dan 7:25. Moral laws are immutable.

The timing of a feast, however, is not.

For the king had taken counsel, and his princes, and all the congregation in Jerusalem, to keep the passover in the second month. 3 For they could not keep it at that time, because the priests had not sanctified themselves sufficiently, neither had the people gathered themselves together to Jerusalem. . . . 15 Then they killed the passover on the fourteenth day of the second month: and the priests and the Levites were ashamed, and sanctified themselves, and brought in the burnt offerings into the house of the LORD. 16 And they stood in their place after their manner, according to the law of Moses the man of God: the priests sprinkled the blood, which they received of the hand of the Levites. 17 For there were many in the congregation that were not sanctified: therefore the Levites had the charge of the killing of the passovers for every one that was not clean, to sanctify them unto the LORD. 18 For a multitude of the people, even many of Ephraim, and Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet did they eat the passover otherwise than it was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, The good LORD pardon every one. 2 Chron 30:2-3, 15-18

The prophecy of Daniel 9 predicted an end to sacrifice and oblation. The prophecy was fulfilled, not when Jews were eventually forced to abandon sacrifices, but rather when the temple was made obsolete at the cross.

Just as Daniel predicted an end to the sacrifices, Hosea predicted an end to the feasts. And just as the Jews have never stopped keeping them, we must look for an end to their meaning rather than an end to their observance. See Hos 2:11.¹

From Isaiah 1 and 2 Chronicles 30, and even from the hint in Daniel 9 and Hosea 2, we learn that that the feasts, the ceremonial Sabbaths, were part of the ceremonial law.

Apostolic Keeping the Feasts

Paul had an intense burden for the Jews, his fleshly relatives.

I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, 2 That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. 3 For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: Ro 9:1-3.

¹ The context may seem a little obscure. God predicts that Israel will be punished for her unfaithfulness. The things she prided in she will lose. These include the feasts. Then (and this happened at the cross) she will be allured back into covenant relation with Him, but this time Gentiles will be part and parcel of the process.

He modeled a life aimed at winning Gentiles and Jews by adapting to their various ways of relating to the law. To those who were Jews he lived as if constrained by their laws. To those who were Gentiles he lived otherwise.

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. 20 And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; 21 To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. 22 To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. 1Co 9:19-22.

This reality mutes, to quite some extent, the argument that could be drawn from Paul's practice among the Hellenized Jews² and from Paul's behavior in Jerusalem. He told the former that he "must by all means keep this feast" and when he came to Jerusalem, he kept it.

And he came to Ephesus, and left them there: but he himself entered into the synagogue, and reasoned with the Jews. 20 When they desired him to tarry longer time with them, he consented not; 21 But bade them farewell, saying, I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem: but I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus. Ac 18:19-21

But before we think that Paul made a regular habit of returning to Jerusalem to keep feasts we should consider verse 11 in the same chapter.

Ac 18:11 And he continued [in Corinth] a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

And in the same chapter (verse 4) we find that Gentiles listened to Paul on the Sabbath.

Some might gather from Acts 2 that Pentecost keeping was a post-cross apostolic practice. But it is very apparent that the disciples were in Jerusalem for the entire time leading up to Pentecost, and they remained there after Pentecost for three years. So the fact that they were there on Pentecost doesn't provide any support for feast-day keeping.

Paul did write "let us keep the feast." And he was referring particularly to Passover. But a careful reading of the passage shows that he was advocating first-century Passover keeping the

² So in Acts of the Apostles 190 we find that Paul was seeking to reach this very class, seeking to mute their arguments against his rejection of the Law of Moses, when he tarried to "keep the Passover" in Acts 20. It is only fair to say that this does provide evidence of what international dispersion had made necessary – namely that some Hellenized Jews kept the feasts wherever they were situated rather than according to the written precept.

same way that I advocate 21st century Day of Atonement keeping. Both are to be kept year round, year after year, in a spiritual sense.

The apostle had just encouraged the Corinthians to remove from fellowship an offending member. The church had retained the corrupt individual, perhaps feeling that they were honoring God's mercy that way. That was his point of reference when he wrote:

Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? 7 Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 1Co 5:6-8.

The evidence is, then, that Paul recommended a spiritual keeping of the feast, that he repeatedly failed to attend the feasts in Jerusalem while in Corinth, that he once told a Jewish audience that he would keep a feast (and this effort to conciliate with the Jews was his undoing). The lack of evidence for feast-day keeping is, itself, a type of evidence – albeit logically arguing from silence is not wise.

Ellen White's Input

Though unneeded Biblically to settle the issue, Ellen White references to the feasts do settle the question under discussion for those who will submit to God's means of bringing us to a unity of the faith, of preserving us from cunning arguments.

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: 14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; Eph 4:11-14.

Ellen White states clearly that even the Passover was to “pass away forever.” And she uses the same form of reference as the Apostle John quoted earlier. She calls the Passover the “national festival of the Jews.”

Christ was standing at the point of transition between two economies and their two great festivals. He, the spotless Lamb of God, was about to present Himself as a sin offering, that He would thus bring to an end the system of types and ceremonies that for four thousand years had pointed to His death. As He ate the Passover with His disciples, He instituted in its place the service that was to be the memorial of His great sacrifice. The national festival of the Jews was to pass away forever. The service which

Christ established was to be observed by His followers in all lands and through all ages. {DA 652.2}

The Passover was ordained as a commemoration of the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. God had directed that, year by year, as the children should ask the meaning of this ordinance, the history should be repeated. Thus the wonderful deliverance was to be kept fresh in the minds of all. The ordinance of the Lord's Supper was given to commemorate the great deliverance wrought out as the result of the death of Christ. Till He shall come the second time in power and glory, this ordinance is to be celebrated. It is the means by which His great work for us is to be kept fresh in our minds.

Some have argued that Ellen White didn't have the light on the feasts. But the statement above indicates she did. Prophets do not write falsehood on those points where they are in the dark. They simply don't write on them.

Some have argued that Ellen White suggested we keep the Feast of Tabernacles. But that is not so. She advocated a modern parallel to the ancient feast, a spiritual retreat like the best of spiritual camp-meetings today. (For those with an interest, the book *Education* enlarges nicely on the non-ceremonial social value of the feasts as spiritual convocations.)

Some have taken Ellen White's statements regarding the "statutes" as justifying the idea that the feasts are part of the moral law. The key statement reads:

In consequence of continual transgression, the moral law was repeated in awful grandeur from Sinai. Christ gave to Moses religious precepts which were to govern the everyday life. These statutes were explicitly given to guard the ten commandments. They were not shadowy types to pass away with the death of Christ. They were to be binding upon man in every age as long as time should last. These commands were enforced by the power of the moral law, and they clearly and definitely explained that law. {RH, May 6, 1875 par. 10}

Two misconceptions about this passage are common. First, that the word "statute" as found in scripture corresponds well with "statutes" in this paragraph. Second, that the feast were among these "statutes." Regarding the first idea, the word "statute" in scripture is applied to a wide range of precepts, from laws regulating the priesthood to sacrifices to precepts like those mentioned in the paragraph above.

And second idea died under the following logic:

Given: These "statutes" were not "shadowy types." -- EGW

Given: New moons and holy days are "a shadow of things to me." Col 2:16-17.

Concluded: The New moons and holy days are not "these statutes" mentioned by EGW.

For those wondering, examples of the statutes discussed include a prohibition of eating things sacrificed to idols (enforced by the 2nd Commandment), a prohibition of fornication (enforced by the 7th), and a prohibition of eating blood or strangle victims (enforced by “Thou Shalt not Kill” one’s self via poor health choices).

Conclusion

By complex arguments men are easily confused. We tend to trust persons who make reference to Greek and Hebrew words and meanings. We tend to trust those who make reference to ancient practices. We tend to trust those who make reference to obscure sources (thinking they must have done a great deal of study to find those sources.)

And we tend to trust men who write very long studies. We think they must be careful students to have written so much.

But these tendencies are a trick of the devil. Simple arguments are worth far more than complex ones. The latter tend to reduce dependence on the Word of God and to replace it with dependence on some student of that Word.

What does the Bible teach related to the keeping of the feasts?

1. That the feasts were “Jewish.”
2. That those who conscientiously keep Passover should be respected and respectful of those who do not.
3. That the timing of the feasts in the Old Testament was flexible, not moral.
4. That Paul’s keeping of the feasts was pragmatic evangelistic effort.
5. That the ceremonial laws separated the Jews from Gentiles. They were removed at the cross, the time of reformation, and included the festivals.
6. That Ellen White addressed the issue of Passover keeping directly. That she was given to keep us from following cunning fables.

And so, they are not obligatory.

I welcome any feedback on this article.

Be faithful,

Eugene