

VOLUME IV

CHAPTER THREE

EARL L. HENN'S "PEER GROUP PRESSURE" THEORY

Earl L. Henn (1934-1997), in his paper, "Are the Sabbath and Holy Days Done Away?" posted at BibleTools.Com, a ministry of the Sabbatarian Church, Church of the Great God (Charlotte, NC), theorizes that the pagan community at Colossae was highly "religious" and corporately believed that perfection could be attained by self-denial; therefore, Paul is saying, in Colossians 2:14-17, something like, "Don't let the pagans in the community upset you by their criticisms of how you observe your dietary laws and holy days." Since his theory is well-articulated and plausible, it is worthy of treatment in our discussion. If Henn is correct, anti-Sabbatarians cannot use Colossians 2:14-17 to show that the Sabbath was abrogated by this passage. Please consider his theory in his own words:

For centuries, people have tried to use Colossians 2:16-17 to say that Christians are not required to observe the Sabbath and holy days. This distortion stems partly from a misunderstanding of Colossians 2:14, which many claim says that the law was abolished and nailed to the cross, and partly from having a carnal mind, which is enmity against God and His law (Romans 8:7). They reason that Paul is saying in verse 16, "Therefore [since the law is done away] don't let anyone condemn you for eating unclean meats or not observing the Sabbath or holy days." Consequently, they interpret verse 17 to mean that Paul dismisses the Sabbath and holy days as unimportant symbols of future events, while emphasizing that the only truly substantive Christian need is belief in Christ. From this, they conclude that we should not concern ourselves about these days because, since Christ died, their observance is not required. This is not true.

The Colossians had been significantly influenced by pagan philosophies that taught that perfection could be achieved through self-denial and abstinence from pleasure. As a result, Colossae tended to be an ascetic community which adhered to a religion of severity, and its citizens thought anyone who was religious should behave as they did. Many of the people who had come into the Christian church in Colossae had brought their pagan philosophies with them, and they soon began to have an adverse influence on the entire congregation at Colossae. Paul corrects the people in the church who were doing this in Colossians 2:20-23. It appears some of the people had begun thinking that this self-imposed asceticism could somehow contribute to their salvation and had begun turning away from trusting in Christ. They had more faith in their unchristian works. Paul warns them about this in Colossians 2:8.

God had called the people in the church at Colossae out of their pagan, ascetic way of life, and they had begun to learn how to enjoy life in a balanced manner as God

intended. This included eating meat, drinking wine, and enjoying food and fellowship when observing God's Sabbath and festivals.

Because the converted Colossians were learning how to enjoy life as God intended, the people in the ascetic community began to look down on them and condemn them. In addressing these problems, Paul reminds the Colossians that they are complete in Jesus Christ; they have no need for the pagan philosophies of this world (Colossians 2:9-10).

Paul explains in verse 16 why they need not be bothered by the attitude of the Colossian society toward their practices and way of life in the church. To paraphrase, "Do not worry about what the people in the community think about your enjoyment of eating good food, drinking wine, and joyously celebrating the Sabbath and the festivals. Christ has conquered the world and all of its rulers, so we do not need to be concerned about what the world thinks about us."

In verse 17, Paul mentions that the Sabbath and holy days are "shadows," symbols or types, of future events in the plan of God. The Sabbath is a type of the Millennium when Jesus Christ and the saints will rule the world for a thousand years. The holy days symbolize various steps in the plan of God and remind us annually of God's great purpose in creating mankind.

A literal translation of the last few words of Colossians 2:17 reads, "but the body of Christ." What is the body of Christ? I Corinthians 12:27 shows that the body of Christ is the church! The exact same Greek expression that is translated "body of Christ" in I Corinthians 12:27 (*soma Christou*) is used in Colossians 2:17. Paul tells the Colossians that they should not let any man judge them or call them into question about these things but rather let the church make those judgments. He is pointing the members to the example of the spiritual leaders of the church who set the tone and pattern of worship on the Sabbath and holy days, exhorting them not to worry about what anyone in the community thinks about them. A similar exhortation is given in Colossians 2:18-19.

Far from doing away with the observance of the Sabbath and holy days, Colossians 2:16-17 is one of the strongest proofs that the early church kept these days and that Paul taught the Gentiles to keep them. From Earl L. Henn (1934-1997), "Are the Sabbath and Holy Days Done Away?"

ANALYSIS OF HENN'S THEORY

It seems unlikely that the Gentile converts, as well as any Jewish converts, would be concerned with what their pagan neighbors thought about what they ate, what holy days they observed, or how they observed those days. These are minor issues compared to the profound differences between the morality of the pagans and the Christians. Their pagan neighbors would have been far more likely to make fun of the new moral values of their newly-become-Christian friends, such as the radical concept that heterosexual relationships were only for a lifetime commitment in marriage and homosexual practices, which were never acceptable. If the Colossian Christians were afraid of being ridiculed for their new faith, it is unlikely that Paul would have to be giving them a pep talk about facing criticism over their dietary and holy day observances.

A study of Colossians Chapter One suggests that Paul's view of the Colossian Christians was that they were basically well-grounded in the faith. Paul's ministry seems to have been focused on the Gospel of Christ and protecting it against the attacks of the Judaizers. A theme that we will see, as our study unfolds, is that Paul understood that the ideas of the Judaizers (but not of Judaism itself) were similar to that of the pagan ascetic teachings in that both influences had in common a human, rather than divine source, and that both sets of teachings promoted the idea that humans can save themselves by their own works. Paul explained to us how the Salvation by Grace of Christianity is superior to the works-oriented characteristics of Judaism, as well as pagan religions.

Henn points out that a Christian is complete in Christ, and as such, not in need of pagan ascetic practices, yet somehow in need of, and indeed required to follow the Jewish, or Old Covenant sabbaths and festivals. There is duplicity in Henn's statements to which he is blind.

Henn's attempt to evade the fact that Paul classifies the Jewish dietary laws, annual and monthly sabbaths, and the weekly Sabbath as "shadows" that were fulfilled when Christ came to this Earth is unconvincing. The idea that the Sabbath is a symbol of the 1,000 year period of time when the saints will rule the Earth with Christ is pure speculation and is based on the interpretation of one text found in the Book of Revelation. His assertion that the word properly translated "body of Christ" means that Paul is telling the Colossians to let God's People, or the Church, determine what is proper in the way of dietary practices and the observance of holy days stretches the accepted principles of literary interpretation well beyond the limits of propriety. It could be, and frankly is painfully obvious, that it is an interpretation designed to bolster the power the "church" has over the individual Christians, supporting the notion that members are subject to the church over that of their own consciences.

Henn also fails to explain why the Sabbath is labeled a "shadow" when Jesus has a body of substance that a shadow does not have.

Additionally, Henn's theory totally ignores the logical problem that Paul expresses two reasons for the obsolescence of these Jewish ordinances. (1) The dietary laws, annual sabbaths, monthly feast days, and weekly Sabbaths were merely shadowy symbols of Christ. (2) The Law of Moses—the law set that required the observance of these dietary laws and holy days—perished at the Cross. All of the provisions of the animal sacrifices and sabbath systems were spelled out in the Law of Moses. In other words, the death of Christ, and only the death of Christ, would have the power to abolish the very core of Judaism's contractual laws.

Not even Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi stooped to use the argument that the sabbath classification in the third position is NOT the weekly category. Henn's approach involves some amazing theological gymnastics that, without any particular scrutiny, produces the illusion that he had just snatched victory out of the jaws of defeat in regard to Colossians 2.