

THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM & THE LAW OF MOSES I: A SCRIPTURAL CONTROVERSY

One of the most pressing issues to arise in the early church was whether the Gentile converts who had come to Christ were to observe the law of circumcision or not. It would also discuss the relation of these newborn followers of Christ who had little-to-no knowledge in regard to the law or its precepts. In Jerusalem, the birthplace of apostolic Christianity, a council of the apostles and elders gathered to consider the matter with the apostle James, bishop of Jerusalem, overseeing the discussions and giving sentence as to the general consensus of the brethren. You can read about this controversy in Acts 15; yet many are reading Acts 15 with an understanding that the church may define what is essential in regards to the law, and declaring it as non-essential for the observance of converts from the Gentiles to Christ. The implications of this are not inconsiderable, but that will not be the purpose of this study (For that study, go to the "I'm a Gentile, not a Jew" article here).

Rather, this study is for the purpose of understanding the early Christian church's decision as it pertains to understanding the law of God, and whether or not it was decreed as non-essential to be observed. It is not the purpose of this study to arouse further controversy on a sensitive subject, but rather to bring us all into a unity of faith with respect to what Scripture teaches.

To bring out the matter completely, we will examine texts from the Bible, as well as what history said about these councils at Jerusalem. While the Bible is sufficient, historical witnesses supply a secondary testimony, shedding more light on the matter and the controversies erupting in the early church regarding the law of God which were not plainly brought to

view directly from the Scripture itself.

Do we uphold the law by keeping the commandments as much of the Bible suggests we should? Or is this council the Achille's heel to it's observance? Or perhaps indeed, there is a Greco-Roman Achille's heel that exists, but it's in the understanding of those reading their ideas into the Jerusalem council. Scripture and history will bear this out as we bring this controversy back to the table for discussion.

There are two classes of Christians today.

(1) Those who believe they should keep the law of God because they are saved.

(2) Those who don't keep the law because they believe they are saved, with no necessity of keeping it.

How often has this second class revisited that council in Jerusalem to resort to justifying their identity as Gentiles who need not keep the law of God! So without further delay, let's look at pulse of the issue: the council itself.

"And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

" (Acts 15:1-2)

And what was the issue? It was an issue and question of salvation, and how a man is saved from sin. "But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter." (Acts 15:5-6) Jesus had taught the apostles to teach "whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20), and the Pharisees believed that the law of circumcision was to be kept [to command them to keep THE law-

that law- this particular law- of Moses], and if it, that very law of Moses itself, was not kept, those who believed in Christ and were baptized were not truly saved at all. Thus salvation from sin was the fruit of their keeping of a law of Moses, and not of believing in Christ. The great problem that was not being factored in was that it was only believing in Christ's power to save from sin who would circumcise the heart to love God wholly, as Moses also instructed (Deuteronomy 30:6); this a man could not do of himself for salvation, as it is wholly a work of God on his behalf.

So the matter was considered, and Peter couldn't accept the charge upon the Gentiles that they were unsaved until they were circumcised because it is "God, which knows the hearts, and He testified, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as He did to us; And has put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith." (Acts 15:8-9) Thus, Peter placed his finger upon the pulse of the issue of the Pharisees; an issue that they long struggled with even in the days of Christ; Peter recognized that they were also born of the Spirit of God, by which alone a man can see the Kingdom of God (John 3:5). It was this very instruction that Jesus gave to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, because it was the instruction so greatly lost sight of amongst that class of believers. The circumcision of the flesh was a sign upon the flesh of the newborn, but the circumcision of the heart was the work of the new birth: a work accomplished by the hand of God and not the hand of man.

The Gentiles constituted those who came from other faith traditions, who in part were unfamiliar with the laws, customs, and traditions of the Hebrew people. The Gentile manner of worship, practice, and things which they allowed were often in sharp variance to the precepts outlined in the laws given to Moses; so much so that the Gentiles were called the uncircumcised, being "without Christ" and "without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). It was not uncommon for Gentiles to

sacrifice unclean animals (swine, eagles, lions, beasts of prey) to their gods; or else to consume them. Neither was it uncommon for them to practice sexual immorality, drink fermented wine, and in the case of governors, to oppress and persecute those whose ideas came into sharp conflict with their own; all of this was consistent with their beliefs, as it was the example set forth by many of their heathen gods.

“Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you [the Gentile converts] with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment:...(Acts 15:28-29)

The law of circumcision is the portion of the law of Moses which they gave no such commandment as essential to salvation, believing only one circumcision as truly essential was the one performed by the Spirit of Christ. This circumcision that was truly essential was the one which “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...” (Col. 2:11)

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL & THE LIMITATION OF AUTHORITY

In council of the apostles, James presided over the council to make the final decision based upon the consensus among them. “Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day.
” (Acts 15:19-21)

The decision was what commands the apostles should enjoin to the Gentile converts as they were only beginning to learn of the things contained within the law. More specifically, these commands pertained to the individual believer’s own body. Paul

the apostle speaks of fornication as sinning "against his own body" (1 Cor. 6:18). He further comments on these particular commands, saying: "...ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would increase more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God...that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; "(1 Thes. 4:1-4)

The decision pertaining to bodily commands as it pertained to the law came from the highest authority on earth, as the mind of God worked through His people in making a judgment. If the judgment was from God, this decision was always to speak in harmony with the law and testimony of Scripture (Isaiah 8:20). Yet many have gone to the extreme as to interpret that the church was given the authority to abrogate God's law when they are minded together to do so. This sentence issued by James however was not to loose the obligation regarding what was not in those four commands. Those four commands were actually found in the law of Moses itself, thus showing the basis of their decision was guided by the law, so as to not overthrow it, but to maintain gospel order and soundness in their conclusion. It was the apostle's judgment not to trouble the Gentiles who were coming to God, as overburdening them with more than they could bear. The reason is given, "For Moses of old time has in every city them that preach him..."; or to put it simply, "They will learn to rest in time. Let the Sabbath reading of the law be a time for them to learn more."

The Gentiles who came to the synagogues to learn of the God of the Hebrews had already been attending the assemblies every Sabbath day, as it was written: "And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next sabbath.

" (Acts 13:42) The fact that the Gentiles were keeping the Sabbath after they were converted to Christ meant that the

four laws were not meant to abrogate the whole law of Moses, especially the Sabbath observance, but only to specify that the outward observances of the law, such as circumcision and tassle-wearing were not enjoined to the Gentiles; and that the rest of their duties in the keeping of the law would be unfolded as they learned more of the principles of the law of God.

The Sabbath was especially regarded by the Gentile converts in the early church just as it was prophesied would happen in Isaiah: "Also the sons of the heathen (Gentiles), that join themselves to the LORD, to serve him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants, every one that keeps the sabbath from polluting it, and takes hold of my covenant; ...for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people. The Lord GOD which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith, Yet will I gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him. " (Isaiah 56:6-8)



That the Gentiles who converted were expected to become established in the law, and not to disregard it a consistent principle laid out in the Scriptures (Rev. 14:12, Rev. 22:14, Rom. 7:7). The apostle Paul says that those who have the law of God, yet break it are actually teaching the Gentiles to blaspheme Him by their example.

"Behold, you are called a Jew, and rest in the law, and make your boast of God...An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, who has the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law.

You therefore which teach another, do you not teach yourself? You that preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You that say a man should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you commit sacrilege? You that make your boast of the law, do you, through breaking the law, dishonour God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you..."

(Rom 2:20-24)

The apostle says that to break the law is in fact dishonoring God, while giving a bad example to the Gentile converts whom they are entrusted to teach. The elder is entrusted to teach the younger the way of life.

The fact that God would allow the Gentiles to come to the law of God, and give them His Spirit, while having time to learn His law is exactly as the parable of the prodigal son. The Gentiles lost sight of the law of God, having gone astray because of their fathers who left the way of the God of Noah. Yet they were to return, and God, as a Father to them, was to meet them a great way off, and provoke the other brother to jealousy who had never left the law of God but had no love in his heart for his repentant brother (Luke 15:20, 1 John 4:20, Deut. 32:21, Rom. 11:11).

***For the second witness, the Historical Account of the Council of Jerusalem and the Law of Moses, and to understand the controversy that erupted in the second century, causing the council to depart from the law of Moses entirely, click [here](#).