

# THEOLOGY

One Bite at a Time



## THE LAW

*“Questions about Jewish / Gentile Tension in the New Testament”*

*A Theology for the Early Church*

Ken Emilio  
RemnantReport.com

# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
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## **Part I      Establishing a New Testament Hermeneutic**

▪ Principles, Presuppositions and the Interpretive Method.....	4
▪ A Brief Moment in History .....	7
▪ We are Not Under the Law .....	9
▪ The Laws of Noah .....	13
▪ The Laws of Moses .....	18
▪ Martin Luther .....	21

## **Part II      A Watershed Moment for The Gospel and Nascent Church**

▪ The Jerusalem Council – Acts / Chapter 15 .....	23
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## **Part III      Treatment of Selected Scripture**

▪ I Corinthians 7:17 .....	27
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## **Part IV**

▪ Conclusion .....	28
▪ Bibliography .....	29

## Introduction

*“If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God? Acts 11:17*

The Book of Acts chronicled the religious and cultural tensions faced by the Jewish Apostles as they set about the task of establishing Christ’s Church – wherein “all nations” could be blessed. This paper will examine these tensions and certain NT accounts to determine how the Apostles, being Torah keeping Jews, were lead by the Holy Spirit to deal with these tensions.

This paper will assert that Jewish / Gentile tension in NT times was a necessary historic component in establishing the NT corpus and the theology contained in it. As such, the existence of this tension should be acknowledged and embraced as an interpretive tool and historic backdrop when exegeting many of the difficult passages in the Epistles - especially those dealing with issues concerning the Law of Moses and its application to Christian lifestyles today.

The declaration which proclaims that “We are not under the Law,” will be examined. It is unfortunate that this fundamental NT teaching has too often been perverted to give rise to the heresy of “cheap grace.” This particular heresy has caused much confusion and fostered aberrant “Christian lifestyles.” These lifestyles, at times rival even the pagans of antiquity, much to the consternation of many serious believers, pastors and teachers of the Word.

This paper will also explore how an antinomian bias so prevalent in Christianity down through the centuries may have clouded a better reading of important NT texts, this according to many ancient and modern day scholars.

The Bible states that the coming of our Lord – His life, crucifixion and resurrection were “necessary” (c.f. Lk 24:25-26). They were the *sine qua non* of God’s providence in redemptive history. In like fashion, the Mosaic Laws prohibiting Jewish / Gentile integration were necessary during OT times in order to secure the covenants and bloodline through which the Messiah would come. But during NT times this separation had to be resolved if the Universal Church was to fulfill its destiny of unity in Christ.

It was God, in His sovereignty, who established the separation of Jews and Gentiles by imposing the Mosaic system on Mount Sinai. This system guided the lives of faithful Jews for thousands of years and kept Jews and Gentiles apart. “*You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation...*” (Acts 10:28a). Because God instituted this separation only God could orchestrate the necessary integration; “*But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean*” (Acts 10:28b).

There were key historical events which served as watershed moments with respect to the religious tensions of the first century Church. One of these watershed events was the Council of Jerusalem (Acts chap 15). This council produced profound theological changes which still challenge us today.

There exist a number of first and second century documents which speak directly to the subject of the Jerusalem Council and the tensions they faced. Some of these documents are presented in this paper and will include the NT, the Didache and early Patristic writings. Further, some modern day scholars, who have done extensive work in this field, will also be consulted.

Why is it important to understand the dynamics of the Jewish / Gentile tension in first century Palestine when reading the Bible? According to some NT scholars, many students of the Bible mistakenly presume that when the Apostles and their fellow Jews became “Christians” they abandoned the Israelite religion. That is to say they stopped being observant Jews – those who kept the Sabbath, circumcised their children, sacrificed at the Temple and kept dietary laws.

According to these NT scholars this presupposition or bias is held either consciously or unconsciously by many Christians today.<sup>1</sup> This bias may cloud or make difficult the exegesis of a number of NT texts concerning “the Law.” As such, this and similar presuppositions will be examined in light of the clear reading of the NT witness concerning the actions and attitudes of the Apostles in the Early Church. In this paper pains will be taken to avoid anti-Jewish or antinomian bias when studying the NT texts.

With these things in mind, it is hoped that this paper will offer some insight into how God built His Church by the difficult and often painful integration of God-fearing Gentiles, and Torah keeping Jews – who were so completely different and yet so utterly committed to Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> There has been extensive work done in this field concerning the integration of the Hebraic and Gentile cultures and traditions in the first century. Some of the most interesting and exciting work comes from those scholars who specialize in OT and NT studies but are not affiliated with the classic European schools of Theology and Ecclesiology. Rather, many of these scholars such as Marvin Wilson, Robert Flusser, Huub Van De Sault, David Bivin, etc, are grounded in the American and or schools like the Hebrew University in Jerusalem which specialize in NT Hebraic studies.

## **Establishing a New Testament Hermeneutic**

### *Principles, Presuppositions and Interpretation*

“The study of the principles of interpretation – both the grammatico-historical interpretation and the practical application of that interpretation in the pulpit – is called hermeneutics.”<sup>2</sup>

F.F. Bruce and J.J. Scott Jr. go to considerable lengths to teach that proper Biblical interpretation depends upon a balanced and informed approach with respect to a number of factors. These factors include an understanding of the Biblical languages, the type of literature represented, (e.g. prose, poetry, history, etc.), the historical background from which the writers authored the texts, the geographical conditions of the day and how those conditions may have influenced the author(s). It is also important to understand the “life setting” – what was in the minds of the people who are presented in the texts and do we have the ability to “get into their heads?” What motivated them – what did they love and what did they hate? What was their worldview(s) regarding religious practices and life in general? Lastly, how strong were their beliefs and traditions and how did they react during times of change and stress?

Indeed the grammatico-historical method of Biblical exegesis is an important and useful tool for reading “out of the text,” however there is also what Bruce calls “Theological Exegesis.”

“For those who accept the Bible as a sacred text, the church’s book, the record of God’s unique self-revelation, its interpretation cannot be conducted on the grammatico-historical level alone. That level is fundamental, but there is a theological level. The books of the Bible do not simply constitute an anthology or a library; they make up a canon – a canon in two stages: the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures (common to Jews and Christians) and the canon of the Greek New Testament (recognized by the church) . . . Where as grammatico-historical exegesis may bring out the variety of viewpoint and emphasis represented in the Bible, theological exegesis presupposes that there is an overall unity in the light of which the diversity can be appreciated in its proper perspective.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001) 611.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 612.

Dr. Bruce's presupposition of "overall unity" in the Canon includes an appreciation for the movement of God throughout "redemptive history." Unity in scripture thus can be posited to say that God brings forth one epoch after another in different settings and time, yet he always accomplishes His will and purpose, (e.g. Heb 1:1).

This overall unity or "theological center," as Walter Kaiser puts it, can serve as an interpretive tool or a basic hermeneutic approach to the texts of the Bible. This is especially useful when dealing with the subject of Jewish / Gentile tensions in the NT.

In his book *"Toward an Old Testament Theology,"* Kaiser summarizes three familiar OT themes or interpretive formulas.<sup>4</sup> While Kaiser was not speaking specifically about the Jewish / Gentile tensions found in the NT accounts, these themes are basic to our understanding.

- *"I will be your God, you shall be My people, and I will dwell in the midst of you."*
- *"I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."*
- *"In thee shall all of the families of the earth be blessed."*

These proclamations by Yahweh point to three biblical truths;

- 1) God chose a specific group of people, i.e. Israel, in order to share a unique covenantal fellowship during the OT era. This was an exclusive relationship
- 2) God then went to extraordinary lengths to take Israel out of Egypt and make them "holy" or separate from the Gentile nations. He did this by instituting the "Laws of Moses." Thus the Mosaic system was exclusively Jewish.
- 3) By way of His promises to Abraham, God used the Jews as the means through which His universal blessings would ultimately be made available to all humankind.

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 12-13.

How does understanding OT themes help develop a useful hermeneutic regarding the Jewish /Gentile tensions encountered in the NT texts? It does it by upholding the basic principle that God instituted the practice of separation, i.e. “holiness” in order to call His people from a sinful world. First He did this during a particular period in history and with a specific group of people – the Jews. Next, this principle of separation was repeated during the formation of the Church. This separation would be extended to include righteous seeking Gentiles (i.e. New Covenant). Just as the calling out of Jews from Egypt was long and painful, the calling of the New Covenant Church did not take place overnight nor was it free of tension.

Critical questions need to be asked at this point. Did the Apostles and their Jewish disciples remain Jewish and continue to observe the 613 Laws of Moses after their conversion to Christianity? Or did they openly renounce the Mosaic system and immediately stop observing the Temple sacrifices and Feasts of Israel? While this may be the assumption held by many Christians, we see no NT texts which directly support this assumption. Indeed there were numerous times in the NT corpus where Paul and the other writers had ample opportunity to reject the Israelite religion and the Mosaic Law but did not do so.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to recognize what God was doing theologically and historically during the formation of the first century Church. It is also important to understand how the Law of Moses contributed to the tensions experienced by Christian Jews and Gentiles.

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<sup>5</sup> It was during this period (35 and 90 A.D.) the Jerusalem Council deliberated and established the basic tenants of the Christian Church concerning the Mosaic Law with respect to Gentiles. Also during this time the Israelite sacrificial system was to be ended with the destruction of the Temple mount in 70 A.D. This rendered mute the need to engage in lengthy discussions about whether or not the Jewish Christians should continue the sacrifices. As to the continuing arguments about dietary laws, circumcision and other customs and traditions of the Jews, these are detailed in the many NT records. (c.f. Rom Chap 14-15).

A Brief Moment in HistoryTime Line <sup>6</sup>

Conversion of Paul	35 A.D.
Famine Visit to Jerusalem	46
Jerusalem Council	49
Writing of the Epistles	
Galatians	49
Prison Epistles	50-52
Paul's Third Missionary Journey	
Captivity in Cesarea	56-58
Arrival at Rome	59
Paul's Martyrdom	64
First Jewish Revolt	63-73
Destruction of the Temple	70
Council of Yavneh (Jamnia)	90
Second Jewish Revolt	132-135 A.D. (Bar Kokhba)

From a chronological perspective the Jewish/Gentile tensions lasted only a brief moment in history. Conflict and divisions surrounding the Law, Sabbath, "The Lord's Day," along with other issues of the Mosaic system divided not only Jewish and Gentiles Christians but also traditional Jews as well. Political realities of the times also had a great deal of impact on the first and second century Church and Synagogue. These tensions ran deep and painful from about 49 A.D. to as late as 135 A.D. with the second Jewish revolt. To be sure, tensions between Jews and Christians existed before and after these dates. For example, during the first Jewish revolt of 63 to 73 A.D., Jewish Christians fled to Pella to avoid the Roman siege of Jerusalem (perhaps due to Jesus' warning of Luke 21:20-22). Many Jews saw this as treasonous and this deepened the divide between Christian Jews and Traditional Jews.

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<sup>6</sup> The time line shown is not without dispute. There are of course many debates about the writings of the various Epistles and the precise dates shown. The above were distilled from two primary sources and will serve our purposes. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction- Revised* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity 1990), 1006-1007. Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans: 1989), 74-84.

It was only after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D. that the Jewish people were forced to reinvent certain practices of the Jewish religion. It was the Pharisees who led the process to restructure Judaism by bringing the Temple rituals into the Jewish home and family. This process saw the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism which can be traced to the Academy of Yavneh (or Jamnia) circa 90 A.D.

However it was the second Jewish revolt of 132 A.D. that finally sealed the division between the Church and the Synagogue. This because many Jews hailed Simon Bar Kokhba as the Messiah. This was of course intolerable to Christians, be they Jew or Gentile.

As for the period between the middle and end of the first century, the debates about circumcision and observing the Laws of Moses still continued to rage for Gentile Christians.

“During the years between the First and second Jewish Revolts, the Jewish Christians and traditional Jews continued to exchange bitter accusations. Gentiles who entered the Church, unlike proselytes who entered Judaism, did not have to deal with the barrier of adult circumcision and other regulations of Jewish Law. Hence many potential proselytes found it more attractive to join the Church rather than the Synagogue.”<sup>7</sup>

### Summary

In keeping with Dr. Bruce’s view, the need to maintain a perspective on the history and the life situations in which the NT was written and the Church was founded cannot be overstated. The Theology and Christology we find in the NT was written during a period of extreme change and tension – peoples’ lives and families were at stake. The decision to follow Christ and His Apostles in faith, and then learning how to practice that faith, were crucial and in many cases a matter of life or death. It is all too easy for American Christians in 2010 to lose sight of this fact when studying the NT. We are all guilty of appropriating NT words and phrases such as “the Law” into our religious lexicons as doctrinal slogans without truly appreciating their origins or profound implications.

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<sup>7</sup> Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 79.

*“We Are Not Under The Law”*

Many of the theological and moral issues encountered by the nascent Church are still with us today. The salvific work of Jesus, the Christian lifestyle in a pagan society – how and when we worship and how we treat brothers and sisters in the Lord. But in NT times there was a particular kind of stress centered on the “Laws of Moses” that is foreign to us. This stress which was experienced by the Jewish and Gentile Christians of the first Century was very practical and personal – affecting their daily lives and bodies. For most of us in the post-Reformation Church these tensions are more an intellectual or theological issue and not personally applicable to us.

For example, when an adult male is converted to Christianity today he is confronted with the command to undergo water baptism and take communion. He is not, however confronted with the duty to undergo surgery, (i.e. circumcision), with a sharp knife at the hands of another adult male, and most likely without the benefit of anesthetics. It is safe to say therefore, that our “experience” with the “Laws of Moses” is wholly different than those of the nascent Church.

So what is “The Law?” All too often Christians use that term as if they know what it means when in reality none of us have ever experienced what the Bible defines as the “instructions” or the “Way of Torah.” Even observant Jews of this modern era have never practiced the Israelite religion in the manner of first century Palestinian Jewry.

Yet every Sunday pastors stand before their congregations proclaiming that “we are not under The Law” with celebratory fervor. As a result, “the Law” has come to represent something evil to many Christians when in fact neither the Apostles nor Jesus held that view.

Because of this perceived conflict between “The Law” and “Grace,” many diligent Christians when reading their Bibles, experience a subtle tension when confronted by key texts that appear legalistic while other texts seem to discard the Law in favor of liberty.

So where did the idea come from – that the Laws of Moses and the OT texts about the Law were to be discarded, deemed irrelevant or even scorned by Christians?

When speaking against the heresy of Marcion <sup>8</sup> (circa 206 A.D.), Tertullian wrote this:

“At the very outset of His [Jesus] ministry, He came not to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but rather to fulfill them... “His word was with power.” However, this was not because He taught in opposition to the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>9</sup>

Another early Church Father put it thus;

“Although my Lord Jesus Christ excels Moses in glory – as any lord excels his servant – it does not follow from this that the glory of Moses is to be scorned.” *Disputation of Archeloaous and Manes (c, 320, E), 6.218.* <sup>10</sup>

Do the NT texts which speak so forcefully concerning the Law of Moses – those which claim freedom from the traditions and customs of the ancient Israelite religion have personal application to modern day Christians? In many ways they do not apply. The modern Church is not currently experiencing the Jewish /Gentile integration or closeness of proximity as did the first century Church. Today Christians and Jews do not gather on Saturday to worship in Synagogue, or sacrifice at the Temple, or have itinerant Apostles and “Judaizers” attending worship services in order to instruct or debate matters of religious practice and lifestyles. But this was the case in the first century.

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<sup>8</sup> The antinomian teachings of Marcion, (against the laws of Moses and the OT), are well documented and were soundly branded as heresy by the early church fathers. Yet as Marvin Wilson points out, vestiges of a kind of neo-Marcionism is at work in modern day Christianity. Among these include a tendency to minimize or neglect the OT by preachers and teachers of the Gospel and to label as inferior or irrelevant the Mosaic Laws. Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 108-109.

This kind of antinomian attitude was never the teaching of the Apostles or the Early Church Fathers. These founders of our faith recognized the difference between the customs and traditions which were distinctly Jewish, (not to be imposed upon non-Jews) and the universal commands of God which are to be observed by all humans who are seeking after righteousness.

<sup>9</sup> David Bercot, ed. *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 394.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

The issues which troubled the early Church concerning matters of “The Law” (e.g. circumcision, dietary customs, ritual cleansings, etc.) were unique to those people at that moment in history. The OT commandments of God (which separated the Jews from the Gentile nations), seemed to collide with the promises of God wherein the righteous people of all nations were to be “grafted” or adopted as “Children of God” – via the work of Jesus on the Cross.<sup>11</sup>

To accomplish this grafting, the Israelite laws, and customs which had been ordained by God and in-place since the times of Moses, had to be carefully parsed by the Jewish Apostles and then judged as necessary, or not, in order to accommodate and integrate people who heretofore had been excluded. This process was known as “binding and loosing.”<sup>12</sup>

God does not change, as such any process as described above would involve a tedious review of each of the 613 laws in order to decide what laws God would have Gentiles observe and those He (God) would want to discard. Would laws of circumcision apply to Gentile believers? – “no.” Would laws prohibiting idolatry apply? – “yes.” This process and legal entanglement would be a difficult task to complete at best and an affront to God at worst.

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<sup>11</sup> I am not here ignoring the underlying issue of the Apostles’ teaching regarding “Works/Salvation.” However, all too often this teaching had been perverted by Jews and Christians to say that the OT method for Salvation demanded that one must be Jewish and practice all of the 613 ordinances of the Pentateuch. Because of this perversion of OT revelation, Christians even today have all too often claimed that Jews believe they must work or sacrifice their way into heaven. This assumption is mistaken and not in keeping with OT revelation or Rabbinic teachings. The OT means of salvation was and is salvation by grace through faith (e.g. Hab 2:4, Heb 11:19).

Many of the NT writings concerning the laws of God were written to clarify OT theology not replace it. OT theology was taught by Jewish Apostles to Gentile and Jewish Christians who needed to be instructed (or reminded) about “*the first principles and oracles of God.*” Heb 5:12b.

However many Jews and Gentiles were understandably confused. And this generated a great deal of tension between them. These were sincere Jews and Gentiles wanting to do the right thing. I believe that to properly exegete the NT writings about “the Law” we must first approach and then interpret these texts with a profound sense of compassion (not judgment), for those participants who lived through these unprecedented times.

<sup>12</sup> The Hebraic concept and authority for “binding and loosing” was authorized by Jesus and granted to Peter and the Apostles. (Mat 16:19) An excellent resource for a study of this topic can be found in David Bivin’s book, *New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus* (Holland, MI: En-Gedi Resource Center, 2007), 98-101, 141. Bivin does a detailed word study of the Hebrew words *asar* (bind) and *hitir* (loose) and their Greek NT equivalents. He also explores the LXX usage of these words and their context in first century Palestine. He then examines these findings in light of first century rabbinic practices concerning the “binding and loosing” of Jewish laws and customs.

With respect to the Laws of Moses the “binding and loosing” would have to be done so as not to destroy the Israelite laws – which was never the intent of Jesus (c.f. Mat 5:17-18). Yet while the Mosaic system and the Jewish Christians who followed that system were to be respected, it was also necessary to respect what God was doing in the lives of Gentile believers who had never been exposed to the Jewish laws and customs.

“The question of whether a Christian is “under the law” or “under some of the law” or “free from the law” is a question that has been debated within the Church since Christianity’s beginning. From a Jewish reading of the Younger [New] Testament, however it certainly seems clear that there are universal *mitzvot* that must continually be fulfilled by all people – parallel to the covenantal obligations we have in Judaism. Judaism also believes that under the covenants of Adam and Noah all humanity is obliged to fulfill the same moral commandments. Finally, many Christians believe that the Ten Commandments of the Mosaic covenant are binding for all humanity as well.”<sup>13</sup>

There is a subtle tendency for many Christians to at first appropriate the Laws of Moses for themselves but then set about a process to disown some of the laws as being “works.” They look at the Ten Commandments as if to say, “these are good and therefore must apply to me.” They separate the Decalogue of Exodus from the rest of the Mosaic system and tend to ignore or spiritualize the second verse of Exodus 20 – *“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”* In its literal and historical context this is a declarative statement to the twelve tribes of Israel and not to the nations and certainly not to modern day Christians.

In order to better understand the tensions in the Church caused by “The Law” it is helpful to draw a distinction between the “universal” laws of God, (obligatory on all people), and the Mosaic Laws which God placed exclusively upon the Israelites in order to keep them separate from the Gentile nations. This requires us to acknowledge two epochs of law-giving by God. For our purposes, the first epoch was the giving of the “Noachian” or the Laws of Noah and the second was the “Mosaic” or Laws of Moses.

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<sup>13</sup> David Zaslow, *Roots and Branches* (Ashland, OR: The Wisdom Exchange, 2006), 170.

Noachian Laws – The Laws of Noah

When a Christian says “we are not under the Law” does he mean we are “lawless?” The very thought of this is of course silly! In the NT, Jesus and the Apostles command all Christians to do certain things and refrain from doing others. So Christians are certainly under some kind of commandments and keeping these laws are obligatory. <sup>14</sup>

But if the Mosaic System was “fulfilled” by the coming of Jesus, was it somehow altered to reflect the new reality of the Gospel? Did the “Commandments of Jesus” found in the Gospels and referred to by the Apostles in the Epistles originate in NT times? Were they some new contrivance of our Lord or a hybrid of the Mosaic Laws? And if not, where did these moral laws so basic to human nature first make their appearance in Scripture?

The Noachide statutes were the commands of God given to Noah during the time of the great flood. These are the universal laws of God which apply to all people – “The Children of Noah.” These statutes of God were given before there was a Jewish nation or the Laws of Moses.

While these laws are not listed in the fashion of the Ten Commandments, they can be discerned by reading the Genesis account (Gen 9:1-29). The Hebrew sages of the OT era distilled them into what was called the “Seven Commandments of Noah.” <sup>15</sup>

It is no coincidence that the Noachian laws of Genesis bear a striking resemblance to the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15:19. These laws may well have been used by the Council in making their decree. Also laws of Noah were incumbent upon Gentiles who wished to be accepted into the camp of ancient Israel without having to undergo full conversion to Judaism. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Upon reading this statement, one may begin to feel the subtle tension that modern Christians often experience upon hearing that observing certain laws are obligatory. But universal laws such as honoring God, and loving neighbor, abstaining from idolatry, blasphemy and immorality are not abrogated by the Gospel. The Gospel in fact drives us to keep these universal laws, and they are evidence that the Gospel has been effective for our salvation. This tension of “Grace through Faith” is therefore a beneficial thing and should not be avoided - to the contrary, it should be cultivated. It is the idea of “Knowing the Truth” and then “Doing the Truth.”

<sup>15</sup> tAvoda Zara 8:4.

<sup>16</sup> Huub van de Sandt & David Flusser, *The Didache* (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2002), 247.

The Noachide Laws were the means by which “God-fearing” Gentiles of the pre and post Mosaic era were deemed to be living in a righteous manner before God. These laws were non-negotiable and universal in their application. Failure to adhere to them resulted in God’s judgment – for example, the Great Flood. <sup>17</sup>

“The Noachide laws were designed to establish a minimum of obligations for the Godfearers [righteous Gentiles] so they could be saved with the Jews who were required to strictly keep to the Law of Moses.” <sup>18</sup>

“Seven commandments were given to the children of Noah; regarding the establishment of justice, idolatry, blasphemy, fornication, bloodshed, theft (and the torn limb)...” (tAvoda Zara 8:4).

The Noachide laws are often mentioned in the rabbinic writings and the prevailing opinion limited them to these seven. It is noteworthy, however, that the number and content of the indispensable laws for Gentiles was never determined in a conclusive way and variations were discussed in many different contexts of rabbinic literature. On the other hand, the Sages do not debate the concept of such a code in itself. The principle that Gentiles could be righteous without conversion might thus have been generally accepted by the Sages in the Tannaitic period. Early material evidence for the idea that God had given certain pre-Sinaitic laws to all mankind is found in Jub. 7:20-21a (second century BCE)... This is the earliest extant text which links the figure of Noah to a universal ethic that is obligatory for the children of Noah. <sup>19</sup>

A summary of the Noachian Laws are;

1. Justice/equity = Treatment of others. “The Golden rule” & establishment of legal courts.
2. Idolatry = Worship only Yahweh – and no other gods.
3. Blasphemy = Using the name of God in vain - with disrespect or false attribution.
4. Fornication = Sexual immorality
5. Bloodshed = Murder, infanticide, human sacrifice and violent tendencies
6. Theft = honoring the property of others – Do not covet.
7. Torn limb = abstaining from meat wherein the animal was not humanely killed – (i.e. painfully, by other animals, natural causes, diseased or for sport – (i.e. not kosher)).

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 246.

Of the seven commandments listed above, it is only number seven that may seem foreign or inappropriate for modern Christians. The other commandments, most Christians would agree, represent a minimum standard for Christian conduct.

With respect to the seventh law – i.e. “the torn limb,” further investigation revealed that this law established the stewardship of mankind for the ethical treatment of God’s animals. In essence God required that even though eating meat was permitted; cruelty, mutilation and abuse of animals for any reason, either for sport or in general was prohibited.

“The prohibition against tearing a limb from a living animal was one of the seven commandments given to the sons of Noah as a code for the whole human race. On the basis of this law any sport which involved the mutilation of an animal while alive would stand condemned. For that reason the arenas were shunned by the pious. ‘One who attends the stadium sits in “the seat of the scornful.” (Ps. i. I)’ (A.Z. 18b).”<sup>20</sup>

God loves and respects His animals – this is not in dispute. The Decalogue (Ten Commandments), includes animals in the Sabbath day of rest (Ex 20:10). God makes covenants with His creatures, *“In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, with the birds of the air and with the creeping things of the ground. Bow and sword of battle I will shatter from the earth, to make them lie down safely.”* (Hos 2:18). Other passages such as Isaiah 65:25 promise a future of peace for the animal kingdom.

It is the law of the “Torn Limb” that gave rise to the kosher tradition of the Jews. These customs established the ethical and humane slaughter of animals for food. The cutting of the jugular was considered the least painful as it did not shock the system of the animal and cause stress such as unnecessary fear. Strangulation and killing for sport was strictly forbidden.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud* (NY, NY: Schocken, 1949), 237. Cohen goes on to cite Josephus who wrote about Herod’s stadium – where animals were forced to fight and were literally torn apart to the delight of foreign spectators; “And truly, foreigners were greatly surprised and delighted at the vast expanse of the shows, and at the great danger of the spectacles, but to the Jews it was a palpable breaking of those customs for which they had so great a veneration.” (Antiq. xv. viii.I).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 237. The command from God that all people are to be humane to animals may shed new light on the text of Acts 15:20 regarding the eating of “things strangled.”

A Christian, (or Jew for that matter), who studies the Noachide Laws will be struck by their universal appeal as righteous conduct before God. When applying these laws to the Christian life and the interpretation of Scripture there is little or no tension encountered.

To be sure the principles of the Decalogue have not been abrogated or made invalid by NT revelation, yet many Christians believe that while they are bound by the Ten Commandments, keeping the Sabbath is not obligatory. It is interesting to note that there is no mention of keeping the Mosaic Sabbath in the Noachide Laws.<sup>22</sup>

It is a matter of record that, as the early church expanded into the Gentile world, strict adherence to the Jewish Sabbath by Gentile Christians was actually discouraged (e.g. Col 2:16), while Sunday assembly was encouraged; “Assembling on every Sunday of the Lord, break bread and give thanks, confessing your faults besides, so that your sacrifice may be clean.”<sup>23</sup>

As stated above the Noachide Laws were expressed in a number of variations over the course of the millennia and never finalized into a fixed code. Eventually a number of rabbinic sources refined these laws into a three-fold formula which captured the essence of God’s intent. These included prohibitions against, 1) Idolatry 2) Sexual immorality 3) Bloodshed.

In reviewing the Noachide Laws we conclude that these universal laws form the minimum standard of conduct for all humankind, be they Jew or Gentile. We also conclude that these laws are active and binding upon us today – as evidenced by their constant appearance in one form or another in the OT and their reaffirmation in the NT.

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<sup>22</sup> In Genesis 2:2-3 the seventh day is described as being sanctified by God, but there is no mention of “keeping it” in the Jewish manner. It was only under the Mosaic system that the Sabbath was officially installed in the prescribed manner in which the Jews alone were specifically commanded to honor it.

<sup>23</sup> Didache 14:1

Huub van de Sandt and David Flusser hold the view that the Apostle Paul looked upon the Noachide Laws not as a “minimum standard,” but as a “maximum standard” to which non-Jewish Christians should adhere.<sup>24</sup> That is to say that Paul commanded that Gentile Christians should not attempt to become Jewish proselytes as in OT times, but remain in the condition to which God had called them (c.f. I Cor 7:17). If a Gentile should attempt to keep one of the Jewish laws he would then be obligated to keep all of the 613 Laws of Moses (Ex 12:43-49, Gal 3:10b).

In summary the Noachide or Universal Laws served the early church well because they gave both Jew and Gentile a code of conduct that was authorized by God in Scripture. This was patterned after the OT model that permitted God-fearing Gentiles into “the camp” of God without becoming full converts to Judaism. In the NT Church this had the advantage of permitting Jewish Christians to remain Torah observant if they chose and fellowship together with God-fearing Gentiles in the new ecclesiastic community. To do otherwise would have unnecessarily discouraged many Jews and Gentiles from turning to Christ.

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<sup>24</sup> Huub van de Sandt & David Flusser, *The Didache* (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2002), 247.

*Mosaic Laws – The Laws of Moses*

Which of the 613 Laws of Moses apply to us today? Or do any of them? It is clear that few Christians would argue that the prohibitions against incest (Lev 18:6-18), or premeditated murder (Lev 24:17), have been abrogated by the Gospel – this much is clear. But less clear are those Mosaic laws dealing with keeping the Sabbath (Ex 20:8-11), or an Elder/Pastor who wishes to marry a widow or divorced woman (Lev 21:14), or the just compensation for the destruction of another's property or person (Lev 24:18-22). So how are Christians to interpret and then apply to the Biblical texts which appear legalistic in contrast to those which suggest liberty from the law?

Clearly establishing the difference of application between the Noachide Laws and the Mosaic Laws is helpful. This is especially the case if we desire to better understand the situation that Jews and Gentiles confronted while establishing the early church.

Simply stated, the 613 Mosaic Laws commanded by God on Mt. Sinai were given solely for the newly formed nation of Israel and those proselyte Gentiles who willingly converted to Judaism during the OT and NT epochs. The Mosaic system of commandments, customs and traditions given to the Israelites, including the Ten Commandments, were not applicable to Gentile Christians in the NT era or for that matter, Christians today.

This being said, there are statutes contained within the Mosaic system which predate Moses. These laws are universal in nature, (i.e. the Adamic and Noachide Laws); and these laws indeed apply to Christians and mankind in general. <sup>25</sup>

Through the careful study and application of this basic hermeneutic principle a theological division of these two distinct systems is both possible and beneficial. It is here that the quality of an expert exegete or pastor is most evident and appreciated.

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<sup>25</sup> Here it must be repeated that when speaking about laws concerning Christians I am not positing a polemic against salvation of the individual by "grace alone." No one is able to keep the totality of any law be it the Noachide or Mosaic laws. The purpose of God's laws are to teach us and then condemn us.

To often however, the student or teacher of the Scriptures fails to articulate or blurs this distinction between the Mosaic and Noachide Laws and their application to Christians. When this occurs, unnecessary angst and confusion is generated in the exegesis of key NT texts.

A brief study of the Sabbath can serve as a helpful example of how angst and confusion can be generated when the Laws of Moses are inappropriately applied to Gentile Christians.

*“Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.” (Ex 31:16-17)*

“Those verses portray the Sabbath as a covenant sign between God and Israel; that is important, for it is repeated twice. It is hard to see, therefore, how the observance of the Sabbath can legitimately be said to be applied to other nations. On the contrary, it was the observance of the Sabbath that was to distinguish Israel from the nations, much as circumcision also set them apart.”<sup>26</sup>

Dr. Boice is correct to make clear that the Sabbath was specifically established by God for the Jews only – to the exclusion of the other nations for the specific purpose of separation. The Sabbath and by extension the entire Mosaic system, including the Decalogue, (given on Mt Sinai) is a Jewish system. Yet surprisingly, Boice then proceeds to make a detailed study of the remaining nine Commandments – asserting how they apply to Christians today!

What Dr. Boice did in this example was to create subtle confusion in the mind of the reader by implying that portions of the Decalogue applies to Christians while others do not.<sup>27</sup>

As an alternative, Dr. Boice could have appealed to the universal laws which predated the Ten Commandments and the two fold “Love Command” of Christ, which summarized all of the Laws of God.

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<sup>26</sup> James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1986), 235.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-6.

He could have demonstrated the universal laws of Genesis chapter nine, as being applicable to Christians, but not the Mosaic laws specific only to Jews found in Exodus chapter twenty and the rest of the Pentateuch. But he fell into the trap that many of us make when we attempt to appropriate only some of the Mosaic System (e.g. the moral laws) as normative for the Church, while trying to explain away those parts of the Jewish “ceremonial” and judicial (*halachah*) laws” as not applying to modern day Christians.<sup>28</sup>

The Apostle Paul, in rebuking the Church at Galatia, could rightly hold that the first century Christians were not under the Laws of Moses while at the same time could insist that the Galatians were under the universal laws of God and not above the law or “lawless.”

If the Galatians or any other group of Gentiles were to attempt to keep the laws of Moses the results would have been chaos. The problems of circumcision and keeping the Sabbath would be the least of their problems. The task of rewriting the property laws and laws of inheritance, not to mention redemption by kinsmen and forgiveness of debt during the year of Jubilee would come up against the Roman laws and surrounding nations with disastrous results.

The solution authorized by Paul and the Council of Jerusalem regarding the question of the Mosaic system being applied to Gentiles was in reality the only solution which would satisfy both Jew and Gentile. The Mosaic system would serve the Jewish Christians and the Noachide laws governed the Gentiles. When the distinction between the Mosaic and Noachian Laws are clearly taught the confusion and angst experienced in exegeting NT texts is greatly reduced.

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<sup>28</sup> There has been a tradition by many Christian scholars down through the centuries to divide up the Mosaic System into two or three categories of laws – Moral, Judicial and Ceremonial. But this division is not supported by direct citation in the text of the Bible, nor can even an indirect reading of this division be defended in the opinion of this writer. “*It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings*” is an oft repeated formula which God applied to all of the laws and statues. To impose a kind of interpretive grid upon the Mosaic system in order to accommodate Christian appropriation of certain portions of the Mosaic system is both cumbersome and unnecessary. See “Martin Luther” in this paper as support for this position.

## Martin Luther

One of the greatest exegetical minds of the Christian era was most certainly Martin Luther. Luther spent a good deal of thought, paper and ink writing about the need to clearly distinguish between the religious practices of the Christian Jew and those of the Gentile Christian in NT times. In his commentary on Galatians, Dr. Luther points out that the tensions experienced by the Jewish and Gentile Christians concerning the practice of circumcision and the Laws of Moses were temporary and specific to that point in time.

“Custom has such force that the Jews who were newly converted to Christ could not suddenly abandon the law. They had received the Christian faith but thought it necessary to observe the law even so. And God bore with their weakness for a time, until the doctrine of the Gospel was plainly distinguished from the law.”<sup>29</sup>

“It would have seemed very strange and unseemly if the law and traditions of the fathers were suddenly abandoned when they had been given to this people from God with such great glory... Paul, then did not reject circumcision as a damnable thing, nor did he say or do anything to force Jews to abandon it (see 1 Corinthians 7:18). But he rejected circumcision as something necessary for righteousness, since the fathers themselves were not justified by it (see Romans 4:11). It was only a sign to them, or a seal of righteousness, by which they testified and exercised their faith.”<sup>30</sup>

It is ironic that Martin Luther who has been vilified as an extreme anti-Semite over the centuries would be the one to teach that God was gracious and patient to the Jewish Christians by not forcing them to abandon their observance of the law.<sup>31</sup> This also was Paul’s message which he articulated in Romans 14 and 15; “*We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples [i.e. things done for conscious sake] of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*” (Rom 15:1).

Luther’s interpretive insights into Jewish / Gentile tensions encountered in the book of Galatians should serve as a model for the rest of the NT passages which deal with this subject.

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<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther, *Galatians*, Edited by A. McGrath, J.I. Packer (Wheaton, IL, Crossways, 1998), 67-68.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>31</sup> It is important to point out that Luther rejected the concept there being a distinction between the “moral and ceremonial laws” as an explanation for keeping some laws and not others. Luther saw the Mosaic system, including the Ten Commandments applying to the Jews only!

*Martin Luther - Passive and Active Righteousness*

In preface to his commentary on the book of Galatians, Martin Luther states that “righteousness” can be broadly summarized into two distinct categories; “active” and “passive.”

Active righteousness includes various kinds of righteousness. There is political and civil righteousness concerning the actions of philosophers, presidents and lawyers. There is also what Luther calls ceremonial righteousness, e.g. human traditions which correct and govern the manners, traditions and customs of people concerning this life.

Continuing with his description of the kinds of active righteousness, Luther states; “Besides these, there is another righteousness, called the righteousness of the law or of the Ten Commandments, which Moses teaches. We too teach this, according to the doctrine of faith.”<sup>32</sup>

In this statement Luther joins the Laws of Moses with the doctrine of faith. Thus the Decalogue has benefit in how we teach our faith which is different than the process of salvation by grace which Luther calls “passive” not being the works of men. Luther goes on; “Yet there is another righteousness that is above all these – namely, the righteousness of faith, or Christian righteousness, which we must carefully distinguish from the other sorts mentioned above.”

Passive and active righteousness, according to Luther, are opposites. All active righteousness, including the commands of God is active – consisting of active human works that may be performed by us, for better or worse. This is wholly different than the righteousness which is imputed to us through Christ which is “without works – is neither political nor ceremonial, nor is it the righteousness of God’s law... We do nothing in this matter; we give nothing to God but simply receive and allow someone else to work in us – that is, God.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. xvii. Here, I believe Luther has captured the heart of Jewish / Gentile tensions which Paul and the Apostles had to address. The NT confirms that both Jews and Gentiles misunderstood the Laws of Moses as a means to obtain salvation – which is something only Christ can do. This is different than righteous behavior which can and should be practiced. This applies to Christians today in that we are “passive” in what Christ has done to save us, but we are responsible to lead “active” righteous lives before God.

## A Watershed Moment for the Gospel and Nascent Church

### The Council of Jerusalem

*“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses,  
you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15: 1b) NKJV*

In its historical context of 49 A.D., the Council of Jerusalem served as a watershed moment for the early Church both theologically and culturally. Theologically, because the Church, (composed of Christian Jews and Gentiles), was struggling with the critical question of personal salvation and how an individual obtained it. Culturally, the Council served as a watershed moment because it defined the manner in which those customs that had separated Jews from Gentiles for centuries would be reconciled – this so Christian Jews and Gentiles could congregate peacefully at the Synagogue in worship, and fellowship together in community life.

The book of Acts clearly shows that there were generally three distinct kinds of people who attended Synagogue during the times of the Apostles and the writing of the Epistles.<sup>34</sup>

(1) Christian Gentiles, (2) Christian Jews, and (3) Torah keeping Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, (Acts 13:14-32; 14:1; 17:1-4, 10-12; 17; 18:4).<sup>35</sup> This meeting of the faithful was unprecedented and had never been experienced before or since in history.

Yet God had commanded that the pivotal event of bringing Christian Jews and God-fearing Gentiles together as the “Children of God,” must occur (Amos 9:11-12) (Acts 10:15, 15:14-18).

As such the labor to reconcile the three kinds of God-fearing people was undertaken by the Apostles and leaders of the Council and this labor resulted in their decree of Acts 15:24-29.

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<sup>34</sup> This description is of course a generalization and does not include sub-categories of the many Jewish sects such as Hellenized, Hebraic Jews, Essenes, Proselytes, “Pharisees which believed,” pre-Ebonite or “Judaizers” etc. These sects no doubt also attended the various synagogues at this time.

<sup>35</sup> What is not clear is the question of un-believing Gentile participation in the synagogues or early Churches. Texts such as Acts 14:1 seem to imply that un-believers also attended synagogue. This discussion, however, while interesting and worthy of further study is not germane to this paper.

*The Question before the Council*

*“But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, that it was needful to circumcise them [Gentiles], and 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) KJV*

The question before the Council of Jerusalem concerned Gentile men who had come to believe in Jesus and turn toward God. The question; was it necessary that adult male Gentiles submit to or be compelled to perform the physical act of circumcision on their bodies in order for them to obtain salvation? This question was raised by Judean men who had come to Antioch and other neighboring churches teaching *“except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.”* (15:1b). KJV

What was not before the Council were any discussions concerning an outright abandonment of the Mosaic laws by the Church in general. Christian Jews, such as Peter, James and Paul, who made up a large portion of the Church, were not the subject of debate.<sup>36</sup> The objective of the Council was to resolve the tensions which threatened to divide the Jewish Christians from the Gentile Christians.

It is important to repeat that the subject and focus of the Council, and its ultimate decree, concerned the circumcision and religious practices of Gentile Christians only – not Christian Jews. This much is specifically stated in the text and reaffirmed in verse twenty three. *“And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia”* (emphasis mine).

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<sup>36</sup> There are numerous Scholars and Christians in general who assume that what the Council did was to abandon the entire Mosaic system and applied this ruling to both Jewish and Gentile Christians. But this assumption is not so stated in the text(s) nor is it supported by the further reading of the NT corpus. Some of the more notable texts in the NT which speak to the issue of Jewish Christians being permitted to keep the Laws of Moses, include Acts 21:15-26, Romans chapters 14 & 15, I Cor 7:17.

In commenting about Acts 21:25 the McArthur Study Bible (Nelson Bibles, 2006, p 1641), affirms that the Jerusalem Council applied to Gentiles only and not Jewish Christians – “James made it clear that what he was asking Paul to do by no means changed the decision of the Jerusalem Council regarding Gentiles. Since Paul was Jewish, that decision did not apply to him.” The Reformation Study Bible in its commentary of Acts 21:15-26 also acknowledged that; “Thousands of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem strictly observed the Mosaic Law...In this way Paul publicly demonstrated that he was a law-abiding Jew.” (Ligonier, 2005, p 1596)

The Council's Decree

*“Therefore, my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”*

*(Acts 15:19-21) ESV*

In making his decision, James touched upon a number of points to defend his position. He openly acknowledged Peter's experience with Cornelius and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon a Gentile household (Acts 10: 1- 48). James held that Peter's experience had Biblical support and was in agreement with Amos 9:1. This, wherein God promised the restoration of the “remnant” (i.e. faithful Jews), *“and all the Gentiles who are called by My name.”* (Amos 9:17a).

To the question of circumcision, the Council disavowed those who had misrepresented the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem and confused the Gentiles; *“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...”* (Acts 15: 24a).

With this statement the Council rejected the assertions of those who would compel the Gentiles to circumcise themselves in order to be saved. Later, Paul in his letter to the Galatians supported and elaborated upon Council's position: *“For in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation,”* (Gal 6:15).

Had the Council limited its judgment to circumcision the matter would have been closed. But the Council's decision did not end there. The decision of the Council included four *halakhic* rulings upon the Gentiles in order to fellowship with Jewish Christians.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “To the Gentiles who were not prepared to enter the fold of Judaism, a moral code, known as the seven commandments of Noah was offered... By righteous conduct, based upon these fundamental laws, they would earn the divine approval.” Abraham Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud* (NY, NY: Schocken, 1949), 65. *Halakhic* i.e., the “Jewish path or way” refers to conduct. James ruling; abstaining from “Things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled and from sexual immortality” (Acts 15:29) summarizes both the Noachide laws and Mosaic laws.

James made the observation that from OT times the writings of Moses had been, honored taught and adhered to in every synagogue. “*for he [Moses] is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.*” (Acts 15:21). In this way James was focusing on the difficulty of Jewish and Gentile Christians assembling in one place to worship and fellowship. Both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians could make no mistake in what the Council had decided.

The ruling could be summarized to say;

“You who are Jewish Christians must accept the fact that the Gentile Christians are not required to keep the Mosaic laws nor be converted to Judaism. However you who are Gentiles must in turn respect your Jewish brothers and sisters who follow the Mosaic laws. You should not continue certain practices that conflict with their Mosaic system making it impossible for them to fellowship with you. Do not practice idolatry or sexual immorality. Also do not offer nor eat in the presence of your Jewish brothers and sisters those foods which are forbidden to them. You who are Jewish Christians are not to shun or look down upon Gentiles who have turned to God. In this way both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians will be able to fellowship together as one people in Christ.”

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (15:28), the Council officially acknowledged the differences between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This permitted both groups to coexist as believers in Christ while not forcing them to become something they were not.

### Conclusion

The tensions between the Jews and Gentiles of course did not end with the Jerusalem Council. Many of the NT Epistles spend a great deal of time explaining and clarifying the distinctions between these two groups. But it is important to point out that the tension and conflicts between the Jews and Gentiles regarding issues of circumcision and dietary laws served a great theological and Christological purpose. These tensions and conflicts provided very tangible and practical examples of the greater spiritual conflict between grace and works. In this way one could posit that the Holy Spirit deliberately placed these tensions between the Jewish and Gentile Christians in order to teach both of them (and us), what God wanted all to hear.

## Treatment of Selected Scripture

### I Corinthians 7:17

*“But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters.” (I Cor 7:17 NKJV)*

Paul’s repeated use of the word “*called*” (Gk – *kaleomai*) is remarkable, (c.f. Rom 9:7, I Cor 1:9, Heb 5:4, 11:8, 18). This particular Greek word leaves no doubt that what we see in this text is the sovereign calling or “election” of God. That is to say, it was God who *called* some to be Jewish Christians – those who would still be required to observe the customs and traditions of ancient Israel. This included circumcision, the keeping of the dietary laws, Temple sacrifices and the other 613 Laws of Moses – Peter and James being the most prominent exemplars. At the same time God also *called* God-fearing Gentiles to Christ and commanded them, through Paul, not to adopt the Mosaic Laws or convert to Judaism (e.g. Gal 2: 3).

Continuing with the text of I Cor 7:17, Paul left no doubt as to his sincerity in this matter because he then “*ordained*” (Gk – *diatassō*, “to arrange throughout”), or commanded that this condition was to be normative “*in all of the churches*” (I Cor 7:17b).

It is interesting that Paul did not offer the option to Christian Jews to renounce their lifelong observance of the Mosaic Laws. All were to remain in the position that God called them. Jews were to remain Jews – Proselytes were to remain Proselytes – Gentiles were to remain Gentiles (i.e. God-fearers), and all were to be “*keeping the commandments of God*” (7:19).

This of course begs the question, which “*commandments of God*” is Paul referring to? Certainly he cannot be referring to the Mosaic system because in the same sentence he instructs Gentiles not to be circumcised. It is reasonable to assume that Paul must have been referring to those commandments that are universal to all people who follow God.

## CONCLUSION

God is providential – He provides and He directs. It was our Lord who established the universal laws by which all humankind are to honor and worship Him.

God is covenantal – It was our Lord who established the holy Jewish nation with its Mosaic system of laws and customs. And it was God who promised Abraham that all of his spiritual seed both Jew and Gentile would be brought together to establish His Church.

God is sovereign – The method and the means by which God brought believing Jews and Gentiles together as the Church was both deliberate and necessary, being no surprise to God.

God is revelatory – The tension and the balance between the Law and Grace, i.e. the Justice of God and the Mercy of God, are organic. Tension and balance are ever in flux in every human as testified by the Word of God. Recognizing the tensions between Law and Grace as exemplified in the Biblical account of the Jews and Gentiles can help us in the study of Scripture.

The Jewish/Gentile tensions of the NT can be viewed by the Christian in one of two ways:

The first is to look upon those tensions in a negative light – as such we tend to approach the NT with the mindset that Hebraic influence is to be diminished or ignored all together in favor of the Greek / Christian theologies of the Roman Catholic and Reformation era only.

The alternative is to look upon the tensions of the first century in a positive light – as a recurring pattern in the plan of God – taught in Scripture and history for our benefit and learning. This is not to be ignored nor diminished but celebrated, because it was how we got our Church.

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