

When did the Disciples of Jesus Stop Observing the Old Testament Laws?

Ron Ammundsen

Introduction

While Jesus was on earth, he and his disciples practiced the religion that God gave to the Israelites through Moses. The guidelines they followed were found primarily in the Torah* – the first five books of the Old Testament. The Torah contains a variety of information including history, the Ten Commandments, and instructions pertaining to finance, government, family, health, farming, dress, feasts, and worship.

It was at some time after the death of Jesus that Christians stopped observing the Old Testament laws. Exactly when that change occurred is not clear in the Bible. Many people believe the change was made by Jesus himself immediately after the resurrection. However, there is compelling evidence in the book of Acts that the change did not occur until much later.

This article examines all the evidence in the book of Acts that indicates whether or not the apostles and early Christians were still following the Old Testament laws. The context of the story is important. It would be a good idea to read the whole book of Acts to understand the passages covered in this study.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

* The Torah should not be confused with the Talmud which was written later. The Talmud contains traditions, laws, and interpretations that were added by the Jewish rabbis. Jesus spoke against some of those interpretations and called them the "traditions of men". (Mark 7:8)

Some of the laws of Torah could only be followed under specific circumstances. Animal sacrifices and many other religious rituals could only be performed by the descendants of Aaron while on duty as priests at the temple in Jerusalem. The civil laws were to be enforced only by properly appointed judges in Israel.

A Look at the Evidence in Acts

Although much of the evidence at the beginning of Acts is indirect, it is all consistent with the plain, confirming evidence found later in the story.

Before Christ ascended

Acts 1:6 So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Just prior to Christ's ascension the disciples were still expecting the Old Testament kingdom of Israel to be restored. That expectation is a clue that the disciples were probably still observing the laws of the Torah. They knew that the restoration of the kingdom of Israel was dependent on Israel's obedience to the law.

Acts 1:12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city.

When Luke wrote this story many years later, he was still measuring distances according to the traditional Jewish Sabbath laws. He wrote the book of Acts sometime after the final events of Acts had taken place - probably in AD 63 or 70.

Pentecost

Acts 2:1-2 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

The Feast of Pentecost was one of the seven annual religious festivals of the Jews (Lev. 23:15-21). Pentecost, which means "fiftieth", occurred exactly fifty days after the Day of the Wave Sheaf (which was after Passover during the Feast of Unleavened Bread). The Feast of Pentecost commemorated God's giving of the law at Mt. Sinai 50 days after the Israelites escaped from Egypt following the first Passover. Pentecost also marked the beginning of the wheat harvest in the spring. Special offerings of wheat bread, baked from the first wheat of the harvest, were brought to the Lord. No regular work was done, and a sacred assembly was held at the Temple.

When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the believers it is likely that they were meeting

somewhere in the Temple precincts to observe the Feast of Pentecost. Luke tells us that after the ascension of Jesus (just 10 days before Pentecost), the believers "stayed continually at the temple, praising God." (Luke 24:53) And after Pentecost Luke says, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts." (Acts 2:46) The use of the word "house" in Acts 2:2 could refer to the meeting rooms that were available around the Temple courtyard -- that particular Greek word for "house" is sometimes translated as "temple".

It is important to note that Christ's death as the Lamb of God had coincided exactly with the Feast of Passover. The significance of the Old Testament Feasts did not end there. God also chose to commemorate the Feast of Pentecost by pouring out the Holy Spirit on that day. So this Feast that marked the beginning of the wheat harvest coincided exactly with the beginning of the harvest of souls under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Some of the other Feasts incorporate themes and imagery of events that are not yet completed -- judgment and redemption.

Acts 2:5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

Acts 2:14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.

Peter was speaking to Jews from all over the world that had come to Jerusalem to observe the Feast of Pentecost. Now if Christ had already done away with these feasts, this would have been a great time for Peter to explain to all these people that they no longer needed to waste their time and resources coming to Jerusalem for the feasts. But in his sermon Peter did not even allude to any such changes to the law.

Acts 2:41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

When these people were convicted by the Holy Spirit, there was no need for them to abandon their Jewish faith. They simply accepted Jesus as the Messiah that had been foretold in the Jewish Scriptures.

In the Temple

Acts 2:46,47 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 3:1 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer--at three in the afternoon.

These first Christians didn't go off by themselves to worship away from the noise and bustle of the Jewish temple. Rather, they continued to meet at the temple where the regular Jewish worship rituals and animal sacrifices were going on.

If the Christians were not living according to the Torah, why did they choose to meet in the very place where the Torah was still being taught and practiced? Actually, if the Christians had been breaking the Jewish religious laws they would not have been welcome in the temple courts, and they would not have enjoyed the favor of the other Jews who had come to the temple to worship.

Acts 3:12 When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"

Here again Peter has the people's attention. If he believed the Jews were wasting their energy observing the laws of the Old Testament, he could have told them so. But he didn't.

Acts 5:11-13 Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.

The Christians continued to meet at the temple and they were still respected by the Jewish worshipers that came to the temple to offer sacrifices. That makes it evident that the apostles were not preaching in opposition to the rituals of the temple.

Acts 5:19, 20 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."

The angel instructs the apostles to preach at the temple the full message of the new Christian life. If the Torah had been annulled and Christians were not supposed to observe its laws any more, the apostles would have started teaching that message in the temple courts. But they didn't. At least Luke didn't record it. Nor did he record any temple riots, which such a message surely would have caused. Later Stephen was falsely accused of speaking against the law, and certain Jews stirred up the people against him. If the apostles had actually been speaking against the Law of Moses, the people would have stirred themselves up against the apostles.

Acts 5:34 But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.

Acts 5:38-40 Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." His speech persuaded them.

By this time the apostles were well known in Jerusalem. If they were not living according to the Torah, the people would have known about it. Gamaliel said, "If it is from God ... you will only be fighting against God". It's highly unlikely that Gamaliel would have been able to convince the rest of the Jewish Sanhedrin that Torah-breaking men might possibly be working for God. To illustrate how unlikely this was, you might try going down to your local Jewish synagogue and in less than 5 minutes (or 5 months) persuade the Jewish elders and rabbis that the pastor of your Christian church has a valid work to do for God preaching at the synagogue, and that if the synagogue leaders resist that work they might be fighting against God.

Acts 5:42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

The apostles continued to go to the Jewish temple to teach that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews.

Deacons

Acts 6:3-5 Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

These are the men chosen by the church to be deacons. Notice that Nicolas is described as a convert to Judaism. The Christians weren't called Christians yet, so we can't expect Luke to describe Nicolas as a convert to Christianity. However, it is apparent that the Holy Spirit and the apostles didn't consider the Jewish religion an obstacle to Christian believers. The rest of the deacons were Jews too.

Stephen

Acts 6:11-14 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

The enemies of Stephen would not have needed the false witnesses if Stephen had been disobeying the laws of the Old Testament. In that case, truthful witnesses would have easily condemned him before the Sanhedrin. The fact that they needed false witnesses to accuse Stephen implies that he was actually obedient to the laws of the Torah.

Acts 7:1,2 Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?" To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.

This is Stephen's opportunity to explain to the Jewish leaders any changes that Jesus made to the laws that Moses handed down. The false witnesses brought up the topic of disputed laws and changed customs, and the high priest asked if it was true. In answering the question Stephen reviewed the Old Testament history, but he did not say anything that

could be understood as being critical of Old Testament laws, nor did he indicate that any changes were made to those laws. In fact, Stephen described the writings of Moses in a rather positive manner -- “and he [Moses] received living words to pass on to us.” (Acts 7:38)

Stephen did say one thing that might be construed as speaking against the temple. Regarding Solomon’s temple he said, "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men." (Acts 7:48) and he quoted from Isaiah 66 to support his point.

Saul persecutes the believers

Acts 9:1-2 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Christianity was referred to as “the Way”. It is significant that Saul went to the Jewish synagogues rather than to churches in order to find the Christians.

Acts 22:19 "'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you.'"

Acts 26:11 Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

In order to worship or teach in the synagogues, the Christians would have needed to observe the Jewish Sabbath as well as enough of the other Old Testament laws to be accepted as Jews in the synagogues. Since Saul needed to force the Christians to blaspheme, it is likely they weren’t guilty of intentionally breaking any of the laws of the Torah.

According to one of the traditional laws of the Jews, it is considered blasphemous to say God’s personal name, “Yahweh” (or perhaps “Jehovah”). This tradition may have been copied from the Babylonians while the Jews were in captivity. Since that tradition is contrary to the Old Testament teachings, it is likely that Jesus and his followers did not adhere to it.

A devout observer of the law

Acts 9:10-11 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

Later, Paul (Saul) includes important details about Ananias as he retells the story:

Acts 22:12 “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.”

The law that Paul mentions here was undoubtedly the law of Moses because in Acts 22 Paul was defending himself before a crowd of Jews who would not have accepted any other law as valid.

It is evident that Ananias was not just an oddball among the Christians because he was highly respected by all the Jews in Damascus. At that time all the Christians were Jews, and in Damascus the Christians met in the synagogues with the Jews. Ananias had the respect of both the Christian Jews and the non-Christian Jews.

God also approved of Ananias. Out of all the available Christians, Ananias was selected as the one to restore Saul’s sight, baptize him with the Holy Spirit, and commission him as an apostle.

The description of Ananias as a "devout observer of the law" clearly confirms what could only be inferred from the earlier evidence in Acts – the followers of Jesus had not yet abandoned the observance of Old Testament laws.

Saul as a Christian

As a zealous Pharisee and a Jew, Saul carefully observed the laws of Moses before he became a Christian. Because Saul was baptized by Ananias who was a devout observer of the law, it is reasonable to expect that Saul would continue to observe the Torah after he became a Christian. This is substantiated later in Acts.

The *NIV Study Bible* acknowledges that as a Christian Paul observed the Old Testament laws. In the study helps for 1 Corinthians 9:20 the authors say, "For the Jews sake Paul conformed to the

Jewish law." That isn't something Paul could have done on a part-time basis.

Acts 9:19-20 and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God

Saul joined the Christians at the Jewish synagogues and proclaimed the Gospel of Christ. A man who was not observing the Torah would not have been allowed to preach in the synagogues.

Saul returns to Jerusalem

Acts 9:26,27 When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.

As a believer, Saul's appearance and behavior had not changed noticeably. At least the other believers couldn't see the difference from a safe distance.

The Torah required Israelites to wear tassels on their clothing as a reminder of the commands of the Lord. (Num. 15:38) If Saul had removed those tassels from his clothes when he became a Christian, it seems the disciples would have noticed that change. However, if Saul had removed the tassels from his clothes he wouldn't have been welcome at the temple or in the Jewish synagogues.

Acts 22:17-18 "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'

After becoming a Christian, Saul still went to the Jewish temple to pray. Although the veil of this temple had been supernaturally torn at the moment when Jesus died a few years earlier, it is evident that the Lord still met with those who came there to worship.

Peter's vision

Acts 10:10-16 He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him,

"Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

Even though the voice repeatedly tells him to eat, Peter refuses and replies, "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." This clearly shows that Peter had been faithfully obeying the Old Testament guidelines regarding unclean and clean (or kosher) foods.

This also shows that Peter did not believe or practice what some people assume Jesus was teaching in Mark 7:19, where Jesus supposedly declared all foods "clean". Using a literal translation to study that passage in context shows that Peter was correct. That's not surprising since Peter was actually there while Jesus was teaching. The issue in Mark 7 was a ceremonial washing of hands, which was one of the "traditions of men" that the Jews had added to the commands of God. The food in question in Mark 7 was grain, which was already clean according to the Old Testament laws.

Peter's vision is sometimes interpreted to mean that God was at this time doing away with the regulations in the Torah regarding clean and unclean foods. Such an interpretation does not agree with Peter's interpretation of the vision in verses 28 and 34.

Acts 10:22 The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say."

Cornelius was apparently already well acquainted with the Jewish laws.

Acts 10:28 He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean."

Peter's interpretation of the vision did not relate to food at all – it was about people. When Peter returns to Jerusalem later, it is evident that he had not started eating "unclean" foods.

Obviously Peter was still carefully observing the Jewish laws -- it took a special vision from God to make him willing to come to Cornelius's house. The law that prohibited associating with Gentiles was not even a part of the Torah -- it was apparently one of the regulations that had been added by the Jews.

Acts 10:34-35 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

Peter again stated what he had learned from the vision. The vision was about people, not food.

Acts 10:45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

Up until this time, all of the Christian believers had been either Jews or Gentiles that had fully converted to Judaism.

Acts 11:1-3 The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

The believers in Jerusalem were concerned that Peter was not properly observing the traditional Jewish laws. Notice that Peter was criticized, not for the food he ate, but for the people he had associated with.

Acts 11:17-18 So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

The believers in Jerusalem concurred with Peter's explanation of the events. No mention was made of any changes to the Torah's instructions regarding clean foods.

To the Gentiles

Acts 11:19-20 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them,

however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

At this time some Christian believers started reaching out to give the gospel to non-Jews as well as Jews.

Acts 11:25-26 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Although the believers in Antioch included Gentiles as well as Jews, nothing is said to indicate that the believers in Antioch behaved any differently than the believers in Jerusalem who were observing the law.

The word "church" is translated from the Greek word "ekklesia", which means an assembly of people. Because it can refer to the people assembled at a Jewish synagogue, a meeting of Christians, or to other assemblies of people, its use in Acts does not mean that the Jewish believers had altered their form of worship.

In prison for the feasts

Acts 12:1-4 It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

Although Luke mentions the Jewish feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread, he does not say here whether or not the Christians were actually observing the feasts.

Ever since the 4th century, western Christians have generally ignored the Jewish feasts. It's easy to assume that the apostles did the same as we do. However, considering the high regard that the apostles had for the law of Moses, it is more likely that the Christians were observing the feasts mentioned here.

First missionary journey

As Paul and Barnabus traveled to the various cities, they went to worship and teach in the Jewish synagogues.

Acts 13:5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

In order to be welcome as teachers in the Jewish synagogues of the city, Paul and Barnabus must have been following the Old Testament laws.

Acts 13:14-16 From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak." Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!

Acts 13:38-39 "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

Although Paul was observing the law of Moses, he did not teach people to rely on the law for salvation. He makes it clear that the law was not for the purpose of justification.

The Torah describes many offenses for which the law provided no remedy -- the guilty person was to be "cut off from his people". Forgiveness for those sins as well as restoration into God's kingdom became available through Jesus.

Acts 13:42-43 As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

If the Christians had been worshiping on Sundays, as is commonly assumed, Paul could have invited the people to meet with the Christians the following day, rather than have them wait until the next Sabbath.

Acts 13:44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

Acts 14:1 At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.

The dispute in Antioch

Acts 14:26 - 15:2 From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

By teaching that circumcision was a prerequisite for salvation, Paul's opponents were attempting to close the "door of faith" that God had opened to the Gentiles and replace it with a form of "salvation by circumcision".

Although it seems that these men from Judea were teaching the Gentiles that they had to earn their salvation by strict observance of the Old Testament law, that probably is not what the real issue was. Many Jews believed correctly that salvation was provided by God's grace, but some thought that God would provide grace and salvation only to the Israelites. So they taught that the only way for a Gentile to be saved was for him to become a Jew. The normal conversion process used by the Jewish rabbis included instruction in Jewish law, offering a sacrifice, baptism, and circumcision done according to extra man-made ritual requirements. That conversion process for Gentiles was what the Jewish believers were familiar with, so it forms an essential part of the context for this controversy. Rather than teaching that salvation was earned by strict obedience to the law, Paul's opponents in Antioch were probably teaching that the Gentiles needed to become Jews in the traditional manner in order to become included in God's covenants which provided for salvation by God's grace.

The Council in Jerusalem

Acts 15: 4-5 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

Paul and Barnabus made a full report to church in Jerusalem so the elders were aware of what Paul was teaching the new Gentile believers regarding circumcision and the law of Moses. Unfortunately, that information is not recorded in Acts so all we know about Paul's side of the argument is that he disagreed sharply with his opponents in some way regarding circumcision. We know that Paul was not totally against circumcision because he had been circumcised as an infant (Phil. 3:5) and he circumcised Timothy as an adult (Acts 16:3). It is possible that Paul was opposed only to the specific methods, the motivation, the timing, or some other aspect of the circumcision ritual being imposed on the Gentile believers.

Was Paul strongly opposed to teaching Gentiles to obey the law of Moses? That's not likely because Paul was observing the law himself (Acts 21:24) and he taught the Gentiles to follow his own example (Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 1Cor. 4:16-17; 11:1). Also, the presence of Gentiles in the synagogues did not seem to bother Paul at all, even though they were being taught to follow the law of Moses. Many of Paul's first Gentile converts were those who worshiped in the Jewish synagogues and were familiar with the Torah. If Paul opposed what the Christian Pharisees said about the Gentiles being required to obey the law of Moses, it may have been because they were teaching the wrong motivation for obeying the law. Or, it may have been because the Pharisees often did not distinguish between the actual laws that God gave to Moses and the man-made regulations that had been added to it. When Paul's opponents referred to the law of Moses, it is likely that they included all the traditional requirements which had been added to "guard" the law of Moses. If so, Paul would have followed Jesus' example by opposing any man-made regulations that changed the intent of the law.

Because circumcision and agreeing to obey the Jewish laws were prominent parts of the traditional

proselytizing process, Paul's opponents may have been using those terms to refer to the whole traditional process and rituals by which Gentiles became Jewish.

Acts 5:6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

The fact that the apostles seriously discussed this question shows that they still had high regard for the law of Moses and considered such questions to be important.

Acts 15:7-9 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

Peter reminds the elders about the first uncircumcised believers and how they received the Holy Spirit at the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. Peter recognized that event as evidence that the uncircumcised men had been accepted into God's covenants. Peter says specifically that God made no distinction between the Gentile believers and the Jewish believers.

Acts 15:10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

Is it possible that Peter could have been referring to the law of Moses as an unbearable yoke? Remember, this is the same Peter that exclaimed, "Surely not, Lord!" when in a vision a voice instructed him to kill and eat all kinds of animals. (Acts 10:14) If Peter thought the laws of Moses were unbearable, wouldn't he have responded something like, "Oh boy! Thanks Lord, I've heard that pork is delicious. I can't wait to share some with the church in Jerusalem"? Also, Peter is talking to the same congregation that the elders were speaking about years later when they said, "many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law." (Acts 21:20) Apparently they observed the law of Moses quite enthusiastically, so it would have been totally untrue for Peter to say the law of Moses was something they had been unable to bear.

Such a statement by Peter would have been vigorously opposed in a congregation which was zealous for the law. If Peter had said that the Law of Moses was an unbearable yoke it would have directly contradicted the Scriptures which describe the law as a delight and something to rejoice about. (Psalm 119) It would also have been disagreeing with Paul who wrote, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law," (Rom. 7:22) and with Moses who wrote, "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach." (Deut. 30:11) To say that the law of Moses was an unbearable yoke would have been saying that Moses lied about the law being not too difficult. It would also be accusing God of choosing a special people to bless, but instead yoking them with a set of unbearable laws, and on top of that adding specific punishments and curses whenever the people failed to follow those unbearable laws. Peter would not have made such accusations against God or against Moses. If he had, it would have likely caused an uproar.

So, what was the yoke that Peter was speaking about? Peter was evidently referring to what Jesus said about the man-made requirements that had been added by the Pharisees but were not actually part of the Torah. "They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." (Matt. 23:4). Those extra laws had become a burden which few Jews could carry successfully.

Acts 15:11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Again Peter makes no distinction between the Gentiles and the Jews – they are both saved by grace. The Jewish Christians were zealously observing the laws of Moses as a result of being saved by grace, so it is certainly possible that the Gentile believers could learn to do the same.

Acts 15:12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

After Peter explained that the Holy Spirit being poured out at the Cornelius's house was evidence that uncircumcised believers had been accepted by God, Paul and Barnabus confirmed that God had been providing similar signs among the Gentiles where they were ministering.

Acts 15:13-18 When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages.'

James called on the authority of the Old Testament prophets to support what Peter had said and what James himself was about to recommend. Although the elders in Jerusalem had the authority to interpret the laws, they didn't presume to have the authority to change the Old Testament laws.

What is special about the "Gentiles who bear my name" that makes them different from the Gentiles who were pagan? When Moses was reviewing God's law with the Israelites, he explained what Gentile peoples themselves would recognize as evidence of bearing God's name. "The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in his ways. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will fear you." (Deut. 28:9-10) If Gentiles can recognize that keeping the commands of the Lord (as recorded by Moses) is evidence of bearing God's name, then wouldn't the "Gentiles who bear my name" also be keeping those same commands?

Acts 15:19-20 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

Of these four requirements listed by James, two were directly from the law of Moses and two were logical interpretations of the law of Moses added by the Jewish rabbis to guard the Torah. They all pertained specifically to Gentiles living in Israel:

• **abstain from food polluted by idols**

Leviticus 17:8-9 "Say to them: 'Any Israelite or any alien living among them who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting to sacrifice it to the LORD--that man must be cut off from his people.'" (To guard carefully

against idolatry, this command was interpreted by the Jews to prohibit eating any meat that had been offered in a prohibited manner. In Rev. 2:14, 20 the words of Jesus show agreement with that interpretation.)

- **from sexual immorality**

Leviticus 18:6-26 lists a wide range of sexually immoral activities and ends with, "The native-born **and the aliens** living among you must not do any of these detestable things,"

- **from the meat of strangled animals**

Leviticus 17:13,15 "Any Israelite or **any alien** living among you who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood and cover it with earth, "Anyone, whether native-born **or alien**, who eats anything found dead or torn by wild animals must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be ceremonially unclean till evening; then he will be clean." (These were interpreted by the Jews to prohibit eating the meat of strangled animals.)

- **and from blood**

Leviticus 17:10 "Any Israelite or **any alien** living among them who eats any blood--I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people."

Rather than canceling or withdrawing these Old Testament regulations, James and the apostles actually extended the scope of these regulations by applying them to Gentile believers living outside the land of Israel.

Why did James choose just these four regulations? The Jews considered all Gentiles to be idolaters, and idolatry was considered to be one of the worst sins. If the Gentile believers were not going to be required to go through traditional process and rituals for full conversion to Judaism, they would probably still be regarded as Gentile idolaters. Something was needed to make sure that these Gentile converts had separated themselves completely from idolatry. Each of the four requirements suggested by James was directly related to some aspect of pagan temple worship.

There certainly would have been more debate regarding those guidelines if the apostles had actually intended to exempt the Gentile believers from the entire law of Moses and replace it with only four guidelines for Christian behavior. Surely they would not have exempted the Gentiles from "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5) and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) which Jesus endorsed as the greatest of

commandments. Also, Peter had just finished saying (twice) that God did not differentiate between the Gentile believers and the Jewish believers, so we could expect that Peter (along with Paul) would have opposed any decision that created a permanent distinction between the two groups of Christians.

Among Christians today it is recognized that the four requirements James listed for Gentile believers do not comprise a complete guide for Christian behavior. Every church bases its discipleship program for new believers on a much broader foundation. The apostles also expected Gentile converts to receive additional training, and James specifically mentions the teachings of Moses as the foundation of discipleship training for Gentile Christians. Paul also recommended the writings of Moses for instructing both Jewish and Gentile believers (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 3:16).

Acts 15:21 For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

James knew that the Gentile converts were already being instructed to follow the Torah as they met with the Christian believers each Sabbath.

Acts 15:22-29 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul-- men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

The phrase "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit" refers to the precedent that was set by God when the Holy Spirit fell on the devout but uncircumcised Gentiles of Cornelius's household (Acts 10). Both Peter and James referred to that incident while explaining the reasons for their recommendations.

To avoid any misunderstanding, the elders from Jerusalem sent a delegation to Antioch to deliver the letter. Christians today would be more likely to understand the intent of the apostles' letter if it was explained to them by a delegation of Torah-observant believers like the men who delivered the letter to Antioch.

Why did the apostles and elders refer to the the four requirements as a burden? Probably because they included two regulations from the extra requirements that the rabbis had added to the law of Moses.

Notice that the apostles' letter to Antioch does not refer at all to salvation or to any requirements for being saved. Evidently the consensus of the elders and apostles was that the Gentile believers were already accepted as members of God's covenant by faith in Jesus.

Acts 15:30-35 The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

The believers in Antioch received the letter as a welcome answer to their original question regarding circumcision for Gentile converts. The men from Jerusalem stayed for some time to minister and teach in Antioch without any new problems developing between the Gentile and Jewish believers.

That would not have been the case if the believers in Antioch had understood the letter to mean that Gentile believers did not need to learn or observe the Torah. It would have created in the local church a distinction between two classes of believers based on race. Maintaining unity within such a church

would have been difficult if the Gentile Christians had been observing only the four guidelines sent from Jerusalem, while the men who had just arrived from Jerusalem were continuing to observe and teach the Torah with the other Jewish Christians in Antioch. There would have been an unavoidable tendency for the church to become racially segregated as both Jews and Gentiles avoided the awkward situations that would have been caused by conflicting practices such as kosher foods, Sabbath, the Biblical feasts, and teaching the Torah. You can imagine the difficulties a Torah-observant Christian like Paul might have today if he were the pastor of an average Christian congregation. The absence of subsequent controversy at Antioch strongly suggests that the Gentile converts were being taught to follow the same Old Testament guidelines that the Jewish Christians were following.

We know from what Peter said (Acts 15:9, 11), and from Paul's writings (Gal. 3:28), and from Jesus's final instructions to his disciples (Matt. 28:19-20) that there was not to be a distinction between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. Because the apostle's decision applied only to Gentile converts, not to Jewish believers, the decision could not have been intended to exempt the Gentile believers from learning to follow the laws of Moses which the Jewish believers were still observing.

The decision of the apostles in Jerusalem regarding circumcision for Gentile converts was not accepted by some of the Jewish Christians in other congregations. In his letters to the various churches, Paul continues to deal with this controversy. Paul urged the Jewish believers to accept the Gentile believers as equal brothers and assured the Gentile believers of their equality in Christ.

Circumcision of Timothy

Acts 16:1-3 He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

In spite of what Paul wrote elsewhere in the New Testament regarding circumcision, it is apparent that

Paul considered circumcision of Christian believers to be an acceptable practice.

Bereans evaluate Paul's message

Acts 17:11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

The Old Testament writings were the only Scriptures available at that time. So the Bereans used the Old Testament to evaluate Paul's teachings to see if they were true. Paul's teachings must have agreed entirely with the Torah and the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures, otherwise those Bereans would have rejected Paul's gospel.

Sabbath and synagogues

Acts 16:12-13 From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

Acts 17:1-2 When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,

Acts 18:4-8 Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

Acts 18:19 They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

Paul takes a vow

Acts 18:18 Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken.

Although it is not certain what kind of vow Paul had made, the cutting off of the hair was typical of the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6). Later Paul could have fulfilled the parts of his vow that required making offerings at the temple in Jerusalem. (Acts 21:26)

Keep this feast

Acts 18:21 (KJV) 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.

Paul was willing to go out of his way to observe the Jewish feasts. This reference to the feast is omitted in some modern versions of the Bible.

Apollos

Acts 18:24-26 Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

Paul's companions Priscilla and Aquila found Apollos speaking in the synagogue. It was not unusual for Christians to worship and speak in the Jewish synagogues, even though they would be expected to live according to the Old Testament regulations.

Paul in Ephesus

Acts 19:8-10 Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

During the two years that Paul taught in Ephesus the Jews continued to come listen to Paul's teaching. Most of the Jews would have stayed away if Paul had been teaching in opposition to the Torah.

Feast of Unleavened Bread

Acts 20:6 But we sailed from Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread lasts seven days and comes right after the Passover in the spring. The mention of the feast here indicates that Paul and his

companions probably observed it. They were traveling in a country where there would be little reason to use a Jewish feast as a time reference, unless they celebrated it. If they had not celebrated the feast, Luke could have easily added a clarifying phrase like "which we no longer observed". There is no such clarification anywhere in Acts.

The resurrection of Jesus came right during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, so it is significant to notice that Luke did not write "we sailed from Philippi a few days after Easter." If the Christians had actually been ignoring the Old Testament feasts, Luke would have mentioned the celebration of the resurrection rather than the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

On the first day of the week

Acts 20:7 On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.

This is the only passage in Acts that mentions Sunday or the first day of the week. Because each Jewish day started and ended at sundown, this meeting probably occurred on a Saturday night, after the Sabbath had ended. In the *New English Bible* this verse reads, "On the Saturday night, in our assembly for the breaking of bread, Paul, who was to leave next day, addressed them, and went on speaking until midnight." So Paul probably spent that particular Sunday traveling rather than worshipping.

To Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost

Acts 20:16 Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.

The Feast of Pentecost was one of the three times each year when the Israelites traveled to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. Paul evidently wanted to participate in the Feast of Pentecost. Later, while he was on trial before governor Felix, Paul clearly stated the reason he had traveled to Jerusalem at the time of the Feast of Pentecost: "You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship." (Acts 24:11)

All are zealous for the law

Acts 21:17-20 When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law.

James couldn't have made it any plainer that at this time the Christian believers in Jerusalem were eagerly observing the law.

The attitude of these believers toward the law may have been caused by their acceptance of the new covenant that was promised by God through Jeremiah the prophet: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." (see Jer. 31:31-33) These believers may also be an example of "the obedience that comes from faith" that was the goal of Paul's apostleship. (Rom. 1:5)

False Rumors about Paul and the law

Acts 21:21 They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs.

The Jewish people in Jerusalem had known about Paul before he was a Christian and about his reputation as a strict Pharisee. They also knew that Paul left Jerusalem and was no longer cooperating with the Sanhedrin and the leading Pharisees. Rumors concerning this significant change would have circulated among the Jews during the years that Paul had been away from Jerusalem. Rumors had probably also come to Jerusalem from the Jews in other areas where Paul was working. But now many of the Jews in Jerusalem had become Christians. They were zealous for the law and had doubts about Paul because of what they'd heard about him over the years.

Then everybody will know

Acts 21:22-24 What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no

truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.

James and the apostles who were acquainted with Paul knew that the reports were false. If Paul joined in the purification rites it would be obvious to everyone that Paul was living in obedience to the law.

Paul did join in the purification rites. As far as we know, he was completely willing to do so.

So today everyone should know that Paul himself was living in obedience to the law of Moses. There was no truth in the rumors that Paul was teaching people to turn away from Moses.

Unfortunately, some people would rather portray Paul as a clever hypocrite - acting like a Christian when he's with Christians, acting like a Jew when he's with Jews, and acting like a Gentile when he's with Gentiles - as if Paul might gain some missionary advantage by doing so. We know that Paul did not approve of that kind of hypocrisy because he had publicly rebuked Peter for such behavior. (see Gal. 2:11-14)

If Paul had been in the habit of disregarding the law of Moses, it would have been deceitful for Paul to join in the purification rites knowing that everyone would think he had been living according to the law. It also would have been deceitful for James and the elders to recommend a course of action that would have intentionally misled the believers in Jerusalem. So it is apparent that Paul really had been living in obedience to the Law all along.

Acts 21:25 As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

Here James continues to express the truth about Paul and his teachings. Contrary to the false reports that had been circulated, Paul had actually been delivering this decision of the elders (Acts 16:4), which affirmed that new Gentile converts were to follow these Torah requirements for foreigners in Israel, but were not required to go through the formal conversion rituals prescribed by Jewish tradition for proselytes.

The King James Version includes the phrase, "that they observe no such thing." Although many people

think this phrase refers to the law, that interpretation is extremely unlikely because Paul instructed the Gentile believers to follow his own example (Phil. 4:9, 1Cor. 4:16-17). This phrase may have referred instead to the purification rituals, or to the teachings falsely attributed to Paul in verse 21 (i.e. the Jews should not turn away from Moses, and the Gentiles should do no such thing either). Or, as other versions render it, the phrase may simply refer to the prohibited foods and immorality which were subsequently listed.

Acts 21:26 The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

If the vow Paul took in Acts 18:18 was a Nazirite vow (Num. 6), these purifications rites and offerings would have fulfilled the parts of his vow that could only be accomplished at the Temple in Jerusalem.

It had been more than twenty-five years since Jesus had died, yet it was still acceptable for Christians to go to the Jewish temple to worship and take part in the rituals. It is interesting to note that this was Paul's final visit to Jerusalem -- he would soon become a prisoner. Yet he chose to go up to the Jewish temple to worship.

Temple Riot

Acts 21:27-29 When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place." (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area.)

Paul was not the only one who had traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. Some of the Jews from Asia recognized Paul. Although their accusations against Paul were false, the temple riot (described in subsequent verses) illustrates the enthusiasm with which the Jews protected the temple from those who were suspected of defiling it.

Before the Sanhedrin

Acts 23:1 Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day."

Many Christians today could say with all honesty the same thing that Paul said. However, a few moments later Paul also states that he is a Pharisee. That defines much more clearly what he and the Sanhedrin understood as his duty to God.

Acts 23:2-5 At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!" Those who were standing near Paul said, "You dare to insult God's high priest?" Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'"

Paul implies that he would not have disobeyed the Torah by insulting the high priest if he had known Ananias was the high priest.

Acts 23:6 Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead."

Although Paul evidently said this in order to take advantage of the dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, it would not have worked if Paul had not been living in accordance with the law of Moses. In that case, it would probably have been laughter, rather than a dispute, that broke out in the Sanhedrin when Paul claimed to be a Pharisee.

Acts 23:9 There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"

Although the Asian Jews had made serious charges against Paul, there was enough evidence to show that Paul's claim to being a Pharisee was valid. Some of the Pharisees declared, "We find nothing wrong with this man." It is doubtful they would have said this about a man who was not following the teachings of Moses. The passages following this show how determined the Jews were to be rid of

Paul, which makes this vindication of Paul by some of his enemies even more significant.

The Lord's approval

Acts 23:11 The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Although some Christians today are critical of Paul's choice to go through the purification ritual which led to his arrest at the Jewish temple, the Lord apparently does not share that opinion at all. In Jerusalem Paul had testified as a Torah-observant believer in Jesus, deliberately making it clear to everyone that he upheld the law of Moses.

In the court of Felix

Acts 24:5-6 "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him.

The Jews considered Paul to be a leader of the Nazarenes, which was a sect of Judaism. History records that the sect of the Nazarenes accepted Jesus as the Messiah and continued to observe the laws of Moses. The sect existed in the synagogues until at least the fifth century.

Acts 24:12-16 My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

Paul denied most of the charges against him, but he did not deny being a Nazarene or a follower of the Way, which the Jews called a sect. Apparently Paul also considered Christianity to be a part of the Jewish religion.

Paul clearly states, "I believe everything that agrees with the Law and the Prophets." The "Law and the

Prophets" was the term the Jews used for the Old Testament Scriptures.

Acts 24:17-18 "After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance.

Paul describes himself as "ceremonially clean" according to the Torah. Paul evidently was not afraid to comply with some of the ceremonial laws.

In the court of Festus

Acts 25:7-8 When Paul appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges against him, which they could not prove. Then Paul made his defense: "I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar."

Paul plainly testified that he had done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews.

Before Agrippa and Festus

Acts 26:4-5 "The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee.

Notice that Paul says, "our religion" instead of "their religion". Paul still thought of himself as a part of the Jewish religion.

Apparently Paul's behavior had been fairly consistent ever since he was a child. If Paul was no longer living as a Pharisee, then what he said about being a Pharisee would have been rather irrelevant. The Jews had not accused him for things he had done before he became a Christian.

It's not likely that Paul would have invited the Jews to verify that he lived as a Pharisee unless he was still living as a Pharisee. The Jews would have been eager to challenge, rather than verify, Paul's testimony.

Acts 26:20 First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

This is an unusual summary of Paul's preaching. Although Paul preached salvation by grace, he also taught that there was a proper place for the deeds that resulted from repentance and a relationship with God.

Acts 26:28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul replied, "Short time or long--I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

Sometimes people assume that Paul continued following the laws of Moses only because of his unique role as an apostle to both Jews and Gentiles. Notice, however, that Paul's prayer was for everyone listening to become, not just a Christian as Agrippa suggested, but a Christian specifically like Paul himself. Paul believed that he was an appropriate role model for all Christians, whether they were Gentiles or not. He wrote, "Therefore I urge you to imitate me." (1Cor. 4:16) and "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." (1Cor. 11:1)

The Fast

Acts 27:9 Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them...

A footnote in the *NIV Bible* says "the Fast" refers to the Day of Atonement. This feast occurred in the fall and was the only Jewish festival that involved fasting. When Luke wrote the story of Acts, he expected that Christians who later read the story would be familiar with the Fast and know what time of year it occurred. That would not be likely unless they continued to observe the Fast.

In Rome

Acts 28:17 Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: "My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans.

Nearly at the end of his life and ministry, Paul declares to the Jewish leaders in Rome that he has done nothing against the Jews or against their customs.

When did the disciples of Jesus stop observing the Old Testament laws?

The book of Acts contains no evidence that the apostles ever stopped observing the Old Testament laws. Instead it depicts Spirit-filled and grace-based Christians who continued to observe the laws of the Torah, not legalistically in order to earn salvation, but in order to honor God as they walked out the Christian life in the footsteps of their Lord Jesus.

It was sometime after the book of Acts was completed that Christians began to turn away from following the Old Testament. For more information, see the article “How the Apostles were Expelled from Christianity.”

Other titles in this series:

How the Apostles were Expelled from Christianity Paul Taught Torah

Available free online at www.fogwhistle.ca/acts

For further thought and study

1. There are some passages in Paul’s writings that seem to be incompatible with Paul’s life-long observance of the Old Testament laws. How should those passages be interpreted so they fit correctly within the whole context of Paul’s own life and early Christianity as recorded in Acts?
2. Today few Christians practice the same form of Christianity that Paul and the other apostles practiced. What historical and social influences have caused Christianity to change to what it is today?
3. Which of the Bible writers and heroes can be used as a role model for the type of Christianity that disregards the Old Testament laws?

This article may be copied for free distribution as long as it is copied completely and accurately, including copyright notices and the website address.

© Copyright 2002 by Ron Ammundsen

Revised April 2003

*Scripture taken from the
HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.
Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers*

I am interested in hearing your comments, insights, or objections regarding this article. If you find **any** errors, please let me know.

Ron Ammundsen
ron@fogwhistle.ca