How the Apostles were Expelled from Christianity

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A hundred years after the church was founded in Jerusalem, a controversy raged within the congregation. The outcome was a doctrinal turnaround with far-reaching consequences. The losers in that debate were subsequently rejected by Christianity. The winning side passed down to us their slant on church history which has strongly influenced our understanding of the New Testament.

Few Christians are aware of the changes that occurred at that time. The traditional interpretations of events are seldom questioned. Like the author of the historical account that follows, we allow our presuppositions to blind us to the implications of those early changes to Christianity.

For an overview of the early development of Christianity, let's look at a classic text that was first published in 1776 and is still widely used and respected by historians. Although various scholars have disagreed with some of Edward Gibbon's interpretations of history, the accuracy of the historic facts he recorded has rarely been disputed.

An excerpt from

The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

by Edward Gibbon

CHAPTER 15
PROGRESS OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION
Part 2

The *enfranchisement* of the church from the bonds of the synagogue was a work, however, of some time and of some difficulty.

The Jewish converts, who acknowledged Jesus in the character of the Messiah foretold by their ancient *oracles*, respected him as a prophetic teacher of virtue and religion; but they obstinately adhered to the ceremonies of their ancestors, and were desirous of imposing them on the Gentiles, who continually *augmented* the number of believers.

Note: Some of the words Gibbon uses in the text may be unfamiliar. Definitions for *italicized* words are provided in the glossary on the last page.

The original church, under the leadership of the apostles, had very close ties to the Jewish religion. However, Gibbon presupposes that those ties were a form of bondage that needed to be broken.

As Gibbon points out, the coming of the Messiah was an integral part of the Old Testament religion of the Jews. The Jewish believers who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah did not need to change religions. Rather than converting, they had simply recognized correctly that Jesus was the expected Messiah that had been foretold in the Jewish Scriptures. As a result they had received the Holy Spirit as was prophesied in those same Scriptures.

Although he puts a negative twist on it by using the word "obstinately" instead of "faithfully", Gibbon recognizes that the first Christians did not abandon the practices of the Old Testament religion and that they were teaching those practices to the Gentile converts.

These *Judaizing* Christians seem to have argued with some degree of plausibility from the divine origin of the *Mosaic law*, and from the *immutable* perfections of its great Author. They affirmed, that if the Being, who is the same through all eternity, had designed to abolish those sacred rites which had served to distinguish his chosen people, the repeal of them would have been no less clear and solemn than their first *promulgation*: that, instead of those frequent declarations, which either suppose or assert the *perpetuity* of the Mosaic religion, it would have been represented as a *provisionary* scheme intended to last only to the coming of the Messiah, who should instruct mankind in a more perfect mode of faith and of worship:

Notice that the original Christians were Judaizing , which simply means that they adopted the customs and beliefs of the Jews.

The article "*When Did the Disciples of Jesus Stop Observing the Old Testament Laws?*" confirms this by examining all the evidence from the New Testament book of Acts.

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that the Messiah himself, and his disciples who conversed with him on earth, instead of authorizing by their example the most minute observances of the Mosaic law, would have published to the world the *abolition* of those useless and obsolete ceremonies, without suffering Christianity to remain during so many years obscurely *confounded* among the sects of the Jewish church.

While many Christians believe that we should follow the example of Jesus and his apostles, most believers fail to recognize what Gibbon points out -- that the founders of Christianity combined the gospel of Christ with the observance of the laws of Moses. Due to the prejudices that were subsequently introduced into the church, many Christians firmly believe that such a combination of gospel and law is impossible.

Arguments like these appear to have been used in the defense of the expiring cause of the Mosaic law; but the industry of our learned *divines* has abundantly explained the ambiguous language of the Old Testament, and the ambiguous conduct of the apostolic teachers.

Gibbon side-steps the valid arguments of the Jewish believers by appealing to the work of unnamed theologians to explain away the obvious contradictions between modern Christianity and the practices of its founders. Apparently none of those abundant explanations of the theologians was sufficiently clear or concise to be included by Gibbon.

It was proper gradually to unfold the system of the gospel, and to pronounce, with the utmost caution and tenderness, a sentence of condemnation so *repugnant* to the inclination and prejudices of the believing Jews.

That process was "proper" only if you assume that the religion taught and practiced by the original apostles was somehow defective.

The history of the church of Jerusalem affords a lively proof of the necessity of those precautions, and of the deep impression which the Jewish religion had made on the minds of its *sectaries*.

The history of the church of Jerusalem shows how far Christianity has drifted away from the Jewish roots of the gospel.

The first fifteen *bishops* of Jerusalem were all circumcised Jews; and the congregation over which they presided united the law of Moses with the doctrine of Christ.

The 4th-century historian Eusebius recorded the names of those church leaders. The first was James, said to be the brother of Jesus -- the same James who is mentioned in Acts as a leader of the Jerusalem congregation.

It was natural that the primitive tradition of a church which was founded only forty days after the death of Christ, and was governed almost as many years under the immediate inspection of his apostle, should be received as the standard of *orthodoxy*.

Originally it was this Jerusalem congregation, which combined the gospel of Christ with the law of Moses, that was considered to be "orthodox" -- the standard of what was right and true.

The distant churches very frequently appealed to the authority of their *venerable* Parent, and relieved her distresses by a liberal contribution of *alms*.

All of the New Testament was written during this period while Christian believers continued to observe the Old Testament laws.

But when numerous and *opulent* societies were established in the great cities of the empire, in Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome, the reverence which Jerusalem had inspired to all the Christian colonies *insensibly* diminished.

The Jewish converts, or, as they were afterwards called, the Nazarenes, who had laid the foundations of the church, soon found themselves overwhelmed by the increasing multitudes, that from all the various religions of *polytheism* enlisted under the banner of Christ: and the Gentiles, who, with the *approbation* of their peculiar apostle, had rejected the intolerable weight of the Mosaic ceremonies, at length refused to their more scrupulous brethren the same toleration which at first they had humbly solicited for their own practice.

In Acts 24:5 Paul is identified as a leader of the Nazarenes.

It is ironic that the Christian Gentiles became intolerant of the Jewish believers.

The article *"Paul Taught Torah"* examines the common misconception that Paul encouraged the Gentile Christians to disregard the laws of Moses.

The ruin of the temple of the city, and of the public religion of the Jews, was severely felt by the Nazarenes; as in their manners, though not in their faith, they maintained so intimate a connection with their impious countrymen, whose misfortunes were attributed by the Pagans to the contempt, and more justly ascribed by the Christians to the wrath, of the Supreme Deity.

Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple were destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD in response to a Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire.

After the unsuccessful rebellion of the Jews, it was not popular within the Roman Empire to be associated with the Jews. Rome imposed an extra poll tax, the *Fiscus Judaicus*, on each person who was identified as a Jew. For each person in the household between the ages of three and 60, the equivalent of two day's wages was levied each year. To distance themselves from the disloyalty of the Jews, Gentile Christians throughout the empire began to abandon the distinctively Jewish practices -- not for scriptural reasons, but simply because it made life easier.

The Nazarenes retired from the ruins of Jerusalem to the little town of Pella beyond the Jordan, where that ancient church languished above sixty years in solitude and obscurity.

They still enjoyed the comfort of making frequent and devout visits to the Holy City, and the hope of being one day restored to those seats which both nature and religion taught them to love as well as to revere.

But at length, under the reign of Hadrian, the desperate fanaticism of the Jews filled up the measure of their calamities; and the Romans, exasperated by their repeated rebellions, exercised the rights of victory with unusual rigor.

The Jews rebelled against the Romans again from 132 to 135 AD under the leadership of Bar-Kochba.

The emperor founded, under the name of Aelia Capitolina, a new city on Mount Sion, to which he gave the privileges of a colony; and denouncing the severest penalties against any of the Jewish people who should dare to approach its precincts, he fixed a vigilant garrison of a Roman cohort to enforce the execution of his orders.

The Nazarenes had only one way left to escape the common *proscription*, and the force of truth was on this occasion assisted by the influence of *temporal* advantages.

At this point Christianity was over 100 years old and the congregation that the apostles had established in Jerusalem was still observing the laws of Moses. However, the pressures of persecution would soon change that.

They elected Marcus for their bishop, a *prelate* of the race of the Gentiles, and most probably a native either of Italy or of some of the Latin provinces. At his persuasion, the most considerable part of the congregation renounced the Mosaic law, in the practice of which they had persevered above a century.

By this sacrifice of their habits and prejudices, they purchased a free admission into the colony of Hadrian, and more firmly cemented their union with the Catholic church.

When the name and honors of the church of Jerusalem had been restored to Mount Sion, the crimes of heresy and schism were imputed to the obscure remnant of the Nazarenes, which refused to accompany their Latin bishop.

Not surprisingly, the Nazarenes who continued to observe the laws of Moses were now accused of heresy by the church. **This created a fundamental contradiction within Christianity that has not yet been resolved:** If the Nazarenes were guilty of heresy because they continued to observe the laws of Moses, then the original apostles and founders of the church would also have to be heretics for the same reason.

They still preserved their former habitation of Pella, spread themselves into the villages adjacent to Damascus, and formed an inconsiderable church in the city of Beroea, or, as it is now called, of Aleppo, in Syria.

Two centuries later in his *Refutation of all Heresies*, Epiphanius Bishop of Constantia wrote of the Nazarenes:

> Only in this respect they differ from the Jews and Christians: with the Jews they do not agree because of their belief in Christ, with the Christians because they are trained in the Law, in circumcision, the Sabbath and the other things.
>
> *Panarian*, chapter 29, par. 7 (AD 374)

The name of Nazarenes was deemed too honorable for those Christian Jews, and they soon received, from the supposed poverty of their understanding, as well as of their condition, the contemptuous epithet of Ebionites.

There is now historical evidence that the Nazarenes and the Ebionites were separate groups that differed on some teachings.

In a few years after the return of the church of Jerusalem, it became a matter of doubt and controversy, whether a man who sincerely acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, but who still continued to observe the law of Moses, could possibly hope for salvation.

The humane temper of Justin Martyr inclined him to answer this question in the affirmative; and though he expressed himself with the most guarded diffidence, he ventured to determine in favor of such an imperfect Christian, if he were content to practise the Mosaic ceremonies, without pretending to assert their general use or necessity. But when Justin was pressed to declare the sentiment of the church, he confessed that there were very many among the orthodox Christians, who not only excluded their Judaizing brethren from the hope of salvation, but who declined any intercourse with them in the common offices of friendship, hospitality, and social life.

The more rigorous opinion prevailed, as it was natural to expect, over the milder; and an eternal bar of separation was fixed between the disciples of Moses and those of Christ.

The unfortunate Ebionites, rejected from one religion as apostates, and from the other as heretics, found themselves compelled to assume a more decided character; and although some traces of that obsolete sect may be discovered as late as the fourth century, they insensibly melted away, either into the church or the synagogue.

Edward Gibbon
The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire
Vol. 1, Pages 393-395 (1845 edition)

http://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap15.htm

Justin Martyr wrote around 140 AD.

Notice that by this time it was the Gentile Christians (who had rejected the laws of Moses) that are spoken of as "orthodox". Those who had formerly been considered "orthodox" were now considered to be either second-rate members or not Christian at all.

Under the supervision of Constantine the Great that "bar of separation" was enforced with all the influence of the Roman Empire. See below.

If the original apostles were alive today, their practice of combining the gospel of Jesus with the law of Moses would prevent them from being accepted as church leaders. Most congregations would not tolerate a pastor who wore tassels on his clothes, did no business or work on Saturday, abstained from pork and other unclean meats, and removed all the yeast from his house at Passover. The authors of our New Testament would be viewed as legalistic oddballs in most churches today.

How did Christians become so removed from the church's Jewish roots? Apparently, the marketing experts of the Roman church decided that the apostles had simply been too Jewish to appeal to the broader civilization of the Roman empire. Through creative use of tradition, art, and re-interpretation, the public's perception of the apostles was modified. They were re-created in the image of Greek heroes, complete with halos borrowed from the sun gods. The make-over was highly successful and few traces of the apostle's Jewish origins remained. Over the centuries, this false but politically correct perception of the apostles has become deeply ingrained into the collective memory of Christianity.

The first "Christian" Roman emperor, Constantine the Great, was very determined to remove Jewish influences from the Roman church. The following excerpts are from the letter that Constantine sent to all the churches after the Council of Nicea reworked the schedule for Easter so that it would never coincide with the Jewish Passover. This letter shows Constantine's strong disdain for anything Jewish and how he was working to eliminate such things from the church.

> ... first of all, it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul.
>
> For we have it in our power, if we **abandon their custom**, to prolong the due observance of this ordinance to future ages, by a truer order, which we have preserved from the very day of the passion until the present time. **Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd**;
>
> For how should they be capable of forming a sound judgment, who, since their parricidal guilt in slaying their Lord, have been subject to the direction, not of reason, but of ungoverned passion, and are swayed by every impulse of the mad spirit that is in them?
>
> … still it would be incumbent on your Sagacities to strive and pray continually that the purity of your souls may not seem in anything **to be sullied by fellowship with the customs of these most wicked men**.
>
> … also that it is most fitting that all should unite in desiring that which sound reason appears to demand, and in **avoiding all participation in the perjured conduct of the Jews**.
>
> Constantine, in a Letter to the Churches following the Council at Nicea in 325 AD
> recorded by Eusebius in *The Life of Constantine the Great*, Book 3, Chapters 17-20
> published in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 1, pp. 741-744
> http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-01/Npnf2-01-29.htm#P7612_3152335

Constantine is largely responsible for the prevalent underlying attitude that causes today's Christians to avoid, almost instinctively, any practices that might be identified as Jewish.

Here is part of the profession of faith from the Church of Constantinople, located in Constantine's new capitol city.

> I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and sacrifices of lambs of the Hebrews, and all the other feasts of the Hebrews, sacrifices, prayers, aspirations, purifications, sanctifications, and propitiations, and fasts, and new moons, and Sabbaths, and superstitions, and hymns and chants, observances and synagogues, and the food and drink of the Hebrews; in one word, I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every Law, rite and custom. ... and if afterwards I shall wish to deny and return to Jewish superstition, or shall be found eating with Jews, or feasting with them, or secretly conversing and condemning the Christian religion instead of openly confuting them and condemning their vain faith, then let the trembling of Cain and the leprosy of Gehazi cleave to me, as well as the legal punishments to which I acknowledge myself liable. And may I be anathema in the world to come, and may my soul be set down with Satan and the devils.
>
> "Profession of Faith, from the Church of Constantinople"
> Stefano Assemani, *Acta Sanctorum Martyrum Orientalium at Occidentalium, Vol 1* (Rome 1748), page 105
> as cited in James Parkes, *The conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (New York: Atheneum, 1974) pp. 397-398
> and quoted by David Stern in *Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel*, page 8

In 404 AD Jerome sent a letter to Augustine that shows how thoroughly the Christian church had adopted the anti-Jewish attitudes of the Romans.

> In our own day there exists a sect among the Jews throughout all the synagogues of the East, which is called the sect of the Minei, and is even now condemned by the Pharisees. The adherents to this sect are known commonly as Nazarenes; they believe in Christ the Son of God, 'born of, the Virgin Mary; and they say that He who suffered under Pontius Pilate and rose again, is the same as the one in whom we believe. But while they desire to be both Jews and Christians, they are neither the one nor the other. ...
>
> If, however, there is for us no alternative but to receive the Jews into the Church, along with the usages prescribed by their law; if, in short, it shall be declared lawful for them to continue in the Churches of Christ what they have been accustomed to practise in the synagogues of Satan, I will tell you my opinion of the matter: they will not become Christians, but they will make us Jews.
>
> Jerome, in a letter to Augustine (AD 404)
> Letters of St. Augustine, Second Division, Letter 75, Chapter 4
> published in T*he Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 1, p.654
> http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-01/npnf1-01-23.htm#P3932_1604395

By the 5th century the Christian church had changed so much that it rejected those who practiced the religion in the way it had originally been practiced by the founding apostles. Unfortunately, those same attitudes have been handed down through the church and are still prevalent in Christianity today.

Glossary

augmented: increased
bishop: leader of a local congregation
confounded: mixed up
divines: theologians, clergymen
enfranchisement: to set free (as from slavery)
immutable: not capable of change
insensibly: imperceptibly, gradually
Judaizing: adopting the customs and beliefs of the Jews
Mosaic law: laws God gave to the Israelites through Moses
opulent: wealthy
oracles: prophets, prophecies
orthodoxy: what is considered right and true
perpetuity: being perpetual or eternal
polytheism: the worship of many gods
prelate: church leader
promulgation: putting a law into force
proscription: prohibition
provisionary: temporary or conditional
repugnant: offensive, hostile
sectaries: members
temporal: related to secular things or earthly life
venerable: deserving honor and respect

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