

The Controversy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Heb. 8:6, Matt. 19:17, Rev. 12:17, Leviticus 23, Acts 15:1–29, Gal. 1:1–12.*

Memory Text: “The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (*John 1:17*).

The early church was composed mostly of Jews who never for a moment thought that by accepting the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, they were somehow turning away from the faith of their fathers or the covenant promises that God had made to His people. As it turns out, they were right. The issue for the early Jewish believers was whether Jews had to become Christians in order to accept Jesus. The other issue for many of them was whether Gentiles had to become Jews before they could accept Christ.

Only later, in the Jerusalem Council, was there a firm answer. They made the decision not to trouble the Gentiles with a host of regulations and laws. That is, Gentiles didn't need to become Jews first in order to accept Jesus.

Despite the decision, however, some teachers continued to plague the churches by insisting that Gentile converts to the faith were required to keep these rules and laws, including circumcision (not exactly a procedure that would make joining Christianity particularly appealing for an adult). That is, they thought that these Gentiles, in order to be partakers of the covenant promises, had to abide by many of the rules and regulations that were deemed a requisite for partakers of the commonwealth of Israel.

What were the issues, and how were they to be resolved?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 14.

A Better Covenant

Read Hebrews 8:6. What is the message here? How do we understand what these “better promises” are?

Perhaps the greatest difference between the religion of the Old Testament and that of the New is the fact that the New Testament era was introduced by the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. He was sent by God to be the Savior. People could not ignore Him and expect to be saved. Only through the atonement He provided could their sins be forgiven. Only by the imputation of His perfect life could they stand before God without condemnation. In other words, salvation was through the righteousness of Jesus—and nothing else.

Old Testament saints looked forward to the blessings of the Messianic age and the promise of salvation. In New Testament times the people were confronted with the question, *Would they accept Jesus of Nazareth whom God had sent as the Messiah, their Savior?* If they believed in Him—that is, if they accepted Him for who He truly was and committed themselves to Him—they would be saved through the righteousness that He offered them freely.

Meanwhile, the moral requirements remain unchanged in the New Testament, because these were founded in the character of God and of Christ. Obedience to God’s moral law is just as much a part of the New Covenant as it is of the Old Testament.

Read Matthew 19:17; Revelation 12:17; 14:12; and James 2:10, 11. What do these texts tell us about the moral law in the New Testament?

At the same time, the entire body of ritual and ceremonial laws that were distinctly Israelite—and were distinctly tied to the Old Covenant, which all pointed to Jesus and to His death and ministry as High Priest—were discontinued, and a new order was introduced, one based on “better promises.”

Helping both Jew and Gentile to understand what was involved in this transition from Judaism to Christianity was one of Paul’s principal aims in the book of Romans. It would take time to make the transition. Many Jews who had accepted Jesus were still not ready for the great changes that were coming.

What are some of your favorite Bible promises? How often do you claim them? What choices are you making that can stand in the way of having these promises fulfilled in your life?

Jewish Laws and Regulations

As time allows, skim through the book of Leviticus. (*See, for instance, Leviticus 12, 16, and 23.*) What thoughts come to your mind as you read all these rules and regulations and rituals? Why would many of these be all but impossible to follow in New Testament times?

It is convenient for us to classify Old Testament laws into various categories: (1) moral law, (2) ceremonial law, (3) civil law, (4) statutes and judgments, and (5) health laws.

This classification is in part artificial. In actuality some of these categories are interrelated, and there is considerable overlap. The ancients did not see them as separate and distinct.

The moral law is summed up by the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 20:1–17*). This law sums up the moral requirements of humanity. These ten precepts are amplified and applied in various statutes and judgments throughout the first five books of the Bible. These amplifications show what it meant to keep the law of God in various situations. Not unrelated are the civil laws. These, too, are based on the moral law. These define a citizen's relationship to civil authorities and to fellow citizens. They name the penalties for various infractions.

The ceremonial law regulated the sanctuary ritual, describing the various offerings and the individual citizen's responsibilities. The feast days are specified and their observance defined.

The health laws overlap the other laws. The various laws relating to uncleanness define ceremonial uncleanness, and yet they also go beyond this to include hygienic and health principles. Laws regarding clean and unclean meats are based on physical considerations.

While the Jew probably largely thought of all of these laws as a package, having all come from God, he or she must have made certain distinctions mentally. The Ten Commandments had been spoken by God directly to the people. This would set them apart as especially important. The other laws had been relayed through Moses. The sanctuary ritual could be kept only while a sanctuary was in operation.

The civil laws, at least in large part, could no longer be imposed after the Jews lost their independence and came under the civil control of another nation. Many of the ceremonial precepts could no longer be observed after the temple was destroyed. Also, after the Messiah came, many of the types had met their antitypes and no longer had validity.

As the Custom of Moses

Read Acts 15:1. What issue was causing dissension? Why would some people believe that this wasn't just for the Jewish nation? See Gen. 17:10.

While the apostles united with the ministers and lay members at Antioch in an earnest effort to win many souls to Christ, certain Jewish believers from Judaea “of the sect of the Pharisees” succeeded in introducing a question that soon led to widespread controversy in the church and brought consternation to the believing Gentiles. With great confidence these teachers asserted that in order to be saved, one must be circumcised and must keep the entire ceremonial law. The Jews, after all, always had prided themselves on their divinely appointed services, and many of those who had been converted to the faith of Christ still felt that since God had once clearly outlined the Hebrew manner of worship, it was improbable that He would ever authorize a change in any of its specifications. They insisted that the Jewish laws and ceremonies should be incorporated into the rites of the Christian religion. They were slow to discern that all the sacrificial offerings had but prefigured the death of the Son of God, in which type met antitype, and after which the rites and ceremonies of the Mosaic dispensation were no longer binding.

Read Acts 15:2–12. How was this dispute to be settled?

“While looking to God for direct guidance, he [Paul] was ever ready to recognize the authority vested in the body of believers united in church fellowship. He felt the need of counsel, and when matters of importance arose, he was glad to lay these before the church and to unite with his brethren in seeking God for wisdom to make right decisions.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 200.

It's interesting that Paul—who often talked about his prophetic calling and how Jesus had called him and gave him his mission—was so willing to work with the larger church body. That is, whatever his calling, he realized that he was part of the church as a whole and that he needed to work with it as much as possible.

What is your attitude toward church leadership? How cooperative are you? Why is cooperation so important? How could we function if everyone was doing only what he or she wanted to do, independent of the larger body?

The Gentile Believers

Read Acts 15:5–29. What decision did the council come to, and what was its reasoning?

The decision was against the contentions of the Judaizers. These folk insisted that the Gentile converts be circumcised and keep the entire ceremonial law and that “the Jewish laws and ceremonies should be incorporated into the rites of the Christian religion.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 189.

It’s interesting to note in Acts 15:10 the way in which Peter depicted these old laws as a “yoke” that they were unable to bear. Would the Lord, who instituted those laws, make them a yoke on His people? That hardly seems so. Instead, over the years some of the leaders had, through their oral traditions, turned many of the laws from the blessings they were meant to be into burdens. The council sought to spare Gentiles from these burdens.

Notice, too, that there was no mention or question of the Gentiles not needing to obey the Ten Commandments. After all, could we imagine the council telling them not to eat blood but that it was acceptable to ignore the commandments against adultery or murder and the like?

What rules were placed on the Gentile believers (*Acts 15:20, 29*), and why these specific rules?

Although Jewish believers weren’t to impose their rules and tradition on Gentiles, the council wanted to make sure that the Gentiles didn’t do things that would have been deemed offensive to the Jews who were united with them in Jesus. The apostles and elders, therefore, agreed to instruct the Gentiles by letter to abstain from meats offered to idols, from fornication, from things strangled, and from blood. Some say that, because Sabbath keeping wasn’t specifically mentioned, it must not have been meant for the Gentiles (of course, the commandments against lying and murder weren’t specifically mentioned either, so that argument means nothing).

Could we, in some ways, be laying on people burdens that are not necessary but are more from tradition than divine command? If so, how? Bring your thoughts to class on Sabbath.

Paul and the Galatians

However clear the council, there were those who sought to go their own way and who continued to advocate that the Gentiles keep Jewish traditions and laws. For Paul this became a very serious matter; that is, it wasn't trifling over the fine points of faith. It had become a denial of the gospel of Christ itself.

Read Galatians 1:1–12. How serious does Paul see the issue he is confronting in Galatia? What should that tell us about the importance of this question?

As stated before, it was the Galatian situation that in large degree prompted the content of the letter to Rome. In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul further develops the theme of the Galatian epistle. Some Jewish believers were contending that the law God had given them through Moses was important and should be observed by Gentile converts. Paul was trying to show its true place and function. He didn't want these people to gain a foothold in Rome as they had done in Galatia.

It is an oversimplification to ask whether Paul is speaking of ceremonial or moral laws in Galatians and Romans. Historically, the argument was whether or not Gentile converts should be required to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. The Jerusalem Council already had ruled on this question, but some refused to follow its decision.

Some read in Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans evidence that the moral law, the Ten Commandments (or, in truth, only the fourth commandment), is no longer binding on Christians. Yet, they are missing the point of the letters, missing the historical context and issues that Paul was addressing. Paul, as we'll see, stressed that salvation was by faith alone and not by the keeping of the law, even the moral law. Yet that isn't the same thing as saying that the moral law shouldn't be kept. Obedience to the Ten Commandments was never an issue; those who make it an issue are reading back into texts a contemporary issue, one that Paul wasn't dealing with.

How do you respond to those who claim the Sabbath is no longer binding upon Christians? How can you show the truth of the Sabbath in a way that does not compromise the integrity of the gospel?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Jew and Gentile,” pp. 188–192, 194–197; “Apostasy in Galatia,” pp. 383–388, in *The Acts of the Apostles*; “The Law Given to Israel,” pp. 310–312; “The Law and the Covenants,” pp. 370–373, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Chosen People,” pp. 27–30, in *The Desire of Ages*.

No doubt, our church faces times of controversy and dissension. But this is nothing new. Satan has always been at war with the church. Even in the earliest days of Christianity, dissension and controversy arose in the ranks of the believers. And there was one controversy that, if not resolved, could have destroyed the church in its infancy.

“Through the influence of false teachers who had arisen among the believers in Jerusalem, division, heresy, and sensualism were rapidly gaining ground among the believers in Galatia. These false teachers were mingling Jewish traditions with the truths of the gospel. Ignoring the decision of the general council at Jerusalem, they urged upon the Gentile converts the observance of the ceremonial law.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 383.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, go over your answer to Wednesday’s final question. In what ways might your local church or you in your own home or maybe even you with yourself be laying burdens on others (or on yourself) that are not necessary? How can we recognize if we really are doing these things? Or might we be in danger of going too far the other way? That is, how can we recognize if we have become too lax in our lifestyles and standards to the point where our lives don’t reflect the high calling that we have in Christ?
- 2 What are some of the arguments that people use to claim that the Ten Commandments are no longer binding on Christians today? How do we answer those claims? Why, on the face of it, are those arguments so wrong, and why in many cases do those who make them not really live as if they believe the Ten Commandments are no longer binding?
- 3 Read again Galatians 1:1–12. Notice how uncompromising, how dogmatic, and how fervent Paul was regarding his understanding of the gospel. What should that tell us about how we must stand absolutely unwaveringly on certain beliefs, especially in a day and age of pluralism and relativism? How does this show that certain teachings cannot be compromised in any way?
- 4 In class, talk about the issues that brought about the Protestant Reformation. What basic differences have not been resolved?

One Year in Mission: Part 1

Anna was certain that God led her to study at Saratov State University, located beside the famous Volga River in Russia. Now she was graduating with a degree in biology, but as she searched for a job, nothing could be found.

“God,” she prayed, “I don’t know why I can’t find a job. But I know You provided this education and that You have something in mind for me.”

God did have plans for Anna—much bigger than she imagined. One day, the youth director of the Volga Conference asked Anna if she would be interested in serving in the One Year in Mission (OYIM) program, a special General Conference initiative to give young adults opportunities to participate in the Mission to the Cities outreach.

“Yes, I really want to do something for God,” Anna responded.

She soon learned that she was chosen to represent the Euro-Asia Division in the OYIM program launching in New York City in 2013. Anna arrived in New York on January 24, 2013, and immediately joined the 13 other young adults representing all divisions and attached fields of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The young people received leadership training in community service, evangelism, medical missionary work, and communication. After New York, they took their practical experience and training back to their divisions and trained a team of ten volunteers coming from each union of their division. In this way, the missionary effect would multiply.

“We used Christ’s method alone—mingling with people, understanding their needs, giving Bible studies, and inviting them to follow Jesus,” Anna said.

Every day, the OYIM missionaries knocked on doors. “Hello, we’ve recently moved here and just wanted to greet you. We’re your new neighbors,” they said. Most of those visited were from India or Nepal, and some invited the missionaries in for a chat.

“When we talked together, they became our friends,” Anna said. “We asked if they wanted to study the Bible, and many agreed. Often we prayed with them.”

“Sometimes I made blinis [thin Russian pancakes] and delivered them to the neighbors, telling them I just wanted to let them know God loves them.”

In addition to her neighborhood activities, Anna was assigned to work in an Adventist church located in a Spanish-speaking community. Many of the residents wanted to learn English, so Anna and others started free English classes at the Adventist church.

“People were so happy,” Anna says. “We began every lesson with a Bible verse, explaining the grammar and the meaning of the verse. After the lessons, we invited them to come to the evening evangelistic programs. We made many contacts this way!”

To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.