

SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (Pt.7)

Paul and the Sabbath (A)

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In the previous article we looked at three illustrations the apostle Paul used to demonstrate the superiority of the new covenant in Christ over the old Law mediated through Moses. Essentially, the apostle shows there are two modes of existence --- one of slavery under the old Law and one of freedom in the power of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

WAS PAUL A TORAH-OBSERVANT JEW?

However, a difficulty many thoughtful souls face at this point is the question as to why the apostle Paul appears to have remained, according to their estimation at least, a "Torah-observant Jew" --- even after his strong teaching about the superiority of the new covenant ratified by the blood of Messiah Jesus.

That is to say why, after his "conversion" to the Lord Jesus Christ, did Paul continue to submit to various Jewish practices such as observing the weekly Sabbath, the annual feasts, and putting himself under certain oaths with fasting? Did he wish to be seen to still be Torah-observant? Was he leaving us an example to follow? Was Paul after all, confused about how to work out his new faith? Was he perhaps guilty of hypocrisy, saying one thing but living another as some have suggested? Or was some other factor in play?

And what are we to make of Paul's own testimony to his Torah compliance, "**I have committed no offence either against the Law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar ... Brethren, though I have done nothing against our people, or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans**" (Acts 24:12; 25: 8; 28:17)? He has observed in good conscience both Jewish and civil conventions.

Mark Nanos champions the notion that the apostle Paul was a Torah-observant Jew;

Paul and his communities--including the community he did not found but wrote to in Rome--were subgroups of the Jewish communities that believed Jesus represented the dawning of the awaited age. **The Jews in these subgroups, Paul included, observed the covenantal obligations of Torah, for they were Jews involved in a fully Jewish movement.** They upheld that by the gift of the Holy Spirit now made available with the arrival of the awaited age to come they were enabled to practice their commitment to the God of Israel according to the highest of ideals of Torah. The non-Jews who joined them did not become Jews and were thus not under the Mosaic legislation (Torah) on the same terms as Jews; **however, they were committed to lives of righteousness defined in Jewish communal terms and thus by Torah, for they met in Jewish groups, and thus according to the Jewish norms for these groups, and enabled by the same Spirit of God.** ¹

When carefully read, Nanos' statement borders on the ambiguous. What exactly does he mean that Gentile Christians were committed to lives of righteousness as defined by Jews observing their communal and covenantal obligations as set out by Torah? Was he perhaps, drawing a distinction between the moral and ritual obligations of Torah compliance? ² And how does a non-Jew remain a Gentile all the while observing Jewish religious markers (including weekly Sabbath) indicating one was a part of the Torah community?

With the greatest of respect, what are we to make of it all, Mr Nanos?

¹ -<http://www.marknanos.com/Romans-Synagogues-8-31-10.pdf>

² We saw in our previous article that Paul does not draw a distinction between the moral and ceremonial Law. For him the Law which "slew" him is illustrated by the tenth commandment, and it's ministry of "death" was engraved on those tablets of stone (Rom. 7:7).

Let's first recall that, if there is one consistent message Paul makes clear, both by direct statement and by numerous illustrations, it is that the difference between the old Torah and the new covenant in Christ, is as different *as* flesh is from spirit,
as slavery is from heirship (contrast Ishmael with Isaac),
as Hagar is from Sarah,
as Sinai is from the Jerusalem above,
as bondage to a difficult marriage is from the joys of love's liberation to a gracious new husband,
as stone and ink are from lives gloriously transformed from within by the Spirit of the Lord,
as fading glory beheld through a veiled face is from the radiance that comes from a direct and intimate relationship with the Lord, and so forth. And remember, some of these illustrations come from Paul's earliest epistles. So the picture for him at least, was very clear reasonably early on: The old Torah covenant obligations, are no longer binding on either Jew or non-Jew. Talk about the difference between chalk and cheese!

That said, we now need to step back and take a look at the bigger picture...

THE TRANSITION

It is true, as Nanos indicates, that in the very earliest apostolic days, Christianity was seen as a subset of the Jewish synagogue ([Acts 2: 46](#)). So yes, the period when the Gospels, the Acts, and the New Testament Epistles were being written was a transition period between the old and the new covenants. The synagogues housed a cosmopolitan mix of Jews, proselytes, Gentile "God-fearers" and Messianic believers. Implications of the new covenant had to be worked out in a mixed cultural-religious *milieu*, and this took a generation or two to distill.

For a few decades, both covenants overlapped in practice within the church's life. It probably took up to the time when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans under Titus in AD 70 for the new wine of Christ's Gospel to irrevocably break free from the old wineskins. I think God was graciously giving Israel time to repent and to assimilate the recent events of the life, death and resurrection of Christ during these days of flux.

I have often used the illustration of it being like a big ship powering along in one direction. For whatever reason the captain decides he must turn the vessel around so as to head in the opposite direction. (I know this from personal experience when the captain of a vessel saw my hat fly past the ship's bridge and he turned the whole vessel around to retrieve it! That wouldn't happen these days.) In the process of turning, the liner is for a short time still partially going forward until the new direction is completely achieved --- if you get my *drift*!?

During this in-between time --- from Messiah's baptism, ministry, death and resurrection, and covering the apostolic first-generation or two's witness --- there was an overlap, resulting in inevitable tensions. New wine is not compatible with old wineskins, but the Christian perspective was and is, that whenever the two came into conflict, the new always trumped the old. ³

THE CROSS OF CALVARY

But let there be no mistaking this: After Jesus had sealed the new covenant by the shedding of his own blood, and after he had announced from the cross, "**It is finished!**", in God's mind and economy the purpose of the old covenant was fulfilled. The proof and evidence of this is that He Himself tore the veil of the Temple --- a massively thick curtain --- from the top to the bottom. This supernatural action symbolized the new-covenant-way was now open ([Mk. 15: 37-38](#)).

This full significance of the "rending of the temple curtain" is explained in [Ephesians 2](#). In essence Paul says that since the cross, Jew and Gentile enter one way --- through Messiah apart from law --- into God's new community of faith --- **Now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off [i.e. Gentiles] have been brought near**

³ Remember how the Shekinah Glory of God had passed after Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain, and how Peter wanted to build "three booths" --- one for Moses who was Israel's great law-giver, one for Elijah who was Israel's great prophet, and one for Jesus --- and how God the Father testified, "**This is My beloved Son, hear him!**"? Then **all at once they looked around and saw no one with them any more, except Jesus only (Mk. 9: 2-8)?** Jesus is greater than law and prophet.

by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who made both groups [i.e. Jews & Gentiles] one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in his flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances [Lit. 'dogmas or decrees], that in himself he might **create** the two [groups] into one **new** man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity (Eph. 2: 13-16).

As *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (Ed. W. Robertson Nicoll) comments, we must carefully observe here that, What was contemplated was not simply the making of *one man (ena anthropon)* where formerly there were two, but the making of *one new (kainon) man*. The result was not that, though the separation between them was removed, the Jew still remained Jew and the Gentile still Gentile. It was something new, the old distinctions between Jew and Gentile being lost in a third order of "man" --- the Christian man. ⁴

Putting this bluntly, Paul is saying, that through the death of Christ on the cross, *God terminated the Mosaic law* as the basis of His *national covenant* with Israel! Observe that the Law is here described *twice* as being hostile (indeed he calls the Law an **enemy**). The reason for this confronting language is because the Law has legal implications for non-compliance, being described as having been written down as **commandments in decrees**.

The upshot is that **the blood of Christ is the basis of a new international covenant between God and all nations**; the Torah of Moses is now the Torah of Christ!

To live life "in Christ" and "in accordance with the law" was not possible; it involved a basic contradiction in terms and in the understanding of what made a man acceptable to God. Thus Paul began to see, [after his confrontation with Peter in Galatians 2] as probably he had never seen before, that the principle of justification through faith meant a redefining of the relation between the believer and Israel --- *not* an abandoning of that link (a flight into an individualism untouched by Jewish claims of a monopoly in the election and covenant grace of God), but a redefining of it --- a redefining of how the inheritance of Abraham could embrace Gentiles apart from the law. ⁵

Thus, to be accepted as righteous before God one no longer had to become a member of the covenant community of national Israel. The promise given to Abraham *before the Law* thus proves that when Abraham was called he was uncircumcised and without law. His relationship with God rested purely on faith and he lived only by the promise of God. The Law which came 430 later cannot alter this original order. ⁶

If Jews want to claim Abraham as their spiritual father --- and Paul wholeheartedly argued for this! --- then they must take Abraham as he was, that is, uncircumcised, without formalized law, and a Gentile who took God at face value and acted on faith. *That is still the way to become a legitimate heir of God's promises in Messiah Jesus today!* From the defining moment of the cross onwards then, **it is those who are of faith who are the sons of Abraham the believer** (Gal. 3: 7f).

BACK TO PAUL'S ALLEGED TORAH-COMPLIANCE

When we read the historical accounts of how Paul conducted himself, we do however, find a repeated pattern of Sabbath behaviour by this apostle.

PAUL IN ANTIOCH

For instance, when his missionary party arrived in Pisidian Antioch, **on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. And after reading of their Law and the prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, 'Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it. And Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand, he said ...** (Acts 13: 14-16).

⁴ Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, USA, Vol. III, 1956, p 296

⁵ James D.G. Dunn, *The Incident At Antioch (Gal 2:11-18)* in *The Galatians Debate, Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*, Ed. Mark D. Nanos, Hendrickson Publishers, 2002, p 230 (Emphases original)

⁶ This is a powerful argument for Jews for whom chronological priority is a powerful concept in Jewish tradition!

Paul's sermon follows. And what is his subject matter? Yes, he does make a passing reference to the Sabbath --- how the Jewish leaders did not recognize either Jesus as Messiah, nor understand **the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath**. Such blindness drove them to pressure Pilate into crucifying one they considered to be an imposter messianic king (v.27).

However, Paul's sermon does not exhort the Jews to continue loyal to their Torah. That's what he thought to do when persecuting the Messianic Jews before he met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus and fell off his high horse hitting the dirt blinded! To the contrary then! He now preaches **the good news** that God has kept His promise to Israel by **raising up Jesus**, so that all who believe in him as their Lord Messiah will be **freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses** (vs. 33-39)!

After Paul's sermon, the people wanted to hear more and they **were begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath** (v. 42). **And the next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of God** (v. 44). The result of Paul's preaching on this Sabbath day was that many of the Jews believed the word of the Gospel of Messiah, but many were **filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming** (v. 45).

What are we to learn from this history? Surely, that Paul's missionary *strategy* was to preach on the Sabbath when the Jews --- and many Gentile "God-fearers" and proselytes --- were gathered to hear the word of God. Any honest reading of the text must conclude that Paul entered the Jewish synagogue on those Sabbath days to preach the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah. His Sabbath practice was motivated by evangelistic desire.

Paul wanted the Jews to be the first to hear the Gospel message of Christ. The content of his sermons was about Christ Jesus and not about the necessity to keep Torah. Indeed, Paul's message was that in the risen Christ, all were now *freed from the binding obligations of the Law of Moses!* It is not stated that Paul was there to uphold the Law of Moses or to keep the Sabbath to fulfill Torah. His aim was to preach the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

PAUL IN THESSALONICA

Another example of Paul's Sabbath practice is found in **Acts 17**. Paul's missionary group arrived in Thessalonica, **where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ"** (Acts 17: 1-3).

Again we observe Paul's evangelistic strategy --- indeed it's called his **custom** --- was to go to the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath days so as to preach the Gospel of Christ. Paul's ***motive*** was *apologetic*, that is, to reason for the Christian faith! Again, he was not there to preach Moses or uphold the Torah. Indeed, nothing is **taught** by Paul regarding Sabbath observance in any of his sermons in the book of Acts. Period.

PAUL IN ATHENS

You will find the same thing in **Acts 18** where Paul **was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks** [these latter were the God-fearing Gentiles]. We then read that Paul was **devoting himself completely to the word** [i.e. the Gospel word of, and about, Christ] **solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ** (Acts 18: 4-5). ⁷

Indeed, if we follow Paul's missionary strategy throughout Acts, we discover that in all of his preaching and teaching, **not once** is Torah or Sabbath-observance the topic of discussion. Every new city where Paul entered to proclaim the Gospel of Messiah, he first went to preach to the Jews about the new Kingdom age introduced by Messiah Jesus. Paul knew where to find the Jews --- in their synagogues on the Sabbath days. He knew that's where and when Moses was read. These were ***Jewish meetings*** and not Christian assemblies (which we will come to in a remaining article).

⁷ See other examples in **Acts 16:11-40** and **19: 8-9** where Paul's invariable evangelistic practice of first preaching Christ to the Jews is on the Sabbath day in the Jewish synagogues.

Paul's *modus operandi* in his own words was, "To the Jews I became a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law ... And I do all things for the sake of the gospel..." (I Cor. 9: 20).

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

The Book of Acts makes it clear that as the Gospel message successfully spread outwards from Jerusalem the church rapidly grew in both Jewish and Gentile converts. With the increasing numbers of Gentile converts, tensions were brewing. The implications of the new covenant arrangement in Messiah started to bite early --- the ship was beginning its slow U-turn!

This period of increasing tension came to a head in Acts 15 at the so-called Jerusalem Council. Certain men later identified as of the sect of the Pharisees --- had begun to teach that unless Gentile converts were circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved (v.1, 5). A heated debate evidently followed with the apostles, including Peter & Paul, present with other Jewish Christian leaders.

The determination of this Jerusalem council, as summarised by the Lord's own half-brother James, was that Gentiles did not have to keep the Law of Moses (remember Paul was already preaching this in Acts 13:39?), but should only, abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication, and from what is strangled and from blood (v. 20). The very next verse gives the rationale for this rather bizarre set of conditions, For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath (v.21).

The three requests made to the Gentile converts can be summarised this way: In the new covenant in Christ, you shall be careful that your freedom from the Law of Moses does not become a stumbling block to your Jewish neighbours. For --- the implication is --- if you Gentile Christians eat food associated with idolatry or that has been strangled, eat or drink blood, or practice sexual immorality, your Christian witness will be hindered because Jews will be so offended they won't be able to hear the good news about Jesus the Christ.

Which is to say, the Council asked that Gentile converts live by the overriding new covenant principle of the law of love (which does fulfill the Law). Freedom in Christ is not an excuse to ride roughshod over another's conscience! However, note what Peter said: Gentile believers were not required to be circumcised and so were declared exonerated from the yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear (v. 10).

WHY DOESN'T PAUL OR THE NEW TESTAMENT DIRECTLY SAY SABBATH OBSERVANCE IS CANCELLED?

I have had folk say to me, 'Until I can see it in black and white that the Fourth Commandment has been now cancelled, I will continue to keep the Sabbath. Who gave us the right --- in the absence of any direct statement in the New Testament to the contrary --- to change God's Sabbath law?'

Sometimes the challenge adds this bit: 'Well, if the first Christians changed God's Sabbath institution from the Seventh Day of the week to the First Day, why is there no record of heated debate on it? Surely, if the Sabbath Day was changed there would have been an outcry by Jewish Christians, lengthy discussions recording this massive shift in practice? After all, we do have evidence of very heated debate(s) over the matters that were altered --- such as dietary rules and circumcision. Why the silence on this critical question? ⁸

This argument is seriously flawed. And here's why;

In Judaism, Sabbath observance was required *only* if one was a member of the covenant community of which circumcision was the entrance sign ... If circumcision was

⁸ The Seventh Day Adventists teach that it was Emperor Constantine who officially changed the Sabbath to the Sunday, and that Christians are now guilty of worshipping on a pagan day. They go so far as to teach that they are the true Church of Christ because Sunday worship is "the mark of the Beast".

not required for Gentile Christians, then neither would Sabbath observance be required, for the Sabbath was reserved only for members of the old covenant community. ⁹

Don't miss the importance of this fact! The New Testament certainly *forbids* circumcision for Gentiles coming into the new testament church. In fact, if they submitted to circumcision, Paul taught they were putting on **the yoke of slavery**, and that as a consequence **Christ will be of no benefit to you**, for the circumcised are **under obligation to keep the whole Law**. And most damningly of all, if one submitted to be circumcised he has been **severed from Christ**, and **has already fallen from grace** (Gal. 5: 1-4)! ¹⁰

This is why the Jerusalem Council in **Acts 15** did not need to address the Sabbath directly. The Council eliminated the entrance sign into the old Mosaic covenant --- circumcision --- altogether!!

Since circumcision stood for all the old covenant Law, to mandate the Sabbath once circumcision was cancelled would be akin to Christians today enforcing the Lord's Supper (Communion, the Eucharist) on someone who had not yet accepted Christ and been baptized. If one is not baptized into Christ, one does not have to partake the Lord's Supper! If one should not be circumcised, then one does not have to keep Sabbath!

So there you have it in black and white. In a sentence, the New Testament has cancelled Sabbath-keeping for those who accept Christ!

CONCLUSION

Was Paul a Torah-observant Jew after his conversion to Christ Jesus? Like the apostle Peter, it took a little while for the full implications of the new covenant to sink in, no doubt. Remember that God had to give Peter a vision at Joppa abolishing the distinction between clean and unclean foods before he went to Cornelius' household to proclaim the Gospel of Christ (**Acts 10**). Remember that Paul had to rebuke Peter for lapsing back into hypocritical table distinctions (**Galatians 2:11-21**).

Traditions long ingrained die hard. But early on the apostle Paul came to see that,

You are all sons of God

through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is not male and female, for you are all one in Messiah Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3: 26-29).

Thus, Paul lived and taught his Christian converts that those old distinctions and values were gone in Messiah. All that mattered in God's new economy is that they were now new creations living by the Torah of Messiah. The old national, social, and gender barriers were dissolved because believers in Christ are all Abraham's children, heirs according to promise.

Contra Nanos then --- the apostle Paul did not **observe the covenantal obligations of Torah**, living **as a Jew involved in a fully Jewish movement**, nor did he identify as one **committed to a life of righteousness defined in Jewish communal terms and thus by Torah**. He has just told us in one of his earliest epistles (Galatians) that in Christ the Jew was not identified as a Jew. Nor is the Gentile any longer identified as a 'foreign' Gentile. In Messiah, **one new man** has been **created**.

How radical this new covenant in Messiah Jesus turns out to be!

In our next instalment we shall turn more specifically to Paul's *teaching* on the Sabbath and the Law in his epistles.

⁹ Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ*, Life Assurance Ministries, Az, USA, 2003, pp 260-261

¹⁰ Both Greek verbs indicate an action already accomplished. Do that and this consequence has already happened!

