

Dear friends, greetings from MI.

Once again, we come to a matter for spiritual reflection. Today I will be discussing the Council of Jerusalem and the decision made about what new Gentile believers were to be asked to do vis a vis the “law of Moses” and circumcision.

Two Pitfalls

If you ever go to a golf club (almost never in my personal experience), you will notice that on the back of the scorecard are often the club rules. There are generally not too many rules or it becomes a burden to play at the golf club. They may have some interesting rules (not to leave canine waste matter or avoiding alligators in the ponds etc.). Some rules are specific to the particular course, such as what to do when a ball passes over an adjacent road. However, there have to be some rules or chaos ensues. I need to know as a new player to the golf course what to do in certain situations I might face.

The game of golf is like any other game – too many rules and the game becomes a bore and the rules a burden which no-one is able to keep. Too few rules and there is a danger that players would take advantage of the course, each becoming a law unto themselves resulting in the destruction of the game.

The Christian life can be viewed as similar to golf in that if we are to maintain the joy of the Christian experience we need to avoid the two extremes of either too many rules which prove to become an unbearable burden or too few that result in us becoming slaves to our own freedom. In this edition of Worldview, we will look at how we can avoid these two pitfalls. Luke addresses this dilemma by presenting us with the essential laws to keep.

How to live after Conversion

This dilemma is especially a problem for new Christians: Luke presents the gospel of a risen Lord who provides forgiveness for sins and who claims authority over the life of the believer. While this provides us with a message to tell the world it doesn't show us the complete picture. We are still left asking the question: Now that I am a Christian how am I to live? Many have tried to answer this question, from the one extreme claiming that through the freedom of the spirit you can decide how to live, to the other extreme emphasizing obedience to numerous laws.

This was the dilemma facing the new, Gentile converts of Antioch. Having accepted Jesus as risen Lord and forgiver of sins, they now faced the question: How does the Gospel affect the way we live? In Acts 15 we find the answer to this question with a story about unnecessary and necessary rules.

Unnecessary rules

The church of Antioch was in danger of drowning from a profusion of unnecessary rules. Rules for this, rules for that. In Acts 15 we read that it all started when men from Judea came preaching to the brethren in Antioch, teaching them that the Gentiles had to do certain things, one of which was circumcision. A hot debate arose, resulting in Paul and Barnabas setting out to Jerusalem to consult with the mother church there. Well, once they got there things went from bad to worse. Once you start to discuss law there is a natural tendency to make rather than abolish laws. One Chinese proverb states that the more laws you make the more criminals you create. Once in Jerusalem the issue widened. The party of the Pharisees rose up and said: “*It is necessary to circumcise them and to charge them to keep the law of Moses*” (Acts 15:5).

Now it wasn't just a case of circumcision but of the whole Mosaic law! Circumcision was colloquial short-hand for the entire Mosaic law. Should the new Gentile believers be circumcised? Should they keep

the entire Mosaic law as the Judaizing party insisted? The ceremonial law had passed away at Calvary, so what was left was the Decalogue and the civil law of Moses. No Gentile was insisting on breaking the Decalogue, and no Judaizer was insisting that the Decalogue be kept, so we presume the Decalogue was being not up for debate – so what was up for debate was the civil laws of the Torah.

Peter's response to this situation was to state the problem of having too many laws: *"Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?"* (Acts 15:10). What was the early church's response to this situation? It was to emphasize the necessary laws over against the unnecessary. It was to lighten and prioritize the legal burden on the new believers.

Necessary laws

The story continues. Paul and Barnabas met with the Jerusalem church and pleaded with the brethren, telling them of the great things the Lord was doing: *"And all the assembly kept silence: and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles"* (Acts 15:12).

After this, James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem church stepped forward and pronounced his decision: *"Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from un-chastity and from what is strangled and from blood"* (Acts 15:19-20).

Here we have a list of the necessary, those laws which would not prove a burden, and yet which would protect the believers in their faith. They are not told to do as they wish, a behavioral free-for-all, but likewise they are not presented with a long list of unbearable laws:

- i. abstain from those things sacrificed to idols.
- ii. abstain from blood and strangled meat.
- iii. abstain from immorality.

Old Testament background

Why these three things? To us they seem like three rules chosen at random, why in particular meat with blood in? And yet there proves to be a reason for these three things. Our explanation is provided for in Leviticus, the law of Moses. There we find a series of laws, aimed at different groups of people.

Chapter 1:2 - 5	to Israel	about burnt, cereal and peace offerings
Chapter 6: 8	to Aaron and sons	about their offerings
Chapter 11:2	to Israel	about food
Chapter 12:1	to Israel	about circumcision
Chapter 13:2	to the leper	what to do with leprosy
Chapter 15:1	to Israel	about discharges
Chapter 17:10	to Israel + stranger	about blood
Chapter 18:26	to Israel + stranger	about sexual practices
Chapter 19:2	to Israel	general rules – harvest, business
Chapter 20:2	to Israel + stranger	idols and mediums
Chapter 21:1	Sons of Aaron	living regulations

We find that three blocks of laws are not only to Israel but also to the strangers / aliens / Gentiles living with them. Laws about blood and meat, about sexual practices / immorality, and about idols. These three

areas are the areas James told the Gentile Christians in Antioch to keep. As Gentiles in the church they are also necessary laws for you and me! If we look at the laws in more detail we find out the necessary guidelines for our own lives.

Any Relevance for Today?

Leviticus 17:10-13

Israel and strangers were to abstain from eating meat that had blood within, such as strangled meat. The reason for this was: *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood”* (Leviticus 17:11-12).

Both Israel and the Gentiles were to eat kosher meat, not for health reasons, but for spiritual reasons. The blood provides atonement for sins. Jesus forgives sins – a symbolic reminder through abstaining from meat with blood. Every time we sit at the table and consider the meat on the table we have a reminder of our need for salvation, for the cleansing blood of Christ. A reminder three times per day of Christ’s all-sufficient sacrifice on our behalf.

As Adventists we tend to cite the health benefits of a good diet. We believe that the mental, physical and spiritual aspects of our being are all interrelated.

- Mental – what you feed your mind with will determine your spiritual desires. Mental attitudes can result in physical sickness.
- Physical – if you are hungry you find it hard concentrating both mentally and spiritually.
- Spiritual – if we have peace with God we know that we have physical benefits (e.g. a good night’s sleep to those who trust him in Ps 127:2, 77:4).

In Acts 15 however the spiritual symbolism of what we eat is emphasized. We are given a constant reminder of what Christ has done for us. Historically we know that the church kept this practice:

- Eusebius = AD 177, Rhone Valley in France, a martyr asks, “How could Christians eat children when they are not even allowed to drink the blood of brute beasts?”
- Tertullian = “We abstain from eating strangled animals and those that have died of themselves.”

Leviticus 18

In chapter 18 of Leviticus ‘immorality’ or ‘fornication’ is defined. The nations around Israel determined their own ordinances and statutes regarding sexual norms. It was against these that Israel is warned: *“You shall not walk in their statutes”* (Leviticus 18:3).

Just as in ancient societies determined what they felt to be appropriate sexual behaviors so we find a similar process today as evidenced the legal changes to marriage in the US. A list of forbidden sexual relationships is given by God in Leviticus 18: no-one near of kin (v6); father or mother (v 7-8); sisters (v9); grandchildren (v10); half-sisters (v11); uncles and aunts (v12-14); daughter and sister in laws (v15-16); a woman and her daughter (v17); your wife’s sister (v18); your neighbors wife (v20); a male with a male (v22) or a man with an animal (v23). Yet these practices increasingly are a description of our modern western societies.

Why would God provide us with such a list? Because God defines the intimate marital relationship as one which represents the relationship between God and man: martially intimate relations are symbolic of our relationship with Christ. When we accept Jesus as Lord in our lives we are committing ourselves to being pure and holy to him. He asks us to reflect this loyalty to him in our loyalty to our husbands and wives. If Jesus is Lord, we are called to faithfulness to him and in our relationships.

Leviticus 20

The real enemy of the true knowledge of God is not atheism (e.g. 'the fool says in his heart 'there is no God,' Ps 14:1; 53:5). The real enemy is the rival gods of this world, (e.g. 'Choose you this day whom you will serve,' Josh 24:15). Leviticus 20 provides us with a warning to stick clear of Molech (20:2-3) and from mediums and wizards. The reason given is that if you visit such people you are playing the harlot in a spiritual sense: *"If a person turns to mediums and wizards, playing the harlot after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people"* (Leviticus 20:6).

The OT believers were faced with an array of other gods to choose from, OT = Marduk (Supreme ruler of Babylon), Dagon (Ruler of land), Chemosh (god of Moab). NT = Zeus (Supreme ruler of Greeks / weather), unknown god, Diana. Today = the gods of today still use mediums and witchcraft. If Jesus is your Lord how would you want to have another lord before him? Thus Gentile believers are called to avoid from any practice that suggests worship of a modern god.

Conclusion

And so the church sent Paul and Barnabas, Judas and Silas back to Antioch with a letter, stating: *"We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity"* (Acts 15:27-29).

What was the reaction to this request from the church in Antioch? *"So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together they delivered the letter. And when they read it they rejoiced at the exhortation"* (Acts 15: 30-31).

Within our Christian experience we need to recognise that Jesus as our Lord has the authority to decide how we live. He calls us to these three simple things, not to make our life difficult, but to protect us in our faith, reminding us of our need for forgiveness on the cross, our need to remain faithful in our relationships and our need to avoid all other gods.

My prayer for us is that as we disciple new believers, we will be careful to identify what are the biblically essential practices of the born-again SDA Christian faith, and which are culturally-driven practices. And may our own lives uphold these commands from Acts 15, which are as binding on us all today as they were when originally given to the Gentile believers of Asia Minor in the 1st century AD.

Have a blessed Sabbath,

Conrad.