

To the Ends of the Earth Ministries

presents



The Jewish Roots of Christianity

With Pastor Jeff Harrison

Come learn about God's original vision for the Church,
How the Church rejected that vision, and how
God is restoring the Church to its Jewish Roots in our generation

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THE JEWISH ROOTS OF CHRISTIANITY



Preface

Welcome! Incredible discoveries in Israel and the Middle East are helping us understand Jesus and the Bible more accurately than for almost two thousand years. [To The Ends Of The Earth Ministries](http://www.servantofmessiah.org) is dedicated to making this information known around the world. Join us as we explore the Jewish Roots of Christianity and take this exciting information to the ends of the earth.

Introduction

“The Jewish Roots of Christianity” is the second seminar in our Landmarks of Faith series. Our first seminar, “Jesus of Nazareth,” presented Jesus and the disciples as they really were: Jews living in Israel. It showed how important our Jewish roots are to help us understand Jesus and the Bible more accurately. But that seminar also raises many questions. Why do Christians know so little about their Jewish roots? Why did Christianity, which started out as a Jewish religion among the Jews, become a mostly Gentile religion? What other important parts of our faith have been lost or misunderstood over the years? And how do we get back in touch with our original Jewish roots today?

This seminar is to answer those questions. We’re going to learn (#1) how Christianity rejected the Jews, Jewish Christians, and its own Jewish roots, (#2) how this rejection led it far away from God’s plan and purpose, and (#3) how God is pointing the way back home in our generation. To answer these questions, we have to look back into the history of Christianity, but not the kind of Church history most of us are familiar with. There is a dark side to Church history that most people know nothing about: a history of hatred, persecution, and rejection of the Jews, of Jewish Christians, and of Christianity’s Jewish roots. This is a hidden history that every Christian needs to know. And God has chosen this generation to hear this message and to act on it.

Some parts of this seminar will be difficult to listen to. But it may be one of the most important teachings you will ever hear. The information in it may change your life, as it has mine, and bring you into a deeper understanding of the Christian faith.

For all this to make sense, you must hear the whole story. So I’m going to challenge you right from the start to attend every session

and listen diligently to everything that is taught. This is going to be an academic-style teaching, with lots of strange names and places. It may take some effort on your part to understand. But it will be very much worth it in the end! Are you ready to go?

Seminar Outline

The seminar is divided into five parts:

Lecture #1) Early Jewish Christianity: What did the church look like when it was still in touch with its Jewish roots? What was God's original plan for the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the Body of Messiah? There's a lot of confusion on this topic that we're going to try to clear up in this first session with the help of new discoveries.

Lecture #2) The Gentilization of the Faith: What happened when Christianity came to Rome and to other Gentile cities and towns. How did Gentile Christians understand and how did they misunderstand the gospel? How did a series of horrible wars make bitter enemies of Jews and Gentiles, and bring anti-Semitic attitudes into the Church – along with many misunderstandings of our Jewish and Biblical heritage. Some of these misunderstandings continue until today. What are they and how can we correct them?

Lecture #3) Imperial Christianity: In the 4th century, Christianity went from being the faith of a persecuted and hated minority to become the official religion of the Roman Empire. This was the origin of the State Church, an official, government sponsored church. State churches can still be found in some places in Europe today. In a state church, pastors are government employees whose salaries are paid by the government! But this also means they are controlled by the government. This State Church officially cut itself off from its Jewish roots under the Emperor Constantine, becoming a Gentile-only religion. The Christian Empire introduced anti-Semitic laws against the Jews and also persecuted Bible-believing Christians. The worst atrocities came in the time of the Crusades, a

church sponsored invasion of the Middle East in which thousands of Jews, Muslims, and Christians were killed through war, massacre, and torture. Perhaps you've heard of the Inquisition: Church-sponsored torture of those who disagreed with the official Church. Many of those tortured were Jews. These are the pages of history that, as one scholar said, the Church has torn out of the history books, but which the Jews and others have never forgotten – and we, too, should never forget.

Lecture #4) Christianity and the Modern State of Israel: The peak of persecution of the Jews was not in the Middle Ages, but in the 20th century. The Holocaust was one of the most horrible events in human history, in which 6 million Jews were killed. This took place in historically Christian nations: Germany, Russia, and Poland. Many of those who committed these murders were baptized, church-going Christians. How could this happen? The Holocaust was not just a horrible “accident” along the road of history. It was the direct result of a long heritage of hatred and persecution of Jews by Christians, a sickness that has gripped Christianity for hundreds of years – and still does today in many places. Anti-Semitism did not end in World War II. It is continuing to grow and spread around the world today.

We'll also look at the dramatic rebirth of the State of Israel, the most important fulfillment of prophecy since the time of Jesus. More prophecies are being fulfilled in Israel today than at any time since the life of Jesus! An important part of these prophecies is the rebirth of Jewish Christianity, or as it is known today, Messianic Judaism. These events came as a shock to many Christians and Christian denominations. What do these amazing prophetic events mean? They're happening for a reason. They're a message that God is sending to us! How does God want us to respond to the message? How is God using Israel to restore the Church to its Jewish roots? And what will this mean for the Church in the years to come?

Let's begin with a word of prayer: Lord God, open our hearts and our eyes as we study the difficult history of your Church. Help us hear the voice of the Spirit as we meditate on both the victories and the sins of the past, so that we can grow in wisdom and knowledge, and lead our generation into the truth. In Jesus' name, Amen.



The Law of the Spirit: Early Jewish Christianity

To many Christians, and to many Jews, *Jewish Christianity* sounds like a contradiction in terms. How can you be both Christian and Jewish? This contradiction can be seen in Christian artwork – even in Israel. The Church at the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem has huge mosaics at the front of the church.¹ Jesus and the disciples are shown with light skin, high foreheads, and light-colored hair: they're shown as Gentiles, as Europeans. But the high priest, Judas and the others, the bad guys of the story, are shown as Jewish with exaggerated features: dark skin, huge potato noses, claw-like hands. This is, of course, ridiculous. *Yeshua* (Jesus) and the disciples were just as Jewish as the rest of them.² So why are such inaccurate and insulting pictures allowed in a church – especially in Israel – and not just there, but in hundreds of other churches around the world? Why is it so hard for Christians to accept Jesus and the disciples as Jews – and a tendency to paint other Jews as less than human? Why are so many Christians ignorant of the most obvious truth about our religion: that we worship a Jewish savior, whose Jewish disciples founded a Jewish religion in Israel?

Originally, there was only one kind of Christianity, and that was Jewish Christianity. That was the Christianity of Peter, Paul, James, and John. They didn't stop being Jews when they accepted Jesus! In fact, you could say they became more Jewish than ever when they accepted Jesus as Messiah. According to their own writings, Christianity is the fulfillment of what Israel and the Jewish people are all about – it's why God separated out Abraham from among the peoples. It's why God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It's why God spoke through the prophets: to prepare a people for the

¹ The Church of All Nations on the Mt. of Olives.

² *Yeshua* is the original Hebrew name of Jesus.



coming of the Jewish Messiah. That people was the Jewish people. And the early Jewish Christians were the ones that first received him. We always tend to focus on the Jews that rejected Jesus. But as Paul says in Romans 11, God didn't reject his people – aren't I a Jew, he says? God didn't reject me! (Rom. 11:1) Nor did God reject the thousands of other Jews that accepted him. Sure, it was only a remnant, a minority of the Jewish people. But God has always worked with a remnant. As Paul says in Romans 9: *“Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved”* (Rom. 9:27).

Yet this original Jewish Christianity of Jesus, Peter, Paul, James, and John disappeared so completely from history that for centuries it was forgotten, and Christians carried on as if there had never been such a thing. Christianity became a completely Gentile religion, cut off from its Jewish roots. Today we must piece together the evidence for the early Jewish Christians like a detective story, sorting out tiny bits and pieces of evidence to find out what happened.

Why Should We Care About the Early Jewish Christians?

But why should we do that? Why should we care about the early Jewish Christians? As one fellow put it, why should I care about such a small group of people that lived in a distant country so long ago? What difference does it make to my Christianity here today, thousands of miles away? Here are five good reasons to start with:

#1: Because God himself cares about the Jews. The biggest miracle taking place right now – in our lifetimes – is the restoration of Israel to the Jewish people: the rebirth of the State of Israel. This came as a shock to many Christians and Christian denominations. Why? Because for hundreds of years, we had been teaching that God has rejected the Jews and has replaced Israel with the Church. And yet, miraculously, spectacularly, God has answered that false teaching with a resounding “No! I have not rejected my people!”

#2: Jesus is a Jew. The gospels of Matthew and Luke list Jesus' ancestry generation by generation all the way back to King David — back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That's as Jewish as you can get! Not only did he look like a Jew, he spoke as a Jew, he taught as a Jew, his ministry was to Jews. If you remove Jesus' ministry from this Jewish context, you will misunderstand his message and his meaning. (This was the subject of our first seminar: "Jesus of Nazareth.")

#3: The New Testament is a Jewish book: nearly all of it was written by Jewish Christians, and much of it was written to Jewish Christians. One of the first things they teach you when you study Bible interpretation is: find out who is writing and who they are writing to. Why? It makes a difference. Many churches want to be New Testament churches, but let's face it, New Testament Christianity was mostly Jewish Christianity. If we really want to have New Testament churches, we must find out about our Jewish roots. Otherwise, we won't understand what the Bible is talking about.

#4: Christianity was originally a Jewish religion. Jesus himself said: "*Salvation is from the Jews*" (John 4:22). Not only were Jesus and the disciples Jewish, all those thousands saved on the day of Pentecost were Jews. The thousands saved at the preaching of Peter and John in the Temple were Jews. In fact, the entire Church was almost completely Jewish for at least ten years after the resurrection of Jesus. That's how many years it took before they realized the gospel was also for Gentiles!

In the early years, they only preached the gospel to fellow Jews: "*Those who were dispersed...made their way...speaking the Word to no one except to Jews alone*" (Acts 11:19). This is the way the gospel was first spread to Phoenicia (modern Lebanon), Antioch (in modern southern Turkey), Cyprus, Asia Minor (the rest of today's Turkey), Greece, and Rome — as the book of Acts tells us; but also, as we know from history, to Alexandria (in Egypt), Cyrene (in modern Libya), Edessa (in Syria), Persia (modern Iraq and Iran), and even

to India in the East. It was a strictly Jewish religion preached only among the Jews.

The disciples never said when they accepted Jesus as Messiah that they left one religion and joined another. They never taught that Christianity was a new religion. They claimed that Christianity was what I'd like to call the "true Judaism," the correct understanding of what Judaism is all about, and a fulfillment of that same Jewish religion.

#5: Even Gentile Christians are part of what God is doing with Israel. As Paul said to Gentile believers in Eph. 2:12,19: "*Remember that you were at that time without Messiah, being alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise.... [but now] you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but you are fellow-citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God.*" The relationship of Judaism and Christianity is shown in the olive tree of Romans 11: That tree is Israel. Some branches have been broken off, other branches have been grafted in – but it's still the same tree (Rom. 11:17-24). We Gentile believers have been grafted in to Israel. Israel is the root, we are only branches.

Israel is the focus and the heartbeat of God's interaction with mankind – even if nearly the whole nation of Israel should turn away from God, as happened in the time of Elijah (1 Kings 19:14,18). Because the true Israel is the spiritual remnant of the nation. As Paul quoted Isaiah in Romans 9:27: "*Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved.*" And because of that holy remnant, Israel was and still is the apple of God's eye. The good news is that we as Gentiles have been invited to join that remnant – that God is willing to accept us into his chosen people.

The coming together into unity of the remnant of Israel and a believing remnant of the Gentiles is one of the reasons Jesus died on the cross. Paul said in Ephesians 2:13-16: "*But now in Christ Jesus, you who formerly were far off [Gentile Christians] have been*

brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who made both [Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians] one, and broke down the dividing wall... – the hostility between the two – in his flesh...that in himself he might make the two into one new man...through the cross."

Satan has done everything he can over the years to destroy that unity and tear it apart. But that doesn't change the fact that it is still God's plan for us as Gentile Christians to be incorporated into the spiritual reality of Israel. We have become citizens of the Jewish kingdom of a Jewish king: King Jesus (*Melech Yeshua*), who rules and reigns over his Messianic kingdom.

Pentecost: Something Completely New?

This is not the traditional Christian view. Many Christians look at the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 as the start of something completely new, the new religion of Christianity, the "birthday" of the Church, as if it was totally disconnected from all the preceding history of Israel. But that's not what the disciples themselves thought of it. On that same day of Pentecost they said, 'These are the last days of which the prophets have spoken.' As Peter said in Acts 2:17: "And it will be in the last days, says God, I will pour out of my Spirit on all flesh." The Messiah was to come at the end of time, the culmination of the age. As the apostle Paul put it in Gal. 4:4: "When the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son." This is imagery from a water clock: when the container is full, it's the end of a period of time. The Messiah came at the end of the age, in the fullness of time. To the disciples, this was not the beginning of the story, as we usually think of it, but the last chapter in an incredible story that was already ages old, tracing all the way back to the time of Moses and Abraham, even back to Adam himself.

The festival at which this happened, the festival of **Pentecost** (also known as the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuoth*) is one of the Jewish feasts that the Jewish people have celebrated since the time of Moses. For Judaism, Pentecost is the anniversary of the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. On this day they remember their incredible experience in

the desert, when a thick cloud descended on Mt. Sinai with thunder and flashes of lightning and the loud blast of a trumpet (Ex. 19:18,19). No wonder God chose this day to send the Holy Spirit with the noise of a strong, rushing wind, and with tongues of fire resting on each one of them (Acts 2:2,3)! To the Jewish disciples of Jesus, this must have seemed like a second Sinai! God was descending again in the fire of the Holy Spirit!

As at Sinai, this was a revelation from heaven to change something in their relationship with God. As Jesus had said just a few days before, *“when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will receive power...and you will be my witnesses”* (Acts 1:8). The Jews had long recognized obedience to God’s Word – to his Law – as a witness to the nations. Even the tablets of the 10 Commandments are called the *“tablets of witness”* (in Ex. 31:18 and elsewhere): they were a witness to the reality of God’s covenant with his people. But now that testimony would no longer be engraved on tablets of stone, but on the hearts of men. As Jeremiah prophesied: *“I will put my law in their inward parts, and on their heart I will write it”* (Jer. 31:33). This is what the New Testament calls the Law of the Messiah (1 Cor. 9:21, Gal. 6:2), the law of faith (Rom. 3:27), the law of liberty (Jam. 1:25, 2:12), the Royal Law (Jam. 2:8), the commandment of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:2), the holy commandment (2 Pet. 2:21), the commandment (1 Tim. 6:14), his commandments (1 John 2:34, 2 John 1:6), or as Jesus said, my commandments (John 14:15,21; 15:10): an inner law of holiness that is in us because of the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

To the Jewish disciples, this new Law was not a contradiction of the old Law, but it’s confirmation. As Paul says in Romans 3, *“Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law”* (Rom. 3:31). In Rom. 8:4, Paul says that the new law of the Spirit was given *“in order that the requirement of the Law [the old Law of Moses] might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit”* (Rom. 8:4). The Spirit of God in us gives us the power to fulfill the requirements of the Law of Moses!

Zealots for the Law

The book of Acts tells us that the thousands of new Jewish believers in Jerusalem were "*all zealots for the Law*" (Acts 21:20). Instead of abandoning the Law of Moses because of their faith in Jesus, they became more devoted to the Law than they had ever been before! Just like today, Jewish people who become believers in Jesus often "rediscover" their Jewishness, and suddenly become very interested in Jewish history, Israel, and the Jewish Law. This obedience to the Law by Jewish Christians has been a big stumbling block for Gentile Christians over the years. When I first heard that most Jewish believers in Jesus obey the Law of Moses, I couldn't accept it. It contradicted traditions I was taught in church and in seminary. But the facts of the Bible are indisputable, as most scholars recognize today.

For example, in Jerusalem, Jewish believers in Jesus continued to worship as Jews in the Temple, even after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus:

Luke 24:53 *"And they were constantly in the Temple, blessing God."*

Acts 2:46: *"Every day...spending a lot of time with one mind in the Temple"*

Acts 3:1: *"Peter and John were ascending into the Temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer"*

Acts 3:11: *"All the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's [located in the Temple]"*

Acts 5:12: *"They were all with one mind in the Portico of Solomon"*

Acts 5:21: *"They entered about dawn into the Temple and were teaching"*

Acts 5:42: *"Every day...in the Temple...they did not stop teaching and telling the good news of Jesus the Messiah"*

They also continued to participate in synagogue worship:

Acts 9:2: *"...letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found some who were of the Way [followers of Jesus]"*

Acts 22:19: *"From synagogue to synagogue I was imprisoning and beating those who believe in you"*

Acts 17:2: "...where a synagogue of the Jews was. But according to the custom of Paul, he went in to them"

James 2:2: "For if a man in shining clothes with gold rings on his fingers enters into your synagogue [this is what it clearly says in Greek, though rarely translated correctly]..."

Hebrews 10:25: "...not giving up our meeting (*episynagoge*) together"

Do you remember the first name for Christianity used by the believers themselves? "**The Way**":

Acts 9:2: "So that if he found some who were of the Way"

Acts 19:9: "But as some were becoming hardened...speaking evil of the Way"

Acts 19:23: "A commotion took place, and not a little one, concerning the Way"

Acts 22:4: "Who persecuted this Way to the death"

Acts 24:14: "According to the Way that they call a sect"

Acts 24:22: "Felix, since he understood the facts concerning the Way more accurately"

2 Peter 2:2: "The Way of the truth will be slandered"

Christianity was understood to be the way to go, the way to live your life; or you could say, rules for living. It was not so much a creed of correct beliefs, although beliefs are certainly important. But the emphasis was on how you lived. This is still the focus of Judaism today. Rabbis teach their students the correct way to live, the correct way to obey the Law of Moses (*Halacha*). In the same way, the Jewish Christians believed that their rabbi, Yeshua (Jesus), had given them the correct way to live, the correct interpretation of the Law of Moses.

The Prophet Like Moses

This was one of the Jewish expectations of the Messiah, that the Messiah would resolve all the difficulties of the Law of Moses. Where did they get this idea from? From Deut. 18:18,19, which was one of the most well-known prophecies about the Messiah: "I will raise up a prophet for them from among their brothers like you [Moses],

and I will put my words in his mouth, and he will speak to them all that I command him.... The man that will not listen to my words that he will speak in my name, I will require it from him." This was a prophecy that God would send a prophet "like Moses," that is, not an ordinary prophet, but one with the law-making authority of Moses himself, to explain God's Law. And how would they recognize this prophet? God said he would "raise him up" (Deut. 18:18). In Hebrew, this the same word used for resurrection.

That's why, when Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" (Matt. 16:13), they answered John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the other prophets: all people that were already dead. Because of Deut. 18:18, they were looking for a prophet that had been raised from the dead. But it wasn't until after the resurrection of Jesus that they understood it's true meaning. It was a prophecy of Jesus' own resurrection, and the proof that he is the Prophet like Moses, who interprets God's Law for us, and whose words must be obeyed.

To the early Jewish Christians, it would be impossible to imagine any contradiction between the Law of Moses and the Law of the Messiah. Christianity was not a replacement for Judaism. As Jesus Himself said in Matt. 5:17: "*Do not suppose that I came to abolish the Law or the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fill them.*"³ So of course the Jewish Christians continued to live as Jesus himself did, obeying the Law of God as Jesus interpreted it to them.

Paul and the Jewish Law

Many are willing to admit that Jesus himself observed the Jewish Law, along with many of his disciples. But what about Paul? Did he obey the Law? There is a popular view that Paul was against the Law of Moses. Some go so far as to say there was a split in the

³ Jesus said he came to "fill" (*pleirosai*) the Law and the Prophets, that is to fill them with their full meaning ("the Law and the Prophets" is the Jewish term for the Old Testament). This can refer to fulfillment, as this is usually translated, but also to completing and perfecting the Law and Prophets, in the sense of giving them the correct interpretation.

Church between the followers of James in Jerusalem, who kept the Law, and the followers of Paul, who did not. Is this true? Was Paul really against the Jewish Law, as so many believe?

According to the Bible, in Acts 18, Paul took a vow: "...after he [Paul] cut off the hair of his head in Cenchrea, for he was keeping a vow" (Acts 18:18). What kind of vow was this? A Jewish Nazirite vow, taught in the Law of Moses (Num. 6:1-21). Why would Paul do this after becoming a believer in Jesus if he was against the Law?

He continued to observe the Jewish feasts: As it says in Acts 20:6: "*We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread...*" Why after the feast? Because the Law forbid travel on holy days. Or in Acts 20:16: "...for he [Paul] was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost." Why? To celebrate the feast. And again in Acts 16:8: "*But I shall remain in Ephesus until Pentecost...*" Paul continued to measure time by the Jewish feasts.

On another trip to Jerusalem, Paul found out that the rumor had gone out (just as it has gone out today) that he was teaching Jews to stop observing the Law, and to stop circumcising their children: "*They have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs*" (Acts 21:21). What did he do about it? He went up to the Temple, not only to prove that these charges were false, but also to prove that he himself was faithfully keeping the Law (Acts 21:23-26). As he said later in Acts 25:8: "*I have committed no offense either against the Law of the Jews or against the Temple.*"

The accusations against Paul were similar to those against Stephen in Acts 6:13,14: "*They put forward false witnesses who said, 'This man does not stop saying things against the Holy Place [the Temple] and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus, the Nazarene, will destroy this place and will alter the customs which Moses delivered to us [the Law].'*" The Bible says it was the false witnesses that said Jesus will change the Law!

But here is the most powerful argument of all: If Paul was really against the Law, why did he circumcise Timothy? "*Paul wanted this man [Timothy] to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews that were in those parts.*" (Acts 16:3). Paul circumcised Timothy? But isn't Paul the one who said in Galatians: "*If you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you*" (Gal. 5:2)? What's going on? Is Paul for or against circumcision? Is he for or against the Law?

Let's let him answer this puzzle in his own words: "*Was anyone called who is circumcised [in other words, who is Jewish]? Do not remove the marks of circumcision. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision [in other words, a Gentile]? Let him not be circumcised.... 'Each in the calling in which he was called,' let him remain in this (his calling)'*" (1 Cor. 7:18,20). According to Paul, being a Jew (circumcised) or being a Gentile (uncircumcised) is a calling of God, which cannot and should not be changed after you become a Christian. Timothy was Jewish: his mother was Jewish, which makes you a Jew even today. He should be circumcised. But the Gentile Christians in Galatia should not be. A Gentile should continue as a Gentile; and a Jew should continue as a Jew, which means he will continue to obey the Jewish law.

This doesn't mean that the Law can contribute anything to salvation. It obviously can't – and nothing is more obvious to a Jewish believer in Jesus that has obeyed the Law all his life, but was not brought by it to salvation. Salvation is only through faith in Messiah, for both Jew and Gentile. This is just as true now as it was in the time of the OT – for salvation was only ever by faith. As Paul says in Gal. 3:6, Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

But for many Gentile Christians, this obedience of Jewish Christians to the Law doesn't make sense. If observing the Law is not essential to salvation, and in fact never provided salvation, why do Jewish believers in Jesus feel that they should continue to obey

it? The answer: Because God told them to. He made a covenant with them, which the Bible says will endure as long as the heavens and the earth endure (Matt. 5:18). Have the heavens and the earth passed away? No. Then it's still in force! As Jesus said, "*Do not think that I came to abolish the Law and the prophets*" (Matt. 5:17). Obedience to the Law is not, and never was a means of salvation. But it continues to play an important role: to point to the Messiah, and to confirm that Jesus is who he says he is!

As Paul says in Romans 11, in speaking about this same issue: "*For the gifts and the calling of God are unchangeable*" (Rom. 11:29). Jews are Jews, and as Jews, they should continue to keep the Law of Moses even after they come to faith in Jesus: it's their calling. Remember, too, that at the time, the Law of Moses was the law of the land. It would make no more sense for a Jewish believer in Jesus to break the Law of Moses than for a Gentile Christian to break the laws of his own country. The Bible says that we should obey the authorities over us. How much more when you know that these laws were given by God himself!

Now that is a different point of view than we're usually taught! And it just might make us downright uncomfortable. When I first heard this from modern Jewish Christians (Messianic Jews), I couldn't accept it. It went against ancient prejudices I'd been taught in seminary. But as I studied the evidence, verse by verse, in Greek and in Hebrew, I was shocked to find: they're right! It's what the Bible has always taught. And it's what the early Jewish Christians did without debate or disagreement for hundreds of years. We Gentile Christians just forgot how to understand these verses correctly.

Gentiles and the Jewish Law

So if Israel is the focus of God's work in the world, and we Gentile Christians have been grafted in to Israel, what about us? Are we supposed to keep the Law, too? If we are fellow citizens with the holy ones (as Paul says in Ephesians), shouldn't we obey the same

laws that they do? This was the big question troubling the early Church. They never questioned whether Jews should obey the Law, but what about us, the Gentile Christians? Do we need to observe the Sabbath, as some teach? Do we need to avoid pork, as others teach? What about blood? What about Jewish festivals? Etc., etc., etc. Today there are many groups teaching that Gentile Christians must obey the Law of Moses. Are they right?

The place of the Gentiles with regard to Jewish religion was not a new problem in the time of the book of Acts: the Jews had already spent hundreds of years debating whether Gentiles should obey the Law of Moses or not. Some rabbis, we'll call them group "A", taught that Gentiles who wanted to serve God should convert to Judaism: they should become **proselytes**, converts to Judaism. This meant they had to obey all the Jewish laws, just like those born Jewish.

But other rabbis, we'll call them group "B", taught it was not necessary for Gentiles to observe the Law of Moses, since the Law of Moses was a covenant between God and the Jewish people alone. Instead, they said it was enough for Gentiles to observe the **Laws of Noah**.⁴ Now what are they? Most of us have never even heard of the Laws of Noah before. According to the rabbis, there are seven of these Laws of Noah: "Rabbi Johanan taught: Seven laws are binding on the descendants of Noah: (1) establishment of courts of justice; (2) prohibition of blasphemy; (3) prohibition of the worship of other gods, (4) of murder, (5) of incest and adultery, (6)

⁴ The Laws of Noah were formalized and given this name after the time of the New Testament. But the idea of seven Noachide laws can already be seen in the book of Jubilees, which dates to the pre-Christian era and was influential in early Christianity (Jub. 7:20,28,29). Many believe these laws originated in sections of the Law of Moses concerning the *ger ha-gar* (resident alien), laws concerning Gentiles who lived among the Jews found mostly in the book of Leviticus. This body of law closely matches the rabbis' seven laws: the prohibition of sexual immorality (Lev. 18:26), the prohibition of eating blood (Lev. 17:10,13,15), the prohibition of idolatry (Lev. 20:2), the prohibition of blasphemy (Lev. 24:16), and the prohibition of murder (Lev. 24:22). The Laws of Noah are mentioned in many places in rabbinic literature, including Gen. R. 16:6, 24:5, 34:8; Sanh. 56a-59b; Hul. 92a; and BK 38a. In Gentile Christian theology, the Laws of Noah were subsumed under the more general idea of "Natural Law."

of theft and robbery, and (7) of eating the flesh of a living animal before it dies [i.e. with its blood]" (San. 56a).

Where did the rabbis get these seven laws, which by the way they still teach today? They are the laws given by God to all mankind in the book of Genesis, from the time of Adam until the time of Noah. It's the covenant for which God gave the rainbow as a sign in the sky. Since we're all descended from Noah, we're all part of God's covenant with Noah. Right? Makes sense.⁵

In Gen. 9:9, God said, *"I myself establish my covenant with you [Noah] and with your descendants after you."* Are you a descendant of Noah? Then this covenant is also with you. In Gen. 9:16, it's called an eternal covenant! Does God break his eternal covenants?

The Laws of Noah match some of the 10 commandments:

- 1) No blasphemy is the **3rd Commandment**: *"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain"* (Ex. 20:7);
- 2) No idolatry is in the **1st and 2nd Commandments**: *"You will have no other gods besides Me"* (Ex. 20:3); *"You shall not make for yourself an idol...you shall not worship them or serve them"* (Ex. 20:4,5)
- 3) No adultery is the **7th Commandment**: *"You shall not commit adultery"* (Ex. 20:14)
- 4) No murder is the **6th Commandment**: *"You shall not murder"* (Ex. 20:13)
- 5) No robbery is the **8th Commandment**: *"You shall not steal"* (Ex. 20:15)

And because of this, some in the Church have taught over the years that Gentile Christians must obey the 10 commandments. But they

⁵ If you look in Gen. 9, you will find only three of the laws mentioned by the rabbis: no murder (Gen. 9:5), the punishment of murderers (Gen. 9:6; usually interpreted as the responsibility to establish courts of law), and no eating of blood (Gen. 9:4). Where did the rabbis get the other laws? From the things forbidden to Gentiles (strangers, *gerim*) in other places in the Law of Moses. See the "Laws of Noah" teaching on the Classroom page of our website at <http://www.totheends.com/noah.html>

forgot why we must obey them: because they were first given to our ancestor, Noah!⁶

The rabbis of group “B” considered any Gentile willing to obey the Laws of Noah a **Godfearer** (in Greek) or a **Fearer of Heaven** (in Hebrew), and taught that they will have a share in the world to come. (Today the rabbis call them Righteous Gentiles or Sons of Noah.) In other words, they taught that Gentiles have their own law, the Laws of Noah, and their own accountability before God, which is different than the law of the Jews. After all, God is the Father of all mankind, isn’t he? Which is exactly how Paul put it: “*Is God only the God of the Jews? Is he not also the God of Gentiles? Yes, also of Gentiles*” (Rom. 3:29). Paul agreed that keeping the Law of Moses is not a requirement for all mankind. The Law of Moses is a distinctive covenant between God and the Jewish people, and no one else.

For example, everyone knows that the Jews are forbidden to eat pork (Lev. 11:7). The rabbis of group “B” saw the prohibition of pork to mean nothing about pork itself. Pork was a perfectly good food. So why did God prohibit pork for the Jewish people? To set them apart from others – period. It’s part of their special calling. This was not because pork was bad for you, or had something about it that was unclean: it was simply because God, for reasons unknown to man, had selected pork to be forbidden.⁷ Lev. 11:7 says, “*It will be unclean to you*” – to the Jews.⁸ It doesn’t say

⁶ To say that Gentile Christians must obey the Ten Commandments contradicts the Biblical teaching that we are not under the Law of Moses (Gal. 5:18; the Ten Commandments are part of the Law of Moses, Ex. 20:1-17). But if we understand that these teachings stretch back to Noah (or to our created nature as the early Church Fathers taught), there is no contradiction. The most important difference between the two sets of law is that the Laws of Noah do not include the Sabbath commandment (nor do the Church’s original formulas of Natural Law).

⁷ Many in both the Jewish and Christian communities over the years have tried to explain the food laws on the basis of health considerations. While there may be other reasons to avoid the foods forbidden in Lev. 11, the bottom line is the fact of God’s command, and not our attempt to derive a rationale for these restrictions.

⁸ When Mark says of Jesus’ teaching, “*Thus he declared all foods clean*” (as it’s usually translated; Mark 7:19), he’s talking about contact uncleanness from unwashed hands.

anything about it being unclean to others. This is exactly the point of view of the apostle Paul in Romans 14:14: "*I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing (he's talking about food) is unclean in itself.*" We do not need to be worried about certain foods because they are themselves unclean.

If you, a Gentile Christian, stop eating pork, it won't make you any more holy. The pork itself is not the issue. All that is important is obeying the will of God. "*Circumcision [that is, being a Jew] is nothing, and uncircumcision [being a Gentile] is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God*" (1 Cor. 7:19). A Jew who obeys God will not eat, because it's forbidden to him, and a Gentile who obeys God is free to eat. Why? Because each has his own calling from God: "*Each in the calling in which he was called*" (1 Cor. 7:20). Why? "*For the gifts and the calling of God are unchangeable*" (Rom. 11:29).

This idea of different people with different callings is a very Jewish way of thinking. And because of that, very hard for Gentiles to understand. How can God have different rules for different people? We always want to make all people alike: equality under the law is a popular legal ideal in modern society.

But the Jews are used to different rules for different people. In the Law of Moses, there are different laws for men and women, for priests and Levites, for kings, for children, for those who are married, and for those who are single. And in the same way, there are different laws for Jews and Gentiles. Each has a special calling, and there are different laws that apply to each calling.

This is an example of Jesus upholding the Written Law of God against the traditions of the Pharisees (as the context clearly shows). It does not refer to the food laws of the Law of Moses. Nor did Jesus ever teach against any precept of the Written Law. As he himself said, "*Do not suppose that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets...*" (Matt. 5:17). See the teaching "Did Jesus Abolish the Jewish Food Laws?" on the Classroom page of our website at <http://www.totheends.com/hands.html>

But what about Gal. 3:28: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus.*" Doesn't that prove we're all the same, with no differences? Does it? It certainly proves that we are all one body in Christ. All of us are accepted by faith, no matter what kind of person we are. But this doesn't mean that men stop being men or women stop being women! Nor does it mean Jews stop being Jews or Gentiles stop being Gentiles. We all have our individual callings. But in spite of this diversity of callings, we are all one in Christ. Diversity in unity, unity in diversity: this is one of the great truths and the great revelations of Christianity.

God does not want uniformity: all of us doing exactly the same thing the same way—like an army of robots. What he wants is unity, or better yet, harmony, like a symphony orchestra--all of us working together toward a shared goal, but each playing a different instrument according to his own individual calling. This is the same God that made thousands of different kinds of flowers, thousands of different kinds of trees, yet all blend together into beautiful landscapes. This is God's vision for the body of Messiah: one body and one spirit, but with grace given to each individually according the gift given to each. Using those gifts in spiritual harmony is what builds up the Body of Messiah (Eph. 4:16; see the Ephesians translation and notes on the Classroom page of our web site at <http://www.totheends.com/ephesians1.html>).

The Council of Jerusalem

At first, Jewish Christians were split on this issue of Gentiles and the Law. Some sided with the rabbis of group "A," who were in favor of making Gentiles convert to Judaism; others sided with the rabbis in group "B." The issue became a conflict in Antioch, when Paul and Barnabbas got into a fierce debate with some believers from Judea (Acts 15:1,2; Gal. 2:12-14). Because of this, the Church held its first council, in Acts 15, to decide what should be done about the Gentiles. The believers that were Pharisees said that Gentile believers must be circumcised (they were on side "A"; Acts

15:5). Then Peter spoke up for the other side (side “B”) and told about the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles at Caesarea (Acts 15:7-11). Paul told about his missions work in Turkey and Cyprus among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). Then a decision had to be made.

That's when James, the brother of Jesus, began to speak. He quoted a Scripture from the book of Amos (Amos 9:11-12): "*After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the Tabernacle of David that has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been named*" (Acts 15:16-17). On the basis of this verse, the issue was settled. Why? What does it mean? What is the tabernacle of David?

These verses allude to the kingly line of David, which fell into ruins in the time of the Babylonians. But in Jesus, this kingly line is now restored! Now the door is wide open to Gentiles as well as to Jews to seek the Lord. Amos' words imply that Gentiles as Gentiles are made acceptable to God through Jesus.⁹ Conversion to Judaism is not necessary.

In David's historical kingdom, there were not only Israelites, but many different kinds of Gentiles: Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and others (2 Sam. 8:1-14). But the Law of Moses was observed only in the Israelite portion of this kingdom. This is the picture of the kingdom of the Messiah given in Acts: All who accept Jesus are under his kingly authority, but only in the Jewish section of that kingdom is the Law of Moses in force.

In Greek, the “booth” or tent of David also brings to mind the tent David built for the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:17). Here they worshipped the Lord not according to the Law of Moses, which required the Tabernacle of Moses, but according to the

⁹ The words “*over whom my name has been named,*” which appear in the original Hebrew of Amos 9:12 and the Greek of Acts 15:17, refer prophetically to Christian baptism.

instructions of David in a new tabernacle, with new music and singing that had never been part of their worship before. This was a new way of worshipping God, outside of the Law of Moses. The "Tabernacle of David" is a way for Gentiles to worship God without having to do it according to the Law of Moses!¹⁰ James and the others accepted this prophecy as proof that it is not necessary for Gentiles to become Jews in order to serve God. God has made another way for us: the Tabernacle of David, which is a picture and a type of the ministry of the Messiah. And because of that, you and I as Gentile Christians are not under the Law of Moses today!

The Three Exceptions

But there were three exceptions to this ruling, three things they thought should be required of Gentile Christians: That they "[1] *Abstain from things contaminated by idols, and [2] from sexual immorality, and [3] from what is strangled and from blood*" (Acts 15:20).¹¹ Now this is really strange. They just decided on the basis of prophecy that the Gentiles are not under the Law of Moses. But then they turn right around and impose three of those laws back on us. What's going on?

If you look carefully, you'll see that these are three of the Laws of Noah. By making this ruling, the Council showed its agreement with the rabbis of group "B," who did not require Gentiles to convert to Judaism, but only required them to obey the Laws of Noah.

But why only these three laws, and not all seven? Perhaps, as someone suggested, it's because most of the other Laws of Noah

¹⁰ Worship in the tent of David did not replace worship in the Tabernacle of Moses, but was in addition to it. The Tabernacle was at the time in the neighboring city of Gibeon (1 Chron. 16:39, 21:29).

¹¹ The prohibition of eating the meat of a strangled animal is essentially the same as the prohibition of blood: The strangled animal is prohibited because its blood remains in it. Some see the prohibition of blood here as a fourth exception referring to the prohibition of murder, though the allusion is clearly to Gen. 9:4.

were already accepted by the Gentile world: The Romans recognized that murder and robbery were wrong, and had courts to deal with these crimes. The prohibition of blasphemy was probably considered unnecessary, since the rabbis considered this only to involve the actual name of God (*YHVH*), which only the priests knew how to pronounce. This left only three to mention: (1) idolatry, (2) sexual immorality, and (3) eating blood, all of which were practiced by the Romans. These are the same three mentioned in Acts 15.

Does that mean these three things are all it takes to be a Christian? No way! We also share with the Jewish Christians the Law of the Messiah, the Way that Jesus came to show us, which is recorded in the New Testament. Acts 15 only exempts Gentile Christians from commands found in the Law of Moses. We must still obey the Laws of Noah as well as the Law of Messiah, the New Testament.

The Bible says this was not only the decision of the Council, but also of the Holy Spirit: *“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”* (Acts 15:28). But do we obey their decision today? I hope so! I certainly hope none of us are worshipping idols, or eating meat offered to idols, or practicing immorality. But what about eating blood? Do we require our meat to be properly butchered, and the blood drained out? Do we avoid foods made with blood?¹²

In the Western Church, Christians have ignored the ruling of Acts 15 since about the 10th century AD. But why did we stop observing it? The Bible says it’s an instruction from God! That’s as authoritative as you can get! And it’s delivered directly to us, Gentile Christians.

Why don’t many Christians obey this today? Because in the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic church took a very literal view of

¹² One example of a food made with blood is the German *blutwurst* (blood sausage, also known as black pudding). In the Philippines there is *dinuguan* (pork blood stew). Many other examples could be given. Properly butchered (*kosher*) meat is available in many grocery stores.

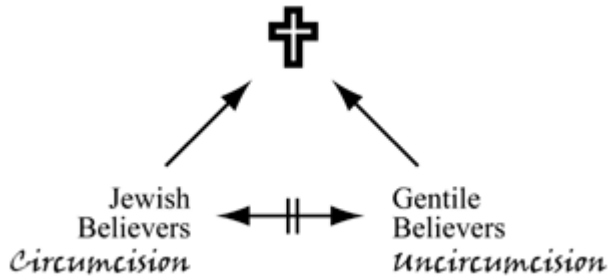


the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist), teaching that in that rite we drink the actual physical blood of Jesus. But how can that be, if the Bible itself forbids us to eat any blood? So the popes effectively cancelled Acts 15 and said it's now okay to eat blood! But in the early Church, and the Eastern Church even today, eating blood is forbidden because of Acts 15.¹³

Judaizing and Gentilizing

In the decision of the Council, and in the writings of Paul, keeping the Jewish Law is considered part of the special calling of being a Jew. Of course a Jewish Christian will obey the Law, because he is a Jew. And because he is also a Christian, he will also obey the Law of Messiah. No other alternative is even mentioned in the Bible for Jewish believers in Jesus.¹⁴

But for a Gentile to submit to circumcision (in other words, to become a Jew) is a step away from God, rather than toward God. Why? Because becoming a



¹³ In the West, under the influence of Augustine, the three exceptions have been treated as a temporary concession to the Jews rather than a theological necessity, despite the Bible's affirmation that these are "necessary things" ("*...no greater burden than these necessary things*", Acts 15:28). But in the Eastern Church (the Orthodox churches), they are still in force today, having been reaffirmed in the Seventh Ecumenical Council (8th cent.). The Western attitude is often justified by an interpretation of Acts 15:21 that sees here an explanation of why the three exceptions were instituted (i.e. as a concession). But Acts 15:21 is instead an explanation as to why the writing of a letter was necessary: to give Gentile Christians an authoritative defense against those preaching Moses "in every city," in other words, against those trying to bring them under the yoke of the Law. As Jesus said of the Pharisees, "*you travel about the sea and the dry land to make one proselyte...*" (Matt. 23:15). These were clearly Pharisees of group "A," that believed conversion to Judaism was necessary for Gentiles.

¹⁴ Although Paul makes the point that his continued obedience to the Law as a Jew is not because he is "under" the Law of Moses, but because he is now under the authority of the greater Law of Messiah (1 Cor. 9:19-21).

Jew does not bring you any closer to God. In fact it takes you farther away if you think it will increase your righteousness: because that shows you have completely misunderstood salvation in Christ (Gal. 5:4). Instead, we Gentile Christians should be concentrating on moving forward in Christ, in the Law of the Messiah, rather than going over to the Law of Moses.

That part Christians have historically agreed about. The Church has always condemned “Judaizing,” that is, telling Gentile Christians they must become Jews or act like Jews.¹⁵ But what about the other side, the side of the Jews? If observing the Law doesn’t help a Gentile get saved, how can not observing the Law help a Jew get saved? It can’t. In fact, for a Jewish believer to reject the Law is also a step away from God. We all agree that Jews should not be allowed to Judaize Gentiles. But that means Gentiles should also not be allowed to “Gentilize” Jews (1 Cor. 7:19,20). Right? Unfortunately, for more than 1,000 years that’s exactly what the Christian Church has done to Jewish believers in Jesus: it has forced them to be Gentilized, sometimes under threat of death for heresy! It wasn’t that long ago that Gentile Christians would give a Jewish believer a ham sandwich to eat to see if he “really” had become a Christian.

But what if a Messianic Jew doesn’t want to observe the Law of Moses anymore? Should he be allowed to stop? That’s a good question. But in practice it hardly ever comes up. Most Jews want to observe the Law after they accept Jesus. The calling of God is unchangeable (Rom. 11:29). Paul circumcised Timothy, even though he was not circumcised before. Why? Because he was

¹⁵ Although Judaizing has been gaining in popularity in recent years, claiming a special “blessing” for Gentile Christians that observe the Law of Moses. Yet this directly contradicts the Biblical teaching that in Messiah, God has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens (Eph. 1:3). If we already have every spiritual blessing, there are none remaining that obedience to the Law of Moses can bring us. Others go further, claiming that Gentile Christians (which they prefer to call Ephraimites or Israelites) are required to obey the Law of Moses. This is in direct contradiction to the clear teaching of the Bible in Acts 15 and many other places (see especially Gal. 4:21-5:15, where Paul addresses a similar teaching).

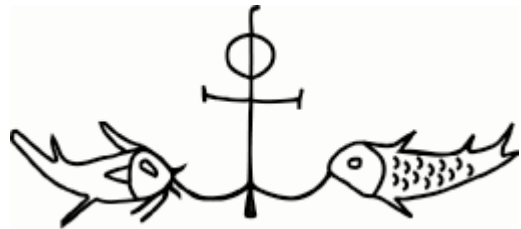
Jewish. For a Jewish believer to stop obeying the Jewish Law would be to renounce the covenant of God with his people, to turn his back on God's calling for his life. Instead, what does Paul say? Stay in the state in which you were called (1 Cor. 7:20). If you are circumcised (Jewish), don't become uncircumcised (a Gentile). If you are uncircumcised (a Gentile), don't be circumcised (become Jewish; 1 Cor. 7:17-20). Instead, obey the commandments that apply to you (1 Cor. 7:19). For Jewish believers in Jesus, this means the Law of Moses as interpreted and amplified in the Law of Messiah.¹⁶

For Gentile believers, this means the Laws of Noah as interpreted and amplified in the Law of Messiah.¹⁷ The Law of Messiah does not replace God's previous work in the Bible, but brings it to perfection.

From the Circumcision and From the Uncircumcision

This understanding of two distinct groups within the Body of Messiah was common in the earliest Christian Church.

Archeological evidence can be seen in this diagram from the catacombs in Rome: two fish caught on a cross-shaped hook.¹⁸ One (on the right) is kosher: it has scales and fins, which means it's permitted by the Law of Moses (Lev. 11:9).



The other (on the left) is not kosher: it has no scales, and looks like a catfish. The first represents the church from the circumcision, obeying the Law of Moses; the second is the church from the

¹⁶ How this actually works out in detail is a topic best left for Jewish believers to decide. It's more complicated than most Gentile Christians can possibly imagine.

¹⁷ An exception to this occurs when Gentile Christians are living in a Jewish community. Following the instructions for the *ger ha-shaar* (the stranger living within the gates) in the Old Testament, as well as the spiritual principles of 1 Cor. 9:20 and Rom. 14, they should adapt their lifestyles so as to give no offense to the larger community.

¹⁸ The original was found on a marble plaque in the Catacomb of Domitilla in Rome, a burial area identified with early Christians.

uncircumcision, which is not subject to the Law of Moses. This was the earliest understanding of the Body of Messiah: two distinct groups, each with a different calling, yet united in a common witness to Messiah Jesus as Lord.¹⁹

Now, in Messiah, it doesn't matter anymore if you are a Jew or a Gentile: both have access in the same Spirit to God the Father. And because of this, the barriers between Jew and Gentile have been broken down. Even though we are different, we can now have peace between us, because we have been united through the death of Jesus. There are different callings, but one Body of Messiah. And just as different spiritual gifts are necessary for the proper functioning of the body, both Jews and Gentiles are necessary for proper balance in the Body of Christ. This is the "one new man" vision of Paul in Ephesians 2:14-15: *"He himself is our peace, who made both (Jewish and Gentile Christians) one, and broke down the dividing wall...that in himself he may create out of the two one new man."* Gentile Christians need Jewish Christians to connect us to our Jewish Biblical roots. Jewish believers need Gentile Christians to help interpret and teach those roots to all the peoples of the world. Working together, we can extend the spiritual impact of Israel – and Israel's Messiah – to the ends of the earth.



¹⁹ Another example comes from the Church of Santa Sabina in Rome. Here a mosaic depiction from the 5th century shows two women, one labeled the "Church from the Circumcision" and the other the "Church from the Gentiles."