

Explanation of Acts 15 (Part 1) Rod Reynolds

Are Christians required to keep the Law of Moses? If someone were to ask you this question, how would you answer? If Christians are required to keep the Law of Moses, what does that mean? If they are not, what does that mean?

This very question was a thorny one for the early Church, and it led to considerable controversy. It has remained a key question among those calling themselves Christian ever since then, and in the recent apostasy within the Church of God the question of law keeping has been a key issue.

We believe and teach that according to Scripture Christians are obligated to obey the law of God (Matthew 19:7; Luke 8:15; 11:28; John 14:15, 23-24; Acts 5:29, 32; Romans 2:8, 25-27; 6:16, 26; Galatians 3:1; Hebrews 5:9; James 1:22-25; 1 John 2:3-4; 5:2-3; Revelation 12:17; 14:12; et al.). We teach that if one refuses to obey he cannot be saved (Matthew 7:22-27; 13:41-42; Revelation 22:14; et al.). But the prevailing teaching of popular Christianity is that law and grace stand in opposition to one another, and that salvation by grace requires nothing more than a profession of faith in Christ.

According to the prevailing teaching of professing Christianity, while obeying at least some laws might be desirable, it's not required for salvation. According to that view, it frustrates grace to require a commitment to obedience as a condition of salvation. Such a requirement is said to constitute "legalism." To sum it up in a catchphrase we're familiar with, the gospel is "Christ plus nothing." Salvation is "Christ plus nothing." In the popular teaching, Christ and the law are presented in conflict with one another. Christ replaced the law. Hence the law is not a guide for Christian conduct. Anyone who says, "You must keep the Sabbath," or "You must keep the Holy Days," or "You must tithe," is a legalist and is minimizing the sacrifice of Christ.

There are several key Scriptures that are used to support these teachings. Two significant areas of Scripture relative to this controversy are the book of Galatians and Acts 15. Mr. Meredith gave a very fine sermon explaining the book of Galatians which we heard on tape sometime ago. But some still have questions and I may address the book of Galatians again sometime in the future. In any case I think it would be good to review these key areas of Scripture from time to time. Today I want to explore the issues in Acts 15 in greater detail than we have before.

Controversial statements: Acts 15:5, 24, 28-29. Context: verses 1-5 -- circumcision the immediate issue, but beyond that the question of keeping the Law of Moses. There are three key questions here that we might ask concerning the Law of Moses: (1) What is meant by the "Law of Moses"? (2) Does Acts 15 state or imply that we need not keep the "Law of Moses"? (3) If so, what does that mean?

Let's deal then with these questions, beginning with, "What is the Law of Moses?" Deuteronomy 5:1-5, 22. Moses received the ten commandments. Verse 31, God also spoke other laws which Moses was to teach. Exodus 24:12 (NKJV) "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to Me on the mountain and be there; and I will give you tablets of stone, and the law and commandments which I have written, that you may teach them.'" Exodus 24:3-4, 7. Moses wrote words of God in a book. Other material was added to the book at various times until eventually Moses had written what we know as the first five books of the Bible.

There are several definitions of the Law of Moses as the term is used in the Bible. The first Biblical definition of the Law of Moses is everything written in the Pentateuch -- the first five books of the Bible. The

five books of Moses are called in the Old Testament *Sepher hatorah*, the Law-book, or book of the law (Deuteronomy 31:26; Joshua 1:8), or simply *Hattorah*, the Law (Nehemiah 8:1-2, 7, 13, etc.). The word *Torah* means instruction, hence law. The Jews commonly call the books of Moses the *Torah*. It's accepted belief among the Jews, and was at Jesus' time, that the Law of Moses included everything found in the Pentateuch (and more, which we will discuss later). "The Rabbins...understand the words "this law," in Deut. xxxi. 9 and 24, as relating to the whole Thorah from Gen. i. to Deut. xxxiv..." (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentaries on the Old Testament*, Vol. I, p. 25, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971).

The "law of Moses" is not just ritual law (Deuteronomy 31:9, 24-26; Joshua 22:5) "Book of law of Moses" (Joshua 23:6). "And keep the charge of the Lord your God: to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His judgments, and His testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn..." (1 Kings 2:3). All law of Eternal written in law of Moses, not just ritual; 2 Chronicles 34:14, law of Eternal; Ezra 7:6, law of Moses which Eternal had given; Nehemiah 8:1, 7-8, law of Moses and law of God the same; Luke 2:22-24, Law of Moses and Law of Lord the same (both quoted from Leviticus 12); Luke 24:44, Scripture divided into Law of Moses, Prophets and writings (of which Psalms was representative). No grounds for idea that the ten commandments are the law of God and law of Moses consists only added civil statutes and sacrificial ordinances (as has been taught in the Church at times).

In the Bible and in Jewish usage the Law of Moses is also equated with the Old Covenant. As I have said before when Paul uses the term "the law" he is almost always referring to it in the sense of the Old Covenant or in the sense of "the law" as it was understood by the majority of the Jews of his day -- that is the law as viewed through the prism of Jewish tradition (or both). I want to establish both of these points, first the point that "the law" is equated with the Old Covenant.

What was the Old Covenant? The Hebrew word for covenant is *berit*, which essentially means an agreement. The verb is *karath*, to cut, to cut off, or to cut a covenant. The usage is derived from the fact that in the Biblical culture a covenant usually involved the sharing of a sacrifice. By eating the same flesh, the parties symbolized that they had agreed, or come to be of one mind in what was agreed upon. The Old Covenant was an agreement between God and the nation of Israel. The people agreed to be faithful to God and obey him (Exodus 19:5-8), and he agreed to bless them if they kept the agreement (Deuteronomy 5:31-33; Leviticus 26:3-13; Deuteronomy 28:1-14). He also promised to curse them if they were unfaithful to the covenant (Leviticus 26:14-39; Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Elements of the covenant included both law and grace, or favor with God. It was not a covenant of law only. Nevertheless the laws of God were a featured part of the covenant, and the term "the law" came to imply all that pertained to the covenant. As *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* says, "'Covenant' is parallel or equivalent to the Hebrew words *dabar* ('word'), *hoq* ('statute'), *piqqud* ('precepts'--Ps. 103:18, NASB), *'edah* ('testimony'--Ps. 25:10), *torah* ('law'--Ps. 78:10), and *hesed* ('lovingkindness'--Deut. 7:9, NASB). These words emphasize the authority and grace of God in making and keeping the 'covenant,' and the specific responsibility of man under the covenant" (pp. 50-51, Old Testament section).

Let's look how closely the law is identified with the Old Covenant in Scripture. Deuteronomy 4:1-2. They were to keep commandments of God Moses taught them. Verses 13-14, ten commandments, statutes, judgments included in covenant. Deuteronomy 31:25-26. The ark is referred to as the "ark of the *covenant*," inside of which were the *ten commandments* and beside which lay the "*Book of the Law*," the books of Moses. Psalm 78:10, Israel did not keep the covenant, they broke the law. Exodus 34:1, God wrote again on stones the words. Exodus 34:27-35. Moses wrote words which reflected the covenant, came down from mountain with tablets, face shone. 2 Corinthians 3:3, 6-9, 13-16. Writing of New Covenant not on stones, but on heart. Veil in reading of Old Testament (δι' ἰσχυρῆς -- word by which the Hebrew word meaning "covenant" or "agreement"

was translated in the Septuagint; here refers to Old Covenant, which is equated with the reading of "Moses"). Veil taken away when one turns to Lord.

Galatians 4:4-5, Christ sent to redeem those under "the law." Verses 21-25, being under "the law" equated with being under the covenant from Mt. Sinai, which engenders bondage (not which is bondage). The laws God gave Israel were not "bondage," but were given as God liberated them from bondage (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). But under the terms of the Old Covenant, Israel and Judah were later sent into captivity, or bondage, because they broke the covenant by disobeying the commandments (Leviticus 26:17, 25, 33; Deuteronomy 4:27; 2 Kings 17:15-23).

Besides being identified with the Old Covenant, the term "the law" in Jewish usage eventually came to be associated with another huge load of baggage. To Pharisees who were an influential force in the Jewish religion by the time of Christ the Law of Moses was viewed in a very particular way. It was viewed through the prism of rabbinic tradition which had developed over a period of centuries. Besides the written law contained in Scripture, a large body of oral tradition developed which in practical terms was equal to or even superior in authority to the Scriptures, as the Jews (or the Pharisees, and many who were influenced by them) viewed it. "...what...opposed the new doctrine of the Kingdom. The first place must here be assigned to those legal determinations, which traditionalism declared absolutely binding on all, not only of equal, but even greater obligation than Scripture itself. [5 Thus we read: 'The sayings of the elders have more weight than those of the prophets' (Jer. Ber. i. 7); 'an offence against the sayings of the Scribes is worse than one against those of Scripture' (Sanh. xi. 3)]. And this not illogically, since tradition was [considered to be] equally of Divine origin with Holy Scripture... [as the Pharisees viewed it]" (*Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim, Hendrickson, 1993, p. 68).

"These traditional ordinances . . . bear the general name of the Halakhah, as indicating alike the way in which the fathers had walked, and that which their children were bound to follow. These Halakhoth were either simply the laws laid down in Scripture; or else derived from, or traced to it by some ingenious and artificial method of exegesis; or added to it, by way of amplification and for safety's sake; or, finally, legalized customs. They provided for every possible and impossible case, entered into every detail of private, family, and public life; and with iron logic, unbending rigour, and most minute analysis pursued and dominated man, turn whither he might, laying on him a yoke which was truly unbearable" (*ibid.* p. 68). The class of traditional ordinances known as the sayings of the Scribes or Rabbis required no Scriptural authority, yet they came to be regarded as equal to or superior to the Scriptures in authority. Matthew 23:1-4, "move," is *remove*. "...these burdens [imposed by tradition] could be laid on, or moved away, according to the varying judgment or severity of a Rabbinic College" (p. 71). It was this traditional law to which Peter referred in Acts 15:10.

As the Pharisees used the term the "Law of Moses," it included their oral tradition because they asserted that not only the written law but the oral law, too, was given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. As it's stated in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "...while the phrase 'Torah (given) to Moses at Sinai' may be understood in a restricted sense [i.e., as the Pentateuch], the Pharisaic-rabbinic tradition (originated by the Pharisees and continued by the Talmudic rabbis) viewed it as referring to a wide body of teaching. According to this position, which dominated Jewish thought until the modern era and still commands the allegiance of traditionalists, the encounter between God and Israel at Sinai deposited not only a written Torah (*Torah she-bikhtav*) but also an oral Torah (*Torah she-be `al pe*) that was transmitted from generation to generation" (Fifteenth Edition, vol. 10, "Judaism," 1978, p. 286). Edersheim adds, "According to the Jewish view, God had given Moses on Mount Sinai alike the oral and the written Law, that is, the Law with all its interpretations and applications. From Ex. xx. 1, it was inferred, that God had communicated to Moses the Bible, the Mishnah, and Talmud, and the Haggadah, even to that which scholars would in latest times propound" (p. 69).

The oral traditions were purported to explain how to apply the law in particular circumstances and, going further, "to prevent any breach of the Law or customs, to ensure their exact observance, or to meet peculiar circumstances and dangers" (Edersheim, p. 70). The Halakhic rabbinical tradition ostensibly denoted in agonizing detail every outward observance and bearing of the Law of Moses. But "beyond this it left the inner man, the spring of actions, untouched.... Of course the laws of morality, and religion, as laid down in the Pentateuch, were fixed principles, but there was the greatest divergence and latitude in the explanation and application of many of them. A man might hold or propound almost any views, so long as he contravened not the Law of Moses, *as it was understood*, and *adhered in teaching and practice to the traditional ordinances*" (p. 73). Do you see? To the Pharisees (and the majority of Jews) keeping the Law of Moses meant keeping it as the Scribes, the majority of whom were Pharisees, understood and taught it, and as they viewed it through their own traditions. And this is where the teachings of Jewish leaders and Jesus diverged. Jesus did not recognize the authority of many of their traditions and did not honor them (Mark 7:1-10).

So when we read in Acts 15 that "...some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command [them] to keep the law of Moses,'" we need to understand that the implication of this teaching was that the Gentile converts would have to live under the provisions of the Old Covenant, and further it implied that they would have to observe the rabbinical traditional ordinances which had become in the Jewish mind a part of the law. To keep the law as these Pharisees would have it, would have required Gentile converts to be circumcised. It would have required them to offer a sacrifice at Jerusalem, because that too was one of the requirements of tradition. It would have meant that they would have to keep the Jewish laws of purity, the ceremonial washing of cups, etc., that Jesus Christ condemned. It would have meant that they could not keep company with, nor eat with, other Gentiles, because that was a requirement of the Law according to Jewish tradition (Acts 10:28; 11:2-3; Galatians 2:11-12). This is what would have been required of Gentile converts if the Church had accepted the argument of this group of Pharisees. "And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law" (Galatians 5:3).

So we've answered our first question, "what is meant by the "Law of Moses"? The answer to the second question (does Acts 15 imply we need not keep the "Law of Moses"?) is now plain as well. The Church took a very strong position that Gentile converts were not obligated to keep the Law of Moses as the term was then used and understood (see Acts 21:20-21, 24-25). But how did they arrive at that conclusion? And what are the implications for the Church in terms of obedience to God? These questions will be left for another sermon.