

## Explanation of Acts 15 (Part 2)

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In a previous sermon explaining Acts 15 we read that the question brought before the Church was an assertion by converts from among the Pharisees that Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:5-6). In order to have a thorough understanding Acts 15 one must understand the background of the controversy from both a Scriptural and a historical standpoint. One must also apply the principle of letting the Bible interpret the Bible that we have often stressed. You will not find the answers to the questions raised in Acts 15 just by reading the chapter. You must understand it in relation to the rest of Scripture and its historical background. This means that in explaining the chapter we must go into considerable detail to fill in this background and connect what is stated in Acts 15 to related Scriptures which allow us to understand its implications.

Going into such detail requires time. I could skim over the chapter superficially perhaps in one sermon, but I doubt that would add much to your understanding. I think it's worth an investment in time to help you understand this chapter, however, because as even some Protestant commentaries point out it's a chapter about which there is more confusion than almost any other single chapter of the Bible. Furthermore it has been often used to attack the true Biblical teaching regarding the requirements of the law for Christians.

In the first sermon I mainly discussed what is meant by the term the "law of Moses." The question we're dealing with is, is it necessary for Christians to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses? So it's essential that we understand what is meant by the term the "law of Moses." I showed you with what I believe are clear cut proofs that the "law of Moses" has at least three meanings as it's used in Scripture: (1) It means what is written in the first five books of the Bible. (2) It means the Old Covenant. (3) It means the traditional or oral law of the Jews added to what was written by Moses. The term "law," or "law of Moses" as used and understood by the Jews at the time the book of Acts was written was primarily the latter, and included the former. It's evident from what is written in Acts 15 that the Church determined that Gentile converts were not required to be physically circumcised nor to keep the law of Moses as the term was commonly used and understood. The important question for us is what are the implications for us as Christians in terms of obedience to God? In order to understand we must take a closer look at the historical and Scriptural background and at how the Church arrived at its decision.

We need to understand that the New Testament Church had its roots in the Jewish religion. The Church used the same Scriptures as the Jews. Jesus and all his closest disciples were Jews. For about ten to fourteen years after the founding of the Church it consisted almost exclusively of circumcised Jews, which would include some full proselytes, that is Gentiles who had converted to Judaism and been circumcised. During that early period the Church also reached out to the Samaritans, who also claimed to have Jewish origins and practiced circumcision. We know of only one uncircumcised Gentile who was baptized before Peter was led by God to baptize Cornelius and some of his relatives and friends. That was the Ethiopian Eunuch, a "proselyte of the gate," as they called uncircumcised proselytes, who was baptized by Philip (Acts 8:26-39). Because the Church was rooted in the Jewish religion, sharing the same Scriptures, its practices were similar in certain respects to Jewish practices, yet there were also fundamental differences. The New Testament reflects the similarities in practices and much of it is also written to address and explain the differences between the practices of the Church and that of traditional Judaism.

In the first century A.D. there were Jewish communities and synagogues in virtually every significant population center of the Old World, including much of Asia stretching perhaps as far as India; the Roman Empire, including Italy, Gaul, Greece, North Africa, Spain, and Britain. Jewish communities existed in the far reaches of Germany, beyond the Roman Empire's borders. There is even evidence of Jewish settlements in North America

dating possibly from the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (died 163 B.C.) through the second century A.D. (*Before Columbus*, Cyrus H. Gordon, pp. 175-187; *Saga America*, Barry Fell, pp. 164-190). (This does not include the much more abundant evidence of widespread Hebrew influence in the "New World" dating back to the second millennium B.C.). It was with ample justification that James stated, "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him *in every city*, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath" (Acts 15:21).

The first century Jews were roughly divided into two major groups, the *Eastern diaspora*, whose chief language was Aramaic, and the *Western diaspora*, whose chief language was Greek. A very important subgroup were the *Palestinian Jews*, who were mostly of the Eastern diaspora and who spoke Aramaic. (Aramaic speaking Jews also commonly read and understood Greek, the "lingua franca" of the time, but Greek was not their first language). There were key differences in the way Palestinian Jews, as opposed to Greek speaking -- or "Hellenistic" -- Jews, viewed and related to Gentiles. Understanding these differences is essential to understanding how the Church developed in its approach to Gentile converts.

The religious life of the Palestinian Jews was dominated by the Pharisees. Though they were never very numerous they were influential, especially in matters of religious practice and outlook among the Jews in Palestine. The Pharisees were organized into closed communities and had strict rules of religious observance based on the teachings of their Scribes, ordained teachers of the law. It was these Scribal teachings which formed the traditional, or oral, law. The Pharisaic communities emphasized especially strict rules of purity and of tithing. They went far beyond Biblical teachings especially in their rules of purity. Many of their rules and rites of purification were specifically designed to set them apart from Gentiles and ordinary Jews. "It was . . . a matter both of principle and policy to multiply the external signs by which they were distinguished from the Gentile world or from those of their own countrymen who approached towards it" (*Angus-Green Bible Handbook*, p. 616). Pharisaic communities had strict rules of admission (*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Joachim Jeremias, p. 251). Before admission there was a period of probation, "during the course of which the postulant had to prove his ability to follow the ritual laws" (*ibid.*). The kind of purity emphasized by the Pharisees had to do with external signs, such as washings, strict rules of handling food, etc., which distinguished them as separate from Gentiles, gave them a badge of righteousness, and marked them as the "true Israel."

According to these teachings Gentiles were "unclean," and almost every kind of social contact with them was forbidden. According to Rabbinical teachings Jews were allowed to do business with Gentiles within certain restrictions. Other than that all contact was to be avoided. Jews were not to eat with Gentiles, they were not to help Gentiles medically who's lives were in danger nor seek medical aid from them when the Jew's life was in danger. Food prepared by Gentiles, such as bread, oil and wine was unclean, or even if it had been touched by a Gentile it was unclean. None of these concepts are found in the Bible, but they affected the attitudes of Peter and perhaps the other original apostles, who were all Palestinian Jews (Acts 10:28).

Despite these teachings there were a number of Gentiles who were drawn to the Jewish religion, at least to the Biblical religion. The question then was, what was to be required of a Gentile convert to be accepted into the community? A set of rules was devised by the Scribes called the *gerim halakoth*. At first there was a difference of opinion among the Pharisaic Scribes regarding circumcision, but by the time of Jesus it was established doctrine among the Pharisees that Gentiles must do three things to be accepted as full converts: circumcision, baptism, sacrifice.

The Sadducees held that circumcision for a male Gentile convert was not necessary. More importantly, the Hellenistic Jews outside Palestine rejected circumcision as a requirement, requiring only baptism. The Jewish synagogues outside Palestine had large contingents of "Hellenistic (uncircumcised) proselytes." "The most zealous were like Jews, only without circumcision.... (But)...no concessions were made in monotheistic faith or in moral requirements, but solely in liturgical matters" (*New Shaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, p. 281).

The leaders of the Church determined that to be pure is a matter of faith, of the heart, not circumcision, (Acts 10:34-35, God-fearers, half-proselytes, proselytes of the gate, do righteousness, keep God's commandments). Acts 15:6-11.

The “yoke” referred to by Peter does not consist of the laws of Scripture, but the laws that were added to the Scriptural requirements by Jewish scribes and the Pharisees through their traditions (Acts 15:5; Matthew 23:1-4). “...to trace the growth of the 'traditions of the Elders' .... 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. And this not illogically, since tradition was [according to the Pharisees] equally of Divine origin with Holy Scripture, and authoritatively explained its meaning ...and generally guarded its sanctity by extending and adding to its provisions, drawing 'a hedge,' around its 'garden enclosed.

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“These traditional ordinances, as already stated, bear the general name of the *Halakhah* [Hebrew: the way]... 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”

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“According to the Jewish view [more correctly, that of the Pharisees and their scribes], 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. 20:1, it was inferred, that God had communicated to Moses the Bible, the Mishnah, and Talmud, and the Haggadah, even to which scholars would in latest times propound.

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“But traditionalism went further, and placed the oral actually above the written Law” (Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus The Messiah*, Hendrickson, 1993, pp. 68-69). Traditionalism divided the Law into three essential classes. The third class – the “sayings of the Scribes (or Rabbis)” consisted of Halakhic ordinances which could be laid on or moved away by Rabbinic decree (*ibid.*, pp. 70-71). Hence Jesus' indictment of the scribes and the Pharisees: "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay [them] on men's shoulders; but they [themselves] will not move [or remove] them with one of their fingers” (Matthew 23:4).

It was the burden of these traditional laws – laws that had been added to the Scriptural requirements – laws that the Jews themselves seldom faithfully kept -- that the Acts 15 conference decided against. Circumcision was only the first in a whole body of extra-Biblical law that the Pharisaic party in the Church wanted to impose on Gentile converts. The apostles and elders, led by James, agreed that Gentile Christians did not have to adhere to the traditional laws of the Jews, which were supposedly (according to Pharisaic tradition), but not actually, handed down through Moses. Neither were the Gentiles required to follow the sacrificial and purification laws which were directly associated with the Temple service (Acts 21:21-25; Hebrews 9:8-10).

Does that then mean they were free to break the ten commandments? What was required of them? Acts 15:20, 29. These requirements were taken from “*Gerim Halakath*” (Leviticus 17-20). Things polluted by idols (Leviticus 17:1-9); blood (Leviticus 17:10-14); “strangled” (not bled properly, Leviticus 17:15-16); sexual immorality (Leviticus 18). But is this all that was required? Note that baptism is not mentioned. Yet baptism is a

requirement for all converts (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15-16).

The idea is that these were minimum requirements to demonstrate that they had separated themselves from heathen ways as a prerequisite to entering the community. When a Gentile entered a pharisaic community by undergoing circumcision, baptism and sacrifice, that was not all that was required. Once having entered the community, then he was expected to obey all the laws of the community. So it is with the requirements outlined here. Once having separated themselves from unclean heathen practices, Gentile converts were expected to obey all commandments pertaining to Christians [Ephesians 2:14-22 (vs. 15, “ordinances,” *dogma*: decrees, teachings); 4:4; Colossians 2:20-23 (“do you subject yourselves to regulations,” *dogmatizo*)]. Note that what Gentiles (and all Christians) are freed from are the decrees imposed by traditions and commandments of men. The “oral law” of the Pharisees consisted of ordinances according to “traditional teaching,” and “the sayings of the Scribes... or Rabbis” (*Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 70).

A number of other laws are given as specifically required of Gentiles in Leviticus 17-20. *Gerim Halakath* applied to all converts. Ten commandments there. Also Exodus 20:8-10. Deuteronomy 16:11, 14; 31:12; Isaiah 56:6-8. The Church saw the prophecies that implied Gentiles worshiping God. Romans 15:8-12, 15-19. Paul sought to make them obedient.

In the next sermon in this series I will go into more detail on what laws the Gentiles are required to keep, and how that was determined by the Church. In summary however, the principle behind what was determined in the Acts 15 conference is stated in 1 Corinthians 7:19. Among the things required of us as Christians, is that we obey God's commandments.

Notes:

1 Kings 2:3 "...keep the charge of Jehovah thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, [and] his commandments, and his ordinances, and his testimonies, according to that which is written in the law of Moses..." (ASV).

Nehemiah 10:29 these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:

This was the book of the covenant. 31:18, God gave Moses the tablets of testimony (Exodus 31:18).

2 Chr 33:8 (NKJV) "and I will not again remove the foot of Israel from the land which I have appointed for your fathers--only if they are careful to do all that I have commanded them, according to the whole law and the statutes and the ordinances by the hand of Moses."

Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah:

p. 68 ff..

In describing the historical growth of the Halakhah, [3 Comp. here especially 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). Compare also Er. 21 b The comparison between such claims and those sometimes set up on behalf of 'creeds' and 'articles' (Kitto's Cyclop., 2nd ed., p. 786, col a) does not seem to me applicable. In the introduction to the Midr. on Lament. it is inferred from Jer. ix. 12, 13, that to forsake the law, in the Rabbinic sense, was worse than idolatry, uncleanness, or the shedding of blood. See generally that Introduction.] And this not illogically, since tradition was equally of Divine origin with Holy Scripture, and authoritatively explained its meaning; supplemented it; gave it application to cases not expressly provided for, perhaps not even foreseen in Biblical times; and generally guarded its sanctity by extending and adding to its provisions, drawing 'a hedge,' around its 'garden enclosed.' Thus, in new and dangerous circumstances, would the full meaning of God's Law, to its every title and iota, be elicited and obeyed. Thus also would their feet be arrested, who might stray from within, or break in from without. Accordingly, so important was tradition, that the greatest merit a Rabbi could claim was the strictest adherence to the traditions, which he had received from his teacher. Nor might one Sanhedrin annul, or set aside, the decrees of its predecessors. To such length did they go in this worship of the letter, that the great Hillel was actually wont to mispronounce a word, because his teacher before him had done so. [a Eduy. i. 3. See the comment of Maimonides.] These traditional ordinances, as already stated, 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. [1 It is so explained in the Aruch (ed Zandau, vol. ii. p. 529, col b).] 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. The return which it offered was the pleasure and distinction of knowledge, the acquisition of righteousness, and the final attainment of rewards; one of its chief advantages over our modern traditionalism, that it was expressly forbidden to draw inferences from these traditions, which should have the force of fresh legal determinations. [2 Comp. Hamburger, u.s. p 343.]

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p. 69 ff.

But other principles apply to the traditions, from Moses downwards. . In answer to the somewhat natural objection, why the Bible alone had been written, it was said that Moses had proposed to write down all the teaching entrusted to him, but the Almighty had refused, on account of the future subjection of Israel to the nations, who would take from them the written Law. Then the unwritten traditions would remain to separate between Israel and the Gentiles. Popular exegesis found this indicated even in the language of prophecy. [b Hos. viii 12; comp. Shem. R. 47.]

But traditionalism went further, and placed the oral actually above the written Law. The expression, [a Ex. xxxiv. 27.] 'After the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel,' was explained as meaning, that God's covenant was founded on the spoken, in opposition to the written words. [b Jer. Chag. p. 76 d.] If the written was thus placed below the oral Law, we can scarcely wonder that the reading of the Hagiographa was actually prohibited to the people on the Sabbath, from fear that it might divert attention from the learned discourses of the Rabbis. The study of them on that day was only allowed for the purpose of learned investigation and discussions. [c Tos. Shabb. xiv.] [1. Another reason also is, however, mentioned for his prohibition.]

But if traditionalism was not to be committed to writing by Moses, measures had been taken to prevent oblivion or inaccuracy. Moses had always repeated a traditional law successively to Aaron, to his sons, and to the elders of the people, and they again in turn to each other, in such wise, that Aaron heard the Mishnah four times, his sons three times, the Elders twice, and the people once. But even this was not all, for by successive repetitions of Aaron, his sons, and the Elders) the people also heard it four times. [d Erub. 54b.] And, before his death, Moses had summoned any one to come forward, if he had forgotten aught of what he had heard and learned. [e Deut. i. 5.] But these 'Halakhoth of Moses from Sinai' do not make up the whole of traditionalism. According to Maimonides, it consists of five, but more critically of three classes. [2 Hirschfeld, u. s. pp. 92-99.] The first of these comprises both such ordinances as are found in the Bible itself, and the so-called Halakhoth of Moses from Sinai, that is, such laws and usages as prevailed from time immemorial, and which, according to the Jewish view, had been orally delivered to, but not written down by Moses. For these, therefore, no proof was to be sought in Scripture, at most support, or confirmatory allusion (Asmakhtu). [3 rom to lean against. At the same time the ordinances, for which an appeal could be made to Asmakhta, were better liked than those which rested on tradition alone (Jer. Chag. p. 76, col d).] Nor were these open to discussion. The second class formed the 'oral law,' [f.] or the 'traditional teaching' [g.] in the stricter sense. To this class belonged all that was supposed to be implied in, or that could be deduced from, the Law of Moses. [4 In connection with this it is very significant that R. Jochanan ben Zaccai, who taught not many years after the Crucifixion of Christ, was wont to say, that, in the future, Halakhahs in regard to purity, which had not the support of Scripture, would be repeated (Sot. 27 b, line 16 from top). In general, the teaching of R. Jochanan should be studied to understand the unacknowledged influence which Christianity exercised upon the Synagogue.] The latter contained, indeed, in substance or germ, everything; but it had not been brought out, till circumstances successfully evolved what from the first had been provided in principle. For this class of ordinances reference to, and proof from, Scripture was required. Not so for the third class of ordinances, which were 'the hedge' drawn by the Rabbis around the Law, to These ordinances constituted 'the sayings of the Scribes' or 'of the Rabbis' [1 But this is not always.], and were either positive in their character (Teqqanoth), or else negative (Gezeroth from gazar to cut off). Perhaps the distinction of these two cannot always be strictly carried out. But it was probably to this third class especially, confessedly unsupported by Scripture, that these words of Christ referred: [c St. Matt. xxiii. 3, 4.] 'All therefore whatsoever they tell you, that do and observe; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but with their finger they will not move them away (set in motion).' [2 To elucidate the meaning of Christ, it seemed necessary to submit an avowedly difficult text to fresh criticism. I have taken the word moveo in the sense of ire facio (Grimm, Clavis N.T. ed. 2(da), p. 241 a), but I have not adopted the

inference of Meyer (Krit. Exeget. Handb. p. 455). In classical Greek also is used for 'to remove, to alter.' My reasons against what may be called the traditional interpretation of St. Matt. xxiii. 3, 4, are: 1. It seems scarcely possible to suppose that, before such an audience, Christ would have contemplated the possibility of not observing either of the two first classes of Halakhoth, which were regarded as beyond controversy. 2. It could scarcely be truthfully charged against the Scribes and Pharisees, that they did not attempt to keep themselves the ordinances which they imposed upon others. The expression in the parallel passage (St. Luke xi. 6) must be explained in accordance with the commentation on St. Matt. xxiii.4. Nor is there any serious difficulty about it.] This view has two-fold confirmation. For, this third class of Halakhic ordinances was the only one open to the discussion of the learned, the ultimate decision being according to the majority. Yet it possessed practically (though not theoretically) the same authority as the other two classes. In further confirmation of our view the following may be quoted: 'A Gezerah (i.e. this third class of ordinances) is not to be laid on the congregation, unless the majority of the congregation is able to bear it' [d B. Kam. 79.] , words which read like a commentary on those of Jesus, and show that these burdens could be laid on, or moved away, according to the varying judgment or severity of a Rabbinic College. [3 For the classification, arrangement, origin, and enumeration of these Halakhoth, see Appendix V.: 'Rabbinic Theology and literature.']

This body of traditional ordinances forms the subject of the Mishnah, or second, repeated law. We have here to place on one side the Law of Moses as second, repeated law. We have here to place on one side the Law of Moses as recorded in the Pentateuch, as standing by itself. All else, even the teaching of the Prophets and of the Hagiographa, as well as the oral traditions, bore the general name of Qabbalah, 'that which has been received.' The sacred study, or Midrash, in the original application of the term, concerned either the Halakhah, traditional ordinance, which was always 'that which was said' upon the authority of individuals, not as legal ordinance. It was illustration, commentary, anecdote, clever or learned saying, &c. At first the Halakhah remained unwritten, probably owing to the disputes between Pharisees and Sadducees. But the necessity of fixedness and order led in course of time to more or less complete collections of the Halakhoth. [1 See the learned remarks of Levy about the reasons for the earlier prohibition of writing down the oral law, and the final collection of the Mishnah (Neuhebr. u. Chald. Worterb. vol. ii. p. 435).] The oldest of these is ascribed to R. Akiba, in the time of the Emperor Hadrian. [a 132-135 A.D.] [2 These collections are enumerated in the Midrash on eccles. xii. 3. They are also distinguished as 'the former' and 'the later' Mishnah (Nedar. 91 a).] But the authoritative collection in the so-called Mishnah is the work of Jehudah the Holy, who died about the end of the second century of our era.

Altogether, the Mishnah comprises six 'Orders' (Sedarim), each devoted to a special class of subjects. [3 The first 'Order' (Zeraim, 'seeds') begins with the ordinances concerning 'benedictions,' or the time, mode, manner, and character of the prayers prescribed. It then goes on to detail what may be

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p. 73

But when the Halakhah, however varied in its application, was something fixed and stable, the utmost latitude was claimed and given in the Haggadah. It is sadly characteristic, that, practically, the main body of Jewish dogmatic and moral theology is really only Haggadah, and hence of no absolute authority. The Halakhah indicated with the most minute and painful punctiliousness every legal ordinance as to outward observances, and it explained every bearing of the Law of Moses. But beyond this it left the inner man, the spring of actions, untouched. What he was to believe and what to feel, was chiefly matter of the Haggadah. 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. In principle it was the same liberty which the Romish Church accords to its professing members, only with much wider application, since the debatable ground embraced so many matters of faith, and

the liberty given was not only that of private opinion but of public utterance. We emphasise this, because the absence of authoritative direction and the latitude in matters of faith and inner feeling stand side by side, and in such sharp contrast, with the most minute punctiliousness in all matters of outward observance. And here we may mark the fundamental distinction between the teaching of Jesus and Rabbinism. He left the Halakhah untouched, putting it, as it were, on one side, as something quite secondary, while He insisted as primary on that which to them was chiefly matter of Haggadah. And this rightly so, for, in His own