

How Did the Church Know What the Gentiles Were to Keep?

Rod Reynolds

As we have covered in previous sermons during the first eight to ten or possibly even fifteen years of its existence the Church consisted of Jews only, the term in this case understood to be inclusive of Samaritan converts who practiced circumcision and followed the Torah and who often claimed to be Jews. Eventually, however, the gospel reached the ears of Gentiles who responded and the Church faced the question of what was required of Gentiles for salvation. The question I want to address specifically today is how did the Church know or determine the answer to the question, "What is required of Gentile converts?" What we will find is that the Church was guided by first the teachings and command of Jesus Christ, who had commissioned the gospel to be preached to all nations; secondly, by the miraculous intervention of God through the Holy Spirit to show that uncircumcised Gentiles who repented were given the Spirit of God; and finally by the clear teachings of the written word of God.

Let's rehearse once again for clarity the background circumstances leading up to the Acts 15 conference. All the original apostles were Palestinian Jews. In Palestine the influence of rabbinical Judaism was especially strong, and the rabbis taught that Gentiles were inherently defiled, or unclean. They, their houses, their possessions were unclean. And to come into contact with them or anything they had touched was a source of defilement (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Edersheim, 1.90-92). On the other hand, the rabbis taught, Israel had been purified at Sinai by receiving the law (*ibid.*, 1.90). Merely having received the law gave Israel merit before God (*ibid.*, 1.551; 2.290). Among the Pharisees, which in certain respects was the most influential religious group among the Jews in Palestine, strict observance of ritual laws relating to purity and the tithe was especially important, along with works of supererogation (or works going beyond the requirements of the law). It was believed by the Pharisees that these earned one merit with God, and that they were the key to eternal life. (Luke 18:9-12; *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Jeremias, pp. 250-251, 254-258; *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, "Alms, Almsgiving," Ages Software Edition).

This matter of purity and how one merits salvation were key questions before the Church in dealing with the Gentiles, and they are at the heart of the discussion in Acts 15. The most immediate issue before the Church was how can a Gentile convert be cleansed or purified from his inherent defilement? From the point of view of the Pharisees and perhaps the majority of Palestinian Jews, to be cleansed a Gentile must be circumcised, baptized, offer a sacrifice and then follow the law in its entirety, including the oral or traditional law which was given even greater weight by the rabbis than was Scripture.

However, among the diaspora, Gentiles had long been accepted into the synagogue for worship without being circumcised, but only baptized and separating themselves from idols. This difference in approach among the Jews is reflected in Josephus, where he recounts that a king of Adiabene named Izates was taught about God by a Jewish merchant named Ananias. Izates accepted the teachings, but on the advice of his mother was reluctant to become a Jew through circumcision. Ananias "said that he might worship God without being circumcised, even though he did resolve to follow the Jewish law entirely, which worship of God was of a superior nature to circumcision." Later, another Jew named Eleazar came along and convinced Izates that he must be circumcised (*Antiquities*, XX.II.4). Even among the rabbis there had been disagreement about the necessity of circumcision for a proselyte, and the Sadducees held that circumcision for adult Gentile converts was not necessary.

So among the Jews themselves were opposing ideas and practices regarding physical circumcision for Gentile converts. There were also among the Jews fundamental disagreements over the necessity of observing the oral law, not only for Gentile converts, but for Jews themselves. Observing the moral laws and the Sabbaths was never a question, however. "...no concessions were made in monotheistic faith or in moral requirements, but solely in liturgical [ritual] matters" (*New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. ix, "Proselytes," p.

281). It's important to know this because this tells us what the discussion in Acts is about. It is about purification ritual and observing Jewish traditional law. It is not about the ten commandments nor the Sabbaths.

Peter, it is evident, started out with the rabbinical teachings concerning the uncleanness of Gentiles fixed in his mind. He was shown otherwise first by a vision and then by circumstances God guided (Acts 10:1-29, 34-35, 42-48). Peter knew Christ had said to preach gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). Earlier Philip, a Hellenistic Jew, had baptized an Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-38).

Subsequently many Gentiles were converted at Antioch, a cosmopolitan city where people from far-flung places of the earth intermingled [11:19-26; "Hellenists," verse 20, is in this case believed by many commentators to refer to Gentiles, and it appears from the context and the fact that there were many Gentile converts at Antioch (cf. Galatians 2:11-12) that it does in fact refer to Gentiles]. Peter saw that uncircumcised Gentiles who had believed the gospel had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:7-11).

Paul knew that the prophets spoke of salvation being offered to Gentiles (Acts 13:42-47). Other prophecies: Isaiah 11:10; 42:1, 6-7. His efforts to minister to Gentiles were based on Scripture consistent with the commission Christ had given him (Acts 9:15; Galatians 1:16; 2:7-8). James uses Scripture (Acts 15:14-21, quotes Amos 9:11-12). Not circumcision, but separation from idolatrous customs was required for Gentiles to become pure (verses 28-29; "no greater burden" relates to circumcision). Acts 21:18-26, episode has to do with ritual purity. At issue was the contention that Paul taught against circumcising children and walking according to customs, which included Levitical laws of purification relating to the Temple worship and Jewish traditions.

Jesus had introduced the "New Covenant" (Matthew 26:28), which had been written about by the prophets (Jeremiah 31:31). Under that covenant the laws of God would be written in the heart and mind, not merely on tablets of stone (verse 33). He had foretold of the destruction of the Temple, and an end to the physical Temple centered worship based on the law of the Levitical priesthood (Matthew 24:1-2, John 4:21, 23; cf. Hosea 3:4). He had prophesied that the Kingdom would be taken from the Jews and given to a "nation" -- the Church -- bearing the fruits thereof (Matthew 21:42-43; 1 Peter 2:6-10).

Paul understood that works are necessary to salvation (Acts 26:20). But he also understood that works apart from faith of no value [Gal 2:11-17]. Verse 14, "live as Jews" means observing Jewish customs such as not eating with uncircumcised Gentiles in accordance with Jewish traditional law. Verse 15, "works of law": *εργων νομου εαν μη δια πιστεως*; that is, if not, or except (*εαν μη*) through faith (*δια πιστεως*). Compare Matthew 23:23. Romans 1:5; 15:18; 16:26. Through faith the heart is changed (Galatians 2:20).

Are Gentile Christians expected to keep the ten commandments? Leviticus 17-20. So called "Noachic" laws obligatory for Gentiles but broken down into seven or as many as 30 specific commandments (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Edersheim, Appendix 12, 2.746; Appendix 14, 2.766). Implicit in these laws are all the ten commandments. For Christians too, including Gentile Christians, the ten commandments are obligatory as Paul's epistles and other Scriptures make plain. Note 1 Corinthians 7:19. Idolatry, adultery, 1 Corinthians 10:7-8; 14; blasphemy, lying, Colossians 3:8-9; Ephesians 4:25; stealing, vs. 28; adultery, covetousness, 5:3-5; murder, Ephesians 4:31-32; honor parents, 6:1-3. These are just a small sampling of Scriptures specifically enjoining upon all Christians the ten commandments not only in letter and in spirit as well.

Sabbaths. All proselytes, whether circumcised or not, were expected to keep Sabbath. (*Easton's Bible Dictionary*, "Proselyte"). Throughout the Bible, keeping the Sabbath is an integral part of God's worship. Exodus 20:10; 23:12; Isaiah 56:1-7 (note circumcision not mentioned, but Sabbath is). Gentiles were also to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:19; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8). And the Feast of Pentecost (Deuteronomy 16:9-11). And the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:13-14; Zechariah 14:16). God's Sabbaths and holy days are

still required to be kept today, as they were kept by Jesus Christ and the apostolic Church.

How did the Church know and determine what was required of Gentile Christians? They knew through what Jesus had taught, they knew through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, they especially knew through the teaching of the Scriptures. Note what Paul wrote to Timothy, a minister to Gentile churches (2 Timothy 3:15-17). All Christians are to live by God's word.