

Then and Now -- *Studying the Past to Shape our Future* By Ed Stevens -- Sunday evening, August 15, 2010 (Lesson 4)

Title of this broadcast: *Transition from Jewish to All Nations*

There are lots of issues in the church today. Around the globe, some of the biggest issues are related to economics, culture, race, religion, and politics. But in the first century, the BIGGEST issue confronting them was whether Gentiles could be saved without circumcision and law-keeping.

The Judaizers argued their case by pointing to the OT prophets who predicted that in the last days the Gentiles would convert to Judaism, so that all nations would become a part of Israel. They would also point to such statements of Jesus as:

John 4:22 “ You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for **salvation is from the Jews.**

Matt. 5:17 “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.

Matt. 5:18 “For truly I say to you, **until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law** until all is accomplished.

Matt. 5:19 “Whoever then **annuls** one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called **least in the kingdom** of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:20 “For I say to you that **unless your righteousness surpasses** *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will **not enter** the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 28:19 “ Go therefore and **make disciples of all the nations**, [proselyte] baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

Matt. 28:20 teaching them to **observe all** that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Acts 1:8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and **even to the remotest part of the earth.**”

These statements, if left unexplained, could easily be interpreted as meaning that the apostles were to go into all the Roman world (the Diaspora) and make disciples from the Jews first, and only from those Gentiles who converted to Judaism first. They viewed salvation as a Jewish thing, only to be obtained by Jews and those Gentiles who converted to Judaism. After all, had not Jesus clearly said that if you did not keep every jot and tittle of the law, better than the scribes and Pharisees, you would not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven when it arrived? So it is easy to see how the twelve apostles could have had the impression that Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the Law in order to be saved.

It is clear, from the early chapters of the book of Acts, that the apostles did not understand that Gentiles would be brought into the Church without circumcision and law-keeping. That is why there was a Cornelius incident in Acts 10, and a Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. You would think that those two occasions would have resolved the issue, but it rears its ugly head again when Paul comes back to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey in AD 58 (almost thirty years after Pentecost)! This time the issue was seemingly resolved, since we hear no more about it in the pages of Acts, nor in the later writings of the NT.

This was a mystery that had not been unveiled for them yet. It was the very same mystery, Paul says in Ephesians 3, which had been kept hidden since the foundation of the world:

[Eph. 3:1-8] For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you **Gentiles** —if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me **for you**; that by revelation there was made known to me **the mystery**, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into **the mystery** of Christ, which in other generations **was not made known** to the sons of men, as it has **now been revealed** to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the **Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise** in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the **Gentiles** the unfathomable riches of Christ. (cf. 1 Cor. 2:7 and Col. 1:26)

That mystery was gradually unveiled for them over the course of the next thirty years. But the Judaizers did not let go of their legalism easily. They fought Paul at every turn. Even Peter, James, and Barnabas, fell prey to their tactics on one occasion. (Gal 2)

We see this very issue, circumcision and law-keeping, dominate much of the pages of the book of Acts, and Paul's epistles. Christians throughout the centuries have struggled with this issue, because of their belief that heaven and earth have not passed away yet, nor has the Kingdom arrived, nor have all of the things predicted in the Law been fulfilled. This has posed a real dilemma for futurists. On the one hand, they know that the Cross purchased redemption for all the elect (including both Jews and Gentiles), but on the other hand "until heaven and earth pass away not one jot or tittle of the Law shall pass away until all is accomplished." This is why they believe the Temple has to be rebuilt and the sacrificial system reinstated, so that the rest of those prophecies can be fulfilled. But by this approach, they would have to believe that Apostle Paul was grossly mistaken, or at least inconsistent, when he taught that Gentiles in the first century did not have to keep the Law in order to be saved.

Apostle Paul was the champion of Gentile freedom. He would absolutely not allow Gentiles to be brought into bondage to anything that was destined to pass away at the

Parousia. Therefore, we can assume that anything which Paul commands the Gentiles to believe and practice was destined to remain a part of the Kingdom after the Parousia. Unless he specifically says it was destined to pass away at AD 70 (for instance, the gift of inspiration, and keeping of the Law), we have to assume that it would continue right on into the eternal Kingdom after AD 70.

It is in this context of Paul's unwavering defense of Gentile freedom from circumcision and law-keeping that we have to examine the counter-claims of the Judaizers. In the book of Galatians, Paul says that anyone who submitted to circumcision and Law-keeping as being essential for salvation was under a curse (Galatians). He clobbered Peter and Barnabas for hypocritically withdrawing from Gentiles in Antioch and refusing to have table fellowship with them (Gal 2). Yet, Paul paid for the sacrifices of himself and four other Jewish Christian men in Jerusalem, so that "all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law." (Acts 21:24)

There is a seeming contradiction here. Many have used this text to unravel the inspiration, integrity, and authority of Apostle Paul and his teachings and writings. I have even heard some Preterists accuse Paul of duplicity on this very issue.

So again, we need to look at this big issue for the first century church and see how the Holy Spirit resolved it. Since the Old Testament prophets indicated that the coming Kingdom would include Gentiles (be a blessing to all the nations), and since salvation had to come through Israel, we can see how the establishment of the Kingdom depended on the resolution of this conflict. The Jews thought Gentile inclusion in the Kingdom could only happen by Gentiles becoming Jews first. They pointed to the OT prophets to support their position.

Well, how did the first century saints solve this dilemma? Or more accurately, how did the Holy Spirit help them solve it? That is what we are going to study here.

ACTS 1:6 -- At the ascension, the apostles still thought of the Messianic Kingdom as a nationalistic Israel thing: "Is it at this time that you are going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?"

ACTS 2:5, 10, 22, 36, 39 -- [AD 30] On the day of Pentecost, it was all Jewish -- "Jews...from every nation under heaven" and "both Jews and proselytes" and "men of Israel" and "all the house of Israel" and "the promise is for you and your children and for all [Israelites] who are far off [in the Diaspora]"

ACTS 6 -- [AD 31] Controversy over Hellenistic widows being neglected in the daily serving of food. The church in Jerusalem was still totally Jewish, including Hellenistic Jews, proselytes to Judaism, and native-born Jews. There were no Gentile Christians yet.

ACTS 9:15 (cf. Acts 22:21) -- [AD 33] At the conversion of Paul, he was told that he would preach to the Gentiles. He claims that Christ directly revealed this mystery to him. It was about this same time that Peter had his vision about Gentiles (Acts 10).

ACTS 10 -- [AD 38] Cornelius was the first Gentile convert. God revealed it to Peter that the Gentiles were welcome to Christ without circumcision and law-keeping. You would think that this would have forever settled the issue.

ACTS 15 -- [AD 49] Some Judaizers from the Jerusalem church went to Antioch and began teaching the Gentiles there that "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved." This instantly erupted into a huge controversy. Paul and Barnabas had intense discussion and debate over it. They finally decided to go to Jerusalem and get a decision on it from the Apostles and Elders there. This was the BIG issue. It is a no-brainer for us today, but it was not to the first century Jewish Christians. They really had a tough time swallowing this idea that Gentiles could get all the Kingdom blessings without becoming Jews first. The Jerusalem elders composed the decretal document which Paul and Barnabas delivered to all the churches in the Diaspora, commanding these essentials to the Gentiles: to abstain from things sacrificed to idols, blood, things strangled, and fornication. The rest they were encouraged to learn at their local synagogues where Moses was preached every Sabbath (Acts 15:21). Even in this decretal document, there is still a strong encouragement to Gentiles to get connected with the synagogue in some way. But Paul later shows that this command to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols was flexible in its application and enforcement.

ACTS 21 -- The plot really thickens here. Paul had just completed his third missionary journey and arrived in Jerusalem. When he met with the elders in Jerusalem, they told him how many thousands of Jews there were in Jerusalem who had believed in Christ, who were all still zealous for the Law, and they had been told that Paul was "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).

Did not Christ's sacrifice on the Cross fulfill all the Law's demands? Yes! Then why were those Jewish Christians in Jerusalem continuing to keep the Law and demanding that Paul continue keeping it and teaching all other Jews to continue keeping it? Were they keeping the Law for salvation-sake? Or for some other reason? Obviously for some other reason. What was that reason?

Take careful note of what they were accusing Paul. It was NOT that he was allowing Gentiles to be saved without becoming Jews first. Evidently they had pretty much resolved that issue in their minds by this time. Their complaint now was that they thought Paul was teaching **all Jewish people outside of Palestine** to forsake Moses and the Law. Do you see what this implies?

1. There were many thousands of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were still keeping the jots and tittles of the law zealously in 58 AD.
2. They believed that not only were Jewish Christians inside Palestine required to keep the Law (because it was the national law code), but so were all Jews even outside of Palestine (because they were citizens of Israel).
3. They believed Paul was violating the Law, the teaching of Jesus, and the other apostles, if he was, in fact, teaching that Jews outside Palestine were no longer bound to keep the Law.

Were these accusations accurate? Was Paul really teaching the Jews outside Palestine to forsake Moses? Or, was he still keeping the Law and teaching all Jews everywhere to continue keeping the Law? And if he WAS still keeping the Law and teaching other Jews to continue keeping it, wouldn't that be nullifying the sacrifice of Christ which supposedly once-for-all ended the validity of the sacrificial system? So, why were these Jewish Christians, including Paul and the other apostles, still keeping the Law in 58 AD (28 years after Pentecost)?

Paul was not keeping the Law for justification sake, since he himself had already stated in his letter to the Roman church that "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified" (Rom 3:20; cf. Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; 3:11; 3:24; and esp. 5:4). He goes even further in the letter to the Galatians and says, "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Gal 5:4). So if Law-keeping was so dangerous to one's relationship with Christ, why was Paul keeping it and teaching other Jews to keep it? Note carefully how Paul answers this question in his first letter to the Corinthians:

1Cor. 9:20-22 To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

Paul was keeping the Law so that he would be in a position to teach his fellow Jews the gospel. He was not keeping it for justification sake. He was being a good law-abiding citizen of Israel by keeping every jot and tittle of it better than the scribes and Pharisees, so that they would see his good example and ask him about Christ. His law-keeping opened doors for the gospel among Jews. The other apostles there in Jerusalem would certainly have agreed with that reason for keeping the Law.

So, what did Paul and the Jerusalem elders do about these false accusations? They told Paul to take four other Jewish Christian brothers, who were under a vow like he was, into the temple and pay their expenses for their purification and head-shaving and the sacrifice for each of them (including Paul), so that "all will know that there is nothing

to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law."

We would have expected Paul to say, "No way, Jose!" But he did exactly what they asked. Was that hypocritical of Paul? Not at all! How do we know? Because this is exactly what Jesus had taught in Matthew 5 regarding the jots and tittles. The Jews would never have listened to law-breakers preaching the gospel. But they would listen to fellow Jews who kept the Law even more scrupulously than they did. This is why Jesus commanded the Jewish Christians to keep every jot and tittle of it, until the destruction of the temple made it impossible to keep. By the time the temple was destroyed, the Gentiles had been fully grafted into the church, so that ALL who were a part of the True Spiritual Israel could be saved.

The Jews needed to hear the gospel within their own cultural context before that End came. The transition from a Jewish kingdom to a church composed of all nations was an enormous change to make in one generation. It required the work of the Paraclete to guide the apostles carefully throughout the transition. It required the apostles to stay within their own Jewish culture in order to lead their Jewish brethren through the wilderness of transition from Law bondage to gospel freedom.

By keeping the Law better than their unbelieving Jewish brethren, they adorned the gospel and made it attractive to their fellow Jews. The non-Christian Jews would have been curious what it was about Christianity that made them better law-keepers. No wonder it says in Acts 6:7 that "the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith." That would never have occurred if the Jewish Christians had quit keeping the Law after Pentecost.

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem knew how important it was for them to continue keeping the Law, and keeping it better than the scribes and Pharisees. The success of the gospel among all Jews everywhere, inside and outside Palestine, was dependent on Jewish Christians continuing to keep every jot and tittle of the Law until the temple was destroyed and it was no longer possible for any Jews to keep it.

That is why they could not fellowship Paul if he was teaching Jews outside Palestine to forsake Moses. But Paul set the record straight by taking those four men into the temple with himself and paying for their sacrifices and related purification expenses. He wanted all Jews everywhere, inside and outside Palestine, to know that he still "walked orderly, keeping the Law."

Paul's whole mission "to the Jews first" would have been instantly and completely nullified if he had been teaching Jews outside Palestine to forsake Moses. Not a single Jew in the Diaspora would have listened to him. He would have been considered anathema to them. Instead, by keeping the Law himself, and encouraging all Jews to continue keeping the Law even after they became Christians, Paul adorned the gospel

and made it attractive to all Jews everywhere. They would be jealous of his more-zealous law-keeping.

Christians today are not bound to keep the jots and tittles of the Law, because Heaven and Earth (the old covenant world) has passed away. The temple was destroyed. The sacrificial system has been permanently abrogated. All the types and shadows of the Law have been fulfilled in Christ and His Church. All the nations have been blessed now by the promised Seed of Abraham (Christ).

If we today ever hope to significantly impact the Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, or other religions for Christ, we will have to learn their culture and become all things to them, the same way Paul did for his fellow Jews. Other cultures listen best to someone from inside their culture.

That is why I put up an exhibit booth every year at the Evangelical Theological Society. I AM a very conservative evangelical Christian. I am not just pretending to be one. I AM one! And it is my conservative evangelical lifestyle which opens the door for me to share my preterist beliefs with my fellow conservative evangelical brethren. Every one of us should find our niche in our own culture and exploit it for the gospel's sake.

A good resource to better understand this issue about Jewish Christians keeping the Law until Heaven and Earth passed away: *The Transition Period and Millennium* (6 audio tracks on the IPA website: www.preterist.org)

Another excellent book to read while we go through these studies of the Transition Period: *First Century Events* by Ed Stevens (available on the IPA website: www.preterist.org)