
Christian Holidays: Gospel to the Gentiles, Circumcision and the Sabbath

by: Ronald L. Dart

One of the strangest things about the Christian faith is that somewhere back in the pages of history, most Christians forgot that Jesus was a Jew. Not only that, they forgot that all of the original disciples of Jesus were Jews, and they had forgotten that the dominant authority for moral conduct, standards, practices and worship for the New Testament Church was the Old Testament.

There is a really interesting quotation from W.D. Davies book, "Paul and Jewish Christianity." He said, "Everywhere, especially in the East of the Roman Empire, there would be Jewish Christians whose outward way of life, would not be markedly different from that of the Jews. They took for granted that the gospel was continuous with Judaism. For them the New Covenant which Jesus had set up at the Last Supper with His disciples and sealed with His death, did not mean that the covenant made between God and Israel was no longer in force. They still observed the feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. They also continued to be circumcised, to keep the weekly Sabbath and the Mosaic regulations concerning food. According to some scholars, they must've been so strong that right up till the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, they were the dominant element in the Christian movement."

And why not? Do you realize that up until 70 A.D., when the Christian Church was forced to flee Jerusalem for Pella, because the Romans were coming and the Temple would be destroyed, that right up until that moment in time, the Jerusalem Church included people who were there when Jesus spoke, who heard Him teach, who saw Him alive after His resurrection and among them, were those of the 12 original apostles. So why wouldn't they be the dominant element in the teaching of the church at that time.

From the beginning of the New Testament, all the way through the twelfth chapter of the book of Acts, the church was composed entirely of Jews and a few circumcised proselytes. And in all that time, there is not a word of any major change in practice or doctrine.

Paul Persecuted The Church

So, when Paul went hunting for Christians to arrest, where did he go? Remember Paul was the great persecutor of the Christian Church. The most diligent of all. Where did he go to find Christians?

Several years after the ascension of Christ, right from the beginning of Paul's involvement, he was busy hunting down Christians all the way to having them killed.

The first reference is in Acts nine verse one, "And Saul, yet breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest {2} And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, that he might bring them bound to Jerusalem."

Think about that. Paul didn't go to Damascus looking for Christians in the street, he went looking for them in the synagogues. Much later when Paul had been arrested, he was talking about this very incident, in his speech he made to some Jews standing on some stairs outside the Romans guards' house

In Acts 22 verse 17, he says this, "It came to pass, when I came again to Jerusalem, even while I was praying in the Temple, I was in a trance, {18} And I saw Him come to me saying, "Make haste and get out of Jerusalem, they will not receive your testimony concerning Me here. {19} And I said, "Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on you."

Now my job is to report and let you decide, but isn't it obvious that the Christians continued to meet regularly in the synagogues on the Sabbath Day with other Jews during this period of time?

For they really saw their only material difference with the Jews in their community, the fact that they believed that Jesus was the Messiah and they believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and for the most part, other than that, Jesus was simply their Rabbi. Now I find it impossible to believe that in these early years the church made any change in its days of worship. There is not a hint about Christmas. No word about Easter and no suggestion that the church had ceased observing the seventh day (Saturday) Sabbath, so if it didn't take place within the time frame of the New Testament, when did it happen?

Before I talk about that, there was one major change that was made by the early church and even that one has not been well understood.

Sabbath and Circumcision

There were two Jewish practices, that particularly identified the Jews in the first century, they were the Sabbath and circumcision. Circumcision, as it happens, became a major bone of contention. As I remarked earlier, up through Acts 12, the Church was entirely Jewish and none of these questions had been raised, but God had no intention of being the sole property of the Jews and in Acts 13 a momentous event occurred.

Gospel To The Gentiles

In Acts 13 verse one, we are told, "Now in the church at Antioch at that time, there were certain prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who is called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul."

Now this Saul, is our Saul of Tarsus, the man we know as Paul.

"As they ministered to the Lord," {2} "and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them." {3} And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."

And for the first time, a serious effort was made toward unbelieving Gentiles. Now it's really hard for the 21st. century reader to look back at that, out of our culture, out of our circumstances with our understanding of Christianity and realize what a momentous event that was. Most Christian people, if you asked them, what is the great commission to the church, will tell you immediately, "Matthew 28 verse 19, "Go into all the world and teach the gospel to all nations."

But what a lot of Christians don't realize is, that what that says is, "Go into all the world and make disciples of all the Gentiles." The word for 'nation' is the same word that is translated 'Gentiles' nearly everywhere else in the New Testament. So, the gospel was from the start supposed to go to the Gentiles.

Here we are, years later and no systematic effort had been made to take the gospel to the Gentiles. So, Jesus takes the initiative, and makes His own effort, and He does not make it from Jerusalem, He makes it from Antioch. He stirs them up by the Holy Spirit and off they go, taking the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas went first to the synagogue in every city and when the gospel was rejected by most of the Jews in the synagogue, they turned to the Gentiles and the Gentiles began to be baptized in droves. They received the gospel gladly and responded to it with alacrity. They were excited by the gospel. These were people who had never heard the gospel before.

Well with this great success in hand, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch. When they got there, they gathered the church together and they rehearsed everything that God had done with them, and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, and they stayed there for a long time with the disciples, but as word spread, there appeared a fly in the ointment.

Dispute Over: Must Be Circumcised To Be Saved

In Acts 15 verse one, Luke tells us this, "Certain men which came down from Judea, taught the brethren, and said, "Except you be circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Now there was a fundamental difference in the world view of those involved in this dispute. Those who were making this argument, we learn later, were Pharisees who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Now can you imagine this group of people not being Sabbath keepers as well, well no, that is inconceivable.

Sabbath and Circumcision

Why then was the Sabbath not an issue? Well because there was nothing in Paul's work with the Gentiles that changed anything regarding the Sabbath. The only thing Paul had done that posed a problem with these people is, he had baptized uncircumcised Gentiles.

Now why is this a problem? Well for the people who came up to Antioch to make this argument, they felt that circumcision was the identifying sign of all people of God, anywhere, anytime. That it identified who God's people were. And if you are not God's people, then you couldn't be saved. You can't come to God, and essentially it really boiled down to the fact that God was the God of the Jews, not the God of the Gentiles and the Gentiles had no business getting involved in this unless, they took the sign of circumcision, which brought them into the Jewish covenant.

Now when you see this, the Pharisees rightly saw circumcision as a matter of national identity. What they made their mistake on was assuming that God was only the God of the nation of Israel. They felt that to serve God you had to join the tribe, by being circumcised.

But there was a fundamental difference between circumcision and Sabbath observance. Circumcision identified the Jews. The Sabbath identified God. This is a major point of confusion among many people to this day.

The Sabbath Is A Sign

In Exodus 31 verse 13 God told the Jews this, "Speak to the children of Israel saying, "Verily my Sabbaths you shall keep, it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations," for what purpose? "So that you may know that I am Jehovah.""

Okay, so here's our big question? Circumcision identified the Jews. The Sabbath identified God, so consequently when this issue began to play out in the New Testament, the issue in the minds of some of these people was, whether or not anyone who was not circumcised could know God? To us looking back on this, it seems like a ridiculous question, but it wasn't a ridiculous question at that time.

How does this conflict play out?

Acts 15 Conference

So "certain men came down to Antioch from Judea and they taught the brethren there, and said, "Except you are circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved"" (Acts 15:1).

This is a shutout. It was an absolute requirement for salvation. according to those men.

"When therefore" verse 2, "Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, finally everyone determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain others, should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question."

So, in order to get a resolution to the question, they decided to go to headquarters, if you want to call Jerusalem headquarters. It was the most influential spot in Christianity, and it was where the apostles were.

"And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church," verse four, "and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all the things that God had done with them, {5} But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed."

This is a category of people. Now it's hard looking back to understand this, but the church in the first century was, maybe if not as politicized as the church is today, it certainly was politicized. It's a mistake to assume anytime people are involved that politics will not be involved. Well, there were here and then.

"There rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees," verse 5, "which believed saying, "It is needful to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

Don't forget from verse one, this is a circumcision salvation issue, not merely whether it is a good idea to keep the law.

Verse 6, "The apostles and elders came together to consider this matter, {7} And when there had been a lot of arguing, Peter rose up and said, "Men and brethren, you know that a long time ago God made a choice among us that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel and believe."

Ah, so this wasn't the first time the gospel had gone to the Gentiles. It was the first effort to be made at unbelieving Gentiles, because what happened in Peter's case, was that he was sent to Cornelius, a man who was a Gentile who did believe. He took him the gospel and he believed it.

Continuing in verse 8, "And God, who knows the hearts, bore them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, just like He did to us. {9} He put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith."

Now I would assume, from what Peter says here, that Cornelius was an uncircumcised Gentile who happened to believe in God and be what they called a God-fearer at that time.

Peter says {9} "Now God put no difference between us and them purifying their hearts by faith. {10} Now therefore why tempt you God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear?"

Now that is a really interesting question that Peter raises here, because what is at issue here, is circumcision and the law of Moses.

Now tell me this, was the law of circumcision something that they could bear? Sure, they had been bearing it for generations. Every man in the room was circumcised. What do you mean, it is something they couldn't bear? Of course, they could bear it.

Well, what other points of the law are we be talking about? Couldn't they bear them? Sure, they could. They had bourn them for generations. What is Peter talking about?

The Yoke

Well the yoke that Peter is talking about, is the attempt to keep the law to be circumcised to be saved, as opposed to salvation by faith and Peter is saying, "We couldn't be saved by our works. Why should we assume that the Gentiles are going to be saved by their works?"

Verse 11 of Acts 15, "We believe that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved just like they."

It is the same thing for Jews and for Gentiles.

"Then," {12} "the whole multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, who recounted all the miracles and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles by them."

Here was the evidence. Evidence, arguments being laid out step-by-step that God is behind this effort.

Then finally, {13} "after they held their peace, James stood up and said, "Men and brethren, listen to me. {14} Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name, {15} And to this agree the words of the prophets as it is written."

Now this is really important, for us to just get together and say, "Well look here, this miracle happened over here, and this door was opened. We accomplished this. We tried this and it worked." That's all well and good, but what James wanted to know was, "Okay, I heard your story. What does the Bible say? Because the Scriptures, what you and I call the Old Testament, that was their final authority.

And so James says in verse 15, "And to this agree the words of the prophets, as it is written. {16} "After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: {17} That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, says the Lord, who does all these things."

God knew from the start, that He intended to call the Gentiles.

James says {18} "Known unto God are all his work from the beginning of the world. {19} So here's my sentence, that we trouble not them, which are from the Gentiles are turning to God, {20} But that we write to them, that they abstain from pollution of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood."

These are things very common in Gentile ceremonies.

Verse 21, "For Moses of old-time has in every city them that preach Moses, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day."

If they want to know right from wrong, then they can go to the synagogue and hear the law read.

"So," verse 22, "this all pleased the apostles and elders, and the whole church, and they decided to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas namely, Judas surnamed Barsabbas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: {23} And they wrote letters by them after this manner; "The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: {24} Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised, and keep the law:" to whom we gave no such commandment."

These men were down there, without any authority, except their own.

A Dangerous Absurdity

Now there is a dangerous absurdity beckoning in this passage. It is tempting to say, "Ah, see there, the Gentiles did not need to keep the law." He said that, "These people came down and troubled you subverting your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised, and keep the law," we did not command that". The absurdity is, that that suggests the Gentiles were free to lie, cheat, steal and commit adultery, if you are going to take it that way.

The issue was not mere obedience to the law. The issue was the law as an instrument of salvation. The law cannot, could not, and never could bring about salvation, not in the days of the apostles, not while Jesus walked the earth, not during the time when Moses led Israel out of the wilderness.

The law defines right from wrong. It never saved anyone.

Circumcision Was Not Abolished

Verse 1 of Acts 15 says, "Certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, "Except you be circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved.""

The issue was circumcision as a salvation issue. Now what is important to know about this section is that circumcision was not abolished. This is a mistake people commonly make when

the Christian theologians look back at this. They say, "They did away with circumcision and a whole bunch of other stuff." No, they did not do away with circumcision. Read it again, read the whole chapter, it is not there. Nothing was changed in fact. Circumcision was a matter of national identity, not spiritual identity. Circumcision identified the Jews. The Sabbath identified God. Circumcision had always been and continued to be the sign of the Jewish people. There is not a hint here that the apostles stopped circumcision for Jewish Christians.

Paul identifies the core issue in his letter to the Galatians when he addresses what happened at this conference.

Could The Gospel Go To The Gentiles?

It is in the letter to the Galatians that Paul tells us what was really at stake here. In the second chapter verse one. He says, "Fourteen years later I went up to Jerusalem again with Barnabas and took Titus with me also. {2} I went up by revelation and communicated to them the gospel I preached among the Gentiles, privately to them of reputation lest by any means I should run or have run in vain, {3} But Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was not compelled to be circumcised." {4} He said, "We had to go up there though, because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily and stealthily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, and to bring us into bondage."

Then he says the important thing, {5} "We did not give subjection to them no not for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you."

What was at stake was whether or not the gospel could continue to go to the Gentiles or not.

Circumcision Not Abolished

But was circumcision then abolished by the Acts 15 conference? No! No, it wasn't. In fact, the very next chapter, Acts 16 verse one, Paul says, "I came to Derby and Lystra and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain woman, who was a Jewess, and who believed, but his father was a Greek. {2} He was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. {3} Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek."

This is truly remarkable. Right after the Jerusalem conference, when it was declared that the Gentiles did not have to be circumcised. Paul considered that the Jewish mother of Timothy made him a Jew and it was necessary for him to be circumcised and so Paul circumcised him. The mind boggles as all of this takes place in utter silence on the issue of the question of the Sabbath, which is every bit as big in the Jewish mind as circumcision is.

Circumcision and the Sabbath were really the twin pillars of the Jews.

From Sabbath To Sunday

The fact is, that all through this time, the entirety of the Christian Church observed the Sabbath day, the same Sabbath as the Jews. Jewish and Gentile Christians all observed it and thought nothing of it.

So, if the change from the Saturday Sabbath to Sunday didn't take place in apostolic times, when did it take place, and perhaps more important, why?

The story is told remarkably well in Samuele Bacchiocchi's landmark work, "From Sabbath to Sunday." At this point in time, there were two major centers of influence in the Christian world, one was in Jerusalem and the other was in Rome.

Now there is a reason why Rome was as strong as it was in the ancient Christian world. The reason is simple enough, Peter and Paul both died there. They were apparently the last two apostles present in Rome. Now about this time, along about 70 A.D., Jerusalem was taken and destroyed by the Romans and all the Christians in Jerusalem fled Jerusalem to Pella. Now this basically broke the center of influence for the Christian Church in Jerusalem for some years, although they did return later.

During the latter years of this century in Rome, other developments were taking place, that began increasingly to separate Christians from Jews. There were persecutions and expulsions of Jews from Rome, that the Christians did not want to be taken up in and so they tried to distance themselves from being Jewish. There were persecutions of Christians that took place which caused the Jews to want to distinguish themselves from being Christians. In Rome, because of the political powers at work there, the separation between Jews and Christians began to become much much stronger.

Here's what Dr. Bacchiocchi has to say on page 169. "The fact that Christians "by 64 A.D.," as F.F. Bruce comments "were clearly differentiated in Rome" while it "took a little longer in Palestine (where practically all Christians were of Jewish birth)" is a significant datum for our research on the origin of Sunday. This suggests that the possibility that the abandonment of the Sabbath and adoption of Sunday as a new day of worship may have occurred first in Rome as a part of this process of differentiation from Judaism."

Dr. Bacchiocchi notes that these kinds of circumstances invited the Christians to develop a new identity, that was not only characterized by a negative attitude toward Jews, which is nothing new in the world, but also by the substitution of different religious customs from the Jewish customs and this was to serve to make the Roman authorities aware that Christians were liberated from any tie with the religion of Israel and the land of Palestine and they represented for the Empire irreproachable subjects.

What a change! What a reason for it? As you might suspect the change took place over a rather long period of time and with the passage of time, the Christians in Rome and Alexandria, in particular in the West, began more and more to try to distance themselves from Judaism and oftentimes the things they said, the statements they made, cast very negative light on the Jews.

Someone even went so far as to claim that the Sabbath and circumcision and the holy days were all imposed upon the Jews because of their infamy, because they were such bad people. But increasingly, the justifications for the change and reading back into the Scriptures the reason for the change, widely influenced large portions of Christianity in the years to come. Pope Innocent the first about 417 A.D. wrote a letter which later became cannon law, that the church should absolutely not observe the sacraments on Friday or Saturday, which reveals of course, up until this time, that a lot of people did.

There were also two contemporary historians, right at the same time, Sozomen about 440 A.D. Socrates about 439 A.D. who confirmed the same thing. Socrates said this, quote "Almost all churches throughout the world celebrated the sacred mysteries on the Sabbath of every week. Yet the Christians of Alexandria and Rome on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this."

So as late as the fifth century, those who did not keep the Sabbath, were in the minority of Christian churches. It is not saying too much to say that the Roman church was determined to stamp out Sabbath observance. They were still ordering fasting on the Sabbath as late as 1,000 A.D., but in the second century there were two major divisions in the Christian church, East and West. In the East they maintained the seventh day Sabbath. In the West they began to lay it aside for political reasons.

Now, here is your challenge: What measuring stick would you take to decide which was right?

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that many Christians have forgotten the importance of the Old Testament?
2. Do you think that there is a loss in our Christian histories in regards to the truth about the Sabbath and God's Holy Days?
3. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's points in regards to the Sabbath and circumcision?
4. What are your thoughts about James' point in Acts 15:21 that the Gentiles can learn about Moses every Sabbath day?
5. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's point that the issue wasn't obedience of the law, the issue was the idea that the law was "an instrument of salvation"?

6. What are your thoughts about the point that the transition from Sabbath to Sunday started in Rome?
7. Christians all agree that the Ten Commandments are important, so why do many not observe the fourth one?
8. What are your thoughts about Socrates quote: "Almost all churches throughout the world celebrated the sacred mysteries on the Sabbath of every week. Yet the Christians of Alexandria and Rome on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this."?
9. What do you think about the point that the Sabbath was still known as late as 1,000 AD?
10. How would you answer Mr. Dart's question in regards to observing the Sabbath: "What measuring stick would you take to decide which was right?"