

# PAUL AND THE CEREMONIAL LAW

Before his debut as the Apostle Paul, Saul entered the world as the son of Diaspora Jews in the city of Tarsus (today located in the country of Turkey). Tarsus was a Roman “free city,” exempt from provincial taxes, and had its own self-government. Its location made it a major east–west trade route.

Since Greek was the language of the area, Paul likely was fluent in both Greek and Hebrew. Since most of his missionary work was to be in Hellenistic cities, he would have no linguistic barriers. He was sent by his parents to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel, the head of the Sanhedrin and a Pharisee (Acts 5:34-40). Many conclude that he also knew Aramaic, the “common language” of the Middle East at that time. Paul actually admitted that he knew many languages to the Corinthian believers (I Corinthians 14:18).

In his adherence to Jewish law and tradition, he declares himself “*blameless*” (Philippians 3:6) and “*exceedingly zealous*” (Galatians 1:14). Though having a multicultural background, he became a religious zealot against the Christians to the point of hating the new sect (Acts 7:57 –8:1).

- “*As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison*” (Acts 8:3).
- Then he received written permission to sell out the Christians in Damascus (Acts 22:4-5).

After Saul met the risen Lord (Acts 27:6-11) and was converted, this man not only became one of God’s most effective evangelists, he was given amazing gifts of tact and discernment, and sought to elevate truth ***without*** undermining Jewish tradition. That would have created barriers against the spread of the gospel. God’s new people were transitioning from 1500 years of theocracy and tradition to a beautiful plan where “*Christ in you*” was central to all covenant promises (Colossians 1:26-27).

Careful in his teachings to avoid unfavorable reactions, he boldly asserted the basis and nature of the Christian body and its wonderful leader:

- “*And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses*” (Acts 13:39).
- “*Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel*” (Ephesians 3:4-6).

Paul selectively taught salvic themes apropos to the audience he addressed.

“He thus tried to allay prejudice, and win souls to the truth. ***He refrained from urging upon the Jews the fact that the ceremonial laws were no longer of any force.*** He cautioned Timothy to remove any occasion for them to reject his labors. ***He complied with their rules and ordinances as far as was consistent*** with his mission to the Gentiles. He would not mislead the Jews nor practice deception upon them; but he waived his personal feelings, for the truth's sake.

“***With the Gentiles*** his manner of labor was ***different. He plainly informed them that the sacrificial offerings and ceremonies of the Jews were no longer to be observed,*** and preached to them Christ and him crucified.

“The apostle in his labors encountered a class who claimed that the moral law had been made void, with the precepts of the ceremonial system. **He vindicated the law of ten commandments**, and held it up before the people as a rule of life. He showed that all men are under the most solemn obligation to obey **that** law, which Christ came to make honorable. He taught that Christ is the only one who can release men from the consequences of breaking the divine law; and that it is only by repentance for their past transgressions, faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and a life of obedience, that men can hope to receive the favor of God.”<sup>1</sup>

### Judaizing Teachers

One of Paul’s greatest challenges lay with the Jews who felt that old customs and ceremonies had spiritual virtues. With zeal beyond propriety these radicals threatened to divide the new church.

“Judaizing teachers were opposing the work of the apostle, and seeking to destroy the fruit of his labors. *In almost every church there were some members who were Jews by birth.* To these converts the Jewish teachers found ready access, and through them gained a foot-hold in the churches.... In the Galatian churches, open, unmasked error was **supplanting** the faith of the gospel. Christ, the true foundation, was virtually renounced for *the obsolete ceremonies of Judaism.* The apostle saw that if these churches were saved from the dangerous influences which threatened them, the most decisive measures must be taken, the sharpest warnings given, to bring them to a sense of their true condition.”<sup>2</sup>

Even “The disciples themselves yet cherished a regard for the ceremonial law, and were **too willing** to make concessions, hoping by so doing to gain the confidence of their countrymen, remove their prejudice, and win them to faith in Christ as the world’s Redeemer.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the great transition to Christianity was delicate and difficult. The disciples compromised too freely, and Paul had to carefully work to quell criticism and even charges of sedition from the powerful Sanhedrin.

“By **non-conformity to the ceremonial law**, Christians would bring upon themselves the hatred of the unbelieving Jews, and expose themselves to severe persecution. The Sanhedrin was doing its utmost to hinder the progress of the gospel. Men were chosen by this body to follow up the apostles, especially Paul, and in every possible way oppose them in their work. Should the believers in Christ be condemned before the Sanhedrin as breakers of the law, they would bring upon themselves swift and severe punishment as apostates from the Jewish faith.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet in the “field,” away from Jerusalem, Paul sought to break down the Jew/Gentile barriers – “we are one in Christ.”

- “*For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise*” (Galatians 3:26-29).
- “*But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe*

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<sup>1</sup> White, Ellen G.; *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, pp. 161-162 (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 188-190 (emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213 (emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212-213 (emphasis added).

days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain” (Galatians 4:9-11).

- “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5:1).

Showing how difficult the path was for Paul is this insight: “He did not find fault with their observance of forms and ceremonies [open criticism was not his method in dealing with Jewish rituals], but showed that **while they maintained the ritual service with great exactness, they were rejecting Him** who was the antitype of all that system.”<sup>5</sup> That is where he was so pointed to the Colossians. The value of rituals exceeded that of the Cross of Christ.

When Jewish influences were absent, Paul did not urge any of the ceremonial or ritual services. “He had done all in his power to remove the prejudice and distrust so unjustly excited because he presented the gospel to the Gentiles without the restrictions of the ceremonial law.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Paul’s Principles of Outreach**

Paul was very gracious and pragmatic in his work with others. He wouldn’t compromise truth or condone sin. He forever elevated the name of Jesus. And, as a tireless worker, he constantly sought to avoid misunderstanding for the higher purpose of sharing the gospel.

This is wonderfully revealed in his letter to the Corinthians.

- “And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law” (I Corinthians 9:20-21).
- “The workers in the cause should not feel that the only way they can work is to make known all points of doctrine ... at once, and in every place. **Such a course would close the ears of the people at the outset, and frustrate the end sought.** God would have his workers be as lambs among wolves, wise as serpents, but harmless as doves. Their own ideas must be laid aside, and they must follow the direction of the Spirit of God. They should not feel that all the truth of God is to be spoken to unbelievers on any and every occasion, but should plan carefully what to say and what to leave unsaid. This is not practicing deception; it is **working as Paul worked.** He says, ‘For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without the law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.’ He did not approach the Jews in a way to stir up their prejudice. **He did not run the risk of making them his enemies by telling them the first thing that they must believe on Jesus of Nazareth;** but he dwelt on the promises of the Old Testament scriptures, which testified of Christ, of his mission, and of his work. Thus he led them along step by step, showing them the importance of honoring the law of God. **He [Paul] also gave due honor to the ceremonial law,** showing that Christ was the one that

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276 (emphasis added).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208 (emphasis added).

instituted the whole Jewish economy of sacrificial service. After dwelling upon these things, evincing that he had a clear understanding of them himself, he brought them down to the first advent of Christ, and proved that in the crucified Jesus every specification had been fulfilled. This was the wisdom that Paul exercised. ***He approached the Gentiles, not by exalting the law at first, but by exalting Christ***, and then showing the binding claims of the law. He showed them plainly how the light that was reflected from the cross of Calvary gave significance and glory to the whole Jewish system. Thus he varied his manner of labor, always shaping his message to the circumstances under which he was placed; and, yet, though after patient labor he was successful to a large degree, many would not be convinced. There are some who will not be convinced by any method of presenting the truth. The laborer for God should, nevertheless, study carefully the best method, in order that he may not arouse prejudice or stir up combativeness unnecessarily. Let him give the people evidence that he is a true Christian, conscientious, desiring peace and not strife, and that he has a love for their souls. Thus the confidence of the people will be gained.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Paul Trained in the Law**

This document is not to review the nuances of the New Testament “law” concepts. It is to briefly decipher Paul’s understanding of the distinction and purpose between the two “laws.”

1. Decalogue
2. Mosaic Law

Later, we will review more deeply references from the writings of Paul – elevating our understanding of his positions. Unfortunately, there is unparalleled confusion in the body of Christ regarding these laws. Compounding this is the growing emphasis on “statute” and “Torah” keeping. The strong emphasis on those positions is self-justifiable only through incorrect Biblical study.

The Decalogue was given at Sinai on tables of stone, written with God’s finger. It is clearly a divine derivative of God’s expectations for man in earthly and heavenly relationships. Many carelessly “lump” this into the Mosaic Law, which is egregious. The New Testament is filled with the Decalogue’s unique principles, including the Sabbath.

The Mosaic Law was a compilation of civil and religious mandates called statutes, judgments and commandments. They were hand-written by Moses, placed in the **side** of the Ark of the Covenant and read to all the “elders of the tribes ... and your officers” (Deuteronomy 31:24-28). Moses, with prophetic eye, foresaw Israel’s apostasy and showed how the Mosaic Law could be protective in turning “aside from the way I have commanded you.” Within the 490-year probationary period of God’s people, Malachi noted: “Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments” (Malachi 4:4).

What is intriguing is the limited analysis of over 600 regulations this law introduces. Paul noted that this “handwriting of ordinances” was blotted out and nailed to the Cross (Colossians 2:14). Speculation is limited only by the imagination as to what Paul was saying. There, the statutes, judgments and commandments that related to the Old Covenant *in anticipation of the Cross* were *rituals in anticipation*. At the Cross all those types became realities. They were no longer needed.

The civil codes would still be applicable as guides to corporate life for the Jewish people. They would have no “moral or legal” antitype at the Cross. The rites, calendars and ceremonies met their objectives at Calvary. Many of those statutes, however, became a framework, by heavenly design,

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<sup>7</sup> White, Ellen G.; *Canvasser*, December 11, 1890 (emphasis added).

for a prophetic template to show how redemption would finally be completed. There is a vast difference between observing an ordinance and its great prophetic meaning in man's restoration.

Nailing something to the Cross is not an invitation to remove it from the Old Testament. They are perpetual documents, giving insight into God's redemptive plans. Some of those statutes, judgments and commandments clarify the deeper meaning of the moral law that represents a distinct part of those regulations. **If they** were nailed to the Cross, then the Decalogue should be also. The Decalogue is the lowest common denominator of God's great moral law, which is the basis for obedience, understanding sin and pleasing God.

Paul referred to this repeatedly:

- By the law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).
- Our faith helps to actually establish (*histanomen*) the law (Romans 3:31). That helps to set it in its proper place and affirms its great moral validity.
- The doers of the law shall be justified (Romans 2:13).

The apostle John concurred: *"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous"* (1 John 5:2-3). There he outlines the two divisions of the Decalogue – obedience to God and obedience to man.

The New Testament is dripping with reminders of the supreme regard Paul had toward the Decalogue. There are no allusions to moral requirements to follow the *Mosaic Law* outside those statutes that embellish man's understanding of the Decalogue.

Paul elevates our thinking through the beautiful imagery of the Melchizedek priesthood. In this He makes it clear that our New Covenant status with God relates to how we grasp the "law issue."

- There is made of necessity a change in the law (Hebrews 7:12).
- Disannulling of the commandments (Hebrews 7:18).
- It made nothing perfect (Hebrews 7:19).

What law?

- The law of a carnal (man-created) commandment (Hebrews 7:16) – referring to the Mosaic Law.

In the New Testament era the great transition from the Jewish Theocracy to the glorious kingdom of Christ occurred. It was introduced by John the Baptist and embellished by Jesus.

*"The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it"* (Luke 16:16).

"In consequence of continual transgression, the moral law was repeated in awful grandeur from Sinai. Christ gave to Moses religious precepts which were to govern the everyday life. **These statutes were explicitly given to guard the ten commandments.** They were not shadowy types to pass away with the death of Christ. **They were to be binding upon man in every age** as long as time should last. **These commands were enforced by the power of the moral law,** and they clearly and definitely **explained that law....**

"The death of Jesus Christ for the redemption of man lifts the veil and reflects a flood of light back hundreds of years, upon the whole institution of the Jewish system of religion. Without the death of Christ all this system was meaningless. The Jews reject Christ, and therefore their whole system of religion is to them indefinite, unexplainable, and uncertain. They attach as much

importance to shadowy ceremonies of types which have met their antitype, as they do to the law of the ten commandments, which was not a shadow, but a reality as enduring as the throne of Jehovah. The death of Christ elevates the Jewish system of types and ordinances, showing that they were of divine appointment, and for the purpose of keeping faith alive in the hearts of his people.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Paul’s Observance of Feasts**

Paul associated with feast keepers at feast times. Not, however, as a religious requirement, but to avoid the divisive charges that the Sanhedrin was craving to place on him, and to minimize the resistance of Judaizing teachers, clearly sent out to infiltrate the churches he had established.

He also saw these feasts as special opportunities to broaden his influence when large numbers of people were gathered together.

“Paul greatly desired to reach Jerusalem before the passover, as he would thus have an opportunity to meet the people who came from all parts of the world to attend the feast.”<sup>9</sup>

In spite of his precautions, compromise and friendliness, even the Christian leaders at Jerusalem found fault with his methods.<sup>10</sup> This caused him much pain. He worked as closely as possible with them, giving in to the decisions of the Council.

“Paul did not bind himself nor his converts to the ceremonies and customs of the Jews, with their varied forms, types, and sacrifices; for he recognized that the perfect and final offering had been made in the death of the Son of God. The age of clearer light and knowledge had now come. And although the early education of Paul had blinded his eyes to this light, and led him to bitterly oppose the work of God, yet the revelation of Christ to him while on his way to Damascus had changed the whole current of his life. His character and works had now become a remarkable illustration of those of his divine Lord. His teaching led the mind to a more active spiritual life, that carried the believer above mere ceremonies. ‘For thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it. Thou delightest not in burnt-offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.’”<sup>11</sup>

Many contend today that Paul had a passionate desire to “keep this feast,” which confirms and affirms keeping that part of the ceremonial law. One example is:

- *“But bade them farewell, saying, I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem: but I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus”* (Acts 18:21).
- But the translation is incorrect.

Oldest manuscripts show the phrase *“I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem”* to be an added phrase which was not in the original text. This is correctly shown in the many translations which eliminate it (e.g., NIV, NRS, NET, ASV).

Our attention is also drawn to the Philippian believers. Paul’s affection for that church was deep. This would be his last time seeing them. Those days during the Passover period would afford special fellowship.

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<sup>8</sup> White, Ellen G.; *The Review and Herald*, May 6, 1875 (emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup> White, Ellen G.; *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, p. 194.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

“At Philippi Paul tarried to keep the passover. Only Luke remained with him, the other members of the company passing on to Troas to await him there. The Philippians were the most loving and true-hearted of the apostle’s converts, and he enjoyed a peaceful and happy visit with them during the eight days of the feast.”<sup>12</sup>

Then “we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and came unto them to Troas in five days; where we abode seven days” (Acts 20:6).

As previously observed, Paul wouldn’t burden the Gentile believers with feast keeping. For the sake of any Jews who might continue to follow this Passover/Unleavened Bread spring celebration, Paul would delay his travels.<sup>13</sup> But he was eager to be on his way to Jerusalem for Pentecost: “For Paul had determined to sail by Ephesus, because he would not spend the time in Asia: for he hasted, if it were possible for him, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost” (Acts 20:16).<sup>14</sup> That was one of the required festivals, and many opportunities to mingle and teach the people would be there. Nowhere is Paul elevating the keeping of the feasts as a Christian requirement. It was a time of fellowship and a time to support the Jewish people who continued those rites. The Judaizers who were in virtually every church were thus deprived of feast-keeper criticism against Paul.

Another text that concerns feast-keeping is in Paul’s letter to the Corinthian believers: “Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep **the feast**, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (I Corinthians 5:6-8).

The article “the” is not in the original. The setting is pastoral. “It does not mean the paschal supper here – for that had ceased to be observed by Christians.”<sup>15</sup> It was in the intent or spirit of that celebration that the Corinthian believers were to put away evil. That **was** a major burden of Paul for that troubled church. As you eliminate leaven, representing sin, remove it from your lives in the spirit of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Paul’s letters to those believers are the most extensive in the New Testament. Christ is our Passover. His merits were to be a continual source of cleansing and restoration. Paul’s invitation is to engage in a continuous spiritual Passover.<sup>16,17</sup>

There is nothing in Paul’s writings or narrative relative to worship to show that he considered the feasts obligatory, sacred or part of the Christian dispensation. In a greater exposition, Paul discusses the transition between the dispensations (cf. Psalm 110:1-7) elevated in the book of Hebrews:

- “For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a **change also of the law**” (Hebrews 7:12).
- “The context requires us to understand it only of the law so far as it was connected with the Levitical priesthood. This could not apply to the ten commandments – for they were given before the institution of the priesthood; nor could it apply to any other part of the moral law, for that was not dependent on the appointment of the Levitical priests. But the meaning is, that since a large number of laws – constituting a code of considerable extent and

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>13</sup> Barnes, *Power BibleCD 5.2*, Acts 20:16.

<sup>14</sup> Poole, *Power BibleCD 5.2*, Acts 20:16.

<sup>15</sup> Barnes, *Op. cit.*, I Corinthians 5:8.

<sup>16</sup> *Family Bible Notes* on 5:8.

<sup>17</sup> *Robertson’s Word Picture* on 5:8.

importance – was given for the regulation of the priesthood, and in reference to the rites of religion, which they were to observe or superintend, it followed that when their office was superseded by one of a wholly different order, the law which had regulated them vanished also, or ceased to be binding. This was a very important point in the introduction of Christianity, and hence it is that it is so often insisted on in the writings of Paul. The argument to show that there had been a change or transfer of the priestly office, he proceeds to establish in the sequel.”<sup>18</sup>

Paul goes on: “*Who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life*” (Hebrews 7:16). The carnal law refers to one related to the “flesh” or outward observances. The new priesthood, laws and covenant agreements did not relate to liturgy or calendars. By an oath (Hebrews 7:21) and by Christ’s death becoming a surety (Hebrews 7:22-23) for us – ***the only law that transcends the Cross is the one that can be written in our minds and in our hearts (Hebrews 8:10). This is a profound doctrinal issue!***

The law of rites and worship rituals, which were shadows of heavenly things, is changed or disannulled (Hebrews 7:12, 18-19). Within that logic and context Paul had already admonished the Colossians that the feasts were only shadows (Colossians 2:16-17). Long ago God reminded His people in rebellion (time of Manasseh – 687–642 B.C.)<sup>19</sup> that there were two laws. One “that I commanded them” (Decalogue) and “the law that my servant Moses commanded them” (“law of Moses” – II Kings 21:8). Only the Decalogue with its clarifying statutes remains.

The highest relationship with Christ is appealed to by Paul. Within one of his great invitations he makes it clear that feast keeping could even be a barrier to full fellowship with Christ. (See “Paul’s Christ-Centered Appeal – Colossians 2:14-17” at [endtimeissues.com](http://endtimeissues.com) website, under Articles.) This amazing apostle raises his voice against “liturgical Christianity,” which detracts from our focus on Jesus. The transition in worship dependency from an earthly to a heavenly priesthood invites the deepest of study.

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Franklin S. Fowler, Jr., M.D.  
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<sup>18</sup> *Power BibleCD*, Barnes on Hebrews 7:12.

<sup>19</sup> Thiele, Edwin; *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1951; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Kregel, 1983). p. 217.