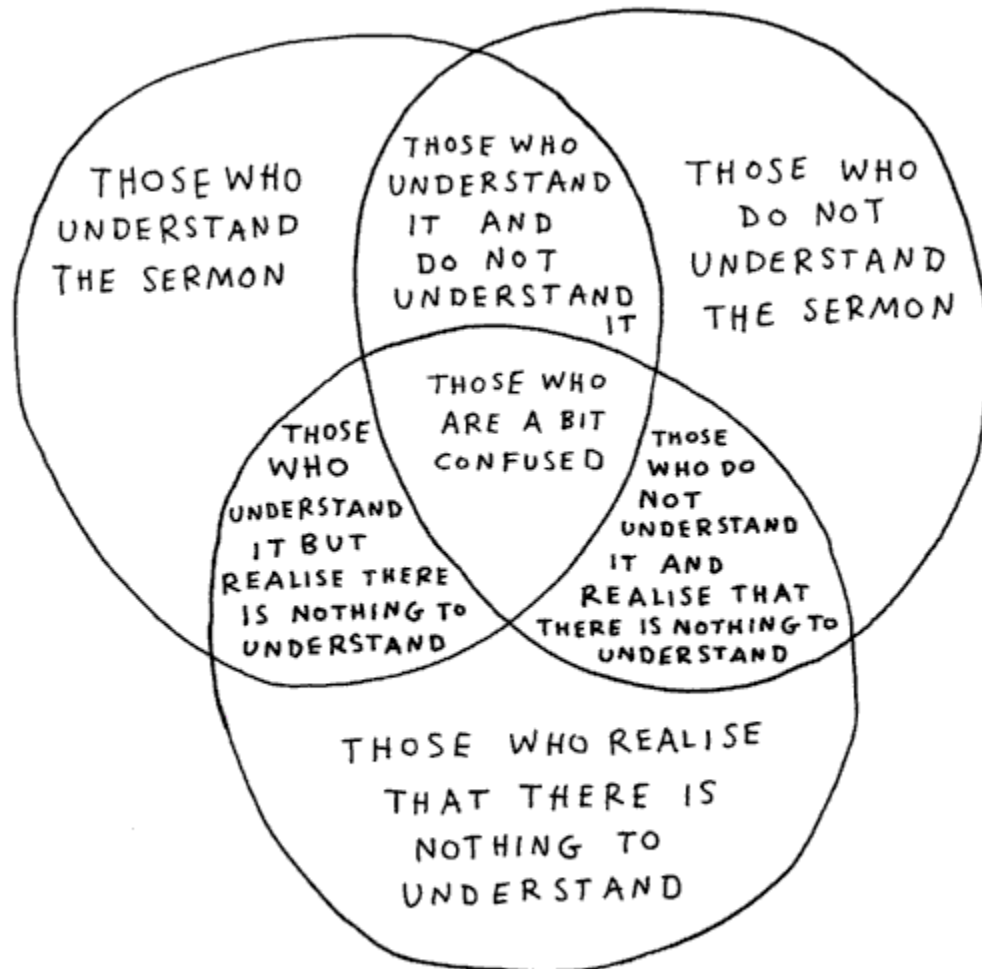


# The Laws of Acts 15

By Phillip G. Kayser · Acts 15:20-29 · 2007-12-2

## Who cares what this means?



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We have come to the last detail of the Jerusalem Council – at least the last detail that *I* thought needed to be addressed. But verses 20 and 29 are a little bit confusing to those who do not understand the Old Testament. We could spend the full 45 minutes that this sermon is going to take, simply going over all the different views on these verses and

never get to application. And as I listed out all the different views this past Tuesday, I became a bit discouraged. And I thought, if it is confusing on paper, it is going to be even more confusing when preaching it. That's why I threw the cartoon of the Venn Diagram into your outline. It shows all the inter-sections of various ways of not understanding the sermon: 1) those who are a bit confused, 2) those who do not understand the sermon, 3) those who understand it but realize that there is nothing to understand, 4) those who do not understand it and realize that there is nothing to understand. Hopefully you will all be in the part that says, "Those who understand the sermon." That's my goal this morning. Several times I was just tempted to pretend these verses didn't exist and just go on to verses 36-40.

### **Misinterpretations of this have led to antinomianism.**

But I can't, because this is a passage that has been so misused by heretics. And besides, several of you have kept asking me when I am going to address these laws. So let me start by showing how the misinterpretations alone make this a critical subject to understand. One misinterpretation says that verse 29 does away with all the Mosaic law, except for four things, and you only have to follow those four *when you are hanging around Jews*. And they mean that even the ten commandments (as written) are no longer binding. They are New Testament believers.

Others have been even more antinomian and say that these verses do away with all law period – whether New Testament or Old Testament law. These are just social guidelines for dealing with Jews who have sexual hang-ups and are grossed out by blood. So there are two kinds of antinomianism, one more serious than the other. Obviously such heresies are fairly easy to recognize. None of us would be tempted to buy into that. But there are some interpretations that are a bit more dangerous.

### **Misinterpretations of this have led to cultural relativism.**

For example, point B. There are evangelicals who believe that this is simply a cultural command for that period, and that each culture will have its own norms. They say, "There are norms, but those norms change as cultures change." And supposedly, all we ought to bring to a culture is

the bare bones Gospel. They call this contextualizing the Gospel. One missionary said that when he is in America he acts as a capitalist, but when he is in his tribe in Ghana he will insist on common property. And he would appeal to this passage as an example of such cultural relativism. They were being sensitive to Jewish norms. When in Rome do as a Roman does, and when in a communist country, live like a communist. So he would say that in the first century, women elders would not be appropriate because that wasn't a cultural norm, but nowadays we should have an equal number of men and women on the elder's board. Why? It's a cultural norm just like James was giving. Or (as another example) he wouldn't be willing to oppose female circumcision in Africa because that is a cultural norm there. But when he is in America, he would be quite willing to oppose female circumcision. Why? It's offensive to feminists.

### **Misinterpretations of this have led to cultural legalism (where culture dictates morality and can add rules to Scripture)**

Another missionary gave a slight variation on this theme by imposing a form of cultural legalism. This is point C. And there are times when the relativists of point B become the legalists of point C on some issues. And let me give you an example from a very famous missiologist. I think you would be shocked if I gave you his name. I will narrow it down for you by saying that he taught at Fuller Theological Seminary. This professor has read 1 Timothy 3:2 to his class, "A bishop must be blameless, the husband of one wife..." He then took this mandate to be "blameless" as being a cultural standard. In the first century polygamy was not honored, monogamy was. (Actually he is wrong on that, but anyway, that was his assumption.) And his thesis was that Paul wanted the elders to be blameless – well regarded in their society. That's the goal. But there is a problem in achieving that goal. And to illustrate, he points to tribes where a monogamist simply could not get anywhere socially because he would not be respected. No one would consider him to be an elder. Why? Because he doesn't have enough wives. If you are to be honored in that culture, you have to have multiple wives. And this professor of missions said that if we are to faithfully contextualize the Gospel, then the church in that culture must impose a standard that an elder *must* be the husband of several wives. I'm not making this up. When he was accused

of not being Biblical, he could simply respond that he was being faithful to the Gospel of Paul, and Paul contextualized the Gospel wherever he went. You can see why I call it a cultural legalism. It is imposing laws that aren't in the Bible. In fact, in this case they contradict the Bible. (But legalism usually does contradict the Bible at some point.)

And we have many churches that do this in America. For example, there are churches like Willow Creek Community Church that mandate female elders when Paul forbids them. Why? Because our culture doesn't respect Patriarchy, and they are imposing cultural legalism in order to be respected in our culture. Mandating children's church when the Bible calls for an integrated church would be another example. It's a cultural legalism. Mandating that their members get psychological counseling would be another example. I know one person who is under discipline because he refused to submit to secular, psychological counseling. Churches mandate universal suffrage even though the Bible only allows male heads of households to vote. That started in the 1900s as a result of cultural norms. So we are not talking about just horrible things like that polygamy example. We can find examples of cultural legalism everywhere, and they will sometimes appeal to a text like this to justify it. They will say that the apostles imposed a cultural standard upon the church. This despite the fact that Jesus condemned the traditions of man in Mark 7 and despite the fact that Paul told the Corinthians not to go beyond what was written in the Bible – that's 1 Corinthians 4:6. If we interpret this as a cultural mandate, then we can fall into the same cultural legalism. This is a very relevant passage for us.

### **Misinterpretations of this have led to a ceremonial observant Messianic congregations.**

Point D is another misinterpretation. I have read articles by Messianic Christians who insist on circumcision, wearing tassels on the corners of their coats; they insist that men may not shave, and they push other ceremonial laws. And after all the time that we have spent on this chapter you might wonder how they could do that. But they interpret this chapter as saying that Gentiles don't have to get circumcised, but Jews must. Gentiles don't have to wear these tassels, but Jews must. If a Gentile wants to shave, that's fine. But we will get on your case if you are a Jew and you do so. I think just from what we have taught on this

chapter already that you can see that this is a gross misinterpretation of the New Testament. Ceremonial laws were optional, and could not be mandated of Jews. Peter, Paul and Barnabas felt quite comfortable breaking the ceremonial laws such as Kosher diet. But the paper I referred to is having great influence in some Jewish Messianic circles that want to impose a Kosher diet. So I am giving you these different views so that you can see that I have a reason for preaching on these verses other than simply idle curiosity.

### **Misinterpretations of this have led to accusations of inconsistencies and contradictions in the Bible or that Paul and James contradict one another.**

Liberals have said that James contradicts Paul. I've already dealt with that false view. But they buttress their heresy by saying that verse 29 is a total cave in on the part of James, and that Paul could not have been pleased. They say, "Notice that Paul didn't say anything after James." Here is James imposing ceremonial laws on Gentiles when Paul has been arguing against ceremonial laws. Paul didn't even want one – he didn't even want circumcision, and here we have four ceremonial laws. But as we will see shortly, these four are exceptions that Paul would have fully agreed with, and which in no way violate the spirit of Jew and Gentile being equally a part of the same body. Circumcision definitely violates that principle but these laws do not.

### **What it does not mean.**

#### **It is not a repudiation of the moral law of Moses (Rom. 13:9 and rest of NT).**

I think it is helpful if we look first of all at what this text does not mean. Obviously we have hinted at it by looking at five misunderstandings. But we can add to that five more. First, this is not a repudiation of the moral law. And people will respond, "Well, 'sexual immorality' is a moral law. And it is the only moral law from the Old Testament that is being upheld." But the Greek word "*porneia*" can refer to non-moral marriage laws, such as "you can't marry your cousin or your nephew." If the law "sexual immorality" is the only moral law that we have to keep, does it mean that we can murder, lie and steal? Obviously not. Romans 13:9

says that the commandments "*You shall not commit adultery,*" "*You shall not murder,*" "*You shall not steal,*" "*You shall not bear false witness,*" "*You shall not covet,*" [is still binding. He's quoting the Old Testament. And he continues] "and if *there is* any other commandment, are *all* summed up in this saying, namely, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" The Assembly did not do away with the moral law.

### **It is not simply a sampling of both ceremonial and moral laws (with other laws being implied) (v. 28).**

Some people try to uphold moral law by saying that the moral law is assumed and that the Assembly gives sexual immorality as just one example of moral laws that need to be kept. But there are two problems with that interpretation. First, verse 28 is quite clear that whatever these four laws are, there aren't more of them. Verse 28: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you *no greater burden* than these necessary things." There isn't anything more than those four laws of Moses that needed to be kept. If all four are not ceremonial laws, then we are in trouble. That means we *can indeed* murder, steal and lie. But if there are more moral laws implied here, then by logical necessity there must be more ceremonial laws. You could argue that they too are samples. That would mean that the sky is the limit to the number of other ceremonial laws that could be added. That's not a helpful solution.

**If more moral laws are required (don't murder, steal, etc) then automatically it is possible that more ceremonial laws apply.**

**But if these are the only ceremonial and moral laws binding, then it is OK to murder, steal, etc.**

**This poses a problem with the rest of the New Testament.**

### **It is not simply a cultural adaptation to the Jews (vv. 28,29).**

Some people say that (based on verse 21) this is a cultural adaptation to the Jews. Verse 21 gives as James' reason, "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath." They say that the only reason for these laws is to accommodate Jews. Where Jews are not present, we can eat blood pudding to our heart's content.

Well, I have a problem with that interpretation because verse 28 calls these four things "necessary things." They are not just cultural adaptations. They are necessary. Furthermore, verse 29 gives no clue that they are simply talking about being around Jews. Instead, it makes it more general. It says, "If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well." SO they are necessary and they are generously applied.

### **It is not simply three things that occur in temples (notice the contrast between verses 20 and 29).**

A fourth creative interpretation looks at verse 20 and says, "the first thing in the list is "things polluted by idols" and it then gives three things that are so polluted: 1) temple prostitution, 2) strangled animals and 3) drinking blood in pagan temples. There are three problems with that interpretation. First, it doesn't say "temple prostitution." There were words that made that clear. Second, the grammar doesn't allow the last three to be modifying the first one. The words "and the" in the Greek precedes each of the last three laws, indicating that they are in addition to, not a subset of things polluted by idols. Thirdly, we will be seeing that verse 29 changes the order. And that is the strongest evidence that these are four separate things.

### **It is not a cowardly caving in to Judaizing pressure on the part of James (v.v. 22,23,25,30-35)**

Finally, it is not a cowardly caving in to the Judaizing pressure on the part of James. Verse 22 shows a solidarity of Paul and Barnabas with the other delegates who are bringing this letter. Verse 23 is clear that this letter came from all the apostles. That includes Paul. Verse 25 again affirms Barnabas and Paul. And verses 30-35 shows that this was a unanimously sent and received message. Whatever the decision was, it is not saying anything different than Galatians has already said or than 1 Corinthians will later say.

## **What it does mean**

**It means that Gentiles believers are not being required to keep anything more than the four requirements of Gentiles in Leviticus 17-18.**

Well, now that we have painted ourselves into a box, some people might think that there is no other option. What *does* it mean? And the solution to this dilemma is that all four laws are the only Jewish non-moral laws that were required of Gentiles in the Old Testament. The Old Testament did not require circumcision of believing Gentiles like Uriah the Hittite or other Gentiles dwelling in the midst of Israel. They didn't have to keep any ceremonial laws except for four - and let me list them from Leviticus 17-18. 1) abstain from eating blood, 2) abstain from eating meat of animals that had been strangled, 3) abstain from meat that had been offered to idols and 4) to *not* marry near relatives. And the laws against marrying near relatives are the laws of consanguinity (we call those blood relations) and the laws of affinity (or the in-laws blood relations). Now those aren't moral laws. For example, where did Cain get his wife? It was his sister. Where did Abraham get his wife? Abraham married his half sister. There are other examples before the time of Moses. It wasn't until the time of Moses that God added those laws for health sake and for ceremonial purposes. And exactly which relatives you may not marry is spelled out in Leviticus 18. I'm not going to look at that right now, but I believe these four laws continue to be binding until the time of the Second Coming. So let me take a bit of time to demonstrate how this interpretation perfectly fits the context of James' argument. I think it is a brilliant argument.

### **It is a logical necessity of the Scriptures cited in Acts 15:16-17**

**Though the main text James cites is Amos 9:11-12 (see previous sermon), James is quoting "prophets" (plural) and therefore Acts 15:16-17 should be seen as a conflation of Jeremiah 12:15 ("After this I will return"), Amos 9:11 ("and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up"), Zechariah 8:20-23/Amos 9:12 ("So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who does all these things") with Zechariah 2:14-17 being a strong parallel passage.**

I won't get into all the nitty gritty of the exegesis of the context, but let's back up to verse 15. James says, "And with this" [that's Peter's statement that God has included Gentiles within the same body as the Jews. "With this"] **the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:** Notice that James is not quoting just one prophet. Last week



we focused on Amos 9:11-12 because that is the main bulk of the quotation, and everything needed for our applications last week can be found in that passage. But James uses the term prophets (plural), and there were three prophets who spoke about exactly the same thing. You could get exactly the same applications that we made from any one of those three passages. So slight variations in words between Amos and Acts 15 are completely reconciled when you compare the parallel passages. In your outlines I point out that the quote is a conflation of Amos 9:11-12, Jeremiah 12:15 and Zechariah 8:20-23. Interestingly, all three prophets speak of the time of Messiah as being a time when Gentiles will be saved and will dwell in the midst of Israel. They distinguish between observant Jews and non-observant Gentiles, yet the Gentiles are clearly saved and considered part of God's people. I'm sure it would have been a puzzle for Old Testament saints who read those passages. How can *Jews and Gentiles* be God's people? But even though it was not clear to Old Testament saints, you can clearly see that it is talking about the same thing that Peter was.

This is why in verse 19 he can make a logical deduction: "*Therefore I judge that we should not trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.*" The observance of those four laws logically flows from Amos 9, Jeremiah 12 and Zechariah 8. One commentator said, "The proviso in Acts 15:20 is not an arbitrary qualification of this decision, but itself follows, with exegetical logic from Acts 15:16-18. If Gentile Christians are the Gentiles to whom the prophecies conflated in Acts 15:16-18 refer, then they are also the Gentiles of Jeremiah 12:16; [and] Zechariah ... and therefore the part of the Law of Moses which applies to them is Leviticus 17-18."

The reason this author says that Leviticus 17-18 is relevant is that it contains the same four laws James brings up, and applies them to Gentiles. So if the Gentiles being saved in Acts are the same as the Gentiles being saved in Amos 9, Jeremiah 12 and Zechariah 8, it follows of *necessity* that they must observe the ceremonial laws that the Old Testament imposed on all Gentiles who dwelt in the midst of Israel. That's the logic of James' argument. I think everyone would have immediately understood that because imposed those laws on Gentiles living in their midst.

**These were ceremonial laws that were imposed upon Gentiles in the Old Testament. A brief history of these laws: The prohibition of blood was imposed on the human race in Genesis 9:4**

Let me give you a brief history of these laws. First, in Genesis 9, as soon as Noah gets off the ark, God gives these Gentiles a prohibition of blood. Genesis 9:3 said that they could eat pork. They weren't bound by any of the kosher laws. Why? Because they are not Jews. God said to Noah, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs." So even though they don't have to follow other ceremonial laws, the next verse absolutely prohibits the eating of blood. It says in Genesis 9:4, "But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood." So the blood laws were applied to every human being. These are not laws that are restricted to Israel. Nor was it trying to be sensitive to the presence of Jews. Long before there were Jews, God forbids the eating of blood as food. It's not an Old Testament ceremony designed to separate Jew from Gentile. And there were a lot of laws that did that, including circumcision. That's why Paul refuses to let them impose circumcision, but he has no problem imposing laws that always applied to Gentiles.

**Under Moses the prohibition of blood was imposed as a "perpetual ordinance" (Lev. 3:17; 7:26-27; 17:12-16; 19:26; Deut. 12:16,23; 15:23)**

I won't look up the verses in your outline, but I give several that say that this prohibition of blood was imposed as a perpetual ordinance. It was not just a time-bounded thing for Israel. So if there are any of you who strangely like to eat blood pudding, God prohibits it for all time. That's the one food that I respectfully decline in Asia, and I am so grateful for this excuse. To see them slurping blood is gross.

**All four laws were imposed upon the "aliens who dwell among you" in Leviticus 17-18.**

**Notice the reference to the "aliens who dwell among you" in 17:8,10,12,13; 18:26)**

Now turn with me to Leviticus 17-18. This is the one place in the Law that made special requirements for Gentiles in the land. And I want to first of all read the verses that show that it was for Gentiles.

Leviticus 17:8 "Also you shall say to them: 'Whatever man of the house of Israel, *or of the strangers who dwell among you*, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice,

[and we will see the relation of this to meat offered to idols. But the key phrase is "the strangers who dwell among you." Other translations render it, "the aliens who dwell among you," or "the foreigners who dwell among you."]. Look at verse 10:

Leviticus 17:10 "And whatever man of the house of Israel, *or of the strangers who dwell among you*, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people.

This prohibition of blood to Gentiles is repeated again in verse 12:

Leviticus 17:12 Therefore I said to the children of Israel, "No one among you shall eat blood, *nor shall any stranger who dwells among you* eat blood.'

So that is clearly not just a Jewish law. Next comes eating things strangled in verse 13:

Leviticus 17:13 "Whatever man of the children of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who hunts and catches any animal or bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with dust;

You can't eat it strangled. You have to bleed the animal. Then comes a bunch of moral and ceremonial laws related to sexual relations and marriage. And I want you to notice that in chapter 18:26 it applies every one of these laws to Gentiles as well as Jews. If there is one of those laws that you don't like, you are in trouble, because those laws apply to everyone. Verse 26:

Leviticus 18:26 You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, and shall not commit *any* of these abominations, *either any of your own nation or any stranger who dwells among you*.

These laws were required of all believing Gentiles who didn't want to become Jews. They were called "strangers within the land" or "Gentiles in the midst of My people."

**The prophecies James cites use the same language of New Covenant Gentiles being "in the midst of Israel."**

That's exactly the same language used by the three prophets that James quotes. For example, Jeremiah 12:16 says, "then they shall be established in the midst of My people." The Zechariah 8 passage indicates not only that the Gentiles would seek the Lord, but they would somehow be considered to be in Jerusalem (v. 22) and would be in a synagogue learning from a Jewish man (v. 23). It wasn't a clear revelation of the mystery of the one body that Paul talks about, but it was consistent with that new revelation. And isn't that what James says? "And with this the words of the prophets agree." Peter gave the new revelation and James says that this new revelation is consistent with what was prophesied, even though it wasn't clearly prophesied. The parallel passage in Zechariah 2 says that "many nations shall be joined to the LORD in that day, and they shall become My people." That's as clear a testimony to the one body as you can get in the Old Testament, yet still not clear enough to understand the doctrine totally without the New Testament revelation of the mystery given to Peter, Paul and all the apostles. It was hidden.

So here is the significance of James' conclusion: if what's going on here is the well-known prophecies of Gentiles being saved and being in the midst of Israel, then the laws governing Gentiles in the midst of Israel continue to apply. We are the wild olive branches grafted into Israel. That is not replacement theology. In Romans 11 Paul says that the natural branches are still being grafted in as a minority now, and will be grafted in on a massive national scale in the future. So Jew and Gentile are distinguished, but they are still part of Israel and part of one body. Does that make sense? And so there is no reason to castigate Israelites if they want to keep circumcision and kosher food laws, and cleanliness laws, so long as they don't see it as a requirement for membership in Israel, or the church. That's the key thing.

**Notice that James at first (when he is talking from memory) gives a different order from Leviticus**

Now look at your outlines, and I want you to notice one more thing in Acts 15 that supports what I have just said. In verse 20 when James is talking off the top of his head, he lists the four laws, but he gives them in a different order than Leviticus does. And I've written the order down in your outlines.

**Eating idol sacrifices (Lev. 17:7-9)**

**Sexual laws (Lev. 18:1-19)**

Eating things strangled (Lev. 17:13-16)

Blood laws (Lev. 17:10-12)

Notice that when James writes the decree, he carefully puts it in the order it was in Leviticus

But when it comes to actually writing the letter, he orders his thoughts, and he puts them in exactly the same order given in Leviticus. In Leviticus you have a prohibition of eating meat offered to idols in verses 7-9 of chapter 17. The next three verses give the laws forbidding the eating of blood. The next four verses give the law forbidding the eating of anything strangled. The next 19 verses give the laws relating to marriage and sexual relations. This would rule out marriage to cousins, nephews, nieces, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, etc.

Eating idol sacrifices (Lev. 17:7-9)

Blood laws (Lev. 17:10-12)

Eating things strangled (Lev. 17:13-16)

Sexual laws (Lev. 18:1-19)<sup>[1]</sup>

Cannot marry within the degrees of consanguinity listed.

Cannot marry within the degrees of affinity listed.

May not engage in marital relations during the monthly period.

The previous Mosaic laws are then followed by a discussion of the sexual sins of adultery, homosexuality and bestiality in verses 20-23.

**They were practiced under the monarchy (1 Sam. 14:34-35)**

I give some more history in your outline that I won't take a lot of time on, but you can see these laws under the monarchy in 1 Samuel 14.

**They were listed as abominations in Ezekiel 33:25; 18:6; 22:10)**

They were also listed as abominations in Ezekiel after the time of the exile.

**They are enforced by the New Testament**

**Sexual laws of Leviticus 18 (Mark 6:18; 1 Cor. 5:1)**

They were also enforced by the New Testament. For example, Mark 6:18 has John the Baptist telling a non-Jewish king (Herod he was an Edomite), "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." How could he say that to this Gentile unless this law that you can't marry your brother's wife while he is living applies? That was one of the degrees of affinity forbidden in Leviticus 18:16, and you will notice a cross reference to that in the margin. 1 Corinthians 5:1 says, "It is actually reported that

there is sexual immorality" [that's the Greek word *porneia*] "among you and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles – that a man has his father's wife!" Here is Paul vigorously upholding the Jerusalem council's edict. He was not opposed to it. And if you look in the margin at 1 Corinthians 5:1, you will see that it cross references Leviticus 18:6-8.

One scholar cited "the Zadokite Documents [which were early Jewish writings], which define 'fornication' as polygamy, infringement of the Levitical prohibitions and about the menstrual period, and consanguineous marriage." And from earliest times the church has upheld these Levitical laws. The *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy* says,

"Diriment Impediment. A term used in canon law to denote a circumstance or fact that makes a person incapable of contracting a valid marriage, e.g., impotency, consanguinity, insufficient age. A marriage by anyone in such circumstances is not merely unlawful but invalid. [in other words, it's not considered to be a marriage. Just like Paul did not consider being married to your step-mother a legitimate marriage. It was null and void. There is no such thing as homosexual marriage. It's not just unlawful. It's invalid.]"<sup>[2]</sup>

So the term "sexual immorality" (which is the Greek word *porneia*) can either refer to any kind of moral sexual sin, or it can be used as a technical term for the Levitical prohibitions to Gentiles and Jews in Leviticus 18, such as the laws of affinity and consanguinity.

#### Things offered to idols (Acts 15:20,29; 21:25; 1 Cor. 10:19-22)

Paul also upheld the law against eating meat offered to idols or having anything whatsoever to do with idols. In 1 Corinthians 10 he said this:

1Corinthians 10:19 What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything?

1Corinthians 10:20 Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons.

1Corinthians 10:21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons.

1Corinthians 10:22 Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?

Some people point to chapter 8 and say that it is OK to eat meat offered to idols knowingly. But that's a wrong interpretation. In chapter 8 he had given an argument that even if the Corinthians were right about eating meat in a temple being OK (a hypothetical argument), it would still violate the conscience of a brother who did not believe that way and should be avoided for that reason alone. But in chapter 10 he forbids it completely. He forbids it just as clearly as the Jerusalem council did.

#### **Blood (Acts 15:20,29; 21:25)**

In Acts 21 Paul agrees with this whole decree, including blood and things strangled. He submits *himself* to some Jewish rituals because he is a Jew. But the only four Jewish rituals he believes should be imposed on the Gentiles are the ones listed in this chapter. All the Apostles are agreed.

#### **Things strangled (Acts 15:20,29; 21:25)**

## **Applications**

### **We must be whole Bible Christians just as James was.**

I think we have given enough background on these laws where (hopefully) you now fit into the part of the Venn diagram where you understand this sermon, and you understand Acts 15 inside and out. But let's look at some applications. I think the first application would be that we must be whole Bible Christians rather than simply New Testament Christians. Without the Old Testament, you can't really understand the New Testament. What does James do to prove his doctrine to the church? He quotes three prophets of the *Old Testament*. If the Old Testament was not binding, that would not make sense. His Bible was not simply the New Testament. The New Testament actually hadn't been written yet. His Bible was all God's revelation. Without the Old Testament we have no guidance on ecology, who we can marry, and have big holes in our system of economics, mathematics, logic and other issues. Even though certain laws have passed away, this passage actually shows how the Old Testament is still normative.

### **There are laws unique to Moses that are not binding on us because they were designed to separate Jew from Gentile. Beyond the New Testament ceremonial laws (baptism and**

**the Lord's Supper) there are only four ceremonial laws which continue to be binding.**

On the other hand, there were some laws given in the Old Testament that were never intended to be binding on Gentiles. In fact, they were temporary laws designed to keep Israel totally separate from and distinct from Gentiles. They could not sow two different types of grain in a field, wear two different types of fabric together, or plow with a donkey and an oxen. They had to wear tassles on their garments, had a long list of forbidden foods, numerous clean/unclean distinctions. I bring this up because some people think that the distinction between ceremonial and unceremonial laws is arbitrary. When the New Testament throws out Mosaic law, they think it is throwing out moral law as well, and not just ceremonial law. These critics say that the law was one seamless whole and to accept even one part of it would mean to accept all of it. Acts 15 disproves that.

Second, if they didn't understand the difference between timeless moral commandments and these temporary laws of separation then passages like 1 Corinthians 7:19 would make no sense. There Paul says, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is keeping the commandments of God," Let's do a little experiment. If there is no difference between circumcision and the commandments of God that are eternal, we could substitute the word "commandments" for circumcision. But then Paul would be saying, "Keeping the commandments is nothing and not keeping the commandments is nothing, but what matters is keeping the commandments of God." That would be patently absurd. But numerous similar absurdities arise if you don't hold to the Reformation distinction between ceremonial and moral laws. All the ceremonial laws of Moses except Baptism, the Lord's Table and these four prohibitions are passed away. But none of the moral laws are passed away. And that's a handy fact to keep in mind when you are arguing with Meredith Kline followers. The Old Testament itself makes this distinction.

**We must avoid cultural relativism and cultural legalism. We must promote nation discipling missions.**



A Third application is that we must avoid both cultural relativism and cultural legalism. Some people use this passage to do away with moral laws like Old Testament economics. Other people use this passage to impose demonic cultural legalism, like the envy and socialism that are rife in that one tribe in Ghana. If you gave somebody a knife or a mirror there, he would not dare hold on to the gift for more than a few days, and he would have to pass it off to someone else. Otherwise, people would get jealous and might burn this guy's house down. Well, the Bible says that such socialism is immoral and must be overturned. There are many demonic aspects to culture that are ignored by missionaries today, and our church is committed to promoting consistent worldview and nation discipling missions. This contextualizing nonsense must be overturned in our missionary endeavors.

**God is concerned about our health: spiritually, physically and socially (see 3 John 2).**

The fourth application is that God is concerned about our health spiritually, physically and socially. 3 John 2 says, "Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things, and be in health, just as your soul prospers." God is interested in our health. We might think that partaking of meat offered to idols is unimportant. But if we deliberately do it, 1 Corinthians 10 says that we are messing with demons and insulting God. It will have spiritual ramifications. We are opening ourselves up to spiritual attack. Don't think that when the President offered incense on the altar in Japan that nothing happened to him. He was entering into communion with demons without realizing it. Don't think that eating with the Dalai Lamma didn't affect him. The blindness which he is showing is totally consistent with demonic deception that no doubt came from such compromises. And we can pray that God would break off those demonic influences that have come upon him and his wife. God gave verses 20 and 29 for our spiritual health.

I believe the sexual laws of Leviticus 18 have more than one purpose, but they are definitely for our health. That is why almost all Western nations forbid this kind of incest and genetic inbreeding. The genetics alone will show you the wisdom of the laws. You might think that Leviticus 18:19 is a strange prohibition for marital relations. It says, "Also you shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness as long as she is in her

customary impurity." But that law is not only for your health, it also shows God's concern for a woman's dignity. It's not a moral law, but these laws show God's goodness.

**Even when we do not understand the reason for God's rules, we should follow them and know that they are for our good.**

But application 5 is that God will sometimes give us "no-no's" that are simply integrity checks to see if we will follow Him. If God commands something, we should follow it whether we know the reasons or not.

**Though Jews and Gentiles are on an equal playing field in the church, God still recognizes national and social distinctions.**

Point F is that even though Jews and Gentiles are on an equal playing field in the church, and even though they are fellow citizens, God still makes distinctions between Jews and Gentiles nationally and socially. And a lot of amillennialists forget that. God still has a purpose for and distinguishes between Jews and Gentiles – even though they are part of the same body. So we need to avoid two errors: 1) on the one side are those like the dispensationalists who make Jews and Gentiles two bodies, and say that Jews in the kingdom will not be part of the bride. 2) on the other side are those who hold to a replacement theology that ignores Paul's distinction between the natural branches and the wild branches. Replacement theology says that there is no future for the Jews. We say that a remnant of Jews will always be coming into the one church (the one bride, the one olive tree) and that at some point in future history, the whole nation of Israel will be grafted back into the one church (the one bride, the one olive tree). But even after they are grafted back in, Isaiah 19 makes clear that Israel, Egypt and Assyria will be three distinct nations and nationalities, even though all will be saved and in the church. So there is one olive tree, but Paul says we shouldn't be too high minded – we Gentiles are the wild olive branches and any Jews in our midst are the natural branches. Unity but distinction. And it really bothers me to see replacement people have a racist attitude to the Jews.

## **God is interested in our liberty, and we must allow God's law to define our liberty.**

The last application is stated well in Galatians 5:1 which says, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage." Unless God defines our liberty, we will lose it. It is like railroad tracks. As long as the tracks are intact, the train has liberty. God's commandments are the railroad tracks. James says that they are designed for our liberty. He speaks of it as being the perfect law of liberty (James 1:25). And in Acts 15 James says that he doesn't want us troubled by anything beyond what God has commanded. Verse 24 says, "Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "*You must be circumcised and keep the law*"—to whom we gave no *such* commandment." When men add commandments beyond what the Old Testament or the apostles have given, we are immediately troubled. Such laws are not for our good. God wants us to have liberty, and He has only given as many laws as will produce maximum liberty. So verse 28 says, "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things": These four Mosaic laws together with all the moral laws of the Old Testament are the perfect law of liberty. Let's stand in that liberty and never give it up. Let's not allow our consciences to be bound by anything other than what God has commanded. *But*, let's embrace all that He has commanded. Amen.

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1. Note that verses 20-25 continues with moral sexual perversions such as adultery [☞](#)
  2. Geddes MacGregor, *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy* 1st ed., (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 189, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=96898747> [☞](#)