

Forms Vs. Spirituality (Part 5)

The Pharisees

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 07-Jun-97; Sermon #292

In the previous sermon we were examining a number of factors in the Acts 15 conference. The major issue facing the apostles was *not doing away with God's laws*, but seeking a solution to the theological issue concerning what is labeled there *circumcision*. Attached to that issue was also a very serious sociological problem surrounding the ethnic groups that did not care much for each other—the Jews and the Gentiles.

They were meeting together in the same congregation because God was calling and converting both. Previous to this time there had been some Gentile proselytes to Judaism, but because they were such a small minority the Jews never really confronted the fellowshiping problem.

At that time neither Jew nor Gentile proselytes who converted to Judaism were what we would call "*converted*," and so they treated each other with all of the fears, all of the insecurities, and all of the intolerance of human nature. But by the time Acts 15 occurred, God was calling and converting large numbers of both Jews and Gentiles into some congregations, and the divisions between the Jews and the Gentiles had to be broached, and they had to be breached.

A major part of the problem was caused by the Pharisees who had converted to Christianity and insisted that the Gentiles who were converted to Christianity had to be circumcised. They said that unless the Gentiles were circumcised they could not be saved, and that they had to keep the law of Moses. In more direct words, the Jews believed that the Gentiles could not be saved unless they first converted to what we call *Judaism*, or we might say *Pharisaism*. Now that was the theological issue that was feeding the already existing sociological problem. Because both groups came into Christianity having very strong prejudicial feelings against each other, it was like putting a match to the sandpaper.

Let us look in Acts 15 and really highlight what the issue was here.

Acts 15:1 And 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.

That is pretty clear. Now look at verse 5.

Acts 15:5 But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them [the Gentiles], and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

Well, that just succinctly states the issue. The issue was not law per se, but Pharisaic theology that made the keeping of certain laws absolutely necessary for salvation. Those terms—"cannot be saved" and "needful to circumcise"—reveal a major misunderstanding about salvation that in turn produced *major* judgment problems on the side of the Jews.

"Theology" primarily, literally means "the study of God." Another way of putting it would be "the science of God." Its secondary meaning, according to the *Reader's Digest Encyclopedic Dictionary*, is "the body of doctrines set forth by a particular church or a religious group. When it is used in that sense, it is very much like a recipe. By this recipe (or by this manner of theology), this is how you are to be saved. The Pharisaic recipe (theology) was *you are saved by means of the keeping of the law*. This was what they were trying to impress upon those Gentiles converted to Christianity. The Pharisees believed that a person could not be saved unless these conditions of keeping the law of Moses (represented by the word "circumcise" in Acts 15) were met.

Acts 15 also contains the apostles' response to that. Let us look at verse 9. Peter is the speaker, and he is talking about the time he was miraculously led by God to Cornelius.

Acts 15:9-11 And put no difference between us [the Jews] and them [the Gentiles], purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt you God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples,

which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we [primarily those who were on the scene when Cornelius and his family were converted, as well as others of the ministry that Paul and Barnabas, and Peter and James and so forth had talked to] believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

There is the apostles' argument or response to the theological argument that is given by the Pharisaic element. Salvation is by grace through faith, not law keeping. Now in more direct language, Peter said in verse 10, "Why tempt you God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" In plainer language, Peter said that keeping the law *perfectly* is an impossible burden, and since it is an impossible burden, no one could be saved. That statement does not do away with law. Nothing said here does away with law.

Like everything else in this series, this decision in Acts 15 succinctly puts law into its proper relationship within the whole purpose of God. The key element is grace. It is *that* which is absolutely necessary for salvation, not law-keeping. But even though grace is the element that is absolutely necessary, that does not do away with law. It *adds* something that makes salvation possible.

The Pharisees' thinking about law's place in God's purpose was not in line with God's purpose. The evidence that I just stated shows up in God's Word in two ways. One is the many recorded disagreements they had with Christ over interpretation of various laws. To the Pharisees, Jesus was a flaming liberal. Brethren, He was not a flaming liberal. Right in His platform statement in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 in the Sermon on the Mount He said, "Do not think that I have come to do away with law." He was not a flaming liberal.

In that platform statement—the Sermon on the Mount—He made it very clear that He was making the law's application even more stringent than ever before, because those converted were going to be held to the application of the spirit of the law—the *intent* of the law—as well as the letter. The intent lays a heavier burden on a person in terms of being perfect than the letter does by far.

Brethren, which is more difficult? To restrain from actually murdering somebody, lying to somebody, or lusting after somebody? Which is harder? It is exceedingly harder to stop this mind from working and stopping lusting than it is to actually commit the act of fornication or adultery. Jesus Christ made the law more stringent. His Word has produced, by means of God's Spirit, a far purer holiness than was ever possible under the Old Covenant.

Jesus was not a flaming liberal. He magnified the law by expanding its application by showing its proper relationship to the whole purpose of God. He clarified the emphasis God wanted in life, but He did not do away with law. The emphasis is now on the *spirit* of law. Jesus moved the deterrent to sin from *after* the fact, to *before* it actually happened. You stop it in the mind before it even breaks out into an actual letter-of-the-law sin. That is one way it is shown. The Pharisees simply did not interpret God's law correctly. Jesus did. They did not understand, so God faithfully recorded the many instances of difference of interpretation.

The second way is contained in their *name* in the many illustrations given in God's Word, that they rightly earned the name Pharisees. God names things what they are. Pharisee means "separate ones" or "a separatist." Jesus taught us to look at the fruit of what something produces. All we have to do here in the United States is to look at the fruits of Protestantism and we can understand that something is tragically wrong with what has been produced in its people, and therefore out into society. Look at all the sin that is being committed—and the religion is primarily Protestantism.

A Pharisee separated himself to a life devoted to keeping the law. So far that sounds pretty good until you look at what it produced in the way of relationships with fellowman. Matthew 23 is an excellent partial catalog of what the Pharisaic life produced. Their interpretation of where God's laws fit into God's purpose drove them away from people. It separated them from even normal social intercourse, making it virtually impossible.

I want you to turn back to Acts 11:1-3. This happened within the church at the time Acts 11 occurred, and I am sure it was still occurring at the time

Acts 15 occurred, and it was at a time when the book of Galatians was written. Acts 11 is a reiteration of what happened when Peter was going to Cornelius' home, and he was called into account of what occurred there.

Acts 11:1-3 And the apostles and brethren that were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision [the Pharisees] contended [argued, disputed] with them, Saying, You went into men uncircumcised, and did eat with them.

Naughty! Naughty! Naughty! Do you see what I mean? A Pharisee not only separated himself from people for the keeping of the law—that which he dedicated himself to—he also separated himself from other people so that normal social intercourse was virtually impossible. The Pharisees would not mingle with what they called sinners out of fear that they would become contaminated and made unholy. Jesus showed them as being self-righteous "holier than thou" types. Therein, right from the scriptures, is a major fruit of Pharisaism.

Let us begin to make this somewhat applicable to you and me. If some manner of conduct on your part is separating you from fellowship with your own brethren, something is wrong somewhere.

In my last statement, the key phrase is "with your brethren." That is important to note because we are not to be fellowshipping with the world even though we are to have normal business and social intercourse with them. In the analogy between the two Israels, there is the physical nation of Israel, and there is the spiritual nation—the Israel of God.

The publicans and sinners of physical Israel were the brethren of the Pharisees. They were all a part of that physical nation, but they were separated within that nation on the basis of some misconstrued and misunderstood misinterpretations of the place of the law of God. Now the brethren of the Pharisees were the physical equivalent, the type of fellow church members of spiritual Israel. Our conduct should not be separating us from each other.

Let me give you an example of something that was working within the Church of the Great God within the past several months. The issue was raised in the church saying that we should not eat refined white sugar because it came into contact with animal blood which was used to filter out protein substance during the processing of sugar. Then, since God commanded that we should not eat blood, the conclusion of some was that we should not eat refined white sugar because it would contaminate our holiness.

That conclusion was taken one step further. Since one cannot tell where sugar may be used in restaurant food, certain ones would never eat in restaurants. Then the conclusion was taken one step further. Since we are pretty much dependent on eating in restaurants during the Feast of Tabernacles, they would not eat in restaurants during the Feast of Tabernacles but would remain in their motel rooms for meals, or at any rate eat foods only prepared by themselves in order to make sure that they came into no contact with defiling blood.

This conclusion was reached and began to spread through the church before anybody had an opportunity to do some simple research on the matter. When we began to look into this, it was found that the original report was untrue. Both Spreckels and Domino, the two largest American refiners, stated that they did not use blood to filter out protein.

When John Reid spoke to a woman chemist for Spreckels, she laughed at his question and said that this was the silliest thing she ever heard of. Well, John was a little bit unsure of her response, and so the following day he was able to get the Spreckels chief chemist, and he told John that blood *had* formerly been used to do this, but that process has not been used for over one hundred years. In addition to that, an encyclopedia which described the processing of sugar in quite a bit of detail made absolutely no mention of blood at any point in the article.

Over and above all of this is the Bible's witness. Jesus clearly stated in regard to food, in Mark 7 and in Matthew 15, that even eating dirt cannot defile a person's holiness, and here is why: ***Because it enters not into the heart.*** No physical thing, of and by itself, has the power to defile or to make

one unholy or holy. This does not do away with the food laws, nor with the command concerning blood. Matthew 15 and Mark 7 merely show that if one takes normal precautions on a daily basis regarding *clean and unclean*, that incidental contact with something even as unclean as dirt is going to have no impact on a person's holiness, or for that matter his bodily health, because Jesus said it would simply be eliminated. God created our bodies to handle it.

But if one *lustfully* seeks out that which is unclean, or rebelliously eats it regardless of what God says, or is so unconcerned as to be cavalier, then one *does* have a problem with holiness because lust, rebellion, and carelessness are matters of the heart—of the mind—and those actions, those attitudes, are ingrained into a person's character and into his personality.

Even more important are those principles which are the subject of I Corinthians 8—10 and Romans 14. I want you to turn to I Corinthians 8 where we have an expansion on Matthew 15 on that principle, as well as Mark 7, and a practical application, a judgment that was necessary to be made on the part of the apostle Paul during the first century.

I Corinthians 8:4 As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols [This has to do with the eating of food. You would think that if there was anything that would possibly defile a person's holiness it ought to be a demon—it ought to be an idol], we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.

I Corinthians 8:8 But food commends us not to God [This is a *major* statement, and that is why I can tell you that food has no impact on a person's spiritual holiness unless lust is involved. Then we have a problem]: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse.

I Corinthians 8:13 Wherefore, if food makes my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world stands, lest I make my brother to offend.

Paul goes even so far to tell us that even an idol, with a foul demon behind the idol, cannot defile the food, but if we offend a brother by our practice regarding food, then we have committed a great sin and we are now in trouble with God, and holiness *is* suffering. So a major principle arises out of this.

Peaceful fellowship in love is exceedingly more important than food.

Peaceful fellowship was so important to Paul that he would not risk offending a brother by what he ate till the world comes to an end. Do you see how things begin to be put into their right slot and level of importance?

Let us ask a question. Is this then saying that we should ignore a good diet? Not on your life! Not at all! It is saying to be very aware with your relationship with your brother, and do not let your dietary preferences destroy fellowship, or lead him to sinning against his conscience. *Clean and unclean* is not even the subject in these places. It is not even the question.

Romans 14:1-2 Him that is weak in the faith receive you, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believes that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eats herbs [or vegetables].

That introduces the subject, but also behind the scene here is that which is sacrificed to idols. These people were, as far as I understand, the ones that Paul calls *weak*. They were not abstaining from meat because they were against meat per se. They were not eating meat because they were afraid that it was offered to an idol and that therefore it was spiritually defiled. Well, we just saw the answer to that in I Corinthians 8, that even a demon, even an idol, cannot defile meat because meat does not commend us to God. These people in Rome were still concerned about eating something that was offered to an idol.

Romans 14:16-17 Let not then your good be evil spoken of: for the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

See how God, through Paul, is arranging things in their proper level. What is more important? Food, or righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit? The general principle involved in all these scriptures—Matthew 15, Mark 7,

I Corinthians 8-10, and Romans 14—is that peaceful fellowship is exceedingly more important than convictions about food.

Now some brethren in the Church of the Great God were getting their minds set to separate themselves from their brethren during portions of the Feast of Tabernacles. One of the major reasons that God convenes the Feast of Tabernacles is for fellowship with Him and with each other in an atmosphere conducive to informal socializing, as well as fellowshiping. Brethren, central to this is *eating*. Eating is important because it produces the right environment for the right kind of socializing and fellowshiping.

We have not yet gotten to the peace offering in the series that I interrupted to go on into this series, but the peace offering pictures communion—fellowship, sharing—with God and each other.

The overwhelming number of sacrifices at the Feast (and if you want to check this out, check Numbers 28 and 29) were peace offerings so people could physically feast together at the spiritual Feast. One of the reasons why the festivals are co-named *Feasts* is for this very reason. It is because of the combined abundance of spiritual and physical food within the framework of convivial spiritual fellowship.

Separating oneself (although very highly questionable presence of a minute amount of blood in sugar) is *wrong*, and is bending toward Pharisaism on three counts.

- 1) Jesus said that food, or dirt, enters not into the heart.
- 2) Paul said that food does not commend us to God, and that the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink.
- 3) Fellowship is exceedingly more important than food.

Paul concluded by saying that he would not eat meat while the world stands if it would offend his brother. Not destroying fellowship over food is that important.

We will now get back again onto the main theme.

There are at least two major reasons why salvation must be by grace through faith, and this is really the central issue of the Acts 15 decision. Number one is the strictly legal aspect, because God's Word says that *the wages of sin is death*, and all of man's history has shown that all men eventually sin, thus earning death.

Before conversion we were all walking dead men; therefore God provided something to make up for this otherwise impossible situation, because everyone then will die and God's purpose will come to a dead-end. No pun intended, because this is very serious business. God graciously provided *grace* through Christ's sacrifice, but His grace does not end there because He continually provides gifts all along our pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God in order to ensure growth as well as salvation. That is the first reason in very simple form. If God did not supply something apart from man there would be no salvation. God's purpose would just simply end.

The second reason why salvation has to be by grace is very closely tied to the first, and it is directly tied to works, or what works has a strong tendency to produce in our attitudes. We must be very careful of this.

Let us go back to Genesis 1:31. This verse takes place at the end of the sixth day of the creation week.

Genesis 1:31 And God saw every thing that he had made, [what He had produced by working] and, behold, it was very good.

God took pleasure in what He had accomplished, because what He did in creating this environment for His purpose to be carried out is awesome, beautiful, and magnificent. It is almost unthinkable (by us) in its beauty, in its complexity, in the realization of the power that it took, of the wisdom in which He did everything, and when He was done, He was pleased. It made Him feel good that He had created something so awesomely beautiful for His purpose to be carried out. We humans are subject to the same influence we work at and accomplish, and indeed brethren, God intended that we receive a great deal of satisfaction from the things that we do.

Turn to Ecclesiastes 9 where I think that Solomon really catches the essence of what I am talking about here. Solomon was reflecting on the things of life, and so here he gives some advice, and he says:

Ecclesiastes 9:7 Go your way, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God now accepts your works.

He is not specific about what kind of works, whether they are spiritual, or things in the physical realm. I do not think that it matters, because *both* are intended.

Ecclesiastes 9:8-10 Let your garments be always white; and let your head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of the life of your vanity [He approves of marriage], which he has given you under the sun, all the days of your vanity: for that is your portion in this life, and in your labor which you take under the sun. [Works again.] Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave whither you go.

What is the conclusion? Solomon says work now, do it now, get at it, because that is where much joy and pleasure and satisfaction and fulfillment comes from, and *do it now* before it is too late. It puts kind of an edge on there. The only problem with this is that there is a downside to this because of human nature. That downside is that we have very great difficulty controlling our satisfaction, and sinful pride enters. I want to show you a verse in II Chronicles 32 that kind of catches the essence of this. It does not fully explain it, but it shows that our satisfaction is in our work—what we do with our hands, how we earn our living, what we do as a homemaker in creating our home, or whatever.

II Chronicles 32:19 And they spoke against the God of Jerusalem, as against the gods of the people of the earth, which were the work of the hands of man.

Now what is he specifically speaking of here? Idols. We have a tendency to think of an idol as being, let us say, a statue—something made by men that they bow down to, but the principle of idolatry is not in there because idols are created by men in other areas as well. In our world, science and technology have become an idol. The things that technology produces, along with engineering, become an idol to man. "Look what I have done!" We are rapidly getting back to the tower of Babel. "Look at what our great minds and hands have made."

We can think of that being done in the days of Babel, but we are subject to the same influences by making idols out of what we take great satisfaction in, as well as in producing. So it is something that we have to be aware of. It does not have to produce this, but it can.

Let us think of this in terms of our relationship with God. Let us think of it in terms of keeping the commandments; of doing the law. Let us think of it in terms of the services, of the sacrifices that we make in behalf of men because of God. We have to be careful here, because the first thing you know, we think God owes us something because we have been so good at the responsibilities, at the duties, at the obligations that He has given us to be about doing. Unless human nature is controlled by other factors, humility is subtly replaced, destroyed, and pride enters to destroy the basis of salvation God has determined and the relationship with God.

Let us turn to a verse that we can probably all quote.

Isaiah 66:1 Thus says the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that you build unto me? And where is the place of my rest?

He begins by making a contrast. He says, "Hey! I live up in this glorious, awesome, pure wonderful heaven that My hands have made. Let's compare it to what you have made for Me." The obvious inference is the people to whom He was speaking were very pleased about the beautiful building they had made with their hands for God, and I have no doubt it was a beautiful work of men's hands. They were proud of all the skill and workmanship that went into producing those alabaster columns, and all the gold and brass and

bronze that was worked into the labor, and of all the statuary that was around it, and all those wonderful hanging tapestries on the inside of the Temple. Then again, is not the Temple a type of the church? Can we not get carried away with this feeling of satisfaction, this feeling of pleasure, this feeling of righteousness that might come upon us because of the works that we have done in helping to build the spiritual temple of God?

I remember Mr. Herbert Armstrong saying about some other man who said that *he* built the church. You might recall whom he was talking about. This other fellow whom he was talking about was very proud of what he had done. Mr. Armstrong said, No, he did not build the church. Christ did. He just used the man.

We have got to have the right kind of focus here or things can get out of hand. This is why Paul wrote what he did there in I Corinthians 4 when he asked the Corinthians, "What do you have that you did not receive?" Every breath of air you breathe comes from God. He gave you your mind. He gave you your hands. He gave you the skill to make these things. He gave you the gifts. How can we get carried away by the works that we do on behalf of God?

Isaiah 66:2 For all those things has My hand made, and all those things have been, says the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite spirit, and trembles at my word.

God says, "Here is what gets My attention: not what you do with your hands, but your attitude toward Me, your attitude toward your fellowman." See, if we do not watch out, our works will bring us to the place where we begin to think that God owes us something because we have been so good about carrying out our duties—it's funny—with the gifts and the tools that He gave us in the first place.

Let us look at a very meaningful one in Proverbs 13:10.

Proverbs 13:10 Only by pride comes contention: but with the well-advised is wisdom.

Pride separates. It is destructive to unity. It destroys the possibility of fellowship. It matters not whether it separates from God or brethren, it separates. It produces the wrong kind of prejudices. There are good prejudices, by the way, but pride produces the wrong kind of prejudices. It produces intolerance. It makes us impatient, competitive, assertive, and aggressive. It subtly elevates our opinion of ourselves until we are "owed"—that is, to be deferred to, and thus we become aggressive and offensive, and in some cases even violent.

An aspect of God's grace is that He must work to keep us rightly humble so we have a balanced opinion of ourselves in relation to Him and to fellowman. I will tell you, brethren, He knows how to take the wind out of our sails without destroying us. It seems, if I can think of it from my own experience, that He has to do it pretty often.

In Luke 17:7-10 this instruction comes to us in the middle of a fairly long section that begins all the way back at the beginning of chapter 16. The very first word "but" shows you there is a contrast that He is speaking of.

Luke 17:7-8 But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird yourself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward you shall eat and drink?

See, the servant is put in the right place and right position in relation to God.

Luke 17:9 Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow [think] not.

Are we not commanded to keep the law of God? Yes we are. That is an obligation. It is a duty. Now is God supposed to thank us because we do what is our duty? That is the question here.

Luke 17:10 So likewise you, when you shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants.

Actually, modern Bibles translate the word "unprofitable" as "unworthy." That is a better translation. We are unworthy. In other words, doing what we are commanded to do does not make us worthy. It is the grace of God that makes us worthy. When we are keeping the commandments of God, we are only doing what we are supposed to do. We are unprofitable or unworthy servants. We have done that which is our duty to do.

Salvation is far more than keeping the commandments, and it cannot be earned simply by doing our duty. A major reason is because even at the time God calls us, we have been ruined by a trail of failure at doing the things that are supposed to be our duty. We have been breaking the commandments almost since the "get-go" in our lives. Now here is a fact: It is impossible to make up for what has been done in the past. I will give you a simple illustration.

If a virgin loses his or her virginity, can that be undone? It cannot. Sin cannot be made up for. In one sense, it ruins us forever—at least that aspect. From the time we come to understand, we begin doing our duty far more conscientiously. The path in that sense still remains, and all of our commandment-keeping cannot make up for that. Grace has to be added. It is absolutely essential. When it comes right down to it, we have nothing to brag about. But even aside from those failures, this instruction is given to adjust our attitude in regard to works as a servant of God.

Please do not misunderstand. It is not given to demean being a servant of God, but it is given to make clear what our attitude ought to be so that our relationships have the right foundation. All of our works leave us unworthy. Brethren, everybody is in the same tub. All of us! We can never put God into our debt, nor can we ever have any kind of a claim against Him by our works.

When we have done our best, we have still only done our duty. When we have done our duty, we are to understand that as we experience our

relationship with God, that all of it is done in His service. *He* is the one who has given us the gifts. He is the one who has given us the tools, the motivation, the vision. And so what do you have that you have not been given? We are not to get puffed up, because all of it in reality is His work. Salvation is by grace.

Were the disciples thinking about reward? Was this instruction given because He could detect maybe in their faces or whatever a misunderstanding in their minds? I think very possibly. There is no doubt that God will reward. He is exceedingly generous. Nobody out-gives God. But brethren, there is a proper order of things, and most importantly for us to understand is that the reward will be given at the good pleasure of the Master. Do you remember that other parable? "Hey! Did you not sign on for a penny? Why are you calling Me into account?"

There is another very clever conclusion that is reached from the Acts 15 circumstance that you might possibly hear. Brethren, this is a big one that most of us in the church of God have either overlooked or maybe never even thought about. Maybe you heard about it and wondered how it fits. This little thing at the beginning actually happened. A certain high-ranking member of the Worldwide Church of God was observed eating something unclean in a restaurant. When questioned about it, he said that he was permitted to eat things like this because he is a Gentile.

Now did God neatly divide responsibility toward law on the basis of one's racial background or ethnicity? That is a possible valid answer *if* you read no further than Acts 15 and simply stay within the context there. The thought behind this thinking is what allowed the Catholic Church to permit paganism to be practiced by its converts.

You have probably seen pictures in *National Geographic* or *Life* magazine of people down in Mexico, or Guatemala, or Colombia, or down in Bolivia who claim to be Catholics, and they are marching around, and they have got these banners and these papier-mâché models or idols or whatever. You begin looking into the text of what this is all about, and you find that this was an ancient Incan-Peruvian celebration which had been adopted and brought into Christianity and Christianized, sanctified by the Catholic Church because, you see, they are Gentiles.

In a real broad way, the converts keep practicing the same things they always have done, but they are simply called "Christian." Now this conclusion is wrong on at least two counts. The first one is that both the biblical and secular records show that the apostle Paul *and* the New Testament church kept right on keeping the law. There is much more to this issue than the Acts 15 decision. The answer to this lies in seeing Acts 15 and its decision in a much larger panorama.

Turn Acts 20:26-27. Paul is saying goodbye to the Ephesian elders.

Acts 20:26-27 Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.

In other words, there is more to the counsel of God than appears in just Acts 15.

Acts 21:24 Them take, and purify yourself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning you, are nothing: but that you yourself [Paul] also walk orderly and keep the law.

In Acts 24, advancing through time a little bit, Paul was defending himself before Felix.

Acts 24:13-14 Neither can they [the Jews] prove the things whereof they now accuse me. But this I confess unto you [Felix] that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my father, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets.

In Acts 25:70-8 Paul was before Festus.

Acts 25:7-8 And when he was come, the Jews which came down from Jerusalem stood round about, and laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not prove. While he

answered for himself, neither against the law of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended any thing at all.

That is quite a testimony.

Acts 28:17 And it came to pass, that after three days Paul called the chief of the Jews together: and when they were come together, he said unto them, Men and brethren, though I have committed nothing against the people, or customs of our fathers, yet was I delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

Up to this point one could still argue that these are still Jews doing this, and any Gentile involvement is kind of shadowy. But there is no doubt that the apostle Paul kept right on keeping the law.

Listen to these quotes that I am going to read from *The Life and Epistles of Saint Paul* by Conybeare and Howson, page 346.

The festivals observed by the apostolic church [not just Paul, but *church*, which included Gentiles] were at first the same with those of the Jews, and the observance of these was continued, especially by Christians of Jewish birth, for a considerable time. A higher and more spiritual meaning however was attached to their celebration, and particularly the Paschal was kept no longer as a shadow of good things to come, but as a commemoration of blessing actually bestowed in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Regarding Conybeare and Howson, one man was a theologian, and the other man was a historian. The one man researched the secular area, and the other man researched the religious area. They combined their research, and between the two of them—secular as well as religious—they said the apostolic church was keeping what we would call today *the religion of the Jews*.

Here is another quote from the same source, only on page 574. This is a comment in regard to the Acts 21 incident and the Jewish charges against Paul.

He himself [Paul] observed the Jewish festivals and previously countenanced [taught] his friends in the practice of Nazarite vows, and circumcised Timothy, the son of a Jewess.

Let us go now to Ephesians 2:11. I thought I might get done with this today, but it goes on and on, but I find it exciting and meaningful. In Ephesians 2:11 the apostle Paul is writing to a Gentile-dominated church which also has some Jews in it, and so he says:

Ephesians 2:11-12 Wherefore remember, that you [Gentiles] being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants [plural] of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.

Brethren, what did he say here? When they were converted they were brought into contact with the Old Testament! Why would God want them to be brought into contact with the Old Testament with those old laws that were [supposedly] done away? They were not done away! He wanted them to learn them.

Ephesians 2:13-16 But now in Christ Jesus you who sometimes were far off are made *near* by the blood of Christ, for he is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of two one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.

What Paul has done here is list the blessings that the Gentiles have now had opened to them. The Gentiles, before conversion, were cut off from the blessings God gave Israel, but now they have hope. Notice he says *covenants*—plural. How many covenants? Not just two. There are many covenants God made with man, with Israel, in the Old Testament, but now as a part of the *Israel of God* they have access to those blessings. What are they

supposed to do? Be converted, come into the church, and ignore the blessings that God intended for man to have? That does not make sense.

One of the major blessings was access to and understanding of God's laws, including those given through Moses. It was not law which caused the enmity, because God said that Israel's wisdom in the sight of the Gentiles was His law. I am going to read that to you.

Deuteronomy 4:1 Now therefore hearken [listen], O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments which I teach you, for to do them, that you may live, [Does God not want the Gentiles to live?] and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers gives you.

Does God not want the Gentiles to go into the Kingdom of God? He most certainly does want them to go into the Kingdom of God. He gave the law so that might be possible.

Deuteronomy 4:2 You shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall you diminish ought from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

Deuteronomy 4:5-8 Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do so in the land whither you go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who has God so near unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that has statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?

These people who teach these things, like saying the Jews, the Israelites, are required by God to keep the law, but the Gentiles are not, would have you

believe that God's law is evil. We have just read God's own testimony, His witness of what *He* thinks about His law, and what Israel should think about it as well.

Brethren, the problem between the Israelites and the Gentiles was Israel's abuse of law, the abuse of their relationship with God, and the abuse of their other privileges. The solution was that each Jew and each Gentile was to serve the Lord Christ in faith, and that would draw these two warring peoples together into one body. So the first reason is the biblical record shows that the apostles went right on keeping God's law.