

What law was abolished?

The Wall of Separation

Ephesians 2:14-15

Compiled by Rachel Cory-Kuehl, May 2018.

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Scripture is quoted from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

Ephesians 2:14-15 “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” (ESV).

He broke down the wall of division between Jew and Gentile, (circumcised and uncircumcised) to create “one new man” - one congregation under the Christ.

Galatians 3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In Romans Chapter Eleven, Paul goes to great lengths to explain that non-Hebrew, uncircumcised believers in Yeshua the Messiah, are “grafted in” to the Olive Tree that is Israel, while unbelieving, unrepentant, circumcised Hebrews, are “broken off” from that Tree.

In the parable of the Rich Man and the beggar Lazarus, Christ taught His truth that believing non-Hebrews, who were thought “unclean” by the Jews, would go to the Kingdom of God with Abraham, while many Jews (rich in the things of God) would not. Not coincidentally, Caiaphas the rich and powerful High Priest, had five brother-in-laws (all sons of the powerful Annas).

THE WALL

When the Jews were allowed to return to “the land” at the end of their captivity in Babylon, they rebuilt the Temple. Around that Temple they built a wall, to forbid entrance into the Court of Sacrifice, by “uncircumcised” Gentiles. In the time of Christ, there was a sign on that wall, in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. It promised death to any uncircumcised male who entered.

Ezekiel the prophet, also a captive in Babylon, received a vision of a future Temple of Yahweh. “No one, uncircumcised in heart or uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter My House,” the LORD said (*Ezekiel 44:7-9*). The Hebrews would have no way to know if a man was “uncircumcised in heart,” but they could certainly fulfill the other part of the prophecy.

When Paul visited Jerusalem and the Temple, after 14 years absence, a riot broke out in the Temple court. His enemies accused him of bringing an uncircumcised Gentile into the Temple court. He had not of course, but the accusation was enough to get him arrested by the Romans.

When Paul writes that “the dividing wall” is broken down in Christ, he is writing about the deep and seemingly impassable, division between Jews and Gentiles. The wall around the Temple to exclude the uncircumcised, symbolized that division. The Jews believed they had a mandate from God, to exclude Gentiles.

PETER AND CORNELIUS

Peter is praying on the roof of Simon’s house at Joppa. He receives a vision from the LORD. A great sheet is lowered from heaven by its four corners, holding all sorts of “unclean” animals, birds and creeping things (*Lev. Cpt 11*). He hears a voice. “Get up, Peter.” “Kill and eat.” Peter objects strenuously, “Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.”

The voice spoke to Peter again, “**What God has cleansed you must not call common.**” This was repeated three times, before the sheet disappeared up into heaven. While Peter was wondering what the vision meant, the servants of Cornelius called out from the gate, asking for him. The Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them.”

The next day Peter with several brethren, accompanied the two servants and one soldier to Caesarea, to the home of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion of the Italian Regiment. Cornelius had been praying and searching to know the true God. Three days before Peter received his vision of the animals, Cornelius had himself seen an angel, who instructed him, “Send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter.” “He will tell you what you must do” (*Acts 10:3-7*).

Peter tells Cornelius, “**You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation.** But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.” So THAT was the gist of the vision with the sheet. It was NOT about food. It was about uncircumcised human beings, and God’s invitation to make them part of His kingdom and His covenant.

Let’s detour for just a moment to look at a few of those “laws” forbidding the association of Israelites with the uncircumcised.

COMMANDMENTS EXPRESSED IN ORDINANCES

Exodus 34:12 “Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst.” (See also Exo 23:31-32.)

Exodus 23:32 “You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods.” (NAS)

Deuteronomy 7:2 “You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them.”

These are the commands, along with those in the Oral Torah of the Pharisees, that Paul is saying are abolished in Christ. In this passage, he was not saying that the whole Torah is abolished, with all of the Ten Commandments. He is writing specifically about the commands that forbade the close association of Jews with Gentiles, especially in worship.

NOTE: Marriage was a “covenant,” therefore Jews could not marry Gentiles. Paul wrote, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers,” but that was about belief in Christ, not about race (2Cor 6:14).

There were also extensions of these commands in the Mishna (the Oral Torah). I won't go into the Oral Torah, except to say that the Oral Torah contained many additions to, and extrapolations of the written Law. Jesus railed many times against what He called “your traditions.” The Pharisees of Christ's day, and Jews still today, regard the Oral Torah as above the written Torah.

In that ancient culture, **to share a meal with another implied covenant**. In the Ancient Middle East you would never share the salt with someone you did not trust. To do so meant that you could not henceforth seek to harm that person. It was called a “covenant of salt.”

Did you know that every sacrifice to Yahweh was to be “salted with salt.”

Reference: “The Salt Covenant,” by H. Clay Trumbull, Impact Christian Books, Inc. 1999

Back to our story of Peter and Cornelius:

As Peter told the Gospel story to the household of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon “all those who heard the word.” Peter and all of the Jews who had come with him “**were astonished**, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.” Peter commanded that they immediately be baptized in water, in the name of Yeshua Messiah. Peter did NOT demand they should be circumcised.

I'll skip a lot of the story.

Much later, the apostles and brethren in Judea heard about all of the Gentiles who were being baptized in the name of Jesus, without circumcision. “Certain men from Jerusalem - believing Pharisees,” made it their business to set things straight. They came to Antioch saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the [entire] law of Moses.”

Acts 15:1 “And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’”

NOTE: These men from Judea were NOT sent by James or by the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:24).

Peter was so afraid of these guys that he quit eating with the Gentile believers. Paul then rebuked him for being a flip-flopper (*Gal. 2:11-12*). Paul was right of course. Peter was treating the Gentile believers like unclean foreigners - not like “fellow citizens” of the commonwealth of Israel (*Gal. 2:11-14, Eph. 2:12*).

Paul and Peter had no small dispute with the visiting Pharisees. The issue of circumcision wasn't going away without some official ruling, and so we read about the meeting of the Jerusalem Council (*Acts 15:1-2*).

Acts 15:5 [At the council meeting] “But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.’”

“When Peter came up to Jerusalem” for this Council meeting, “those of the circumcision contended with him.” You ate with them!!! - with uncircumcised men! That's against the law!

So Peter told the whole story from the beginning, about his vision of the sheet, about Cornelius' angel visit, and about those of his household being filled with the Holy Spirit (without benefit of circumcision). “Who was I, that I could withstand God?” Peter asked.

From the evidence so far sited, I conclude that one may be filled with the Spirit, WITHOUT physical circumcision. And one may be baptized, also WITHOUT circumcision. Physical circumcision is therefore NOT a requirement for acceptance into full citizenship in God's “Commonwealth of Israel.”

THE LETTER FROM THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Acts 15:14 “Since we [the Jerusalem Council] 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 ...” (Also Acts 15:24).

The whole dispute about circumcision was a dispute about HOW to induct Gentile converts into “the commonwealth of Israel” (Eph. 2:12).

The believing Pharisees were teaching that every Gentile convert must be circumcised, and take a vow to keep ALL the commands of Moses, and all of the added laws (the “Oral Torah”).

It was NOT just about circumcision.

Most folks do not realize that a person of another nation *could* come under the Sinai Covenant. They simply had to be instructed for two years, then vow to keep the entire “Law” - both written and oral, and then be circumcised. It is the same today. The only difference is that there is no Temple at Jerusalem today, with a priesthood, so the Laws involving those things cannot now be obeyed as originally written.

Under the First Covenant, it was **unlawful** for an Israelite to enter into any covenant with an uncircumcised man (Exo. 23:32, Deut. 7:2). From this had arisen the “law” that the circumcised were not to “eat with” the uncircumcised - because eating a meal together implied a covenant (especially if they shared the salt). Also an Israelite was not to give his daughter in marriage to an uncircumcised man. (See Gen. 34:14.)

Paul and Barnabas (with Titus) traveled to Jerusalem for the Council meeting to debate THIS issue. **Should physical circumcision be required for the new converts from the Gentiles?** Obviously the believing Jews at Jerusalem still considered themselves Jews and Israelites. They did not regard themselves as something new. They had simply found the Messiah (of Israel) and wanted to tell everyone the news.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the council issued a letter, “to the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.” (These were areas, not individual congregations.) All were places where Paul had founded congregations. The letter from the Jerusalem Council did NOT require physical circumcision for new converts. Quite the contrary!

NOTE: The letter from the Jerusalem Council was sent only to congregations with large numbers of Gentile converts. It was not circulated throughout Judea, to congregations made up mostly of believing Jews. If this letter was primarily to tell Jews that the Law concerning circumcision was now to be considered non-binding for Jews who believed in Yeshua, why send it only to congregations of converted Gentiles?

THE LETTER FROM THE COUNCIL

The Letter from the Jerusalem Council is found in Acts 15:23-29. Notice that the believers at Jerusalem call the Gentile believers “brothers.” Something unthinkable only a short time before. The last part of the letter lists the minimum requirements for common worship - for Gentiles to join in worship with Jews. It doesn’t say that the Gentiles will not learn more concerning the Sabbath or the Feasts, or about other things. It’s just the minimum to begin joint worship.

Acts 15:28 “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from [eating] blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell” (NIV).

It’s worth noting that “sexual immorality” is defined BY the Torah.

CONCLUSION

Ephesians 2:14-15 “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” (ESV).

Jesus broke down “the dividing wall of hostility” between Jews and Gentiles, BY “abolishing the law of commandments,” in both Oral and written Torah, that forbade their association.

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