Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

For the Jews I Became Jewish, Part 1
Scripture: Acts 15:7–21; 1 Corinthians 9:19–23
Code: B110910

As we noted in the last post, Paul was not advocating “contextualization” when he wrote to the Corinthians, “I have become all things to all men, that I may be all means save some.” He was calling for self-denial and sacrifice for the sake of reaching unbelievers with the gospel.

How did Paul apply that principle? In 1 Corinthians 9:20 he describes the practical outworking of self-denial: “To the Jews I became as a Jew . . . to those who are under the Law, as under the Law.” This describes a selfless sacrifice of Paul’s personal liberty: “though not being . . . under the Law,” Paul willingly subjected himself to the law’s ritual requirements in order to win those who were under the law. In other words, he adopted their customs. Whatever their ceremonial law dictated, he was willing to do. If it was important to them to abstain from eating pork, he abstained. If their sensibilities demanded that a certain feast be observed, he observed it. Why? Not to appease their pride or affirm their religion, but in order to open a door of opportunity for him to preach the uncompromised truth, so that he might win them to Jesus Christ.

Paul would stoop to no compromise of the truth. He simply sacrificed personal freedoms and preferences, removing any unnecessary diversion or excuse that would thwart the opportunity to declare the powerful, saving gospel plainly to them.

Paul was not suggesting that the gospel can be made more powerful by adapting it to a certain cultural context. He was not speaking about accommodating the *message*. He was simply saying he would not jeopardize his ability to preach the message by unnecessarily offending people. If the message was an offense, so be it: “We preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:23). But Paul would not make *himself* a stumbling block to unbelievers: “Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God” (1 Corinthians 10:32).

Several illustrations of this may be adduced from the New Testament. In the fifteenth chapter of Acts the Jerusalem Council, the first church council, met to determine how they should assimilate the Gentile converts. Many of the Jewish believers were so steeped in Jewish tradition that they were skeptical about the Gentiles who were turning to Christ. Then some men came down from Judea and began teaching the Christians, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (1 Corinthians 15:1). In other words, they were claiming the Gentiles couldn’t become Christians unless they became Jewish first. The church was thrown into confusion.

The Jerusalem Council was assembled to discuss the issue. Scripture says there was much debate (Acts 15:7). At one point Peter testified that he had been present when Gentiles first received the Holy Spirit, and all the evidence demonstrated that God was in it (Acts 15:7–12). Finally, James, the leader, handed down this ruling: “It is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:19).

That settled the question. The church would accept Gentiles as they were, without placing them under the Jewish ceremonial law.

But then notice the next verse. James went on to add this: “We [will] write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.” He listed four things the Gentiles were to stay away from.

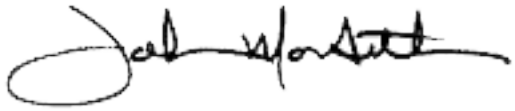
First, “things contaminated by idols” meant food offered to idols. That was precisely the issue that troubled the Corinthians. Eating food offered to pagan idols was grossly offensive to Jewish people. They despised pagan idolatry. But as Paul suggested, there is nothing inherently wrong with eating food that had been offered to idols. What is an idol, anyway? “We know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one” (1 Corinthians 8:4). Nevertheless, the Jerusalem Council added this warning to stay away from things contaminated by idols, so as not to needlessly offend the Jews.

Second, the Gentiles were to stay away from fornication. This does not mean simply that they were not to *commit* fornication. That is obvious. It is not a gray area. There was much in the apostolic teaching that prohibited every form of fornication, or sexual sin. So “abstain . . . from fornication” is much more than a command against acts of fornication. Since the Gentile religions revolved around sex rites, temple prostitutes, and orgiastic ritual, James was saying the Gentile believers should have nothing to do with their former ways of worship. They should not attend any ceremonies where these things were going on. They were to sever the tie completely with pagan styles of worship so repulsive to Jews.

Third, they were to abstain from the meat of strangled animals; and fourth, they were to stay away from blood. Strangled meat retains a lot of blood. Jewish law demanded that any animals to be eaten must have the blood completely drained from them. To the Jews, the eating of blood was one of the most offensive of all Gentile practices. And some pagan religious rites involved the drinking of pure animal blood. The Jerusalem Council therefore commanded Gentile believers to abstain from all such practices.

Understand the significance of this. The Jerusalem Council’s decision was an explicit condemnation of legalism. The Council refused to put the Gentiles under the Mosaic law. So why did they lay these four prohibitions on them? The reason is made clear in Acts 15:21: “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

In other words, they were to abstain from those four things so they would not offend the Jewish unbelievers. If Christians practiced these most offensive of all Gentile rituals, unbelieving Jews might turn away from the gospel before hearing it.



Available online at: http://www.gty.org

COPYRIGHT (C) 2024 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (https://www.gty.org/about#copyright).