

Does Acts 21 Confirm Sabbath Keeping for Believers?

Introduction

I have to confess I have a problem with James.¹ No, not the book. I don't have Martin Luther's difficulty.² But I do have a problem with James' attitude and actions towards Paul in Acts 21, when Paul returned to Jerusalem after his work among the Gentiles. It was all to do with the law, the law of Moses, in connection with converted Jews and Gentiles. And the way James spoke to Paul, and dealt with him, does leave me in a bit of a quandary.

Having said that, at one time Peter and Barnabas had a problem over the very same issue at Antioch, and it needed Paul to sort them out. Which he did. See Galatians 2. Indeed, as is evident from the number of references to it in the apostolic writings, the law of Moses was a very hot potato for believers in those early days. And, for many believers today it still is. At least, many get it wrong. Which, when you come to think about it, is very odd.

Let me explain. Because of the raging dispute over the law in the churches at the time, the writers of the post-Pentecost Scriptures – especially Paul and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews – tackled the issue, dealing with it once and for all. Scripture, as only to be expected, sets out the definitive position on the matter. Paul, in nearly all his letters, had to deal with churches which in one way or another were being confronted by it. And deal with it he did! His letters (along with other apostolic writings, the letter to the Hebrews in

¹ The substance of this article first saw the light of day in my *Sabbath Notes & Extracts* pp92-96.

² Because he did not understand Jas. 2:14-26, and could not reconcile it with Paul's teaching in Romans on justification, and because he was under heavy attack from Rome on the issue, he dismissed the book of James as so much hay or straw.

particular) laid down the final word on the subject and put it to rest. Or so one would think!

But no! Sad to say, as the centuries passed, some clever men – philosophers – rolled their sleeves up, got to work and devised a logical system which got round the teaching of Scripture on the law. One man in particular played a very important part in this fandango. I am, of course, talking about Thomas Aquinas. His disastrous legacy lives on even to this day. And not only in Romanism. Protestants, too, have been heavily influenced by him; albeit unwittingly in most cases, they still are being heavily influenced by him.³

For, alas, the medieval Roman church bought into Aquinas, big-time. But that's the way of Rome, is it not?

Even more sadly, John Calvin never threw off his Romanism in this regard. Indeed, on the question of the law, Calvin set his thinking in concrete in his *Institutes*. And that has spelled trouble with a capital T for many Reformed and evangelical believers ever since. Covenant theologians, many Puritans in particular, took Calvin's views, developed them into a rigid legal system, with catastrophic results, results which are with us to this very day.⁴

Let me briefly set out the salient scriptural facts.

We know that Israel, and Israel alone, out of all the nations, was privileged to be given God's law through Moses on Sinai. We have an abundance of scriptures which put it beyond doubt (Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5, and so on). In this, Israel was unique among all the nations:

[God] has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws (Ps. 147:19-20).

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God (Rom. 3:1-2).

³ See my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

⁴ See my *Christ Is All*.

[Consider] the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen (Rom. 9:4-5).

Although God could say: ‘All the earth is mine’, he chose to declare to the Israelites: ‘You shall be a special treasure to me above all people’. But there was a condition: ‘Now therefore, *if* you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, *then* you shall be a special treasure to me above all people’ (Ex. 19:5). ‘Keep my covenant’; in other words: ‘Keep my law’. In giving this new nation – this nation of Israel, his nation – his law in order to mark them out as his people, in particular God gave them a special – unique – sign that they were his people. This sign belonged to no other people, since only Israel was his nation. And this sign was his sabbaths: ‘Moreover I also gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between them and me, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them’ (Ezek. 20:12); that is, separates them from all other peoples. God commanded the Jews ‘to hallow my sabbaths, and they will be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God’ (Ezek. 20:20). And the same applied to their following generations (Ex. 31:13). By ‘sabbaths’, of course, God meant the weekly sabbaths in particular. In short, on delivering them from Egypt, God commanded the Hebrew people, from that time on, until he brought that epoch to its appointed end in Christ, to keep his law, especially the sabbath, *and especially the sabbath as a sign that they were God’s nation, distinct from all others:*

Surely my sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that it is the LORD who sanctifies you. You shall keep the sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death... Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Therefore the children of Israel shall

keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed (Ex. 31:13-17).

Comment is surely superfluous. Under the Mosaic covenant, Israel was given the law; Israel alone, of all the nations, was given the law; the law was given to Israel for Israel and for no others. The sabbath, at the very heart of the old covenant and the Mosaic law, was the hallmark of Judaism.⁵ And the sabbath was the simple, clear-cut marker that, at a glance, guaranteed kosher behaviour under the law. Obedience to the entire body of more than 600 commandments could be distilled into sabbath keeping in accordance with the fourth of the ten commandments. That, and dietary laws, marked out the Jews.

Such is the background to Acts 21.

As for today, sabbath observance is the reddest of all red buttons in some circles.

What of Acts 21?

In Acts 21, James and all the elders in Jerusalem told Paul (on his return after several years) that they knew ‘many myriads of Jews... who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law’. In this we can hear echoes of Ananias – ‘a certain disciple’, ‘a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews’ in Damascus (Acts 9:10; 22:12). In addition, as James explained, he and the elders were afraid that, since Paul had taught ‘all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses’, his presence would upset the Jerusalem believers. To forestall this, they urged him to make

⁵ In those days, dietary laws came into it also. But this is not an issue in the current debate since Aquinas, with his clever but unscriptural tripartite division of the law, has provided an escape route for those who buy into his system. See my *Christ Is All*.

a public display of his loyalty to the law. And the apostle complied (Acts 21:18ff).

What can be made of this? Was it fair of Samuele Bacchiocchi, writing to advocate sabbath keeping by believers today, to claim: ‘The profound loyalty of the leadership of the Jerusalem church to Jewish religious traditions is self-evident’, and to further argue that the believers there circumcised their infant sons, ate kosher foods, ‘retained a deep attachment to Jewish religious customs such as sabbath keeping’, and so on? Was he right to say, quoting W.D.Davies, these observances ‘must have been so strong that right up to the fall of Jerusalem in AD70 they were the *dominant* element in the Christian movement’?⁶

Let me say at once, Bacchiocchi’s assertions may be right; may be. If they are, then of course, I concede the point; namely, Jewish believers in Jerusalem at that time clung with enthusiasm to Judaism (but not just one or two aspects, mark you – the lot!). But, of course, we know that Gentile converts did not adopt Judaism (indeed, they were forbidden to do so).

Inevitably, therefore, if Bacchiocchi and his fellows are right, we are faced with the proposition that both groups of believers – those who were trying to fulfil the law, and those who were resting in the finished work of Christ who fulfilled the law on their behalf (Matt. 5:17-18; John 19:34; Rom. 8:1-4; 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Galatians; Hebrews, for instance) – must have been perfectly acceptable (at least in Jerusalem). I find this very hard to accept. But, allowing that it was so, James was clearly living on a knife edge, and he was, to put it mildly, fearful that Paul’s coming to the city would spell nothing but trouble. However, Paul did nothing at the time to sort out the mess (for that is what it was, allowing it was happening). Of course, he had little time in which he could do

⁶ Samuele Bacchiocchi: *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity*, The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, Rome, 1977, pp148-149,151. His quotation was from W.D.Davies *Paul and Jewish Christianity*, 1972, p72, emphasis mine.

anything of the sort since he was very rapidly whisked off his feet, detained in custody, and carted away from the city, making it impossible for him to sort the matter out. Nevertheless, if he had acted as did everywhere else, we are in no doubt about what would have been his attitude to it. Wherever the issue arose, and whoever was involved in it, Paul immediately stepped in to put a stop to the nonsense. Nonsense? To go back to the law was an offence to Christ, an attack upon his finished work, and a diminishing of the grace and power of God in the age of the Spirit.

And that takes us to the letter to the Hebrews. In his letter, the sacred writer bent over backwards to instruct, urge, press, exhort Jewish believers not – under any circumstances whatever – to go back under the old covenant. Indeed, he rebuked them for even thinking of it, let alone doing it. He positively argued, and argued with majestic cogency, that Christ had carried out his manifesto (Matt. 5:17-18), fulfilled every shadow of the old covenant and its law, thus rendering the old covenant obsolete. Read the entire letter of Hebrews to see the point. Hebrews 8:13 could not be more explicit.

Consequently, if Acts 21 really does belong to that very short time when Judaism was acceptable – kosher – for believers, whether they had been Jew or Gentile before conversion, certain facts inevitably follow. Such a view poses very serious, far-reaching questions – questions which must be faced by those who hold to Bacchiocchi's view.

Above all, the many clear statements in the New Testament, which are very damaging to the idea that Judaism was perfectly acceptable in the early churches, have to be explained. What do *they* mean? How do *they* fit in with the notion that it was perfectly acceptable for ex-Jews (and Gentiles) to be zealous for the law?

Nevertheless, I admit I find the events recorded in Acts 21 very puzzling. As Bacchiocchi himself said: 'This excessive attachment of the Jerusalem church to Jewish regulations may perhaps perplex' certain people. I agree. It certainly perplexes me. Before I concede Bacchiocchi's point however, may I offer some food for thought?

For instance, notice the abrupt way James and the elders responded to Paul – and James must bear the responsibility for it since he was in the driving seat. Paul came to Jerusalem with wonderful news – wonderful news, I stress – God was calling the Gentiles, forming churches, far and wide. True, James and the others ‘glorified the Lord’ at the news. But immediately – I emphasise this – *immediately*, sharply, abruptly, they turn from Paul’s marvellous news to... to what? To the scruples of believing Jews about Jewish customs! What a feeble welcome this for Paul, after many years away (Acts 24:17). Paul must have felt that a bucket of cold water had been thrown in his face. Indeed, James and the elders seem to fear that the church would meet on hearing of his arrival. What an alarming thought! What might happen? The leaders looked on Paul as a likely embarrassment; he would cause difficulties; his teaching among the Gentiles was not liked (Acts 21:19-22).

What is to be made of this meeting between James and Paul? I am convinced it was James who did not altogether like or appreciate Paul’s teaching – that was the real problem.⁷ This raises a question: can we take James’ words at face value? Please do not throw my article down in disgust. Remember Galatians 2:11ff; even Peter and Barnabas got things wrong, and on this very issue. And it was teachers who came from James (Gal. 2:12) who were the cause of the trouble in Antioch.

And notice another thing; James told Paul about the decision made at the Acts 15 church meeting (Acts 21:25).⁸ In so doing, he spoke as though Paul knew nothing about it. Yet it was Paul himself who had first raised the issue among the churches. Let that sink in! James was talking as if Paul knew

⁷ See Ben Witherington III: *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on... Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, T.&T.Clark, Edinburgh, 1998, p269.

⁸ This was *not* a Church Council. It was a church meeting. See my *Battle For The Church* pp85-90. We must not read Christendom back into the New Testament. See my *Letting Loose a Gadfly: Edward Miall Speaks Today; The Pastor: Does He Exist?*

nothing about it, and yet it was Paul who raised the issue at Jerusalem. He did it at Antioch. Indeed, it was Paul who had rightly brought it back to where it belonged – the Jerusalem church, and with James. Furthermore, it was Paul and others who had been commissioned to take the decision by letter to all the churches. And yet, despite this catalogue of facts, James now treated Paul as though he did not have a clue about the issue. Talk about teaching grandmothers to suck eggs!

There is another possibility. It could be that James was telling Paul that he was willing to leave Paul to get on unhindered with the Gentiles in the wider world, and he would appreciate it if Paul would reciprocate and let him get on with the Jews in Jerusalem, and do so without interference. In other words, in a nice way, was he telling Paul to keep off the grass? Was he forestalling what he feared might happen – namely, that Paul would upset the apple cart in Jerusalem?⁹

Whichever it is, it seems to me, as I have said, James had a problem – not Paul. And maybe the problem was more than theological; maybe it was personal.¹⁰ I suspect James found it very hard to come to terms with the end of Judaism. In Galatians 2:12 he was implicated; in Acts 15 he wanted to hold on to as much Judaism as he could; and here in Acts 21 he is still at it. Paul had long since seen the glorious truth – the old covenant had gone, the new had come. Galatians 2:11-14

⁹ Although I am responsible for this paragraph, it was a comment made by Steve Guest which gave me the idea, for which I am grateful.

¹⁰ Did James, perhaps, not understand Paul's teaching? Was his criticism deliberate? Rordorf: 'It is... certainly a calumny when in Acts 21:21 Paul is reproached for having taught all Jewish Christians living among Gentile Christians to forsake Moses', and so on (Willy Rordorf: *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church*, SCM, London, 1968, p138). See Acts 25:8; 28:17. James' blanket criticism is easy to make; simplistic, indeed. But things need much more nuancing than this!

furnishes more than enough proof of this.¹¹ It looks as though old habits died hard with James. They certainly did with Peter (Acts 10:9-17,28-29,34-43,47; 11:5-12,17; Gal. 2:11). And not only with Peter – ‘the apostles and brethren who were in Jerusalem’ needed convincing that Peter had not gone off the rails when he went to Cornelius. Happily, they were convinced when after ‘those of the circumcision contended with him... Peter explained it to them in order’ (Acts 11:1-18).

Despite this, Peter sadly slipped at Antioch, dragging others with him (Gal. 2:11-13), *but it was a slip, a mistake, a failure*; Paul could remind him of his true conviction: ‘If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as the Jews?’ (Gal. 2:14). Indeed, Peter had learned the lesson so well, he had gone public on it, challenging the false teachers and their sympathisers at the Jerusalem church-meeting called to deal with the issue: ‘Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?’ (Acts 15:10). We know Paul’s view: Christ has ‘abolished in his flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances’ (Eph. 2:15), ‘having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross’ (Col. 2: 14). This is of the utmost importance. Paul and Peter, it is clear, though *ex-Jews*, were not keeping Jewish ordinances, customs and laws; converts from the ‘sinners of the Gentiles’ (Gal. 2:15) certainly were not – nor were they expected to. This definitely involved eating habits (Gal. 2:12). It probably also involved circumcision – otherwise, why is it mentioned? As it is (Gal. 2:3; 5:3).¹² Who, in the light of Galatians 4:9-11,¹³ will argue it did not also include sabbath observance? Paul would not

¹¹ If any more proof is required, look at Rom. 3 – 8; 2 Cor. 3; Gal. 3 – 4, and so on. See my *Christ Is All; Three Verses Misunderstood: Galatians 3:23-25 Expounded*.

¹² It also seems to be emphasised in verses 7,8,9,12. I realise, of course, that ‘the circumcision’ means ‘the Jews’.

¹³ See my *Christ Is All; Sanctification in Galatians*.

yield to bondage, not 'even for an hour [better, a moment, NIV], that the truth of the gospel might continue with' the Galatians (Gal. 2:4-5); and by his action, he stopped Peter in his tracks.

For such reasons as these, I cannot believe the Jewish converts were still keeping the Mosaic law after Pentecost, and doing so with apostolic approval.

So why did Paul do as James asked in Acts 21? Paul, I think, saw the bigger picture. He was willing to accommodate James. He was, perhaps, carrying out his principles expressed in this passage:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23).¹⁴

And:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved (1 Cor. 10:31-33).

But this does not mean that he retracted his teaching, or tolerated sabbath observance, let alone elevated it to the status of being the very summit of spirituality.

Yet another possibility remains. Paul, himself, may have made a mistake here. It appears he had come to Jerusalem with the intention of fulfilling a vow which he had already

¹⁴ See my *Believers Under the Law of Christ*.

begun (Acts 18:18,21). Was he right in this? Is it significant that he was never allowed (by God's providence) to complete it? True, he did not try to hide what he had done – quite the opposite (Acts 24:17).

So, what is my conclusion? I simply do not know. Perhaps Paul should have stood up to James as he did to Peter in Galatians 2.

Whatever the reason, however, Paul yielded. Nevertheless, if James had hoped to avoid a fuss, he was disappointed. True, there is no mention of trouble in the church,¹⁵ but what an outcome his scheme produced in the city – a riot, a lynch mob, Paul's attempted torture, his imprisonment, his trials and so on! And where was James then (and the many converted Jews who, according to James, were zealous for the law)? What comfort did he – or they – offer to Paul? I know it is very dangerous to argue from silence, but to all appearances it looks as though once James had got Paul to toe the line, he lost all interest in him.¹⁶

In concluding this brief look at Acts 21, I repeat my admission that I find the passage very puzzling on many counts. But one thing I do not find; I find no mention of sabbath keeping in the Jerusalem church. Nor does anybody else. Indeed, throughout the apostolic writings there is not a single passage which speaks of believers observing the sabbath. Yes, Paul would go to the synagogue or elsewhere on a sabbath wherever Jews assembled so that he might address them with the gospel (Acts 9:20,29; 13:5,14-52; 14:1; 16:13; 17:1-2,10; 18:4; 19:8; see also Acts 18:24-26; 28:17-31), but this is a far cry from saying that, as a believer, he observed the sabbath in accordance with the Mosaic law.

¹⁵ Which makes me wonder if James had been right in saying what he did in the first place.

¹⁶ As I say, silence *is* dangerous – I take to heart Turner's warning (Max M.B. Turner: 'The Sabbath, Sunday, and the Law in Luke/Acts', in D.A. Carson (ed): *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, Zondervan, 1982, p154).

Thus, in answering the question in my title, I state that Acts 21 does not confirm the claim that believers should keep the sabbath. Not at all!

To end on a positive note. Christ is the believer's sabbath (Matt. 11:28-30; Rom. 5:1; Heb. 4:9-10). In this article, I simply state the fact, but for those who wish to read more of the arguments behind my claim, they should see my *The Essential Sabbath*.

I close by saying that to argue for the observance of the sabbath is to argue for an obsolete shadow which belonged to Israel in that temporary time of the law under the Mosaic covenant. All those old-covenant shadows, not excluding the sabbath, have been fulfilled and rendered obsolete in and through Christ. The abiding – eternal – reality of it all is Christ himself.

And that is the point. Do not set your heart on a day; that is, do not to cling to the shadow and miss the substance. To do that is to make a very serious mistake indeed.

As Joseph Hart put it:

*To all God's people now remains
A sabbatism,¹⁷ a rest from pains,
And works of slavish kind;
When tired with toil, and faint through fear,
The child of God can enter here,
And sweet refreshment find.*

*To this, by faith he oft retreats;
Bondage and labour quite forgets,
And bids his cares adieu;
Slides softly into promised rest,
Reclines his head on Jesus' breast,
And proves the sabbath true.*

¹⁷ 'Sabbatism'. Hart clearly spotted the significant change the writer to the Hebrews made in Heb. 4:9. He had been using *katapausis* and *katapauō* ('rest', noun and verb), and doing so frequently, but changed to *sabbatismos*, 'a keeping sabbath, the blessed rest from toils and troubles', the only time the word is used in Scripture.

*This, and this only, is the way,
To rightly keep the sabbath day.
Which God has holy made.
All keepers that come short of this,
The substance of the sabbath miss,
And grasp an empty shade.*

In short, set your heart on Christ (Col. 3:1-4). Christ is all (Col. 3:11).