

Resilient, Resurgent Legalism

In the epistle about the body of the Church Paul wrote “For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” Eph. 6:12. At the outset of this study we give the devil his due and note his stratagem for trying to take the Church away from Christ. Long before he employed the Romans and the might of their empire to attempt to crush the Church, he tried to thwart the advance of the kingdom by means of his Jewish thrust. It was a two pronged attack: legalism from within, persecution from without. In this pincers move he would utilize both according to his evil will. The focus in this study is not the persecution that emanated from the synagogue and Sanhedrin, but from the Jewish Christians or those who claimed to be Christians in their legalism.

There are five sure episodes of Jewish Christian legalism with possibly a sixth in this study. They cover a span of over twenty years and reach from the mother church, Jerusalem, to the fields well beyond.

<u>Episode</u>	<u>Possible Dates</u>	<u>Areas of Activity</u>
Cornelius’ house	41, 43	Caesarea, Jerusalem
Galatia	46, 48	Syria (Antioch), Galatia
Jerusalem Council	49, 51, 52	Jerusalem
Corinth	55, 56, 58	Greece (Corinth)
Paul’s Arrest	56, 58	Jerusalem
Titus in Crete	63, 65	Crete

In considering these scenes Jerusalem is repeatedly involved. And see how far afield the problem goes and over such a time period. The devil finds ready ground in man’s heart to sow the seeds to propagate a resilient, resurgent legalism in these episodes, in particular among Jewish Christians. Like Creeping Jenny in the garden, it is always beneath the surface ready to spring forth and entwine and choke. Like those noxious weeds in the garden, we see the Judaizers cut off again and again, only to reappear. In these episodes we consider the Christians still tied in varying degrees to the Mosaic Law.

1) Cornelius’ House

We know from Luke’s narrative how Peter admits himself how he just would not go to the Gentiles. It took a vision from God to get Peter off of dead center. In going to Cornelius he was accompanied by “believers from among the circumcision.” οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς πιστοὶ Acts 10:45 God used a miracle at

Cornelius' to underline the truth of going to the Gentiles. The circumcised believers "heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God." Acts 10:46 There just could be no question that the Gospel was also for the Gentiles. Or could there be a question?

When Peter and companions come to Jerusalem after this, the objection is raised, "Why did you go to the uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Acts 11:3 Those who raised this objection were οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς, v.2. After Peter gave his explanation, there was a settlement, "they were silenced. And they glorified God, saying 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life.'" Acts 11:18 Well, then, it is obvious and what with God's miraculous emphasis there could be no question! Old ways die hard and the flesh is strong. Even apparent stalwarts, Peter and Barnabas, would be carried away at another time with the legalism.

2) Galatia

While Paul wrote to Galatia, it was also with reference to Antioch where the opposition arose. In Gal. 2:4 he refers to ψευδοἀδελφους, but brethren nonetheless within the pale. In 2:12 the opposition are called τινὰς ἀπὸ Ἰακώβου which makes them Jewish Christians. Peter backs off in an encounter and even Barnabas does. Paul is astonished that the Galatians are so quickly deserting...:6. Other strong words also indicated the seriousness of the situation: 3:1 "foolish," "bewitched," 4:11 "I am afraid," 4:20 "I am perplexed," 5:12 "mutilated themselves." The devil's attack is not only in Galatia, but in Paul's home base of Antioch, where Paul mentions even Peter and Barnabas' backing off when men came from James of the circumcision party τοὺς ἐκ περιτομῆς. 2:12 Things had to be straightened out.

3) Jerusalem Council

Men came down from Judea and taught "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Acts 15:1 After Paul and Barnabas had no little debate with them at Antioch, Paul, Barnabas and some others went up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this question. I take this to come after the letter to the Galatians, and that the letter to the Galatians does not refer to the Jerusalem council. This means there was more to the frequency of the problem than if the Galatian letter had referred to the Jerusalem council. The problem dealt with in Jerusalem is with Jewish Christians. Acts 15:5 τινὲς τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς αἰρέσεως τῶν Φαρισαίων πεπιστευκότες, and 15:24 τινὲς ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξεληθόντες are clear on this. The well-known settlement in verses 19-29 should have settled the matter, right? A united front was presented.

We remember who is actually behind all this and that his cunning is beyond our ken. In Galatia and again in Corinth he hounded the missionary. He ratcheted up his attack, breaking the formerly united front there at Antioch between Paul, Barnabas and Peter. He varies his attacks, his bag of tricks being deep. Would it be any different with the God-pleasing outcome at Jerusalem?

Before we go on to Corinth, back to Jerusalem and to Crete consider the excursus that follows in how the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 is not referred to in the Galatians two trip reference.

Excursus – The views on Galatians are that it was written: before the council., soon after the council, a few years later. I think it appears to have been written obviously after the first journey but before the council.

- Gal 2:1 says that Paul, Barnabas and Titus went up to Jerusalem, while in Acts 15:2 it is Paul, Barnabas and some others. .
- In Gal. 2:2 they went up by revelation κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν, while in Acts 15:2 it was determined after debate and they ἔταξαν ἀναβαίνειν. Οἱ μὲν οὖν προπεμφθέντες ὑπὸ τῆς ἐκκλησίας v.3, they were appointed to go up.
- In Galatians 2 it was a preventative measure so that there would be no misunderstanding about Paul's work. V.2 ἀνεθέμην αὐτοῖς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ὃ κηρύσσω ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσι. With Acts 15 it was to correct a problem περὶ τοῦ ζητήματος τούτου. V. 2
- In Galatians Titus is not only mentioned, but it is pointed out he was not compelled to be circumcised. In Acts 15 he is not even mentioned.
- In Gal. 2:7-8 the point made is of a division of labor, with Peter going to the circumcised and Paul to the uncircumcised. In Acts 15:3-4 it would seem to be the carrying out of Paul's part of the labor and relating of it to the Jerusalem brethren.
- In Gal. 2:9 it would seem to be more of a private meeting with James, Cephas and John then giving the right hand of fellowship agreeing on the division of labor. In Acts 15:4 it was a public welcoming by the church and apostles and elders. In v. 6 they gathered to consider the matter which was decided after much debate, v.7. And in v.22 the apostles and elders and the whole church concurred.
- The Gal. 2:10 reference of remembering the poor seems to point at this being likely connected to the Acts 11:30 relief trip from Antioch by Paul and Barnabas.
- In Galatians there is no mention of the great settlement mentioned in detail in Acts 15. And no mention in Galatians of the letter sent out from the council. Because Paul was having such trouble with the Judaizers in Galatia and Antioch, it would seem he would refer to that latter of unity if the council had occurred before the Galatian letter.
- What is true of both episodes is that it was a contending against Jewish Christians who would not give up the Law of Moses. If the sequence I advocate is right here, notice Peter. At Cornelius' and Jerusalem after that he was sound. Then in a visit to Antioch he back-pedaled. But when the council met, he redeemed himself. Still, notice what the vehemence of the Judaizers did.

4) Corinth

In Second Corinthians Paul is defending his ministry against some who would improve upon him and his work, so to speak. The possibility that these were Judaizers as in the other episodes comes from chapter 11:4-5, 12-13, 20-23, and 12:11. The opponents were Jewish, 11:22 and Christian 11:23. Paul calls them in 12:11 and 11:5 τῶν ὑπερλίαν ἀποστόλων, superlative apostles. From where would apostles come but from Jerusalem? These are not any of the twelve though. Paul calls them in 11:13 ψευδαπόστολοι, ἐργάται δόλιοι, μετασχηματιζόμενοι εἰς ἀποστόλους Χριστοῦ. They would enslave, v. 20. To put back under the law would be enslavement. If these are not Judaizers, what else could they be? Jewish Gnostics? But they are described differently: Col. 2:8 “philosophy,” v. 21 judgmental true enough in “food and drink, festival and Sabbath,” but v. 18 involved in “self-abasement and visions” not the law. Is it possible that these were involved in calling themselves a ‘Cephas party’?

There is of course variety to legalism to suit any fluctuations in taste which could allow for these at Corinth, too. Just peruse Ye Olde Shoppe Legalismus and there is variety galore for those who would add to the Word or make the Word into something it is not. Tragically, we too stare at the wares and even hanker, become somewhat engrossed with their seeming sturdiness and practicality. Of course it is all veneer. At a distance it is an appealing chimera, but up close and upon it a disease that would cripple spiritually. And there is that something in us that it decidedly appeals to – the flesh. I think it was Malcom Muggeridge who told of how in a twilight hour he saw on a beach an enchanting silhouette of a woman. He dove into the water and swam up to her only to find out up close that she was a leper.

5) Jerusalem Again

In Acts 21 when Paul comes to Jerusalem the brethren there hit upon a seemingly good preventative measure, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who believed; they are zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you forsake Moses...” 21:20-21 μυριάδες εἰσὶν Ἰουδαίων τῶν πεπιστευκότων, καὶ πάντες ζηλωταὶ τοῦ νόμου ὑπάρχουσι. So Paul is to go with the four men who have taken a vow, so as not to incite. The problem is among those who believe. The μυριάδες is likely a hyperbole, indicating there were a lot of Christians in Jerusalem, though not necessarily 10,000. That these are Jews who believe is indicated with the word πεπιστευκότων, which is also used of Gentiles in v.25.

In Acts 15 the problem was the circumcision party who came into the meeting and raised the issue. Here the elders are present with James and the opposition they anticipate is from those who believed. A justified concern, as we see the mob take over.

6) Crete

In Titus 1:10 Paul warns Titus, "There are many insubordinate men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially the circumcision party." οἱ ἐκ τῆς περιτομῆς This is the same expression as used in Acts 10:45, 11:2, Gal. 2:12 all referring to Jewish Christians. So here again they resurface, not necessarily the same ones, but of the same general stripe. These are one group among others. They are working among the believers as they have a base there. "They must be silenced, since...upsetting whole families." 1:11

Conclusion

The Lord gave the miracle of tongues at Cornelius' house to underline the fact that salvation is for Gentiles also, and not by law. Our Lord's Gospel mandate was clear: "all nations" Mt. 28:19, "all the world...whole creation" Mk. 16:15, "to all nations" Lk. 24:48, "I send you...forgive the sins of any" Jn. 20:21-23. The Lord clearly taught He came to fulfill the law and that in Him alone is the way, the truth and the life. Jn. 14:6 Yet among the Jewish Christians came the big 'BUT', "Moses must be followed." The tack the devil inveigled them to take was not, "Come back with us to the synagogue," but "why we are Christians, too, of Jewish background with MORE to tell you."

Considering this phenomenon as so long-lived (from Scripture references over a twenty year period), and so widespread (Jerusalem, Syria, Galatia, Greece, Crete), we could be inclined to shake the finger at a segment of Jewish Christians, who just couldn't give up the law. This though is just the first large recorded manifestation of legalism in the Christian era that is always creeping up among Christians. Church history is replete with examples of those not rightly handling the word who opt for law orientation.

It dare not be the case of pointing the finger at one group and somberly intoning, "Shame on you." We must look to ourselves and say, "Shame on me, for each of us is an incipient legalist. That which we see widespread among Jewish Christians in the apostolic age and extant throughout the history of the Church is ever present today among us because our flesh delights in the law religion and contends for its supremacy. It definitely crops up with me, I have to readily admit, for who always rightly handles the Word? We yearn for quicker results. The law can work this. We desire tangible, visible results. The law will accomplish this. Meanwhile the devil pulls no punches in appealing to our flesh which is egged on to take pride in what has been done "by me."

In answer to the devil's pincers attack at any time is the two fold solution: 1) Keep Christ as the center of life and teaching, I Cor. 1:30-31, "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.'", 2) Use the Word as guide, as seen in these six episodes, Ps. 119:32, "I will run the way of Thy commandments when Thou enlargest my understanding."