

PRONOUNCEMENT

Must believers become Jewish to please God?



1. Introduction

Is there another way to be saved, but by Jesus? Nowadays many Christians believe that there is. Currently the idea is spreading that Judaism is a relevant alternative. Most people do not want to forsake their Christianity at first. They do, however, try to combine the two religions. As a result believers stray from the truth and begin to fall away from grace. This is not a new problem. The early church also experienced it. At the Jerusalem Council, the leaders of the Church deliberated the matter. This article deals with the subject of Judaizers, both ancient and modern.¹

2. The Jerusalem Council

a. The Problem

Paul and Barnabas were staying in Antioch. They evangelized and ministered to the inhabitants. Antioch already had a Christian community and Peter was also involved. Both Jewish Christians and gentile Christians belonged to this church. They had free fellowship amongst each other. Then some people arrived from Judea. They were Pharisees who had become Christians. These Christian Pharisees brought with them a new theology. It was their opinion that gentile believers had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5). Paul also used to be a Pharisee. He then became a Christian. After this he no longer followed the doctrine of the Pharisees. The people from Judea, however, were different. Even though they believed in Jesus, they stayed Pharisees. They wanted to combine their Pharisaic lifestyle with their Christian beliefs. The Christian Pharisees began to command influence in the church. As a result the free fellowship among Jewish and gentile Christians stopped. Gentile Christians now had to live according to Jewish culture and customs. If they did not, the Christian Pharisees rejected and scorned them. Even Peter succumbed to the peer pressure, but Paul and Barnabas stood firm against it.

b. The Charge

Peter was a Jewish Christian. Yet, he did not live like a traditional Jew. He kept company with gentile Christians. He also ate with them. Then Peter fell under the influence of the Christian Pharisees. He reverted to Jewish customs himself. He also started ordering gentile Christians to adopt a Jewish religious lifestyle. Paul confronted Peter with the question: "If thou, being a Jew, livest as the nations [the gentiles] and not as the Jews, how dost thou compel the nations [the gentiles] to Judaize?" ² Paul charged Peter with being a Judaizer. From the context the meaning of the charge is clear: **a Judaizer is someone who tries to impose Jewish 3 ancient and modern customs on gentile Christians.**

c. The Verdict

They brought the dispute before the apostles in Jerusalem. The apostles delivered a verdict against the Christian Pharisees. They also confirmed Paul and Barnabas as legitimate representatives of the Jerusalem Church. They then wrote a letter to the church in Antioch.

1 This article is a summary of two more comprehensive papers that discuss the different aspects in depth. Their titles are: *The Practises of Rabbinic Judaism and Christian Faith and The Christian Church and Judaizing Groups*. 2 Galatians 2:14b. Quoted from the Darby Bible, which is a literal translation. 3 It is important to note that Peter did not continue in this error, but that there was a reconciliation between him and Paul later on.

A record of this letter is contained in Acts 15:

24 Since we 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— 25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 15:24-29, NKJV)

Paul was one of the ministers sent out by the leadership of the church in Jerusalem. **They had an important duty: to protect the truth of Christian liberty against the Judaizing teachers.**

d. The Judgement

Why did the apostolic leadership rule against the Christian Pharisees? After all, aren't Jewish customs filled with Godly truth? Doesn't a Jewish lifestyle provide the best context for understanding the Gospel? If one presumes that Jewish culture provides the substance for salvation, one would have to answer yes. **However, the point of salvation is not to discover Jewish living. The point of salvation is to discover Jesus.** Jesus provides the substance for salvation. This is the ideal of the Christian faith.

Pharisaism had a different goal. People had to make the *Torah*⁴ their guiding principle. This is the ideal of Pharisaism. Now, one could hold the view that Jewish eating habits have a wholesome influence on home-life. One could contend that the Jewish festivals stimulate a better culture. One could argue that Sabbath observance provides the right worship-emphasis.

One could urge gentile Christians to live according to Jewish culture and customs. However, this would be a misguided undertaking. This would make a person guilty of Judaizing. Why? Because Jewish culture does not provide the substance for salvation. For this reason churches must not allow people to use Jewish customs as a standard of comparison for Christian living. In Colossians 2:16-17 the Bible says:

16...let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, 17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. (Italics added)

A religion that is not Christ-centred is not Christianity. This is why the apostolic leadership ruled against the Christian Pharisees. The Christian Pharisees should have repented of their Pharisaic beliefs and lifestyle. They should have forsaken their old ways, like Paul did. Instead they tried to combine two religions: Pharisaism and Christianity. Now one could ask: did they not merely attempt to relate Christianity to the faith of the Old Testament saints? The answer is no. Jesus Himself declared Pharisaism a heresy.

4 The Word Torah is defined as 'Law' by the Apostolic New Testament writers, but Judaizers prefer to describe Torah with phrases like 'the guiding light for living' or some such.

3. The Influence of the Pharisees

a. Pharisaic Judaism

Where did the Pharisees go wrong? One important reason is that they used a different bible. This bible was called The Tradition of the Elders (or Fathers). It was in fact a Torah that had been tampered with. The Tradition of the Elders was a textbook composed by Rabbis. The Pharisees claimed that it explained God's written law in practical terms. They held the idea that The Tradition of the Elders came from God. Jesus disagreed. In Mark 7:8 Jesus says to the Pharisees: "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." 6 The Pharisees admired titles, and religious status symbols. Jesus branded the Pharisees as a movement that caused hypocrisy and obsessive self-righteous behaviour. In Matthew 23:5-7 Jesus states:

5 "Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others. 7

Pharisaism had become a man-made religion. It was different from the faith of the Old Testament saints. Pharisaism was something that people had to repent of and forsake. In Matthew 23:15 Jesus says: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” The Pharisees had infiltrated the Jewish religion with a dangerous heresy. Would they attempt this with the Christian religion?

b. Pharisaic Christianity

Paul was once a Pharisee. Then he repented and became a Christian. In Galatians 1 Paul testifies that the gospel is not of human origin (verse 11). He also concedes that during his previous life in Judaism, he was zealous for the ‘Traditions of the Fathers’ (verse 14). Jesus had called these Traditions mere human inventions 8. After Paul became a believer he acknowledged this truth. However, other Pharisees who became believers did not recognise it. They tried to mix their Pharisaic beliefs with the Christian lifestyle. Then they imposed this teaching on other believers. In plain words: they began to act as Judaizers.

This problem also occurred in Galatia and Colossae. Judaizers infiltrated the churches. They posed as teachers and tried to submit Christians to these human traditions. Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians. He warned them against these people, saying: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on **human tradition** and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8, italics added).

5 *Where did the Tradition of the Elders come from? Malachi was the last Old Testament prophet. 400 Years went by before the time of Christ. During this ‘period of silence’ many apocryphal and falsely attributed works were written. Evidence point to this as the period when the Tradition of the Elders was composed. At the time of Jesus’ ministry, this textbook (or commentary) had not yet been written down, but was memorised and passed from one generation of Rabbis to the next. Rabbinic tradition, however, claims that God gave the Tradition of the Elder to Moses, who passed it down through the generations.*

6 Quoted from the NIV 7 Quoted from the NIV 8 Mark 7:8

What exactly was going on in this church? Verse 16 explains what these teachers did. They tried to convince the Christians to start following special ways of eating and drinking. They told them to celebrate religious festivals and New Moons and also to observe the Sabbath. It may have sounded good but these commands did not come from God. Paul explains that these are “commandments of men” (verse 22), and exposes the shocking truth: “Even though they have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship and false humility achieved by an unsparing treatment of the body – **a wisdom with no true value** – they in reality result in fleshly indulgence.” 9 **Taking part in these things has no value; not even a little bit.** Human reasoning may want to say otherwise. The truth remains: Pharisaic Christianity is a heresy and a worthless waste of time.

c. The Pharisaic Movement through the Ages

During the days of Jesus' ministry on earth, Judaism had four main socio-religious movements. They were: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes and the Zealots. In the year 66 A.D. the Jewish-Roman War 10 broke out. In 70 A.D. the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. The Jewish population was scattered. Of the four main groups, only the Pharisaic movement survived this crisis.

Over time the Pharisees stopped using the label Pharisee. They gradually annexed the familiar term 'Rabbi'. In time this became the customary title for Pharisee-teachers. **The Pharisaic movement had therefore succeeded in taking over the mainstream Jewish faith. From that time until today it would be known as Rabbinic Judaism.** Through the centuries they expanded The Tradition of the Elders to form the basis for the Talmud. To this day Talmud functions as the de facto bible of Rabbinic Judaism. We do well to remember what Jesus told the Pharisees about The Tradition of the Elders. In Mark 7:8 Jesus said: "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.

d. The Continuing Danger of Pharisaism

The Pharisaic influence affected God's Old Testament People. It turned the Jewish Nation against the commands of the Lord and towards human traditions. The Pharisaic influence also affects God's New Testament People. The church must resist it. Judaizers should not get the opportunity to turn Christians against the commands of the Lord and towards human traditions. **The New Testament is clear about the lifestyle of the believer. We know what we must do. It is not necessary to add Jewish customs. The New Testament has no shortfall that needs to be supplemented by Old Testament laws.** The Lord gave specific commands to the Old Testament nation of Israel. He also gave specific commands to the New Testament Church. In Mark 7:8 Jesus tells the Pharisees: "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." We should guard against making the same mistake. Jewish culture and traditions are not required of Christians.

Paul had once been a Pharisee. He then repented and became a believer. As a Christian he preached a Christ-centered faith, not a Torah-centered religion. In Philippians 3 Paul tells about his old life. He had been circumcised as an infant and he knew his tribal genealogy 11 . Paul was once a Pharisee and he had been Torah-observant. Back then these were precious matters to him. He was zealous enough to persecute Christians for the sake of his beliefs. Yet in Philippians 3:7-8 he declares: "7I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. 8Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ."

9 Quoted from the NET translation – Italics Added. 10 There was the First Jewish-Roman war.

4. The Pharisaic Agenda of Present day Judaizing Movements

a. Tribal Descent and Torah-Observance

Paul made it clear that one's descent from Israel, one's tribal genealogy and even one's Torah observance, are all worthless. In the context of Christian belief these things have no value. **Still, modern day Christian Pharisees try to convince believers otherwise. They spread the idea that these things are not garbage but important ideals. These people teach that Christians should celebrate religious festivals, observe the Torah and keep the Sabbath to discover their own 'Jewish Roots'.** They infiltrate churches and propagate Jewish traditions. They employ special Hebrew words to refer to normal Christian realities. They attempt to draw rules for Christian living from a tampered and incomplete version of the Torah.

Because God used Paul to refute this heresy, the New Testament letters of Paul are a problem to modern-day Christian Pharisees. After coming out of a Judaizing movement Martin 12 states that:

This is where my thought patterns were directed to the time between Genesis and the death of Jesus. There was little focus on the resurrection and the New Testament. The letters of Paul received scant attention.

A Judaizing group called the 'First Fruits of Zion' state: "We believe that Paul has been profoundly misunderstood, and no book of the Bible is more misunderstood than the book of Galatians."¹² Some groups go even further. After forsaking a group that classified themselves as 'Hebraic Roots' and 'Torah Observant' Emma testifies that one of the teachers declared the writings of Paul unreliable and wicked. After this Emma¹³ realized that she was involved with heresy and she left the group.

b. Different Groups, Different Teachings

There are therefore different Judaizing groups with different teachings. Still, there is a main distinction. For some groups Jewishness is a precondition for salvation. We will call these the 'pre-salv' Judaizers¹⁴. For other groups Jewishness is the goal of salvation. We will refer to them as the 'post-salv' Judaizers. Neither 'pre-salv' Judaizers, nor 'post-salv' Judaizers want to be called Judaizers. All Judaizing groups have one thing in common: they believe that at some point gentile believers must accept a Jewish/Israelite identity. In their view this is the only way someone can be recognized as a true child of God.

1.11 Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin

2.12 Name changed to preserve anonymity.

3.13 Name changed to preserve anonymity

4.14 These groups claim that people who do not descend from one of the twelve tribes cannot be saved.

Certain radical ‘pre-salv’ groups claim that salvation is only available to Jews. Some of these groups invent genealogies. Martin has an interesting story. As a Christian he got involved in a Jewish roots group. This group spent much time and effort on genealogies. Martin15 tells that:

The belief surfaced that each of us is part of one of the tribes of Israel that was scattered among the nations. We all began searching for the tribe from which we descended. The method of investigating was to compare ones own personality traits with the tribes of Israel. This would help find out one’s own tribe.

Other groups instruct their members to find out about their lineage. Tom16 researched his family history back to the seventeenth century. Finally (to his great joy and relief) he discovered a Jewish ancestor who came to the Cape Colony in the year 1698. Judaizing groups spend much time and effort on genealogies and Torah-observance. This is not a new trend. Paul warned Timothy about it. In 1 Timothy 1:3-7 Paul says:

3 As I urged you when I was leaving for Macedonia, stay on in Ephesus to instruct certain people not to spread false teachings, 4 nor to occupy themselves with myths and interminable genealogies. Such things promote useless speculations rather than God’s redemptive plan that operates by faith. 5 But the aim of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. 6 Some have strayed from these and turned away to empty discussion. 7 They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not understand what they are saying or the things they insist on so confidently. 17

Believers should be careful of this trap. Judaizers entangle Christians in Pharisaism. There is a consequence. The time and energy of such people are soon consumed by rituals, speculations and genealogical research. **This is the problem with heresies. They draw believers away from a useful Christian life.**

5. The Idea of an Alternative to Jesus

a. The Crossover Effect

Pharisaic Christianity cannot work. Its ceremony and doctrine should not be transferred into the Christian lifestyle. This is a harmful experiment. **Importantly, the use of ritual objects is also dangerous. Ritual objects point to doctrine. If the doctrine is false, the ritual object can lead one into error.** Rabbinic Judaism is a development of Pharisaism. Rabbinic Judaism is not the faith of the Old Testament saints. Not all believers know this. Some Christians think that there are two ways to be saved. One way is to be to become a Christian. The other way is to become a Jew or Israelite. This is a fallacy. There is only one way to salvation. One has to accept Jesus and believe in Him. All who reject Jesus are lost, whether they are Jews or gentiles. Pharisaism and its modern form, Rabbinic Judaism, cannot save anyone. John 3 records Jesus’ conversation with a Pharisee.

This Pharisee's name was Nicodemus. Jesus said to him (John 3:36): "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them." 18 **Christians must accept that Jesus is the only way. Yet, some people believe that there are two legitimate ways to get saved. These people are deceived. They are also in danger of the crossover effect. This is when a Christian tries to import bits and pieces from another religion.** In this case people insert elements from Rabbinic Judaism into their Christian lifestyle. As a result Pharisaic/Rabbinic symbolism enters like a little bit of leaven. Soon the whole lump is leavened19 . This means that the introduction of harmless looking objects can contaminate a person's entire faith.

b. An Example of Crossover: The Tallit

Even so, Pharisaic teachings and ritual objects still creep into churches. A relevant example is the tallit. The tallit is a shawl worn by Rabbinic Jews. It never existed during Biblical times. The earliest reference to the tallit is found in the Zohar. The Zohar is a Rabbinic manuscript that appeared in Spain during the thirteenth century. The tallit's name and embroidery are symbolic. They refer to the legal framework of the Talmud. The Talmud, of course, is built on the Tradition of the Elders. **The tallit is therefore a symbol of Pharisaic disobedience. It stands for the error that Jesus spoke against when He told the Pharisees: "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions" (Mark 7:8).** This is the problem. People make additions to our religion and attribute it to God.

Popular use of the tallit by Christians is a recent development. Certain television evangelists are partly to blame. Benny Hinn has marketed the tallit for a number of years. The following sales promotion was found at bennyhinn.org:

You and your family will cherish this beautiful and colourful prayer shawl as you are reminded every day of the assurance we have as believers under God's strong arm of safety. Available in English and Spanish. Order yours today!20

John Hagee's bi-monthly magazine contained the following advertisement:

The tallit or prayer shawl has been worn by devout Jews for centuries. It was designed by God [*this is untrue*] and infused with tremendous power. You'll find its legacy woven throughout the Old and New Testaments [*In Biblical times the word 'tallit' did not even exist*]. And it still carries the power to energize your prayer life [*Only God's Spirit has the power to energize a person's prayer life. No fabricated object has that power*]. Pastor Hagee uncovers this dynamic truth and gives you the keys to unleashing it in your own life. Included with this series is an authentic prayer shawl imported directly from Israel. KT183D Prayer Shawl and DVD - \$55.21

1.19 See *Galatians 5:7-10*

2.20 Found at www.bennyhinn.org/shopping/productdesc.cfm?itemid=408

3.21 Gevind by <http://www.jhm.org/catalog/detail.asp?code=KT183D>

Unfortunately these enthusiastic advertisements cannot change historical truth. The tallit is a symbol of disobedience and error. It belongs to the Pharisaic movement. Why then are some Christians enthusiastic about the tallit? Why do they drape it over their heads when they pray? There is only one explanation:

Pharisaism has not lost its strong attraction. Some people are still drawn to its emblems and rituals.

6. Conclusion

Pharisaism was dangerous from the beginning. Its main idea was that one could establish one's own righteousness. This is a problem. People who attempt this become unwilling to submit to God's righteousness. Rules and regulations take centre stage. Faith becomes a competition with winners and losers. This is the Pharisaic heresy. It infiltrated Judaism like leaven. Mainstream Rabbinic Judaism today is simply Pharisaism under a different name. The early church endured a massive onslaught of Pharisaism. People tried to enforce a mixture of Pharisaism and Christianity onto believers. God used Paul to point out that those who do this are Judaizers.

This heresy has not died. Modern-day Judaizers entangle believers in Pharisaism. They teach that Christians should celebrate religious festivals, observe the *Torah*²² and keep the Sabbath to discover their own 'Jewish Roots'. People who believe this teaching are drawn away from a useful Christian life. They spend excessive time in rituals, speculations and genealogical research. Taking part in these things has no value. Pharisaism is a strange religion with a continuing attraction. Some people are still drawn into error through its emblems and practices. Christians should not use Rabbinic/Pharisaic ritual objects as tools of devotion. Rabbinic inventions such as the tallit have no place in Christian worship. Jesus is the only way to get saved. The point of salvation is to know Him in his fullness. The point of salvation has never been to discover Jewish living.

22 Once again a tampered and incomplete Torah, divided into categories and often explained through stacks of pamphlets and tracts.

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