

The voice of the Spirit & the Jerusalem Council on same-sex practice

Introduction

There has always been confusion about the role of the Law of Moses in the life of a Christian. Didn't Jesus change things? Didn't Paul do away with it? The following will look at the solution that the Jerusalem Council came to on this point. We specifically look at its relevance for the issue of homosexual practice. Is the prohibition of homosexual practice in Leviticus 18:22 still binding today? (This is an adaptation of the essay: *Should Christians Keep the Law of Moses?*)

Jewish Christians continue to submit to the Law

Jesus himself was Law observant and he taught his Jewish disciples to continue to submit to the teaching of Moses (Matthew 5:17-19; 23:2-3; 23:23). Jesus rejected the human traditions which the Pharisees used as their guide for keeping the Law (Matthew 15:1-9). He rather showed how to keep the Law in accordance with the righteousness of the Kingdom of God, which goes even beyond Moses. So Jesus taught his Jewish followers to keep the Law, but to do so according to his teaching and example. For instance, his Jewish disciples should keep the Sabbath, but recognize that mercy has priority (Matthew 12:9-14).

It is clear that the apostles and the other Jewish Christians did keep the Law, including Paul. James, the brother of Jesus, was famous for his strict observance of the Law. And he bears testimony that Paul also kept the Law in Acts 21:20-24. These Jewish believers did not keep the Law in order to be saved by it. They did so because Moses was the authority that God had placed over them, and so they continued to submit to him, knowing that the Law will not pass away until the Kingdom is fully established on earth (Matthew 5:18).

Gentiles do not submit to the Law

But what about Gentile believers? There was a debate about this because Jesus did not leave any instructions on this point. Jesus' mission was to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:6; 15:24). This is one of those places that Jesus must have had in mind when he said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:12-13). And, in fact, it is the testimony of the apostles in Acts 15:28 that the Spirit guided them in their decision on this matter.

The book of Acts tells us that some taught that Gentiles must be circumcised and become fully Law observant Jews before they could be accepted before God (15:1; 5). The apostles gathered together, with the elders of the church of Jerusalem to discuss this issue, and decided that the Gentiles were already participating in the Kingdom of God, for they were righteous Gentiles – following Jesus and they had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:8). Therefore they should not be forced to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses (Acts 15:13-19). Gentiles are acceptable to God on the basis of the salvation that Jesus brings.

Three essentials

However, it was also decided that there was one portion of the Law that they should observe. We see this in what is called the apostolic decree:

"For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well" (Acts 15:28-29).

This letter lays out three essentials:

- 1) do not eat idol food
- 2) do not eat blood
- 3) do not practice Porneia (sexual immorality)

These essentials refer back to Leviticus 17-18, which talks about these issues in the same order that we find in the apostolic letter:

- 1) Leviticus 17:1-9 - idol food
- 2) Leviticus 17:10-16 - eating blood

3) Leviticus 18 - Porneia

So the decision of the Jerusalem council is that Gentiles do not need to submit to the Law of Moses, except for a particular part of it - Leviticus 17-18.

The Porneia Restriction and Leviticus 18:22

The word Porneia - sexual immorality - refers to any kind of forbidden sexual activity. In a Jewish context it means forbidden according to the Law of Moses. In the case of the apostolic decree Porneia is used to refer to the offenses found in Leviticus 18:

- **Marrying close relatives** (incest) [v. 6-18]
- **Sexual relations during menstruation** [v. 19]
- **Adultery** [v. 20]
- **Offering seed to Molech** [v. 21] Using sexual expression with the intention of giving the seed/child over to an idolatrous ceremony.
- **Homosexual practice** - Leviticus 18:22 says, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.”
- **Bestiality** [v. 23]

So the result of the apostolic decree is that homosexual practice is forbidden to all Christians. *The Jewish Christians would already have held to this, and here we see that the Gentile Christians also were instructed, at the Spirit’s urging, to keep this standard, along with the others.* Leviticus 18:22, along with the rest of it, is binding on Christians.

The binding nature of the apostolic decree

That the decree is meant to be binding on all (Gentile) Christians can be seen from the following:

1. These three essentials were chosen because they teach a ‘creation righteousness’ that is incumbent even upon the Gentiles. That is, these commands are not Jewish specific, but apply to all people, everywhere.
 - We are not to eat **food sacrificed to idols** because God is our creator and our only Lord (Genesis 1:27). Therefore we are to have no participation with idolatry, including idol food (I Corinthians 10:14-22; Revelation 2:20).

- We are not **to eat blood or strangled meat** from which the blood has not been drained. In the creation account God allowed only vegetation to eat. God gave permission to Noah to eat meat, but only without the blood (Genesis 9:4). Thus this command applies to all the children of Noah - all people. This prohibition is connected to the teaching that the life is contained in the blood (Leviticus 17:11). The blood therefore is God's since he is the creator of all life.
- We are not to participate in **Porneia**, for God, as our creator, has sovereignly established the boundaries between what is right and wrong sexual behavior. The boundaries are set within the relationship of a husband and wife (Genesis 2:24). Leviticus 18 gives further stipulations. As Leviticus 18:24-30 makes clear, the Gentiles in the Land of Canaan were held to this standard.

2. The decree represents the voice of the Holy Spirit on this issue - Acts 15:28.

3. The decree represents the conclusion of a truly ecumenical and apostolic council. This was a highly unusual and unique event that cannot be replicated. If any council's decision is binding it is this one.

4. The decree was sent to the churches. It was not just a local decision. Paul delivered this to his congregations - Acts 16:4.

5. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, also taught this to his congregations in his teaching on idol food and Porneia (for instance - I Corinthians 10:14-22 and I Corinthians 6:9-11). (There is no recorded discussion of eating blood in Paul's letters).

6. The teaching of the decree was followed in Gentile churches for centuries as is evidenced in various church manuals and other writings:

- No **idol food**: *Didache* 6:3; *Apostolic Constitutions* 7:2:21.
- No **eating blood**: Irenaeus *Fragments* xiii; Tertullian *Apology* 9; *Apostolic Constitutions* 7:2:20.
- No **Porneia**: *The Apostolic Tradition* 16:20; *Apostolic Constitutions* 6:5:28 forbids homosexual practice, bestiality, intercourse during menstruation, etc. and appeals to Leviticus 18.

7. The decree is apostolic teaching, found in the canonical Scriptures, to which we bind ourselves as Christians. It is authoritative.