THE SALVATION OF THE JUDAIZERS

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When the apostles began to preach the gospel of faith alone in Christ alone to the Gentiles, they encountered opposition from the Jews. Some Jews insisted that the Gentiles should observe the customs of Judaism, namely the dietary laws, the holy days, and even circumcision. In the New Testament, these Jewish crusaders are called by various vague names such as "men from James" (Gal.2:12), "men from Judea" (Acts 15:1), etc. They have been given the name Judaizers.

The Greek verb "judaize" only appears once in the New Testament. It means "to conform to Jewish practice." The one time it makes an appearance in the New Testament, it is used by Paul to say that by not eating with the Gentiles, some Jews were compelling the Gentiles to keep the Jewish custom of only eating food the Mosaic Law deemed ceremonially clean (Gal. 2:14). A Judaizer, then, was a Jew practicing Jewish customs and trying to get Gentiles to do the same.

At first brush, this might not seem like an important issue, but the question that needs to be asked and answered is, "Were the Judaizers genuine believers?" The reason that is a critical question is that the Judaizers in Galatia perverted the gospel (Gal. 1:7). The perversion was severe. Can a believer in Christ pervert the gospel?

The Appearances of the Judaizers

Here is a list of the appearances of the Judaizers in chronological order.

Those of the Circumcision (Acts 11:2) In Acts 10, Peter preached the gospel to a house full of Gentiles and all of them believed, received the Holy Spirit, and were baptized (Acts 10:43-48). Luke records what happened next: "Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, 'You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!'" (Acts 11:1-3). "Those of the circumcision" objected to Peter eating with the Gentiles because that would mean he was not observing Jewish food laws.

False Brethren (Gal. 2:4) In Galatians 2, Paul says when he, Barnabas, and Titus went to Jerusalem, those "of reputation" (Gal. 2:2, the elders and apostles) did not compel Titus, a Gentile believer, to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3). However, Paul goes on to say that "false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), but to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you" (Gal. 2:4-5). The false brethren of Galatians 2 wanted Titus circumcised.

Men from James (Gal. 2:12) In Galatians 2, Paul says when he and Peter were at Antioch, Peter ate with the Gentiles until "certain men came from James." Then Peter "withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision" (Gal. 2:12). When Paul saw that Peter and others "were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14), he withstood Peter to his face (Gal. 2:12) and said to him, "If

you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?" (Gal. 2:14). Peter's actions implied that the Gentile believers had to observe the Jewish food laws.

Some Who Trouble You (Gal. 1:7; 5:15) Paul's opponents in Galatians are never named. He refers to them as "some who trouble you." He says, "There are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:7) and "I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off!" (Gal. 5:12). Those who troubled the Gentile believers in Galatia wanted them to be circumcised (Gal. 6:12).

Men from Judea (Acts 15:1) After Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from the first missionary journey, "certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1). The church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to get this issue resolved (Acts 15:2). The men from Judea wanted the Gentile believers circumcised.

Pharisees Who Believed (Acts 15:5) When Paul and Barnabas arrived at Jerusalem, they encountered "some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed," who said, "It is necessary to circumcise them (Gentiles) and to command *them* to keep the Law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). The Pharisees who believed wanted Gentile believers to be circumcised and to keep the Mosaic customs.

Jews Who Believed (Acts 21:20) Much later, there were "many myriads of Jews" at Jerusalem who "believed." They were "all zealous for the law" (Acts 21:20). They objected to Paul teaching all the Jews who were among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that "they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs" (Acts 21:21).

To sum up, the various groups of Judaizers are as follows.

1. Those of the circumcision at Jerusalem (Acts 11:2)
2. False brethren at Jerusalem (Gal. 2:4)
3. Men from James at Antioch (Gal. 2:12)
4. The opponents of Paul in Galatia (Gal. 1:7, 5;12)
5. Men from Judea at Antioch (Acts 15:1)
6. Pharisees who believed at Jerusalem (Acts 15:5).
7. Jews who believed at Jerusalem (Acts 21:20-21).

Judaizers appeared at Jerusalem, Antioch, and Galatia. Paul mentions the Judaizers in Philippians and Colossians. The issue involved in each of these encounters is as follows.

Those of the circumcision	Objected to Peter eating with Gentiles
False brethren	Wanted Titus, a Gentile believer, to be circumcised
Men from James	Wanted Jewish believers to stop eating with Gentile believers
Those who trouble you	Wanted Gentile believers circumcised
Men from Judea at Antioch	Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved
Pharisees who believed	Gentile believers to be circumcised and keep the law
Jews who believed	Wanted Jews to circumcise their children

Are all these groups cut from the same piece of cloth? If they are all in the same group, are they unbelievers, or believers? Or are there two groups, some unbelievers ("false brethren") and some believers ("Pharisees who believed")? Paul warns the believers at Philippi to beware of Jewish opponents who are not trusting in Christ (Phil. 3:2-9). They are not saved. He warns the believers at Colosse not to let the Jews judge them (Col. 2:16). Is it possible these Jews were saved? All Paul says about them is not to let them judge you.

To answer the question of the salvation of the Judaizers, each case must be analyzed.

The Salvation of the Judaizers

Those of the Circumcision Acts 11:1 says the "apostles and brethren who were in Judea" heard the Gentiles had been converted. When Peter arrived at Jerusalem, "those of the circumcision" contended with Peter for eating with uncircumcised men (Acts 11:2-3). Calling those who contended with Peter "those of the circumcision" indicates they were Jews.

Were those of the circumcision believers? The fact that they are called "brethren" in verse 1 indicates that they were believers. Just a few verses before this, the Jewish believers who were with Peter in Acts 10 are called "those of the circumcision who believed" (Acts 10:45). In other words, Jewish *believers* contended with Peter for eating with the Gentiles.

Commentators conclude that those of the circumcision were Jewish believers (Barnes; A. T. Robinson; F. F. Bruce; Marshall; Toussaint). MacDonald explains they were "Christians of Jewish birth who were still bound by their former ways of thinking. For instance, they believed that a Gentile must be circumcised to obtain full blessing from the Lord." Marshall accurately analyzes the problem when he says, "If Jewish Christians felt bound by the Jewish food laws, there could not be fellowship with Gentile Christians (or contact with non-Christian Gentiles) unless the Gentiles were circumcised and observed the Jewish food laws themselves."

The False Brethren In Galatians 2, Paul says he, Barnabas, and Titus went to Jerusalem. This refers to the visit recorded in Acts 11:27-30 when they went to Jerusalem to deliver the money that had been collected for the saints there. This trip to Jerusalem is called the famine visit. When Paul arrived, he privately communicated "to those who were of reputation" (the apostles in general or James, Peter, and John in particular) the gospel he preached among the Gentiles (Gal. 2:2). They did not compel Titus, who was a Gentile, to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3). Paul explains that the reason this came up was that "false brethren (were) secretly brought in." Paul goes on to say they "came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage" (Gal. 2:4).

The expression "false brethren" only occurs twice in the New Testament, here and in 2 Corinthians 11:26. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul lists "perils among false brethren" as one of the many dangers he faced as a minister of Christ. Perhaps the "false brethren" of 2 Corinthians 11:26 are also mentioned earlier in 2 Corinthians 11 under a different designation. It has been suggested that the false *brethren* of verse 26 are an allusion to the false *apostles* in verse 13 (Kruse; Luther calls the false brethren of Galatians 2:4 false apostles). Also, in 2 Corinthians 11, Paul refers to "he who comes" (2 Cor. 13:4). It is

likely that the "he who comes" in verse 4 is one of the false apostles in verse 13. Satan's work is mentioned in connection with both "he who comes" and the false apostles (compare 2 Cor. 11:3 with 2 Cor. 11:14). In both cases, deception is mentioned (compare 2 Cor. 11:3 with 2 Cor. 11:13). If this connection is accurate, the false brethren are false apostles bringing false doctrine.

Paul describes the *false apostles*: "For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, *it is* no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works" (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Paul details the *false doctrine*. "For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or *if* you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it! (2 Cor. 11:4). The false brethren in 2 Corinthians were peddling a different gospel.

It should be pointed out that the false brethren mentioned in Galatians 2 were in Jerusalem during the famine visit in AD 47. The false brethren mentioned in 2 Corinthians 11 were in Corinth around AD 57. In other words, these could be two different groups of people. On the other hand, Paul calls both groups false brethren.

Were the false brethren believers? Everything that is said about them suggests they were not genuine believers, including their designation "false brethren;" they came in secretly (they were not part of the Christian community), they came in to spy on Christian liberty, and they came in to bring a Gentile believer (Titus) under the law. If the false brethren of Galatians 2 are the same as the false brethren of 2 Corinthians, who are false apostles bringing in false doctrine, they were not genuine believers.

Eadie says the term "false" indicates that they were "false in professing to be brethren, while yet they were only spies, not from curiosity, but from an earnest and insidious longing to enslave the Gentile converts." He also says, "Epiphanius affirms that they were Cerinthus and his party" (Epiphanius, *Haeres*. 28.4). Generally, commentators agree. Burton believes that the false brethren were those who professed to be brethren, true members of the Christian body, but were not. Campbell calls them "'false brothers' ('sham Christians,' NEB)."

Men from James In Galatians 2, Paul says, "For before certain men came from James, he (Peter) would eat with the Gentiles" (Gal. 2:12a). This probably refers to ordinary meals (Burton), although they no doubt partook of the Lord's Table together (Lightfoot; Hendriksen). The Greek word translated "eat" is in the imperfect tense, indicating that this was not done on just one single occasion but was done repeatedly (Burton). Eating with Gentiles had become a habit for Peter!

This is significant. The Mosaic Law made a distinction between clean and unclean food and forbade the Jews to eat unclean food (Lev. 11). The Gentiles made no such distinction and ate these foods, such as pork. Over the years, the Jewish leaders, especially the Pharisees, concocted man-made restrictions forbidding Jews to eat with Gentiles.

Peter had been given God's special direct revelation on this subject (Acts 10). One afternoon, on the rooftop of a house, he saw a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven containing unclean creatures. When he heard a voice instructing him to eat, he objected. He was told he must not call common what God cleaned. From that experience,

Peter concluded that he was to go to the home of a Gentile named Cornelius, which was unlawful for him as a Jew. In his sermon in Cornelius' house, Peter preached that God shows no partiality and saves all who believe in His Son. Those Gentiles trusted Christ. They were baptized and welcomed into the church. Peter reported all of this to the Jewish believers at Jerusalem (Acts 11).

Peter, of all people, had overcome old Jewish scruples. He did not consider himself in any way defiled or contaminated by contact with uncircumcised Gentiles. He understood thoroughly that God accepts Jews and Gentiles on the same basis of faith in Christ.

"But when they came [men from James], he [Peter] withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision" (Gal. 2:12b). Perhaps the fact that Peter had gotten in trouble concerning eating with a Gentile before (Acts 11:1-3) motivated him to withdraw from eating with the Gentiles this time.

Just exactly who are the men from James? What is their relationship to James? There are three basic explanations of "from James."

1. James did not send them. They came from James in the sense that they came from Jerusalem (Chrysostom; Augustine; Beza) or the church at Jerusalem (JFB; Hendriksen/Baker). "'Certain from James' may merely mean that they came from the Church at Jerusalem under James' bishopric" (JFB). "They came from the church at Jerusalem, a church in which James occupied a position of special prominence" (Hendriksen/Baker).

2. James sent them an official delegation. Alford argues that the expression "from James" has "been softened by some commentators into persons who merely gave themselves out as from James" or "who merely came from Jerusalem where James presided" (Beza; *et al.*). "But the candid reader will, I think, at once recognize in the words a mission from James" (Meyer; *et al.*).

3. James sent them, but they did not represent his position. They came "invested with some powers from James, which they abused" (Lightfoot). "It is doubtful that they had James' endorsement" (Campbell). "No doubt these brethren let the idea get out that they were emissaries 'from James.' But that idea is inconsistent with the position of James as president of the conference and the author of the resolution securing liberty to the Gentile Christians" (A. T. Robinson). "Certain men came from James indicates that they came with the authority of James, one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:9). However, it is unlikely that they accurately represented the views of James (Gal. 2:7-10)" (NKJV Study Bible).

Were the men from James believers? In the final analysis, what is known about them is that they were Jews. They came to Antioch. They met with the assembly of believers and objected to Christian Jews (Peter) eating together with Christian Gentiles, that is, the Galatians (circumcision was not an issue on this occasion). Based on everything that is known about James, it is highly unlikely that their objection to eating with Gentile Christians was James' point of view (Gal. 2:9). They were probably Jewish believers. After all, they were from James! They met with the believers at Antioch and Peter listened to them. Thus, they were not false brethren (Meyer; Burton).

A number of commentators say they were believers. Several call them "brethren" (Rendall in *Expositor's Greek New Testament*; A. T. Robinson). Meyer says they were not false brethren; "they were certainly men of importance, strict in their Jewish-Christian observances." MacDonald says, "They claimed to represent James, but he later

denied this (Acts 15:24). They were probably Jewish Christians who were still clinging to certain legal observances."

Those Who Trouble You Paul founded several churches in the Roman province of Galatia (Gal. 4:19). He confirmed them (Gal. 4:19) and visited them at least twice (Gal. 4:13). Shortly after (Gal. 1:6) his last visit, opponents of Paul's teaching arrived. They claimed that Paul received his information from the apostles but perverted their teaching. They taught that the Galatians must keep the law, including the observance of days (Gal. 4:10) and circumcision (Gal. 5:1-12; 6:11-15). The Galatians started keeping the Law (Gal. 4:9-10) and were about to be circumcised (Gal. 5:2; 6:12). In response, Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians to, among other things, refute these troublemakers.

Who were these troublemakers? Paul does not name them. He only refers to them directly four times. Paul writes: "There are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:7); "I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will have no other mind; but he who troubles you shall hear his judgment, whoever he is" (Gal. 5:10). "I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off!" (Gal. 5:12). "As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these *would* compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh" (Gal. 6:12-13).

Twice, Paul says his opponents in Galatia are those "who trouble you." The Greek word translated "trouble" means "trouble, disturb, perplex" (see "disturbing you" in the NASB and "throwing you into confusion" in NIV). It was used of disturbing the mind (Burton; Hendriksen) and shaking the allegiance of a person (Lightfoot). These opponents were perverting the gospel and disturbing ("confusing") the Galatians by trying to get them to observe Jewish customs, such as eating only ceremonially clean food, observing Jewish holy days, including the Saturday Sabbath, and even being circumcised. Paul does not name them, but his Jewish opponents in Galatians are commonly called Judaizers.

Were these troublemakers believers? When commenting on Galatians 1:7, most commentators do not directly address the question of the salvation of those who troubled the Galatians. Commentators call them "opposers" (Lange), "disturbers" (A. T. Robinson), and "troublers" (Vincent). Others label them in such a way as to at least imply that they are not believers. They call them "false apostles" (Calvin; Luther) and "false teachers" (Campbell).

Some commentators, however, seem to suggest that it is possible these Judaizers were believers. For example, Bengel says, "Those, who troubled them did not quite deny Jesus Christ; but Paul acknowledges nothing but the pure Gospel." Jamison, Fausset, and Brown say, "Though acknowledging Christ, they insisted on circumcision and Jewish ordinances."

Before making a decision on the salvation of these Judaizers, three passages from the book of Galatians need to be examined.

In Galatians 1:8-9, Paul says, let the Judaizers "be accursed." Does that mean they were not saved? No. In 1 Corinthians 16, Paul says, "If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed" (1 Cor. 16:22). In that passage, the people Paul refers to are believers. They are the believers in the church at Corinth who were behaving in an unloving way, which is an indication of not loving the Lord. In Galatians 1:8 and 1:9, it

also applies to believers. Paul included himself! In the Old Testament, the curse on Canaan was not eternal condemnation; it was to servitude (Gen. 9:25). The children of Israel could be cursed (Deut. 27:16-26), but that was temporal judgment (Deut. 28:17-18). Being accursed is some kind of temporal judgment.

Proverbs 28:27 says, "He who gives to the poor will not lack, but he who hides his eyes will have many curses." The German Old Testament scholar Delitzsch says the many curses in Proverbs 28:27 are "all kinds of misfortunes" (Delitzsch). MacDonald says the many curses are "many sorrows" (MacDonald).

In Galatians 5:12, Paul says, "I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off!" The Judaizers were practicing circumcision, the cutting off of the foreskin. Paul says if they think that a little physical mutilation is of value, let them go all the way and castrate themselves (Burton)! His sentiments sound coarse and malicious, but such a thing was common to the Galatians. The pagan priests of the goddess Cybele in Asia Minor made eunuchs of themselves (Stott). Deuteronomy 23:1 instructed that one who was castrated was to be excluded from the congregation of the Lord. Galatians 5:12 is an echo of Galatians 1:6-9. Paul explains his strong sentiments here (see "for" in 5:13; Burton; Toussaint). He could wish the Judaizers were judged because they were hindering the Galatians from a life of liberty. Besides, if they castrated themselves, they couldn't produce any more children of slavery! It is common for commentators to say this verse is about being excluded from the church (Barnes; MacDonald) and excommunicated from the church (Clarke).

In Galatians 6:12, Paul says, "As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these would compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may glory in your flesh" (Gal. 6:12-13). In this passage, Paul analyzes the motives of the Judaizers. For one thing, they wanted to make a good showing in the flesh. Lightfoot says this means "to make a pretentious display of their religion in outward ordinances" and it implies insincerity. They also wanted to escape persecution. The cross severed believers from the obligations of the Mosaic System and that caused persecution from the Jews (Toussaint). So to avoid persecution, they practiced and persuaded others to practice the Old Testament rite of circumcision.

In other words, they didn't keep the whole law—that's impossible anyway (Gal. 3:10). Rather, these Judaizers wanted to glory in the flesh. The phrase "in the flesh" refers to circumcision (Burton). Their concern was not to keep the law. Their concern was to be able to boast to their fellow countrymen that they had persuaded so many Galatians to be circumcised (Lightfoot; Hendriksen).

Were "those who trouble you" believers? In Galatians, the Judaizers were accursed, but that does not mean they were assigned to hell. Paul could wish they were cut off, but that only means he wants them cut off from the church. Therefore, there is nothing in Galatians that demands that "those who trouble you" are not believers. On the other hand, some things seem to suggest they might have been saved. In the first place, they were in the churches teaching their doctrine of the necessity of keeping the law. Furthermore, their motive was to avoid persecution because of the cross, which certainly seems to suggest that they were misguided believers.

In the article on Judaizers in *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Rightmire says, "Amidst the rising pressures of Jewish nationalism in Palestine during

the mid-first century, and increased Zealot animosity against any Jew who had Gentile sympathies, it would appear that these Jewish Christians embarked on a judaizing mission among Paul's converts in order to prevent Zealot persecution of the Palestinian church." Notice he calls the Judaizers in Galatians *Jewish Christians*.

Men from Judea After Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from their first missionary journey, "certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1).

Some commentators say that the men from Judea were saved. Barnes says, "These were undoubtedly men who had been Jews but who were now converted to Christianity. The fact that they were willing to refer the matter in dispute to the apostles and elders Acts 15:2 shows that they had professedly embraced the Christian religion." Clarke says, "The persons who taught this doctrine appear to have been converted to Christianity; but, supposing that the Christian religion was intended to perfect the Mosaic, and not to supersede it, they insisted on the necessity of circumcision, because, by that, a man was made debtor to the whole law, to observe all its rites and ceremonies." The NKJV Study Bible notes say, "When the Jewish converts from Judea arrived in Antioch, they insisted that believers must be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). The text later (Acts 15:5) indicates that these converts were from among the Pharisees, the strictest of the sects of the Jews. The disputations would also seem to indicate that some of the early believers still looked upon Christianity as a movement within Judaism at this point."

Were the men from Judea believers? Several factors suggest they were. Before the men from Judea went to Antioch (Acts 15:1), Jews in Judea objected to Peter eating with the Gentiles (Acts 11:1-3). Luke says, "Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, 'You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!'" (Acts 11:1-3). Notice Luke calls those from Judea "the brethren in Judea." The Jews who objected to what Peter did were believers. Were the men from Antioch (Acts 15:1) part of the "brethren who were in Judea" (Acts 11:1)? The book of Acts seems to imply that is the case. Moreover, the men from Judea were teaching in the church at Antioch and the text says explicitly they were teaching "the brethren" (Acts 15:1). On top of all that, as Barnes points out, they were willing to refer the matter to the apostles and elders. Unlike the false brethren, they were part of the Christian community.

Incidentally, A. T. Robinson says these are people known in church history as the Nazarenes and the Ebionites. At Caesarea, Paul was charged by the Jews before Felix with being "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). In Paul's case, the point of the charge was that he was the ringleader of a group considered a schism. Alexander says that believers were called Nazarenes until after the destruction of Jerusalem when it became the name of a Christian sect that still adhered to the Mosaic Law. According to such Church Fathers as Jerome and Augustine, there was a Jewish Christian sect in the 4th century called Nazarenes. There is also an eleventh-century reference to a group of Sabbath-keeping Christians called Nazarenes.

Pharisees Who Believed When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem to settle the dispute with the "men of Judea, "some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to command *them* to keep the law of

Moses'" (Acts 15:5). Some, not all, of the Pharisees, who had believed in Jesus as the Messiah, disagreed with Paul and Barnabas, insisting that it was necessary for the Gentile converts to be circumcised and to observe the other requirements of the law to be saved.

Were the Pharisees who believed real believers? The text says they believed! Some commentators agree (Clarke; F. F. Bruce). "These people believed in Jesus Christ but were still identified as Pharisees. Jews who became followers of Christ could still be Pharisees. The same could not be said for the Sadducees, for they denied that there was a resurrection, and thus could not believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead" (NKJV Study Bible).

Jews Who Believed On Paul's last trip to Jerusalem, he encountered Jews who believed in the law and were zealous. Luke records, "And when they heard *it,* they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law, but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs'" (Acts 21:20-21). When James and the elders heard what Paul had to say, they glorified the Lord, that is, they acknowledged it to be, in truth, the work of God. "They ratified again the concessions made to the Gentile believers" (Rackham).

Then James and the elders told Paul that there were "many myriads of Jews" who were believers, but they were still zealous for the Mosaic Law. The expression "many myriads of Jews" means an innumerable number, not to be defined by a specific number, to convey the idea of a large number (Alexander).

These Jewish believers in Jerusalem had been informed that Paul taught Jews living outside Jerusalem among the Gentiles to forsake the Mosaic Law. More specifically, it was rumored that Paul told them not to circumcise the children or to keep the Mosaic customs. James and the elders considered these rumors false (Bruce).

Paul did teach that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith apart from keeping the Mosaic Law, including circumcision and the Mosaic customs (Gal. 3:6-11; 4:9-11; 5:3). At the same time, as far as Paul was concerned, circumcision was a manner of indifference (Gal. 5:6; 6:15). He taught that as long as the issue was not eternal salvation, believers were free to do some of the things in the Law (Rom. 14:2-6). If, after becoming a believer, a Jewish father wished to have his sons circumcised in accordance with ancestral custom, Paul had no objection (Bruce). Paul had his spiritual son Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3). To the Jews, he became a Jew (1 Cor. 9:20). "There is no evidence that he actively persuaded Jewish Christians to forego circumcising their children or giving up Jewish customs" (Marshall).

Were the Jews who believed believers? These Jews who believed in the law and were zealous were genuine believers (Barnes; A. T. Robinson; Clarke; Ironside). Barnes says, "They are spoken of as believers, or as having faith in Christ, in contradistinction from those who rejected him, and whose characteristic trait it was that they were unbelievers. They still observed the Law of Moses. The reference here is to the law respecting circumcision, sacrifices, distinctions of meats and days, festivals, etc. It may seem remarkable that they should still continue to observe those rites since it was the manifest design of Christianity to abolish them. But we are to remember:

"(1) That those rites had been appointed by God, and that they were trained to their observance.

"(2) That the apostles conformed to them while they remained at Jerusalem, and did not deem it best to set themselves violently against them, Acts 3:1; Luke 24:53.

"(3) That the question about their observance had never been agitated at Jerusalem. It was only among the Gentile converts that the question had risen, and there it must arise, for if they were to be observed, they must have been imposed upon them by authority.

"(4) The decision of the council in Acts 15 related only to the Gentile converts. It did not touch the question whether those rites were to be observed by the Jewish converts.

"(5) It was to be presumed that as the Christian religion became better understood - that as its large, free, and catholic nature became more and more developed, the special institutions of Moses would be laid aside, of course, without agitation and without tumult. Had the question been agitated at Jerusalem, it would have excited tenfold opposition to Christianity, and would have rent the Christian church into factions, and greatly retarded the advance of the Christian doctrine. We are to remember also:

"(6) That, in the arrangement of Divine Providence, the time was drawing near which was to destroy the temple, the city, and the nation, which was to put an end to sacrifices, and effectually to close forever the observance of the Mosaic rites. As this destruction was so near, and as it would be so effectual an argument against the observance of the Mosaic rites, the Great Head of the church did not suffer the question of their obligation to be needlessly agitated among the disciples at Jerusalem."

Summary: Except for the false brethren, the Judaizers, Jews who wanted Gentiles to keep the Mosaic legal system, including circumcision, were believers.

As was pointed out, the false brethren were not believers (also see Phil. 3:2-6); they were not even part of the Christian community. Pretending to be believers, they came in secretly to spy on what was going on in the Christian community.

The other groups of Judaizers were believers. Scripture confirms that two of the remaining five groups were believers (Acts 15:5; 21:20). Unlike the false brethren, the other five groups of Judaizers were Jewish believers *who were part of the Christian community,* trying to get *believers* to observe the Mosaic Law. "Those of the circumcision" objected to a *Jewish believer* (Peter) eating with the Gentiles (Acts 11:1-3). The "men from James" objected to a *Jewish believer* (Peter) eating with Gentile believers (Gal. 2:12). "Those who troubled" the Galatians wanted *Gentile believers* to be circumcised (Gal. 6:12). The "men from Judea" wanted the *Gentile believers* at Antioch to be circumcised (Acts 15:1). The "Pharisees who believed" wanted *Gentile believers* to be circumcised and to keep the Mosaic customs (Acts 15:5). The "Jews who believed" wanted Paul to teach *Jews* who lived among the Gentiles to circumcise their sons and practice the Mosaic customs (Acts 12:20-21).

The reason that these Jewish believers wanted the Gentiles to practice the Mosaic legal system was that they were so accustomed to it that they believed that they had to keep the Law system to be completely righteous. After all, God instituted it. Their ancestors had practiced this God-given religion since God gave it to Moses. They were steeped in it. It was all they had known from birth. They could not imagine God not requiring it.

Except for the false brethren, the Judaizers were not unbelievers trying to get people saved by law-keeping. They had believed in Christ, but like Peter at Antioch, they were misguided.

Of course, suggesting that believers must keep the law has profound ramifications. Most believers today do not understand just how serious it is. In fact, when Peter withdrew from eating with the Gentiles, not even Paul "got it" at first. He himself said, "But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). The word "when" implies that Paul did not see the theological implications of all this immediately. Burton suggests that perhaps Paul was out of town when it started.

In Paul's case, the question was, "Must Gentile believers keep the Mosaic Laws?" Bruce says the issues are 1) the requirements for Gentile church membership (circumcision) and 2) the means of promoting fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers (eating meals together). Rackham says the serious ramifications are: Will there be one unified church or two churches? Will the Gentile believers be in an inferior position, like the God-fearers in the synagogue?

The very nature of the church meeting created a major problem. When the early church gathered, they shared a meal, including the Lord's Table. This posed the practical problem of table fellowship. Traditionally, the Jews did not eat with Gentiles because the Gentiles did not eat kosher food. Any food Gentiles served their Jewish friends would be unclean.

Ultimately, the issue is law and grace. Wiersbe puts it like this: "What were these legalists actually doing and why were they so dangerous? They were attempting to mix Law and grace and to pour the new wine into the ancient brittle wineskins (Luke 5:36-39). They were stitching up the rent veil (Luke 23:45) and blocking the new and living way to God that Jesus had opened when He died on the Cross (Heb. 10:19-25). They were rebuilding the wall between Jews and Gentiles that Jesus had torn down on the cross (Eph. 2:14-16). They were putting the heavy Jewish yoke on Gentile shoulders (Gal. 5:1; Acts 15:10) and asking the church to move out of the sunlight into the shadows (Heb. 10:1; Col. 2:16-17). They were saying, 'A Gentile must first become a Jew before he can become a Christian! It is not sufficient for them simply to trust Jesus Christ. They must also obey Moses!'"

The sad fact is that *believers* can pervert the gospel with profound consequences. In the first century, the Jewish believers called Judaizers did it. They wanted gentiles believers to practice food restrictions, Sabbath observance, and even circumcision. They confused believers (Gal. 1:7). If believers mix law-keeping with justification by faith (being declared righteous by faith), they will not walk by faith (Gal. 2:10); they will think they are righteous because they keep the law! Furthermore, they will fall from the grace system of living (Gal. 5:4; Heb. 4:16). They will not grow to Christ-like maturity, which was one of Paul's fears (Gal. 4:11).

Believers today pervert the gospel. Some are a reflection of the ancient Judaizers. They will say one must trust Christ. Then, they want believers to observe the Saturday Sabbath. Don't add law-keeping to faith. Don't add law-keeping to grace. To add anything to the simple message of faith alone in Christ alone is to pervert the gospel.

Keep the issue clear. Justification is by faith alone in Christ alone, not by the works of the Law (Gal. 2:16). The subsequent life of those justified by faith is a life of faith that produces love (Gal. 2:20; 5:6), not by law-keeping (Gal. 5:18).

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