

Chapter 19

Annual festivals

As part of his covenant with the Israelites, God commanded them to observe various annual festivals. These festivals symbolized facets of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Now that Christ has redeemed us, are these festivals still required under the new covenant? Let us examine the Old and New Testament evidence.

Passover

Just before the Israelites left Egypt, God revised the Israelites' calendar and commanded a festival. On the 10th day of the month Abib (in the spring), the Israelites were to select lambs. On the 14th day, they were to kill the lambs and put some of the blood on their doorframes. They were to roast them and eat them with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, with their cloaks and sandals on, with their staffs in their hands, ready to depart Egypt, and all leftovers were to be burned (Exodus 12:1-10). If Gentiles wished to participate, the men had to be circumcised (verses 43-49). The day was commanded as a lasting ordinance for future generations; it was to be a commemorative celebration, a festival (verses 14, 24-25).

Three festival seasons are mentioned in the Sinaitic covenant (Exodus 23:14-17), but Passover is not mentioned by name. However, it is mentioned in the summary of the Sinaitic covenant given to Moses later (Ex. 34:25). In Leviticus 23:4-5, the Passover is called a sacred assembly. Although work was forbidden on other festivals, there was no such requirement for the 14th.

In Numbers 9:2-5, the Passover was again commanded, but no details were given, other than referring to previously given "rules and regulations." Provision was made for an observance of Passover in the second month for people who were unable to participate in the month Abib (verses 6-14). Requirements were that it must be done at evening, that it must be eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread, that no meat be left until morning, and that no bones should be broken.

Deuteronomy 16:1-7 established the tabernacle as the site for Passover observances, rather than at the homes of the people. In the morning after the Passover, they were to return to their tents (verse 7b). Otherwise

the regulations were the same as before. Soon after this, the Israelites celebrated the Passover on the plains of Jericho (Joshua 5:10).

Unleavened Bread

The week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread was closely associated with the Passover, since it started on the 15th, right after the Passover lambs were killed. It was instituted in Egypt (Exodus 12:15-20). Leaven (yeast) was to be removed on the first day (verse 15), and no leaven was to be in the homes for seven days (verse 19). Sacred assemblies were held on the first and seventh days, and ordinary work was forbidden on those days, except for food preparation. It was "a lasting ordinance for the generations to come." Even aliens had to abide by the rules (verse 19). Flat, unleavened bread (matzos) was the only bread allowed for this week.

The night of the 15th became a commemoration of the escape from Egypt (verses 17, 42; 13:3-9). The festival was commanded within the Sinaitic covenant as a memorial of the Exodus (Exodus 23:15), and the festival was repeated in the covenant made with Moses and Israel (Exodus 34:18). It was described again in Leviticus 23:6-8, but no new regulations were added. Numbers 28:17-25 prescribed extra sacrifices for the entire week.

Deuteronomy 16:3-8 repeated the regulations and indicated that the Passover lamb was sacrificed on the evening of the first day of unleavened bread (verse 4b). The unleavened bread was a reminder that the Israelites left Egypt in haste (verse 3); they did not have time to put yeast in their dough and let it rise (Ex. 12:34, 39).

When the Israelites entered the land of Canaan after the Passover, they ate unleavened bread (Joshua 5:11). Solomon offered sacrifices as required in the book of Moses (2 Chronicles 8:12-13). In Hezekiah's day, the people celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread in the second month (2 Chronicles 30:13, 21), even though that wasn't the official date for it. Then they celebrated it another seven days (verse 23). The festival was restored again by Josiah and Ezra (2 Chronicles 35:17; Ezra 6:22).

In Ezekiel's vision of the restored temple and

sacrificial system, the Festival of Passover and Unleavened Bread was included (Ezekiel 45:21-24).

Firstfruits

Associated with the Festival of Unleavened Bread was the ceremony of waving the firstfruits, the first part of the spring grain harvest. Before any new grain could be eaten, some grain had to be waved before God, with lamb, grain, oil and wine offerings (Leviticus 23:10-14). This ceremony involved the priests, and there was little for the people to do. It was not a Sabbath or a sacred assembly. The ceremony could not apply in the wilderness; it was to be in force only after the Israelites entered the land (verse 10), and then it was to be a lasting ordinance wherever they lived (verse 14b).

Fifty days after the wavesheaf offering, at the end of the grain harvest, was the festival now known as Pentecost (a Greek word meaning *fiftieth*), which was a sacred assembly, a day on which regular work was forbidden (verses 15-21). Leavened loaves were to be offered with animals, grain and drink offerings — “a lasting ordinance for generations to come, wherever you live.”

This festival was included in the Sinaitic covenant (Exodus 23:16) and in the restatement of that covenant (Exodus 34:22). Additional offerings were commanded in Numbers 28:26-31. The festival was commanded again in Deuteronomy 16:9-11, with the theme of rejoicing at the central tabernacle site.

Festival of Trumpets

On the first day of Tishri, the seventh month, was a festival of blowing trumpets. It was a day of rest and a sacred assembly (Leviticus 23:23-25; Numbers 29:1).

Day of Atonement

On the 10th of Tishri was the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). No work at all was to be done on this “sabbath of rest,” and there was a sacred assembly (Leviticus 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7). Fasting was required; anyone who worked or did not fast was cut off from the people. Sacrificial rituals for this day are in Leviticus 16. That chapter also repeated the requirements for the people — even Gentiles — to fast and avoid work (verse 29). The purpose of the fasting is given in verse 30: “because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you.”

Festival of Tabernacles

The autumn harvest festival was the third main festival season (Exodus 23:17; 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:16; 2 Chronicles 8:12-13). The first day of the seven-

day festival was a sacred assembly on which regular work was forbidden (Leviticus 23:33-36a; Numbers 29:12). The people were to collect fruit, palm fronds and leafy branches and live in crude shelters for seven days. It was a lasting ordinance for all “native-born Israelites,” reminding them of the Exodus from Egypt (Leviticus 23:39-43).

The festival was to be kept at a central site, and it was a time for joy and celebration that included Gentiles who lived among the Israelites (Deuteronomy 16:13-15). Every seventh year, in the sabbatical year in which crops were not harvested and slaves were released, the law was to be read publicly during this festival (Deuteronomy 31:10-13). In those years, it would have been a festival of liberation rather than a harvest festival.

Ezekiel predicted a restoration of this festival (Ezekiel 45:25); Hosea also mentioned it in a prophecy (Hosea 12:9). The most specific prophecy about this festival is in Zechariah 14:16-19 — even Gentile nations would be required to go to Jerusalem to keep the festival, or else they would suffer drought.

The Festival of Tabernacles lasted seven days, but the eighth day was also a sacred assembly and a day of rest (Leviticus 23:36b, 39b; Numbers 29:35). This day was called “the closing assembly” (Leviticus 23:36b).

Sabbatical years

The old covenant also stipulated that the land was not to be cultivated every seventh year (Exodus 23:10-11). The land was to lie fallow, and vineyards and olive trees were to be left untended so poor people and wild animals could eat the fruit. The land was to observe a sabbath year (Leviticus 25:1-7). God warned the people that if they were persistently rebellious, he would ensure that the land had its sabbaths (Leviticus 26:34). And it came to pass — the land was given its sabbath rests (2 Chronicles 36:21).

Nehemiah, in pledging allegiance to God’s laws, restored the land sabbath (Nehemiah 10:31). He also indicated that the seventh year was a time for canceling debts, in keeping with Deuteronomy 15:1-11. It was also the time for freeing Hebrew slaves (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 31:10-13; Jeremiah 34:14).

Similarly, every 50th year was to be a festive year, a jubilee year. Liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land, and farmlands were to be returned to the families originally having them (Leviticus 25:8-10). It was also a sabbatical year for the land, since the people were not to sow or reap or harvest (verses 11-12).

Why have I taken so much space to describe these festivals? For one thing, I know Christians who keep

these festivals. I once thought that they were required, and I kept them. And the evidence for their validity is similar to that for the weekly Sabbath. These festivals were an important way that the Israelites showed loyalty and love for God. Jesus kept these festivals, too. If these holy convocations can be set aside in the new covenant, as they are, then it should be no surprise that the weekly Sabbath is, too.

Jesus and the annual festivals

At the time of Jesus, the festivals were being observed regularly at Herod's temple. Although some Jews may have been lax about festival observance, others were faithful to the covenant. Scribes and Pharisees helped keep people aware of the festivals. Synagogues had been built, and the law was taught weekly.

Jesus went to the festivals, although there is no evidence that he journeyed to Jerusalem for every festival in every year. When he was an infant in Egypt, for example, he probably did not — nor was it expected of Jews who lived there. After he moved back to Nazareth, his family went to Jerusalem every Passover season (Luke 2:41), so Jesus would have been familiar with the sacrificial rituals. Assuming that Joseph died and Jesus became head of the family, he would have brought Passover lambs to be sacrificed in Jerusalem.

Jesus taught during Passover seasons (John 2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55). His most famous Passover was his last (Matthew 26:26-29), and then he himself was sacrificed as our Passover lamb (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

Jesus taught during the Festival of Tabernacles (John 7:2-14), including its last day (verse 37). Although he taught during the festivals, he did not specifically comment on their meaning. He taught about living waters, for example, but he did not say that his message had anything to do with the festivals. Rather, it was about the Holy Spirit and faith in Jesus (verses 38-39). Jesus also kept Hanukkah, the Festival of Dedication (John 10:22).

There is only one festival that the Lord commanded Christians to observe. "Do this in remembrance of me," he said at his last meal (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24). He told his disciples to commemorate his suffering and death by sharing bread and wine.

Annual festivals in the early church

The early church, composed entirely of Jewish Christians, continued to keep the festivals. They were assembled in one place on Pentecost (Acts 2:1) — but that is not unusual, since they often met together for

prayer (Luke 24:53; Acts 1:14). On Pentecost, they were sitting in a "house," not necessarily in the temple (Acts 2:2).

The next mention of a festival is in Acts 12:3-4. Herod arrested Peter during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, intending to prosecute him after the Passover season. Although the early church probably kept these festivals, these verses do not tell us that; the festivals are mentioned simply to tell us what time of year this happened. This passage is neither a command nor an example. The mere mention of a festival does not imply a command for its observance (cf. John 10:22).

The next mention is Acts 18:21 (in many texts; other Greek texts do not have this passage). Paul was debating with Jews in the synagogue at Ephesus (verse 19). They wanted him to stay longer, but he refused, saying, "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem" (NKJ). Paul probably kept some of the festivals, just as he kept Jewish customs such as cutting his hair after a vow (Acts 18:18) and participating in purification rituals at the temple (Acts 21:26). Just because he did something does not mean that we have to follow his specific example. If we must literally follow all specific biblical examples set by both Jesus and Paul, then it would be necessary to observe the festivals in Jerusalem. That is the way that they were commanded.

Paul could have kept the festival in Ephesus if he wanted to (1 Corinthians 16:8; Acts 16:13). Although the Old Testament required festivals to be kept in Jerusalem, Paul didn't have to go there; the requirement was not deemed applicable to Jews who lived outside of the Promised Land. However, he may have wanted to be in Jerusalem because there would be a large crowd of people to preach to. The text doesn't tell us his motive.

Paul sailed from Philippi after the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Acts 20:6). This verse, like 12:3-4, simply tells us when this happened; it does not say that Christians kept the festival, nor does it command us to. Similarly, Acts 20:16 tells us that Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. Although Paul probably planned to keep the festival in Jerusalem, the text does not tell us that he did; it simply tells us when he wanted to arrive. He could just as easily have kept the festival with the Ephesian church if he wanted to.

Acts 27:9 tells us that sailing was dangerous after "the Fast," referring to the Day of Atonement. This text does not say anything about Christians observing this day (although they may have); it is simply a calendar marker in the story. Since Gentile churches were often associated with synagogues, the readers could have known when the Fast was because they knew when the Jewish festivals were.

Paul praised the Thessalonians for becoming imitators of the churches in Judea (1 Thessalonians 2:14). Did this involve festival-keeping? Not necessarily. The churches in Judea observed various Jewish customs, and we see in Acts 15 and Galatians 2 that they had many traditions that weren't binding on Gentiles. If the Thessalonians were imitating *everything* the Judean churches did, their example isn't authoritative for us today. Actually, the context of 1 Thessalonians 2:14 tells us the way in which the Thessalonians were imitating the Judeans: They accepted the gospel as the word of God (verse 13) and were willing to accept persecution from their countrymen (verse 14b).

“Let us keep the Festival”

“Let us keep the Festival,” Paul told the Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 5:8). Some have taken this to be a command to observe the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and as first glance it does appear to be a command for festival observance, but this is not what the passage teaches. First, let us note the context: In verses 1-5, Paul tells the Corinthians to put a sinful brother out of their fellowship. Then in verse 6, he writes, “Don't you know that a little leaven works through the whole batch of dough?” This proverb is similar to a modern one: “One rotten apple can ruin the whole bunch.” If Paul had written that, he would have been comparing rot to sin, indicating that rot must be removed before it spreads. In a similar metaphor in verse 6, Paul is comparing yeast to sin — and sin, if it's not corrected, can spread through the whole community.

When Paul says, “Get rid of the old yeast” (1 Corinthians 5:7), he is still speaking figuratively about disfellowshipping the sinful brother, not telling them to get rid of physical leaven. “Yeast” is still being used as a figure of speech for the sinful person. It would be like writing, Get rid of the rot.

When Paul says that the Corinthians are already unleavened — that they are a “new batch without yeast” — he is comparing the people to a lump of dough. He is not saying that their homes have all leaven removed, or that yeast has been removed from their diets. It is the Christian community itself that is, figuratively, the new batch of dough. This evidence in the text tells us that Paul is speaking metaphorically.

Further evidence that Paul is speaking spiritually is the last part of verse 7: The Corinthians are to put out spiritual leaven, and they are already unleavened, because Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed. They are spiritually cleansed by the atoning death of Jesus Christ, and they therefore ought to eliminate sin from

their community. Christ's sacrifice on the cross is not a logical reason to put leaven out of our homes for one week, but it is a logical reason to put sin out throughout the year.

Paul was not addressing the topic of physical leaven. If he had wanted to forbid physical leaven, he would have said, “Put the leaven out, for the law has commanded us to.” Christ's crucifixion did not have anything to do with physical leaven, but it does remove spiritual leaven. It is the Corinthian Christian community, not their homes or their diets, that is said to be unleavened. Christ has declared them to be holy (1 Corinthians 1:2; Hebrews 10:10), so they ought to act like it. Sanctification is a process as well as an initial event (Hebrews 10:14).

Paul is telling them to put blatant sin out of their fellowship so they can be a group of people who live in holiness, since they have been sanctified or declared holy by the sacrifice of Christ. They had leaven (i.e., the sinful member) in their midst, but Christ had made them unleavened (forgiven), so they had the logical duty to put the sinful member out of their fellowship. Paul is teaching the Corinthians to live up to what they already were. They were already cleansed; now they needed to continue to remain free from sin and corruption.

Paul says that Christ is our Passover. However, Jesus' sacrifice has changed the way the Passover is observed; it has also changed the way we strive to be unleavened, as Paul brings out in verse 8.

A better way to keep the festival

“Therefore” — because Christ has been sacrificed for us — “let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast...” Does this imply that we can keep the festival with new yeast? Of course not. Paul isn't talking about physical leaven, or else he wouldn't need the word “old.” Paul is contrasting the old lifestyle of sin with the new Christian lifestyle of holiness. Paul is telling the Corinthians to keep the festival in a new way, concerned about sincerity and truth. The old leaven he's talking about is clearly identified as “malice and wickedness” — that's the sort of thing we must put out. That's what the festival had pictured all along.

Now, Christians are to keep the festival with unleavenness (the word “bread” is not in the Greek). Again, Paul is not talking about being physically deleavened — he clearly says that the unleavenness he is talking about is “sincerity and truth.” We are to keep the festival in the new spiritual way, by eliminating sin.

Christianity is a continuous festival, a celebration of the salvation we have in Christ. The festival symbolism, eliminating leaven, is fulfilled by the

elimination of guilt and sin through the atoning work of Christ and his sanctifying work in our lives. For Christians, sincerity and truth characterize our complete devotion to and worship of our Lord and Savior. If we are circumcised in heart, we are not required to submit to the physical rite of circumcision, since we have fulfilled the spiritual principle that the physical rite pictured. Likewise, when we live in sincerity, truth and holiness, we are not required to remove yeast from our homes, since we have already fulfilled the spiritual meaning that the physical ritual pictured.

Could the Corinthians understand Paul's symbolism if they were not observing the festivals? Yes. They could understand Jesus' role as a Lamb of God without killing Passover lambs, and they could understand the spiritual fulfillment of sacrifices without killing any animals. Since the church in Corinth began in a synagogue, and there were Jews in Corinth, even the Gentile Christians could have understood the allusions without actually keeping the festival in the old covenant way. Some of the Christians in Corinth may have even kept the festivals in an old covenant way, but that in itself does not indicate that the festivals are required for all Christians.

Don't let others pressure you

Colossians 2:16 says, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day." First, we should note the connecting word "therefore" — it links verse 16 with the previous verses. Because Christ has circumcised us spiritually, forgiven us and given us new life, for that reason we should not allow anyone to judge us regarding various rituals.

Apparently the Colossian heretics taught that certain customs were required, and Paul is telling the Christians that they should ignore the heretics' criticisms because of what Christ had done for them. The false teachings were probably a combination of Jewish customs and ascetic restrictions. The Christians were eating and drinking things that the heretics disapproved of (perhaps meat and wine), and the Christians' behavior on festivals wasn't what the heretics said was necessary. Perhaps the Christians were observing these days with less rigor than the heretics demanded, or perhaps they were not observing these days at all.

The Greek words translated "with regard to" literally mean "in part," but there is no evidence that the Christians were observing only part of the festivals (such as all but the sacrifices). The words are a Greek idiom meaning with regard to, with respect to, in

connection with, concerning, etc. The Christians were not to allow others to judge them in connection with or regarding what they did on a Jewish festival. But how could they stop other people's attitudes? They could not; all they could do is make sure that the criticisms did not cause them to change their behavior as if it were necessary for salvation. That is probably what Paul meant. Christian behavior should not be determined by external pressures.

The clearest point in the whole passage is that we shouldn't let people judge us regarding these things — not other Christians, not even people in our own fellowship. Salvation doesn't depend on our observance of dietary rules or specific festivals. Christ is the judge, and we are to obey him rather than human traditions.

Does this verse imply that we can be saved whether we keep these days or not? Yes. That harmonizes well with the principle Paul gave in another situation (Romans 14:4-6). Some people regard the day as special to the Lord, and others regard it as optional, also basing their belief on their desire to obey the Lord. Each should be fully convinced, bringing every thought into submission to the Lord, but we are not to judge each other, since Christ is our Lord and our Judge. We are not to let others judge us (that is, pressure us to change our behavior because of their opinions), and we are not to judge others regarding food and drink and festivals.

Shadows pointing to Christ

Festivals, new moons and Sabbaths are shadows pointing to the reality, which is Christ (Colossians 2:17). The tabernacle and laws of sacrifices were also shadows (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1). All these things had symbolic significance, but Christ fulfilled the symbolism of the old covenant rites. The old covenant specified holy places and holy times, but the New Testament does not label any time as "holy." Just as in the case of circumcision, when we have been given the spiritual reality, we are not bound by physical worship rules.

Although Christians may observe the festivals as celebrations of various aspects of salvation, nothing in the New Testament says that they are required. In Colossians 2:16, the old covenant festivals are placed in the same category as new moon observances. Christ does not require us to observe them, nor does he forbid us to observe them. Festivals can be helpful if they emphasize what Christ has done for us, but they can also take our attention away from Christ.

Weekly and annual sabbaths

Some of the arguments for the weekly Sabbath apply to the annual festivals, too. The Sabbath and festivals were instituted by God himself; so were the sacrifices and the tabernacle. The festivals are “feasts of the Lord,” but the tabernacle and sacrifices were, too. The festivals were commanded forever, but so were some of the sacrifices and so was circumcision. None of these are requirements for Christians today.

The new covenant is significantly different from the old; worship requirements have been greatly transformed. The Sabbaths are not signs or proofs of true Christianity and are not a basis for judging whether someone is in the faith.

Two festivals were instituted before Sinai, but circumcision was also instituted before Sinai, and it is not a requirement. Christians are inheritors of the covenant of promise that God made with Abraham because of his faith, and laws that were added afterwards cannot change the promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. Even the festivals commanded before Sinai were given through Moses and are part of “the Law of Moses.” They were historically conditioned, linked to the agricultural seasons of a specific nation in a specific land, linked to physical salvation and physical promises.

The Sabbath and the festivals were commanded within the old covenant, and *only* within the old covenant. The terms of that covenant are not binding on Christians today. Observances instituted in the old covenant are obsolete unless we have evidence that they are also part of the new covenant. If we are to teach something as a requirement for people in a new covenant relationship with God, it must be based on the new covenant, not the old.

The prophets predicted a restoration of the festivals, but they also predicted sacrifices (e.g., Zechariah 14:20-21) and circumcision (Ezekiel 44:9). Their prophecies cannot be used to make requirements for the church in this age.

Faulty arguments

Jesus observed the weekly and annual Sabbaths because he was born under the law, while the old covenant was still in force (Galatians 4:4). He observed old covenant customs such as participating in the sacrifice of Passover lambs, tithing to the Levites, telling cleansed people to make offerings as prescribed by Moses, etc. He also observed Hanukkah. Christians should be careful about using his example in cultural, time-bound circumstances.

We should instead focus on what he actually

taught, and the meaning of what he *did* for us. If we were to teach circumcision as a requirement, for example, then we would be denying the significance of what Jesus did, even though Jesus never said anything against circumcision itself. We would be failing to recognize the new covenant that he brought; the same is true if we require other obsolete laws.

The early church observed the festivals, since the first Christians were Jewish. They also observed circumcision and other customs that were not binding on Gentile believers. It was certainly permissible for Jewish believers to continue observing their traditions, but their example is not authoritative unless there is evidence that Gentiles were also required to observe these laws. God gave the Holy Spirit on one festival, but he never told us to commemorate that event with a required assembly (although many Christian churches observe Pentecost, it is by tradition rather than command); he gave the Spirit on other days, too. Later history shows a few Christians keeping the festivals, but some kept circumcision, too. Their example isn't authoritative. Our standard must be the Bible, particularly the new covenant.

Paul kept some festivals in Jerusalem, but he was away for most of them. He also kept other Jewish customs, so we can't just assume that we have to do everything he did. We need to discern which details of their lives were based on the culture they lived in, and which were based on the new life in Christ. Paul considered himself under the law of Christ, not under the law of the old covenant (1 Corinthians 9:19-21). Today, we are to obey the commands of Jesus (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus commanded a commemoration of his death, but he otherwise did not command Christians to observe any festivals. Likewise, Paul did not command Gentiles to keep the festivals. In referring to the Festival of Unleavened Bread, he spiritualized it, saying that Christians were to rejoice in sincerity and truth. And he told the Colossians to ignore what others might say regarding Jewish festivals and Sabbaths. They were symbolic shadows, so they did not matter. The reality to which they had pointed had come. They had symbolic significance, but so did circumcision and the sacrifices. They are meaningful, but that in itself does not mean that observance is required.

How many details are needed?

Moreover, if the festivals were required, we would have to ask how many of the customs are required. Can we say that one physical custom (unleavened bread) is still required but another physical custom (bitter herbs)

is not? Or we might consider that the old covenant required not only temporary dwellings, but also homemade, substandard dwellings. Can we say that one aspect of the shelters is important, but the others are not? If we say that tree-branch booths are not practical in our climate, are we using convenience to limit our obedience?

The Israelites were told to celebrate the Feast of Ingathering with fruit, “palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars” (Leviticus 23:40). This passage tells us when the Feast should be observed. It tells us how to celebrate: with sacrifices, palm fronds, etc. It tells us who the festival is for: “native-born Israelites” (verse 42). It tells us why: the festival commemorates the beginning of the nation. It is arbitrary to insist on the dates for the festival (which appear to be based on climate in one part of the world), but ignore other details.

The Bible simply doesn’t tell us that one part of the passage is to be obeyed forever and the next part is temporary. If we are to accept one verse as authoritative, shouldn’t we accept the next verse, too? If we are to accept the weekly Sabbath, shouldn’t we also accept the biblical instructions for it, which tell us to stay home?

The simple truth is that all these are *not* requirements under the new covenant. They are part of “the Law of Moses” that is not a requirement for membership in the Christian community (Acts 15). We may not understand precisely how Jesus fulfilled the symbolism of leavened loaves and other festival rituals, but we do know that in the New Testament our relationship with God is based on faith in Christ. He is our atoning sacrifice, so there is no reason to fast on the Day of Atonement, since we do not believe that atonement is made for us on that particular day. Since we have been given salvation in Christ, we are already abiding by the purpose of the festivals; we have begun to experience the reality that the festivals only pointed to.

Optional observances

Those who wish to abstain from leavened bread during that festival are free to do so, but there is no requirement to do so. We are spiritually unleavened through faith in the sacrificed Lamb of God, and there is therefore no need to physically perform something that was only a shadow of the reality. However, there is a danger in doing such optional things: they tempt us to think that we are more obedient and better than others. They tempt us to look to ourselves instead of to Christ for our salvation.

Similarly, those who want to fast on the Day of Atonement are free to do so, but they do not have to. It is not more righteous or holy to do so. Through his sacrificial death, Jesus Christ has already made us “at one” with God. At its best, the Day of Atonement is a celebration both of Christ’s atoning work and of the reconciliation with God that we have been given because of his work. Although fasting can be a spiritually valuable discipline, there is no new covenant requirement to continue the old covenant practice of fasting on this particular day to acknowledge one’s spiritual separation from God. Our fast days and worship days are not determined by the Hebrew calendar, which was given to Israel alone as part of the old covenant.

Paul did not require Jewish Christians to stop practicing their customs, but he did require them not to impose those customs on Gentile converts (Galatians 2:14-15). The law was a guardian that could lead us to Christ (Galatians 3:24), and if the festivals lead us to Christ, they are good. But they are not a substitute for Christ; they cannot save us. Nor are they a required addition to faith in Christ. People who keep the festivals, or the Sabbath, are not better Christians than those who do not. The important thing is whether people have faith in Christ and obey him. If we have faith, we are already fulfilling the purpose of Israel’s worship rules. We are saved by grace through faith, not by performance of specific old covenant customs.

Review

- The Israelite annual festivals were designed for the agricultural seasons of Palestine.
- Jesus kept the festivals and other obsolete laws.
- Paul used the festival as a metaphor of morality — when we live in sincerity and truth, we have already fulfilled the symbolism.
- The symbolism of Atonement has been fulfilled in Christ.
- Question: What is more educational: a date on a calendar, or a tree-branch booth? Should we encourage the educational aspects of the festivals?

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