

Why do we celebrate the Biblical Feasts?

Origin of the Feasts

In Leviticus 23, we find that the Lord commanded the Israelites to keep the Sabbath and the following feasts:

- Passover
- Firstfruits
- Weeks
- Trumpets
- Day of Atonement
- Tabernacles

In verse 1, they are called '*the appointed feasts of the Lord*'. The Hebrew word *moed* translated '*feast*' has the idea of an appointment or a fixed time, rather than an emphasis on eating.

Isn't the Law done away with?

Didn't Jesus die to set us free from all that legal bondage? Certainly, the commandments and ordinances are not a basis of salvation, but many Christians have presupposed that all value is removed from the Feasts as a means of celebration and teaching. The Hebrew word '*Torah*' is translated as '*law*' in our bibles but it would be more accurate to say '*teaching*' or '*instruction*'.

Jesus himself set out a first principle which we must take when it comes to an evaluation of the validity of celebrating the feasts today. In Matthew 5:17-18, he said '*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished...*' (NIV)

Paul appears to contradict this in Ephesians 2:14-15, but rightly understood the verses are saying that it is the *enmity* caused by the Torah between Jew and Gentile that has been abolished, rather than the *Torah* itself.

A word is in order here about the use of the word '*fulfil*' in Matthew 5:17. The Greek word there can mean a number of things, including 'fulfil', 'fill out', 'fill up' and 'complete'. It seems to me that Christendom has read too much into the word 'fulfil' and interprets it as if it means 'swept away into oblivion'.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus interprets and reinterprets Torah, as Rabbis always have done. As Christians, we generally take his teachings as binding for Gentile believers as well as Jewish. When it comes to the specific ordinances of the Torah, however, it seems clear to me that these were given to Israel and not the Gentiles, except insofar as a Gentile was part of a Jewish household.

One other comment – there is a simplistic Christian view that the New Covenant has entirely swept away the ‘Old’ Covenant. However, the ‘Old’ Testament contains a *series* of covenants. This is an area which Christians need to reappraise and I cannot put forward a detailed argument in this short paper. Please refer to my forthcoming book ‘Christians and Israel: The Heart of the Matter’, in which I deal with this vital area.

Must Gentiles observe the Feasts?

I have already said that the commandments and ordinances are not a basis of salvation. So, two questions arise- is there any obligation for New Testament believers to observe them, and is there any point in observing them?

Must we observe them?

In my understanding, we must make a distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. A Jewish believer is still part of Israel with their specific covenants. Therefore, many Jewish believers take the view that they are still under various obligations arising under their covenants, although some believe they those obligations are now voluntary.

Gentile believers are in a different position. In the New Testament period, we find that some of the Jewish believers were insisting that the Gentile believers should be under the same obligations as the Jewish ones. There is comment in the Epistles against that stance and the final word on the question appears to me to be the ‘Jerusalem Council’ of Acts 15 which ruled that four things were binding on the Gentile believers. That is to abstain from:

- *food polluted by idols*
- *sexual immorality*
- *the meat of strangled animals*
- *blood*

As an aside, it is interesting to consider how far those principles are relevant to Gentile believers today, as opposed to those of the first century. As more and more Jews come to faith, perhaps we will have to review our lifestyles.

Having said that, the church was born in Jewish soil and the Bible is a Hebraic collection of books from start to finish. It was natural that the Gentiles would follow some of the Jewish practices as part of a joint outworking of faith.

It is interesting to note that there no new festivals are introduced in the New Testament. All the festivals of the church have been invented since the early centuries when Christianity and Judaism eventually went their own separate ways. It has to be said that the festivals invented by the church are a curious mixture of paganism, legend and biblical truth*. Early church history shows that the early believers, Jewish and Gentile, continued with the ‘Old’ Testament feasts, adapting them to include New Covenant teaching.

* for example, see my article ‘Christmas – Christian or Pagan?’

Perhaps they had in mind Paul's comments in Romans 11:17 that we Gentile believers '*have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root...*' or Paul's comment in Ephesians 2:19 that we Gentile believers...'*are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household...*'

Have you ever thought of looking at 1 Corinthians 5:8 as an exhortation to continue keeping the Passover?

Later on, there was a separation between the Jewish and Gentile sides of the church and the Gentiles pulled right away from anything with any Jewish influences.

So – we Gentiles are not obliged in a legal sense to observe them, but we are free to do so and there are good reasons to.

In the early church, there was debate about how far to take these things and, now that Gentile believers are rediscovering the richness of the feasts and the numbers of Jewish believers are increasing, the debates are reopening.

What is the point?

There is much of value in and much joy in celebrating the feasts, celebrating what God has done and looking forward to the future. The Feasts have past, present and future aspects. We look back at what God has done and thank Him, we thank Him for where we are now, and we look to what lies ahead in the glorious consummation of God's purposes.

For example, at the Feast of Tabernacles, we look back at the dwelling in the wilderness of the Israelites in booths, we look at the fact that God became flesh and 'tabernacled' with man and 'tabernacles' with us now by the Holy Spirit. We also see that ultimately God will in person 'tabernacle' with us forever- Revelation 21:3-4.

The Feasts have been adapted and built on and we use programmes which are modified and, indeed, are still in many ways experimental. We include some traditions which are not specifically biblical but are meaningful and harmonise with the themes of the various occasions. We do not, however, include every Jewish tradition nor seek to observe every day and detail scrupulously

The Feasts are rich in Messianic symbolism and typology, and audio-visuals are used. As far as possible, we try to involve the children, especially at the Passover.

There is much to be said for being in harmony with the biblical calendar, rather than the paganised cultural calendar imposed on us by our nation. There is much significance in the events in the Gospels and in events yet to come in terms of the biblical calendar.

And- if the enmity between Jew and Gentile caused by the Torah has been abolished, can we not see that as an invitation to participate with our Jewish friends?

Why in *our* day?

Finally, the question might be asked- why is God in our day putting in our hearts a desire to celebrate the biblical feasts again after centuries of Christian neglect of them?

Partly, it is simply God's timing, designed to bring us back to our forgotten roots. It is also a reflection of the fact that God has begun to fulfil the prophetic word of Romans 11:25 to accomplish the long-awaited salvation of Israel.

As more and more Jews come to faith, the exciting challenge of realising the 'one new man' vision of Paul is becoming a reality, as it was in the beginning.

Who knows – perhaps more so in these last days?

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