

Is Christian Morality Unique Part 1

A Church Council in the 50's CE

Michelle Nailon CSB

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Is Christian Morality Unique? Part One Church Council in early 50's CE



Have you ever wondered?

What happened to the followers of Jesus immediately after Jesus had died, risen and ascended into heaven?

We know Jesus had appointed Peter as leader.

But then a brilliant young Jew called Saul was converted, changed his name to Paul and began preaching to the Gentiles (non-Jews).

Soon there were many non-Jewish followers of Jesus.

At the time there were a large number of groups within Judaism - the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians and even the Essenes.

Some now called the followers of Jesus "the Nazarene sect"

But what was fairly inevitable with all these new converts who were non-Jewish followers of Jesus?

- ▶ Much of the book of the Acts of the Apostles is taken up with the on-going tension between Jewish converts to a following of Jesus and Gentile converts.
- ▶ There is stress in particular on the difficulty that the apostle Paul had with the Jews of the day and even Jewish Christians
- ▶ (cf. his letter to the Galatians)

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Like Jesus, Paul continued to teach the commandments to the Gentiles, especially those which protected basic human rights,

Commandment

Protection of rights

Notation cf. Catholic tradition

5. Thou shalt not kill

Protect life

6. Thou shalt not commit adultery

Protect a basic family support structure

7. Thou shalt not steal

Protect property

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But the Jews of the day (c1st CE) surrounded these key commandments with multiple rules and regulations. (cf. Galatians 2;11-13)

Amongst the rules in particular was the requirement that all male Jews had to be circumcised.

Also, it was expected that once a Gentile (i.e. non-Jew) was circumcised, they would keep all the other Jewish regulations as well.

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Around the middle of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke the writer, tells of a Church Council that was held to deal with this issue of circumcision and the myriad Jewish regulations (Ch 15 Acts of the Apostles).



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Tensions about the issue had mounted to a head when people from Jerusalem, had gone to Antioch, the first place where the followers of Jesus were called Christians

(Acts 11:20-21).

The visitors told the Gentile Christians in Antioch that they should become circumcised.

(Galatians 2)

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- ▶ When these people arrived they claimed to be coming from James in Jerusalem.
- ▶ Apparently, James was by then the apparent leader of the emerging Church (Gal. 2;7-10).

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One of these Jewish Laws forbade Jews to eat with Gentiles.

But this law conflicted with the remembrance meal of the followers of Jesus.

Here, both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were expected to gather and eat together.

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As it was, even when all the followers did gather for this remembrance meal, there were problems. Paul for instance wrote to tell his converts in Corinth off about this.

He said some people were so busy with their own concerns at the remembrance meal that some people there would go hungry while others would get drunk

(1 Corinthians 11:20-22).



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In Antioch, with pressure from the Jerusalem visitors, even Peter, who had been nominated by Jesus as head of the apostles, avoided eating with the Gentile converts.

Paul publicly accosted him about this

(Galatians Ch 2).

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The Church council, convened to sort out the issue about circumcision and all the Jewish regulations, was held in Jerusalem in the late 40's - early 50's CE

(cf. Acts 15 and Gal. 2).

According to Acts, **the Council did resolve the problem.**

How so?

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Paul and Barnabas were sent to the Council by the church in Antioch (Acts 15:2).

At the same time, there were Pharisee converts there, who wanted Gentile converts to be circumcised (i.e. made into Jews first of all) cf. Acts 15:1.

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What happened at the Council?



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At the Council Paul gave an account of the many Gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) converts who were coming into the Church

(Acts 15:4).



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- ▶ According to Luke’s Acts of the Apostles, Peter addressed the gathering of the Church council.
- ▶ He said that most of the people there, including himself, were never able to keep all the rules and regulations of Judaism anyway.
- ▶ So why should these rules be imposed on Gentile newcomers?

(Acts 15: 7-10)

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Keeping the letter of the law
was not good enough

James recalled that the prophet Amos challenged the people of the day. He pointed out the wealthy may not be stealing outright from the poor.

But, they were “squeezing” the poor in such a way as to keep them desperate.

In other words, as James pointed out, keeping the letter of the law was not good enough.

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- ▶ Then James, who it appears, was the leader of the Church by that time, addressed the Council.
- ▶ He recalled how the prophet Amos (some centuries beforehand) had railed against exploitation of the poor (Acts 15:15-17).
- ▶ These same exploiters apparently thought they were keeping the law

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Blood, Fornication, Strangling

James went on to say that the new Gentile converts should avoid **“blood, fornication and strangling”** (cf. Acts 15:20).

And, as well as the worship of the one God, that was all they needed to do !

This sounded similar to the requirements of visitors to Palestine as laid out in the Old Testament many years before (cf. Leviticus 17-18).

So it seemed, for some in the audience, that there was not any seismic shift between what was required of the Gentile converts and what was required of the visitors to Palestine centuries before.

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However, on the other hand, it would appear that others at the Council, including Paul and people such as Luke who later wrote up an account of the Council, saw the **implications** of what was being proposed by James.



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Avoid



Blood, Fornication, Strangling

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What did this mean?

When the threefold prohibition for Gentile converts against "blood" "fornication" and "strangling" was put to the Council by James (Acts 15:20) everyone there agreed.

This was a milestone for the Church.
But what did it mean?

In fact The three prohibitions against "Blood, fornication and strangling" went further than what was set out in regulations about Gentile visitors centuries before.

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Avoid Blood

Consider the proposal to avoid "blood".

Consider also the Roman Empire of the day and the environment in which the Gentile converts were living.

In the Roman Empire there was an entrenched culture of "blood sports".

For instance any sizeable city of the day would have an Amphitheatre where animals and prisoners were forced to kill and be killed for the entertainment of the crowd.

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In the context of the Roman Empire and the teaching of Jesus, "blood" implied more than eating meat with blood in it, which was something the Jews avoided.

Rather, "blood" would imply any violence and cruelty and coercion as such.



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Avoid Fornication

In James' statement about "fornication" he goes further than prohibiting adultery, which is sex with someone who is already married and committed to somebody else.

He challenges people to avoid sexual relations outside of marriage where there is no commitment. Temple prostitution for example was an institution of the day.



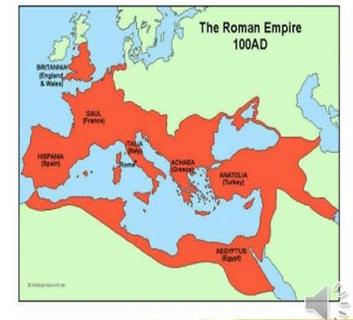
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The proposal was against blood sports and cruelty as such



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Avoiding fornication implies control of sexuality in respect for "the other"

Paul for instance warned his converts in Corinth "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19)

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Avoid Strangling

- ▶ What did James mean by his proposal to “avoid strangling”?
- ▶ At one level the word “strangling” implies the Jewish avoidance of eating strangled meat.
- ▶ That is, animals had to be bled out before being eaten which ensured meat would be fresh.



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Avoid Strangling

- In the context of talking about Amos the prophet, the word “strangling” implies “squeezing” the poor people with unjust business practices.



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Blood, Fornication, AVOID Strangling

After the Council agreement, the message about “avoid blood, fornication and strangling” was sent out to the churches around the Empire, including Antioch. People there welcomed the outcome. (Acts 15:22-29).

The people in Antioch were also told that the visitors who had caused such an upset had not been authorized to do so (Acts 15:24).

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What were the implications for the Gentile converts?

Rather than keeping all the rules and regulations of Judaism they were challenged to “raise the bar” of the key social commandments of :

- ▶ “Thou shalt not kill”,
- ▶ “Thou shalt not commit adultery”,
- ▶ “Thou shalt not steal.”

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That is,

“Thou shalt not kill”

Avoid violence and cruelty

“thou shalt not commit adultery”

Avoid abusing others sexually

“Thou shalt not steal”

Avoid unjust business practices

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The bar of the Commandments was being raised!

Thou shalt not kill	Thou shalt not commit adultery	Thou shalt not steal
Avoid blood	Avoid fornication	Avoid strangling
Avoid blood sports/violence/cruelty	Avoid sex outside marriage/commitment	Avoid unjust business practices

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Avoid blood sports/violence/cruelty	Avoid sex outside marriage/commitment	Avoid unjust business practices
⤴⤴⤴ Avoid Blood	⤴⤴ Avoid Fornication	⤴⤴ Avoid strangling
⤴⤴ Thou shalt not kill	⤴⤴ Thou shalt not commit adultery	⤴⤴ Thou shalt not steal

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Raise the Bar

The Jerusalem Council did more than solve the immediate problem of pressure on Gentile converts to be circumcised, and regulated and thereby become Jews.

It clarified and defined the approach that Jesus had taken and which Christians would also be taking to the Commandments well into the future.

It changed the negative of the “Thou shalt not” in the Commandments into an on-going, idealized “raising of the bar”.

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At the council (around first century 50CE the major people pushing for the circumcision of all male "followers of Jesus" were the Pharisees. In mainstream Judaism, after the fall of Jerusalem in 70CE, the Pharisees became the strongest group and leaders of Judaism. They put great stress on literal observance of the Jewish laws.

James proposed that the laws to be observed were to avoid blood, fornication and strangling. These laws were similar to ancient laws in the book of Leviticus which applied to visitors to Palestine.

Do you think the Pharisees at the Council could have been confused here? Because of the parallels with Leviticus, they agreed to the proposal. But they didn't fully realise the implications about "raising the bar" of the Commandments. On the other hand do you think it much more likely that people like Paul at the Council, did see the implications about "raising the bar of the Commandments"?

Do you think that "raising the bar" of the Commandments would have related to following "the way" (of Jesus) that Paul referred to in Acts?

In Acts, Paul is accused of being a leader of "the Nazerene sect". But he contradicts this and says he is a follower of "the way" (Acts 22:4; 24:14)

At one stage Paul says they had great difficulty explaining "the way" to people (cf. Acts 19:23). Do you think this fits in with what appeared to be going on in Antioch when, after the Council, people were still trying to make the Gentile converts get circumcised?

Some may describe "the way" as following Jesus. But in terms of the Commandments what do you think this means?