Did the Apostles still keep the Law?

Apologetics · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/does-the-fact-that-paul-kept-torah-mean-that-we-all-have-to-keep-torah/

The apostles were Jewish believers who continued to live as Jews in many respects. They worshiped in the temple, attended synagogue, observed certain customs, and often participated in Jewish festivals. At the same time, the New Testament consistently shows that they did not teach that Christians—Jew or Gentile—remained under the Mosaic Law as a covenant obligation. Instead, they taught that believers are justified by faith in Christ and live under the New Covenant established by His death and resurrection.

This distinction is crucial. The apostles sometimes continued aspects of Torah observance as matters of cultural identity, personal freedom, or ministry strategy, but they vigorously opposed making observance of the Law a requirement for salvation, fellowship, or Christian maturity (Acts 15; Gal. 2; Gal. 5:1–6).

The apostles were Jews

The first Christians did not stop being Jewish when they believed in Jesus.

Peter, John, and the other apostles continued to visit the temple (Acts 3:1; 5:42). Paul regularly attended synagogues when entering new cities (Acts 13:14; 17:1–2). Acts also records Paul participating in a purification ritual (Acts 21:23–26).

These passages are sometimes cited as proof that the apostles believed all Christians remained obligated to keep the Torah.

But that conclusion overlooks an important distinction between **what the apostles sometimes practiced** and **what they taught the Church**.

What did the apostles teach?

When controversy arose over whether Gentile believers had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses, the apostles gathered in Jerusalem to settle the matter (Acts 15).

Their conclusion was clear:

> “We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” (Acts 15:19).

The Jerusalem Council did **not** require Gentile Christians to come under the Mosaic covenant. Instead, it gave a small number of pastoral instructions designed to promote holiness and table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Likewise, Paul repeatedly taught that believers are justified by faith apart from works of the Law (Rom. 3:28), have died to the Law through Christ (Rom. 7:4–6), are no longer under its guardianship (Gal. 3:23–25), and are not under the Law but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

These teachings are difficult to reconcile with the claim that the apostles expected all Christians to remain Torah-observant.

What about Paul's own example?

Paul's life demonstrates remarkable flexibility.

He circumcised Timothy before taking him on missionary journeys (Acts 16:3), yet he refused to circumcise Titus because doing so would have compromised the truth of the Gospel (Gal. 2:3–5).

He participated in Jewish customs on some occasions while strongly opposing those who taught that circumcision or Torah observance was necessary for justification (Gal. 5:2–6).

This makes sense only if Paul viewed these practices as matters of freedom rather than covenant obligation.

What does 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 mean?

One of the clearest windows into Paul's thinking is found in 1 Corinthians 9.

He writes:

> “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (**though not being myself under the law**)… To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (**not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ**)… I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:20–22).

This passage is significant for several reasons.

First, Paul explicitly says he is **not himself under the Law**. If Paul believed he remained covenantally obligated to observe the Torah, this statement would be very difficult to explain.

Second, Paul distinguishes between being “under the Law” and being “under the law of Christ.” This indicates that while Christians are not lawless, their covenant relationship is now defined by Christ rather than by the Mosaic covenant.

Third, Paul explains that he adapted his behavior depending on the people he was trying to reach. Around Jews, he willingly observed Jewish customs. Around Gentiles, he did not require those customs. His goal was not personal consistency in ceremonial practice but removing unnecessary barriers to the Gospel.

Far from teaching universal Torah observance, this passage demonstrates Paul's remarkable missionary flexibility.

Why did Paul sometimes observe the Law?

Paul loved his fellow Jews and desired to remove unnecessary obstacles to their hearing the Gospel.

For a first-century Jew, refusing to participate in familiar customs could create needless offense before a conversation about Christ even began. Paul therefore voluntarily observed certain Jewish practices when appropriate—not because he believed they remained covenant obligations, but because they served the mission of the Gospel.

He himself summarizes the principle:

> “Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them” (1 Cor. 9:19).

Freedom—not obligation—is what made such flexibility possible.

What about Jewish Christians today?

Many Jewish believers in Jesus continue to observe aspects of their Jewish heritage, such as Passover or other traditional customs. These practices can be meaningful expressions of cultural identity and reminders of God's faithfulness.

The New Testament does not forbid such voluntary observance.

What it consistently rejects is making Torah observance a requirement for justification, church fellowship, or spiritual maturity. Paul warns strongly against requiring circumcision or other Mosaic obligations as conditions of belonging to God's people (Gal. 5:1–6; Col. 2:16–17).

The issue is therefore not whether a Christian may observe aspects of the Torah, but whether those observances are viewed as covenant obligations under the New Covenant.

Key Scriptures to Study

- **Acts 15:1–29** — The Jerusalem Council rejects requiring Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses.
- **Acts 16:1–3** — Paul circumcises Timothy for missionary purposes.
- **Acts 21:17–26** — Paul participates in a Jewish purification rite.
- **Romans 6:14** — Believers are not under Law but under grace.
- **Romans 7:4–6** — Christians have died to the Law through Christ.
- **1 Corinthians 9:19–23** — Paul adapts to different audiences while declaring he is not under the Law.
- **Galatians 2:3–5** — Paul refuses to circumcise Titus.
- **Galatians 5:1–6** — Seeking justification through circumcision undermines the Gospel.
- **Colossians 2:16–17** — Festival days and similar observances were shadows fulfilled in Christ.

Objections & Misconceptions

If Paul kept parts of the Torah, shouldn't Christians do the same?
Paul sometimes observed Jewish customs, but he never presented them as binding on the Church. His own explanation in 1 Corinthians 9 is that he adapted his conduct to reach different people with the Gospel. His actions were voluntary expressions of freedom, not evidence of continuing covenant obligation.

Didn't Acts 21 prove Paul remained Torah-observant?
Acts 21 shows Paul participating in a purification ritual to preserve unity among Jewish believers who had heard false rumors about his ministry. It describes what Paul did in a unique pastoral situation; it does not teach that all Christians remain under the Mosaic Law. The interpretation of Acts 21 should also be informed by Paul's own letters, where he repeatedly explains that believers are not under the Law but under Christ.

Doesn't Jesus say His followers should obey everything He commanded?
Absolutely. Christians are called to obey Christ (Matt. 28:20). The question is what Christ commanded His New Covenant people. The apostles consistently teach that Jesus fulfilled the Mosaic covenant and established a new covenant, under which believers are guided by the law of Christ rather than the covenant given at Sinai.

Why This Matters

Understanding the apostles' relationship to the Torah helps us distinguish between **descriptive history** and **prescriptive doctrine**. The apostles remained culturally Jewish, but their teaching consistently points believers to the freedom found in Christ rather than to continued obligation under the Mosaic covenant.

This also helps preserve the unity of the Church. Jewish and Gentile believers can each honor their backgrounds without requiring one another to adopt particular cultural or ceremonial practices. Our identity is ultimately found not in the Sinai covenant but in Jesus Christ, who has made believing Jews and Gentiles “one new man” in Himself (Eph. 2:11–22).

Recommended Resources

- Thomas R. Schreiner — *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law*
- Frank Thielman — *Paul and the Law*
- Douglas J. Moo — *Galatians (BECNT)*
- F. F. Bruce — *The Book of Acts*
- R. L. Solberg — *The Law, the Christ, the Promise*