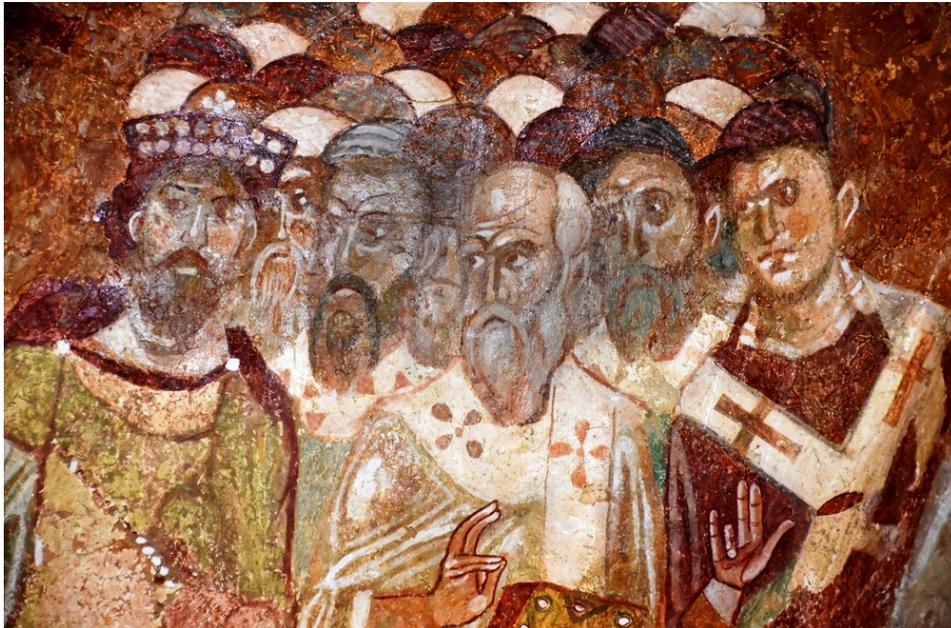


It is Often Said: “Two Thousand Years of Christianity Cannot be Wrong!”

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6/9/2016



The current renewed appreciation for the Torah among many followers of Yeshua has often met with firm resistance by traditional Christian groups. Believing that the “Law” has been abolished in favor of the New Covenant, many consider that emerging Torah Communities have simply been hornswaggled into believing bad theology and following misinterpretations of Scripture. Moreover, the question of history is often brought forward as a formidable argument against those who believe God wants His people, all of them, to live in obedience to Torah. “Two thousand years of God’s blessing upon the Christian Church certainly can’t be wrong!”

The argument seems airtight. If the Christian Church, from her earliest days, rejected the Torah as something that was set aside by Yeshua and His Apostles, and if God has clearly blessed the Christian Church through two millennia of her history, then the obvious conclusion is that such divine blessing must likewise offer a divine *imprimatur* on the Church’s rejection of the Torah. Or to put the historical argument into the form of a syllogism:

Major premise: God controls history

Minor premise: The Christian Church, with her anti-Torah theology, has remained viable for two millennia of the earth’s history

Therefore: God approves the anti-Torah theology of the Christian Church

What is more, no one would deny that countless numbers of people throughout the centuries who have received Yeshua as their Savior have demonstrated lives of faith and righteousness, and have been stalwart witnesses of God’s grace and salvation, many of them even giving up their lives for their confession of faith. Clearly, individual lives as well as whole societies have been changed as a result of the Gospel carried to nearly every part of the globe by the Christian Church.

So how do we respond to this historical argument? First, we dare not diminish the common ground we share with genuine believers in Yeshua who disagree with us about the Torah. In spite of our clear differences, we still equally confess Yeshua to be the only means of eternal salvation. Moreover, we also confess the Apostolic

Scriptures to be the inspired word of God, and the Scriptures as a whole to be our sole basis for faith and practice even though our interpretations and applications of these Scriptures may differ widely. We likewise affirm that right standing before God comes through faith in Yeshua and not through “works of righteousness which we have done” (Titus 3:5 ). In other words, in many of the essentials, we share much in common.

But secondly, we must reassess this argument from history. Is it really that substantial? Is the internal logic of the argument sound? Does the history of the Christian Church form a unified testimony against the Torah, affirmed by God Himself?

“Christian”—A Very Large Label

You probably noticed that in one of the above paragraphs I used the term “genuine believers.” This was necessary because the label “Christian Church” is really too broad to be useful for our current discussion. When I say that we share much common ground with the “Christian Church,” I am talking about the segment of the Christian Church comprised of those who have genuine, saving faith in Yeshua. Obviously, such a narrow definition excludes many who may call themselves “Christian.”

Now this fact should be taken into consideration when discussing the historical argument. The claim that “two thousand years of Christianity cannot be wrong” erroneously considers Christianity as monolithic. Anyone who thinks about this, however, will realize that we must speak of Christianities in the plural, not Christianity as an homogenous entity. For instance, most Protestants would surely not consider the Roman Catholic Church to be a model of correct theology, and *vice versa*. It follows, then, that if the Roman Catholic Church is judged to be wrong in some essential matters of theology, there can be no assurance that she represents a correct perspective in her views of the Torah either. You can’t have it both ways. If the Roman Catholic Church is dead wrong about how God saves a sinner, then logically it cannot be trusted as an authority regarding the Torah.

Furthermore, under the broad label of Christianity there have always existed some groups who have held to the enduring value and application of Torah (to one extent or another). For instance, we know that the sect of the Nazarenes, who observed the Torah, remained a viable entity within Christianity as late as the 4th Century.[1] Indeed, throughout the history of the Christian Church there have always been those who openly accepted the Torah as having enduring application to believers in Yeshua. Many of these groups observe the seventh-day Shabbat, Torah festivals, and kosher foods.[2] Even though such groups are obviously in the vast minority, they still are a witness to the fact that one cannot view historic Christianity monolithically.

Therefore, when one considers the multi-faceted nature of historic Christianity, what at first may have seemed an overwhelming host of witnesses for the historical argument against Torah is actually greatly diminished.

Different Label—Same Substance

As a teenager, I was very taken up with science in general and chemistry especially. My upstairs bedroom was actually a laboratory with a bed in the corner, complete with a large lab bench and shelves full of glassware and chemical bottles. One day as I was in the kitchen pouring salt into a bottle to which I had carefully affixed the label “sodium chloride,” my mother asked me, “Why don’t you just call it salt? That way, you won’t forget what it is!” To which I responded: “It may be salt at the dinner table, but it’s sodium chloride in the lab!” Different label, same substance.

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, a great deal of Torah has been taught and practiced, even if done so under a different label. While many sincere Christians may say they have no obligation to obey the Torah, in reality they *live out* many Torah commandments as a matter of obedience to God. In this regard, their actions speak louder than their words. In Matthew 23, our Master reproves some of the Pharisees for neglecting the weightier matters of Torah while focusing on the minutiae of tithing herbs. He describes the weightier matters of the Torah as “justice, mercy, and faithfulness.” Clearly there are many Christians who excel in matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. My own father was such a person. Though he held a fairly typical Christian view of the Torah, his life remains a high watermark of holiness for me. He was careful with his tongue and meticulous in his

financial dealings. He was kind to all, giving aid to the poor and the widows. He revered God in his daily living and took every opportunity to share the Gospel. And though he gave his life to serve others as a humble shepherd of souls, he never neglected his family. He was a faithful husband and a good father. In other words, his life exemplified the “weightier matters of the Torah,” and so have many Christians throughout the centuries.

I’m not diminishing the obvious fact that much of Christianity has neglected important biblical commandments such as the Sabbath and festivals. Nor am I discounting the dire consequences of such disobedience. But my point is that even though the general stance of the Christian Church is against Torah, in reality she has lived out much of it, even if she has done so under a different label. Therefore, the historical argument cannot properly claim that Christianity has summarily jettisoned the Torah when in reality she obeys many of its commandments.

Let Not Many of You Become Teachers

James gives a stern warning in his epistle (3:1): “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.” The stricter judgment for teachers is in relationship to their position of influence among God’s people. Let’s face it: the vast majority of Christians who reject the Torah do so on the basis of what they have been taught from the pulpit. This does not exempt anyone from the responsibility of personally studying the Scriptures in order to know and obey the truth. But in large measure, the responsibility for the rejection of the Torah by the Christian Church rests on the shoulders of her teachers. My experience has been that often, when Christians are given the opportunity to hear and see the Scriptural basis for Torah obedience, they respond with openness to the message. They do so, that is, until the pastor or teacher persuades them otherwise.

The same thing was happening in the days of Jeremiah. Shepherds of Israel were destroying and scattering the sheep of God’s pasture (12:10; 23:1–3) by neglecting what God had ordained, and giving a false message to the people. They were assuring the people of peace when there was no peace (6:14; 8:11). They were comforting the people, promising that no calamity was coming upon them (23:17), and giving them false assurance. But God’s judgment was already on its way. The only comfort Jeremiah himself could offer was that ultimately God would restore Israel and provide her with true shepherds: “Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding” (3:15).

So we must recognize that the long history of prejudice against the Torah within the Christian Church is the result of what her teachers have taught. While all who fail to obey what God has commanded will give account, it would seem that greater responsibility rests upon the shoulders of Christian teachers and leaders. The voice of Christianity that traditionally set the Torah aside is not that of the common person in the pew, but that of the leaders and teachers. Therefore, it is not quite accurate to say that “two thousand years of Christianity cannot be wrong.” The voice of history to which the historical argument appeals is actually the voice of the Church’s teachers, not the masses.

It Hasn’t Always Been This Way

It is well known that very early in the emerging Christian Church, the insidious doctrine of “replacement theology” became well entrenched in Christian theology.[3] In proclaiming herself as the “new Israel” that had replaced the divinely forsaken Israel of old, the Torah (by which Israel had essentially defined herself) was likewise “replaced” through “spiritualizing” it under the rubric of the “new covenant.” Yet though one can find plenty of disparaging remarks about the so-called “ceremonial” aspects of the Torah in historic Christian writings, it is only in modern times that Christianity has taught the total abandonment of the Torah. When we read the older confessions of faith produced by the Christian Church, we find much praise for the “law of God,” language most contemporary Christians would find unsettling. For instance, in The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 (Question 91), we read:

But what are good works? Only those which proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to his glory; and not such as are founded on our imaginations, or the institutions of men.

Likewise, Question 93 asks concerning the Ten Words:

How are these commandments divided? Into two tables; the first of which teaches us how we must behave towards God; the second, what duties we owe to our neighbour.

The Westminster Confession of 1646 clearly held that the “ceremonial” aspects of the Torah had been abolished (see section 19.3). But the Westminster Divines considered the “moral” laws of the Torah to be eternal and to be the righteous rule of life for Christians:

19.5. The moral law does forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither does Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.

And the Confession continues:

19.6. Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly...

19.7. Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requires to be done.

Surely the Christian Church very early adopted the first day of the week as the Christian Sabbath, forsaking the true Sabbath of the Torah. And while some groups abandoned the entire concept of Sabbath (see the Augsburg Confession of 1530, Article XXVIII), most affirmed the Sabbath principle even if they did so on the first day of the week (see the Westminster Confession, 21.7). Note well how the Westminster Confession speaks of the Sabbath principle:

21.8. This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

This Sabbath perspective was the norm in the vast majority of Christian denominations until more modern times. Even in early America, the “blue laws” which prohibited work and commerce on the Sabbath (meaning Sunday) were the established law of the New England Puritan colonies. Only following the American Revolution did these “Sabbath laws” begin to decline.

Indeed, the use of the Law for the Christian was universally received in all major denominations of Christian Churches before our modern times. Consider the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, chapter 19 entitled “The Law of God,” in which the use of the Law (Torah) by Christians is stated. After noting that the Law of God is of great use to Christians, the confession states:

The fact that a man does good and refrains from evil because the law encourages the former and deters from the latter, is no evidence that the man is under the law and not under grace.

In other words, the Law of God, the Torah, was viewed as encouraging the Christian to do good works and deterring him from sin. Moreover, a Christian who lived in accordance with the Law was not to be viewed as “under the law” but as living out the grace of God.

This section of the Baptist Confession ends with language closely resembling the Westminster Confession:

The aforementioned uses of the law of God do not run contrary to the grace of the gospel, but are most happily in line with it, for the Spirit of Christ subdues the will of man and enables it to do freely and with cheerfulness that which the will of God, as revealed in the law, requires to be done. (Chapter 19, §7).

What may we derive from these few historical examples? The reality is that modern Protestant Christianity hardly resembles historic Christianity when it comes to the use of the Torah. The disregard for the application and use of “the Law” in modern Christian denominations would have been labeled as heresy by the founders of the Protestant Reformation. So the claim that “two thousand years of Christianity cannot be wrong” is founded on a false premise, namely, that modern Christianity represents historic Christianity with regard to the place of the Torah in the life of the believer. It is not “two thousand years of Christianity” that can be brought forward as an argument against the Torah. The current wholesale despising of the Torah by mainline Christianity is rather a modern phenomenon that would have been rejected by many Christian Churches even 100 years ago.

The Patience of God

But the most significant problem with the historical argument is that it fails in its basic premise, namely, that since God has allowed the Christian Church to exist and grow over two millennia, He has therefore given His approval to her theology, and specifically to her perspective on the Torah. But does this logic follow? Does the existence of the Christian Church affirm God’s approval of her theology? Arguing from the other point of view, is it not just as possible that God is displaying His patience toward His erring children? Indeed, God’s patience is a demonstration of His grace, and it is God’s patience that leads to repentance.

Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? ([Romans 2:4](#))

But some might argue, would God be patient with the Church if she were disobedient for two thousand years?

But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. ([2Peter 3:8](#))

The record of Genesis records the wickedness of Lemach, and the generations that followed him. [Genesis 6:5](#) gives notice that “the wickedness of man was great on the earth.” Yet from the time of Lemach until God destroyed the earth with the flood, nearly eight hundred years had gone by.

Or consider the patience of God toward wayward Israel. Jeroboam’s reign, with all of his idolatry and sin, began in 931 BCE, and it is noted of the kings that followed him, that they “walked in the sins of Jeroboam.” Yet the northern kingdom lasted over 200 years before the Almighty allowed Israel’s enemies to take her into exile. He waited nearly 150 years more before He punished Judah in a similar fashion. And what are we to make of the

notice in Nehemiah 8, when the exiles realized, after reading the Torah (which they had neglected for generations), that they were to celebrate the festival of Sukkot?

The historian tells us:

The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing. (Nehemiah 8:17 )

Israel had, in one way or another, neglected the *mo'edim* since the days of Joshua, a span of nearly 1000 years! Yet in spite of their open disregard of the Torah, God did not entirely withhold His blessing from them. He gave her Judges through whom Israel experienced victory over her enemies. He sent her prophets and provided the nation with His inspired word. And even though eventually the disciplining hand of God took the people into exile, He guarded and sustained them in the land of their captivity, and even brought them back to the Land, making a way for them to rebuild the Temple.

Yeshua Himself taught that many religious people in the day of judgment will be surprised at the divine verdict ([Matthew 7:22–23 !\[\]\(d3fb9f94af8b26d1c844efa9a98805b0_img.jpg\)](#)). Having prophesied, cast out demons, and done miracles in the name of Yeshua, they will nevertheless hear the condemning words: “I never knew you, depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” In other words, the judgment against them for having lived contrary to the Torah does not come in their lifetime, but is reserved for the day of judgment. Apparently they reasoned that their religious practice, uninterrupted by the hand of God, was proof of God’s favor.

So it is fundamentally wrong to argue that the mere existence of the Christian Church through several millennia marks God’s approval of her variegated theologies. Until the rise of modern ecumenicalism, no Protestant denomination would have considered the unbroken chain of Papal authority in the Roman Catholic Church to be proof of God’s approval for that office. Yet by the mysterious providence of God, the Papal office has continued and grown in its influence from earliest times. Would any person of faith argue that the existence and growth of Islam from the 7th Century to the present proves its veracity? Surely not! On the basis of the same logic, then, it is a false premise to posit that the anti-Torah position of the Christian Church (in what ever form it might take) is proof of God’s approval simply on the basis that the Christian Church has existed for a very long time.

If we would know for certain what God approves and disapproves, our only sure measure is the word of God itself. History is a fickle standard, and thus no standard at all. Rather than presuming upon the patience and long-suffering of God, we should return to a diligent investigation of His enduring and unchanging word, and recognize that God’s patience leads to repentance. If we are to walk as He walked, then we must do so by the map of the Scriptures. We cannot use history as the litmus test of truth, for God has not commanded us to conform to history, but to the unchanging standard of His word.

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Works Cited

1. Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Magnes Press, 1988), p. 108.
2. On the issue of groups who maintained the seventh-day Sabbath in the Middle Ages, see Daniel Augsburger, “The Sabbath and the Lord’s Day During the Middle Ages” in Kenneth A. Strand, ed. *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Review and Herald Pub. Assoc., 1982), pp. 190–214; For the period of the Reformation, see Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony* (Ohio Univ. Press, 1983).
3. See, for instance, *The Epistle of Barnabas* 4.6–8; Justin Martyr, *Dialog with Trypho*, Ch. 11; Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.22.

