

Issues with "Divine Invitation Theology"

Part 1

Recently a new teaching has emerged in Messianic Judaism. "Divine Invitation Theology" has been defined as "other than" the so-called "One Law" position in Messianic Judaism. While we do not define ourselves by "One Law," "Divine Invitation," or any such name; here at Bereans Online, we will always question theologies that:

1. Diminish the Deity of Messiah Yeshua
2. Blur the distinctive standard of righteousness as defined by Scripture
3. Separate Jew and Gentile

This series will address some of the questions that "Divine Invitation Theology" raises.

Our goal in this series is not to single out any person, or organization. We cannot know motives, and to pretend that we can would be to engage in *lashon hara* [evil speech]. We will not engage in questioning the scholarship of those promoting differing views. We will not accuse others of being pro-Rabbinic, nor are we anti-Rabbinic (on the contrary, we find great value in extra-biblical Jewish texts and practice). We will not place ourselves in the position of seeming to have a superior revelation.

We are simple students of the Bible. We are Bereans.

We will not "name names" because our goal is only to answer some of the issues this new teaching raises. To that goal we are guided by:

Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

Acts 17:10-11

You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of HaShem your G-d which I command you.

Deuteronomy 4:2

Our bottom line is:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear G-d and keep His commandments, for this is man's all.

Ecclesiastes 12:13

Issue #1: This new teaching claims that Jews and Gentiles have different covenant obligations and different standards of righteousness.

This new teaching claims that Acts 15:20; 29; and 21:25 are the only standard of righteousness for Gentile believers (plus what they call the “moral and ethical” imperatives of the Torah). Using Acts 15 and 21 as proof-texts, this new teaching expresses a desire “not to go beyond the teaching of the Apostles” regarding Gentile covenant obligations. It teaches that when the issue of circumcision and full Torah observance were proposed by some Pharisees in Acts 15, the Apostles explicitly removed those (the commandment of circumcision and full Torah observance) as requirements for Gentile believers, but instead only imposed four dictates for Gentile believers. It teaches that the Apostles refused to lay any “greater burden” (ie. Torah observance) on believing Gentiles.

Key texts used by this new teaching:

And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Acts 15:1 NKJV

Now therefore, why do you test G-d by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

Acts 15:10 NKJV

Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to G-d, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.

Acts 15:29-20 NKJV

Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “You must be circumcised and keep the law”—to whom we gave no such commandment...

Acts 15:24 NKJV

But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

Acts 21:25 NKJV

If you can bear the L-rd’s full yoke, you will be perfect. But if you cannot, then do what you can. Now about food: undertake what you can. But keep strictly away from what is offered to idols, for that implies worshiping dead gods.

Didache 6:2-3

Bereans Online responds:

This new teaching falls into traditional Christianity's explanations for what is occurring in Acts 15. It tries to argue that the "yoke" mentioned in Acts 15:10 is the "burden of the Torah;" all the while speaking of the Torah in terms of blessing for those who will accept the "invitation" to this yoke. It cannot be both. Because it also argues that Torah observance is an "obligation" for Jewish believers, its use of Acts 15:10 is confusing. If, as it argues, the "yoke... *that neither our fathers nor we were able to bear*" is the Torah, it must of course deal with these passages:

*For this is the love of G-d, **that we keep His commandments.** And His commandments **are not burdensome.***

1John 5:3

*"For this commandment which I command you today is **not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off.** It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' **But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.***

Deuteronomy 30:11-14

*The Law of HaShem is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of HaShem is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of HaShem are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of HaShem is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of HaShem is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of HaShem are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. **Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward.***

Psalms 19:7-11

*All Scripture is given by inspiration of d, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, **for instruction in righteousness,** that the man of G-d may be complete, thoroughly equipped for **every good work.***

2Timothy 3:16

Clearly, the Torah is not a burden; and it was given for us **to do**.

How does this new teaching deal with these passages? As we will see later in issue #3, its definition of Torah observance is **not** simply "keep His commandments" – nor do the definitions of "Law" and "Torah" fit into the traditional enumeration of 613 commandments. It explains these by use of classical Christian definitions of "the commandments" (eg. "moral and ethical") when they speak of how they relate to believing Gentiles, and also by resorting to the Oral Torah.

While teaching that the four Acts 15 dictates are not “Noachide Laws” this new teaching does appear to accept the Noachide Laws as the standard for non-believing Gentiles. With regard to believing Gentiles, it takes a similar approach that modern-day Orthodox Judaism takes to “righteous Gentiles” by providing them an inferior standard of conduct, with the intent to keep Jew and Gentile separate. This is how the Noachide Laws are used in normative Judaism today. Gaining acceptance by other Judaisms is one of the “benefits” that this new teaching touts for its stand on Gentiles and the Torah.

It should be noted that the seven Noachide Laws are not found in any literature that is contemporary with the Apostolic Scriptures. In fact, the Noachide Laws are not mentioned until the time of the Tosefta (after 200 CE). They are not mentioned in the Targums, Mishna, Josephus, nor are they referenced by Philo. The Noachide Laws have always been used to separate Jews and Gentiles. This new teaching uses this same method in their analysis of Acts 15, which is in direct contradiction to the injunctions of Scripture.

From Acts 15 and Acts 21, the four prohibitions incumbent upon Gentiles who come to faith are:

1. Things polluted by idols
2. Sexual immorality
3. Things strangled
4. Blood

We find the same four categories of commandments in Ezekiel 33:

Then the word of HaShem came to me, saying: “Son of man, they who inhabit those ruins in the land of Israel are saying, ‘Abraham was only one, and he inherited the land. But we are many; the land has been given to us as a possession.’ “Therefore say to them, ‘Thus says HaShem G-d: “You eat meat with blood, you lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood. Should you then possess the land? You rely on your sword, you commit abominations, and you defile one another’s wives. Should you then possess the land?” ’

Ezekiel 33:23-26

Notice the sins that G-d identifies:

1. Practicing idolatry
2. Engaging in sexual immorality
3. Eating strangled meat
4. Shedding blood

Beloved, the accusation of Ezekiel 33 is not toward Gentiles, **it is leveled against Israel**. These are categories of HaShem’s holy and eternal standard. Each one of these is found in the Torah,

and like the Ten Commandments, provide categories for all the others. **The Apostles were not limiting the Gentiles to four specific and narrow edicts.** They were indeed providing the **starting point.** That is born out in Acts 15:21, which is the **purpose clause** for the four prohibitions:

*Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to G-d, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. **For** [gar = because] **Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.**"*

Acts 15:19-21

Verse 21 has no reason for being in this passage if it does not serve as the purpose clause for Acts 15:20. The four prohibitions are clearly the starting point for Gentile behavior after coming to faith. This new teaching insists that the Apostles are silent on the believing Gentile's obligation to the righteous standard of HaShem found in the Torah. An argument made solely from silence is always non-sequitur; but in any case: **no, the Apostles are not silent in regard to the Gentiles and the Torah.** If the Sabbath is a "Jewish identity" commandment as this new teaching insists, how would believing Gentiles hear "*Moses... being read... every Sabbath?*" This new teaching sees this as a vague "invitation" to Gentiles, while maintaining that the believing Jews in the synagogue would hear the same words and consider them an "obligation." This denies the purpose of the Torah itself (Deuteronomy 4:5-6: to reveal the righteousness and wisdom of HaShem to the nations).

This new teaching argues that in addition to the "four edicts" of Acts 15, the minimum standard of righteousness for believing Gentiles is obedience to the "moral and ethical" components of the Torah. This is the classical non-biblical division of the Torah. This is perhaps our most serious concern with this new teaching. By being careful not to define what it considers the "moral" commandments, it opens up the Scriptures to all manner of subjective interpretation and application. **To be clear, nowhere in Scripture are the instructions of the Almighty categorized as anything even remotely resembling "moral, ritual, and civil" as this new teaching purports.** This unbiblical classification comes from a doctrinal stand that seeks to divide the instructions of HaShem into "Jewish" and "Christian" mandates. This method of classification permitted early church fathers to declare those "Jewish" commandments as a curse upon "stiff-necked Israel" – where the Sabbath was called a burden and a curse upon Jews.

Post-Modern Christianity uses the Scriptures in much the same way as this new teaching, where what is "moral" is defined as what is best for the community. That is not the way the King of the Universe defines His righteous standard. Can we all admit that the Scriptures are quite clear and distinct in this passage?

*You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. **It is an abomination.***

Leviticus 18:22

Is this a “moral” commandment? Does this apply equally to believing Gentiles as well as Jews? Is this an “invitation”? Do both Jew and Gentile have an obligation to adhere to this righteous standard? Would it be a sin for a believing Gentile to engage in such activity?

If so, why not these words, which also use a word meaning “abomination”?

*Now HaShem spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, “Speak to the children of Israel, saying, ‘These are the animals which you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth: Among the animals, whatever divides the hoof, having cloven hooves and chewing the cud—that you may eat. Nevertheless these you shall not eat among those that chew the cud or those that have cloven hooves: the camel, because it chews the cud but does not have cloven hooves, is unclean to you; the rock hyrax, because it chews the cud but does not have cloven hooves, is unclean to you; the hare, because it chews the cud but does not have cloven hooves, is unclean to you; and the swine, though it divides the hoof, having cloven hooves, yet does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. Their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch. They are unclean to you. ‘These you may eat of all that are in the water: whatever in the water has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers—that you may eat. But all in the seas or in the rivers that do not have fins and scales, all that move in the water or any living thing which is in the water, they are an abomination to you. They shall be **an abomination** to you; you shall not eat their flesh, but you shall regard their carcasses as **an abomination**. Whatever in the water does not have fins or scales—that shall be **an abomination** to you.*

Leviticus 11:1-12

This new teaching suggests that the Apostles did not want to “burden” Gentile believers with Leviticus 11. When the believing Gentile is only obligated to keep the four edicts of Acts 15 plus the “moral” aspects of the Torah, it is the first step into moral anarchy – where as in the days of the Judges, “*each man did what was right in his own eyes,*” and each objection to such a perspective is met with the mocking, “**Has G-d truly said...?**”

We contend that if the Apostles had indeed advocated that believing Gentiles should not keep all the instructions of Scripture, that they were **false prophets. Not believing for a moment that such is the case**, we contend that the Apostles were providing a method to include Gentiles in the believing community’s practice – a starting place, where they could graciously learn the commandments of HaShem. This is the approach of a parent to an adopted child. The natural child already has learned the rules of the house. The adopted child is given an opportunity to learn them. Ask any parent that has both adoptive and natural children and they will tell you that in the end, a fair and wise parent will ensure that all their children are held to the **same standard**.

That “circumcision” can refer to the physical commandment of circumcision found in the Torah and also refer to the extra-biblical tradition of ritual conversion to Judaism is unfortunate. It is not impossible to deduce the different uses of the word in the Apostolic Scriptures, so it is disconcerting that this new teaching often reverts to the classical Christian interpretation that it refers to the physical commandment of circumcision. We would argue that except for the few places, such as in the Gospels, most often refers to the man-made tradition of ritual conversion to Judaism. Otherwise, such passages would make no sense:

*Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. **Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of G-d is what matters.***

1Corinthians 7:18-19

After all, circumcision *is* a commandment of G-d. On the other hand, ritual conversion, a man-made ritual, is not. Instead, this new teaching does not acknowledge the “ritual conversion” usage of the word – choosing to revert to the physical commandment of circumcision in Acts 15:1, against all historical and grammatical evidence to the contrary.

This new teaching uses the *Didache* as if it were Scripture to support its case. Interestingly, the real argument of Acts 15 was whether Gentiles should go through ritual conversion to Judaism (also known as “ritual circumcision”) to be considered a part of Israel. The answer is unequivocally, “no!” However, most scholars believe the first part of the *Didache* had its origins as a Jewish document on how circumcised converts to Judaism were to behave while they learned the Torah. Ignoring the fact that the *Didache* has no clear date, no clear authorship (multiple authors and later editing is evident), and some disturbing similarities to the anti-Semitic Epistle of Barnabas; this new teaching chooses to use the *Didache* as a proof-text for what it thinks the Apostles *meant* in Acts 15. Parts of the *Didache* finds their origins in a murky time of competing and faulty imitations and pseudographs that make its use as a supposedly authoritative text quite troubling. Truly, the *Didache* provides some interesting insights into origins of Second Century Christianity – but it has no authority in determining the practice or standard of righteousness for the believer.

Lastly, this new teaching chooses to present Acts 15:24; 21:25 in the King James Version (KJV) or New King James Version (NKJV). Although it is not our intent to call into question those otherwise excellent translations – this new teaching seems to use this version for a reason: The underlying Greek manuscript for the KJV and NKJV is the *Textus Receptus*, which has a much later origin than the manuscripts that comprise the earlier Majority Text. The *Textus Receptus* is the **only** Greek text that contains the phrases, “...*You must be circumcised and keep the law*”—to whom we gave no such commandment...” and “...*that they should observe no such thing, except...*” These phrases are not found at all in the vast majority of Greek manuscripts – **and are pivotal in supporting this new teaching’s view of the believing Gentile’s inferior covenant obligations**. The fact that they are not found in the vast majority of manuscripts, makes this passage all the more salient:

*And if a stranger [ger = not native-born] dwells with you, or whoever is among you throughout your generations, and would present an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to HaShem, just as you do, so shall he do. One ordinance [chok = suprarational commandment] shall be for you of the assembly and for the stranger who dwells with you, an ordinance [chok] forever throughout your generations; **as you are, so shall the stranger be** before HaShem. **One Torah** and **one custom** [mishpat = judgment] shall be for **you and for the stranger** who dwells with you.' "*

Numbers 15:14-16