

Gentile Christians And The Law

Commentary for May 1, 2023 — An Article By Dr. Ernest Martin, December 1976

One of the earliest decisions made by the apostolic church [*ekklesia*] concerned circumcision for the Gentiles. It became plain that Gentiles could be in covenant relationship with God without being circumcised. The apostle Paul made it clear that Gentiles could keep the essentials of God's law without observing circumcision, Sabbaths, holydays, or any ceremonial laws.

"For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts ..."

• **Romans 2:14**

This is a powerful scripture! It shows that people not given a revealed law can keep the essentials of law. In relation to this, recall this biblical principle: a keeper of the law is one reckoned to keep all of it, for if anyone offends in one part, he fails to keep all (James 2:10). Paul said Gentiles showed **"the work of the law written in their hearts."** They perform law BY NATURE. This means all the necessary parts of it. The truth came to Paul through Progressive Revelation.

The phrase **"BY NATURE"** in Romans 2:14 signified the natural state of man — without aid of spiritual knowledge. Paul shows this is the meaning. **"Uncircumcision ... is BY NATURE"** (Romans 2:27); the uncultivated olive tree **"is wild BY NATURE"** (Romans 11:24). Man and woman were made sexually compatible to one another, but man with man or woman with woman **"is against NATURE"** (Romans 1:16). The sons of Judah were **"Jews BY NATURE"** (Galatians 2:15).

These examples show that the words **"BY NATURE"** signify a natural state without supernatural involvement. In such condition the uncircumcised Gentiles (like wild olive trees, and not Jews BY NATURE) were able to keep God's law through **"the law written in their hearts."**

Look at the Sabbath as an example. The Sabbath was supernaturally revealed as a law written on tablets of stone. Could anyone through his own natural faculties come to the conclusion that every seventh day of the week (from sundown to sundown) should be a time when no work is done, and the day reserved for assembly and worship of God?

There is nothing in nature to suggest such a thing. While the year, month, and even the day are of natural significance and people by the millions have given heed to them variously, the seventh day of the week has no natural features associated with it. No human by nature would devise a special, religious significance to the day. If they had, why haven't the Chinese, Africans, Indians, Russians, Greeks, or Americans naturally come to see an essential holiness to it? Even the Israelites of old would never have arrived at any significance of the Sabbath, with all its precise requirements, by their own natures. Even they had to have the law written on tablets of stones for them to understand its relevance in their religious lives.

Paul knew about the supernatural meaning of the Sabbath for Israel under the Old Covenant, but despite this, Paul was finally able to see that the Gentiles were able to keep essential law BY NATURE even without the Sabbath. They did so by the law **“written in their hearts.”** Or, as Paul said to the Corinthian Gentiles **“Not in tablets of stone** [such as the Ten Commandments — which included the Sabbath], **but in fleshly tablets of the heart”** (2 Corinthians 3:3). Such an observance of the law written on the heart can be accomplished, according to Paul, by the direct agency of the Holy Spirit (verses 3, 6, 17). Thus, the Holy Spirit can stir up the conscience of any man who has law written on his heart. And God had revealed to Paul that this was now happening with the Gentiles.

How can Gentiles keep the important laws of God BY NATURE? One does not need commands engraved in stone to accomplish the task because all people have been graced with a measure of LOVE, if they will exercise it. The fulfilling of law involves the active expression of LOVE. Paul summed it up in Romans 13:8, 10: **“For he that loves another has fulfilled the law ... therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”** Anyone (Gentile or Jews) can know how to show respect, honor, and love to their fellow humans. And once the Holy Spirit sparks a person’s mind to understand the significance of Christ. He can turn that respect, honor, and love towards Christ and God the Father. ALL people have natural capacities for such virtues if they will but stir them up. Roman Christians were doing it — without circumcision and sabbaths.

Note this key point. The Roman Gentiles never kept circumcision, the Sabbath day, holydays, clean and unclean food laws, the wearing of phylacteries, or any Old Covenant requirements. And Paul never insisted upon these Old Covenant teachings in all his sixteen chapters to the Romans. Nor did he say it was necessary in any other letter to Gentiles under his jurisdiction. This is uncanny if these points were essential commands for them to observe. It is no use saying that the Roman Gentiles were simply keeping the Sabbath already, because nothing is more complex in its intricate requirements than Sabbath observance.

I tried to keep it twenty years and at the end I still asked myself “Is this allowable or not?” Half the time I was not sure — and most “Sabbath-keepers” (if they are honest) will admit to similar difficulties. One of the hardest things to know for new people who are just introduced to the Sabbath is to know what is allowed or not allowed on the day. Whole reams of published material have been prepared by Sabbath denominations telling their members what to do and what not to do. But significantly, Paul uttered not a syllable about it to his Gentile converts. He did say all days are alike (Romans 14:5–6), and it was not necessary to observe days in a scrupulous manner (Galatians 4:10) and that no one should judge any Christian about the Sabbaths (Colossians 2:16). But he said not one word about the need to keep it.

The point is, the observance of the law today can be done THROUGH NATURE if the reservoirs of love, respect, and honor within our consciences are only allowed a release. And especially when the Holy Spirit of God is mixed with those natural capabilities, one’s life can be graced (even transformed) with the inflowing of supernatural love — the love that really counts. Too many people still insist on mixing the Old Testament requirements with those of the final revelations of God. But only spirit and truth count now.