

5. The writer exhorted his readers to imitate the faith of those who led them, being fully assured that the Messiah they confessed is the same person their leaders had served with all faithfulness. Those leaders had found Jesus to be faithful and constant, as He bore good fruit from their faithful devotion to Him. Indeed, these Hebrews were *themselves* part of that good fruit, and they could expect the same fruitfulness in their own lives as they devoted themselves to the Lord who never changes.
- a. But precisely because Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, those who embrace Him must do so according to the truth of who He is, and then hold tightly to that truth, refusing any alteration of it or movement away from it. Binding oneself to “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” is the foundational discipline of a faithful life, and thus the epistle author pressed his readers with this obligation: “*Do not be carried away by varied and alien teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were thus occupied were not benefited*” (13:9).

The writer exhorted them to guard against diverse and foreign teachings that would lead them astray, and three things in particular are noteworthy here:

- 1) First, his grammar indicates that at least some of these Hebrews were being drawn in and influenced by these teachings.
- 2) Secondly, his clarifying statement that the heart is established and strengthened by grace rather than by foods indicates that these “alien” teachings were associated with Judaism and its practices (cf. 9:9-10).
- 3) Finally, his contrast between grace and foods underscores a key truth: *how a Christian perceives his relationship with God is fundamental to his perseverance in the faith*. Thus he was reminding his readers that their status as God’s covenant children was determined by their union with His Son, not their faithfulness to the obligations of the Law of Moses.

In context, then, these teachings pertained to the matter of one’s relationship with God and what it means to be faithful to Him. Some of it perhaps challenged Jesus’ legitimacy as Israel’s Messiah, but it seems the main thrust of this teaching was to encourage these Hebrews to rethink their faith in Jesus in the light of their Jewish heritage. From this vantage point, it’s easy to understand the readers’ vulnerability to such teachings, and why the writer pointed to the constancy of Jesus *the Messiah* to counter them. To the extent that these teachings reflected historical Judaism and its claims and practices, they weren’t at all strange or foreign to his Hebrew readers. Indeed, their familiarity is precisely what made them so appealing and effective. But Jewish doctrine and practice, to the extent that they conform to God’s *Torah*, testify of His Messiah (John 5:39), so that faithfulness to Torah now entails faithfulness to Jesus. The answer to those who called for concessions to Judaism is that the Messiah is ever the same, whether as promised in the past, triumphant in the present, or fully revealed in the future.

This is the specific circumstance the writer was speaking to, but his concern and instruction have broader significance for Christian life and witness. These Jewish Christians were wrestling with the arguments of their Jewish countrymen that departure from Judaism and Torah is departure from the Living God. But the same fundamental question of what defines Yahweh's covenant people and their faithfulness to Him was creating conflict *within* the Christian community as Gentiles were increasingly coming to faith in Jesus. *Whether pertaining to their relationship with Judaism or the Gentiles, the most fundamental question the early Christians had to address was the nature, extent, and outcome of Jesus' work as Messiah, and what this meant for Israel and the Gentile world.*

- Israel's scriptures are clear that Yahweh was going to send His Messiah to deliver and restore His covenant people Israel, but in order that they should fulfill their mission to the Gentiles (Genesis 12:1-3, 28:10-14).
- So the first Christians – who were Jews and Gentile proselytes to Judaism – understood that, if Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, then God has renewed His covenant relationship with Israel. But Israel's renewal through the Messiah meant the time had come for Yahweh to begin gathering in the nations, and Israel (the Abrahamic household) was God's chosen instrument in this work (cf. Isaiah 11:1-12, 49:1-13, 53:1-55:5; Jeremiah 3:1-17; Amos 9:11-15; Zechariah 2:1-13, 8:1-23, 9:9-10; etc.).
- Thus Jesus commissioned His disciples, and thus the early Jewish Christians commenced the Gentile mission (ref. Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:1-8, 8:1-14:28), *but without a clear understanding of how Gentiles who embraced Jesus as the Messiah fit into the restored covenant household.*

Even as the first Christians were Jews and proselytes, so the early Christian *ecclesia* was viewed as a movement within Judaism. And the believers themselves saw their community as the firstfruits of *Israel's* promised restoration through God's triumph in His Messiah. So both Israel's scriptures and the nation's history indicated that Gentiles could find a place in this renewed covenant community, but according to what criteria? *How was this new "Israel" to be delineated?*

This quandary came into focus in the early decades of the Christian movement and expressed itself in the "Judaizing" phenomenon in which some Jewish Christians were pressing Gentile believers to be circumcised and adopt practices prescribed by the Law of Moses. Paul addressed it in several of his letters, and it was the primary motivation for the Jerusalem Council recounted by Luke in Acts 15. The New Testament highlights the importance of this issue, but many fail to address it within its historical context.

- For centuries this Judaizing phenomenon has been widely understood in terms of a *law* versus *grace* dichotomy and the contention that Judaism is a religion of "works righteousness" that teaches "salvation by works."

- Thus the conclusion that these Jewish “agitators” (Galatians 1:7) demanded Gentile circumcision and compliance with the Mosaic Law because of their Judaistic conviction that a person’s salvation depends on his own good works, rather than God’s grace alone through faith in Jesus (ref. Acts 15:1-5; also Galatians 2:1-5, 5:1-11, 6:11-15; Philippians 3:2-3).

This understanding has predominated within Protestantism since the Reformation, but it betrays a lack of historical and salvation-historical consideration as well as a flawed perception of first-century (second temple) Judaism. Beyond that, it reflects a distorted conception of “salvation” and God’s saving work in Christ – specifically, the idea that personal salvation depends on possessing perfect “righteousness” defined as absolute conformity to a divinely imposed standard (moral, ethical and spiritual). In this scheme, a person can only be “saved” if he meets this standard himself or someone else meets it for him. Thus salvation is by “works,” but those of Jesus, not a person’s imperfect ones.

This perspective, then, becomes the lens for interpreting Jesus’ atoning work and its goal and outcome. But it also underlies the conclusion that the Jewish believers who insisted that Gentile converts “Judaize” were promoting the false doctrine of “salvation by works.” Selfish interest played a part in this Judaizing effort (Galatians 6:12), but the fundamental, legitimate concern was faithfulness to God.

*Indeed, the principle that drove the Judaizing phenomenon was one that God Himself established, namely that His people consist of the Abrahamic household – i.e., those, and only those, who are members of Abraham’s covenant family.*

- It wasn’t enough to be descended from Abraham; to be a covenant son, one had to bear the covenant sign of circumcision and adhere to the covenant *torah* (revealed truth and instruction) which later became codified in the Law of Moses (Genesis 17:1-14; Exodus 19:1-8, 24:1-8).
- Circumcision and Torah marked out the Abrahamic people as Yahweh’s covenant children, and the same was true of Gentiles. From the very beginning, covenant membership was open to non-Abrahamites, but only as they joined themselves to Abraham (and Israel) by circumcision and submission to Yahweh’s covenant prescription.

This had been the way God delineated His covenant people since the days of Abraham, and the “Judaizers” simply maintained that the coming of the Messiah hadn’t altered this. Yes, Jesus had renewed the covenant, but in order to restore the covenant household that God had established in Abraham (Luke 1:67-75). Indeed, Jesus Himself was circumcised, and He repeatedly confronted His detractors with the claim that He was fully faithful to the covenant Torah (cf. Matthew 5:17-20; Luke 24:44; John 5:1-47, 8:20-49, 9:1-10:38; etc.). *If Yahweh’s Messiah demonstrated His covenant sonship through circumcision and Torah, how could it be otherwise for His disciples, whether Jewish or Gentile?*

In fact, in a very real way, these Judaizing believers were right; Jesus never denied the foundational principles that God's covenant household is comprised solely of Abraham's covenant children, and that those children are marked out by circumcision and Torah. He upheld those long-standing truths, *but He also showed by His words and deeds that they had now attained their ultimacy in Him and needed to be interpreted and implemented in light of His person and work.*

- He is the true Seed of Abraham and ultimate referent of the covenant promises, so that all people, Jew and Gentile alike, become Abraham's covenant children and heirs by sharing in Him (Galatians 3:15-29).
- So these new children, like the covenant family that preceded Jesus, are delineated by circumcision and Torah, but as they are now "yes and amen" in Him (Romans 2:28-29, 3:21-31; cf. also Galatians 3:1-14).

Israel's very existence and life as Yahweh's covenant household was prophetic and preparatory, and reached its predetermined climax and fulfillment in Jesus' person and work. This is what He meant when He told His Israelite countrymen that He hadn't come to abrogate the Law and Prophets, but to *fulfill* them (Matthew 5:17). Jesus embodied Israel's life and destiny in Himself (ref. Isaiah 49:1-7), and this is why Paul could insist that God's promise to Abraham and his seed was ultimately to *one* Seed (Galatians 3:16). God determined to bind up in Abraham the entire destiny of the cursed creation, but with an eye to one particular descendent – the son He'd previously pledged to Eve (Genesis 3:15).

Jesus of Nazareth was born to fulfill all that God had disclosed, performed and promised since Eden, *and this included His covenant with Abraham and all that followed from it.* Jesus was an Israelite descendent of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, born under the Law of Moses and subject to it (cf. Luke 2; Galatians 4:4). He didn't disannul or supplant Israel or its covenant torah, but neither did He recover and reestablish them according to their former existence (as was the expectation of His Jewish countrymen and many contemporary Christians). Rather, He fulfilled both by *christifying* them – by transforming them in Himself. Jesus' *Church* is this transformed Israel, reconciled and related to God through the renewed covenant in His blood (Matthew 16:13-21; Colossians 1:18-20). As such, the Church has neither replaced Israel nor resuscitated it; it is the *resurrected* Abrahamic household consisting of Jews and Gentiles who have been raised to share in Jesus' resurrection life. It has its origin and foundation in Israel, but as Israel has become Israel *indeed* in the Messiah.

This dynamic of fulfillment and transformation in Christ is crucial to understanding the relationship between Israel and its covenant life and the renewed, ultimate "Israel" that God is forming in His Son. *That relationship is one of essential correspondence along with crucial distinction,* and both are key to the writer's assertion in verses 10-12 and the exhortations in verses 13-15.