



Lines in the Sand

by Tim Kelley

Just a few weeks ago I was talking with a couple of friends who were doing some work on my property and one of them asked the question “Well Tim, how did your feast go?” This is a common question that is asked among people who observe the festivals of God and who experience the joy of doing what God has commanded. Being that I knew that my friends observe these same festivals, though in a somewhat different way, I proceeded to say “Great, how about yours?” The one who asked went on to briefly state where he had attended it and some of the things they did. I replied by saying “That’s good!” then went on to state that we had about a 25% increase in attendance over the previous year and that it seemed that God was drawing His people out of the churches and leading them to the festivals. He then replied “Well that may be so, but the problem is that those people all believe in the Trinity!”

My thoughts immediately went to “what difference does that make”, but of course I knew that for this fellow, belief in a trinity indicated a serious flaw in a person’s understanding of God. “But”, I thought, “They do at least believe in God!” So I answered “Well, at least they’re keeping the festivals . . . isn’t that a good start?”

It’s interesting to think of the things we let divide us. No, actually, it’s sad! Churches divide over just about anything. There seems to be no tolerance within the body over issues that are mildly, or in some cases, totally irrelevant to the Godly walk. Many times we draw lines in the sand in regards to what a person must believe, or how he must walk, in order to be considered a “brother in Messiah”. Though we are all eager to evangelize, we are somewhat impatient when it comes to how quickly the proselyte comes to our point of view.

What does the scripture say in regards to what a person must believe before he’s accepted as one of God’s people? Are we to be so concerned about what a person believes, or is it more important that a person act on what he does believe? Are we to draw lines in the sand in places God never drew them? In the next few moments I want to address these questions.

At what point should we consider a person to be part of the “people of God”. What is the litmus test to determine if this group or that group is worthy of your fellowship. The answer varies with group and denomination.

Some groups and organizations set their “line in the sand” at the point you’re willing to agree to their “Statement of Beliefs”. A few months before this past year’s Feast of Tabernacles, I got an email from a “Hebrew Roots” organization that was asking if we wanted our Sukkot celebration listed on their web site. ‘Seems they were compiling a list of “approved” Sukkot celebrations for those who are on their mailing list. It sounded good to me, after all, everyone likes more exposure. So I read on. If we would send them our information and few notes and pictures about what we did during Sukkot, they would put us on their listing. So I began to fill out their form, but before clicking on the “Submit” button I noticed that by pressing that button, I was confirming that I agreed with their Statement of Beliefs. “Whoa!” I said to myself. I’d better read their statement of beliefs. So I read them from their web site and saw that, even though I agreed with much of what they taught, I didn’t agree with it all. I could not honestly agree that I agreed with their beliefs, so I exited out of the site and moved on.

Apparently, in order to be a part of what they are doing, a person has to agree with their theology. For other groups, it might not be a Statement of Beliefs, but a determination by a minister or a board of elders that you do or do not qualify to be a part of their organization. Other groups might welcome you into the fold after you have been faithful in paying tithes to the group for a certain period of time. These are all “lines in the sand” that stand between God’s people and fellowship with like-minded believers.

Lines in the Sand

When does God begin to consider a person to be “His People”? Does He wait for them to meet some level of belief or obedience? I don’t think so. The scripture seems to indicate that as long as a person is turning to Him and moving in His direction, God considers him, or them, to be “My People”.

The people of Ancient Israel are a good example. Ancient Israel came on the scene as a people, a nation, in the book of Exodus. When we first see them, they are slaves. They had little knowledge of YHVH, the god of their fathers – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but they knew there was a God, so they cried out for help. Notice what the scripture says –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 2:23** Now it happened in the process of time that the king of Egypt died. Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage.

We gain a little more insight into the details of what the Israelites were doing by looking at the Hebrew of this passage. In the Hebrew, the phrase “their cry came up to God” (שׁוֹעֲתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים) (transliterated *shaw atam el ha elohim*) can be translated “their cry for help went to the God”. In other words, they were crying out to the God of their fathers for deliverance. It wasn’t just any God, they cried out to the true God . . . a god that at that time, they knew little about. So YHVH raised up Moses and said to him -

^{ESV} **Exodus 3:7** . . . "I have surely seen the affliction of **my people** who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings . . ." (*emphasis mine*)

Keep in mind that at that time, Israel was not observing the Torah . . . in fact, they didn’t even know which day was the Sabbath. God spent fifty days, from the time of their deliverance till they got to Mount Sinai, teaching them about who He was, and it wasn’t till they got to Mount Sinai that he gave them the Ten Commandments. Yet, all during that time, He refers to them as “my people”. In fact, the term “my people” is found over 200 times in the Tanakh and it applies to Israel throughout their history. The only time God stops calling Israel “my people” is when they get so corrupt that He has to send them into exile.¹

Thus it seems that God is willing to count us as His people as long as we recognize Him as our God and are walking toward Him and not away from Him. So if God considers someone to a part of “His People” even though they, like ancient Israel, are totally new to the walk – but are on the path, and whose understanding of God is fresh - but growing, then would it stand to reason that we should also?

But what determines if a person is walking toward God? Is it what he believes, what he does, or a combination of both? I think it goes without saying that if someone is not at least attempting to follow His commandments and walk in his ways, it would be difficult to make a case that he is a part of the people of God, but let’s see what the scripture says.

In some of the last instructions Moses gave to Israel before his death, he summarized what God wants from us –

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 10:12-13** "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?"

From this passage we see that we are to 1) fear (stand in awe of) God, 2) walk in His ways – his paths, 3) love and serve him, and 4) keep His commandments . . . a rather short, but clear, list.

Later, during the times of the kings, God inspired the prophet Micah to once again tell both Israel and Judah what He expected from them. Micah’s statement is in many respects, the same as what Moses had said roughly 600 years earlier -

^{NKJ} **Micah 6:8** He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?

¹ See the book of Hosea

Lines in the Sand

How to “do justly” is defined in the Torah, to love mercy is displayed by a person’s love of God’s way – His Torah, which is filled with mercy, and to walk humbly is to refrain from making a show of your Torah observance.² Just as Moses showed 700 years earlier, God is pretty clear about what He expects from us.

Roughly seven hundred years after Micah wrote, God once again defined what “His people” would look like. In a vision to the Apostle John, he described who would be considered to be a part of God’s remnant –

^{ESV} **Revelation 12:17** Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus . . .

John’s description of God’s people is once again short and clear. They will observe and protect God’s commandments, and will possess and hold in high regard the witness of Yeshua – that is, they see that He is the much-prophesied Messiah of Israel.

To summarize these three verses we see that, throughout history, God’s expectation of us is that we walk humbly before him, keep his commandments, and realize that we’ve been redeemed by the blood of Messiah Yeshua. Notice that God never mentions in His list of what He expects from His people that they subscribe to a certain belief system (other than, of course, that we “believe” [a term we’ll investigate later] that Yeshua is Messiah). He seems to be more concerned about what we do with what we know . . . that is, our observance of His law as He has revealed it to us.

So does that mean that if a person is not keeping the commandments, he’s not part of God’s people. Yes, I believe that would be the case, but there’s a problem. Whose job is it to determine whether or not a person is indeed “keeping the commandments”? Is a person who is new to this walk, and has little knowledge about the commandments “keeping the commandments”? I think we would all agree that each of us is responsible for what we do with what we know. James seems to make that clear –

^{ESV} **James 4:17** So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

We don’t know what all God has revealed to an individual. Many Christians observe a day of rest the best way they know, but unfortunately for most, they’ve been deceived into thinking that the Sabbath is Sunday. Does that make them bad, or are they merely blind? If they’ve truly been deceived (like most of us were at one time), then it’s God’s job to open their eyes, not ours. On the other hand, there are “Torah observant” people that are observing the festivals based on different calendars, on different days, and in different ways. There are even people who believe the Sabbath begins at different times – some at sundown, and others at daybreak. Face it - some of us are doing it right, some of us are doing it wrong . . . or maybe all of us are doing it wrong! Are some of us God’s people and some of us not? Has God cast us out of the body simply because we see things differently in regards to the Sabbath? We can be thankful that God is willing to forgive us for both our intentional sins (which is what James is describing) and our un-intentional sins . . . our sins of ignorance.³

What about our beliefs . . . things that are not really clear in scripture, things like “who did Seth marry”, the nature of God, angels mating with humans, three days and three nights, and many more. Does God differentiate between a person who believes one thing one way and another person who sees the same thing another way? To answer that question, let’s first understand the word “believe”.

The Hebrew word for “believe” is the word “aman” (אָמַן - Strong’s 539). It’s a root word that means “to prop up, support, lean on, be firm”. In other words, at least in regards to the Tnakh, to believe something meant that you had something firm to grab hold of and trust in. Take, for instance, the letters that make up the word “aman” – aleph, mem, nun. Their pictographic meanings are: strong, water, and life. These words remind me of the oceans – strong waters that bring for life . . . fish. In many countries and cultures,

² See the article “Modesty for Messianics” on the Ami Yisrael.org web site - http://www.amiyisrael.org/articles/Modesty_for_Messianics.htm

³ Numbers 15

Lines in the Sand

the major food source is fish, and most of it comes from the oceans. The oceans have been teeming with fish since the beginning, and can always be counted on, can be trusted, to provide food.

Thus, if God told someone in the Old Testament to “believe” something, then that “something” would have been accompanied by clear evidence, possibly signs and/or miracles. Take, for instance, the case of Moses being sent to deliver Israel.

When Moses was told to tell the Israelites that God had sent him to deliver them, Moses answered saying that the people would not believe (*aman*) that God had sent him. So to help their unbelief, God gave Moses a sign that he could show the people, something they could actually see, that would convince them.

^{ESV} **Exodus 4:1** Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe (Hebrew - *aman*) me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The LORD did not appear to you.'" ² The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." ³ And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. ⁴ But the LORD said to Moses, "Put out your hand and catch it by the tail"- so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand- ⁵ **that they may believe** (Hebrew - *aman*) that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."

God didn't expect them to believe just because Moses said so, He gave Moses solid, firm evidence so that the people would believe . . . and not just believe, but act on what they were now sure of.

I've search all through the Tnakh and have yet to find one place where God tells us to believe something about Him or about anything for that matter, where He has not provided clear solid evidence. The same is true in the New Testament. Yeshua began His ministry by turning water into wine. He never asked anyone to believe that He could do it, He just did it, but from that point His fame grew to where His disciples were able to believe that He was indeed the promised messiah.

^{ESV} **John 2:11** This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

Yeshua lead a life of fulfillment of Bible prophecy. His actions and His words were part of the concrete evidence, the “belief package” you might say, that He provided to His followers. But the miracle after miracle that was performed by Yeshua, which caused His fame to snowball throughout His ministry, helped His disciples to believe (*pisteuo* – *Strong's 4100* – *be persuaded of, have confidence*) that He was indeed the Messiah of Israel and be willing to testify of that fact, even to the point of death.

^{ESV} **John 14:11** Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works (signs) themselves.

So neither YHVH nor Yeshua expected people to believe something that They had not convinced them of through signs or miracles. God also expects us to believe, not simply because we've been told, but because we have access to the prophecies and the testimonies of men who were willing to sacrifice their lives in support of what they had witnessed.

^{NKJ} **John 17:20** " I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word;

^{ESV} **John 20:29** Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Just as we believe that George Washington existed based on what was written about him - even though we never saw him with our own eyes, we can believe in Yeshua because of what was written about Him, and comparing it to the myriad of prophecies about the coming messiah.

Lines in the Sand

But, after reading all the things that He said, you'll notice that Yeshua never told us that we had to believe anything about His relationship to His father, He simply told us what it was.⁴

So, since God never told us to believe – i.e. place confidence in or lean upon – something that He had not clearly shown us about Himself, then why do we get upset when someone doesn't believe the same thing about Him as we do. Why have we got this "line in the sand" in regards to the relationship between God and Yeshua that God didn't place there? And what's more, why are we willing to break fellowship because of it?

Are there lines in the sand that God has established? Yes indeed! There are numerous places in the Torah when God has placed lines in the sand in regards to a person's behavior, but never in regards to what a person believes. Exodus 21 and 22 is full of "if's" in regards to wrong behavior that if a person crosses that line, that person is to be separated from the camp of Israel.

Deuteronomy 13 shows that YHVH has also drawn a line in the sand in regard to false prophets and teachers, but only if that false prophet is trying to convince you that either 1) you should begin to follow a god other than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or that 2) you should, or are allowed to turn from the Torah based way in which He has commanded us to walk. Thus, if that teacher is trying to convince you that, say – you should eat rabbinical kosher, God gives no authority to kick him out of the camp. We can pity him, but we can't kick him out of the camp. In fact, that teacher might have other things to say that are of value – things we can benefit from.

Another line in the sand that YHVH has established is in regards to our attitude toward the priests and judges. Deuteronomy 17, beginning in verse 8, talks about what to do when brothers have disagreements and decide to go to the judges for a resolution. God says that the judge's decision is final in these cases, and that if one of the parties refuses to follow the decision of the judge, he must be put out of the camp. Obviously, this is intended to keep peace within the camp. But notice – the judge cannot make a decision on a case that has not been brought to him, and his decisions did not become case law. Each decision had to stand on its own.

So how should we deal with people who come into the fellowship, who see things differently from the way we do? How do we keep PEACE in the camp? Are we to jump down their throat with "don't you know . . . ?" or "if you study the scripture you'll see that . . ." No, not at all! Instead we can follow some of the examples we see in the New Testament, a time when many people were (re-)turning to the worship of the God of Israel and were new to the walk. The apostles were facing these situations all the time.

One of the most popular examples of how to work with people who are new to the walk or who see things differently is to turn them to the Torah. This is illustrated quite clearly in Acts 15.

NKJ Acts 15:19-21 ¹⁹ "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble (*cause trouble or annoy*) those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ "but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood. ²¹ "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

If we turn people to the Torah, many of the differences will dissolve; and like what James said, there's no need to get them annoyed or frustrated because they see things differently. It's called "having patience with your brother".

Paul talks about this in the 14th chapter of Romans where he addresses a congregation of Jews and non-Jews, many of which are turning to the way and apparently bringing a lot of baggage with them. Did Paul instruct the "strong" to trample on the "weak"? No! Instead, he instructed the strong to accommodate the weak if possible in order to avoid offense and to maintain peace in the congregation.

ESV Romans 14:13-15 ¹³ Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴ I know and

⁴ John 10:23 - 38

Lines in the Sand

am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean (common⁵) in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

According to Paul, it's often futile to try to convince your brother that he's wrong in regards to His belief, so the best thing to do is accommodate him as much as practical so as to not lose him. It's so important to maintain the fellowship so that over time, the proper understanding will become known.

Paul believed that the Messiah would return in his day, and that he was witnessing the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy – that God would draw the exiles of Ephraim and Judah back together and make them one stick in His hand. Paul knew that his Jewish brothers did not have all the answers, otherwise the majority would not have denied Messiah, but on the other hand, he knew that Ephraim – the gentiles of his day – didn't have all the answers either. Thus, his greatest challenge was bringing these two peoples back together and leading them into the walk God had ordained 1400 years earlier at Mount Sinai.

I too hope we're in the last days. I pray daily that Yeshua will come and restore the kingdom in my lifetime. But if He does, prophecy shows that it will be preceded by a return of the remnant of Israel. Many churches, groups, and individuals have drawn lines in the sand that will prohibit the integration of, and impede the growth of many God is calling into the community of Israel. Are we going to accommodate those God has called - that remnant of Israel - if they show up at our door, or are we going to offend them and drive them away because they don't see things the way we do? As long as we avoid the tendency to draw lines in the sand where God has not drawn them, I think we'll be OK.

Shalom Alecheim

⁵ According to Jewish tradition “common” food was (and is) biblically clean food that was not killed a specific way, may not have been tithed on, or had not been subjected to various points of “oral” law.