

Outline

1. Conflict arises
 1. Men from Judea arrive teaching circumcision
 2. Paul & Barnabus dispute their teaching
 3. Delegation is sent to Jerusalem to inquire
 4. They take an overland route and spread news of the Gentiles' conversion to all of the churches along the way
2. Meeting in Jerusalem
 1. Paul & Barnabus recount what God had done with them on the first missionary journey
 2. Former Pharisees now affirm the necessity of conversion to Judaism
 3. Peter recounts his role in Cornelius' conversion
 1. He does not refer to Cornelius as a proselyte or as having converted to Judaism.
 2. He does affirm that he was accepted by God with "no distinction between us and them" (Acts 15:9)
 3. He points out that the Jews had never kept the law perfectly
 4. Paul & Barnabus recount the miracles performed among the Gentiles
 5. James provides statements from the prophets and suggests a solution
3. Decision
 1. Send Barsabas and Silas along with Paul & Barnabus
 2. Send a letter
 1. Disavowing the teaching in dispute
 2. Abstain from things offered to idols, partaking of blood, things strangled, and fornication
4. Reception in Antioch
 1. Rejoicing over encouragement
 2. Barsabas and Silas further exhorted them
 3. Silas remains behind and continues teaching with Paul, Barnabus, and "many others"

Commentary

This incident provides a foreshadow of what becomes a major question confronting the Church in the first century: “What is the nature of Christianity?” Is it something of itself or is a sect of Judaism? Paul will spend a significant portion of his writings dealing with this question.

We should be careful in thinking that the brethren in Antioch were asking the church in Jerusalem to make some kind of decision for the Church as a whole. There was not a need to do so. The brethren in Antioch already had in Paul an apostle in their midst. What need there was for an authoritative voice, speaking on behalf of God, would have been met by him.

It seems to me that the major cause of the trip to Jerusalem is found mentioned in the first sentence of the reply sent by their letter, when the apostles, elders, and brethren say: “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). This was a question about what these men were teaching and if such was what they had actually been sent to say.

This would also call into question whether there was a split in apostolic teaching. Sid Latham suggests that “The reason they went up to Jerusalem was that it appeared that apostolic authority was divided. Paul was saying one thing and those from Jerusalem were saying another. Surely they claimed that their message was in harmony with the sentiments of the apostles in Jerusalem. This had to be resolved” (Latham, 159). Fortunately, when the answer is eventually given, we see that all of the apostles (those in Jerusalem and Paul from outside) were in harmony.

Peter follows a contentious debate (Acts 15:7) with his statement regarding the conversion of Cornelius (whom he does not name). Given that the events in Acts 10 occur at Cornelius’ home in Caesaria, it is likely that he is not (and probably has never been) associated with

the church in Jerusalem. But, Peter has already defended that conversion as being the will of God. It is no great stretch to go from Cornelius as a lone case to the greater numbers converted by Paul.

Sid Latham makes an important point concerning the phrasing used by Peter when talking about how all are saved by grace: “The Pharisees argued that the Gentiles must be saved like Jews. Peter responds that the Jews ‘are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they [the Gentiles] also are’ (Acts 15:11). In other words, it is not the Jewish model that is normative for the Gentiles, but the Gentile model that is normative for the Jews!’ (Latham, 152).

Peter ends his statement by reminding all present that they were in need of salvation because they were unable to keep the law which some were now desirous of press upon the Gentiles. He refers to this adding to what God had revealed as a test of God (Acts 15:10).

James cannot be the apostle James (who was put to death in Acts 12:2). Most scholars believe this to be the brother of Jesus. His role is to point out that salvation is extended to the Gentiles according to prophesy (Amos 9:11-12). In this, he appears to follow a version of Amos found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Longenecker notes:

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But while the text of Amos 9:11-12 differs from the MT in meaning and the LXX in form, “it is exactly identical with that of 4QFlor,” as de Waard has shown. And it is not too difficult to visualize James as using a Hebrew variant of Amos 9:11-12 then current, as incorporated in 4QFlorilegium 1.12, in arguing his point with the scrupulous Jewish Christians in the council—particularly if among those most concerned for Jewish legalities were some drawn from an Essene background (cf. comments on 6:7). (Gaebelein, 9447, internal citations omitted).

The things James suggests should be prohibited (and which are contained in the resulting

letter) are things which are indicative of things of particular concern to the Gentiles (eating things offered to idols and fornication) or which were prohibited by God to all (things strangled and blood) back in the days of Noah. As Latham notes:

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Finally we will deal with the last two commands simultaneously. They are to abstain from things strangled and from blood. The reason that things strangled are prohibited is because the blood has not been drained from a strangled animal. Again this prohibition is almost certainly rooted in idolatrous practice. It should be noted that the required abstinence from blood and food containing blood transcends the Law of Moses. This requirement was first given to Noah and his descendents (Gen. 9:4-6). It is therefore universal in scope. I am surprised that many Christians seem to dismiss this as unimportant. We of all people should be aware that the life is in the blood. This reality is behind our very salvation. To dismiss it or take it lightly is to dismiss the fact that we live because His blood was shed. (Latham, 157).

Once the letter was sent by the hand of Paul, Barnabus, Barsabas, and Silas, and their encouragement was received, the brethren from Jerusalem are sent back with the blessings of the church in Antioch. Some versions (KJV/NJKV, ASV/NASV) state that Silas remains in Antioch, while Acts 15:34 is omitted from others (ESV, NIV). It is thought by many that verse 34 is a late addition intended to set-up and explain Paul's decision to take Silas on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:40).

Thought Questions

Please consider the following thought questions:

1. What is the relationship of Judaism to Christianity?
2. What was the purpose of emphasizing the “need” to be circumcised by the Judaizing

teachers in the first century?

3. Is there any importance attached to the change in order of the parties (apostles, elders, church/brethren) in verses 4 and 23?
4. What are the key points of the decision(s) made?
5. Why would the Gentile Christians find the letter encouraging?