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THE TWO WAYS OF THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

CHAPTER 5

ENTER PAUL AND THE GENTILES

"But the Lord said unto him, 'Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.....'" Acts 9:15

Jesus Christ said after His resurrection, "All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth."

(Matt.28:18). The book of Acts tells us, in part, how Jesus Christ chose to exercise that power. The first seven chapters of Acts indicate that the reign of Jesus Christ began in a far greater way than is commonly taught or perceived. Three thousand believed the first day of the church. Five thousand men believed after the lame man was healed. Multitudes here and multitudes there believed. A great company of priests believed. We are left to fill in the picture of just how extensive the church was and how fast it grew.

The writer of Acts, Luke, ends his former work, the Gospel of Luke, with the account of Jesus saying to the apostles, to the men Jesus talked with on the road to Emmaus, and to all the others that were gathered together with them (Luke 24:9-33), that He would send the promise of the Father upon them and they would be endued with power from on high (Luke 24:49). Luke 24:47 gives us Jesus Christ's stated purpose in doing what He said He was going to do. The purpose is that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." Although the first seven chapters of Acts deal with events only in Jerusalem, the first six years of the Christian church certainly included "repentance and remission of sins" being preached in the name of Jesus Christ among all nations. It is hard to imagine that the message could have been contained in Jerusalem for so long a period of time.

Most of the Jews and proselytes, gathered for the feast of Pentecost on the first day of the church age, went home after the feast was over, and we can only conclude that many of them preached "repentance and remission of sins" in Jesus name when they arrived home as well as along the way home.

No greater vehicle for spreading the "good news" could have been in place in the world than the Jewish feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles together with the requirement that every Jewish male over thirteen years of age attend these feasts. It is likely that the world has never seen such a systematic gathering of people from all over the world since the Temple was destroyed by Titus in 70 A.D.. Certainly, large crowds have gathered from time to time in the world, but it is doubtful if the world has seen such a systematic gathering, three times a year, for forty years, as was in place in Jerusalem for the first forty years of the church age.

Even in today's world of telephones, television, radio, computers, the "information explosion" and the rest of the "fast travel" devices at our disposal today, the spreading of such revolutionary truth as was spread in the first century could hardly be matched today. None will deny that the best and most convincing testimony comes from "friends and neighbors" rather than from books, newspapers, or strangers. The revolutionary truth that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead and made available "repentance and remission of sins" to all mankind was carried throughout the world by people who had been changed by its reality.

It seems impossible to overestimate the effect of such a massive witness to the truth. Picturing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Christians going back and forth from their homes to Jerusalem, three times a year for forty years, is a back drop for the book of Acts that cannot be ignored. It causes the book of Acts to be seen not as a comprehensive summary of the first century church (certainly a book larger than Josephus' record of the unbelieving world at that time would be required for such a purpose) but as a record with a specific purpose in mind. Endeavoring to determine that purpose is what this book is all about.

At the risk of doing injustice to the "fast travel" of the "good news" in the first century, allow me to draw the analogy of the state of affairs in America in the late sixties and early seventies of this century. There may have been other times in the past two thousand years of a similar nature, but I do not know of them. I am familiar with the spreading of the Gospel in the late sixties and early seventies for I was young then and a part of the "Jesus Revolution". The dissatisfaction among young people of the time was apparent with Vietnam protesters and the "Hippie" movement. Among this culture (and among the not so visible "normal" population) a convincing case was made that the bible was the Word of God after all. Those who were revolutionized by its study and application were likely to show up thousands of miles away in a short period of time telling their friends the "good news" they had learned. Homes were opened to bible study and from coast to coast and from Mexico to Alaska young people would hitch hike with no money in their pockets but a swelling heart to make up for it.

The particular group I was involved with was only a part of the "Jesus Revolution". But, as was typical of the time, a feature article appeared in Life Magazine entitled, "The Groovy Christians of Rye, New York" and showed pictures of long haired young people sitting in a room studying their bibles. The article reported the comments of some parents who said they could understand "dope" but this was spooky. Interest in the bible seemed to grow everywhere. From teaching the bible in a bowling alley in Long Island to the basement of a catholic monastery in Cleveland, to the homes of the very rich to those of the very poor, I traveled the country. For me, it was an electrifying time of great discovery and of establishing friendships with thousands of Christians all over the country. Only the Lord knows how many other people were doing the same kind of thing that I was doing.

That was twenty years ago, but the effects of the "Jesus Revolution" are still seen today. Jesus Christ is more popular than He ever was. Speaking in tongues is regularly discussed and practiced. The Christian school movement gains momentum every year and has in fact been described as a "time bomb" as more and more children are brought up in Christian schools and then take their place in the adult world. Even the predominantly protestant "Moral Majority" and the predominantly Catholic "Right To Life" groups found common cause over the issue of abortion and immorality in general. The "Beetles" claimed to be more popular than Jesus Christ when they started and maybe they were. They certainly were not by the time they finished. Even Bobby Dylan sings Christian songs today.

Certainly no group can take credit for such a wide spread and pervasive moving of the spirit of God in the past twenty years. The Christian must conclude that Jesus Christ was at the center of it, causing the various parts of the body of Christ to have effect in miraculous ways. We cannot help but think that the "Jesus Revolution" of the 60's and 70's, as far reaching as it was, had little impact compared to the "Jesus Revolution" of the first forty years of the Christian church. Whatever part the individuals named in the New Testament played must have been very small in comparison to the overall work accomplished by Jesus Christ through the millions of Christians of the time. Nations were changed and western civilization became centered in Christianity. We mean no disrespect to the Apostle Paul when we say that there must have been many, many "Apostle Paul's" around the world doing the same things that Paul did. Christianity is preeminently "Pauline" only because Jesus Christ was Paul's Master. That reality does not take away from Paul. It adds to the comprehension of the preeminence of Jesus Christ.

We have seen from Acts 8:1 that the Jerusalem Christians were "all scattered" after the death of Stephen and although it is inconceivable to me that in exercising the "all power" of Matt. 28:18, Jesus Christ would allow His followers to be "all scattered", it is a fact that He did allow it. We are told that Stephen saw Jesus Christ standing on the right hand of God in Acts 7:55. He surely could have prevented the

scattering, but did not. The scene of Acts then moves from Jerusalem to the work being done among those scattered (Acts 8). Then it moves to one of the "scatterers", Paul, and we are told that Jesus Christ personally appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus.

This is the first account in Acts of Jesus Christ appearing anywhere on earth after His Ascension. As with all "first events", it is filled with significance. I do not imply that Jesus Christ could not have appeared anywhere else previously, only that Luke first mentions the fact that He did appear on earth in Acts 9. Luke does not present Jesus Christ as appearing in the Temple to take over as High Priest. Many people had expected him to do just that. Instead, He appears on the road to Damascus and He chooses to appear to a Jew who is actively persecuting the church. It is as if Jesus Christ has allowed Himself to be "scattered" with the rest of those in Acts 8:1 and wants to demonstrate just how effectively He can work in spite of the persecution emanating from Jerusalem. The man that Jesus Christ appears to is named Saul in Hebrew, Paul in Greek.

Some Background on Paul

In Paul, Jesus Christ calls a man with seemingly the worst set of credentials possible. Paul persecuted the church and destroyed believers. He gave his consent to the stoning of Stephen, and was more than likely one of the instigators that caused Stephen's death. Although some say that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, it is highly unlikely that he was, for Acts 7:58 says he was a "young man" and the Sanhedrin members were usually elders and were the wealthy men from the twelve tribes.

Probably the most persuasive argument against Paul being a member of the Sanhedrin is Paul's omission of the fact in his list of credentials in Philippians 3:5-6. If he had been a member, surely Paul would not have omitted it from his list of things whereby he could trust in the flesh if he had chosen to. Also, it is unlikely that a member of the Sanhedrin would have been doing what Paul was doing in going from house to house and from synagogue to synagogue, taking Christians to prison (Acts 8:3, 22:19). Presumably, a Sanhedrin member would have had other people doing that kind of work for him.

In all probability, Paul would have been a member of the synagogue of Cilicia- mentioned in Acts 6:9- since his home town was Tarsus. Since he obtained letters from the High Priest (Acts 9:2) and since he studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), he would have been recognized by the Sanhedrin as a "promising young man". Paul mentions in Acts 22:5 that the High Priest and "all the estate of the elders" would bear him witness, which shows a familiarity with them all.

From Paul's statement (and the setting about twenty years later in which he gave it in Acts 23:3) that he "taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day," we see both Paul's misdirected zeal before his conversion and the misdirected zeal of those still in Jerusalem twenty years later. After Paul's conversion in Acts 9, the book of Acts shows us that Jesus Christ had something far different in mind for Paul to do than to persecute Christians.

Regarding Paul's being a member of the synagogue of Cilicia, it should be pointed out that about 63 B.C., Pompey carried a large number of Jews to Rome. When they were liberated and many returned to Judea, they formed the synagogue of the Libertines, or Freedmen. It seems from the listings in Acts 6:9 that the synagogues represented geographical interests. The Libertines, or Freedmen, would probably have been tied to the Jews in Rome, the synagogue of Cilicia to the Jews of Tarsus, and so on. If so, they would have had Saducees, Pharisees, Hebrews, Grecians, and others in each of them, much like we have a broad cross-section of people in most churches today.

Undoubtedly there were hundreds of synagogues in Jerusalem at the time, but the four listed in Acts 6:9 are singled out as the ones that were not able to withstand the wisdom and spirit by which Stephen spoke. This "wisdom and spirit" was a threat to the leaders of these synagogues. It seems that they were in danger of losing control over their members. And so Stephen was accused on false charges, put on trial, and stoned before the trial was completed.

Paul was evidently one of the leaders in the synagogue of Cilicia. From Galatians 1:14, we learn that he

profited in the Jews religion above many of his equals, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of the fathers. From Acts 26:5 we learn that Paul lived from his youth in Jerusalem according to the strictest sect of the Jews religion- a Pharisee. He was born in Tarsus.

From the evidence that Paul gives of himself before his conversion, it becomes apparent that the "wisdom and spirit" by which Stephen spoke was powerful indeed. If Paul was a leader of the synagogue of Cilicia and even he was not able to withstand the testimony of Stephen, that testimony must have been powerful indeed.

Paul, and others like him, had certainly been developing their defenses and arguments against Christ for a long time. Perhaps six years. And yet, the fact that they could not prevail by "fighting fair" points to the conclusion that they were in the minority in Jerusalem at the time of Stephen's death. Or, if they were in the majority, that majority seems likely to have been maintained by deception and trickery rather than reason. The message of Jesus Christ was apparently accepted as more reasonable. It is doubtful that a Pharisee, such as Paul, would have stooped to deception and trickery to defeat Christianity, although hate and murder is not difficult to understand in Paul, and those like him, since their whole system of thought and training were threatened. I leave it to the reader to decide if these opinions on the nature of "scholars" are reasonable.

In Philippians 3:4-6, Paul says, "If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee, concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless."

But all these things (background, accomplishments, heritage) he counted as nothing after he found Christ or rather was found by Christ. After his conversion, he certainly was the most outspoken advocate of the new nature, the nature of trusting in God, the nature of "no condemnation in Christ Jesus our Lord" (see Rom. 8:1-39). Paul was also the most outspoken person concerning the total uselessness of the old nature, that nature that wars against the spirit and leads men and women into bondage (see Rom. 10:1-4).

In Paul, God calls a man of entirely different character than Peter. Peter was a rural fisherman. Paul was an urban scholar. Peter was born and raised in Israel and his native language was undoubtedly Aramaic. Paul was born and raised in Cilicia and his native language was most likely Greek (although, as a Pharisee, it might also have been Aramaic). Both men demonstrated the power of God in a mighty way. Peter's strength and determination are matched by Paul's tenacity. And, Paul's great heart would be spoken against by many in the church down through the ages just as Peter's has been. Neither deserve the erroneous picture of them that has come down to us.

To many Christians, the events that come first to mind when thinking about Peter are his doubting when he walked on water, his denial after Jesus was arrested, or his dwelling with Simon the tanner in Joppa. In the first case, he is pictured as weak because he began to sink. The correct picture of him will show that he is probably the only man to ever walk on water besides Jesus Christ. Such strength of character and trust in Jesus Christ should not be made light of simply because Peter began to sink. And, Jesus Christ did rescue him.

In the second case, Peter is pictured as a man full of fear. But, the correct picture will show that the same evening that Peter denied Jesus, he defended Him by cutting off the ear of one of those who came to arrest Jesus (Jn. 18:10). Considering the odds, his was a brave act indeed. Also, no one dared to follow Jesus to the High Priest's house except Peter. These were acts of a very brave man, not a coward. That his courage failed him is not a discredit to Peter at all. It merely shows the inability of the best of men.

In the third case, Peter is pictured as a man who was hiding out and not fulfilling his ministry by being in Joppa. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is absolutely no evidence that he was anywhere other than where God wanted him to be. The correct picture will show that, by Peter, the whole nation of Israel was forced to admit that the Gentiles had received the same gift of holy spirit as had the Jews. Peter had six witnesses with him and reported to the extensive Christian community in Jerusalem that Cornelius

and his household had all spoken in tongues.

As with Peter, so with Paul. Some Christians today think that Paul was blind or had bad eyes. Some think that he was ugly. Some think he was a homosexual. We will see that many thousands of Christians in Jerusalem wanted to kill him. But, all the distortions and hateful accusations against Paul fly in the face of Jesus Christ appearing to him on the road to Damascus and selecting Paul as a "chosen vessel". Of all the millions of "vessels" that Jesus Christ could have chosen, He chose Paul. That fact alone sets Paul above and beyond all unfounded criticism.

As we shall see, he was not the most popular personality in Jerusalem after his conversion- within or without the church. In Acts 9:27, we find Barnabas (the Levite recorded in Acts 4:36) with Paul. He brings Paul to the apostles in Jerusalem and in Acts 9:29, we find Paul disputing with the Grecians.

The Grecians and Paul

Since this term "Grecians" is only used three times by Luke in the book of Acts, it is reasonable to conclude that each usage is referring to the same group of people. In Acts 6:1, the Grecians murmured against the Hebrews over the distribution to the widows. We have endeavored to show that this issue resulted in the murder of Stephen. In Acts 9:29, we see that the Grecians planned to assassinate Paul. If this is the same group as in Acts 6:1, the implications are serious indeed. They lead to the conclusion that people within the Jerusalem church were trying to kill Paul.

As we have seen, the Jerusalem of the first six chapters of Acts readily accepted Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead. It seems clear that the issue debated by Paul with the Grecians in Acts 9:29 was not whether or not Jesus Christ had risen from the dead but rather the implications arising from that fact. The event occurred about three years after Stephen's death and perhaps eight years after the start of the church age. All the residents of Jerusalem would certainly have known about Jesus Christ and His power by this time. Those who did not believe in Him refused to believe rather than being innocents who had never had the chance to hear the gospel. It seems clear that the issue in Jerusalem had moved to the sanctity of the law by the time of Acts 9:29.

Times had changed in the eight years since the church age started. This was not even the same Jerusalem that is seen three years earlier in Acts 6:1. The Grecians were not merely murmuring against the Hebrews anymore. Now they went about to kill Paul! Some will say that certainly these are not the same Grecians as those referred to in Acts 6:1. And, whether or not they were exactly the same people, I do not know. But, Luke used the same term to describe them and I believe he does so in order to communicate some "tie in" between the people of Acts 9:29 and the corresponding people of Acts 6:1.

The common definition for "Grecians", "Greek speaking Jews", does not satisfy. There were probably relatively few Jews who did not speak Greek. Paul spoke Greek and yet he calls himself "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5). Even the explanation of "Grecians" being "those who followed the customs and traditions of the Greeks rather than strictly adhering to the customs and traditions of Moses", does not satisfy. This explanation is far too broad and ambiguous to define the group Luke is talking about. It seems that such a definition could cover the whole range of Jews from the Sadducees, who said there was no resurrection, to those Pharisees who were not as strict in their observance of law as was Paul.

Therefore, it seems apparent that the context of Acts 6:1 and Acts 9:29 must be the basis upon which any definition of "Grecian" depends. In Acts 6:1, they were mostly, if not all, Christians. In Acts 9:29 we must assume they were also mostly, if not all, Christians. And, it is logical to assume that the motive for them wanting to kill Paul is tied to the motive for the killing of Stephen. There may well have been others who wanted to kill Paul (the High Priest and Sanhedrin could well have had him on their "list" for being a traitor to them) but we must confine ourselves to the Grecians since they are the ones referred to in Acts 9:29.

Consider for a moment some of the possible motives of the Grecians for wanting to kill Paul:

1. They wanted to kill Paul because they were "unbelievers" and he was telling them about salvation. This is highly unlikely because the apostles had been doing that same thing for perhaps nine years and they were not killed or driven out of town.
2. They wanted to kill Paul because they were "unbelievers" and Paul had betrayed them and was now a Christian. This is also unlikely since "unbelievers" were no more likely to be Grecians than Hebrews and Luke would have used the more general term "unbelievers" or "Jews" if this was the case. Also, since Paul calls himself a "Hebrew of the Hebrews", the unbelieving Hebrews would be more likely to want to kill him than the unbelieving Grecians. And, as has been mentioned previously, since Paul was "disputing" against them, it is hard to imagine that he was arguing about the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ with them. The facts of the preceding eight years were all well known and one either accepted them or rejected them. Arguing about them would have been unlikely. Disputing over facts only occurs when the facts are cloudy, not when they are clear. Disputing over concepts, or ideas, or doctrine, is more likely.
3. They were "unbelievers" and the same people who could not resist the "wisdom and spirit" by which Stephen spoke in Acts 6:10. They were trying to kill Paul for the same reasons that they set up Stephen and had him killed. This is very probable except that the "Grecians" in Acts 6 were more likely to have been "believers who were zealous for the law" rather than unbelievers. In other words, it seems that the hate for Paul was over the issue of law and grace rather than over salvation.
4. They were "believers" and among the "disciples" of Acts 9:26 who were afraid of Paul until Barnabas took him to the apostles and they were satisfied and "officially" welcomed him into the church at Jerusalem. (Acts 9:27-28). This is likely since Acts 9:26-29 shows that the apostles were still popular in Jerusalem and therefore the "church" was still large rather than small. Verse 28 says that Paul was "with them (the apostles) coming in and going out at Jerusalem". Verse 29 says that Paul "spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Grecians but they went about to slay him". Since verse 29 is all one sentence, Paul's work seems very similar to Stephen's in Acts 6 and the Grecians in Acts 9:29 seem to correspond to the people from the synagogues of Acts 6:9 who were not able to resist the wisdom and spirit by which Stephen spoke. So also, the Grecians of Acts 9:29 were not able to resist the wisdom and spirit by which Paul spoke but hated him nevertheless.

If we say that "every believer" had to leave Jerusalem in Acts 8:1, then we would have to say that the Grecians were "unbelievers". But, if "every believer" was forced to leave Jerusalem, there is no explanation as to how the "disciples" arrived back in Jerusalem by Acts 9:26. Acts 9:26 also shows that the "disciples" in Jerusalem were "timid" in that they were afraid of Paul. This seems to suggest that they remembered the persecution three years prior. If these believers had been among those driven out of Jerusalem when Paul was "entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3), there should be some explanation as to how they came to be back in Jerusalem three years or so later.

It seems much more probable that the disciples mentioned in Acts 9:26 never left Jerusalem. If so, Stephen's death and the resulting persecution of Acts 8:1 was not over "salvation" but over law, and the church was split over that issue. Those who stayed in Jerusalem deluded themselves into thinking that the "old wineskin" (Luke 5:37) could hold the "new wine" of the age of grace. But, as one author stated, "the house of delusions is easy to build, but drafty to live in."

The disciples in Jerusalem were afraid of Paul by the time he came to Jerusalem, even though they had seen many examples of miraculous deliverance and could well have believed the reports of the previous three years that Paul had been converted. And, although Paul was "with them (the apostles) coming in and going out at Jerusalem" (Acts 9:28), the Grecians tried to kill him. Some will say that "believers" would not do such a thing as to try to kill Paul. I will only point out that the Crusades resulted in the killing of many innocent people. Some Christians are not above any wicked act imaginable if they are given the right deception to spur them on. And, more to the point, the whole city of Jerusalem tried to kill Paul in Acts 21:31 and there were still thousands or tens of thousands of believers who were zealous for the law in Jerusalem at the time. (see Acts 21:20).

The Loss of Vitality of the Jerusalem Church

If we read from Acts 1 through Acts 9:29, we see that except for the events outside of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 8:4 through Acts 9:25, everything takes place in Jerusalem. Multitudes are added to the church, the believers have favor with all the people, and finally Stephen is stoned. The very next event recorded about Jerusalem is the Grecians trying to kill Paul. Jerusalem had somehow changed in the course of the first eight years of the church age and the attempt on Paul's life is probably for the same reason that Stephen was killed. He was perceived as speaking against Moses. The issue was not Jesus Christ and the resurrection, the issue was Jesus Christ with Moses or Jesus Christ without Moses! And, Paul's credentials in the law made his position against the Mosaic Law's usefulness much more poignant than even the twelve apostles, who were not as educated and had no reputation in Jerusalem before they became disciples of Jesus Christ. With this in mind, the fact remains that Jesus Christ called Paul on the road to Damascus and the Grecians tried to kill him in Jerusalem.

If one considers the contrast between the old nature and the new nature, he can readily see that the old nature is no different when lived in by believers than when lived in by unbelievers. We choose how we are going to live. We decide. So it was with the believers in the first century. Some chose to walk by the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus. Some chose to walk by the law of sin and death, even after accepting Jesus Christ as Lord.

We see in Acts 9:30 that the "brethren" escorted Paul out of Jerusalem and sent him on his way to Tarsus. The next verse says, "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the holy spirit, were multiplied." With Paul removed to Tarsus, the church in Israel had rest. The issues that Paul would later write about are removed from the land of Israel and accommodation between Moses and the law and Jesus Christ is somehow achieved in Israel. Compromise prevailed and with it the Bondage Church prevailed in Israel as well. Some are bound to say that getting Paul out of town was good for Christianity since the churches had rest throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria and were multiplied. But, Jesus Christ had called Paul to minister not only to the Gentiles but also to the children of Israel, and Paul's being forced out of Jerusalem certainly indicates a problem with Jerusalem rather than a problem with Paul.

The picture that begins to unfold is one in which the church at Jerusalem and in Israel continues to grow. But signs of its losing its vitality begin to show themselves. We see that the Apostles cannot prevent the designs of the Grecians and that Paul is forced to leave Jerusalem. The continuing loss of vitality in the Jerusalem church seems to correspond to the degree to which it was absorbed into the worldly system of the Jewish nation. The believers in Jerusalem ultimately became known as the "Sect of the Nazarines" and were understood to be a part of Judaism. Today we might call them a "cult" or other such disparaging term. The Jerusalem church was assimilated into the Jewish nation. The believers there compromised their liberty and yielded their uniqueness, in the hope of achieving worldly unity. Instead of resisting the morally bankrupt system of the world, they resisted the truth represented by Paul and became ineffective as servants of Jesus Christ. The same attitude today causes the same ineffectiveness wherever it is found.

The Apostles were still respected in Jerusalem but we see next that Peter is not held in the same regard as previously, when he returns to Jerusalem after the event of Cornelius, together with his family and friends, speaking in tongues. Acts 11:2-3 says, "they that were of the circumcision contended with them saying, 'thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them'."

Cornelius and Company Speak in Tongues

A time frame for the events recorded in Acts up to the end of Acts 12:20 is fixed by the death of Herod Agrippa I recorded in Acts 12:21-23. He was King of Israel during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Caligula, and for three years after Caligula was assassinated. Herod Agrippa's death occurred in the third year of the Roman Emperor Claudius, or 45 A.D. (some say 44 A.D.). Paul's missionary journey, as recorded in Acts 13, begins about this time, or about fifteen years after the start of the church age. If we allow five years from the start of the church until the conversion of Paul and three years from that time before Paul goes to Jerusalem in Acts 9 (see Gal.1:17-18), the conversion of the house of Cornelius must

have occurred somewhere around 38 A.D. to 40 A.D..

One of the surprising things about Luke's account of Peter and Cornelius is the amount of time he spends on it. Almost seven percent of the book of Acts is devoted to the account. The only other events he spends as much time with are those surrounding the death of Stephen (about six percent) and those surrounding Paul's final trip to Jerusalem (about thirty five percent). The extensiveness of the three accounts seem to fully reveal Luke's purpose in writing the book of Acts. It seems evident that Luke's purpose is not merely to show the growth of the early church. Luke does not even mention the spread of the Gospel throughout Egypt, or Babylonia, or even Galilee. Since Jesus did most of His work in Galilee before His crucifixion, certainly the church there would have been numerous and active. Luke's silence on the subject speaks loudly that his purpose in writing Acts was not to show the gradual and harmonious spread of Christianity. The extensive amount of time spent on the account of Stephen's death, the conversion of Cornelius, and Paul's final trip to Jerusalem seem to point to the purpose being to show the conflict between law and grace within the early church.

Scholars have noted that Luke's portrayal of Paul, as a flexible, reasonable person willing to compromise his principles for the sake of expediency (see Acts 16:3,4; 21:26) are a contrast to the Paul of the epistles (see Gal. 1:8; 2:3). Some even question the reliability of Acts because of these differences. However, if Luke's purpose in writing Acts is to show the conflict between law and grace within the early church, then there is no reason to question it's reliability on account of Paul trying to compromise but finding he was unable to do so and still stand for God's unmerited, divine favor to all men. Most of Paul's epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and the personal epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon) were written after the events of the book of Acts when the positions of the opposing camps had hardened beyond the possibility of compromise.

It should also be pointed out that the book of Acts was not titled "The Acts of the Apostles" until the second century. Luke did not give it a title, and the title given his work in the second century certainly does not fit the text. Most of the twelve apostles are not dealt with at all in the book of Acts. A title such as "The Acts of Jesus Christ" or "The Acts of the church of Grace and the Acts of the church of Law" seem more descriptive of the message and purpose of Luke's history.

In any event, Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman Legion, a semi-proselyte, or "God fearer" of the Jew's religion (not a proselyte which required acceptance of all Jewish practices, including circumcision and meant, in essence, becoming a Jew) and living in Israel, was converted along with his whole family. Peter had left Jerusalem to minister throughout the countryside (see Acts 9:32-43) and was staying in Joppa when an angel appeared to Cornelius and told him to send men to Peter and bring Peter back to Caesarea (a distance of about thirty miles).

The account in Acts 10 shows how Peter was given a vision and subsequently went with the men when they arrived. The record shows us clearly that Peter was "zealous for the law" and would not have gone without the vision. It is interesting to note, however, that he was staying with a tanner, whose profession dealt with dead animals and who was therefore looked down upon by the Jews. Contact with a "tanner" would render a person "ceremonially unclean" and would require a period of purification before being able to participate in Temple activities.

After Peter arrives and Cornelius has gathered together his family and friends, Peter says, "Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean." (Acts 10:28). In other words, Peter was saying to Cornelius, "you know I'm breaking the law don't you? What is it that is so important to you that you have called for me?"

Peter knew he was disobeying the law but did so because God told him to! He also brought six witnesses with him and they also knew they were disobeying the law. Who the six witnesses were, we are not told. But, from Peters previous reputation, it is safe to say that they were of the highest integrity and respected in Jerusalem. It is significant that Peter took six witnesses with him rather than one or two. Peter certainly

knew he would be in trouble when he got back to Jerusalem. Peter and his six witnesses heard everyone speak in tongues that Cornelius had gathered together (Acts 10:46). Thereby Peter knew that the Gentiles had received the same gift as had all the Jews who believed.

Notice in Acts 11:2 and 3, how much static Peter, chief spokesman for the Apostles, got upon returning to Jerusalem with his report. The members of the circumcision party in the church accused Peter, saying, "Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them."

My first reaction is, "How Dare They!" Not only did Peter heal the lame man at the Temple and do many mighty miracles in Jerusalem, he even raised the dead at Joppa (see Acts 9:36-42). And now, in Acts 11 we find people in Jerusalem bold enough to accuse Peter of eating with the wrong people! What audacity! Perhaps enough time had gone by that they had forgotten what happened to Ananias and Sapphira when they were caught in a lie by Peter. These men of the circumcision party in the church in Jerusalem were not awed by Peter at all. In fact, it appears that they felt superior to him. What a change from the events of perhaps six years prior when the people were blessed beyond measure just to have Peter's shadow pass over them.

It is hard to believe that these were the same group of people who in Acts 5 laid their sick in the street so that the mere shadow of Peter passing over them would heal them. Who were these people that dared to accuse Peter of anything? Why were they not routed from the church? What dismal state of affairs had the Jerusalem church come to that these people could sit in judgment of Peter- and have the support of the church behind them? This was a different Jerusalem entirely than the one we saw in the first five chapters of Acts!

Notice also that Peter knew he would get static in Jerusalem and therefore had his six witnesses with him. In verse fifteen Peter reports that "the holy spirit fell on them as on us at the beginning". In verse seventeen, Peter says, "God gave them the same gift as he gave us". But, notice the response of the people Peter was addressing. They said, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." They did not admit that the Gentiles were given the same gift! What they said was true. But, it was far less than what Peter had reported and his six witnesses had confirmed.

These Jews did not joy in the thrilling revelation that the Gentiles had received the same gift as they. They still held to their "old nature", superior attitude that the Gentiles could never be equal to the Jews. Where was their realization that their own salvation was as much by grace as was the Gentiles?

Acts 11:2 should raise some eyebrows when one asks, "How did a party system rise up in the church at Jerusalem so that now there was a Circumcision Party?" And, how was this party strong enough to force Peter to defend his actions to them? And why, when Peter finished his report, did he not force them to confess that the Gentiles had received the same gift that they themselves had? Was it not politically expedient for Peter to do so? After all, Peter and the apostles couldn't even influence the Grecians when they wanted to kill Paul!

The church we see Peter reporting to is the very church which Paul distances himself from. In his epistles he warns against it, reasons with the people against it, shows the futility of it, and goes so far in Galatians as to say, "Those who seemed to be somewhat in conference added NOTHING to me." (Gal.2:6). Clearly, the Jerusalem church was robed in its own haughty self-righteousness by this time.

The Jerusalem Church Extends its Influence

Acts 11:19 takes us back to where Acts 8:4 leaves off- namely, the scattering of the believers upon the death of Stephen. Notice that these believers preached the Word to Jews only. Verse twenty one says that a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

So, news of the spreading of the Gospel reaches Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem church decides that their representatives should go as far as Antioch. A few questions are in order. Was the church in Jerusalem responsible in the first place for the spreading of the Gospel in Antioch? Absolutely not! If anyone was

responsible other than God, it would have to be the political leaders that persecuted the church and caused its scattering. Notice that Acts 11:22 says, "then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem." Clearly, the actions of the Jerusalem church in sending representatives to Antioch were "after the fact".

Why was it necessary for an official representative of the Jerusalem church to go to Antioch? The obvious answer is that by this time the church in Jerusalem was a political power as well as a church. The church in Jerusalem wanted to extend its control to include the church in Antioch. Notice also that Luke does not tell us in Acts 11:22 that the apostles sent Barnabas to Antioch. The "church which was in Jerusalem" had "tidings of these things (that) came unto their ears." From what we have seen so far, the make up of the Jerusalem church had changed after the "scattering" of Acts 8:1, and Peter had been called in question regarding his entering the house of Cornelius. From what we will continue to see, the apostles were no longer in the forefront of the Jerusalem church. James, the brother of Jesus, was the leader of the Jerusalem church. The Jerusalem church had been weakened by the "scattering", not only in numbers but in doctrine as well. It seems more than coincidental that one of "the seven" of Acts 6:1 was a proselyte from Antioch and now the Word of God was growing mightily in Antioch after, presumably, the remaining six of "the seven" were driven out of Jerusalem.

In Acts 11:27 we find prophets coming down to Antioch from Jerusalem who told of a coming famine throughout all the world. We are told that this famine came to pass during the reign of Claudius Caesar in Rome.

Claudius became emperor in Rome in 42 A.D. after the murder of Caligula. He ruled until 54 A.D. A number of famines occurred during his reign, but the one referred to in Acts 11:28 occurred before the Jerusalem Council in 49 A.D., recorded in Acts 15. It seems most likely that the famine referred to in Acts 11:28 occurred from 45 A.D. to 47 A.D..

With all the wonderful things that had happened since the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, why was there a famine? We read in Proverbs 11:11, "by the blessing of the upright, the city is exalted." This city was being brought low. It is a very certain indication that godliness was diminished in Jerusalem even though the Jerusalem church still had a "form of godliness".

Fifteen years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Jerusalem was receiving welfare from outside sources. The glorious rise evidenced during the first five years of the church age by great healing, by signs and wonders, by boldness to speak God's Word, and by the multitudes of people who believed, was gone. Jerusalem was in decline and famine was in the land after just ten more years. Recall the account in Acts 4:34 where it says that there were not any among them that lacked. By Acts 12, there were many that lacked.

But, in the mean time, the "murmurings" of the Grecians occurred. Stephen was stoned. Peter was questioned and criticized for eating with Gentiles. The Grecians tried to kill Paul. And, about the time of the famine, Herod Agrippa I had the apostle James killed because he saw that it pleased the people and then proceeded to arrest Peter (with the intent of killing him after the days of unleavened bread, or the Passover, were completed).

Famine had arrived in the land instead of blessing. In just fifteen years, from 30 A.D. to 45 A.D., the greatest deliverance Israel had ever seen had passed and the nation was in the midst of famine. Israel had been eager to accept God's pardon, but they were reluctant to walk in it. However, the decline of Israel is the occasion for the rise of godliness among the Gentiles. The message of deliverance and grace escaped the confining influence of Jerusalem and that message would continue to spread to the ends of the earth.



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