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THE TWO WAYS OF THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

CHAPTER 8

SHOWDOWN IN JERUSALEM

"And certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, 'Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved'. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question."

Acts 15:1,2

Trouble seems to have a way of invariably showing up, even in the most well intentioned group. There does not appear to be a single Christian group in the world today that does not have its share of trouble. Some groups will try to deny it, some will try to hide it, some will make laws to prevent it, but it inexorably forces its way in. Those labeled "trouble makers" are not always the ones who make the trouble. Many times they are the ones who simply will not bow to the trouble and they only stand out because so many people run from confrontation. A magazine article commented years ago, "Some people, when confronted with evil, simply turn their backs and figure it will get discouraged and slink away." It obviously does not slink away. It may sneak in, but it seldom, if ever, sneaks out. Our response to trouble and our behavior during conflict determine the extent to which trouble is overcome and the extent of permanent damage that it causes in our lives and among the groups with which we are associated.

Today there seems to be a perception common in the church that conflict itself is evil. When a church splits over some issue, the community generally points its' finger at the entire congregation as if to say, "They are all wrong, Christians should be above conflict." Such an attitude arises from a Utopian view of Christianity that is neither based on the reality of the death of Jesus Christ and its causes, nor on the truth of what the New Testament has to say. It is essentially a pagan accusation designed to intimidate the Christian into yielding to errors, lies, half-truths, and non-Christian behavior. The supreme conflict of the ages is yet to come when Jesus Christ appears. Until then, conflict remains in the world and the Christian has a position to maintain at all costs in many conflicts that arise. He simply cannot lead a victorious Christian life and yield to the adversary simply to avoid conflict. If we sow to the wind, we will reap the whirlwind (Hos.8:7).

In Acts 15 we see trouble developing between the church in Antioch and the church in Jerusalem. Unlike the previous "troubles" we have talked about, this trouble is clearly explained, its principal characters, on both sides of the conflict, clearly identified, and its consequences clearly seen.

We may have been unable to clearly identify the motives of Ananias and Sapphira. We may not have seen a clear picture of who the Grecians were in the three accounts in which Luke uses the term. The motives and principal characters involved with Stephen's death may not all be clear. The reason for Peter reporting to James and his brothers after being delivered from prison may be cloudy. The reluctance of the Jerusalem church to receive Paul when he first went there after his conversion may not be fully understood. But, the light shed on all of these events by the clear conflict in Acts 15 helps to explain all of the previous "troubles" we have seen so far.

Trouble in Antioch

Trouble had been brewing since the start of the Church Age nineteen years prior, and what started as a little cloud became a destructive storm. "Certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, 'Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1). The storm hit full force in Antioch! The church was told that no one could be saved unless they were first circumcised after the manner of Moses. No bigger lie would ever be foisted on any other group of Christians at any subsequent time. And, like most lies, it can be stated in hundreds of different ways. "Salvation is not possible except through Israel". "Israel is superior to Jesus Christ". "All those who say they are Christian are liars if they are not circumcised and obedient to the authority of the Temple". The statement given by the representatives of the Jerusalem Church to the church in Antioch, "You must be circumcised after the manner of Moses or you cannot be saved" is a bold-faced lie.

In the previous two chapters of Acts, there is not a hint that Paul or Barnabas circumcised even one of those who believed, let alone all of them. Now we see men coming down from Jerusalem and as much as saying that Paul and Barnabas did not accomplish a thing- they saved no one! You would think that the great number of believers in Antioch would have laughed them out of town.

Perhaps they would have laughed them out of town if Paul's epistles had been available. But, Paul had not written them yet and so these men were given respect and their statements considered. The "children of the bondwoman" came down to Antioch and tried to prevail over the "children of the freewoman". In all probability, they arrived while Paul and Barnabas were gone.

If so, when they returned, trouble was in their midst. They did not run from it or minimize its importance. They had "no small dissension and disputation with them" (Acts 15:2). In other words, they objected in no uncertain terms. The battle was engaged, the storm confronted. Trouble was recognized, and it was challenged.

Ten years ago, it was this verse in Acts that started me on the subject of this book. For, time and time again, I had seen disagreements among Christians and had been party to them myself. I went to this scripture in hopes of finding a pattern for solving similar disputes in the church today. My search was with an honest motive. I thought that examination of this dispute between those who came from the Jerusalem Church and Paul would give me the pattern I was looking for. My hope was that God would reveal His secrets on how to overcome trouble. The secrets revealed were hardly what I had expected to find.

In Antioch we have a church that has the distinction of being the first church in which the believers were called "Christian". We have shown that people from distant parts of the world came there after they became believers. In Acts 13:1 we are told that one of the "prophets and teachers" in Antioch was from Nigeria and another from Cyrene. We are also told that one of the "prophets and teachers" was brought up with Herod the tetrarch. These facts tell us that Antioch was a major center of Christianity. Paul and Barnabas were also among the "prophets and teachers" there. It was from this church that they were sent out on a tremendous missionary journey as revealed in Acts 13 and 14. But, in Acts 15, we find men from the Jerusalem church teaching the people in Antioch that salvation is not possible without circumcision "after the manner of Moses" preceding it!

When I first started my search for an answer to resolving conflict in the church today, I did not appreciate the powerful benefit we have today in having Paul's epistles in front of us. The Antioch church did not have them. They were not yet written. It is quite possible that Paul did not even know, at the time, all of the information he was to write at a later date. In 49 A.D., none of his epistles had yet been written.

Perhaps Paul had to go through the events recorded up to the time of Acts 15:1 and following to fully appreciate just how absolute is the split between law and grace. He had taken relief money down to Jerusalem during the famine. Surely, the Christians there were his brothers in Christ. Surely he must have felt that they were on the same side in the war against ungodliness. Surely he must have felt that the problem could be solved and agreement reached that salvation was the unmerited gift of God and that Jew and Gentile alike were saved by God's grace.

Paul and Barnabas Go to Jerusalem

However, the trouble was not resolved by the dissension and disputation of Paul and Barnabas with the men that came down from the Jerusalem church. The trouble caused by the "trouble makers" from Jerusalem must have been serious indeed. In fact, Paul and Barnabas were probably considered to be the "trouble makers" by many. The same people who try to avoid trouble by minimizing its importance also seem to be the ones, many times, who are offended when someone dares to stand against it. It is not an uncommon phenomenon in the church today. In any event, the Antioch church determined to send Paul and Barnabas with certain others (undoubtedly the people who started the problem were included) down to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders about the question. This was no minor point of disagreement. Either Jesus Christ earned our salvation, or else what He did wasn't quite good enough and had to be prefaced by a work on our part in bowing down to the religious superiority of the Jewish Christians and showing it by circumcision "after the manner or Moses".

It should be pointed out that these men were not impostors or the Antioch church would certainly have known it. They would have had credentials of some kind or there would never have been a Jerusalem Council. And, had there not been some of the Jerusalem authorities that adhered to their position, as well as a substantial number of people in the Jerusalem church and the Antioch church who did the same, there would have been no need for a council in the first place.

The fact that there was a council is conclusive evidence, to those of us who have access to Paul's epistles, that substantial unbelief existed in the Jerusalem church. Paul said, "If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing" (Gal.5:2). He also points out that those who insisted on circumcision "desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh (Gal. 6:1). (See also: Phil.3:3, Col. 2:10-11, 3:10-11, Rom. 2:24-3:16). How that unbelief took root is seen from the first half of the book of Acts which we have already endeavored to show.

Ananias and Sapphira's death said in no uncertain terms to the unbelievers that Christianity was serious business indeed, and the fight over money by the "reform" (Grecian) verses "orthodox" (Hebrew) faction in the church gave Satan the divide and conquer issue he was looking for. Now we have an issue that is seriously contested over whether a person must be circumcised in order to be saved. The official position of the Jerusalem church, as represented by those who came down to Antioch, was that he did. We dare not gloss over the severity of the problem. Paul and Barnabas were unable to resolve it by their efforts in Antioch. The men from Jerusalem were clearly not impostors or interlopers. And, a council had to be called in Jerusalem to discuss the matter. In view of these facts, it appears evident that many in the Jerusalem church as well as the Antioch church believed that a person could not be saved unless he was first circumcised after the manner of Moses.

And so Paul and the others went up to Jerusalem to debate the issue and on the way (Acts 15:3) Paul and Barnabas declared the conversion of the Gentiles in spite of the dispute, and in obvious contempt for the position that one must be circumcised to be saved, and they caused great joy among all the believers in Phoenicia (not Phenice or Phoenix which is in Crete) and Samaria.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they declared all things that God had done with them. But, instead of the scripture saying that there was great joy there also, we are told (Acts 15:5) that certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed said that these people had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses.

The question to be asked is how did some of the "sect of the Pharisees" get into the Jerusalem church? How did the Jerusalem church tolerate such a situation? These people were believers in Jesus Christ and yet adhered to the sect of the Pharisees. They belonged to the same group that was instrumental in having Jesus crucified. And, not only did they keep their double standard, they had enough sway to cause a council to be convened. This is a highly significant fact to consider. It appears that members of the Jerusalem church could maintain their standing among the Pharisees and not offend either group. How had the Jerusalem church changed to allow such a situation? And, how had the Pharisees changed as well to allow such a situation? These are weighty questions to consider. Among other things, they point to the perception of an extensive church in Jerusalem that was at least tolerated by the Pharisees (if not openly

embraced by them).

The Jerusalem Council

Acts 15:7 tells us that when the council was convened, there was MUCH DISPUTING! This was not a situation of a few trouble makers trying to stir the pot. There was a substantial element in the church that took the position that salvation was dependent on circumcision "after the manner of Moses". Finally, Peter rose up and spoke the last words we have recorded of him in Acts. (He would later recognize Paul in his epistle, II Peter 3:15-16) Peter reminded the council that God had chosen him (not them) to be the one that spoke the gospel to the Gentiles so that they believed to the end of speaking in tongues! Remember the grilling Peter took over the conversion of Cornelius? Certainly everyone in the council did!

Words do not adequately convey the picture of Peter standing up in the council and giving his declaration. I can imagine his face being flushed and his voice trembling with emotion and conviction. Perhaps there were tears in his eyes. And, I'll bet the silence in the room was deafening as he said, "God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as He did unto us-AND PUT NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US AND THEM- purifying their hearts by faith." Such a declaration could hardly have been given without some kind of emotion. Peter was saying, "God put no difference between us, the leaders of the Jerusalem church, and the Gentiles who believe." In the sight of God, there was "no difference".

There were sure to be those in the audience that frowned and hated Peter for daring to suggest that the Jews were no better than the lowly Gentiles. But, Peter continued. "Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" Peter accuses the men in the council of tempting God! This is a monumental thing to consider. If a preacher today responded to a question about the Jerusalem Council by saying, "Oh, that Council! The one where they were tempting God!", many Christian people would wonder how a preacher could say such a thing. And yet, this is exactly what Peter said to the council. We can imagine Peter looking right into the faces of those scowling Christian Pharisees and saying with all the emotion in him, "We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ WE SHALL BE SAVED, EVEN AS THEY!" (Acts 15:11). It is clear that the "ye" refers to those advocating circumcision and the "we" to those advocating grace.

These are the last words of Peter in the book of Acts. There is no compromise, there is no hesitancy, there is no wavering. He tells the members of the Council who are also members of the sect of the Pharisees, as well as those who sided with them in the Council, that they were tempting God and that God put no difference between Jew and Gentile.

The Jerusalem church had truly gone a long way on the road down since the time people hoped that just Peter's shadow would pass over their sick so they would be healed. Those Christian Pharisees who could quote the law and strutted around so filled with their self importance, if they could have done one day's worth of Peter's ministry they would have been blessed beyond measure. Instead, they quoted from their books and solicited the votes of their followers in hopes of prevailing in the council. Big shots!

After Peter finished, Paul and Barnabas spoke and declared the miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. How could those who said a person has to be circumcised before he can be saved explain away the miracles and wonders? At least that is what Paul and Barnabas must have had in mind. Surely, these Christian Pharisees would have to change their minds in the light of God performing miracles and wonders among the Gentiles. Surely the rest of the people in the Council would see the striking contrast between Paul and the Christian Pharisees who advocated circumcision. Paul had been "a Hebrew of the Hebrews" and a Pharisee himself (Phil. 3:5). But, unlike the Christian Pharisees in the Council, he did not consider his accomplishments in the law as gain but rather counted them as loss for Christ (Phil, 3:7). The Christian Pharisees did feel superior and even had the nerve to contend with Peter, Paul and Barnabas in siding with those who had gone to Antioch and said, "you cannot be saved unless you are circumcised after the manner of Moses." They contended over the wisdom of men while Peter, Paul and Barnabas pointed out the power of God. Perhaps Paul had this confrontation in mind when he wrote that "your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (I Cor. 2:5).

When Paul and Barnabas finished their presentation, James spoke and he has the final word in the Council. This was not James the apostle- for he had been killed years before. This was James, the brother of Jesus and the author of the book of James. It is clear that he was, by the time of the council, the undisputed head of the Jerusalem church because he speaks last, and because, in verse nineteen, he gives his sentence or verdict on the matter. In Acts 15, about nineteen years after the start of the church age, James, the brother of Jesus Christ is clearly the supreme authority in the Jerusalem church. One well known author goes so far as to say, "James emerges as the undisputed leader of the Jerusalem church, perhaps president of the Sanhedrin of the new Israel."

What does James say? Does he point out God's grace as did Peter? No. Does he point out miracles and wonders as does Paul and Barnabas? No. He quotes from the prophet Amos about building again the tabernacle of David and then says, "Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world." The incongruity of the statement given at the end of a debate over as critical an issue as the Christian church has ever faced, fixed my attention on James. I came to this statement by James and thought, "what an empty thing to say!"

No one would disagree with the statement, "known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world". It was not wrong. Certainly God knows all his works from the beginning of the world. But, everyone in the council knew that. The men in the council were not neophytes. They were not novices or newcomers to Christianity. They were elders in the church and apostles. They were all men well versed in the Old Testament. There was no disagreement among them regarding such an obvious statement. James, as head of the Jerusalem church, is about to give his decision on the crucial matter of whether a person must be circumcised to be saved, and he says, "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world." The more I thought about James saying these words the more I questioned his competence to give the final word on the matter before the council.

James simply does not address the issue before the Council. He does allude to Peter's comments. He admits that Peter's statement had some validity because the prophets agreed. But, James refers to Peter as Simeon rather than the name that Jesus gave him, "Petra", or Peter. James does not even recognize Paul, let alone anything that Paul said. And so, my suspicions grew rather than diminished. They were confirmed when I read Paul's summary of the meeting in Galatians. He says, "for those who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me!" (Gal. 2:6).

James' Verdict

At the conclusion of his presentation, James says, "My sentence (declaration) is that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God." (Acts 15:19). Don't trouble them he says! Don't trouble them? The whole purpose for the meeting is to decide the issue raised by the men who were sent to Antioch by the Jerusalem church. The Antioch church had been troubled indeed! This was not a Council that was called by innocents that had caused no trouble. The people sent from James had caused trouble that even Paul and Barnabas could not stop in Antioch. Nor were they cordially received when they arrived in Jerusalem to try to solve the problem. My mind asks the question, "James, did Jesus Christ save the Gentiles or are they not saved because they are not circumcised?"

James does not address this kind of question but rather continues, "but that we write them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood." He then gives his reason for deciding to write these edicts. He says, "For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day." (Acts 15:21). In other words, the Gentiles will be sure to hear about Moses once they are converted. In short, James wants a letter written that will obviously trouble them. Perhaps it will not trouble them as much as "you can't be saved if you are not circumcised". But, it is a sure statement affirming that the Jews are superior to the Gentiles.

The letter will trouble them most of all because James does not clearly state that the Gentiles do not have to be circumcised to be saved. It will trouble them because James does not deny that the men who started the trouble were authorized by him to go to Antioch (Acts 15:24). The best he can say is that he did not tell them to say what they said. It will trouble them because James does not say "God has put no

difference between us and them" (Acts 15:9) as Peter had reminded the Council.

It is true that James is backing down from the position of "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1), but he covers himself with the Pharisees in the Council by his next statement. "For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day." The Pharisees could nod their heads in agreement with this statement as if to say, "I see what he's driving at, we'll bring the Gentiles under our authority in the end, one way or another." In short, James is the perfect appeaser. He says, in essence, "Don't trouble them." "God knows everything." "We've got Moses covered."

Questions Regarding James

In my initial study of the Jerusalem Council, some questions came to mind and demanded answers: "Who is this guy James anyway?" "Is he a good guy or a bad guy?" "If he's a bad guy, what about the book of James?" "Is it God's Word?" So, I read the epistle of James. In it, James mentions Jesus twice and the resurrection NOT ONE TIME! He says, "faith without works is dead." Paul says, "A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28). In other words, faith without works is alive!

Over ten years ago these questions began to present themselves to my mind, and although many answers have been found to the questions raised by the possibility that James was a bad guy rather than a good guy, more remain to be discovered. Hopefully, this book represents a good start in that direction.

There may well be others who have written on this subject, but I have not been able to find them. At least those who have written on the subject in the past two hundred years do not appear to address the question of how James became the head of the Jerusalem church. All of the authors I have read agree he was the head of the Jerusalem church by Acts 15, but none address the question of how he became the head. The oldest succession list, that of Hegesippus in about 150 A.D., shows that James was the first bishop of Jerusalem. And yet, there is silence on how he became the head of the Jerusalem church. To think that James was superior to Peter in the Jerusalem church is something that demands an answer, based on the evidence of Acts, as to how such a thing could happen. One of those that may have shed light on the subject was Marcion, in the second century. But, none of his writings have apparently survived and students of the canon of scripture have only his critics from which to gather their information.

In studying about Marcion to find how we got the present Bible and who decided which books should be in it, all the books and articles I read mentioned "the heretic Marcion" as though heretic was his first name. Finally my curiosity led me to an old encyclopedia that said, "It may be safely said that in the second century, no one took the trouble to try to understand Paul, except Marcion, and it must be added that he misunderstood him". I was overwhelmed. To think it possible that no one in the second century knew about the wonderful things in Paul's writings, was beyond me. I still do not believe it. But, I do believe it is possible that no one in the "organized church" of the second century, except Marcion, tried to teach and live the wonderful truths that Paul's Epistles reveal.

In about 140 A. D., Marcion was excommunicated from the old catholic church and whether before or after that event, declared that the only books he would accept as "God breathed" were Paul's epistles, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts because Luke traveled with Paul. His is the earliest canon. And, there is evidence that the Marcionite church rivaled the Roman Catholic church from the second century through the fifth century. One author suggested that Marcion was a heretic in the same sense that Martin Luther was a heretic- Marcion by stating a canon and Luther by expunging the apocryphal books from the canon of his day.

It should be added that Luther relegated the book of James to a secondary position in the New Testament and called it "the epistle of straw". Also, the book of James did not become recognized as canonical until the fourth century. That is three hundred years after the events of Acts. And, if it be true that Paul's writings only survived because of Marcion's insistence in the second century one can only imagine the state of unbelief in the "organized church" by the fourth century.

The Letter Sent from the Jerusalem Council

But, we have gone quite astray from Acts 15:21. James statements conclude the council of Jerusalem and Acts 15:22 starts a new thought. After the council, it pleased the apostles and elders to send chosen men from Jerusalem with Paul and his company back to Antioch. And it pleased them to write a letter as James had instructed. Acts 15:23-29 is the content of the letter and there are some obvious problems with that letter.

First of all, it admits that the people who came to Antioch and started the problem, were recognized by the Jerusalem church and authorized by them. "Certain which went out from us" (Acts 15:24) can be read no other way. The letter does say, "to whom we gave no such commandment". In other words, they were saying, "we didn't tell them to tell you that you must be circumcised to be saved." The letter certainly reveals much about the Jerusalem church, both by what it does say and by what it doesn't say.

By not specifically denying that "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved", it is obvious that this position was popular in the Jerusalem church. Notice also that the letter is written not only to the Gentiles in Antioch. It is addressed to the Gentiles in Syria and Cilicia as well (Acts 15:23). The work among these Gentiles was apparently started by Paul before the churches in Judea ever saw Paul (Gal.1:21-22). The fact that the believers in Syria and Cilicia were addressed in the letter make it clear that the conflict between the churches represented by Paul and the churches represented by James was a major conflict indeed!

We can safely assume that the conflict was not a small, local one. It was a huge, general one. It was not a couple of impostors speaking on their own behalf in Antioch to a small insignificant group of Christians. It caused much disputation in Antioch. It caused a Council to be convened in Jerusalem, and it caused letters to be written even to the churches in Syria and Cilicia. It is more likely that many representatives from James traveled all over the world teaching the same thing as those who said, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." (Acts 15:1).

The letter does not say that James representatives were lying. It merely says that James did not command them to say the things they said. In fact, the letter does not even state the problem accurately. It says, "ye must be circumcised, and keep the law." Nothing about salvation is mentioned. It also minimizes the trouble that the representatives from James caused- saying, in effect, that it was just words and that, after all, the Jerusalem church didn't command them to say what they said anyway.

The record in Galatians 2:12-13 makes it very clear that the conflict centered in Paul on one side and James on the other side. Peter was in the middle of the conflict and clearly sided with Paul in the Council. We are told in Galatians that before "certain came from James, he (Peter) did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation." (Gal.2:12-13). James controlled the circumcision party, and he did it by fear. Paul defended the church of Liberty from the poison of the church of bondage.

It is significant to note that the letter does not accurately state what the men said. The representatives from James said, "except you be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved"! (Acts 15:1) The letter says, "ye must be circumcised and keep the law." (Acts 15:24). The letter is a cover up, not a solution!

Acts 15:28 is the central statement of the letter, "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things..." The word necessary is "epanankes" in the greek. It means "compulsory". The letter claims that these necessary or compulsory things seemed good to the Holy Spirit. Moffatt's translation of Acts 15:28 says "The Holy Spirit and we have decided not to impose any extra burden on you, apart from these essential requirements..."

Certainly they are not trying to say that they had a meeting with the Holy Spirit and reached agreement on what to write. In verse 19, there is no mention of Holy Spirit. James says that it is his decision. There is no

evidence that the council heard a voice from heaven, or that a prophet arose and said, "thus saith the Lord!" The letter does not say, "thus saith the Lord". It says, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

When Peter spoke at the council, he accused them of tempting God (verse 10) by endeavoring to put a yoke upon the Gentiles which neither they nor their fathers were able to bear. Then he emphatically states that the Jews would be saved in the same manner as were the Gentiles, not the Gentiles saved as were the Jews. It is clear that the "burden" the letter was about to put on the Gentiles was NOT GOOD to the Holy Spirit. A word study of the word "seemed" in Acts 15:19 will also show that the verdict of the Jerusalem Council was not sanctioned by the Holy Spirit. "Seemed" is the word "doceo" in Greek and means to judge by appearances and personal opinion. It has nothing to do with receiving revelation from God.

Paul's Response to the Jerusalem Council

Paul's epistle to the Galatians, written a short time after the Jerusalem council, is Paul's version of what happened. In chapter one he gives his credentials and emphasizes his lack of association with the Jerusalem church.

Galatians 1:19 is a verse that many use to show that James, the Lord's brother, was an apostle. The King James version seems to say that he was when Paul says that he went up to Jerusalem to see Peter. It says, "but other of the apostles saw I none save James the Lord's brother." It is the only "evidence" that James could have been a "good guy". However, the word "other" is not the Greek word "allos", meaning "other of the same kind". It is the Greek word "heteros", meaning "other of a different kind". If Paul meant to call James an apostle, he at least meant an apostle of a different kind than Peter and the other eleven. If so, Paul must have had in mind an apostleship to a different gospel, the contrasting "gospel" he points out in Galatians 1:6-9. Regarding that gospel, Paul could be no more emphatic in denouncing it. In both verse eight and verse nine he says, "let him be accursed."

From this fact and all we have seen so far, it is hard to imagine that Paul would call James an apostle. It seems more likely that he would be the last one to call James an apostle, especially in Galatians 1 where his purpose is clearly to distance himself from the Jerusalem church. The fact that James does not even call himself an apostle, in the book of James, should also be noted. Peter and Paul both clearly establish their apostleship in their epistles. Certainly James would point out his apostleship if he was, in fact, an apostle.

We have pointed out the fact that Jesus Christ did not select James, His brother, to be an apostle. We have also called attention to the fact that James was not considered to take the place of Judas in Acts 1. If Paul is meaning to call James an apostle in Galatians 1:19, the obvious question is when, how, and by whom was he called to be an apostle? After all, Paul wrote Galatians twenty years or more after the start of the church age. In I Cor. 15:8 Paul says regarding his own apostleship that it was "as of one born out of due time". Moffatt renders it, "an abortion of an apostle". If Paul says that his own apostleship was "an abortion", it is hard to conceive that he would attribute apostleship to James at all.

A better translation of Galatians 1:19 is, "but other THAN the apostles saw I none save James the Lord's brother". A. E. Knoch's Concordant Literal New Testament translates verse nineteen, "Yet I became acquainted with no one different from the apostles, except James, the brother of the Lord." Moffatt translates the verse, "I saw no other apostle, (I saw) only James the brother of the Lord." It seems clear that James was not called an apostle by Paul! And, nowhere else is he called an apostle in the scripture.

Galatians 2:1 begins Paul's record of the Jerusalem council and he states in verse two that he went up BY REVELATION. In Acts 15:2, we read that the Antioch church determined to send Paul and others up to Jerusalem. Paul says he went up by revelation, which indicates that he would not have gone without revelation even though the Antioch church wanted him to go.

He continues to say in Galatians 2:2 that he communicated the gospel privately to those of reputation which speaks to the extent of unbelief in Jerusalem. At least, it shows how unpopular Paul was in

Jerusalem. Also, Paul says that "they who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me!" (Gal.2:6).

Verse nine records the proposal of James, Peter and John, that Paul should go to the heathen and they to the circumcision. But, what was God's commission to Paul? Acts 9:15 states it very clearly, "for he is a chosen vessel to me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL!" Nowhere does it say that Paul accepted the proposal of James, Peter and John! All the evidence in Acts and Paul's epistles points to the fact that he did not accept their proposal. Paul did minister to Gentiles, and Kings, and the children of Israel after the Jerusalem Council.

Galatians 2:10 says that they wanted Paul to remember the poor and he points out that he always did that anyway. There is no mention by Paul of the letter sent to the Antioch church, nor of any intervention by the Holy Spirit sanctioning the letter. Contrarily, the following verses of Galatians show the result of the letter sent with the people from Jerusalem. Paul says that when Peter came to Antioch, he withstood him to the face- because he was to be blamed.

Galatians 2:12 is an amazing account. Peter ate freely with the Gentiles until representatives from James came down. When they came, Peter withdrew and separated himself BECAUSE HE FEARED THEM WHICH WERE OF THE CIRCUMCISION! Verse 13 tells us that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy! One "pillar", Peter, (Gal.2:9) was afraid of another "pillar", James! Did the letter from the Jerusalem church reconcile the differences between them and the Antioch church? No! It appears to be merely an attempt to assert their authority over the Antioch church and the other churches that Paul had started as well. The evidence provided by Paul's account in Gal. 2 shows that the Jerusalem church still felt superior to the Gentiles. And, in this division between the Jerusalem church and the Antioch church we find that Peter was afraid of James! Did the letter "seem good to the Holy Spirit"? It is obvious that it did not. And, it also becomes obvious that Paul's references to the circumcision throughout his epistles are not to the non-Christians in Jerusalem but rather to the Jerusalem church headed by James, the brother of Jesus Christ. They are the children of the bondwoman.

Paul sums up his position in Galatians 2:21 where he says, "I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness came by the law, then Christ is dead in vain." He is clearly contrasting himself with the Jerusalem church who did frustrate the grace of God and who, although they would not admit it, said by their example that Jesus Christ died in vain.

The law frustrates the grace of God, and the letter sent by the Jerusalem church in Acts 15:28,29 is an obvious attempt to frustrate the grace of God. And, the book of James is also an attempt to frustrate the grace of God. James 1:8 says, "a double minded man is unstable in all his ways." James also says that "he that wavereth" should not be allowed to "think that he shall receive anything from God." (James 1:6-7). James presumes to set limits on God's ability to give! How many believing men and women have condemned themselves when they read these verses, knowing full well that they had unanswered questions in their minds about the things of God, and therefore doubted that they were good enough to receive anything from God. How these verses frustrate the grace of God! I John 3:20 tells us that, "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart." These are words that encourage us in the grace of God.

Even when we are confused or frustrated in our minds, God is able and willing to direct our path and give us stability. One who has the spirit of God is not unstable in all his ways! He can be deceived into thinking he is. But, all he has to do at that point is rely on his Lord, Jesus Christ, and He will deliver him!

Paul says that the just shall live by God's faithfulness, not our own (Gal. 3:11). These are words of wonderful encouragement. We can forget whether or not we are wavering or "getting our believing up" or "renewing our minds" or all the other subtle condemning slogans we've heard over the years. We can rest in God's great peace and have the assurance that He will deliver us, He will provide for us, He will comfort us, He will teach us. The burden is not on our shoulders, it was laid on the shoulders of Jesus Christ. He bore the iniquity of us all (Is.53:5). And, because He did, we can "Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." (Gal. 5:1).

James Versus Peter, Paul and Barnabas

Perhaps a few words should be said regarding Peter and Barnabas and their apparently contradictory behavior. For that matter, Paul should be included as well, for Acts 16:3 says that he had Timothy circumcised and Acts 16:4 says that Paul delivered the decrees as he went from city to city that were contained in the letter sent to Antioch. Certainly Paul did his best to live in harmony with the Jerusalem church. But, he found that it could not be done, as is clear from his epistles. He even went to Jerusalem to try to achieve reconciliation with the Jerusalem church, in spite of God telling him not to go (Acts 21:4). He considered the effort to achieve reconciliation of higher importance than his own life (Acts 20:24). But, reconciliation with prideful and self-righteous men is not possible at all. Reconciliation on any other terms than God's love and under the authority of Jesus Christ is sheer foolishness.

The simple truth is that although Peter, Paul and Barnabas were all God's ministers and did mighty things by virtue of His power and strength, they made mistakes and did wrong. It should be an encouragement to us to know that we also can do great things by the power of Him that worketh in us to will and to do His good pleasure. Even if we make mistakes, and even if we condemn ourselves God does not condemn us. The epistle of John continually calls to our attention that God is greater than our hearts, even when our hearts condemn us.

But, James is another matter. There is no record of any godly works that James did and in fact we have Jesus own words that the world could not hate him. How he became head of the Jerusalem church is clear from Paul's epistles- the people chose to walk by the flesh rather than by the spirit and the first obvious case of nepotism in the church is the result.

The Christian Jews of the circumcision may well have asked themselves, "who better to head the church in the absence of Jesus Christ, than his brother?" It seems that their answer was, "No one!" How Peter could have been afraid of James is difficult to imagine. He must have been motivated by his great love for Israel or some misguided hope that he could do more good within the group than outside of it. These are common justifications today for defending groups that become increasingly ungodly. Certainly the fear of Peter was not the result of cowardice. Peter was no coward. And, evidently, Peter finally dissociated himself from the Jerusalem church as did Paul. From the end of Peter's two epistles, it appears that he finished his ministry either in Babylon or Rome (depending on how the word Babylon is understood in his epistles.) In any event, we cannot diminish the work that Peter did. However, Israel, as a nation, is another matter. As one author has pointed out, Israel was quick to accept God's pardon, but they refused to walk in it. Peter, who was once held in awe by the children of Israel, removes himself from the Gentiles in the Antioch church because of fear. It is an awesome thing to consider and I do not doubt that the fear was real. Just what form it took, is not apparent. However, we cannot conclude that Peter was a coward or weak in any way. From all that we know about him, it is inconceivable that his fear arose out of weakness. It is much more conceivable to think that it arose out of a consideration of the consequences in Jerusalem to the church there if it was reported that he ate with the Gentiles in Antioch. Perhaps it would even have caused an insurrection. We do not know. We can say, as Paul said, that he was wrong. We cannot say that cowardice was his motive.

But, the account in Galatians 2 tells us that the war between the carnal man and the spiritual man is a real one. And, as a nation, Israel lost that war. However, the contrast to that loss, as revealed in the rest of Acts, is a glorious one. No finer record exists of God's deliverance and grace.



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