

INTRODUCTION

The early church experienced similar things to those we experience today. We can learn from the way the apostles handled them, and put their example into practice. Everyone likes being comfortable, but the spread of the gospel inevitably brings some changes, even if they are only the addition of other people to the church. We need to understand the issues we are facing, for it is easy to make wrong assumptions and then make mistakes. This part of the Book of Acts presents us with two issues that are face the church of Christ today – How should we handle disagreements on major matters? And, how can a sinner be saved?

THE EVENTS

1. Verses 1-2. Some Christians from Jerusalem came to Antioch. They told people that they could not be saved unless they were circumcised and kept the Mosaic Law. Since they seemed to be believers, and pointed to God's Law given through Moses, people were likely to trust them. But it was not the gospel the apostles had taught. It caused serious disagreement.
2. Verses 3-4. Paul, Barnabas, and others went to Jerusalem to discuss the matter.
3. Verse 5. The individuals who had contradicted the gospel continued to promote their views.
4. Verse 6. An assembly of apostles and other church leaders was called.
5. Verses 7-13. The matter was discussed carefully.
6. Verses 14-21. The assembly produced its finding.
7. Verses 22-29. The assembly sent a letter along with official representatives to the churches that had been affected.
8. Verses 30-35. The delegates from the Jerusalem assembly visited Antioch.

THE FIRST ISSUE – HOW TO HANDLE SUCH A DISAGREEMENT?

What we read here helps us to deal with disagreements we may experience today. It was a major matter – a key teaching. Other matters are less important and may be handled in a slightly different way.

The leaders of the church at Antioch brought the matter to the church at large met in Jerusalem. The question under dispute (how a sinner may be saved) affected the entire church. The trouble had come from Jerusalem, which was still the centre of activity for the entire church; it needed to be discussed there. Most of the apostles appear to have been still in Jerusalem; they had been commissioned directly by Christ and could give an authoritative opinion.

Several principles are involved here. Such matters affect the entire church, so they should be discussed in a wider forum than the local church; we are “one in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 4:1-6). There is value in having many people from a variety of situations looking at a problem (Proverbs 11:14). The apostles could give first hand accounts of how the Lord Jesus viewed the matter; the equivalent for us is studying their writings in the New Testament.

Local churches learn from this to use the available resources of Christian wisdom based on the teaching of Christ in Scripture.

Those principles are widely practised. Many ecumenical assemblies and councils have been held to deal with disputed issues Their writings are relevant today; e.g. the heresy of Marcion (that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the

New) is still present; so is the heresy of Arius (that Christ is not divine – taught today by Jehovah Witnesses). We have many creeds and statements of faith to help us understand issues. Some, e.g. the Westminster Assembly, were held to provide a basis for church union – they should not be regarded as divisive.

Churches also learn to take their problems to the Bible. “What says the Scripture?” is the question we must ask. There we find the teaching of Christ through the writings of his apostles, as well as the teaching about Christ through God’s prophets and historians.

What we must not do is try to deal with every problem alone, or follow the ways of the world. It is God’s church, not ours; his will must be done.

The Jerusalem Council looked to God, not to man. They reached their conclusion with the help of God’s Spirit as they considered God’s works and God’s Word.

They noted that:

1. Verse 7 – God had a purpose when he chose Peter to bring the gentiles to faith in Christ;
2. Verse 8 – God gave believing gentiles the Holy Spirit – although they did not follow Jewish rites he did not discriminate against them; instead he gave to them what he had first promised to the Jews;
3. Verse 9 – he transformed them (“purified their heart by faith”); circumcision was only a sign, whereas a new heart was the reality to which it pointed; they were not inferior to believing Jews, and had a better standing than unbelieving ones.

It is not always easy to read the significance of God’s work; so it cannot be taken on its own as a guide for action. We need his Word; it is authoritative.

The Council based its finding on the fact that God’s Word confirms what the apostles taught (verses 15-16).

The Holy Spirit was involved in this decision. It was his Word they used to come to their conclusion; and he often illuminates the Word, so that we understand it more clearly.

Sometimes people suggest that his Word contradicts itself (which is an absurd idea – how can the God of truth contradict himself?). The heretics tried to base their case on a selective reading of the Old Testament. Does the Old contradict the New? No. Some of God’s Law given in Old Testament times was time-limited, while other parts were basic moral principles that are inherently the same always. See the next part.

THE SECOND ISSUE – HOW CAN A SINNER BE SAVED?

This is the greatest problem facing humanity, though not often recognised. All of life’s problems can be traced to two things: humanity’s innate tendency to evil; and God’s punishment of that. From our point of view this is our greatest need – “What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” From God’s point of view it is the most important matter – hence the Good Shepherd seeking and saving the lost. It was the purpose of Jesus’ mission “To save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). If we have not felt this need it suggest we are asleep.

Two answers can be given – either we do it or God gives it – salvation by works, or salvation by grace.

Since the days of Cain humanity has imagined it can do whatever God requires of us. Many of the Jews in Jesus day thought they could get to heaven by keeping God’s Law. In secular Western society education has been tried, and failed. Laws (both God’s and man’s) may restrain but cannot cure.

The people who were troubling the church in Antioch did not deny that Christ Jesus was the Saviour. But they added human works to what he had done and what promised to do. It was a case of 'Christ plus'. That is a subtle and dangerous error. The Bible teaches that sinners are saved by Christ alone, and that we do not contribute anything to our salvation.

Salvation is "through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 11). Grace is God's free favour, and salvation is his gift. It comes through our Lord Jesus Christ who has borne our sins on the tree so that we may be forgiven. The "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" refers to all the benefits God gives freely for Christ's sake.

Salvation is "through faith" (verses 8,9). Faith means believing this message of grace, welcoming the Christ that it shows us, and asking God to save us on those terms. This is the opposite of trying to earn salvation – faith is simply relying on God to do what he has said.

Salvation involves the work of the Holy Spirit, whom Christ gives to everyone when they believe his gospel (verse 8). The act of believing in Christ involves a moral change – it cleanses the person's heart (verse 9).

So salvation is free. Trying to work for it is a nonsense idea and offensive to the God of grace.

It has also has two aspects – reconciled to God by the shed blood of Christ; and given a "new heart" (Ezekiel 36:26), so that we begin to love and practice what is good, starting with believing in Christ.

So why did the heretics say people must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses? Was there a different way of salvation in Old Testament times? No! Those who thought there was are very selective in their reading of the Old Testament. It was always by grace, and God gave his people signs and laws that reminded them of that. God gave his people signs that reinforced the Word he had spoken; the tree of life; the rainbow; the Passover; circumcision; baptism; the Lord's Supper. The physical act of circumcision (seen as removing the filth of the flesh) was a sign that pointed to the spiritual act of God putting away the spiritual filth of the human heart. The reason the Jews were commanded to do it (during Moses' time) was to remind them of the real, spiritual cleansing that they needed and that God promised. Baptism is a sign of the same thing today. Since these are only signs that point to a greater reality, there is no need to be circumcised or baptised, in order to be saved. The reason God commands it is to teach us, not to save us.

THE OUTCOME

The leaders of the church wrote to the church in Antioch and sent official representatives to reassure them.

They dissociated themselves from the heretics (verse 24). They assured the Christians that keeping the Law in order to be saved was a burden no one should carry (verses 10, 28).

The purpose of the Law is to show us how to live holy lives that please God. So their letter included instructions to avoid those social practices (mainly to do with idol worship) that could easily involve them in sin.

The result was joy among the Christians of Antioch.