



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## Missiology

### Lesson 8 – The First Doctrinal Controversy

The order of events leading up to the controversy between Paul and Barnabas, on the one hand, and certain Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, on the other hand, cannot be firmly established from Scripture. In this lesson we will be following one possible order of events that seems to make good sense. The events themselves are what is important, however, not the exact order in which they took place.

When Paul and Barnabas returned from their first mission journey, they stayed in Antioch of Syria **“a long time”** (Acts 14:28). It is possible and even likely that during this time the apostle Peter came to Antioch to visit the Christians there. Peter had no problem eating with the Gentile Christians in the congregation, for the congregation in Antioch was made up of both Jewish and Gentile Christians in one united congregation.

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, however, were not accustomed to eating with Gentiles, even though they were Christians. This was part of their Old Testament culture, and Peter knew this. Therefore, when Jewish Christians came to Antioch from Jerusalem, Peter stopped eating with the Gentile Christians and ate only with the Jewish Christians. This, of course, confused the Gentile Christians. Were they not Christians on the same level as the Jewish Christians? They became even more confused when Barnabas, Paul’s partner in his mission work to the Gentiles, also joined Peter and ate only with the Jewish Christians. In fact, Peter’s example led all the Jewish Christians in Antioch to stop eating with the Gentiles.

When Paul saw what was going on, he could not keep silent. This is what he wrote to the Galatians about what took place: **“Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James (the head elder of the Jerusalem Christians), he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, ‘If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?’”** (Galatians 2:11-14). Peter did not want to upset the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, but he ended up giving the impression that Gentile Christians were not really on the same level as Jewish Christians. His actions implied that if they really wanted to be real Christians, they would have to live like Jews and follow Jewish customs, and only then would they be worthy of having Jewish Christians eat with them.

So here was a public confrontation between two apostles. Paul accused Peter of hypocrisy before the entire group. Peter likely acknowledged that Paul was correct, for Peter himself knew that Gentile Christians were saved by faith in Jesus, just as Jewish Christians were saved by faith in Jesus. And Peter himself had no problem eating with the Gentile Christians before the Jerusalem visitors arrived.

It was not long before the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem made their position clear. We read in the book of Acts: **“And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’”** (Acts 15:1). Not only were they refusing to eat with the Gentile Christians; they were saying that the Gentiles would have to become Jews through circumcision and keep the Jewish Old Testament laws if they wanted to be saved. Faith in Christ would not be enough for salvation. They insisted that faith in Christ and also obedience to the Jewish laws were necessary for salvation.

These Jewish false teachers who claimed to be Christians were not satisfied to stir up the Antioch congregation. They made their way to the congregations in Galatia that Paul and Barnabas had just founded and spread their false teachings there as well. When Paul heard this, he wrote his New Testament letter to the Galatians, in which he taught very clearly and plainly: **“A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. ... By the works of the law no flesh shall be justified”** (Galatians 2:16). **“The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me”** (Galatians 2:20).

Paul was amazed that the Galatians who had come to faith in Christ through the Gospel Paul that preached were so easily attracted to this false gospel that was not good news at all. He wrote to them: **“As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.’”** (Galatians 3:10). In other words, if a person wants to be saved by the law, he must keep every part of the law perfectly or else he is under the curse of the law. Because we have not perfectly kept every part, we are all under this curse. But, as Paul stated in his letter, the Good News is this: **“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us”** (Galatians 3:13). Jesus Christ did this by taking our sin upon Himself and being punished for our sin in our place on the cross. Jesus is the only way of salvation. We are saved alone by faith in Him and not by any observance of any law. Paul’s conclusion: **“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”** (Galatians 3:26-28).

Meanwhile, back in Antioch of Syria, the controversy became so heated that **“they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question”** (Acts 15:2). Most of the Christians in other cities along the way had no problem treating the Gentile Christians as Christians equal to

themselves. We know this because when Paul and Barnabas and the Antioch delegation went through Phoenicia and Samaria **“describing the conversion of the Gentiles, ... they caused great joy to all the brethren”** (Acts 15:3).

It was a different story when they got to Jerusalem, however. **“Some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses’”** (Acts 15:5). The argument went back and forth for some time until Peter resolved the dispute by simply reporting how God Himself had created faith in the hearts of the Gentiles in Cornelius’ home and that God had even poured out on them the special gift of the Holy Spirit as He did the day of Pentecost. Peter said: **“God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they”** (Acts 15:8-11).

This is the only correct way to resolve doctrinal disputes. We let God resolve the dispute through His words and His works. We find God’s answers in the Holy Scriptures.

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem looked up to Jesus’ brother James as their leader. They were all waiting for what he would say in response to Peter. James agreed with Peter and showed that the Old Testament itself clearly spoke of Gentiles who would seek the Lord and become part of His people. In conclusion James said: **“I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God”** (Acts 15:19). These Gentile Christians should not be troubled or pressured into thinking that they had to obey Jewish laws to be saved. Nevertheless, the path for Christian unity between Jew and Gentile could be smoothed if the Gentile Christians tried as Paul stated in his letter to refrain from certain things that were especially repugnant to Jews out of love for their Jewish brothers. So James suggested **“that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood”** (Acts 15:20).

This suggestion was accepted by the apostles, the elders, and the whole church. They sent Paul and Barnabas, along with Judas Barsabas and Silas, to Antioch in Syria and to the Galatian congregations with the decision of the council on the controversy and with the suggestion of James. The letter made it clear who was in the right and who was in the wrong in this controversy: **“Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and keep the law’ – to whom we gave no such commandment – it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Acts 15:24-26). The letter then requested that they to refrain from the four things mentioned by James.

So **“they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement”** (Acts 15: 30-31). Later, when Paul returned to the Galatian congregations with his new companion Silas, they **“delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily”** (Acts 16:4-5).

Sometimes Christians are tempted to minimize and downplay the importance of faithful Christian teaching when they carry out the Christian mission. Some suggest that we should concentrate on spreading the Gospel and not be so concerned about correct doctrine. But this was not the way the apostles carried out their mission. Doctrinal disputes need to be settled by the Word of God. We need to do both: we need to get the message correct, and we need to get the message out.

### Questions

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1. Why did Peter stop eating with the Gentile Christians in Antioch?
2. Who followed Peter’s example?
3. Why did Paul publicly rebuke Peter for his actions?
4. What was the false teaching of some who came from Jerusalem?
5. Where did they spread their false teaching?
6. What led Paul to write his letter to the Galatians?
7. How did Paul speak clearly about the only way to salvation in this letter?
8. For what purpose did the Antioch leaders decide to go to Jerusalem?
9. What were the two positions in this controversy?
10. How was Peter able to resolve the dispute?
11. What suggestion did James make, and why did he make it?
12. Which view was strongly condemned in the letter that was drawn up?
13. Where was this letter delivered?
14. How did the Gentile Christians respond to this letter?
15. What lesson does this controversy have for us today?
16. Why was it so difficult for the Jewish Christians to accept Gentile Christians?