

Text: Acts 15:22-31

Title: Doctrinal Storm Calmed

Truth: The council of leaders and the Jerusalem church came to a clear decision about the false teaching and communicated it effectively to the Antioch church.

Date/Location: Wednesday July 24, 2013

Introduction

We continue studying how the church responded to a heresy that arose in its midst.

I. Bad Teaching Troubles the Souls of People, v. 24, 19

- A. Christians are troubled and unsettled by bad teaching. In this case, the false teaching tried to yoke the Christians with requirements that were not part of the good news of Jesus, nor could produce remission of sin, nor could even be kept by the Jewish people.
- B. Clearly affirming true teaching is needed to re-settle the souls of those who are turned upside down.
- C. False teaching calls for a swift and clear response from the church.

II. Official Response of the Church, v. 22-29

- A. The council decided to send a letter from the entire church as well as messengers from among the leaders of both congregations. This is an official statement and act. The way it is written shows that their approach has the approval of God.
- B. Notice the structure of the letter:
 - 1. Who is writing: apostles, elders, brothers of the church.
 - 2. To whom it is written: Gentile brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. This affects more than one church.
 - 3. Christian greetings.
 - 4. Statement of the occasion and problem: some teachers troubled you with words to the effect that Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law. It is important to be clear about this and not be around the bush.
 - 5. Clarification: This teaching was not from the church in Jerusalem despite the fact that the people “went out from us”: “to whom we gave no such commandment.”

6. Explain how they wisely addressed the issue: assemble the right people who share a united purpose, think through the issue, make a decision on specifics and then to send men to communicate the message by word of mouth. These men are qualified to do this and worthy of high esteem (they risked their lives for Jesus).
 7. Communicate the substance of their response to the heresy by listing the four items decided upon in their conference.
 8. End with a courteous closing.
- C. Notice the role of “word of mouth.” It is less impersonal than a mere letter. Something is not right if you cannot speak about your decision or teaching to other people.
- D. Notice the statement, “We gave no such commandment.” If you are a maverick, watch out. You should not be launching out on your own with strange doctrine when you have not been sanctioned to do so by your church!
- E. The decision of the church puts the false teachers in their proper place.
- F. The letter makes clear affirmations:
1. The Law and circumcision are NOT NECESSARY to be saved nor are they necessary to be sanctified.
 2. What is necessary is for Christians to do (after they become followers of Christ by faith alone):
 - a. Abstain from things offered to idols = idolatry
 - b. Avoid blood = an action that is sin (predating the law of Moses) and causes offense to some believers
 - c. Not eat things strangled = ditto above, eating meat with the blood in it is forbidden (Gen. 9:4, Lev. 19:26, Deut. 12:23, 1 Samuel 14:33-34, Ezek 33:25).
 - d. Stay away from sexual immorality (adultery, fornication, etc.)

Since these things are not desirable to any true Christian, this is no problem!
- G. The Lord has given to the church authority to be able to do make decisions of this sort—of course, under God and, very importantly, in accordance with His word.
- H. The church cannot claim this exact level of authority today because there are not apostles present in the church today. Church decisions today are bound to follow what is already revealed in Scripture.

III. Applications: Who Made Decisions and How They Made Them

- A. You do not have to be told who the leaders are. You can clearly see them, by who is faithful and who is leading through service.
- B. Church board or councils would do well to study this passage and see how they handled this difficult situation.
- C. The apostles and elders led by consensus and majority. The leadership had consensus among themselves, and the church was, by apparently a large margin, in agreement. The text says the “whole” church.
- D. There were probably still some dissenters still left (v. 24 – some who went out from us) – unless surprisingly all of the dissenters turned to the proper doctrine. This is not usually what happens. There are some who do not or will not come along or agree with the whole of the church and its leadership. I do not believe this creates a problem with the word “whole” as a description of the church. The vast majority of the church decided this is where this church is going. That’s the whole church. If there were a few stragglers who disagreed or even vehemently disagreed, they were basically by so doing showing that they were not really a part of the body.

This is not a matter of what color the carpet should be.

- E. The church approved James’ conclusion and were happy to be able to send a clear message to the other brothers to fix the troubling situation.

IV. Encouragement, v. 30-31

- A. The letter and the men who brought the letter encouraged the church in Syria that they would be doing well if they kept from those four things. It is always good to be encouraged.
- B. Verses 30-31 – that is exactly what happened. The letter was read aloud. The people rejoiced. They were confirmed that they were believing the right gospel and did not have to start keeping Jewish law in order to be saved. They WERE saved.

Conclusion

The doctrinal disaster was averted, avoiding a major split in the Christian faith during its infancy. Yet the issues that it settled remain to this day among movements that demand works are necessary in order to obtain salvation; or that a return to the faith’s “Hebrew roots” is imperative to practice the true essence of following Christ. The truth stands: God does

not require us to be circumcised or keep the Law He gave through Moses. Period.

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