

THE JUDAIZERS IN ANTIOCH (part-three of a four-part part study)

This segment will seek to employ some common-sense speculation in order to connect the dots and fill in the gaps which do exist between Galatians 2:11-14 and the overall chronology of Acts.

Common Sense Speculation #1 – Why was Peter in Antioch?

During incursion #1, Peter is in Antioch. During incursion #2, no mention is made of Peter, but when Paul and Barnabas show up in Jerusalem, it is obvious that Peter is already there. Why? The most likely scenario is that he was seeking a safe haven from the animosity of Herod, who wanted to kill him (Acts 12:1-3). Peter first escapes from prison through the miraculous intervention of an angel of the Lord, and then leaves Jerusalem altogether for Antioch (Acts 12:17b). Upon arriving there, he finds a unified fellowship of Jews and Gentiles, with no Old Testament dietary regulations separating them. Due to his experience on the rooftop of Simon the tanner (Acts 9:10-16), and his encounter with the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:24-48), he was perfectly comfortable with the situation which existed in Antioch.

But Paul tells us that Peter responded so poorly to incursion #1 due to “fear” of the Judaizers (Galatians 2:12b). Perhaps it was out of a desire for self-preservation, in that his safe haven in Antioch would have been discovered and eventually disclosed to Herod by the Judaizers. But having learned his lesson in his confrontation with Paul, as well as the news of Herod’s death (Acts 12:23-25), Peter returns to Jerusalem and is present during the Jerusalem Council in order to stand with Paul and Barnabas in defense of the gospel (Acts 15:6-12).

Common Sense Speculation #2 – Why Acts 15:29?

The end result of the Jerusalem Council involved the leaders of the early church taking a stand for the integrity of the gospel in renouncing the notion that circumcision was a requirement for salvation. No doubt, Peter’s testimony, in siding with Paul and Barnabas was highly influential in that decision. However, instead of keeping the solution that simple, we have the insertion of four new prohibitions for the believers in Antioch; one of which was absolutely necessary in that it reflected the moral character of God regarding the sexual sin of fornication. But what about the other three? It may not be initially obvious, but connecting the dots here may not be that difficult. Why? The other three involve OLD TESTAMENT DIETARY REGULATIONS! Why? My best guess is that Paul’s confrontation with Peter resulted in the successful crushing of incursion #1 by the Judaizers. If incursion #1 was indeed authorized by James, and I believe it was, then the Judaizers’ return to Jerusalem with a report of what happened, could not have sat well with James. So having made this critical and necessary concession in regard to circumcision, he takes the opportunity for a trade-off when it comes to “you know what.”

Isn’t it significant that the list seems to equate the violation of those dietary regulations with sexual sin? Is it possible that those dietary regulations were so deeply ingrained in the Jewish psyche that they were essential to their sense of self-esteem and superiority over other people groups? At the same time, Paul and Barnabas obviously considered the trade-off to be worth it, as well. When it comes to giving James the benefit of the doubt, these first three prohibitions could have also been designed to create a measure of sensitivity within the minds of the Gentile believers in Antioch, toward their fellow Jewish Christians. Paul himself sought to establish this attitude in his epistles when dealing with matters of personal conscience (Romans 14). But some 2,000 years later, I would hold to the view those specific dietary concessions for the Gentile believers in Antioch, no longer apply to us as fellow believers in Christ.