

The Jerusalem Church's narrow-mindedness and Peter's Accountability to It

Here are a few simple comments on a brief text from Acts, which is not altogether without significance with respect to the two main points of the story: the bigotry of the Jewish Christians and Peter's lack of any authority in the Jerusalem Church.

The Bigotry of the Jerusalem Church

Acts 11:1-18 is quite revealing about conditions in the early days of Jerusalem Christianity as well as the Apostle Peter's relation to it.

The chapter begins by informing that the “apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the gentiles, too, had accepted the Word of God” (11:1). It does not merely say that the Word of God had been preached to the gentiles, but that the gentiles had accepted it. The information is given in a rather neutral manner. It does not say that they were glad or disappointed with the news. Luke keeps himself to the objective fact of the report having been heard. No more. Only later, following the defence of Peter, were their fears and concerns assuaged, and they praised the Lord, concluding “Then, God has given repentance to life to the gentiles as well” (11:18).

Things begin to happen when Peter returns to Jerusalem. Those who were of the circumcision, i.e. faithful Jews, who had taken an interest in the new Faith—for if they were usual Jews unconcerned with the new Faith, they would not have figured here—opened a front against Peter, accusing him of going into the house of gentiles and even sharing table fellowship with them.

This is, indeed, a pathetic stance! These people had understood nothing of the implications of the teaching of Jesus nor

of the consequences of his death, nor again, of the new life, the new relationship to God, and of God's love for all peoples without exception. They were still immersed in their bigotry, their exclusiveness and their hypocrisy. If they had heard—as they must—that God loved the whole world, that Christ offered to those who believed in him a new life and a new relationship to God and to one another, then how could they continue to look upon their fellow men with the disdain and abhorrence that characterized their behavior toward persons other than Jews? Here we see how Christian these Jews were! Many years later, when Paul returned from his third missionary journey, bringing the gifts of the gentiles to fill the Jews' desperate needs, their chief leader, James, says to Paul: "Do you see, Brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who believe and all of them are zealous for their law"! But why such a statement? Did James bemoan the situation or was he proud of them? Again, Luke seems to be holding back his evaluation. But we may draw our conclusions. Had James and the other leaders who worked in Jerusalem and in Judea so completely failed to make clear to them what the Christian Faith was all about? Could people of this sort be regarded as true Christians? The vision of Peter in the previous chapter with the prompting to eat of all kinds of creatures that were shown to him, shows that Peter, too, had his Jewish misgivings, but being not a fanatic, like the rest, but a good man, always willing to learn and to do the right thing, he readily accepted the explanation given and accommodated himself to God's will.

The Verb “Believe”

One of the problems here is the way in which Luke uses the verb “believe”. From a number of passages in the Gospels, that speak of Jews believing, we gather that the verb is sometimes used to denote not an enlightened faith, a faith according to knowledge, a saving or justifying faith—such as we find in the epistles of St Paul, but a beginning interest, an awakened interest in Jesus’ teaching, one that has not yet taken the form of a full commitment. Accordingly, Lk 8:13, for example, uses the verb “believe” even of those in the parable of the sower who were sown on stony ground, who, not having developed any roots, have no lasting faith: they have believed only for a time and when problems arise, they fall away. John 2:11 and 22 makes the disciples “believe” in Jesus repeatedly, because of what Jesus did, and yet at the end, they leave him and run away. It is obvious that this is not the justifying faith, the once for all experience of the sinner who comes to Christ to receive His mercy, forgiveness and salvation. Jn 2:23 tells us that during the Easter Feast “Many believed in his name”. It is noteworthy, however, that the very next verse informs: “however, Jesus did not entrust himself to them, because he knew what was in man”. In other words, Jesus did not accept their “believing” at face value. We thus ask in astonishment: “What kind of believing did they have?”, “What does it mean that they believed in him, when he did not accept their faith as genuine?” And would it be too much to suggest that perhaps at least some of them who “believed” in his name during this Easter, at a later Easter were among those who cried: “Away with him, crucify him”?

Jn 6 is also instructive. A large crowd followed Jesus, because they saw the signs he did on their sick. They obviously followed him because they had come to have some sort of

‘faith’ in him (6:2). Having listened to his teaching, Jesus fed them (6:10-13). This sign formed within them the opinion that he must be the Prophet, and thus they were minded to take him by force and make him king (6:14-15). This would seem to imply that they really believed in him. And yet in 6:36 Jesus charges them with not believing although they had seen him (*sc.* acting, in his majestic works). The net result is that from that point on “many of his *disciples* went away and *no longer followed him*”! (6: 66). This is certainly a strange combination: *disciples* who *did not follow him*! Again, we may ask: “What kind of disciples were they?” and “What kind of faith did they have”? Certainly, *not* the saving faith, not the faith that God demands for justification.

It would, then, appear that Acts, too, uses the verb “believe” in this ‘superficial’ way. In 8:13 even Simon Magos is said to have “believed”. Yet what kind of faith he had comes through a little further down. He approaches Peter, offering him money, so he could buy the right to give the Holy Spirit to whoever he liked. Peter’s answer to him sounds anything but an answer he would have given to a Christian brother. Peter sees through Simon. His words of condemnation could hardly have been stronger: “May your money go to perdition together with you. You have no part in this. Your heart is not right before God. ... I see you are in the bitterness of gall and bound by the bonds of unrighteousness” (8:20-23). These are terrible words to say to anybody. No one would ever use such words to a Christian brother, nor would a Christian brother be guilty of such charges, for then he could not be a Christian brother. This state of affairs is explained simply by the circumstance that in a number of instances in the Gospels and Acts the verb “believe” does not mean “believe” in its properly Christian content, but is used also of a superficial impression or interest taken, which is not real and does not last.

This is how we must understand the state of the “myriads of Jews who believe and who are all zealous of their law” (21:20). This is, too, the way in which we must understand the interrogators of Peter. No doubt many of those who examined Peter were among the myriads James mentions in ch. 21.

This sad picture of the condition of the Jerusalem Church seems to be the reason why Jewish Christianity, having taken the wrong road—zeal for their law—could only end up in the tragic way it did. Prior to the capture of Jerusalem by Titus, the Jewish ‘Christians’ fled to Pella East of Jordan. By degrees the gap between Judaic Christianity and gentile Christianity widened. From within the circles of Jewish Christianity spring a number of sects opposed by the (gentile) Christian Church, such as the Bardesanes, the Naasenes, the Ophites, the Hemerobaptists, and the Ebionites. At all events two-three centuries later Jewish Christianity practically ceases to exist altogether. Why? Because of the wrong foundations they had laid: their law could not sustain them. They were trying to put the new wine into their old bottles. They had not taken heed of the warning of Jesus that new wine (the new Faith) had to be put into new bottles (forms of worship), and they thought they could mix Judaism and Christianity (Mk 2:22). That proved their undoing. Jewish Christianity sadly enough died out and henceforth the only Christian witness was that of the so-called gentile Christianity.

St Paul

What the Jerusalem Apostles and elders had failed to do, i.e. to clarify the true nature of the new Faith *vis à vis* Judaism, was carried out by the Apostle Paul. He, too, was a bigoted Jew, fanatic to the extreme, thinking that imprisoning and

killing Christians was a service to his God, until the Damaskos revelation. There it dawned on him that Jesus was no impostor, but the Son of God, who had given his life for the salvation of those who believed in him. It was Paul who brought out the implications of Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection. He gave the definitive interpretation of those events, and freed Christianity from the shackles of Judaism. Under God, the Christian Church owes to the Apostle Paul its very existence. There would have been no Gospel to preach, if it had not been for the Apostle Paul.

Peter

If the first point of this text was the bigotry and hypocrisy of the Jewish Christians, the second point is Peter's position in Jerusalem Christianity. Here there is no recognition, whatsoever, that Peter was the 'head-disciple', that he was especially endowed and entrusted with the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. His word is no law in Jerusalem Christianity. His wisdom in going to the gentiles is called into question. So far from Peter having any special position, a unique authority among the Jewish Christians, he is made to sit on the dock to answer charges. Like a small naughty boy he is examined and an apology for his actions is demanded.

Here, then we see a Peter who lacks all authority and who stands condemned by his fellow Jews. In a humble way, Peter relates to them what happened in Joppa: his vision, Cornelius' messengers, Cornelius' words at his home, the Holy Spirit's coming on them, etc. and at the same time, presents the six Jewish Christians of Joppa, whom he had brought with him in order to support his testimony. It appears that he dared not face them alone!

That the Jerusalem leaders treated Peter disrespectfully is not in question. Given their mentality and their misplaced beliefs, it was not altogether unexpected. That Peter was in the right is not in doubt either. What is important here is how the Jerusalem Church looked on Peter. He had transgressed the cultic boundaries of the Jews and could not be forgiven, unless he had some very good explanation. That he had, is beside the point. The point is that Peter was not ascribed any authority above that of other leaders in the Early Church.

In view of these facts, one may rightly wonder, where the Roman Catholic Church got the idea of Peter's primacy and supremacy over all other Christian leaders. Certainly not from this text! That he also bequeathed something he never had to the bishops of Rome is another fantastic story.