

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



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Differences and Divisions

The fact that brethren have serious differences over issues does not necessarily doom them to divide. There is a way to maintain unity, despite our disagreements.

“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’” (Ac. 15:1).

This message brought to the Gentile church at Antioch of Syria touched off a firestorm of controversy that threatened to permanently split the church into Jewish and Gentile factions. How the leaders of the early church managed this controversy provides important lessons on how to manage our differences today.

Christianity began in Jerusalem as an exclusively Jewish phenomenon. The apostles made no effort to force these early brethren to renounce their Jewish heritage or the ceremonial aspects of their religion. It is not surprising, therefore, to read of these Jewish brethren holding some distorted ideas regarding the role of the Law of Moses in salvation.

This did not create a problem until Gentiles began to come into the movement. The more militant advocates of Jewish purity in the church (brethren from a Pharisaic background, Ac. 15:5)

were offended by the lack of respect for Moses among these new brethren, and felt compelled to promote Mosaic regulations among the Gentile brethren. Antioch of Syria was their first target.

Acts 15 records a meeting of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem with representatives of the church in Antioch to discuss this issue. Relying on prior revelations and examples, they came to the conclusion that the Gentiles did *not* have to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (v. 7-21). A message went out to the Gentile churches setting the matter straight (v. 22-31; see also 16:4).

At this point, the Jewish element in the church follows two different tracks. One group ignored the Acts 15 decision and continued to promote their distorted version of Christianity among the Gentiles. The epistles to the Galatians, 2 Corinthians, Colossians, and others indicate that these teachers continued to actively circulate among the Gentiles, insisting that Gentiles follow the Law of Moses to be saved. Paul called these men “false brethren” (Gal. 2:4; 2 Cor. 11:26), men who were sowing discord

among God’s people. They were self-serving heretics “whose mouths must be stopped” (Tit. 1:10-11).

The second group, isolated in Jerusalem, still clung to their Jewish prejudices, but did not force them on the Gentiles. As late as the end of Paul’s third missionary journey, we read of large numbers of Jewish brethren in Jerusalem who were still “zealous for the Law” (Ac. 21:20). To placate these people, the elders of the Jerusalem church insisted that Paul fulfill a Mosaic ritual in the temple, and Paul complied without dispute (v. 21-26). No Gentiles were involved, so Paul did not see it as an issue worth fighting.

The story of how the early church dealt with the circumcision issue provides guidance on how we should deal with our issues today. Brethren will disagree over any number of serious questions. Those issues should be studied, discussed, and (hopefully) resolved. But even if they are not fully resolved, brethren can still maintain unity, if they will not force their personal convictions on one another.

– David King