

Wings

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



May 13, 2012

Necessary Inference

Necessarily inferring conclusions from available evidence is a critical tool in Bible interpretation, as illustrated by how the apostles resolved one issue in their day.

“Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Ac. 15:19).

When the gospel first grew out of its Jewish incubator and began expanding into Gentile territory, the first controversy it encountered was the role of circumcision among the Gentile converts. This question first surfaced in the church at Antioch, following the arrival of Jewish teachers from Jerusalem (Ac. 15:1-2).

The conflict hinged on a simple question: Were the Gentiles required to be circumcised in order to be saved? The Jewish teachers—who apparently claimed authority from the apostles in Jerusalem for their position—said, “Yes”; Paul and Barnabas said, “No.”

Both positions could not be right. One or the other party in this dispute was operating on faulty information. If Christianity was going to survive intact, this question had to be resolved. So the church in Antioch sent representatives, including Paul and Barnabas (who knew the apostles and elders in Jerusalem), to Jerusalem to discuss the matter.

Acts 15 records the meeting of the representatives of the two churches. The meeting began with “much dispute” among the participants (v. 7); no doubt, there were strong convictions on both sides of this subject. But the record focuses on the contributions of only three parties: Peter (v. 7-11), Paul and Barnabas (v. 12), and James, the brother of the Lord (v. 13-21).

Peter appealed to his experience with the household of Cornelius, the Roman centurion (ch. 10). In that case, God had poured out the Holy Spirit upon a group of uncircumcised Gentiles, signifying that they were acceptable candidates for baptism in that condition.

Paul and Barnabas recounted the work they had done among the Gentiles on their first missionary journey. They had converted multitudes of Gentiles throughout Asia Minor; but circumcision was not part of their message. Yet God had blessed their work through the miracles they had performed.

James took the testimony of these men, added a prophecy from Amos that spoke of the Gentiles seeking God

(Amos 9:11-12), and drew a conclusion: “Therefore I judge” that circumcision is not required of the Gentiles (v. 19).

Centuries before this Jerusalem meeting took place, the Greek philosopher Aristotle posited rules of logical reasoning based on the idea of *deduction*, that is, “speech in which, certain things having been supposed, something different from those supposed results of necessity because of their being so” (*Prior Analytics* I.2). Whether or not James was familiar with the work of Aristotle, his conclusion was pure Aristotelian: a logical deduction inferred from the available evidence.

Every conclusion we draw from our study of Scripture—*every* conclusion—is the result of the same process of inferring a necessary deduction based on all the available evidence. The process can often be difficult, and our conclusions may not always agree, but we cannot dismiss necessary inferences as a legitimate tool of Bible interpretation without rendering the Bible worthless for any practical use today. Our task is to use this tool carefully and wisely.

— David King