

## The Dilemma of Gentile Inclusion

By Dan and Brenda Cathcart

The video version of this teaching is at: <https://youtu.be/yJovQHaWfrU>

The scripture reading is Acts 11:19-30

In the ensuing ten plus years since the resurrection and ascension of Yeshua, the Jewish sect known as The Way had experienced explosive growth. Up until this time, that growth in numbers was mostly within the Jewish communities both in the Land of Israel and in the diaspora. Now with the experience of Paul's transformation from persecutor of the believers to one of its strongest supporters and advocates, as well as Peter's change of heart toward the inclusion of the Gentiles in the kingdom of God following his encounter with Cornelius, the stage was set for the next phase of the gospel message.

The believers followed a more intense or orthodox form of second Temple Judaism than the average Jew of the day. They numbered among both the Hebraic and the Hellenist, or Greek speaking Jews. But the one thing they had in common was they all believed in the ultimate return of the entire nation of Israel, all the people of God, to be united once again in a re established kingdom ruled by Messiah Yeshua.

Deuteronomy 30:3-4 NKJV 3 "that the LORD your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you. 4 "If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you.

As the initial persecution of the believers in Jerusalem escalated, the believers fled to other cities not so hostile toward them. The Hellenist, or Greek speaking Jews fled to three primary cities in Greek speaking areas bringing the gospel message with them.

Acts 11:19-21 NKJV 19 Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. 20 But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

The city of Antioch was a little over three hundred miles north of Jerusalem on the river Orontes. Antioch was the Roman capitol of the province of Syria. A large city for that time, Antioch had over a half million inhabitants and over twenty-two thousand mostly Greek speaking Jews living there in a tight knit community.

The beauty and grandeur of Antioch was only surpassed by that of Alexandria and Rome. Antioch boasted many temples devoted to Greek and Roman gods; Zeus, Apollo and many others, with their idols found adorning much of the city's public places. The largest and most prominent of these Greek/Roman temples was the temple of Apollo where the open practice of sexual immorality was the norm. If one wanted to be counted among and associated with the rich and powerful and politically connected of Antioch, one would have a duty to participate in these temple rituals on a regular basis.

In such an environment, it is easy to imagine the level of depravity pervasive within the city. The Jewish community of Antioch would appear as a sanctuary of sanity in the darkened surroundings and many Gentiles were drawn to the light of the Torah of God that the Jewish community radiated.

The Gentiles of Antioch who found the refreshing monotheism and simple lifestyle of the Jewish population attractive became God-fearers like Cornelius. The historian Josephus spoke of the many Gentiles joining themselves to the Jews of Antioch.

“... They also made proselytes of a great many Greeks perpetually, and thereby, after sort, brought them to be a portion of their own body”<sup>i</sup>

It wasn't long before the community of believers in Antioch had a major problem on their hands. The Gentiles were coming to them faster and in greater numbers than they could accommodate. Still under the impression that a full conversion was ultimately necessary for their full participation in the community, the local leaders were simply overwhelmed. Conversion to Judaism was a years long process and had to be overseen by qualified rabbis and teachers. Word of their dilemma had reached the leaders of The Way in Jerusalem.

Acts 11:22-24 NKJV 22 Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. 23 When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. 24 For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

Once Barnabas arrived at Antioch, he found that God was doing a great work among the Gentiles, but also realized the situation was unmanageable. What were they to do with the large number of Gentiles who were coming to believe in Yeshua of Nazareth? They didn't really fit well with the established community. They dressed strangely and stuck out like a sore thumb in the synagogues. They certainly could not be allowed to participate in the idolatry and immorality of the city at large. In many cases their social status and participation in the Gentile community would have required them to continue in the pagan temple practices. The Jews of Antioch found this abhorrent!

In addition, this was the time of the Roman Emperor Claudius. Participating in the worship of the Greek and Roman gods, including worship of the Emperor himself was a legal requirement for every Roman citizen, the exception being the Jews and those who legally converted to Judaism. Barnabas and the Jewish leaders of Antioch looked to the Torah for guidance. The Torah stipulates that a Gentile brought into the community must be circumcised in order to fully participate.

Exodus 12:48 NKJV 48 "And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it.

The disciples in Antioch needed teachers. They needed men with impeccable rabbinic credentials. Barnabas knew just the right man for the job.

Acts 11:25-26 NKJV 25 Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. 26 And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Barnabas had probably known Paul from his time in Damascus and it seemed to Barnabas that Paul was the right man for the job. These new Gentile God-fearers needed instruction in the Torah and the teaching of Yeshua. They needed some solid teaching and they needed it in their native Greek language. Paul had the right credentials and credibility for the job.

Paul agreed to return to Antioch with Barnabas to take on this important task. But at Antioch something else happened. Early on, Paul was commissioned by Yeshua Himself to take the gospel message of salvation through Messiah to the Gentiles. Now, instead of preparing the God-fearing Gentiles of Antioch for conversion to Judaism, Paul taught them the ways of the Torah and of Messiah Yeshua, but also that the Gentiles should remain as Gentiles. This was risky given the geo-political climate of the day.

Paul taught that the Gentiles were included in the kingdom of God, in the synagogue, and fully included in the family of Abraham without the need for circumcision. Paul taught that salvation was for both Jew and Gentile. Through Messiah Yeshua, the Gentiles along with the believing Jews, inherit eternal life, the kingdom of God, and the resurrection of the dead. This was not in keeping with many of the other apostles who expected that once a Gentile received the Gospel of Yeshua, they would then naturally become Jewish through legal conversion.

First Fruits of Zion in their work The Chronicles of the Apostles summarizes Paul's teaching:

“Paul believed that the assembly of Messiah should reflect the Messianic kingdom, a world composed of both Jews and Gentiles. He envisioned Jews and Gentiles worshiping together in the same assembly, fellow heirs and co-religionists. As regards salvation in Messiah, he taught that “There is neither Jew nor Greek. (Galatians 2:28)”<sup>ii</sup>

It was at Antioch where the name of “Christian” was first used to describe this new Jewish sect. The name never originally implied anything other than a sect within Judaism, no different than the use of the term Pharisee, Essene, or Sadducee, The Way or Nazarenes as the believers were sometimes called. The use of the term Christian as the name or description of a separate religion, apart from Judaism did not come until centuries later. The name simply referred to an association with Messiah and was of a Greek language origin rather than Hebrew. For that reason, the name stuck in the Greek speaking Jewish communities.

It seems reasonable that over time, the sect of the “Christians” would form their own synagogues in the same way that other sects of Judaism congregated together. The “Synagogue of the Christians” in Antioch consisted of both Jewish and Gentile believers.

Paul's teaching that it was unnecessary for the Gentiles to undergo circumcision and become fully Jewish became a sticking point in the believing Jewish community at large and did not sit well with many of the other apostles and disciples of Yeshua. Circumcision is a Torah commandment identified as a sign of the covenant with Abraham. There were clear lines of separation between Jew and Gentile as far as participation in the community and worship practices were concerned.

In the case of the God-fearing believers of Antioch, matters were quite different. These Gentile believers, under the instruction of Paul, claimed full participation without conversion. They congregated and ate with their fellow Jewish believers. They fully functioned in the community as fellow disciples and claimed a share of God's covenant promises. It seemed logical that they should also keep the sign commandments connected to those covenants.

As we have observed over the last several teachings, there were clear lines of separation between God-fearing Gentiles and Jews. Paul's position and teaching was that these lines of separation were arbitrary and, in the eyes of Messiah Yeshua, entirely unnecessary. Paul wrote about this in his letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 2:13-16 NKJV 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of

commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, 16 and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.

In this letter, Paul speaks of a “middle wall of separation.” In practice, this was a literal wall or screened off area in the synagogues separating it into sections where the God-fearing Gentiles were separated from the Jews by this barrier. The Temple complex also had a barrier past which Gentiles were forbidden to go.

At Antioch, Paul presented a somewhat radical departure from the long-accepted understanding of the relationship between Jew and Gentile. Not only was there a physical barrier between the God-fearing Gentiles and the Jewish believers but a religious separation as well. The God-fearers were not allowed to fully participate in the Jewish Feast days, especially the Passover.

The essence of Paul’s Message to the believers of Antioch and throughout his ministry can be summed up in this Ephesians passage. The two parties that Paul talks about in verse fourteen are Jew and Gentile. The work of Messiah Yeshua has made Jew and Gentile one by abolishing the barriers between them. Young’s Literal Translation of verses fourteen and fifteen shed additional light on this passage.

Ephesians 2:14-15 YLT 14 for he is our peace, who did make both one, and the **middle wall of the enclosure did break down, 15 the enmity in his flesh**, the law of the commands in ordinances having done away, that the two he might create in himself into one new man, making peace,

In practice they also forbade any Jewish person from eating with a Gentile or even going into the home of a Gentile. We observed Peter’s mind and heart changed in this regard in last week’s teaching. These additional “laws” put in place by the Jews over several centuries were called a barrier around the Torah. Paul, as a Pharisee, was familiar both with this practice and this phrase. Yeshua also refers to these additional man-made laws in Matthew fifteen, one through three.

Matthew 15:1-3 NKJV 1 Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, 2 "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." 3 He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?"

Paul calls the Gentile inclusion in the covenants of promise the mystery of the gospel.

Ephesians 3:3,6 NKJV 3 how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery ... 6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.

Later in Paul’s ministry, he went to Jerusalem and speaking to the non-believing Jews, proclaimed that Yeshua rose from the dead and was the Messiah they were looking for, they were willing to listen up to a point. But, as soon as he said that Yeshua told him to take the message to the Gentiles, these leaders rose up in anger and rejected his message.

Acts 22:21-22 NKJV 21 "Then He (Yeshua) said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.'" 22 And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!"

Paul refers to this incident at the conclusion of his letter to the Ephesians. He says he is in chains because he proclaimed the mystery of the gospel that the Gentiles are included.

Ephesians 6:19-20 NKJV 19 and (pray) for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to **make known the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains;** that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

Paul tells us that this inclusion of the Gentiles is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Yeshua as the cornerstone. Yeshua Himself mentions the inclusion of sheep of another flock in John ten sixteen. The prophet Isaiah writes in three different places that the Messiah will be a light to the Gentiles. We find that in Isaiah forty-two six, forty-nine six, and sixty verse three. In Isaiah fifty-six the prophet explains how the Gentiles will be included in the covenant and have access to God's temple which will be a house of prayer for all nations.

Isaiah 56:1-3, 6-8 NKJV 1 Thus says the LORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, For My salvation is about to come, And My righteousness to be revealed. 2 Blessed is the man who does this, And the son of man who lays hold on it; Who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, And keeps his hand from doing any evil." 3 Do not let the son of the foreigner Who has joined himself to the LORD Speak, saying, "The LORD has utterly separated me from His people"; Nor let the eunuch say, "Here I am, a dry tree." ... 6 "Also the sons of the foreigner Who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, And to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants-Everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, And holds fast My covenant- 7 Even them I will bring to My holy mountain, And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices Will be accepted on My altar; For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." 8 The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, says, "Yet I will gather to him Others besides those who are gathered to him."

Isaiah says to keep justice and do righteousness because Yeshua is about to come and God's righteousness will be revealed. He goes on to say that the foreigners, the Gentiles, who join themselves to the LORD in love, keeping His Sabbaths, and clinging to His covenant will be accepted. The barrier between Jew and Gentile is broken down in Yeshua, God's salvation.

Paul's task in Antioch was to present this Gospel of Yeshua to the Jewish community and to the Gentile God-fearers. He was to train them up in the ways of Messiah and prepare them to fully participate in their community and the kingdom of God. Paul demonstrated to the other apostles and disciples of Yeshua that the Gentiles were full participants in the covenants of promise through the blood of Yeshua. Paul also demonstrated that the rules and regulations, the barriers that separated Jew from Gentile were not the work or intention of Messiah Yeshua. Despite the Roman laws of the day as well as the long-standing practices and traditions of the Jewish people, Paul demonstrated that the Gentiles are full heirs in the covenants and promises through Messiah Yeshua. This is the mystery of the gospel, that Jew and Gentile are indeed one people with one heart.

Study Questions:

1. Paul's teaching at Antioch is all about Gentile inclusion. Aside from the Isaiah passages listed in this teaching, what other scripture from the Torah, prophets and writings speak about the Gentiles inclusion in the family and kingdom of God?
2. Given Yeshua's teaching while He was with the disciples, and Peter's experience with his vision and encounter with Cornelius, why was it still so difficult for the leaders of The Way to accept full participation of the Gentile God-fearers in the community of believers?

3. Did Paul deviate from his teaching about Gentiles remaining Gentiles in the case of Timothy? Reference Acts 16:1-3. Did Timothy undergo a conversion? Was he born a Jew according to the accepted definition at the time?
4. In this week's reading, we begin to see the details of the message that Paul brings to the various assemblies to which he travels. Paul later (Romans 2:15-16, Romans 16:25, 2 Timothy 2:8-9) refers to his message as "his gospel." What is Paul's gospel? Is it different than the teaching of the other apostles?
5. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

© 2019 Moed Ministries International. All rights reserved.

---

<sup>i</sup> Flavius Josephus The Wars of the Jews 7.3.45

<sup>ii</sup> FFOZ The Chronicles of the Apostles, D. Thomas Lancaster, Vol 1, p342