

The Incident at Antioch

The crisis at Antioch, reported by Paul in Galatians 2, came over the issue of table fellowship: representatives of James (brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church) encouraged the Jewish Christians in that community to observe Jewish dietary laws, even though this required them to separate themselves from the Gentile Christians when the community shared meals together, including, we might assume, celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

Such a policy was probably presented as a mediating “separate but equal” position: let the Gentiles who become Christians live as Gentiles, and the Jews who become Christians live as Jews. Paul would have none of it, rejecting both parts of that proposal as hypocrisy (2:13).

Let the Gentiles who become Christians live as Gentiles. Paul thinks that it is hypocritical to claim that the policy of separate tables does this, because the actual effect is to “compel the Gentiles to live like Jews” (2:14). He does not explain exactly why that is the case, but the point may be that the policy marginalizes Gentiles within the community and puts social pressure on them to become law-observant like the respected church leaders who eat at the Jewish Christian table.

Let the Jews who become Christians live as Jews. Paul claims that Jews who become Christians actually live as Gentiles in the only sense that matters: they live as people who have been justified by faith in Jesus Christ, just as the Gentiles are (2:15–16). It is hypocritical for Jews to live as Gentiles in this sense (trusting in Christ for justification) and still claim to be living as Jews just because they keep dietary laws.

The book of Jubilees, written around the time of Jesus (give or take fifty years), offers this advice to Jews:

Separate yourselves from the Gentiles, and do not eat with them.

Do not perform deeds like theirs, and do not become associates of theirs.

Because their deeds are defiled, and all of their ways are contaminated, and despicable, and abominable. (Jubilees 22:16)