

BIB204 NT2 Early Church

Unit 1c

Early Divergence between Christianity and Judaism

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In this segment, we continue because we're going to the point of the transition where we begin to see a divergence. And I must be careful about saying divergence because a divergence is initial. It isn't fully complete. That will get worked out over the rest of the first century. It will get worked out primarily in the letters written by Paul the apostle. But we definitely see the genesis of that divergence between Christianity and Judaism in these early chapters of the Book of Acts. So we are here now in chapter 6. In 6:1, we read, "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.'"

I want to stop here and just basically describe what we just read. The disciples are increasing in number. So the Gospel is still being preached. The church is growing. It's exponential growth. And in the midst of all of this, Luke focuses in on another situation that's taking place in the growing community. You have when it says the Hellenists, what we mean by that is you have Greek-speaking Jews. In other words, it's just a way of saying diaspora Jews, Jews who did not live originally in Palestine, were not born and raised in Palestine the country, in Israel. They were not. They came from outside. But here they are. They haven't gone home. They're selling lands and they're bringing the proceeds and they're giving them to the apostles. So what that means is they're probably sending letters home and they're having lands sold and they're having proceeds being brought to them and they are delivering them to the apostles. That's one way they're doing it. So you have these diaspora Jews who are Hellenized. They are culturally Greek. That is, they are dual cultured, if I could put it that way. That means they are able to integrate with Greek culture and Greek norms, but they are also able to integrate quite nicely with Palestinian Jewish norms, at least to a significant degree. But of course, the only ones who could really tell the difference are Jews who are native to Palestine, who are not diaspora. So what you see here is you see a divergence in treatment. There is preferential treatment for widows who are from Palestine. That's what you see. So there is a complaint. Their widows are being neglected in the daily distribution of the goods and property and material that is being sold. They're not getting an equitable share.

So the twelve summoned everyone and they say, "We can't serve tables. It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God. So pick out seven men full of the Spirit and of wisdom. We will appoint them, but we are going to devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word." "We're not going to stop what we're doing, so this is an issue that needs to be taken care of from you. Pick out seven men that are acceptable to everyone." Verse 5, "What they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch." So Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch, that's a Gentile who has been integrated within Judaism. He has undergone circumcision. He offers sacrifice. He keeps the Law of Moses, or did prior to entry into faith in Messiah. "These they set before the apostles (verse 6), and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." That is rather significant because at this point in history, the ruling classes, the ruling families are Sadducean, as I've said. So it's entirely possible that some of these became believers. They ended up believing in the resurrection of Jesus and left their Sadduceanism. But more likely, these are Levites, priests who are not of the ruling families, not part of the ruling families,

not part of the ruling classes. They tend to be the people of the land. They tend to be middle class to poor. And they are simply seeking to serve the Lord faithfully and they're coming into the faith as they watch this community grow and flourish on temple grounds.

Stephen, he's full of grace and power. He's doing great wonders and signs among the people. That's verse 8. And then we read in verse 9, "Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen." That's a very important verse. "Some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen." It was called the synagogue of the Freedmen. And we're told that Cyrenians, Cyrene is very close to Cyprus. It's not on an island, but Cyrene is north of Cyprus. You have the Alexandrians, so you have some Jews, Alexandrian Jews from Egypt, south of Palestine. You have those from Cilicia and from Asia. That would be Asia Minor. So those from Cilicia, that would be where Saul of Tarsus comes from because Tarsus is found within the Syrian and Cilician provinces. And that's where Saul comes in. That's the earliest indication. That's when you know where Saul comes from. He comes from Tarsus, which is in the region of Cilicia, Syria-Cilicia. So they rise up and they dispute with Stephen. So that's a very important verse.

"But they could not (verse 10) withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law (and the Torah), for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.' And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

The thing to note is that the accusation that they bring against Stephen is probably exaggerated. The thing to note is that Stephen, given the Greek name Stephanos, is a Greek-speaking Jew. He is selected. He is agreeable to the people. He's one of the seven. But he is culturally Jewish. He can speak Aramaic, certainly, but he also speaks Greek. And that's why you find him in the synagogue of the Freedmen, if we do a reconstruction of these events and infer probabilities. He is a member of the synagogue of the Freedmen. He is alive to the significance of the temple. You'll note that in a previous segment. I used that language. He is alive to the significance of temple, altar, incense, the ministry of the priesthood. The teaching of the apostles has taken root in this man. And so here it is. He is beginning to see the end of the law, the end of Torah.

In the 1st century, indeed in the second temple period which runs from 516 BC to 70 AD, by most scholars' reckoning, Judaism is very traditional. It's based on the traditions of the fathers. There's oral tradition which will become written tradition. There's teaching in the synagogue. Monotheism is intensified in the wake of the previous history of Israel in which they worshipped other gods, the gods of the land, the Baals, the Els, and so on and so forth. So they are seriously monotheistic and they are 'on' about the law. Generally speaking, that is. Some more than others. Now, the Essenes, who do not feature in the Book of Acts, are based in the northwest of the Dead Sea. They follow the law quite intensively, more so than anyone else in Jerusalem, by their own estimation, by their own account. They are quite devoted to the law. They see the sacrificial system as being flawed, as being corrupted. And then you have people who still adhere to the sacrificial system and they too are on about the law.

Certainly the Pharisees are on about the law. Before Stephen's conversion, he is probably on about the law. But remember, he is culturally Greek.

So with these new insights that are being generated by the instruction that he is receiving from the apostles, the teaching in the temple, the prayers, the service, he begins to see the end of the law and he begins to talk about it. And when he talks about it in his regular synagogue, he runs into opposition that he probably was not expecting. They rise up. Something in them is aroused. Some of them may not have, in fact, been diligent practitioners of the Law of Moses. Some of them may have been somewhat lax. Or they may have simply been on about the Law of Moses. In any event, what Stephen begins to suggest, as his insights begin to burst in on him, is enough to inflame passions in the synagogue that he frequents. And the people that are incensed, note again (take a look at verse 9), these folks are Cyrenians. They're from Cyrene. They are from Alexandria, Egypt. They are from Cilicia. They are from Asia Minor. These are diaspora Jews that are getting inflamed. They get up and they dispute with Stephen that they can't withstand the wisdom and the Spirit by which he is speaking because he knows the Scriptures just as well as they do, but he has the Holy Spirit and they do not. And so he's making connections. He's drawing connections together that they haven't thought about before, couldn't have thought about, and it's challenging what they understand about the Law of Moses. So they instigate men (verse 11) who say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." That wasn't true. He was simply seeing the end of the law. He was seeing into the ramifications of this new thing that started at Pentecost.

This is where we begin to see the divergence between Judaism and Christianity. It's still not discernible enough. It will become more discernible. It will increase in terms of its starkness as the 1st century rolls on. But this is the beginning point of it. So they accuse him of blasphemy. They bring him before the council, they set up false witnesses (verse 13), and they say, "This man never ceases." That's not true. He probably only spoke about it that one time and they argued with him. "Never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law. We've heard him say Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." They have extrapolated from his words and they've said more than he intended to say. So he's challenged. Chapter 7 in verse 1, "Are these things so?" And Stephen runs them through a history lesson. That's all of chapter 7, which I will not read. It's a reiteration of Israel's history.

The salient point is that this is what he says in verse 44 of chapter 7: "Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands." That's probably one of the key features of what he talked about in the synagogue of the Freedmen. "The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands." Never mind the fact that this is in Scripture. Solomon himself said it. "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me," says the Lord, "or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?" But Solomon, in the dedication of the temple that bears his name, said the same thing. "But can the glory of the Lord inhabit a house such as this? The heaven of heavens cannot contain you," Solomon said. So that is all that Stephen is referring to. But Stephen sees beyond. He sees to the end of the law. And so he concludes.

He says in verse 51, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the Torah as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” So he exposes them and they are in rage. That’s what you read about in verse 54. They’re in rage. They ground their teeth. I mean, that’s an expression of visceral hatred. And what does he do? He’s full of the Holy Spirit. He looks into heaven. He’s granted a glimpse of the resurrected Christ standing at the right hand of God. He tells them that he sees this, and that is enough to galvanize them to stone him to death.

And of course, Saul, a young man (verse 58) is standing there approving of his death. The men who stoned Stephen to death laid their garments at the feet of Saul. As they’re stoning Stephen, he cries out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” He prays that the Lord would forgive this sin, and then he dies. Chapter 8 verse 1, Saul approved of his execution. On that day, there arose a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men bury Stephen. They make great lamentation over him (8:2). But Saul is ravaging the church. He’s entering house after house. He’s dragging off men and women and committing them to prison. So the church is now scattered beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem and the surrounding regions, into the further regions of Judea. They will be scattered into Samaria and they’ll be scattered into Galilee and further north. And for a while, they will only speak to other Jews about Jesus’ resurrection.