

11. The Council of Jerusalem

15:1–16:5

For several years now Gentiles had been brought to faith in Christ and welcomed into the church by baptism. It began with that God-fearing centurion in Caesarea, Cornelius. Not only—in quite extraordinary circumstances—did he come to hear the good news, believe, receive the Spirit and be baptized, but the Jerusalem leaders, once the full facts were presented to them, instead of raising objections, ‘praised God’ (11:18). Next came the remarkable movement in Syrian Antioch when unnamed missionaries ‘began to speak to Greeks also’ (11:20), a great number of whom believed. The Jerusalem church heard about this too and sent Barnabas to investigate, who ‘saw the evidence of the grace of God’ and rejoiced (11:23). The third development which Luck chronicles was the first missionary journey, during which the first complete outsider believed (Sergius Paulus, proconsul of Cyprus) and later Paul and Barnabas responded to Jewish unbelief with the bold declaration ‘we now turn to the Gentiles’ (13:46). Thereafter, wherever they went, both Jews and Gentiles believed (e.g. 14:1), and on their return to Syrian Antioch, the missionaries were able to report that ‘God ... had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles’ (14:27).

All that was fairly straightforward. After the conversion of both Cornelius and the Antiochene Greeks the Jerusalem leaders had been able to reassure themselves that God was in it. How would they now react to the even more audacious policy of Paul? The Gentile mission was gathering momentum. The trickle of Gentile conversions was fast becoming a torrent. The Jewish leaders had no difficulty with the general concept of believing Gentiles, for many Old Testament passages predicted their inclusion. But now a particular question was forming in their minds: what means of incorporation into the believing community did God intend for Gentiles? So far it had been assumed that they would be absorbed into Israel by circumcision, and that by observing the law they would be acknowledged as *bona fide* members of the covenant people of God. Something quite different was now happening, however, something which disturbed and even alarmed many. Gentile converts were being welcomed into fellowship by baptism without circumcision. They were becoming Christians without also becoming Jews . They were retaining their own identity and integrity as members of other nations. It

was one thing for the Jerusalem leaders to give their approval to the conversion of Gentiles: but could they approve of conversion-without-circumcision, of faith in Jesus without the works of the law, and of commitment to the Messiah without inclusion in Judaism? Was their vision big enough to see the gospel of Christ not as a reform movement within Judaism but as good news for the whole world, and the church of Christ not as a Jewish sect but as the international family of God? These were the revolutionary questions which some were daring to ask.

No wonder Haenchen can write: ‘Chapter 15 is the turning point, “centrepiece” and “watershed” of the book, the episode which rounds off and justifies the past developments, and makes those to come intrinsically possible.’¹ This is not an exaggeration. Luke draws attention to it by silent shifts of emphasis. In this chapter Jerusalem is still the focus of interest, and Peter makes his final appearance in the story. But from now on Peter disappears, to be replaced by Paul, and Jerusalem recedes into the background as Paul pushes on beyond Asia into Europe, and Rome appears on the horizon. Indeed we ourselves, from our later perspective of church history, can see the crucial importance of this first ecumenical Council held in Jerusalem. Its unanimous decision liberated the gospel from its Jewish swaddling clothes into being God’s message for all humankind, and gave the Jewish-Gentile church a self-conscious identity as the reconciled people of God, the one body of Christ. And although the whole Council affirmed it, Paul claimed that it was a new understanding granted specially to him, the ‘mystery’ previously hidden but now revealed, namely that through faith in Christ alone Gentiles stand on equal terms with Jews as ‘heirs together, members together, sharers together’ in his one new community.²

1. The point at issue (15:1–4)

The tranquillity of the Christian fellowship in Syrian Antioch was shattered by the arrival of a group Paul later dubs ‘trouble makers’.³ *Some men came down from Judea to Antioch* (1). Before going on to consider who they were and what they were teaching, I need to share with my readers that I hold the so-called ‘South Galatian’ view, namely

¹Haenchen, p. 461.

²*Eph. 3:2–6; cf. Col. 1:26–27; Rom. 16:25–27.*

³*Gal. 1:7 and 5:10, RSV.*

that Paul's Letter to the Galatians was written to the South Galatian churches of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, which he and Barnabas had just visited on their first missionary journey; that he dictated it during the height of this theological crisis before the Council settled it (for he does not refer in his letter to the 'apostolic decree'); that he was writing it probably on his way up to Jerusalem for the Council, which would be his third visit to the city, although he does not mention it in *Galatians* because it has not yet taken place; and that therefore the situation Luke describes at the beginning of [Acts 15](#) is the same as that to which Paul refers in [Galatians 2:11–16](#).⁴

If that is correct, then the statement that *some men came down from Judea to Antioch* (1) corresponds to 'certain men came from James' to Antioch.⁵ Not that James had actually sent them, for he later disclaims this (24), but that was their boast. They were trying to set two apostles against each other, claiming James as their champion and framing Paul as their opponent. They were 'Pharisees' (5), and 'zealous for the law' (21:20). And this is what they were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved' (1). Nor was the circumcision of Gentile converts their only demand; they went further. Gentile converts, they insisted, were also required to obey the law of Moses (5). Because they could not accept conversion without circumcision as adequate, they had organized themselves into a pressure group, whom we often term 'Judaizers' or 'the circumcision party'. They were not opposed to the Gentile mission, but were determined that it must come under the umbrella of the Jewish church, and that Gentile believers must submit not only to baptism in the name of Jesus, but, like Jewish proselytes, to both circumcision and law-observance as well. It is hardly surprising that this teaching of theirs brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them (2a).

We need to be clear what they were saying, and what the point at issue was. They were insisting, in Luke's tell-tale summary, that without circumcision converts could not be saved.⁶ Of course circumcision was the God-given sign of the covenant, and

⁴ See Colin Hemer's chapter 7, 'Galatia and the Galatians' (pp. 277–307). His view 'embodies a synthesis of three elements: (1) a South Galatian destination of the epistle; (2) an early, pre-Jerusalem Council dating of the epistle; (3) a straightforward identification of the visits to Jerusalem, [Acts 9](#) with [Gal. 1](#), [Acts 11](#) with [Gal. 2](#), [Acts 15](#) being later than the epistle' (p. 278).

⁵ [Gal. 2:11–12](#).

doubtless the Judaizers were stressing this; but they were going further and making it a condition of salvation. They were telling Gentile converts that faith in Jesus was not enough, not sufficient for salvation: they must add to faith circumcision, and to circumcision observance of the law. In other words, they must let Moses complete what Jesus had begun, and let the law supplement the gospel . The issue was immense. The way of salvation was at stake . The gospel was in dispute. The very foundations of the Christian faith were being undermined.

The apostle Paul saw this with great clarity, and was outraged. His indignation increased when the Judaizers won over a notable convert in the apostle Peter, who was also in Antioch at the time. Before they arrived, as Paul explains in [Galatians 2:11–14](#), Peter ‘used to eat with the Gentiles’. True, they had not been circumcised, but they had been converted. They had believed, received the Spirit and been baptized. So Peter, remembering Cornelius, was entirely happy to associate with them freely, and even to eat with them, doubtless including the Lord’s Supper, recognizing them as brothers and sisters in the Lord. But when the circumcision party arrived in Antioch, they persuaded Peter to withdraw ‘and separate himself from the Gentiles’.

Unfortunately, that was only the beginning. What happened next Paul rehearses in [Galatians 2](#). The rest of the Jewish believers followed Peter’s bad example and ‘joined him in his hypocrisy’ (for Paul knew Peter was acting from fear, not conviction), and even Barnabas, in spite of everything he had seen during the first missionary journey, was carried away by the flood and ‘led astray’. Paul was hot with anger—not from personal pique, because his position was losing ground, but out of concern for the truth. He saw that Peter and his followers were ‘not acting in line with the truth of the gospel’. So he ‘opposed him [Peter] to his face, because he was in the wrong’, and rebuked him publicly for his inconsistency. His behaviour was a disgraceful contradiction of the gospel. So he said to him: ‘We ... know [you and I, Peter and Paul, are agreed about this] that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in [Jesus Christ](#). So we, too, have put our faith in [Christ Jesus](#) that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified.’⁶ How then, if we know this and have ourselves experienced it, can we preach a different gospel to Gentiles? Further, if God has accepted them by faith, as he has accepted us, how can we

⁶ [Gal. 2:15–16](#).

break fellowship with one another? How dare we reject those whom God has accepted? Paul's logic was incontrovertible. His courageous confrontation of Peter evidently had the desired result. For by the time Peter reached Jerusalem for the Council, he had regained his theological equilibrium and went on to bear faithful witness during the assembly to the gospel of grace and its consequences for Gentile-Jewish fellowship. Barnabas had recovered too.

The issue can be clarified by a series of questions. Is the sinner saved by the sheer grace of God in and through Christ crucified, when he or she simply believes, that is, flees to Jesus for refuge? Has Jesus Christ by his death and resurrection done everything necessary for salvation? Or are we saved partly through the grace of Christ and partly through our own good works and religious performance? Is justification *sola fide*, 'by faith alone', or through a mixture of faith and works, grace and law, Jesus and Moses? Are Gentile believers a sect of Judaism, or authentic members of a multi-national family? It was not some Jewish cultural practices which were at stake, but the truth of the gospel and the future of the church.

We are not surprised, therefore, by the 'fierce dissension and controversy' (2, NEB) which arose. We may be thankful that the church of Antioch grasped the nettle, and took practical steps to ensure a resolution of the issue. The calling of a Council can be extremely valuable, if its purpose is to clarify doctrine, end controversy and promote peace. *So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question (2). The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad (3). When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them (4).*

2. The debate in Jerusalem (15:5-21)

No sooner had the delegation from Antioch been given a warm welcome by the Jerusalem church, especially by the apostles and elders, than the controversy broke out afresh. *Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses' (5).* They were entirely biblical to value circumcision and the law as gifts of God to Israel. But they went

further and made them obligatory for everyone, including Gentiles. We note their word ‘must’, as we did the word ‘cannot’ in verse 1. Circumcision and law-observance, they insisted, were essential for salvation. So *the apostles and elders met to consider this question* (6), although others were present too. Luke gives no details of the *much discussion* (7a) which took place, but he summarizes the decisive speeches which were made successively by the three apostles involved—the apostle Peter (7–11), the apostle Paul supported by Barnabas (12) and the apostle James (13–21).

a. Peter (15:7–11)

Peter’s contribution was to remind the assembly of the Cornelius incident, in which he had been the chief human factor, and which had taken place *some time ago*, probably about ten years previously. He humbly attributed the whole initiative to God. First, he said, *God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe* (7). The choice had been God’s the privilege his. Secondly, *God, who knows the heart* (the word *kardiōgnostēs*, ‘heart-knower’, had been used of Jesus in 1:24), *showed that he accepted them* (literally, he ‘bore witness to them’, meaning ‘showed his approval of them’, NEB, JB) *by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us* (8). This proves that Peter’s earlier statement that ‘God ... accepts men from every nation who fear him ...’ (10:35) meant that there is no racial barrier to conversion; but God ‘accepted them’ in the sense of welcoming them into his family only when he gave them his Spirit. Thirdly, *God made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith* (9), demonstrating that it is the inward purity of the heart which makes fellowship possible, not the external purity of diet and ritual. It is also a purification by faith, not works.

This threefold work of God (choosing Peter, giving the Spirit, purifying the heart) led to an unavoidable conclusion. In expressing it, Peter addressed the opposition direct: *Now then, why do you try to test God* (that is, why do you provoke him by resisting what he has clearly revealed?) *by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?* (10). We Jews have not obtained salvation by obedience to the law; so how can we expect Gentiles to do so? ‘No!’ Peter concludes, ‘*We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are*’ (11).

As he makes this final affirmation, we notice that he is echoing, perhaps quite uncon-

sciously, the gospel statement which Paul had made to him in Antioch, while publicly challenging him. Together they make it plain that salvation is ‘through the grace of [Jesus Christ](#)’ and ‘by faith in [Jesus Christ](#)’. Grace and faith cannot be separated.

Paul: ‘We know that a man is ... justified ... by faith in [Jesus Christ](#). So we, too, have put our faith in [Christ Jesus](#)’ ([Gal. 2:16](#)).

Peter: ‘We believe it is through the grace of our [Lord Jesus](#) that we are saved, just as they are’ ([Acts 15:11](#)).

The central theme of Peter’s testimony was not just that Gentiles had heard the gospel, believed in [Jesus](#), received the Spirit and been purified by faith, but that at each stage God *made no distinction between us and them* (9, cf. [10:15](#), [20](#), [29](#); [11:9](#), [12](#), [17](#)). Four times in Luke’s condensed report of Peter’s speech the theme of ‘us-them’ or ‘we-they’ is repeated. God gave the Spirit to them as to us (8) and made no distinction between us and them (9). So why lay on them a yoke we could not bear? (10). We conclude that we are saved by grace as they are (11). If only the Judaizers could grasp that God makes no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, but saves both by grace through faith, they would not make distinctions either. Grace and faith level us; they make fraternal fellowship possible.

b. Paul and Barnabas ([15:12](#))

The whole assembly became silent, evidently out of deep respect, *as they listened to Barnabas and Paul* (perhaps the priority of Barnabas is because he was better known in Jerusalem than Paul) *telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them*. Previously God was said to work ‘with’ them (*meta* in [14:27](#) and [15:4](#), *RSV*); now ‘through’ them (*dia*) as his agents. This extremely brief résumé may be due to the fact that Luke’s readers were already fully acquainted with the details of the first missionary journey from having read [Acts 13](#) and [14](#). And probably the emphasis on the signs and wonders is intended not to denigrate the preaching of the word, but because they confirmed and validated it.

c. James ([15:13–21](#))

The James who spoke next was ‘James the Just’, as he came later to be known because of

his reputation for godly righteousness, one of the brothers of [Jesus](#), who had probably come to believe in him through being granted a resurrection appearance.⁷ In his New Testament letter he would later emphasize that saving faith always issues in good works of love and that heavenly wisdom is ‘peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere’.⁸ He manifested some of that wisdom now. Almost certainly an apostle,⁹ and already recognized as a (even ‘the’) leader of the Jerusalem church ([12:17](#)),¹⁰ he was evidently the moderator of the assembly. He waited until the leading missionary apostles Peter and Paul had completed their evidence. Then, *when, they finished, he spoke up* ([NEB](#), ‘summed up’), addressing his audience as *Brothers* and requesting them: *listen to me* ([13](#)). Then, referring to Peter by his Hebrew name (an authentic touch), he summarized his testimony in these words: ‘*Simon [literally, Symeon] has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself*’ ([14](#)).

His statement is considerably more significant than it looks at first sight, for the expressions ‘people’ (*laos*) and ‘for himself’ (literally, ‘for his name’) are regularly applied in the Old Testament to Israel. James was expressing his belief that Gentile believers now belonged to the true Israel, called and chosen by God to belong to his one and only people and to glorify his name . He did not refer also to the testimony of Paul and Barnabas, perhaps because it was their mission policy which was on trial. Instead he went straight from the apostolic evidence to the prophetic word: *The words of the prophets are in agreement with this* ([15](#)). Councils have no authority in the church unless it can be shown that their conclusions are in accord with Scripture. To substantiate his claim, James quoted [Amos 9:11–12](#):

¹⁶ “After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,

⁷ [Mk. 6:3](#); [Acts 1:14](#); [1 Cor. 15:7](#).

⁸ [Jas. 3:17](#).

⁹ [Gal. 1:19](#).

¹⁰ [Gal. 2:9](#); cf. [Acts 21:18](#).

¹⁷that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things”
¹⁸that have been known for ages.’

As it stands, this quotation from Amos is a powerful statement of two related truths. God promises first to restore David’s fallen tent and rebuild its ruins (which Christian eyes see as a prophecy of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, the seed of David, and the establishment of his people) so that, secondly, a Gentile remnant will seek the Lord. In other words, through the Davidic Christ Gentiles will be included in his new community.¹¹

Thus James, whom the circumcision party had claimed as their champion, declared himself in full agreement with Peter, Paul and Barnabas. The inclusion of the Gentiles was not a divine after-thought, but foretold by the prophets. Scripture itself confirmed the facts of the missionaries’ experience. There was an ‘agreement’ between what God had done through his apostles and what he had said through his prophets. This correspondence between Scripture and experience, between the witness of prophets and apostles, was for James conclusive. He was ready to give his *judgment*. The Greek verb *krinō* could mean merely to ‘express an opinion’. But the context demands something stronger than that. ‘I rule, then’ (JB), on the other hand, is too strong, as is Kirsopp Lake’s explanation that ‘it is the definite sentence of a judge, and the *ego* implies

¹¹ The difficulty with James’s citation of Amos is that the next quoted is almost exactly that of the LXX, whereas in the Masoretic (Hebrew) text the first promise refers to a restored Israel and the second to Israel’s possession of Edom and all the nations. To be sure, the Masoretic text would still have been an appropriate quotation for James to use, understanding Edom as an example of the nations to be ‘possessed’ or embraced by the true Israel. But which text was James using? Critics argue that, being the Hebrew leader of the Hebrew church, he would never have used the Greek LXX. Perhaps not. On the other hand, ‘like all Galileans he would be bilingual’ (Neil, p. 173), and the proceedings of the Council are likely to have been in Greek. If, however, he was speaking Aramaic, then probably he was using a Hebrew text different from the Masoretic, which presumably lay behind the LXX translation, and which, in a form almost identical to the LXX wording, the Qumran community seem to have known.

that he is acting by an authority which is personal'.¹² So we need a word stronger than 'opinion' and weaker than 'decree', perhaps 'conviction', since James was making a firm proposal, which in fact the other leaders endorsed, so that the decision was unanimous and the letter went out in the name of 'the apostles and elders, with the whole church' (22).

What, then, was the decision? In general, it was *that we should not make it difficult for* ('impose no irksome restrictions on', NEB) *the Gentiles who are turning to God* (19). *Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood* (20). Putting these two sentences together, James was saying that they must recognize and embrace Gentile believers as brothers and sisters in Christ, and not burden them by asking them to add to their faith in Jesus either circumcision or the whole code of Jewish practices. At the same time, having established the principle that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, without works, it was necessary to appeal to these Gentile believers to respect the consciences of their Jewish fellow-believers by abstaining from a few practices which might offend them . For, James went on to explain, *Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is still being read in the synagogues on every Sabbath* (21). In such contexts, where Moses' teachings were well known and highly respected, Jewish scruples were sensitive and out of charity should not be violated.

A degree of uncertainty, however, surrounds what is sometimes referred to, at least in Anglican circles, as 'the Jerusalem Quadrilateral', that is, the four requested abstentions. At first sight, they appear to be an odd mixture of moral and ceremonial matters, since sexual immorality belongs to the former category, and idol-meats, 'things strangled' (AV) and blood to the latter. How could James combine them, as if they were of equal importance? Besides, sexual chastity is an elementary ingredient in Christian holiness; so why state the obvious by including it in the list? In addition, verse 20 raises complex textual questions, as variant Greek readings reflect variant interpretations. Two main solutions have been proposed, both aimed at separating the ethical from the ritual.

The first is to regard the requested abstentions as being all moral. Since the third

¹² BC, IV, p. 177.

(‘the meat of strangled animals’) cannot by any feat of imagination or ingenuity be turned into an ethical matter, it is proposed to follow the Western text and omit it. We are then left with three. ‘Food polluted by idols’ (20) or ‘food sacrificed to idols’ (29) is understood as idolatry; ‘blood’ is interpreted as blood-shedding, that is, murder; and ‘sexual immorality’ retains its moral meaning. These three (idolatry, murder and immorality) were in Jewish eyes the main moral offences which human beings can commit. It seems a neat solution, but it raises more problems than it solves. (i) The textual warrant for dropping ‘the meat of strangled animals’ is very weak; (ii) the interpretation of the unqualified word ‘blood’ as meaning murder is far-fetched; (iii) the three sins are so grave, that a special apostolic decree was not necessary to outlaw them; (iv) the choice of only three moral prohibitions raises the question whether Gentile converts were permitted to break the rest of the Ten Commandments, e.g. to steal, bear false witness and covet. It may be this lacuna which led a scribe to add the Golden Rule in negative form, preserved in the Western text: ‘and not to do to others what one would not have done to oneself.’

The alternative solution is the opposite, namely to regard the four abstentions as being all ceremonial, all matters of external purity. In this case, the first is not actual idolatry but the eating of idol-meats, to which Paul was later to refer in [Romans 14](#) and [1 Corinthians 8](#). ‘Blood’ refers not to shedding it, but to eating it, which was forbidden in Leviticus, while ‘the meat of strangled animals’ related to ‘animals killed without having the blood drained from them, whose flesh the Jews were forbidden to eat ([Lv. 17:13–14](#))’.¹³ In place of these two, the Gentile believers would be expected to eat ‘kosher’ food, prepared according to Jewish dietary rules. This leaves the fourth item, sexual immorality. It now seems to be the moral exception to a list of ceremonial requirements, just as ‘things strangled’ was the ceremonial exception to a list of moral requirements. One way of dealing with the problem is to omit the word, and there seems to have been at least one manuscript in existence which did this, and which was known to [Origen](#) in the third century. But the evidence for this is extremely flimsy. The better way is to interpret *porneia* (which covers, in any case, ‘every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse’, [BAGD](#)) as referring here ‘to all the irregular marriages listed in [Leviticus 18](#)’ ([JB](#) margin), in particular to ‘marriage within degrees of blood-relationship or affin-

¹³ [BAGD](#).

ity forbidden by the legislation of [Leviticus 18](#)'.¹⁴ A number of other commentators agree with this interpretation.

If this reconstruction is correct, then all four requested abstentions related to ceremonial laws laid down in [Leviticus 17](#) and [18](#), and three of them concerned dietary matters which could inhibit Jewish-Gentile common meals. To abstain would be a courteous and temporary (although in some circumstances 'necessary', [28](#), [RSV](#)) concession to Jewish consciences, once circumcision had been declared unnecessary, and so the truth of the gospel had been secured and the principle of equality established. 'The abstinence here recommended must be understood ... not as an essential Christian duty, but as a concession to the consciences of others, i.e. of the Jewish converts, who still regarded such food as unlawful and abominable in the sight of God'.¹⁵

¹⁴ Bruce, *English*, p. 315; he mentions [1 Cor. 5:1](#) as an example, where *porneia* means 'incest'.

¹⁵ Alexander, II, p. 84.