

CHAPTER 5

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

The Council in Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, is a pivotal point in apostolic history. The Apostle Paul was one of the main participants in this council, along with Peter and James the Lord's brother.

One of the thorniest problems is the question about Gal 2:1-10. Is that Paul's own account of this conference? If so, does it conflict with that in Acts 15? Many critical scholars have concluded that it is impossible to reconcile the two accounts, and, since Paul's is undoubtedly genuine, have concluded that Acts is not reliable history. That position, in turn, calls into question the historicity of Luke's gospel as well.

An example of modern critical scholarship is Paul J. Achtemeier, professor at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, "An Elusive Unity: Paul, Acts, and the Early Church," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48:1 (Jan., 1986) 1-26. Achtemeier concludes that Paul was not present at the Jerusalem Council, even though the author of Acts placed him there.

Theologically also this conference was a milestone. It upheld the freedom of the Gentile church, while at the same time regulating behavior in those churches threatened by internal division in such a manner as to demonstrate Christian charity. It was a model of compromise in matters indifferent, and steadfastness in matters central to gospel truth.

Controversy in Antioch

Judaizers came to Antioch in Syria after Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey (Acts 15:1-3; for description of Judaizers, see notes on Galatians, p. 9.1). They said that the Gentiles must be circumcised, or they were still lost. Paul and Barnabas argued vehemently against them. Finally, the church determined to send Paul and Barnabas and others (including Titus, according to Galatians) to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the "apostles and elders" there.

In these notes, we will proceed on the assumption that Paul was discussing this conference in Gal 2. There it says that Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem "by revelation" (Gal 2:2). In that case, God revealed by his Spirit that they were to go to Jerusalem. This double leading, human and divine, was already evident during Paul's first stay in Jerusalem as a Christian (Acts 9:30; cf. 22:17-18).

Gal 2:1 says Paul visited Jerusalem “fourteen years after.” In our chronology, that would be fourteen years after his conversion (cf. Gal 1:17-18), not fourteen years after his first visit in A.D. 38. This would date Paul’s conversion ca. A.D. 36; otherwise, Paul’s conversion would be dated ca. A.D. 34, which is possible too.

Arrival and preliminary meetings

After a successful trip through Phoenicia and Samaria, they arrived in Jerusalem, where they were graciously received and gave their report to the church.

Gal 2:2 reports that they met privately with the leaders of the Jerusalem church. This apparently took place before the public meeting described in Acts 15. Such initial meetings would be sensible.

The believing Pharisees, who had Judaizing tendencies, gave their position first (Acts 15:5), and Paul and the others refused to give in and have Titus circumcised (Gal 2:3-5). Apparently there was considerable debate and discussion prior to the official public meeting.

The public discussion

The gathering of the “apostles and elders” was in keeping with the form of government of the synagogues, with their sanhedrin. This form of government is maintained in presbyterian church bodies today.

Peter, the one to whom Jesus had given the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:19), along with the other apostles, gave his report on the Lord’s bringing salvation to the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas gave their testimony from their ministry in Antioch and on the first missionary journey.

James the brother of Jesus, the leader of the Jerusalem church, summarized these statements from the apostles, and noted that these events agreed with the prophecy of Amos 9:11-12, that, when Jesus returns, there will be the remnant of Jewish believers, and “the Gentiles on whom his name is called.” James gave his recommendation, which was adopted by the apostles and elders (Acts 15:7-22). The “whole church” concurred in the decision.

The decision

James gave his recommendation (Acts 15:19-21), and the council adopted that as its decision, framing it in a letter to the affected churches (vv. 23-29).

The decision clearly exonerated Paul and Barnabas, stating that circumcision was not required. However, it did require the Gentiles to avoid certain practices that were particularly

abhorrent to Jewish people: food sacrificed to idols, eating of blood, eating meat from strangled animals, and sexual immorality.

Recently scholars have noticed that these four requirements reflect the four requirements for Gentile sojourners in Israel, as stated in Lev 17-18. “The use of the catchphrase בְּתוֹכָם [betawek] (‘in the midst’) explains the selection of just these four laws as binding on precisely those Gentile believers who have joined the eschatological people of God” (Cornelis Bennema, “The Ethnic Conflict in Early Christianity: An Appraisal of Bauckham’s Proposal on the Antioch Crisis and the Jerusalem Council,” *JETS* 56:4 [Dec 2013], 759). If this is the case, it makes sense that the Jewish believers would be especially offended if the Gentile believers broke these regulations. It also would explain the mention of the number of Jewish believers in each city, showing the expedient nature of the requirement (Bennema seems to think the requirement was morally obligatory as well as expedient).

There is a series of textual variants in these lists, especially between the Alexandrian and Byzantine texts on one hand, and the Western text on the other (the UBS Greek testament gives the Alexandrian text at v. 20 a {C} rating and at v. 29 a {B} rating). The Alexandrian text reads that these requirements were ceremonial (except for the one about immorality): abstaining from certain foods. On the other hand, the Western text makes them moral. It leaves out the prohibition about things strangled, and understands the term “blood” as murder or violence. Thus it prohibits idolatry, violence, and immorality; in addition, it adds the negative Golden Rule, “Do not do to others what you would not wish them to do to you.” The bulk of textual evidence, however, favors the traditional reading, and the requirement to compromise in areas of personal liberty.

We note that this decision was given not for all the churches, but especially for those of Syria and Cilicia, with their large Jewish populations (Acts 15:23; cf. v. 21).

Many have said that this decision runs counter to the freedom Paul claimed for the Gentile believers. Even though it does not require circumcision, it does limit normally harmless behavior. Does not this compromise Paul’s gospel? A careful examination of Paul’s epistles shows that he agreed with this approach. Note Paul’s attitude toward the ceremonial law in 1 Cor 8-10, especially 9:19-22; 10:23-33.

Recognition of Paul and Barnabas

According to Gal 2:6-10, the Jerusalem leaders, James, Peter, and John, recognized Paul and Barnabas as equal workers in the church, with Paul in particular as the leader of the Gentile work, just as Peter was of the Jewish work (Paul’s own words are recorded probably in vv. 14-21 [NASB, NIV, NKJV], not in v. 14 only (NRSV, ESV)). They only asked that Paul would contribute for the poor in Jerusalem, as a mark of the unity of the church. Paul himself fully intended to do this anyway, as evidenced by the collection he mentions in 2 Corinthians.

Return to Antioch with the letter

The council sent its letter back to the churches in Syria and Cilicia with Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by Judas and Silas (Acts 15:27). The church there rejoiced to receive the good news of the decision. Judas and Silas, who were prophets, preached there; and then the text says they returned to Jerusalem (Acts 15:33).

There is a problem, however, since Silas was still in Antioch in Acts 15:40; in order to correct it, some later texts add the statement which is v. 34 in the KJV, “notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there.” The probable solution is that there were other men with them, and they all, with the exception of Silas, returned to Jerusalem. Luke did not mention that fact in verse 33, since verse 40 made it clear that Silas remained in Antioch.

Paul’s conflict with Peter

According to Gal 2:11-21, Peter visited Antioch and ate with the Gentiles, breaking the Jewish food regulations. He had already been shown in Acts 10 that these regulations were no longer required. Yet when representatives from James visited from Jerusalem, Peter was afraid to cause strife with them and ate only with the Jewish Christians.

Paul strongly opposed Peter in this matter. His statement to Peter is recorded in Gal 2:14-21. It shows that there was spiritual unity and doctrinal unity between him and Peter, but that Peter’s practice at that point was putting the gospel of grace at risk and endangering the church. Apparently, Paul’s rebuke was received graciously by Peter, and there was no rift in the apostles’ unity (cf. 2 Pet 3:15). Jesus’ prayer in John 17:11 for his disciples was answered.

It seems best to make Paul’s statement to Peter include verses 14-21; this is followed in the NKJV, NASB, and NIV. The ESV, however, includes only verse 14 in the quotation.

For the spiritual significance of Peter’s actions, see Bruce, *Paul*, pp. 175-83; for their spiritual unity, see Machen, *Notes on Galatians*, pp. 140-61.

Those who adopt the earliest date of Galatians place this confrontation before the Jerusalem Council instead of after it. Yet it is easy to see how it could happen even after the council, which did place food requirements on the Gentile churches when the peace of the church and its testimony depended on it.