

The Apostolic Councils of Galatians and Acts: How First-Century Christians Walked Together

Arthur A. Just Jr.

At first blush, it does not appear as if the situation in Acts, and particularly the apostolic council in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15, has much bearing on the situation facing churches today. There were, however, some significant decisions that were made by the apostles and other church leaders in the first twenty years of the church's life that are instructive for us. This study will argue that the apostolic councils presented in Galatians¹ and Acts are watershed events in the life of the early church which provide the twenty-first-century church with a model for handling debate and disagreement, as well as forging consensus.

I. The Jerusalem Church

The apostolic council of Acts 15, while held in the midst of great strife and debate in the church, occurred during a time of relative peace in the empire. This secular peace, however, was unusual, for a series of persecutions characterized the first fifteen years of the post-Pentecost church, persecutions to which the church responded with faith and courage, even growing beyond its Jerusalem borders. It was the third persecution of Christians that had the most impact on the course of the apostolic council of Acts 15. This persecution came not from the religious establishment of Israel, but from Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great. It lasted from AD 41 to 44, during which time James, the son of Zebedee, was martyred (Acts 12:1–5). During this same persecution, Peter was imprisoned, miraculously escaping to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, the very John Mark who would later accompany Barnabas on his missionary journeys and then author the second Gospel (Acts 12:6–19). At the end of this episode, the simplicity of Peter's statement belies its significance: "But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, 'Tell these things to James and to the brothers.' Then he departed and went to another place" (Acts 12:17).

¹ Although the event recorded in Acts 15 is most widely known as the "Apostolic Council," it will be argued in this article that Galatians 2 testifies to a prior private council among these apostles. This understanding is reflected in the title of this article.

Richard Bauckham, in a discussion of the place of James, the brother of Jesus, in the Jerusalem Church, remarks that "12:17 is a key verse in the development of the narrative of Acts."² This is the first time James is referred to in Acts, and in this same verse Peter is described as moving to an unknown location. Peter will be referred to again in Acts only at the apostolic council. The persecution of Herod Agrippa I seems to have prompted the shift in the leadership of the Jerusalem church from Peter and the apostles to James, the brother of Jesus, and the elders. This shift in leadership will have significant bearing on how we perceive the course of events at the apostolic council of Acts 15.³

II. Peter and the Twelve

During the first fourteen years of the church's life, Peter and the apostles were the clear leaders in the Jerusalem church, staying behind in the city when everyone else was scattered during the persecution of the Diasporan Jews led by Paul. The reconstitution of the Twelve in Acts 1, when Matthias was chosen to replace Judas, indicates the symbolic significance of the Twelve as the representation of reconstituted Israel in the post-resurrection, post-Pentecost era. The pillars of the church would have been Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, the only members of the Twelve mentioned in Acts, with Peter and John persecuted and imprisoned for their preaching, and James being martyred during the persecution of Herod Agrippa I. Following Proverbs 9:1, "Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars," Bauckham suggests that along with the three apostolic pillars, the other four pillars were the four brothers of Jesus, James, the eldest, and Joses, Jude, and Simon. The "pillars" of the church are significant in light of Paul's language in Galatians 2:9, in which he refers to "James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars." Throughout the New Testament, the description of the church as a building with Christ as the cornerstone and the apostles as the foundation is common language (1 Cor 3:11; Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:4, 6-7). For Bauckham, this expresses the belief that "the early Christian church . . . saw itself as the place of God's eschatological presence, destined to supersede the Jerusalem Temple."⁴

Another key figure in this early period of the Jerusalem church is Barnabas. Although he never assumes a position of leadership, he is

² Richard Bauckham, *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 434.

³ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 434-41.

⁴ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 442-43.

introduced into Luke's narrative early on as a model member of the Jerusalem church, a Levite from Cyprus (a Diasporan Jew). He is called Barnabas because he was a "son of encouragement" who readily shared his wealth with the nascent church (Acts 4:36-37). Bauckham notes that "Barnabas acts as a key link between Jerusalem and developments in Antioch (Acts 11:22-24, 29; 12:25), as well as between the Twelve and Paul (9:27; 11:25, 29)."⁵

III. James and the Elders

With the persecution of Herod Agrippa I, James, the brother of Jesus, assumed leadership of the Jerusalem church with the so-called elders, who are first mentioned in 11:30 in connection with the sending of famine relief to Jerusalem through Barnabas and Saul. It appears that with the dispersion of many of the apostles, the pillars in the church now became "James and Cephas and John" (Gal 2:9). The original seven pillars were reduced to three, and the newly constituted body of elders replaced the apostles as the group to which Paul and Barnabas would give the famine relief. It is difficult to determine who the "elders" were, for Acts never gives us any definitive description of them.⁶ With the Herodian persecution, the apostolic circle would no longer have exerted control over the Jerusalem church. We might speculate that the remaining apostles who stayed in Jerusalem, or who returned to Jerusalem after their missionary efforts, would have joined the company of elders. Also among the elders were perhaps the brothers of Jesus still in Jerusalem.

As the official leader of the Jerusalem church, James plays a significant role in Acts. If the apostles now represented the movement of the gospel from its center in Jerusalem into the outermost parts of the earth, that center would be held in place by James, who assumed the position of bishop of Jerusalem as the significant stabilizing Christian presence in the city. Bauckham refers to James's legendary status among later historians such as Hegesippus, a Palestinian Christian writing around AD 180, whose description of James was preserved by Eusebius, a fourth-century historian: "because of his excessive righteousness [James] was called 'the Righteous' (ὁ δίκαιος) and Oblias (Ὀβλίαις) which is, in Greek, 'Rampart of the people' (περιοχὴ τοῦ λαοῦ), and 'Righteousness' (δικαιοσύνη), as the prophets show concerning him."⁷ James's character was such that he was

⁵ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 450.

⁶ This is the first reference to "elders" as leaders of the Christian church in Jerusalem. Earlier references are to the Jewish leaders.

⁷ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 448, citing Hegesippus in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.7.

remembered for his righteousness and his stalwart defense of the Christians in Jerusalem during the difficult days leading up to the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Bauckham uses Isaiah 54:11-12 to give biblical support for such claims:

A reference to James as "righteousness" was probably found in Isaiah 54:14, which would make James the means by which God builds the eschatological Zion, and/or Isaiah 28:17 (which continues the favorite early Christian text about Christ as the cornerstone of the messianic Temple), which would make James the plumbline which God uses to build the new temple . . .

Concerning James as "a rampart," Bauckham notes:

The most important aspect of the use of this term for James may be that, of the various architectural features mentioned in Isaiah 54:11-12, [rampart] is the only one which occurs in the singular. It was therefore appropriate to describe the unique position James came to hold at the head of the mother-church in Jerusalem. As a singular feature of the new Temple, James as the rampart compares only with Peter as the rock. This claim for James does not compete with Peter's; it attributes to him a different but equally unique and distinctive role in the church. It seems probable that the use of this term for James does go back to his lifetime, and corresponds to the position which Acts 21:18 also implies that James had acquired. Later, in the light of the legendary developments which treated the fall of Jerusalem as consequent upon James' martyrdom (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2.23.18-20) the term "Rampart of the People" was held to mean that, by praying for the forgiveness of the Jewish people (*Hist. Eccl.* 2.23.6), he protected the city, while he still lived, from impending disaster. But originally it will have referred to his role in relation to the eschatological people of God, the Christian community.⁸

As mentioned above, the elders appear to have been newly constituted after the persecution of Herod Agrippa I, and would have included those of the twelve who remained in Jerusalem. Of significance is the reference in Acts 15:6 at the beginning of the apostolic council, where Luke writes that "the apostles and elders were gathered together to consider this

⁸ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 449-450. Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 2.23) cites Josephus to support his claims that Jerusalem's siege was a result of James's death: "So extraordinary a man was James, so esteemed by all for righteousness that even the more intelligent of the Jews thought that this was why the siege of Jerusalem immediately followed his martyrdom. Indeed, Josephus did not hesitate to write: 'These things happened to the Jews as retribution for James the Just, who was a brother of Jesus who was called Christ, for the Jews killed him despite his great righteousness.'" See Eusebius: *The Church History*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999), 83.

matter," as well as the address in the council's letter to the Gentiles, which begins, "The brothers, both the apostles and elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings" (Acts 15:23). At this climactic moment in church history, when the churches of Jerusalem and Antioch met in Jerusalem, Peter was in charge of the apostles, and James was in charge of the elders, with James leading the Jerusalem church. Bauckham states:

The Twelve as such no longer existed as a constitutional group, but members of the Twelve could have belonged to the new body of elders. In connection with the Jerusalem council, Luke makes this explicit by specifying "the apostles" as well as "the elders," because it is important to him to give the fullest possible authority to the council's decisions, and also because he wants to indicate here the continuity between the mission of the Jerusalem church as he has described it in the early chapters of Acts and the Pauline mission to the Gentiles which is here endorsed by the Jerusalem council.⁹

What must be said of James and the elders is that as Jewish Christians they lived like Jews, keeping all the laws of faithful Jews, and yet they fully understood that living by the law was not a matter of salvation. As we shall see, Paul would have agreed wholeheartedly with this perspective, as he indicates in Galatians. The problem arises when keeping the law, particularly the rite of circumcision, becomes necessary for salvation. In this respect, as a faithful Jewish Christian who was now also the head of the apostolic mission, Peter would have followed James and the elders. Even Paul followed James when, according to Acts 21, he returned to Jerusalem and was confronted by James and those Jewish believers who were zealous for the law. The report in Jerusalem was that Paul was telling Jews to forsake the law of Moses and stop circumcising their children. Paul humbly submitted to James's authority, joining the four men who were taking the vow, purifying himself along with them before going into the temple for the presentation of his offering (Acts 21:17-26). At the time of the apostolic council, therefore, the leadership in the Christian mission consisted of Peter and the apostles, sent to the Jews, and Paul and Barnabas (along with the seventy from Luke 10), sent to the Gentiles (Gal 2:8-10).

The persecution of Herod Agrippa I ceased in AD 44, and the Christian church entered a seven-year respite from persecution under three Caesarean procurators: Cuspius Fadus, Tiberius Alexander, and Ventidius Cumanus. As Bo Reicke notes, "Extreme Jewish nationalism was

⁹ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 437 (emphasis mine).

somewhat subdued, and the Zealots had not yet achieved any dominant influence."¹⁰ It was during this period that there was a famine in Jerusalem in AD 46 and Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to give a gift to the elders.

IV. The First, Private Council and Conciliar Agreement (Gal 2:1-10)

During the famine visit, Paul and Barnabas laid before the apostles the gospel they had preached to the Gentiles. They felt compelled to meet with the three pillars of the church—James, Peter, and John—to share with them the results of their mission to the Gentiles and to receive their support, or as Paul puts it, “in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain” (Gal 2:2). Paul reports that fourteen years after his conversion, he went up to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1), bringing us to AD 46, the very year in which Paul and Barnabas began their first missionary journey, and three full years before the apostolic council of Acts 15. This would be Paul’s second reported visit to Jerusalem, the first visit coming three years after his conversion, when he met privately with Peter and visited also with James (AD 35, Gal 1:18-24). After the famine visit, Paul and Barnabas made their first missionary journey, including Paul’s first visit to Galatia, where he founded a Gentile church (AD 46-47, Acts 13:1-14:28).

In Galatians 2:1-10, Paul carefully outlines the major players at the private council in Jerusalem, and they are the same as those at the later public apostolic council: Paul, James, Peter, and John. Remarkably, most of the New Testament books were written by these four, and these men probably influenced some of those books that they did not personally write.¹¹ A remarkable group of men was present at this meeting, as well as at the later public apostolic council. Minor players at this private council included Titus, who as an uncircumcised Greek served as Paul’s object lesson for the Gentile mission, and Barnabas, Paul’s faithful traveling companion from his first missionary journey.

This private council was a meeting between two churches, Antioch and Jerusalem, and their respective leaders: Paul and Barnabas for Antioch, and James, Peter, and John, whom Paul calls pillars in the

¹⁰ Bo Reicke, *Re-examining Paul's Letters: The History of the Pauline Correspondence*, ed. David P. Moessner and Ingalisa Reicke (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 20-21. Reicke notes that this is reported by Josephus.

¹¹ Here is the list: Paul’s thirteen epistles (with Luke as Paul’s Gospel and Acts as his personal history), Peter’s two epistles (with Mark as Peter’s Gospel), John’s Gospel and his three epistles (and possibly Revelation), and James’s one epistle. The only New Testament books not represented are Matthew, Hebrews, and Jude.

Jerusalem church. As we observed above, the order of names—James, Peter, and John—indicates that James had taken a leadership position in the Jerusalem church. Paul notes that this visit was by revelation, an apocalyptic event in keeping with his motif in Galatians of the incarnation, his conversion, and his baptism (as well as the conversion and baptism of all who are in Christ) as invasive acts of God in which he breaks into our world and into our lives by his initiative.

Paul went to Jerusalem for this visit "to set before them the gospel I proclaim among the Gentiles" (Gal 2:2), that is, the gospel he and Barnabas had preached on their first missionary journey. As J. Louis Martyn indicates, the gospel happens for Paul apocalyptically as a preached event in which the end-time mystery of Christ is unveiled (1:12, 16). For Paul, the gospel is Christ (Gal 1:16), and it is for all people, including Gentiles (Gal 1:16; 2:2).¹² What Paul sought was recognition from Jerusalem of the two missions: Paul to the uncircumcised Gentiles and Peter to the circumcised Jews (Gal 2:8; here Paul acknowledges Peter as apostle and implies that he himself is an apostle like Peter). Paul received from the pillars in Jerusalem the right hand of fellowship concerning the two missions, reiterating once again that Paul and Barnabas would go to the Gentiles, and the Jerusalem church, led by Peter, would continue to go to the Jews.

For our purposes, it is important to note that there were two points of view represented here. Paul represented the Gentile point of view, what Martyn calls the circumcision-free Gentile mission.¹³ The doctrinal issue for Paul was to proclaim salvation by grace in contrast to works of the law, particularly circumcision, such as the false brothers were teaching in Antioch after secretly slipping into that city "to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery" (Gal 2:4). James, Peter, and John represented the Jerusalem/Jewish Christian point of view, that of the law-observant mission. Obeying the law was not a

¹² On Paul's apocalyptic theology in Galatians, see J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A, New York: Doubleday, 1997), 97–105. See also Moisés Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians as a Test Case* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 171–172, who affirms this apocalyptic perspective: "At the outset Paul highlights two important elements in the teaching of the epistle: (a) Christ's work, since it can be described as an act of rescue, leads to freedom; and (b) that from which Christ frees us is *the present evil world*—a phrase that, as is generally recognized, reflects an eschatological mode of thought. And as Schlier (H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater*; *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* 7, 14th ed. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1971], 34) correctly infers, the work of Christ must signify the dawning of the new age" (emphasis original).

¹³ Martyn, *Galatians*, 206.

matter of salvation for them, but was a custom that all Jewish Christians were invited to keep as part of their cultural heritage as Jews. As we shall see when we unpack the issues dealt with at the public apostolic council, the doctrinal issue for the Jewish mission centered in Jerusalem was idolatry, that is, they were deeply concerned about Jews becoming involved in any Gentile religious practices associated with idol worship.

This agreement between Antioch and Jerusalem in Galatians 2:1-10 was a private decision which turned out to be exactly the same as the decision reached at the public council of Acts 15. The decision was simply this: there were two missions, one to Gentiles and one to Jews, and Gentiles did not have to become Jews by means of circumcision in order to be members of the church. One may wonder why this decision was not reported by Luke in Acts, but it would be unnecessary to do so since the public decision of the Jerusalem council superseded this private decision. Paul, of course, does not refer to the public council because it had not yet happened. The Jerusalem council would be a public decision by the whole church, apostles and elders, which through the apostolic decree and the letter to the churches would add precision and public authority to the decision of this private meeting.

Following this momentous private meeting between the churches of Antioch and Jerusalem, the Jerusalem church must have engaged in a contentious debate about the law and the need for circumcision. This may have prompted the "men from Judea" to come to Antioch, causing Peter and Barnabas to be swayed by their arguments. The infiltration into Galatia of a similar group, or of the same group, caused the same problems there as in Antioch, which was the reason for Paul's letter.

V. The Antioch Incident (Gal 2:11-14)

Immediately following Paul's report of his private meeting with James, Peter, and John in Jerusalem, Paul also reports on the sad incident in Antioch that was one of the precipitating events for the Jerusalem council (Gal 2:11-14). We will assume that this is the same event reported by Luke in Acts 15:1, though, as we will see below, the issues were not exactly the same.¹⁴ Luke writes that "Some men came down from Judea and were

¹⁴ See Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 469-470: "Probably, then, the Antioch incident (Gal. 2:11-14) belongs to the events which led immediately to the Jerusalem council, which Luke describes in Acts 15:1-2a. Galatians would have been written in the heat of this debate at Antioch, shortly before the Jerusalem council. This explains Paul's failure to refer to the events of Acts 15:2b-33 in Galatians. That Luke makes no reference to the consultation and decision described in Galatians 2:1-10

teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1).

The major players in the Antioch incident were Peter and Barnabas, as well as "certain men from James" (Gal 2:12), an indefinite reference that may indicate the false brothers or the circumcision party. Whatever the case, these were men from Jerusalem claiming to be representatives of James. Whether their claim was true or not is impossible to determine, but from the portrayal of James in Acts, it is unlikely that James would have gone so quickly against the decision he had made with Paul and Barnabas in the private council with Peter and John. Whether or not Paul was in Antioch when the incident occurred is unclear, but Paul did confront Peter and Barnabas in Antioch afterward.

Table Fellowship with Gentiles

The issue here was not circumcision but table fellowship with Gentiles—eucharistic table fellowship—which is clear from the language that Paul uses in reporting the event: "For before certain men came from James, he [Peter] was eating with (συνήσθιεν) the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back (ὑπέστειλλεν) and separated himself (ἀφώριζεν)" (Gal 2:12). To eat with someone is a common expression in Luke-Acts and has eucharistic overtones.¹⁵ This is confirmed by the language Paul uses to

(which on this hypothesis took place at the time of the visit of Barnabas and Paul to Jerusalem described in Acts 11:30) is not at all surprising. This decision proved (shortly after the writing of Galatians) to have been a short-lived arrangement, very soon superseded by a fuller and more authoritative decision, which then remained permanently in force. None would have had cause to remember the earlier agreement once the Jerusalem council had promulgated the apostolic decree. For the continuing history of the Gentile mission, which Luke narrates, the agreement of Galatians 2:1-10 was of little significance, while the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 was epoch-making."

¹⁵ Besides this reference, this expression occurs four other times in the New Testament, three of them in Luke-Acts. In Luke 15:2, Luke reports on the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes concerning Jesus' eating with sinners. In light of the eucharistic overtones in the parable of the prodigal son, this is part of Luke's table-fellowship matrix, of which the Eucharist is its climax; see my excursus on "Jesus' Table Fellowship" in *Luke 1:1-9:51* (Concordia Commentary on Scripture; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 231-241. In Acts 10:41, Peter's sermon to Cornelius reports that the eyewitnesses of the resurrection "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." This may be a reference to eating and drinking at the Lord's Supper. In Acts 11:3, when Peter reports on the Cornelius affair in Jerusalem, he is accused by the circumcision party of eating with the uncircumcised. One cannot quite imagine this not including the Eucharist, for after preaching the gospel to Cornelius and his household and baptizing them, they likely celebrated the Lord's Supper together. Finally, in 1 Cor 5:11, Paul warns against eating with someone who calls himself a brother but also

describe what happened when table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles occurred in Antioch. Martyn is persuasive in his description of what the act of “drawing back” and “separating” meant to the Antioch church:

The first verb, “drew back,” sometimes describes a military or political maneuver designed to bring one into a sheltered position of safety. The second refers here to cultic separation. Since the eucharist was part of the common meal, Peter’s withdrawal from the latter brought with it his withdrawal from the former. He has now separated himself from the Gentile members as they eat the Lord’s Supper.¹⁶

The Gentiles were known to have more delectable foods and sumptuous banquets than the Jews. It was common for Gentiles to partake of the meat that came from the sacrifices to idols. Food was a fundamental part of pagan worship, and the pagan temple functioned as one of the best restaurants in town, serving the fine meats that came from the ritual sacrifices. The worst-case scenario for Christians occurred when they ate these meats in the pagan temple itself. This Paul would not allow. But eating meat sold in the markets at one’s home or the home of another Christian or even a Gentile was another matter. The association with idolatry would have been lost, and therefore it was possible to partake of these meats unless they were identified by someone at the table as meat sacrificed to an idol, in which case the Christian was to refrain for the sake of the weaker brethren.¹⁷ Any involvement in pagan worship—whether by eating meat sacrificed to idols or participating in meals where pagan prayers were offered—was strictly forbidden. But table fellowship with Gentiles was more than simply eating food sacrificed to idols, for “prayers to the pagan deities were normal parts of Gentile meal customs.”¹⁸ The situation in Corinth confronted by the apostle Paul (1 Cor 10:14-11:1) was typical of the problems facing both Jewish and Gentile Christians:

The idol temple seems to have served both as a butcher shop and as a place for sharing a cultic meal. For the most part, meat was either eaten at the temple or sold at the market after a pagan festival, and the association with the pagan gods, which was idolatry to the Christian, was obvious. . . . Recent Gentile converts to Christianity would have found it difficult to

engages in sexual immorality, greed, and idolatry and reviles, becomes drunk, or swindles others. In the context of 1 Cor, Paul is likely talking about fellowship at the Lord’s table and not the common meals taken together.

¹⁶ Martyn, *Galatians*, 233.

¹⁷ Philip W. Comfort, “idolatry,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 425.

¹⁸ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 160.

consider the issue of meat offered to idols independent of its ritual setting; they would eat with a guilty conscience (1 Cor 8:7). The invitation to dine in the home of an unbeliever could present a dilemma (1 Cor 10:27-30); while the invitation to dine at a temple would only sharpen the issue (1 Cor 8:10).¹⁹

To complicate matters, the sacrificial cult of the pagan temples also involved temple prostitution.²⁰ Temple food and temple prostitutes were the "sacraments" of pagan worship, that is, the means by which the god communicated benefits to the pagan worshiper. This combination of temple foods and temple prostitutes as central to pagan worship is affirmed by St. John's words to the church at Pergamum, whose members were flirting with the Nicolaitans, a cult that John warns against: "But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality" (Rev 2:14). The connection between idolatry and sexual immorality is made by Paul when he links them together in his catalogue of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9), as well as his opening words to the church in Rome (Rom 1:18-32).

The attraction of pagan worship to both Christians and Jews in the first century is obvious. Today we wring our hands over the entertainment worship of many churches, not to mention the enormous appeal of other religions. Imagine if they were offering the finest foods along with sexual favors. Early Christian sensitivity to any association with idol worship simply continued the concern of the Old Testament with the fertility cults that combined this magnetic appeal of food and sex. In fact, the entire Old Testament is a history of Israel's inability to resist the temptations of pagan worship and pagan gods. Gregory Lockwood, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 10, shows the significance of this for both the Old Testament and the Corinthians:

Anyone familiar with the OT sacrificial practices knew that those who ate the sacrifices were partners of the altar. When priests, Levites, and other Israelites consumed their allotted portions of the sacrificial animals, they entered into a close relationship with the altar and all it represented. The altar was the focal point for communion between God and people, and for the reception of divine gifts. In Mt 23:16-22 Jesus argues for the inseparable connection between the sanctified gifts on the altar, the altar

¹⁹ Bradley B. Blue, "Food Offered to Idols and Jewish Food Laws," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 309.

²⁰ For more on the significance of temple prostitution, see Brian S. Rosner, "Temple Prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20," *Novum Testamentum* 40 (1998): 336-351.

itself, the temple, the throne of God, and the One seated on the throne. The vertical dimension is paramount. That the Corinthians' relationship to the supernatural—to demons and to God—is Paul's chief concern is spelled out by the succeeding verses (1 Cor 10:20–21). Above all, the Corinthians are not to tempt the Lord (10:22; cf. 10:9).²¹

These issues concerning Gentile table fellowship are introduced here because they have a bearing on the apostolic decrees of Acts 15. To partake of the food of idols and engage in other practices of the pagan temple was to confuse the identity of the true God of Israel and the new Israel with the false gods of the pagan cults.

Peter's Withdrawal from Gentile Table Fellowship

Although there is no indication that the table fellowship in Antioch that precipitated the incident between Peter and Paul included meat sacrificed to idols, Jews were suspicious of any table fellowship with Gentiles because their strict dietary laws were a means for preserving their identity as the people of God.²² These laws were so ingrained in Jewish, and Jewish Christian, identity that the very idea of eating with Gentiles was abhorrent. Within this context, it required a vision from God to the effect that it is permissible to eat with the Gentile Cornelius for Peter to break through the barriers between Jews and Gentiles at the table (Acts 10 and 11). The Gentile mission began as a result of this invasive act by God to bring Peter to understand that table fellowship with Gentiles is part of his plan to extend the gospel to all nations and peoples.

We have no way of knowing what the "men from James" said to Peter and Barnabas, but we can theorize as to what might have caused Peter and Barnabas to withdraw from table fellowship with Gentiles. "Peter," they may have said, "as a Jewish Christian you have failed in your obligation to obey the law. You have compromised your obedience to the food laws of your fathers by eating with Gentiles. As the head of the Jewish mission originating in Jerusalem, you are failing to act as our leader."

Of course, Gentile Christians were not forced by Peter or anyone in Antioch to observe certain food laws when eating with Jewish Christians as a matter of their salvation. In fact, Peter's withdrawal from table fellowship with Gentiles does not mean that he or Barnabas were teaching the Gentiles that they had to keep the food laws or be circumcised to

²¹ Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians* (Concordia Commentary on Scripture; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 343.

²² Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 97.

become members of the Christian church, nor were they confessing such a thing. They were not teaching or confessing that Gentiles must keep the law in order to be saved. Peter did not withdraw as a matter of confession, but because he had been chastised by the "men from James" as being unfaithful in his leadership of the Jewish mission. Unfortunately, his act of withdrawal included his withdrawal from the Lord's Supper, a cataclysmic break in the fellowship of believers in Antioch.

Paul's rebuke of Peter was also a criticism of him as a leader. What Paul condemned was not Peter's confession but Peter's action as a leader of the Jewish mission, for his withdrawal as a leader encouraged other Jewish Christians to withdraw as well, including Barnabas, who as a Levite and Jew must have followed Peter in feeling it necessary to be true to his Jerusalem roots. Both Peter and Barnabas were returning to their Jewish identity. The "men from James," Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, were using their withdrawal to force the issue: Gentiles must keep the whole law, including not only the dietary laws but also circumcision.

Paul condemned Peter's actions because they lent plausibility to the circumcision party from Jerusalem. For Paul, this was an act of hypocrisy (Gal 2:13), and as Paul so clearly indicates, hypocrisy arises from fear of confessing the true faith,²³ in this case, fear of the circumcision party from Jerusalem, against whom Peter was afraid to stand because of their criticism of his table fellowship with Gentiles. What Peter was afraid of was persecution, the kind of persecution from Jewish zealots that would later cause some Jewish Christians to apostatize after the public council in Jerusalem. As Reicke notes:

During this time [the decade of the fifties], the Zealots grew in power and influence and began a reign of terror over the Jewish people that lasted until the end of the Roman-Jewish war around AD 70. Anyone who had anything to do with the Greeks or Romans was subjected to ghastly persecution. Isolated rebellions of the Jewish people had already occurred under the procurator Ventidius Cumanus (AD 48-52), but it was not until the rule of Antonius Felix (52-60) that the chauvinistic terror became relentless, only to increase to unbelievable proportions during succeeding procuratorships. Among other things, Josephus and Tacitus relate that during the time of Felix the chauvinists, or "bandits," ratcheted up their violence and appeared as *sicarii* ("dagger-carriers") or would hire such assassins to eliminate all suspected "collaborators." This zealotism was also at home in the Diaspora. According to Acts 21:38, it was an Egyptian

²³ This is the way Jesus understands hypocrisy in his controversy with the Pharisees in Luke 12, where fear, hypocrisy, persecution, and possessions are related in Jesus' teaching of what it means to confess the true faith.

Jew who led the four thousand *sicarii* (assassins); Acts 21:27 mentions Jews from the province of Asia who violently threatened Paul for entering the Temple. On the whole, it was Jews in Greece and Asia Minor who repeatedly used violent means to thwart Paul's Gentile mission.²⁴

For Paul, Peter's actions were a matter of not walking straight according to the truth of the gospel (2:14). For Paul, the truth was the gospel,²⁵ so that what was at stake was the very essence of the church's belief and confession. Peter's actions in living like a Jew had caused other Jews to force Gentiles to live like Jews as a matter of their salvation. Paul rebuked him publicly because this was a public sin that had caused an entire church to compromise the truth of the gospel. Peter's public act did not fall under the injunctions of Jesus' teaching found in Matthew 18 because it was public, whereas Matthew 18 is for individuals whose sin has not yet caused an offense to the congregation. Here Paul immediately told it to the church because it was not a private sin against Paul but a sin against the entire Antioch church.

Paul's description of the incident at Antioch becomes the occasion for his preaching of the gospel in Galatians. For Paul, this is a matter of doctrine. This is the first place where Paul uses the language of justification, or declaration of righteousness (*δικαιώω*), as well as the first place where faith versus works occurs in his writings. The question facing Paul, the Galatians, the church in Antioch, and his opponents is this: does God make sinners righteous through our works of the law? Paul writes this letter to the Galatians to reject such a notion of justification. Paul's opponents insist that we are and remain righteous before God through our observance of the law. Paul counters by his passionate proclamation that justification comes through Christ's faithful death on our behalf and our faith in him. Here human action is contrasted with divine initiative. Our human observance of the law is set against Christ's action in which he "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age" (Gal 1:4). Here "objective justification" takes center stage. Christ's faithful death on our behalf, viewed as atonement for sin that brings about God's end-time invasion and rescue, is contrasted with the observance of the law as the means through which God justifies sinners.²⁶ The accent, then, is on God's objective act in Christ on the cross and in his resurrection for the life of the world.

²⁴ Reicke, *Re-examining Paul's Letters*, 21–22.

²⁵ I am taking this expression—*τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου*—as an exegetical genitive.

²⁶ Martyn, *Galatians*, 97–105.

The death of Christ is the eschatological event for Paul in which humanity is freed from powers of the old lord in the old aeon and put under the subjection of a new Lord in a new aeon. The death of Christ is the pivotal event that separates these two aeons and brings about the change that is constituted by death to the law and life to God. But these two aeons overlap in the sense that the "present evil age" is the time when the old and new aeons are engaged in battle. The boundaries of the map of this embattled world in which Paul and the Galatians now live have been redrawn. It is no longer through the law that one distinguishes holy from profane, that is, where God is making right what has gone wrong, but rather it is through Christ, and particularly his death, that one now maps the world of God's holiness, the space of the new creation.²⁷

VI. Paul's Letter to the Galatians

The occasion for Paul's letter to the Galatians is the infiltration into this Gentile church of a group of Jewish Christians similar to those who caused disruptions in the Antioch church. These infiltrators, like the ones in Antioch, were compromising the truth of the gospel by compelling Gentile Christians to become like Jews through the rite of circumcision. Traditional commentaries have called them Judaizers, but more recent commentators have corrected that misnomer by describing them as "teachers"²⁸ or "missionaries."²⁹ These two designations indicate that Paul's opponents are attempting to do more than simply make Gentile Christians live like Jews, even though that is surely part of their program. Like Paul, they are evangelists for a universal and cosmic message, teachers of a gospel that includes the law, missionaries for their brand of Jewish Christianity. They are at home in the Diaspora among Gentiles, and though they have close ties with the circumcision party of Jerusalem, their mission is to show that unlike Paul's gospel, which requires no observance of the law, they proclaim Christ plus circumcision and other legal observances. Paul considers them not only his opponents, but opponents of God and of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, "who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age" (Gal 1:4).

This infiltration of troublemakers into Paul's Galatian mission was the occasion for the writing of the letter. Martyn suggests that Paul's letter is "an argumentative sermon preached in the context of a service of

²⁷ Martyn, *Galatians*, 250, uses the language of "God's making right what has gone wrong" as a paraphrase of what δικαιώω means in Galatians.

²⁸ Martyn, *Galatians*, 14, 117-126.

²⁹ Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 184-186.

worship—and thus in the acknowledged presence of God.”³⁰ Martyn goes on to say, “Paul is concerned in letter form to *repreach* the gospel in place of its counterfeit.”³¹ Paul writes with passion about the gospel of Jesus Christ because it is threatened in the Galatian congregations. Paul’s opponents preach another gospel, the gospel plus something, and that something is the law, particularly circumcision. With equal passion, Paul writes to the Galatians as a pastor about how they must understand the radical change that has taken place in them since the Spirit’s entry into their hearts at Baptism and their cry of “Abba, Father.” By helping the Galatians to understand the relationship between Christ and the law, Paul provides them with “a map of the world in which they actually live.”³² Paul’s letter to the Galatians is as much a pastoral homily as it is a fiery defense of the gospel, for his defense of the gospel is the foundation of his pastoral concerns. To interpret Paul’s Galatian letter, we must read it through the apocalyptic events of Christ’s incarnation, his death on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead, events that have forever changed the cosmos.

VII. The Apostolic Council in Acts 15

The public apostolic council of Acts 15 was the watershed event in the early Christian church, the most significant decision in the church’s history up to that point. After this council, circumcision was no longer an issue in the church. Joseph Fitzmyer notes that in the book of Acts, the council appears at the midpoint: the first fourteen chapters contain 12,385 words, and the final fourteen chapters contain 12,502 words.³³ More importantly, this is the last time we hear of Peter in the book of Acts, and James also drops out of the picture except for a brief appearance in Acts 21, when Paul returns to Jerusalem and is arrested. If the first half of Acts was Peter’s story, the second half is all about Paul and his mission to the Gentiles. Our analysis of the public apostolic council begins with a summary of the three points of view represented at the council and the decision made by the council in light of these three perspectives. We will then proceed to an overview of the structure of Luke’s account in Acts 15:1-35, focusing on the issues that arise from the speeches of Peter and James as well as the letter from the apostolic council to the Gentile churches. We conclude by offering suggestions on how the apostolic council might serve as a map for consensus in the church today.

³⁰ Martyn, *Galatians*, 21.

³¹ Martyn, *Galatians*, 23 (emphasis mine).

³² Martyn, *Galatians*, 482 n. 41.

³³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 31, New York: Doubleday, 1998), 538.

Three Points of View at the Council

In evaluating the council's decisions, it is important to begin by recognizing the three points of view represented at the council. First, the Pharisaic Christian point of view corresponds to the theology of the troublemakers in Antioch and Galatia. This group of Jewish Christians within the Jerusalem church is called the party of the Pharisees. They insist upon the necessity of circumcision. Their doctrinal concern is that Gentiles need to observe the Mosaic law (15:1, 5). The implication for them is that, if Gentiles are not compelled to be circumcised and keep the law, their very salvation is at stake and their Jewish identity will be destroyed.

Second, the Petrine/Pauline/Gentile point of view corresponds with the theology of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, which Peter also came to understand in the Cornelius episode after a vision from God. Peter takes the initiative in representing this position at the council. This position calls for a circumcision-free mission. The doctrinal concern of this group is to assert against those representing the Pharisaic Christian point of view that salvation is not by works of the law but "through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 15:11). The implication for this Gentile point of view is that Gentiles need not become like Jews in order to be Christians; that is, initiation into the Christian church is by Baptism, not by circumcision.

Third, the James/Jerusalem/Jewish point of view corresponds to the position of James at the council as it is represented in the apostolic decrees issued in the letter to all the churches. Like the previous position, it too calls for a circumcision-free mission and wholeheartedly embraces the doctrinal concern that salvation is not by works of the law but by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. But the adherents of this position have another doctrinal concern besides the preaching of the gospel plus the law. They are concerned with practices associated with idolatry, namely, partaking of food sacrificed to idols and committing adultery, particularly through cultic prostitution. These concerns apply to all Christians, Jewish and Gentile alike. Recall that the Jerusalem point of view is held by people who, like James, keep the Jewish laws as part of their cultural heritage, but in no way see this as contributing to salvation. The implication for this Jerusalem perspective is that eucharistic table fellowship is possible between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The apostolic council, with representatives of these three different perspectives, addresses this issue with the decisive answer: Gentiles do not have to become like Jews through the rite of circumcision in order to become Christians.³⁴

³⁴ Cf. Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 541.

The Decision of the Apostolic Council

The apostolic council affirmed that salvation is by grace through faith without works of the law by demonstrating from the Old Testament (Amos 9:11-12) that the Gentile, circumcision-free mission was part of God's plan of salvation. For all intents and purposes, circumcision ceased to be an issue in early Christian communities after this summit in Jerusalem. The council also issued what are known as the "apostolic decrees," which also demonstrated from the Old Testament (Lev 17-18) that there are for all Christians legal restrictions associated with the issue of idolatry. These restrictions are particularly acute for Gentile Christians living among Jewish Christians.

The decision of the council concerning circumcision made official in a public meeting what was decided privately by James, Peter, and Paul (Gal 2:1-10). It also affirmed what God had shown through Peter's vision: it was acceptable to have table fellowship with Gentiles. As Luke Johnson writes, "the human Church now catches up with the divine initiative, and formally declares itself on the side of God's plan to save all humanity."³⁵ In Luke's narrative, the mission to the Jews now gave way to the mission to the Gentiles, with Paul taking center stage in the story of the church in Acts. At the same time, the apostolic decrees of James made clear that the identity of the Christian community had to be centered in an affirmation of the true God apart from the false gods of the pagan temples, for idol-worship or association with idols would destroy the church's identity.

Peter, James, Paul, Barnabas, and the entire church came to an agreement between two churches—Antioch and Jerusalem—and two missions—the Gentile mission and the Jewish mission. The Gentile and Jewish points of view were maintained without compromising the confession of the church. The Pharisaic Christian point of view was emphatically rejected. This was a remarkable agreement in which two out of the three points of view were maintained without compromising the integrity of the church's faith.

The Structure of Acts 15:1-35

The literary framework of the time, place, and persons of the Apostolic Council is crucial to its interpretation. Although it is impossible to determine the exact date of the council, common consensus places it in AD 49 with the following events leading up to the council:

³⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series vol. 5, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 268.

AD 46	Famine in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30)
AD 46-47	First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:1-14:28)
AD 46-47	Paul and Barnabas meet with James, Peter, and John in Jerusalem (Gal 2:1-10)
AD 46-47	False brothers, the circumcision party, slip into Antioch, causing great disruption by compromising the truth of the gospel in compelling Gentile circumcision (Gal 2:4-5)
AD 48	Antioch Incident (Gal 2:11-14; Acts 15:1-2)
AD 48	False brothers, the circumcision party, head to Galatia, causing great disruption by compromising the truth of the gospel in compelling Gentile circumcision
AD 48-49	Galatians written by Paul
AD 49	Apostolic Council (Acts 15)

The council took place in Jerusalem, but it is important to note that there was movement from Antioch to Jerusalem and then from Jerusalem to Antioch. Jerusalem still played a central role in Luke's geographical framework, but at the same time the movement of the church was out from Jerusalem into the Gentile world, demonstrating how the actions taken at the apostolic council resulted in a Gentile mission that overshadowed Jerusalem and the mission to the Jews.

The players at the council included the party of Pharisees, representing the Pharisaic Christian point of view. They objected to the report of the conversion of the Gentiles without circumcision and the keeping of the law of Moses (Acts 15:5). Paul and Barnabas represented the Antioch church as ambassadors to the apostolic council (Acts 15:2). They represented the Gentile point of view, although they would have only a small role in the proceedings. Peter also represented the Gentile point of view, although he would be associated with the Jerusalem church first and the Gentile mission second. His role in the council was crucial but not primary (Acts 15:6-11). James, as bishop of the church in Jerusalem, represented the Jerusalem point of view and would be the most important player at the council. His speech before the assembly and accompanying letter indicate his leadership at the council (Acts 15:12-29). The only other players were the apostles and elders (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22), as well as the whole church, which included all believers in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:4, 22). As we discussed above, it is impossible to know who was represented among the apostles and elders, but within these two groups were represented those of the Twelve who remained, the leaders in the church of Jerusalem, and other missionaries with Jerusalem roots. These two groups of apostles and

elders, together with James, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, gave to the council the "fullest possible authority" of the extant church.³⁶

An outline of the content of the Jerusalem council and its results is as follows:³⁷

Jerusalem Council

- 15:6-21 Debate in the Council
 - 6-7a Apostles and elders consider the matter
 - 7b-11 Peter's speech
 - 12 Barnabas and Paul describe mission to Gentiles
 - 13-21 James's speech
- 15:22-29 Resolution in the Council
 - 22-23a The decision of the council
 - 23b-29 The letter to the churches

Results of the Jerusalem Council

- 15:30-35 Reconciliation within the church
 - 30-34 Churches rejoice over encouragement in letter
 - 35 Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch

Issues that Arise from Peter's Speech (Acts 15:7b-11)

The church's debate over the challenge brought by the party of the Pharisees is interrupted by Peter's speech. Instead of having Paul represent the point of view of the Gentile mission, Peter represents the Gentile/Pauline point of view on his behalf. This is a remarkable act of courage in light of Peter's position in the Jerusalem church and the outcome of the Antioch incident, in which Paul writes that Peter stood condemned. It is also an act of great kindness to Paul by Peter, who knows that Paul would not be received as well by the Jerusalem church as Peter would be. By speaking on behalf of Paul and the Gentile mission, Peter "repents" of his actions in Antioch and provides a bold witness to the Jerusalem church from one of their own. Any concern within the Jerusalem church that Peter and Paul were not of one mind concerning the Gentile mission would be dispelled by Peter's bold witness to the council in representing the position of the apostle Paul.

In Peter's speech, he refers to God's apocalyptic action that has revealed to him that table fellowship with Gentiles is acceptable to God (Acts 10-11). Peter's subsequent actions with Cornelius make him the

³⁶ See Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 437.

³⁷ This outline is adapted from Earl Richard, "The Divine Purpose: The Jews and the Gentile Mission (Acts 15)," in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 190.

father of the Gentile mission. He is therefore the appropriate person to bear witness to the truth of the gospel as it is manifesting itself in the Gentile mission. He reaffirms what he and others have experienced with Cornelius in Caesarea—that the Holy Spirit has been given to the Gentiles just as to the Jews. There is now no distinction between Jew and Gentile, for salvation is the same for both groups of Christians: both Jews and Gentiles are “saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11). Jesus’ faithfulness unto death and his vindicating resurrection are the foundation for faith in Jesus. Pharisaic Christians are putting God to the test by placing the yoke of the law on the Gentiles as a means of salvation.

Peter offers nothing new here, but supports the previous decision from Galatians 2:1-10 and serves as spokesman for Paul/Barnabas and for the Antioch church. Paul and Barnabas affirm Peter’s speech by relating the signs and wonders God has done through them among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). What is remarkable about the witness of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas is that the appeal is first to God’s miraculous intervention with Peter and Cornelius, and second to the signs and wonders that accompanied the Gentile mission of Paul and Barnabas.

Issues that Arise from James’s Speech

As we developed above, James would have been recognized by the assembly in Jerusalem as its leader, and his words would have assumed an authority that would have superseded Peter’s, which is why he follows Peter and initiates the actions that disseminate this decision throughout the church. James affirms Peter’s witness to God’s visiting of the Gentiles first through Peter and Cornelius and now through the mission of Paul and Barnabas to the Gentiles. Unlike Peter, however, James provides exegetical proof for the Gentile mission by citing a text from the Old Testament to support Peter’s claims. This is an entirely different approach than that of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas and is in keeping with what the Jerusalem assembly expected. Richard Bauckham not only describes the difference between the approaches, but summarizes the essence of James’s argument from the Scriptures:

Peter argues that the miraculous charismatic phenomena which accompanied the conversion of the first Gentile converts constituted a declaration by God that Gentiles are acceptable to him as Gentiles (15:8-9; cf. 11:12), and Paul and Barnabas support this argument by referring to the miraculous signs which attended their own Gentile mission (15:12). However, this line of argument cannot, for an assembly of Jewish Christians, be the finally decisive one: the issue is a matter of *halakah*, which can only be decided from Scripture (cf. *B. B. Mes.* 59b). The

clinging argument, provided by James, is therefore a scriptural one. He argues that the prophets, when they predicted that Gentiles would join the eschatological people of God, also made it clear that they will do so as Gentiles (15:15-19). Gentile Christians are therefore not obligated to the Law of Moses as a whole, but four specific commandments are binding on them (15:19-20). These are the terms of the so-called apostolic decree (15:28-29; cf. 21:25). As we shall see, James' argument really means that the Torah itself requires Gentile members of the eschatological people of God to keep these, but only these four commandments. Summarized in James' brief speech is a very precise exegetical argument as to the relationship of Gentile Christians to the Law of Moses.³⁸

James's choice of Amos 9:11-12 is startling. He is making a claim about the Scriptures that calls us to affirm that "God's action dictates how we should understand the text of Scripture" and not vice versa.³⁹ What is stunning about James's choice of Amos is the relevance of his interpretation for the very context of the apostolic council. The referent of the rebuilding of the tent of David is, of course, the Christian church, which will now accommodate "all the Gentiles who are called by my name" (Acts 15:17).⁴⁰ This phrase is a claim by God on Israel as his chosen nation. Amos notes that when this messianic temple is restored, it will be accompanied by the conversion of the Gentiles, who will be included under "all the nations over whom my name has been invoked" (Acts 15:17). James knows that Jesus is the new temple (John 2:18-22) and that the church is also this new temple because it is the locale of Jesus' bodily presence in word and sacrament. As Bauckham concludes, "Thus whereas Gentiles could not enter God's presence in the old Temple without becoming Jews, in the new Temple of the messianic age, the Christian

³⁸ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 452.

³⁹ Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 271. Johnson places this citation of Amos in what he calls the early church's "process of discernment of God's activity." He describes this as a "new understanding of Torah," a "component of decision-making as an articulation of faith [that] is the reinterpretation of the Scripture." Johnson notes, "What is striking about James' citation of Amos 9:11-12 is . . . the way in which James puts the case. He says that 'the prophets agree with *this*' rather than that 'this agrees with *the prophets*' (15:15). In other words, it is the experience of God revealed through narrative which is given priority in this hermeneutical process: the text of Scripture does not dictate how God should act. Rather, God's action dictates how we should understand the text of Scripture."

⁴⁰ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 456-457, notes that there are "two crucial points of interpretation. . . . The first is that the messianic Temple (τὴν σκηνὴν Δαυὶδ) will have been understood to be the Christian community. . . . The second point of interpretation concerns the phrase: 'all the nations over whom my name has been invoked.'"

community, they could do so as Gentiles. Probably no other scriptural text could have been used to make this point so clearly."⁴¹ The first part of James's speech is clear: the gospel is for both Jews and Gentiles.

It is the second part of his speech that has caused commentators more difficulty, because it has to do with the law, that is, with what parts of the law apply to both Jews and Gentiles. James cites the Scriptures for the second time to support his position that there are certain laws which are universal, that is, which both Jews and Gentiles must keep. These four prohibitions are derived from Leviticus 17-18. Most scholars acknowledge that these prohibitions from Leviticus are regulations for both Jews and Gentiles. According to Moses, those obliged to keep the law are, first, Israelites/Jews, and second, "The alien who sojourns in your midst" (Lev 17:10), that is, Gentiles. The key to understanding this passage is to note that it applies to "the alien who sojourns in your midst."

What is surprising here is that James also appeals to an exegetical argument to show that, even though Gentiles who have joined the Christian community are not obliged to be circumcised or keep the law of Moses, there are some universal laws that apply to all people. The law of Moses in Leviticus 17-18 contains four commandments which apply to Gentiles because of their relationship to idolatry. These prohibitions are as follows:

1. Abstain from the things polluted by idols;
2. Abstain from sexual immorality;
3. Abstain from what has been strangled;
4. Abstain from blood. (Acts 15:20)

Of these four prohibitions, the first two are clearly related to temple sacrifices and temple prostitution. These are the things of idolatry, in which both Jewish and Gentile Christians are not to be participants. The other two prohibitions are less clearly related to the ritual practices of idolatrous worship, although it could be argued that both meats strangled and meats with blood in them could refer to foods associated with pagan temple sacrifices. This may be confirmed when these prohibitions are referred to by James in the letter that is sent to the churches (15:29) and when Paul returns to the temple and purifies himself by placing himself under a vow (21:25). The same prohibitions are spoken, but in a different order, showing that the three food prohibitions together are related to idol worship. Even the final prohibition concerning sexual immorality is

⁴¹ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 458.

related to idol worship if it refers to the ritual acts of cultic prostitution in the pagan temples:⁴²

1. Abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols;
2. Abstain from blood;
3. Abstain from what has been strangled;
4. Abstain from sexual immorality. (Acts 15:29; 21:25)

It cannot be emphasized enough that this so-called “apostolic decree” has to do with idolatry. C.K. Barrett affirms this:

The fundamental requirement of the Gentile convert was that he should abandon the religion that he had previously practised; that is, he must abandon the gods he had worshipped, turning his back on idolatry. He must abstain from the spiritual defilement that comes from idolatry. Verse 20 [Acts 15] states this in absolute terms; v. 29 and 21:25 make the assumption that to eat εἰδωλόθυτα is to commit idolatry and is probably for most Gentile Christians the way in which they would be most likely to commit it. Jews had long known that the temptation to idolatry came most often through the butcher’s shop and the brothel. Hence, what is in effect the command to use only Jewish butchers, where one could be confident that no εἰδωλόθυτα, πνικτά, or αἷμα would be sold, and the prohibition of πορνεία. It should be noted that such commands, especially the prohibition of idolatry, would be necessary for salvation, and not merely in order to facilitate fellowship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.⁴³

There may be no fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians if the latter associate with idolatrous practices. This includes, as we have

⁴² There is no universal agreement that this refers exclusively to cultic prostitution, which may in fact be overstating the case. Certainly it refers to all forms of sexual immorality, including cultic prostitution. If, however, this apostolic decree is concerned primarily with idolatry, then perhaps the reference to sexual immorality is primarily a reference to cultic prostitution. See Brian S. Rosner, “Temple Prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20,” *Novum Testamentum* 40:4 (October 1998), 336–351, whose case for reading 1 Cor as referring to temple prostitution (1 Cor 6:8–10) extends to other passages in the New Testament, including Acts 15. But cf. Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 459–460: “‘Sexual immorality’ (πορνεία) refers to Leviticus 18:26, where all the forms of sexual relations specified in Leviticus 18:6–23 (relations within the prohibited degrees, intercourse with a menstruating woman, adultery, homosexual intercourse, bestiality) are prohibited to ‘the alien who sojourns in your midst.’ The general term πορνεία covers all these.” See also Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 557–558, who sees this as referring to the Jewish restrictions on certain degrees of marriage.

⁴³ C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles. Vol. 2, Introduction and Commentary on Acts XV–XXVIII* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 733–734.

seen, temple meats and other foods sacrificed to idols, as well as temple prostitution. For the Gentiles these prohibitions come as no surprise:

The prohibitions are neither new to the Gentile converts or a burden to them. This implies that they would have learned of the prohibitions through their association with the synagogue, and would already be observing them. Looked at in this light, the prohibitions themselves clearly seem to fit within the sort of requirements for "proselytes and sojourners" already spelled out in Leviticus 17-18, and elaborated in the rabbinic discussions of the so called "Noachian precepts." These were the commandments given to the sons of Noah for observance, and include (among others) the prohibitions listed here by Luke (see *bT Sanh. 56b*).⁴⁴

There is some disagreement among the commentators as to whether these four prohibitions are part of the Noachian precepts, although there are persuasive reasons to believe that this is exactly what James is referring to.⁴⁵ There is agreement, however, that these prohibitions are for Gentiles who engage in table fellowship with Jews. But if they are in fact related to idol worship, then even within an exclusively Gentile context, these prohibitions would apply.⁴⁶ They are primordial commands known to all nations, to those already frequenting the synagogue and those who, like the Galatians, are entirely Gentile in origin. To abide by these prohibitions is the basis for table fellowship and full communion between Jew and Gentile. Luke Johnson asks the right question as to why James would insist on these commandments, and then gives a convincing answer:

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 273.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Robert H. Stein, "Jerusalem," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 470-471, who persuasively argues in his description of the Noachian precepts that the prohibitions listed by James fit in this category: "These restrictions are best understood as based on Noachian laws: minimal laws which Jews believed were enjoined by the Scriptures on all people, reaching back to the period prior to Abraham (Gen 9:1-17). There were seven of them: the prohibition of idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual immorality, theft, eating from a living animal (i.e. eating the blood of an animal) and, on the positive side, the need to establish a legal system of justice. In Acts the non-controversial Noachian laws (blasphemy, murder, robbery, establishment of justice) are omitted. The first three mentioned in Acts refer to food restrictions: things devoted to idols, or food dedicated to idols (cf. Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25 with 1 Cor 8:1-13; 10:14-33), and the meat which was non-kosher, that is meat obtained from animals killed by strangling and from which the blood was not properly drained (Lev 7:26-27; 17:10-14). The fourth requirement was ethical in nature and dealt with sexual immorality." See, however, Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, 734, and Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 557, both of whom make a case that these are not part of the Noachian precepts.

⁴⁶ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 464.

But why insist even on these? The point would seem to be to provide the basis for table-fellowship and full communion between Jew and Gentile Messianists. The commandments in Leviticus in particular give as their motivation the avoidance of "defiling the land" and "defiling the people," and the consequence of breaking the commandments is "being cut off from the people" (Lev 17:7, 9, 10, 14; 18:21, 24-25, 28-30). But according to the protocol of table-fellowship in the ancient world, one would eat only with someone who shared the same values. Table-fellowship symbolized spiritual fellowship (see 1 Cor 10:14-22). How could *Jews* eat with those whose practices fundamentally defiled themselves and the land and the people? These requirements of the Gentiles therefore enabled Jews to remain in communion with them, since the Gentiles would not be engaging in practices in radical disharmony with the Jewish *ethos*, and the Gentiles would be "keeping the Torah" as it was spelled out for "proselytes and sojourners in the land."⁴⁷

The Letter from the Apostolic Council to the Gentile Churches

The letter sent by the Jerusalem church was a response to the Pharisaic Christians who had troubled and unsettled the Gentile churches. It was the result of what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," indicating that the council perceived its decision as Spirit-directed. The letter detailed the decision of the council and was sent along with Paul and Barnabas, Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas. The churches that received these emissaries of the council received the letter with rejoicing because of its encouragement. That this was a God-pleasing, Spirit-inspired decision may be seen in the results of the letter among the Gentile churches, which sent Judas and Silas off in peace. Luke indicates that the church came out of the council unified around the council's decision because the clear word of the Scriptures had spoken through the authoritative representatives of the church. In keeping with other decisions in Acts, this decision was accomplished through collegial debate. It was a decision of the whole church guided by the Spirit with strong apostolic leadership from Peter and James. What is most striking is the use of the Scriptures in providing the church with the foundation for its decision.

VIII. Conclusion: A Model for Walking Together as the Church Today

How can the councils of Galatians 2 and Acts 15 examined above serve as a model for the twenty-first-century church walking together in confessing the Christian faith? First, these councils testify to the importance of meeting together to debate doctrinal issues that confront the church. Luke Johnson, in his commentary on Acts 15, asks an important

⁴⁷ Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 273.

question about the application of this text to the life of the church: are we able to see conflict and debate as legitimate and even necessary elements in the process of walking together?⁴⁸ Johnson answers in the affirmative. So should we. As Johnson also points out, doctrinal discussions go to the heart of our identity as the church in this postmodern world. As we walk together as church in a life together in Christ, our pastors—especially those in leadership positions—need the courage to confront situations in the church with the word of the Scriptures, desiring to hear it speak no matter how uncomfortable it might be for our ears to hear.

Second, these councils also teach us that when the church engages in a doctrinal dispute or disagreement, it is crucial that the various points of view be identified clearly and fully addressed. By identifying the points of view in this early dispute, we see how all of them were addressed by the decision of the apostolic council. Furthermore, the three points of view reflected in Acts 15 are often representative of the points of view in many doctrinal disputes since that time. The church must always affirm salvation by grace through faith and reject salvation by works of the law and any association with idolatry. Salvation by works of law is the fundamental belief for all religions except Christianity. Even within Christian denominations, however, works righteousness is alive and well. Works righteousness is a great threat to every Christian congregation, as is reflected in Acts 15 in the point of view represented by the Pharisaic Christians who caused the trouble in Antioch and Galatia, and who precipitated the public apostolic council. All Christians must be constantly aware of the temptation to come to believe that they are able to save themselves by their own efforts or by cooperating with God in some way in their salvation. The scriptural teaching that our Reformation fathers fought for—that a sinner is justified by grace for the sake of Christ through faith—must be upheld in this day and age, no matter what pressure we may receive from our culture to do otherwise and despite the persecution we may encounter even within the church. Moreover, the temptation to compromise with false religions or to accommodate ourselves to situations within our culture, no matter how noble the motives, continues to confront us every day. As with the earliest church, it is vital that we not cloud our witness to the true God with language or actions that affirm such idolatry.

Third and foremost, these councils testify to the word of God as the source of authority in addressing the issues confronting the church. Although Peter, Paul, and Barnabas testified about the truth of the gospel

⁴⁸ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 270–271.

as it was being expressed in the Gentile mission through either an apocalyptic vision from God or the signs and wonders accompanying the mission, it was the clear word of the Scriptures as presented by James that carried the day. Fraternal and collegial consensus was reached after hearing an authoritative figure like James unfold the Old Testament Scriptures as they related to the issues they were facing. James's authority came from his leadership in interpreting the Scriptures and showing how God's actions were helping the church see the true meaning of the Scriptures. The church today also must be very careful not to solve doctrinal disputes through means that do not reflect the clear testimony of Scripture. Even though we have constitutions and bylaws to govern us, the decisions reached on the basis of these human traditions must be subjected to the scrutiny of the Scriptures. This is not unlike the situation in Acts, in which the Pharisaic Christians applied their oral traditions to the Gentile mission only to be rejected by the clear testimony of Amos and Leviticus through the authoritative interpretation of James. The reason that various parties gave "the fullest possible authority to the council's decisions"⁴⁹ is, undoubtedly, due to the council's use of the authoritative Scriptures in coming to a consensus.

Fifth, we can learn from these early councils that consensus on the basis of the word of God does not mean that every viewpoint is going to be affirmed. Sometimes there are gray areas where mutual understanding between two groups leads to a compromise that upholds the Scriptures and affirms the position of both groups. At other times, there are clear matters of right and wrong, with one group clearly being shown to be in conflict with the word of God. The goal of such debate is not to affirm every viewpoint, but to "come to one accord" on the basis of the word of God (Acts 15:25).

Finally, it is also important that pastors demonstrate, through their public actions, that the gospel is not to be compromised. Mistakes, however, will be made by faithful pastors, including church leaders. Like Peter, we must all have the courage to repent of our mistakes when our public actions lead people astray and cloud our confession of the only true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Like Paul, we must be ready to be reconciled with the brother who repents and work together with him in reconciled love for the unity of the church and the reaching of the lost.

⁴⁹ Bauckham, *Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, 437 (cited above, 267 n. 9, 282 n. 36).