The Jerusalem Council

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The year is A.D. 49, eighteen years after the cross and fourteen years after Paul’s conversion on the Damascus road. Paul’s first missionary journey is over and he is back in Antioch of Syria.

This is the place where the followers of Jesus Christ were first called “Christians.” At Antioch Christians had taken the momentous and risky step of entrusting the cherished name of their Savior, the Hebrew Meshia, to the ambivalent Greek word Kurios, Lord, with all of its baggage. Here at Antioch the Christians had commissioned Barnabas and Paul as missionaries, sending them off on their first missionary circuit.

And now Paul and Barnabas are back in Antioch where they would spend what is for them a long time in one place, perhaps as much as two years. Imagine how the believers felt when they heard of the signs and wonders and conversions from the first missionary journey. No doubt they heard much more
than is recorded for us in Acts 13 and 14. How the Christians of Antioch must have reveled in the joy and delight of the expansion of the Christian church.

But this idyllic picture of preaching, teaching, and mission stories did not last for long because a delegation arrived from Judea, the birthplace of the church. The brethren from Jerusalem had a message: You folks who came in under Paul's preaching are not good Christians. In fact, you may not even be saved. You are not even circumcised. Ever since Father Abraham's time, true worshippers of God have been circumcised. You must obey all of the laws of Moses.

Now, let's not come down too hard on the visiting brethren from Jerusalem. Let us give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that they are deeply converted Christians who live good moral lives and have no ulterior motives. They have good reasons to be concerned as they look out at the pagan world with its grossly immoral lifestyle. Pagan temples blend idolatry and immorality into a fearful brew. When Simon Peter extended membership to Cornelius and his household, apparently without circumcision, a lot of eyebrows went up. But that was only the beginning because now churches are being planted by Paul and Barnabas all over the place.

In the words of famed New Testament scholar, F. F. Bruce, “For many of them the church was the righteous remnant of Judaism, embodying the ancestral hope which all Israel ought to have welcomed, preparing itself for the impending day of the Lord: to countenance any relaxation in the terms of the covenant with Abraham, sealed in the flesh by circumcision, would be to forfeit all claim to remnant righteousness, all titles to salvation on the last day” (Bruce 1988:287).

F. F. Bruce identifies two main issues at the Jerusalem Council. The first issue was to define what were “the terms on which Gentile believers might be admitted to church membership” (282). What made this a difficult question was that the gospel was crossing cultural boundaries. Christianity always wears cultural robes, just as Jesus Christ was born into human flesh and human culture. Even Jesus Christ's perfect life was molded by his Jewish culture. His lifestyle would have been somewhat different had he been incarnated into another culture. God's eternal, universal law applies to people in all cultures, but culture molds both human obedience and disobedience to God's law.

When missionaries carry the gospel into another culture they translate the gospel not merely into another language but into another whole culture. On their missionary journeys, Paul and his colleagues proclaimed the gospel in
Greek (a language they already knew), but the larger part of translation remained to be done—translating the gospel into Gentile culture.

Cross-cultural missionaries must perform two tasks: first, they must exegete their own way of being a Christian to differentiate between God’s absolutes and matters of cultural style in their own experience. This is not an easy task because religion and culture are fused in a person’s understanding. Second, missionaries must exegete the other culture to discern its good, neutral, and bad elements and to facilitate the birth of authentic Christianity within a new culture. From the very start new believers have to participate in the exegesis of their own culture and they must be expected to gradually take over the leading role in that translation process.

Although cross-cultural diffusion of the gospel has been challenging and difficult from Apostolic times down to the present, what a blessing it has been. “It is in the moments of transition, the process of diffusion across cultural boundaries, the points at which cultural specificities change, that the distinctive nature of the Christian faith becomes manifest in its developing dialogue with culture. . . . As Paul and his fellow missionaries explain and translate the significance of the Christ in a world that is Gentile and Hellenistic, that significance is seen to be greater than anyone had realized before. It is as if Christ himself actually grows through the work of mission. . . . As he enters new areas of thought and life, he fills the picture” (Walls 1996:xvi-xvii).

The Jerusalem Council was to set a direction that persists to the present day—complete cultural translation. Paul Hiebert calls this process critical contextualization. As the Early Church grew beyond its Jewish cultural roots and imbedded itself within the hearts and minds of Gentile converts, it was performing the task of translation or contextualization. Some believers did not want to do any contextualization at all. They wanted to simply export Jewish Christianity, including circumcision and the ceremonial law, to the Gentiles. Other Early Church Christians were antinomians who favored an uncritical, anything-goes contextualization. The Jerusalem Council pointed the church toward full cultural translation or critical contextualization.

The second issue the Jerusalem Council struggled with was how social interaction “and especially table fellowship, might be promoted between Jewish and Gentile believers” (Bruce 1988:282). Fellowship between believers is a primary Christian doctrine. The church is called the body of Christ, and fellowship within that body is part of God’s plan of salvation. Thus, we will see that the decisions of the Jerusalem Council take into account the feelings and
convictions of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Christianity is a relational religion that seeks peace and harmony, even as it seeks truth.

Let’s come back to this gripping mission story. The Antioch Church has been having praise sessions, but some visiting brethren have come in with bad news. “You folk aren’t real Christians. You probably won’t even be saved.” Very quickly fellowship has deteriorated into debate. “Yes we are! No you aren’t!” “What shall we do next? Let’s send Paul and Barnabas with some of our elders to Jerusalem for guidance.”

On the way to Jerusalem those early Christians stopped at some other churches, and pretty soon those churches were full of rejoicing over the work God was doing among the pagans. God was visibly at work in his world, doing things that seemed utterly impossible causing the believers to be drawn to join the action.

In Jerusalem the apostles and elders welcomed the Antioch delegation warmly and listened to their reports. The Jerusalem Church was filled with joy, but the Pharisees had problems with the report. Extending membership to so-called Gentile converts who were uncircumcised was unthinkable. Furthermore, the Eucharist and other meetings were difficult because you never knew when certain so-called Christians might show up who would be ritually unclean.

After lengthy and heated debate, Peter stands up and signals for quiet. “Brethren, you know that God chose me to start work among the Gentiles. You know about the strange dream I had with the wild beasts. Then Cornelius came and was baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. I was there and I saw it. Those Gentiles were filled with the Holy Spirit just like we were. And now God treats us all alike because we are all saved by grace. Now, why are you trying to lay a heavy yoke on Gentile believers that even you cannot bear? Don’t you remember what Jesus said: ‘Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light’” (Matt 11:29-30).

After hearing Peter, “The whole assembly kept silent, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12). Direct witness of God’s powerful deeds had a profound effect. Then James stood to speak: “My brothers, listen to me. You know that what Simon Peter and Paul and Barnabas have said is right. Furthermore, the prophets predicted in advance the very things we are seeing. Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those
Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:12-14, 19, 20) (emphasis supplied).

Although circumcision is not mentioned directly, it is omitted from the list of requirements. Gentile converts should abstain from things polluted by idols, fornication, whatever has been strangled, and blood. I have found three interpretations of these requirements (Gallagher and Hertig 2004:196ff).

The first interpretation is that Gentile Christians should abstain from three cardinal sins, i.e., idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder. Things polluted by idols in this interpretation, refers to idolatry. Some manuscripts omit “strangled,” leaving only “blood” and add the negative Golden Rule. Thus, abstaining from blood is interpreted as not committing murder.

Textual scholars say that the manuscripts used in this interpretation are later ones, and not authoritative. The problem with this view is that it seems to over-simplify the Jerusalem Council discussion. Something more was happening than simply saying, you don’t need to be circumcised but remember the second, third, sixth, and seventh commandments.

A second interpretation says to abstain from all aspects of pagan worship—abstain from idolatry. Animal sacrifices, sacred meals, drinking blood, and temple prostitution were all elements of pagan worship. Like the previous view, this one seems to leave out an important part of the Jerusalem Council discussion.

A third view is that the required abstentions amounted to diplomatic concessions for the sake of Jewish Christians to facilitate fellowship. This view interprets “fornication” as referring to certain laws of Lev 17-18 that refer to marriage between relatives and to gender relationships, things that fall short of the seventh commandment. Once again, we have an interpretation that seems incomplete.

Following is an interpretation that uses the Seventh-day Adventist distinction between moral law and ceremonial law along with principles we have already discussed. First, circumcision is the hot issue mentioned by the Jewish Christians and is a code word for the whole ceremonial law. The apostles’ word is short and pointed—don’t trouble Gentile converts with this yoke. Circumcision and the other ceremonial requirements of Judaism do not apply to Gentiles. Jewish Christians could continue their ceremonial observances as cultural features of their Christianity, but those cultural specificities need not cross over the cultural bridge to the Gentiles.
The magnitude of this judgment in the eyes of Jewish Christians may be hard for us to grasp. To detach the meaning of being in covenant relationship with God from the symbol of circumcision was difficult. Although the Judaizers apparently did not offer a rebuttal to Peter and James at the Council, some continued to push for circumcision and the ceremonial law.

Second, fornication is part of the apostolic judgment that is absolute. Sexual immorality was part of the fabric of Gentile society, not just a matter of personal failure. By living a pure moral life, Gentile Christians were being counter-cultural. Gentile Christians already knew about biblical morality, but the apostles were giving a pastoral reminder in the hearing of Jewish Christians who feared for the moral purity of the church.

Third, idolatry is another part of the apostolic judgment that is absolute. No doubt some new Gentile converts were continuing to feel the attractions of pagan worship and some were yielding to temptation. Gentile Christians already knew about biblical worship, but the apostles were giving another pastoral reminder.

Fourth, there were diplomatic concessions for Christian fellowship. Even if Gentile Christians had been set free from the idolatry and immorality associated with pagan worship, they should put aside the symbols of pagan worship for the sake of good fellowship with Jewish Christians. This interpretation would fit with Paul’s counsel that “food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow becomes a stumbling block to the weak. For if any one sees you, a man of knowledge, at a table in an idol’s temple, might he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak man is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ (1 Cor 8:8-12).

Could Christians from Jerusalem, the birthplace of the church, be considered “weak”? Yes! New believers in newly entered societies have things to teach the churches that brought them the gospel. There is just a little more to the story. The Jerusalem Church accepted the apostolic decision, although the issues did not cease to be disputed by some Judaizers. A written statement was prepared and Judas and Silas, witnesses from the Jerusalem Church, were sent back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

“When its members read [the letter], they rejoiced at the exhortation. Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and...
strengthen the believers. After they had been there for some time, they were
sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them” (Acts 15:31-34).

What a good ending to a great story. In the history of our beloved church,
this story describes a landmark, epoch-making, paradigm-setting event that
has shaped and must shape the way we relate to gospel and culture.

In conclusion, notice the main features of this wonderful story: God was
powerfully at work in the Gentile world in the person of the Holy Spirit and
through missionaries chosen and sent by the Antioch Church. Gentile converts
discovered the happiness and joy of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus
Christ. As the Spirit confronted Gentiles with the demands of God’s eternal
law, they repented of their sins, received forgiveness, were empowered by the
Spirit, and commenced the pilgrimage of faithfulness. The expansion of the
church was spontaneous and could be attributed only to the power of the Spirit.
However gifted Paul and Barnabas may have been as missionaries, the fruits of
their ministry far exceeded their personal qualities. The living Christ allowed
his Body (the church) to take on the innocent cultural contours that made the
church a place where Gentile Christians could feel at home. Established Chris-
tians in Judea were happy about the Gentile conversions but doubted their au-
thenticity because the new churches did not adopt the innocent cultural con-
tours of Jewish Christianity. When the Gentile Christians were confronted by
the Judeans, they were upset and appealed to the church leadership. In this
story, at least, all parties submitted themselves to the decisions of the apostles.
The apostles were, themselves, Jewish Christians but they were guided by the
Spirit to a deeper understanding than the Judaizers. The apostolic decisions
were absolutely faithful to God’s eternal, universal law and made room for in-
nocent cultural elements. Although Jewish Christians thought that circumci-
sion was at the very core of Christianity, the apostles saw that it was in fact a
feature of cultural identity. Gentile Christians were given freedom in Christ.

What a wonderful pattern the Jerusalem Council gives us as we seek to
emulate the faithfulness of the Apostolic Church.

Reference List


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