

What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts

What If We, the Church, Can't Get Along?

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If We, the Church, Can't Get Along?

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text: Act 15:1-35

Introduction

Are the early Christians *making compromises* or *reaching consensus* in this week's reading? Who are the principal antagonists? Protagonists? Why does Luke choose to include the narrative of the Jerusalem Council at this point in *Acts*, separating as he does the first missionary journey of Paul from his second?

The first century Christian community had its share of controversy and conflict. At times the lines which divided the combatants were stark: those who spoke in favor of the Law-free Gospel, and those who spoke against it. When the leadership of Second Temple Judaism, especially the High Priest, refused to accept that the crucified Jesus had risen from the dead, and denied complicity in the crucifixion, the result was persecution, martyrdom and the scattering of the Jesus followers beyond the borders of Jerusalem and Judea. Add to the religious dimension the political one — in the person of Herod Agrippa — and the stakes grew higher for both sides. All of this we have already observed with clarity in Acts 1-12.

Then, when the great missionary thrust into the regions of Cyprus, Pamphylia and Galatia took place under the leadership of Paul and Barnabas, new forms of conflict appeared. The self-serving Jewish magician in Paphos tried to dissuade his patron, the Roman proconsul, from heeding the invitation of the apostles. In some ways we hardly raise an eyebrow at these shenanigans, expecting that evil men will predictably undermine the Good News — that is, after all, what evil men are suppose to do. It is a bit difficult to swallow the role which Judaism played in all of this. Blessed with covenant promises, one would have expected national Israel to rejoice in the achievements of Jesus of Nazareth. Especially in the *diaspora* where opportunities already existed for Jews to make missionary progress among the Gentiles, the old "markers" of national identity got in the way of accepting God's new creation agenda.

We are amazed at the persistence of those Jews who pursued Paul and Barnabas from town to town, determined to wipe out their witness, driven by zeal for the Law. Left to their own choices, the average synagogue attendees seemed willing enough to consider the claims about Jesus, and initially gave the apostles a warm welcome. But "agitators" soon dampened the general response and convinced the lay leadership that the newcomers were a threat to the Jewish way of life — even though they were Jews themselves. In addition we puzzle at the determination to undermine the apostles' effort among *Gentiles* as was the case in Lystra where Paul is finally left for dead after the incitement of a mob who at first thought he was a god.

Paul and Barnabas did not solicit conflict nor did they make efforts to sow discord among the Jewish community of the *diaspora*. That was not their purpose. Of course, whenever the work of God advances, we fully expect opposition: "what God proposes, man opposes," is a time-worn cliché, though applicable in this case. Men like Paul had no desire to "divide the Jewish family" or to launch a new religion, where once the "children of Israel" represented the chosen people of God. As his later writings would attest, there was *one family of God*, and Jesus had come to unite it once more, Jew and Gentile, into the community of the new creation which dawned with the coming of Jesus. Family squabbles troubled Paul, though he encountered many such divisions in places like Corinth and elsewhere (see 1 Corinthians). Perhaps one sentence best encapsulates his sentiment, and it takes the form of a question: "Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:13).

Some of the schisms arose from human rivalry, jealousy and pride — the fruit of selfish ambition. But the conflict which congealed within Acts 15 had roots within the Jew-Gentile problem. It was one thing for adamant disbelievers of the Gospel to stir up animosity against the apostles, but quite another for seemingly committed Christ followers to, *on principle*, refuse to accept each other as fully vested members of the people of God. Second Temple Judaism made allowances for Gentiles to examine, partially share and certainly admire the Jewish faith. We have already met the "God-fearers," Gentiles who went as far as their scruples allowed them — just shy of circumcision. Their presence within the synagogue and the Temple had been an accommodation. However, nobody actually believed that official Judaism fully accepted such persons into their table fellowship or within the covenant family.

That was, of course, precisely what the Jesus movement had started to do, beginning with the remarkable vision of Peter (Acts 10-11) and the explicit commissioning of Saul to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9). Granted, Peter had a harder time accepting table fellowship with Gentiles than did Paul. Perhaps it was the effect of the *diaspora* and Hellenization on Paul which made it easier for him to adjust. But, in the end, the majority of the leadership in both Antioch and Jerusalem conceded the end of any barriers between the two groups. They did so, however, only after a major debate, one which prompted the calling of the first church council in Jerusalem. And that is the topic of this week's study.

Outline

1. The Judean objectors in Antioch (15:1-2a)
2. The Antioch delegation to Jerusalem (15:2b-4)
3. The Pharisee objectors in Jerusalem (15:5)
4. The Jerusalem Council (15:6-29)
 - a. Considering the question (15:6-7a)
 - b. Peter (15:7b-11)
 - c. Paul and Barnabas (15:12)
 - d. James the Lord's brother (15:13-21)
 - e. The Council's Letter (15:22-29)
5. The Jerusalem delegation to Antioch (15:30-35)

The structure of the reading is somewhat chiasmic (like an "X") with a slight variation in the sequence. A clear parallelism exists between 15:2b-4 and 15:30-35, and takes the form A to B and B to A. Intersecting this symmetry is the doublet involving the claims of the objectors, stated initially by "some men" from Judea and then stated formally as a complaint in Jerusalem before the assembled Christians (15:1-2a, 15:5). Another doublet is contained in the decision to consult with the Jerusalem leadership (15:2b-4) and the actual meeting of the Council (15:6-29). Within the council section, we see three components: 1) the question is stated, 2) three speakers address the question, and 3) a letter that embodies the spirit of the council. Again, the symmetry is evident between #1 and #3. Further, the speakers' component itself has three parts. In length, the Peter section parallels the James section, while the Paul and Barnabas section serves as the hinge for the two, and is quite brief. Since Peter and James would likely reflect the Judean viewpoint, they receive greater space in the narrative, while the Paul and Barnabas section is remarkably brief and sketchy.

Brief Chronology

Again this week, we are including the following summary chronology which originally appeared in my *Background Notes* for September 13/14, 2008. This gives the reader a better idea of when the events we are studying took place. This week's material is noted by the ►◀ symbols.

| | Event | Date (C.E./A.D.) |
|--|--|-------------------------|
| | Death, Resurrection, Ascension of Jesus, and Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1-2) | 33 |
| | Stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:1ff) | 35 |
| | Saul's conversion/commission on the Damascus Road (Acts 9) | 35 |

| | Event | Date (C.E./A.D.) |
|---|--|-------------------------|
| | Saul in Damascus and Arabia (Acts 9:8-25; Galatians 1:16-17) | 35-37 |
| | Saul's first visit to Jerusalem since conversion/commission: Meets Peter and James (Acts 9:26-29; Galatians 1:18-20) (End of "three years" mentioned in Galatians 1:18) | 37 |
| | Saul in Syria (Antioch) and Cilicia (Tarsus) (Acts 9:30; Galatians 1:21) | 37 |
| | Saul's trip to Antioch at Barnabas' invitation (Acts 11:25-26) | 43 |
| | Saul's second visit to Jerusalem with famine relief: Meets the leadership (Acts 11:30; Galatians 2:1-10) | 47 |
| | Saul in Antioch (Acts 12:25-13:1) | 47-48 |
| | Saul/Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13-14) | 48-49 |
| | Paul and Peter meet in Antioch; emissaries from James arrive creating controversy over Gentiles and circumcision (Acts 15:1-3; Galatians 2:11-16) (End of "fourteen years" mentioned in Galatians 2:1) | 49 |
| | The letter to the Galatians written from Antioch | 49 |
| ▶ | Paul's third visit to Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Council led by James, attended by the leadership along with Paul and Barnabas. Reach agreement and draft a letter to be carried by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:4-35) | 49 ◀ |
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The Judean Objectors (15:1-2a)

1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them...

By saying that "some men came down from Judea," Luke generalizes their origin to predominantly Jewish areas without saying that they came "from Jerusalem," which might appear to be an official delegation. The verb "to come down" (*katerchomai*) is a participle in the aorist tense, modifying the verb "to teach" which appears in the imperfect tense. Their "coming down" is reported as an accomplished fact (no more were coming down — just these persons), whereas "the teaching" was ongoing. We are not told the context for their teaching activities, but presumably in formal settings, such as meetings within the Christian community. On the other hand, *what they teach* is spelled out succinctly. The grammatical form takes the form of an *objection*, and so we refer to them simply as the "Judean Objectors."

To what do they *object*? Using the Greek "If not..." followed by an implied "then," they deny the possibility of anyone being "saved" *unless* they undergo the rite of circumcision as Moses required. Literally, "If you are not circumcised in the Moses *ethos*, you are not able to be saved." Presumably, these teachers object to the Christian practice of allowing Gentiles to become part of the restored Israel without following this *custom of Moses*. Why do they raise this objection? Quite simply, Moses specified the *practice* if a person — presumably a Gentile person — was to be saved. Gentiles could, of course, live within the borders of national Israel, while observing certain specific requirements (see Leviticus 17-18, which we will discuss later). But if anyone claimed to be delivered from the covenant curse it had to be because they underwent the rite of circumcision.

What is the force of the word "custom, practice, *ethos*?" We find the Greek word throughout Luke's writings (see Luke 1:9; 2:42; Acts 6:14; 15:1; 16:21; 21:21; 25:16; 26:3; 28:17) to refer to Jewish or Roman customs. In one instance, the practice of Jesus is referred to with this term (Luke 22:39). Moses, the objectors argue, is the guarantor of the custom of circumcision. By implication, not following this *ethos* means not following *Moses*. The objects of this instruction were "the brothers," that is, the believing community in Antioch, largely Gentile in composition. Luke acknowledges them as *adelphoi*, while the objectors obviously do not. On the other hand, the objectors are not viewed as "brothers" by Luke. Paul, in his later letter to the Galatians, would refer to such objectors as "false brothers" (Galatians 2:4).

So significant is the conflict arising from this intrusive teaching, that Antioch must rely on Paul and Barnabas to fend off the potential damage to the church there. The nature of the dispute is described by two Greek words:

1. *stasis*. "To engage in intense and emotional expressions of different opinions; to quarrel, heated quarrel."
2. *zētēsis*. "To express forceful differences of opinion without necessarily having a presumed goal of seeking a solution; to dispute."

Two clear aspects of the conflict stand out: 1) it was highly emotional in nature, leading to heated exchanges; 2) it involved an exchange of strong opinions but without resolution. We might say, "Lots of heat but not much light." Of course, Paul and Barnabas were part of the debate, though we are told nothing about what they contributed to the discussion on that occasion. We are left with the impression that the two apostles were dragged into the dispute.

The Antioch delegation to Jerusalem (15:2b-4)

2b ... Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

Since such exchanges lead nowhere, a better route for resolution was required. An official action by the church in Antioch led to the appointment of Paul and Barnabas, along with certain other representatives, as part of a delegation to Jerusalem where the counsel of the apostles and elders might moderate this sharp dispute. The key terms are these:

1. "appointed" (Greek: *tassō*). A familiar term in Luke's writings (Luke 7:8; 13:48; here; 22:10; 28:23), it suggests the giving of authority on behalf of another. In this case, the Antioch church empowers the delegates to act on their behalf to resolve this dispute.
2. "sent on their way" (Greek: *propempō*). Includes both the idea of 1) escorting someone as they begin a journey, and 2) the act of sending that person, being the actual cause of their going in the first place. In *Acts*, #1 is found in 20:38 and 21:5. Similarly, Paul uses this second sense in his letters (Romans 15:24; 1 Corinthians 16:6, 11; 2 Corinthians 1:16; Titus 3:13; 3 John 1:6). "*Help* someone on their way" is the general idea behind the word.
3. "about the question" (Greek: *zētēma*). Based on the same root as *zētēsis* (see above), the emphasis falls on the controversial nature of the question, and that it is a point of disagreement. Again, used several times in the book of *Acts* (15:2; 18:15; 23:29; 25:19; 26:3).

Maintaining unity in the face of disagreement was a high priority in the early church. Paul would refer to this often in his letters, as exemplified by the phrase "maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). By appealing to the "apostles and elders" in the Jerusalem church, the church at Antioch showed proper regard to authority within the community. As the history of the church unfolded, the importance of the "bishop" (chief elder, overseer) as guarantor of unity increased. Recall how Paul and Barnabas appointed "elders" (*presbuteroi*) in the cities of their first missionary journey (Acts 14:23). It should be noted that a collective authority existed within the Jerusalem church, and a healthy sense of collegiality bound together the decision-making process. This was not simply a matter of Paul speaking and everybody listening, or Peter issuing a decree or James making a ruling. *Everyone affected* had a part to play in the decision-making process. Clearly, the notion of apostolic authority existed, but in a *plural form*. No single person held all the authority, but collectively, several persons acted in concert with each other to reach a resolution. The appeal, then, is not to Peter or James or Paul, but to "the apostles and elders."

Paul and Barnabas, while taking their mission seriously, wasted no time along the way. Traveling from Antioch to Jerusalem (a journey of some 250 miles), they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria where there were

Christ followers. Since persons living in these regions were at one time "on the margins" but "brought near" by the Gospel, they rejoiced at the news that Gentiles — persons even more alienated from the Jewish community — had been converted. Earlier in our study, we saw the witness in Samaria (Acts 8:4-25) and the fruit it bore. Samaritans had been isolated from official Judaism, a fact evident from Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well in Sychar (John 4). Most Jews considered Samaritans to be no different than Gentiles. Therefore, the response Paul received in 15:3 was really no surprise. Perhaps the Samaritans saw themselves as the first-fruits of a movement at the margins!

The account of how the Antioch delegation was received by the Jerusalem leadership suggests a similar joy, especially after the delegates reported the full extent of their mission. Luke characterizes their work as "everything God had done through them." The phrase "through them" is actually the same one found in 14:27, translating the Greek expression *met' autōn*, "with them." Once more we have the affirmation of God's co-workers. The Gentile mission undertaken by Paul and Barnabas was not their idea, but God's instead. As they give their report (Greek: *anaggellō*), they are, in effect, not only "telling what happened" but "proclaiming" what God had been doing. By presenting his material in this way, Luke lays the ground-work for how the Jerusalem meeting would turn out, and how the disagreement will be resolved. The mood is positive and celebratory, an especially helpful context for resolving differences. Rather than emphasizing the negative aspects first, the Antioch delegation sets forth what God has already been achieving among the Gentiles.

The Pharisee objectors in Jerusalem (15:5)

But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

Had we been present during the arrival of Paul and his delegation, the spirit would have been joyful, as noted above. However, we might well have heard someone say, "We hate to break up this joy-fest, but that's not why we came here. We've got serious business to attend to, and no amount of celebration should distract us from that!" A bit ironic, to be sure, that the good report suddenly yields to the "question" which prompted the original conflict. There's nothing like pouring cold water on warm fellowship!

Whereas 15:1 spoke in vague terms about "some from Judea," 15:5 identifies the objectors in Jerusalem — unlike those who instigated the controversy in Antioch — as "believing Pharisees." Luke uses the term *hairesis* ("party" or "sect") to identify the objectors in this case. Usually, we expect this Greek word to have the negative sense of "heresy," but that is a later connotation in the history of the term. Elsewhere Sadducees (Acts 5:17), Pharisees (26:5), and Nazarenes (24:5) are each referenced by this word. Within the Pharisees one could find further "divisions" (see 5:33-42): Hillel vs. Shammai, revealing the right-wing, left-wing extremes. Paul himself had a history with *both wings* of the party and was well-suited to make the case for the Gospel when the need arose.

In this case, Luke calls the objectors "believers" (Greek: *pisteuō*), using the perfect participle of the verb: the ones who *have come* to believe. This group can hardly be called "false brothers," though we might see the original Antioch objectors in this light. What they seek is the treatment of Gentile converts *as proselytes* to Judaism. The position staked out by them looks similar to issues raised in the book of *Galatians* which has a number of connections to the present controversy. In the case of the Galatian Christians, the problems exist out in the *diaspora* among the churches Paul planted during his first missionary journey — the congregations of so-called "Southern Galatia" (Perga, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, etc.) referenced in our study of Acts 13-14.

For the Pharisee believers, circumcision remained the "marker" for identifying a person as part of the people of God. While accepting the message of Jesus the Messiah, crucified and risen, they insist on keeping this "distinctive" precisely because it shows *obedience to the law of Moses*. Since this issue lies at the watershed section of *Acts*, we see its importance to Luke's framework. The church must settle this question early on, or it threatens to cripple the unanimous preaching of the Gospel based on salvation through Jesus alone.

Before pressing forward to the heart of the Jerusalem Council and the conclusions it reached about this controversy, we would do well to consider the parallels between Acts 15 and what Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatian churches (established in Acts 13-14). The following chart offers points of contact between the material in *Acts* and Paul's account of the events in his Galatian letter.¹

| Event | Galatians | Acts |
|---|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Saul persecutes Christ followers | 1:13-14 | 7:58; 8:1-3 |
| Saul's conversion and commission | 1:15-17 | 9:1-22 (and parallels) |
| Saul's First Visit to Jerusalem after his conversion | 1:18-20 | 9:26-29 |
| Saul travels to Syria and Cilicia | 1:21-22 | 9:30 |
| Famine relief: Second Visit to Jerusalem | 2:1-10 | 11:29-30; 12:25 |
| First Missionary Journey | 4:13-15 | 13-14 |
| Return to Antioch and Incident in Antioch | 2:11-14 | 14:26-28; 15:1-2 |
| Jewish Agitators in Galatia | 1:6-9; 3:1; 4:17-5:12; 6:12-13 | |
| Paul writes <i>Galatians</i> while still in Antioch | 6:11 | |
| ► Paul and Barnabas: Third Visit to Jerusalem; the Jerusalem Council | | 15:2-29 ◀ |
| Return to Antioch and reading Jerusalem letter | | 15:30-35 |

The reader is encouraged to review the *Background Notes* on *Galatians* which I wrote during September-October, 2008. Paul offers an in-depth treatment of all the issues impacting on the preaching of a Gospel-with-circumcision vs. a circumcision-free Gospel. What Luke offers by way of consensus-building in Acts 15, Paul treats in biblical-theological terms, offering careful explanations of several key Old Testament texts which affect the interpretation and application of salvation to Gentiles.

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-29)

In response to the Pharisee believers' claim about the necessity of commanding circumcision for new Gentile converts, the first "council" of the Christian church meets to resolve this matter. Precedent is set in the year 49 C.E. by this event. We can hardly call it an *ecumenical* ("world-wide") council, since it does not include representatives from the newly birthed communities from Paul's first missionary journey. However, as a means for conflict resolution, the gathering succeeds in doing precisely that. Ernst Haenchen was certainly correct in his use of words like "the turning-point," "centerpiece," and "watershed" to characterize Acts 15.² Everyone present had a stake in the outcome, and many who were absent — and unaware of the proceedings — surely would be impacted by it.

The debate at the Council is not trivial, for it has to do with the question how are Gentiles saved. Nobody seemed to dispute the possibility that Gentiles *could be saved*, but there was substantial difference of opinion about the essential ingredients. What the objectors raised was the age-old custom of circumcision which marked out one people group from another in a decisive, graphic, physical and literal way. Gentiles who became proselytes bore a distinctively irreversible sign in their bodies which declared them to be Jews. They were forever "marked." What Paul and his companions had been doing was offering a circumcision-free Gospel to Gentiles — one in which the "mark" was absent, but presumably replaced by the rite of Christian baptism, the "mark" or "seal of the Holy Spirit" (see 2 Corinthians 1:22), and perhaps the marks of persecution (Galatians 6:17). Of course, there were notable differences in the *form of the sign*. Baptism was a witness given to others

¹ Adapted from Witherington, pp. 445-446. Also, David B. Whitlock, "An Exposition of Acts 15:1-29, *Review and Expositor*, 92 (1995), pp. 375-378.

² Ernest Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*. Tr. By Noble, Shinn, Anderson and Wilson. Philadelphia, 1971, p. 461.

at a specific time and place, could be shared by men and women alike, did not require the permanent modification of the human body, and was physically invisible after it was administered. What baptism did was announce the Gospel of the dying and rising Jesus in graphical terms — dramatizing the event with water. It was expected that persons who were baptized would live lives consistent with the *profession of their faith*. Here was the true "mark" of the Christian: the changed life; the *converted life*. The real question before the Jerusalem Council was simply, could the *changed life* exist without *circumcision*? Or did the Gentile believers have a "circumcision" that went much deeper than the *mohēl's* knife, one not made by human hands (Colossians 2:11)?

In her article, "Conversion, Conversation and Acts 15,"³ Lois Malcolm takes up Bernard Lonergan's analysis of conversion as an "about face," a new beginning occurring when a person moves from one *horizon* (way of seeing the world) to another.⁴ In conversion, we share in God's ways of loving and knowing, and we come to see His presence and work in the ways human beings think and act. When we are converted (as the Gentiles had been), the intellectual, moral and religious levels of life become affected. Distorted habits of thought, feeling and speech get corrected, as we experience, understand, judge, and decide in new ways. Lonergan appeals to converts to "be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving" — that is, *to change* if necessary.

By its very nature, such radical *change* leads persons into a new *conversation* with each other. In so doing, they enter into conversation with God Himself, who as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is already engaged in an eternal conversation. With the arrival of God's Son into the world and the later giving of the Holy Spirit, fresh new events have graced the world — events flowing from God's own conversation within Himself as a Trinity. When the followers of Jesus meet in Jerusalem in 49 C.E., they do so in order to further the divine conversation, or, perhaps better put, to reveal that conversation in new ways, fresh with possibility.

Those who *object* to receiving Gentiles *without circumcision* see the world in ways which *pre-date* the revelation of God's Son and the arrival of the Spirit. They seem more comfortable simply settling the matter in terms of the *letter of the law* but ignore the fundamental changes brought by the Holy Spirit. God has brought a new revelation of Himself into the world which breaks open existing frames of reference and initiates new possibilities in life. What the Council must do is decisively advance or extend the discussion, even if it means posing new questions rather than merely answering old ones. The Council will need a generative power to question the present life in light of the past and then open up a new future for the Christian church. In a word, the church requires *revelatory truth* which will help it understand what happens when people receive and experience the "Holy Spirit with power" or, conversely, try to manipulate or resist it.

Near the end of this large section (15:6-29), the wisdom of the Council finds full expression in the statement, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (15:28). This suggests strongly the shift in the church's understanding, as it ceases to be a "Jerusalem-centered" community and becomes a world-wide community which reaches to the ends of the earth (1:8). How well will the Council rise to its task? Will Gentile *conversion* provoke genuine *conversation*?

Considering the question (15:6-7a)

⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. ⁷ And after there had been much debate...

"Gathered together," as a phrase, situates the conversation which follows. Once more the root word *sunagō*, found in the Greek translation of the Hebrew idea "synagogue," appears in the text. Here is conversation in search of consensus, using the familiar form of social life within Judaism: the synagogue. As we have noted in previous *Background Notes*, the experience of living within a synagogue promoted not only worship but also constructive engagement through debate. Education found its center through the discipline of social activity

³ *Word and World*, Volume 22, Number 3 Summer 2002, pp.246-254.

⁴ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, New York, 1972.

within the synagogue. The early Christian community benefited from adopting synagogue forms. Associating the word "elders" with the word "gathered," Luke uncovers this strong Jewish element in Christian community life. What's *different*, of course, is the addition of the word "apostles," for that word reminds us of the newly witnessed events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth and also of the responsibility to bring this witness to the world. After all, apostles are those who are "sent forth" (see Luke 6:13; 9:1-6) for the purpose of calling others to become part of God's renewed and restored people. The community in conversation is the community of apostles and elders; of those sent and of those sending; the ship and the anchor.

Their task was "to consider the matter." The Greek is more concise: *idein peri tou logou toutou*; literally, "to look around this *logos*." The word "to look" stresses observation, recognition, and perception. The Council faces a matter requiring *close attention* and *careful analysis*. Some questions demand the utmost of care. This particular question has many sides to it and presents serious outcomes. Everybody knew how important it was, and gave their time and energy to a wise solution.

Such questions provoke strenuous debate, as 15:7 makes clear: "After much debate..." That's part of having a conversation: allowing the debate to take place, much as it had in Antioch (15:2). The underlying Greek word *zētēsis* appears once more in the text. Normally, such exchanges don't lead to an immediate answer to the question posed, nor do they lessen the emotion expressed but commonly focus it. Nobody gets up and complains about the argument taking place, and Luke feels no need to record the scattered details of what was actually said during this preliminary phase of the Council. Sometimes it's best to simply get all of the issues on the table without pressing for a conclusion, and the early church shows wisdom in what happens during this part of the discussion.

Following this generalized debate, three speeches focus the conversation. We hear from Peter (15:7b-11), Paul and Barnabas (15:12), and James (15:13-21). Each public address makes its own contribution:

1. Peter stands in defense of the Gentile converts, following a line of argument quite similar to what he said about his actions at the house of Cornelius, based on his *first-hand experience* (Acts 10; 11:1-18).
2. Paul and Barnabas are surprisingly brief, perhaps out of deference to the more senior members of the Jerusalem community. Their statement is a simple report, *bearing witness* to the "signs and wonders" which took place among the new Gentile converts out in the *diaspora*.
3. James offers what we would call a studied *theological and biblical argument* supporting his views on the admission of Gentiles, without circumcision, into the Christian community.

We observe how the respective gifts of each person are brought to bear on the question at hand. Different approach vectors shape the overall response, blending first-hand experience, eye-witness testimony and serious biblical scholarship.

Now the details of each...

Peter (15:7b-11)

^{7b} Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Consistent with the role Peter played in the early Jerusalem church, Peter "stood up." When the original Twelve lacked one of their members, Peter "stood up" (Acts 1:15). After the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, complete with "signs," Peter stood up (2:14) in order to explain the mysterious phenomena. A hint of Peter's moral authority shows itself in his posture: *anastas*, "having stood." His leadership among the Twelve remains unchallenged and fully acknowledged in the role he plays among the Council members. But Peter does not speak down to his audience, in spite of his special position within the early church. He calls his fellow

delegates *andres adelphoi*, "men-brothers," or perhaps as an idiom we should read this, "my brothers, my dear family." What he has to say rests on a foundation far deeper than his own claim to be the "first among equals."

We are after all, Peter tells his audience, *brothers*, living within the same family, and have kept no family secrets about what God's been up to —since the early days. Why, God chose Peter to bring the word of the Gospel to the Gentiles! How do we know this? Because they believed that word and received the Holy Spirit just as the original disciples had done! These are indisputable facts, and they are entirely the work of God. Anybody re-reading Acts 10-11 must admit that it wasn't Peter's idea to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. That decision had been made by God, since it was his "choice." Luke uses the Greek word *eklegomai*, "to choose, select" and attributes this action to God. Perhaps the force of the phrase "early days" (Greek: *aph' hēmerōn archaiōn*) is to place God's decision *well into the past*, ruling out the idea that the decision to include Gentiles within the Gospel call was a last minute affair. "It's quite *archaic*" overstates the meaning, but puts the emphasis where we suspect Peter placed it. Perhaps a better description might be: "it is *archetypal*." God knew all along what he intended to do for the Gentiles. Peter will leave the fine biblical points to what James teaches in his speech.

"God knows the heart," Peter reminds his audience. This statement echoes Old Testament themes, especially about what God truly wants from those who call themselves His chosen people. When speaking about His choice of David to be king (by contrast to Saul, Israel's first king), God tells Samuel not to pay attention to external qualities (stature, physical traits, etc.): "Man looks at outward appearance; God looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Peter may also have in mind that twice repeated command in *Deuteronomy* that Israel must "circumcise its heart" (10:16; 30:6), not just its foreskins. This is a theme which Paul picked up when he wrote to the Romans: "But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God" (Romans 2:29).

Since the hearts of Gentile believers were right with God, He was more than willing to give the same Holy Spirit to Gentiles as to the Jewish believers who received the *same* Spirit on Pentecost. God's gift of the Spirit was His witness to the Gentiles that He intended to treat them *just as he treated the Jewish believers*. The Spirit became the confirmatory witness that God had accepted Gentiles just as he accepted Jews as His covenant people. The gift of the Spirit was *the sign* that God "made no distinction between us and them." The Greek is definite: *outhen diekrinen metaxu hēmōn kai autōn*, "not at all did he discriminate 'between us and them.'" The verb *diakrinō* appeared in Acts 10:20 in conjunction with Peter's going to the house of Cornelius: he was to do so "without discrimination." Peter's willingness to sit at table with a Gentile stood in stark contrast to his critics in 11:2 who exhibited discriminatory attitudes when they questioned his actions. In that same setting, the Holy Spirit "made no distinction" (11:12) when he commanded Peter to accompany Cornelius' messengers to his house.

What did the Holy Spirit do for these Gentiles toward whom he showed no discrimination? According to Peter's rendering of the Cornelius account, "he cleansed their hearts by faith." This is a direct reference to God's verdict on the Gentiles, revealed to Peter in his vision of the sheet with unclean animals: "What God has made clean, do not call common" (Acts 10:15). The language of the "pure heart" appears in Psalm 24:4 where it belongs to a list of things which allow a person to come into the presence of God and be counted among the holy people of God. Gentiles are judged by God to be included among His people because He Himself has cleansed their hearts. The phrase "cleansed their hearts" stands in contrast to the debated issue of having "circumcised foreskins." Peter purposely crafts the phrase, "cleansed their hearts by faith," so that it stands over against what the objectors are demanding as an entrance requirement for Gentiles to become part of God's people, namely circumcision.

Having offered his own *witness to God's actions on behalf of the Gentiles (gift of the Spirit)*, Peter proceeds to direct his aim at the objectors. How does their complaint stack up against what Peter has just testified about the Holy Spirit being given to the Gentiles as the true sign of their membership in the believing community? In

terse Greek words, Luke narrates Peter's next statement: *nun oun ti*, "Now then, why?" Based on the plain witness of the Holy Spirit — given equally to Gentiles as to Jews, without precondition, except believing hearts cleansed by God — Peter poses this direct question. "Why are you putting God to the test?" The Greek word for "test" is actually a verb form, *peirazō*, used in the present tense: "Now then why are you *still* testing God?" This word has a history of use in the writings of Luke: 1) the devil tempting Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:2); 2) Jesus' critics testing him (Luke 11:16); 3) Ananias and Sapphira testing the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:9). It also has the simple meaning "to *attempt* to do something" (Acts 9:26; 16:7; 24:6). In Jewish history, the act of "testing God" belonged to the period from the Exodus to the conquest of Canaan, some forty years when Israel lived in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 6:16). We learn from Malachi 3:15 that evildoers make it a practice of putting God to the test — in order to see what they can "get away with." In the present context, "testing God," implies *resisting God* in His choices and decrees. Having spoken clearly through the Spirit to the house of Cornelius, God has made his choice of Gentiles-*without-circumcision* quite plain, but the objectors, by wanting to require circumcision are, in fact, trying to enforce a demand which God no longer lays on His people.

Taking up the imagery of "laying something on another," Peter invokes the imagery of "the yoke" (Greek: *zugos*). The objectors are trying to place it on the "neck" (Greek: *trachēlos*, singular in form, "neck" not "necks"). This is not merely a requirement placed on individual Gentiles: it is an entrance bar demanded of a *whole group of people: a covenant-bound people*. The singular form of the noun reinforces the "group identity" implied by the imposition of the yoke. The objectors are not just trying to exclude Gentiles at the *personal* level; they are seeking treat them as a *group* who must meet some special entrance standard imposed by circumcision.

Bruce comments,

The term "yoke" was particularly appropriate in this connection; a proselyte, when he undertook to fulfill the law, was said to "take up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven." But to ordinary Jews like Peter and his hearers the traditional law, especially as expounded by the severe school of Shammai which was dominant at the time, was a heavy burden under which they groaned.⁵

Jesus himself spoke of the yoke in the same way in Matthew 23:4, but previously had told his disciples that "my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

By invoking the memory of "our fathers," Peter invites his audience to relive the ancient story of Israel, including their wilderness sojourn when they tested God, even though they had Torah to guide them. In the hands of Second Temple Judaism, Torah had become *law*, a burden enforced as a boundary marker, setting Israel apart from the rest of the nations.

Luke recounts Israel's new story quoting Peter: "We are believing" (Greek: *pisteuomen*) in just the same way as they..." and places this act of faith under "the grace of the Lord" (Greek: *tēs charitōu tou kuriou*). Peter chose to speak of the "grace of the Lord" rather than the more generic "grace of God." It is, after all, the great affirmation of the Gospel that Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's Messiah and *Lord* of the world — the Lord of grace.

Peter brings the argument back to the earliest claim made in 15:2 that, in order to be saved, Gentiles needed to be circumcised. "No," declares Peter, "it is by the grace of the Lord *we shall be saved* just as *they*" (15:11). Therefore, Peter rests the weight of his argument on the grace of the Lord which is the only basis for salvation, and, in this single statement, Peter refutes the claims of 15:2 and 15:5. He cannot deny what he directly *witnessed in the case of Cornelius*, and his testimony becomes the first of three brought to bear on the Jewish objection raised in Antioch and Jerusalem.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, in the NICNT Series, Eerdmans, 1954, p. 307.

Paul and Barnabas (15:12)

¹² And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Coming from Peter, the first speaker, this speech had a solemn effect on the "assembly." Luke uses the Greek expression *pan to plēthos* to talk about the whole crowd. Present were not only the Council of apostles and elders but, no doubt, others who wanted to share in the conversation. But at this moment, after Peter's direct speech, everyone "fell silent" (Greek: *sigāō*). The form of the verb is intransitive and in the aorist tense, suggesting that suddenly nobody was talking. Debate seems to have ended, as the audience digests the significance of what Peter just articulated. In the Old Testament, "silence" often meant wonder and awe in the presence of Yahweh: "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10); "Be still before Yahweh and wait patiently for him" (Psalm 37:7); "Be silent before the Lord Yahweh... Be silent, all flesh, before Yahweh" (Zephaniah 1:7; 2:13).

Considering the new role Paul and Barnabas started to play in Acts 13-14, their apparent minimal speech-role in 15:12 is striking. However, what they tell the Council is how God performed "signs and wonders." This familiar combination of words (*sēmeia* and *terata*) has appeared throughout *Acts* (2:19, 22, 43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; 15:12). To an attentive student of the Old Testament, the whole idea of "signs and wonders" taking place *outside of Israel* showed that God was at work *among the nations*, achieving His special purposes. Consider some examples:

1. When God brings Israel out of Egypt, he does so with "signs and wonders" performed *in Egypt* (Hebrew: *'ōthōth* and *mōphēthōth*) (Exodus 7:3). God's calling of "a nation for himself from the *midst of another nation* ... by signs and wonders" was, in the view of the ancient Hebrews, an unparalleled event in history (Deuteronomy 4:34; see also, 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:3; 34:11). All of these references to the Exodus from Egypt contain this phrase. By using the same language, Paul and Barnabas may well intend the audience to see the connection with God's *calling of a Gentiles from the midst of the nations and making them part of His holy people*. That is, the emergence of a sizable Gentile Christian community is a New Exodus, achieved by Jesus through his death and resurrection. The pagan nations were in their own slavery to sin, ignorance, darkness and dead. But through the preaching of the Gospel — marked by "signs and wonders," Exodus-style — the believing elect are set free from "Egypt (=the world)." Paul and Barnabas have a Moses-Aaron role among the nations out of whom God is calling out a new people for His name.
2. Even as late as the return from Exile (a kind of second Exodus for Judah), Nehemiah uses "signs and wonders" language to describe God's new work on behalf of His people returned to their land (Nehemiah 9:10).
3. The data is overwhelmingly in favor of an Exodus setting for the use of "signs and wonders" language (Psalm 135:9; Jeremiah 32:20-21).
4. In later prophetic literature — Daniel in particular — we find the phrase reappearing as God announces the *future of His people* and the ultimate triumph of His kingdom in the world. These texts have Messianic implications, and point to the coming of Jesus, and connect that coming *with the nations, that is, the Gentiles* (Daniel 4:2-3; 6:27).
5. Paul will, in his letter to the Romans, expand on the brief intimations of his work among the Gentiles in 15:12, and, as in the present passage, will emphasize the role of "signs and wonders" in confirming the God-given nature of that work. Consider:

¹⁸ For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to **bring the Gentiles** to obedience- by word and deed, ¹⁹ by the power of **signs and wonders**, by the power of the Spirit of God- so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; (Romans 15:18-19).

In this case, notice how Paul writes about what "Christ has accomplished through me," and compare that language with Acts 15:12 where Luke tells about "the signs and wonders *God had done through them*." Again, in *Romans* he speaks about "bringing the Gentiles to obedience" in parallel to the 15:12 where God does His work "among the Gentiles."

James the Lord's brother (15:13-21)

¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶ "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸ known from of old." ¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

Having listened to Paul and Barnabas, the Council receives a fresh word from James, "the brother of the Lord." The New Testament identifies possibly five different persons with the name "James." The Greek text uses the word *Iakobos*, a transliteration of the Hebrew word *ya'aqōb*, known to most readers as "Jacob." As to the five persons with this name:

1. **James the son of Zebedee.** According to Mark 1:16-20, he was among the earliest disciples of Jesus. An inner circle of Peter, James and John seems to surround Jesus, and these names appear first in lists of the Twelve (see Matthew 10:2; 17:1; Mark 5:37; 9:2; 13:3; 14:33; Luke 6:14; 8:51; 9:28; Acts 1:13). According to Acts 12, he is beheaded by Herod Agrippa I.
2. **James the son of Alphaeus.** He receives scant mention in the Gospels (Mark 3:18).
3. **James the son of Mary.** He was the son of Clopas and a Mary — one of the women who watched the crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 15:40). There is a possibility that he might actually be the same person as #2.
4. **James the father of Judas** (not Iscariot). This Judas (not Iscariot) is one of the Twelve, and this James is his father. Otherwise we know nothing about him (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13).
5. **► James the brother of Jesus.** How this James acquired his *fraternal* relationship to Jesus is hotly debated. 1) Was he the blood offspring of both Joseph and Mary at some point after the birth of Jesus? 2) Was he part of a previous family of Joseph whose wife died before he married the Virgin Mary? 3) Is the word "brother" a generic term which could mean "cousin" or other close relative, but not a literal brother of Jesus? During Jesus' earthly ministry, his own brothers, including this James, were unsympathetic to his vocation. According to John 7, they displayed a cynicism toward his activities, and 7:5 explicitly tells the reader, "For even his own brothers did not believe in him." However, after the resurrection, all of that changes, and we find James and the brothers praying and witnessing together (see 1 Corinthians 15:7; Acts 1:14).

Gradually, leadership for the Jerusalem church falls on this James, something attested by Paul himself in Galatians 2, and now here in Acts 15. In the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas* (12), Jesus is purported to have said in response to the question, "Who is to be our leader?": "Wherever you are, you are to go to James the righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being." The moniker, "James the Just," is often applied, then, to this James. Tradition attributes the book of *James* to him (c. mid 50's C.E.), and the man called "Jude" claims James as his own brother (Jude 1:1).⁶ From the writings of Josephus we learn about the death of James in the days before the Jewish war, circa 62 C.E. (*Antiquities*, 20.9.1), overseen by the high priest Ananus. Eusebius, writing much later, also offers additional details (*Ecclesiastical History*, 4.22.4).

And so, when James addresses the Council with the words, "Brothers, listen to me," he is not being presumptuous, but acting in ways consistent with the leadership which he held. The speech he gives follows loosely the pattern of *deliberative rhetoric*.⁷ His introduction (*exordium*) is to the point (15:13), followed by a brief *narratio* concerning what Peter said and did (15:14). More importantly, is the citation of Old Testament

⁶ Additional resources on the various persons called "James" include: R. Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church*, Edinburgh, 1990; F.F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James and John*, Grand Rapids, 1980; L.T. Johnson, *The Letter of James*, *Anchor Bible*, Volume 37A, New York, 1995, pp. 89-123.

⁷ Witherington, pp.456-467; Soards, *The Speeches in Acts*, pp.92-95; Bruce, *Speeches in the Acts*, pp.19-20; Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, p. 126.

Scripture in support of both Peter's words and what God is presently doing in calling Gentiles to become part of His people, a sort of *probatio* (15:15). All of this leads to a firm *propositio* which forms the "judgment" reached by James in 15:16. Consequentially, in the *peroratio*, a certain course of action is prescribed, namely, that a letter be drafted and sent to the Gentiles (15:20-21).

When he speaks about Peter, he uses his Hebrew name, Simon, which in the Greek text is actually spelled as *Simeon*. This is probably an attempt to capture the Hebrew spelling, *Shim'ōn* where the "e" is actually the Hebrew letter *ayin*, represented by the ' symbol in English transliteration. Why does he refer to Peter with his other name?" Perhaps the constraints of speaking to a mixed Greek and Hebrew audience compelled James to accede to the Jewish sensibilities. No insult can be intended, although "Simon Peter" regularly appears in the Gospels as his full name. In John's Gospel, Jesus addresses Peter with the name "Simon" during the process of restoring him to fellowship and service. In Acts 10:5 we hear the angel tell Cornelius that he is to find "Simon who is called Peter," a designation recurring in 10:18, 32 and 11:13. Statistically, the name "Peter" occurs 152 times in 148 verses; "Simon Peter" is found 32 times in 29 verses; "Simon" (referring to Peter) appears 49 times in 44 verses. We can hardly form any certain opinion about James' reasons, other than that Peter was referred to by this name before Jesus gave him a new name in Hebrew: *Cephas*, that is, "Peter" in Greek.

James reviews Peter's announcement, namely, that God revealed His earliest concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for Himself (15:14). This simply reinforces what we were told in 15:7. The language is somewhat different, likely for emphasis. According to 15:7 "God chose" and in 15:14 "God showed concern." The Greek word, translated "showed concern," is *episkeptomai*, literally, "to look on," in the sense of "looking over, watching over." As Bruce points out, this was a common way of describing a "providential visitation," as illustrated in Luke 1:68, 78 and 7:16. The emphasis is on the "care" with which the action is performed. When God chose the Gentiles, He did so with a providential care, consistent with that shown to those who are already included among the people of God. Curiously, the connotation of the word "first" (Greek: *prōton*) could lead us back to the earliest days of Hebrew history: God *first* called His people when He summoned Abram from Ur and brought him to the land of Canaan. Was not Abram himself originally a *Gentile* before Yahweh called him? It is not clear that James (or Peter) intends this broader perspective, but the possibility cannot be ruled out.

What follows is an *Old Testament text citation* referred to with the expression, "the words of the prophets," which are said to be "in agreement with" what Simon had already told the Council about God's choice of the Gentiles. The formula, "as it is written," is an authoritative citation form, used throughout the New Testament (see Matthew. 26:24; Mark 1:2; 7:6; 9:13; 14:21; Luke 2:23; 3:4; John 6:31; 12:14; Acts 7:42; 13:33; 15:15; Romans 1:17; 2:24; 3:4, 10; 4:17; 8:36; 9:13, 33; 10:15; 11:8, 26; 14:11; 15:3, 9, 21; 1 Corinthians 1:31; 2:9; 6:16; 10:7; 2 Corinthians 8:15; 9:9; Hebrews 10:7). Normally, this citation formula introduces a *fulfillment saying*, to the effect that what has recently transpired *fulfills* what the ancient Scriptures foretold.

Although James speaks about the "words" of the prophets, *plural*, the text itself comes from Amos 9:11-12. At first glance, this seems straightforward enough as James quotes the Scripture. However, scholars have pointed out that James does not follow the text preserved in the Masoretic⁸ version of the Hebrew Bible (abbreviated

⁸ "The Masoretic Text (MT) is a Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible (*Tanakh*). It defines not just the books of the Jewish canon, but also the precise letter-text of the biblical books in Judaism, as well as their vocalization and accentuation for both public reading and private study. The MT is also widely used as the basis for translations of the Old Testament in Protestant Bibles, and in recent years also for Catholic Bibles. The MT was primarily copied, edited and distributed by a group of Jews known as the Masoretes between the seventh and tenth centuries AD. Though the consonants differ little from the text generally accepted in the early second century (and also differ little from some Qumran texts that are even older), it has numerous differences of both greater and lesser significance when compared to (extant 4th century) manuscripts of the Septuagint, a Greek translation (made in the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC) of the Hebrew Scriptures that was in popular use in Egypt and Palestine and that is often quoted in the Christian New Testament. The Hebrew word *mesorah* refers to the transmission of a tradition. In a very broad sense it can refer to the entire chain of Jewish tradition (see Oral law), but in reference to the masoretic text the word *mesorah* has a very specific meaning: the diacritic markings of the text of the Hebrew Bible and concise marginal notes in manuscripts (and later printings) of the Hebrew Bible which note textual details,

MT), but cites the translation found in the Septuagint (abbreviated, **LXX**). Recall, that sometime around 200 B.C.E., Jewish scribes translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek.⁹ The New Testament, written in Greek, often follows the reading of the LXX in preference to the Hebrew text. In most cases, the differences between the underlying texts (Hebrew or Greek) are minimal and do not affect the meaning. However, in the case of Acts 15:16-18, considerable differences are alleged which affect the interpretation offered by James. For the sake of clarity, I am placing the several versions side-by-side:

| Acts 15:16-18 | Amos 9:11-12 in the LXX | Amos 9:11-12 in the MT |
|--|--|--|
| "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name," says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old. | "In that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and will rebuild its ruins, and will set up its parts that have been broken down, and will build it up as in the ancient days: 12 that the remnant of men, and all the Gentiles by whom my name is called, may earnestly seek me," says the Lord who does all these things. | "In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, 12 that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name," declares the LORD who does this. |

The major difference is the expression "that the remnant of mankind (or men) may seek the Lord" in Acts 15 and in the LXX, which differs from "that they may possess the remnant of Edom" in the MT. Without boring the reader with much technical detail, we acknowledge the differences, but also cite recent research which suggests that the LXX may have followed a more original reading in this case than the MT. If that is the case, then James would not have even been aware of the later reading and therefore actually followed a Hebrew version identical in meaning to the LXX at this point.¹⁰ Otherwise, the use of this Amos passage is unremarkable from a *textual* perspective.

However, from a *theological* perspective, it is remarkable indeed!

The expression "called by my name" (Greek: *eph' hous epikeklētai to onoma mou ep' autous* likely triggered James to cite Amos, since he had just reminded the Council how Peter explained God's call of the Gentiles, using strikingly similar language (15:14). What James wants the Council to see is that the turning of the Gentiles to the Gospel was predicted and affirmed centuries before by God Himself. This is consistent with what Luke himself recorded of the words of Jesus in Luke 24:45-47: "...understand the Scriptures...this is what is written...to be preached to all nations..." Furthermore, the mission to the Gentiles is the direct consequence of the renewal of Israel itself: First, God rebuilds the fallen house of David — by raising up Messiah and then raising him from the dead. Once that has been achieved — starting at Pentecost when the 3000-remnant repent and believe and are filled with the Holy Spirit — the message will then go to the Gentiles who will also believe.

usually about the precise spelling of words. The oldest extant manuscripts of the Masoretic Text date from approximately the ninth century AD,[1] and the Aleppo Codex (once the oldest complete copy of the Masoretic Text, but now missing its Torah section) dates from the tenth century." See: Robin Lane Fox, *The Unauthorized Version*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1991. pp. 99–106; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, Fortress Press, 1992; Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, Fortress Press, 1995.

⁹ From *Septuagint.net*: "**Septuagint - What is It?** Septuagint (sometimes abbreviated LXX) is the name given to the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures. The Septuagint has its origin in Alexandria, Egypt and was translated between 300-200 BC. Widely used among Hellenistic Jews, this Greek translation was produced because many Jews spread throughout the empire were beginning to lose their Hebrew language. The process of translating the Hebrew to Greek also gave many non-Jews a glimpse into Judaism. According to an ancient document called the *Letter of Aristeas*, it is believed that 70 to 72 Jewish scholars were commissioned during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus to carry out the task of translation. The term "Septuagint" means seventy in Latin, and the text is so named to the credit of these 70 scholars. "

¹⁰ Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 448, n. 4; Michael A. Braun, "James' Use of Amos at the Jerusalem Council: Steps Toward a Possible Solution of the Textual and Theological Problems," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (June 1977):114-117. Also, the work of Gleason L. Archer and Gregory Chirichigno in *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament*, Chicago, 1983, pp. 152-155.

James stands squarely in the same court with Peter who himself saw the Cornelius conversion as God's first initiative *to the Gentiles*.¹¹ But the restoration of Israel *precedes* it. A couple of points require clarification in this regard:

1. The notion of *restoration* is expressed by using the words *anoikodomēsō* = "rebuild" and *anorthōsō* = "set up." The root for "rebuild" is *anoikodomeō* and this is its only occurrence in the New Testament, but lies behind Jeremiah 24:6, Amos 9:11-12 and Zechariah 1:16. Applied to the "tent of David," the verb recalls everything found in 2 Samuel 7 where God promises to make out of David himself "a house," that is, a dynasty.
2. A certain play on words is created from the Amos text by James when he ties together God's "returning" to Israel (*anastrephō*) and the Gentiles "turning" to God (*epistrephō*). The familiar theme of *God returning to Zion* is clearly contained in the way James introduces the Amos passage with the words, "After this I will return..."
3. God's return to Zion happens precisely so that the Gentiles might "turn to" Him. James establishes that connection with the Greek words *hōpōs an* used alongside of *ekzētēsōsin*: "with the result that they might seek..." X happens so the Y might happen. This is a classic *purpose clause* in Greek.
4. The word "people" (Greek: *laos*) gets applied to Gentiles not just to Jews. Moreover, this "people" is actually called "the remnant" (*hoi kataloipoi*) of the human race, implying that just as Israel had its remnant so now the Gentiles who are "called out from" the nations are God's remnant as well. By interpreting Amos in this fashion, James is saying, in effect, the Gentiles are not included in the remnant, but are themselves the remnant. Gentiles are more than an associate people — the God-fearers — they actually become Israel. The people of God consisting of both restored Israel and the Gentiles are the equivalent of the New Testament community, the church.
5. By calling out the remnant from the Gentiles, God is being faithful to His people Israel in a way they had not previously imagined. Once the faithful remnant among national Israel turned to God — making the mission to the Jews a success not a failure as some supposed — these Jews bring the Gospel to the Gentiles which is also a fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. There is likely an allusion to Zechariah 2:11 where God foretold, "many nations shall join themselves to the lord on that day and shall be my people."

This, then, is the meaning James reads from the text of Amos. David's "house" is the restored house of Israel, both Jew and Gentile. There is one people of God, not two. The church was God's plan all along — the called out ones (*ekklēsia*, the Greek word commonly translated "church"). And they are called from both the Jews and the Gentiles and formed into a "raised up house of David," to use the language of Amos 9. What happened at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10-11) agrees with the words of the prophets, James affirms. This is the work of God, announced in advance, but now brought to fulfillment in the present.

Using the Greek clause *egō krinō*, which means, "I make the judgment," James declares his *propositio* in clear and unambiguous terms in 15:19:

1. **We should not trouble (Greek: *parenochleō*) the Gentiles who turn to God.** The verb means "to cause extra difficulty and hardship by continual annoyance" (Louw-Nida, 22.25). Literally, we should not bring anything else *alongside* to *block* the Gentiles. Our English word "occlude" shares a root with this term: "shutting off or obstruction of something." Clearly, God has opened up a way of entrance for Gentiles to become part of God's people; He has opened the door to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27), and we who are Jewish believers must not slam it shut by dragging in burdensome requirements like circumcision which would become occlusions.
2. **But should write to them.** As Jewish believers, James tells the Council, we have a responsibility to make ourselves clear and consistent about what we expect from Gentile believers whom God has already placed among us as His people too. The drafting of a formal written document is a new development in the life of the fledgling church. For the first time the church's understanding of what the Holy Spirit is saying to it is being put in written form. We have certainly heard about oral messages from God to His people through the

¹¹ Kaiser, "Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of Gentiles," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 20:2, June, 1977.

Holy Spirit. We have read about visions, dreams, prophetic utterances, speaking with other languages — all at the initiative of God's Spirit. In a predominantly *oral culture*, such spoken statements were familiar and understood as the living word of God. Yet, when James uses the words *episteilai autois*, "to write to them," he conveys an official communication.

3. **To abstain from** certain practices. James' recommended prohibitions comprise the center of what we might accurately call *an apostolic decree*, where the Gentile believers are addressed in a more authoritative way. That is the fundamental content of 15:22-29. What are these prohibited practices? Again, without being too technical, the biblical text in Greek has a few variations.¹² The majority view accepts the form found in most contemporary translations which has *four clauses* which contain the four prohibited behaviors. Why does James choose these *four* for special consideration? Is he laying down some kind of moral handbook for Gentiles, a sort of minimal moral code? To that challenging but important question we now turn our attention.

First, we need to carefully list the four prohibitions. We might also note that the list of restrictions appears *three times* in the book of *Acts*: 15:20; 15:29; and, 21:25. The order of the items varies between the first, and the second and third — which agree with each other. We will follow the wording of 15:20:

1. Pollutions of idols.
2. Fornication
3. Strangled
4. Blood

Second, we need to look for an Old Testament context where these prohibitions are stated. That background is most certainly Leviticus 17-18. These chapters from the Torah pertain to *how Gentiles who lived among the Jewish people were to conduct themselves*. This requires an explanation for our readers. In ancient Israel, there were always non-Hebrews who lived among the Israelites. Sometimes they were called "strangers," a rough approximation of our idea of "resident alien." The phrase "alien in your midst" was a frequent way of describing these persons. Special legal status was accorded to them, much as it might be in our own society for someone who is a temporary resident. In the Hebrew text the word *gēr* ("stranger, alien") appears alongside *b^etōk* ("in the midst, in your midst") and often with the verb *gūr* ("to sojourn, live as an alien").

As a *legal* alien, such a Gentile, living within the Israelite community, was expected to observe certain ceremonial rules or customs, even though they were not actually fully participating members of the covenant community. Though not necessarily connected to the faith of Israel (that is, they were not *observant*), they must follow these customs. We believe that a reading of the Leviticus' passage, with its repeated phrase "foreigner in their midst," reveals the true context for James' decree. The purpose of the original laws was not merely to avoid offending the Israelites, but to place Gentiles in an environment where pagan influences would be less likely to flourish. Moreover, the farther resident alien Gentiles got from pagan practices, the more open they might become to the true faith of Israel.

At the head of the all versions of this *list of four* was the prohibition having to do with *idol worship*. The prerequisite for any worship of the one true God is the forsaking of all other gods and the forms of worship associated with them. This was the central point of Paul's words to the Lystrans in Acts 14:15, "We...bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God." Without question, in the Jewish mind, *idolatry was the hallmark of being a Gentile*, and it is the main feature of his life which must change. If there was one thing above all which dominated the Jewish view of the Gentiles and the appeals they made to them, it was the conviction that they were idolaters. Not only was idolatry believed to be their main shortcoming, it was also held to be the basis of all other forms of Gentile immorality. This gets special attention in the Jewish extra-biblical writings: Wisdom 12-14; Jubilees 2:16-18; Sibylline Oracles 4:28-32. Nor can we miss the connection

¹² See Royce Dickinson, "The Theology of the Jerusalem Conference, *Restoration Quarterly*, 32 no.2, 1990, p.78.

in Romans 1:19ff where Paul blames idolatry for the slippery slope of other "Gentile sins." The Ten Commandments ("Ten Words") begin with "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20).

If we examine Leviticus 17-18, we find the likely correlation with James' list. There are five occurrences of the phrase "alien in the midst" (17:8, 10, 12, 13; 18:26). Of these, two refer to the same prohibition (17:10, 12), leaving *four* which must be observed by both Jews and Gentiles. As it turns out, these correspond to the four prohibitions of the apostolic decree recommended by James in Acts 15:¹³

1. "Things sacrificed to idols" (*eidōlothutōn*) are referenced in Leviticus 17:8-9. These verses are about not only *burnt offerings*, but also about sacrifices whose meat *could be eaten* by the worshippers, ruling out any sacrifices *not brought to the tabernacle* which, by implication, are not offered to Yahweh *but to idols*.
2. "Blood" is prohibited in Leviticus 17:10, 12.
3. "Things strangled" (Greek: *pniktōn*) are prohibited in 17:13.
4. "Sexual immorality" (Greek: *porneias*) refers to Leviticus 18:26, where all forms of sexual sin are implied.

If the decree in Acts 15 is based on the Leviticus texts, the reason might be sociological. Gentile Christians must follow four simple instructions already required for Gentiles who are participating in Jewish worship. In this way the early Christ community supported its Jewish ethic as found in Torah — applying to Gentiles only what Torah presently required. Should Jewish people question the inclusion of non-circumcised Gentiles, the church would only need to point to the faithful Gentile observance of this ethic. As John Proctor has noted, "The unity and peace of the church are preserved, and Christianity can hold its place within Judaism. At the same time the church claims its Gentile converts as members of eschatological Israel, the Israel of the prophetic promises."¹⁴

Coupled with this reading of Acts 15 in relationship to Leviticus is yet another consideration of the prohibitions. First and foremost, the decree is about idolatry and about worshipping in Greco-Roman temples. In brief, the Gentile converts must separate themselves from pagan worship which includes eating from the sacrificial carcass. Idol worship is the thing to avoid, because idol worship drags the person into the other areas addressed by the final three prohibition.

We must also see how this text raises *missionary* questions. What expectations apply to new converts? How do older Christians and newer ones relate to each other? In what ways does the Gospel intersect cultural lines, avoiding over-enculturation while at the same time maintaining biblical standards for reasonable ethical conduct? Such questions show concern for the integrity of both the Gospel and the culture of those who receive its message. Several safeguards must accompany attempts to answer these questions:

1. Worship must be given to God alone and anything which smacks of idolatry within a culture must be avoided at all costs.
2. Christians should remember where they came from, for our history depends on Israel's. Proper respect in our dealings with Jewish followers of Jesus is paramount.
3. The New People of God is predominantly multi-racial. The Holy Spirit made eminently clear to the early church that the Gospel is advancing into new areas. The Jewish roots of Christianity must be balanced with the Gentile mission.
4. The Messianic movement continues to be Jewish, yet committed to Gentile mission. By appealing to a biblical standard (Amos and Leviticus, in this case), it secured its position in Judea while maintaining its prospects of missionary growth elsewhere.

From the approach taken by the Jerusalem Council, *vis-à-vis* James, new Christians accommodated themselves to the expectations of those who were in Christ before them, and did so as a matter of mission and love. The

¹³ This analysis is sustained by Richard Bauckham in his *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, Eerdmans, 1995, pp.459ff.

¹⁴ John Proctor, "Proselytes and Pressure Cookers: The Meaning and Application of Acts 15:20," *International Review of Mission*, 85, no. 339 O 1996, p475.

Jewish church retained integrity in Judea while protecting itself from hostile neighbors. On the other hand, this did not suggest that conformity was paramount, otherwise the *whole Torah* would have been required from the Gentile converts — which was obviously not the case with circumcision! Mission remained open on two fronts — Jew and Gentile. When the Gospel intersected cultural boundaries, both people groups worked out their responsibilities to each other. The sorts of question they faced squarely were:

1. How can we treat Scripture seriously when we make new decisions?
2. How can we keep alive and open all the missionary possibilities that are now before us?
3. What can we do to protect one another from hardship?

The ethical implications within a pagan society are enormous. Idolatry comes first; the Lord is God Alone. Then, blood has a sacred quality for it symbolizes the sacredness of life in all its forms and rejects violence against human beings. Sex is also holy and will become a danger rather than a blessing if used outside its proper boundaries.

The Council's Letter (15:22-29)

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

The recommendations of James find their way into a formal letter, presumably the work of several members present at the Council. We know it had the backing of the apostles, elders and the whole church. That's quite a consensus! And it was the fruit of constructive engagement and engaging *conversation*. Once more, the names of newcomers (Judas Barsabbas and Silas) get added to the associates of Paul and Barnabas who will bring the letter to Antioch. For reasons known to the Council, the addition of these two men enhanced the perspective of the Council's decree and broadened the constituency who would hear it. Luke calls them "leading men among the brothers" (*andras hēgoumenous en tois adelphois*). The word "leading" means "to be regarded as fit or necessary," suggesting that both men brought something useful to the task which otherwise was lacking. We should be heartened by this: even though the wholly competent team of Paul and Barnabas was bringing the consensus document, Judas and Silas supplied the missing piece for the mission. Perhaps they "greased the skids" in a unique fashion! Unknown to Paul, Silas will become his new traveling companion on the second missionary journey.

The *exordium* of the apostolic letter from the Council offers warm greetings to the brother-Gentiles in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. Put simply, the letter is a "brothers-to-brothers" communication, underscoring the level ground at the foot of the cross. Though the Jerusalem Council represented the "apostle and elders" as stated in the greeting, the letter is an intra-family document and lacks the intimidation one would expect from a royal letter sent by a king to his subjects. No rigid hierarchy dominates the letter.

At its heart, the letter seeks to correct a misperception. Specifically, "some went out from us without our authorization, troubling your minds by what they said" (15:24). This is an illuminating statement for it implies that the "men from Judea" in 15:1, reinforced by the Pharisees in 15:5, gave the impression that they had the full support of the Jerusalem elders, led by James. Galatians 2:12 makes a similar reference to "certain men" who "came from James." What the Council's letter uncovers is a falsely ascribed communiqué from Jerusalem, and by implication, from James. The net effect of the false delegation was a "troubling" of Gentile minds. The Greek term *tarassō* means "to cause movement, usually as the result of shaking or stirring, to stir up."

The goal of the letter is to settle the minds of the Gentile Christians by sending properly authorized persons (Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas) who would supply two critical elements: 1) an oral report of the Council; 2) a written document authenticating the oral report. Coupled with the good character of the messengers, the believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia would have ample evidence that the information transmitted was, indeed, what the Jerusalem leadership actually intended. This special care in securing good information reveals one of the weapons used by those who opposed the Gospel: the proliferation of misinformation. The agitators among the Jews put false reports in the mouths of the Jerusalem leadership to purposely mislead the Gentiles. A reading of *Galatians* reveals a similar strategy at work in the province of Galatian affecting cities like Iconium, Antioch, Lystra and Derbe.

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (15:28). With this statement, the Council conveys its four prohibitions to the Gentiles which we have discussed above. The obvious priority of the "Holy Spirit" in knowing the will of God appears in this passage. Presumably, the Council deems its decree "good" *because the Holy Spirit deemed it good*. Here is a classic case of the leading of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. But the discernment of the Holy Spirit's mind was not the activity of only one person, but of the community gathered, speaking, listening, asking and answering. It was not only the word of Peter or of James or of Paul. Rather, after much discussion (15:7a), the several members addressed the assembly until a joint decree arose from the wisdom of the community, inspired by the Holy Spirit. The prophetic gift, in this case, was not the gift of only one, but the shared expression of several. The Jerusalem Council guards the collective wisdom of God's counsel. Inspiration, in this case, gets applied through the whole undertaking.

The clause, "it seemed good," comes from the Greek *edoxen* which may simply imply that the conclusion of the Council and the evident leading of the Holy Spirit led to the same understanding of the matter. Obviously the conclusion of the Council was not, *ipso facto*, the foregone conclusion of the Holy Spirit, as if somehow human beings could claim infallibility. This has been, of course, a mistaken view of some throughout church history. Whether it is an over-estimation of the office of the prophet or the claim of unbroken apostolic succession, the church has sometimes overstepped its confidence in its own ability to know and declare the purposes of God. Under such circumstances, the counsel of Luther applies: where Scripture speaks, we speak; where Scripture is silent, we are silent. A simple re-reading of the process by which the Council reached its decision shows that Scripture was everywhere consulted, read and interpreted in order to arrive at that which "seemed good to the Holy Spirit." In his writing to the *diaspora* believers, Peter would one day tell them near the end of his life:

¹⁹ And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19-21).

"Carried along by the Holy Spirit" and keeping close to the "prophecy of Scripture," the senders of the letter to the Gentile Christians remained faithful to the will of the Holy Spirit.

"Not to burden you more..." Those words translate the Greek *mēden pleon epitithesthai humin baros*. The verb "place" is used with "a burden," and is expressed as a present tense. Whatever ends up in this letter would become a continuing requirement for the Gentile believers, and the Jerusalem Council wants to be sure it does not turn into a "dead weight" — a *baros* — dragging the new converts down. This "weight" assumes the form of "demands" on the ethical conduct of the Gentiles. This sort of language reminds us of Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-30 where he invites his followers to take "my yoke," having previously worn one which brought "labor" in the form of "a heavy burden." What follows are, of course, the recommendations of James, agreed to by the rest.

The Jerusalem delegation to Antioch (15:30-35)

³⁰ So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³² And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. ³³ And after they had spent some

time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. ³⁴ ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Paul and Barnabas, Silas and Judas take this letter back to Antioch where it is read. The response is summed up in the words "joy" and "encouragement." From 15:32 we learn the further role of Judas and Silas: to encourage and strengthen the brothers in Antioch. Not satisfied with a simple delivery of the message, the messengers become part of the message. We can only surmise the niche filled by the newcomers within the Antioch community. Fresh faces with new ways of saying things deepen existing understandings. With a topic as highly charged as cross-cultural understanding, varied perspectives from a broad base of people groups can strengthen the conversation. The Holy Spirit works through personalities in just such ways as these.

Once the work of Silas and Judas is finished, they return "to those who sent them" — presumably to Jerusalem, while Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch, no doubt anticipating their next mission into the Gentile world.

Concluding Thoughts

The mission to the Gentiles, reaching back to Acts 10-11 and continuing through the first missionary journey, was God's idea. In nearly every case, the Holy Spirit was active among the Gentiles *before* the apostles arrived on the scene to proclaim the Good News. What we sometimes call the *prevenient grace of God* — the grace that "goes before" — prepared hearts and revealed instructions to persons like Cornelius. All of this had a certain immediate joyful effect on the new converts as well as a puzzling sense of wonder on the part of those who finally brought the message. The human messenger — Jewish in this case — needed to "catch up" with the initiative of God's Spirit. Recall the startled and dazed words of Peter when the Holy Spirit suddenly fell on the household of Cornelius, complete with Pentecostal signs. Peter's words are priceless (and I paraphrase): "Well, I guess if God wants the Gentiles in His community by giving them the Holy Spirit, we might as well baptize them!" Imagine: the Holy Spirit is given to the Gentiles *before they are baptized!* Who can know the mind of the Lord? And so, not only must the Holy Spirit be active in the *converting* of the Gentiles — a remarkable event — he must also direct the *conversation* of the apostles as they try to understand how the Gentiles are to become fully participating members of the people of God. It is this *conversation* which grew out of *conflict* and then became the Jerusalem *Council*. From misinformation to missionary vision.

The Spirit helps the apostles and disciples break open their ways of thinking, feeling, and acting so they can participate in the world of God's reign — the world of the Spirit's power — a world not limited by a particular set of social, ethnic, or ritual prescriptions. Thinking patterns, ways of being and acting, are radically transformed and reshaped.¹⁵

Glory to God! Amen.

¹⁵ See Lois Malcom's "Conversion, Conversation, and Acts 15," p. 252.

Digger Deeper: *What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If We, the Church, Can't Get Along?*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If We, the Church, Can't Get Along?*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. This week's reading describes a *conflict* within the Christian community as described in Acts 15. Carefully read 15:1-35 and propose a simple outline of the main sections.
2. Who were the antagonists? The protagonists? Be specific in labeling the groups who participated in each dimension of the debate.
3. Who was most affected by the conflict provoked by the antagonists? Who took responsibility for resolving the conflict?
4. Why did the scene shift from Antioch to Jerusalem? Who were the primary participants in what has come to be known as the *Jerusalem Council*?
5. What claims did the antagonists make in 15:1b and 15:5? Does it surprise you that there were *believers* among the Pharisees? Based on what you know about this Jewish sect, why did they demand the specific requirements for the Gentiles?
6. How important was it that "much discussion" took place before the "heavy hitters" spoke their minds (15:6-7a)?
7. What specific contribution did Peter make to the discussion, and on what basis did he make his arguments?
8. Why do you think Luke gave Paul and Barnabas "brief coverage" (15:12)? What was the content of their report?
9. How did James approach the main issue differently from the other leaders? How important was Scripture to his argument? Explain his use of Amos 9:11-12.
10. How did James propose resolving the conflict, and what will the solution mean for the Gentiles?
11. What "prohibitions" did James recommend for Gentile behavior? Compare these with Leviticus 17-18. Why do you think he identified these particular restrictions?
12. What method did the apostles and elders propose for communicating the decision of the Council?
13. According to 15:24 what seemed to be the method used by the antagonists for stirring up trouble in the first place?
14. Explain the meaning of the sentence, "It seemed good to the Holy and to us...", found in 15:28.
15. Who brought the letter to the Gentiles, and how did the Gentiles respond to it?
16. What general lessons about conflict resolution can be learned from this story?