

The Jerusalem Council - Lessons learned

Acts 15:1-35

Let's tell the Gentiles:

1. Abstain from things polluted by idols,
2. Abstain from sexual immorality,
3. Abstain from what has been strangled,
4. Abstain from blood.

James, in Acts 15:20

Dear Gentiles,

1. Abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols,
2. Abstain from blood,
3. Abstain from what has been strangled,
4. Abstain from sexual immorality.

The letter, Acts 15:29

“There remained, however, a practical problem. In most cities Gentile believers had to live alongside Jewish believers, who had not been brought up to observe the levitical food restrictions and to avoid contact with Gentiles as far as possible. If there was to be free association between these two groups, certain guidelines must be laid down, especially with regard to table fellowship....”

“James therefore gave it as his considered judgment that Gentile Christians should be directed to avoid food which had idolatrous associations and the flesh [meat] of animals from which the blood had not been completely drained, and that they should conform to the Jewish code of relations between the sexes instead of remaining content with the pagan standards to which they had been accustomed....”

“The prohibition against eating flesh with the blood still in it (including the flesh of strangled animals) was based on the ‘Noachian decree’ of Gen. 9:4. At a later time, when the issue dealt with by the apostolic council was no longer a live one, the provisions moved by James and adopted by the other leaders were modified so as to become purely ethical injunctions; thus the Western text makes James propose that Gentile converts ‘abstain from idolatry, from fornication and from bloodshed [see footnote, next slide], and from doing to others what they would not like done to themselves.’”

“Idolatry, fornication, and murder were the three cardinal sins in Jewish eyes; avoidance of these was held to be binding on the whole human race.”

F. F. Bruce, 296, footnote 62

“This policy, James urged, would not work to the detriment of Israel’s mission in the Gentile world; there was still ample opportunity for Gentiles to learn the law of Moses, for it was read publicly every sabbath in synagogues throughout the civilized world....This observation was perhaps intended to calm the apprehensions of the believing Pharisees, in whose eyes it was specially important that the whole Torah should be taught among the Gentiles; this, said James, was being attended to already by the synagogues.”

F. F. Bruce, 295-296

But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.

Genesis 9:4

“Are the ‘necessary things’ of Acts 15:29 still binding in any way on Gentile Christians? Related to this is the question of any parallel NT teaching that might assist in the application of the Apostolic Decree. Witherington observes first the teaching in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 about the demand for Gentiles to turn from idolatry to serve the living and true God, coupled with instructions about avoiding all forms of sexual immorality in 4:1-8.”

“More extensively, Paul deals with *porneia* in 1 Corinthians 5-6 and then the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8-10, where the word *eidolothyton* is used several times (8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:19; cf. Acts 15:29). A specific connection between sexual sin and dining at a pagan temple feast is made in 1 Corinthians 10:7-22. ‘For Paul, the issue is clearly one of venue rather than menu, as the advice in 1 Cor. 10:23-28 shows....In short, Paul, like James, insists that pagans flee idolatry and immorality and the temple context where such things are thought to be prevalent.’”

“Witherington’s approach is generally more helpful than attempts to explain the Apostolic Decree specifically in terms of the Noachian precepts, or the rules in Leviticus 17:8-18:18, or in rabbinic texts indicating matters on which compromise by Jews was impossible. Witherington suggests a particular social context in which the four prohibited activities were believed to occur together.”

“His solution fits with Jewish evidence that during the NT era Jews believed that ‘the chief source of Gentile impurity was their contact with “the defilement of idols,” not their contact with nonkosher food’. It [his solution] avoids the implication that Gentiles were somehow placed under some modified obligation to keep parts of the Mosaic law (without circumcision and Sabbath observance!).”

“It shows how Paul could have happily consented to such a solution and commended the decision to his Gentile converts (Acts 16:4). The decree was expressly formulated in a way that would be understood by those who knew something about the law of Moses and Jewish concerns about Gentiles (15:21). It was a warning to abstain from acts that would offend Jewish scruples and hinder social intercourse between Jewish and Gentile believers.”

“But its deeper significance is the implied challenge to break completely with every pagan association and practice (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1) and to do all things, even eating and drinking, to the glory of God, causing no one to stumble, ‘whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God’ (1 Cor. 10:31-32).”

“John Stott helpfully concludes his discussion of the Jerusalem Council by observing that it ‘secured a double victory — a victory of truth in confirming the gospel of grace, and a victory of love in preserving the fellowship by sensitive concessions to conscientious Jewish scruples.’”

David Peterson, 445-446