

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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The Jerusalem Council

The so-called Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 is sometimes made the crux of an argument against the autonomy of the local congregation. The suggestion is sometimes made that Acts 15 depicts a subordinate church (Antioch) appealing to a superior church (Jerusalem) to determine correct doctrine and practice, and then submitting itself to the resulting decision. Beyond this, the further suggestion is made that Paul and Barnabas placed themselves under the authority of the Jerusalem Council and obeyed its decrees. This situation is regarded as a prototype for bodies that exercise authority over the local congregation.

The actual situation in Acts 15 is that aberrant teachers had come to the Antioch church from Judea (v 1). In other words, these teachers were members of the Jerusalem church, a fact that is confirmed in the Jerusalem letter (v 24). This connection of the teachers to Jerusalem is usually overlooked, but it is essential to a correct understanding of the passage.

The doctrine of these teachers was in certain respects understandable. When the church came into existence in Acts 2, it was not initially separate from national Israel. It was an entirely contained subset of Israel. Everyone in the church was also in Israel. In Acts 10, however, the gentile Cornelius and his household were admitted into the church. The status of these gentiles was ambiguous. What position did they occupy in the church? One suggestion (apparently adopted by these teachers) was that the gentile believers ought to become Jews. Only if they did this could the church remain a subset of Israel.

Whether or not this was the actual reasoning of the teachers from Jerusalem, their doctrine did not receive a cordial reception at Antioch. In fact, these teachers met with very vigorous opposition from Paul and Barnabas, who were leaders of the church at Antioch. At this point, the Antioch congregation should have been in a position to determine its own teaching and to enforce its own doctrine. Why, then, would “they” (v 2, apparently a reference to the congregation as a whole) determine that Paul and Barnabas should be sent to Jerusalem about the matter?

The simplest and most obvious answer to this question is this: because the false teachers were from Jerusalem. This factor introduced two complications into the situation. First, the church at Antioch might reasonably want to know whether these teachers really represented the views of the whole Jerusalem congregation—if so, trouble was clearly brewing. Second, the congregation at Antioch had no authority over teachers from another church. If the aberrant teachers were to be called into account, Jerusalem would have to do it.

In Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were received not only by the apostles and elders, but by the whole church. After they had rehearsed the work that they had done among the gentiles, a cadre of Pharisees insisted that gentile believers should be circumcised and required to observe the Mosaic Law. Evidently, the teachers who had gone to Antioch enjoyed a measure of support within the Jerusalem congregation. This was serious enough to warrant a staff meeting on the part of the Jerusalem leadership, apparently conducted in the presence of the whole church (the crowd or multitude of v 12). At first this staff meeting was rather discordant, but then Peter rehearsed his experiences at Cornelius’ household, arguing rather forcefully against the Pharisees. This restored a measure of composure to the meeting, at which point James stepped forward to summarize certain relevant biblical principles and to offer his counsel to the church’s leaders.

What Acts 15 depicts is not in any sense a church council, presbytery, synod, classis, or congress of bishops. The closest modern equivalent would be a local church’s business meeting, with a pastoral staff meeting embedded in the middle of it. The meeting was held, not to settle doctrine for Antioch, but to clarify the Jerusalem church’s own position. Paul and Barnabas certainly precipitated the meeting, as they intended to do. The text nowhere indicates, however, that they were somehow under the authority of this assembly.

Acting upon the counsel of James, the Jerusalem congregation quickly rejected the position of the Judaizers. Still, the mere existence of such teachers alerted the church to a potential problem. Jews regarded gentiles as idolaters—generally, with good justification. For any church or any Christian to become identified with idolatry would be to contradict the nature of the church as a people of God. Therefore, gentile believers would have to be especially careful to avoid any practices that might identify them with idolatry in the eyes of unsaved Jews.

Having clarified its own views, the church at Jerusalem now had to communicate its position to the gentile churches. It did this through letters that were addressed to the gentile congregations and carried by official appointees from the Jerusalem church. These letters made three points. First, the teachers who had gone to Antioch had not been given authority from the

Jerusalem congregation (v 24). Second, Jerusalem officially rejected the doctrines that those teachers had proclaimed (v 28). Third, gentile believers would need to observe certain strictures in order to preserve their testimony among Jews (vv 20-21, 29).

A further word needs to be said about these strictures. One of them (avoiding fornication) was clearly a moral issue in itself and did not rest upon the authority of the Jerusalem church. Two of them (abstaining from blood and strangled things) are not otherwise addressed in the New Testament. One of them (avoiding meat offered to idols) is considered separately by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8-10, where he clearly teaches that eating such meat is permissible under certain circumstances. In other words, the Jerusalem strictures were not necessarily an open-and-shut case. They must be viewed as fraternal advice from one congregation to others, rather than as binding pronouncements issued from a superior body to inferior ones.

In sum, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to deal with two issues. They wanted the Jerusalem church to clarify its own doctrinal position and they wanted it to call its own members into account. The “decrees” of the Jerusalem council were a public response that did three things. First, they communicated that the Jerusalem church would hold its members accountable. Second, they clarified the teachings of the Jerusalem congregation. Third, they offered fraternal advice to other congregations for the maintenance of a clear testimony.

Acts 15 certainly shows that autonomous congregations are not independent congregations. These two churches clearly maintained close ties of fellowship. They communicated with each other, inquired of each other, and advised each other. Nothing in this chapter, however, provides a convincing reason for thinking that either church answered to the other in any official sense. Nothing in this chapter provides a convincing reason for believing that any body outside of the local congregation has the right to determine that congregation’s doctrine or practice. Furthermore, nothing in this chapter contradicts the notion that local churches are to be governed under Christ by the consensus of the congregation, achieved after patient consideration of the teaching of the Word and the advice of mature leaders. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

The Good Shepherd

Lope de Vega (1562-1635)
tr. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

SHEPHERD! who with thine amorous, sylvan song
Hast broken the slumber that encompassed me,
Who mad'st Thy crook from the accursed tree
On which Thy powerful arms were stretched so long!
Lead me to mercy's ever-flowing fountains;
For Thou my shepherd, guard, and guide shalt be;
I will obey Thy voice, and wait to see
Thy feet all beautiful upon the mountains.

Hear, Shepherd Thou who for Thy flock art dying,
Oh, wash away these scarlet sins, for Thou
Rejoicest at the contrite sinner's vow.
Oh, wait! to Thee my weary soul is crying,
Wait for me: Yet why ask it, when I see,
With feet nailed to the cross, Thou'rt waiting still for me! ✕

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