

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

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The fifteenth chapter of the book of Acts in the New Testament tells of a high-level council meeting in Jerusalem of the leaders of the Church. The date is not recorded, but the events leading up to the council indicate that the meeting was held in approximately AD 49 or 50. Within the short space of those sixteen or seventeen years after the death of Christ, the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ among non-Jewish people raised questions of doctrine and procedure that the young Church had not encountered when missionary work was done among the Jews only. Those questions made a top-level discussion necessary, for the decision would affect the Church in matters of doctrine, in missionary procedure, and in family religious observances. The council was not held in a vacuum nor was it just an academic exercise. It was the result of, and was attended by, persons having strong opinions, religious convictions, traditions, and biases. In effect, a crisis was forming in the Church.

THE NEW TESTAMENT RECORD

The complete title of the New Testament book of Acts is “The Acts of the Apostles.” It is generally understood to have been written by Luke and is in reality a sequel to the book of Luke. Both the book of Luke and the book of Acts are addressed to an acquaintance named “Theophilus” (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Acts refers to the book of Luke as the “former treatise” of “all that Jesus began both to do and teach” (Acts 1:1), whereas the book of Acts itself deals with the work, growth, and development of the Church after the ascension of Christ.

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Although each member of the Twelve is mentioned at least once in Acts, the book deals initially with the ministry of Peter, James, and John and records at great length the conversion and ministry of Paul. It is a record of the “acts” not of all the Apostles but of only a few and especially of Paul. Acts is in truth a short account of the missionary outreach of the Church to the Jews in Judea, then to the Samaritans, and finally to the Gentiles throughout the Mediterranean world. Because Paul is the dominant personality in the extension of the Church among Gentiles, he becomes the dominant personality in the book of Acts from chapters 13 through 28. Likewise, fourteen of the twenty-one epistles in the New Testament were written by Paul.

Even though our present New Testament does not contain a record of it, there can be no doubt that many, if not all, of the Twelve traveled extensively in giving missionary service. Jesus commanded the Twelve to go unto all nations, teaching and baptizing them (see Matthew 28:19–20). Tradition and apocryphal sources suggest that the original Apostles were true to their commission and traveled throughout Africa, India, Mesopotamia, the Near East, and so forth, and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹ Yet the New Testament that has been among Christians for the past eighteen hundred years focuses primarily on the area immediately surrounding the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea: Greece, Turkey, and Italy, with only slight mention of Spain. It contains no record of the ministry of the Twelve in other parts of the world such as Egypt and India.

I believe there is a reasonable explanation for that narrow focus. The New Testament is a record of the work and preaching of living prophets and Apostles who went forth with priesthood authority to build up and regulate the Church of Jesus Christ in their day, the first century after Christ. Most of the writings and records of travel of those early authorized brethren have not been preserved for later generations, yet the missionary records of Paul, Peter, and John have been. Could it be that those records in particular were preserved for the benefit of the Restoration? Perhaps the Lord, knowing among what people the Restoration in the latter days would need to begin, preserved the sacred records that dealt with the establishment of the Church in southern Europe, from where it moved throughout Europe, the British Isles, and Scandinavia. There would thus be among them a scriptural base for the Restoration of the fulness of the gospel by the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Most of the settlers in early North America came from the countries of

Europe, and they brought the Bible with them. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century based most of its philosophy on the writings of Paul. The Reformation was absolutely necessary as prologue to the Restoration. The Joseph Smith family, the Richards family, the Youngs, the Kimballs, Whitmers, Taylors, and other early families in the Church were of European Protestant stock. Furthermore, when missionaries of the Church went forth in the late 1830s and immediately thereafter, most of the converts came from Europe—from England, Wales, Scotland, Scandinavia, Germany, and Holland.

I believe the Lord preserved what He did in the New Testament because it was that part of the history and doctrine of the early Church that would be most useful and serviceable in establishing The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the dispensation of the fulness of times. The Lord knew and designed that it should be among those people in America who were of European extraction that the Restoration in the latter days should first take root and sprout. It would then be nourished by converts from Europe. From that beginning the gospel in the latter days would spread to all other nations. It would have been a great deal more difficult than it was for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be established among people who did not have a New Testament or who had a New Testament that had not produced the Protestant Reformation.

EVENTS LEADING TO THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

As noted earlier, the causes that produced the Jerusalem Council did not develop in a vacuum. The need for such a council was the consequence of several doctrinal and cultural factors that had been at work among both Jews and Gentiles for centuries. It will be necessary to review the activities of the Church as recorded in Acts 1 through 15 to understand the thrust and direction of the early Church and see what led to the council itself. Following is a summation of significant events.

Jesus ascends into heaven from the Mount of Olives, having told the Twelve not to extend their ministry beyond Judea until after they receive the Holy Ghost. They will then be empowered to go to Jews, Samaritans, and the “uttermost part of the earth” (Gentiles) in that order (Acts 1:8). Because of the vacancy in the Quorum of the Twelve, Peter calls the eleven remaining Apostles together, and Matthias is chosen (see Acts 1:13–26).

One week after the ascension of Jesus to heaven, at the annual feast of Pentecost, the Holy Ghost descends on the Twelve, and they speak in

tongues to people of many nations. Gathered at Jerusalem for the feast are thousands of Jews from at least fifteen nations throughout the Near and Middle East, including Rome, Greece, Turkey, Crete, Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Parthia, and Mesopotamia. These are people of the Jews' religion who have come to Jerusalem for the annual feast of Pentecost, which is held fifty days after the feast of Passover. Many thousands are present, for from among the visitors the Apostles baptize three thousand in one day (see Acts 2:41).

It is of particular importance that the record states that those who came from those fifteen nations were Jews and proselytes, which means that not all were Jewish by lineage but some were Gentile converts to Judaism (see Acts 2:10). The term *proselyte* in the New Testament always means Gentile converts to Judaism. Certainly some of the three thousand converted to the Church on the day of Pentecost would have been from among the proselytes and thus the first persons of Gentile lineage to join the Church in the meridian dispensation. Jesus had instructed the Twelve, when they were starting on their first missions more than two years before, not to go among the Gentiles or the Samaritans at that time (see Matthew 10:5). Hence, Church members up till then were exclusively Jewish. But note this important fact: even though individuals of Gentile lineage now came into the Church, they had all previously converted to Judaism, which meant complying with the practice of circumcision, eating kosher food, offering sacrifice, and honoring the Sabbath day in proper Jewish style. Although Greek, Galatian, or Roman in lineage, they were Jews in religion.

Acts 3 through 6 deals with the ministry of the Twelve among the Jews in and around Judea. The Church grows rapidly with Jewish converts. Persecution comes from the Jewish leaders. Church growth necessitates administrative adjustments, so seven men are selected to assist the Twelve, primarily in welfare duties. Among those seven are some with such Gentile-sounding names as Stephen, Parmenas, and Nicolas. Nicolas is further identified as a proselyte from Antioch (see Acts 6:5), thus affirming that he is a Gentile by lineage who first joined the Jews' religion and then was converted to Christ and the Church. Thus at least Nicolas, and possibly others among the seven, is actually of Gentile lineage but has been circumcised and practices all that pertains to the Jews' religion and the law of Moses.

Stephen, one of the seven, is accused of having taught that Jesus would destroy Jerusalem and the temple and "change the customs which Moses

delivered” unto Israel (Acts 6:14). He is taken before the Sanhedrin and permitted to speak. Found guilty of blasphemy, he is stoned to death. Saul (later known as Paul) witnesses his death (see Acts 7). Stephen is the earliest on record who is reported to have said that Jesus will change the Mosaic customs.

Philip, another of the seven, baptizes many men and women in Samaria (see Acts 8). That is another extension for the Church, which to this point had not done missionary work in Samaria. Peter and John come from Jerusalem to lay their hands on the new converts and confer the Holy Ghost. The Church is thus officially established among the Samaritans, but this is only half a step away from teaching the Jews. Even though the Samaritans were genealogically Israelite mixed with other nations and thus were technically not Jews, they practiced the law of Moses and hence were circumcised, ate kosher food, offered sacrifice, and so forth. In this respect they were similar to the Jews, and the conversion of Samaritans did not challenge allegiance to the law of Moses.

Saul is converted to Jesus Christ by a personal visit in which he sees, hears, and converses with the resurrected Lord (see Acts 9). Paul proclaims his testimony of Christ in the synagogues of Damascus. For Paul to have become a follower of Jesus Christ was a great change in his life, but his conversion did not mark a doctrinal or cultural change in the Church because he was already circumcised, ate kosher food, and so forth.

Peter, having been directed by a vision and the voice of the Spirit, baptizes Cornelius and his family at Cæsarea (see Acts 10–11). Peter is shown in vision animals forbidden to be eaten under the law of Moses, and he is told to eat them. This is a sign to him from the Lord that the dietary restrictions of the law of Moses are about to end. It takes Peter a little time to get used to the idea. Cornelius is a good man, an Italian, and a soldier, but he is not a proselyte to Judaism. An angel directed him to send for Peter. Peter, having already been prepared by the Lord, is willing to baptize Cornelius.

This is the first clear case of a Gentile coming into the Church without having first complied with the law of Moses through circumcision and so forth. The conversion and baptism of Cornelius in this manner is thus a major step—a full step—in extending the Church missionary system. It is very significant that the Lord brought about this new procedure through Peter, who, as the senior Apostle of the Church, could exercise all the

priesthood keys and held the proper office through which such direction from the Lord should come.

Many Jewish brethren in the Church complained to Peter about that direct process for gaining membership in the Church, but he answered their criticism with a recital of the vision, the angel, the voice of the Spirit to him, and the manifestation of the Holy Ghost to Cornelius and his family before their baptism (see Acts 11). Cornelius did not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost before baptism, for such is contrary to the order of the kingdom. What he did receive before baptism was the witness of the Holy Ghost, as the Prophet Joseph Smith explained:

There is a difference between the Holy Ghost and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Cornelius received the Holy Ghost before he was baptized, which was the convincing power of God unto him of the truth of the Gospel, but he could not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost until after he was baptized. Had he not taken this sign or ordinance upon him, the Holy Ghost which convinced him of the truth of God, would have left him. Until he obeyed these ordinances and received the gift of the Holy Ghost, by the laying on of hands, according to the order of God, he could not have healed the sick or commanded an evil spirit to come out of a man, and it obey him.²

Even after the landmark conversion of Cornelius, with Peter, the Lord's anointed, directing this phase of the missionary outreach, some Jewish members of the Church refused to accept the change, and they preached the gospel to "none but unto the Jews only" (Acts 11:19). Nonetheless, the way was opened for Gentiles to come into the Church without becoming Jews first. At Antioch of Syria, a great Gentile city about three hundred miles north of Jerusalem, so many Gentiles joined the Church that the Brethren in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to oversee the change that was taking place. Barnabas was a good diplomatic choice: he was a Levite by lineage, was reared in Cyprus (a Gentile environment) and converted to the gospel, being "a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith" (Acts 11:24; see 4:36). Upon seeing the magnitude of the Gentile conversion in Antioch, Barnabas was pleased with the direction in which the missionary work was going and sent for Saul (Paul) to assist him. Barnabas had known of Saul earlier and had introduced him to the Apostles (see Acts 9:27).

Acts 12 deals with the martyrdom of James, one of the three most senior

Apostles and the brother of John. Administrative activities are also discussed in this chapter.

At Antioch, Saul, Barnabas, and John Mark are called and set apart to missionary service. They go to Cyprus, Barnabas's native country, and then to many cities in what is now central Turkey. While at Cyprus, Saul changes his Hebrew name Saul to the Latin Paul (see Acts 13:9). This name change is very significant and decisive doctrinally and presages some cultural changes. The Brethren preach first to the Jews and then to the proselytes who come to the synagogues. They teach that the gospel of Jesus Christ is greater than the law of Moses and that the law of Moses cannot save them (see Acts 13:38–39). The Jews are furious, but many of the Gentile proselytes join the Church. Paul and Barnabas thereafter direct their chief attention to the Gentiles (see Acts 13:45–49).

Paul and Barnabas establish branches of the Church, ordain elders in each of the cities they visit, and then return to Antioch with glowing reports of their success among the Gentiles. And of course, they have baptized many Gentiles directly into the Church without benefit of the law of Moses—that is, without circumcision and so forth.

When word of the success of Paul and Barnabas reaches certain Church members in and around Jerusalem, these Judean brethren, much concerned, go to Antioch on their own, without authorization from the Twelve or any of the presiding Brethren of the Church, and declare to the Gentile Church members at Antioch that “except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). Thus the problem is apparent: Is obedience to the law of Moses with all its attendant performances required for salvation now that Jesus Christ has made the Atonement?

Let me digress a moment to explain the great emphasis on circumcision, for it may seem to us today an odd matter for early Church members to have been fighting about. Circumcision is a very old practice among mankind, even among non-Jewish peoples, but the Lord Jehovah appointed it the token of the covenant He made with Abraham (see Genesis 17). This covenant was to extend throughout Abraham's posterity, and through this covenant the blessings and promises of God's favor were to be realized throughout time and eternity. Circumcision was the badge, the sign of identification, showing that one was a believer in the true God and in the covenant. That token was continued in the law of Moses. The manner in which the word *circumcised* is used throughout the

book of Acts and the Epistles is generally as a one-word representation for the entire law of Moses; hence when the Jewish members of the Church insisted that Gentiles be circumcised, they meant that the Gentiles should obey all of the law of Moses. But back to the events at Antioch.

Paul and Barnabas are contending with the brethren from Judea on this important matter, which is not simply a topic about tradition or custom but a fundamental doctrinal issue regarding the Atonement of Jesus Christ. The dissension becomes so great that it is decided such a matter can be settled officially only by the Twelve at Jerusalem. The question is three-fold:

1. Did Jesus Christ by His earthly ministry and Atonement fulfill the law of Moses with its multitudinous ordinances and performances? If so,
2. Do converts from among non-Israelite peoples have to obey the law of Moses to become baptized members of the Church of Jesus Christ? And
3. Should Church members, Jew and Gentile, have their sons circumcised as a requirement for salvation?

The settlement of this threefold question would affect how believers regarded Christ's mission, what missionary procedures were implemented, and what would be the practice of every family in the Church with respect to their sons for generations yet unborn.

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL CONVENES

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem to see the Brethren, they were respectfully received, and they conveyed an account of their success among the Gentiles. There were in Jerusalem, however, many Jewish members of the Church who had been Pharisees before their conversion to Jesus Christ. They would not give up the law of Moses and insisted "that it was needful to circumcise [the Gentiles], and to command them to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). Therefore the Apostles and the elders at Jerusalem "came together for to consider this matter" (Acts 15:6).

After much disputing in the council, Peter declared the baptism of Cornelius and others by his hand. He reminded the congregation that the conversion of the Gentiles was the work of God and that God "put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith." He also stated that the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" would save both "us and them" (Acts 15:9, 11), affirming the truth that works are insufficient without God's grace.

After Peter's testimony, the "multitude" in the council listened as

Barnabas and Paul told of the “miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them” (Acts 15:12). Then James, who may have replaced the James who was slain as recounted in Acts 12 and who apparently conducted the meeting, stated as a type of official pronouncement that no greater burden than the necessary things of purity and refraining from idol worship and from eating blood should be placed on the Gentiles who wished to come into the Church. James did not specifically mention the law of Moses, and it is conspicuous by its absence, though the context of the council implies it. The council decreed that Paul and Barnabas should return to Antioch, accompanied by two men from Jerusalem, “chief men among the brethren,” named Barsabas and Silas (Acts 15:22). These two could testify with Barnabas and Paul of the decision of the council. The Brethren prepared an epistle to be carried to Antioch and the surrounding area, stating the decision of the council:

The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cicilia:

Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment:

It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth.

For it seemeth good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;

That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well. (Acts 15:23–29)

Upon arriving in Antioch of Syria, the Brethren assembled a multitude of Church members, read the epistle, and exhorted the people, who “rejoiced” at the news (see Acts 15:30–33).

Such is the report of the proceedings of the council recorded in Acts 15. We learn from Paul’s later epistle to the Galatians the significant information we would not otherwise have that Paul went up early to Jerusalem to

confer privately with the Brethren to learn of their views and to make certain they agreed with what he and Barnabas had done in receiving the Gentiles, "lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain" (Galatians 2:2). This private meeting is probably the one referred to in Acts 15:4-5, but Paul's epistle gives it a clearer focus by expressing his motive for speaking with the Brethren in private.

Another important factor we learn from this Galatian epistle is that Paul and Barnabas took Titus, a young Gentile convert probably from Antioch (see Titus 1:4) to the council. Paul may have seen in him a kind of "exhibit A," for Titus was an uncircumcised Greek who was a model of faith and virtue, strong in the Spirit. Paul could show the Jewish members of the Church in Jerusalem a living example of the grace of God given to the Gentiles without the encumbrance of the law of Moses. Paul was apparently successful, for he declares, "Neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised" (Galatians 2:3).

The Galatian epistle also helps us determine the date of the council. In chapter 1, Paul tells of his conversion to Jesus Christ; in chapter 2, he tells of going to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus to the council fourteen years later. We do not know when Paul joined the Church, but it could not have been less than a year or two after the Ascension of Christ. Assuming that he was baptized around AD 35 or 36 (see Galatians 1:15-19), fourteen years later would be AD 49 or 50. Paul mentions an event "three years" after his conversion, but a close reading of Galatians 1 shows that the three years were within the scope of the fourteen, not in addition to them.

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL WAS ONLY A HALF STEP

As forward-reaching and beneficial as the decision by the Jerusalem Council was, it was only a half step forward in the progress of the Church. For one thing, the council did not decisively declare an end to the law of Moses. The announcement part of the epistle sent from the council does not use the words "law of Moses" nor declare its fulfillment or its final and absolute end as a practice in the Church. Furthermore, the epistle was addressed not to all members of the Church but only to the Gentile members in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. The council settled the matter of observing the law of Moses with respect to the Gentiles; it did not address the subject with respect to Jewish Church members. So far as the epistle is concerned, the Jewish members of the Church could continue to observe the ordinances of the law of Moses as a supposed requirement for salvation.

Why would the Brethren have been so ambiguous and nondeclarative? They seem to have said as little as they could about the matter. Perhaps they hoped to avoid dividing the Church and alienating the strict Jewish members. Likewise, they would not have wanted to invite persecution from nonmember Jews. James seems to have had that in mind when, after announcing the moderate decision, he said to the council, "For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day" (Acts 15:21).

The decision of the council was favorable to Paul, Barnabas, Titus, and the Gentiles who were already in the Church and who would yet join, but it also left the Jewish members free to continue the practice of the law of Moses if they wished to. The council did not say that the Gentiles could not or must not practice the law of Moses, only that they need not do so for salvation. By wording the decision the way they did, the Brethren probably avoided a schism in the Church and no doubt also the ire that would have come from the Jews had the decision been stronger. There must have been many who would have preferred a stronger declaration, but the Brethren acted in the wisdom requisite for their situation.

Not long after the council adjourned, when Paul was on his second mission, he wanted Timothy, a Greek convert at Lystra, to accompany him. Because Timothy's mother was a Jew and his father a Greek, he had not been circumcised. Paul therefore circumcised him so that he would be more acceptable to the Jews among whom he would do missionary work. That may seem contradictory to Paul's standards, but it is fairly simple: the action was expedient because of Jewish tradition and culture, but it was not necessary for Timothy's salvation.

The effects of the moderate decision of the council were far-reaching and long-lasting. Ten years later, when Paul returned to Jerusalem at the end of his third mission among the Gentiles of Greece and Turkey (Galatia and Asia), he was greeted by the Brethren, who rejoiced at his great success among the Gentiles of the Roman Empire but cautioned him about preaching strong doctrine, especially about the law of Moses, in Jerusalem. Even a decade after the council, Jewish members of the Church in Judea were still observing the law of Moses. The Brethren

said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law:

And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.

What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come.

Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them;

Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law.

As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication.

Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them. (Acts 21:20–26)

There is no question that Peter and the other Brethren knew that the law of Moses was fulfilled. The doctrinal question was settled. The law was no longer a requirement for salvation now that Jesus had made the Atonement. Missionary work among the Gentile nations could go forth directly and without impediment. But there was a conflict between culture and doctrine. The Brethren were clear on the matter, but long-standing culture and tradition persisted among many Jewish members of the Church even after the doctrinal question had been settled. Latter-day revelation leaves no doubt that the law of Moses was fulfilled in Christ (see 3 Nephi 15:4–5; Moroni 8:8; D&C 74).

In like manner today there may be points about which the doctrinal foundation is clear but about which tradition or custom or the ways of the world are so strong that the Brethren hope, as did the New Testament leaders, that the Holy Ghost will eventually cause the adherents to forsake tradition, academic popularity, and peer pressure for the word of God. Perhaps the theory of organic evolution, some political and economic

issues, the doctrine of election as pertaining to the Abrahamic covenant, and several other points are in this category requiring time to elapse and changes to occur before definitive pronouncements can be made beyond what is already in the revelations. At any rate, the book of Acts gives our present generation an informative model of how both members and non-members react when revelation confronts tradition and long-standing custom. Only living prophets could correctly handle the situation then. Only living prophets can do so now.

NOTES

1. See William Byron Forbush, *Fox's Book of Martyrs* (Philadelphia: Universal Book and Bible House, 1926), 1–5; M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 14–15n, and such geographic areas as Persia and India as are listed in the index).
2. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 199.