Dealing with Doctrinal Issues in the Church: Part 2

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Dealing with **doctrinal issues in the church**: Part 2

The first Jerusalem Council, described in Acts 15, has been the subject of numerous scholarly studies.¹ In this article, we will look at these deliberations as a model of how the early church dealt with controversial doctrinal issues. We also argue that our church today can learn from this model on how to deal with our disputes on doctrine and/or practice as well.

**Setting the stage**

One of the problems the early church had to face was that some Jewish Christians had come from Judea to Antioch and taught, “‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1).² Luke reported that, as a result of this teaching, “when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question” (v. 2). Coming to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas brought a report to the church and its leaders in Jerusalem of what God had done with them in the conversion of the Gentiles (vv. 3, 4), but “some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them [the Gentiles], and to command them to keep the law of Moses’” (v. 5).

Thus, the basic issues facing the early church at the Jerusalem Council were twofold: (1) Should Gentiles become Jews in order to become Christians? (2) What Jewish practices beyond the moral law of the Ten Commandments were required for these Gentiles? Ellen G. White summarized the problem: “The Jewish converts generally were not inclined to move as rapidly as the providence of God opened the way. . . . They were slow to discern that all the sacrificial offerings had but prefigured the death of the Son of God, in which type met antitype, and after which the rites and ceremonies of the Mosaic dispensation were no longer binding.”³

An assembly of representative church leaders

In response to the disputed theological issue regarding the Gentiles’ relationship to the Jewish ceremonial law, “the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter” (v. 6). This verse specifically mentions the “apostles and elders who met together with Paul and Barnabas and leaders sent from the church at Antioch, but verse 12 speaks of “all the multitude/assembly [πληθῶσις]” and verse 22 of “the apostles and elders, with the whole church.” Ellen G. White clarifies that this assembly involved “delegates from the different churches and those who had come to Jerusalem to attend the approaching festivals.”⁴ She also wrote, “At Jerusalem the delegates from Antioch met the brethren of the various churches, who had gathered for a general meeting.”⁵

Here is a model that gives biblical justification for Ellen G. White’s statement regarding the authority of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in general session: “God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority.”⁶ At the same time, the basic principle of gathering representative leaders for a general assembly to deal with a theological issue also applies to appointed assemblies held in regional settings and less formal occasions than the General Conference in session.

Frank and spirited discussion of the issues and clarifying presentations

At the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, there was much “disputing,” dispute” (KJV, NKJV), “debate” (ESV, NASB), and “discussion” (NIV) (v. 7). The Greek noun ζητήσις, in the context of this verse, probably refers to “engagement in a controversial discussion, debate, argument,” but the term can also mean “a search for information, investigation” (as, e.g., in Acts 25:20).⁷ Ellen G. White states that the basic question at issue “was warmly discussed in the assembly.”⁸

Along with the spirited discussion, debate, argument, and/or investigation,
Peter gave a presentation from his experiences and theological perspective. He alluded to his own encounter with Cornelius (described in Acts 10), when God Himself had directed that Gentiles hear and accept the gospel from his preaching. Peter “argued that since God had established such a precedent within the Jewish Christian mission 10 years earlier—though it had not been recognized by the church as such—God has already indicated His approval of a direct Gentile outreach. Thus Paul’s approach to the Gentiles could not be branded as a deviation from the divine will.”

Personal reports and testimonies of the Holy Spirit’s working

According to Acts 15:12, after Peter had given his presentation, “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” (ESV). An important part of the Jerusalem Council was listening to reports detailing the miraculous workings of the Holy Spirit, through Barnabas and Paul, among the Gentiles. So, in our dealing with doctrinal controversy today, we should present reports and personal testimonies of the Holy Spirit’s working through council members and others in relation to the issue under discussion.

However, the report of the Holy Spirit’s work did not end the proceedings of the Jerusalem Council. The next step, often overlooked in most discussions of Acts 15, is perhaps the most crucial part of the process.

Testing and verification by the witness of Scripture

It has sometimes been claimed that Acts 15 provides a model of ecclesiastical authority in which the church, empowered in the freedom of the Spirit, is able to reach back into the Old Testament (OT) witness and select those portions of the OT still relevant to the current situation. Then, with that same authority of the Spirit, move beyond other portions of the OT that are no longer applicable, and even add new stipulations not contained in the OT. In other words, the New Testament (NT) church, and by implication the church today, supposedly has the authority—by rejecting some OT instructions and adding new ones—to determine the best path to unity.

Such a position, however, does not square with Acts 15. The Jerusalem Council did allow for vigorous debate (vv. 7–12), but the deciding factor was Scripture. James’s concluding statement was based upon an exegesis of OT passages. In Amos 9:11, 12, he found the answer to the issue of whether Gentiles had to become Jews to become Christians: they did not. They found, too, in Leviticus 17; 18 the biblical basis for deciding which ceremonial laws applied to Gentiles. The intertextual linkage between Acts 15 and Leviticus 17; 18 is not apparent on the surface; but as one looks more...
closely, the connection between the relevant OT passages and the situation in the Jerusalem Council becomes evident. Acts 15 lists four prohibitions for Gentile Christians given by the Jerusalem Council: “that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled [i.e., with the blood coagulated and not drained away],13 and from sexual immorality (porneia)” (Acts 15:29). One cannot fail to notice, upon close inspection, that this is the same list, *in the same order*, as the four major legal prohibitions stated in Leviticus 17; 18 to be applicable to the stranger or alien as well as to native Israelites. In these OT chapters, we find (1) sacrificing to demons or idols (Lev. 17:7–9); (2) eating blood (vv. 10–12); (3) eating anything that has not been immediately drained of its blood (vv. 13–16); and (4) various illicit sexual practices (Lev. 18).

Numerous scholars have recognized this intertextual connection. In this clear case of intertextuality, the Jerusalem Council undoubtedly concluded that the practices forbidden to the uncircumcised stranger or alien in Leviticus 17; 18 were what should be prohibited to uncircumcised Gentile Christians. What was required of the Gentile “strangers” in the OT was still required of them in the NT. Gentile “strangers” in the OT was still prohibited to uncircumcised Gentile Christians. What was required of the uncircumcised stranger or alien in Leviticus 17; 18 were what should be prohibited to uncircumcised Gentile Christians. What was required of the Gentile “strangers” in the OT was still required of them in the NT.

Thus, Scripture ultimately provided the basis for the church’s decision regarding practice. Such an ultimate test by the Word of God is, obviously, crucial for any contemporary proceedings dealing with controversial doctrinal issues.

**Emergence of a Spirit-led consensus**

As the study and application of Scripture proceeded, a consensus began to emerge under the guidance of the Spirit and the leadership of the apostles, as made apparent from the Jerusalem decree: “The apostles, the elders, and the brethren” (Acts 15:23); “it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord” (v. 25); “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us” (v. 28). Ellen G. White elaborates on the process at this stage of the council’s proceedings, highlighting the “careful investigation of the subject” by those present: “James bore his testimony with decision—that God designed to bring in the Gentiles to enjoy all the privileges of the Jews. The Holy Ghost saw good not to impose the ceremonial law on the Gentile converts; and the apostles and elders, after careful investigation of the subject, saw the matter in the same light, and their mind was as the mind of the Spirit of God.” White further describes the consensus: “The council moved in accordance with the dictates of enlightened judgment, and with the dignity of a church established by the divine will. As a result of their deliberations they all saw that God Himself had answered the question at issue by bestowing upon the Gentiles the Holy Ghost; and they realized that it was their part to follow the guidance of the Spirit.”

This consensus was articulated by James, the brother of Jesus, who presided over the council (v. 19). The Spirit longs to guide His church into such a consensus today as they deal with doctrinal controversy, in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise (John 16:13). It must be recognized that the first Jerusalem Council unity (consensus) did not mean uniformity (of practice). It appears that the consensus reached by the early church was not the conclusion that was expected as the process began, but came as a surprise to those involved as the Spirit led them to a deeper understanding of Scripture. The Spirit may well surprise us again.

**Formal decision and circulation of the council’s action**

The consensus reached by the council was formalized in writing (vv. 23–29) and circulated among the churches (vv. 22, 30; 16:4). Ellen G. White makes clear that the decision on the issues discussed, once made by the council, “was then to be universally accepted by the different churches throughout the country.” There was no need for a vote by the church membership at large: “The entire body of Christians was not called upon to vote upon the question. The ‘apostles and elders,’ men of influence and judgment, framed and issued the decree, which was thereupon generally accepted by the Christian churches.” Despite some resistance among Jewish Christians, “[t]he broad and far-reaching decisions of the general council brought confidence into the ranks of the Gentile believers, and the cause of God prospered.” Such formal decision and public pronouncement of church action is applicable today in such venues as Annual Council and the General Conference in session.

**Universal authoritative status of the council’s decision**

Some claim the Jerusalem Council decision was only advisory, not binding, because Paul considered its ruling as a nonissue in his dealings with food offered to idols (1 Cor. 10:19–33). But such readings overlook both the wider NT data and the OT basis for the Jerusalem Council’s ruling. According to Acts 16:4, in Paul’s journeys after the Jerusalem Council, he and Silas considered the rulings of the council as binding: “Now while they were passing through the cities, they [Paul and Silas] were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe” (NASB).

Paul did not change his basic position in his counsel to the Corinthians. Rather, he apparently recognized that the OT basis for not eating food offered to idols was found in Leviticus 17:7–9, which prohibits the sacrificing of food to demons or idols. Paul seems to have understood the intent of this OT passage that formed the basis of the Jerusalem Council prohibition, and thus correctly upheld the prohibition against offering food to idols or demons (1 Cor. 10:20, 21). At the same time, he recognized that Gentile Christians not personally offering food to idols would not be going against the OT prohibition (and hence, against the Jerusalem Council ruling based upon...
that OT prohibition) if they ate food that, unknown to them, someone else had offered to an idol (vv. 25–27). Within the overall parameters of the Jerusalem Council ruling, moreover, Paul allowed for a difference of practice based upon one’s individual conscience and the conscience of others (vv. 27–29).

Conclusion

Acts 15 reveals that the church, in its assembly of representative members, may indeed speak with binding authority upon the whole church, as that authority is based upon the Written Word.20 This chapter also provides a paradigm for dealing with doctrinal controversy, a paradigm that the Seventh-day Adventist Church may well follow when facing controversial issues. Some of these principles apply when facing controversial issues. One’s individual conscience and the conscience of others (vv. 27–29).

the itinerant model and then, from those principles, develop a role for the Adventist pastor in the twenty-first century. Those principles I have consistently advocated are the health of the church, a nonpastoral dependency, and a mission-centeredness. I have suggested ways that this might be done, but none of them has been to re-create itinerant pastors. That would be an impossible lifestyle for most pastors today.

At the present time in North America, there are many churches that are run totally by laypeople, and they are much like the churches of early Adventism. However, we have discovered that these churches are never able to move beyond 100 in attendance. It is purely a small-church model. Larger churches absolutely need a local pastor serving in the equippers role in order to grow past 100. Our problem in Adventism is that we subsidize small churches to have pastors, taking tithe away from the large churches. As a result, our large churches are unable to grow because they are not adequately staffed. My position is that you need a resident pastor for every 125–150 people in attendance. However, those pastors are operating in the trainer-equippers role, not in the caretaker mode. They supervise, but only provide care in the more difficult cases, as Moses did with the Jethro model. Most of their time is spent helping members in their respective ministries.

I have also advocated large districts of these multiple church districts in order to free up the resources to adequately staff the large churches, especially those in the cities. Also, this freeing up of the resources would allow money to be allocated to church planting as well, which no longer receives adequate funding and thus hinders the advancement of the Adventist Church.

Actually, the authors and I are not as far apart as they think I am. My biggest concern is that pastors do not lose their evangelistic function. We cannot ignore our Adventist heritage or the counsels of Ellen G. White on the pastoral role, but we must apply that knowledge on a principle basis, not a replication model. Any pastoral role model we advocate must be based on biblical and Adventist historical roots, not on the models of other denominations.

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2 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New King James Version.


4 Ibid., 190. The reference to “idols” in v. 6 has been interpreted by many to refer only to the local elders of the Jerusalem church, but it may also include local elders of the various Christian churches (cf Acts 11:30; 14:20, 21; 15:17; 21:16; 1 Tim. 5:17; I Tim. 1:5).

5 Ibid., 191. Cf. ibid., 196: “The council which decided this case was composed of apostles and teachers who had been prominent in raising up the Jewish and Gentile Christian churches, with chosen delegates from various places. Elders from Jerusalem and deputys from Antioch were present, and the most influential churches were represented.”


10 Ellen G. White clarifies, “This yoke was not the law of Ten Commandments but rather the law of ceremonies, which was made null and void by the crucifixion of Christ.” The Acts of the Apostles, 194.


12 For discussion of how James’s interpretation is in harmony with the meaning of Amos 9:11, 12 in its OT context, see especially R. Reed Lessing, Concordia Commentary: Amos (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 2009), 575–578, 586–590.

13 The Greek adjective πνικτός, usually translated as “strangled” or “choke,” actually refers precisely to the situation described in Lev. 17:13–16. See H. Bietenhard, The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 1:226 (hereafter NIDNTT, s.v. “πνικτός”). “The command (of Acts 15:28, 29) goes back to Lev. 17:13 and Deut. 12:16, 23. An animal should be so slaughtered that its blood, in which is its life, should be allowed to pour out. If the animal is killed in any other way, it has been ‘strangled’.” Cf. H. Bietenhard, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:457 (hereafter TDNT, s.v. “πνίκη, πνικτή, συμπνικτή, πορνεία, πορνεύω, εκπορνεύω”). “The regulations in Lv. 17:13 and Dt. 12:16, 23 lay down that an animal should be slaughtered in such a way that all the blood drains from the carcass. If it is put to death in any other way, it ‘choke[s],’ since the life seated in the blood remains in the body.”


17 Ibid., 198.

18 Ibid., 196.

19 Ibid., 197.

20 Acts 15 is an illustration of the principle set forth by Jesus regarding the authority of the church in Matthew 16:16–19: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” (NASB). As the NASB correctly translates the perfect passive participle of the verbs for “bind” and “loose,” what the church decides is not independent and arbitrary, but is “binding” and “loosing” dependent upon recognizing what already “has been bound” and “has been loosed” in heaven, as revealed in Scripture through the Spirit.