

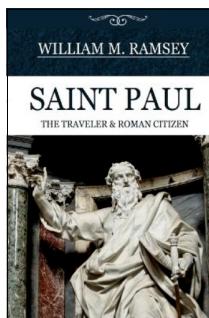
The Council on Circumcision and the Consensus of the Church

Study 15a: CONFLICT & ACCOUNTABILITY (14:24-15:3)

14:24-28 To whom do even apostles give account?

15:1-3 Is the Antioch church accountable to Jerusalem? (i.e. Under whose jurisdiction falls the problem?)

... the situation described in Gal. 2:11-14 is that which existed in Antioch after Paul's return from the Galatian Churches. In the first part of his letter to the Galatians, Paul recapitulates the chief stages in the development of the controversy between the Judaising party in the Church, the premonitory signs on his second visit to Jerusalem, and the subsequent open dispute with Peter in Antioch. The dispute occurred after Paul's second, but before his third, visit to Jerusalem, i.e., either between Acts 12:25 and 13:1, or between 14:26 and 15:4. Now in 15:1 (cp. 5:24) envoys from James caused strife in Antioch; and we can hardly think that envoys also came from James after 12:25, and caused exactly similar strife, which was omitted by Luke but recorded in Gal. 2:12. -- W.M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* p.160



Study 15b: CENTRAL CONTROL? (15:4-21)

15:4,5 To whom did Paul, Barnabas etc. report?

The council met to consider this matter, to hear the report of those who were sent by the Church at Antioch; not in order to learn what the Church at Jerusalem had to say authoritatively and finally, in order that it should be obeyed; but for purposes of conference, and that the larger fellowship of Christian people might be taken into account when facing so grave a situation. -- G. Campbell Morgan, *Acts* p.278

15:6,7 According to Paul, did a 'governing body' have to plan the Gentile mission? (10:19,20; 11:12)

[Paul] was not seeking the authority of the Church at Jerusalem. He was not asking for an expression of truth by James, or by Peter, ex cathedra. He was

there for purposes of consultation; and had the finding been one that put the Gentiles into bondage he would have broken with Jerusalem and all the apostles in the interests of truth. There are evidences in his account of the story of the fact that there was good deal of dissension and difference and argument before finality was reached. -- G. Campbell Morgan, *Acts* p.279

15:8-11 In contrast to outward conformity, what does Peter stress? (Jer. 31:33,34)

The essential problem remains: Are we going to have two doors into the kingdom, one for "us" and the other for "them"? Are we going to have two classes of citizens in the kingdom: those who are merely "saved," and our special group composed of the few who are not only saved but who in addition _____? I refuse to fill in that blank. Perhaps it is "don't smoke" or "shave and wear short hair." Or possibly it is "don't have instrumental music in church," or "keep the seventh-day Sabbath." Whatever it is that you and I set up that gives us a feeling of superiority within the church, let's write it in that space. And then let's face it once and for all. *There are no second class citizens!* The kingdom of heaven has only one door, As someone long ago stated: Salvation is by grace, through faith, plus nothing. -- W.S. LaSor, *Church Alive* p.236

15:12-17 According to James, the Gentiles are to be a 'people for

How can there be order without organization?

In conclusion, what are the applications of this story to ourselves? There is something we do well to consider in the method of the findings. The supreme word flames with light upon this page: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." It marks a progression or development from a centre to something external. Communion with Christ by the Holy Spirit lies at the very root of that word. The second thing is the outcome of the first; that of the unity of the Church by the Spirit. The final thing is that of the unanimity of the Spirit and the Church. There will never be unanimity unless it be based on unity. There never will be the realization of unity save in response to a fundamental union; a union between the members of the Church and the living Lord by the Holy Spirit. -- G.C. Morgan, *Acts* p.285

And now, as they draw up their "deliverance," and formally issue letters conveying their final verdict, they boldly treat the Holy Spirit as one of their number -- a fellow-counsellor, who unites with them in the announcement of a joint conclusion; as though he, the Spirit of God, had sat with them in their deliberations, had with them counselled as chief adviser, and now unites with them in this deliverance, sealing their conclusions with his approval ... In the exalted truth we seem to reach the apex of the teaching of this book. In the fifth chapter we saw the Spirit's presence and presidency exhibited in the church, so that back of Peter, as the apparent head, he stood as the real Administrator of affairs. Then in the sixth chapter we saw him, as the Archbishop and Primate of the whole church, controlling all subordinate offices so that they shall be filled only by men who are first filled with the Spirit and prepared to cooperate with him and be subordinate to him. Then in the eighth and ninth chapters we traced his individual dealing and leading, bringing chosen workmen and inquiring souls together. Again in the thirteenth chapter we have seen him choosing and calling by name, separating and sending forth, the first two missionaries to regions beyond. And now we reach a still loftier level, where he is seen not only occupying the higher seat of sovereignty, but condescending to the lowlier seat of a fellow-counsellor. -- A.T. Pierson, *The Acts of the Holy Spirit* pp. 107,108

[whose] name'? (14:23;15:17, NWT -- but whose name ONLY has been mentioned at the council?)

Then the eyes of the company turned to James the brother of the Lord, a man who enjoyed the respect and confidence of all. But this time James appears to have occupied a position of leadership among the elders of the Jerusalem church; if the elders were organized as a kind of Nazarene Sanhedrin, James was their president, *primus inter pares*. The circumcision party may have relied on James for support, but if so, they were disappointed. He summed up the position in words which recognized the logic of the preceding arguments. "Listen to me, brethren", he said (cf. Jas. 2:5, "Harken, my beloved brethren"). Then he summarized Peter's speech, referring to the apostle by his old name Symeon. If he made no reference to what Paul and Barnabas had said, that may have been politic; James knew how to carry his difficult audience with him. It was the work of Paul and Barnabas that had roused such apprehension in the minds of the Jerusalem rank and file. -- **F.F. Bruce**, *The Book of the Acts* p.309



F.F. Bruce

15:18-21 What is the basis of James' authority? (1 Cor.15:7) [Note his conciliatory powers]

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 from the time of Noah. After the Bar-Kokhba rebellion was put down (A.D. 135), the rabbis of Lydda laid it down that a Jew, if his life were at stake, might break any commandment of the law except those which prohibited these three things. -- **F.F. Bruce**, *op.cit.*, p.312

Study 15c: 'GOVERNING BODY' OR CONSENSUS? (15:22-34)

15:22-27 What does the decree acknowledge as to the source of both disturbance and decision? [NOTE: WHOSE NAME is at stake?]

It is noteworthy that Luke used the vague expression that "persons came down from Judaea," which is made more definite in v. 24: the champions of circumcision who cause the dissension in Antioch had come on a mission from the Apostles in Jerusalem. Luke pointedly avoids any expression that would connect the leading Apostles with the action of these emissaries. They had been sent from Jerusalem: but in v. 24 the Apostles disclaim all responsibility for their action. While Luke gives all the materials for judging, the substitution of *Judaea* for *Jerusalem* in his narrative is very significant of his carefulness in the *minutiae* of expression. -- **W.M. Ramsay**, *op.cit.*, p.158

... we may conclude that the apostles (to whom are now joined the *presbyters*) met together to see about the matter, for the discussion and decision of the matter rested with them. But they called to themselves or summoned the multitude (6:2), because though the initiative rested with the apostles, the consent of the whole church was required. The council was then a real 'ecclesia,' and assembly of the whole church in due order, i.e. of (a) apostles, (b) presbyters, and © the multitude. -- **R.B. Rackham**, *The Acts of the Apostles* p.249

It is not to be expected that all Christians will ever see alike on all matters, nor is it desirable; but it is always possible, while holding our particular view, to have the fullest fellowship with those from whom we differ, only in the Holy Spirit. -- **W. Graham Scroggie**, *Unfolding Drama of Redemption* Vol.2, p.344

15: 28-34 Who is ordering the church? (e.g. Silas, v.34 cf. v.32)

In the mission of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem it is noteworthy that the Divine action plays no part. The Church in Antioch resolved, and the Church sent them to Jerusalem, escorting them on their way. This is not accidental, but expresses the deliberate judgment of Paul and of Luke. The action that led up to the Council in Jerusalem and the ineffective Decree did not originate in Divine revelation. -- **W.M. Ramsay**, *op.cit.*, p.154

The words "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us", with which the terms of the council's decision are introduced, emphasize the church's role as the vehicle of the Spirit. So conscious were they of being possessed and controlled by Him that He was given prior mention as chief Author of their decision. -- **F.F. Bruce**, *op.cit.*, p.315

Is 2-tier 'Theocracy' really 2-faced tyranny?

[Fred Franz for public consumption] It is a theocratic organization, ruled from the divine Top down, and not from the rank and file up. The ... members of it are under Theocracy! -- *Watchtower*, Dec.15, 1971 p.754

[Fred Franz to the Gilead Missionary class] "So, you see the Lord Jesus Christ was acting as the Head of the congregation and taking action directly, without consulting anybody here on earth what he could do and what he could not do. And he acted in that way in regard to Saul and Barnabas and they were both apostles of the Antioch congregation ... and where did they go, where did they report? There's the record, you read it for yourself in the closing verses of the fourteenth chapter of Acts. They went back to Antioch, to the congregation there ... Well, is it the body of apostles and of other elders of the Jerusalem congregation that summoned them up there and say, 'Look here! We have heard that you two men have gone out on a missionary tour and finished it and you haven't come up here to Jerusalem to report to us. D'YOU KNOW WHO WE ARE? We are the council of Jerusalem. DON'T YOU RECOGNIZE THE HEADSHIP OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST? If you don't come up here in a hurry, we're going to take disciplinary action against you!' Is that what the account says? Well, if they had acted that way toward

Paul and Barnabas because they reported to the congregation by means of which the holy spirit had sent them out, then this council of apostles at Jerusalem and other elders of the Jewish congregation would have put themselves above the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ ... We can't challenge what HE DOES." [unpublished for obvious reasons]

