

For several years now Gentiles had been brought to faith in Christ and welcomed into the church by baptism. It began with that God-fearing centurion in Caesarea, Cornelius. Not only – in quite extraordinary circumstances – did he come to hear the good news, believe, receive the Spirit and be baptized, but the Jerusalem leaders, once the full facts were presented to them, instead of raising objections, 'praised God' (11:18). Next came the remarkable movement in Syrian Antioch when unnamed missionaries 'began to speak to Greeks also' (11:20), a great number of whom believed. The Jerusalem church heard about this too and sent Barnabas to investigate, who 'saw the evidence of the grace of God' and rejoiced (11:23). The third development which Luke chronicles was the first missionary journey, during which the first complete outsider believed (Sergius Paulus, proconsul of Cyprus). Later Paul and Barnabas responded to Jewish unbelief with the bold declaration, 'we now turn to the Gentiles' (13:46). Thereafter, wherever they went, both Jews and Gentiles believed (e.g. 14:1), and on their return to Syrian Antioch, the missionaries were able to report that 'God . . . had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles' (14:27).

All that was fairly straightforward. After the conversion of both Cornelius and the Antiochene Greeks, the Jerusalem leaders had been able to reassure themselves that God was in it. How would they now react to the even more audacious policy of Paul? The Gentile mission was gathering momentum. The trickle of Gentile conversions was fast becoming a torrent. The Jewish leaders had no difficulty with the general concept of believing Gentiles, for many Old Testament passages predicted their inclusion. But now a particular question was forming in their minds: what means of incorporation into the believing community did God intend for Gentiles? So far it had been assumed that they would be absorbed into Israel by circumcision, and that by observing the law, they would be acknowledged as bona fide members of the covenant people of God. Something quite different was now happening, however, something which disturbed and even alarmed many. Gentile converts were being welcomed into fellowship by baptism without circumcision. They were becoming Christians without also becoming Jews. They were retaining their own identity and integrity as members of other nations. It was one thing for the Jerusalem leaders to give their approval to the conversion of Gentiles: but could they approve of conversion – without – circumcision, of faith in Jesus without the works of the law, and of commitment to the Messiah without inclusion in Judaism? Was their vision big enough to see the gospel of Christ not as a reform movement within Judaism but as good news for the whole world, and the church of Christ not as a Jewish sect but as the international family of God? These were the revolutionary questions which some were daring to ask (Stott, 240-241).

15:1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

15:2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

Before verses 1-24 are considered, one needs to remember that Paul and Barnabas had returned from their missionary journey and established churches in south Galatia: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

Prior to Acts 15 Paul had written the Book of Galatians. In Galatians 2:4 he wrote of "false brothers who slipped in to spy out our freedom," and in Galatians 2:11–16 he spoke of certain men who came down from Judea to Antioch and boasted that they had been sent by James (Gal. 2:11-12). Acts 15:1 could be the same event.

These men insisted that Gentiles not only needed to be circumcised; they should also be required to obey the Law of Moses (Acts 15:1, 5). These were not opposed to the Gentile mission, but they insisted that Gentiles must come under the umbrella of Judaism to be saved. More specifically, they were insisting that without circumcision, the Gentiles could not be saved and that obedience to the Law of Moses would complete what Jesus began. The way of salvation was at stake. "The gospel was in dispute. The very foundations of the Christian faith were being undermined" (Stott, 243).

Judging from Paul's letter to the Galatians, the debate was heated. For a time the Judaizers had even won over the apostle Peter, who was also in Antioch at the time. In Galatians 2:11-14 Paul explained that Peter used to eat with the Gentiles but had since isolated himself from them.

Unfortunately, this was only the beginning. Soon other Jewish believers started following Peter's bad example and joined him in his hypocrisy; even Barnabas, in spite of everything he had seen during his first missionary journey, was carried away by this false teaching and led astray. Paul, therefore, opposed Peter to his face and rebuked him publicly for his inconsistency. His behavior was disgraceful and a contradiction to the Gospel. In Galatians 2:15-16 Paul says ". . . knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified." How then, if they knew this, could they preach that one is also justified by the law? Paul's logic was compelling and Peter had regained his theological equilibrium by the time he went to the Council of Jerusalem. In Acts 15:11 Peter declares, "But we (Paul and Peter?) believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

Verses 1-2 record what had happened in Syrian Antioch; verse 3 and following tell of the events that took place in Jerusalem:

15:3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

15:4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

15:5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

Although Paul and Barnabas had a warm welcome when they arrived in Jerusalem, especially by the apostles and elders, it wasn't long before the party of the Pharisees stood up and insisted that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved.

The term "sect" (15:5) refers to a distinct subgroup that has distinct beliefs. It is *not* a pejorative term here equal to our sense of heresy. The term is used descriptively of the Sadducees in Acts 5:17, of the Pharisees in 26:5, and of the Christians in 24:5, 14 and 28:22. All of this suggests that Luke presents Christianity as a natural extension of Judaism because promises given originally to the Jews are now offered in the new community formed by Jesus the Messiah. The church is not a "monolithic block," absent of tension. Luke is honest about debated points in this early period.

Circumcision was applicable to the nation of Israel, but this sect of Jews took it too far by making it obligatory for everyone. Note how dogmatic they were: in verse 1 they say that one '*cannot*' be saved apart from circumcision; in verse 5 they say '*it is necessary*' to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses. Paul violently opposes this doctrine. In Galatians, when writing to the churches that he had established that were falling to the teaching of the Judaizers, Paul said, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!" (Gal. 1:6-8). This gives us a bit of insight on the temperature of the debate that took place.

15:6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

15:7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.

15:8 "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;

15:9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

15:10 "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

15:11 "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

Luke says that *much debate* took place, but he summarizes the decisive speeches made by the three apostles – first, the apostle Peter (15:7-11), then the apostle Paul supported by Barnabas (15:12), and lastly, the apostle James (15:13-21).

In 15:7 Peter reminds the church of the incident that happened "*in the early days*" (about 10 years earlier) when the question of Gentile salvation was still being worked out and confirmed by the church. It was in those days that God chose Peter from among all the leaders in Jerusalem to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles and confirm that they had truly believed and entered into the New Covenant. It

was then that Peter met with Cornelius and reported to the church in Jerusalem that the Gentiles were saved just as the Jews were (see notes on Acts 10 and 11). At that time, the church confirmed the words of Peter as truth (Acts 11:18).

In Peter's defense he attributes all that had happened to God. *God* chose Peter (15:7), and *God* decided that through his mouth the Gentiles would hear and believe. *God* knows the heart (15:8). *God* gave His Spirit (15:8) which could not happen unless they were forgiven and cleansed. *God* made no distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles (15:9a). *God* purified their hearts by faith (15:9b). In other words, God had revealed that He cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles apart from circumcision. This wasn't an apostolic decision; it was an act of God! To oppose this truth was to oppose God.

In verse 10 Peter asks why they are testing God. Why do they doubt God's kindness and His ways? If God has declared the Gentiles clean and has given them His Spirit apart from anything else, what right does anyone have to call that into question? Peter also points out that even the Jews who are insisting that the Gentiles keep the law cannot keep the law themselves. The law was like a yoke that was placed upon them which they could not bear. Why then insist that the same yoke be placed upon the Gentiles?

"Peter also emphasizes and underscores the theological equality of Jew and Gentile when it comes to matters of salvation, for what he says about grace applies to both groups" (Bock, 501).

This defense by Peter is quite remarkable since at one time he had cowered to this Jewish sect that he is now opposing.

As Paul says in Galatians 2:11-14, "But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, 'If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'"

This is the last we will hear of Peter in the Book of Acts.

15:12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Barnabas may have been listed ahead of Paul since he was better known by the church in Jerusalem, was greatly respected, and was sent by them earlier to investigate the salvation of the Gentiles (11:22). The brevity of what is recorded about Paul and Barnabas' speech may be because Luke's readers are already familiar with what they had done in the earlier chapters of Acts.

15:13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me.

15:14 "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

James is James the Just, the half-brother of Jesus. At this point of time he was most certainly the leader of the Jerusalem church and he was likely the moderator of the assembly. Simeon in verse 13 is Simeon Peter (that is, Peter).

**15:15 "With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,
15:16 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT,
15:17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,'
15:18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.**

James wants to show that what Peter has just said is in agreement with Scripture. He says, "With THIS . . . the prophets agree" ("this" is Peter's statement that God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name – the prophets agree with this).

Acts 15:13-18 and Amos 9:11-12

The Book of Amos describes the horrible fate of the northern kingdom of Israel due to her abandonment of God. However, in spite of her rebellion God will not abandon her.

- "Nevertheless, I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob," Declares the LORD" (Amos 9:8).
- "In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, And wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins, And rebuild it as in the days of old (Amos 9:11).
- "That they may possess the remnant of Edom And all the nations who are called by My name" (Amos 9:12).
- "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "When the plowman will overtake the reaper And the treader of grapes him who sows seed; When the mountains will drip sweet wine, And all the hills will be dissolved (Amos 9:13).
- "Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, And they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them, They will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, And make gardens and eat their fruit (Amos 9:14).
- "I will also plant them on their land, And they will not again be rooted out from their land Which I have given them," Says the LORD your God (Amos 9: 15).

Amos 9:13-15 clearly speaks of messianic times. Amos 9:11-12 appears in a somewhat paraphrased form in Acts 15:15-17. James uses it to explain to certain Jewish Christians why it *isn't* necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law when they believe (Acts 15:5). According to James, Amos 9:11-12 shows that God had promised to return to Israel and restore the fallen Davidic dynasty with the aim of bringing salvation to the Gentiles. It was always God's intent to make a people for His name from among the Gentiles, so it was *not* necessary for Gentiles to follow Jewish custom after they were saved.

James tells us that the restoration of the Davidic dynasty will happen **“after these things,”** while the prophet Amos said that God will restore the dynasty **“in that day.”** The words, “after these things,” must find their meaning *in Amos* itself since that is the book that James is quoting. When Amos spoke, his prophecy was a word of hope that looked forward to the restored Davidic dynasty in Messiah after a period of humiliation (i.e. exile- Amos 7:1-9:10); from Amos’ historical perspective he was saying, **“in that day** (i.e. after the judgment of Israel) God would rebuild David’s house.” However, as James spoke, he was no longer looking at “that day” as a future event as Amos did, for the judgments that Amos had predicted were already over. Therefore, it would be natural to speak of the restoration of the Davidic dynasty as “after these things,” since the present age is *after* the judgments in Amos 7:1-9:10. To paraphrase, James was simply saying, “After the humiliation of Israel, Amos said that God would restore the Davidic dynasty and the Gentiles would be saved; and this is exactly what we see happening!” The way that James phrases it is that the salvation of the Gentiles is the purpose or aim of the restoration of the line of David (v. 17 “so that;” the word ὅπως with an aorist subjunctive [ἐκζητήσωσιν] commonly expresses purpose – see Robertson’s Grammar, 986). In sum, Amos 9 is fulfilled *in Christ* and explains Gentile salvation.

In other words, James is saying that the salvation of the Gentiles is due to the fact that God has returned to His people in the person of Christ and in Him the Davidic dynasty has been re-established. The Davidic throne is no longer vacant for Christ has been seated at the right hand of the Father “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come” (Eph. 1:21-22).

This explains why the Gentiles are blessed with messianic salvation now, but why aren’t the other blessings in the same passage in Amos taking place?

Restoring the Davidic dynasty in Christ does not necessitate that this prophecy has been fulfilled *in totality*. Though Messiah is seated on the Davidic throne and has brought salvation to the Gentiles already, this does not mean that His kingdom is also established. Amos 9:13-15 is yet to be fulfilled. The NT clarifies that the complete restoration of the household of David would be fulfilled in two “comings” of Christ. Christ presently sits in a position of authority on the throne of David, yet He is not exercising complete rule in the world.

Thus the interpretation of Acts 15:16-17 is as follows:

¹⁶ **‘AFTER THESE THINGS** (after the judgment of Israel predicted in Amos 7-9) **I will return** (the Lord did this in the person of Christ) , **AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN , AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT,** (the kingly, Davidic line was reestablished in Christ, though it will not be restored in its totality until His second coming).

¹⁷ **SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’** (The restoration of the Davidic dynasty has at its aim the salvation of the Gentiles. This being so, the Jews should not trouble themselves with trying to make the Gentiles into Jews -Acts 15:5).

James' conclusion follows:

15:19 "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,

15:20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.

15:21 "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

The decision that was made was that the Jewish believers should not impose the Law of Moses or circumcision upon Gentile believers. At the same time, the Gentiles should be encouraged to maintain peace with their Jewish brothers who found certain practices particularly offensive. Since the books of Moses were so widely read in the synagogue and the Jews had been raised by his teachings, they found it hard to adjust to being around the practices of the Gentiles.

The list itself contains four items: They were to abstain (1) from things contaminated by idols, (2) from fornication, (3) from what is strangled (4) from blood. The second restriction (fornication) is the most difficult to understand since it appears to be moral rather than simply ceremonial. Why pick fornication from among the many sins the pagan world practiced?

Although numerous suggestions have been made, I believe that Bock's is the most satisfying:

(1) Things Contaminated by Idols

This is the only place the Greek noun, translated as "things contaminated" (ἀλίσημα), appears in the Bible, but the verb form (ἀλισγέω) appears in Daniel 1:8 and Malachi 1:7,12 where it is associated with food desecrated by its use in idol worship (for a conceptual parallel see Lev. 17:7 and Exo. 20:4; Bock, 505; I Cor. 8:4-13; I Cor. 10:20-22, 28).

(2) Fornication

The word "fornication" is porneia (πορνεία) from which we get our word pornography. It refers to any deviant sexual behavior but also appears to have a cultic dimension; that is, it was part of the religious ritual of many pagan religions and was a figure for spiritual infidelity to God (Rev. 2:20-21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2; Exo. 34:15-16; Psa. 106:37).

(3) What is Strangled

This expression is a single adjective in Greek (πνικτός). It appears in Matthew 13:7; 18:28 and Mark 5:13 where it refers to plants choking other plants or to pigs drowning. This is probably a reference to the killing of an animal by strangulation where the blood is not drained (see "blood" below).

(4) Blood

Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17; 7:26-27; 19:26; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23, 25, 27; 15:23; I Samuel 14:32-34, and Ezekiel 33:25 all prohibit eating blood or meat that has not been properly drained of the blood. This command was given because God had declared that life is in the blood and all life is His.

Bock concludes: "In all likelihood, this is a request to be faithful to the one true God, to be moral in worship, and to have sensitivity to issues of unclean animals and eating strangled animals without draining the blood, as Leviticus 17:13-14 and 18:6-30 suggest. The limitations are probably to keep relations from becoming strained in a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, as well as to warn about association with idolatry. It is quite likely that the prohibition relates especially to attending pagan temples and what goes with them" (Bock, 506).

These restrictions, therefore, were designed to lessen the tensions in the clash of Jew and Gentile cultures. They were suggestions of Christian charity toward other believers.

James refers to the fact that Moses is read each week in the synagogue, to indicate the need for sensitivity. The note about the reading of Moses shows a missionary concern. The point is that the law is read each week to Jews, and so one should be sensitive to Jewish concerns (see I Cor. 9:19-23 for the practical principal explained). . .

In sum, we see the church in deliberation about a disagreement whose resolution paved the way for the church's future. Several points emerge. First, however deep the original disagreement, the meeting allowed both sides to speak and relied on what God had done, as well as what Scripture teaches. The result, a compromise, led to an understanding that may not have completely satisfied anyone. Nevertheless, each side agreed that it could live with this agreement and that it would be wise to be sensitive to all the groups, given the differences in the cultures that made up the new church.

Stott summarizes two additional, complementary lessons. On the one hand, salvation by grace is an issue of Christian truth that is not to be compromised. No particular work of the law was added as a requirement for salvation or membership in the new community. Salvation cannot be a matter of human works. It is about receiving God's grace from start to finish. Faith means relying only on what God has provided in terms of forgiveness and the benefits of salvation that come with it. On the other hand, Christian Fellowship means that Grace should be shown for differences that are not central to the truth of salvation, as an expression of love. This deference preserves the church and protects it from fragmentation. . .

Another implication emerges here: Jewish believers are free to practice the faith in their way, just as Gentiles are not required to come under the law. The principal is that neither side sees salvation as the issue in following these practices (Bock, 507-508).

15:22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

15:23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

15:24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,

15:25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

15:26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

15:27 "Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.

15:28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:

15:29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

15:30 So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

15:31 When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

A letter was sent to Antioch, the source of the original controversy.

The unanimous decision "liberated the gospel from its Jewish swaddling clothes into being God's message for all humankind, and gave the Jewish-Gentile church a self-conscious identity as the reconciled people of God, the one body of Christ. And although the whole Counsel affirmed it, Paul claimed that it was a new understanding granted specially to him, the 'mystery' previously hidden but now revealed, namely that through faith in Christ alone Gentiles stand on equal terms with Jews as 'heirs together, members together, sharers together' in his one new community" (Stott, 241; Eph. 3:2-6; Rom. 16:25-27).

The Gentiles rejoiced in the news that they were full members of the Christian community.

15:32 Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.

15:33 After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out.

15:34 But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.

15:35 But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.

Stott (255-257) makes some salient observations:

The Judaizers were arguing that circumcision was necessary for salvation (1). There was, therefore, a danger of the church breaking up into competing theological factions, with different apostles teaching different gospels, and the churches' unity destroyed. The danger was real

enough. The Judaizers claimed the authority of James and contradicted Paul. Peter was led astray and was opposed by Paul. The three apostles appeared to be at loggerheads, with James and Paul on opposite sides and Peter oscillating between them. The situation was critical. So Luke was at great pains to describe how in the Council Peter spoke first, then Paul, then James; how Scripture and experience coincided; and how the apostles (Peter, Paul and James), the elders and the whole church reached a unanimous decision (22, 28). Thus, the unity of the gospel preserved the unity of the church. In spite of its rich diversity of formulation and emphasis in the New Testament, there is only one apostolic gospel. We must resist modern theologians who set the New Testament writers at variance with each other, and who talk about Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine positions as if they were incompatible gospels. Even Paul and James, who are reconciled at the Council, can be reconciled in their New Testament letters too. They talk the same way of salvation.

Moreover, the gospel of Christ's apostles is the gospel of God's free grace, of his undeserved love for sinners in the death of his Son in our place. Further, it is the gospel of God's sufficient grace. It cannot be regarded either as a supplement to something else (e.g. Judaism) or as needing to be supplemented by something else (e.g. circumcision), without being undermined. Yet this was exactly the Judaizers' mistake. To them, faith in Jesus was not enough; circumcision and law works had to be added. Today people try to add works of a different kind, philanthropy perhaps, or religious observances, or a particular ceremony or experience. In each case it is a 'Jesus plus' gospel, which is derogatory to the adequacy of his work. We need to echo Peter: "we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they" (11). We and they, Jews and Gentiles, are saved in the same way, through the one and only apostolic gospel of God's grace.

It was one thing to secure the gospel from corruption; it was another to preserve the church from fragmentation. Paul was resolutely unwilling to compromise "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). He resisted the Judaizers, rebuked Peter publicly, and wrote a passionate appeal to the Galatians. At the same time, he was extremely anxious to maintain Jewish-Gentile solidarity in the one body of Christ. So how could he unite the church without compromising the gospel, or defend the integrity of the gospel without sacrificing the unity of the church? His answer reveals the greatness of his mind and heart. Once the theological principle was firmly established, that salvation is by grace alone, and that circumcision was not required but neutral, he was prepared to adjust his practical policies. He made two notable concessions, both for the same conciliatory reason. First, he excepted the four cultural abstentions proposed by Jewish leaders to Gentile converts, because Moses was widely read and preached, and this Gentile restraint would ease Jewish consciences and facilitate Jewish-Gentile social intercourse. Secondly, he circumcised Timothy (he who had just been fulminating against circumcision!), out of consideration for the Jews who would be offended if he remained uncircumcised . . .

A strong conscience gives us liberty of behavior, but we should limit our liberty out of love for the weak. Again, though free, Paul was willing to make himself a slave to others. To those under

the law, he was prepared to become like one under the law, in order to win those under the law. Was that not exactly what he was doing when he circumcised Timothy, as also when some years later he excepted James' proposal in Jerusalem that he join in certain Jewish purification rights (21:17-26)?

We may say, then, that the Jerusalem Council secured a double victory – a victory of truth and confirming the gospel of grace, and a victory of love in preserving the fellowship by sensitive concessions to conscientious Jewish scruples.

It is also worth noting that the Gentiles' eating habits were not tempting the Jews to stumble and eat unclean food that would defile their consciences; rather, their behavior was simply offensive to the Jews which resulted in a breakdown of fellowship that would not have existed if they had been more sensitive. Though they had liberty to eat whatever they wanted, they were more concerned about removing barriers than in insisting on their freedom. They lived out what God commanded in Romans 14:19-20: "pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense."