

## Chapter 37: Godly Authority

*Acts 15:22–35*

In the last passage, James the Elder had concluded his speech in the Jerusalem Council with recommendations not to trouble Gentiles with keeping ceremonial aspects of the law beyond instructions for observing ceremonial regulations that touched on moral issues: sexual immorality and eating foods related to idolatrous practices (Acts 15:19–20). Although in some cases a believer might have claimed a certain measure of liberty, James counsels that Gentiles should adhere to a minimum standard of conduct to avoid causing unnecessary offense to Jewish believers “in every city” where Moses has been proclaimed and read (Acts 15:21). This proposal was James’s personal judgment (“Therefore my judgment is that...”; Acts 15:19). This next passage picks up at the adoption of this resolution by the assembly to lay down a perpetual principle for the church: *godly authority blesses the church with joy, encouragement, strength, and peace.*

### Godly Authority (Acts 15:22–29)

The phrase, “it seemed good” (ἔδοξε; *edoxe*; v. 22a) refers to a formal decision.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the decision was reached by the apostles and the elders; however, Luke also notes that this decision reached wide approbation and approval “with the whole church” (v. 22b). The specific decision reached was not only to make a judgment on the doctrinal question on the necessity of circumcision for Gentiles. Beyond the doctrine itself, the apostles and elders also determined “to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” (v. 22c). There is good wisdom in this to strengthen the position of Paul and Barnabas as they returned to Antioch by sending others with them to confirm the message. Without these other representatives from the church in Jerusalem, it is possible that the word of Paul and Barnabas alone about the decisions reached by the Jerusalem Council may have been met with skepticism. The two men appointed to be sent were “Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers” (vv. 22d). Luke does not explicitly tell us what leadership role these men may have held, but we have a few clues. First, this is the same word that appears in Hebrews 13:17: “Obey your *leaders* and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Second, it is unlikely that the apostles and elders would have sent men who were not involved in coming to the decision to teach the decision. So, it is very likely that these were among the “elders” who had gathered with the apostles to hear this case (Acts 15:6; see also “to the apostles and the elders...from among them”; v. 22). Third, that they ended up remaining in Antioch encouraging and strengthening the brothers “with many words” suggests that these were *teaching* elders—i.e., pastors (v. 32; 1 Tim. 5:17). Here, they function in the capacity of short-term missionaries to strengthen the church in Antioch before heading back to Jerusalem (Acts 15:33). This seems not to have been the first time that these men served as missionaries, since the letter also outlines that these are “men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 26). They “themselves will tell you the same things [as written in the letter] by word of mouth” (v. 27).

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<sup>1</sup> “*it seems best to me, I decide, I resolve...as administrative*” (BDAG, δοκέω, §2.b.β, p. 255.)

The church at Jerusalem then sends these four men—Paul, Barnabas, Judas/Barsabbas, and Silas—with a letter setting down James’s proposals into writing.<sup>2</sup> In the greeting of the letter, the Council identifies those who have made the decision: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders” (v. 23a). While the whole church approved of the decision of the apostles and the elders, only the officers of the church make this decision. Next, the greeting identifies the intended recipients of the letter not as to all Christians everywhere, but specifically “to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia” (v. 23b). Finally, the greeting of the letter includes an actual greeting: “greetings” (v. 23c).

After the greeting, the apostles and elders are careful to note that those who have troubled the church did so on their own inclinations, and not by any direction from the church as a whole: “Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions” (v. 24). This is an important statement for us to reflect upon in the entrepreneurial and individualistic culture in which we live. There are so many professing Christians who start “ministries” of various kinds without any kind of overseeing authority. Launching everything from social media accounts to whole churches on their own initiative, they often stir up trouble and then claim persecution when the church seeks to correct their errors. Those who do so reject the Scriptural authority of the church to their own peril and only end up troubling the church.

To be sure, the Scriptures give not the slightest whiff of anything like the hierarchical authority centered in the so-called pope that the Roman Catholic Church claims. It is notable that Peter (whom Roman Catholics assert to be the first pope) did not give the final word in this assembly, but it was the proposals of an elder (not an apostle) that ended up being adopted by the *plurality* of apostles and elders. Furthermore, it is certainly true that “All synods or councils, since the Apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, we do not have to throw out the baby of church authority with the bathwater of Roman Catholicism. The Scriptures everywhere demonstrate that the institution of the church does have real authority, especially in judging doctrinal questions like the ones raised here. Yet, the Scriptures also teach that whatever authority the church possesses (1) is exercised on behalf of King Jesus, who personally possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18), and (2) is *accountable* to others. Everyone is accountable to God, but no one is accountable *only* to God. Every person in the church—including, and especially the officers of the church—is accountable to other elders.

How, then, are we to judge the authority of decisions, especially if they may err? This is where the approbation of the broader church is important. The elders make doctrinal determinations in courts that handle cases such as this, but they do not make decisions that rest on the authority of the church *per se*. Rather, the authority of the church is only ministerial (i.e., to administer what God’s Word requires the church to do) and declarative (i.e., to declare what God’s Word teaches). The church’s authority, then, rests upon the authority of the Word of God. Where the church accurately interprets and applies God’s Word, the church exercises her authority rightly—that is, the church exercises the authority of Christ to *rule* on his behalf (1 Tim. 5:17). But, where the church

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<sup>2</sup> Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 436.

<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 31.3.

misinterprets or misapplies God’s Word, the church usurps the authority of Christ. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* summarizes the Scriptural teaching on this point:

It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, while the apostles and elders make determinations, those determinations should be met with approval “with the whole church.” Elders in Christ’s church are not infallible. Speaking for myself and the decisions I have participated in making on various church courts, I have erred, and I will continue to err. It is wise for elders to remember their own fallibility even and especially by listening carefully to criticism from others in the church. This does not democratize the church, but it does remind us that no small part of our persuasive authority rests on “the approbation of an impartial public,” even though the ultimate evaluation stays in “the countenance and blessing of the great Head of the Church” Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the elders and apostles had “come to one accord” (v. 25) is a powerful testimony, though, to the strength and unity of the mind of the church on this issue.

In this case, the Jerusalem Council is balancing both the Scriptural promise that Gentiles will be brought into the church alongside questions of propriety and wisdom for the church to endure together. In other words, the authority of the Jerusalem Council does not set a precedent for establishing laws that bind the conscience, but only seek to address “any danger lest the unity should be cut asunder. So that, to speak properly, this necessity was accidental or external; which was placed not in the thing itself, but only in avoiding of the offense, which appeareth more plainly by abolishing of the decree.”<sup>6</sup> In Presbyterian polity, part of the ministerial power of the church rests in the authority of courts of the church (i.e., sessions of elders at the local level, presbyteries at the regional level, and the General Assembly at the national level) to determine the wisdom and prudence of *circumstantial* questions.<sup>7</sup> The PCA’s *BCO* puts it this way:

The jurisdiction of Church courts is only ministerial and declarative, and relates to the

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<sup>4</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 31.2.

<sup>5</sup> *Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America (BCO)*, The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. “Preliminary Principles,” #8.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:78–79.

<sup>7</sup> “...there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.6)

doctrines and precepts of Christ, to the order of the Church, and to the exercise of discipline.

*First*, they can make no laws binding the conscience; but may frame symbols of faith, bear testimony against error in doctrine and immorality in practice, within or without the Church, and decide cases of conscience.

*Secondly*, they have power to establish rules for the government, discipline, worship, and extension of the Church, which must be agreeable to the doctrines relating thereto contained in the Scriptures, **the circumstantial details only of these matters being left to the Christian prudence and wisdom of Church officers and courts.**

*Thirdly*, they possess the right to require obedience to the laws of Christ. Hence, they admit those qualified to sealing ordinances and to their respective offices, and they exclude the disobedient and disorderly from such offices or from sacramental privileges. The highest censure to which their authority extends is to cut off the contumacious and impenitent from the congregation of believers. Moreover, they possess all the administrative authority necessary to give effect to these powers.<sup>8</sup>

These principles are drawn from many places in Scripture, but nowhere so clearly as we see them exhibited in the decisions reached by the Jerusalem Council.

In the content of the letter, the apostles and elders state that “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements...” (v. 28). As Polhill notes, “The addition of the Holy Spirit in v. 28 is significant. Just as the Spirit had been instrumental in the inclusion of the Gentiles (15:8,12), so now in the conference the Spirit had led the Jerusalem leaders in considering the conditions for their inclusion.”<sup>9</sup> Then, they state the proposals of James simply: “that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell” (v. 29). As we discussed in the previous study, these were all elements that sat on the border of ceremonial and moral law. Some aspects of these elements were entirely forbidden (sexual immorality and participation in idolatrous worship, especially by eating food sacrificed to idols; see 1 Cor. 10:5–22).<sup>10</sup> Other elements, however, may have merely posed too great of an offense to Jewish believers to support lasting, united fellowship. Without seeking to impose more on these Gentile believers, they commend these practices to them as instructions for how they ought to behave in the household of God.

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<sup>8</sup> BCO 11-2, emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 335.

<sup>10</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 614–15.

## Joy, Encouragement, Strength, and Peace (Acts 15:30–35)

With that, these four went back to Antioch, who had sent the original question up to the Jerusalem Council (v. 30; cf. Acts 15:2). In this, we see an example of communicating the decision to the broader church: “because it belongeth to all alike to know for a surety what they must hold, the godly and learned teachers must make known to the whole Church what they have set down out of the word of God.”<sup>11</sup> These doctrinal questions are not simply decisions to be made. More than that, these determinations from Scripture are for the encouragement and edification of the whole church: “In sum, the resolution of this problem did not result in a secret solution. The result and, to a degree, its rationale were made public.”<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, “when they [the missionaries] had read it [the letter], they [the church at Antioch] rejoiced because of its encouragement” (v. 31). The word for encouragement encompasses the idea of exhortation, consolation, and support, but the idea of “encouragement” is probably the single best word for how to translate it here.<sup>13</sup> The idea is that the clarity of this decision gave wind in their sails to encourage them forward with the mission to reach the nations for Christ.

More than just a one-time reading, so that the message was forgotten, “Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words” (v. 32). Certainly, this must have involved a greater exposition of the basis for the decision of the Jerusalem Council, but it likely also went beyond this too: “In the New Testament prophecy is primarily the gift of inspiration whereby one delivers a word from God that addresses the present needs in the life of the church.”<sup>14</sup> They stayed for “some time” continuing with encouragement and strengthening for the church “with many words” (vv. 32, 33). After the two short-term missionaries left, the long-term missionaries continued the work: “Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also” (v. 35). Here again, they continued working by “teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.” The “many others” seems to reflect a growing number of Christian ministers and elders who can help with the preaching, teaching, and shepherding in the church.

## Discussion Questions

1. What had James proposed in the previous passage (Acts 15:19–20)? How closely does the final decision of the Assembly reflect James’s proposal (vv. 28–29)? Why does the Jerusalem Council appoint men to go with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch (v. 22)? Who were these men (vv. 22, 26)? What role did they exercise while they were in Antioch (v. 32)? Now that the gift of prophecy has ceased in the church, what equivalent role would exist to these men in the church today?
2. What does the greeting of the letter teach us about the specific people who exercised godly authority to make this determination in the church (“The brothers, both the apostles and the elders”; v. 23)? When the Council describes those who troubled the church in Antioch, “though we gave

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<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:81.

<sup>12</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 514.

<sup>13</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 620–30.

<sup>14</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 336.

them no instructions,” what does this suggest about the authority of the church in matters of doctrine and practice (v. 24)?

3. How does the Council’s act of writing down the decision of the council in the form of a letter provide an example for doctrinal clarity in the church? How does the Council’s act of gathering the church at Antioch to read the letter model relational closeness (v. 30)? What kind of fruit is produced by the godly authority exercised by these leaders in the church at Antioch (vv. 31–33)? What should we learn about godly authority for the church today?

4. What has your experience been with authority in the church? How does your heart relate to authority in the church? Where do you seek authoritative teaching on spiritual matters—from those who possess that authority lawfully, or from other voices in the world? Are you experiencing the fruit that this passage describes from godly authority (joy, encouragement, strength, and peace)? If so, why do you think that is? How might you grow in this area?