

EXEGETICAL BRIEF: ACTS 15:20 What Was Prohibited by the Jerusalem Council?

Daniel P. Leyrer

In his *On the Councils and the Church* (1539) Martin Luther pointed to the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 as an example of how peace can be made within the church when her members resolve to be directed by God's Word rather than human opinions. Recall the Acts 15 setting for the early church. "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved" (Ac 15:1). This salvation-by-law heresy was roundly defeated when Paul and Barnabas made their case before the other apostles and elders. James spoke for the Council: "It is my judgment that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Ac 15:19). The early Christians had successfully rejected a manmade teaching that surely would have separated Jewish Christians from their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ. There would not be one Jewish Christian Church and one Gentile Christian Church. There would be one church of all people who trust alone in Christ for salvation and do not look to Old Testament law as the basis of their relationship with God.

Sola gratia, sola fide, and sola scriptura were all upheld by the Council decision James announced. The verse in question, Acts 15:20, displays another beautiful facet of the Council's scriptural wisdom:

ἀλλὰ ἐπιστεῖλαι αὐτοῖς τοῦ ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων καὶ τῆς πορνείας καὶ τοῦ πικτοῦ καὶ τοῦ αἵματος

Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

Though the apostles and elders in Jerusalem in no way wanted Gentile Christians around the world to think they had to become Jews in order to be saved, at the same time they wanted Gentile Christians to know how important it was for them to be sensitive to Jewish scruples. Gentile believers were to avoid four activities in particular in order not to offend their Jewish brothers and sisters. The NIV translates these four prohibitions of the "apostolic decree" in this way:

- 1) "food polluted by idols" (τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων);
- 2) "sexual immorality" (τῆς πορνείας);

- 3) “the meat of strangled animals” (τοῦ πικτοῦ);
- 4) “blood” (τοῦ αἵματος).

By abstaining in these four areas Gentiles would, as Luther writes in the aforementioned treatise, “desist, for the benefit and salvation of the Jews, from giving willful offense.”

While the theological intent of the Council’s fourfold list is not in question, there have been many questions raised about the list itself. There are textual questions. Are there three or four items on the list? Some Western manuscripts leave out the reference to “the meat of strangled animals” (πικτός) and add a sort of Negative Golden Rule (“and whatever they do not want done to them, they should not do to others”). An early papyrus (p45) omits the reference to sexual immorality. These omissions and additions are not widespread in the manuscript testimony, and their presence is fairly easily explained as attempts to make the list easier to understand by giving it a common theme. When πικτός is removed the common theme becomes “moral injunctions”: do not commit idolatry; do not commit sexual immorality; do not commit murder (i.e., shed “blood”). By adding the Negative Golden Rule the list is taken in the same direction toward moral injunctions. When πορνεία is removed from the list the common theme becomes “Jewish mealtime scruples.” In that case the list would be understood as encouraging Gentile Christians to refrain from eating food that had been associated with pagan idols in some way and from meat that still had blood in it, which would be the case when animals were strangled to death in contradiction to the Lord’s command in Leviticus 17:13,14.

The manuscript evidence for reducing the list from four items to three is not persuasive. And yet the interpretational questions remain. Is there a common theme to the list? Why would the Council make three prohibitions ceremonial in nature and one prohibition ethical in nature? What do Jewish mealtime scruples have to do with sexual immorality? Would Gentile Christians, even if they were new Christians, need a statement on abstaining from πορνεία?

Of course, the only common theme the list needs is “four things Gentile believers should avoid in order not to offend Jewish believers.” Whether the prohibitions are more ethical or ceremonial in nature makes no difference. Christ’s disciples were happy to abide by them (cf. Ac 15:31). Furthermore, new Christians in first century Asia Minor, whose only previous religious experiences would have been connected to pagan temple practice, needed special instruction in these four areas. Avoiding food that had been involved in idolatrous feasts as well as meat that had not been prepared in a kosher way would not have appeared on the Gentiles’ radar. And if their pre-

Christian view of sexuality was filtered through the “spiritual” practices of temple prostitution and fertility rites, we can understand why the prohibition of πορνεία would be included on the list. Clear instruction was needed not only for these new Christians to walk together with their Jewish fellow believers, it was needed for them to walk with Christ and turn away from their heathen past. It stands to reason, then, that the apostolic decree would speak to the Christian law of love both ceremonially and ethically.

Recent scholarship has brought to light the distinct possibility that πορνεία is not the only ethical prohibition on the list. This scholarship has to do with the word πικτός. In the June, 2009 *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (52:2) David Instone-Brewer writes convincingly that we should not feel compelled to understand πικτός as referring to a strangled animal. The word, used biblically only in references to the apostolic decree (Ac 15:20, 29; 21:25), is used only rarely in Greek literature of the time in connection with meat preparation. Much more often the adjective referred to the smothering of infants, a practice which most non-Jews of the first century would have regarded as a normal form of birth control. It may be that the apostles and elders were forbidding with the word πικτός something that the new Gentile Christian had previously considered a common practice, namely, infanticide by post-birth smothering. If this is the meaning of πικτός, then infanticide would take its place alongside sexual immorality as an ethical prohibition in the Jerusalem Council’s letter.

Does πικτός refer to a strangled animal or a smothered infant? Does αίμας refer to blood in the meat or bloodshed? Is ἀλλόγημα the defilement that occurs from idol worship or eating food that had been sacrificed to idols? Does πορνεία refer to sexual immorality in general or the sexual practices specifically forbidden in Leviticus 18? Interpretational questions remain as to what exactly was being prohibited by the Jerusalem Council. Yet these ambiguities should not alarm us. What is most important is that they were clear to those early Gentile Christians in Antioch and other places who had the list explained to them by faithful men like Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and Judas Barsabbas (Ac 15:22, 30-35). We rest assured that these church leaders expounded and applied the Council’s letter in exactly the way it needed to be. In so doing they taught new Christians that God’s children are not under law (cf. Gal 5:18), and yet they are privileged and pleased to fulfill the law of Christ (cf. Gal 6:2). The Jerusalem Council had made clear by its letter that salvation is not by law, and yet the saved gladly follow God’s law, bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit against which there is no law (cf. Gal 5:23).