

DRAWING ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FROM THE PROCESS OF THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

A NEW APPROACH TO ACTS 15:4-29¹

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Summary

This study proposes that the main ethical points found in the decision of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:4-29 should include the council members' attitudes of trusting each other, respecting God and his Word, and answering with some conceded responses to the others, rather than just the four prohibitions. To argue this proposal, first of all, the situation of the council is described in terms of the historical background and the narrative flow. The three lists of the four restrictions in 15:20, 29 and 21:25 are then compared, and the characteristics of the decision of the council are examined. The council's list differs from James' and has the perspective of worship and covenant rather than of ritual.

1. Introduction

The four restrictions in Acts 15:20, 29 and 21:25 have been studied in terms of their source, background, nature, purpose, and ethics. Are these restrictions influenced by Leviticus 17–18, Noachide commandments, or rabbinic literature? How can we harmonise Acts 15, 21 and Galatians 2:1-21? Do the four items have a ritual or moral basis, or both? What purpose can we read in the council and its decision? What kinds of ethical points can be obtained from the council?

¹ This paper was presented for the New Testament and the Ethics study groups at the Tyndale Fellowship Conference in 2009. I thank the conference participants and especially Dr Stuart Rochester for his proofreading and useful comments. In this paper, translations of the Greek text follow the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

In spite of several debates about each subject, missionaries still use these prohibitions at their mission field, interpreting these as ‘for all future believers’.² David and Cynthia Strong admit that ‘[o]ver the years, missiologists have repeatedly turned to this passage [Acts 15] as a model or paradigm for contextualization’.³ In addition, Acts 15 has received attention recently as a text to be applied to the modern church.⁴ So by reason of both interpretation and application, there may still be room for more research into the Jerusalem council and its decision. To set up a starting point, it will be helpful to quote Wiarda:

None of the authors reviewed here tries to draw methodological lessons from the procedural steps taken by Luke the theologian as he goes about his business, or by Paul the epistle writer as he formulates his message.⁵

So it seems good to start from such ‘procedural steps’ based on Galatians 1–2 and Acts 15. Then the three lists of the four prohibitions will be examined to see if they are the same or not. Clarifying the characteristics of these four items will be important for finding ethical points in the council’s decision.

2. Situation behind the Council

In order to form a broad backdrop to the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 and to recognise main characters’ (especially James’) position in the council, it would be necessary to consider Bauckham’s suggestion on ‘five conferences’ in Acts 11:1-18 (1st), Galatians 1:18-19 (2nd), 2:1-10 (3rd), Acts 15:1-2a with Galatians 2:1-21 (4th), and Acts 15:6-29 (5th).⁶

² Tennent (Timothy C. Tennent, ‘Contemporary Promises and Challenges in Global Christianity’, Handout [Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2002]: 7) says that the four prohibitions in Acts 15 can still be applied to present mission fields.

³ David K. Strong and Cynthia A. Strong, ‘The Globalizing Hermeneutic of the Jerusalem Council’ in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Nottingham: IVP, 2007): 127-28.

⁴ John Proctor, ‘Proselytes and Pressure Cookers: The Meaning and Application of Acts 15:20’, *International Review of Mission* 85 (1996): 469-83.

⁵ Timothy Wiarda, ‘The Jerusalem Council and the Theological Task’, *JETS* 46 (2003): 246.

⁶ Richard Bauckham, ‘James, Peter, and the Gentiles’ in *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans (Leiden: Brill, 2005): 137-38.

The first conference may have occurred in AD 34–35, and the others in AD 35, 46, 48, and 49.⁷

From the second to the fifth meeting James seems to be an important figure, if we identify the James in Galatians 2:9 and 2:12 as the same ‘James the Lord’s brother’ (1:19), as Farmer assumes.⁸ At each conference James appears, in Galatians 1:19 (2nd), 2:9 (3rd), 2:12 (4th), and Acts 15:13 (5th). At the second one (AD 35) Paul met Peter, the chief of the apostles, and James ‘the Lord’s brother’. The statement, ἕτερον δὲ τῶν ἀποστόλων οὐκ εἶδον εἰ μὴ Ἰάκωβον τὸν ἀδελφὸν τοῦ κυρίου (Gal. 1:19), may not imply that James is an apostle.⁹ The best translation of this verse can be ‘I saw none of the other apostles—unless you count James the brother of the Lord as an apostle’,¹⁰ or ‘[o]ther *than* the apostles I saw none except James, the Lord’s brother’.¹¹ Paul’s mention of James in this verse must be related with his next visit to James, Peter, and John in 2:9.

In the third conference (AD 46), James appears as a leader of the Jerusalem church along with Peter and John (Gal. 2:9). As Bruce suggests, ‘It is conceivable that these three [Peter, James, and John the apostles] were at first regarded as the “pillars” and that, on the death of one James, his namesake [James the Lord’s brother] was co-opted to take his place as a “pillar” (not, of course, to take his place as member of the twelve).’¹² James the Lord’s brother might have gained the leadership of the Jerusalem church at the time of Peter’s escape in AD 43¹³ (cf. Acts 12:17).¹⁴ That James is named first rather than Peter and

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (third revised and enlarged edn; Leicester: Apollos, 1990): 92.

⁸ William R. Farmer, ‘James the Lord’s Brother, According to Paul’ in *James the Just and Christian Origins*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (NovTSup; Leiden: Brill, 1999): 133. So also James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993): 108.

⁹ So also Dunn, *Galatians*, 76–77.

¹⁰ John Bligh, *Galatians in Greek: A Structural Analysis of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians with Notes on the Greek* (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1966): 96.

¹¹ L. Paul Trudinger, ‘“ΕΤΕΡΟΝ ΔΕ ΤΩΝ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΩΝ ΟΥΚ ΕΙΔΟΝ, ΕΙ ΜΗ ΙΑΚΩΒΟΝ: A Note on Galatians i 19’, *NovT* 17 (1975): 201 (emphasis original).

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1982): 123. So also David Wenham and A. D. A. Moses, ‘“There Are Some Standing Here...”: Did They Become the ‘Reputed Pillars’ of the Jerusalem Church? Some Reflections on Mark 9:1, Galatians 2:9 and the Transfiguration’, *NovT* 36 (1994): 154.

¹³ Bruce, *Acts*, 92.

John in Galatians 2:9¹⁵ may have to do with ‘James being the brother of Jesus combined with the tradition that he was numbered among those to whom the Lord appeared after his death, burial and resurrection’.¹⁶ Nevertheless, probably this verse stresses that even *James* gave the hand of fellowship to *Paul* who is named before Barnabas.¹⁷ Here James may be introduced first because it may have been hardest for him to give Paul and Barnabas ‘the right hand of fellowship’. So mentioning James first does not necessarily mean that he is the leading figure of the conference.¹⁸

The most controversial meeting (the fourth) started in AD 48 right after the first journey of Barnabas and Paul. If Galatians 2:11-21 is connected with Acts 15:1-2a, as Farmer and Bauckham suggest, James and Paul stood at the centre of the storm. In Galatians 2:11-21, ‘certain persons from James’ had some message from James like ‘Break the habit of “eating Gentile food at Gentile tables”!’¹⁹ At that time Peter had table fellowship with Gentile Christians but, for fear of the circumcision faction, he drew back from the fellowship (2:12). Then the other Jews including Barnabas followed Peter’s ‘hypocrisy’ (2:13). At the moment of separation between the Jewish and the Gentile Christians in the table fellowship, Paul blames Peter for not following both the gospel and his established practice (2:14).²⁰ On account of Paul’s argument, Barnabas should take his previous position again. That would be the reason that Barnabas is mentioned with Paul in Acts

¹⁴ Wenham and Moses, ‘Reputed Pillars’, 154, think, ‘Peter and presumably John (if he was there) had to escape from Jerusalem at that point in time, leaving James the Lord’s brother in charge.’

¹⁵ In Gal. 2:9, there is a textual variant, which puts Peter before James (see D, F, G, 629, 1175, etc.).

¹⁶ Farmer, ‘James the Lord’s Brother’, 140.

¹⁷ At that time there seems to have been an agreement between the two groups, that each team should have its own target group. One group goes ‘to the Gentiles’ and the other ‘to the circumcised’ (2:9). In 2:7-8 Peter is called ‘apostle to the circumcised’, indicating that Peter is the leading figure of this group.

¹⁸ *Contra* Jostein Ådna, ‘James’ Position at the Summit Meeting of the Apostles and the Elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15)’ in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, ed. Jostein Ådna and Hans Kvalbein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000): 125.

¹⁹ T. W. Manson, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles: With a Memoir of T. W. Manson by H. H. Rowley*, ed. Matthew Black (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962): 181. Similarly, Bruce, *Galatians*, 130.

²⁰ This blame continues up to Galatians 2:21 according to Bauckham (Richard Bauckham, ‘James and the Gentiles [Acts 15.13-21]’ in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts*, ed. Ben Witherington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 125-26).

15:2a. Therefore, James and Paul can be seen as representatives of each group in Galatians 2:11-21.

Probably a bit after the time of Galatians 2:11-21, some came from Judaea and insisted that ‘unless you are circumcised according to the law of Moses, you are unable to be saved’ (Acts 15:1). This group mentions the ‘salvation’ of the Gentile Christians. As a result of this teaching, ‘no small disagreement and debate’ occurred towards Paul and Barnabas (15:2). It was hard for the Antioch church to go further since these Jews raised a fundamental matter, ‘salvation’. The church sent Paul, Barnabas, and some church members to the ‘apostles and elders’ in Jerusalem. On the way, because of their report on the conversion of the Gentiles, they got a warm welcome from the believers in Phoenicia and Samaria (15:3), where there was neither disagreement nor debate.

However, the circumstances were quite different in Jerusalem.²¹ After exchanging greetings, the church members in Antioch were dragged into debates again when they ‘reported all that God had done with them’ (Acts 15:4). The insistence of ‘some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees’ is briefly introduced in 15:5. They demand that the Gentile Christians should come within the boundaries which had existed between the Jews and the Gentiles for a long time, and that they should keep the law of Moses including the food laws exactly the same as the Jewish Christians do.

If we do not mix Acts 15:1 and 15:5, the former group called ‘certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us’ (15:24) stresses circumcision and the law of Moses in respect of salvation. However, the latter group participating in the council just emphasises circumcision and the law of Moses, without any relation to salvation. Between the two there is a report from Paul and Barnabas on ‘all that God had done with them’ (15:4). The believers who belong to the sect of the Pharisees (15:5) seem to respond to this report, still standing by the side of those ‘who came down from Judaea’ (15:1) but omitting reference to the matter of salvation, by reason of what God has done through Paul and Barnabas. So the council reaches the issue, as Bauckham says, ‘evidently not

²¹ Cf. Lois Malcolm, ‘Conversion, Conversation, and Acts 15’, *Word & World* 22 (2002): 249.

whether Gentiles could join the messianically renewed Israel, but whether they could do so without becoming Jews'.²²

This would be the situation of the Jerusalem council including its first stage. The council had to give an answer to that issue. Some arrangement should be made between the two groups, one group represented by Paul, and the other by James.

3. Situation of the Council

In Acts 10:1–11:18 Luke reports on the first conference including its background, that is, Cornelius' conversion story. So the first audience, including Theophilus, and also modern readers who read carefully from the beginning of the book, may expect that a further arrangement would be made by the Jerusalem church because a different kind of group involvement in the faith (that is, the Gentiles) had necessitated an action from the church.

In Acts 1:13-14, we see Jesus' mother and brothers with the disciples who are waiting for the fulfilment of the promise made by God the Father. Then follows the election of Matthias (1:15-26). After substantial growth of the congregation of the Jerusalem church in Acts 2–5, the church appointed seven [deacons] to serve it (6:1-6). When people in Samaria received the Word of God, the church sent Peter and John (8:14). Even after Paul's conversion, a meeting of the apostles was held to receive the persecutor as a member (9:27). Then, as we mentioned, there was the first conference (11:1-18) after Cornelius' conversion. So it would be very natural that the church met in Jerusalem after many Gentiles became believers.

In the Acts 15 conference, however, a very delicate matter is raised. It is not a matter of electing a replacement for an apostle, or of appointing a kind of deacon, or of examining an apostle who is doubtful about having unlawful relationships with Gentiles, but a very old and essential subject of how the Gentiles can belong to the Jewish community. So various groups take part in the council. The leadership has been enlarged from the apostles (cf. 1:26; 2:42; 4:33; 6:6; 8:14; 9:27; 11:1) to 'the apostles and the elders' (15:4, 6, 22, 23).

One side is represented by 'some who came down from Judaea' (15:1) and 'some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees'

²² Bauckham, 'James and the Gentiles', 168.

(15:5), and the other by Paul and Barnabas. The main speakers of the council are some disciples who had followed Jesus in his ministry on earth, namely Peter and probably Barnabas,²³ and some who became disciples after Jesus' death and resurrection, namely Paul and (very likely) James (cf. Luke 8:19-21; Acts 1:14; 1 Cor. 15:7).

One opinion is briefly introduced in 15:1, 5, as we have seen in the previous section. Another opinion is that the Gentile Christians do not need to keep the law of Moses both to be saved and to be united with the Jewish Christians. This is insisted upon by Paul and Barnabas and at this time by Peter. As the representative of the apostles in Acts, Peter is the main speaker for this opinion. He at first deals with what God has done.²⁴ He gives two pieces of evidence: God chose Peter and gave his spirit to the Gentiles (15:7b-8). Peter concludes that 'we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will' (15:11). He points out that there is 'no distinction' between the two groups (15:9). His evidence comes from Cornelius' case, which has already been finalised in Jerusalem (11:1-18).²⁵ Peter's argument effectively silences the whole assembly (15:12). His evidence is supported and multiplied by 'all the signs and wonders that God has done among the Gentiles' through Barnabas and Paul, the missionaries for the Gentiles (15:12).

'After Paul and Barnabas finished speaking' (15:13) the last speech is given by James, who is not an apostle but an elder. Speaking last may not be enough to prove that James is the leader of the Jerusalem council. The group members are called 'apostles and elders', and James does not belong to the apostles. James can be seen as 'a leading representative of the so-called *Hebraioi*'.²⁶ James' final proposal is made on the basis of Peter's remark on God's salvation (15:14) and of Scripture, especially of 'the prophets' (15:15). Hosea 3:5, Jeremiah 12:15-16, Amos 9:11-12, and Isaiah 45:21 are suggested as the Scriptures related to Acts 15:16-17.²⁷ Then, the apostles and the elders,

²³ Some manuscripts and ancient translations (D 6^s *pc* it *vg*^{mss}) have 'Barnabas' instead of 'Barsabbas' in Acts 1:23, which means that Barnabas had been with Jesus from John's baptism to Jesus' ascension.

²⁴ Cf. Bauckham, 'James and the Gentiles', 154.

²⁵ So also Bauckham, 'James, Peter, and the Gentiles', 117.

²⁶ Ådna, 'James' Position', 126. His use of 'Peter's Hebrew name שְׁמֹעֵן', Simeon (Acts 15:14) may indicate James' position (Ådna, 'James' Position', 145, n. 64).

²⁷ Ådna, 'James' Position', 128-39, 161. So also Proctor, 'Proselytes and Pressure Cookers', 474.

with the whole church, decide to send two leading brothers to Antioch with a letter containing the famous fourfold prohibition (15:22-29).²⁸

4. Three Lists of the Four Prohibitions

The letter of the council said ‘abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication’ (Acts 15:29). The order of these items is slightly different in 15:20, 15:29 and 21:25. Moreover, the three versions do not have exactly the same literal expressions. Proctor briefly summarises the differences as follows:

The listings are consistent, though not identical. The order of the terms switches, and two different words are used to denote involvement in idolatry: one in James’ speech, the other in the letter and the subsequent reference to it. Apart from these points, the three texts correspond closely.²⁹

These changes are explained either as ‘merely stylistic’³⁰ or as a source-critical matter.³¹ Nonetheless, Luke may use repeated expressions to show characters’ qualities and to deliver a message.³² So we need to consider the differences among them within their contexts. The first version is James’, the second belongs to the council, and the last is repeated by the Jerusalem elders. Both the first and the second occur at the same time but differently in terms of authority. The last one occurs about eight years later (AD 57) than the first two (AD 49). If the differences among the three versions are just stylistic, why does Luke employ different orders and expressions? These are the three passages:

²⁸ The ‘structure of Acts 15:4-29’ in section 5 is helpful in seeing the situation of the council.

²⁹ Proctor, ‘Proselytes and Pressure Cookers’, 471.

³⁰ Charles H. Savelle, ‘A Reexamination of the Prohibitions in Acts 15’, *BSac* 161 (2004): 451.

³¹ E.g. Bauckham, ‘James and the Gentiles’, 183-84.

³² For the function of the repeated parts in the Cornelius story in Acts 10–11, see R. D. Witherup, ‘Cornelius Over and Over and Over Again: “Functional Redundancy” in the Acts of the Apostles’, *JSNT* 49 (1993): 45-66, and for the role of the three Saul’s conversion accounts in Acts 9, 22, and 26, see Daniel Marguerat, ‘Saul’s Conversion (Acts 9; 22; 26)’ in *The First Christian Historian: Writing the ‘Acts of the Apostles’* (tr. Ken McKinney et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 179-204.

15:20 τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων καὶ τῆς πορνείας καὶ τοῦ πνικτοῦ καὶ τοῦ αἵματος (James' list)

15:29 εἰδωλοθύτων καὶ αἵματος καὶ πνικτῶν καὶ πορνείας (the council's letter)

21:25 τό τε εἰδωλόθυτον καὶ αἷμα καὶ πνικτὸν καὶ πορνείαν (the later reference).

In some manuscripts we can find an effort to harmonise these three lists. For example, some minuscules (945, 1739, 1891) change the order of 'blood' in 15:20 (from the fourth to the second) and the numbers of 'things strangled' in 15:29 (from plural to singular), to make the second, the third, and the fourth items the same in the three lists.³³ Changing the numbers of 'things strangled' can be found in many manuscripts, namely P⁷⁴ A^c **ⲛ**^c E H L P Ψ 049 056 1 33 88 etc.³⁴ However, scholars prefer the variants adopted in NA²⁷ and UBS⁴ as original.³⁵

If we analyse the three versions, we see 'blood' as the last item in James' list but as the second in the others. Only James' list employs a very ritual term ἀλισγημάτων ('pollutions').³⁶ If τῶν ἀλισγημάτων is expanded by τῶν εἰδώλων καὶ τῆς πορνείας καὶ τοῦ πνικτοῦ καὶ τοῦ αἵματος,³⁷ James' list can be seen as quite ritual-centred. In the council letter 'idols' (εἰδώλων) change to more worship terminology, 'idol sacrifices' (εἰδωλοθύτων). 'Strangled' in 15:20 is changed from singular to plural (a more inclusive term) in 15:29. Moreover, each item of the four in 15:20 has the Greek article, but none of the four has the article in 15:29. This omission may indicate that the Gentile Christians could not understand the ritual aspect of the four items. However, the debate had occurred for a long time, at least five times according to Bauckham, so even Gentile Christians may understand

³³ Reuben J. Swanson, ed., *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Variant Readings Arranged in Horizontal Lines against Codex Vaticanus, the Acts of the Apostles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998): 263.

³⁴ Swanson, *Greek Manuscripts*, 268.

³⁵ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (Fourth Revised Edition)* (2nd edn; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994): 382; Savelle, 'Prohibitions in Acts 15', 450-51.

³⁶ Savelle (Savelle, 'Prohibitions in Acts 15', 452) connects this term with 'eating food'.

³⁷ Instone-Brewer (David Instone-Brewer, 'Infanticide and the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15', *JETS* 52 [2009]: 304) suggests the possibility that τῶν εἰδώλων καὶ τῆς πορνείας καὶ τοῦ πνικτοῦ καὶ τοῦ αἵματος modifies τῶν ἀλισγημάτων.

some ritual aspect of the four. Nevertheless, the church omitted the Greek article from the four, which may imply a change of aspect from ritual to something different like worship or covenant.

The list in 21:25 seems to be the same as that in 15:29. However, all four items in 21:25 have the singular even though ‘idol sacrifices’ and ‘things strangled’ in 15:29 have the plural. Also, only one article τó is applied to all four or at least to the first three, which may be the reason for two items to become singular. Moreover, in respect of situation and function, this list is very different from that of 15:29. In 21:21 it is said that Paul teaches the Jews to forsake the law of Moses so as not to circumcise their children and not to keep the customs. Paul’s teaching to the Jews, not to the Gentiles, is at issue. The fourfold list in 21:25 is mentioned to emphasise the distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles. However, the list in the council letter in 15:29 was given to emphasise the *unity* between the Jewish and the Gentile Christians.

Therefore, it would be important to pay attention to the differences among the lists. First, James makes the list ritual-centred by using the term ‘pollutions’, which can be expanded into the three or four items to follow. Second, the council omits the term to remove a strong aspect of ritual. Additionally, by changing the order of ‘blood’ the council seems to stress another aspect. Using the plural form of ‘thing strangled’ also may generalise the item. Third, the last list stated by the Jerusalem elders in 21:25 features a neutral single article and is functioning as a law for the Gentile Christians to separate them from the Jewish Christians.

5. Characteristics of the Four Items in the Council Letter in Acts 15:29

The characteristics of the four items offered to the Gentile Christians in 15:29 have been debated. Some Western texts, first of all, may show that ritual and moral perspectives had been important even in the past. Some witnesses (D, I [VIII], etc.) omit ‘what is strangled’, and more (D, 323, 614, 945, 1739, 1891, a few manuscripts of the majority text, I [VIII], p [VIII], w [XIV/XV], etc.) add a negative form of the Golden Rule.³⁸ Savelle evaluates Western texts as ‘reinvented along ethical

³⁸ Cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 380.

lines'.³⁹ Barrett writes, 'Just as the circumstances that evoked it had both ritual and ethical elements, so the Old Uncial Decree had both ritual and ethical elements ... The Western editor(s) came down strongly on the ethical side.'⁴⁰ So, considering the text critical issues, Metzger asks if 'the three or four prohibitions [are] entirely ceremonial, or entirely ethical, or a combination of both kinds'.⁴¹

In addition to this textual criticism, some aspects of Second Temple Judaism make Bauckham raise the same question. On the basis of Klawans' article⁴² on the Second Temple Jewish understanding of the Gentiles, Bauckham claims, 'It is not matters of ritual purity that concern the group opposed to Peter, Barnabas and Paul, but the moral conversion of Gentiles.'⁴³ On the basis of not only the textual variants and the differences between James' and the council's lists but also of Bauckham's recent claim, a suspicion comes into my mind that the two lists might have been made from different perspectives. Therefore it is necessary to examine Bauckham's argument more closely, because he had not seen Klawans' thesis published in 2000.⁴⁴

According to Klawans' thesis, ritual and moral impurity can be distinguished as follows:⁴⁵

	Ritual Impurity	Moral Impurity
Source:	Bodily flows, corpses, etc.	Sins: idolatry, incest, murder
Effect:	Temporary, contagious impurity	Defilement of sinners, land, and Sanctuary
Resolution:	Bathing, waiting	Atonement or punishment, and ultimately, exile

On the one hand, Klawans makes clear his use of the terms:

³⁹ Savelle, 'Prohibitions in Acts 15', 450-51.

⁴⁰ C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, Vol. II: Introduction and Commentary on Acts XV-XXVIII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998): 736.

⁴¹ Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 379.

⁴² Jonathan Klawans, 'Notion of Gentile Impurity in Ancient Judaism', *AJS Review* 20 (1995): 285-312.

⁴³ Bauckham, 'James, Peter, and the Gentiles', 118.

⁴⁴ Bauckham, 'James, Peter, and the Gentiles', 91.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 27.

By using these terms I am not intending to state that ritual and morality are opposing or mutually exclusive concerns. I am simply trying to drive home the point that there are two kinds of impurity in ancient Israel, one of which is more associated with sin than the other.⁴⁶

Klawans' treatment of these themes in the New Testament does not deal with Acts 15.⁴⁷ Further, even though he uses Leviticus in defining both 'ritual impurity' and 'moral impurity', in his thesis Klawans mentions Leviticus 17–18 very little, that is to say the chapters Bauckham suggests as backgrounds to the four prohibitions.⁴⁸ What is more, Klawans admits that the dietary law has both 'ritual' and 'moral' aspects.⁴⁹ So it seems too facile to conclude that the four prohibitions are linked to moral iniquity.

On the other hand, Klawans' article has some evidence for the notion that some Jews thought of the Gentiles as ritually impure. The evidence comes from Josephus' works (*Ant.* 12:145; 14:285; *War* 1:229; 2:150) and from some rabbinic sources (*T. Zabim* 2:1).⁵⁰ Ritual impurity can become moral impurity by doing something, and moral impurity can be purified ritually as well as by getting punishment.⁵¹ On the basis of Acts 14:1 and 17:1-4, Klawans insists that 'Acts as a whole sees no inherent barriers to Jewish-Gentile interaction, even in synagogues'.⁵² However, we need to remember that Acts 17:1-4 occurred after the Jerusalem council and even Acts 14:1 after the third conference in AD 46 (Gal. 2:1-10). So Bauckham's stance on the Jewish understanding of the Gentiles as morally impure is not strong.

Moreover, Bauckham's claim seems to result from his supposition that James' list is the same as the council's list,⁵³ and that the four items are related to eating food. He pays attention to 'the profane food of profane people'.⁵⁴ However, the council's decision seems not the same as James'. Simply speaking, the council's list is closer to worship

⁴⁶ Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 22.

⁴⁷ See Klawans, 'Gentile Impurity', 136-57.

⁴⁸ Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 22-31.

⁴⁹ Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 31-32.

⁵⁰ Klawans, 'Gentile Impurity', 286, 298-300.

⁵¹ Klawans, 'Gentile Impurity', 289.

⁵² Klawans, 'Gentile Impurity', 301-302.

⁵³ Barrett, *Acts*, 736, says, 'It is not surprising that those who accepted the authority of this mixed Decree emphasized sometimes one [ritual] sometimes the other [ethical] aspect of it'. This mixture may result, in one sense, from the fact that all three lists are dealt with collectively.

⁵⁴ Bauckham, 'James, Peter, and the Gentiles', 103.

or covenant than to ritual. I present below five considerations in support of this claim.

First, the council (15:29) seems to change some ritual aspect embedded in James' remark (15:20) into some worship aspect which includes ritual aspect, from 'things polluted by idols' to sacrificing or worshipping other gods. To Proctor, all four are connected with 'a matter of idolatry', and so, 'Worship must be given to Israel's God alone. This is the point to be secured; the rest will, it seems, look after itself.'⁵⁵ He says, 'Nor will abstinence from black pudding be much help in healing these deep divisions; the main things that Jews have found offensive in Christianity are not dietary.'⁵⁶ Further, Park connects the first item ('idol sacrifices') with a covenantal law, saying 'the first component of the four restrictions, the things sacrificed to idols (εἰδωλόθυτος in Acts 15:29; 21:25; cf. εἴδωλον in Acts 15:20), is related absolutely to mandatory $\square\text{ר}\text{ח}$ because idolatry is the sin that should result in mandatory $\square\text{ר}\text{ח}$ '.⁵⁷ So the first item employed by the council has to do with worship.

Second, changing the order of the 'blood' may be related to covenant. Proctor suggests this blood should be 'a metonymy for violence, wounding or murder, the outcome of human conflict'.⁵⁸ However, according to Savelle,

understanding αἷμα in the sense of murder seems unlikely for at least two reasons. First, when αἷμα is used with the sense of murder, the context usually makes it clear that it is to be taken that way. ... Second, would something as obvious as prohibiting murder be included in what is clearly a highly selective list? This seems unlikely.⁵⁹

The Church is the new community based on the new covenant at the centre of which there is the blood of Jesus. They drink Jesus' blood at Holy Communion (Luke 22:20; Acts 2:46) and through it they worship (Heb. 9:14; 10:19). Paul stresses that the blood of Christ brought the Gentile Christians near to Israel, the covenants, and God (Eph. 2:12-13). So eating other bloods may be connected with breaking the new covenant. Interestingly, some usages of 'blood' in Luke-Acts refer to

⁵⁵ Proctor, 'Proselytes and Pressure Cookers', 478.

⁵⁶ Proctor, 'Proselytes and Pressure Cookers', 479.

⁵⁷ Hyung Dae Park, *Finding Herem?: A Study of Luke-Acts in the Light of Herem* (Library of New Testament Studies; London: T&T Clark, 2007): 174.

⁵⁸ Proctor, 'Proselytes and Pressure Cookers', 472.

⁵⁹ Savelle, 'Prohibitions in Acts 15', 455.

Jesus' blood (Luke 22:20, 44; Acts 5:28; 20:28). So the council might prohibit Gentile Christians from eating 'blood' out of consideration for Jesus' blood, just as it prohibits them from worshipping other gods except God the Father. The council may move the 'blood' from last to second place so as to lay greater emphasis on the mark of the new covenant. By and large, Jesus' blood as the covenantal sign is important since it is compared with circumcision, the sign of the old covenant strongly held by some Jews in the council.

Third, 'things strangled' is considered as 'the eating of animals that had not had their blood drained properly (Lev. 17:13-14; Deut. 12:16, 23)',⁶⁰ or 'a method of cooking',⁶¹ or 'choking sacrifices in pagan temples (a practice which may have occurred but was probably very rare) and smothering infants—a practice which most non-Jews regarded as a normal form of birth control'.⁶² If we follow Instone-Brewer's highly specialised study, these 'smothered' or 'strangled' things are not food.

Fourth, fornication is a strong term linked to idolatry. Savelle holds that '[i]n the Septuagint *πορνεία* is used about fifty times, usually as a metaphor for idolatry or unfaithfulness to God' and that '[t]he issue is further complicated by the fact that a number of pagan religions included immoral sexual activities as part of their worship'.⁶³ Moreover, fornication can be identified with idol-worship in Exodus 34:15-16.⁶⁴

Fifth, backgrounds to the four prohibitions may encourage us to see covenant and worship as the characteristics of the four components in the decree. If the 'Noachide commandments' proposed by Bockmuehl⁶⁵ form a background to the Jerusalem decree,⁶⁶ the four items may demonstrate a covenantal perspective. Taylor says, 'The reference implied in these seven precepts is not the particular Covenant with Abraham or its renewal at Sinai, or even Creation (which would be

⁶⁰ Savelle, 'Prohibitions in Acts 15', 456.

⁶¹ Proctor, 'Proselytes and Pressure Cookers', 473.

⁶² Instone-Brewer, 'Infanticide', 321.

⁶³ Savelle, 'Prohibitions in Acts 15', 454. So also Park, *Finding Herem*, 9, 174.

⁶⁴ Park, *Finding Herem*, 174.

⁶⁵ Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics* (Edinburgh: Clark, 2000).

⁶⁶ Pace Justin Taylor, 'The Jerusalem Decrees (Acts 15.20, 29 and 21.25) and the Incident at Antioch (Gal. 2.11-14)', *NTS* 46 (2001): 374-77; contra Proctor, 'Proselytes and Pressure Cookers', 476; Barrett, *Acts*, 733-35.

implied in a precept to observe the Sabbath), but Noah, that is to say, a very general covenant between God and humanity as a whole.⁶⁷ Alternatively, many scholars think of Leviticus 17–18 as the background of the decree.⁶⁸ Bauckham summarises the connection between the four restrictions and Leviticus 17–18 as follows: ‘(a) “things sacrificed to idols” are prohibited in Leviticus 17:8-9; (b) “blood” is prohibited in Leviticus 17:10, 12; (c) “things strangled” are prohibited in Leviticus 17:13; (d) “sexual immorality” refers to Leviticus 18:26 and covers all the prohibited forms of sexual practice in Leviticus 18:6-23.’⁶⁹ Leviticus 17–18 is a part of a bigger structure, that is, Leviticus 17–21, and its centre is Leviticus 19.⁷⁰ This chapter seems to be used elsewhere in the New Testament⁷¹ and includes both ritual and moral aspects, such as worship or covenant. Leviticus 17–21 is given to ‘all the congregation of the children of Israel’.⁷² In addition, Leviticus’ main context is worship, so all the cases, including suggested occasions (for example, eating blood, idolatry, sabbath, fornication), are mentioned in respect of worship. Each case regulates the time when the Israelites will lose the status of worshipper temporarily or permanently. So the suggested backgrounds to the four items help us to consider the four components’ characteristics as worship and covenant.⁷³

Hence, we can conclude that the four items in Acts 15:29 issue from the perspective of worship and covenant rather than of ritual. The four in James’ list, as we have seen, have a more ritual perspective. In considering Galatians 2:11-21, it is possible that James wants to make the Gentile Christians keep some ritual regulations of the Old Testament. However, the council seems to base their stance on

⁶⁷ Taylor, ‘Jerusalem Decrees’, 374.

⁶⁸ E.g. Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972): 133-52; Proctor, ‘Proselytes and Pressure Cookers’, 474-75.

⁶⁹ Bauckham, ‘James, Peter, and the Gentiles’, 119.

⁷⁰ Jin-Myung Kim, ‘An Exegetical Study for the Canonical Unfoldings of Leviticus 19’ (Th.D. dissertation, Seoul, Presbyterian College and Theological Seminary, 2007): 119 (in Korean)

⁷¹ Luke T. Johnson, ‘The Use of Leviticus 19 in the Letter of James’, *JBL* 101 (1982): 391-401.

⁷² Kim, ‘Canonical Unfoldings’, 122.

⁷³ My suggestion (Park, *Finding Herem*, 174) on the concept of *Herem* as a background to Luke 16:16-17 and to the four prohibitions in Acts 15:29 also supports this proposal.

covenant, acknowledging the *unity* of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

6. Ethical Principles Found in the Decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15

Up to this point, we have argued that (1) there had been a long history behind the council; (2) there is a flow of conversation in Acts 15:6-29 where two groups are involved; (3) there are significant differences among the three lists of the four prohibitions, and (4) James' list is more related to ritual but the council's list to worship and covenant.

On the basis of this understanding, we may now say something about ethics. First of all, we need to ask whether this decision demonstrates any general principle like 'the so-called Negative Golden Rule' expressed in some Western manuscripts (D, 323, 945, etc.) that is, 'they should not do to others what they do not like to have done to themselves'.⁷⁴ Probably not, because the Jewish Christians would still keep the law of Moses. They would circumcise their children eight days after birth and still would not eat ritually unclean foods. It is highly likely that even Peter had not eaten unclean foods at Cornelius' house. The circumcised believers in Jerusalem charged Peter, not with breaking the rules of food, but with 'eating with' uncircumcised men (11:2-3).

Then, can the unification of two groups be the very purpose Luke would like to present, as Savelle suggests?⁷⁵ This is possible, but something more than mere unification is indicated here. Perkins' remark is intriguing: 'Luke suggests that true peace and unity among peoples is not created by the order of the Roman empire but by a common hope for salvation which is open to all people.'⁷⁶ In my opinion, Luke seems to make an effort to describe common sense shared within the council members. They listen to others carefully and trust in the truthfulness of others' speech. They do not doubt their testimonies. Although the members had not experienced Peter's or

⁷⁴ Proctor, 'Proselytes and Pressure Cookers', 471-72.

⁷⁵ Savelle, 'Prohibitions in Acts 15', 467.

⁷⁶ PHEME PERKINS, *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988): 238.

Paul's and Barnabas' life,⁷⁷ they trusted each other. In addition, they are all God-centred. 'In testifying to these common experiences, Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James repeatedly pointed to the fact that this is God's work (vv. 3-4, 7-9, 12, 14, 17).'⁷⁸ Peter gives authority to God rather than to humans, because in contrast to Acts 10:1-16, in 11:5, 9, he twice uses 'from heaven' (ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ). He concludes 'who was I that I could hinder God?' (11:17).

Moreover, all the council members respect Holy Scripture and use the same hermeneutics to interpret the Scripture. Bauckham concludes, 'the prohibitions in the Apostolic Decree are based not simply on Leviticus 17-18, but on the exegetical link between Jeremiah 12:16; Zechariah 2:11/15 and Leviticus 17-18'.⁷⁹ All agree or at least do not disagree on this unspoken interpretation. This agreement is important to the Strong's, who think that the example of the Jerusalem council 'holds promise that the modern church can also resolve other such conflicts if "scriptural authority" is fully recognised'.⁸⁰

What is more, the council members have the attitude of concession to form a better solution even though each part has its own reason for its point of view, based on God's word and their experience. On the one hand, Peter has 'the message of the good news' (Acts 15:7) and knows from experience that God gives the Holy Spirit to the uncircumcised Gentiles (15:8). So he does not want to place any yoke on the neck of the Gentile disciples (15:10). In spite of the chief apostleship, he accepts James' four items after slightly changing their perspective in a more general direction. On the other hand, James, who is seen as the chief leader of the Jewish group insisting that the Gentile Christians should be circumcised and keep the customs, also has the Word of God on circumcision in the Old Testament and has lived at the time when circumcision is a socially crucial issue, but he admits of a covenantal side. Bauckham says, 'If Acts 15:14b alludes to these pentateuchal statements [Exod. 19:5; 23:22 (LXX); Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18-19] about the covenant people, then it substitutes λαὸν τῶ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ for λαὸν αὐτῶ περιούσιον, as an equivalent phrase

⁷⁷ The Strong's (Strong and Strong, 'Jerusalem Council', 138) think, 'The council was able to arrive at a harmonious conclusion because it focused on common experiences.' However, most of the members had not shared experiences with Peter, Paul, and Barnabas.

⁷⁸ Strong and Strong, 'Jerusalem Council', 137.

⁷⁹ Bauckham, 'James and the Gentiles', 177.

⁸⁰ Strong and Strong, 'Jerusalem Council', 132-33.

which points forward to the key phrase from Amos [9:11, 12] which appears in the quotation in 15:17.⁸¹ If Bauckham is right, James' quotation can be taken as an admission of Peter's side.⁸² In addition, James shows an attitude of concession by reducing the whole law to the fourfold prohibition, and by using both MT and LXX.⁸³

These shared attitudes raise an important ethical point, namely attitudes of trusting each other, respecting God and His Word, and answering with some conceded responses to the others. The flow of the conversation in Acts 15:4-29 surely proves the participants' attitudes. This council starts with the Jerusalem church's welcoming the Antioch church members (15:4a). Then Paul and Barnabas talk about what God has done without making any complaints regarding the debate which recently arose (15:4b). Some Pharisaic believers of the other group mention circumcision and the law of Moses, but not 'custom/practice' and 'salvation' in Acts 15:1 (15:5).⁸⁴ The council gathers to consider this matter and spends a long time, without going away in anger or pushing people into discarding their opinion or making political moves to defeat their opponents (15:6-7a). Then Peter speaks using *logos* rather than *ethos* or *pathos* (15:7b-11). The whole assembly steps back from the debate to think and listen (15:12a). Barnabas speaks of all the signs and wonders that God has done, probably more than Paul if it is meaningful for Barnabas' name to come before Paul's, again without mentioning any other things except God's work (15:12b). Then they become silent (15:13a). James does not demand the Gentile Christians' circumcision but only four requisites of Gentile residents among the Israelites (15:13b-21). Finally, the council makes an agreement that is located between the two positions, very similar to James' suggestion, but adjusted to a more covenantal perspective (15:22-29). This

⁸¹ Bauckham, 'James and the Gentiles', 171.

⁸² With regard to ἐφ' οὗς ἐπικέκληται τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐπ' αὐτούς in Acts 15:17, see Bauckham, 'James and the Gentiles', 170.

⁸³ Ádna, 'James' Position', 143, thinks that James considered both MT and the Vorlage of the LXX on account of the delegation from Antioch.

⁸⁴ Wilson (S. G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* [Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983]: 4) insists, 'It would appear that for Luke, on some occasion, the term ἔθος and νόμος are interchangeable and that he moves naturally from the one to the other in describing the same phenomenon'. However, the phrase of 'the customs of Moses' occurs only twice in Acts 6:14 and 15:1 and is employed by people who stand against the church (6:14) or against the will of God towards the Gentiles (15:1).

conference succeeded in establishing a unity, and resulted in encouragement and rejoicing (15:31).⁸⁵

I suggest, therefore, that an ‘attitude of concession for encouragement and unity to form a better solution’ is a characteristic of the Jerusalem council, along with the participants’ other attitudes. This is not ‘the attitude essential to achieving more global understandings’ as the Strong’s suggest.⁸⁶ The Jerusalem council did not aim at the globalisation of the church but pursued the will of God by taking their stance only on what God had said in the Bible and had done in their lives.

This ‘attitude of concession’ is demonstrated elsewhere in Acts. Before the Jerusalem council, this attitude had been used to solve some conflicts. In 6:1-6 the apostles revealed this attitude to find a solution to the problem which arose between two groups within one church. In 9:10-19a Ananias in the Damascus church exhibited this attitude when he went to Paul.

Further, this attitude helps to explain the continued context, since Acts 15 concludes with the division between Barnabas and Paul (15:36-39) and goes to the second journey where going astray (16:6-8) and hesitating to talk about Jesus (18:5; cf. 1 Thess. 3:1-8) are included. The division between Barnabas and Paul may be considered as a conflict between ‘encouragement’ and ‘conviction’. Barnabas, literally meaning ‘son of encouragement’ (4:36), lives a life of ‘encouragement’, shown by his giving money to the church (4:37), his defence of Paul (9:27), and his ministry for the Gentiles (11:22). Paul is a man of strong ‘conviction’.⁸⁷ He was able to approve even of Stephen’s death (8:1). He did not stop breathing ‘threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord’ (9:1). After his conversion, he continues to show this behaviour in his mission (9:20; 14:20-21). Both ‘encouragement’ and ‘conviction’ are good virtues, but without the attitude of concession both may lose their strength.

Later in the story we see a change in the man of conviction, especially in 21:26. ‘Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having purified himself, he entered the temple with them, making public the completion of the days of purification when the sacrifice would be

⁸⁵ Bauckham, ‘James and the Gentiles’, 464-67, 471-75.

⁸⁶ Strong and Strong, ‘Jerusalem Council’, 134.

⁸⁷ In the NRSV, ‘conviction’ appears only in Rom. 14:22; 1 Thess. 1:5 and Heb. 11:1.

made for each of them.’ This man, who could not accept Mark because of deserting colleagues, now accepts even those who are ‘zealous for the law’ (21:20), in order to fulfil the mission for the offering of the Gentiles (24:17; Rom. 15:16). For Luke, is this change positive or negative? When we read the rest of Acts, especially the last verse (Acts 28:31), Luke seems to think of Paul’s change as positive. In Ephesians 2:14, on the basis of that offering of the Gentiles, Paul seems to proclaim boldly that the dividing wall between the Jews and the Gentiles has been broken down.

7. Application to the Present Situation

In terms of the worship and covenant perspective, the four items can be applied to the church, regardless of ages. Idol worship or pagan worship should be forbidden at any time. However, it would not be proper, as Proctor says,⁸⁸ to apply the four items directly to the modern church. If missionaries who are not Jewish apply these four restrictions directly to any nations in Africa, North and South America, Asia, or Europe, the situation would be quite different from the context in Acts 15. First, contemporary missionaries neither keep the food laws nor are circumcised, so the restrictions are not concessions to them. Second, most would not be encouraged by hearing these kinds of prohibitions, not only because they normally do not have synagogues nearby so they do not have an opportunity to hear the law of Moses (cf. 15:21), but also because there will be no concession made by teachers or missionaries. Third, it would promote not unity but examination, leading to separation even within the same group. Nevertheless, the Strongs’ application is quite interesting; ‘Missionaries among Jews and Muslims would willingly embrace a kosher or *halal* diet rather than forcing converts to eat pork as a sign of conversion, and those among Jains would become vegetarians.’⁸⁹ Time has passed and the situation is reversed.

An emphasis on the shared attitude rather than on the four items can be useful to the current church. Disciples should have the attitudes of trusting each other, respecting God and his word, and answering with some conceded responses to others. There are many situations in which

⁸⁸ See Proctor, ‘Proselytes and Pressure Cookers’, 477-78.

⁸⁹ Strong and Strong, ‘Jerusalem Council’, 134.

an attitude of concession for encouragement and unity is required. The Strongs say,

How different this is from our contemporary penchant for abandoning the fray and going our own ways. Unfortunately, this attitude has even found its way into the schools and seminaries that prepare future leaders. There deep divisions exist between the schools of theology and the schools of mission.⁹⁰

It is quite interesting too that the Strongs mention ‘Koreans’ in their article: ‘some utilizing the allegorical method’; ‘Koreans, who prefer the hierarchical and authoritarian leadership styles of Confucianism’; ‘[o]ne early believer in the animistic Korean context’.⁹¹ They may be right, but the new generation in Korea has different preferences. However, the Strongs’ conclusion is quite acceptable, namely, ‘Mutual appreciation for one another’s values, coupled with a willingness to be flexible as to which style is adopted, would create appreciation and unity within the global missions community.’⁹²

When we apply the ‘attitude of concession for encouragement and unity’ in Acts 15 to our situation, we need to remember that there were not divisions within the groups in the Jerusalem council in terms of hermeneutics, nor of the authority of Scripture. So ‘the recent dispute over homosexuality within the worldwide Anglican Communion’⁹³ would *not* be a case to which the attitude can be directly applied, since it is said that ‘[f]rom a hermeneutical perspective, the conservative wing of the church follows a hermeneutic based on the finality of Scripture, whereas the liberal wing begins with the ideals of love, acceptance, and compassion and reaches different conclusions’.⁹⁴

In conclusion, we suggest that taking an ‘attitude of concession for encouragement and unity to form a better solution’, rather than fighting for one’s own opinion, is much more likely to lead to a consensus, if the members of a group have the same confession of faith in God the Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. With this attitude, potential splits that can occur so easily in Christian organisations could be transformed into occasions of unity, encouragement and rejoicing. €

⁹⁰ Strong and Strong, ‘Jerusalem Council’, 138.

⁹¹ Strong and Strong, ‘Jerusalem Council’, 133, 134, 136.

⁹² Strong and Strong, ‘Jerusalem Council’, 134.

⁹³ Strong and Strong, ‘Jerusalem Council’, 133.

⁹⁴ Strong and Strong, ‘Jerusalem Council’, 133-34.