

Church Unity, Testimony, and the Jerusalem Council

A Review and Analysis of Acts 15 Prepared for the Theology of Ordination Study Committee
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Overview

It is appropriate to study the experiences and organization of the early church, since “the organization of the church at Jerusalem was to serve as a model for the organization of churches in every other place where messengers of truth should win converts to the gospel” (AA 91). And there is much to learn from the early church: “Great truths that have lain unheeded and unseen since the day of Pentecost, are to shine from God’s word in their native purity” (RH 9/17/1897).

In the book of Acts, God has preserved important records¹ of how the church has faced conflict with directions for how the church can have successful conflict resolution (Acts 15:25). And we have been urged to “study ... the fifteenth chapter of Acts” (LLM 464). Important additional background information provided in Galatians 2 is also utilized in this review.²

Early Believers United

The book of Acts opens with the church in “one accord” (Acts 1:14).³ This was a prerequisite to its subsequent great success.

This united early church was not a male-only church. Both men and women were active and essential to fulfill its mission, and about 120 men and women were assembled in the upper room (Acts 1:14,15).

God designated a portion of His work to men, and with prophetic guidance (Acts 1:16, 20, 21) a man was selected to take Judas’ place from two similarly qualified men (Acts 1:24-26). This did not diminish the importance of women, since following the selection of this leader, there was an unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit distributing gifts⁴ to both men and women, which

¹ Frequent review of this sacred history should be done since “We have nothing to fear for the future, *except as we shall forget* the way the Lord has led us, and his teaching in our past history” (GCDB 1/29/1893, Art. C.5).

² Speaking of Galatians 2, Ellen White states that Paul “describes the visit which he made to Jerusalem to secure a settlement of the very questions which are now agitating the churches of Galatia, as to whether the Gentiles should submit to circumcision and keep the ceremonial law” (LP 192).

³ The disciples’ unity was a direct answer to Jesus tear-stained and earnest prayer to His Father for unity. John 17:20, 21.

⁴ For example, contrary to the common portrayal by charismatics and pentecostals that *all* of the group received the gift of tongues, it appears that only the Apostles received this gift. “Behold, are not *all these which speak Galilaeans?*” (Acts 2:7). “This diversity of languages would have been a great hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel; God therefore in a miraculous manner supplied *the deficiency of the apostles*. The Holy Spirit did *for them* that which they could not have accomplished for themselves in a lifetime” (AA 39-40).

Peter linked to the prophecy of Joel 2 (Acts 2:14). The next few chapters of Acts recount how the church grew and prospered as unordained young and old men and women, with their varying spiritual gifts, fulfilled their appointed tasks “under the wise leadership of the Apostles” (AA 88).

Unity Restored by Ordination

The story of the first threat to church unity is found in Acts 6, which gives the account of an inadvertent neglect of needy converted Gentile⁵ widow women. The narrative highlights the importance of ordination in maintaining church unity,⁶ for the problem did not resolve until the church, “led by the Holy Spirit” (AA 89), selected and ordained⁷ men of good reputation, spirit-filled, and wise (Acts 6:3). As these men took their leadership duties to better organize “*all* the working forces of the church” (AA 89),⁸ both men and women, the church emerged stronger (Acts 6:7).

Satan, defeated in his internal attack on the church, was reduced to external force.⁹ The “head deacon”¹⁰ Stephen, was martyred (Acts 7:59,60). Though God appointed men to head the work (Acts 1:21,22; 6:3), this in no way diminished the importance and the influence of the spirit-filled women filling their God-appointed roles and in the severe persecution that followed, both men and women were arrested, imprisoned, and killed (Acts 8:3; 26:10, 11). But this violent persecution (Acts 8:1) served to scatter the believers into regions outside Israel.

Planting the Church in Antioch

“Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). They traveled “as far as ... Antioch” Syria (Acts 11:19), a little over 300 miles north of Jerusalem.¹¹ This became a center for missionary outreach.¹²

Saul Brought to Antioch

⁵ Called “Grecians” in KJV, “Hellenists” in NKJV (Acts 6:1).

⁶ “‘The church must flee to God's Word and become established upon gospel order, which has been overlooked and neglected.’ This is indispensably necessary in order to bring the church into the unity of the faith” (EW 100).

⁷ Speaking of the seven deacons Ellen White says emphatically, “These brethren had been ordained” (AA 90).

⁸ Throughout this paper any italicized words in quotes from the Bible or Spirit of Prophecy are added for emphasis.
⁹ “We have far more to fear from within than from without. The hindrances to strength and success are far greater from the church itself than from the world.” RH 3/22/1887.

¹⁰ “Stephen was chosen first; he was a Jew by birth and religion, but spoke the Greek language, and was conversant with the customs and manners of the Greeks. He was therefore considered the most proper person to stand at the head and have supervision of the disbursement of the funds appropriated to the widows, orphans, and the worthy poor. This selection met the minds of all, and the dissatisfaction and murmuring were quieted” (7Red 28).

¹¹ Accordance Bible Software Map.

¹² Antioch *First*s: 1. Believers called Christians (Acts 11:26). 2. Organized efforts to reach the Gentiles (Acts 11:19-21). 3. Sent out official Christian missionaries (Acts 13:1-4).

Because of the evangelistic success in this metropolis, the apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to superintend the expanding work (Acts 11:22). With continued rapid church growth (Acts 11:24), Barnabas called Saul from Tarsus to assist him (Acts 11:25). In an amazing turnabout, the church which had been strengthened because of Saul's persecution, now grows because of his ministry! For a year the church flourished¹³ through the efforts of this dynamic duo and Antioch became an important financial supporter of the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:26-30).

The Holy Spirit had fallen on these two men and they had received their spiritual gifts. Their ministry was fruitful. "God ... abundantly blessed the labors of Paul and Barnabas during the year they remained with the believers in Antioch. But neither of them had as yet been formally ordained to the gospel ministry" (AA 160).

This shows conclusively that ordination to the gospel ministry is not necessary to have a fruitful and effective ministry.¹⁴ It further shows that spiritual gifts are not a substitute for ordination. Though Paul and Barnabas were both prophets (Acts 8:1), the gift of prophecy did not supersede their ordination making it either unnecessary or automatic.

Without ordination,¹⁵ Paul and Barnabas did not have church authorization to baptize new members or organize new congregations.¹⁶ This presented no difficulties during their work in Antioch, which had already been properly organized with ample access to ordained personnel,¹⁷ but would

¹³ "The two disciples labored together in that city for a year, teaching the people, and adding to the numbers of the church of Christ (3SP 345).

¹⁴ "The ordained ministers alone are not equal to the task of warning the great cities. God is calling not only upon ministers, but also upon physicians, nurses, colporteurs, Bible workers, and other consecrated laymen of varied talent who have a knowledge of the word of God and who know the power of His grace" (AA 158). God "sends forth to His work many who have not been dedicated by the laying on of hands" (YRP 171). "Not upon the ordained minister only rests the responsibility of going forth to fulfill this commission. Everyone who has received Christ is called to work for the salvation of his fellow men" (AA 110). "The standard of truth may be raised by humble men and women; and the youth, and even children, may be a blessing to others, by revealing what the truth has done for them. God will use the most feeble instruments if they are wholly submitted to Him.... Everyone may have an understanding of the truth, and exert an influence for good. Then go to work, my brethren and sisters. Gain an experience by working for others. You may make mistakes; but this is not more than the most intelligent, and those in positions of trust, have done again and again. You will not always meet with success; but you can never know the result of humble, disinterested effort to help those who are in darkness. Through the agency of the Holy Spirit, you may win souls from error to truth, and in so doing your own souls will be filled with the love of God" (YRP 173).

¹⁵ As used in this paper, *ordination* is the ceremony of the church to formally set aside biblically qualified men "to the gospel ministry by prayer and the laying on of hands" (LP 42).

¹⁶ "... these apostles were solemnly dedicated to God by fasting and prayer and the laying on of hands. Thus they were authorized by the church, not only to teach the truth, but to perform the rite of baptism and to organize churches, being invested with full ecclesiastical authority" (AA 160). See also LP 42.

¹⁷ For example, Peter visited Antioch on at least one occasion (Gal 2:11), and official church representatives were sent to this important church (Acts 15:24; Gal 2:12; Acts 11:27-30).

have posed a significant impediment to aggressive evangelistic work when they pioneered unentered territory.¹⁸

The distinction between unordained and ordained workers is not trivial, for the Holy Spirit, during a time of heart searching, fasting, and prayer, sent the Antioch church leadership the command to ordain Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13:2,3).¹⁹ Just as God selected David from among his brothers, not his brothers and sisters²⁰ (1Sam 16:5-13), and God selected Matthias from among qualified men²¹ (Acts 1:21,22), God selected Paul and Barnabas for ordination from a group of five similarly qualified men (Acts 13:1), not similarly qualified men and women.

The three prophets (and teachers) who were not selected—as well as the rest of the men and women in the Antioch church who also were not selected—were not being discriminated against or snubbed.²² Ordination is not our purpose for living. It is not necessary for salvation. God promises salvation, not ordination, to all who believe (Acts 13:39; John 3:16). Ordination is not God's plan for all; it is His plan for some. True Christianity is marked by contentment with God's

¹⁸ “The apostles who had been appointed to lead out in this work would be exposed to suspicion, prejudice, and jealousy.... God foresaw the difficulties that His servants would be called to meet, and ... He instructed the church by revelation to set them apart publicly to the work of the ministry” (AA 161).

¹⁹ “The circumstances connected with the separation of Paul and Barnabas by the Holy Spirit to a definite line of service show clearly that the Lord works through appointed agencies in His organized church. Years before, when the divine purpose concerning Paul was first revealed to him by the Saviour Himself, Paul was immediately afterward brought into contact with members of the newly organized church at Damascus. Furthermore, the church at that place was not long left in darkness as to the personal experience of the converted Pharisee. And now, when the divine commission given at that time was to be more fully carried out, the Holy Spirit, again bearing witness concerning Paul as a chosen vessel to bear the gospel to the Gentiles, laid upon the church the work of ordaining him and his fellow laborer. As the leaders of the church in Antioch “ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate Me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them” (AA 162).

²⁰ “David the seventh: Whose sisters were Zeruah, and Abigail” 1Chron 2:15,16.

²¹ “Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us” (Acts 1:21),

²² This happens in heaven. When Jesus offered His baptismal prayer, every angel would have loved to answer it. But they were not selected. “Never before have the angels listened to such a prayer. They are eager to bear to their loved Commander a message of assurance and comfort. But no; the Father Himself will answer the petition of His Son” (DA 112). King David desired to build the temple in Jerusalem, but his offer to be the builder was denied and Solomon was selected to build temple (2 Sam 7:12,13).

plan for our lives.²³ A key evidence of Satan's work is discontentment and dissatisfaction with our circumstances.²⁴

Paul and Barnabas Ordained

In obedience to the divine command, Paul and Barnabas were ordained before leaving Antioch as missionaries (Acts 13:2, 3).²⁵ Ordination is not something that is simply a local action independent of the world church. "*The brethren in Jerusalem and in Antioch were made thoroughly acquainted with all the particulars of this divine appointment*" (LP 43). This shows the linkage between heaven, the local church, and the world church. It was essential that the newly established churches with their baptized members were recognized, not alone by the church in Antioch, but by the church worldwide. Ordination is never simply a regional issue.²⁶

Some have challenged the use of the term ordination. But it is the term which Ellen White, under inspiration, selected consistently and repeatedly when describing the appointment ceremony of Paul and Barnabas in *Acts of the Apostles*.²⁷ She summarized it this way: "'Sent forth by the Holy Ghost,' Paul and Barnabas, *after their ordination* by the brethren in Antioch, 'departed into Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus'" (AA 166). From eternity God knew of the con-

²³ "Godliness with contentment is great gain." (1Tim 6:6). "Be content." (Heb 13:5).

²⁴ "And do not be discontented, as some of them were, and they were destroyed by the Destroyer" (1Cor 10:10, Wey).

"In great mercy, according to His divine character, God bore long with Lucifer. The spirit of discontent and disaffection had never before been known in heaven. It was a new element, strange, mysterious, unaccountable" (PP 39).

"Lucifer went forth to diffuse the spirit of discontent among the angels" (GC 495). "By arousing the same discontent in the angels under his command, he caused their fall" (4SG 345). "By giving expression to ... discontent, they yield themselves as instruments to Satan" (COL 340).

"You are continually finding fault with circumstances, which is nothing less than finding fault with providences" (5T 571).

²⁵ The ordination of Paul and Barnabas was not a unique process but representative of the way leaders were selected for ordination. The Old Testament provides standards for leadership and "the apostles held to the high standards of leadership outlined in the Old Testament Scriptures" (AA 95). The early church "chose men who had given good evidence that they were capable of ruling well their own house and preserving order in their own families, and who could enlighten those who were in darkness. Inquiry was made of God concerning these, and then, according to the mind of the church and the Holy Ghost, they were set apart by the laying on of hands. Having received their commission from God and having the approbation of the church, they went forth baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and administering the ordinances of the Lord's house" (EW 100).

²⁶ Ellen White comments extensively in *The Acts of the Apostles*, on this ordination, see pp. 161-164. The section concludes with the following: "The Lord in His wisdom has arranged that by means of the close relationship that should be maintained by all believers, Christian shall be united to Christian and church to church. Thus the human instrumentality will be enabled to co-operate with the divine. Every agency will be subordinate to the Holy Spirit, and all the believers will be united in an organized and well-directed effort to give to the world the glad tidings of the grace of God.

"Paul regarded the occasion of his formal ordination as marking the beginning of a new and important epoch in his lifework. It was from this time that he afterward dated the beginning of his apostleship in the Christian church." (AA 164).

²⁷ Within five pages discussing this event the term ordination is used six times (AA 161-166).

trovsky that would erupt over ordination and even over the term ordination. Those who are neither ignorant of what is written nor “wise above what is written” (1SM 16) are protected from end-time confusion.

With the official sanction of the church,²⁸ they led an evangelistic team²⁹ through what is now southeastern Turkey. Though facing great obstacles, they obtained great victories and baptized numerous converts. They organized churches composed entirely of these new converts (Acts 13-14).³⁰ “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed” (Acts 14:23, KJV).³¹

Concluding their mission in Attalia, “they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed” (Acts 14:26).

Paul and Barnabas took a furlough, returning to their home base. What a testimony they had of miracles and wonders that God had performed. “Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). The reports of God’s blessings in heathen territory galvanized the church into an even greater effort to win Gentiles to Jesus.³² This testimony was so important that God arranged for it to be given again and again (Acts 15:3,4,12). Yet, amazing as their experience had been, their greatest obstacle and greatest victory was still ahead.³³

²⁸ “They were now authorized by the church, not only to teach the truth, but to baptize, and to organize churches, being invested with full ecclesiastical authority” (LP 42). “Both Paul and Barnabas had already received their commission from God Himself, and the ceremony of the laying on of hands added no new grace or virtual qualification. It was an acknowledged form of designation to an appointed office and a recognition of one’s authority in that office. By it the seal of the church was set upon the work of God” (AA 161).

²⁹ Termed a “company” (AA 169).

³⁰ “Paul did not bind himself nor his converts to the ceremonies and customs of the Jews, with their varied forms, types, and sacrifices; for he recognized that the perfect and final offering had been made in the death of the Son of God. The age of clearer light and knowledge had now come” (LP 105).

³¹ This appears to have been by vote. Young’s Literal Translation translates it, “Having appointed to them by vote elders in every assembly, having prayed with fastings, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23, YLT). Tyndale translated it, “When they had ordered them elders by election in every congregation after they had prayde and fasted they comended them to God on whom they beleved.” Weymouth translated the passage, “In every Church, after prayer and fasting, they selected Elders by show of hands, and commended them to the Lord on whom their faith rested.” Moses gives important insight into how the leaders of the Old Testament were chosen. He did not arbitrarily select the leaders, he instructed the tribes “Choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes, and I will make them heads over you” (Deut 1:13).

³² “Paul and Barnabas soon after returned to Antioch in Syria, where they again labored for some time; and many Gentiles there embraced the doctrine of Christ” (LP 63).

³³ “The battle raged. Victory alternated from side to side. Now the soldiers of the cross gave way, “as when a standardbearer fainteth.” Isaiah 10:18. But their apparent retreat was but to gain a more advantageous position. Shouts of joy were heard. A song of praise to God went up, and angel voices united in the song, as Christ’s soldiers planted His banner on the walls of fortresses till then held by the enemy” (8T 41).

While God was using Paul's testimony to advance the gospel cause in Antioch, Satan was inspiring his agents to carry a far different testimony to Jerusalem. Jews who had rejected and opposed Paul's gospel message traveled to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. In Jerusalem they gave their testimony. They told of synagogues being split and homes divided by Paul. In the most inflammatory manner they told of how Paul was causing Jews to cast aside long-established Jewish traditions and customs. They blamed Paul for stirring up dissension among the Jews throughout the Diaspora. These testimonies stirred up the anger of the Jews against believers in Jerusalem. As a Jew Saul had caused persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem; but now as a Christian Paul appeared to be the cause of renewed persecution of Christians in Jerusalem. As a result, prejudice against Paul developed even among the Christians.

In an ironic twist, Saul first went out from Judea to oppose Christians, now Christians from Judea went out to oppose Paul.

Conflict in Antioch—*Agitating a New Doctrine*

Luke captures the essence of the conflict in the first verse of Acts 15. "Certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses,³⁴ you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1).³⁵ The dissension created was so serious it threatened "the prosperity, if not the very existence, of the Christian church" (AA 192).

The introduction of this false teaching³⁶ made of none effect the life and sacrifice of Christ. It did away with the prophecy of Daniel 9:27—that Christ, the Prince of the covenant, would cause the sanctuary sacrifice and offerings to cease. It attempted to mend and restore the veil of the temple that a heavenly angel had ripped apart at Christ's death.

³⁴ Jesus pointed out that more precisely it was not given by Moses, but the patriarchs before Moses (John 7:22).

³⁵There is nothing in the Old Testament that teaches "salvation by circumcision." This should have been obvious to the Jews since half of them, the women, were uncircumcised. Abraham, the father of the Jews, was not saved by his circumcision. *Before* his circumcision "he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness (Gen 15:6. This passage is quoted by both Paul and James (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23).

Likewise, the Israelites were not saved by their circumcision since Israelite children born during the wilderness wandering were not circumcised (Josh 5:5), yet these uncircumcised children were preserved through the dangers of the wilderness while their circumcised parents died. These uncircumcised children entered Canaan before being circumcised (Josh 5:1-8), while their circumcised parents never entered the promised land.

Circumcision did not save the Gentiles. Simeon and Levi required the Shechemites to be circumcised. Instead of saving these Gentiles, circumcision was the means of their destruction (Gen 34:14-29). Neither did it save the Gentile Philistines that David killed and "circumcised" (1Sam 18:25-27) for the hand of Michael, King Saul's daughter. David's kingdom, symbolic for Christ's kingdom, ultimately included both Jew and Gentile, and the Gentile's were not required to be circumcised in order to be subjects in David's kingdom (1Chr 18:13).

³⁶ Inspiration refers to this teaching as a "false doctrine" (AA 189).

Paul was well familiar with this teaching, for as a Pharisee he had once taught it himself. During the trial of Stephen he had supported the accusation of false witnesses who stated that Stephen taught that “Jesus of Nazareth will ... change the customs which Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6:14).

As a Jew Saul had made this accusation against Christians—now fellow Christians are making this accusation against him. After his conversion Paul recognized that in Jesus’ life type had met antitype, ending the purpose of the ceremonial rituals given by Moses at God’s command.

Careful students of the Word recognized this truth quickly during that unforgettable Passover weekend on which Christ was crucified. “From the crucifixion to the resurrection many sleepless eyes were constantly searching the prophecies, some to learn the full meaning of the feast they were then celebrating Many who at that time united in the service never again took part in the paschal rites” (DA 775). They understood it—the ritual service had no further value. They were now Christians. The deliverance from bondage in Egypt had been superseded by deliverance from the bondage of sin. Type had met antitype. The communion service replaced the Passover service. In the sacrificial service the blood of animals had temporarily represented the blood of Christ, but the one sacrifice on the cross replaced the daily sacrifice on the altar of burnt offering.

Just as a blueprint points to the finished building, so the ceremonial service pointed forward to the finished product, but was not the product itself. After the building is complete, the blueprint is only useful to understand the building. “The law of ceremonies ... was made null and void by the crucifixion of Christ” (LP 68).

Although many never again took part in the Passover, others continued to be bound by Jewish traditions and customs (Acts 21:21). A few years after Pentecost, but years before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:7), “Peter spoke with Cornelius and those assembled in his house, concerning the custom of the Jews; that it was considered unlawful for them to mingle socially with Gentiles, and involved ceremonial defilement. It was not prohibited by the law of God, but the tradition of men had made it a binding custom” (7Red 62). At that time Peter set aside his own prejudices, preached to these Gentiles, ate with them, and when the Holy Spirit fell on them with miracles and wonders, he “remembered the word of the Lord” (Acts 11:16). Guided by the testimony of “the word of the Lord,” not the testimony of miracles and wonders, Peter baptized these Gentiles without requiring their circumcision.

The pro-circumcision teaching was a new adaptation of an old heresy,³⁷ appealing to the cultural prejudices of long-held traditions of the Jews. It attempted to inject a fundamental change into Christianity not authorized by Jesus. By contrast, the Christian teaching of Peter and Paul was the continuation, renewal, and flowering of the teaching of patriarch and prophet.³⁸

Chief Characteristics of the Pro-Circumcision Party

Since “what is to be has already been” (Eccl 3:15), for our own protection we should learn to recognize the characteristics of the pro-circumcision party for they are shared by false teachers in every generation.³⁹

Furthermore, through the centuries those faithfully holding to biblical principles, such as the Sabbath, have been unflatteringly compared to the pro-circumcision party. This caricature is still used today.⁴⁰ To determine if this categorization is true, the characteristics of the pro-circumcision party should be closely examined.

- *Sincere* (LP 121)⁴¹

They were sincere. Inspiration tells us “They sincerely thought ...” (LP 121)⁴⁰

- *Moderate and Progressive* (LP 121)⁴⁰

They considered their compromising approach to be *moderate and progressive*. They were dissatisfied with either of the two “extreme” positions. The position of the Jews was that only Jews could be saved. The position of the Christians was that Gentiles could be saved without observing the ceremonial laws of Moses. By proposing that Gentiles could be saved by being circumcised and adopting the ceremonial laws, they believed they were advocating a “medium ground between Jew and Christian” (LP 121).

³⁷ “That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9).

³⁸ “The gospel was but the development of the Hebrew faith” (LP 104).

³⁹ Lucifer in heaven, Korah in the wilderness, Absalom during David’s reign, Judas in Christ day, all manifested these same identifying qualities. Though Paul had not yet become a target, each of these prior false teachers thought their ideas were superior to the leader God had appointed.

⁴⁰ Those who hold to the Sabbath are likened to the pro-circumcision party (for example see S. Michael Houdman, <http://www.gotquestions.org/Jerusalem-Council.html>). Those who hold to the biblical qualification of an elder being “husband of one wife” have been similarly designated (for example see Dwight Nelson, “My Personal Testimony,” January 2014 TOSC, p. 12).

⁴¹ “They sincerely thought that in taking this medium ground between Jew and Christian, they would succeed in removing the odium which attached to Christianity, and would gather in large numbers of the Jews” (LP 121).

They believed their accommodating position would build bridges that would overcome Jewish prejudice. They believed their approach “would succeed in removing the odium which attached to Christianity” (LP 121). But their bridge brought Judaism to Christianity, not Christianity to Judaism. It was the fast-track to Pharisaical tradition. Their new doctrine was promoting a superficial and selective outward compliance to God’s law *in place of* an unconditional surrender to God’s will.

Their teaching was not only wrong in what it affirmed, but also in what it failed to affirm. Like fast food, it not only contained that which is objectionable, it lacked that which was essential. Their message was unbalanced, incomplete, lacking necessary gospel vitamins, minerals, amino-acids, and fiber. The Christian message requires us to declare the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), not just the politically acceptable counsel of God. The pro-circumcision party’s testimony was false, neglecting clarifying truth. Compromise with error always means the surrender of truth.

- *Evangelistic Zeal* (LP 121; Acts 21:20)

The pro-circumcision party promoted their approach as an important new evangelistic aid. They felt their moderate view “... would gather in large numbers of the Jews” (LP 121). How true is Solomon’s twice-repeated warning, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Prov 14:12, 16:25). In place of being the new right answer, it was just another wrong answer. Instead of strengthening the cause of truth, it strengthened the cause of evil by dividing the believers.

It is a law of the mind that the rejection of truth imparts a religious zeal that borders on the fanatical. “Those who will not themselves accept the truth are most zealous that others shall not receive it” (LP 86). Evangelists and pastors have the opportunity to observe how the rejection of truth brings an energetic zeal in opposing truth and promoting error. Those with false ideas can’t help but push them. Eve became zealous in pushing the forbidden fruit on Adam (Gen 3:6). Cults are very zealous in their proselytizing (Matt 23:15).

The zeal manifested by these false teachers will be manifested by false teachers in last-day deceptions within the church. The warning is clear and unambiguous. “In these last days, false teachers will arise and become actively zealous.... False theories will be mingled with every phase of experience, and advocated with satanic earnestness.... In the very midst of us will arise

⁴² See 1 Tim 4:1.

false teachers, giving heed to seducing spirits whose doctrines are of satanic origin”⁴² (YRP 125).

- *Exceed and Misuse Their Church Authority* (Acts 15:24)

Though sent to Antioch on official church business, they misused their church position⁴³ to promote their private beliefs. By exceeding their authority they revealed themselves to be unrestrained by God-appointed church-delegated authority.⁴⁴

- *Promote a Party Spirit and Divisions* (Acts 15:5; Phil 3:2).

They were “of the sect of the Pharisees who believed” (Acts 15:5). Sometimes they are referred to as those “of the circumcision” (Acts 11:2), or “of the concision” (Phil 3:2, KJV).

- *Divided and Unsettled Members* (Acts 15:24)

Fruit is a reliable way to test a message (Mt 7:20). Paul’s pro-Christian message strengthened the churches (Acts 15:41). The pro-circumcision party divided and weakened the churches (Acts 15:24).

The pro-circumcision movement was a repeat of Lucifer’s rebellion in heaven. Though professing complete loyalty to God, he rejected God’s appointed Messenger and order (PP 37-38). Lucifer professed to be promoting the harmony of heaven and accused the loyal of being the cause of the divisions in heaven. And like Lucifer’s rebellion, division marked its progress (PP 38). It is little wonder that Paul warned the Philippians, “Beware of the false circumcision” (Phil 3:2, NASB) classing them with evil workers.

- *Willfully Teaching Resistance to Authority* (Titus 1:10)

They exhibited a willful, stubborn, and independent spirit.⁴⁵ They were contradictory (Titus 1:9,10); insisting on their own way. With apparent humility (Col 2:23) and conscientiousness,

⁴³ The leaders in Jerusalem acknowledged “some who went out from us have troubled you with words ... to whom we gave no such commandment” (Acts 15:24).

⁴⁴ At the Utrecht 1995 General Conference the Seventh-day Adventist church soundly denied a requested NAD motion to grant divisions the authority to ordain individuals without regard to gender. Thus a church official promoting regional ordination without regard to gender is acting beyond church authorization.

⁴⁵ God has not made any person independent of authority. Even “the prophets are subject to the prophets” (1Cor 14:32, 33).

they undermined divinely appointed church structure and lawful authority by precept and practice: “For there are many insubordinate⁴⁶ ... especially those of the circumcision” (Titus 1:10).

Inspiration warns against those today who “take a course of *their own choosing*. ... instead of leading persons to become consecrated to God and to listen to the voice of the church, they teach them to be independent and not to mind the opinions and judgment of others ... A poisonous atmosphere is inhaled from these unconsecrated ones. The blood of souls is in the garments of such, and Christ will say to them in the day of final settlement: ‘Depart from Me, all ye workers of iniquity.’ Astonished they will be; but their professedly Christian lives were a deception, a fraud” (4T 513).

- *Rejected Paul’s Instruction*

Acceptance of Paul’s instruction is a test of true spirituality, “If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor 14:36,37). Though these men professed a high view of Scripture, their claim was demonstrably false since they did not accept the Spirit of Prophecy as manifested through Paul.⁴⁷ They regarded Paul’s evangelism as incomplete, omitting important and essential points. Some regarded Paul’s instruction as applicable only to certain local situations.⁴⁸

- *Culturally sensitive, not biblically faithful* (LP 188)

They mistook cultural sensitivity for biblical faithfulness. Prevailing customs and traditions profoundly influence us. This was even true of the earliest Christians. Universal truth appeals to all,⁴⁹ but heresy must appeal primarily to the culture from which it arises. The circumcision

⁴⁶ ἀνυπόταχτοι is variously translated “unruly” in the KJV; “rebellious” in the NIV; “don’t respect authority” in the CEV.

⁴⁷ This rejection persisted even after the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 (See Acts 21:20-21). This continued rejection is discussed in the section *Aftermath* and its footnotes. Paul “could not count upon the sympathy and support of even his own brethren in the faith. The unconverted Jews who had followed so closely upon his track, had not been slow to circulate the most unfavorable reports at Jerusalem, both personally and by letter, concerning him and his work; and some, even of the apostles and elders, had received these reports as truth, making no attempt to contradict them, and manifesting no desire to harmonize with him.” AA 398.

⁴⁸ Those of the circumcision party who accepted the Jerusalem Council’s decision, begrudgingly accepted Paul’s instruction that circumcision was unnecessary—but they limited this instruction to the Gentiles. They continued to oppose Paul’s instruction that circumcision was actually unnecessary for all, Jew or Gentile. This made these believing Jews more ready to accept the unbelieving Jews’ false accusation against Paul, “They have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs” (Acts 21:21).

⁴⁹ “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* men unto me” (John 12:32).

heresy was especially appealing to the Jewish believers⁵⁰ and spread like a viral contagion, carried from Judea to Antioch and subsequently to every Jewish Christian community.⁵¹ Blinded by familiar culture, fallacious arguments were persuasive to Jewish believers that were easily rejected by Gentiles converts.

Since the circumcision party's teaching was another gospel, an actual repudiation of salvation through Christ alone, Paul and Barnabas could not remain silent.⁵² This was a time to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3, KJV). They "had no small dissension and dispute with them" (Acts 15:2). And Paul and Barnabas' response was appropriate. "In every age the arch-enemy adapts his temptations to the prejudices or inclinations of the people. It is the duty of every faithful servant of God, to firmly and decidedly withstand these perverters of the faith, and to fearlessly expose their errors by the word of truth" (LP 192).

Paul and Barnabas were both prophets with an inspired message. They pointed their hearers to appropriate and plain Scripture. This should have settled the issue, but the pro-circumcision party interpreted the Bible through the myopic lens of pharisaic and rabbinical tradition and was not open to correction by the Spirit of Prophecy as manifested by Paul.

A Time of Sifting

Although dissension and dispute among God's people is to be lamented, it is not the worst thing that can happen to them. The winds of strife are a means God uses to blow away the chaff. "God will arouse His people; if other means fail, heresies will come in among them, which will sift them, separating the chaff from the wheat" (5T 707).

This was a separation time for Antioch—this large church must be sifted. This heresy would serve to arouse the true members to more careful Bible study. And it would sift out false brethren who cherished pride of opinion more than they loved the truth as it is in Jesus.

While God can and does overrule church dissensions and disputes for His glory,⁵³ it is never to be sought. It results in harm to God's work. We are to avoid expressing our personal opinions that are different from the established faith of the body. These differences of opinion should not

⁵⁰ "Many of the believing Jews of Antioch favored the position of the brethren recently come from Judea" (Ibid.). "In almost every church there were some members who were Jews by birth. To these converts the Jewish teachers found ready access, and through them gained a foot-hold in the churches" (LP 188).

⁵¹ "In almost every church there were some members who were Jews by birth. To these converts the Jewish teachers found ready access, and through them gained a foot-hold in the churches" (LP 188).

⁵² See for example Galatians 1:8, 9.

⁵³ See Rom 8:28; Ps 76:10.

be publicized in our papers or taught to students (1888 p. 21). Ellen White wrote to the editor of the *Signs* that to “consider it your duty to present your views in decided opposition to the faith or truth as it has been taught by us as a people, is a mistake, and will result in harm, and only harm” (1888 p. 23).

A Temporary Proposal for Unity

Paul and Barnabas spent earnest time in prayer. God’s answer came by revelation (Gal 2:2), instructing the brethren to go to Jerusalem for a general church council. Since Biblically based global church unity is a priority with God (John 17:21), local practices that impact the church globally must be decided globally. This has been true from the very beginning of the Christian church.

Yet God’s instruction was counterintuitive. How could a general conference in Jerusalem solve the problem when Jerusalem seemed to be the source of the heresy? But trusting the divine directive, the Antioch church members resolved to stop all discussion of the controverted point for a time lest there be an actual division in the church.⁵⁴ “They determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question” (Acts 15:2). An uncircumcised Gentile convert, Titus, was part of the group (Gal 2:1). Titus was willing to be circumcised or remain uncircumcised depending on the decision of the general conference (Gal 2:3).

A Disciplined Army

You can tell much about an army by the discipline of its soldiers. The early church was disciplined.⁵⁵ “All controversy was to cease until a final decision should be made by the responsible men of the church” (LP 63). Paul and Barnabas, as disciplined soldiers, were careful to avoid mentioning circumcision in their presentations. This was an easy task for them, since Jesus was their focus⁵⁶ and circumcision was unnecessary.

⁵⁴ “The matter resulted in much discussion and want of harmony in the church, until finally the church of Antioch, apprehending that a division among them would occur from any further discussion of the question, decided to send Paul and Barnabas, together with some responsible men of Antioch, to Jerusalem, to lay the matter before the apostles and elders” (LP 63).

⁵⁵ “The order that was maintained in the early Christian church made it possible for them to move forward solidly as a well-disciplined army clad with the armor of God. The companies of believers, though scattered over a large territory, were all members of one body; all moved in concert and in harmony with one another. When dissension arose in a local church, as later it did arise in Antioch and elsewhere, and the believers were unable to come to an agreement among themselves, such matters were not permitted to create a division in the church, but were referred to a general council of the entire body of believers, made up of appointed delegates from the various local churches, with the apostles and elders in positions of leading responsibility” (AA 95).

⁵⁶ Paul wrote, “For me to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21).

A poorly disciplined army is a weak army. When commissioned or non-commissioned officers continue a battle when commanded to stop, the army is weak indeed.

A Permanent Solution

While stopping discussion could be a temporary measure, the more permanent solution must involve the world church in a general conference. Even though the church in Antioch was large, prosperous, and important, it was only one part of a much larger whole. Maintaining the organic unity of the whole is a great protection for each part. “The efforts of Satan to attack the church in isolated places were met by concerted action on the part of all, and the plans of the enemy to disrupt and destroy were thwarted” (AA 95).

Reports to the Churches about the Gentile Believers

“So, being sent on their way by the church,” (Acts 15:3) they made their way south to Jerusalem. Where possible Paul and Barnabas gave their testimony to Christian believers en route. Their reports of God’s mighty work among the Gentiles were inspiring. “They passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren” (Acts 15:3). The brethren, uniting with the church in heaven, rejoiced with these conversion stories (Lk 15:7). These testimonies reminded the Jewish believers that the gospel message was to “be preached to all nations” (Matt 24:14) and that God’s house was to be a house of prayer for “all nations” (Isa 56:7).

At Jerusalem

After arriving in Jerusalem, Paul wisely met privately with Peter, James, and John to obtain their counsel (Gal 2:2,9).⁵⁷ Subsequently the Antioch delegates “were received by the church and the apostles and the elders” (Acts 15:4). Once again “they reported all things that God had done with them” (vs. 4). But the testimony that had brought great joy to Antioch, Phoenicia, and Samaria, brought no joy to Jerusalem. Though they “related ... the success that had attended the ministry” (LP 63), their testimony had an important addition. Tactful, they also told of “the confusion that had resulted from the fact that certain converted Pharisees declared that the Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved” (LP 63).

⁵⁷ After his arrival at Jerusalem Paul “first sought a private interview, in which he set the matter in all its bearings before the leading apostles, Peter, James, and John” (LP 192).

Sometimes Paul is portrayed as rigid and dogmatic. A recent adult Sabbath school quarterly described Paul as “headstrong.”⁵⁸ This might have been true of the Pharisee Saul, but it is not true of the Christian Paul, who was gentle, soft hearted, and easily entreated. Paul was like Jesus. In fact, four years after this experience,⁵⁹ when he returned to Jerusalem with the Gentile donation to the church in Jerusalem, he was too accommodating to the advice of the church leaders⁶⁰ resulting in his arrest and imprisonment.

Gentle, tactful, respectful courtesy was the striking characteristic of Paul. “By cheerful, patient kindness and Christian courtesy, he won the hearts of the people, quieted their prejudices, and endeavored to teach them the truth without exciting their combativeness” (LP 162).

From time to time physicians must tell patients that they have a life-threatening disease. This is never pleasant to say or to hear, and normally physicians try to say it as empathetically as possible. But sometimes patients are unable or unwilling to hear what the physician is trying to say. Paul tried to tell this group of church leaders, as gently as he could, the serious and contagious spiritual disease in their midst—but they could not or would not hear him. Instead, the pro-circumcision party, like the elder brother of the prodigal son (Lk 15:25-30), was exasperated by Paul’s testimony. Disregarding it they presented their own way forward.

“Some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:5).⁶¹

Though the testimony of Paul did not bring unity, it did serve to highlight the council’s disunity. This deep division between the pro-circumcision view and the pro-Christian view was not an auspicious way to begin a general conference.

An Important Question

There is important insight contained in the Pharisees’ statement, “It is necessary to circumcise them.” The real issue of most conflicts can be discovered by a simple question: *What is it that is felt to be necessary?*

It is only as individuals believe something is *necessary* that they feel justified, even righteous, in promoting it. It gives them a cause. If it is really morally necessary then it is not just related to the dominant culture of the times. If it is necessary, then those agitating the question are right to

⁵⁸ *Adult Bible Study Guide*, March, 17, 2014, p. 98.

⁵⁹ LP 210.

⁶⁰ AA 405.

⁶¹

push it. If it is not necessary, the agitators have lost legitimacy for pushing merely a personal or cultural issue.

There is a group that feel it is necessary to ordain women to the gospel ministry. For 4,000 years before the cross, it wasn't necessary. Jesus didn't find it necessary in His life and ministry. The early church did not find it necessary. "The Vaudois churches, in their purity and simplicity, resembled the church of apostolic times" (GC 68) and did not find it necessary to ordain women.⁶² The reformers did not find it necessary.⁶³ God raised up the remnant church and it wasn't necessary for the pioneers.⁶⁴ But to those supporting women's ordination, it is now necessary.⁶⁵

Most women's ordination supporters agree there is no explicit Bible command to ordain women.⁶⁶ There is no contemporary living prophet to affirm it. There are no objective supernatural miracles and wonders to confirm it. Yet women's ordination to the gospel ministry is still felt to be such a moral imperative that some enthusiasts feel it is worth dying for.⁶⁷

The Jerusalem Council

"The apostles and elders came together to consider this matter" (Acts 15:6). The deliberations must have begun with earnest prayer for unity. God heard the prayer and sent testimony to bring unity.

From time to time the freeway of life brings us to a fork in the road, and we must choose which road to take. There comes a time when compromise is unachievable, further delay is impossible, and a decision must be made between two choices.

⁶² "Their pastors ... followed the example of their Master.... The youth who received ordination to the sacred office saw before them ... a life of toil and danger, and possibly a martyr's fate.... With each young man was usually associated a man of age and experience, the youth being under the guidance of his companion, who was held responsible for his training" (GC 68-70).

⁶³ See Gerard Damsteegt "Magisterial Reformers and Ordination" presented at the January, 2013 TOSC.

⁶⁴ See David Trim "Ordination in Seventh-Day Adventist History" presented at the January, 2013 TOSC.

⁶⁵ For example Richard Davidson concludes his paper "Should Women Be Ordained as Pastors?" pp. 66,67 (presented at the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, July 2013) with the question, "Will the Seventh-day Adventist Church in these last days allow God to complete this upside-down revolution in our midst by recognizing and affirming, yes, ordaining, all those—including women—gifted by the Spirit for positions of leadership?" This question implies that those opposing the ordination of women are standing in the way of God's plan. The question, however, confuses a recognition and affirmation of certain gifted individuals with the ordination of persons who meet the specific qualification to the biblical office of overseer. The Holy Spirit in both the Old and New Testament recognized and affirmed men and women who are not ordained.

⁶⁶ "There is no statement in the Bible: 'Ordain women to ministry!'" Moskala, Jiří *Back to Creation: Toward a Consistent Adventist Creation—Fall—Re-Creation* (TOSC, July 22-24, 2013) p. 1. "The Bible does not directly address the ordination of women" NAD TOSC Report Summary, Recommendation 1.

⁶⁷ *BUC News* 9/12/13.

The early church was faced with just such a situation. Gentiles could not be partially circumcised. Circumcision was either necessary or it was unnecessary. The Bible alone must provide the answer. The church could not create truth, modify truth, or abolish truth. The church, by vote, could only accept or reject truth.

This representative group of men⁶⁸ did not start out in “one accord.” The moderator patiently allowed a full discussion of the issues from the varying viewpoints which Inspiration sums up in two words: “much dispute” (Acts 15:7). In this verse we see that there was no effort to suppress one side of the discussion. They didn’t carefully handpick the representatives so a predetermined decision would emerge. Here we also see this debate was not a race issue—Jew versus Gentile—since it was primarily Jew debating Jew. The debate was truth against strongly held error.

From a historical perspective I would love to have the entire transcript of the meeting, but we see something about God’s character—He did not preserve the arguments that divided these early Christians. But God did preserve the testimony that would serve to unite them.

A Leader Speaks

Finally, “Peter rose up and said to them: ‘Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe’” (Acts 15:7).

Peter had listened to the arguments and observed the spirit of the speakers. There comes a moment in a long, contentious process where leadership must make a statement and take a stand. Peter recognized when that moment had arrived.

We should note Peter’s introduction carefully: “Men and brethren *you know* ...” He wisely begins with something they all agree on, something they all are familiar with and accept as truth.

God Chooses Our Assignment

“... you know that a good while ago *God chose among us.*” God decides. He chooses “among us.” This is His right, not our right. God is the One who chooses among His angels and gives them their tasks. And God is the one that chooses among His servants on earth and assigns them their missions. We do not demand our tasks; we accept our tasks. It is not our will, but God’s will

⁶⁸ Verse 12 refers to the assembly as a “multitude.” “The council which decided this case was composed of the founders of the Jewish and Gentile Christian churches. Elders from Jerusalem, and deputies from Antioch, were present; and the most influential churches were represented” (LP 70). With the successful evangelistic efforts of Paul and Barnabas it included Gentiles, such as Titus, but it was overwhelmingly Jewish.

that is to be done (Mt 6:10; 26:42). “It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jer 10:23). It was God who chose the Apostles and appointed them their work. Jesus had told the twelve: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you” (John 15:16).

“God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe” (Acts 15:7). God selected a specific angel to deliver a special message to Cornelius (Acts 10:3-6). Though this angel was in every way more qualified than Peter, the angel was not given the privilege of preaching the gospel to Cornelius.⁶⁹ The angel’s task was to connect Cornelius with the one who was appointed to preach the gospel. An angel was also given the task to prepare Peter for this assignment. It is important that each did their assigned task. The first manifestation of Lucifer’s rebellion in heaven was Lucifer stepping outside of his assigned task.⁷⁰

“God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.” When these Gentiles heard the presentation of Peter, they did believe. “So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:8,9). Whether Jew or Gentile, they could have purifying righteousness only by faith.

A Broad Principle

God looks beyond the external form to the heart. Circumcision was *not* necessary, and there was no reason to argue that it was necessary, for the Holy Spirit fell on circumcised and uncircumcised. This principle is broad. Woman’s ordination is *no more* necessary than circumcision, and there is no reason to argue that it is necessary, for at Pentecost the Holy Spirit also fell on unordained men and women just as He fell on ordained men.

The Circumcision Party Rebuked

Peter’s statement was clear and uncompromising. Moved by the Spirit, Peter closed his testimony with a sharp rebuke and warning to the pro-circumcision party using similar language that he had used with Sapphira, just before she was struck down by the judgments of God (Acts 5:9). “Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (Acts 15:10).

⁶⁹ “Here again God showed his regard for the gospel ministry, and for his organized church. His angel was not the one to tell the story of the cross to Cornelius.... The heavenly messenger was sent for the express purpose of putting Cornelius in connection with the minister of God, who would teach him how he and his house could be saved” (3SP 326).

⁷⁰ “Satan ... gradually assumed command which devolved on Christ alone.” 1SP 17.

The Bible gives us at least five ways God is tested. Each way is a false testimony. The pro-circumcision party was guilty of each of these ways:

1. *Hypocrisy* (Mt 22:17,18)

We test God when we profess a commitment to God's word that we do not really have.

"Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth.... But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, 'Why do you test Me, you hypocrites?'"

Hypocrisy majors on external forms. Circumcision of males, like ordination of females, is an external form. The pro-circumcision party focused on the external form. What is needed is a deeply converted ministry and membership. This cannot be achieved by mere outward forms and ceremonies.

Obedience to every word of God is a condition of success. What made the early church strong was that the believers, ordained and unordained, were connected with heaven and were constantly receiving God's guidance and in God's power obeying it. "Victories are not gained by ceremonies or display, but by simple obedience to the highest General, the Lord God of heaven" (6T 140). Without complete submission to God's word, ordination doesn't matter, it is mere hypocrisy.

2. *Using Scripture to Promote Wrongdoing* (Mt 4:6,7).

We test God when we use Scripture to promote wrongdoing as Satan did in the wilderness of temptation (Mt 4:6,7).

The inspired writings are not given as a smorgasbord from which we pick and choose our practices and beliefs.⁷¹ They are given as our exclusive source for doctrine and practice. We are forbidden to teach as commands of God what are merely opinions of men. It is testing God when an inspired passage is twisted to promote falsehood. "Men entertain errors, when the truth is clearly marked out, and if they would but bring their doctrines to the word of God, and not read the word of God in the light of their doctrines, to prove their ideas right, they would not walk in darkness and blindness, or cherish error. Many give the words of Scripture a meaning that suits their own opinions, and they mislead themselves and deceive others by their misinterpretations of God's word" (RH 7/26/1892). A practical and consistently useful way to detect error has been provided: "Numberless words need not be put upon

⁷¹ We have no permission to say of any inspired writings "This portion which pleases me is from God, but that portion which points out and condemns my course of conduct is from Sister White alone" (TSB 153).

paper to justify what speaks for itself and shines in its clearness. Truth is straight, plain, clear, and stands out boldly in its own defense; but it is not so with error. It is so winding and twisting that it needs a multitude of words to explain it in its crooked form” (EW 96).

3. *Failing to wait for God’s counsel* (Ps 106:13,14).

In the wilderness the Israelites became impatient, refusing to wait for God’s counsel. Finding a compliant leader, they forged ahead and made a golden calf (Ex 32:8). “They would not wait to learn His plan” (Ps 106:13, JPS), so they adopted the worship practices of the cultural influences around them and then called this the worship of Jehovah (Ex 32:5). This is testing God.

4. *Complaining of God’s Way* (Ex 17:2).

The Israelites tested God by complaining of His providences and accusing leadership decisions for their difficulties. “Therefore the people contended with Moses, and said, ‘Give us water, that we may drink.’ So Moses said to them, ‘Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the Lord?’” Some do this today, “You are continually finding fault with circumstances, which is nothing less than finding fault with providences. You are continually casting about for somebody or something to answer the place of a scapegoat, upon which you can lay the blame” (2T 571).

5. *Perverting God’s Law* (Acts 15:10 vs. Mt 11:30).

We test God when we dismiss what He does require.⁷² We just as surely test God when we require what God does not require. “The Jews had so perverted the law that they made it a yoke of bondage” (DA 204). Peter, like Christ (Matt. 23:4), compared the Pharisaical corruption of the ceremonial system with its traditions to an unbearable yoke for either Jew or Gentile—quite different from the easy yoke of Jesus (Mt 11:30).

Peter then declared clearly and forcibly what was necessary for Jew and Gentile. “We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as

⁷² The ceremonial system itself was a disciplinary measure of God. Speaking of ancient Israel, we are told “God gave them His law, but they would not obey it. He then gave them ceremonies and ordinances, that, in the performance of these, God might be kept in remembrance. They were so prone to forget Him and His claims upon them that it was necessary to keep their minds stirred up to realize their obligations to obey and honor their Creator. Had they been obedient, and loved to keep God’s commandments, the multitude of ceremonies and ordinances would not have been required” (2T 607).

they” (Acts 15:11).⁷³ By this important statement, Peter declared that it was grace, not race, that saved the Jew. He declared that the pro-circumcision party had it backward. Instead of the Gentile needing to become like the Jew, the Jew needed to become like the Gentile and have the heart circumcision of the Gentile, the heart purified by faith, in order to be saved.

Peter gently softened his home thrust by including himself, “we shall be saved in the same manner as they.” And Peter’s statement remains true for all time. We are saved in the same manner as they. Our hearts, too, must be purified by faith.

Peter’s testimony was crucial for church unity. We can never have unity in the church without such powerful, proper, and pointed testimony. “God designs that His people shall be a unit, that they shall see eye to eye and be of the same mind and of the same judgment. This cannot be accomplished without a clear, pointed, living testimony in the church” (3T 361). Peter’s forceful presentation was just such a testimony. It was this testimony that was the first step toward unity.

When we pray for unity, we are praying that God will restore a clear, pointed, living testimony in His church. And this type of testimony will come, because as many as Christ loves He rebukes and chastens (Rev 3:19).

Prepared to Listen

With Peter’s rebuke ringing in their ears, “all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12).⁷⁴ This testimony was not part of a slick public relations and marketing gimmick. Paul and Barnabas told of real miracles and wonders. Only a very few of these supernatural manifestations of God’s power have been preserved as a sample:

- Elymas the Jewish sorcerer being struck with blindness converting the proconsul of Paphos (Acts 13:6-12).
- Virtually the entire city of Antioch Pisidia trying to crowd into a synagogue for a Sabbath service to hear the gospel message (Acts 13:44).
- An unstoppable message of the gospel spreading like wildfire throughout the region of southeastern Turkey (Acts 13:49).

⁷³ Peter’s declaration is the earliest doctrinal statement of the Christian church: “We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved.”

⁷⁴ These “many miracles and wonders” were a fulfillment of the prophecy, “I will provoke them to jealousy by those who are not a nation” (Deut 32:21).

- Fierce persecution resulting in the message being joyfully spread to Iconium, where “great multitudes” of both Jewish and Gentile converts were made, causing a city-wide division (Acts 13:45-14:4).
- Persecution spreading the message to the cities in the region of Lyconia (Acts 14:5-7).
- The healing of a congenital cripple in Lystra, resulting in an attempt to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods, followed by the stoning of Paul and his apparently miraculous recovery (Acts 14:8-20).
- Persecution spreading the gospel to Derbe, with another large ingathering of souls (Acts 14:20,21).

Prepared to Decide

When Paul and Barnabas concluded their testimony of God’s work among the heathen, a solemn stillness from the Lord reigned over the assembly, and the general conference was finally ready to come to a decision.

“And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, ‘Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written ...’” (Acts 15:13-15). Like the fair-minded Berean’s (Acts 17:11), James was comparing what Peter had said with the Scripture. Like Jesus, James could speak with authority (Mk 7:29) from an “It is written,” a plain “thus saith the Lord.”⁷⁵ Though he gives but one reference as a sample, he acknowledges that the writings of all the prophets agree.

It was on Scripture, not the testimony of miracles and wonders, that the early church placed its confidence. This general conference was not above the Bible. Without Bible authority even the early church had no authority.

James does not say, “We believe because of the miracles and wonders being performed by Paul and Barnabas.” He doesn’t even refer to them. A testimony of miracles and wonders are not the proof of truth. Moses had warned Israel not to be deceived by signs and wonders that lead away from strict obedience to God (Deut 13:1-5).

⁷⁵ “God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain ‘Thus saith the Lord’ in its support.” GC 595.

Testimonies of miracles and wonders remain a source of danger today. We are warned that testimony will be misused at the end of time. “Let not anyone consider it a grand point to have a startling experience to relate; for here is a fruitful field where credence will be given to unworthy persons. Young men and women will be lifted up, and will regard themselves as wonderfully favored, called to do some great thing. There will be conversions many, after a peculiar order, but they will not bear the divine signature. Immorality will come in, and extravagance, and many will make shipwreck of faith” (2SM 59).

This is going to happen, not in a small way, for “many will make shipwreck of faith.” Because of its danger God has given us access to Satan’s clever battle plan. Committees looking for speakers for meetings and seminars will be tempted to select speakers with a startling testimony. Because there is apparent fruit—“conversions many”—these testimonies could be welcomed on many levels. This will be a hot item. Copy-starved editors will want to print the testimonies in their paper, Publishing houses will want to print the testimonies of these startling experiences to sell books. Media companies will want to produce the DVD’s. And these will be featuring young people— young men and women. We have been expecting this. We have been waiting for the Holy Spirit and the finish of the work, this seems to be it! No one wants to be judgmental or critical. No one wants to be a rejecter of new light. Those with doubts will keep their doubts to themselves, “and many will make shipwreck of faith.”

“Just as it is written”

We should not miss that this was presented “just as it is written.” This was not a reinterpretation of the Bible, created to give a plausible cover to a new belief. This was not some “trajectory” argument. It was “just as it is written.” The church was in danger of straying from the Bible. By using the Bible “just as it is written,” without complicated commentary, James was using the Bible to correct the errors seeking admittance into the church.

James selected a passage from the prophet Amos. “... After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who does all these things” (Acts 15:16,17).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ “From the beginning the Jewish Christians had realized that the promises to David were fulfilled in Christ. What they were now beginning to see, and what James saw foretold in Amos, was that these promises included the Gentiles” (John Polhil, “The New American Commentary,” Acts, p. 330).

Amos, speaking of the restoration of David's kingdom, refers to the Gentile subjects of this restored kingdom. The Davidic kingdom was a type of Christ's kingdom. Ultimately, Gentiles made up a significant portion of the Davidic empire when it extended from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River (2 Sam 8:1-14; 2 Chr 9:26). These Gentile subjects, like Ittai (2Sam 15:19), were loyal and trustworthy—enlarging, enriching, and strengthening David's kingdom. And nowhere does the Bible give a requirement that these Gentiles be circumcised in order to become David's subjects.

As it was depicted in the type, so it would be in much greater measure in the anti-type. Isaiah called the throne room of the Messiah's restored Davidic kingdom “the tabernacle of David” (Isaiah 16:5). Following the ascension of Christ with the heavenly pageantry of His enthronement in the heavenly places, this prophecy was fulfilled—the tabernacle of David had been re-established. While Christ's enthronement energized the good angels, it dispirited Satan's angels. God took that opportune moment to send the Early Rain at Pentecost. In holy vision God had shown Amos this restoration of David's kingdom, and that a major purpose in this restored kingdom was to bring Gentile subjects flooding into the Messiah's kingdom. By the sure word of prophecy it was the time of the Gentiles.

And James adds, in agreement with Peter's prior observation (Acts 15:7), God had planned for this all along. “Known to God from eternity are all His works” (Acts 15:18). From eternity God knows what He is going to do and He has given us His promise that He will not make changes in the future that He has not revealed to His prophets in the past (Amos 3:7). God makes no hasty, last minute, poorly thought through choices that He suddenly springs on us. His choices were long before we were born (Jer 1:5; Lu 2:21). From His vantage point of eternity He chooses “among us.”⁷⁷

In Acts 15 we see the same pattern that is given throughout the Bible. It is the present-truth principle. Present truth is a past prophetic truth that applies to the present. Present truth is light that guides us in making decisions. There are many examples of this principle, but we will mention only four.

The change from the first-born being the priest to the priesthood being restricted to the Levites was first prophesied by Jacob (Gen 49:7),⁷⁸ but it was not present truth until authorized by the prophet Moses (Ex 38:21; Num 1:50). The change from Judge to King was first prophesied by

⁷⁷ “Above the distractions of the earth He sits enthroned; all things are open to His divine survey; and from His great and calm eternity He orders that which His providence sees best” (8T 272).

⁷⁸ Speaking of Jacob's final blessing we are told, “The priesthood was apportioned to Levi” (PP 235).

Jacob (Gen 49:10), then Moses (Deut 17:14,15; 28:36), but it was not present truth until authorized by the prophet Samuel (1 Sam 8:9). The change from United to Divided Kingdom was first prophesied by Ahijah (1 Kings 11:29-31), but it was not present truth until authorized by the prophet Shemaiah (1 Kings 12:22,23).

Present Truth Principle Summary

Change	Prophetic Truth	Present Truth
First born to Levite priesthood	Jacob	Moses
Judge to King	Jacob, Moses	Samuel
United to Divided Kingdom	Ahijah	Shemaiah
Mosaic Ceremonies Stopped	Amos, Isaiah, Daniel	Peter, Paul, Barnabas, James

Notice that it is always God’s Word that guides. We do not look to the whims of the people for guidance. We look to prophetic truth with prophetic authorization for any change we support. This is why God’s word brings unity. Jeroboam was authorized to be king of Northern Israel, but no such authorization was given him to introduce worship changes or priesthood changes. The divided kingdom was present truth and must be allowed, but the divided worship and priesthood change was apostasy and could not be supported by the faithful.

The word of God is clear, “You shall not follow a crowd to do evil” (Exo 23:2). When there is a dispute raging we are not to “testify in a dispute so as to turn aside after many to pervert justice” (Exo 23:2). It is not popularity that determines the rightness or wrongness of an action. We are not to let this influence us in the slightest.

Pilate did not follow this instruction. He let the loudest voices make the choice. He went with the easy, momentarily popular side. But when the early church leadership was tested, they did not make their decision based on the local preference or the most vocally demanding. Peter and James were guided in their testimony by the present truth principle, not popular error. They would not “turn aside after many to pervert justice.”

What was prophetic truth⁷⁹ by Amos, Isaiah, and Daniel became present truth when authorized by Jesus and the Apostles.

With clear prophetic guidance James was prepared to make a motion, “Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19,20).

Although circumcision was the flashpoint, this reveals three other items were included in the discussion (AA 191-192):

1. Meats offered to idols (Acts 15:20).
2. The use of blood in the food preparation (Acts 15:20).
3. Immorality (Acts 15:20).

Unlike the ceremonial laws, which were temporary, these three involved the moral law: the second commandment forbids idolatry (Ex 20:4-6); the sixth commandment demands the preservation of health with avoidance of activities that would shorten life (Ex 20:13); and the seventh commandment prohibited moral impurity (Ex 20:14). The Jerusalem Council recognized the eternal nature of the moral law and upheld it, differentiating it from the temporary ceremonial system.

Putting personal prejudices and feelings aside,⁸⁰ the representatives of the world church passed this motion unanimously (Acts 15:25, 22). The pro-circumcision heresy was rejected. The Gentile convert Titus, who had accompanied Paul and Barnabas, was not required to be circumcised by this council (Gal 2:1,3,4) and apparently never did get circumcised.

⁷⁹ The Old Testament also taught this typologically. The Davidic kingdom has already been mentioned. The children of Israel in the wilderness were a type of God’s people to the close of time (1 Cor 11:6). Though many parallels have been made by others (for example, see Taylor Bunch, “Exodus in Type and Antitype”), circumcision parallels are relevant for this paper. All those leaving Egypt were to be circumcised (Exo 12:44,48). Because of unbelief and rebellion a short time into the wilderness wandering, the children of Israel were actually forbidden to be circumcised. In this type, as in the enacted parable of Hosea (Hos 2:23), outwardly circumcised Israel were rejected as God’s people, while outwardly uncircumcised Gentiles were accepted as God’s people. In the wilderness type an entire generation of Israelites were uncircumcised. The circumcised parents perished in the wilderness while this uncircumcised generation entered the land of Canaan (Josh 5:1-8). In the antitype the uncircumcised Christian church, not the circumcised Jewish nation, will be translated to the heavenly Canaan.

⁸⁰ “The Spirit of the Lord then witnessed to the word spoken, and under its influence the council yielded their prejudices, and expressed themselves as in harmony with the position of the apostle, and sent an address to the churches to that effect” (LP 209).

Furthermore, the council affirmed the work of Paul and Barnabas, while the self-appointed work of the pro-circumcision party was exposed and explicitly condemned. “Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and keep the law’—to whom we gave no such commandment” (Acts 15:24). Regardless of their church position and connections, these agitators did not speak for the church. They were simply giving their personal opinions and private interpretation.

Enforcing the Jerusalem Council Action

It was not enough to vote this motion, for James advised that a letter be written explaining the particulars of the decision (Acts 15:20). The council went beyond James’ recommendation and not only authorized a letter but sent two highly respected church leaders as official representatives⁸¹ to carry the letter and explain it (Acts 15:22). This heresy was to be refuted by pen and by voice in the very place where the circumcision party had made their assertions.⁸²

By this action the church was protected and purified. Perhaps some Pharisaic elements, rejecting the Council’s decision to follow Scripture, departed, leaving the church stronger by their exit. “The broad and far-reaching decisions of the general council brought confidence into the ranks of the Gentile believers, and the cause of God prospered” (AA 197).

Aftermath

While the Jerusalem Council’s decision was an important and necessary step, it must be acknowledged that this decision did not fully extinguish the problem. It continued smoldering among the Jewish Christians for years.⁸³

“Not all, however, were pleased with the decision; there was a faction of ambitious and self-confident brethren who disagreed with it.... They indulged in much murmuring and faultfinding,

⁸¹ This follows the Bible teaching that out of the mouth of two or three witnesses every word was to be established.

⁸² At a later date at least one church refused to receive letters sent out by the apostles, “I wrote to the church, but Diotrophes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church” (3 John 9,10).

⁸³ After the decision of the council at Jerusalem concerning this question, many were still of this opinion, but did not then push their opposition any farther. The council had, on that occasion, decided that the converts from the Jewish church might observe the ordinances of the Mosaic law if they chose, while those ordinances should not be made obligatory upon converts from the Gentiles. The opposing class now took advantage of this, to urge a distinction between the observers of the ceremonial law and those who did not observe it, holding that the latter were farther from God than the former” (LP 121).

proposing new plans and seeking to pull down the work of the men whom God had ordained to teach the gospel message” (AA 196).⁸⁴

Though circumcision was never brought to another general council, prejudice against Paul remained, causing him wearing labor for the rest of his ministry.⁸⁵ The book of Galatians was written in response to this heresy surfacing in Galatia. Paul also had to deal with it in Corinth.⁸⁶ The accusation against Paul gradually changed from condemning him for not insisting on Gentile circumcision to accusing him of advocating that Jews not circumcise their children (Acts 21:21). Ultimately, this antagonism toward Paul was responsible for the unwise counsel of the leading brethren that placed him in circumstances that resulted in his imprisonment.⁸⁷

Application

The primary purpose of the Jerusalem Council was to promote unity in the world church.

The Jerusalem Council Process

1. Representative men from the churches were given the task of carefully examining the problem. “The entire body of Christians was not called to vote upon the question. The ‘apostles and elders,’ men of influence and judgment, framed and issued the decree, which was thereupon generally accepted by the Christian churches” (AA 196).

⁸⁴ Also see LP 209, 210, 212.

⁸⁵ “The party maintaining that Christianity was valueless without circumcision arrayed themselves against the apostle, and he had to meet them in every church which he founded or visited; in Jerusalem, Antioch, Galatia, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. God urged him out to the great work of preaching Christ, and him crucified; circumcision or uncircumcision was nothing. The Judaizing party looked upon Paul as an apostate, bent upon breaking down the partition wall which God had established between the Israelites and the world. They visited every church which he had organized, creating divisions. Holding that the end would justify the means, they circulated false charges against the apostle, and endeavored to bring him into disrepute. As Paul, in visiting the churches, followed after these zealous and unscrupulous opposers, he met many who viewed him with distrust, and some who even despised his labors” (LP 122).

⁸⁶ See 1Cor 7:19 for example.

⁸⁷ See LP 214.

2. Carefully and prayerfully selected by the churches and institutions, these representatives were promised wisdom.⁸⁸ “He will give wisdom and understanding to his representative men in every part of his great moral vineyard” (TM 212).⁸⁹
3. Opportunity was given for a full discussion, with all sides being fairly represented and heard.
4. Although the general conference could not claim infallibility,⁹⁰ these representatives made decisions which were to be regarded as authoritative. “This was the only instance in which [Paul] had deferred to the judgment of the other apostles as superior to his own.” (LP 192). “When, in a General Conference, the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered” (9T 260).
5. The decision settled the issue, it was never brought back to a later council for reconsideration.
6. The decision was enforced by circulated written documents and official personnel sent out to explain the decision and its biblical basis. Those who advocated a contrary view were explicitly rebuked. It was made clear that contrary views could not be authorized by the world church because they were not authorized by the Bible. The official church publications and educational institutions spoke and taught unitedly to maintain biblical unity.
7. Those disregarding the decision were labeled as divisive and were avoided. “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (Rom 16:17).

The Jerusalem Council Decision

⁸⁸ Peter and James’ presentations show great wisdom. Paul and Barnabas also were given wisdom in the manner and content of their presentation.

⁸⁹ “God would have His people an understanding people. He has so arranged matters that chosen men shall go as delegates to our conferences. These men are to be tried and proved. They are to be trustworthy men. The choosing of delegates to attend our conferences is an important matter. These men are to lay the plans that shall be followed in the advancement of the work; and therefore they are to be men of understanding, able to reason from cause to effect.” 9T 260.

“From these scriptures (Exodus 18:13-26; Acts 1:21-26) we learn that the Lord has certain men to fill certain positions. God will teach His people to move carefully and to make wise choice of men who will not betray sacred trusts. If in Christ’s day the believers needed to be guarded in their choice of men for positions of responsibility, we who are living in this time certainly need to move with great discretion. We are to present every case before God and in earnest prayer ask Him to choose for us.” Ibid. 264.

⁹⁰ “The council did not claim infallibility in their deliberations, but moved from the dictates of enlightened judgment, and with the dignity of a church established by the divine will” (LP 70).

Some who promote women's ordination have called the Jerusalem Council a model for the church to follow today.⁹¹ Just prior to the Utrecht 1995 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the editors of *Ministry* magazine devoted a special issue strongly promoting women's ordination.⁹² One article written under the pseudonym Andrew Bates, was titled, "The Jerusalem Council: a model for Utrecht?" It opened with the statement "The circumstances facing the 1995 General Conference session are strikingly similar to those facing the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 49."⁹³ The article focused on the author's perception of the issues and decision of the Jerusalem Council.

During the 1995 General Conference the following motion from the NAD was considered: "... a division may authorize the ordination of qualified individuals without regard to gender. In divisions where the division executive committees take specific actions approving the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, women may be ordained to serve in those divisions." However, after discussion and debate, this motion was defeated by a large majority.⁹⁴

There was no follow-up article in *Ministry* continuing to compare the Utrecht General Conference to the "Jerusalem Council." However, one obvious similarity between Utrecht and the Jerusalem Council stands out, "Not all, however, were pleased with the decision; there was a faction of ambitious and self-confident brethren who disagreed with it. These men assumed to engage in the work on their own responsibility.... From the first the church has had such obstacles to meet and ever will have till the close of time" (AA 196). Those in favor of women's ordination continued to vigorously agitate their view, and with the passage of time, some unions, on their own responsibility, have started ordaining women with neither biblical command nor world church approval.

For those in favor of women's ordination to again suggest that the Jerusalem Council is a model to follow when such a council has already occurred and rendered a decision, is not to express a *commitment* to the Jerusalem Council *process*, but a *desire* for what is perceived to be the Jerusalem Council's *outcome*.

Some who are pro-women's ordination believe that those who hold the biblical qualifications view are on the side of the tradition-bound Pharisees, while they imagine they are on the side of

⁹¹ "The Apostolic Council in Jerusalem may serve as a pattern and the key on how to approach such difficulties." Moskala, Jiří "Back to Creation: Toward a Consistent Adventist Creation—Fall—Re-Creation" p. 17 (presented at the TOSC, July 22-24, 2013).

⁹² April, 1995 issue.

⁹³ *Ministry*, April, 1995, p. 18.

⁹⁴ *General Conference Bulletin*, July 11, 1995, p. 30.

Paul (certainly this is a remarkable conclusion since it is Paul’s clear teaching on the qualifications for ordination that is most notably rejected by those in favor of women’s ordination).

Some believe that male only ordination to the gospel ministry is a cultural issue⁹⁵ and that the outcome of the Jerusalem Council is a model for dealing with issues of cultural and traditional diversity—the Jews continued to circumcise and follow the ceremonial laws, while Gentiles were not required to circumcise.⁹⁶ The Jerusalem Council has been portrayed as showing a broad-minded tolerance in allowing each culture to do what is right in its own eyes (Deut 12:8; Judg 21:25). However, as previously noted, the Jerusalem Council was not dealing with a clash of cultures—Jew versus Gentile—but with false doctrine versus true doctrine.⁹⁷ The issue in Acts 15 was not whether Jews or Gentiles could be circumcised, but whether it was necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1, 5). The decision of the council did not allow variance for anyone anywhere to teach that circumcision was a requirement of the gospel message. The Jerusalem council held all to the requirements of the moral law (Acts 15:20) while actually releasing the Jews from the requirements of circumcision and the ceremonial laws (Gal 2:14; Acts 15:10).⁹⁸ Every church was to abide by this decision; no allowance for anything else was given.

The Jerusalem Council could do no other than it did, since it had no authority to allow nor forbid anything not allowed nor forbidden in God’s word.⁹⁹ The Council had no authority to “supplement” the word of God. “The very beginning of the great apostasy was in seeking to supplement the authority of God by that of the church” (GC 289). God alone make rules for the church, and He has not given this authority to any, not even angels of heaven to change them (Gal 1:8, 9; Heb 2:5-9). The Jerusalem Council’s only authority was to find and follow God’s instruction as given in the Scripture.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ “While every culture contains elements that are both good and evil, all too often cultural views and perspectives, rather than biblical principles, have been allowed to define who can be ordained and how ordained persons should exercise their authority.” Teresa Reeves, “Shall the Church Ordain Women as Pastors?” p. 20, also see p. 1 (presented at the TOSC, July, 2013). Certainly there should be agreement with the sentiment expressed in this statement that culture should not be allowed to define who should be ordained. The biblical qualifications alone should determine who is to be ordained else we usurp the prerogatives of God by adding to His Word.

⁹⁶ Verbal conversations with several TOSC committee members who are proponents of women’s ordination members. Also see David Penno “Women’s Ordination and the Concept of Present Truth” (Meaning, Memory, & Faith, Sponsored by the Adventist Theological Society, May 8, 2013); and David Newman “Is the Women’s Ordination Issue about Unity or Uniformity?” *Spectrum* Editorial, August 13, 2012.

⁹⁷ “Paul and Barnabas met *this false doctrine* with promptness” (AA 189).

⁹⁸ “The council had, on that occasion, decided that the converts from the Jewish church might observe the ordinances of the Mosaic law if they chose, while those ordinances should not be made obligatory upon converts from the Gentiles” (LP 121).

⁹⁹ “Do not add to His words, Lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar” (Pro 30:6).

¹⁰⁰ “But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines.” GC 595.

A church council must avoid the danger of adding, changing, or diminishing aught of the word of God.¹⁰¹ It must decide between heresy and truth, based solely on the word of God. “God’s word must be recognized as above all human legislation. A ‘Thus saith the Lord’ is not to be set aside for a ‘Thus saith the church’” (AA 68). It is clear why this is true. Christian church history is littered with church councils which, unlike the Jerusalem Council, were unfaithful to Scripture. “Vast councils were held from time to time, in which the dignitaries of the church were convened from all the world” (GC 53). Unfortunately, they often strengthened the cause of error and promoted unity of error. It was “the decree of a general council” that “established” idol worship in Christianity (GC 51). These church councils were an important vehicle to strengthen Sunday observance, and “in nearly every council the Sabbath which God had instituted was pressed down a little lower, while the Sunday was correspondingly exalted” (GC 53).

Although women’s ordination is not in the same category as the Sabbath, the underlying arguments historically put forward by the proponents of Sunday are strikingly similar to arguments sometimes put forward today by those in favor of women’s ordination. Since the Jerusalem Council decision is used as an argument by those supporting women’s ordination¹⁰² and by Sunday keepers,¹⁰³ the linkage deserves a closer look.

- Sunday advocates acknowledged that Sunday was not explicitly commanded in the Bible (GC 53), but denied that it was explicitly forbidden (GC 289).

However, if Sunday keeping is not a command of God, it must be a command of man. Tradition is basing a doctrine on the commandments of men (Mk 7:7,9) and is the root of hypocrisy and vain worship (Mt 15:7-9). Since we are to teach only what God commands (Mt 28:20) and we are not to add to His words (Deut 4:2; 12:32), what is not expressly commanded is excluded from true doctrine (Deut 5:22).

- Those who acknowledged that Sabbath observance was taught in the Old Testament, likened it to circumcision and denied that Sabbath was explicitly commanded in the New Testament. The

¹⁰¹ “You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Deut 4:2). “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Deut 12:32).

¹⁰² See for example, Richard Davidson, “The Bible and the Ordination of Women Pastors” p. 2, presented for the Lake Union Theology of Ordination Study Process.

¹⁰³ What Evangelical Speaker, John MacArthur, states is a sample of many, “When the Apostles met at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), they did not impose Sabbath keeping on the Gentile believers” (Are the Sabbath laws binding on Christians today? at <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Questions/QA135>).

trajectory of the Bible was “the Lord’s day,” Sunday.¹⁰⁴ The clearest texts were reinterpreted and explained away by scholars. Every day was said to be holy (just as Korah declared that all members were holy (Num 16:3)).

- Those men pleasers who were without conviction and were therefore tolerant of both Sunday and Sabbath views considering the topic to be non-essential were lauded as “truly enlightened by the gospel spirit.”¹⁰⁵
- Although efforts were made to give some biblical relationship to Sunday keeping, the actual source of Sunday keeping was not the Bible, but pagan culture.
- Sunday keeping was urged as necessary to increase the number of converts¹⁰⁶ (undoubtedly to keep from losing young people, and keep the church fresh and relevant).
- As Sunday began to be adopted, it seemed to cause no great problems.¹⁰⁷
- Each council’s decision was never quite enough to satisfy those pushing Sunday worship. But building on the last compromise, those in favor of this innovation would bring it back again and again to gain further concessions.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ “It was not, however, without a reason that the early Christians substituted what we call the Lord’s day for the Sabbath. The resurrection of our Lord being the end and accomplishment of that true rest which the ancient sabbath typified, this day, by which types were abolished serves to warn Christians against adhering to a shadowy ceremony. I do not cling so to the number seven as to bring the Church under bondage to it.” John Calvin *Institute of the Christian Religion*, volume 2, Chapter 8, Section 34 (A New Translation by Henry Beveridge, Esq. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997).

¹⁰⁵ “One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it” (Rom 14:5,6). Arguing from such texts, Sunday defenders maintained it was a matter of indifference whether Sunday or Sabbath was kept or how to keep it. They denied Sabbath was of divine authority. “They who were truly enlightened by the gospel spirit, and knew how to distinguish essentials from non-essentials in religion, such men as Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, and Augustin, sought to avoid all controversy on matters of this sort They held it as a principle, that, in such matters, each individual should follow the custom of his own church, or of the country in which he resided, and strive that the bond of charity might not be broken by differences in such unimportant matters, and that occasion of offence might not be given to any man.” Augustus Neander *General History Christian Religion And Church*, volume 3, Translated from the German by Joseph Torrey (Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1851) 423.

¹⁰⁶ Emperor Constantine, who made Sunday a festival throughout the Roman Empire, “was urged to do this by the bishops of the church, who, inspired by ambition and thirst for power, perceived that if the same day was observed by both Christians and heathen, it would promote the nominal acceptance of Christianity by pagans and thus advance the power and glory of the church” (GC 53).

¹⁰⁷ Since even rats quickly learn to avoid an immediately lethal poison, successful rat poison must work slow enough to avoid detection by the rats. Satan uses this same technique with humans: “Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Eccl 8:11).

¹⁰⁸ “In nearly every council the Sabbath which God had instituted was pressed down a little lower, while the Sunday was correspondingly exalted” (GC 53).

- The pastors of Sunday-keeping churches reported how God was blessing, and there were wonders and miracles.¹⁰⁹
- Those defending the Sabbath were demonized as Judaizers, like the circumcision party.¹¹⁰ Sabbath defenders were marginalized and silenced.

Rome, leader in this apostasy, refused to wait for the rest of the church; and forged ahead professing to honor Jesus by honoring the day of His resurrection.¹¹¹ Of course, the moment the church placed itself above the Bible and permitted Sunday in some regions,¹¹² it was inevitable that this apostasy would ultimately spread to all regions.

The foundation of the Roman Catholic heresy was its “supplementing” the word of God—like Uzzah, “steadying the ark” (2Sam 6:6). This permeates every part of this early Christian apostasy. The Catholic church disregards the Sabbath, but also disregards God’s instruction on ordination, refusing to allow the bishop/overseer to be the husband of one wife (1Tim 4:3; 1Tim 3:2). “The very beginning of the great apostasy was in seeking to supplement the authority of God by that of the church. Rome began by enjoining what God had not forbidden, and she ended by forbidding what He had explicitly enjoined” (GC 289).

Foundational not cultural

For the church to be engaged in a major study on “the laying on of hands” should make us very humble, since Paul lists this as a beginner’s doctrine, part of the mother’s milk of the word, a

¹⁰⁹ “For fear the doctrine should not take without miracles to support it, Gregory of Tours furnishes us with several to that purpose” Morer, Thomas *A Discourse in Six Dialogues on the Name, Notion, and Observation of the Lords’ Day*. (The Newborough, at the Golden Ball in St. Paul’s Church-yard, 1701) 68.

¹¹⁰ “Mosheim gives an account of another sect in the twelfth century, in Lombardy, who were called Pasaginians, or the circumcised; that they circumcised their followers, and celebrated the Jewish Sabbath. The account of their practising circumcision is undoubtedly a slanderous story forged by their enemies, and probably arose in this way. Because they observed the Seventh day, they were called, by way of derision, Jews, as the Sabbatarians are frequently at this day.” Benedict, David *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America*, volume 2, (Manning & Loring, No. 2, Cornhill, 1813) 414.

¹¹¹ Though wholly fallacious, these arguments proved persuasive over time. Ultimately, most of the Christian world joined Rome in acceptance of this heresy.

¹¹² “For although almost all churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this.” Socrates Scholasticus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, by Socrates Scholasticus, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series: Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. A. C. Zenos, vol. 2 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890) 132.

“The people of Constantinople, and almost everywhere, assemble together on the Sabbath, as well as on the first day of the week, which custom is never observed at Rome or at Alexandria.” Sozomen, Hermias *The Ecclesiastical History of Salaminius Hermias Sozomenus*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series: Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. A. C. Zenos, vol. 2 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890) 390.

subject suitable for spiritual babies—those unskilled in the word of God (Heb 5:12-6:2). “The laying on of hands” in ordination was easily understood and practiced from the beginning by the Adventist pioneers, even before the church was officially organized.¹¹³

Though “the laying on of hands” is not a difficult subject, it is important, for the author of Hebrews lists it as one of Christianity’s foundational beliefs (Heb 6:1,2) and the Bible warns, “if the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Ps 11:3).¹¹⁴

Since the pillars of the Seventh-day Adventist church are built on the foundations of the Christian church, anything that attacks the foundation of the Christian church threatens the pillars of Adventism.

God’s appointment of male leadership is consistent throughout the Bible.¹¹⁵ This is seldom debated for the Old Testament.¹¹⁶ God’s selection of male leadership remains consistent in the New Testament. Jesus’ choice of twelve male apostles was far too important to be merely a cultural choice. Mark makes this clear in his introduction of the twelve by saying, Jesus “called to Him *those He Himself wanted*” (Mark 3:13).

The early church’s choice of male leadership was confirmed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

These Old and New Testament men, selected by God for leadership office, are immortalized in the New Jerusalem with their names on its twelve foundations and its twelve gates (Rev 21:12, 14), where cultural influences from this earth cannot be said to “somehow” be controlling. Since wrong earthly decisions “are reversed” (GC 650) in heaven, the fact that no woman’s name is added or included on the foundations or gates is significant.

Conclusion: Acts 15, Unity, and the Remnant

The Jerusalem Council closed in unity (Acts 15:22, 25). This unity was the great miracle of Acts 15. This was not an agreement to disagree. It was not done by changing the subject to something

¹¹³ For example, “it was decided that there were those present that should be ordained to the work of the Gospel ministry, and that there were those (not present) who profess to teach the present truth, who were not worthy of the confidence of the church, as teachers. At 1 o’clock at night we adjourned to 8 o’clock in the morning, when the subject of ordination was again taken up. And it was the unanimous expression of all present that our dear Brn. J. N. Andrews, A. S. Hutchins and C. W. Sperry, should be set apart to the work of the ministry (that they might feel free to administer the ordinances of the church of God) by prayer and the laying on of hands. And as Bro. Joseph Baker and the writer performed the solemn duty, the Holy Ghost came down upon us. There, bowed before God, we wept together, also rejoiced.” (James White, “Eastern Tour” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 15, 1853).

¹¹⁴ All quoted texts are from the New King James Version unless another version is specifically indicated.

¹¹⁵ See Acts 7:8 for example.

¹¹⁶ Though Jacob had at least one daughter, Dinah, she is never listed as a “matriarch.”

they could all agree upon and pronouncing this “unity.” The decision was not one of political expediency, placing the church in a position to call some parts of the Bible essential while other parts could be disregarded at pleasure.¹¹⁷

Biblically based unity and love is a ‘DNA’ marker of genuine Christianity (John 13:35; 17:21). The Christian church, which began in unity in Acts 1 and regained its unity in Acts 15, must close in unity—men and women, youth and aged, every race and culture, all working together in harmony under God’s direction. This is the only testimony to the world that really matters. This testimony of unity is needed at every level.

Christ prayed His prayer for unity where we could overhear: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that *they all* may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:20,21).

Christ’s prayer is not only that each separate generation of believers would be in harmony with each other, but that *all*, from first generation to last generation, would be in harmony—the last generation *one* with the disciples and the early church. This is the remnant principle, the last of the bolt is like the first.

The Christian church is to form one antiphonal choir, all following one director, all in harmony, in tune, without one discordant, independent note.

What was the early church like? Is the Seventh-day Adventist Church today living and teaching what Paul and the apostles taught? Are the two churches one—separated only by time, not biblical belief or practice?

If the Jerusalem Council had been considering the question of ordaining women, how would it have decided? Any General Conference must be focused on making the decision that would keep the body of believers in harmony—*one*—with the early church, by keeping it in harmony with the Bible.

Is the corporate body of the church utilizing the women of the church like Christ and the Apostles utilized them, treating each with dignity and importance?

What ministry did Jesus give women (Mk 15:40,41)? Is the remnant church the promoter of the same women’s ministry? The ministry of Peter’s mother-in-law was so important that Christ

¹¹⁷ “We dare not tamper with God’s word, dividing His holy law; calling one portion essential and another nonessential, to gain the favor of the world” (GC 610).

healed her so that she could resume it (Mk 1:31). Unselfish women ministered with their substance (Lu 8:3). Dorcas' ministry was so important that God resurrected her so that she could continue it (Acts 9:36-41). Paul listed the qualifications for the women whose ministry entitled them to the church's "sustentation" fund: "She has been the wife of one man,¹¹⁸ well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work" (1Tim 5:9,10). Is the remnant church in unity with these early believers? Is it seconding Paul's emphasis on the importance of women bringing up children in the fear of God?

God has chosen and assigned our sphere of responsibility and influence. Not all are content with God's choice; some even feel insulted by it. These discontented women have an example to consider—Eve. "Like restless modern Eves, she was flattered with the hope of entering a higher sphere than that which God had assigned her. In attempting to rise above her original position, she fell far below it. A similar result will be reached by all who are unwilling to take up cheerfully their life duties in accordance with God's plan. In their efforts to reach positions for which He has not fitted them, many are leaving vacant the place where they might be a blessing. In their desire for a higher sphere, many have sacrificed true womanly dignity and nobility of character, and have left undone the very work that Heaven appointed them" (PP 59).

Paul, who spoke of the ministry heaven has appointed to women, also spoke of the ministry heaven has called men to perform. He gave inspired instruction to Timothy for selecting leaders among the Gentile converts.

Those who feel a call to the overseeing role of gospel minister have a great calling. "If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work" (1Tim 3:1).

But it is not enough to feel such a call; there are specific qualifications to confirm this call. "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife" (1Tim 3:2). Paul could have said, "A bishop then must be ... married", but he does not. However, with the statement, "the husband of one wife," Paul is affirming the value of women in the church. A leader benefits from the influence of a godly wife. Though she is not the head, she is no less important. The Catholic Church long ago rejected this instruction of Paul and finally reversed it by teaching that "a bishop must not be the husband of a wife." Let us not join in their rejection by further distorting Paul's instruction to say "a bishop may be the wife of one husband."

¹¹⁸ Few would argue that these qualifications were not specifically for females. This is only a couple chapters after Paul gives the requirements for ordination as one who is "the husband of one wife." Both are equally clear.

“Temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?)” (1Tim 3:2-5). There is nothing in this list that is hard to understand. We see that Paul’s instruction is interlinked and self-explanatory. Paul clearly links leadership in the home with leadership in the church. We must not join the Catholic Church in revising or reversing this.

“Not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1Tim 3:6,7).

In their desire to be faithful to the Bible, the pioneers of the remnant church early adopted this biblical instruction as an important element in church organization. This must continue to be taught as a component of church organization till Jesus comes.

Speaking of the early church practice on ordination we are told that, “The brethren *chose men* who had given good evidence that they were capable of ruling well their own house and preserving order in their own families, and who could enlighten those who were in darkness. Inquiry was made of God concerning these, and then, according to the mind of the church and the Holy Ghost, they were set apart by the laying on of hands.... *We have their example, and should follow it.*” (EW 100, 101).

There is no basis for suggesting that Paul’s instruction on qualifications for ordination was limited to a local situation. God preserved it precisely because it would guide the church worldwide till the close of time. “Paul had been enabled to communicate lessons of divine wisdom, which met the necessities of *all classes*, and which were to *apply at all times*, in *all places*, and under *all conditions*” (AA 301).

To say that Paul’s instruction on church leadership doesn’t apply to “all classes,” “at all times,” “in all places,” and “under all conditions” shows bias and caste and is to contradict both Paul and the sworn Testimony of Jesus Himself.

Paul’s instruction on leadership qualifications applies today just as it applied when he was inspired to write it. Those in the pro-circumcision party didn’t accept Paul’s instruction. The Catholic Church, like the circumcision party, rejected Paul’s instruction as it reads. Now the Seventh-day Adventist Church is at a similar crossroad. Will we “learn ... not to go beyond what is written” (1Cor 4:6, ESV)?

Dermatologists see patients with the open sores of prurigo nodularis. The sores may be infected. These patients usually have scars. Sometimes dermatologists see patients with lichen simplex chronicus. Both these skin problems are self-inflicted from repeatedly rubbing and scratching. The cure is to stop the scratching and rubbing. The church right now has a self-inflicted disease with wounds open to the world. Further agitation won't help this since it was the agitation that caused the problem in the first place! The solution is the discipline that the dermatologists' patients need—discipline from the head to control the hands.

Satan would love to hijack the remnant church as he hijacked the early church. He advances his agenda little by little, with gradual erosion of faithfulness to the Bible. He would succeed but for the constant protection and watchful vigilance of Christ for His church. He calls us to “contend earnestly for the faith which was *once for all* delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). May God give us the courage to follow the example and give the united testimony of the early church.