

# A unity perspective drawn from Acts 15

A paper presented at the CTBI Conference held in Edinburgh on 22-23 November 2016<sup>1</sup> by Hugh Osgood

The paper I am presenting today follows on from a paper I presented on ‘Unity and Diversity – a Pentecostal Perspective’ at a CTE Anglican-Pentecostal Consultation held at Free Churches House on 5 November 2015.<sup>2</sup> That Consultation focused on the feasibility of using *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* as a basis for exploring closer relations.<sup>3</sup> As my brief on that occasion was to consider the WCC document from a unity standpoint, I focused on Section C of Chapter 1 of the document, ‘The Importance of Unity’, and in particular paragraph 8 which states:

The importance of Christian unity to the mission and nature of the Church was already evident in the New Testament. In Acts 15 and Galatians 1-2, it is clear that the mission to the Gentiles gave birth to tensions and threatened to create divisions between Christians. In a way, the contemporary ecumenical movement is reliving the experience of that first council of Jerusalem. The present text is an invitation to the leaders, theologians and faithful of all churches to seek the unity for which Jesus prayed on the eve before he offered his life for the salvation of the world (cf. John 17:21).<sup>4</sup>

Among other things I was intrigued by the reference to the contemporary ecumenical movement ‘reliving the experience of the first Council of Jerusalem’, not least because the WCC Document had raised the matter of convergence in its Introduction and I was not convinced about the juxtaposition of the two. Let me first quote from the Introduction and then from my earlier paper:

Our aim is to offer a convergence text, that is, a text which, while not expressing full consensus on all the issues considered, is much more than simply an instrument to stimulate further study. Rather, the following pages express how far Christian communities have come in their common understanding of the Church, showing the progress that has been made and indicating work that still needs to be done.<sup>5</sup>

So, in my earlier paper I responded to this juxtaposition of ‘convergence’ and ‘Council of Jerusalem’ by saying:

No Pentecostal, to my knowledge, would deny the importance of the Council of Jerusalem in resolving the issue of Gentile compliance with certain Jewish laws. The Bible gives the Council significant space and that is sufficient to guarantee that Pentecostals give it due weight. I think, however, that some would question the statement that, ‘In a way, the contemporary ecumenical movement is reliving the experience of the first Council of Jerusalem’. The assertion makes sense if the experience referred to is the acknowledging of differences but it is less convincing if we go on to remember that the Council of Jerusalem was a liberating exercise, ensuring that the views of one section of the church were not imposed on another so that both could exist, comfortably juxtaposed

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a slightly reworked version of a paper presented at the consultation on Anglican-Pentecostal Relations held at University of Roehampton on 13<sup>th</sup> January 2016. The preamble relates specifically to the Edinburgh CTBI conference.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Osgood, *Unity and Diversity: a Pentecostal Perspective*, unpublished paper produced for the CTE Anglican/Pentecostal Consultation, 5.11.2015 (written from a personal perspective rather than as a President of CTE).

<sup>3</sup> *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214, World Council of Church Publications, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 1C, paragraph 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p1.

in an on-going diversity. If we read the Council proceedings in this way, it was an exercise in **beneficial divergence** rather than **convergence**.<sup>6</sup>

Although I did not state specifically that Pentecostals would be more comfortable with beneficial divergence than convergence, the possibility of such a preference did, at the time, lead to some further reflections on Acts 15 and Galatians 1-2, not least because both 'convergence' and 'divergence' can imply a process as well as a state, with 'convergence' being capable of indicating 'on-going **and increasing** convergence', and 'divergence' being capable of indicating 'on-going **and increasing** divergence'. In identifying divergence at the Council of Jerusalem I was not seeking to imply that the parties would increasingly diverge, rather I was seeking to emphasise a static divergence that all present at the Council seemed content to endorse.

Maybe at this point we should distinguish between **convictions**, **persuasion** and **positioning** as we consider the situation in Antioch and Jerusalem at around 50 AD. It is clear that the basic tenets of the Gospel had been equally grasped by Jew and Gentile with identical transforming effect, but alongside these core **convictions** some were anxious to ensure Gentile adherence to the Mosaic Law whilst others, the Apostle Peter included, had had a spiritual encounter that **persuaded** them otherwise. **Positions** then began to be taken, albeit tentatively at times, with the compatibility of these positions quickly coming into doubt. Resolving these apparent incompatibilities between parties became the task of the Jerusalem Council!

If we begin with the Antioch incident recorded in Galatians 2, we find Paul stating that, prior to the arrival of the circumcision party, Peter '*being a Jew, live[d] in the manner of Gentiles*'.<sup>7</sup> We do not know exactly how much adjustment this 'living in the manner of Gentiles' had entailed for Peter but Acts 10:28 makes it clear that prior to his Joppa vision he, as a Jewish man, would not have 'kept company with' Gentiles. In not eating with the Gentile Christians at Antioch, Peter was definitely taking a step backwards from the Joppa vision, even if when he had been previously sharing a table he had always stopped short of adopting a Gentile diet.

On the more fundamental issue on which the Council of Jerusalem deliberated, that of whether or not circumcision is a prerequisite for salvation, there is no evidence that Peter ever wavered. So the dissension in Antioch referred to in Acts 15:2 presumably took place after Peter had left. Maybe this absence, together with his recovery from Paul's assault on his earlier compromise, gave Peter greater freedom when expressing his views in Jerusalem. For whatever reason, though, the question of eating with Gentiles appears not to have been raised at the Council, although three of the 'four necessary' things written into the final communique related to the food Gentiles may have been in the habit of eating.<sup>8</sup> I quote from that communique:

*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.*<sup>9</sup>

Another matter worthy of note is the 'sent' or 'not sent' issue referred to earlier in the communique, as the circumcision advocates who came to Antioch from Jerusalem appear to have claimed to have come from James.<sup>10</sup> Paul, prior to the Council clearly believed this, but James affirmed they had never been instructed to teach what they taught.<sup>11</sup> Such references rather suggest that they were not party to the discussions that

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<sup>6</sup> Osgood, Unity and Diversity.

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 2:14.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 15:20 and 29.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 15:28-29.

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 2:12.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 15:24.

led to the Acts 15 settlement, although doubtless they would have been expected to adhere to it, and just as doubtless they did not, as subsequent New Testament history shows.

So overall, the outcome of the Jerusalem Council appears to have been that Gentile and Jewish expressions of Christianity were able to exist side-by-side with Gentiles being free of the Mosaic Law, except for the four 'necessary things', and with Jews laying aside their expectations for Gentile circumcision and setting aside their scruples about not eating in mixed company. The theology underlying these different practical positions does not seem to have been a major focus at Jerusalem as Peter's argument from experience held sway and was backed up by James quoting the Davidic promise of Amos 9:11-12 about re-raising David's tabernacle to highlight the biblical expectation of the inclusion of the Gentiles at the time of the establishing of Christ's kingdom.

It fell to Paul, writing subsequently, to give a more through theology both of the covenant privileges and responsibilities resting uniquely on the Jewish nation, and of the principle of respect for the consciences of others when faced with food restrictions and similar behavioural requirements, which in other circumstances Paul would almost certainly have deemed as theologically non-essential.<sup>12</sup>

So, in many ways the relatively easily achieved contentedness shown by the Apostles and Elders at Jerusalem in endorsing a statement that appears to cry out for much more work to be done on it, both in terms of theological conformity and uniformity of practice, seems to challenge the way we tend to pursue unity today. It seems that the Jerusalem Council, having reached a consensus that was sufficient to facilitate fellowship, felt under no pressure to declare this as 'conditional', or 'dependent on a greater convergence of practice and theology'. I think this is helpful as I am really quite keen to use the Council of Jerusalem as a template for unity and am willing to take as much time as necessary in discussion and debate to make sure we understand it correctly. I am hopeful that if we do this we may, sooner than we had expected, be confessing *'For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us'*.<sup>13</sup>

I do, however, want to sound a warning note for our current ecumenical Pentecostal and Black Majority Churches discussions. In the 1700s and 1800s, movements such as Methodism and the Salvation Army moved from being ridiculed to being accepted, and, at the risk of being over-simplistic, one can probably trace some stereotyping centring on 'class' as a way of facilitating the apparent success of that transition process. Much the same happened with white Pentecostalism in Britain in the 1900s. So, sadly, it seems that we in Britain have in times past accommodated variations in theology and practice on the grounds of socio-economic difference. We must ensure, therefore, that accommodation on the basis of ethnic difference does not now come into the mix.

We need to remind ourselves that variations in theology and practice were accommodated at the Jerusalem Council on the grounds of **covenant history**, not discounted (as might easily have been attempted) on the basis of ethnicity or culture. As the covenant history argument cannot be used in our intra-Gentile relationships today, we may have to work harder on some issues than they did in Jerusalem to make sure we rise above unjust cultural and ethnic discrimination, or patronising cultural and ethnic accommodation.

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<sup>12</sup> On food offered to idols, in 1 Corinthians 10:14-33 we read strong things that Paul had to say, pointing out that food offered to idols is food offered to demons and that we cannot be found to be eating at the table of the Lord and the table of demons. In the same passage, though, he advises when dining in a non-believer's home *'eat whatever is set before you'*, unless it is clearly said that the meat has been offered to an idol in which case you should refrain for the sake of the one who has drawn attention to it. Likewise, he sees no problem in eating whatever is bought in ignorance in the market place. His embargo is evidently less than absolute.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 15:28.

So here are seven reasons I would like to offer to explain the relative ease with which a 'contented consensus' was achieved at the Jerusalem Council. I will list them then devote a few closing sentences to the points I list first and second in order to throw more light on a biblical understanding of visible unity.

In Jerusalem there was...

1. ... a strong underlying conviction on the part of both parties that the Church had an inherent unity in constant fulfilment of Jesus' prayer as recorded in John 17.
2. ... a commitment on the part of both parties to make unity visible through manifestations of mutual love, in line with the statements made by Jesus in His Last Supper discourse.
3. ... a willingness on the part of both parties to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit in His affirmation of inclusiveness, as evidenced in the home of Cornelius.
4. ... a willingness on the part of both parties to make gracious concessions for the sake of each other's consciences.
5. ... also a willingness on the part of both parties to commit to mutually acceptable expressions of fellowship, such as 'keeping company' and sharing tables.
6. ... a willingness, certainly on the part of James, to dissociate, at least in part, from people who were unhelpfully intransigent.
7. ... a willingness to maintain love and respect, even when anticipating a future investigation of the theological differences that underscored their different practices. (And maybe putting them 'in the future' was part of the reason for the relative speed of the Jerusalem Council's success.)

Conclusion: In *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, John 17:20-21 is held up as the point **to which** we journey. The WCC's description of itself as 'a community of churches **on the way** to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ' can sometimes leave us thinking that the journey towards John 17:20-21 will be extremely protracted.<sup>14</sup> The Apostles in Jerusalem, however, had personal recall of Jesus' prayer *en route* to Gethsemane and His words would not have been far from their minds as they met in Council:

*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.*<sup>15</sup>

There is at least a theoretical possibility that at the Jerusalem Council, even in the face of the differences they had assembled to resolve, they presumed that they were living in the answer to this prayer. From the moment the Church had been birthed through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost there had been much that exemplified its inherent unity. Maybe they were so quickly contented in their Council because they honestly believed their differences never could, or never should, undermine their celebration of unity in the Spirit or their joy at their oneness over core convictions. They just knew they were one; Jesus had prayed for it and they never doubted it.<sup>16</sup>

So, on the matter of 'visible unity' the Apostles would no doubt have simply accepted what Jesus said in the Upper Room before leaving for Gethsemane:

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us>. Accessed 28.12.2015. Emphasis mine.

<sup>15</sup> John 17:20-21.

<sup>16</sup> Someone had stated earlier in the conference that Archbishop Gregorios had said something at the last CTE Forum to the effect that the Church is already united.

<sup>17</sup> John 13:34-35.

And they would have believed that their love, and not their uniformity, would make their unity visible.

These two points are not intended to be trite. I am just seeking to establish the two-fold understanding of unity that I believe the Jerusalem Council exhibited. The Jerusalem Council **did not establish a unity of practice**. The Jews had a covenant that the Gentiles had never been part of and, in establishing that Jewish covenantal practices were not binding on the Gentiles, the Council made no binding requirement for Jewish practices to be curtailed for Jews. Furthermore, **there was no real unity of theology**, as the theological underpinnings of these positions were not articulated at the Council. **There was, however, a unity of the Spirit**.

Later Paul was to write to the Ephesians *‘walk worthy of the calling with which you were called... endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’*.<sup>18</sup> A few verses further on he wrote of *‘the equipping of the saints for the works of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...’*<sup>19</sup> Clearly there is a unity that Paul urges us to press towards that is undergirded by a unity that he beseeches us to maintain. It could be argued that the Jerusalem Council succeeded in *‘keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’* whilst leaving the door open for a steady pressing onwards to an even greater unity.

I think this is where many Pentecostals, Independents and other evangelicals increasingly see themselves, regarding unity as being more about respect than institutional convergence.

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23.11.16

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<sup>18</sup> Ephesians 4:1, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ephesians 4:12-13.