

Synodality: Lessons that can be learned from the Council of Jerusalem

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Text: Acts 15:1-29

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers and sisters, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.

⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church assembly and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.

⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us;⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me.¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name.

¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,¹⁶ 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord-- even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things¹⁸ known from long ago.'¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues."

²² Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers and sisters,²³ with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.²⁴ Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds,²⁵ we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,²⁶ who have risked their lives for the sake of

our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials:²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

1. Read this text a few times and see how the community came to their final decision
2. What can we learn from this about our discussions on synodality?

Reflection The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-29)

Pope Francis has described synodality as a 'journey together on the way.' The story of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 can teach us much about both the topic and decision-making process of synodality.

To show the importance of the Council of Jerusalem, not only does Luke place it in the middle of the Acts of the Apostles but he also brings the two main protagonists, Peter and Paul, together for the first and only time in Acts.

To make sense of the Council we must put it in context. After Pentecost, despite Peter's quotation from Joel 3:1 that God would "pour out his Spirit on all flesh," the new community was made up almost completely of Jews who followed the Law of Moses and still continued to go up to the Temple to pray. They saw themselves as a sect within Judaism rather than a separate religious grouping. However, as the early church continued to grow and spread, more Gentiles began to join the new community of believers in Jesus Christ. Luke emphasises this outreach to the Gentiles, in particular through Peter's encounter with the Roman centurion, Cornelius (Acts 10), and the baptism of his whole household and by the story of Paul's first mission when he began to move out beyond the Jewish community to the Gentiles (Acts 13-14). This movement outward lead to tension among the diverse members of the early community and eventually necessitated the calling of the first decision-making gathering of the church known as the Council of Jerusalem.

The lead up to the council shows a community that is having a very serious disagreement, described in the original Greek as 'a heated dispute' and 'strife' (Acts 15:2). Some men from Judea visited the church in Antioch and insisted that circumcision was necessary for salvation. When Paul and Barnabas disagreed strongly with this, they were sent to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the apostles and elders. So the gathering in Jerusalem is made up of people with very different views, from those with a Pharisaic background, who want the new converts to accept Judaism with all its dietary and purity rules including circumcision, to people like Paul and Barnabas who fully embrace the Gentiles once they have faith in Jesus. So the first council of the church focuses on the topic of inclusion, who should be welcomed into the community and what they had to do to become full members of that community.

When Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem, they are welcomed, not only by the elders and apostles, but by the whole church. They share their personal testimonies of the mission to the Gentiles and “the whole assembly kept silent” as they listen to them. Peter also adds his witness to the faith of the Gentiles to the discussion. As well as those personal testimonies, the participants also search for direction in the Scriptures; those who were Pharisees draw on Moses while James quotes the prophets.

The Holy Spirit is central to the discussion and resolving of the problem but we are not told how the Spirit communicates with them. There is no description of a miraculous intervention like the one found in the Pentecost story. Instead when the decision is made, James states that “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” to come to that decision (Acts 15:28). The Spirit is working through the community discussion and discernment.

The decision is very clear. Despite the objections of those of a Pharisaic background, the former Gentiles must follow a few basic rules, the most important of which refer to refraining from eating meat offered in Roman sacrifices and any connection with the ritual prostitution that was associated with those temples. Put simply, they were not to worry about a multitude of rules and regulations but refrain from idolatry and instead place their relationship with the Lord at the centre of their lives.

To summarise, the Council of Jerusalem can give us many pointers about synodality and how it should operate:

- The focus of the first Council was on inclusion, welcoming the outsider and how that outsider should be treated. In insisting that we go out to the margins, Pope Francis echoes this.
- When the community gathered, they listened with respect to one another’s views (even when they vehemently disagreed with them).
- Many different views were allowed to be expressed, from the Pharisaic emphasis on the Law to Paul’s recognition of the importance of the faith of the Gentiles.
- The personal experiences of Peter, Paul and Barnabas were accepted as valid inputs into the discussion.
- Participants turned to the Scriptures for guidance.
- It was accepted that the group discernment was inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- The decision that was communicated to the believers was not to lay ‘further burdens’ of many rules and regulations on them but focus instead on the core value of belief in the Lord.