

**APPENDIX**  
**NOTE 12**

*The Council of Jerusalem*

**F.F. Bruce**

[p.219]

The Council of Jerusalem, of which we read in Acts 15, is sometimes adduced as an argument against the position maintained in this volume regarding the administrative independence of each local church. It may, therefore, be helpful to say one or two things about it.

In the first place, the Council of Jerusalem was not (as has been imagined by some) a body of apostles and elders meeting in permanent session in the metropolis of Christianity. It was a special gathering convened for a special purpose.

In the second place, the Council of Jerusalem does not represent any superior authority enjoyed or exercised by the Church of Jerusalem over the other churches of apostolic days.

The Council of Jerusalem was a conference held between delegates from the Church of Antioch (including Paul and Barnabas) with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, to reach agreement with regard to the terms on which Gentile believers might be welcomed to full Christian fellowship. The stricter Jewish Christians of Jerusalem and Judæa had insisted that these Gentiles should be circumcized. Failure to reach agreement on this point might have resulted in a schism between the Church of Jerusalem and her daughter-churches in Judæa on the one hand, and the Church of Antioch and her daughter-churches in Asia Minor on the other hand. The conference agreed, however, that no ritual or ceremonial conditions were to be required of Gentile converts; the principle 'of grace alone, by faith alone' which had been sufficient for their salvation was to be sufficient for their recognition as full sharers in the Christian fellowship. A recommendation of a practical nature was added which would make it easier for Jewish and Gentile believers to enjoy full Christian and social intercourse.

Had the Jerusalem members of the conference thought differently, it would have put grave difficulties in the way of fellowship between the churches, but Paul would obviously have refused to accept their views as binding on the churches which he founded. As it was, however, all could rejoice that the conference, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, had reached such a happy decision.

One further point is to be noted. As a result of the conference, the apostles and elders of Jerusalem sent a letter to the Church of Antioch and her daughter-churches. Apostles as such wielded an authority that was not locally restricted, but here the apostles and elders write as leading members of the Church of Jerusalem. The terms in which they write the letter are therefore interesting, 'The New Testament,' says Dr. Hort (*The Christian Ecclesia*, p. 82), 'is not poor of words expressive of command...; yet none of them is used. It was in truth a delicate and difficult position, even after the happy decision of the assembly. The independence of the Ecclesia had to be respected, and yet not in such a way as to encourage disregard either of the great mother Ecclesia, or of the Lord's own

[p.220]

Apostles, or of the unity of the whole Christian body.' What they say, therefore, is: 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us.' If the mind of the Spirit be humbly sought, ascertained and followed, fellowship between churches will be promoted, as it will not if a church is subjected to the authority either of another church or of a group of churches. And the mind of the Spirit to-day is expressed in the Word, interpreted by that same Spirit. For the Spirit in the Word, as John Knox said to Queen Mary, 'is never contrarious to Himself.'

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