

Does Acts 15 Establish a Centralized Hierarchy Over Local Assemblies?

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This paper is presented to refute those who say that the Jerusalem church had positional authority over the other local assemblies and that James was the solo bishop of the church in Jerusalem.

Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

Acts 15:2

IN THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER OF ACTS, we read of Paul and Barnabas traveling from Antioch to Jerusalem to settle a serious doctrinal dispute. After a time of deliberation with Peter, James, and a number of unnamed brethren, a letter was composed which Paul and Barnabas carried back to the church at Antioch. Some say this incident reveals a centralized authority over the early apostolic assemblies with its headquarters in Jerusalem. Some say that James held the highest position of authority. But is this really what this passage teaches? Does Acts 15 reveal that the local assemblies of the first century were governed by a hierarchical¹ structure with its headquarters in Jerusalem? And does it indicate that James was the head of this centralized authority?

The vital question omitted by those who see a centralized authority is this: *Why was a matter being disputed in Antioch sent to Jerusalem for resolution?* As we examine this question, let us set aside all preconceived ideas of a hierarchy and look closely at the information presented in Acts 15. As we do this, we (the authors) are certain that any thought of a hierarchical relationship between the Jerusalem assembly and the assembly in Antioch will quickly evaporate.

Taking it to the Source

Acts 15:1 introduces the episode in question by telling us that certain men had come to Antioch from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." In his letter to the Galatians, Paul declared that these kinds of teachers were preaching another gospel and should therefore be accursed (Galatians 1:6-9). According to Paul, to require circumcision (or any other ceremonial practice) for salvation was to become estranged from Christ and a debtor to keep the whole law" (Galatians 5:2-4). His conclusion was, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation" (Galatians 6:15). Paul was a preacher of the New Birth, not religious ceremony.

Why then did the Antioch assembly send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to discuss this issue? It was because these certain men had come to Antioch from Judea, specifically from Jerusalem. This is corroborated by the letter the brethren in Jerusalem composed, which began, "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). So we see that the Antioch assembly was simply going to the source of the problem. Their question to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem was, "Did you send these men to us?" The ultimate response from the Jerusalem assembly was, "No we did not, and we don't agree with their gospel." "

Notice that Paul and Barnabas did not decide on their own to take this matter up with the brethren in Jerusalem. They were selected and sent on their way by the church at Antioch (Acts 15:3). What we see here is one local assembly sending representatives to the respected leaders at another local assembly to discuss an important doctrinal issue. We can conjecture that the Antioch assembly may have even been concerned about remaining in fellowship with the brethren in Jerusalem if they were indeed preaching another gospel. But irrespective of whether this was a concern or not, there is no basis within the text itself for construing this incident to be an example of a local assembly taking a dispute to its headquarters authorities.

Received by the Church

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders (Acts 15:4). They were not received specifically by James, though he was certainly included among those called the apostles and elders. But no indication is given to suggest that he was the leader of either the apostles or the elders. To be sure, James was a leading figure in the Jerusalem church, being known as the half-brother of the Lord Jesus. And having received a

special visitation from the Lord after His ascension and being a wise and mature man, he was obviously highly regarded by the believers (1 Corinthians 15:7). But there is not a single verse of Scripture declaring that James held positional authority over any of the apostles or elders of Jerusalem. Let us look at what the Bible actually does say about this man.

In Galatians 1:19, Paul states that James was an apostle. In Galatians 2:9, he wrote that James, Cephas, and John seemed to be pillars. A pillar holds up a house; it does not control or dominate it. Moreover, James is described in exactly the same terms as Peter and John without any suggestion that he exercised authority over them. After Peter was miraculously delivered from prison in Acts 12, he told his comrades, Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren (Acts 12:17). Even though James is singled out from the rest, to conclude that this means he held a position of authority over the rest of the brethren is adding to this verse what is not there. On another occasion when Paul returned from one of his missions, the Bible says, Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present (Acts 21:18). The implication is that James was a leading figure, even an apostle. But there is no information in this verse that tells us he exercised authority over either the other apostles or the elders.

In Galatians 2, Paul mentions an occasion when certain men came from James to the assembly in Antioch (2:12). When they arrived, Peter withdrew his association with the Gentiles, apparently fearing these men might consider him to be defiled. But Paul did not hesitate to rebuke Peter in front of everyone, showing us that Paul was far more concerned about the purity of a man's doctrine than his personal connections. The fact that the men had come from James did not prevent Paul from addressing the falsity of their gospel. The passage is unclear as to whether these men represented James or whether James subscribed at that time to their gospel of circumcision. What we know is that Paul did not consider it inappropriate to challenge them simply because they had come from James.

This is all we know about James from the Scriptures. The popular proposition that he was the single leader or bishop² of the Jerusalem church is a Catholic tradition without any scriptural basis. The Catholics also believe that Peter was the bishop³ of the church in Rome, and that after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Roman church replaced the Jerusalem church as the central authority. Yet there is no biblical evidence that Peter ever set foot in Rome or that the assembly in Rome was headquarters for the rest of the Church universal.

The Defense of the Gospel

A second related question which extended beyond the question of whether the

Jerusalem assembly had sent these men to Antioch concerned the doctrine itself. Since we can now read this account as part of the Word of God, we can see that this second question went to the defense of the gospel as the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and obedience to the gospel by repentance, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Concerning those who preached the additional requirement of circumcision, the Jerusalem brethren declared, "We gave no such commandment." This written defense of the gospel was intended specifically for the believers in Antioch. Later, Paul and Silas took it to many of the other local churches. Today, as part of the canon of Scripture, we can now accept it as an admonition to all believers in all times.

In the Acts 15 account, we see that after Paul and Barnabas gave their report of all that God had been doing among the Gentiles, 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" (15:5). We see here that there were indeed some among the Jerusalem church who did subscribe to this other gospel which was of such concern to the believers in Antioch. But were their beliefs representative of the assembly as a whole?

At this juncture, the apostles certainly remembered Jesus' warning, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:6). They understood that their responsibility was to preach the gospel, that is, the pure gospel delivered to them by the Lord Himself. Similarly, the elders knew that their responsibilities included using sound doctrine both to exhort and convict those who contradict (Titus 1:9). For these reasons, the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter (Acts 15:6).

The first to speak was not James, as one might expect if he were in fact the leader of the Jerusalem church. Instead it was Peter, who rose up to defend the gospel he had first proclaimed on the Day of Pentecost. He reminded the assembled brethren that it was he who had first preached to Gentiles in the household of Cornelius, and that God had purified their hearts by faith (15:6). They were not purified by being circumcised, but by obeying the gospel. This same Peter later wrote to the believing Jews of the Diaspora that they had purified their souls by obeying the truth (2 Peter 1:22). Some have said that Peter was also a preacher of this gospel of circumcision, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Even though he may have at times yielded to pressure from the circumcision crowd, Peter consistently preached salvation by repentance, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit; that is, by obedience to the truth.

Once Peter had finished his assessment of the situation, then 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 (15:12). How could anyone deny that God was working in the hearts of the Gentiles? They were being

miraculously healed, demons were being cast out, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit and speaking in other tongues just like the Jews. It was only after Peter, Paul, and Barnabas finished speaking that James finally entered the discussion.

James began by affirming Peter's assessment. He then added further confirmation by citing a prophecy from Amos 9:11-12 which foretold the Gentiles coming to God. He concluded by adding his assessment, "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). The word translated "judge" frequently refers to a judicial decision, especially one by God Himself. But it can also mean nothing more than "to determine, to resolve, or to form an opinion" (Strong's #2919). The use of this word does not, in and of itself, provide any evidence that James was exercising authority over the assembled apostles and elders. The context suggests that he was merely summing up what had been said and expressing his own opinion about how the matter should be resolved.

James' summation and suggested plan of action met with the approval of the brethren. A letter was drafted expressing these ideas and a delegation was selected to go back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. Notice that the letter was not addressed from James to the church at Antioch, but from "the apostles, the elders, and the brethren" (15:23). The content of the letter does not say that James commands you to abstain from certain things, but rather, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things" (15:28). This verse confirms that Peter, Paul, Barnabas, James, and the other brethren were expressing what the Head of the Church was directing them to say, not solely their own opinions or views.

Notice also that the approach the early church used in resolving this dispute was not to write to the false teachers demanding that they stop teaching their perverted doctrine, but rather to educate the people of the assembly so they would be able to recognize false teachers in the future and reject their teachings. Again, this suggests loving brotherly concern rather than hierarchical control.

The Character of Jerusalem's Response

Acts 15:22 says, "Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas." Why did the Jerusalem church send Judas and Silas back to Antioch along with Paul, Barnabas, and the letter? The Bible says they were leading men, well known and respected by the body of believers. Furthermore they had a powerful prophetic

ministry. It was important to the Jerusalem church to affirm to the Gentile believers in Antioch in the strongest possible way that they neither subscribed to nor supported the circumcision heresy.

In an article about the structure of oversight in the early church, an apostolic writer suggests, "Apparently these two men had the authority to settle any dispute in the local church over the issue."³ But did they really have this authority or did they go to Antioch for a different purpose? When we limit ourselves to the information we are given in this passage, we see that after arriving in Antioch, Judas and Silas "exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words" (15:32). These men were sent, not to exercise the authority of a centralized headquarters church, but to bless and strengthen the brethren in a beloved sister assembly.

With regard to the letter itself, rather than receiving it as some sort of authoritative decree, the Bible says, "When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement" (15:31). Those who view this letter as an official decree that was binding on the local assembly in Antioch are reading this passage through the lens of hierarchical rule. But this was not the perspective of the believers in Antioch. Rather than seeing it as a decree, they received it as a word of encouragement. The difference between these two points of view is profound.

Centralized Authority Over Local Assemblies?

It is interesting to note that the doctrine of the supremacy of the Jerusalem church is based primarily on this one passage. But where are the other New Testament verses describing a centralized hierarchical structure over the local apostolic assemblies? While you will not find this structure in the New Testament, you will find it in the writings of the so-called Church Fathers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries.⁴ This is where the seeds began to germinate which ultimately led to the doctrine of the supremacy of the Church of Rome and its inerrant Vicar of Christ, the Pope. As believers in the Apostles' Doctrine, we do not accept the supremacy of the Roman Church; yet many in our ranks continue to believe that during the days of the early church, the Jerusalem church reigned supreme.

An example of this view can be found in the same article on oversight previously quoted, where the author writes, "This reveals the centralized work of the church, whose headquarters was in Jerusalem."⁵ This writer is not the only one to assert that Acts 15 provides a model for centralized church government. Another apostolic writer states, "If Acts 15, the elders acted under the direction of James as a governing body for the entire church. On this occasion, James is unmistakably the leader of leaders."⁶

Are these assertions accurate? Does Acts 15 reveal that the local assemblies of the

first century were governed by a hierarchical structure with its headquarters in Jerusalem? And was James the leader of this centralized authority? In truth, these ideas are easily refuted by a simple examination of the Scriptures, which shows that the oversight structure of the early local assemblies consisted of multiple leaders operating as a collegial team, usually referred to as elders (ref. Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 5:17; James 5:14). But why do some see a hierarchy in Act 15? Could it be because they are looking at these verses through a hierarchical lens and interpreting them through a hierarchical belief system (i.e. a Roman Catholic lens and belief system).

The construction of this doctrine begins with the assumption that a hierarchical relationship existed between the Jerusalem assembly and the assembly in Antioch. Selected portions of Acts 15 are then used to prove this assumption. This is a classic example of circular reasoning, a type of argumentation known as begging the question. It works like this: you make an arbitrary or superficial assumption; you use that assumption as fact to prove another assumption; you then use the proved assumption as proof of your original assumption.

The Headship of Jesus

If we set aside the foundational assumption of a hierarchy, we can easily see that Acts 15 provides no basis for establishing a centralized hierarchy with authority over local assemblies. It does not even suggest that there was a hierarchical relationship between the assembly in Antioch and the Jerusalem church. They were sister assemblies, localized expression of the one body of Christ. The leader of these assemblies was not James, Peter, the apostles and elders, or any other man; it was the Lord Jesus Christ, who continues to this day to be the Head of the Church.

This does not mean that God did not have a plan for structure, oversight, and accountability in the early church. Certainly the twelve original apostles were highly respected, having been taught by the Lord during the days of His flesh. Acts 5:13 says that the people esteemed them highly. Because of this, it is easy to see why many of the local assemblies may have sought out their counsel, especially concerning key doctrinal issues. In addition, many other men such as Paul, Barnabas, James, other apostles and prophets, and many of the local elders were also held in high regard. But this respect and high esteem was not based on the supposed positions these men held; it was based on their maturity, experience, spiritual gifts, proven character, and demonstrated care and concern for the people of God.

The book of Acts describes a church that was at once spontaneous, interactive, and well-ordered. But in the Acts 15 account, we do not have an example of one group of believers making decisions and imposing rules over other groups of

believers in remote locations; instead, we have a powerful example of how Jesus functions as the Head of His church in protecting His flock from false doctrine. His plan was not that some believers would rule over others, but that all believers would work together in collegial harmony. This is not the abdication of strong leadership, but rather the exercise of the spiritual leadership of the Lord Jesus.

Does the church have a headquarters? Is there a centralized place of authority that watches out for the interests of the entire church worldwide? Yes! But the place where the Head is quartered is not Jerusalem, Rome, or any other city; it is upon the throne of heaven and within the body of Christ. For Jesus Christ is the Head over all things to the church, which is being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 1:22; 2:22).

Endnotes:

1. The word hierarchical refers to a system of church government in graded clergy ranks, where a centralized group of rulers has official authority over the affairs of each local assembly. This is the structure of the Roman Catholic Church and most Protestant Denominations. It sometimes becomes the *de facto* system in autonomous churches when local assemblies allow themselves to be manipulated or controlled by men who are not members of the assembly. The word hierarchy comes from the Greek words *hieros* meaning priest and *archos* meaning rule. At its root, a hierarchical system is where the assemblies are ruled by priests.
2. In the vernacular of Roman Catholicism, a bishop rules over all the congregations within a diocese (ecclesiastical district) as part of a hierarchical structure. But this is not how the term is used in the Scriptures. From an exclusively biblical perspective, a bishop was part of a collegial team of men who provided pastoral oversight within a local assembly. The New Testament word translated bishop is *episkopos*, meaning overseer and is closely associated with the shepherding function (ref. Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Timothy 3:1; 1 Peter 5:1-3).
3. Urshan, Nathaniel A., Was There a Structure of Organized Oversight in the Apostolic Church? , *The Pentecostal Herald* (Hazelwood, MO: United Pentecostal Church, 1994), Vol. 69, No. 4, p. 5.
4. The writings of Ignatius are the earliest extant manuscripts which make a distinction between bishops and elders and exalt the single bishop to a place of supreme authority over a local assembly (see *Letter to the Trallians*, 3:1).
5. Urshan, Nathaniel A., Was There a Structure of Organized Oversight in the Apostolic Church? , *The Pentecostal Herald* (Hazelwood, MO: United Pentecostal Church, 1994), Vol. 69, No. 4, p. 5.
6. Erickson, Gary D., *Response to "Why Eldership is the Proper Apostolic Model for World Revival;"* article presented May 2, 2003 at Symposium held at Urshan Graduate School of Theology, Florissant, MO.

Note to the reader:

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