

Speaking for the Spirit in the Time of Division¹
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The NRSV renders Acts 15:28, “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.” Our traditions have appropriated this text in ways that suggest a more colorful range of paraphrases:

“The Holy Spirit has authorized us to lay these necessary things upon you.”

“We have authorized the Holy Spirit to lay these necessary things upon you.”

“We have authorized the Holy Spirit to lay these necessary things upon everyone.”

“The Holy Spirit and we hereby micromanage you and anathematize them.”

“We, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, hereby declare Antioch our turf. (They’ll return the favor later.) With this canon, we authorize and anticipate seven future ecumenical councils.”

“We, the Magisterium, hereby faithfully develop the unchanging deposit of the apostolic faith along an infallible, irrefractable trajectory that leads from Jerusalem to Rome.”

“‘We’ who sit on James’ throne hereby obscure the gospel of justification by faith alone with the following early Catholic dogma.”

“The Jerusalem Presbytery issues the following committee resolution on behalf of the session of the Reformed Church in Palestine. It would keep from offending your brethren if, until they are more firmly established, you would exercise your freedom in the following way.”

“The Holy Spirit and we refute all past, present, and future local claims to autonomy by laying these burdens upon you.”

“We usurp your congregations’ right to autonomy by imposing these unnecessary burdens.”

“I, Luke the evangelist, hereby paper over the crisis between Jewish and Gentile Christianity to make the Church more appealing to Rome.”

“Having been baptized, filled, and slain by the Holy Spirit, we offer this word of knowledge to our sister churches. (Paul has a word too, but he wants to send it himself.)”

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon [women leaders, divorced pastors, homosexual believers] no greater burden.”

This little text is a battleground, ammunition, and prize in countless ecclesiological wars. To cite it is to claim divine authority for one’s words. Many have presumed to do so.

What are the conditions, if there are any, under which a group of Christians can *speak* to the Church on behalf of the Holy Spirit who dwells within it? And what are the conditions for communities to *receive* those findings in that same Spirit?

Most answers are given in terms of political structure: One must speak as a council of apostolic successors, or as the successor of Peter himself, or as a local congregational assembly, or as some other formally authorized and politically delineated Magisterium. Or in terms of doctrine: One must speak in the apostolic tradition as witnessed in Scripture and organized in the normed norms of biblical creeds. Or in terms of charisma: One must be speaking from the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Each has its merits. Yet what if all these proposals have missed something so basic that without it, they are doomed to failure, and so elusive that its absence has characterized many of the Church's teachings, despite their triumphs?

This essay explores the ecclesial and theological conditions for speaking and hearing in the Spirit by examining the Council (or Conference)² of Jerusalem, to which all Christian traditions have appealed as having paradigmatic authority for ecumenical discernment and problem-solving.³ *The theme of the passage – God's sudden inclusion of the Gentiles apart from observance of Torah – ties the character and salvation-history of God into every aspect of the Jerusalem meeting and its letter: Its setting, communities, articulation, tradition, and reception.* My interpretation argues for an approach to ecumenism that respects the central concerns of the "Pentecostal" (Lesslie Newbigin) or "baptist" (James McClendon) tradition – that is, the free-church tradition – without absolutely privileging them. Furthermore, it confirms Robert Jenson's proposal that the basic flaw in ecumenical (*i.e.*, Catholic and Protestant) theology is an inadequately Christianized doctrine of God.⁴

Setting. *A failure and triumph of vision.* The controversy is fundamentally eschatological, in at least two respects. The first respect concerns the issue around which the debate revolves:

Does salvation require circumcision? How should Christian practice of the Law reflect the new creation's inauguration? The second respect concerns the role of prior authorities: What authority do these believers have to teach the Law? How do the old structures of authority function in restored, apostolic Israel? Despite their outward differences, these two questions are deeply related, even two respects of one common question.

The Pharisee believers' answer to both is "business as usual." The Torah retains its prior authority in the life of Jesus' people, and its teachers retain their authority to interpret it. The Gentile influx is a new blessing, but it runs along the old lines. Luke is not subtle in implying that the Pharisees' reading of both Law and eschaton fails the fruits-test (15:2). This is true both doctrinally and politically. The cause of the crisis and its threat of schism is the Pharisee believers' failure to discern their new location in the new creation.

So the Church gathers and answers in a more eschatologically discerning way. Its leaders come to see the recent events as a Rubicon already crossed. That insight is already familiar to the reader of Acts: "*This is that* spoken of by the prophet Joel." "I do a deed *in your days*, a deed you will never believe." "All the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came afterwards, also proclaimed *these days*." "*After this* I will return, ... says the Lord, who has made these things known *from of old*." With every event the momentum shifts palpably from old to new as the God of the excluded unveils his cosmic act of inclusion. Eschatological vision brings clarity to the otherwise perplexing issue of Gentile observance of Torah in Christ.

Moreover, eschatological vision construes the Kingdom's authorities in a particular way that looks unlike the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox visions that command the lion's share of later theological and ecumenical attention. This is so because the Spirit's unfolding revolution constantly stretches, undermines, and renews old structures of authority. The changing shape of Israel transforms not only Israel's prechristian authority structures (*e.g.*, the Christian priests and

Pharisees of Acts), but even the apostolic structures already in place at Pentecost.⁵ By the middle of Acts, Peter and the Twelve are the “old guard,” still ruling over the restored Israel. The newcomers, Barnabas, Paul, and James, have joined the movement since (and on account of) the resurrection. As Acts moves on, Peter decreases, James presides, and Paul increases.

Not developmentalism, primitivism, nor radicalism. There is no guarantee that yesterday’s authorities will be playing the same roles tomorrow. Doing the job of the first-century Church demands a continuing openness to the unpredictable consistency of the Holy Spirit’s ever-new work. Thus the very consistency of the task of discernment keeps us from simply grounding a normative method of discernment on original authority structures. Both the primitivism of Baptist and Reformed polity, and the developmentalism of Catholic and Orthodox polity, dogmatically reject just such prerogatives of the new creation’s Creator.⁶ They must statutorily reject any pneumatic innovations that might jeopardize the structures on which their theological and denominational distinctives rest. Yet Luke’s narrative repeatedly recounts just such innovations.

Yet unpredictable consistency is not unqualified radicalism either. The new creation is renewal, not rejection, of older creation (which is not simply ‘old creation’). God has chosen both the old guard and the new to be part of the next stage. Furthermore, the two look out for each other: The old guard speaks on behalf of the new (15:7-11), and the new speaks on behalf of the old (15:13-21).

God of the first and last. To appreciate and honor God’s unpredictable consistency in the economy is to appreciate and honor God’s unpredictably consistent character. Here I will appeal to two ecumenical authorities: Lesslie Newbigin’s *Household of God*⁷ and Robert Jenson’s *Unbaptized God*. For both, the root cause of the ecumenical impasse and its ultimate solution are eschatological, pneumatological, theological.

Newbigin maintains that the elusive key to the Protestant-Catholic impasse may be the radical “Pentecostal” strand of ecclesiology that eschewed ecumenism in his day. In its appreciation both of God’s spontaneity and of the Church’s eschatological nature, it alone respects the “dangerously revolutionary implications” of the Spirit’s work.⁸

Jenson roots the Protestant-Catholic impasse not on the surface issues over which the two sides usually disagree, but in an incompletely Christianized Hellenistic theology still exerting influence throughout the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions.⁹ By stopping short of its missionary calling to criticize old gods, the Gentile Christian movement failed to overthrow the god of the philosophers in its own thinking. God was still conceived as immune from time, rather than originating it, directing it, and participating in it.¹⁰

The Catholic tradition (and in a different way, the Orthodox) historicizes the eschaton in order to defend its magisterial authority to write and interpret Scripture. The Protestant tradition dehistoricizes it in order to relativize any temporal authority, even (at the extreme) Scripture itself, so that divine presence is always a discontinuous event. The “Pentecostal” strand, which James McClendon (a Baptist) identifies with what he calls “the baptist vision,”¹¹ inverts the normativity of worldly time over eschaton that drives both of these approaches. Because time’s Creator is its eschatological Indweller and Goal, history is a theologically and teleologically determined category.

McClendon characterizes the baptist vision in terms of parallel eschatological claims. First, “this is that” (cf. Acts 2:16 on Joel 2:28-32). The Church of the apostles *is* Israel, and *is* the Church today. This is not because it lies along the trajectory of institutional apostolic succession. Nor is it because the Word breaks into human history only in discrete events of revelation, which leave the world’s linear chronology otherwise intact. It is because “then is now.” “The church now *is* the primitive church; *we* are Jesus’ followers; the commands are addressed directly to *us*,” says

McClendon. “And no rejoinder about the date of Jesus’ earthly ministry versus today’s date can refute that claim” (McClendon 1986, 33).¹² To conflate McClendon and Jenson, we are the world’s time, its metanarrative, the people in whom God’s story becomes the human story. Jerusalem’s apostles and elders are among the ancient people of God whom the blood of Christ and the wind of the Spirit have been regathering from the ends of the earth. And *today*, when we assemble and proclaim the will of the Holy Spirit, we do so as the primitive and final Church, sharing the common task of discerning the times and telling the gospel as we travel along its divine, human narrative.

Primitivism would seem the inevitable implication of this eschatology. For example, as the necessary condition for speaking for the Spirit, John Howard Yoder proposes a formal *process* patterned closely on the New Testament Church rather than either a hierarchically mediated formal apostolic structure or a biblically mediated event of divine inbreaking. That process takes the form of conversation, in a context of forgiveness, through listening to several witnesses (cf. Matt. 18:15, 18), according to functions discharged by various organs within the community.¹³ Such a conversation will necessarily include agents of prophetic direction (1 Cor. 14:3, 29), agents of scriptural memory (Matt. 13:52), agents of linguistic self-consciousness (teachers, James 3:18), and agents of order and due process (Acts 15:13, 28). “The attestation, ‘It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by us’ ... was a testimony grounded in the formal validity of the conversational process, not in the status of James’ throne.”¹⁴ Our community is the community of James’ original conversation. *This is that.*

Yet even if the free-church vision is right, it demands that we say more. Do not Israel’s synagogues, and both Roman and Protestant Magisteria, have all these agents? Then how could *their* ecclesial claims be less authentic?

It is here that Newbigin's "Pentecostal" label is more apt than McClendon's "baptist" label.¹⁵ By appealing to inadequate doctrines of God as the ultimate causes of Christian division, Newbigin and Jenson lead us away from the temptation of supplying conditions for pneumatic speaking that are merely hierarchically, or conversationally, or congregationally political, and from the opposite temptation of denying conditions outright. The Triune God's actions drive us to claim with and for Jerusalem's apostles and elders that *communities and individuals speak for the Holy Spirit insofar as they correctly discern God's character and purposes*. Insofar as the Spirit's spokespeople are appreciating the revealed mystery of the immanent, economic Trinity, their words have divine as well as human authority. "The one whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he gives the Spirit" (John 3:34). While this verse literally applies only to the Son, in whom apostolicity centers (John 3:35), God has now breathed the Spirit upon Jesus' disciples, individually (John 19:30)¹⁶ and collectively (John 20:22). The divinity of prophetic and apostolic speech is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Insofar as the Spirit's spokespeople *fail* to honor that mystery, however, their words and actions, however formally authoritative, are not binding. No polity, process, or proof-text can make them so. Rather, these agents are merely "apostles from human authorities" (Gal. 1:1 NRSV) and "*reputed* pillars" (Gal. 2:9) who open themselves to rebuke by the Lord's greater authority.

Such rebukes may not look like hierarchical magisterial hermeneutics. They may not look like free-church conversational hermeneutics. Yet they *are* binding: "We must obey God rather than human beings" (Acts 5:29). Paul, the untimely apostle, is right to condemn even Peter at Antioch (Gal. 2:11) and to judge while absent (1 Cor. 5:3-4). John the prophet is told to judge entire communities in Jesus' name and from a distance (Rev. 1-3).¹⁷

The structural variety of pneumatic speech does not mean that church structures are unimportant! Jesus' ministry, the entire New Testament, and the Church's history all prove

otherwise. What it means is that church structures are important in surprising ways. The Spirit's work takes unpredictably consistent turns that can be reliably discerned but never ensured, manipulated, nor foreseen. God writes precisely the story Aristotle describes: "One in which each new event is genuinely unpredictable beforehand, but afterward recognized as what had to happen."¹⁸

If McClendon's baptist vision were merely a reiteration of the futurist (or is it realized?) eschatology of free-church primitivism, it would betray both God's unpredictable consistency and Newbigin's vision of three inadequate types that must defend their existence by appealing to ultimately inadequate criteria for ecclesiological security. Yet McClendon's baptist vision is wider and more Pentecostal than his terminology at first implies. In the final theological exercise of his career, McClendon rejects the normativity of congregational autonomy. He calls catholicity (in W.B. Gallie's phrase) an "essentially contested concept." No party of Christians fully appreciates its meaning, not even his own. Nor does he believe the problem can be solved by adding up the various insights or splitting the differences, if that were even possible. To learn the depth of the Church's catholicity demands a shared struggle among all who now see only in part what we will someday fully understand.¹⁹ The wholeness of "all in each place" demands tolerance, conversation, openness to the future, humility before God – and ultimately ecclesial death and resurrection.

This leads to the next aspect of the Jerusalem meeting: The politics of its communities.

Communities. *Are the Antioch and Jerusalem communities divided?* One community, the Judean Church, has disturbed another by criticizing its constitutive practices. The affected community invites the instigator to help resolve its problem (15:2). Mutually acknowledged authorities from both communities deliberate and come to consensus. How could this story of

partisans acting within a fellowship guide the practices of opponents in divided churches who seek unity according to different and incompatible visions?

The differences between then and now are not so vast as they might seem, for until the meeting's conclusion, the communities do not know they are united. In fact, they are *divided* – engaged in deep soteriological dissention (15:2a, 7a) that goes to the heart of the gospel, and political dissention that goes to the nature of Christian authority. Some in Jerusalem undoubtedly see the meeting as a test of Antioch's orthodoxy, not unlike its testing of Samaritan Christianity in Acts 8. On the other hand, Peter and Paul see it as a test of *Jerusalem's* orthodoxy. Peter, who knows from experience, accuses the assembly of “trying God,” ominously echoing Luke 4:12. Luke is tactfully silent about Paul's conduct at the meeting (and if Galatians is an indicator of that conduct, wisely so), but Paul may be even more suspicious of James than James of Paul.

Our situation is actually quite similar. Idealized readings of Acts 15, whether Orthodox, Protestant, or Catholic, clothe prior expectations of swift ecumenical success and prior commitments to clear ecumenical failure in auras of orthodoxy. But these fail to discern the times then and so misinterpret the times now. Our divided communities cannot help but acknowledge a share of ecclesial standing in each other. Yet by no means are we assured of each other's fundamental health. We have had no small dissention and debate (15:2). The first century's crisis of authority is our own.

If so, then we face a possibility that has been rarely exploited. What if we truly envisioned each other as the partisans of Acts 10-15, rather than the apostates of 1 John 2 or the factions of 1 Cor. 1? On the grounds of Luke-Acts, is it legitimate for us to acknowledge, even provisionally, each other's authenticity and authority?

Are the communities equals? It is commonly assumed that Antioch and other new communities orbit the Judean center like little planets around a star. Yet Acts 15 portrays a

startling degree of *symmetry* between the two communities, a symmetry that reflects the political consequences of the Spirit's unfolding revolution. A Judean inquiry into Antiochene practices prompts what is possibly an Antiochene inquiry into Jerusalem's own. There is dissent and debate at Antioch, and much debate in Jerusalem. A question from Antioch to Jerusalem prompts a response from Jerusalem back to Antioch. Two apostles go up to Jerusalem; two teachers go down to Antioch. Barnabas and Paul, outsiders from Cyprus and Tarsus, testify sandwiched between Peter and James, the ultimate Galilean insiders. Jerusalem affirms the apostolic teaching in Antioch (cf. 13:39-41); Antioch affirms the apostolic teaching in Jerusalem (15:31); both reject the "Judaizing" teaching of unauthorized teachers. Timothy, the story's half-Jewish poster child, personifies the new harmony and interdependence between Jew and Gentile (16:1-5).

To be sure, this symmetry is lopsided. *Jerusalem's* teachers presume to go to Antioch; Antioch sends its apostles to *Jerusalem*; *Jerusalem* sends a letter advising its neighbors. Of all the world's cities, it alone is indispensable to Jesus' plan (Acts 1:8). Yet even here, Luke is intent on subverting the kind of magisterial triumphalism that later takes hold among some of the apostles' and elders' successors. The center of the Church is, ironically, the center of churchly opposition to God's will. If Antioch consults Jerusalem because its people have longer histories with Jesus, they do so in vain, for the assembly can cite no dominical teaching to solve the problem. Luke shows Paul and company going through Samaria and Judea, triangulating against the circumcision party and winning the battle for public opinion (15:3). Jerusalem has the last word on the matter in part because Jerusalem is the last church to *get it* – the last truly to perceive and proclaim the new vision of the Holy Spirit that its sister communities already share.

How seriously have magisterial churches taken this fact?

However, for all the irony, Jerusalem's word remains respected, and its faculty of discernment is ultimately vindicated. If the communities are equals, Jerusalem is the first among them.

How seriously have free churches taken *this* fact?

Jerusalem's eschatological primacy is critical. Constantinianism massively centralized authority along Roman lines; anti-Constantinianism massively decentralized it along European and then American lines. Both visions come from a Church that had long neglected Israel as the ethnic and geographical origin, center, *and* goal of the world's salvation, and had learned to envision themselves in terms of the world's kingdoms. Luke's end-times are different from either the Constantinian or anti-Constantinian end-games. Here Jerusalem is neither the seat of the Magisterium, nor one more local church in exile, but the center of a fellowship, itself magisterial, that is reaching out to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). It is not *transferring* to the ends of the earth – either to St. Peter's basilica or to my local sanctuary – but resides in “the dwelling of David” (Amos 9:11 LXX in Acts 15:16).

Therefore the council respects the Spirit's present and future initiative by acknowledging the Law's new role, *and* respects the Spirit's past initiative by acknowledging the synagogues in which Moses is preached (15:21). Subsequent ecumenical decrees have not always been so sensitive to the theological, ethical peculiarities of Israel's people, and so they have exacerbated the most basic Christian division of all. Our Greek, Latin, European, American accents have often garbled the words of Jesus the Nazarene, and sometimes we have substituted the words of our unbaptized gods.

Articulation. *What action do the authorities actually take?* The council's decree, if it should even be called that,²⁰ arguably does not impose a rule beyond the prior practices of Christian God-fearers at Antioch.²¹ It seems to be an acquittal, so to speak, of Antioch's practices

in light of Scripture. The Holy Spirit's decision has already been delivered, in Antioch and Caesarea. The initiative belongs to God, the response to the Antiochian and Judean churches. The apostles and prophets are no more authorized to create new commandments than to relax old ones. That prerogative belongs only to God. So "the Holy Spirit and we have decided" names two chronological moments, not one. The council is interpreting, not legislating. Here we find a surprising resemblance to Paul's own teaching on circumcision, which does not in the end forbid the practice (Gal. 6:15). He too is interpreting rather than legislating.²²

Such reserve is short-lived. The Spirit's agency eventually comes to be identified with the Magisterium's, and the Church begins to invoke the spirit of Acts 15:28 for a far wider variety of canonical discourse. Many supposedly necessary things have come along since the Jerusalem Council. The habit of imposing further uniformity of faith and practice across the Catholic Church comes early, *e.g.*, settling paschal dating controversies through threats of excommunication in the second century, and actual excommunication at Nicea. Moreover, following Montanist excesses, enthusiasm for the Spirit's consistency soon quenches enthusiasm for his unpredictability. Holy Tradition assumes an irreversibility that would have made the Judean teachers blush. The baptist/Pentecostal vision fades, and the stage is set for the Orthodox-Protestant-Catholic showdown.

We need not deny the profound insight and blessing of many of these later actions to ask how often the later Church has really been doing what the apostolic Church does in Jerusalem. After all, presuming to speak for God magisterially, imposing uniformity of practice, and citing precedent too confidently are the very acts that create the crisis in Antioch. In seeking to imitate the apostles and elders, we have too often resembled the unauthorized Judean teachers.

Tradition. *Are texts enough?* Two moments of discerning the Spirit, articulation and reception, meet in a third: the process of promulgation or tradition. Here too we find an important

quality of Jerusalem's practice. The council's response does not offer the Antiochians any reasons for its conclusions.²³ The reader of Acts may know something of the mind of James,²⁴ but readers of the Jerusalem letter do not. Instead, Jerusalem sends *teachers* to Antioch. This holds at least twofold significance for ecumenism.

First, Antioch is free to use its own theological reasoning to support its sister church's practical and theological claims. It is advised to appreciate God's character and purpose as Jerusalem does, but it may do so from a different perspective. Likewise, the greatest triumphs of ecumenical discourse, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Chalcedonian Formula, famously omit the reasons for their assertions. Their economy has given them enormous versatility and persuasive power across cultures, eras, and theological traditions. When the Church has canonized its theological reasoning along with its theological conclusions, the results have been less successful.

Second, lasting unity comes not merely by joint assent to dogmatic texts, but by *mutual personal presence* in tradition and reception. The right to eat at each other's table means little if no one bothers to exercise it. It is not enough that Paul and Barnabas return with the right hand of fellowship, for the dynamics that aggravated the first crisis would still be ready to stir the next one. So Paul and Barnabas return with Judas and Silas, who strengthen the tenuous bond between the sister churches with their teaching and prophecy. They learn as they teach – and help the still wary communities keep an eye on each other. (As they say in arms control, "Trust, but verify.")

Nothing breaks down barriers like truly shared lives. Here we sense what Yoder was claiming, though it is better expressed in pneumatological terms:²⁵ *Those indwelt by the Spirit can best discern when they live out the fellowship of the Spirit.* The practice of community is essential to spiritual articulation, tradition, and reception, especially across the boundaries that divide.

Ecumenism has been stronger on the first two than the third (for instance, in the reception of *BEM*, which was largely intradenominational).²⁶

Despite its reputation for sectarian divisiveness, the free-church tradition has wisdom to contribute on this topic. McClendon describes three meanings of catholicity that emerged in the early Church. The first, catholicity-as-authenticity, describes the wholeness of any community that embodies a wholly Christian way of life. The second, catholicity-as-universality, describes the full extension of Christian existence over space and time, “the entire authentic new people of God” of which local congregations could be a part. The third, catholicity-as-party, describes the concrete tradition that uses catholicity as a proper noun, a label that distinguishes the true Church from other, defective varieties of Christianity. Each represents not just a vision of catholicity, but a *strategy* for achieving unity. In the third, those lacking full catholicity are exhorted to leave behind their lack and rejoin the true fellowship. The second finds ground for proclaiming “mystic sweet communion”, but no concrete instructions for realizing it. The first pursues “the character that is complete or authentic or prototypically Christian,” which cannot but bring together the communities that practice it, especially when they practice it together. To John Henry Newman’s (and many others’) strategy of universality through partisan solidarity, McClendon and Yoder prefer the “baptist path” of universality through authenticity. It is, they say, one pursued in apostolic times and among monastics, Czech Brethren, Anabaptists, General Baptists, Campbellites, and all communities that struggle for “unity first of all with one another” (though less among today’s Baptists than their spiritual ancestors).²⁷ McClendon admits that unity through authenticity may not be the whole prescription, but he rightly senses it is an essential and oft-neglected one.

Reception. *What are the conditions for reception?* Reception of the Jerusalem letter has a structural, indeed liturgical, component: “Having gathered the congregation together, they

delivered the letter” (Acts 15:30). This structure goes beyond the written text’s performance to include the community’s reception of Judas and Silas and their exhortations (15:31-32). Yet here too, polity is no guarantee, even when liturgically focused. It has taken anonymous refugees in Antioch and dreams from heaven to bludgeon the Church’s chief authorities into perceiving an event that had been announced in the Scriptures for centuries and already accepted even in Samaria and Syria.

If a certain political structure is neither a necessary condition nor a necessary consequence of pneumatic speaking, then how can authentic speech be known for what it is? Only in the same Spirit in which it was given.²⁸ The conditions for reception of God’s speech are as theological as those for its articulation and tradition. *It is critical to the authority of the Spirit’s spokespeople that their words are authenticated by those who know God’s protological character and eschatological end.*

In Acts 15, such authentication is neither particularly rare nor particularly common. On the one hand, it has been going on for some time: In Antioch before Peter’s vision; at Cornelius’ house; throughout Phoenicia and Samaria. On the other hand, the battle is hard-won. And here too Luke overturns our expectations: Jerusalem is the *last*, not the first, to receive authentication, because Jerusalem is the last community to appreciate this aspect of God’s history.

What counts as success? The Jerusalem council has rightly been viewed as a triumph of fellowship over division. But just how complete a triumph is it? Certainly circumcision is soon ruled out as a means of Christian salvation. Yet the euphoria of Acts 15:31-33 is fleeting. Reception of the exhortation is far from uniform. It is authoritative and popular in Jerusalem, at least through Acts 21. It is binding in Antioch and as far west as Lystra. It may even be echoed in Didache 6.²⁹ Yet in Corinth (cf. Acts 19:10), the dietary rules are different. Paul may simply have left Jerusalem’s sphere of influence to concentrate on nations farther west.³⁰ Furthermore, the

Jerusalem church is unable or unwilling to defend Paul's reputation as Acts progresses, and James confronts him with the letter in 21:20-25 as if he has not even seen it. The lingering distrust costs Paul dearly on his return to Jerusalem. Relations between Christians and Jews only deteriorate from there, and Paul eventually shakes the dust of the synagogue off his feet (28:25-28).

The later textual tradition of Acts 15 reflects an even wider variety in reception, with serious ecumenical consequences. The famous incompatibilities between the Alexandrian and Western manuscript traditions of the apostolic decree are more than a headache for biblical critics. They reflect an apostolic and patristic church willing to interpret the Jerusalem Council so freely as to change the language, add or drop individual items so as to turn a focus on "ritual" into a focus on "ethics" (or vice versa),³¹ and ignore inconvenient prohibitions. Whatever the reason for the divergences (scribes "interpreting" the apostolic words, or Luke revising his own manuscript, or any of the other competing theories³²), the fact remains that traditions of textual mutation survive in the canon itself. The *Filioque* (which, after all, may fundamentally be a translational issue) pales by comparison.

The exhortation's uneven reception helps us set realistic expectations for ecumenical discourse. Apparently we may interpret ecumenical speech to the point of limiting its synchronic and diachronic scope, and even to the point of changing its very language, without inevitably violating authority or breaking fellowship. Juxtaposing Acts 15 and Gal. 1-2 suggests how much canonical latitude we have. By contrast, actual insubordination to proper authority or break in fellowship constitutes an outright failure to discern somewhere in the process. God's people have then failed either to speak for the Spirit, or to hear in the Spirit.

Even the greatest successes of Constantinian Christianity must on these grounds be judged *relative* failures. This is true even of its crown jewels, the creeds and canons of Nicea 325 and Constantinople 381, on account of the *Filioque* (not because of the textual change itself, but

because of the way it has been received so far).³³ Here – *even* here – the theological conditions for discerning have not been fully met. God has not been perfectly understood.³⁴ The consequences have been incompletely edifying – which is to say that they have been disastrous.

Jenson concludes his project with the dream of a church that looks forward to God as clearly as it looks back to him, and “thus experiences the temporal unity of its own communal self as the personal unity of the risen Son.”³⁵ While we do look forward and back in that way, we do it *imperfectly*, and so we are imperfectly one (cf. John 17:23). Like people who ruin the stories they tell, churches have repeatedly proven inadequate to the narrative treasure entrusted to them. Perfect timing is not a quality of the apostolic community that was lost; it was a quality the apostles and prophets never had in the first place. We, like they, lose our place, step on our lines, and argue over the details. Newbigin is right that the more apostolic the Church has been, the more it has found its division intolerable.³⁶

Yet the categories of *relative* success and failure are an unlikely source of hope. Our long track record of both has somehow sustained us. Our divided communities *have* common authorities. We *do* submit to the authorities of other communities insofar as we hear our Lord’s voice in theirs. With God’s help, we still manage to stammer out the divine wisdom of our apostolic and prophetic ancestors. For all our disagreement, we finally tell *one* story, about a Jesus whom we recognize in each other’s tellings, and so our stories are finally one in his. The strong family resemblances among Christian canonical practices – Bible, sacraments, and so on – indicate that (contrary to Bruce D. Marshall’s fear in *First Things*³⁷) God has *not* abandoned the divided churches of Jesus Christ. Our common narrative practices do sometimes, incompletely, meet the conditions for articulation, tradition, and reception in the Holy Spirit.

The persistent authority of the Church’s Scriptures, its rules of faith (embodied in the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds, only the latter of which is inextricably tied to conciliar

Constantinianism), its sense of the faithful, its special and general spiritual gifts, its fruit of the Spirit – all of these indicate a living faculty for discernment. Furthermore, our use of these common resources as guides to the whole Christian life shows a common grasp of the connection between the *faith* of the Church – that is, its appreciation of the character and purpose of the triune God of Israel – and the *authority* of the Church.

This suggests a range of relative authority for the claims that pass the tests of discernment, and even for those that fail them and divide us. It also suggests that the greatest chance of ecumenical success may come from an approach to fellowship that respects the limits and peculiarities of our speaking. Ecclesial discourse, both ecumenical and local, has often pursued and claimed maximal authority. Consequently it has often overstepped its bounds, presumed its authority, enjoined inappropriate uniformity, created crises, and divided believers. This tendency to overstep is nothing new: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Conclusion. It is time to add my paraphrase to the list that introduced this exercise:

“Greetings from the Jewish brothers and sisters in leadership, to the Antiochian and Syrian and Cilician Gentile brothers and sisters. We hear that some from among us trouble and unsettle you with their words. We did not ask them to do this. So we have agreed to send teachers of our choosing back with Barnabas and Paul, whom we love just like you do. Judas and Silas have put themselves on the line for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They will affirm the same things in person. The Holy Spirit fell upon you, burdening you with nothing more besides these necessary things: Avoiding idolatry, and blood, and what is strangled, and immorality. We agree with God’s decision. Staying away from these things, you will get along fine.”

Deciding more would have misread the Spirit, and might have cost Jerusalem its fellowship with Antioch, let alone with the Pauline communities. Deciding less would have left the crisis to heal itself, which of course it would not have done, and might still have cost the communities their unity. The Mother Church managed to steer clear of either course, for it both saw clearly, and trusted others to see clearly what it could not see for them. The results were

uneven, but successful. The new teaching strengthened rather than alienated Jerusalem and its sister churches.

Then is now. We are those churches. We bear no greater burden besides these necessary things: To see God and the world through the eyes of Jesus, to discern the unpredictable consistency of the Spirit, to write what we see, and to know when to stop.

¹ Many thanks to Jonathan Wilson and Bruce Fisk of Westmont College for their patient reading and perceptive criticisms on an earlier draft of this essay, and to the ecclesiology study group of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, for whom this paper is prepared, for their critical suggestions and corrections.

² Raymond E. Brown warns of confusing the “meeting” of Acts 15 with the ecumenical councils of the later Church. In later Catholic usage, one might call this a *primatial* council. See Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 306.

³ In recent thought, see John Howard Yoder, “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood: A Protestant Perspective,” in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, 1984); Dalton Reimer, “Phases in Problem Solving: A Biblical Model for the Christian Community,” *Direction* 19:2 (Fall 1990), 3-17; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

⁴ *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992). Jenson earlier alluded to this claim in a response to an earlier paper of mine, “Gusty Winds or a Jet Stream? Charismatics and Orthodox on the Spirit of Tradition,” delivered in 1999 for the American Academy of Religion Evangelical Theology and Orthodox Theology groups.

⁵ Consider the roles of three newcomers to Church leadership: Barnabas, Paul, and James. Or the Antiochene Church’s very existence, predicated on nameless refugees from Judea who preached the gospel to Greeks even before Peter’s vision. Or the founding of the “diaconate” (Acts 6:1-7). Or the overall shape of the Church in Acts 28 compared to its shape in Acts 1.

⁶ Orthodox developmentalism resembles primitivism in some respects and Catholic developmentalism in others, and Orthodox Christians would be unhappy with the term. Nevertheless, the Orthodox vision does not share the political open-endedness of this vision.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship, 1954). See in particular the chapters “The Community of the Holy Spirit” and “Christ in You, the Hope of Glory.”

⁸ Newbigin, 106.

⁹ For Newbigin, the foe is division; for Jenson, Hellenism; for McClendon, Constantinianism. These different agendas drive somewhat different categories. Eastern Orthodoxy remains out of sight for Newbigin, but in his analysis it is most at home in the Catholic type. Jenson includes Eastern Orthodoxy in his project, sensing both promise and failure there, and locates Baptist ecclesiology under the Protestant umbrella. Again, McClendon endorses the Pentecostal type over the Protestant.

¹⁰ Jenson, 137ff.

¹¹ While the baptist vision is manifested most often in the traditions of the Radical Reformation, McClendon’s featured baptist visionaries are Jonathan Edwards, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Dorothy Day, as well as the communities of the Pentecostal movement. See James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986) and *Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 343. Furthermore, many Baptists do *not* share the vision, especially those formed theologically by classical Protestantism.

¹² I have developed McClendon’s claims according to eschatological categories in *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), chapter 3 (“The End of Scripture”), and will not repeat them here.

¹³ Yoder, 26-28.

¹⁴ Yoder, 29-34.

¹⁵ I develop this distinction in “Reordering Salvation: Church as the Proper Context for an Evangelical *Ordo Salutis*, in *Ecumenical Theology in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: Essays Presented to Geoffrey Wainwright on his Sixtieth Birthday* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 182-195.

¹⁶ Thank you, David Yeago, for this insight.

¹⁷ Yet, contrary to some Protestant usage, the condemned spokespeople do not forfeit their standing as *apostles* and *churches* (Rev. 3:1). They are invited to have their official authority restored in the new and always renewing order of the Church of Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Jenson, 131, quoting *Peri Poietikes* 1452a, 3.

¹⁹ McClendon, *Witness: Systematic Theology Vol. 3* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 338-339.

²⁰ See Peder Borgen, “Catalogues of Vices, the Apostolic Decree, and the Jerusalem Meeting,” in Jacob Neusner et al., eds., *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 126-141, for a rejection of the idea that the letter from Jerusalem is a ‘decree.’ Borgen considers the letter’s “necessary things” to be an affirmation of prior Jewish and catholic Christian proselyte tradition, which condemns pagan vices, rather than a new apostolic decree (133).

²¹ Whether these are “ethical” or “ritual,” if these distinctions are even helpful, is immaterial to this point.

²² The parallels may be more than formal. Paul’s Galatian teaching on pagan vices (5:19-23) echoes the letter’s “ethical” necessities (Acts 15:29). If the letter from Jerusalem lies behind the letter to the Galatians, then Paul remains compliant with James’ will. But Paul spins boldly, to be sure!

²³ This surprising omission may be additional evidence that the necessities of the letter are prior practices in Antioch, which would not need explaining.

²⁴ But not much: Are these Torah regulations for “aliens in the land”? Or rabbinic traditions about what was forbidden to all Noah’s children? Or pragmatic considerations designed to ease friction with Jewish believers and unbelievers? What is clearer from the text than from most of the commentaries is that the regulations recognize the Gentiles’ new incorporation as the turning point in the eschatological fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel.

²⁵ Yoder appeals to these too, but delineates them formally along primitivist lines (29).

²⁶ I am willing to be corrected on this point. But the initial recommendations of the *BEM* document were that the representatives of the separated communities were to take the findings back to their own communities, not to each other’s. Of course, the Jerusalem meeting did not provoke a schism, at least not at the time, so the communities shared common personal authorities. The common authorities of divided Christian communities may be merely textual.

²⁷ McClendon 2001, 335-337, drawing on McClendon and Yoder, “Christian Identity in Ecumenical Perspective” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 27/3 (Summer 1990, 561-80).

²⁸ Newbigin, 107.

²⁹ “As regards diet, keep the rules so far as you are able; only be careful to refuse anything that has been offered to an idol, for that is the worship of dead gods.”

³⁰ Brown, 309.

³¹ The two terms overlap more than is often appreciated in the critical literature. If the *Didache* is a witness to the apostolic letter (see chapter 6), it already interprets it in an “ethical” direction.

³² Bruce Metzger, in *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994), 222-236, lists a dizzying array of proposals.

³³ On the other hand, the “Clarification on the Filioque” from the Secretariat of Christian Unity in Rome represents a more positive stream in the Filioque’s history of interpretation.

³⁴ Perhaps, as Jenson claims, because the God of the East and West has remained incompletely Christian.

³⁵ Jenson, 147.

³⁶ Newbigin, 173.

³⁷ “Who Really Cares About Christian Unity?” *First Things* (January 2001), 29-34, here 29. This is not to deny Marshall’s contention that today’s divided Church suffers from being under God’s judgment. Today’s Corinthians are indeed falling ill and dying. Yet they are still “the church that is at Corinth ... sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,” and hopefully blessed with grace and peace (1 Cor. 1:2-3).