

## CHRIST INCARNATED IN CULTURE<sup>1</sup>

One event changed human history—God became man, incarnated as Jesus Christ; He was called Emmanuel, God with us. The incarnation was specific; God didn't become generalized humanity. He was "born of a woman, born under law" (Gal. 4:4). He joined<sup>2</sup> "a particular family at a particular period and place, spoke a particular language, shared in a particular culture." Jesus Christ lived, worked and died within Jewish society of first century Palestine. Yet His salvation is for all mankind. So, in resurrection, Christ sent His followers into all the world to disciple the nations (Matt. 28:19). It was no easy task; the disciples needed to overcome the religious, ethnic and cultural barriers which separated them, as devout Jews, from other peoples.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as barriers are bridged and the gospel is proclaimed and received, Christ is "incarnated" once more among diverse nations; He is manifested in places where he never walked while in the flesh. In a sense, regeneration is incarnation repeated. Witness Lee says,<sup>4</sup> "Every time a man is regenerated, Christ is born once more in humanity." If incarnation is viewed as translation ("the Word became flesh" John 1:14), there have been many subsequent "re-translations." University of Edinburgh Professor, Andrew Walls says,<sup>5</sup> "Following on the original act of translation in Jesus Christ of Nazareth are [countless re-translations](#) into the thought forms and cultures of different societies into which Christ has been brought as conversion takes place." Such re-translations are necessary, since, as C. Kraft says,<sup>6</sup> "It is the intent of God that [biblical Christianity be 'reincarnated' in every language and culture](#) at every point in history."

The first phase of this process is described in the book of Acts. Some early disciples, refugees from Jerusalem, although they were 100% Jewish, successfully translated the gospel message to reach their pagan Greek neighbors in Antioch (Acts 11:19–20). That was the first cross-cultural transmission of the faith recorded in history; it initiated the church in Antioch. This was followed by Barnabas' and Paul's mission to the Gentiles. That raised another set of issues described in Acts chapter 15, whose resolution had far-reaching consequences for the Christian faith. The principles embodied in that historic event offer guideposts for the unfinished task of the gospel's cross-cultural communication in subsequent generations, down to today.

### Converts, Not Proselytes—Cultural Diversity Enshrined within the Church

Acts 15 is an important chapter detailing the first church Council in Jerusalem which determined how Gentile believers could be received as God's people. Watchman Nee described it as<sup>7</sup> "the most precious chapter in the whole book of Acts." Some expositors characterize the Jerusalem decree as<sup>8</sup> "not absolute," and "not...satisfactory to Paul." Yet Professor Walls calls it "an astonishing decision," breaking the centuries-old convention by which Gentiles (like Ruth, the Moabite) were received into Israel as proselytes. He explains,<sup>9</sup> "The great council described in Acts 15...deliberately [rejected the time-honored model of the proselyte. It was an astonishing decision.](#) Hitherto all the believers in Jesus had been circumcised and kept the Torah [Law], just like the Lord himself. It was the standard lifestyle for believers. But the early Church decided that the Gentile believers in Jesus ...should be left to find a Christian lifestyle of their own within Hellenistic [Greek] society under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They were not to be proselytes, but converts." Through that historic decision, believing Gentiles didn't have to adopt the standard lifestyle of their Jewish fellow-believers—circumcision, kosher diet, and Sabbath-keeping. More generally, it implies<sup>10</sup> "no group of Christians has...any right to impose...upon another group of Christians a set of assumptions about [the Christian] life." Henceforth, cultural diversity was enshrined in the church's "constitution." Here we examine the biblical basis and implications of that diversity.

### Two Christian Lifestyles

The Jerusalem decree imposed certain minimum requirements on Gentile believers (e.g., avoiding idol sacrifices, blood, Acts 15:20). Yet those were minor provisions. It was acceptable to the apostle Paul, since its major provisions left believing Gentiles unfettered by the ceremonial law and circumcision. That was good enough for Paul; evidently,<sup>11</sup> he applied the letter of the council's decision, delivering it to the Gentile churches explicitly named, and conveniently ignoring its minor provisions elsewhere. Gentile believers were free from circumcision and the ceremonial law. Meanwhile many Jewish believers continued to observe both. Consequently the apostolic decree<sup>12</sup> "[produced two distinct Christian lifestyles...the one for Jewish society, the other for Hellenistic \[Greek\] society.](#)"

## Paul Circumcised Timothy—Was He A Hypocrite?

The New Testament suggests Paul accepted Jewish believers who retained their Jewish lifestyle equally with Gentiles who maintained theirs.<sup>13</sup> He counseled “each one, to remain in the status in which he was called” (1 Cor. 7:17–24). Paul strenuously resisted efforts to judaize Gentile believers (Gal. 2:14). Consistency implies he should oppose “gentilizing” Jewish believers. In Jerusalem Paul withstood efforts to circumcise Titus, a Greek (Gal. 2:3); yet immediately afterward<sup>14</sup> he circumcised Timothy, a half-Jew (Acts 16:1–3). Wasn’t this judaizing Timothy? This is a problem case for those claiming the apostolic decree applied to both Jewish and Gentile believers.<sup>15</sup> Saint Jerome (AD 347–420) saw the contradiction; he argued Paul only *pretended* to circumcise Timothy!<sup>16</sup> It was a problem also for Witness Lee.<sup>17</sup> He declared,<sup>18</sup> “The dispensation of law was altogether over...any disregard [for this fact]...would be a great damage to God’s economical plan.” He stated<sup>19</sup> “After the [Acts 15] decree, it would have been **wrong to allow the Jewish churches to keep the practice of circumcision.**” W. Lee believed Paul taught believing Jews it was<sup>20</sup> “no longer necessary to practice circumcision” (Acts 21:21). He was reluctant to condemn Paul for circumcising Timothy, yet conceded,<sup>21</sup> “We might have said, ‘Paul, what are you doing? You are not stable. First you oppose circumcision, and now you are having Timothy circumcised.’ On Paul’s behalf, however, we may say that he was being flexible.” Stated frankly, W. Lee’s view implies Paul didn’t practice what he preached; he was hypocritical.<sup>22</sup> By circumcising Timothy, Paul upheld Moses’ law which “was altogether over” (in W. Lee’s words); Paul’s actions contradict W. Lee’s view of Paul’s position. Doesn’t this mean Paul was “not walking in according to the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14)? This view assumes, however, that only one divinely-approved lifestyle exists for both Jewish and Gentile believers--one which excludes circumcision, kosher diet, etc. Martin Luther, seeing this flaw, said this argument assumes that<sup>23</sup> “after Christ the ceremonial laws were fatal.” It presumes participation in the dispensation of grace *is conditional on* abandoning Jewish ceremonial laws—circumcision, kosher diet, etc. Under this hard-line view, it is not sufficient for Jewish believers to realize they are saved by faith, not by law-keeping. They must also utterly forsake their past Jewish lifestyle of Mosaic ordinances; they must be gentilized.

An alternative view takes “freedom in Christ” seriously (Gal. 5:1). Believing Gentiles are free from the law’s obligations; believing Jews are also *free to continue* (or discontinue) their Jewish customs, if they choose to do so. Liberty in Christ is symmetric in that sense. Paul’s Galatians polemic told *Gentile* believers they didn’t need circumcision; they needn’t be judaized. Equally, however, believing Jews needn’t be gentilized. For believers “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails, but faith avails” (Gal. 5:6). Under the New Covenant, circumcision, the kosher diet, etc. are matters of indifference. They are not the “litmus test” for belonging to God’s people.<sup>24</sup> Hence, Paul was free to circumcise Timothy, a half-Jew (Acts 16:1). Paul was not a hypocrite; he didn’t “flip-flop” on this issue. His actions acknowledged both Jewish and Gentile lifestyles as equally-valid forms of Christian living. New York’s Tim Keller calls this<sup>25</sup> “a remarkable case of discerning between abiding principle and cultural practice. If anyone would have felt circumcising was intrinsically a wrong thing for a believer to do, it would have been Paul—who just fought a crucial battle for the gospel itself [Acts 15:1]. Yet immediately Paul shows he knows **the difference between abiding principle and cultural practice.** He knows that while **the gospel of grace is an absolute—the practice of circumcision is culturally relative.**”

## Two Patterns of Church-life

The Jerusalem decree produced two distinct forms of church-life—one among Jews and another among Gentiles. Scripture recognizes the “churches of the Gentiles” (Rom. 16:4) and the “churches of Judea” (i.e., of the Jews, 1 Thess. 2:14). Both were legitimate first century expressions of Christ in their societies. Paul didn’t campaign to rid the Judean churches of Old Covenant practices. Yes, he opposed imposing them on Gentile believers, but, he didn’t denounce their personal practice by Jewish believers. In fact, he circumcised Timothy! Prof. Walls observes<sup>26</sup> “Each Christian lifestyle, representing a culture converted to Christ, expressed something the whole body needed. Hellenistic Christianity was not a [Lawless] soft option for benighted heathen who could do no better...Nor was Judaic Christianity a system of legalistic bondage...Each was necessary for the other...for each was an expression of Christ under certain specific conditions.” Hence, the Acts 15 decision was precedent setting because<sup>27</sup> “**it built cultural diversity into the church forever.**” It demonstrates that there is no unique divinely-endorsed “Christian culture or lifestyle.” As Fuller Seminary Prof. Charles Kraft expresses it, God has<sup>28</sup> “no holy culture, no sacred set of cultural...patterns that he endorses to the exclusion of all others.”

## Is there a Unique “One New Man Culture”?

On occasion certain Christians have felt their particular form of Christianity was *the* unique divinely-approved Christian lifestyle. The judaizers who came to Antioch from Jerusalem [Acts 15: 1] were merely the first with this elitist attitude. Recently some have claimed exclusive ownership of the “new culture and language of the one new man.” LSM’s “blended brothers” declare<sup>29</sup> “In the Lord’s recovery we are a special group of people with our own culture, a divine and heavenly culture.” They claim proprietary rights to<sup>30</sup> “the new culture, the God-man culture of the one new man.” They condemn all Christianity as “Babylon,” asserting<sup>31</sup> “We in the Lord’s recovery have an entirely different culture from Babylon...we are in a different realm, and we have a different culture...We speak the language of God.” To justify their claims to the “God-man culture of the one new man,” they quote Col. 3:10–11 and Gal. 3:28. The latter says, “There cannot be Jew nor Greek...slave nor free man ...male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This scripture implies the elimination of distinctions in Christ. However, it’s clear that the apostle Paul recognized the continued existence of distinctions between free and slave, male and female believers (e.g. Col. 3:18–22). How can this paradox be reconciled? Witness Lee distinguishes<sup>32</sup> between the church’s “extrinsic form” and its “intrinsic constituent.” Outwardly, the church as “one new man,” is composed of diverse believers in its “extrinsic form.” Inwardly, Christ is its “intrinsic constituent.” On the “divine side,” the Triune God is *supracultural*, transcending human culture.<sup>33</sup> Therefore “in Christ” there are no Greeks or Jews, slaves or free. Yet on the “human side, extrinsically,” these distinctions continue to exist in human society. In the practical church-life, believers exist at the “overlap of the ages”; they are in Christ, yet still in this world. Therefore, human distinctions—gender, ethnicity, language, age, etc.—still play a role.<sup>34</sup> Hence, the church in Thessalonica was “the church of the Thessalonians” (composed of local believers), yet it was “in God the Father...” (1 Thess. 1:1). The New Testament doesn’t recognize a unique divinely-approved “new culture of the new man.” The notion that only one culture and language are approved by God belongs to Judaism and Islam;<sup>35</sup> it is not a New Testament concept or teaching. **Christ is “incarnated” in every culture through His believers.** We reject as unscriptural the elitist claims by LSM’s “blended brothers” to proprietary rights over the “new language and new culture of the new man.” The New Testament never refers to a unique “new divinely-approved language.” On the contrary, as Trinity Professor D. A. Carson points out,<sup>36</sup> “At Pentecost God did not give the gift of one language...he gave the gift of many languages, so that the one message could be heard in all the relevant languages, thus preserving the diversity.” God’s action at Pentecost authenticates all human languages, not merely one!

## Scripture Canonizes Diversity

When we proclaim that the Bible is our unique standard, our canon for teaching and practice, **this has important implications for diversity.** Both Jewish and Gentile manifestations of the Church are validated by the New Testament. The “churches of the Gentiles” are recognized in Scripture (Rom. 16:4); these were Gentile churches. Correspondingly, “the churches in Judea” were essentially Jewish churches (Acts 9:31; Gal. 1:22; 1 Thess. 2:14). There were marked differences between the two.<sup>37</sup> University of Durham Divinity Professor, James Dunn concludes,<sup>38</sup> “*There is no single normative form of Christianity in the first century.*” Rather, “*there were many different expressions of Christianity within the New Testament.*” Significantly, under God’s sovereignty, the epistles of James, Jude and Peter to Jewish believers were included in the New Testament canon alongside Paul’s letters to Gentile churches. Thus, in the New Testament, expressions of “**Jewish Christianity**” and “**Gentile Christianity**” **have equal status in terms of canonicity.** As Prof. Dunn states,<sup>39</sup> “The canon of **the New Testament ...recognizes the validity of diversity**; it canonizes very different expressions of Christianity.” The scriptural canon validates the Gentile local churches raised up by Paul; but it also authenticates the Jewish churches of first century Palestine. Moreover, Scripture recognizes equally the “Pentecostalism” of Corinth, Thessalonica’s “eschatological emphasis,” alongside the ecclesiastical order of the “Pastorals” (Timothy & Titus). In Scripture, there is no single uniform expression of the Church, no unique Christian culture; there is no single church model replicated everywhere. Rather, there are diverse expressions of the Christian faith suited to different cultures and circumstances. It’s not “one size fits all.” Through such a variety of local churches, *intensely local* churches,<sup>40</sup> Christ is incarnated once more among diverse peoples.

## Christ Incarnated in Greek Culture, Transforming it

Christ's believers are "in the world, but not of the world" (John 17:11, 14). The Lord doesn't take His people out of the world, rather He sends them into the world (John 17:15, 18). If the apostolic Council had imposed a Judaic lifestyle on Gentile believers, they would have been isolated from Greek society. That would have hamstrung the gospel. As Prof. Walls says,<sup>41</sup> "If the first Gentile believers had become proselytes...they would have had virtually no impact on their society; they would effectively have been taken out of that society. In fact, it was their task...to convert their society...they had to learn to keep turning their ways of thinking and doing things ...towards Christ....In this way a truly Greek, truly Hellenistic type of Christianity was able to emerge. Not only so, but that Hellenistic Christianity was **able to penetrate the Hellenistic intellectual and social heritage.**" The process was slow and painful; in Paul's lifetime Christians numbered in the thousands, a minute percentage of the population. Yet ultimately, over the next 250 years, despite opposition and persecution, the Roman Empire was pervaded by the gospel of Christ. University of Washington Professor, Rodney Stark estimates that by AD 300 there were over six million Christians within the Roman Empire;<sup>42</sup> believers constituted 10% of the total population. The percentage was higher in urban areas and in the eastern Empire. The Christian faith grew to the point the Roman Emperor Constantine found it politically expedient to embrace Christianity.<sup>43</sup> Why did the Gospel prevail?

## Translating the Gospel, Capturing Culture for Christ

The gospel's translation contributed to Christianity's triumph in the Roman Empire. This includes the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek Septuagint version by Jewish scholars 250-300 BC. This was a major asset; it enabled Greek-speaking people to read the Scriptures in their mother tongue. They could find Christ in the Old Testament. That linguistic translation provided a base for gospel proclamation among the Greeks. Moreover, the message was also translated into Greek concepts. Terms like Messiah (Christ), the Son of Man, and kingdom of God (heavens), though significant to Jews, were foreign to Hellenists. So<sup>44</sup> "in order to explain in the Greek world who Christ is and what he did and does, a new conceptual vocabulary had to be constructed. Elements of [Greek] vocabulary already existing in that world had to be commandeered and turned towards Christ...[Then] Hellenistic people began to see Christ on their own terms...Christian preaching and Christian understanding **moved beyond the category of Messiah...to embrace such categories as *Logos* [Word] and *Pleroma* [Fullness] to explain the significance of Jesus.**" The New Testament recognizes that Jews and Greeks differ religiously, culturally and psychologically (1 Cor. 1:22). Both need Christ and His salvation; so the message of Christ was translated and tailored so it could resonate in the hearts of both.

## Paul's *Pleroma* & John's *Logos* Leading People to Salvation

Consider the concept of the *Logos* (Word, John 1:1, 14). Greek philosophers were familiar with this idea; Greeks could relate to it. Even Gnostics employed this term. This "baggage" of pre-existing concepts could have frustrated Greeks from seeing the true significance of the *Logos* in John's gospel. Yet, even the "high things" of Greek philosophy can be captured for Christ and made to serve<sup>45</sup> His purposes (2 Cor. 10:4-5). In using this term, John, under the Spirit's inspiration, was translating the gospel into Greek cultural concepts. Prof. Dunn suggests,<sup>46</sup> "*John was deliberately attempting to portray Jesus in a manner as attractive as possible to would-be (Christian) Gnostics.*" In John's hands, the *Logos*<sup>47</sup> "becomes an indispensable tool by which to bring Christ into contact with the Greek heritage...The prior loading...may have meant that Greeks ...missed many important things about the *Logos*...**but it did not mislead them about their salvation. Indeed it enabled them to see that salvation.**" John employed the *Logos*; Paul utilized the concept of "fullness" (Greek: *Pleroma*, Col. 1:19; 2:9). Translating the gospel in this way bridged cultural barriers and surely contributed to its rapid advance among the Empire's Greek-speaking peoples.

Such cross-cultural communication produces a greater realization of who Christ is. As the apostles, John, Paul, etc.,<sup>48</sup> "explain and translate the significance of the Christ in a world that is Gentile and Hellenistic, that significance is seen to be greater than anyone had realized before. **It was as though Christ himself actually grows...As he enters new areas of thought and life, he fills the picture.**" This matches Paul's notion of growth unto full measure of the One New Man (Eph. 4). Moreover, salvation not only transforms people's lives; it also changes their culture and society.

## Canon, Creeds & Orthodoxy—Issues of the Gospel's Interaction with Culture

The Church's interactions with Greco-Roman society certainly had negative issues—religious hierarchy, institutionalization etc. Yet, on the other hand, there were positive results. As the gospel gained ground in the Roman Empire, it changed society. Idol worship diminished; pagan practices receded. Elements of society were commandeered to serve God's purpose. As Professor Walls indicates,<sup>49</sup> "The total system of [Greek] thought had to be penetrated by the Gospel...bring[ing] the intellectual tradition into captivity to Christ and using it for new purposes....[This] meant putting the traditions of codification and of organization to the service of the Gospel. **The result was orthodoxy:** logically expounded belief set in codified form, established through a process of consultation." He refers to the Creeds (e.g., The Nicene-Constantinople Creed, AD 325, 381) produced by church councils during the Church Fathers' era. By then Gentile believers constituted the vast majority of Christians. Their society was<sup>50</sup> "an intellectual environment that combined the influences of Greek philosophy, Roman law, Eastern mysticism and spirituality...giving rise to questions that no believers had found it necessary to ask before. That intellectual environment was the highway to **a great outworking of creative theological activity...The eventual result was Christian theology as we know it.**" Gentile believers sought, with the Spirit's guidance, in the light of Scripture, answers to questions important to them. Such queries weren't raised by earlier Jewish believers. They didn't think that way; they had their own questions. Christian theology issued from Greek believers asking Greek questions concerning God and Christ. As Prof. Walls indicates, the<sup>51</sup> "classical doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation sprang from the...cross-cultural diffusion of the faith....The transposition was enriching without being distorting ...[it] gave a new dimension to thinking about Christ....What Greeks wanted to know was the relationship of...Christ to the Father. Thus, inevitably, the language of *ousia* [essence] and *hypostasis* [Latin, *persona*] enters. Were Christ and the Father of the same *ousia* [essence]? Or different...? Or similar in *ousia*?...It was a long, painful process, but it issued in an expanded understanding of who Christ is. Christian theology moved on to a new plane when Greek questions were asked about Christ and received Greek answers using the Greek Scriptures.... [It] led to new discoveries about Christ."

The gospel's interaction with Greek thought impacted succeeding generations of Christians down to today. It resulted in the canon of Scripture, the creeds and the concept of orthodoxy. Terms like incarnation, Trinity, Triune God, and co-inhere issued from believers grappling to define exactly what they believed about God and Christ. All Bible-believing Christians accept the twenty-seven New Testament books as a closed canon; it differentiates orthodox from heterodox teachings. Today Christian groups, even those critical of the creeds and church councils, define themselves in terms of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed (AD 325, 381).<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

At the "fullness of the times," God was incarnated in a particular culture--that belonging to first century Judaism in Palestine. As the gospel was translated to different peoples, languages and nations, Christ was "incarnated" once more in places where He never walked while in the flesh. The book of Acts records the initial phase of the gospel's cross-cultural transmission. It also records the historic apostolic council in Jerusalem which determined that believing Gentiles need not be judaized, becoming proselytes. Rather, they were free in Christ to develop a Christian lifestyle in the midst of their own Greek society, as the salt of the earth and light of the world (Matt. 5:13–15). Equally Jewish believers were also free as New Covenant believers to incarnate Christ in the midst of their Old Covenant Jewish society in Palestine. Acts 15 establishes the principle of cultural diversity within the Church; there is no unique divinely-approved Christian lifestyle, rather there are many Christian lifestyles. Since the first century there have been numerous Christian cultures, manifesting Christ in their respective societies. They have succeeded (and failed) to manifest Christ in differing degrees. Nevertheless, we rejoice to the extent they have succeeded. Today the responsibility is ours; Christ must be incarnated again in today's multi-cultural society as we live Christian lifestyles in union with Christ. "Freedom in Christ" means we are unfettered by the straight-jacket of narrow theological interpretations and Christian lifestyles developed in other times and places. Under the Spirit's guidance, and based upon God's Word, the gospel can be translated to communicate Christ to today's post-modern "Google generation." The process will manifest more dimensions of Christ, enrich the gospel and capture today's culture for Christ.

Nigel Tomes,

Toronto, Canada

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#### NOTES:

1. This article develops themes initially addressed in the author's "The God of Translation" posted at: <http://www.keepitintune.net/thegodoftranslation.html> Papers by Professor Andrew F. Walls (cited below) have been particularly helpful on this topic. However, this does **not** imply the author agrees with all Prof. Walls' views. My thanks to those who commented on earlier drafts. As usual the author alone is responsible of the views expressed here.
2. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1996, p. 47
3. Peter's aghast response, "By no means Lord, for I have never eaten anything common and unclean" (Acts 10:14) and his declaration to Cornelius, "You understand that it is unlawful for a man who is a Jew to join himself or come near one of another race," (Acts 10:28) indicate the substantial racial and religious barriers separating Jews (even the Lord's own disciples) from the Gentile nations.
4. Witness Lee, *The Experience of Life*, p. 12. In context the quote reads--Regeneration is "the birth of Christ within us...The birth of Christ in us means that Christ is born once more. Every time a man is regenerated, Christ is born once more in humanity." [Witness Lee, *The Experience of Life*, p. 12]
5. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 28
6. Charles H. Kraft, *Culture, Communication & Christianity*, p. 345
7. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, p. 151
8. The characterization of the Acts 15 Jerusalem decree as "not absolute," is found in Witness Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 456 and as "not...satisfactory to Paul" in Witness Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 364
9. Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2002, p. 68
10. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 8. The quote in context reads, "No group of Christians has therefore any right to impose in the name of Christ upon another group of Christians a set of assumptions about life determined by another time and place."
11. This point is discussed at length in the author's article entitled, "The Jerusalem Council's Apostolic Decree (Acts 15)—Proof Text for Authority & Uniformity OR Blueprint for Diversity?" posted at: [http://www.concernedbrothers.com/Truth/Acts\\_15\\_Apostolic\\_Decree\\_Binding.pdf](http://www.concernedbrothers.com/Truth/Acts_15_Apostolic_Decree_Binding.pdf) There I stated, "although Paul delivered the decree to the Galatian churches (Acts 16:4,) it is never mentioned in Paul's ministry or epistles. Significantly Paul's epistle to Galatians makes no reference to the Jerusalem judgment when addressing this issue. Evidently, once Paul delivered the decree to the churches explicitly named in the Jerusalem accord, he chose to conveniently ignore it. New Testament scholars suggest "Paul imposed the apostolic decree of Acts 15 on Gentile congregations only as far west as Galatia." [Hemer cited in Steven J. Friesen, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (July, 1995), pp. 291-314.] In terms of churches subsequently raised up by Paul, Professor F. F. Bruce concludes, "it is...certain in the light of Paul's writings, that Paul did not impose [the Jerusalem decree] on his own churches." [F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John: Studies in Non-Pauline Christianity*, p. 93] Third, whenever Paul spoke of eating idol-sacrifices, (as F. F. Bruce says, PAUL: *Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI. 1977, p. 187) "it is noteworthy that...he never [appealed] to the apostolic decree"—prohibiting such eating (Acts 15:20, 29). On the contrary, directly contravening the decree, Paul gave the Corinthians the liberty to "eat everything sold in the meat market," no questions asked (1 Cor. 10:25-30). Likewise, Paul told the Romans, "one believes he may eat all things [including meat from idol-sacrifices,]...Let each be fully persuaded in his own mind." (Rom. 14:2-5) Paul gave individual believers liberty<sup>30</sup> before the Lord in this matter, instead of mandating the "Apostolic Decree." For Paul, Christian liberty trumped the legality embodied in the Acts-15 decree."
12. Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p. 76 W. Lee acknowledges this difference, saying, "I have the full assurance that in the early days the churches in Judea were quite different from the churches in the Gentile world." [W. Lee, *The Life & Way for the Practice of the Church Life*, p. 119, emphasis added] New Testament scholars generally recognize the "two tier system" established in Acts 15. For example, Philip Alexander states, "Acts 15 and 21 propose a compromise: Jewish Christians were to continue to follow their 'way of life', observing the food laws, circumcising and keeping Sabbath; Gentile Christians were not to be obliged to adopt Jewish customs, but were to be subject only to general 'Noachide' laws." [Philip S. Alexander, in *Jews and Christians—The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135*, edited by James D. G. Dunn, p. 23]
13. The former [Jewish believers] may be "weaker brothers," but they were "brothers" nonetheless (Rom. 14:1-9; 1 Cor. 8:9-13).
14. Although Bible expositors differ in their dating of Paul's Galatians epistle, here we follow Witness Lee (and many others) in equating Paul's visit to Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1-10) with the "Apostolic Council" recorded in Acts 15. This results in juxtaposing Paul's refusal to circumcise Titus (Gal. 2:3-5) with his initiating the circumcision

of Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). Note that the latter incident took place in the area of Galatia, making Paul's Galatians epistle particularly relevant to these events. Tim Keller comments, "The juxtaposition can't be accidental. Though Paul has just fought vehemently against mandatory circumcision for believers, he circumcised Timothy..." [Tim Keller, *BEING THE CHURCH IN OUR CULTURE*, Reform & Resurge Conference 2006, p. 16] For an examination of Timothy's status under contemporary Jewish teaching see Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Was Timothy Jewish (Acts 16:1-3)? Exegesis, Rabbinic Law & Matrilineal Descent" in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 105, No. 2 (1986) pp 251-268. After reviewing the relevant material from 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism, Philip S. Alexander indicates that "Jewishness is acquired by birth if ones *mother* is Jewish; the status of the *father* is immaterial to the status of the child." [Philip S. Alexander, in *Jews and Christians—The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135*, edited by James D. G. Dunn, p. 4, emphasis original] According to this, Timothy, as the son of a Jewish woman, **would be considered a full-fledged Jew**, regardless of the fact that his father was Greek (Acts 16:1-3).

15. For example Witness Lee states, "The one solution made at Jerusalem for the problem of circumcision became a decree **for all the churches, both Jewish and Gentile, to keep** (Acts 15:1-31). Hence, in relation to the matter of circumcision, all the churches should be the same. **After the issuing of such a decree, it would have been wrong to allow the Jewish churches to keep the practice of circumcision while permitting the Gentile churches not to observe it....**The one solution regarding the problem of circumcision was good for all the churches, making all the churches the same." [W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem in the Lord's Recovery Today and Its Scriptural Remedy*, p. 34] The same point related to Acts 15 appears in W. Lee, *Elders' Training Book 7* (1986) under the heading "The solution made in Jerusalem being the decree for all the churches to keep," Along similar lines, W. Lee is quoted saying, "**The decision made covered all the churches, whether Jewish or Gentile. This does not mean that the churches in Judea can keep the law and the churches in the Gentile world do not need to keep the law.**" [W. Lee, *Elders' Training, Book 4: Other Crucial Matters Concerning the Practice of the Lord's Recovery*, pp. 29-30 emphasis added] Along the same lines, LSM's "blended brothers" claim "This [Acts 15] word of resolution was **not a word for just one church; it went out to many churches...this resolution was for the Body of Christ. It was for all the churches.** No church had the right to select what they wanted." [DL *The Ministry*, vol. 7, No. 6, (August, 2003) p. 116] Based on the Acts 15 "apostolic decree," they assert that all the local churches should be identical in speaking, practice and living.
16. Jerome contended that Paul's circumcision in Acts 16:3 must have been a pretence, and "deceitfully" should have been added into the text there. That is, Paul fooled the Jews into thinking he had circumcised Timothy. Saint Augustine countered Jerome's contention.
17. Notice that Bro. Lee asks the same question, at least four times, in the context of a single message—"Why then did Paul circumcise Timothy?" [Witness Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 372]. "Since Titus in Galatians 2 was not circumcised, why did Paul in Acts 16 circumcise Timothy...?" [W. Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 372]. "Why did he [Paul] have Timothy circumcised?" [W. Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 373]. "Should Paul in Acts 16 have had Timothy circumcised?" [W. Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 375]. In the latter case he continues, "It can be said fairly that eventually the Lord will take the way of not circumcising anyone. The best we can say...is that he [Paul] was being flexible in a particular environment." [W. Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 375]. Yet, elsewhere W. Lee is more dogmatic, saying "**After the issuing of such a decree [Acts 15], it would have been wrong to allow the Jewish churches to keep the practice of circumcision while permitting the Gentile churches not to observe it....**The one solution regarding the problem of circumcision was good for all the churches, making all the churches the same." [W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem in the Lord's Recovery Today and Its Scriptural Remedy*, p. 34, emphasis added]
18. Witness Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, pp. 163-4. Elsewhere Bro. Lee declares, "**After the issuing of such a decree [Acts 15], it would have been wrong to allow the Jewish churches to keep the practice of circumcision while permitting the Gentile churches not to observe it.**" [W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem in the Lord's Recovery Today and Its Scriptural Remedy*, p. 34] Applying the same logic to the Apostle Paul, doesn't this imply that—"**it would have been wrong to...keep the practice of circumcision [in Timothy's case] while permitting...[Titus] not to observe it**"? W. Lee also said, "God's New Testament economy is to have a new dispensation **absolutely separated from Judaism.**" [W. Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 163, emphasis added] W. Lee points specifically to circumcision, the kosher diet and the Sabbath, saying, "Circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and a particular diet are the three strongest ordinances according to the law of Moses..." [W. Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 239] "We have pointed out that the three main ordinances that caused the Jews to be distinct and separate from the Gentiles are Circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and a particular diet...According to Ephesians 2:15, these ordinances of the law have been abolished by the Lord's death on the cross..." [W. Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 241] "To tell believers to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses nullifies God's New Testament economy. It also nullifies the death of Christ..." [W. Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 355]
19. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem in the Lord's Recovery Today and Its Scriptural Remedy*, p. 34, emphasis added
20. Witness Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 490. During his last visit to Jerusalem, James told the Apostle Paul, that the thousands of Jewish believers "have been instructed concerning you that you are teaching all the Jews...not to circumcise their children, nor to walk according to the customs" (Acts 21:21). Witness Lee comments that this allegation is "correct as to the facts" (p. 489) and "The Jews were right regarding the

facts" (p. 490) "The Jews also claimed that Paul taught the people not to walk according to the customs. In this matter they were accurate." (p. 490). Also he says, "I believe that Paul did teach that [it] is no longer necessary to practice circumcision. Yet, as we have pointed out, he had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:1-3). The criticism of his opposers, therefore was not fair." (p. 490) It is doubtful, however, if Paul's circumcision of Timothy would have carried much weight. That one incident hardly counter-balances Paul's (alleged) teaching "throughout the nations." In fact it merely highlights the apparent contradiction between that one case (Timothy) and Paul's (alleged) teaching.

21. W. Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 374
22. Witness Lee is highly critical of James and the Church in Jerusalem. He says, "James, continued to think that it would be better for the Jewish believers to practice the...Old Testament and to keep the law. James seemed to say, 'The Gentiles do not need to keep the law or to be circumcised. But we [Christian] Jews should practice circumcision and keep the law.'" Witness Lee also says, "James 2:8-11 indicates that the Jewish believers at James' time were **still practicing the keeping of the Old Testament law** [*Life-study of Acts*, p. 488, emphasis added] He continues, "....**They were not aware that the dispensation of the law was altogether over** and that the dispensation of grace should be fully honored, and that any disregard of the distinction between these two dispensations would be contrary to God's economical plan..." [W. Lee, *Life-study of Acts*, p. 489 the same paragraph appears also on p. 365, emphasis added]. Although the Jewish believers were "not aware that the dispensation of the law was altogether over," surely the Apostle Paul was fully aware! According to Witness Lee's view, wasn't Paul's circumcision of Timothy "still practicing the keeping of the Old Testament law"? Was not Paul's action also, to "disregard of the distinction between these two dispensations [and therefore]...contrary to God's economical plan..."? It is difficult (impossible?) to reconcile the actions of the Apostle Paul—circumcising Timothy (Acts 16:1-3), making a vow in Greece (Acts 18:18) and taking a Nazarite vow in Jerusalem (Acts 21:26)—with Witness Lee's characterization of Paul's stance relative to Judaic practices. In our view, the historic "data" in the Acts record do not match Witness Lee's position.
23. Responding to Jerome's position concerning this issue, Martin Luther wrote: "**Paul did not reject circumcision as something damnable**; nor did he by any word or deed compel the Jews to give it up. For in 1 Cor 7:18 he says: 'Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision.' But he did reject circumcision in the sense of something necessary for righteousness [salvation]. **Paul did not require that anyone who wanted to be circumcised should remain uncircumcised, but he did want [them] to know that circumcision was not necessary for salvation.** Paul wanted to remove this compulsion. Therefore he allowed the Jews to observe the Law as an obligation." (Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, pp. 84-85, emphasis added)
24. James D. G. Dunn states, "...in denouncing 'works of the law' Paul was not disparaging 'good works' as such, but observances of the law **valued as attesting membership of the people of God—particularly circumcision, food laws and Sabbath.**" [James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*, p.11, emphasis added] That is, Paul opposed (disparaged) Judaic observances--circumcision, food laws and Sabbath—not on the basis of their own merits as practices, but **in so far as they were valued "as attesting membership of the people of God."** That is, as a "litmus test" of belonging to God's people. The "hard line dispensational view" does not entertain the possibility that Jewish believers could continue observing their cultural traditions—circumcision, kosher diet and Sabbath-keeping--**with the full-realization** that these customs **do not** make them righteous in God's sight, **do not** secure their justification or sanctification and **do not** qualify them as members of God's people. **With this realization** a Jewish New Testament believer could observe these practices *on par* with a Gentile believer who is a vegetarian (for example) or a Gentile believer who chooses circumcision for medical-hygienic reasons.
25. Tim Keller, *BEING THE CHURCH IN OUR CULTURE*, Reform & Resurge Conference 2006, p. 16 <http://www.journeyon.net/media/being-the-church-in-our-culture.pdf>
26. Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p. 78
27. Andrew F. Walls, "Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church" International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Jan. 2004) p. 5
28. Charles H. Kraft, *Culture, Communication & Christianity*, p. 209. Along the same lines, Walls says, "There is no such thing as 'Christian culture' or 'Christian civilization'...There have been several different Christian civilizations already" over the past 2,000 years. [Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 22] Also Walls declares, "All churches are culture churches—including our own" [Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 8]
29. DT, *The Ministry*, vol. 9, No. 3 (March 2005) p. 67
30. EM, *The Ministry*, vol. 9, No. 5 (May 2005) p. 137
31. MC, *The Ministry*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (March 2005) p. 36
32. The distinction is made (for example) in W. Lee, *Conclusion of the New Testament*, Message 196, p. 2111.
33. See Charles H. Kraft, *Culture, Communication & Christianity*, p. 316
34. Prof. Walls recognizes this duality, saying, "The fact...that 'if any man is in Christ he is a new creation' does not mean that he starts or continues his life in a vacuum, or that his mind is a blank table [sheet of paper]. It has been formed by his own culture and history, and since God has accepted him as he is, his Christian mind will continue to be influenced by what was in it before. And this is true of groups as for persons. All churches



- are culture churches—including our own.” [Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 8]
35. See my previous piece, “The God of Translation.” Prof. Walls, contrasting Christianity with Islam, says, “Christianity has no culturally fixed element, as is provided [in Islam] by the Qur’an [Koran] fixed in heaven, closed traditions on earth, perfection of law in *sharia*, single shrine in Mecca, and true word everywhere in Arabic.” [Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p. 13] He also says, “Islamic absolutes are fixed in a particular language, and in the conditions of a particular period of human history. The divine word is the Qur’an, fixed in heaven forever in Arabic, the language of original revelation. For Christians, however, the divine word is translatable, infinitely translatable.” [Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p. 29]
  36. D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008, p. 74. Carson is professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL. USA.
  37. W. Lee concedes “I have the full assurance that in the early days the churches in Judea *were quite different* from the churches in the Gentile world.” [W. Lee, *The Life & Way for the Practice of the Church Life*, p. 119]
  38. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 373, 372, emphasis original
  39. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 376, emphasis original. He also says the New Testament “*canonizes the diversity* of Christianity.”
  40. This echoes Watchman Nee’s statement—“the churches are local, *intensely local*.” [W. Nee, *Normal Christian Church Life*, p. 102, emphasis original]
  41. Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, p. 68
  42. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, Harper Collins, 1997, p. 6. Prof. Stark points out that the implied growth rate is 40% **per decade** or 3.42% p.a. compounded continuously—i.e. “slow & steady wins the race.”
  43. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, Harper Collins, 1997, p. 5
  44. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. xvii
  45. It’s worth quoting Trinity Professor D. A. Carson here He writes, “No truth which human beings may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture-transcending way--but that does not mean that the truth thus articulated does not transcend culture.” (D. A. Carson). Certainly the concept of the *Logos* had cultural associations, different associations in different cultures; it (and other terms) was not “culture-transcending.” Yet the culture-transcending truth, regarding God in Christ, was articulated by John’s use of the *Logos*.
  46. Dunn, , *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 302, emphasis original
  47. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 34
  48. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. xvii
  49. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, pp. 18-9
  50. Walls, “*Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church*,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Jan. 2004) p. 6
  51. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, pp. 79-80
  52. For example, LSM declares, “The Christians in the local churches share common doctrine with all other mainstream, orthodox, evangelical Christians.” [This quote is from the LSM-affiliated Internet website “contendingforthefaith.com”.] They then proceed to enumerate “...including the belief: [1] That the Holy Bible is the complete divine revelation verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit. [2] That God is the only one Triune God - the Father, the Son and the Spirit, coexisting from eternity to eternity. [3] In the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that eternal salvation comes through grace by faith in Him.” [Entry under: “Living Stream Ministry & The Local Church: Background Information--Description of The Local Church and Living Stream Ministry” posted on the Internet at: <http://www.contendingforthefaith.com/libel-litigations/harvest-house-et-al/ministry.html> ] Notice that the language and statements of the creeds are alluded to here. Yet LSM’s writers routinely lambaste the Church Councils. For example, Paul Onica criticises the Council of Constantinople (381 AD) for being under the “influence of Imperial politics” and “the early and progressive deviation from the central line of the New Testament revelation.” [Paul Onica, “MILESTONES,” in *LSM’s Affirmation & Critique*, Vol. 1, No. 4, October 1996]