

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL AND THE THEOLOGICAL TASK

TIMOTHY WIARDA*

This article is partly about the Jerusalem Council and partly about hermeneutics, contextualization, and theological method. As I have been reading in the latter three areas recently, I cannot help noticing how often writers make reference to the Jerusalem Council. It sometimes enters their discussion in its pure Acts 15 form, sometimes as an event reconstructed from a combination of sources. Either way, the Council serves as paradigm and precedent for a number of proposals concerning the theologian's task. The proposals themselves are fraught with consequence, since they concern the shape and status of the church's message. Any NT episode cited on their behalf, therefore, deserves at least a few moments of our attention. What do various writers mean when they claim the Jerusalem Council as a model? And looking deeper, what are the marks and functions of a good biblical paradigm?

I. A SURVEY OF PROPOSALS

The scattering of writers I will cite share a belief that the Jerusalem Council offers a paradigm that may be followed today by those who develop theology to guide the church.¹ These authors do not all highlight the same aspects of the Council episode, however, nor do they draw identical conclusions from it with respect to theological method.

1. *The Council as a model for contextualization.* The Council seems to be cited most frequently by writers who stress the factors of culture and ethnicity and who view the decision to free Gentile believers from the requirement of circumcision as a matter of contextualization. John Davis, for instance, considers the Council of Jerusalem to be the prime example of early Christian contextualization.² That is to say, when the church debated

* Timothy Wiarda is professor of New Testament at Singapore Bible College, 9-15 Adam Road, Singapore 289886.

¹ The book of Acts depicts the Jerusalem Council making two decisions. One relates to the question of whether Gentile believers have to be circumcised in order to be saved, the other concerns certain practices that Gentile believers are asked to avoid (apparently to make it easier for Jewish Christians to fellowship with Gentile Christians in mixed congregations). Only the first of these decisions is in view in the discussion that follows. This is the issue the writers I mention primarily have in mind when they cite the Council and, in any case, the NT accounts portray Gentile circumcision as the central question facing the Council.

² "Biblical Precedents for Contextualisation," *Asia Theological Association Journal* 2 (1994) 21.

circumcision, the underlying issue concerned the sort of principles that should be followed when Christian teaching was brought across ethnic-cultural boundaries. Those Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentile believers be circumcised did so because they assumed the law given to their own nation was valid for all cultures; those who rejected the demand for circumcision, on the other hand, were guided by the insight that what is binding on one people group is not necessarily binding on all. David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen offer a similar analysis: the decision concerning circumcision was an instance of contextualization; the Council determined that salvation did not depend on the traditions and institutions of any particular ethnic group.³ According to Charles Kraft, the Jerusalem consultation was called in order to “make a decision with respect to Gentile converts and Hebrew culture.” When the Judaizers insisted that Gentiles needed to be circumcised, they were in effect demanding that Gentiles submit to “cultural conversion.”⁴

Davis, Kraft, Hesselgrave, and Rommen are concerned first and foremost with missiological issues: how the gospel should be expressed when it is carried across cultural boundaries, and how emerging national churches can formulate theology in ways that suit their own distinctive cultures. These writers clearly wish to conform their methodological proposals to biblical teaching and models; they work with Scripture in its final canonical form; and they all speak of circumcision and the law of Moses as if these were primarily matters of Jewish culture. Kraft expresses himself most emphatically on this latter point, but a similar assumption seems to be held by all of these authors, namely, that the Council exemplifies the same kind of contextualization that cross-cultural missionaries or national churches might also practice today.

For the moment I will note just two of the questions this approach provokes. They relate to what actually took place at the Jerusalem Council—the problem tackled and the solution agreed. First, to what extent did any of the participants in the original debate view circumcision and the Mosaic law as matters of culture? Second, was the theological decision that emerged from the Council conceived of as universal (applicable to all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles) or local (restricted to one cultural community)? Certain elements in the narrative of Acts 15 (the text to which these writers primarily appeal) make these questions fair, perhaps even unavoidable. Some of Peter’s comments, for example, appear to touch on the universal-or-local question. He describes the law as a yoke that “neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear,” and affirms that “it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we [Jews] are saved, just as they [Gentiles] are” (Acts 15:10–11). Remarks such as these do not, on the surface, sound like expressions of a culture-specific theology. As for how the Council participants might have

³ *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 10–11.

⁴ *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979) 340–41. Cf. D. Whiteman: “The principles debated at the Jerusalem Council and laid out in Acts 15 are as applicable today as they were then—converts can follow Christ without abandoning their culture for that of another” (“Editorial: Contextualizing the Gospel,” *Missiology* 25 [1997] 3).

viewed the connection between circumcision and culture, to suggest that the Mosaic law was purely a cultural *product* would run counter to the perspective of the Acts narrative (see 7:38, for example), as well as the convictions of the early church more widely. I assume, then, that when these writers speak of circumcision as cultural they mean that, though the practice was divinely commanded, it was a requirement given only to Jews, a God-given mark of their identity as a nation. To describe circumcision in these terms accords with the perspective of Israel's Scriptures—when looked at from one angle. Is it adequate, however, as a complete account of the circumcision command? The OT writings portray a tight link between the Jewish nation and God's covenant, so that for a Gentile to join one meant joining the other. Circumcision was the means of becoming a Jew, certainly. But it was also the required way for a Gentile to receive the blessings promised within the covenant relationship. Would not the early Christians have been mindful of the testimony of Scripture on this subject?⁵ If they were, then those who gathered at the Jerusalem Council had to wrestle with something other than simply the pressures of culture and ethnocentrism.

James D. G. Dunn is another author who highlights issues of culture and ethnicity in connection with the Jerusalem Council. Though writing as a NT specialist rather than a missiologist, he too cites the church's decision with respect to circumcision as a model for churches and theologians as the gospel spreads into new lands today. I mention Dunn separately, however, because he handles the Council somewhat differently than the writers discussed above. First, his analysis of what happened at this consultation proceeds on the assumption that Acts does not offer a completely accurate historical account. Second, some of his most stimulating reflections on the Council are based on his interpretation of Paul's letter to the Galatians.⁶ Third, and most important, while the writers cited earlier stop short of exploring all that their view of the Council might suggest concerning the nature and status of theological concepts,⁷ Dunn looks deeper and expresses himself more boldly. In his Acts commentary he highlights the church's expansion across an ethnic boundary (that dividing Jews from Gentiles) as the key factor explaining the Council's decision that Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised—a decision made possible, to be sure, by signs of divine approval and agreement among the church leaders. He then suggests that similar difficult theological steps may have to be made today, as the Christian mission continues to develop.⁸ But what does this imply concerning the unity and stability of the gospel message? It is here that Dunn's discussion

⁵ Cf. J. D. G. Dunn: "How it was that Christian Jews felt able thus to disregard the explicit injunctions of Gen 17:9–14 is one of the great unsolved mysteries of Christianity's beginnings" (*The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993] 70).

⁶ Dunn sides with those who view Gal 2:1–10 as a description of the Jerusalem Council (*Theology* 65). A number of commentators hold the alternative perspective that the Galatians passage refers to an event preceding the Council, thus reflecting an earlier stage of discussion concerning the issue of Gentile circumcision.

⁷ Though Kraft should perhaps be excepted here. See *Christianity and Culture* 116–46.

⁸ *The Acts of the Apostles* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 199.

of Galatians proves most interesting. According to Dunn, the Council concluded that there were in fact *two* gospels: one for Jews, with circumcision and law (the gospel committed to Peter), and one for Gentiles, without circumcision and law (the gospel committed to Paul).⁹ Hand in hand with this analysis of the Council decision goes a particular conception of the nature of theology, as some of Dunn's further comments suggest. There is one central gospel confession that remains solid and unchanging (Christ died for our sins and rose again), while teachings developed around this center (such as the claim that circumcision is or is not necessary for justification and salvation, if I read Dunn aright) are matters of flexible and context-specific interpretation.¹⁰

When Dunn's treatment of the Jerusalem Council is compared with those of some of the others who cite the event as a pattern for contextualization, certain strengths become evident. He reads the NT texts carefully and squarely tackles the challenges they present. He is aware of the wider implications of using the Council as a model for doing contextualized theology. Nevertheless, his conclusions generate a number of questions. One that comes quickly to mind is an exegetical concern: does Galatians really allow for two gospels? Though Dunn is not the first to see 2:7 as pointing in that direction, his reading of this text does not reflect the mainstream of interpretation; one particular problem is that such an interpretation seems to fly in the face of Paul's passionate rejection of other gospels in 1:6–9.

2. *The Council as a model for Spirit-led community interpretation of Scripture.* Let us now turn to another group of writers. At least a few recent theologians draw lessons from the Jerusalem Council with respect to the hermeneutical process. Some of these cite the Council as an example of how the Spirit leads Christian communities in the interpretation and application of Scripture. French Arrington, for example, suggests that Acts 15 depicts an "interplay of Scripture, experience, Pentecostal tradition, and reason under the direction of the Spirit" that provides an important hermeneutical pattern.¹¹ John Christopher Thomas develops the Acts 15 model in greater detail.¹² While stressing the importance of the believing community in the

⁹ Dunn bases this conclusion on Gal 2:7. How does this relate to Paul's vehement insistence in 1:6–9 that there is only one valid gospel? Dunn explains that the "other gospel" Paul rejects in 1:6–9 was actually about the same as the gospel entrusted to Peter—which, as 2:7 indicates, Paul is willing to acknowledge and accept. What made the former of these two "no gospel" in Paul's eyes was the fact that its proponents tried to impose it on the Gentiles, claiming it was the only true gospel, whereas Peter and the others at the Council had agreed that both forms of the gospel were valid in their respective contexts (*Theology* 27–28).

¹⁰ *Theology* 44. It should perhaps be noted that in some later passages in this same book (see e.g. p. 79) Dunn says that Paul rejected the idea of any link between justification and law as a valid theological option even for Jews, and that he sought to correct Peter's thinking in this regard. How this correlates with Dunn's statements about differing gospels for differing contexts is not clear.

¹¹ "Hermeneutics," in S. Burgess and G. McGee, eds., *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 388.

¹² "Women, Pentecostals and the Bible: An Experiment in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 5 (1994) 41–56; "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: A Pentecostal

interpretation process,¹³ he gives greatest attention to the role of the Spirit. The Spirit first created a series of powerful spiritual experiences that impacted the thinking of those gathered at the Council (the conversion of many Gentiles, the signs and wonders done among them, the outpouring of the Spirit on Cornelius), then led James to select a biblical text that supported the inclusion of Gentiles among God's people (Amos 9:11–12). Stated in this general form, I find Thomas's points about the hermeneutical importance of spiritual experience and the Spirit's direction to come as helpful reminders. His more detailed analysis of *how* the Spirit led the Council through Scripture requires closer examination, however. According to Thomas, the Spirit directed James and the others at the Jerusalem Council to *one particular type* of OT text, while bypassing texts that potentially supported an opposing theology. The implication for today's churches is that, when faced with issues concerning which there seems to be a diverse range of biblical data, each community should look first to its own Spirit-given experience and its own sense of the Spirit's leading, then on that basis choose those particular strands of the Bible's witness that seem most fitting. This limited selection of texts becomes the community's source of authoritative teaching.¹⁴ A methodological proposal along these lines will perhaps seem moderate to many. Nevertheless, it does stand in significant contrast to traditional approaches to Scripture that seek to reconcile or balance divergent emphases within the Bible. The Spirit does indeed lead Christians through the Bible according to Thomas's model, but in doing so he sometimes guides churches into differing and even mutually incompatible theologies.¹⁵

Thomas offers a stimulating reading and application of the Council episode, but we cannot let it pass without asking certain questions. Two stand out as especially important; in fact, they might well have been raised earlier in connection with our survey of contextualization-model approaches to the Jerusalem Council, since they are as relevant to those proposals as they are to the model advanced by Thomas. One concerns the *time* of the Jerusalem Council—its location in the flow of redemptive history—and the other concerns the *participants*. These twin factors have been largely ignored in the interpretations and programmatic suggestions reviewed thus far. This is puzzling, since the “when” and “who” questions call attention to aspects of the Council episode that are certainly germane to its suitability as a continuing model. To take up the first of these issues, how does the fact that the Council stands so close to the time of Jesus affect the way we view its paradigmatic

Hermeneutic as a Test Case,” in J. Green and M. Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 108–22.

¹³ “. . . any model of hermeneutics that seeks to build upon Acts 15 cannot afford to ignore the significant role of the community of believers in that process” (“Reading” 117).

¹⁴ “Women” 46, 50, 53–56.

¹⁵ “Women” 56; “Reading” 121. Having raised the issue of how some methodological approaches offer a comfortable resting ground to theological dissimilarity while others do not, I should stress that what is at stake here is not whether one will be humble and accepting as opposed to divisive and judgmental in relating to other Christians. The issue is rather whether one will view inter-church theological disagreement with optimism or a measure of unease.

value? The claim that the Messiah's coming, death, resurrection, and ascension were unique and epoch-changing events is basic to the Christian story. Basic, too, is the belief that these events carried far-reaching implications for the covenant God had made with Israel. The Jerusalem Council took place fifteen or twenty years after Jesus' death and resurrection; it focused on covenant-related issues, the sign of circumcision, and the status of Gentile believers. Given the intimate connection between the issue brought before the Council and the unique events of messianic fulfillment that shortly preceded it,¹⁶ it might be wise to think twice before attempting to replicate the Council's process of theological decision-making today. In other words, the Spirit's hermeneutical guidance, fresh and context-related though it was, may have been decisively tied to the eschatological change brought about by the once-for-all (all times and all communities) work of Christ.

Turning to the question of *who* participated in the Council, we note that, while the Acts narrative does not leave the wider church completely out of the picture, it identifies "the apostles and elders" as the crucial players (15:6, 22, 23). The named speakers are Peter, Barnabas, Paul, and James. Does this heavy presence of apostles or near-apostles¹⁷ encourage an easy correlation between the theological decision-making done at the Council and that carried out by Christians and churches today? Are the chief characters portrayed in Acts 15 exemplary disciples or uniquely authoritative figures? In the narrative leading up to the Council episode the apostles are shown to occupy a special position that includes bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus, giving authoritative teaching, and making decisions (1:2, 15–26; 2:14, 42; 6:2–4; 8:14). This might well suggest that the leading figures depicted in Acts 15 are something other than typical Christians, or even typical church teachers. A very similar picture emerges in Galatians when Paul describes talks in Jerusalem about Gentiles and circumcision (2:1–10).¹⁸ He indicates the key participants to be James, Peter, John, Barnabas, and himself. Paul takes pains to highlight his own apostleship and revelation-based insight into the gospel,¹⁹ while at the same time acknowledging the position of James, Peter, and John, and their right to exercise special leadership and theological discernment. An emphasis on apostleship, authority, and revelation runs throughout this section, in fact, with little to suggest that Paul wishes to hold himself up as an example for the churches to emulate.²⁰ The effectiveness of a model depends on the degree of analogy between the original ex-

¹⁶ Note the emphasis on messianic fulfillment in James's citation of Amos 9:11–12 (Acts 15:16–17). The theme of eschatological fulfillment is likewise strong throughout Paul's epistle to the Galatians (e.g. 1:4; 3:23; 4:4–5).

¹⁷ Acts highlights the importance of the twelve apostles (1:15–26; 2:14, 42; etc.). Barnabas and Paul are identified as apostles in 14:4, 14, but their exact status in relation to the Twelve is not defined. James is obviously a key leader (12:17; 21:18), though not one of the Twelve; the narrative of chapter 15 does not clarify whether he belongs in the apostle or elder category (but see Gal 1:19).

¹⁸ I understand this passage to refer to a conference prior to the Council portrayed in Acts 15.

¹⁹ Gal 1:1, 11–12, 15–17.

²⁰ Though in other contexts, of course, Paul often does present himself as an example to follow. See e.g. Gal 2:19–21; 4:12.

ample and the later situations to which it is applied. That being so, the gap between the apostles and us, and between their time and our own, is a matter that must not be overlooked.

3. *The Council as a pattern for a bimodal authority structure.* James Shelton also emphasizes the role of the Spirit-led community in the Acts account of the Jerusalem Council.²¹ His analysis is distinctive in at least two ways, however: he sees the Spirit's guidance as a second source of authority alongside of Scripture rather than simply assistance in interpreting Scripture, and he sees it given specifically through the church's leadership structure (the apostles and elders) rather than through the community at large.²² Shelton believes that Acts presents this pattern as a normative model for the church through the ages. He thus explicitly rejects the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, concluding instead that "Christian epistemology is bimodal: Scripture and Tradition, with the latter being the Holy Spirit speaking through the Church to the Church."²³ Shelton further asserts that the Acts model shows that churches today should have "a strong apostolic government,"²⁴ though he does not go on to develop a picture of what this would look like in practice.

The strength of Shelton's reading lies in his recognition of the role played by apostles at the Jerusalem Council—a factor many interpreters overlook. He is also correct, I believe, in observing how the apostles' Spirit-enabled authority stands side by side with that of the OT. But does Shelton draw the right conclusions from these elements in the Acts account? Consider first his rejection of *sola Scriptura* in favor of a two-source authority structure. Traditional Protestant theology has always seen apostolic authority as something very closely tied to Scriptural authority, not as an additional source of teaching separate from Scripture. We do sometimes find what might be called "bimodal" authority in Acts.²⁵ But this is best described as a duality of OT authority plus apostolic "new covenant" witness (closely allied to what we now have in written form in the NT), not a duality of Scripture plus extra-scriptural apostolic tradition. Shelton's second major conclusion, that the Acts portrayal of apostolic leadership provides a model for the ongoing leadership of the church, raises challenging questions. What is an apostle? What does it mean for a contemporary church to be apostolic? I will not pursue these large issues here, except to reiterate a point briefly argued in the preceding section: nothing in the larger narrative of Acts suggests that the apostolic figures depicted in chapter 15 are presented as typical church leaders.²⁶

²¹ "Epistemology and Authority in the Acts of the Apostles: An Analysis and Test Case Study of Acts 15:1–29," *The Spirit & Church* 2/2 (2000) 231–47.

²² *Ibid.* 242–46.

²³ *Ibid.* 247.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 246.

²⁵ Notice the way citations from the OT work in tandem with fresh apostolic testimony in Peter's Pentecost sermon (2:14–41), for instance.

²⁶ Shelton's argument for seeing the authority pattern in Acts 15 as normative is that "Luke envisioned the Church as the prophetic witness to the on-going apocalyptic in-breaking of God's

4. *The Council as an example of canonical conversations.* Another writer who believes the Jerusalem Council supports a particular model of hermeneutics is Robert Wall.²⁷ Writing from the perspective of a canonical approach to Scripture, Wall highlights the factor of “canonical conversations” in connection with the Jerusalem Council and the events surrounding it. “Intercanonical conversations” is Wall’s preferred metaphor for describing the theological plurality he perceives within the NT. New Testament writers engage in intramural debate. There is much common ground among them, but also areas of disagreement. These are not resolved; rather, it is through point and counter-point that the biblical witness achieves its purposes. The intercanonical conversations reflected in the Bible legitimize the “inter-ecclesial conversations” (debates) that exist between sections of the church today. They show us, says Wall, that theological diversity (within boundaries) is not a negative thing. On the contrary, recognition of this truth will prevent any group from becoming too parochial in its views, and will allow each faith tradition to affirm its own legitimacy.²⁸ How does the Jerusalem Council contribute to this model? According to Wall, the disagreements among the apostles reflected in Acts 15 and Galatians 2 exemplify or set a pattern for the widespread NT phenomenon of theological diversity. There was debate among the participants at the Council; in like manner there is debate among NT writers. This kind of unresolved conversation then provides a pattern for today’s churches as they work through theological issues.²⁹

The most pertinent question to ask concerning this suggested link between the Jerusalem Council and canonical conversations centers on the terms “disagreement” and “unresolved debate”—key characteristics of both intercanonical and interecclesial conversations, as Wall understands them. Are the narratives of apostolic consultation in Acts and Galatians about

sovereign acts” (“Epistemology” 245). But at the Jerusalem Council the apostles are still giving foundational witness to God’s once-for-all action *in Christ*, to the basic meaning of *the gospel*. The miracles and experiences they recount are signs that prompt this witness, not new salvation-historical acts that require new teaching or a new gospel.

²⁷ “Canonical Context and Canonical Conversations,” in *Between Two Horizons* 165–82. Wall does not discuss the details of Jerusalem Council in this essay, but merely cites Acts 15:1–21 and Gal 2:1–15 as examples of his concept of “intercanonical conversation” and as paradigms for his proposal concerning “interecclesial conversation.” His reference to this episode is nonetheless significant, since he uses it to support key parts of his approach to Scripture; the only other example he offers is the difference in perspective between the Epistle of James and Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Romans.

²⁸ “Canonical Context” 180–82.

²⁹ Wall seems to affirm that the actual *texts* of Acts 15:1–21 and Gal 2:1–15 serve as examples of apostolic diversity, and not simply that a *historical reconstruction* of the events lying behind these texts provides the example of apostolic disagreement. He says that “the biblical canon stabilizes and bears continuing witness to the historic disagreements between the traditions of the church’s first apostles. . . . Not only do these controversies acquire a permanent value within Scripture, but Scripture in turn commends these same controversies to its current readers” (“Canonical Context” 180). Wall presumably means that these texts directly model disagreement (though possibly he means that the two texts express differing theologies?).

disagreement or agreement? Do they depict debate without resolution or issues resolved? Consider first the Acts narrative. Yes, there is debate, both preceding and during the Council. But the account soon begins to portray a growing consensus. A first clue comes when we are told that the whole assembly becomes silent and listens when Barnabas and Paul recount what God has been doing among the Gentiles. Then James makes a positive reference back to what Peter has said. James further affirms Peter by saying that the prophets agree with the things he has highlighted. The description of the letter sent out by the Council then triply confirms this progressively building emphasis on consensus. First, the narrative says that the decision to send the letter is made by “the apostles and the elders with the whole church.” The letter’s salutation then reinforces this point by showing that the letter goes out under the name of the apostle and the elders. Finally, a comment within the letter itself (“being of one mind”) reminds readers of the Council’s like-mindedness.³⁰ A similar emphasis is found in Galatians. To support his apostolic credentials and the truth of the gospel he preaches, Paul begins an extended narrative section by stressing his independence from the Jerusalem church.³¹ But when he moves on to describe his meeting with James, Peter, and John in Jerusalem (2:1–10), his theme shifts. Paul now highlights the equally vital point that an agreement exists between him and the Jerusalem apostles. His all-important claim is that James, Peter, and John have endorsed his message.

To be sure, both Acts and Galatians reveal a situation marked by tension. Paul hints in Galatians that the strains were felt even among the church’s highest leaders. It is no doubt true, then, that historical events involving inter-church disagreement form the background of the Jerusalem Council. The biblical narratives themselves, however, emphasize resolution and unity, and describe a process whereby the disputed questions were settled. They thus make an ironic choice as support texts to a proposal that legitimates inter-canonical and inter-ecclesial disagreement. If one is looking for NT reports of open-ended contention, more suitable examples might be found in Acts 15:36–41 (Paul and Barnabas’s disagreement over John Mark) or Gal 2:11–16 (Paul’s rebuke of Peter at Antioch).³² But even these texts do not offer good precedents for *theological* dispute. The difference of opinion between Paul and Barnabas does not relate to doctrine or teaching. Paul’s dispute with Peter comes closer, but even in this instance Paul faults Peter primarily for inconsistency, hypocrisy, and failure to think through the implications of his actions. Paul seems to assume that he and Peter do share a common theology, a new understanding of the law in the light of the gospel.³³

³⁰ Acts 15:22–25.

³¹ Gal 1:13–24.

³² This latter incident is, in fact, included within the texts Wall cites in support of the “inter-canonical conversation” concept (i.e. Acts 15:1–21 and Gal 2:1–15).

³³ See especially vv. 12, 14–16.

5. *The Council as a precedent for theological decision-making based on a concept of progressive revelation.* An analysis that highlights time and progress as the key factors driving the early church's judgment with respect to circumcision provides a final example of the paradigmatic use of the Jerusalem Council. Such a perspective marks the discussion of Paul Smith, who looks to the Council in the context of developing his case for using feminine language for God in church worship.³⁴ In his view, the early Christians' decision concerning circumcision parallels the decision that some contemporary churches have made to introduce feminine language for God. A particular conception of progressive revelation is fundamental to Smith's reasoning. God's past revelation concerning the law was replaced by new revelation at the time of the Council; in the same way, an old revelation that uses almost exclusively male language for God must now give way to new insights concerning feminine aspects of God. Here, then, is an approach that takes the history-related character of God's revelation seriously. But where does the specific *history-changing action of Christ* fit in? Smith does not neglect this question. He is careful to affirm that the incarnation of Christ is God's final word to us. How then can the contemporary church gain new theological insights at the same level of far-reaching importance as those attained by the first generation of Christians? Smith's answer is that, while God's revelation in Christ is final, the Holy Spirit only progressively reveals the *implications* of that definitive revelation. The implications concerning circumcision were revealed at the time of the Jerusalem Council; the implications with regard to the feminine face of God are being made known today.³⁵

If the approach to theology that Smith advocates and finds validated in the Jerusalem Council were accepted, it could be applied to a wide range of issues facing the church. But should it be accepted? The validity of Smith's paradigm might be challenged on the grounds that it focuses rather narrowly on just one element within the Council episode, the simple fact that something old was replaced by something new and better. But I believe a more pressing matter is the way this proposal forces us to consider a larger question: the relation between the Spirit and the Word. Smith describes a model in which the Spirit sometimes guides the church on major theological issues more or less apart from the Bible—sometimes even leading the church away from revelation already given in the Bible, including the NT. Below the surface of the Spirit-Scripture question, of course, lies the deeper matter of the Spirit's relation to the Word become flesh. While Smith does avoid a complete divorce between the Spirit and the work of Christ, insisting that the new things the Spirit reveals today are simply long-hidden implications of Christ's incarnation,³⁶ the link appears tenuous in practice. First, Smith

³⁴ *Is It Okay To Call God "Mother": Considering the Feminine Face of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 215–26. Smith bases his discussion on the Acts 15 account.

³⁵ Smith says, "The Holy Spirit was really left with many things to interpret after the Bible was written! The intent of Jesus in future situations which Jesus did not directly address or face is one of those things we need the Holy Spirit to help us discern" (*Is It Okay* 223).

³⁶ *Ibid.* 221–22.

does not specify how the use of feminine language for God is an implication of Christ's coming. Second, by pressing so far beyond the NT in his search for Christ-based insight, he risks dissolving the connection between Christ and the testimony of the apostles.

A defense of the Spirit-Word relationship lies well outside the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, having now raised this issue in connection with the model proposed by Smith, I will go on to say that I think some of the other proposals here surveyed may also strain that link, whether consciously or not. The models suggested by Thomas and Wall, for example, do clearly stress that the Spirit guides the church through the Bible. By emphasizing the theological diversity and flexibility of Scripture,³⁷ however, they offer a picture in which the Spirit aligns himself with just certain parts of Scripture at a time, or chooses different parts of Scripture for different Christian communities. This suggests, if I understand these models correctly, that the Spirit does not guide the whole church through the whole Bible the whole time. Would that further imply that the Spirit does not mediate the whole Christ to the whole church the whole time? And if that is so, is not the Spirit's relation to Christ significantly reduced? Or again, if the Spirit leads churches to interpret a pliable Scripture, does this imply that he communicates a pliable Christ? Is the Spirit free to shape a new Jesus for every community? How flexible can Christ be and still remain the Word who became flesh?

Another point of strain relates to a matter that has already been noted, the way that several proposals marginalize the "when" and "who" factors in connection with the Jerusalem Council. They speak of the Spirit guiding the church in its theological task, and may even speak of the Spirit revealing *Jesus* to the church,³⁸ but seem to envisage a guidance that is to a large extent independent of both the historical work of Christ and the teaching of the apostles. Does the Spirit bring us into theologically fruitful relation with a Christ thus distanced from the one who came and acted in history? My own sense is that the models here reviewed carry implications with respect to pneumatology and Christology that require further thought.

II. REFLECTIONS ON THE USE OF BIBLICAL PARADIGMS

My survey of writers who refer to the Jerusalem Council has concentrated on the contours of the episode itself and on the specific methodological

³⁷ Wall speaks of an "elastic" biblical text, with "inherent multivalency" ("Canonical Context" 167, 174).

³⁸ In a companion article to "Canonical Context," Wall says, "The whole truth of the living Jesus is learned more immediately through his Spirit in our lives. Thus, we make a mistake by supposing that we can only come to know the truth of Jesus by remembering what he once said and did according to the Scriptures. The long and complex process of knowing what manner of truth and grace truly came to us with Jesus must include those ordinary moments of life when we simply and quietly engage and concretely experience the transforming Spirit of Jesus in our lives" ("Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The 'Rule of Faith' in Theological Hermeneutics," in *Between Two Horizons* 95).

guidelines that some have drawn from it. I would now like to offer a few brief thoughts concerning the use of Scriptural precedents more generally.

1. *The importance of being particular.* It might be argued that vigorous theology looks beyond small points of detail. From that perspective, the way I have been questioning and probing each of the models reviewed above could seem overly critical. But precision is sometimes a virtue. When an event or narrative is asked to provide a model for an important aspect of theological method, or is called in to support a particular point of view, it must be allowed to be what it is and say what it says. Otherwise, why bring it into the picture at all? Several of the interpretations surveyed above lose force through overlooking details in the Bible's presentation of the Jerusalem Council.

Being particular means taking obvious and relevant features of the paradigmatic text or event into account and giving at least some interpretive attention to factors that seem to speak against the model being explored. I can think of three reasons for looking to biblical precedents. One is to *inform* theological construction. Another is to *confirm or lend credibility* to a proposal. A third is to *illustrate* a concept. It is hard to see how any of these purposes can be served unless the precedent itself is handled in a careful way.

2. *The importance of narrative shaping.* The biblical precedents and paradigms that are sometimes brought into theological discussion usually come from the narrative portions of Scripture. Both of the texts that figure prominently in discussions of how the Jerusalem church decided the circumcision issue are narrative, for example.³⁹ Those who make use of scriptural models will therefore need to be sensitive to the dynamics of narrative interpretation. An important starting point is to recognize that biblical narratives—certainly NT narratives—are *rhetorically shaped*. They are not neutral accounts. If they describe events, they also guide the reader to see the significance of those events. Narrative critics have performed a valuable service in recent years by elucidating the various means through which biblical authors and texts lead their readers along in certain directions. All this means that the most powerful and reliable biblical paradigms will be those that follow the shaping of the texts from which they are derived.

Narrative episodes in the Gospels and Acts tend to be shaped in one of two basic directions: some are theologically or Christologically focused (they point the reader toward truth about God or Jesus or salvation), while others are paradigmatically directed (they highlight the experience of disciples or other characters, and offer some kind of example either to follow or avoid). Many narrative units contain both theological and paradigmatic elements, of course, though typically one emphasis predominates. Turning to the Acts narrative of the Jerusalem Council, a first question is whether it is theolog-

³⁹ I.e. Acts 15:1–21 and Gal 2:1–10. Galatians, of course, is an epistle rather than a narrative. Nevertheless, 1:15–2:14, in which Paul recounts the history of his relations with the Jerusalem apostles, is narrative material.

ically or paradigmatically focused. Is the text about the mechanics of decision-making, or does it focus attention on the truth that uncircumcised Gentiles are freely accepted by God? My assessment is that the narrative forcefully highlights a theological message, that God's purpose for the Gentiles is salvation without circumcision. Readers are directed towards this truth at every point: a sequence of notable speakers support it, confirming signs are reported, God's direct involvement in the mission to the Gentiles is emphasized, supporting Scripture is cited, and the Holy Spirit is said to stand behind the Council's final decision. Even the carefully constructed picture of agreement that was noted earlier serves primarily to reinforce the theological message that uncircumcised Gentiles are accepted by God. In other words, the narrative directs the reader first and foremost to the content and truth of the Council's decision. At the same time, however, I believe the narrative does make a secondary paradigmatic point. One reason for saying this is that Acts presents readers with a whole series of scenes depicting church life.⁴⁰ Some of these show a positive picture of fellowship and worship, some show the church overcoming problems, and one even portrays disobedience, but they all seem to serve as examples, setting down a pattern for Christian life in the church. The narrative of the Jerusalem Council to some extent fits within this series of scenes. If that is so, what is it designed to exemplify? Perhaps it is not a process for decision-making, but rather the fact that church problems can and should be resolved in a harmonious way.

The narrative of Gal 2:1–10, as we have already seen, is designed to reinforce Paul's claim that his message of justification apart from law is true. The only way one could derive a model for doing theology from this account would be through reconstructing Paul's thought processes at the time he wrote. That would not be easy. It would also mean attending to something other than what Paul seeks to communicate through the text.

3. *The source of paradigms: Scripture or behind-Scripture?* An appeal to precedent implies a desire for rootedness, grounding, guidance, and authority. Appeal to a *biblical* precedent implies that some kind of guiding authority, or canonical status, is accorded to Scripture. But contemporary theologians hold a wide range of views concerning the nature and use of Scripture. A consequence of this state of affairs is that it is not always clear what a label like "biblical precedent" actually points to, or where the location of biblical paradigms is thought to lie. Here I would like to note three options concerning the source of biblical paradigms (though other possibilities could also be mentioned). One could look to *what a writer directly says in a biblical text*; one could look to *the events the text speaks about as reconstructed and interpreted by the theologian*; or one could derive paradigms from *a reconstruction of the biblical author's motives and thought processes*. The first of these options focuses on the biblical text, the second and third on something behind the text.

⁴⁰ E.g. 2:42–47; 4:42–37; 5:1–11; and 6:1–7.

The writers surveyed in this essay all seem to grant canonical weight to what the Bible authors actually say, and I believe they are correct to do so. In two instances, however, I am not quite sure whether a writer's true guiding authority is the text itself or a reconstruction of the events behind the text. I think this deserves comment because in the present theological climate it is important to be both self-aware and explicit with respect to one's stance on the issue of canonical source. The first instance relates to Dunn's handling of the Acts account of the Jerusalem Council. Peter's statement concerning Jews and the law (15:10) appears to be marginalized because it does not easily fit into Dunn's historical assessment of the Jerusalem church.⁴¹ Dunn's view of the Council's paradigmatic significance may thus be at least partially influenced by a historical reconstruction that stands in tension with the communicative thrust of the actual biblical text. A second instance concerns Wall's citation of the Council as an example of intercanonical debate. Though he does say that the biblical texts themselves present this debate as an exemplary precedent,⁴² it is hard not to believe that the precedent he has in mind centers on a reconstruction of early church events more than on themes highlighted in the actual narratives of Acts and Galatians.⁴³

The third option for locating precedents—finding them in the processes and principles that guide the biblical writers as they develop their messages—I only mention by way of parenthetical comment. None of the authors reviewed here tries to draw methodological lessons from the procedural steps taken by Luke the theologian as he goes about his business, or by Paul the epistle writer as he formulates his message. Nevertheless, there have been recent suggestions that we should look to the Bible, not primarily for theological *content*, but for models of how to *do* theology. This approach to Scripture allows even non-narrative texts, such as the NT epistles, to be used paradigmatically. My only comment concerning such proposals is that they appear to locate the source of guiding authority somewhere behind the text—in the reconstructed *how* and *why* of the writing rather than in *what* the authors wrote.

4. *The logic of paradigms: formal functions and material lessons.* A final observation concerning biblical paradigms is that there should be harmony between the material content of a particular proposal and the form of argument used to defend it. A paradoxical situation arises in connection with some of the proposals surveyed in this essay, particularly those that affirm the presence of multiple and even contradictory voices within the Bible, and advocate a similar theological pluralism among Christians today. The logical tension issues from the fact that these proposals are supported and defended

⁴¹ Acts 20:1.

⁴² See note 22 above.

⁴³ In Wall's case the ambiguity may be deliberate. The question of canonical source is complex within some canonical approaches to Scripture. Among the elements that jostle for attention are biblical texts, the practice of the NT church behind the texts, the reception history in front of the texts, and the church's rule of faith alongside the texts.

by reference to the biblical precedent of the Jerusalem Council. Appeal to the Council suggests that there is something normative about this episode that should guide our approach to the theological task. But if the NT is not characterized by univocal theological content, can it provide a single universal paradigm for contextualization or the theological use of Scripture? Thomas seems to recognize this situation. Near the beginning of his discussion he acknowledges that the Jerusalem Council exemplifies just one of a number of different hermeneutical approaches to be found in the NT. He is therefore consistent to the extent that he does not claim that all Christians should adopt the Spirit-led community model that he discerns in Acts 15, suggesting only that it has special appeal and validity for many Pentecostals.⁴⁴ But can you justify methodological pluralism by appeal to an authority that is itself pluralistic? Theological reflection does force us to acknowledge and accept paradox at several points, of course. But is this one of them?

A second point at which inconsistency between formal support and material content may appear is brought to light by asking whether various proposals actually *need* biblical precedents. Does Thomas's model, for instance, with its emphasis on the Spirit's freedom to lead the community in its selection and interpretation of Scripture, really need to appeal to a carefully exegeted precedent? Or does Wall's canonical approach, which accords so much authority to the church in determining the meaning of Bible texts,⁴⁵ and which gives such normative weight to the church's "Rule of Faith,"⁴⁶ need to conform to a biblical paradigm? I think that reference to biblical precedents does play a valuable role within the argument of these two writers, inasmuch as they are concerned to remain within a biblically delimited range of interpretive options. But no precedent is likely to be completely authoritative or necessary within either of these approaches. The need for a biblical precedent perhaps diminishes further in the case of Shelton's proposal, with its critique of *sola Scriptura*. When we turn to Smith's progressive revelation model biblical support seems still less important, since here contemporary theological decision-making is so little bound by the revelation of the past. The Acts 15 example, as Smith reads it, makes almost all other biblical examples irrelevant.

III. CONCLUSION

This discussion of the Jerusalem Council has focused on critical evaluation of interpretive and methodological proposals, and I have not done justice to the strong positive message that the Acts and Galatians narratives convey. The most important thing to say about them, I believe, is that they communicate a definite message and earnestly commend it as true. It is worth noting that this message stretches beyond the core gospel facts of Christ's

⁴⁴ "Women" 44.

⁴⁵ E.g. "The intended meaning of a Biblical text, then, is not the property of its author but of the church to whom Scripture belongs" ("Canonical Context" 168).

⁴⁶ See e.g. "Canonical Context" 167, 173.

death and resurrection to include guiding concepts for interpreting them—with special reference, in this case, to the issues of grace, law, and race. Though this message highlights the implications of Christ's coming for the Gentiles, it is grounded in the assumption that his mission has created a new situation with respect to the law that applies equally to all people. In addition to their strong theological message, however, I believe these narratives do also present us with a model that can guide our approach to the ongoing theological task. Each in its own way pictures like-mindedness within the church as a valued ideal.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ See the discussion in sections I.4 and II.2 above.