

## **The Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem in lucan narration (Acts 15: 1-35).**

### **A solution for the unity of primary Christianity?**

This paper addresses a topic of interest for the New Testament theology, but also for the misiology. The way in which the issues were raised and in which decisions were made by the Apostles decisively influenced the teaching of Orthodox faith and the organization of the Eastern Church. The Church has suffered from its inception many transformations due to the times of its activity, but it has taken special care of the teaching of faith that it received from our Savior Jesus Christ. The Episode of the Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem, reported by St. Apostle Luke in Acts chapter 15 and by St. Paul in Galatians, chapter 2 is an episode of Church history that raises many questions. There have been over time many explanations for the reasons of the meeting, the decisions of the apostles, and the significance that the Synod had in the Primary Church. But little has been insisted on the importance of the synod's decisions on contemporary Christianity and the possible negative effects of the Apostolic Decree in the Primary Church.

In this thesis, I made a presentation of the situation of the Church from the beginning to the meeting of the Apostolic Synod, emphasizing the reasons that generated the necessity of its assembly and the Judeo-Christian perception of Moses' law.

I presented the important points of the Apostolic Synod and the Decree adopted within it by exposing the reasons behind it, the importance of the works of the Apostolic Synod and the provisions of the Apostolic Decree on the Primary and the Contemporary Church. The main objective of the work was to show that the Apostles reached a consensus and issued this decree in order to preserve the unity of the Church, which otherwise was threatened by division, and the mission among the pagans was seriously threatened.

I have also reported this event by exposing its conflicts, because I wanted to show that the apostolic decisions did not please everyone. The expectations of some Jewish Christians were "deceived" (in their understanding) by not including the Law of Moses in Christianity, which is why they later distanced themselves from the Church.

In the research I undertook I started from the following hypotheses:

1. The Jerusalem church, mainly formed of Judeo-Christians, had a conservative attitude regarding the observance of the Law of Moses and the taking over of parts of it (or according to some, the assumption of the Law in its entirety) in Christianity.

2. With the expansion of the Christian mission beyond the boundaries of the Holy Land, the question was raised as to how the Gentiles who come to Christ must be received in the new faith.

3. God has shown His Apostles and members of the Christian community in Judea, through the descent of the Holy Spirit over Cornelius and his house, that His will is to receive the heathen in the Church without them having to fulfill other conditions beforehand.

4. Even if some Christians were convinced of Peter's account, it was extremely difficult for many to accept that God had cleansed the heathen and should not look at them with contempt and that circumcision ceased to apply.

5. The apostles met at a council in Jerusalem at the year 49 or 50 A.D. to discuss and make a decision on how the Gentiles will receive faith and whether they should circumcise or not in order to receive Christian baptism.

6. Although the solutions adopted by the Apostles expressed the Church's agreement to the matter discussed, there were also brothers who disagreed with the decision made by the Apostles at the Synod of Jerusalem.

7. Discussions at the Apostolic Synod were of particular importance to the Primary Church. A rupture in the early Church would have meant a regress in the development process of the Church.

8. Even if they adopted the decree to solve a punctual problem that required the Church's attention, the effects of the Apostolic Decrees extend beyond the times when it was issued, and have come to differing interpretations in our day.

In the first chapter, titled "The Situation of the Primary Church up to the Apostolic Synod," I gave an overview of the causes that determined the meeting of the Synod, and made a summary of the evolution of the Jewish national religious conception in order to show why the early Judeo-Christians insisted that other Christians (from the heathen) should also keep the Law of Moses. I have shown that the Jews were aware of the fact that they were God's chosen people, even though they did not rise up to the height of this call throughout history. However, they have failed to understand the meaning of the law in their preparation as a people, just as they have not been able to recognize the Messiah when it came to them. We have also shown that the Law was not an end in itself, but had to awaken the conscience of sin in man, had to be a guide to Christ to prepare the people for His coming.

Next, I made a presentation of the Primary Church from its emergence until the event of the conversion of the centurion Cornelius, insisting on the historical events that marked the appearance of the Church and the identification of the Christians related to Jews and other peoples. In this context, I described the existing relationships between the members of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, the emergence of the Christian cult, and the way in which the first Christian community was referring to the Law of Moses.

In the second chapter, I exposed the direct causes that determined the meeting of the Synod, the historical context and the chronology of the events that took place on the occasion of the Apostolic Synod, starting from the premise that the dispute between Peter and Paul of Antioch of Syria took place before the Apostolic Synod. Here I also analyzed the theories of correspondence between Acts chapter 15 and Galatians chapter 2 and the existing relationship between the Apostles in the vicinity of the Apostolic Synod.

In the third chapter, I presented the Apostolic Synod in two parts, namely the first meeting with the speeches and statements of each one, context in which I also

showed the reasons which led some and the other to adopt a certain behavior, followed by the second meeting where prohibitions were presented for those who come to the faith of the heathen, and the historical and doctrinal analysis of the reasons why they were given.

In the fourth chapter, I discussed the solution adopted by the Apostles with the reasons behind its elaboration and the way it had to be implemented in the Church. Also in this chapter I presented the events that took place during a subsequent visit of the Apostle Paul to Jerusalem, as well as the counter-mission undertaken by the Judaizers against it, events that denote a post-synodal conflict state between Paul and the supporters of the Law of Moses which contributes to a good understanding of how the Apostolic Decree was received by some Judeo-Christians.

In the fifth chapter, I highlighted the importance that the Apostolic Synod had on the development of Christianity, the doctrinal and historical impact, the contribution to the formation of the canonical law of the Church, and some interpretations given to the Apostolic Decree over time, emphasizing on the heresy of Jehovah's Witnesses.

In this paper, I sought to answer the following question: Has the Apostolic Synod offered or not a solution for the unity of primary Christianity? Also, following another research direction, I chose to present and to support an alternative theory regarding the temporal positioning of the Apostolic Synod in relation to the episode of Peter and Paul's conflict in Syria's Antioch with effect on the dynamics of the relationship between them, as well as the side effects that the provisions of the Apostolic Decree had.

In order to better understand the perspective of the Jews and later of the Judeo-Christians upon the Law of Moses, I succinctly presented how historical events and divine intervention shaped over the centuries the manner in which they related to other peoples and to the Law received from God through Moses. God wanted to show the first Christians that they cannot follow the teachings of the Savior and remain anchored in the letter of the Law.

In the adopted approach I made an insight into the history of Christianity and came to present the appearance of the Primary Church to show the similarity between the event of the Holy Spirit's coming down upon the Apostles (and those with them)

and the event of the descent of the Holy Spirit over Cornelius and those present in his house. God made no distinction between the Jews and the heathen, sending to one and the other the Holy Spirit, an event in which both categories manifested themselves in the same way. God made the first Christians understand once and for all that the ones He cleansed cannot be considered as being „defiled”. (Acts 10, 15)

From the events described up to chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles, we come to the conclusion that God has drawn a direction in which the Church must move towards, but unfortunately many Judeo-Christians were reluctant and disbelieving when in Christianity it came to the renunciation of the Law in which they were raised and knew that God had left them for eternity. Unlike these brethren who had a way of thinking very similar to that of the Pharisees (many of them were actually coming from the Pharisees), St. Paul succeeds in transcending the teachings he received from his youth and obeying the plan of God regarding the expansion of the Church throughout the world. The Apostles validated the Gospel of Paul at the Apostolic Synod and determined that the Gentiles who come to Christ must not circumcise and bear the yoke of the Law of Moses, but only follow the four provisions of the Apostolic Decree. The expanding church has thus gone through a hardship that threatened both its unity and development, by reaching an agreement through communion, with the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

As a result of the research I came to the following conclusions:

1. The decisions of the Apostolic Synod are particularly important for primary Christianity. A rupture within the primary Church would have meant another course of history different from what we know today. If Paul had not brought up the issue of receiving the Gentiles to Christ without imposing the Mosaic Law, the tensions in the mixed pagan-Christian communities would have created a lot of concern. Misunderstandings would have marked the life of the community more than living in communion with Christ, and sitting at the tables at the brotherly agape would have been in many places impossible. The Church would have suffered a division between the two great groups, Judeo-Christians and pagan-Christians, which would have affected the unity of the primary Church.

2. Another negative effect that the Church would have suffered if freedom from the Law of Moses for those who came to Christ among the heathen would not have been decided would be that Christian mission among the Gentiles would have been stopped or at least slowed down. If circumcision had been imposed on those who came to the faith from the heathen and Paul would have agreed, then the number of those who would have converted to Christianity would have been reduced considerably, and Christianity would have remained at the stage of a Jewish sect.

3. If circumcision had been imposed on those who came to the faith from the heathen, and Paul did not agree with the decisions taken at the Council, then certainly his mission and credibility with the heathen would have suffered, in the context in which he could not ignore the Apostles of the Savior in the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

4. If the question of receiving the heathens to Christ without the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law were not discussed in Jerusalem by the Apostles, there would have been the possibility of free interpretation of this problem. The Law of Moses would have been imposed in many places on the pagans, who, let us not forget, were abhorred by circumcision, and thus the spread of Christianity would have suffered in many places. It is very possible that Christianity today was not spread throughout the world, precisely because of this impediment.

5. In addressing this particularly important issue for primary Christianity, it is noted that the Apostle Paul - the Apostle of the Gentiles, who, although Jewish at origin, defends the Gentiles in respecting the Law of Moses. His intervention is not limited to a simple act of attendance and a speech at the Apostolic Synod, but as we can see from his epistles, the Apostle Paul addresses the question of the obligation of the Mosaic Law for Gentiles in several places in his epistles, emphasizing the fact that the grace to God saves us, and not to the works of the Law, "of which no man shall be moved" (Gal. 2:16). The Apostle Paul succeeded in overcoming the "problem of the Law of Moses" and militated for the freedom of the Gentiles, even though he was a Pharisee at origin, and his activity was decisive for the spread of Christianity among the heathen. The results of the analysis of this work reveal something known and supported by many Bible Executors, namely

that the Apostle Paul is the great architect of the unity of the Church and he has the greatest merit in gaining freedom from the Law for pagans coming to faith.

6. The Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem shows the consensus of the Primary Church in an important topic for that time, a consensus in accordance with the will of God, which no longer imposes the Law of Moses, and wants the Apostles and the Church in general to understand this. The law had faded from the state desired by God to become an external element, and its observation had no justification (and nevertheless failed to bring man any atonement before God) in the context in which the Savior Jesus Christ accomplished the objective salvation through His sacrifice on the Cross.

7. Not all Judeo-Christians gladly received the news of St. Apostle James, so some of them have distanced themselves from Christianity and returned to their old Jewish religion, and some of them have fought fiercely against St. Paul and the Gospel which he preached.

8. In Jesus Christ, the unity of mankind is indeed restored. There is no Jew or Elin (Gal. 3:28). The Jews and pagans were reconciled once the wall of hatred fell apart. They form a single and new human nature, a single construction in which Christ is the cornerstone, a single body whose head is Christ (Ephesians 2: 11-22). In the light of the Gospel, the old rites and ceremonies entrusted to Israel have gained a new and more profound meaning. The things to which they were a shadow were accomplished, and those who lived beneath the gospel were delivered through the divine providence from keeping the Law, by God " *Whose desire is that all men may have salvation and come to the knowledge of what is true.* " (1 Tim 2:4).

9. The Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem marks the beginning of canonical law and synodal practice, which have been preserved in the Eastern Church to our day. Decisions are not taken by a single apostle, but by all of them together. Even the words used by St. Apostle James when he presents the Apostolic Decree implies the idea of synodality, by using the plural in the formula: " For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28), a formula later taken by Church and used at synodal decisions.

I consider that the originality of the present work consists in analyzing the effects of the Apostolic Synod on the development of the Church and in presenting the

dynamics of the relationship between the apostles, in relation to the temporal positioning of the Antioch episode before the Apostolic Synod. By accepting this theory, I consider that the good relations that continued to exist between the apostles are explained, and the theory that there was a rupture between Peter and Paul in Antioch is being refuted. I analyzed the motives behind the supporters of the Mosaic law for pagan Christians and the contrast between their claims and the plan of God for the salvation of the world, which includes all peoples.

The work opens other research directions regarding the evolution of the primary Church from the Jewish cult to the new Christian cult, as well as the interpretation of the provisions of the Apostolic Decree in the contemporary cults. I believe that the Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem is a vast subject that cannot be exhausted in this thesis, leaving open the way for other approaches. Although there are many interpretations of the consequences of the decisions made at the Apostolic Synod, the general opinion of those who dealt with the analysis of this event foresee a compromise which saved the unity of the Church, at least for a while.

**Keywords: Synod, Decree, Jerusalem, Antioch, Apostles, Paul, Peter, James, Law, Circumcision.**



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