

Exegetical Brief: The Prohibitions In The Jerusalem Council's Letter To Gentile Believers

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Acts 15:28,29

²⁸ ἔδοξεν γὰρ τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν μηδὲν πλεον ἐπιτίθεσθαι ὑμῖν βάρος πλὴν τούτων τῶν ἐπάναγκες, ²⁹ ἀπέχεσθαι εἰδωλοθύτων καὶ αἵματος καὶ πνικτῶν καὶ πορνείας, ἐξ ὧν διατηροῦντες ἑαυτοὺς εὖ πράξετε. ἔρρωσθε.

²⁸*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:* ²⁹*You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. (NIV)*

The list of practices which the Jerusalem Council urged the Gentile Christians to avoid seems to be a strange mixture. This has led to debate with regard to the meaning of the items on the list. Some maintain that they are all selected from the Ten Commandments. Others see them all as adiaphora. Still others believe that the list is a mixture of both.

Determining the meaning of εἰδωλοθύτων, the first item on the list, seems to be the most troublesome. Bauer as well as Louw and Nida give the meaning as meat which has been offered to an idol. In connection with this passage in Acts, Bauer refers to leftovers of pagan sacrifices which were then sold in the market. Kittel says very much the same. When Paul speaks of eating such meat in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, it seems that the context determines whether he has in mind simply eating or eating as part of a pagan ritual. Since the context of the verse we are considering does not indicate otherwise, it seems best to take εἰδωλοθύτων to be meat that has been offered to an idol without anything more than simple eating being implied. The rationale for these prohibitions which is given in v.21, "For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath," also steers the interpreter in this direction. It indicates that eating such meat was to be avoided because it would be offensive to the Jews.

It seems evident that αἵματος refers to eating meat which has not been drained of its blood. This was forbidden both by the Noachian Covenant (Ge 9:4) and the Ceremonial Law (Lev 3:16; Dt 12:16). The only other possible interpretation would be a prohibition against murder. It seems highly unlikely that the Jerusalem Council would have found such a special prohibition against murder called for.

The only possible meaning for πνικτῶν seems to be strangled animals. Eating the meat of animals killed in this way was an abomination to the Jews, no doubt because the blood was not drained off.

The use of the word πορνεία in the New Testament indicates that it means sexual immorality. It is true that later Judaism included unlawful marriages in this term, but it seems that this referred to marrying a woman who was guilty of cohabitation outside of marriage and not to any marriage contrary to the Ceremonial Law. As it is used in our text it seems to be difficult to find any meaning for the term πορνεία other than "sexual immorality." The fact that sins of this nature were so rampant among the Gentiles of that day makes this interpretation all the more credible.

If we accept the meanings of these terms as outlined above, the list of prohibitions is mixed. Three of them are adiaphora and one is contained in the Decalog. Those who see all of these prohibitions as adiaphora which were a part of the Old Testament Ceremonial Law take πορνείας to mean such marriages as were forbidden in Leviticus 18. Those who see the list made up entirely of prohibitions taken from the Decalog take εἰδωλοθύτων to mean idol worship and αἵματος to be murder. In this case πνικτῶν seems to cause a problem. That is probably why codex D omits it.

The infinitive ἀπέχεσθαι, which states what the conference is requiring of Gentile believers, applies to the entire list. They are to abstain from all of these things. If this list includes both adiaphora and a sin that is forbidden in the Decalog, and if the entire list is under the same prohibition, then the Holy Spirit is telling us that when Christian love requires us to abstain from an adiaphoron, that prohibition is just as binding as any of the Ten Commandments.