

Jerusalem Council in Acts Chapter 15:1-35: Its Relevance for Sustainable Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

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This paper discusses Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter 15:1-35 and its Relevance for sustainable conflict Resolution in Nigeria. The paper identifies the crucial problem and controversy that called for Jerusalem Council. It identified and discussed the contributions of Peter and the leadership of James. Resolution and implementation of the Council for contemporary Nigeria society is identified. It is established in this work that the principle, method of debate, discussion, dialogue, resolution and implementation of decisions adopted for Jerusalem Council are very relevant in our contemporary Nigeria society, they are recommended for application in our society. Historical cum exegetical approach is used as method or instrument of achieving our objective in this work. Our finding is that the recommendation of Jerusalem Council was acceptable to the Gentiles and the Jews were happy with the acceptance. The implication of this acceptance was good understanding and harmonious living as the Gentiles were accepted unto Jewish- Christian fellowship without circumcision.

Keywords: Jerusalem Council, society, conflict resolution

Introduction

Conflict is found on different levels, those that are directly related to our basic types of interest and those closely associated patterns of attitude. There is conflict wherever like interests are inharmonious (Oblion, 2006, p. 251). Conflict is a State of disagreement between two or more people, groups of people or Countries (Dzurgba 2000, p. 19). It is an integral part of human life (Adamolekun 2006, p. 201). Conflict arises when there is a complete breakdown of trust and the resultant action may be destructive or non-destructive (Onigu 1999, p. 220).

The simplest case of Conflict is that of two or more persons or groups who want the same individual thing. 'What I want you want' means cooperation where the interest is shared or common but means conflict when the interest is individualized and exclusive.

Since 1980, Nigeria has witnessed a lot of disturbances some of which have threatened the existence of the country as a nation. Some of these disturbances are described as "intra-religious, while the others are inter-religious" (Adeniyi 2000, p. 203). There are others that are more political or economic in nature than religious, even though some people may see them as religious simply because each group involved come from different religions. Religious conflicts in Northern part of the Country are always between Christians and Muslims while the Conflict

between Muslims and Christians in Yoruba land is in the area of evangelization to win Muslims to Christianity or win Christians to Islam. Intra-religious Conflict in 1980-1984 includes Maitatsine uprising in Kano in 1980, Maduguri, Kaduna, Yola, Sabongari Kano and Gombe in 1984. inter-religious Conflict include Kafanchan (Gefwen 2007, p. 83), Zango Kataf, Zaria, Funtua in 1987; Banchi; Tafawa Balewa 1991, and other places up to 2010; And presently Bokoharam (Western education is sin) has been attacking Christians Churches, Mosques, and Police or law enforcement agents since 2011 because of her demand for "Comprehensive implementation of shariah systems" (Alli, 2012, p. 9).

This paper examines Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter 15:1-35 and its relevance for sustainable conflict resolution in Nigeria. Particular attention is paid to the way Jerusalem Council handled issues of disagreement, differences, misunderstanding or opposite views and proffered solution satisfactorily to the problem which would have destabilized or had negative effect on their society. In an attempt to achieve our objective, Historico-exegetical and theological methods are adopted we shall discuss the crucial problem that led to the Council in Jerusalem, the controversy, the role of Peter and James in decision making of the Council, the decision, resolution, and its implementation. Contextualization of Religious Conflict in Nigeria milieu will be made. The work will conclude by discussing the relevance

of the Council's approach to conflict resolution to Nigeria society; then give recommendation, and conclusion.

The Crucial Problem That Demand For Jerusalem Council

The word council, an assembly, from Latin 'consilium', is a collection of people or persons for the purpose of deliberation, consultation, or decision (Harrison, 1991, p. 141). In the New Testament the word is commonly used to translate 'synedrion' meaning seated together. Ecclesiastically, Councils and Synods are assemblies of Christian leaders for the purpose of discussion and decision in matters of doctrine and administration. Council according to Hornby is a formal meeting to discuss what action to take in a particular situation (Hornby 2000:120). The Council of Jerusalem is the name given to the meeting convened between delegates from the Church of Antioch (led by Paul and Barnabas) and the Apostles and Elders of the Church of Jerusalem, to discuss problems arising from the large influx of Gentile converts into the Church.

The preaching to the Gentiles and the influx of the Gentiles into the church produced a problem which had to be solved. The whole mental background of the Jews was founded on the fact that he belonged to the chosen people (Barchan 1964, p. 120). not only were the Jews the peculiar possession of God but also that God was the peculiar possession of the Jews.

The rapid progress of the gospel among Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 11: 19-21) and in Cyprus and Asia Minor (Acts 13: 4-14:26) presented the conservative Jewish believers in Judea with a serious problem. The Apostles had acquiesced in Peter's evangelization of the household in Caesarea because it was attended by evident marks of divine approval (Acts 10: 1-11:18) but if the spread of the gospel among Gentiles continued on the present scale there would soon be more Gentiles than Jews in the Church, with a consequent threat to the maintenance of Christian moral standards. To this problem, many Jewish Christians had a simple solution. Let the Gentile converts be admitted to the church in the same way as the Gentile proselytes were admitted into the Commonwealth of Israel: Let them be circumcised and accept the obligation to keep the Jewish law.

Thus far, these conditions had not been imposed on Gentile converts. No word appears to have been said about circumcision to Cornelius and his household, and when Titus, a Gentile Christian visited Jerusalem with Paul and Barnabas on an earlier occasion the question of circumcising him was not even aired (Gal.2:3).

The crucial problem or question on circumcision was, Before a Gentile became a Christian and a member of the Christian Church was it necessary that he should be circumcised and take upon himself the law of Moses? In other words, must the Gentile before he became a Christian first become a Jew? Or could a Gentile be received into the Church as such? Was he eligible for acceptance simply as a man? But even were that question settled there even arose another problem. He could not have him a guest nor yet be his guest. He would not, as far as possible even do business with him so then arose another question, even if the Gentiles are allowed into the Church, in how far can Jews and Gentiles associate in the ordinary social life of the Church and of the world? If the Gentiles are allowed in, are the lines of demarcation to continue even in the Church? Or were Gentiles and Jews to be on the same footing with no difference at all? These were the problems which had to be solved. The solution was not easy. But in the end the Church took the decision that there should be no difference between Jew and Gentile at all. It is the 15th chapter of Acts which tells of the Council of Jerusalem which took that decision. Its decision in the opinion of Barclay "was the charter of freedom to the Gentiles" (Barclay 1964, p. 122).

Controversy: The Problem Becomes Acute 15: 1-5

The Gospel was being preached to Jews and to Gentiles alike; and Jews and Gentiles were living together as brethren. There were narrow-minded Jews from Judea; the zealots for the law, who were converts that belonged to the party of the Pharisees that came to the Church at Antioch saying that the Gentiles, could only come into the Church on the condition that first they became Jews. They decided to press upon the Gentile Christians of Antioch and her daughter church the necessity of taking upon themselves the yoke of the law. Their teaching was: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" Acts 15:1.

Their pressure proved so persuasive in the recently founded Churches of Galatia that Paul had to send these churches the urgent protest which we know as the epistles to the Galatians. In Antioch itself, they caused such controversy that the leaders of the Church there decided to have the whole question ventilated and settled at the highest level (Halley 1965, p. 573).

If this attitude of the zealots had prevailed inevitably Christianity would have become nothing other than a sect of Judaism. Some of these narrow-minded Jews came down to Antioch and tried to persuade the converts that they would lose everything

unless they first accept Judaism. Paul and Barnabas argued strongly against this move. Matters came to a deadlock. The only way out was to make appeal to Jerusalem, the headquarter of the church where a final decision in one way or another must be taken. The case which Paul and Barnabas put forward was simply the story of what happened. They were prepared to let the facts speak for themselves. The said there were certain of the Pharisees who had become Christians. The very name Pharisee means the separated one. They had separated themselves from all men in one lifelong attempt to keep the last detail of the law. They wanted that all converts must be circumcised and must keep the law. The argument was on in all its sharp division.

The Role or Contribution of Peter to the Debate 15: 6-12

In answer to the Pharisees and the stricter Jews, Peter reminded them of how he himself had been responsible for the reception of Cornelius into the Church in the early days, ten years before this. The proof that he had acted rightly was that God had granted his Holy Spirit to these very Gentiles who had been received. As far as the Law's claims went they might have been ceremoniously, unclean, but God had done a far greater thing by his spirit; he had cleansed their hearts. To Peter, there is only one way for everyman, it is the acceptance of the free gift of the grace of God in an act of self-surrendering and humble faith. Religion in the opinion of Peter consists in casting ourselves on the grace and the love of God. Paul and Barnabas supported Peter's argument by telling how God had similarly blessed large numbers of believing Gentiles through their ministry.

Discussion and Debate under the Leadership of James 15: 13-21

James the Just, leader of the Jerusalem church, summed up debate and expressed his judgment that no condition should be imposed on the Gentile converts beyond the condition of faith in Christ with which God had clearly shown himself to be satisfied. The Gentile cities, he said, had no lack of witnesses to Mosaic Law; but the entry of the Gentiles into the Church of the Messiah was the fulfillment of the promise that Davids fallen tent would be set up again and his sovereign be re-established over Gentile nations.

James suggested that the disciples should be allowed into the church without let or hindrance. But even they are allowed in, the matter of ordinary

social intercourse come in. how could a strict and orthodox Jews consort with a Gentile? To make things easier James suggested certain regulations that Gentiles must keep which include one, they must abstain from the contamination of idols. That was a food regulation. One of the greatest problems of the early Church was the problem of meat offered to idols. Two, they must abstain from fornication. The Christian must be pure in an impure world. Three, they must abstain from things strangled. Four, they must abstain from blood. To the Jew, blood was life. The Gentile is ordered to eat only meat prepared in the Jewish way. James judgment embodies the authoritative conclusion of the Church. In the opinion of Laymon, the result of the Jerusalem Council was a compromise, "circumcision is not required for salvation, but Jewish ritual requirements are essential for fellowship" (Laymon, 1971, p. 748). It is to be noted that the transition from Jewish to Gentile Christianity occurred without conflict; the decision was made in Jerusalem the source of the Church's mission.

Resolution and Implementation 15: 22-35

Once the main question of principle was settled in a way which must have given complete satisfaction to the Antiochene delegation, a practical matter remained to be dealt with, affecting the day –to-day fellowship between Jewish and Gentile converts where there were mixed communities. It would be a sign of grace and courtesy if Gentile Christians respected certain Jewish scruples. Hence, at James suggestion, the letter in which the Jerusalem leaders conveyed their findings to the Gentile Churches included a request to them to abstain from certain kinds of food which their brethren of Jewish stock would find offensive, and to conform to the Jewish code of relations between the sexes. Without such concessions from Gentile Christians there would have been grave practical difficulties in the way of their enjoying unrestrained table-fellowship with Jewish Christians.

Once the Church had come to its decision, it acted with both efficiency and courtesy. The terms of the decision were embodied in a letter. The letter was entrusted to Judas and Silas who went to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. Had Paul and Barnabas come back alone their enemies might have doubted that they really did bring back a correct message; but Judas and Silas were official emissaries and guarantors of the reality of the decision. The Church was wise in sending a person as well as a letter. A letter could have sounded coldly official; but the warm words and the wise teaching of Judas and Silas

added, friendly warmth that the bare reception of a letter could never have achieved. The Church by sending a letter and two people took the wisest means of putting that decision into effective action.

Contextualization: The Relevance of Jerusalem Council to Contemporary Nigeria Society

This section discusses the Relevance of the method adopted for resolving crisis in Jerusalem Council to Nigeria. There are several dimensions to resolution of crisis. These include debate, dialogue, discussion, understanding, accommodation, resolution, and implementation of decision or adopted resolution.

The method adopted in Jerusalem Council was the identification of a problem, having understood the nature of the problem; it was extensively and freely discussed. This involved dialogue, debate, tolerance, resolution, and recommendation. The resolution was given immediate implementation.

The Council took the following steps in resolving the conflict. Identification of the nature of conflict and the cause, then summoned a meeting for debate and dialogue. The issues involved were extensively discussed with open mind by listening to different opinions and suggestions. There was good understanding among the members of the Council. A practical positive step was taken to implement the resolution and recommendation arrived at by sending emissary with a letter for immediate implementation. It is to be noted that the recommendation was not put in a cooler and there was no begging the issue. A letter was sent and two people Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leading men among the brethren, as emissary to explain in detail the decision of the Council. It is to be noted here that good understanding and workable agreement was reached that satisfied both parties in the conflict. This satisfaction confirms the statement or belief that conflicts are better settled or solved through dialogue and not in the battle field.

There is always a solution through genuine dialogue between two warring factions. "Dialogue calls for understanding among the conflicting parties (Onaiyekan, 2011, p. 10). If two opposite parties understand each other, they would be able to settle their differences through genuine dialogue. This was the suggestion of Paul to numerous conflicts of interest in the Church in Corinth. It was the argument of Peter and James at the Jerusalem Council for a conflict that was capable of destabilizing the early Christian Church. (Acts 5: 6-21).

There were several cases of Religious, ethnic and communal conflicts in Nigeria since 1980. Several investigation panels were set up to investigate the circumstances leading to these conflicts and proffer

solution. The panels were to find out the cause and extent of damage done, suggest way forward and recommend measures to be taken to avert future occurrence. It is observed that some of the outcome of the recommendations of the panels did not see the light of the day as they were kept in the cooler. In some, the implementations of the findings were not effected.

In a situation where dialogue and understanding is jettisoned, there is always chaos. Understanding tolerance, dialogue, interaction, and reconciliation go a long way in resolving conflict in a society.

Boko-Haram religious conflict in Nigerian defies dialogue which makes solution to the conflict difficult. Government untiated dialogue with Boko-Haram in order to put an end to random killing by the sect but it rejected dialogue. Abdul-Qaga the spokes man of Boko Haram said "there would be no further attempts at negotiation with government until Quran replaced the secular Nigeria Constitution"¹⁵. Alli, Boko Haram spokesman reporting the reason for Boko Haram activities in the statement credited to Boko Haram titled "Boko Haram disowns dialogue with government" in the 'Nation' of Thursday August 23, 2012 said:

The Federal Government of Nigeria knows that the only recipe for peace is comprehensive implementation of the sharia system. The Quran must replace the constitution, and western democracy must be abolished. Failure to implement these conditions means continued violence because the warrior of Allah will never lay down their arms..... We are optimistic that we would triumph over the infidels by overthrowing the government and replacing it with Islamic government. The government could not subdue us when we started this crusade few years using Knives, swords and sticks, cutlasses and knives; We are now sophisticated and in possession of countless high profile (Alli, 2012, p. 9).

The above statement credited to BokoHaram will definitely make dialogue and resolution of conflict difficult. In response to the above statement of refusal for dialogue by BokoHaram, Government spokesman explained the way or method of dialogue adopted. To the government, it tackles the issues of dialogue from various dimensions including political, economic, social and using of the law enforcement agents.

The Presidential spokesman Reuben (2012) in his statement on the method of adopted for dialogue with Boko Haram said: among other things that:

The dialogue is not the conventional talks he noted that the government has adopted the back room channels to reach the Boko Haram sect. when government says it is already talking to Boko Haram, the form of that dialogue must be properly understood. I think a lot of people are under the

impression that the dialogue involves a situation whereby government officials are sitting on one side, Boko Haram persons are sitting on the other side in an air-conditioned room and there are negotiations across the table. That is not the form of the dialogue. The form of the dialogue is that backroom channels are being used to reach across with the sole objective of understanding what exactly the grievances of these persons are, what exactly can be done to resolve the crises, in the overall best interest of ensuring peace and stability in Nigeria and the security of life and property. And all of this is consistent with the position of Mr. President, so what is called dialogue is at many levels through back room channels and through multi-level, constructive interventions to address a difficult issue that is multifarious (Reuben 2012, p. 57).

One could infer from the statements of both Boko Haram and government spokesman above that the issue between them is a sort of hide and seek game which lacks sincerity. Boko Haram had made a straight forward statement that it wants comprehensive implementation of Sharia system in a secular state. The government in our opinion should be bold enough to maintain a stand by holding the bull on the horn through openness and conventional dialogue instead of backroom channel method.

In our view the conflict between Muslims and adherents of other religions will not disappear totally in Nigeria unless the parties involved embrace the policy of religions understanding, accommodation, tolerance, and genuine dialogue.

Conclusion

We have attempted in this paper to discuss Jerusalem council in Acts Chapter 15 and its relevance for sustainable conflict resolution in Nigeria. The motivating crucial problem that demanded for Jerusalem Council have been identified, the genesis of the controversy has been discussed. The role of Peter identified and the leadership activities of James have been discussed. The resolution and implementation of the Council discussed. Contextualisation in Nigeria milieu of the relevance of the Council for Contemporary Nigeria society identified. The work concludes that the method adopted in resolving the conflict in Jerusalem Council is relevant to Nigeria situation. It is established in this paper that dialogue, tolerance, mutual understanding and accommodation were adopted in conflict resolution at Jerusalem council and this principle is relevant to contemporary Nigeria society.

In our belief, the concept of dialogue is based on the assumption that we can actually talk to one another and understand one another. "Dialogue aims at speaking together and acting together; if we do not have common grounds we would not be able to act together"(Onaiyekan 2011, p. 39). When we are able to act together, it is only then that we can face the many challenges which afflict everybody irrespective of creed or religions affiliation. Thus, dialogue in our view is to be seen not first and foremost as debates and arguments over our differences, rather it should be seen as a gentile listening to each other so as to discover those things which we hold in common so that on the basis of common ground we can face together our common challenges. It is our suggestion that the principle of genuine dialogue, understanding, tolerance, mutual trust and frank discussion with positive results adopted for Jerusalem Council be used in solving numerous Religious, ethnic, and communal conflicts in our Society.

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