

“THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL AND THE INSIDER MOVEMENT PARADIGM”

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Some advocates of the Insider Movement paradigm (IMP)¹ suggest we are witnessing something like a modern-day Acts 15, a shift in God’s activity resulting in unprecedented spread of the gospel, particularly among Muslims. The importance of Acts 15 for IMP proponents is evident in several ways. First, IMP proponents originally labeled an early meeting discussing this approach as a “Second Jerusalem Council,”² obviously a clear indication of its importance for the IMP. Second, the sheer volume of appeals which IMP advocates make to this so-called precedent reinforces its significance.³ Third, the line of reasoning IMP advocates draw from the Acts 15 council appears regularly in pro-IMP literature. According to these proponents, the

¹ This methodology, the Insider Movement “paradigm” is not monolithic. Advocates state that the movements themselves differ, and differences exist among theorists. I the term “Insider Movement paradigm” for two reasons: (1) to indicate that enough similarity exists in order to identify it as a paradigm for missions, and (2) to indicate that variations exist. In general, I use this phrase to refer to the general paradigm; however, occasionally the term “Insider Movements” (capitalized) will be used instead, usually when following the usage of authors being referenced. Uses of “insider movements” (lowercase) will indicate reference to specific movements on the ground. Any direct quotes will follow the practice of the author being quoted.

² Gary Corwin apparently objected to this original title and it was subsequently changed to “The Jerusalem Council Applied: Apostolic Insights into Today’s Insider Movements.” For published comments on this, see Gary Corwin, “A Response to My Respondents,” *IJFM* 24 (Summer 2007): 54; *IJFM* Editorial Staff, “The New *IJFM* and *ISFM* 2006—Atlanta,” *IJFM* 24 (Spring 2007): 4.

³ While the following list of articles is not exhaustive, it should demonstrate the importance of Acts 15 for IMP proponents. See Rick Brown, “Contextualization without Syncretism,” *IJFM* 23 (Fall 2006): 127–28; Bernard Dutch, “Should Muslims become ‘Christians’?,” *IJFM* 17 (Spring 2000): 18; Rebecca Lewis, “Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community,” *IJFM* 26 (Spring 2009): 18; Rebecca Lewis, “The Integrity of the Gospel and Insider Movements,” *IJFM* 27 (Spring 2010): 43–44; Joshua Massey, “God’s Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ,” *IJFM* 17 (Spring 2000): 8; Joshua Massey, “Misunderstanding C-5: His Ways are not Our Orthodoxy,” *EMQ* 40 (July 2004): 299; Brian K. Petersen, “The Possibility of a ‘Hindu Christ-Follower’: Hans Staffner’s Proposal for the Dual Identity of Disciples of Christ within High Caste Hindu Communities,” *IJFM* 24 (Summer 2007): 90; John Ridgway, “Insider Movements in the Gospels and Acts,” *IJFM* 24 (Summer 2007): 85; Tim Timmons, “Christianity Isn’t the Way—Jesus Is,” *IJFM* 25 (Fall 2008): 159; John Travis et al., “Four Responses to Tennent,” *IJFM* 23 (Fall 2006): 124; John Travis, “Must All Muslims Leave Islam to Follow Jesus?,” *EMQ* 34 (October 1998): 411; J. Dudley Woodberry, “To the Muslim I Became a Muslim?,” *IJFM* 24 (Winter 2007): 25–27.

council's decision meant that "Gentile believers were not required to join the Jewish community, attend synagogue services, become circumcised, change their names, or maintain the ritual cleanliness prescribed by the Law."⁴ To state it slightly differently, the council agreed "that non-Jews did not have to 'go through' Judaism to enter the Kingdom of God."⁵ Likewise, Muslims today are not required to "go through" Christianity in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Perhaps the best succinct illustration of the significance of Acts 15 is a personal anecdote shared by John Travis, a leading IMP proponent:

For the past decade, my family and I have lived in a close-knit Muslim neighborhood in Asia. My daughter, who loves our neighbors dearly, asked one day, "Daddy, can a Muslim go to heaven?" I responded with an Acts 15:11-type "yes": If a Muslim has accepted Isa (Jesus) the Messiah as Savior and Lord, he or she is saved, just as we are. We affirmed that people are saved by faith in Christ, not by religious affiliation. Muslim followers of Christ (i.e. "C5 believers" . . .) are our brothers and sisters in the Lord, even though they do not "change religions."⁶

A Closer Look at IMP Views

In the interest of representing IMP views as fairly as possible and further informing readers unfamiliar with IMP appeals to Acts 15, I would first like to note a few additional points stressed by IMP advocates. It is important to emphasize here that no official IMP interpretation exists. As with many issues, groups, movements, and paradigms, variety exists among proponents. In the description to follow I will attempt to present what I understand to be important aspects of IMP commentary on Acts 15, based on a survey of literature written by IMP proponents themselves. I would also like to note that, in my opinion, IMP views have often been insufficiently or inaccurately represented by critics, however unintentionally. The restrictions of a short article will certainly not permit an entirely thorough description, but my aim here is to provide a sufficiently fair and thorough description.

⁴ Dutch, "Should Muslims become 'Christians'?", 18.

⁵ Lewis, "Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community," 18.

⁶ Travis, "Must All Muslims Leave Islam?," 411.

First, IMP advocates sometimes stress the process which the Jerusalem Council followed. In their view, case studies or field reports played a leading role. Rebecca Lewis states, “It was the Pharisee believers (vs. 5) who did not want to actually look at what God was doing but stand on the Law of Moses as a matter of principle.”⁷ Similarly, John Travis writes, “It is highly instructive to note that as they came together to decide a theological matter (is circumcision required?), they did not first go the Scriptures; rather they went first to case studies of what God had been doing among the Gentiles.”⁸ The implication, of course, is that just as God was working among Gentile believers in the first century, He is working among Insider believers today, and this activity of God should play a significant (perhaps even primary?) role in adjudicating the question of whether these movements are valid. I am not suggesting that IMP advocates fail to recognize the role of Scripture in the debate, but for them the review of case studies is significant.

Second, at least some IMP advocates recognize and emphasize the soteriological nature of the question under consideration in Jerusalem. For example, Rebecca Lewis notes that the essential question was whether those with a Greek pagan background must accept the identity and religious traditions of Jewish believers in order to be saved.⁹ Similarly, Kevin Higgins writes:

At stake here is not simply whether Gentiles must become culturally Jewish to follow Jesus. Peter’s conclusion in verse 11 makes it clear that the question is soteriological in nature: “we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will.” Thus, the main issue facing the gathering in Jerusalem is the salvation of the Gentiles, and the ongoing place of the divinely revealed Torah in their salvation. Similarly, in discussing

⁷ This statement appears in Gary Corwin, “A Humble Appeal to C5/Insider Movement Muslim Ministry Advocates to Consider Ten Questions,” *IJFM* 24 (Spring 2007): 11.

⁸ Travis et al., “Four Responses,” 124.

⁹ Lewis, “Integrity of the Gospel,” 43.

insider movements among Muslims today, we must realize that the fundamental issue is not about culture and forms, but about salvation (emphasis in original).¹⁰

Third, IMP advocates highlight the council's conclusion: there were "no doubts about the conversion of the Gentiles in question."¹¹ In other words, these Gentiles clearly "turned to God" and are addressed in the resulting letter as "brothers."¹²

Fourth, IMP proponents understand the council's four prohibitions in various ways. For example, Rebecca Lewis seems to view them all as intending to promote a "peaceful co-existence between Jewish and Greek believers."¹³ Lewis adds, however, that with the exception of the command to avoid sexual immorality, all of these were removed by Paul before the end of the New Testament.¹⁴ For Brian Petersen, the prohibitions are aimed at promoting sanctification, although he also mentions the issues of maintaining a witness in society and promoting fellowship with Jewish believers.¹⁵ Brother Yusuf, an Insider believer, only comments on the command to avoid things sacrificed to idols, assuming this was prohibited because "it would be a form of idol worship."¹⁶ Among IMP proponents, Kevin Higgins presents the most nuanced view. Higgins places the injunction against "strangled meat" and "blood" in the category of maintaining table fellowship with Jewish believers, fornication under ethical issues, and "things sacrificed to idols" in the category of concern for actual idolatry, or "what modern missiologists would call syncretism (emphasis in original)."¹⁷

¹⁰ Kevin Higgins, "Acts 15 and Insider Movements among Muslims: Questions, Process, and Conclusions," *IJFM* 24 (Spring 2007): 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Lewis, "Integrity of the Gospel," 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* This is apparently noted to reinforce the claim that the main concern of these prohibitions was fellowship with Jewish believers. However, Lewis does not comment on why the prohibition on fornication was not removed.

¹⁵ Petersen, "Possibility of a 'Hindu Christ-Follower'," 90.

¹⁶ See Yusuf's comments in Corwin, "A Humble Appeal," 10.

¹⁷ Higgins, "Acts 15 and Insider Movements," 30.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, IMP proponents draw a significant implication from the council's discussion and decision. As Rebecca Lewis puts it, "The Acts 15 question is still relevant today: Must people with a distinctly non-Christian (especially non-Western) identity 'go through' the socio-religious systems of 'Christianity' in order to become part of God's Kingdom?"¹⁸ Of course, she answers negatively, concluding that the gospel makes it possible for one to obtain a new spiritual identity without relinquishing one's birth identity, without the requirement of a new socio-religious label, or passing through the religious systems of Judaism or Christianity.¹⁹ In other words, just as early Gentile believers were not required to align themselves with Judaism, Insider believers, while true disciples of Jesus, are not required to align themselves with what they consider to be a "godless Western institution called 'Christianity,' where (from a Muslim perspective) homosexuals enter the clergy, immodest women come to worship in scantily clad summer dresses, and people put the Word of God on the floor right next to their dirty shoes."²⁰ They can remain within their socio-religious communities (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) as faithful followers of Jesus, although they will need to modify or reject certain elements of them.²¹ This remaining may look very different from place to place and person to person, but it can potentially include such things as continuing to participate in mosque worship, continuing to affirm Mohammad as a prophet in various ways, and ongoing affirmation and use of the Qur'an (again, in various ways).²²

¹⁸ Lewis, "Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community," 18.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Massey, "God's Amazing Diversity," 8.

²¹ Kevin Higgins, "Inside What? Church, Culture, Religion and Insider Movements in Biblical Perspective," *SFM* 5 (August 2009): 90–91.

²² For a brief description of three types of approaches suggested by an IMP proponent, see Kevin Higgins, "Identity, Integrity and Insider Movements: A Brief Paper Inspired by Timothy C. Tennent's Critique of C-5 Thinking," *IJFM* 23 (Fall 2006): 121.

An Examination of Acts 15

Evaluating these elements, and particularly the major implication, will require significant discussion of several aspects of Acts 15. First of all, we can readily acknowledge that IMP proponents are correct in emphasizing the soteriological nature of the debate, including whether Gentiles were required to follow the Law in order to be saved. Acts 15:1 makes it clear that teachers from Judea saw circumcision as essential for salvation, or at least a necessary evidence of true faith. Furthermore, some of the believers from among the Pharisees added that Gentiles should “observe the Law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). Circumcision and the Law constituted the two demands related to Gentile salvation.²³ In other words, the issue in Acts 15 is “not merely post-conversion behaviour but what constitutes true conversion in the first place.”²⁴ Based on Peter’s testimony of God’s activity among the Gentiles (Acts 15:7–11), and James’ scriptural examination (Acts 15:13–18), the council determined that circumcision and the Law are not essential for salvation. IMP proponents have rightly understood the soteriological nature of the Acts 15 debate and the council’s basic conclusion regarding the Gentile believers’ soteriological status. However, a full assessment of IMP views on Acts 15 requires examination of other matters.

Of significant importance is the nature and purpose of the council’s prohibitions (Acts 15:20, 29). As Peterson notes, once the essential question of salvation had been resolved, “James then proposes what at first glance appears to be a qualification of the freedom of Gentile

²³ Darrell Bock, *Acts* (ECNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2007), 196.

²⁴ S. G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* (SNTSMS 50; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 72. Bock also mentions the issue of Gentiles joining the community, “The issue is not whether Gentiles should be included in the community but the specific requirements for their inclusion.” Bock, *Acts*, 497. However, it is clear from Bock’s comments on page 501 that he understands this as a debate about soteriology.

Christians.”²⁵ If these Gentiles were truly saved, why the qualification? What did this mean then and what does it potentially mean for the IMP?

Scholarly discussion of these four prohibitions have often focused on several questions. First, on what sources did the council draw in selecting these four prohibitions? Second, what was the nature of the prohibition: ethical, societal, or cultic? The third question is closely related to the second: What was the purpose of the prohibitions? Were they intended to establish basic ethical norms for Gentile believers, promote fellowship or harmony between Jewish and Gentile believers, or encourage Gentile believers to avoid contamination of idols? Space will not permit a review and evaluation of all the various options.²⁶ Here I intend to draw on the commentary of several biblical scholars to outline what seems to me the most plausible view. This outline will address three important questions: First, from a scriptural standpoint how did the council arrive at the conclusion that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised and keep the Law? Second, how did the council select these specific four prohibitions? Third, what was the purpose of the prohibitions?

In Acts 15 James and the council obviously conclude that Gentiles are not required to become Jews in order to be saved. As noted earlier, this is partly due to the field reports of God’s activity among them. However, as good Jews, James and the council needed a scriptural basis for their conclusion. Richard Bauckham believes that in Acts 15:16–18 James draws on key Old Testament texts (Amos 9:11–12; Hos 3:5; Jer 12:15–16; Isa 45:21). In selecting and interpreting

²⁵ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 433.

²⁶ I have done that elsewhere. For a summary of the various views and their relative strengths and weaknesses, see Doug Coleman, *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology, and Ecclesiology* (Pasadena: EMS Dissertation Series, William Carey International University Press, 2011), 139–160.

these texts, James employs the Jewish exegetical practice of *gezērâ shāwâ*, or associating scriptural texts which share a common term or terms.²⁷

James' conclusion regarding these texts, according to Bauckham, rests on two points of interpretation. The first understands the messianic or eschatological Temple to be the Christian community, an interpretation which Bauckham says was "widespread in early Christianity" and "goes back to the early Jerusalem church under James' leadership."²⁸ The second point of interpretation concerns the phrase "all the nations who are called by my name" (Amos 9:12). While the invoking of God's name in the Old Testament is often an expression of ownership, especially of God's election of Israel as his own people, its usage in reference to "all the nations" in Amos 9:12 indicates that "the nations qua Gentile nations belong to YHWH."²⁹ Therefore, more than any other scriptural text, Amos 9:11–12 makes the point that "whereas Gentiles could not enter God's presence in the old Temple without becoming Jews, in the new Temple of the messianic age, the Christian community, they could do so as Gentiles."³⁰ Therefore, Amos provides the exegetical basis for the conclusion that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised and keep the Law. But this does not account for the selection of the four prohibitions or tell us their significance.

James' exegesis also answers the question of how the council selected these four prohibitions. Here again James seems to employ the hermeneutical practice of *gezērâ shāwâ*, linking several texts that contain the same term. In several Old Testament prophecies, the Gentiles who join the eschatological people of God are said to be "in the midst of my people"

²⁷ Richard Bauckham, "James and the Jerusalem Church," in *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting* (ed. Richard Bauckham; vol. 4 of BAFCS; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 452–57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 457. For Bauckham's discussion of the interpretation of the church as the eschatological Temple, see pages 442–50. Wright describes Bauckham's conclusions on this as "clear and convincing." Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006), 518–19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 457–58. The quotation here is found on page 458.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 458.

(Jer 12:16; Zech 2:11a; Amos 9:11–12). In Leviticus 17–18, the Gentiles are referenced five times with the phrase “the alien who sojourns in your/their midst” (Lev 17:8, 10, 12, 13; 18:26).³¹ These sections of Leviticus 17–18 contain the four specific prohibitions selected by the council, with two of them repeating the same prohibition.³² As Bauckham notes, other Old Testament laws, e.g. the Sabbath commandment, did apply to resident aliens (Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14), but these verses do not use the catchphrase בתוך (“in the midst, among”). On the other hand, the Old Testament verses corresponding to the decree of the council contain this key catchphrase (Lev 17:8, 10, 12, 13; 18:26).³³

Bauckham further points out that the only other laws in the Torah incumbent upon the alien “in the midst” (בתוך) of Israel are Lev 16:29 and Num 15:14–16, 29; 19:10. These refer specifically to the Temple cult, and it is reasonable to believe “that Jewish Christian exegetes who understood the eschatological Temple to which Gentile Christians are admitted to be the Christian community would not apply these laws literally to Gentile converts.”³⁴ Bauckham contends that while the use of בתוך (“in the midst”) as a defining principle of selection may seem arbitrary to modern minds, in first-century Jewish hermeneutics it was a “well-recognised exegetical method.”³⁵ He concludes that careful exegesis underlies both the decision regarding circumcision and the selection of the four prohibitions required of Gentile believers.³⁶

We have now answered the question of the biblical bases for the council’s answer to the soteriological question as well as the selection of the four prohibitions. This leaves only the question of the purpose of the prohibitions. What was the council aiming to accomplish with the

³¹ Ibid., 459. Bauckham notes that all of these verses use either בתוכם or בתוככם.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 461.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 462.

selection of these four items? Or to approach the question from a different angle, how did these specific prohibitions apply to the situation of Gentile believers who were now joining the eschatological people of God?

Drawing on the work of Bauckham, Greg Beale agrees that the Gentiles are to become part of true Israel “by means of being built as the true temple.”³⁷ Regarding James’ quotation of Amos 9, Beale states:

The laws about uncleanness were primarily aimed at revealing who was not clean to dwell within the perimeter of Israel’s camp and who could come into the outer court of the tabernacle to worship God. James’s quotation demonstrates that Gentiles are now to be considered clean for entrance into and worship in the ‘tabernacle’ without keeping the Mosaic uncleanness laws, which Peter notes is ‘a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear’ (v. 10). The reason is that their ‘hearts are cleansed by faith’ in Christ.³⁸

Beale agrees that the prohibitions are rooted in Leviticus 17–18, but suggests the primary concern is encouraging the Gentile believers to abstain from idolatry.³⁹ After a brief description of the relationship between the four prohibitions and idolatrous practices, Beale concludes that the reason for the allusion to Leviticus 17–18 is “to show that one of the ultimate purposes of the Law for Gentile proselytes or Israelites was to guard them against idolatry.”⁴⁰ Therefore, while specific aspects of the Mosaic Law are no longer valid for God’s people, the Law’s prohibition on idolatry remains valid in the new age. Just as God’s presence at the tabernacle meant Israelites were to refrain from idolatrous sacrifices elsewhere (Lev 17:7–9), “so Christ’s end-time presence as the true tabernacle is the reason for not participating in idol worship.”⁴¹

³⁷ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 239. For the fuller discussion of Beale’s view of “Christ as the emerging new temple,” especially in relation to James’ speech at the Jerusalem Council, see pages 232–44.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 233, 239–41.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

Beale establishes the link between Leviticus 17–18 and the concern for idolatry, and Ben Witherington further addresses the question of how these four prohibitions are specifically connected to idolatrous situations. Witherington suggests the text of Acts 15 contains four hints that indicate what is in view is attendance at pagan temple feasts and their accompanying activities. First, Witherington notes a small difference between the two listings of the prohibitions in Acts 15:20 and 15:29. Verse 20 instructs the Gentile Christians to abstain from τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων (“things contaminated by idols”) while verse 29 forbids εἰδωλοθύτων, commonly translated as “things sacrificed to idols” (NASB) or “meats offered to idols” (KJV). Witherington suggests that Luke’s audience would interpret the meaning of εἰδωλοθύτων in Acts 15:29 in light of the phrase in Acts 15:20.⁴² Furthermore, after extensive examination of the term εἰδωλοθύτων (found in 15:29), Witherington concludes that “in all its 1st century AD occurrences [it] means an animal sacrificed in the presence of an idol and eaten in the temple precincts. It does not refer to a sacrifice which has come from the temple and is eaten elsewhere, for which the Christian sources rather use the term ἱερόθυτον” (emphasis in original).⁴³

The second hint is the use of the word porneia (fornication, sexual immorality) in Acts 15:20 and 29, which most basically refers to prostitution, also including so-called sacred prostitution.⁴⁴ Witherington suggests that while infidelity could be found at symposiums in pagan homes, the term most likely to address this would be moicheia, not porneia. (For example, Matt 5:27–28 uses moicheia, not porneia.). Therefore, James’ use of porneia in Acts 15 suggests

⁴² Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 462.

⁴³ Ben Witherington III, “Not So Idle Thoughts about *Eidolothuton*,” *TynBul* 44 (1993): 240. For a critique of Witherington’s conclusions regarding these terms, see Alex T. Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy* (JSNTSup 176; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 319–22.

⁴⁴ Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 463.

he had in mind activities believed to accompany pagan rites and feasts occurring in pagan temples.⁴⁵

Third, Witherington believes the imposition of food laws meant to apply to Gentiles dwelling in the Holy Land (Leviticus 17–18) would indeed be a “burden,” and the Jerusalem Council clearly does not intend to burden or trouble the Gentiles (15:19).⁴⁶ Finally, Witherington believes that understanding the decree as primarily about idolatry leads to a better harmony between the prohibitions and verse 21—which mentions the preaching of Moses in the synagogues every Sabbath—since abstaining from idolatry and immorality were “the most basic things required by the Mosaic Law.”⁴⁷ Therefore, the Gentiles’ adherence to the prohibitions would negate the claim by dispersion Jews that Gentile Christians continued to practice idolatry and immorality by attending pagan feasts.

In addition to these specific textual hints, Witherington offers other forms of evidence to support his view. For example, he sees the issue as “not just where one might find one or another of the four elements of the decree in isolation, but in what social setting one might find them together.”⁴⁸ Witherington concludes that all four elements are most likely to be found at a temple feast, not in a home.⁴⁹ To demonstrate that Jews believed pagans participated in such a combination of activities in a temple, he points to 2 Maccabees 6:4–5. In describing Antiochus’ suppression of Judaism and defiling of the Jerusalem temple, this passage mentions idol meat and sexual activity together. Witherington also notes evidence “that the choking of the sacrifice,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Based on this, Witherington rejects Leviticus as the source of the prohibitions. On pages 464–65 Witherington furthers critiques the view that Leviticus served as the source for the prohibitions. Some of Witherington’s objections are overcome by Bauckham’s proposal, and it is curious that Witherington does not acknowledge this in his critique given that he favorably cites Bauckham’s proposal earlier. Other objections do not appear fatal for the view, and it seems that a synthesis between Witherington and Bauckham could be possible.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 461.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

strangling it, and drinking or tasting of blood transpired in pagan temples.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, he suggests the strong concern for idolatry is found in the subsequent New Testament documents, especially evident in 1 Thess 1:9; 4:1–9; 1 Corinthians 5–10; and Rev 2:14, 22.⁵¹ If Witherington is correct, the Jerusalem Council’s decree would reflect this overarching concern as well.

Conclusion and Implications

The strengths of this view are significant. First, it offers a biblical basis for the council’s conclusion about Gentile salvation. Second, it offers clear criteria for the selection of the four prohibitions. Third, as noted above this view better accounts for the reference to Moses in verse 21.⁵² Fourth, this view better explains why Paul would not object to the prohibitions. Given his record in other parts of the New Testament, it seems likely that he would have strongly objected to the imposition of random Mosaic regulations. Finally, this view is consistent with the ongoing New Testament concern for avoiding idolatry.

One implication of Acts 15, a point which IMP advocates have rightly understood and emphasized, is that new believers are not required to follow all the customs of older believing communities.⁵³ In other words, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists or other non-Christian background

⁵⁰ Ibid., 464. In his related article, Witherington gives a lengthy description of a sacrifice in Roman religion. See Witherington, “Not So Idle Thoughts,” 242–46. Witherington acknowledges the account comes from Ogilvie. R. M. Ogilvie, *The Romans and their Gods in the Age of Augustus* (New York: Norton & Co., 1969), 44ff.

⁵¹ Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 465–66. Witherington also mentions a comment by Marion Soards, “The condemnation of idolatry implicit in the proscriptions against eating meats offered to idols anticipates Paul’s proclamation in 17:24–27.” Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 95. 1 Corinthians 8–10 will be discussed in more detail below.

⁵² Peterson agrees with Witherington on this point. Peterson, *Acts*, 446.

⁵³ John Proctor, “Proselytes and Pressure Cookers: The Meaning and Application of Acts 15:20,” *IRM* 85 (October 1996): 478.

believers are not required to adopt Western expressions of the Christian religion.⁵⁴ Biblical faith in Jesus is completely unrelated to a “cultural conversion” to Western Christianity.⁵⁵

On the other hand, the clearest implication of the interpretation of Acts 15 proposed here is to avoid idolatry. I suspect all IMP proponents would strongly agree that avoiding idolatry is non-negotiable. So this raises the question of what constitutes entanglement in idolatry. After examining Acts 15 from a missiological perspective, John Proctor concludes, “The priority for new Christian converts is to keep clear of other religious ties—especially tangible participation in other religions.”⁵⁶ The application of this principle may vary depending on context, and Paul’s nuanced instructions in 1 Corinthians 8–10 should play an important role.

This also raises the question of whether religion and culture can be separated, a question that IMP proponents often answer in the negative. In some cases religion and culture may be so interwoven that it can be extremely difficult to categorize specific elements as simply religious or cultural. These cases require deep understanding of the culture and great discernment, and even still brothers may need to agree to disagree at times on where the line should be drawn. However, some events, such as the Friday noon mosque worship seem clearly religious, and not merely a non-religious cultural event.

But if the Jerusalem Council’s decision requires religious exclusivity, does this hold even if the Insider modifies his understanding of and participation in other religions? For example, what if the believer from a Muslim background joins unbelieving Muslims at the Friday noon

⁵⁴ For examples of IMP proponents who note this, see Brown, “Contextualization,” 128–29; Dutch, “Should Muslims become ‘Christians?’”; Lewis, “Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community,” 18.

⁵⁵ Charles H. Kraft, “Christian Conversion or Cultural Conversion?,” *PA* 10 (July–August 1963): 179–87; Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 339–44. This is a major element of Kraft’s writing. Since Kraft wrote much of his work before the emergence of the public discussion on the IMP, he does not address the approach directly. However, his work contributed significantly to its development. For more on Kraft’s influence on the IMP, see “Insider Movements: An Assessment of the Viability of Retaining Socio-Religious Insider Identity in High-Religious Contexts” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 58–59, 67, 97, 101–06.

⁵⁶ Proctor, “Proselytes and Pressure Cookers,” 478.

prayers but changes the words he prays during the prayers, the words of the traditional Muslim creed, his understanding of Mohammad and the Qur'an, etc.? What if the Muslim background believer does not view the Allah of the Qur'an as different from the God of the Bible? I will address this in a subsequent article discussing 1 Corinthians 8–10. In that article I will touch briefly on whether Allah and the God of the Bible are the same being, and I will argue that Paul's teaching in that passage prohibits active participation in clearly religious rituals, such as Friday mosque worship, even if the believer reinterprets or modifies those events.

Finally, I believe the IMP has read into the Acts 15 council a question that was not being addressed, and this has led to an inappropriate conclusion. The question asked in Jerusalem was this: Must Gentiles be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses? In other words, must they join or "put on" Judaism to be saved? The answer, based on consideration of God's activity and careful biblical exegesis, was a resounding "No." However, suppose the following question had been asked: Can Gentiles who repent and affirm Jesus as Messiah continue to participate in religious rituals at the pagan temples as long as they reinterpret those rituals and modify their participation? In other words, must Gentile believers "put off" active participation in pagan rituals in order to be saved? Based on the rest of the New Testament witness, it seems highly likely, perhaps even unavoidably certain, that the answer would have been quite different. But this remains to be demonstrated in a future article.

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