A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL DISCOURSES: TABLE FELLOWSHIP AND THE IMPLICIT THEOLOGY OF SALVATION

MICHAEL MAHAN

This study undertakes a narrative reading of the text of Acts 15:1-31 and develops the construct of implicit theology, defining it as generic, usually unspoken ideas about the theological realm that have a measurable effect on individual and congregational behavior. The reading of the Jerusalem council narrative (Acts 15:1-31) highlights three points of view regarding law, grace, and fellowship considerations. This study finds that one chief thread of the narrative is the issues of the practical matter of fellowship between Gentiles and law-following Jewish Christians. The practical issues in the narrative reveal the main narrative thread of the contrast of differing perspectives on the theology of salvation. Based on the council narrative, it is suggested that in applied settings, the implicit theology of salvation is a balance between grace and law rather than a dichotomous, theological position. This study proposes the development of instruments measuring implicit theology in congregational studies, potentially revealing implicit theological tenets underlying observable congregational characteristics.

The Jerusalem consultation, recounted in Acts 15:1-31, describes a significant practical issue regarding the integration of Gentile Christians into what had been a
primarily Jewish body of believers. The issues seemed to have been multiple and necessitated the assembly of a significant portion of the early church’s leadership structure. Through the description of the contextual situation and its resolution, the narrative presents the possibility of an implied theological issue underlying practical issues such as the potential fellowship of believers with radically divergent life practices.

I. ACTS 15: AN OVERVIEW

The Jerusalem council narrative is pivotal to the body and theology of Acts and has been at the center of much scholarly discussion as well. According to Bock, numerous practical concerns are at stake:

1. “How can Gentiles ignore God’s covenant law?”
2. “How can fellowship occur if Jewish Christians keep the law but Gentiles do not?”
3. “Does the issue of uncleanness emerge?”
4. “How can law-observing Jewish Christians and law-ignoring Gentile Christians coexist?”

In the council narrative, amidst a certainly heated discussion of the practical issues of circumcision, strangled animals, blood, fornication, and the general issue of the Law of Moses, the apostle Peter addressed a theoretical issue. As a conclusion to his monologue, the apostle stated, “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are” (Acts 15:11).

II. NARRATIVE CRITICISM

Hermeneutics and exegesis traditionally offer numerous methodologies for Biblical research, yet since the twentieth century, the historical–critical method has been prolific. In the burgeoning fields of organizational and ecclesial leadership, Vernon Robbins’s socio-rhetorical criticism has likewise enjoyed an almost exclusive rule as the interpretative methodology. In the case of Acts 15, the vast majority of studies produced to date (with the notable exceptions of Cheung’s Narrative Analysis of Acts

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3 Bock, Acts.
4 Ibid., 486-487.
5 All scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.
14:27-15:35, Ben Witherington’s *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, and Robert Tannehill’s *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*) have relied almost exclusively upon the historical-critical method. Precisely the focus on the historical—critical approach has led Meier to affirm that “only with fear and trembling any exegete should presume to speak of the Jerusalem council, since reconstructing the events surrounding that meeting is fraught with difficulty.” Yet John Meier’s concern is methodologically bound; approaches such as that of narrative analysis need not reconstruct the entirety of the event, nor reconcile it with foreign texts (e.g., Gal 2) in order to speak of the Jerusalem council or its theological significance. Meier’s bias and subsequent concern have failed to recognize the simple genre of the account. According to Grant Osborne:

Biblical narratives contain both history and theology. . . . The historical basis for the stories is crucial, but the representation of that story in the text is the actual object of interpretation. . . . Our task is to decipher the meaning of the historical—theological text in the biblical narrative, not to reconstruct the original event.  

Although narrative criticism can forego the difficulties of the historical—critical method, narrative criticism can be complemented by other methodologies; specifically socio-rhetorical techniques such as oral—scribal intertexture and inner textual repetitive—progressive textures are particularly important in a nuanced text such as Acts 15.

III. THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

*External and Internal Plot*

The Jerusalem council narrative occupies a central role in the book of Acts. This is first clear from a structural perspective. As noted by Joseph Fitzmyer, in his translation, “chapters 1-14 have 12,385 words and chapters 15-28, 12,502 words.” Acts 15 is also theologically pivotal to the entire book’s narrative—so much so that Haenchen described it as the “turning-point,” “watershed,” and “centerpiece” of Acts. The council narrative concludes the introduction of the gospel to the Gentiles (beginning in Acts 10) and thus marks a change in emphasis from Jewish Christianity to the gospel’s work amongst the Gentiles. According to Conzelman, in Acts 15, the concern

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for Judaistic Christianity (focused on Jerusalem) falls off, and Paul’s missions to the Gentiles take over for the rest of the Acts narrative.  

Likewise, it does not seem coincidental that this particular incident occurs in Jerusalem. Luke’s introductory comments regarding the apostolic mandate to witness (“you shall be my witnesses in both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and even to the ends of the earth” [Acts 1:8]) places Jerusalem in a central position regarding the gospel. According Scott, then, Acts narrates the cultural, racial, and social expansion of the church from Jerusalem. Richard therefore concluded, “Not only do all post-crucifixion events occur in or around the holy city, but also every impetus, embassy, or ideational thrust—regardless how reluctant or questionable—arises from or is related to Jerusalem. Officially and unofficially, theologically and spatially, Jerusalem is critical for an understanding of Acts 15.” As the later chapters of Acts depart from the Jerusalem center, the influential role of the Jerusalem church in blessing this geographical and social shift of the gospel is fundamental.

Not only does the Jerusalem council narrative denote the shift from Jerusalem, even the narrative’s character focus pivots around the episode. The character of Peter, previously the prominent apostle, effectively disappears from the Acts narrative beyond chapter 15. Paul subsequently becomes central to the entire narrative of Acts. The council episode is the point of overlap between Peter, apostle to the Jews, and Paul, apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 2:8), allowing for a natural transposition between the two characters and their evangelistic foci. Even on the level of character depiction, Acts 15 is central to the entire book, further underlining that Jerusalem council narrative is thus essential to the plot of the entire Acts narrative. Ben Witherington’s comment that “it is no exaggeration to say that Acts 15 is the most crucial chapter in the whole book” is thus fully justified.

The internal plot of the council narrative consists of a series of four incidents (minor episodes), each initiated by a missionary report. Allowing for Cheung’s inclusion of Acts 14:27-28 into the council narrative, missions reports are given on at least four separate occasions: 14:27, 15:3, 15:4, and 15:12 (see table 1). The reports are characterized by two clear themes: (a) the work that “God had done” and the Gentiles and (b) reactions to the reports, varying greatly from “great joy” (15:3) to protests (15:1, 15:5). The protests, though, are characterized by a concern for circumcision and the

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20 The inclusion of Acts 14:27-28 in the council narrative is a primary purpose of Cheung’s work, “A Narrative Analysis.”
Law of Moses. With no further reading, it is initially clear that an ideal underlying the varying conflicts, in the narrative itself, is a contrast between the work of God, ethnicity, the work of man (circumcision).

Table 1. Minor episodes in Acts 14:27-15:21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mission report</th>
<th>Initial reaction</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“All things God has done,” “how he opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27)</td>
<td>Protest—“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (15:1)</td>
<td>Entourage to Jerusalem (15:2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“in detail, the conversion of the Gentiles” (15:3)</td>
<td>“Great joy to all the brethren” (15:3)</td>
<td>Continuing to Jerusalem (15:3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“all that God had done with them” (15:4)</td>
<td>Protest—“It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses” (15:5)</td>
<td>Apostolic/pastoral assembly (15:6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (15:12)</td>
<td>“All the people kept silent” (15:12)</td>
<td>Resolution letter (15:19-20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the narrative, the initial mission reports give rise to the situation that will finally allow the negative reactions to be dealt with on a definitive basis. The narrative is thus driven forward to resolution by the mission reports and the reactions. Each minor episode is essential to the narrative: without the initial episode (14:27-15:2), the conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christianity would never have arisen; without the second episode (15:3), the true measure of the conflict (between joy and protest) could not be appreciated; without the third episode (15:4-6), the council would not have met to discuss the issue; and without the fourth (15:12-20), no final resolution of the conflict (and the underlying doctrinal issue) would have occurred.

In every minor episode, the read is driven to understand a theological message. From the original mission reports, through objections and the defenses and final conclusion at the council, the reader is convinced, at times even implicitly, of the issue of salvation. According to Timothy Wiarda:

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. The driving home of this point is pivotal to the expansion of the gospel and to the rest of the Acts narrative. Even the final resolution of the council, through a letter to the churches, is important for later narrative, as the findings and Paul’s use of them resurface in a later episode (Acts 21:19-26).

The Characters

The actual function of the characters is fundamental in narrative and is often important as characters are developed or because of the points of view that they may embody. A precursory reading of the main characters of the council narrative reveals a limited list of characters representing determined points of view: Paul and Barnabas, Peter, James, the party of the Pharisees. According to Joseph Fitzmyer and Arthur Just, these characters actually compose only three groups (or points of view, see table 2). Although each of these characters undergoes little development here in Acts 15, they are not without a more complete development throughout the entire Acts (or possibly Luke–Acts) narrative.

Peter. Peter has been described as one of the chief pillars of the Jerusalem church. In numerous episodes, Peter is portrayed as the chief spokesperson for the apostles. He is also one of the central figures of the episodes in Acts 4-5, Acts 9:32-43, Acts 10-11, and Acts 12. Peter is depicted as the bringer of the gospel to the Gentiles in the Acts 10 narrative (the conversion of Cornelius) and in Acts 11 as he reports this good news back to the Jerusalem church. The bulk of these episodes are situated in Jerusalem. Yet even in those episodes outside Jerusalem, Peter’s role is that of verifying (or even active involvement) in the gospel’s expansion to Samaritans and Gentiles, echoing his role in the witness radiating out from Jerusalem (see Acts 1:8).

According to Cheung’s narrative reading, the presence of Peter in the Council narrative is crucial to the flow of the book of Acts. Peter’s mission to the Gentiles is carried to its logical conclusion thorough Peter’s discourse and the council’s final decision. In essence, Peter’s witness to the gospel in Jerusalem, Samaria, and the ends of the earth is consolidated at his character’s final appearance in the entire Acts

\begin{flushleft}
24 Just, “The Apostolic Councils.”
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narrative. Peter’s role as the primary spokesman from the Gentile point of view at the council is also appropriate; he functions within the persona of primary spokesman for the apostles—even when the issue itself is brought by others, such as Paul and Barnabas.

Table 2. Main characters in the Jerusalem narrative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Point of view</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul and Barnabas</td>
<td>Antioch</td>
<td>Gentile Christian</td>
<td>Salvation by the grace of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
<td>Gentile Christian</td>
<td>Salvation by the grace of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharisees/Jews</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
<td>Pharisaic Christian</td>
<td>Christian need for circumcision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Antioch</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mosaic law observance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Galatia)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James (elders)</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
<td>Apostolic Decree</td>
<td>Salvation by grace, table fellowship by avoiding idolatry.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paul and Barnabas. The convening of the actual council is narratively attributed to the mission reports and disputes in which Paul and Barnabas are primary players (Acts 15:2). Paul and Barnabas are by no means new characters in the story of Acts; Barnabas was introduced to the reader at the Jerusalem church in Acts 4:36-37 and Paul is preliminarily introduced in Acts 8:1. Initially, Barnabas was presented as an encourager; Paul (Saul) as a persecutor. In Acts 9, Paul was converted to Christianity and he encountered Barnabas, who took him under his wing and presented him to the apostles. By Acts 13, both Paul and Barnabas serve in the church of Antioch (Barnabas had intentionally found him and brought him there in Acts 11:24); the Holy Spirit sets them apart for service (Acts 13:2) and they jointly begin missionary travels. Although in popular conception Barnabas may be viewed as conceding the role of leader to Paul, the Lycaonians at least would not have agreed, as they attempt to honor Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes, his spokesman (Acts 14:11-12).

Although by the later chapters of Acts, both Paul and Barnabas are fully developed as individual characters, in the council narrative they function as a single narratological unit. It is only in a subsequent episode (“some time later” in Antioch in Acts 15:36), that significant differentiation between the characters is clear. In the Jerusalem council narrative, the names occur united; the two assemble churches, recount the conversions among the Gentiles and the power of God, and dispute and debate with the Pharisee party. Paul and Barnabas thus function as a united missionary team in a true sense, with a single *modus operandi* and point of view.

Cheung is instrumental in noting the relationship between Paul and Peter in the Jerusalem council.²⁹ Luke’s primary concern is to show the agreement between the two apostles; a harmony that is noticeable through a number of parallels through the entire Acts narrative (see table 3). Although Peter is the spokesman for those representing the view of Gentile Christianity (Paul, Barnabas, and the church in Antioch), according to Cheung, his discourse takes a subtle Pauline wording, presenting Pietrine theology (1 Pt 1:1-8) in a way representative of the entire Gentile Christianity team.³⁰

Table 3. Similarities between Paul and Peter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarity</th>
<th>Peter</th>
<th>Paul</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heal men lame from birth</td>
<td>Acts 3:1-10</td>
<td>Acts 14:8-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heal by secondary contact</td>
<td>Acts 5:15</td>
<td>Acts 19:12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise the dead</td>
<td>Acts 9:36-41</td>
<td>Acts 20:9-12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The party of the Pharisees. The council narrative utilizes the party of the Pharisees (or some men “down from Judea”)³¹ as the group driving the social and theological conflict of the entire episode. The group is rightly called “troublemakers” by Just;³² they leave Judea in order to arrive at Antioch to stir up trouble by advancing their ideology and by their musings essentially necessitate global ecclesial action.³³ That

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²⁹ Cheung, “A Narrative Analysis.”
³¹ That the “party of the Pharisees” and the “mean came down from Judea” function as one narratological group is evident from the singular point of view regarding circumcision in Acts 15:1 and 15:5.
³³ The narrative reading of the council, and the Pharisaic Christians’ driving role (representing Mosaic law and salvation) in the narrative, strongly contrasts Scott’s (“The Church’s Progress,” 219) thesis that side

Within Acts, the Pharisees are never a clear group, although some Pharisees (like Gamaliel) were part of the Sanhedrin who attempt to silence the apostles (Acts 5:17-41). Acts 11, though, presents a party known as the “circumcised believers” (Acts 11:2-3) that criticized Peter’s fellowship with the Gentile Cornelius. Although Acts’ characterization of the Pharisees is more positive than that of Luke, the general position that “Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses” (Acts 15:5) is fully within character of the Pharisees within Luke and Acts. These Pharisees may not be the hypocrites so often criticized by Jesus himself, but a central aspect of their religious life was the contrast between the Law of Moses and the grace in Christ.

**James and the elders.** The third and perhaps most critical voice in the narrative is James. According to Just, James would have been the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem assembly, whereas for Hoefer, he was “seemingly the head of the elders.” Robert Tannehill upholds James’s importance, noting that in a normal narrative, a chief figure would have been introduced; the lack of even an introduction thus indicates a common understanding of his identity. In Paul’s description of the church in Jerusalem, James was also reputed a pillar (Gal 2:9). This denomination seems upheld by historians, both modern and ancient, as Bauckham and Hegesippus attest. James’s prominent role was recognized in the Acts narrative in Acts 12:17, as Peter, after his miraculous release from prison, advised that “James and the brothers” be notified. Later in the Acts narrative, when Paul goes visit James, the other elders were present as well (Acts 21:18). It is precisely in Acts 21 that James (along with the elders) also shows consideration for the strong law-seeking contingency in the Jerusalem congregation. According to narrative criticism, in the council narrative, Peter represented the apostles’ voice while James represented the group of elders at the assembly (Acts 15:6).

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issues such as association first surfaced in the council. In a narrative reading (rather than Scott’s historical–critical method), association is only addressed implicitly and in later discourse.

34 Just, “The Apostolic Councils.”
Ideological Points of View

Within the council narrative, the character groups function to relate contrasting ideological points of view and drive the conflict and final resolution. Commentators generally agree on three points of view represented in the council: the Pharisaic Christian point of view, the Gentile Christian point of view, and the Jerusalem/Apostolic decree point of view. In the narrative itself, the depth of the characters’ dialogues is progressive; whereas the Pharisaic Christians have two simple statements, Peter’s dialogue is more developed and James’s is very well rounded, complete with allusion to previous discussion, oral—scribal intertexture, and scriptural exegesis.

Pharisaic Christian point of view. The Pharisaic Christian point of view has been said to be completely clear, stated in “no uncertain terms.” The first pronouncement (Acts 15:1) creates two clear emphases, circumcision and salvation. The second pronouncement (Acts 15:5) seems to clarify the implications of the first. Circumcision is not a standalone ritual; the Pharisaic Christians understand circumcision as an entry ritual into Mosaic Law. The relationship of circumcision to the following of Mosaic Law is fully justifiable, yet circumcision, even within Lukan narrative, is seen as belonging to the Jews. Narratologically, though, the Pharisaic point of view expressed in the council narrative contrasts the perspective of the Lukan narrator. In Lukan usage, circumcision is not related to salvation and as a right is never impugned but is a “custom of the people.”

Two devices, literary and narratological, underline the force behind the Pharisaic point of view. First, the belief in this ideology is so strong that a group of men leave Judea to go to Antioch for the purpose of teaching it. The act is comparable to the evangelism connected to the early persecution of the church, taking the gospel as far as Antioch (Acts 11:19). Despite the specific content of the point of view, it was held to be so fundamental that certain groups were prepared to travel in order to be sure it was taught alongside the gospel itself.

Second, in the narrative, this is the only repeated point of view. Whereas the two following points of view are developed throughout discourse, the Pharisaic Christian point of view is pronounced twice in two minor episodes. For scholars such as Grant Osborne, Vernon Robbins, and Robert Alter, repetition is an important literary device,


40 “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

41 “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses.”


with a number of functions.\textsuperscript{44} In Acts 15, the repetition highlights the central role of this point of view. For Robbins, the progression from “circumcised” to “circumcised and required to obey the law” would function to underline the strong relationship between the single circumcision act and the full praxis of following the law. The Pharisaic Christian point of view does not simply insist on circumcision as a rite or for fellowship purposes (akin to Paul’s circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16:3), but as representative of law following, for salvific purposes. In this point of view, circumcision is not a cultural practice, but is a salvific condition. For the Pharisaic Christian point of view, as a consequence of following Christ, Gentiles must be assimilated into Judaism as well.

**Gentile Christian point of view.** Although the Paul and Barnabas duo and Peter (along with the sending congregation of Antioch) constitute the Gentile Christian group, it is Peter that fully represents the point of view as its spokesperson. His role as representative is perhaps accentuated, though, because of his association with the Jerusalem church.\textsuperscript{45} Peter is also a natural representative for the Gentile Christian point of view because, in his own words, “God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.”\textsuperscript{46}

Peter’s speech (see table 4), although relatively brief, is composed of three clear sections. In the first, the dialogue is composed of three statements regarding the action of God. The second section contrasts the perspective of the first, placing the action on the part of human action, asking a rhetorical question to the Pharisaic Christian group. The final section provides a conclusion, an answer to the rhetorical question based upon the first section. The Gentile Christian point of view foremost underlines the action of God in the conversion of the Gentiles. In a repetitive–progressive texture, God is shown to have: (a) chosen the Gentiles, (b) showed his acceptance, and (c) made no distinction between peoples. Each of these statements is backed by a proof, that the Gentiles: (a) heard the message and believed, (b) received the Holy Spirit, and (c) had their hearts purified by faith.

The radical shift in perspective between the first and second section of the discourse is notable through three grammatical shifts. The change from divine to human action is first demarcated by the shift of grammatical subject, from God to you. According to the Gentile Christian perspective, what God has affected is contrasted by what the Pharisaic Christians are attempting to do; human action is contrasting the divine. A second grammatical shift likewise underlines the second section. Where in the first section of the discourse God acted toward Gentiles, the Pharisaic Christian group is acting towards God (testing God). The third grammatical shift is the reference to the Gentiles and Gentile Christians. In a progressive texture, those that had been called “Gentiles” (Acts 15:7) become “the disciples” (Acts 15:10). This more subtle shift serves


\textsuperscript{45} Just, “The Apostolic Councils,” 279.

\textsuperscript{46} Acts 15:7, NIV.
to emphasize the position that there is no distinction between Gentile and Jewish Christians, a position clearly stated in Acts 15:9 and 15:11.

Table 4. Peter’s speech (the Gentile Christian point of view) in Acts 15:7-11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Divine action</th>
<th>Human action</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the</td>
<td>Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples</td>
<td>No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he</td>
<td>a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>faith.</td>
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</table>

The conclusion of the Gentile Christian discourse clarifies the basis for the point of view. The salvation of all disciples is dependent upon God’s grace. If this discourse was in any way prompted by the Pharisaic Christian group’s action, the conclusion indicates that Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and the Antioch church perceive the obligation to follow the Law of Moses as a threat to grace. Yet a grammatical shift also gently turns the ideological perspective inside out. Where the Pharisaic Christians had contrasted the salvation of the Gentiles disciples, Peter’s conclusion places the Jewish Christian position on the line: “It is through the grace of our Lord that we are saved” (Acts 15:11). From Peter’s point of view, the action of God had clearly proven the Gentile Christians’ salvation by grace; the actions of the Pharisaic Christians, instead, had actually questioned the means of salvation of Jewish Christians!

The Jerusalem point of view (the Apostolic Decree). James’s speech, representative of the Jerusalem point of view is the most developed and conclusive in the council narrative, as it concludes the assembly and initiates the proliferation of the council’s decision.\(^\text{47}\) The monologue becomes the theological/ideological conclusion of the council and like Peter’s speech, is built in three sections (see figure 1). These sections are an introductory tie-in to Peter’s speech, an oral–scribal texture (a citation from Amos 9:11-12), and the logical conclusion with consequently implied actions.

The introductory section of James’s speech shows two notable characteristics. First, as noted by Robert Tannehill, James actually uses the Semitic name for Peter, Symeon.48 This identifies James with the Aramaic speaking part of the church.49 Therefore the most definitive voice in the council proceedings is Jewish, as is every speaking character at the council. Second, in this point of view, the Gentiles are characterized as a people taken for God “for himself.” The statement (and its wording) is vaguely reminiscent of references to Israel as God’s chosen people,50 in some way identifying the Gentiles as God’s chosen people.51 This only stands to be reinforced in the following oral–scribal texture.

Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: 

“After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. 
Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, 
that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, 
and all the Gentiles who bear my name, 
says the Lord, who does these things’ that have been known for ages.”

“It is my judgment, therefore, 
that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 
Instead we should write to them, telling them 
to abstain from food polluted by idols, 
from sexual immorality, 
from the meat of strangled animals 
and from blood. 
For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

Figure 1. James’s speech (the Jerusalem point of view) in Acts 15:13-20

48 Tannehill, The Narrative Unity, 186.
50 “And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself” (2 Sm 7:23).
51 See Tannehill, The Narrative Unity, 186.
The mid-section of James’s speech derives from Amos 9:11-12. This was to be expected from an elder of a Jewish Christian congregation, where,\textsuperscript{52} and according to Witherington, it is the strength of this proof from scripture that allows the council to be concluded and acted upon.\textsuperscript{53} This approach from the Jerusalem point of view is therefore also noticeably different from that of the Gentile Christian group. Whereas Peter progresses from God’s action in the present, James progresses from God’s past testimony in scripture. Despite the clear difference in perspective, Just argues that James’s use of scripture constitutes a change of traditional hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{54} James, in Just’s surmisal, declares that the action of God determines how scripture is understood. This follows Luke Johnson’s note that James is revising the formula used to compare events to prophecy; where usually it is stated that “this is in agreement with the prophets,” James states, “The words of the prophets are in agreement with this.”\textsuperscript{55}

The text of Amos 9:11-12 utilized by James is particularly adapt to the situation of Gentile integration into what had been Jewish Christianity. The text is such a good fit that Bauckham has stated, “Probably no other scriptural text could have been used to make this point so clearly.”\textsuperscript{56} Robert Tannehill, noting the relationship of the rebuilding metaphor to Lukan narrative, has suggested the theme related to David and Christianity is repeated throughout Luke and Acts in Luke 1:32-33, 69 and 2:10-11, and Acts 2:30-36 and 13:22-23, 32-34.\textsuperscript{57} For Tannehill, this quotation is thus a type of repetitive–progressive texture, culminating in James’s usage, in which the rebuilt tent encompasses all men of every nation. Even discounting Tannehill’s wide narratological reading, it is at least clear that the Amos citation brings the Gentiles into the category of God’s chosen. As a second and conclusive note to Gentile chosen-ness, the mention of the “Gentiles who bear my name” represents God’s enlarged claim on all mankind rather than only the Jews, as his chosen people.\textsuperscript{58}

The final section of James’s speech is conclusive doctrinally and as far as future action is concerned, yet it is considerably more problematic from a theological point of view. The section is composed of two sections, the first of which is James’s simple response to Peter’s rhetorical question in Acts 15:10: “We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). The second section is difficult and seems to incorporate a second oral–scribal texture; beginning with Hans Waitz,\textsuperscript{59} a strong tradition has linked the prohibitions in the Apostolic Decree to the text of Leviticus 17-18. Scholars are in no way in agreement regarding the application of this text to

\textsuperscript{53} Witherington, The Acts, 457.
\textsuperscript{54} Just, “The Apostolic Councils,” 282.
\textsuperscript{55} Johnson, Acts, 271.
\textsuperscript{57} Tannehill, Narrative Unity, 189.
\textsuperscript{58} Just, “The Apostolic Councils,” 282.
Christianity and it is well beyond the scope of this article to discuss this oral–scribal texture, but it should be noted that Jerusalem point of view does not create an ad-hoc list of requirements for Gentile Christians.\(^{60}\)

It is also clear, though, that James’s conclusion neither regards circumcision nor following the complete Law of Moses. However these four prohibitions are fleshed out, they regard neither the means of salvation nor entrance into the Jewish population (proselytism).\(^{61}\) The fourfold prohibition, though, is universally recognized as regarding practices of idolatry.\(^{62}\) Luke Johnson consequently asked the question, “Why insist even on these [requirements]?”\(^{63}\) What is the connection between Gentile and Jewish Christianity, idolatry, and the explanation offered by James (that Moses is preached in every city)?

The agreement of scholars would seem to be that these prohibitions regard Gentile and Jewish table fellowship.\(^{64}\) Although Gentile Christians are not obliged to obey the entire Law of Moses, Jewish Christians did follow the law, although not for salvation (as implied by Peter’s speech in Acts 15:11). The requirements of Leviticus 17-18 would, though, create a particular situation for Jewish Christians. Amongst law followers, even aliens were prohibited from sacrifices, blood, and illicit sexual relations; such acts would demand the removal of the practitioners. These practices could contaminate both land and people (Lv 18:24-25); faithful Jews would therefore necessarily not have fellowship with those participating in such acts. In this light, the fourfold prohibition of James’s speech and the Apostolic Decree was a way of assuring that Jewish Christians, as Jews, could maintain table fellowship with Christian Gentiles. The imposition of these four holiness codes upon Gentile Christians, then, “enabled Jews to remain in communion with them, since the Gentiles would not be engaging in practices in radical disharmony with the Jewish ethos.”\(^{65}\)

If this is indeed the case (and not all scholars are agreed),\(^{66}\) the Jerusalem point of view as explained by James advances the theological discussion beyond matters of

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\(^{63}\) Johnson, Acts, 273.


\(^{65}\) Johnson, Acts, 273.

\(^{66}\) Callan’s The Background of the Apostolic Decree is one notable opponent. His view expounds significantly upon the regulations of Leviticus 17-18 as applied to Israel and the Gér. His analysis, although complete, is founded upon the ideology that Christians were incorporated into a physical Israel (minimal converts to Judaism). Callan does not even consider the possibility that the Apostolic Decree permitted table fellowship between two culturally diverse groups of Christians.
salvation. The Jerusalem concern surpassed matters of circumcision and law following. The council did not desire to burden Gentiles with the Jewish yoke (Acts 15:10, 20), yet it did impose regulations upon Gentiles. This imposition is interesting exactly because food or ethical laws were not the issue that prompted the disputes and the Jerusalem council. The issue had been circumcision (Acts 15:1, 5); yet the council’s concluding comments gave no mention to circumcision nor to the plethora of regulations necessary for becoming a member of a Jewish community. The issues addressed, though, could prohibit Jews from table fellowship with Gentiles and thereby preclude the multi-cultural sharing of the Eucharist. In Kesich’s words, “the Eucharist is the life of the Church and if these laws made it possible for Jews and Gentiles to share in the Eucharist, then these laws were acceptable to everyone.”

The Jerusalem point of view, then, respected both salvific and fellowship issues, more than any of the other points of view.

**Theological Analysis**

Human behavior quite frequently manifests side issues (symptoms) alongside real issues. In narrative criticism, these issues may be referred to as the major and minor theological threads. As a narrative reading shows, the initial conflicts introduce issues of circumcision and the Law of Moses and the final resolution deals with the relationship of Christianity to Judaism and the possibility of fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

The bulk of recent scholarship has addressed issues such as church council precedents, conflict resolution, and the issue of fellowship. Amongst these, the issue of fellowship is particularly significant. Arthur Just, for example, is particularly concerned with fellowship, both from an exegetical and applied points of view. In his appraisal, the Jerusalem council functions to provide a model for dealing with church debate and fostering consensus. For Herbert Hoefer, the narrative’s address of the question of fellowship relates significantly to contemporary cross-cultural ministry possibilities. Similarly, to Timothy Wiarda, the council narrative is “grounded in the assumption that his [Christ’s] mission . . . that applies equally to all people.” Amongst other commentators such as Bock, Scott, and Witherington (who all produce significant lists of the underlying issues in the council narrative), the chief concern of the text is fellowship (see table 5). This consensus among scholars indicates that a major thread throughout the council narrative is the issues of cross cultural, Christian fellowship.

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70 See Meier, “The Jerusalem Council,” for a discussion of all of these.
72 Hoefer, “Principles of Cross-Cultural,” 139.
The narrative flow seems to suggest fellowship as such a major issue. The initial minor incident begins with Gentile evangelization and a report to the first congregation with a significant Gentile population (Acts 11:19-20) that had sent the mission. The narrative progresses to the council, in which an entirely Jewish cast of characters discusses theology. Exegesis prevails (in concomitance with the witness of the Holy Spirit) in describing the salvation of all of mankind under the tent of David. At the conclusion of the narrative, the findings of the council are taken back to the Gentile congregation in Antioch. Intercultural relations are a clear thread in the council narrative.

Yet beyond the flow, the council dialogues themselves make no explicit mention of fellowship as an issue! It must be wondered, then, how much the historical–critical method (and the problematic relationship of Acts 15 to Galatians 2) has influenced our reading of the council narrative. Neither is circumcision explicitly mentioned in the council dialogues. Although it is implied that following the law/circumcision is “a yoke” (Acts 15:10), “trouble” (Acts 15:19), and “a burden” (Acts 15:28), neither the law nor circumcision are mentioned. From the narrative perspective, Scott is correct to affirm that these questions are, in fact, “side issues”\(^\text{75}\) in the theological debate, although law and circumcision were the initial controversy, manifesting underlying and more fundamental issues.

Table 5. Questions pertinent to the main thread in the council narrative\(^\text{76}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scott</th>
<th>Bock</th>
<th>Witherington</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With whom may Jewish Christians associate?</td>
<td>How can fellowship occur if Jewish Christians keep the law . . . but Gentiles do not?</td>
<td>How can fellowship continue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With whom may Jewish Christians eat?</td>
<td>Does the issue of uncleanness emerge?</td>
<td>How to deal with ethnic division?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the status of food laws within the new faith?</td>
<td>How can Gentiles ignore God’s covenant law?</td>
<td>How may the church remain one?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the necessity and place of circumcision and the customs within Christianity?</td>
<td>How can law-observing Jewish Christians and law-ignoring Gentile-Christians coexist?</td>
<td>What constitutes the people of God?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the status of Jewish privilege?</td>
<td></td>
<td>How may the major ethnic divisions in the church be dealt with so that both groups may be included in God’s people on equal footing?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{75}\) Scott, *The Church’s Progress*, 219.

That Gentile-Jew fellowship was implied in the narrative is demonstrated through the contemporary concern in the scholarly debates and in the implications of James’s quotation of Amos 9. Yet according to numerous scholars, and the council dialogues themselves, neither circumcision nor fellowship were the real issue. In Kesich’s reading, “the council dealt with a pure issue of faith, a doctrinal question of grace and salvation.” Scott concurs that “at Antioch the main issue became clear: what is the nature of the new faith? On what basis is salvation imparted?” Wiarda’s theological evaluation of the narrative is similar: “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.” According to these and other scholars, the underlying issue, and the true main theological thread throughout the narrative, even though it is not discussed explicitly in James’s discourse nor in the resolution letter, is the theology of salvation.

**Implicit theology.** The construct of implicit theology has been recently introduced by Martyn Percy. In Percy’s theorization, implicit theology contrasts explicit propositional theology (i.e., doctrine) and strongly shapes church life. For Percy, implicit theology would attempt to arrive at “hidden meanings in structures and practices that on the surface appear to be benign and innocent.” Percy, primarily following Hopewell and Geertz, originally proposed implicit theology to describe aspects of congregational or denominational culture (symbols, etc.) that influence their own self-understandings. From this point of view, implicit theology is generally deduced from observable church practices.

Yet implicit theology could find larger substantiation and application through the way in which implicit leadership theory has been theorized. Implicit leadership theories have been described as “generic ideas about the traits and behaviours that leaders in general have.” Following this theorization, implicit theology can be better substantiated as generic, usually unspoken ideas about the theological realm that have a measurable effect on individual and congregational behavior.

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78 Scott, “The Church’s Progress,” 219.
81 Ibid., 2.
In Acts 15, conflict over an implicit theology of salvation not only drives the narrative, the implicit theology of salvation is the theological underpinning that framed the circumcision/law protest, the council discussions, and the fellowship resolution. Implications of the theology of salvation are present throughout the narrative at least at three visible points. First, the initial Pharisaic Christian protest (Acts 15:1) was clear, “Unless you are circumcised . . . you cannot be saved.” This first statement of the means of salvation within the narrative could mean that, in the eyes of Pharisaic Christians, either: (a) salvation obtained through law observance or (b) salvation is through grace plus law. For this reason, some commentators such as Terrance Callan discuss the necessity of becoming part of Israel in order to be saved. Yet even the findings letter does not utilize salvation language, simply concluding, “If you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well.” It is precisely this implied understanding (that circumcision is not a salvific issue) that suggests that the theology of salvation is an implicit theological in the text.

The second indication of an implicit theology of salvation is manifest as Peter explicitly contrasts either possible reading of the Pharisaic Christian statement regarding salvation. In the conclusion of his monologue, he clarifies the Gentile Christian position, “We are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way they are also.” According to Kesich, through this statement, “Peter set the tone, and furnished the framework in which the whole problem had to be examined. God’s plan was to include all within the Church. Man would be saved by grace of God and not by an act of circumcision.”

Through this statement, Peter made explicit what the implicit matter in previous debates had been. Circumcision, following the law, and Jewish or Gentile heritage, as themes of debate, were manifest issues; the often implicit but underlying issue was the nature of salvation. Through insistence upon circumcision and law-keeping, Pharisaic Christians manifested a fundamental belief about the nature of salvation: it was through Judaism, and more particularly, it was related to personal works. For Peter, though, that God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles manifested an implicit theological truth: that salvation is given only by grace. The Pharisaic Christian position and the Gentile Christian position represented two extreme theologies of salvation: salvation by works (either in whole or in part), or salvation by grace.

The third indication that the implicit theology of salvation is the main thread in the council narrative occurs in James’s monologue. In Acts 15:14-18, the Jerusalem

85 In “The Background of the Apostolic Decree,” Callan writes, “The Apostolic Decree implies that Gentile Christians are incorporated into Israel in some way, either as converts or as a group associated with Israel without full conversion. This suggests that for Luke the core of the Christian church is that part of the Jewish people which has accepted Jesus as the Messiah sent by God. Gentile Christians are associated with this restored Israel and are dependent on its existence in order to be part of the Christian church” (p. 297).
87 Acts 15:11.
position reiterated the manifestation of salvation by grace: “God had taken from among the Gentiles a people for himself.” The exegetical proof along with the experiential proof underlined how God actually saved; he had taken for himself a people from among the uncircumcised Gentiles. God’s action had been wholly independent of law, indicating a particular theology of salvation: salvation by grace. In keeping with the unspoken nature of the undercurrent, though, the theology of salvation does not emerge as the explicit matter.

IV. PRACTICAL LEADERSHIP APPLICATIONS OF THE IMPLICIT THEOLOGY OF SALVATION

Debate of grace versus law in salvation is longstanding—prominent in the first century (as Acts 15 and numerous epistles attest), during the European Reformations and contemporarily as well. As common as the “law versus grace” terminology is that of the “battle between antinomianism and legalism.” The lack of agreement between the reformers, the continued contemporary debate, and even the need for a congregation such as Antioch (with prophets and teachers and even an apostle of the Lord!) to send to Jerusalem for assistance underline the difficulty with which the dichotomy is resolved. Seemingly, even though doctrinal resolutions of the grace versus law dichotomy exist through systematic theology, in practice, the continual, periodic resurgence of the issue indicates a permanent tension between law and grace.

Some empirical data exists to demonstrate that in contemporary churches different implicit theologies of salvation are indeed operant. Neil Anders, Rich Miller, and Paul Travis, together with the George Barna Research Group, conducted research into what they defined as legalism within the American church. In a sample of 529 churchgoers, 58 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “I feel like I don’t measure up to God’s expectations of me,” and 66 percent agreed with the statement, “Rigid rules and strict standards are an important part of the life and teaching of my church.” In the same survey, 70 percent disagreed with the statement, “I am motivated to serve God more out of a sense of guilt and obligation rather than joy and gratitude,” yet in another survey conducted the same year, 55 percent of Americans affirmed to believe that salvation can be earned through doing good. Yet in a recent survey of church mission, value, and vision statements conducted among Anglican

89 Alister McGrath, Reformation Thought (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 103-104.
93 Ibid, 18.
94 Ibid, 33.
congregations, none spoke of law while many spoke of grace.\textsuperscript{95} Either Anderson, Miller, and Travis’s sample is skewed compared to Voss’s, or an implied theology of salvation, (specifically of salvation by human effort or law following) is being propagated within churches. According to another question in Anderson, Miller, and Travis’s survey, though, it would seem that sample diversity is not the problem; amongst the same sample (of which 55 percent believed that salvation could be earned), 77 percent believed that their congregation loved and accepted others, regardless of their actions.\textsuperscript{96}

That some theologies of salvation are implicit, communicated by church practice rather than systematic theology or indoctrination, could explain the pigeonholing and debate around certain Christian churches. Aecio Cairus, responding to accusations of strictness or legalism, offered a strong and rather agreeable doctrinal defense of his denomination’s position on salvation.\textsuperscript{97} Yet over a decade later, Ryan Cragun and Ronald Lawson’s study in the sociology of religion, still considered Carius’s among similar denominations as strict proselytizing groups.\textsuperscript{98} The contrast could not be stronger, yet it highlights a difference between explicit doctrinal affirmation and church practices that imply a different doctrine. The difference seems to correspond strongly to Chris Argyris and Donald Schon’s differentiation between espoused theory and theory in action.\textsuperscript{99} Yet the dilemma is not exclusive to Carius’s denomination; numerous authors describe similar situations for their churches as well.\textsuperscript{100} It is precisely the lack of congruency between teachings and understandings, even in the matter of the theology of salvation, that led Martyn Percy to question, “What is the relationship between the acknowledged propositional truths that order ecclesial identity, and the more hidden and mellifluous currents that might shape the life of the church?”\textsuperscript{101}

Manifestations of such incongruence existed in the Jerusalem council narrative as well. Where grace was being taught, joy abounded (Acts 15:3, 31); where law was attempted to be bound, there was disturbance and troubling (Acts 15:24). There is little evidence that amongst the groups promoting grace (the Gentile Christian perspective or the Jerusalem perspective) that joy was being taught as a value; nevertheless where


\textsuperscript{96} Anderson et al., Breaking the Bondage, 11.


\textsuperscript{99} Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974).


\textsuperscript{101} Percy, Shaping the Church, 1.
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grace could have implicitly created joy. It may also be plausible that law following implicitly created the contrasting ("troubling") climate. Whereas it would be difficult to assume that the Pharisaic Christians intended to create troubling situations, the climate may have been a consequence of the implicit theology of salvation the group promoted. The narrative reader, in fact, is left to decide whether the trouble is from theological conflict—or a side effect of the theology of salvation. Whichever the case may be, in the narrative itself this contrast exists and it corresponds to distinct groups with specific theologies of salvation.

The question remains whether the implicit theology of salvation, as manifest in the Jerusalem council narrative, would be clearly dichotomous (a singular choice between grace and law) or represent a scale. Implicit theology would want that in any given group or congregational setting, the standardization of church practice would eventually settle the law versus grace issue in some practical (and not dogmatic) way. As seen in the work of Anderson, Miller, and Travis and Voss, the resolution would probably not be by doctrinal statement by the congregation. The simple fact that in the Jerusalem council narrative, three perspectives exist is indicative of nuance within viewpoints (the Jerusalem point of view imposed upon full freedom of Gentile followers in order to promote fellowship, a view that was subtly different from that of the Gentile Christians). It would therefore not be surprising to find that in contemporary practice, the implicit theology of salvation in any congregation is somewhere between the extremes of grace and law. This viewpoint would justify the lack of the accusation either of antinomianism or legalism against every Christian group—accusations that, according to Tom Pennington, are applied to some (but not all). The development of and validation of a scale for the implicit theology of salvation would be an important step for future research in ecclesiological/congregational studies.

V. IMPLICATIONS OF IMPLICIT THEOLOGY FOR ECCLESIAL LEADERSHIP

Implicit theology, as developed in this study and by Martyn Percy, is in no means limited to specifics of the theology of salvation. Percy’s development of the construct deals with limited expressions familiar in his Anglican settings. Theoretically, though, implicit theology could address all the chief areas of systematic theology: the theology of God, Christology, pneumatology, theological anthropology, psychology, ecclesiology, soteriology, and the like. As such, implicit theology should be addressed as a multidimensional and open construct, much like implicit leadership theories.

Percy has suggested that implicit theology be found through deduction, inferring unspoken theological dimensions through the cultural artifacts of any given congregation. Percy is correct about the collocation of implicit theology within congregational studies, in very practical situations in which implied theologies may

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102 Anderson et al., Breaking the Bondage, 11-18; Voss, “Congregational Leadership,” 131-145.
103 Pennington, “All the World’s A Stage,” 113.
104 Percy, Shaping the Church, 12.
express themselves in clear ways. Yet the assumption that implicit theology is best understood through deduction overlooks the great strength of modern ecclesiological research. Through the development and use of specific social–scientific instruments (questionnaires, etc.) measuring numerous theological dimensions, congregationally held implicit theologies could be statistically correlated to church practice and other elements of church culture. Such an enterprise could provide a unique window of understanding into how implicit theologies affect congregational life in very concrete ways. This is the promise of implicit theology within the contemporary field of ecclesial leadership, surpassing speculations (no matter how logical they may be) and providing empirical data linking observable congregational characteristics to previously hidden beliefs.

VI. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Much scholarly debate (generally based in the historical–critical method) has focused on the relationship of Acts 15 to Galatians 2 without rendering a consensus of the two texts’ relationship and without highlighting the full intricacies of the Jerusalem council narrative (Acts 15:1-31). The council narrative is pivotal to the overarching flow of the Acts narrative. The text provides a transition to the expansion of the gospel; it also provides the backdrop of a controversy over which to discuss the integration of Jewish and Gentile Christianity and to the resolution of the issue of law and grace. Although the controversy which gives rise to the episode is circumcision, the narrative’s internal flow highlights the issue of fellowship while implying responses to the issue of the role of law in the New Covenant. The ideological perspectives of the three groups (Gentile Christians, Pharisaic Christians, and Jerusalem Christians) are the carriers of the theological discussion and final resolution.

Most astonishing in the council narrative is the lack of mention of circumcision and the law (or grace) in the final resolution discourse and the communication letter to Antioch. Much of what is to be learned from the narrative is implicit; both the significance of the fellowship issue and the theology of salvation are encoded into the narrative itself—an encoding that highlights narrative criticism’s role in Biblical research. Yet what is implicit is what is most important to the theological message of the Jerusalem council story.

The fellowship issue was central to the Antioch congregation and thus became a focal point for Jerusalem as well. That Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians could have table fellowship through cultural concessions is a significant precedent for contemporary Christianity and, perhaps most relevantly, for the mission work and the missional movement. Although salvation is by grace, for all peoples, there are cultural practices (rights) that render table fellowship and evangelism difficult or even impossible. A central theological theme of the council narrative is thus personal sacrifice in order to enable and enjoy cross-cultural fellowship. Further exploration of Acts 15 from the point of view of narrative criticism could provide a vital contribution to the missional movement and to cross-cultural missions.
The issue of grace versus law is prominent in theological discussion even into the present. Whereas the council narrative deals with the issue implicitly, it is the possibility of the grace/law equilibrium underlying Christian group or congregational practices that emerges as perhaps most significant. Research into the linkage between church organizational characteristics and implicitly held theologies (of any dimension) could be ground breaking in the field of congregational studies. Implicit theology, like that observed in the council narrative, holds incredible promise to further our empirical understanding of church health, church growth, and potentially any dimension of practical ecclesiology.

The question remains whether the implicit theology of salvation, as manifest in the Jerusalem council narrative, would be clearly dichotomous (a singular choice between grace and law) or represent a scale. Implicit theology would want that in any given group or congregational setting, the standardization of church practice would eventually settle the law versus grace issue in some practical (and not dogmatic) way. As seen in the work of Anderson, Miller, and Travis and Voss, the resolution would probably not be by doctrinal statement by the congregation. The simple fact that in the Jerusalem council narrative three perspectives exist is indication of nuance within viewpoints (the Jerusalem point of view imposed upon full freedom of Gentile followers in order to promote fellowship, a view that was subtly different from that of the Gentile Christians). It would therefore not be surprising to find that in contemporary practice, the implicit theology of salvation in any congregation is somewhere between the extremes of grace and law. This viewpoint would justify the lack of the accusation either of antinomianism or legalism against every Christian group—accusations that, according to Tom Pennington, are applied to some (but not all). The development of and validation of a scale for the implicit theology of salvation would be an important step for future research in ecclesiological/congregational studies.

About the Author

Michael Mahan is a missionary in Italy, where he has served for the last fifteen years. Mike is a frequent speaker at national church conferences in Italy and has presented scholarly papers on Biblical perspectives in leadership and servant leadership at international roundtables. He holds an M.A. in Biblical Interpretation from LCU and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Ecclesial Leadership at Regent University. He and Antonietta, his wife of thirteen years, are the proud parents of two beautiful children, Pietro (6) and Miriam (10).
Email: michmah@regent.edu

105 Anderson et al., Breaking the Bondage, 11-18; Voss, “Congregational Leadership,” 131-145.
106 Pennington, “All the World’s A Stage,” 113.