

THE RELEVANCE OF THE APOSTOLIC SYNOD OF JERUSALEM REGARDING THE SPREADING OF THE TEACHING OF CHRIST TO THE GENTILES

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Abstract:

The present study addresses a theme of interest not only for the new testamentary theology, but also for other related theological disciplines. In the present study, we will focus mainly on an exegetical research, but we will not ignore the information coming from the historical branch, given the context in which the Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem took place.

The story of the first Synod in the history of the Christian Church is made exhaustively by the Holy Evangelist Luke in his book, The Acts of the Holy Apostles, in chapter 15, 1-35, but references to this major event in the life of the Primary Church will also make one of actively involved in the works of the synod, namely, the Apostle Paul, in the Epistle to Galatians 2, 1-10.

In the isagogical part of this study, we briefly presented the work of the Holy Apostles to preach the Gospel to all nations according to the commandment of the Savior Jesus Christ (Mt. 28,19), then to make known the motivation and necessity of convening the Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem.

In the steps taken, the presentation of the pleadings in the proceedings of the Synod, the analysis and the finality of the debates, was the focus of my concerns, finally pointing out that the Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem decided that the Mosaic Law would not apply to the Gentile Christians to any person who wants to adhere to the faith in Christ, while affirming Christian freedom to the Mosaic Law.

***Keywords:** Relevance, Synod, Christianity, Judaism, propagation, missionary*

Preliminaries

According to the Savior's commandment: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...” (Mat. 28, 19), the Apostles pointed their Gospel preaching attention to the Gentiles, in order to attract as many followers as possible to the new faith. The general framework of the Book of Acts

on the vast ministry of proclaiming the Gospel to the Gentiles begins with the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the founding of the Christian Church. Then, on the day of the Holy Spirit's coming, the first mass conversion to the new faith took place, "the words of Saint Peter of Pentecost deeply troubled the hearers, who received the message of salvation and were baptized (Acts 2, 37-41)" (Preda 2002: 69).

It is worth noticing the echo of the first missionary sermon in the listeners' souls, "through which they came to faith by proclaiming the evangelical kerygma" (Dupont 1973: 783) as to three thousand souls, thereby proclaiming the propagation of the Gospel of Christ. Reproducing the Savior's command concerning the preaching of the Gospel "... to the ends of the earth - *καὶ ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς*" (Acts 1, 8) (Schnabel 2004: 389), we note that before this commandment, Saint Luke uses the future indicative, "and you will be my witnesses - *καὶ ἔσεσθέ μου μάρτυρες*" a phrase that indicates that the Holy Apostles are called to be confessors of gracious power, to the salvation of those who would believe in Him and would confess Him as the Son of God. To preach the Gospel to all nations everywhere, with time and without time, had become for the Apostles not only obedience, but also their way of being in Christ.

Through their activity of spreading the teaching of Christ to the Gentiles, the Holy Apostles took part, succeeding the Savior, to the new birth of the world, through the work and care of the Holy Spirit.

The necessity and motivation of summoning the Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem

From the isagogical information provided by the book of Acts of the Holy Apostles, the spreading of Christian teaching in the heathen world was taking place rapidly. The acceptance of faith by the Ethiopian phenomenon (Acts 8, 36) and the Christian baptism receiving by the centurion Cornelius, together with his house (Acts 10, 47-48) also encouraged other Christian missionaries to preach to the Gentiles the Gospel of Christ, mostly to the Greeks (Acts 11, 20). With all these positive aspects, already highlighted, some controversions still arise. From the very beginning, the Church tried to resolve these controversions in the light of scriptural exhortations and commands, using community dialogue. The most eloquent example of this is in the Apostolic Synod of

Jerusalem, that, under the care of the Holy Spirit, had made decisions on the polemics in the Primary Church, that were accepted and observed by all its members (Chifăr 2001: 48).

From the etymological point of view, *synod* - *σύνοδος* derives from *συν-together*; *ὁ ὁδός* - *road*, means *gathering, reunion or communion* (Bailly 2000: 1864). The synodal model used by the Holy Apostles was used by the Church when negative aspects that threatened the unity of the Church arose. In fact, the synod is an “expression of ecclesiastical unity” (Andresen and Ritter 1993: 176) and corresponds with “its very being of communion of faith” (Beck 1959: 39), while they became indispensable for the unaltered organization and preservation of the teaching of faith.

Returning to the controversies mentioned above, one of them was related to receiving the Gentiles in the Church. This issue came to the forefront when a group of Judaizers who came from Judea visited Syria's Antioch by teaching their brothers (*ἐδίδασκον τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς*) and proclaiming as a precondition for those who wanted to enter the Church, the circumcision [The circumcision in Hebrew *mulá* - *מילה*, in Greek-*περιτομή*, is an extraordinary act of worship instituted by God as a sign of the covenant with the patriarch Abraham (Gen. 17, 1) and his descendants (Gen. 17, 11), act which was to be fulfilled in all the children of male Jews. According to the Old Testament text, circumcision was made 8 days after birth (Gen. 17, 14) and represents an act of worship with a deep religious and moral sense] (Abrudan and Cornițescu 1994: 254-256; Popa 2011: 106) obligation according to the Law of Moses. In the sense of these Judaizers, circumcision was considered above the Gospel and salvific grace: “...*Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved*” (Acts 15, 1).

In the 55 Homilies of the Acts of the Apostles, Saint John Chrysostom interpreting this verse also notes that the Judaizers in Judea “not only recommended circumcision, but regarded it as necessary for salvation - *Καὶ οὐκ ἐδίδασκον ἀπλῶς περιτομὴν, ἀλλ' ὅτι οὐδέ σωθῆναι δύνασθε*” (Sfântul Ioan Hrisostom, *Comentariu la Faptele Apostolilor, Omilia XXXII, 1*, în *PG LX*, col. 233).

The church in Antioch, the city where the first Christian Church of the other Gentiles was founded, and where Christians received this name (Acts 11, 11-26), soon became very prosperous. Detached by the

Palestinian spirit The Church of Antioch in Syria was constituted since its foundation, from Jews and Greeks, being thus a mixed Church (Moisescu 1951: 399).

The life and organization of the Antiochian community imitate the example of the Christian community in Jerusalem, but with a somewhat different way of life. From the beginning, a new life is being built up in the Church of Antioch in Syria, the strong faith in Jesus Christ and brotherly love is shown in the Antiochian Christian community as characteristic sides of Christian life. Within the cult, the Antiochian community practiced agape table and organized parcels for the poor in Jerusalem (Acts 11, 29). Shortly after embracing Christian faith, the Antiochians understood that mercy was a means of salvation, so they did not use it (Mircea 1955: 79).

From these insights into the establishment and organization of the new Antiochian community, we find out that in Antioch of Syria there was a prosperous Christian community with a spirit of brotherly, spiritual and social solidarity, and therefore the Jewish claim to apply the circumcision of Gentile Christians and the observance of The Mosaic law created concern.

The Syrian Antioch Church opposed this principle, and in the interest of the inner peace of the Church and its subsequent development, sent a delegation to Jerusalem led by Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by Titus (Rămureanu 1992: 40), to discuss the pressing issue of the necessity of circumcision for Christians coming from among the Gentiles who manifested their willingness to be received in the Church (Acts 15, 2). This divergence of opinion that had the tendency to amplify had to be resolved, being the object of the Apostolic Synod at Jerusalem between the ages of 49-50 (Marcu 1974: 531).

The development of the works of the Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem

In the account of this major event in the first century of Church history, St. Luke makes the first reference to the participants in the subsequent debates. In his narrative we meet five times the phrase, “ἀπόστολους καὶ πρεσβύτερους” (Acts 15, 2; 4; 6; 22; 23). The noun, *ὁ πρεσβύτερος*, comes from the comparative degree of the adjective

πρέσβυς, which means *old*, so that the direct meaning of the noun *ὁ πρεσβύτερος* is older or elder (Carrez and Morel 1999: 239).

The same term *πρεσβύτερος*, is also found in chapter 14, 23, here indicating priests ordained by St. Paul and Barnabas in newly established communities at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia. The reason why the author of the book uses this phrase, “*ἀπόστολους καί πρεσβύτερους*”, is to emphasize the authority and supreme leadership in the old Christian Church (Ghiaurov 1958: 170), in the scripturistic verses mentioned above “the term *πρεσβύτερος* designating the ordained church ministers” (Verzan 1990: 63).

In the works of the Synod, the word “opening” was given by the Apostle Peter (Acts 15, 7-11) as an authorized person, but not because the so-called primate of Peter, as the Catholic Church's teaching states, but because of two more deep aspects. The first aspect is that the Apostle Peter was the eldest of the twelve Apostles, a fact known and signaled since Jesus' earthly activity, when at Caesarea of Philip, Peter confessed, in the name of all the apostles, the divinity of Jesus Christ (Mt 16, 16-19). The second aspect is the one that God reveals to Peter about the reception of Cornelius and those of other generations in the Church without the fulfillment of the Law of Moses (Acts 10, 9-20) (Parsons 2007: 162-163).

In his plea, St. Peter sought to build the relationship between the Law and the Gospel, noting that it is not necessary for those who wish to be Christianized to pass through the mosaic law and all its practices, namely circumcision, because doing that, there would be “put *a yoke (ζυγόν)* upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Acts 15, 10). In the same context, the Saint Apostle Peter wanted to point out that salvation is sufficient for God's grace and faith in Christ Jesus (Acts 15, 11) without circumcision, not in cold forms, specific to the Jewish cult and belief, but, “in spirit and truth” (John 4, 23). This saving grace (*χάρις*) of which the Apostle Peter speaks, “is the power of God” (Evdokimov 1996: 290), by which the Gentiles are saved. This saving grace transmitted through apostolic succession to sanctified ministers is shared with all who through the apostolic kerygma and the obedience of the evangelical message come to the faith.

After the Saint Apostle Peter's oral exposure, a complete silence lay, and thus having this opportunity, St. Paul and Barnabas began to tell

those present about all the signs and wonders God made through them among the Gentiles, as well as about the success of the mission in converting the Gentiles to the Christian doctrine (Acts 15, 12) [It is noteworthy that both St. Peter in his speech and St. Paul when speaking of the call and conversion of the Gentiles to faith, namely the baptism of Cornelius the centurion and his house (Acts 10, 1-48), or the signs and miracles committed among the Gentiles (Acts 13, 10-12) points out that these works were made by the will of God and by the participation of the Holy Spirit: “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message” (Acts 10, 44); „...The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus” (Acts 13, 4)].

Fully agreeing with the plea previously presented by St. Peter the Apostle, the two missionaries also showed that circumcision *is not the foundation of salvation*, which is why it should not apply to the Gentiles eager to embrace faith in Jesus Christ. At the same time, the Apostle Paul makes a harsh indictment to those Judaizers who had descended from Judea to Antioch by teaching Christians there that they had to circumcise themselves by calling these Judaizers, “*some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves*” (*slaves of the Old Testament, who are enslaved to the Judaizers*) (Galatians 2, 4). Thus, the Apostle Paul points out that no one has the right to compromise and to prevent the freedom of the Gentiles to accede to the faith and the doctrine of Christ, a teaching that is accessible to all who believe (Perrin and Hays 2011: 271).

As a result of this intervention by the Apostle of the Gentiles and by the decision of the Synod, “the Gospel truth remained unwavering, this decision decisively driving the ministry of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles” (Verzan 1996: 26).

Concluding and wholly agreeing with the statements of his forefathers, St. James, named “the righteous or brother of the Lord”, the sedentary bishop of Jerusalem, who was worthy of the revelation of the Savior Jesus Christ appearance after the Resurrection” (I Corinthians 15, 7) (Mircea 1995: 213), also spoke.

In the prologue of his address, St. Jacob refers to the work of St. Apostle Peter, to his vision from Joppa, and to the reception of Christian

baptism by Cornelius and those in his house, confessing that this call to faith was fulfilled, according to the will of God, without the need to observe the law of Moses. In his exposition, St. Jacob emphasized that the Mosaic law should not apply to Christians from other nations, noting that “nations too have access to salvation, under the same conditions as faithful Jews, as also foreseen by the prophets of The Old Testament” (Marcu 1974: 531).

Following the presentation of the public opinions of Saints Peter, Paul, and Jacob, it was decided that the Mosaic law would not apply to Christians who had come from the Gentiles, nor to any person who wanted to adhere to the faith in Christ: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15, 19). However, St. Jacob, having a conciliatory attitude and wanting to leave the impression that he is also protecting the susceptibilities of converted Jews, proposes a compromise solution by deciding a few prohibitions of theological, moral and practical value” (Bădiliță 2017: 330) to be fulfilled by all Christians.

These prohibitions, otherwise prescribed by the Law of Moses, are acceptable and at the same time give a minimum of satisfaction to the converted Jews. So:

1. *To abstain from pollutions of idols* (Acts 15, 20a). This “prohibition not only refers to the act of idol sacrifice, but also to the action, as non-Christian of service and persistence in the state of sin” (Arion 2010: 67);

2. *To abstain from fornication* (Acts 15, 20b; Leviticus 19, 6-24);

3. *And from things strangled, and from blood* (Acts 15, 20c);

4. *To abstain from animal blood* (Acts 15, 20d) (Gianotto 1996: 124-128), because any body’s life is in his blood (Leviticus 17, 10-16).

The four conditions or clauses proposed by Saint Jacob and accepted are known as *St. Jacob's clauses* and they will be recorded in the so-called Apostolic Order (Acts 15, 23-29) (Barret 1998: 1098). The content of the Apostolic Decree

answers succinctly and clearly the concern originally raised in Antioch, ... affirming Christian freedom to the Mosaic Law. At the same time, the Decree proposes a minimum of Jewish prescriptions in order to make possible the communion between Judeo-Christians and Gentile Christians in the one Church of Christ (Mihoc 1989: 24 and 28).

The decisions of the Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem come to establish and consecrate a state of affairs, Saint Luke explaining that the decisions taken were contained in the letter sent by the synodic representatives to all Gentile Christians, as well as to the communities of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. This letter sent by Paul and Barnabas, along with Judas the one called Barsabbas and Silas, brought much joy and comfort to the Gentile Christians.

At the end of the Synodal Letter, essential for the future of the Church, we have the argument of the infallibility of the Synod, as well as the argument that the Synod of Jerusalem was under the mandate of the Holy Spirit: "... *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us* - ἔδοξεν γάρ τῷ Ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι καὶ ἡμῖν", (Acts 15, 28) who cares for those present at the Synod, inspiring them, to make the best decisions and pleasing to God.

Analyzing in depth the decisions of the Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem, we find their relevance in the life of the primary Christian Church, which is the foundation of the organization and prosperity of the Church in the coming ages.

Conclusions

1. The Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem, under the care of the Holy Spirit, played a decisive role in spreading the Gospel of Christ among the Gentiles.

2. The Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem decided that the Mosaic law should not apply to Gentile Christians, nor any person who wants to adhere to the faith in Christ, but decrees four bans known as St. Jacob's clauses.

3. The Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem resolves with clarity and wisdom the problem caused by the Judaizers who came from Judea to Antioch, while affirming Christian freedom to the Mosaic Law.

4. The Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem is a major event in the life of the Primary Church. It shows the unity and consensus of the Christian Church, a consensus that will stand at the foundation of the organization and propagation of the Church in the coming ages.

5. The Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem marks the beginning of synodal practice, the use of the plural of the formula at the end of the synodal letter: "...*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us* - ἔδοξεν γάρ

τῷ Ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι καὶ ἡμῖν”, (Acts 15, 28) supposes the idea of synodality. This formula has been maintained until today in the practice of our Ancestral Church.

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