

Acts 15 and Gal 2: Strive For Unity, not Uniformity

Christians have come together united by the “glad tidings of salvation,” seeking to achieve unity. We have gathered not only to engage in theological discussions, but also to worship God in diverse language and accents, guided by the inspiration of God’s Spirit. We celebrate many meaningful landmarks for ecumenical councils and conversations towards unity. The 11th Assembly of World Council of Churches have gathered in Karlsruhe, Germany in Sep. 2022¹; We look forward to celebrate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicea in 2025; The bi-lateral dialogues between Christian traditions are well underway.² As the world is filled with escalated polarizations and divisions, it is all the more crucial and urgent for Christians to have profound and renewed conversations. We must follow Jesus’ mandate to strive for unity and to be united in God’s love. As we seek to address interconnected crises such as racism, sexism, and classism, it is crucial to ask key questions include:

- What resources and challenges does Scripture provide concerning these crises?
- How might the salvation as the central theological themes that we engage affect broader public efforts to dismantle the intersecting realities?
- What are our core beliefs around salvation, and which beliefs are considered non-essential beliefs?

¹ <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-11th-assembly-31-august-8-september-2022>

² <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2022/2022-06-24-mercic-new-members.html>; <https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/ecumenical-relationships/>

These conversations and questions are vital components of ecumenical dialogues. The Jerusalem Council, which is considered to be the first Church Council, portrayed in Acts 15 (and Galatians 2) serves as a poignant illustration of these inquiries.

This paper will focus on exploring the complex picture of the call for unity, not uniformity. The paper will consider to Acts 15 (and Galatians 2) in the bilateral ecumenical dialogues between Methodist and Roman Catholic churches (Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission (hereafter, MERCIC)).³ A brief exegesis of Acts 15 and Galatians 2 ensue, followed by reflection on the call to unity, not uniformity.

Acts 15: Ecumenical Gatherings for Unity

Consensus on Conflicting Opinions?

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 offers an important model for later ecumenical councils and ecumenical conversations, which can illumine various ways that ecumenical conversations have transpired on unity, not uniformity, amongst diversities. In particular, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) I. Authority I. document (1976) delineates the importance of the Council of Jerusalem and the Christian gatherings, “either regional or world-wide,” that ensue. “Ever since the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) the churches have realized the need to express and strengthen the *koinonia* by coming together to discuss matters of mutual concern and to meet contemporary challenges” (§9). This agreement is supposed to affect the entire Church.⁴

³ <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/consiglio-metodista-mondiale/dialogo.html>

⁴ <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/arcic-i/testo-in-inglese5.html>

For the Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogues, MERCIC statement titled “Towards a Statement on the Church” (Nairobi, 1986)⁵ notes the significance of unity amongst diversities shown in Acts 15. Since this passage is so crucial, I cite it in full:

In the New Testament period, diversity of time, place and circumstances produced diversity among groups of believers - diversity of community structures, diverse formulations of the faith, diverse traditions shaped by different histories and problems, diverse house meetings places within the same city, diverse Christian centers. Nevertheless, passages in the New Testament, such as the account in Acts 15 of the Council of Jerusalem, attest to *Koinoia* among such diversities, and to a sense of the Church to which all Christians belong. There are also passages, such as 1 Jn 2:19, that suggest the breaking of the *Koinoia* because certain diversities were deemed intolerable distortions of what was from the beginning (Nairobi §5).⁶

Indeed, these differing opinions on matters of faith and salvation necessitated a gathering to address the conflicting views. The meeting was called because of both dissents (στάσις; *stasis*) and discussion points (or inquiry) (ζήτησις; *zetesis*) (Acts 15: 2).⁷ A profound ecumenical problem was posed: should Gentile Christians be considered as Christian and as legitimate members of the Church?⁸ Amid this tension, a unity is

As the same ARCIC document continues to note, “The decisions of what has traditionally *been called an ‘ecumenical council’* are binding upon the whole Church; those of a regional council or synod bind only the churches it represents. Such decrees are to be received by the local churches as expressing the mind of the Church. This exercise of authority, far from being an imposition, is *designed to strengthen the life and mission of the local churches and of their members*” (§16, emphasis added).

⁵ <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/consiglio-metodista-mondiale/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/en4.html>

⁶ MERCIC statement “Towards a Statement on the Church” continues to explore the theme of unity in Acts 15:

Acts 15 shows Peter, Barnabas, Paul and James as all speaking to the issue of the admission of Gentile converts without circumcision, but indicates that James insisted on their observance of specific purity laws. Gal 2 and Acts 15 have led many to suspect that Peter’s position in relation to Judaism stood in between that of James on the one side and of Paul on the other. Some would regard the failure to mention Peter in the second half of the book of Acts as a sign that his authority had declined; others would regard the fact that Luke concentrates on Peter first and then on Paul as reflecting the author’s purpose to show how Christianity gradually moved from Jerusalem and the mission to the Jews, towards Rome and the Gentile Mission (Nairobi § 43).

⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p.259. As a reporter in the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, said, “We gather here because we disagree.” (Sep. 1, 2022)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Y_WoC89Pq8&ab_channel=WorldCouncilofChurches

⁸ William J. Abraham, “Method in Ecumenism,” *Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, eds. by Geoffrey Wainwright and Paul McPartlan (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), p.639

shown in Acts, when those who attended on the crucial gathering agreed on the most important part of salvation, when Peter says, “... We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they [the Gentiles] will” (Acts 15:11).⁹ This core theological conviction is powerfully reiterated.

Acts 15 emphasizes the consensus nature of the agreement: “Then the apostles and the elders, with the *consent of the whole church* (NRSV)” or “together with the *whole church*” (KJV, ESV, etc.) (Acts 15:22, emphasis added). Since there was not yet a biblical canon that they drew on, they appealed to the wonderous works of the Holy Spirit that already incorporated Gentiles Christians into the Church.¹⁰ Indeed, Peter’s speech proclaims, “we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:11).

But we are to ask this important question at this juncture. What would be the nature of this consensus? As an important ecumenical maxim goes, unity is not uniformity.¹¹ But if unity is confused with uniformity (or “homogeneity”), which flattens the complex voices of people, it is indeed dangerously close to how *homonoia* of the Roman Empire operates. Uniformity is an effort to erase people’s various voices and privilege one voice of faith over others. As Harding Myer aptly says, “Unity in reconciled diversity’ aims first and foremost to bring to expression the fact that the unity of the church which is being sought does not—or need not—mean the achievement of a single

⁹ James then adds, “Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ as Peter stood up and said to them, “And God, who knows the human hearts, testified to them [the Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us” (Acts 15:8), and when Paul and Barnabas gave testimonies of “the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12). William J. Abraham, “Method in Ecumenism,” *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, p.640.

¹¹ Harding Myer, “Unity in Reconciled Diversity,” *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, p.559.

invariable entity, whether in the sense of a melding of the existing churches into one church with a new identity and a new name or in the sense of the absorption of them all into one of the existing churches.”¹²

This problematic nature of consensus is complicated when we get to Acts 15:8-9. Peter’s claim (“He [God] has made no *distinction* (διέκρινεν) between them and us”) is noteworthy because this expression does not mean that “them” and “us” become the same. This verse is remarkably similar to Paul’s manifesto in Galatians 3:28 [“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ.”] Caroline Johnson Hodge says, “The unity in Christianity Paul articulates in [Gal 3:28] has often been cited in support of the view that Paul advocates an *erasure* of embodied identities, including ethnic and racial ones, for a non-ethnic, religious identity, Christianity. But notice that this is *not* what Paul says.”¹³

Neither Peter nor Paul says that to be one and united in Christ means the erasure of differences of Jesus-followers. Their (read: early Jesus-followers) stories of serving God and spreading the good news that “Jesus is the Lord!” come from their love for God whether they are from the Jerusalem communities who had gone through so many hardships, or from the diaspora who had gone through trauma and longing, or from the Gentiles who had needed to claim their space in the new faith. All of them were practicing faith and working faith, standing before the God for all humanity.

¹² Harding Meyer, “Unity in Reconciled Diversity,” *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, p.560.

¹³ Caroline Johnson Hodge continues, “The unity Paul speaks of in Christ in itself ethnically specific’ it is tied to Israel. Those who are baptized into Christ become descendants of Abraham, and thus heirs of God’s promise. This new identity is described in terms of ethnicity, kinship, and standing before Israel’s God.” Caroline Johnson Hodge, “Paul and Ethnicity,” *The Oxford Handbook of Pauline Studies*, eds. by Matthew V. Novenson and R. Barry Matlock (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), p.10

Two Tales of The Apostolic Councils in Jerusalem

Reading Acts 15 and Gal 2 Together

In order to probe more of the complex relationship between unity and uniformity/ homogeneity, I suggest us to read both Acts 15 and Gal 2 together. (John Wesley's sermon on Acts 15 also guides us to read Acts 15 and Gal 2 together!¹⁴) Both the texts (Acts 15: 1-21 and Galatians 2: 1-10) explore the Apostolic Meeting(s)¹⁵ with significant differences.¹⁶ There are important figures who come to the Jerusalem

¹⁴ John Wesley's note on 1 Corinthians 15 and Galatians 2 have many overlaps.

<https://ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.i.vi.xvi.html>; <https://ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes/notes.i.x.iii.html>

Wesley's references to Acts 15 are in the following:

Acts 15:7, 8: Preaching text 11/05/39, Islington; source: diary (p. 20)

Acts 15: Preaching text 10/14/40, London, Foundery; source: diary (p. 32)

https://wesleyworks.files.wordpress.com/2022/07/register-04_register_of_john_wesleys_preaching_texts.pdf

¹⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson provides an important point that I draw on in this study on the Jerusalem Council: "Once more, the reader faces the problem posed by multiple sources and their disagreement. ...The most important overlap and divergence is found in Gal 2:1-14, which is described both a conflict in Antioch and a meeting in Jerusalem, but in terms quite different than Luke's....The problem in assessing the historical character of these events is rendered more difficult by the fact that neither Paul nor Luke are disinterested observers; each has a purpose to telling the tale the way he does.... The discrepancies are many and the questions they pose real. Was there only one meeting, concerning which the sources disagree, or were there several? Do the sources refer to the same or different meeting?" Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p.269.

In this paper, my point is neither argue or prove that Acts 15 and Galatians 2 treat the same meeting in Jerusalem, which would take insurmountable work. Instead, I would like to explore the complexities that rise from these two readings, and that can illumine our effort towards unity. The New Testament scholars are divided on this matter. What is clear is that the major source for the material about the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is Galatians. Richard Pervo, *Acts: Hermeneia* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2009), p.369.

¹⁶ There are important figures who come to the Jerusalem Council to discuss their theological beliefs. Paul and his companions—Barnabas and Titus— join the council. From the Jerusalem Church, Peter and James (the "acknowledged pillars" in Gal 4:9) as well as "the apostles and the elders" (in Acts 15) are those who gathered for the Jerusalem Council. As we saw above, they agreed on what is "essential" (Acts 15: 28) for salvation: they reinforced faith in Christ as the basis of salvation and accepted the inclusion vision (God's vision) for both Jews and Gentiles.¹⁶ Accordingly, they agreed that the Gentile believers need not be circumcisions and then the Council of Jerusalem would divide on the mission work between Peter and Paul. As is portrayed in Gal 2:7-10, which is Paul reports that the Jerusalem Council yields a good result: they reached an important agreement that Peter will bring the gospel to the circumcised (Jewish people) while Paul is sent to the Gentiles.

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¹⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, p. 268.

¹⁸ This condition is repeated in Acts 15:29: “You abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

¹⁹ Paul passionately fulfilled his agreement to remember the power by setting up a collection from his gentile mission communities. See Rom 15:25-27; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8:1-9:15. *The Harper Collins Study*

While a harmonious picture of unity has been achieved among the early followers of Christ (*or at least this is how Luke portrays in the Acts*), divisions ensued after the Jerusalem Council. This picture should not surprise readers for Acts; after all, as Jaroslav Pelikan notes, “in virtually every chapter of the book of Acts there is evidence of ongoing theological disagreement, at the surface or hovering just beneath it.”²⁰ In Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas—who has been an advocate for Paul when others did not trust Paul—depart from each other’s company due to different opinions on John Mark. Furthermore, in Gal 2, Paul condemns Peter for not eating with the Gentile Christians in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14). After the volatile encounter between Paul and Peter, it seems that Paul completely works apart from the Jerusalem Church, other than taking collections to the Jerusalem Church from the gentile mission churches as he agreed. Is unity and harmony fragile?

Politics of Voices and Space

These conflicting narratives (or narratives punctuated with conflicts) draw us powerfully into the layered voices and diverse cultures entangled with various social locations. The narratives warrant the readers to explore complicated relationships between diverse earliest Christian communities such as diaspora Jews, Palestinian Jews, and Gentiles. Peter and James are Palestinian Jews who were born and raised in Palestine; Paul and Barnabas are diaspora Jews, who were ethnically Jewish and yet

Bible: New Revised Standard Version, eds. by Harold W. Attridge and Society of Biblical Literature (HarperOne, 2006), p. 1975

²⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, p.170.

were born and raised in diaspora.²¹ There are also growing populations of Gentile Christians such as Titus, whose presence provoked the seminal question in the Council of Jerusalem. There different voices and cultures are worthy to be reflected on. As the seventh Assembly of the WCC (Canberra, 1991) issued a statement on “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling,” that says both “various cultural, ethnic or historical contexts” and “diversities which are rooted in theological traditions” are “integral to the nature of communion.”²² The two tales of the Jerusalem Council might come from *both* divergent socio-cultural locations of participants *and* diverse theological traditions in nascent Christianity. But then theological traditions and cultural, ethnic, and historical contexts are so inextricably intertwined.

The exploration of the (dis)agreements, unity, and conditions from the Jerusalem Council in the 1st century invites us to examine further our contemporary racial and ethnic relations in the landscape of Christianity in diaspora. For example, we can find a clue on this matter in various studies on diaspora Asian Christians in the United States with regard to ethnic church and cultural preservation. What do different heritage groups agree on as Christians?²³ How do we see and solve the tension between ethnic particularism and religious universalism?

We also note that, in these two portrayals of the Jerusalem Council, what Luis Menendez-Antuna dubs as “textual crevice,”²⁴ that takes the shape of absence, of a void,

²¹ For a helpful work on Paul and his politics of identity, see Yung Suk Kim, “The Politics of Identity in Paul’s Gospel: In the Case of the Antioch Incident (Gal 2:11-14),” *Encounter* 80 (2020).

²² Harding Meyer, “Unity in Reconciled Diversity,” in *Encyclopedia of Ecumenical Theology*, p.571.

²³ For example, Sharon Kim, “Shifting Boundaries within Second-Generation Korean American Churches,” *Sociology of Religion* 71:1 (2010): 98-122; Helen Kim, “Reconstructing Asian America’s Religious Past: A Historiography,” *Envisioning Religion, Race, and Asian Americans*, eds. by David K. Yoo and Khyati Y. Joshi (Hawai’i, University of Hawai’i Press, 2020).

²⁴ Luis Menendez-Antuna, “Topographies of Silencing: Book Review of *Minoritized Women Reading Race and Ethnicity*, edited by Jin Young Choi and Mitzi Smith. Nov. 30, 2020.

of a lack of presence. Whose voices are clear? Whose voices are construed as silent? Whose presences are ignored? Coming back to the different conditions of the agreement, would Paul agree with the conditions that were proffered by James in Acts 15? Since Galatians 2 has a different description of the conditions, it seems that it is not how Paul understood about the condition. We don't have a way of knowing, for Paul does not speak much in Acts 15, other than speaking in front of "the whole assembly" of "all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:12). As Paul penned Galatians, we do not get to hear Peter's perspectives about his actions in Antioch in Gal 2:11-14. The Peter whom we see from Paul's presentation in Gal 2 is vastly different from Peter in Acts 15. There, Peter is a champion who supports the Gentile mission, for he obeys the Holy Spirit who breaks the boundaries between the Jews and the Gentile especially after a mysterious eye-opening experience in Acts 10. After all, it is Peter who said this powerful message in Acts 15: "And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no *distinction* between them and us" (Acts 15:8-9; emphasis added). Acts 15 and Gal 2 also expound the point that the whole community was there in the Jerusalem Council.²⁵ What stories, testimonies, and dissenting opinions did they share that we do not get to hear?

In answering this question, we consider politics of space at play in the narrative. As Willie Jennings says, "The joining of spaces would mean the joining the worlds."²⁶ Jerusalem has a symbolic meaning for the early Jesus followers. The Jerusalem Church indeed serves as a mother church for all the early Jesus followers including Palestinian

²⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, p. 261.

²⁶ Willie Jennings, *Acts*, p.86.

Jews, Diaspora Jews, and gentiles. In this setting, from the portrayal in the Acts of the Apostles 15, Paul does not speak much. Paul does not have sufficient clout in Jerusalem in front of “elders” in Jerusalem. On the contrary, in Galatians 2, we see a different picture: Paul is emboldened to confront Peter!²⁷

To delve further into the politics of speech and space among various groups, let’s consider a classroom setting where we have theological conversations. As bell hooks argues, “Accepting the decentering of the West globally, embracing multiculturalism, compels educators to focus attention on the issue of voice. Who speaks? Who listens? And why?”²⁸ As hooks reminds us, the idea that “the classroom should be a ‘safe’ place” usually means that “the professor lectures to a group of quiet students who respond only when they are called on. The experience of professors who educate for critical consciousness indicates that many students, especially students of color, may not feel at all ‘safe’ in what appears to be a neutral setting. *It is the absence of a feeling of safety* that often promotes prolonged silence or lack of student engagement.”²⁹ When we realize that the classroom is not a safe space, what then shall we do? Instead of emphasizing issues of safety, the community building should be focused on. hooks continues, “I think that a feeling of community creates a sense that there is *shared commitment and common good that binds us....* It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice [emphasis added.]”³⁰ In a seminary/divinity school pedagogical setting in particular, as

²⁷ Gal 2:11-21, “Paul challenged Peter, the leading Jerusalem apostle, when Peter deviated from the truth of the gospel. This is the meaning of the scene usually called the ‘Antioch incident.’ Setting this scene with ‘when Cephas came to Antioch’ indicates that Paul is located in Antioch.” Eugene Boring, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p.283.

²⁸ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, p.40.

²⁹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, p.39.

³⁰ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, p.40.

well as setting where ecumenical dialogues happens, “shared commitment and common good that binds us” can mean the Kin(g)dom of God that brings love and justice for all and that everyone has God’s image in them. Even if we agree with hooks about the importance of “recognizing the value of each individual voice” as a way “to build community in the classroom,” we find it hard to practice it: Some voices tend to be louder than others and drown other voices.

Via Transformativa:
Transformed by the Holy Spirit’s Guidance and
United By God’s Love

The Wesleyan understanding of salvation and grace is closely connected to the three-fold schema that the Central Committee of the WCC’s 10th Assembly elaborated the concept of the ecumenical pilgrimage of justice and peace. The three-dimensional approach that is organically, not sequentially, connected is in the following:

- **Celebrating the Gifts (via positiva)**
- **Visiting the Wounds (via negativa)**
- **Transforming the Injustices (via transformativa)³¹**

This approach explores pertinent theological questions.

- What kinds of gifts do we have? (**Via Positiva**)

³¹ World Council of Churches, *Towards An Ecumenical Theology of Companionship: A Study Document for the Ecumenical Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace* (Geneva, Swiss: WCC Publications, 2022), pp.11-12.

- What kinds of divisions and misgivings, trauma, and suffering do we have that divide us, the body of Christ (**Via Negativa**)?
- Assessing these illuminating and yet daunting paths, to what work is the Holy Spirit guiding us in our walk of solidarity, renewal, and unity (**Via Transformativa**)?

The Jerusalem Council—with two tales that narrates the historical meeting—reflects this intertwined approach of these three ways (via positiva, via negativa, and via transformativa) with its promise of unity amongst diversities, its acknowledgement of the fragile nature of unity possibly due to human nature of frailty, and yet its trust in the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit that transforms and renews all God's people.

What do these stories of fragility and vulnerability among early followers of Christ teach us? These texts lay bare conflicts without hiding them. When we are gathered in the table surrounded by Christ's love, we are coming from heterogeneous environments, experiences, and communities where we belong. With people's differences, divisions and cracks are bound to happen. Yet we are called to work towards reconciliation and unity, with the Holy Spirit's help. If unity is equated with uniformity, which flattens the complex voices of people who come to serve God and love Jesus Christ, it is not a unity to which we are called to. As an important ecumenical maxim goes, unity is not uniformity.³² Just as the tales of the Jerusalem Council penned by Luke and Paul are not afraid of laying bare divisions in the earliest Christian communities, we are also not to be daunted by divisions and dissensions. Rather, we are called to see these dissensions as a crucial part of discerning how God is leading the

³² Harding Meyer, "Unity in Reconciled Diversity," *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies*, p.559.

humanity.³³ We are called to face the divisions, dissensions, pains, and traumas that come from it, and we are called to walk the way of reconciliation and unity with God's Spirit. As seen in Acts 15:8-9, we are called to be united in God's love and transformed by the Holy Spirit's guidance. We are to be reminded again of ARCIC I: Authority I that references the centrality of the Holy Spirit.

Local councils held from the second century determined the limits of the New Testament, and, gave to the Church a canon which has remained normative. The action of a council in making such a decision on so momentous a matter implies an assurance that the Lord himself is present when his people assemble 'in his name' (Mt 18:20), and that a council may say, '*it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*' (Acts 15:28). The conciliar mode of authority exercised in the matter of the canon has also been applied to questions of discipline and of fundamental doctrine. What decisions (as at Nicaea in 325) affect the entire Church and deal with controverted matters which have been widely and seriously debated, it is important to establish criteria for the recognition and reception of conciliar definitions and disciplinary decisions. *A substantial part in the process of reception is played by the subject matter of the definitions and by the response of the perspective through the Spirit's continuing guidance of the whole Church* (§16, emphasis added).

As we see again and again in the Acts of Apostles, which is also fittingly called as "the Acts of the Holy Spirit," the Holy Spirit moves and inspires people in such a mysterious and unexpected ways. The Holy Spirit brings people into the God's community/

³³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p.270.

oikonomia where people proclaim that “Jesus is the Lord.” This claim is the core of theological conviction. And yet, we see that the crucial differences that are part of important conversations. The call that we have is not a unification unto a uniformity; rather, it is a call to unity *and* keeping our distinct voices that come to love God.

It is important to see how the Acts portrays God’s agency that carries the humankind. In the Jerusalem Council, Paul and Barnabas are witnesses of “the signs and wonders God has done with them” among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). Both Acts and Galatians agree that the mission to the Gentile comes from God, as God’s gift (Acts 15:11; Gal 2:9).³⁴ It is God who leads us and we are to obey the Spirit’s leading, such as in Acts 2 when people are glorifying God in various languages. The Holy Spirit is driving us in mysterious ways and, many times, beyond our understanding. This could seem radical for some. We see how the Holy Spirit leads Peter into Cornelius’s household in Acts 10, and how the Holy Spirit prods Paul for the Gentile mission that may sound a bit too radical for many in the Jerusalem Church in Acts 15. While God’s agency takes the most significant role in the journey of Christian faith, our agency and cooperation with the divine agency is also essential. Neither those earliest Jesus-followers nor we are passive beings, automatons without our wills and volitions. It is significant that the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: 28 says, “It [the decision itself or unity created among those who attended] looks good for the Holy Spirit *and* to us” (emphasis added).

We are thus called to *strive for unity*. I use the expression of “strive for” here, for this verb—the translation of ζηλόω³⁵— is fittingly used in a beautiful harmony and yet a

³⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp.269-70.

³⁵ Most contemporary scholars have translated ζηλόω “to strive to obtain.” For the discussion of this translation, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), pp.1082-87.

mysterious co-existence of the divine and human agencies. In explicating the divine gifts from God in 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul says,

1 Cor 12:31 “But *strive for* the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” (NRSV)

ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ μείζονα. Καὶ ἔτι καθ’ ὑπερβολὴν ὁδὸν ὑμῖν δείκνυμι.

1 Cor 14:1 “Pursue love and *strive for* the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy.” (NRSV)

Διώκετε τὴν ἀγάπην, ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ πνευματικά,
μᾶλλον δὲ ἵνα προφητεύητε.

1 Cor 14:39 “So, my friends, *be eager to* prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.” (NRSV)

ὥστε, ἀδελφοί μου, ζηλοῦτε τὸ προφητεύειν, καὶ τὸ λαλεῖν μὴ κωλύετε γλώσσας·

Gifts (*charismata*) come from God, but Paul also encourages the readers to “strive for” gifts from God. What a mystery!³⁶ Thus our call to “strive for unity” also reflects our reality and our hope: unity can only come from the Holy Spirit and it can even be brittle, but we are invited to strive for it, trusting God’s steadfast and faithful love for the humanity. Unity is a gift from God and we are to work on and strive for it. This concept is tightly connected to what John Wesley said in “Scripture Way of Salvation” (III.10), where Wesley expounds on the nature of the sanctification and the

³⁶ More on this, see Jung H. Choi, “‘Earn the Grace of Prophecy’: Early Christian Prophecy as Practice” (Forthcoming).

necessary “works of mercy” or “practices of mercy.”³⁷ Wesley knew so well that the routine practices of the means of grace takes a central stage in Christians’ spiritual growth. It is God’s Spirit who guides and sanctifies us in our Christian journey; at the same time, we are to participate in ordinary practices, trusting God’s way.³⁸

The Holy Spirit prompts us and guides us to cooperate in this journey towards unity. We are invited to walk this journey with obedience and boldness. We open our hearts to God and ask God: “Come Holy Spirit, fill us with your love and let us be united by your love.”³⁹ May our hearts be strangely warmed by the Holy Spirit and by God’s love.

³⁷ <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-43-the-scripture-way-of-salvation/>

³⁸ Sangwoo Kim, *All the Good: A Wesleyan Way of Christmas*, by Lacey Warner, Amy Valdez Barker, Jung Choi, and Sangwoo Kim (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2021), p.64-65.

³⁹ Tom Colvin, The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 432.

“Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love, shows us how to serve the neighbors we have from you.”