

Acts 15:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.

Analysis

The Jerusalem Council's Decision: This verse records the apostolic decree addressing Gentile believers' relationship to Mosaic Law. The Greek word ἀπέχεσθαι (apechesthai, "abstain") means to hold oneself away from, indicating active avoidance rather than passive non-participation. **Four Prohibitions:**

1. ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων (alisiγημάτων tōn eidōlōn, "pollutions of idols")—meat offered to idols
2. πορνείας (porneias, "fornication")—sexual immorality
3. πνικτοῦ (pniktou, "things strangled")—meat not properly bled
4. αἵματος (haimatos, "blood")—consuming blood.

Theological Significance: These requirements balance freedom from the Law with sensitivity to Jewish believers.

Three of the four relate to Noahic covenant principles (Genesis 9:3-6), suggesting universal moral standards. **Practical Wisdom:** By requiring only these essentials, the apostles removed barriers to Gentile conversion while maintaining fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers in mixed congregations.

Historical Context

The Jerusalem Council (circa AD 49-50): This pivotal meeting addressed the fundamental question: Must Gentile converts be circumcised and follow Mosaic Law? The controversy arose when Judaizers from Jerusalem taught that circumcision was necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1). The council's decision, led by James (Jesus' brother), represented a watershed moment in church history, officially recognizing that salvation is by grace through faith alone, not by works of the Law.

Cultural Context: The four prohibitions addressed practices common in Greco-Roman culture but offensive to Jewish sensibilities. Meat sacrificed to idols was sold in markets and served at social gatherings. These requirements enabled table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, crucial for church unity in the first century.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. Why did the Jerusalem Council choose these four specific requirements rather than others from Mosaic Law?
2. How do these prohibitions balance Christian freedom with sensitivity to others' consciences?
3. What is the relationship between the Noahic covenant and the four requirements listed here?
4. How does this decision demonstrate the early church's wisdom in distinguishing between essential doctrine and cultural practice?
5. What principles from this passage should guide modern churches in matters of Christian liberty and unity?

Interlinear Text

ἀλλὰ ἐπιστεῖλαι αὐτοῖς τοῦ ἀπέχεσθαι ἀπό τῶν
But that we write unto them G3588 that they abstain from G3588
G235 G1989 G846 G567 G575 G3588
ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων καὶ τῆς πορνείας καὶ τοῦ
pollutions G3588 of idols and G3588 from fornication and G3588
G234 G1497 G2532 G4202 G2532
πνικτοῦ καὶ τοῦ αἵματος
from things strangled and G3588 from blood
G4156 G2532 G129

Additional Cross-References

Revelation 2:20 (Parallel theme): Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.

Acts 15:29 (Blood): That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

Revelation 2:14 (Parallel theme): But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.

Leviticus 3:17 (Blood): It shall be a perpetual statute for your generations throughout all your dwellings, that ye eat neither fat nor blood.

Genesis 9:4 (Blood): But flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat.

Acts 21:25 (Blood): As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves

from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication.

Revelation 9:20 (Parallel theme): And the rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and of wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk:

1 Corinthians 6:9 (Parallel theme): Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,

1 Corinthians 8:1 (Parallel theme): Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.

1 Corinthians 6:18 (Parallel theme): Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.

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