

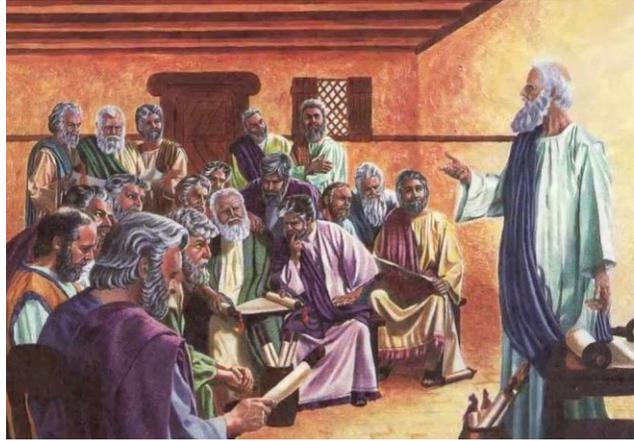
Session #14: Acts, Chapter 15

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15:1-35 The Council of Jerusalem:

Understanding the Battle

In every age of the Catholic Church there are varied *opinions* as to the meaning, practice and understanding of faith as outlined by Jesus Christ and scripture. This conversation is important because it allows human



intellect to process and, in tiny steps, and

catch up with elements of God's truth. This only happens when the power of the Holy Spirit leads us to truth and harmony. These conversations throughout history have taken place through theological writing, dialogue and eventually come to official moments in the Church (called councils) when the teaching authority of the Church comes together to respond to and resolve issues or problems in this conversation. When the magisterium* comes to consensus in a matter, as Catholics we understand they have come to truth and that truth is understood as essential to our faith and is stated as such it becomes a teaching or pillar of the faith that defines who we are as Catholics. There have been a wide variety of topics, from defining Mary as the Mother of God to understanding the role of the papacy.

Every age for the past two thousand years has its issues and misconceptions. For example: In the third century, there was the discussion on the divinity of Jesus. The debate among the scholars was focused on two sides: was Jesus simply God who pretended at humanity or was Jesus born only human who was later rewarded with divinity. It was in the fourth century the teaching authority, the magisterium of the Church, Pope with Bishops and held the Council of Nicea (325). With this council along with two others, (Council of Ephesus 431 Council of Chalcedon 451.), the Church came to the truth that Jesus was both fully human AND fully divine from the moment of conception to his death. A study of the various councils throughout Church history is a good study in the development of the teachings and doctrines of our faith. What we study today is the first of these many moments, of these various councils. The bulk of chapter 15 will be about the Council of Jerusalem where the leadership of the early Church came to its definitive teaching and practice regarding the Gentiles who come to belief in Jesus Christ. Must they enter through orthodox Jewish belief and ritual or can they enter without that obligation?

There weremany elements to consider with this issue for the early Church but for our conversation let's focus on two. First the early church had to decide what would be the

protocol of inclusion for one who is not Jewish but seeks to join this new Christian community. The two camps have been sparred with each other for some time now. On one side, we have those who believe that the followers of Christ are just an extension of Judaism. To accept this point of view means that those who seek to join the Church the Gentiles must first come through the traditions of the people of Israel (such as circumcision for male believers) and learn and commit to embracing the practices of ritual purity throughout the remainder of their lives before fully embracing the teachings of Jesus. On the other side (on which Sst. Peter, Paul & Barnabas sit) are those who believe that Christianity, although built on the foundation of the faith of the Israelite community and understood as a fuller expression of Judaism, that Gentile believers do NOT have to conform to Jewish tradition before becoming Christian. But there is more to this issue than how to enter the faith community, which brings us to our second problem.

Those who believed that Christianity, while the fulfillment of Judaism was still a part of the Jewish faith and therefore continued to practice ritual purity. This meant that at Christian gatherings these individuals would refuse to eat and sit with those Gentiles who would not conform to Jewish law. They held to the idea that to interact with a Gentile mean dishonor and disgrace. This created a great division in regards to not only the praying community but their social gatherings as well. Can you imagine the animosity that builds within a community when one group will not sit down with the other. Think of the 1940's & 1950's rural south with segregation and "Whites Only" signs. This attitude creates a sense of ghettoization making one group better than the other which does not lead to the peace and harmony of faith in community that Christ had called all to. The arguing had been going on for too long, (and in truth would continue well after an official decision was made).

What we will study today is the First Council of Jerusalem. Most biblical scholars date this meeting as taking place in 49/50 A.D. While it will only take us five minutes to read and over an hour to study it is likely the discussion happened over days, weeks, possibly even months. And it is also as likely that the debate was lively and hot causing some to question their allegiance to this new faith community. This first century official conversation within the leadership of the Christian Church led to a decision which we hold to in our continued practice in faith to this day. In our creed we say that we believe: *in one, holy, universal, and apostolic Church;* meaning among other things that ALL are welcomed.

This first council of the Church is significant for two reasons: First, it shows that this growing group of, what was once disjointed individuals, has become a Church body functioning distinctly from the Jewish Church. If they saw themselves as only a part of the Temple they would have sought Rabbi's and Priests to discern this matter. Secondly, with this decision to not expect

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inclusion in the Jewish faith and practices, the catholic community sees the and works to realize the fullness of their missionary work. There is no land, no person that should not hear and be brought to belief in Jesus Christ. The Church throws opens its doors and embraces all nations which embraces Jesus' command: *Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Mark 16:15, Matthew 24:14, 28:19, Luke 9:60)

Scholars point to the idea that this was not by accident that our author, St. Luke has place this moment, this council almost directly in the middle of Acts. Some scholars suggest that St. Luke did so to show this as a pivotal moment in the life of the Church. You might call it a peak moment. In study of the "story" before this moment we heard of the Apostles and disciples, like toddlers, learning to walk in their faith and figuring out just what they were to do now that Jesus was not directly among them. Now, in their Apostolic leadership the decision is made to stop and discern, to listening to the will of God communicated to them through the Holy Spirit through the voices of one another. From here, as we study the remainder of this document, the early Church goes on to embrace it's mission to *make disciples of all nations* (Mark 16:15) and to break away from the Jewish Church.

15:1-5

Paul and Barnabas return from their missionary journeys to find themselves engaged in a battle. What we see is the recognition of the authority of the Church which resides in Jerusalem with Peter the first pope and the Apostles as the first Bishops, as they travel there to settle the issue once and for all.

15:1 some men came down from Judea

It is mostly likely that these "men" who came down from Judea were converted Jewish Pharisees (See Acts 15:5) who objected to the "relaxed" practices that some uncircumcised gentiles were baptized and accepted into the faith without the expectation of obedience to the Mosaic Law. They took their argument to the streets telling the Christian community they could only be saved through baptism AND through the Mosaic practices

15:2 no little dissension and debate

This could be confusing in the way it is written but we understand that that there was a great and long discussion, debate, argument that brought about no conclusion. So, the local Church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas and possibly others to Jerusalem for guidance on this matter and in hopes to a final resolve.

15:4 welcomed by the church

The official faith community gathered welcomes their brothers in Christ. Barnabas having his roots in Jerusalem and Paul having a rich history here as well are, in many ways, coming home. The faithful unit as one in their welcome even if they are in descent about how Gentiles should be welcomed into the Church.

15:5 the law of Moses

Those coming from the Jewish faith, the Pharisaical/Jewish Christians state their argument: the expectations for the newly converted Gentiles was not just the circumcision for the males – that was just an obvious outward sign. These men of Judea and their supporters were looking for the newly converted to take on all the practices of ritual purity which meant the dietary laws, ritual washings, and prayer expectations and the separation from what the Jewish faith considers unclean.

15:6-12 Peter's Address to the Council

Peter, our first Pope and as head of the Church, is the first to weigh in on the matter. To him it is simple (after his own experience with Cornelius and his household, Acts 10)– regardless if you are a Jew and Gentile, it is not an outward act such as a knife that saves us but by an inward conversion, it is by faith in Jesus Christ that salvation is won.

15:7 after much debate

Just as we would today keep notes on important meetings this small phrase lets us know (while saving St. Luke much ink and paper) that the conversation was lengthy possibly lasting for days or weeks.

that by my mouth

This comment is in reference to God's calling, drawing Peter to act on behalf of Cornelius and his household. Remember in Chapter 10 the vision Peter had being called to eat the "unclean food" and then being directed to go to Cornelius' house? It was by the words of Peter that Cornelius and his household were baptized and accepted into the Christian faithful

15:8-9 God who knows the heart...giving them the Holy Spirit...made no distinction

Peter is drawing their attention to the fact that the Gentiles, in the course of being open to hearing the Word of God, that God Himself bestowed the gift of the Holy Spirit upon all those gathered regardless of their being uncircumcised. Peter is making the point that faith is a gift that God bestows. Not something that is earned through action or ritual.

15:10 yoke... that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear

Peter is pointing out that even with the best of intentions faithful Jews are not able to be attentive to every matter of the law. It is not meant to be a slam but to point out that the yoke, the collar, the burden these Christian Pharisees and their followers would place on the backs of the Gentiles is unfair since they themselves struggle to understand and abide with each and every law.

15:11 we believe

Peter, as head of the Church, ends the conversation with his declaration which in summery is, we come to salvation by the grace of God, not by any act or action we perform. Because it comes from the mouth of our Pope in his official capacity as such, (which today we would say Peter is speaking *ex cathedra* meaning from the seat of his authority), what we just read is a doctrinal judgment about the means of salvation. In other words this is now a foundational teaching of our faith. As such to fight against this decision is understood by the Church to stand against the direct will of God.

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15:13-21 James Speaks

Now it is James turn. It is believed this is James the Lesser; a relative (brother) of Jesus who took over the leadership of the Church in Jerusalem when Peter fled for his safety (Acts 12). He agrees with Peter on the teaching of Paul and Barnabas but offers some practical expectations to facilitate and maintain unity within the faithful.

15:14 Symeon This is the original Semitic or Hebrew name which we translate into the Greek – Peter. We will only find it used twice in the Bible. Here and in 2 Peter 1:1.

5:16-18 I will rebuild its ruins James is using his knowledge of the Old Testament of backing up his argument in the welcoming of the Gentile converts. The opening line is a paraphrase from Jeremiah 12:15 with the remainder of the quote taken from Amos 9:11-12. These prophets understood that in the Messianic age (the age began with Jesus to the present) that it was God intention to bring ALL nations (meaning the Gentiles) into His kingdom and not just the Jews.

15:20 but should write to them Once James has spoken his peace about welcoming the Gentile he recognizes that, to keep peace in the ranks there are some things that should ask of the Gentiles recognizing that in mixed communities (converted Jews and Gentiles) the need for compromise to keep the peace. He calls for a letter to be written, an apostolic pronouncement asking for some restricts which adds up to a minimal code of religious purity. He suggests 3 basic requirements:

1. The eating of the meat of animals that was used in sacrifice to the idols. The Jews believed that eating the meat from pagan idol worship implied in some way their acceptance of the worship
FOR YOUR INFORMATION: When an animal sacrifice was offered at a pagan temple only a small portion of the meat was actually surrendered to the god. The rest was returned to the worshipper to either feast with friends or to sell or give away.
2. The avoidance and abstinence of fornication and immoral practices.
3. The eating of meat that has blood in it (in other words required to eat Kosher meat. Kosher means that the animal is slaughter in a very specific ritual practice in the most humane way and all blood is drained). This comes from the Jewish belief that blood contains the life of the person or beast, and as such belongs to God alone.

This decision and decrees, scholar believe, was based on an Old Testament requirement of Gentiles living in Jewish lands. Based in Leviticus 17-18, it was a way for Gentiles to show their respect to the God of Abraham even if they didn't believe, and to live in peace with the children of Israel (the Jews). In the early Church for a Jew to sit side by side with a Gentile breaking these basic laws would have been repugnant if not impossible. So to keep unity and peace these rules were put into place for those "mixed" communities. Later in the fifteen century at the Council of Florence it was declared that these expectations were meant only as

a temporary measure to expedite unity between the Jewish converts and Gentile converts in the early Church. In truth with time the issue became less present as the generations passed.

15:22-35 Letter of the Apostles

The debate had ended. A decision had been made. So now what remained was how they were going to communicate this to the rest of the community. So, a letter was drafted and men chosen to deliver it to Antioch and further explaining its content.

15:22 Silas Silas is also known as Silvanus and we will hear about him again in 2 Corinthians 1:19. He will later become a trusted member of Paul's missionary team. **The** reason these men were added to the original delegation of Paul and Barnabas is that Judas and Silas can give witness that the letter presented truly came from the hands of the Church leadership in Jerusalem. If Judas/Barsabbas and Silas had not come the communities could accuse Paul and Barnabas of just writing what they wanted and saying that Peter and James wrote it. (Example – schools have learned to call the homes regardless of getting a note because of the history of so many notes “penned” in the name of the parents without their knowledge.)

15:28 Holy Spirit The members of the counsel want the members of the community to know that the decision made was not just a human one but was guided and directed by God through the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus had promise – to send one who would guide and keep the Church on the true path.

15:32 prophets We need to understand the word in this context as meaning having the gift of God's wisdom and the strength in their ability to communicate that to others. Old Testament prophets were few. Since the time of Christ every Christian is called and gifted with prophecy. As Catholics we are baptized “priest (leadership), prophet (to see understand the world and relationships as God understands) and king (belonging to a royal people, God's people).

15:34 What happened to verse 34? The gift of contemporary scholars and the finding of original documents we can now see that this verse was added later. Scholars can compare what we have been using to what was originally written. What was added that is now missing? *But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.*

Paul's Second Missionary Trip

So, we move into a new section in our readings – Paul's second missionary trip. As best as scholars can tell this trip lasted about three years and we will study is beginning here 15:36 through to its conclusion at 18:33. This would have been approximately around 50 AD and as we can see on the map it will take him full circle starting off through communities he reached out to on his first trip and then reaching further west into what is present day Greece and then coming back. St. Luke, in recounting this trip does not give specifics as we might today, who we

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met and what we did. St. Luke wants to show that the gospel of truth continues to grow and go out into the world. He also want his readers to be aware that with the Jewish community preaching and teaching continues to fall on deaf ears. Our trip does not begin without some “issues”. As they begin their journey Barnabas wants to give John called Mark a second chance but Paul, after having been burned once on him cannot agree. And so Barnabas and Paul part ways

SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY: Approximate dates: 50 - 52 AD Companions: Silas, Timothy, Priscilla and Aquila, Luke Mission field: Syria, Turkey, Greece Approximate miles traveled: 2,800 miles Sent by church of Antioch, Syria	
Syria and Cilicia (Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia was Paul's hometown)	Acts 15:23
Derbe and Lystra in Lycaonia/South Galatia	Acts 16:1-5
Phrygia and North Galatia	Acts 16:6
Mysia to Troas	Acts 16:7-10
Samothrace and Neapolis	Acts 16:11
Philippi in Macedonia	Acts 16:12-40
Amphipolis and Apollonia	Acts 17:1
Thessalonica	Acts 17:1-9
Beroea (Berea)	Acts 17:10-15
Athens	Acts 17:16-34
Corinth	Acts 18:1-18
Cenchrea (Cenchreae)	Acts 18:18
Ephesus	Acts 18:19-21
Caesarea	Acts 18:22
Jerusalem	Acts 18:23

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We should note that it is in this second mission that St. Luke meets St. Paul and joins the missionary team. Scholars conclude this because, as we will see in Chapter 16, the narrative changes from second person (they and them) to first person (we and us). SEE 16:10-17. So, St. Luke now becomes an eyewitness to the details of this journey.

Paul's Mission – to the Ends of the Earth 15:36-41

15:39 there arose a sharp contention

If we look back at the first mission trip of St. Paul and St. Barnabas we will remember that Barnabas' cousin John Mark had joined them but then abandoned the trip midway (Acts 13:13). John Mark obviously wants a second chance. Paul says no and Barnabas says yes. Their resolve? To go their separate ways. Barnabas takes John Mark and sails to Cyprus, Barnabas' native land. We see in verse 40 that Paul chooses Silas and heads to Syria and Asia Minor (present day Turkey) to see how those he has brought to the Lord are doing. Timothy will also join Paul (16:1).

*The **magisterium** of the **Catholic** Church is the church's authority or office to establish its own authentic teachings. That authority is vested uniquely by the pope and by the bishops, under the premise that they are in communion with the correct and true teachings of the faith.

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Reflection Questions:

1. In this argument of the early Christian Church we studied that faith is a gift given by God not earned. What is your thought on this – can we earn faith? What is the difference of faith given by grace and faith earned by actions and rituals?
2. Have you ever experienced, in parish life, an issue arising that split the community into camps? What happened and why? How was the problem resolved?
3. What are your thoughts about the magisterium, the authority of the Church having the final say as to what is good for the Church? Can you see how the Holy Spirit guides the Church?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

The MORAL LIFE AND THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH: 2031-2040

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