

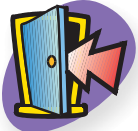
Galatians



Catholic Scripture Study

The Council of Jerusalem: Controversy Addressed

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church



Introduction

As we have seen in the first chapter of Galatians, Paul was shocked that the Galatians were being tempted to accept a gospel different from the one he taught them. There can be only one gospel, and it cannot be changed. In order for the Galatians to trust him in this claim, he felt he had to remind them of the basis for his apostolic authority. He continues to give details of his credentials in Galatians 2. There he makes mention of another trip he made to Jerusalem, fourteen years after his first one (Gal. 2:1). This trip was very probably the one he made to the Council of Jerusalem, which was convened for the purpose of addressing the complex problem of whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised. Because the conclusion of that Council is vital to understanding Paul's letter, it is worth taking a digression from Galatians to study the record of it in Acts 15. There is, in addition, another compelling reason to pause here and ponder this event. As Catholics, we are able to recognize in it the pattern of how apostolic authority has worked in the Church from the beginning until now. The structure of authority that was in place in 50 A.D., the probable date of this Council, is exactly the structure of the *Magisterium* of the Catholic Church today. Therefore, all Catholics need to be familiar with the details of this piece of biblical history, for in them lies the defense of the truths that make us Catholic. To consider this episode adequately, we will devote two lessons to it. The entire text appears in this lesson, but questions and discussion on Acts 15:19-35 will be in the next lesson.

In this lesson, we will trace how a controversy in a church in Antioch (a considerable distance from Jerusalem) wound up before the apostles in Jerusalem for a decision (Acts 14:21-15:5). We will be able to observe the way the infant church settled questions that stirred up strong differences of opinion (Acts 15:6-18). Because of the perpetual importance of this part of Church history, we will take the time to think carefully about the profound implications of this passage for life in the Catholic Church today.

Read this passage all the way through, at least once. Then answer the questions on the text that follow.



ACTS 14:21-28; 15:1-35

14:21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." 23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed.

24 Then they passed through Pisidia, and came to Pamphylia. 25 And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia; 26 and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled. 27 And when they arrived, they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they remained no little time with the disciples.





ACTS 14:21-28; 15:1-35 (cont.)

15:1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.”

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. **10 Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.**”

12 And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brethren, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written, 16 ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, 17 that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, 18 says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old.’ 19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues.”

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 with the following letter: “The brethren, both the apostles and the elders, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greeting. 24 Since we have heard that some persons from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, 25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. 32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them. 33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brethren to those who had sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.





Questions on the Text

THE PROBLEM OF CIRCUMCISION

Read Acts 14:21-15:5

1. *In addition to preaching the good news and encouraging the disciples, what did Paul and Barnabas do in each of the churches they established (vs. 23)?*
 2. *Once it was clear that there was a real problem about circumcising Gentiles, what did the church in Antioch decide to do? What does this indicate about how these Christians understood the role of the apostles? Why couldn't they just pray and get it sorted out themselves?*
 3. *Look at vs. 4. What three groups of people welcomed Paul and Barnabas?*
 4. *For Catholics who disagree over a teaching each one holds dear and feels very strongly about, what should their first course of action be, in light of this passage from Acts?*
-

A DECISION IS MADE

READ ACTS 15:6-18

5. *What two groups of people were involved in the decision-making process?*
6. *Before Peter stood up to make his pronouncement, the issue was thoroughly debated, which means there were strong arguments on both sides of the issue. Why do you think this question sparked so much debate among even the apostles, who knew the gospel better than anyone?*
7. *Why do you suppose Peter reminds them of his crucial role in declaring Gentiles welcome in the Kingdom of God (see Acts 10:24-48)?*
8. *In vs. 10, how does Peter describe the law of circumcision and all the ceremonial law that was attached to it?*
9. *What is the "dogma" that Peter pronounces here? In other words, what is Peter saying will be the church's teaching concerning how a person gets saved, whether he's a Jew or a Gentile?*
10. *In vs. 3, this James is the one mentioned by Paul in Gal. 1:9 and was the "elder" of the Church in Jerusalem. Why do you suppose he quotes an Old Testament passage (Amos 9:11-12) at this point?*
11. *Think about the development of the ruling on the question of circumcision—first a problem arises in a local church, causing division and controversy. Then it is referred to the apostles in Jerusalem, where it is hotly argued. Finally, a decision is rendered. What are all the implications of this development for us today, as we continue to face difficult questions over what is true? Take time on this question and be as thorough as you can.*





Questions for Reflection

One of the best ways to meditate on God's Word is to take it deeply into your life through memorization. The suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the text in the lesson. Or you may choose one of your own. For further reflection, consider these:

1. ***Is there any place in your life where you feel deeply divided from other Christians? Is there anything instructive for you from this lesson?***
2. ***Do you have confidence in the Lord that no matter how hotly questions of truth are debated, He guarantees a truthful outcome? Speak to the Lord about doubts, if you have them. Adore the Lord for His goodness if you don't.***
3. ***God gives us truth in the Church for the sake of unity. Examine yourself today to see if you are allowing Truth to work that way in your life. Think about whether the truths of the Catholic faith enable you to move towards others, not away from them.***





Opportunities for Additional Study

For the student who wishes to reflect more deeply on the passage in the lesson, consider these:

Points to Ponder

Imagine yourself, for a moment, as a time-traveler. You are with Jesus and the apostles as the time for His crucifixion draws near. You listen very carefully to all the things Jesus has to say to them at the Last Supper (read through John 13-17, the “Last Supper discourse,” as it is often called). Slowly it starts to sink in that Jesus intends to do an absolutely *outrageous* thing. Unless you are very mistaken, you have heard Him say that the apostles are going to represent Him in the world. They are not simply going to preach and teach about Him—they will be His presence in the world (John 13:20; 17:18). He sounds as if He is willing and ready to hand over the entire enterprise of His Church to these inconstant and often thick-headed human beings. On top of that, the Holy Spirit will deliver Truth when it is needed to *these guys* (see John 14:25-26). Would you be tempted to blurt something out? “WAIT! Jesus, surely there is a better way! Do You know what You’re doing here? You don’t really want to do this, do You? Look, here’s a better idea. Why don’t You just write a book? Right here, right now. Don’t let these guys speak for You. It’s way, way too risky. Write a book, and skip over them. Just put all your messages and teachings and guidelines in it. That’s what we need. Whatever You do, do NOT give these humans that kind of authority.”

This lesson from Acts shows that Jesus said what He meant and meant what He said. If he *sounded* like He aimed to build His Church on the apostles, that’s because He meant to do exactly that. We see from this bit of history in the early Church that the apostles and their followers recognized the kind of authority Jesus gave to them (think about the episode in Acts 5:1-11, when Ananias and his wife lied to the apostles about money from the sale of their land: Peter says, “You have not lied to men but to God”). In order for questions about Christian truth to be answered down through the ages, human beings will be invested with Divine Authority, a charism of Truth from the Holy Spirit. Which human beings will it be? Will every Christian have that kind of authority? Apparently not. Had that been the case, the Church in Antioch would not have needed to refer their problem to Jerusalem. We cannot miss the fact that this account in Acts confirms what we would suspect if we put together all the clues Jesus gave about His Church—that Peter would hold the keys and exercise leadership, and that all the apostles would have the power to bind and to loose (to allow and to forbid). The Church of the New Testament was an incarnation—both human and divine. The idea of this would terrify us were it not for that remarkable promise Jesus made to Peter that “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” What explains this strategy, so dependent on mere men? Only one thing—the love of God for His human creatures. If you are not in a state of speechless wonder over the condescension of God, you just haven’t thought about it long enough.

Catechism Connection

Excerpted from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Acts 15:5 – “Among the religious authorities of Jerusalem, not only were the Pharisee Nicodemus and the prominent Joseph of Arimathea both secret disciples of Jesus, but there was also long-standing dissension about him, so much so that St. John says of these authorities on the very eve of Christ’s Passion, ‘many...believed in him,’ though very imperfectly. This is not surprising, if one recalls that on the day after Pentecost ‘a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith,’ and ‘some believers...belonged to the party of the Pharisees,’ to the point that St. James could tell St. Paul, ‘how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; and they are all zealous for the Law.’” (595)

Acts 15:10 – “Jesus, Israel’s Messiah and therefore the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, was to fulfill the Law by keeping it in its all-embracing detail—according to his own words, down to ‘the least of these commandments.’ He is in fact the only one who could keep it perfectly. On their own admission the Jews were never able to observe the Law in its entirety without violating the least of its precepts. This is why every year on the Day of Atonement the children of Israel ask God’s forgiveness for their transgressions of the Law. The Law indeed makes up one inseparable whole, and St. James recalls, ‘Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.’” (578)



Summary

Summary

In this lesson, we observed that:

1. A dispute over Christian truth which arose in a local church had such potential to destroy the unity of that community that it was referred to the apostles in Jerusalem to be settled. The Christians in Antioch did not divide from each other and start new churches. They expected the question to be resolved.
2. In Jerusalem, the apostles and elders debated the issue of circumcision of Gentile converts. The elders were those appointed by the apostles to help them carry out the work of the gospel. They *shared* authority with the apostles.
3. After much debate, Peter announced a decision on what the Church was to believe about this question. Salvation for the Gentiles will be through their faith in the gospel, just as it is for the Jews. They will not be required to become Jews through circumcision.
4. This decision was recognized to be in keeping with an Old Testament prophecy about the restoration of the kingdom of David. It was an *extra*-biblical decision (not contained in the Scriptures of that time) but not an *anti*-biblical one. It was a logical development of Truth already revealed, not a newly invented truth.

A Message from the Authors

Are you enjoying our study? Would you like this important service to continue? If so, please be aware that Catholic Exchange is a non-profit charitable organization totally dependent on your financial support to maintain both our website and our groundbreaking Catholic Scripture Study. So please make an on-line donation with your credit card at www.catholicexchange.com, call 1-888-477-1982, or mail as generous a donation as possible to:

Catholic Exchange
P.O. Box 231820
Encinitas, CA 92023

Thank you for making the Word of God available to anyone who wants it anywhere in the world.
God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

