

ECCLESIAL AUTHORITY AND THE MOSAIC LAW:  
ACTS 15 AS A PARADIGM FOR  
RESOLVING THE SABBATH QUESTION

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Luke describes the fomentation of a theological dispute c. 50 CE, concerning the obligation of certain Jewish observances:

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’... Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them. (Acts 15:1-2)

Christians in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (cf. 15:23) embraced believing gentiles into their church communities without requiring their circumcision or obedience to the Mosaic Law entire. This policy soon met with opposition from “some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees,” traveling from Judea. Probably citing Scriptural assertions of the perpetual obligation of both circumcision (Gen 17:7,9-10) and the Mosaic Law (Deut 29:29; Luke 16:17), they contended that both were required of gentile believers (Acts 15:5).

In order to resolve the debate, “Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders” who “met together to consider this matter” (Acts 15:2,6). Luke provides a vignette of the council, summarizing the perspectives of its leading personalities. Throughout the proceedings, the apostles trusted that the Holy Spirit inspired their decisions (15:28), illuminating recent experiences (15:7-12) and the scriptural evidence (15:15-17). The Council’s final decision, framed by James, released the gentiles from most Mosaic observances, including circumcision (15:19-20,22-29).

Although the apostles and elders had hoped their authoritative decree would settle the issue, persistent dissent frustrated the cause of doctrinal uniformity. (Paul’s anti-circumcision polemics in his epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians evince the continuing conflict.) Some still maintained the validity of scriptural interpretations condemned at Jerusalem, and attempted to propagate them in opposition to the Council.

Nevertheless, these factions met with decisive opposition. The apostles universally condemned those lacking their “authorization” to teach (Acts 15:24 NIV). Paul, for instance, warned the young bishop Titus of “rebellious people, idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision,” adding that, “they must be silenced, since they are upsetting

whole families by teaching... what it is not right to teach” (Tit 1:10-11). Ultimately, dissenters were also excluded from the fellowship of the Church (Rom 16:17).

### *Observations*

As the New Testament’s prototypical example of doctrinal controversy, Acts 15 frames the Catholic paradigm for addressing theological disputes in all subsequent centuries—especially those regarding the obligation of particular Old Testament laws. At once, the chapter informs us that theological disagreement is as inevitable as it is intolerable. Varying interpretations of the Scripture will always exist (1 Pet 3:16), threatening Christian unity; however, the Church (in its visible, societal manifestation) must resolve these controversies, especially when touching vital points of doctrine. Towards this end, individual communities appeal to magisterial bodies convened by the Church (e.g., councils), which definitively discern and promulgate orthodoxy following the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and evidence of Scripture. All the faithful are bound to embrace the decrees of these bodies as authoritative—excluding the persistence of dissent.

Unfortunately, the Biblical record confirms that dissent is also inevitable—and equally intolerable. Convinced of their orthodoxy, dissidents will challenge the authority and rationale of those councils that excluded their views. However, local communities must enforce the decrees and definitions of the visible Church. Two camps necessarily emerge after conciliar intervention: one composed of those who submit to Church authority, and the other composed of those who subvert it.

### *Application*

In this light, the historical process of theological formulation manifests itself as a communal enterprise; the visible Church, so far from being incidental to the process, is its most essential participant. Naturally, this arrangement presupposes the unicity of the Church, as a permanent institution capable of authoritatively resolving theological/moral questions in every generation. And indeed, history informs us that the apostolic Church (designated “the Catholic Church” by the year 100 CE) survived the first century. Through the principle of apostolic succession, its institutional integrity survives to the present day—and with it, the magisterial structures and authority exercised in Acts 15. Accordingly, twenty centuries of Church councils have addressed theological controversies, and faithfully articulated the orthodox faith. Christians who submit to the decisions of these councils (and thereby uphold the “universal” faith of the entire Church) assume the name “Catholic.”

Among those councils, no less than three have issued rulings concerning another Mosaic observance: Sabbath-keeping. Guided by the Holy Spirit, each reiterated the position that Christians are released from its obligation (Chalcedon, c. 1 [enforcing Laodicea c. 29]; II Nicaea, c. 8;

Basel-Ferrara-Florence, Session 11 [Bull of Union]). Unfortunately, the dichotomy between those who will submit to the authority of the Church, and those who will subvert it, persists to the present day. Many reject the decrees of the councils, imposing the Sabbath obligation upon other Christians, allegedly on scriptural grounds. However, the New Testament itself identifies the Church as the final arbiter of theological disputes, entrusted with the responsibility of defining the authentic import of controverted texts. As in Acts 15 then, the resolution to the Sabbath question must ultimately be found in the communal decisions of the Church.