

SESSION EIGHT

Peter Decides

Acts 10:1-48; 11:1-18; 15:1-29

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants discover the keys opening their greatest door, the Gentiles, through Peter at Cornelius's house, and then watch the Church's first council settle its first doctrinal crisis: hard cases going up, much debate, Peter rising, the assembly falling silent, James applying, and a letter that binds. The steelman that James, not Peter, presided gets its full day in court.

Catholic Touchstone: Primacy inside collegiality. The Council of Jerusalem is the Catholic shape of authority in a single chapter: in the traditional Catholic reading, the steward settles the doctrine, the college and the local bishop own the decision with him, and the letter speaks for the Holy Spirit and the Church together (CCC 85-87; 880-883).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Acts 10 is the hinge of the whole book, and Luke marks it by telling the story twice (chapters 10 and 11) and referencing it a third time (chapter 15). The question is the biggest the apostolic Church ever faced: can the Gentiles come in as Gentiles? And the answer arrives through one man, on a rooftop in Joppa, three times, because Peter argues with heaven: "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" (10:14). The vision of the sheet, the Spirit's instruction, Cornelius's parallel vision, and the Spirit falling on the household mid-homily all converge on Peter's ruling: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality" (10:34), and his command: "he commanded them to be baptized" (10:48). The largest door in salvation history swings, and the hand on the key is Peter's, exactly as he himself will later summarize: "God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe" (15:7).

Acts 11 adds a note that keeps Catholic theology honest: when Peter returns to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticizes him, and Peter does not thunder about his office; he explains, step by step, and the church is satisfied: "they glorified God" (11:18). Primacy in Acts is accountable, persuasive, and exercised among brethren. The office never floats free of the body.

Acts 15 is the destination the whole study has been driving toward since Deuteronomy 17. Men from Judea teach that Gentile converts must be circumcised to be saved; Paul and Barnabas dissent sharply; and the church does exactly what the Torah prescribed for hard cases: they go *up*, to Jerusalem, to the

apostles and the elders (15:2). Make sure the group hears the echo themselves: this is Deuteronomy's pattern, a living authority receiving the case Scripture alone had not settled among sincere believers.

The council's sequence deserves frame-by-frame attention. "After there had been much debate, Peter rose" (15:7): open argument first, then the steward stands. His speech settles the doctrinal principle: God chose that the Gentiles hear through his mouth, God gave them the Spirit "and made no distinction," and the punchline that startles everyone who thinks Catholics fear the sentence: "we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (15:11). Salvation by grace, ruled from the chair of Peter, at the first council. Then Luke's stage direction: "And all the assembly kept silence" (15:12). Luke narrates no further debate after Peter finishes; what follows is testimony (Barnabas and Paul) and application (James).

Now the steelman, and give it everything: many Protestant readers argue James presided. The evidence is real: James speaks last; he says "my judgment is" (15:19); he is the local bishop of Jerusalem, and even St. John Chrysostom notes that James, as bishop there, fittingly speaks last. Honor all of it. Then press with the text's own structure: the doctrinal question is settled by Peter's speech, after which the assembly falls silent and nobody debates again; James opens by citing Peter as his premise ("Symeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles," 15:14) and adds Amos in support; and his "judgment" (krinō, "I judge"; the verb's range runs from "I am of the opinion" to "I decide," so it cannot by itself settle whether James is ruling or proposing; the structure of the scene has to do that work) concerns the pastoral application, the four abstentions that make table fellowship workable. The final letter comes from "the apostles and the elders" together (15:23). What Acts 15 actually shows is not James over Peter or Peter alone: it is doctrine settled by the steward, application shaped by the local bishop, and the decision owned by the whole college. That is not a defeat for the Catholic structure; it is a diagram of it.

The letter's warrant is the boldest sentence any church body has ever mailed: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things" (15:28). The council speaks its ruling in the Spirit's name and binds churches its members had never visited. The great councils, from Nicaea onward, have looked back to that sentence as their model, and Catholic teaching documents still echo its grammar.

One honest boundary: Acts 15 is one council in one decade, and it will not carry the entire papal edifice alone; the development of how primacy operated across the first centuries is Session Ten's evidence and Session Twelve's precision. Tonight establishes the pattern at the source: hard cases go up, Peter's mouth settles, the college binds, the Spirit signs.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Deuteronomy 17:8-13. The Torah's hard cases go up to the appointed authority, whose verdict binds. Acts 15:2, "they were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question," is the pattern executing in the New Covenant, and your group found the pattern themselves four sessions ago.

Amos 9:11-12. James's citation: the rebuilt booth of David under which "all the Gentiles who are called by my name" gather. The council reads the Gentile influx as the restoration of the Davidic kingdom, the same kingdom whose steward received the keys.

Genesis 9 and Leviticus 17-18. Many interpreters connect the four abstentions of the council's letter (idol food, blood, things strangled, unchastity) with the rules Leviticus 17-18 applied to sojourners living among Israel; on that reading, the decree's mercy was ancient, targeted, and pastoral, easing shared tables between Jewish and Gentile believers. The precise rationale is debated.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles, on the Council*

Chrysostom marvels at the order of the assembly: there is no arrogance in the Church. Peter, entrusted with the flock, speaks first among them and with power; Paul and Barnabas are heard without interruption; and James, as bishop of Jerusalem, fittingly speaks last to apply what has been declared. For Chrysostom the council's beauty is that authority and brotherhood breathe together, each voice in its place.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Jerome *Letter 15, to Pope Damasus*

Writing from the Syrian desert amid a three-way schism over the see of Antioch, Jerome asks the bishop of Rome to tell him with whom to communicate, and gives his reason: I follow no leader but Christ, but I am in communion with the chair of Peter; on that rock I know the Church is built. When the hard case arose, the instinct of the fourth century's greatest biblical scholar was the instinct of Acts 15: take it up, to Peter's chair.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage *Letter 59, to Pope Cornelius*

Cyprian names the see of Rome the chair of Peter and the principal church, the source from which the unity of the priesthood took its rise, and he is indignant that schismatics dare to sail to Rome, as if unity's own source could be enlisted against unity. Cyprian's full ecclesiology is debated (he would later clash with Pope Stephen), but in this letter the chair of Peter stands as the visible reference point of the episcopate's unity.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 85-87 returns tonight with new depth: the living teaching office interprets the Word authentically, serving it and not surpassing it, and Acts 15 is that office's first plenary session.

CCC 880-883 describes the permanent structure the council displays: the college of bishops with Peter's successor at its head. The college has no authority unless united with the pope as

its head (CCC 883), while the pope himself holds full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, which he can always exercise freely (CCC 882).

CCC 890 names the purpose under it all: the Magisterium exists to guard God's people from deviations and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error, exactly what the council's letter did for the churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.

THREAD WATCH

The Keys thread completes its opening arc. Pentecost opened Israel's door; Cornelius opens the Gentiles'. Peter will summarize both with his own mouth at the council (15:7). After tonight the keys have done what Matthew 16 promised; what remains for the study is how the office continues, fails, and endures.

The Deuteronomy 17 thread pays off. "They went up to Jerusalem about this question" is the payoff of Session Four's cold discovery. Let a group member make the connection before you do; someone will.

The Failing Steward thread stands one week from its reckoning. Tonight shows Peter at his height. Next session opens with Galatians 2, Peter rebuked by Paul, and the group's hardest and most liberating evening. If anyone mentions Antioch tonight, smile and say: bring that exact passage next week.

SESSION GOALS

1.

Watch the Gentile door open through Peter: the triple vision, the ruling at Cornelius's house, and the accountable explanation in Acts 11.

2.

Recognize Deuteronomy 17's pattern in Acts 15:2 without leader prompting.

3.

Reconstruct the council's sequence frame by frame: debate, Peter rises, silence, testimony, James applies, the letter binds.

4.

Steelman the James-presided reading honestly and resolve it structurally with the traditional Catholic reading: doctrine by the steward, application by the local bishop, decision by the college, warrant by the Spirit.

TIME NOTE

75 to 90 minutes. This is a two-chapter night; keep Acts 10-11 to twenty-five minutes (Builds 1-3) so the council gets the full second half. If time runs short, compress Build 2 and cut the Dig Deeper. Protect Builds 5 through 7, the council sequence and steelman, absolutely.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer:

Holy Spirit, you taught the Church her boldest sentence: it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. Open our eyes tonight as you opened Peter's on the rooftop. Tear down the partitions we still keep, and give your Church, in our day as in the first, decisions that free and a unity that holds. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

1.

Have you ever been part of a group decision where, after everyone had argued, one person's word visibly settled the room? What gave their word that weight?

2.

What is a conviction you once held firmly that God had to dismantle in you more than once before it finally gave way?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

1.

Read Acts 10:9-16. Describe the rooftop scene: what does Peter see, what is he told, how does he answer God, and how many rounds does it take? What is really being decided up there?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

A sheet from heaven full of every kind of creature, the command "Rise, Peter; kill and eat," and Peter arguing with heaven: "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." It happens three times, because Peter is Peter, and the voice answers: "What God has cleansed, you must not call common" (10:15).

The menu is the parable; the guest list is the point, and Peter says so once he understands: "God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (10:28). The question on the rooftop is the biggest the apostolic Church will ever face: can the nations come in as they are? And notice where heaven chose to deliver the answer: not to the Twelve in plenary, not to Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, but to the man with the keys.

2.

Read Acts 10:34-48. What happens in the middle of Peter's homily, and what does Peter then command? Frame it in Matthew 16 language: what just happened to the biggest locked door in the world?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality": Peter rules the principle, and while he is still speaking, the Holy Spirit falls on the whole Gentile household, tongues and all, heaven countersigning mid-sentence. Peter draws the only possible conclusion, "Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people?", and "he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (10:47-48).

In Matthew 16 language: the keys just opened the Gentile door, the largest in salvation history, and the hand on the key was Peter's. He will state it exactly this way himself at the council: "God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe" (15:7). Pentecost opened Israel; Caesarea opens the world; both through the same mouth, on purpose.

3.

Read Acts 11:1-4, 18. Peter comes home to criticism from the circumcision party. Watch his response carefully: what does he *not* say, what does he do instead, and how does it end? What does this scene teach about how primacy actually behaves?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He does not say "I hold the keys, case closed." He explains, "in order," step by step: the vision, the Spirit's instruction, the parallel vision of Cornelius, the Spirit falling "just as on us at the beginning." And the critics are won: "When they heard this they were silenced. And they glorified God" (11:18).

Primacy in Acts is accountable and persuasive, exercised among brethren, never over them: Session Five's "leader as one who serves" in administrative form. File this scene next to next week's texts: the office that can explain itself can also be questioned, and even, as we will see, rebuked, without the office dissolving. The Catholic claim was never that the steward floats above the household.

4.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Now the crisis. Read Acts 15:1-2. What is being taught in Antioch, what would it mean if true, and what does the church do with the dispute? Someone should be hearing an echo from Session Four; name it.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Men from Judea teach the Gentile converts: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." If true, the Gospel is Torah plus Jesus, and every Gentile baptism Peter and Paul performed was incomplete. Paul and Barnabas dissent with "no small dissension and debate," and sincere believers with Scriptures in hand cannot settle it locally.

So they do what Israel was always commanded to do with hard cases: "they were appointed to go *up* to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question." That is Deuteronomy 17:8-13, the passage

this group read cold a month ago: when the case is too hard, go up to the appointed authority, whose verdict binds. The New Covenant kept the pattern and staffed it with apostles.

5.

Read Acts 15:6-12 frame by frame. What happens first in the council? Then who rises, and what does his speech actually settle? Quote verse 11 out loud and let it surprise you. And what is the assembly doing when he finishes?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

First, "much debate": the Church argues openly, and the text is not embarrassed by it. Then "Peter rose," and his speech settles the doctrine at its root: God chose that the Gentiles hear the Gospel "by my mouth," God gave them the Spirit "and made no distinction between us and them," so putting the yoke back on is "making trial of God." And verse 11, from the chair of Peter at the Church's first council: "we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." Salvation by grace is a Petrine ruling before it was ever a Reformation slogan; Catholics should quote it first, not flinch from it.

Then Luke's stage direction: "And all the assembly kept silence" (15:12). Luke records no further debate after Peter finishes. The Catholic reading takes that silence seriously: what follows is not counter-argument but testimony (Barnabas and Paul) and application (James), and the final decision issues from the apostles and elders with the whole church (15:22).

6.

Steelman chain, full strength. Your Protestant friend says: "Look who actually presides: *James* speaks last, James says 'my judgment is' (15:19), and the council follows James's proposal. If anyone is pope in Acts 15, it is James, not Peter." Build his case as well as he would, including the detail that even St. John Chrysostom notes James, as bishop of Jerusalem, fittingly speaks last.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Give it everything it deserves: James really does speak last, in the host's position; "my judgment is" really is his phrase; the four abstentions in the letter really are his proposal; and the ancient Church itself remembered James as bishop of Jerusalem presiding in his own see, Chrysostom says exactly that. And notice that James's judgment in 15:19 is not only the four abstentions; it is "that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God," the substantive decision itself, in the form the council adopts. Any Catholic account that erases James is doing apologetics instead of exegesis, and your friend is right to be suspicious of it.

Now the structure, piece by piece. What did James's speech decide? He opens by citing Peter's ruling as his settled premise ("Symeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles," 15:14), adds Amos in confirmation, and then formulates the decision on that basis: do not trouble them, ask only the four abstentions widely read as making shared tables workable. James frames the decree; but the doctrinal premise he frames it on is the one Peter established before the assembly fell silent, and nobody, including James, reopens it. The Catholic claim is not that James did nothing decisive; it is that his decisive formulation builds on, rather than contests, the steward's ruling. And the letter issues from "the apostles and the elders" together (15:23). So Acts 15 is not James over Peter, and it is not Peter alone

either: it is doctrine settled by the steward, application shaped by the local bishop, the decision owned by the whole college. Your friend has not found a problem with the Catholic structure. He has found a photograph of it.

7.

Read the letter's warrant, Acts 15:28-29, out loud: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." Sit with that sentence. What is the council claiming, whom does the letter bind, and where have you heard this grammar since?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The council claims that its human deliberation, debate, testimony, ruling, application, issued in a decision the Holy Spirit himself co-signs: good to the Spirit *and* to us, one verdict with two authors. And it binds believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, churches most of the signers had never visited, who receive it and rejoice (15:31).

The councils from Nicaea onward have looked back to that sentence as their model, and Catholic teaching documents still speak its grammar. Notice also what the binding produced: not burden but liberty, "no greater burden than these necessary things." The office exists to open doors and lift yokes; when it binds, it binds so that consciences across the world can finally rest on the same answer (CCC 890).

DIG DEEPER · Paul checks his Gospel

Paul, of all people, describes making his own trip up: "I went up by revelation... and I laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain" (Galatians 2:2), and he names the pillars who gave him and Barnabas "the right hand of fellowship": James and Cephas and John (2:9). Paul insists those of repute "added nothing to me" (2:6); his Gospel came from Christ, not from them, and yet he still laid it before them "lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain." The apostle of Gentile freedom, personally commissioned by the risen Christ, still sought the communion of the pillars for his mission. Independence from that communion never occurred to him as an option, which makes his rebuke of Peter in the very next paragraph all the more interesting. Next week.

8.

Zoom out over both chapters. Between the rooftop, the accountability scene, and the council, assemble the study's most complete picture yet: how does authority actually work in the apostolic Church?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Heaven initiates and the office responds: the ruling on the Gentiles was God's act delivered through Peter's mouth, not Peter's innovation. The steward decides and explains: keys used at Caesarea, then an accounting given in Jerusalem. Hard cases go up, exactly as the Torah taught; debate is open and unembarrassed; Peter's word settles doctrine; the local bishop shapes application; the college binds together; and the letter speaks for the Spirit and the Church in one breath.

Primacy inside collegiality, authority as service, binding that liberates: the Catholic shape, visible already around the year 49, a reading of the scene the Church has held from Chrysostom onward, even though the exact division of roles at Jerusalem is not itself defined doctrine. What the study must face next is the harder question the New Testament also refuses to hide: what happens when the man holding this office fails, publicly, after all of it? Bring Galatians 2. Bring your questions about bad popes. Next week is for them.

SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

1.

God showed Peter the sheet three times, and Peter answered heaven with "No, Lord." Where is God repeating himself to you right now, and what is your version of "No, Lord"?

2.

The council bound the churches so consciences could rest on one answer. Is there a settled teaching you keep re-litigating privately, and what would it mean to let the question actually rest?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1.

Read Acts 15:1-31 once more this week and mark every speaker in the margin: debate, Peter, silence, testimony, James, letter. Teach the sequence to one person in your life; it takes three minutes and it reframes everything.

2.

Peter's partiality died on a rooftop. Identify one category of person you quietly treat as "common or unclean," and do one deliberate act of table fellowship this week.

3.

Keep the daily Our Father for the pope, adding this week: "Lord, give your Church councils like the first one: bold debate, clear rulings, and burdens no heavier than necessary."

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you opened Israel's door and the nations' door through the same weak, willing man. Thank you for a Church that can settle what Scripture's sincere readers dispute, and for verdicts the Spirit signs. Make us quick to go up with our hard cases, and quicker to rejoice when the answer comes. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things." (Acts 15:28, RSV2CE)

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in Session Eight, in order of use. All references RSV2CE.

PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Main text one, Builds 1-2: the sheet and Cornelius's house

Acts 11:1-18

Build 3: accountable primacy

Acts 15:1-29

Main text two, Builds 4-8: the council

Deuteronomy 17:8-13

Build 4 payoff: hard cases go up

Acts 15:7, 11

Builds 5-6: Peter's ruling, grace alone from the chair

Amos 9:11-12

Leader background: James's citation, David's booth rebuilt

Genesis 9; Leviticus 17-18

Leader background: the four abstentions' roots

Galatians 2:1-9

Dig Deeper: Paul checks his Gospel with the pillars

CCC 85-87; 880-883; 890

Catechism Connection