

It Has Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us

Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 14 and 15

What We Found

At Lystra we watched the whiplash of crowds, hailed as gods and then stoned by the same crowds, and we watched the man who once held the coats at Stephen's stoning receive Stephen's death and get up and walk back into the city. His summary stands over the whole Christian life: "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (14:22). And before leaving, the missionaries installed in every single church, with prayer and fasting, appointed elders, presbyterous, the office whose very name wore down through the centuries into the English word priest (14:23). The Church has never traveled without it.

Then Jerusalem. The demand that Gentiles be circumcised to be saved was a rival gospel armed with real Scripture, and it was settled the way the apostolic Church settled it: gathered in council. The apostles and elders gathered; there was much debate; then Peter rose, recalled that God chose his mouth for the Gentiles' first hearing, and declared, "we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will", and all the assembly kept silence (15:7-12). James confirmed from the prophet Amos: God is rebuilding "the tent of David, which has fallen," so that all the Gentiles may seek the Lord, which answered a question left open on the study's first night: the kingdom the disciples asked about in Acts 1:6 is being restored, present now in seed and beginning as the Church (CCC 541, 669), and the streaming-in of the nations is its proof. The decree went out to churches the council had never visited, in words no merely human assembly would dare: "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (15:28), and the churches that received it were strengthened and grew (16:4-5).

And we did not look away from the ending: Paul and Barnabas, fresh from defending the Church's unity, quarreled so sharply over John Mark that they parted. God's arithmetic with the wreckage: two mission teams instead of one, Mark restored by Barnabas's patience until Paul himself called him "very useful in serving me" (2 Timothy 4:11), and the man who left at Perga became, by early tradition, the Evangelist Mark. Saints clash; providence does not.

Voices of the Church

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles (4th century)

Chrysostom lingers on the order of the council: much questioning, for the Church does not fear debate, then Peter rose first, as ever, and after he had spoken all the multitude kept silence. James, ruler of the church at Jerusalem, speaks last and frames the decree; each office kept its place, and the Spirit spoke through their harmony.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, Book III (2nd century)

St. Irenaeus appeals to the council's own letter and its decision freeing the Gentiles, which he cites as the apostles' judgment still in force in the churches. The council is standing proof that Christ's Church can know and declare the truth with one voice, and that the apostles' judgment on the Gentiles still standing in the churches of his own day.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Vincent of Lérins, Commonitorium, ch. 23 (5th century)

St. Vincent taught that the Church's understanding of doctrine truly grows, but as a body grows, always in the same sense and the same meaning. Vincent states the principle; the application to Acts 15 is this study's. Read by his rule, nothing of the Gospel was changed at Jerusalem; rather the Church, guided by the Spirit, came to see what the Gospel had contained from the beginning, and declared it so the faithful might hold it with certainty.

Live It This Week

Two assignments from the council floor. First, pray for the successors: every day this week, pray by name for the Holy Father and for your own bishop, the living heirs of the men who gathered in Acts 15, asking for them courage in debate, fidelity to the deposit, and the Spirit's assistance in judgment. Second, read one conciliar page: find Dei Verbum, the Second Vatican Council's constitution on divine revelation, and read just paragraph 10, three minutes at most. Acts 15 shows those principles at their apostolic source; go see how the Church describes them, and bring one sentence of reaction next week.

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)

Before Next Session

Read Acts 16 and 17, once. A door closes, a man of Macedonia calls in the night, a jailer asks the most important question in the world, and Paul takes the Gospel to the intellectuals of Athens.

Catechism References

CCC 85-87 (the living Magisterium) · CCC 890-891 (the charism of truth) · CCC 1577, 1590 (presbyters and Holy Orders)