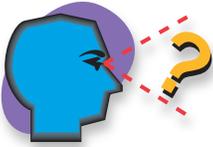


Galatians



Responses to the Questions



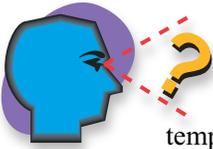
NOTE: BE SURE TO RESPOND TO ALL THE QUESTIONS YOURSELF BEFORE READING THESE RESPONSES IN ORDER TO MAKE THE MOST OF THIS STUDY.

THE PROBLEM OF CIRCUMCISION

Acts 14:21-15:5

1. The new churches established by these two missionaries were put in the charge of “elders” or “presbyters.” This word “presbyter” is the Greek word from which we derive the English word “priest” (elsewhere also referred to as “bishop”; see Titus 1:7). There is no denying that from its inception, the church had a hierarchy. There was never a time when a leaderless church existed. From the beginning, even small, new Christian communities had “elders.” And these elders were not the “first among equals.” This was not empty leadership. See how Paul writes to one such leader he had personally installed in Crete (Titus 2:15): “Declare these things (i.e., the sound doctrine Paul had taught him, by word and letter); exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.” The leadership came not by consensus; it was delegated by the apostles to specific individuals through the laying on of hands for the safeguarding of the faith and the shepherding of the flock.
2. The debate that Paul and Barnabas had with the Judaizers who came down from Jerusalem was heated. There must have been convincing arguments on both sides, or Paul would have had no trouble persuading everyone of his own position. Each side was convinced it was absolutely right. What could they do? They could present the problem, with all its complexities, to the apostles in Jerusalem. Apparently, the Christians in Antioch believed that a final decision *could* be made on this question, but they knew they weren’t the ones to do it, even though the great Apostle to the Gentiles was there in their midst. There is, in the decision to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to see the other apostles, an implicit acknowledgment of a unique authority residing there. Without recourse to a binding authority, what were their options? With each side convinced of the truth of its position, only one course of action would have been possible—to split one church into two, so each side could continue to cling to its conviction. They did not do this; they did not have to. They knew how to obtain a solution.
3. The church, the apostles, and the elders all welcomed Paul and Barnabas. Already we can see a distinction among the Christians. This reinforces what we observed in Acts 14:23, that the early Church had a hierarchy. The elders would have been those leaders appointed by the apostles to exercise authority and shepherd the flock, which is here referred to as “the church.”
4. The first step to resolve a disagreement between Catholics is to see if the Church has spoken authoritatively on it. This can most easily be done by referring to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on questions of dogma or to the Canons of the Church on questions of liturgical and spiritual practices. The reason the Church speaks definitively on so many questions is to enable her children to live in unity. We are not left to our own reason and emotions to settle disputes over truth. Of course, the stronger our convictions are over something, the more





Responses to the Questions (cont.)

tempted we are to cling to our own opinions if they differ from the Church's teaching. We can feel very right yet be very wrong.

If the Church has not spoken, we can seek wise counsel from a priest or religious about how to live with our differences. It is so clear from Acts 15 that the goal of deliberations of truth is *unity*, not simply the joy of being right. Divisions in the Body of Christ weaken it and impair His work in the world.

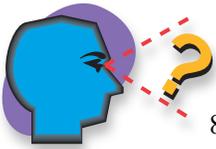
A DECISION IS MADE ACTS 15:6-18

5. When the time came for the matter to be discussed, we see that it was the apostles and elders who hashed it over, not the "church." It is of great importance to observe that even at this very early stage in the development of the Church, the apostles were sharing their authority with the elders. It was not possible for every Christian church to be shepherded by one of the Twelve, so they delegated their authority to others who would labor with them for the gospel. The apostles knew they would not live forever (see Acts 1:15-26 to see how the apostles, led by Peter, clearly understood that in their apostleship they were filling offices which needed to be filled when they died off), so even before they were close to dying, they shared their authority with chosen successors. This is what the Catholic Church calls "apostolic succession," and it is the foundation for the Church's claim to an infallible teaching authority in all matters of faith and morals. These verses provide very sound evidence that the apostles themselves foresaw a church in which the charism of Truth given to them by Jesus would continue to exist through their successors. Even just a cursory glance at the history of the Christian church in the era immediately following the death of the apostles makes it abundantly clear that these apostolic successors, who had been taught by the apostles or by disciples of the apostles, also understood this to be the Lord's plan for His church. For example, Clement, who was Bishop of Rome from 92-101 A.D., wrote "Our apostles...gave instruction that when these (bishops) should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in ministry" (*First Epistle of Clement*).

6. It is hard for us moderns to understand just how difficult it was for the Jews to believe that the Gentiles were acceptable to God on the basis of their faith and not on the basis of becoming Jews (remember that Peter resisted that idea when God first made it clear to him in a vision). But what *really* made this issue so divisive was that there was not a direct teaching of Jesus to solve it. He had certainly suggested in His teaching that it was not the food we eat that makes us unclean but what comes out of our hearts (Mark 7:17-19), thus eliminating the food regulations of the Mosaic code. However, He had never addressed this question about whether Gentile believers in Him had to be circumcised. The answer to this was going to have to come from somewhere else. Everyone had an opinion. It was bound to create a lot of discussion.

7. Peter obviously assumes that he must make a final ruling. This is precisely what we would expect to see as a result of the conversation Jesus had with him recorded in Matt. 16:13-20. Peter was the one who first preached the gospel to Gentiles, as a result of a vision he had. We should note that the vision made it clear that the Gentiles were just as much recipients of the Holy Spirit as the apostles and Jewish converts had been, but there was nothing at all in the vision itself which specifically addressed the matter of circumcising Gentiles. That was very much a decision that had to be made.





Responses to the Questions (cont.)

8. Peter speaks of a yoke that neither they nor their forefathers “have been able to bear.” He recognized the meaning and impact of the ceremonial law—conviction of sin. In this description, he acknowledges that the Mosaic law was not able to confer life. Instead, it wrought judgment, exposing sin for what it was, and thus preparing and tutoring Israel to understand the need for a Savior. This is an idea Paul explores very thoroughly in his letter to the Galatians.

9. Peter announces that the dogma (that which “we believe”) of the church is this: Both Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by grace through faith. The Gentiles do not have to bear the heavy burden of the Mosaic ceremonial law. After that, there is silence. All the assembly seemed to understand that this was the final word on the debate. Paul and Barnabas gave testimony about the wonderful works God had done through them among the Gentiles. It is clear that the debate had ended. This is a moment worth examining. We have here the first case of the apostles exercising their authority to define an article of belief for the entire Christian Church. They appear to do this with confidence, even though this matter of circumcision of Gentiles wasn’t something Jesus taught them about while He was with them. They recognize the need to examine and refine and apply the truth of the gospel to a particular concern. This was the practical outworking of the promise Jesus had made to them to send the Holy Spirit to lead them into all truth (John 14:26). Indeed, as they draw up a letter to be sent around to the churches explaining their decision, they say “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28).

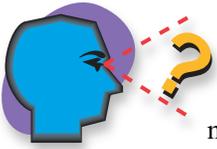
10. James aims to show how the Scriptures (at this time, only the Old Testament existed) support and reinforce the decision made by Peter. The Scripture quoted by James does not make explicit reference to the question of circumcision for Gentiles, but it does make clear that the restored kingdom of David will be so bright with the light of God that the Gentiles will be drawn to it. To James, the ruling on this question is a fulfillment of that prophecy.

11. It is well worth the time it takes to list as many implications of this account as possible:
 - a. Not every conceivable question about how we are to live our lives in Truth can be answered directly by something explicit either in Sacred Scripture or Sacred Tradition (for example, whether *in vitro* fertilization is something God allows). Questions will come up that need to be answered.

 - b. People can develop very strong convictions about their opinions. They can *feel* very right. However, their strong feelings, their sense of the reasonableness of their conviction (with Scripture to back it up, like the Judaizers probably had with passages like Gen. 17:9-14), and the fact that others are persuaded and agree with them are *not* the evidence that they have the truth on a particular question. Truth has to be decided by the apostles and their successors (that’s why, in this passage, the apostles and elders separated themselves for the debate). They are the ones to whom Jesus promised the gift of truth through the Holy Spirit (John 14:26).

 - c. The presence of hot debates within the Church is nothing new or ominous. It is inevitable that questions without answers will spark differences of opinion, sometimes very sharp. This is not a sign of failure. If it were, then we would be forced to say that St. Paul was a miserable failure in the Church in Antioch, since the controversy was quite heated there. As long as God entrusts His kingdom into the hands of human beings, there will be very human behavior when differences of opinion develop. This, of course, does not excuse failures in charity. Yet we can see from these verses that eventually the question and the controversy it sparks are resolved by those who have been given the authority to do so. It would be possible to look at this situation in Jerusalem and say, “What a mess! How can God’s truth come out of such human arguing?” The great





Responses to the Questions (cont.)

mystery of the Church, however, is that she is an incarnation—both human and divine. It is a song of praise to the glory of God and His great love for humans that out of what *looks* so earthbound and unpromising comes the pure gold of Divine Truth.

d. Peter takes the lead in resolving this question. After listening to all the arguments, he stands to bring it to a conclusion, reminding the assembled apostles and elders that he was the one who first preached to the Gentiles. The successor of Peter, the Pope, continues to serve as the leader of the Church that way. Some non-Catholic Christians have suggested that the Church today doesn't need a leader. However, if the Church in its infancy had a leader, when most of the original Twelve were still alive, what does that mean for us? If ever there might have been a time in the life of the Church when it *didn't* need a leader, surely that would have been it. Yet here we see Peter doing exactly what we would expect from the only disciple whose name was changed by Jesus and to whom Jesus gave the "keys to the kingdom" (see Matt. 16:17-19). If the Church needed a leader then, it will always need a leader. This passage is dramatic biblical support for the structure of authority, the *Magisterium*, still residing in the Catholic Church today.

e. In this passage, James connects the decision of Peter to not require circumcision of the Gentiles to an Old Testament passage. He demonstrates that this decision is a development of an idea already implicit in the Scripture. The ruling is *not* something explicitly spelled out in the verses from Amos that James quotes. But it can be seen to be a natural development from the prophecy there concerning the relationship between the rebuilt kingdom of David (which is the Church of Jesus, Son of David) and Gentiles. Likewise, the Church today makes decisions about Truth that are consistent with Scripture, even if not explicitly stated there. For example, when the question as to whether Mary had been conceived without sin had to be decided, the Church ruled that hers was an Immaculate Conception. The Church could look at verses like Luke 1:28 and say that implicit in the phrase "full of grace" is the conclusion that she had been spared the stain of original sin. The Church's teachings will always be in *harmony* with Scripture, either explicitly or implicitly.

