



Lesson 1.

Early Church Unity and Councils

Introduction

Acts chapter 15 is usually given a title such as “The Council at Jerusalem.” Read verses 1-7,12-13,19,22-23,30-31 and then discuss the following questions with your table or small group.

- The Jerusalem meeting seems to have become a model in the infant church for the way differences should be resolved. List some important aspects of the meeting that could be replicated in present-day congregational or synodical meetings.

Church leaders gathered formally to discuss questions.

All of the parties were allowed to explain their positions.

Because the matter involved doctrine, the parties did not just agree to disagree.

The questions were thoroughly discussed in light of the Holy Scriptures.

While making a decision that adhered to true doctrine, the leaders asked the Gentiles to abstain from things that were particularly offensive to Jewish consciences.

The decisions were recorded, shared with the entire church, and put in letters that representatives carried to the various churches.

- What did the council do to ensure that it was successful?

It sent a letter explaining the proceedings and the decision to all the churches so that none would be ignorant of the rationale behind the decisions.

1.1 The Church About A.D. 325

Two hundred and fifty years had passed since Pentecost. The Christian church had spread to all the major and minor cities of the Roman Empire, throughout the Middle East, and even to India. In most urban areas Christians made up no more than 5 percent of the population and probably considerably less in the countryside. During this period, the church had become less Jewish in its ethnic makeup and predominantly Greek-speaking within the Roman Empire. A significant body of Christian literature had been penned, and adherents to Christianity could be found at all levels of society.

Christians did not take part in civic religious rituals, attend theatrical performances, or go to the gladiatorial or wild beast fights. Instead, they spent a considerable amount of their free time in one another’s company. This made them a target of rumor and speculation. And since the imperial government had made it clear early on that their local groups (*collegia*) were not to be legally recognized, Christians also became easy scapegoats in their communities. Emperor Nero (ruled A.D. 54–68) used this as a convenient excuse when he rounded up and executed Christians in Italy, blaming them for the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64.

From then on, anyone who became upset by a Christian neighbor could report that person to the government, and a trial and execution often followed. But the government as a whole did not go hunting for Christians again until the mid-third century. Then, with the empire reeling from inflation and military setbacks, Emperor Decius (ruled 249–251) ordered everyone to perform pagan sacrifices “for the safety of the empire.” Christian leaders were singled out for compliance, and those who refused were executed. Although persecution came again under Emperor Valerian (ruled 257–260), the worst of all formal persecutions took place at the beginning of the next century—the Great Persecution of Diocletian (ruled 303–313).

1. In physically dangerous situations like these, why might it be comforting for Christians to make use of a creed? Consider 1 Peter 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4; and 1 Kings 19:14-18. *When Christians suffer for their faith, it is easy for them to be tempted into feeling they are suffering alone. By making use of ecumenical creeds, Christians can have the confidence that there are people all over the world who believe the same things that they believe and who also often suffer for it. (cf. Elijah) The creeds also remind Christians that their faith is not something personal, of their own invention, but a system of beliefs that has been shared by millions over the centuries.*
2. How do creeds serve as a comfort for Christians today? *Creeds are one way that we can glimpse signs of the invisible church around the world. When we recite the creeds in worship, we can take comfort that we have brothers and sisters in Latin America, Africa, Europe, Asia, etc., who are all confessing the same basic Christian truths that we are. It also reminds us that even if our local church or denomination is not numerically large, our saving faith is shared by millions.*

1.2 Leadership and Organization in the Early Church

Despite the setbacks brought about by persecution, the church continued to grow. Following these persecutions, imperial edicts ordered some restitution to Christians whose property had been seized. This confirms that despite the lack of any official standing as a group, the church had its own church buildings and cemeteries by this period. A uniform church structure had also developed, **with the Christians in each city being led by a single head called the bishop**. He was **assisted by priests** who **conducted worship at numerous locations** and **deacons** who **oversaw the church’s charitable work** in the congregation and the community. In some rural areas, a chorepiscopus, that is, a country bishop, was appointed. The bishop of one of the older and larger cities of a region would serve as a regional leader. By the fourth century, the bishops of Alexandria, Antioch in Syria, and Rome (and eventually the new eastern capital of Constantinople) would be called **patriarchs** and **would oversee larger regions**. Members of the clergy within a city would meet regularly to discuss their work, and bishops within a region would likewise meet in council. While these meetings originally were held ad hoc when special problems arose, **eventually they became regularly scheduled meetings, called councils in Latin and synods in Greek**.

3. Why did it make sense for the early church to establish a system of church offices? *With any large group, good organization makes things work smoothly. God ordained the public ministry of the gospel but allows the church freedom in determining how to organize. The city (Greek, polis) was the basic administrative unit in the Roman Empire, similar to our counties. The early church recognized the usefulness of having a single person (bishop) oversee and coordinate the Christian communities within each city and in having patriarchs oversee bishops. Since many tasks apart from teaching and preaching needed to be done, the position of deacon was created to fulfill those needs.*

4. How do the early offices of bishop, priest, and deacon compare with positions and duties in our church today? Bishops and priests functioned like our present-day pastors—teaching God’s Word, administering the sacraments, and conducting worship services. Some present-day denominations have an organized system of district presidents who, like the bishops, oversee and coordinate the work of pastors and churches within geographical regions. Some congregations have staff ministers who function much like the ancient deacons. In other congregations, lay members do the duties of the ancient deacons.

1.3 The Apostles’ Creed

Before becoming a member of the church through Baptism, adults were required to study the church’s beliefs and teachings. This catechetical study involved learning the meaning of short summaries of Christian teaching. These summaries, which we call baptismal creeds, were memorized to ensure that new members understood and agreed with the common faith of the community. The baptismal creed used in the city of Rome came to be referred to as the Apostles’ Creed.

I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy Christian church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.

5. Is the Apostles’ Creed still used for its original purpose? How else is it used today? Because the majority of Lutheran Christians today are baptized as infants rather than as adult converts, they do not learn the Apostles’ Creed as a summary of the faith to be confessed at their baptisms; yet the creed is often recited to indicate the faith into which children are baptized. We also employ the Apostles’ Creed in our catechism classes to teach young people the basic truths of Christianity to prepare them for participation in the Lord’s Supper.

We also recite the Apostles’ Creed in many of our public worship services as an expression of our unity with all members of the invisible church. It is evidence that we are not a sect but members of the true holy Christian church.

6. What makes the Apostles’ Creed a good baptismal creed? The Apostles’ Creed is brief and rather easy to memorize, yet it summarizes the core truths of Christianity. Its brevity reminds teachers that new converts do not have to master every bit of Christian doctrine before receiving the blessings of Baptism. (Consider the Ethiopian eunuch or the jailer in Philippi.) At the same time, someone who is willing and able to publicly confess the Apostles’ Creed is demonstrating that he or she has learned and is confessing the essentials of the Christian faith and wishes to be part of the church, the body of Christ.

7. Agree or disagree and defend your answer: Pre-baptismal instruction (catechesis) is just as important today as it was in the early church. Agree: We always want to take doctrinal instruction seriously. Though we live in a Christian society, we should not assume that new Christians have a better basic understanding of the faith than pagans in the Roman world would have had.

Disagree: Because infant Baptism in a Christian church is such a common occurrence today, even among those who are not practicing Christians, we do not have as many opportunities to baptize adult converts. Many of them have already been baptized. While we still instruct them, in most cases it is not technically pre-baptismal instruction.

1.4 Baptismal Creeds and Rival Churches

Already in the second century, however, some teachers and communities began deviating from accepted teaching and left (or were expelled from) the larger church. They set up opposition communities, claiming the superiority of their own teachings. A number of these groups separated into rival church bodies. To distinguish itself from these breakaway groups, the larger church came to call itself the catholic (universal) church. [Because the church that taught correctly became known as *catholic*, the Roman baptismal creed—the Apostles’ Creed—confessed a belief in the “holy catholic church.” In order not to confuse this with the present-day Roman Catholic Church, we have “the holy Christian church” in our translation of the creed.]

During the persecutions, some Christians caved under the pressure to perform sacrifices. Many later repented and wished to be readmitted to the church. The catholic church leaders welcomed back such Christians after an appropriate period of repentance. Those who disagreed, wishing to keep the church “pure” of such apostates, formed new breakaway churches. The Novatians (centered in Rome), the Donatists (primarily in northwest Africa), and the Melitians (in Egypt) all became rival groups that lasted for several centuries.

8. Why do you think the Christian church might be especially prone to internal divisions? Unlike many other religions, Christianity is, by nature, a doctrinal religion. One must be taught and believe certain truths about God in order to be a Christian. For many other religions, practicing traditions or performing ceremonies is central. Any difference or disagreement in doctrine by necessity divides Christians who highly value the truth of God’s Word.
9. How might a church today deal with a person seeking to rejoin a congregation after denying his or her faith in a public setting? The church tries to maintain a balance in the application of important truths. On the one hand, apostasy is a very serious sin and cannot be lightly dismissed. On the other hand, we dare not withhold forgiveness from those who come with repentant hearts. Exactly how we express the forgiveness will depend on individual situations. It is also important to consider the consciences of others in the congregation. If someone has suffered greatly for refusing to deny his or her faith in the midst of trial, it might be hurtful to see another person who did deny his or her faith welcomed back with seemingly no consequences. We will want to apply law and gospel carefully to both people in a situation like that. However, the gospel and forgiveness (“seventy-seven times,” Matthew 18:22) must always predominate in our Lutheran congregations. Because we cannot see into hearts, we must accept a person’s confession of repentance unless his or her actions seem to indicate that the confession was not sincere.

1.5 A Christian Emperor Seeks to Keep the Church Unified

The third century was a time of crisis within the Roman Empire due in part to a succession of incompetent and short-lived emperors. The slide into chaos ended in the early fourth century shortly before the rise of Constantine. By 313, he had become the ruler of the Western Empire and also a believer in the Christian God (although he was only baptized on his deathbed in 337). After entering Rome, he met with leaders of the church and donated imperial property to the bishop. He kept the well-known Spanish bishop, Hosius of Cordoba, with him as his personal chaplain. Whenever he added more of the empire to his own rule, he immediately declared toleration for Christians and ordered the restoration of Christian property seized during the recent persecutions. Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea and a budding church historian, saw God’s hand in all that Constantine did.

[The reality of Constantine's personal faith is still debated by historians. Among the evidence cited against his being a Christian early on are (1) continued pagan imagery on some coins; (2) his order for the execution of his wife Fausta and eldest son, Crispus, in 326; and (3) his waiting until his deathbed in 337 to be baptized. However, there is little reason for his substantial donations to the church, involvement in its affairs, and identification with such a minority religion unless he was a believer.]

Constantine believed his empire and the Christian church were linked in their destinies. He became concerned after being asked to mediate disputes between the church and its breakaway groups. He was also told of disagreements about church practices, such as the wide variety of methods used for choosing the proper day to celebrate Easter. Finally, he was made aware of a growing dispute about church teaching. An Egyptian priest named Arius had openly challenged the respected bishop of Alexandria about his teachings on the divinity of Christ, and soon Arius had supporters across the empire.

Constantine tried to broker peace in this dispute by sending a letter that called for unity to the disputing parties. When this did not bear fruit, he sought to solve the problem with an examination before a panel of bishops. This was how disputes were fairly decided within Roman legal practice. A similar tradition had developed in the church since New Testament times (as we saw in Acts chapter 15 earlier in this lesson). Constantine—perhaps at the instigation of his advisor, Bishop Hosius—decided that a small council or synod, or even a regional gathering, would not be sufficient to deal with the complex issues that had already spread so widely. Therefore, the idea was born of a great, or general, council that would include bishops from across the inhabited world (Greek, *oikoumene*). So Constantine sent invitations across the empire for bishops to come to an “ecumenical” council at the city of Nicaea in A.D. 325.

10. Agree or disagree: It is good to have Christian political leaders, so we ought to seek and support political candidates who will make laws based on biblical teachings. Agree: Christians seek to live in safe, stable, and justly governed communities, so naturally we will seek candidates for office who show the most promise in providing these benefits. We may conclude that Christians would be the best people for these tasks, since they would be motivated by their faith to pursue these goals and to act for the good of the community rather than their own selfish interests. Christian morality would be good for all citizens.

Disagree: Christians should not seek to use the power of government to compel non-Christians to act like Christians. Sanctified living comes from Spirit-worked faith, not governmental laws. Also, Christians should not mix church and state in such a way that could result in forfeiting the means of grace to the control of the secular government. History has demonstrated that when the government achieves power over the church, it often suppresses true doctrine; when the church achieves power over the government, it often becomes corrupt. Moreover, political figures may have flawed theologies.

11. How important is it for the Christian church to be outwardly united? united in its customs and practices? united in its teaching?

For Christians to enjoy church fellowship with one another, it is essential that they be united in teaching. We cannot agree to disagree on anything God's Word teaches, for to do so would be, in effect, telling God that parts of his Word are not important. While we seek to be united outwardly with as many Christians as possible, we will not unite in public worship with anyone with whom we are not in complete doctrinal agreement. Unity in matters of custom and practice can be helpful, and we are free to establish these to fit our own situations. However, we will not make them a barrier to practicing church fellowship. For a variety of reasons, church bodies that share the same beliefs may still decide to retain separate external organizations (for example, WELS and ELS).

12. In what ways is our use of the word *synod* the same or different from its use in the early church?

Similar: The word *synod* comes from a Greek word meaning “to walk together.” The early church used it to refer to meetings at which clergy would gather to discuss doctrinal questions and seek a solution whereby they could *walk together* in faith. Today, several Lutheran denominations have organized their church bodies into synods to express the fact that the members of their respective denominations *walk together* in faith.

Different: The early church used the word to refer specifically to formal gatherings of church leaders (church councils), whereas we use it to refer to administrative organizations (church bodies).

Closing Thought and Prayer

For three hundred years, the church grew while under threat of persecution. Then, when the church finally was allowed to function freely, differences within the church boiled to the surface. Throughout biblical history (and the two thousand years of church history since), God’s people have survived attacks from without and within. Jesus promised his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). Even when we are not experiencing outward peace, God’s promise remains with us, and we need not fear. In our next lesson we will see how the church dealt with key problems at the Council of Nicaea in 325.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, we thank and praise you that you have remained ever faithful to your beloved church and have preserved it through many centuries of testing and hardship. Guard and guide us in our own day also, that your Word may dwell in our hearts richly as we worship and live for you. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.