

Homily 33 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon highlights the importance of not troubling the Gentiles with unnecessary rules and the significance of the prophetic witness of Symeon in supporting the decision of the Apostles and elders.

Scripture: Matthew 23:9, John 17:21, Acts 15:13-33, Galatians 2:9

Topics: "Church Unity", "Apostolic Authority"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the unity and wisdom displayed in the early Church council in Acts 15, where James, Peter, and Paul play significant roles in resolving disputes and making decisions. James, known as the bishop, speaks last with moderation and wisdom, quoting both old and new prophets to support his argument. The council decides not to burden Gentile believers with unnecessary laws but to focus on essential teachings, showing respect for the Law while emphasizing faith in Christ. The unity and authority of the Apostles and elders are highlighted as they send chosen men to deliver the decision to the Gentile believers, promoting peace and harmony within the Church.

Transcript

Acts XV. 13, 15

And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Symeon has declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets.

This (James) was bishop, as they say, and therefore he speaks last, and herein is fulfilled that saying, In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established. Deuteronomy 17:6; Matthew 18:16 But observe the discretion shown by him also, in making his argument good from the prophets, both new and old. For he had no acts of his own to declare, as Peter had and Paul. And indeed it is wisely ordered that this (the active) part is assigned to those, as not intended to be locally fixed in Jerusalem, whereas (James) here, who performs the part of teacher, is no way responsible for what has been done, while however he is not divided from them in opinion. (b) Men and brethren, he says, hearken unto me.

Great is the moderation of the man. His also is a more complete oration, as indeed it puts the completion to the matter under discussion. (a) Symeon, he says, declared: (namely,) in Luke, in that he prophesied, Which You have prepared before the face of all nations, a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel. I testify Thou Thy servant depart."--It is remarkable that it does not occur to Chrys. that

Symeon is Simon Peter, though 2 Peter 1:1 has Συμῶν Πέτρος in the Cod.

Alexandr., and many other mss. In the Mod. text Chrys. is made to say: "Some say that this is he who is mentioned by Luke: others, that he is some other person of the same name. (Acts 13:1?) But whether it be the one or the other is a point about which there is no need to be particular; but only to receive as necessary the things which the person declared."--> (c) How God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His Name. Luke 2:25 Then, since that (witness), though from the time indeed he was manifest, yet had not authority by reason of his not being ancient, therefore he produces ancient prophecy also, saying, And to this agree the words of the Prophets, as it is written: After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up.

Acts 15:16 What? Was Jerusalem raised up? Was it not rather thrown down? What sort of raising up does he call that which took place after the return from Babylon? That the residue of men, he says, may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles upon whom My Name is called. Acts 15:17 Then, what makes his word authoritative -- Says the Lord, which does all these things: and, for that this is no new thing, but all was planned from the beginning, Known unto God are all His works from everlasting.

Acts 15:18 And then again his authority (καὶ τὸ ἐξῆμα πᾶσιν) (as Bishop): Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: but that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollution of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses of old time has in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day. Acts 15:19-21 Since then they had heard of the Law, with good reason he enjoins these things from the Law, that he may not seem to make it of no authority.

And (yet) observe how he does not let them be told these things from the Law, but from himself, saying, It is not that I heard these things from the Law, but how? We have judged. Then the decree is made in common. Then pleased it the Apostles and elders, together with the whole Church, to choose men of their own company -- do you observe they do not merely enact these matters, and nothing more?-- and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: and they wrote letters by them after this manner.

Acts 15:22 And observe, the more to authenticate the decree, they send men of their own, that there may be no room for regarding Paul and his company with suspicion. The Apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia. Acts 15:23 And mark with what forbearance of all harsh vituperation of those (brethren) they indite their epistle. Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, You must be circumcised, and keep the Law: to whom we gave no such commandment.

Acts 15:24 Sufficient was this charge against the temerity of those men, and worthy of the Apostles' moderation, that they said nothing beyond this. Then to show that they do not act despotically, that all are agreed in this, that with deliberation they write this -- It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send men of ours whom we have chosen Acts 15:25-- then, that it may not look like disparagement of Paul and Barnabas, that those men are sent, observe the encomium passed upon them -- together with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have sent therefore Judas and Silas; who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us-- it is not man's doing, it says -- to lay upon you no greater burden -- again it calls the Law a burden: then apologizing even for these injunctions -- save these necessary things Acts 15:26-28: "That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication from which if you keep yourselves, you shall do well.

Acts 15:29 For these things the New Testament did not enjoin: we nowhere find that Christ discoursed about these matters; but these things they take from the Law. From things strangled, it says, and from blood. Here it prohibits murder. cf. Genesis 9:5 So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle: which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation. (v. 30, 31.) Then those (brethren) also exhorted them: and having established them, for towards Paul they were contentiously disposed, so departed from them in peace.

And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them. And after they had tarried there a space, they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the Apostles. (v. 32, 33.) No more factions and fightings, but thenceforth Paul taught.

(Recapitulation.) Then all the multitude kept silence, etc. Acts 15:12 There was no arrogance in the Church. After Peter Paul speaks, and none silences him: James waits patiently, not starts up (for the next word). Great the orderliness (of the proceedings). No word speaks John here, no word the other Apostles, but held their peace, for James was invested with the chief rule, and think it no hardship. So clean was their soul from love of glory. And after that they had held their peace, James answered, etc.

Acts 15:13 (b) Peter indeed spoke more strongly, but James here more mildly: for thus it behooves one in high authority, to leave what is unpleasant for others to say, while he himself appears in the milder part. (a) But what means it, How God first (πρ^οτ^ον) did visit? Acts 15:14 (It means) from the beginning (■ ξ^ι ρ^αχ^ις). (c) Moreover he well says, Symeon expounded (■ ξηγ^ησατο) (or, interpreted), implying that he too spoke the mind of others. And to this agree, etc. Observe how he shows that this is a doctrine of old time.

To take out of the Gentiles, he says, a people for His Name. Acts 15:15 Not simply, Chose, but, for His Name, that is for His glory. His Name is not shamed by the taking (προλ^ηψει) the Gentiles first, but it is even a greater glory.-- Here some even great thing is hinted at: that these are chosen before all. After this I will return, and rebuild the tabernacle of David which is fallen down. Acts 15:16 But if one would look into the matter closely, the kingdom of David does in fact now stand, his Offspring reigning everywhere.

For what is the good of the buildings and the city, with none obeying there? And what is the harm arising from the destruction of the city, when all are willing to give their very souls? There is that come which is more illustrious than David: in all parts of the world is he now sung. This has come to pass: if so, then must this also come to pass, And I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: to what end? that the residue of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom My Name is called.

Acts 15:17 If then it was to this end that the city rose again (namely) because of Him (that was to come) of them, it shows that of the building of the city the cause is, the calling of the Gentiles. Who are the residue? those who are then left. And all the Gentiles, upon whom My Name is called: but observe, how he keeps the due order, and brings them in second. Says the Lord, which does these things. Not says (only), but does. Why then, it was God's work.-- But the question is other than this (namely), what Peter spoke more plainly, whether they must be circumcised.

Then why do you harangue about these matters? For what the objectors asserted, was not that they must not be received upon believing, but that it must be with the Law. And upon this Peter well pleaded: but then, as this very thing above all others troubled the hearers, therefore he sets this to rights again (θεραπειεῖ). And observe, that which was needful to be enacted as a rule, that it is not necessary to keep the Law, this Peter introduced: but the milder part, the truth which was received of old, this James says, and dwells upon that concerning which nothing is written, in order that having soothed their minds by that which is acknowledged, he may opportunely introduce this likewise.

Wherefore, says he, my sentence is, not to trouble them which from among the Gentiles do turn unto God Acts 15:19, that is, not to subvert: for, if God called them, and these observances subvert, we fight against God. And again, them which from the Gentiles, he says, do turn. And he says well, with authority, the my sentence is. But that we write unto them that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication-- (b) and yet they often insisted upon these points in discoursing to them -- but, that he may seem also to honor the Law (he mentions), these also, speaking (however) not as from Moses but from the Apostles, and to make the commandments many, he has divided the one into two (saying), and from things strangled, and from blood.

Acts 15:20 For these, although relating to the body, were necessary to be observed, because (these things) caused great evils, For Moses has of old times in every city, etc. Acts 15:21 This above all quieted them. (■ ν■παυσεν) (a) For this cause I affirm that it is good (so to write to them.) Then why do we not write the same injunctions to Jews also? Moses discourses unto them. See what condescension (to their weakness)! Where it did no harm, he set him up as teacher, and indulged them with a gratification which hindered nothing, by permitting Jews to hear him in regard of these matters, even while leading away from him them of the Gentiles.

See what wisdom! He seems to honor him, and to set him up as the authority for his own people, and by this very thing he leads away the Gentiles from him! Being read in the synagogues every sabbath day. Then why do they not learn (what is to be learned) out of him, for instance * *? Through the perversity of these men. He shows that even these (the Jews) need observe no more (than these necessary things). And if we do not write to them, it is not that they are bound to observe anything more, but only that they have one to tell them.

And he does not say, Not to offend, nor to turn them back, which is what Paul said to the Galatians, but, not to trouble them: he shows that the point (καταρθωμῶ) if carried is nothing but a mere troubling. Thus he made an end of the whole matter; and while he seems to preserve the Law by adopting these rules from it, he unbinds it by taking only these. (c) There was a design of Providence in the disputation also, that after the disputation the doctrine might be more firm. Then pleased it the Apostles to send chosen men of their own company, etc., no ordinary persons, but the leading men; having written (letters) by them after this manner.

To those in Antioch, it says, and Syria and Cilicia. (v. 22, 23) where the disease had its birth. Observe how they say nothing harsher (φορτικῶτερον) against those men, but look to one thing only, namely, to undo (the mischief) which has been done. For this would make even the movers of the faction there to confess (that they were wrong). They do not say, The seducers, the pestilent fellows, or suchlike: though where need is, Paul does this, as when he says, O full of all guile Acts 13:10: but here, the point being carried, there was no need.

And observe, they do not put it, That certain from us ordered you to keep the Law, but, Troubled you with words, subverting your souls,-- nothing could be more proper (κυριότερον) than that word: none (of the other speakers) has so spoken of the things done by those men. The souls, he says, already strongly established, these persons are ■ νασχευζοντες as in speaking of a building, taking them down again: displacing them (μετατιθεντες) from the foundation). To whom, he says, we gave no such commandment.

It seemed good therefore to us being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you together with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (v. 25, 26.) If beloved, they will not despise them, if they have hazarded their lives, they have themselves a right to be believed. We have sent, it says, Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by word of mouth. Acts 15:27 For it was necessary that there should be not merely the Epistle there by itself, lest they should say that Paul and Barnabas had suppressed (the real purport), that they said one thing instead of another.

The encomium passed upon Paul stopped their mouths. For this is the reason why neither Paul comes alone nor Barnabas (with him), but others also from the Church; that he may not be suspected, seeing it was he that advocated that doctrine: nor yet those from Jerusalem alone. It shows that they have a right to be believed. For it seemed good, say they, to the Holy Ghost and to us Acts 15:28: not making themselves equal (to Him)-- they are not so mad. But why does it put this (so)?

Why did they add, And to us, and yet it had sufficed to say, To the Holy Ghost? The one, To the Holy Ghost, that they may not deem it to be of man; the other, To us, that they may be taught that they also themselves admit (the Gentiles), although themselves being in circumcision. They have to speak to men who are still weak and afraid of them: this is the reason why this also is added. And it shows that it is not by way of condescension that they speak, neither because they spared them, nor as considering them weak, but the contrary; for great was the reverence of the teachers also.

To lay upon you no greater burden -- they are ever calling it a burden -- and again, save these necessary things: for that was a superfluous burden. See here a brief Epistle, with nothing more in it (than was needed), neither arts of persuasion (κατασκευες) nor reasonings, but simply a command: for it was the Spirit's legislating. So when they were dismissed they came to Antioch, and having gathered the multitude together, they delivered to them the epistle. Acts 15:30 After the epistle, then (Judas and Silas) also themselves exhort them by word Acts 15:31: for this also was needful, that (Paul and Barnabas) might be quit of all suspicion.

Being prophets also themselves, it says, exhorted the brethren with many words. It shows here the right that Paul and Barnabas have to be believed. For Paul also might have done this, but it behooved to be done by these. And after they had tarried there a space, they were let go in peace. Acts 15:33

No more faction. On this occasion, I suppose, it was that they received the right hand, as he says himself, They gave to me and Barnabas right hands of fellowship. Galatians 2:9 There he says, They added nothing to me. Galatians 2:6 For they confirmed his view: they praised and admired it.-- It shows that even from human reasonings it is possible to see this, not to say from the Holy Ghost only, that they sinned a sin not easy to be corrected. For such things need not the Spirit. -- It shows that the rest are not necessary, but superfluous, seeing these things are necessary. From which if you keep yourselves, it says, you shall do well. It shows that nothing is lacking to them, but this is sufficient. For it might have been done also without letters, but that there may be a law in writing (they send this Epistle): again, that

they may obey the law (the Apostles), also told those men (the same things), and they did this, and confirmed them, and having tarried a space were let go in peace.

Let us not then be offended on account of the heretics. For look, here at the very outset of the preaching, how many offenses there were: I speak not of those which arose from them that were without; for these were nothing: but of the offenses which were within. For instance, first Ananias, then the murmuring, then Simon the sorcerer; afterwards they that accused Peter on account of Cornelius, next the famine, lastly this very thing, the chief of the evils. For indeed it is impossible when any good thing has taken place, that some evil should not also subsist along with it.

Let us not then be disturbed, if certain are offended, but let us thank God even for this, because it makes us more approved. For not tribulations only, but even temptations also render us more illustrious. A man is no such great lover of the truth, only for holding to it when there is none to lead him astray from it: to hold fast to the truth when many are drawing him away, this makes the proved man. What then? Is this why offenses come? I am not speaking as if God were the author of them: God forbid!

But I mean, that even out of their wickedness He works good to us: it was never His wish that they should arise: Grant to them, He says, that they may be one John 17:21: but since offenses do come, they are no hurt, to these, but even a benefit: just as the persecutors unwillingly benefit the Martyrs by dragging them to martyrdom, and yet they are not driven to this by God; just so is it here. Let us not look (only at this), that men are offended: this very thing is itself a proof of the excellence of the doctrine -- that many stimulate and counterfeit it: for it would not be so, if it were not good.

And this I will now show, and make on all hands plain to you. Of perfumes, the fragrant spices are they which people adulterate and counterfeit; as, for instance, the amomum leaf. For because these are rare and of necessary use, therefore there come to be spurious imitations likewise. Nobody would care to counterfeit any common article. The pure life gets many a false pretender to it: no man would care to counterfeit the man of vicious life; no, but the man of monastic life.-- What then shall we say to the heathen?

There comes a heathen and says, I wish to become a Christian, but I know not whom to join: there is much fighting and faction among you, much confusion: which doctrine am I to choose? How shall we answer him? Each of you (says he) asserts, ' I speak the truth.' (b) No doubt: this is in our favor. For if we told you to be persuaded by arguments, you might well be perplexed: but if we bid you believe the Scriptures, and these are simple and true, the decision is easy for you. If any agree with the Scriptures, he is the Christian; if any fight against them, he is far from this rule. (a) But which am I to believe, knowing as I do nothing at all of the Scriptures?

The others also allege the same thing for themselves. What then (c)if the other come, and say that the Scripture has this, and you that it has something different, and you interpret the Scriptures diversely, dragging their sense (each his own way)? And you then, I ask, have you no understanding, no judgment? And how should I be able (to decide), says he, I who do not even know how to judge of your doctrines? I wish to become a learner, and you are making me immediately a teacher.

If he say this, what, say you, are we to answer him? How shall we persuade him? Let us ask whether all this be not mere pretence and subterfuge. Let us ask whether he has decided (καταγγνωκε) against the heathen (that they are wrong). The fact he will assuredly affirm, for of course, if he had not so decided, he would not have come to (enquire about) our matters: let us ask the grounds on which he has decided, for

to be sure he has not settled the matter out of hand. Clearly he will say, Because (their gods) are creatures, and are not the uncreated God.

Good. If then he find this in the other parties (ἀρσις), but among us the contrary, what argument need we? We all confess that Christ is God. But let us see who fight (against this truth), and who not. Now we, affirming Him to be God speak of Him things worthy of God, that He has power, that He is not a slave, that He is free, that He does of Himself: whereas the other says the reverse. Again I ask: if you would learn (to be) a physician, * * *? And yet among them are many (different) doctrines.

For if you accept without more ado just what you are told, this is not acting like a man: but if you have judgment and sense, you shall assuredly know what is good. We affirm the Son to be God, we verify (παληθεομεν) what we affirm: but they affirm indeed, but (in fact) confess not.-- But to mention (something) even plainer: those have certain persons from whom they are called, openly showing the name of the heresiarch himself, and each heresy in like manner: with us, no man has given us a name, but the faith itself.

However, this (talk of yours) is mere pretence and subterfuge. For answer me: how is it that if you would buy a cloak, though ignorant of the art of weaving, you do not speak such words as these -- I do not know how to buy; they cheat me-- but do all you can to learn, and so whatever else it be that you would buy: but here you speak these words? For at this rate, you will accept nothing at all. For let there be one that has no (religious) doctrine whatever: if he should say what you say about the Christians-- There is such a multitude of men, and they have different doctrines; this a heathen, that a Jew, the other a Christian: no need to accept any doctrine whatever, for they are at variance one with another; but I am a learner, and do not wish to be a judge -- but if you have yielded (so far as) to pronounce against (καταγινσκειν) one doctrine, this pretext no longer has place for you.

For just as you were able to reject the spurious, so here also, having come, you shall be able to prove what is profitable. For he that has not pronounced against any doctrine at all, may easily say this: but he that has pronounced against any, though he have chosen none, by going on in the same way, will be able to see what he ought to do. Then let us not make pretexts and excuses, and all will be easy. For, to show you that all this is mere excuse, answer me this: Do you know what you ought to do, and what to leave undone?

Then why do you not what you ought? Do that, and by right reason seek of God, and He will assuredly reveal it to you. God, it says, is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that fears Him, and works righteousness, is accepted with Him. ch. 10:34-35 It cannot be that he who hears without prejudice should not be persuaded. For just as, if there were a rule, by which everything behooved to be put straight, it would not need much consideration, but it would be easy to detect the person who measures falsely (τὴν παραμετροντα λαβειν), so is it here.

Then how is it they do not see it at a glance? Many things are the cause of this: both preconceived opinion, and human causes (ἀττα). The others, say you, say the same thing about us. How? For are we separated from the Church? Have we our heresiarchs? Are we called after men -- as one of them has Marcion, another Manichæus, a third Arius, for the author and leader (of his sect)? Whereas if we likewise do receive an appellation from any man, we do not take them that have been the authors of some heresy, but men that presided over us, and governed the Church.

We have no masters upon the earth -- God forbid -- we have One Master that is in heaven. Matthew 23:9-10 And those also, says he, say the same. But there stands the name set over them, accusing them, and stopping their mouths.-- How is it, there have been many heathen, and none of them asked these questions: and among the philosophers there were these (differences), and yet none of those holding the right party (ἀ■πεσιν) was hindered (thereby)?-- Why did not (those believers) say, when (the others) raised these questions, Both these and those are Jews: which must we believe?

But they believed as they ought. Then let us also obey the laws of God, and do all things according to His good pleasure, that having virtuously passed this life present, we may be enabled to attain unto the good things promised to them that love Him, by the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost together, be glory, dominion, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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