

Peter and Acts 15

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Peter and his Privileges

Simon Peter is one of the most prominent characters in the early church. He (with James and John) was one of the three disciples with whom the Lord associated most frequently, and his name appears 97 times in the gospels, more than any other except “John” (102x, but including the Baptist as well as the disciple) and of course “Jesus” (615x). In Acts, he is named third most often (58x), after “Jesus” (66x) and “Paul” (133x). He was the first of the disciples to recognize the man Jesus as both the promised Messiah and the son of God (Matt 16:16), an insight that the Lord Jesus recognized as a special mark of divine blessing. The Lord promised him “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” and the authority to “bind ... and ... loose.” He shares the latter privilege with the other disciples (Matt 18:18), but only he is given the keys.

The “binding and loosing,” in rabbinic usage, refers to the power to establish rules, and is clearly reflected in the special authority assigned to the writings of the apostles in the early church. But the special grant of the keys is the focus of ongoing disagreement between papists and many others who claim to follow the Lord Jesus. Papists understand this grant to establish a perpetual office in the church, initially occupied by Peter, with authority over the church and the other apostles. They understand the keys to be a reference to Eliakim, a senior court official under King Hezekiah of Judah:

Isa 22:22 And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.

Whatever other duties Eliakim may have had, the Isaiah prophecy associates it with a key that can open and shut locked doors. This symbolism shows that whatever other duties he had, he was the chief steward, who controlled the storerooms and distributed the resources that were needed throughout the palace. The Lord Jesus describes the function of such a person:

Mat 24:45 Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, **to give them meat in due season?**

Peter certainly did function in this way in the book of Acts. God entrusted him with a clear revelation of the threefold identity of the Savior:

Mat 16:15 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? 16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. 17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

He was the first of the apostles to recognize that that Lord has three identities:

- “thou,” the man Jesus of Nazareth
- “art the Christ,” the promised Jewish Messiah
- “the Son of the living God,” the divine Lord from heaven.

He distributed this precious revelation to God’s people when he proclaimed the gospel after the Lord’s ascension, first to the Jews in Acts 2, then to the Gentiles in Acts 10. Both of these gospel presentations focus on his insight in Matt 16:16 that the Lord is human (Jesus), divine (Lord),

and messiah (Christ). His sermon to the Jews on the day of Pentecost is a carefully structured argument leading to his conclusion,¹

Act 2:36 Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same **Jesus**, whom ye have crucified, both **Lord** and **Christ**.

And he begins his sermon to the Gentile Cornelius with the same theme:

Act 10:36 The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by **Jesus Christ**: (he is **Lord** of all:)

The record of Acts clearly shows that Peter is a faithful steward of the revelation of God, distributing it to Jew and Gentile in due season. If the typology of Eliakim gives Peter further authority, we can expect to see it in Acts as well. And that brings us to the meeting in Acts 15.

Jerusalem and Antioch

Peter plays a dominant role in the Jerusalem church in Acts, down through chapter 12. Then he is arrested in preparation for execution, but an angel miraculously releases him. He visits the believers, and then, in 12:17, Luke takes him off the stage with the comment, “And he departed, and went into another place.”

Scripture does not record where Peter went. Galatians, most likely written by Paul from Antioch at the end of Acts 14, records a visit by Peter to Antioch, which may have taken place shortly before Paul wrote the letter. What we do know is that in Acts 15, we find him again in Jerusalem, at a meeting of great consequence for the future of the church of Jesus Christ. Let’s consider the background of this meeting.

Acts 13-14 describe in some detail Paul’s first missionary journey, when he and Barnabas, sent out by the church at Antioch, planted churches of Gentile believers in several cities in the southeast of what is now Turkey. When they returned to Antioch and news reached Jerusalem of the conversion of many Gentiles, some of the Jewish believers were not happy about the direction things were taking.

Acts 15:1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. 2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

Paul and Barnabas were not opposed to the Jewish rite of circumcision, for believers of Jewish descent. Later, Paul circumcises Timothy (Acts 16:1), the son of a Jewish mother. But Peter did not circumcise the Gentile Cornelius before baptizing him in Acts 10, and Paul has not circumcised his Gentile converts. Now Jewish believers from Jerusalem are seeking to reverse this policy, a discussion that developed into “no small dissension and disputation.”

The Lord Jesus in Matt 18:15-22 gave detailed instructions for how to deal with disagreements among believers.

Mat 18:15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or

¹See https://cyber-chapel.org/sermons/acts/notes/Acts2_22_40.pdf for structural details.

three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

The action of the church at Antioch in response to the “certain men” from Judaea in Acts 15:1 fits this pattern exactly. Unable to resolve the matter privately, they appeal to the church from which these troublemakers came.²

The Meeting in Jerusalem

Two matters deserve attention in the record of the meeting: the sequence of events, and James’ declaration in 15:19.

The Sequence of Events

Acts 15:6-32 records the progress of the meeting. The narrative is straightforward:

1. 6-7a, the apostles and elders gather to discuss the matter. Verse 12 describes the gathering as a “multitude,” and there was “much disputing.”
2. 7b-11, Peter takes the floor and briefly recounts his experience in Acts 10, in which Gentiles received the Holy Spirit without being circumcised. Peter’s appearance is sudden and unexplained. Perhaps he had been in Antioch, and came to Jerusalem along with Paul and Barnabas among the “certain others” mentioned in v. 2.
3. 12, the multitude finally quiets down and listens to a report by Paul and Barnabas of how the Lord has saved many Gentiles during their trip.³
4. 13-21, James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, suggests that the salvation of the Gentiles is a fulfillment of OT prophecy (Amos 9:11-12), and proposes four behavioral constraints (not including circumcision) that would minimize offense given by believing Gentiles to pious but still unbelieving Jews.
5. 22-29, the assembly composes a letter, disowning the troublemakers and summarizing James’ recommendation, to send to Antioch and the new churches that Paul and Barnabas had planted.
6. 30-32, Paul and Barnabas, along with two brothers from Jerusalem, Judas and Silas, take the letter back to Antioch.

²The meeting is sometimes called “the Jerusalem council,” but Luke never uses this term to describe it. Throughout the New Testament, “council” always describes a gathering of unbelievers, generally opposed to God’s people. This meeting is simply a consultation between two local assemblies to resolve a situation that might divide them.

³The flow of the narrative suggests that Peter is talking over the crowd, and not until Paul and Barnabas are ready to give their report does “all the multitude [keep] silence” (Acts 15:12). Butler, Dahlgren, and Hess, *Jesus, Peter, and the Keys*, Santa Barbara, 1996, p. 94 claim that the silence in 15:12 is out of respect to Peter, and actually began when Peter began to speak. They rely on the aorist tense of the Greek verb, and cite a letter by Sungenis that claims this tense indicates “an action in the past that was completed ... This past tense usage shows that the multitude was silent when Peter was speaking and remained so when Paul and Barnabas started speaking.” There is a Greek verb tense that has the meaning Sungenis seeks, but it is the perfect, not the aorist. Luke could have written, “The multitude had kept silence [perfect tense, when Peter began to speak], and then gave audience to Barnabas and Paul [aorist],” but he does not. In narratives, the aorist is the default verb for relating a series of events without further temporal qualification (this happened, then this happened, then this happened) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aorist#Greek>), and that is the construction Luke uses throughout his narrative. Butler *et al.* misstate basic principles of Greek grammar in an effort to boost Peter’s prominence in the narrative.

One commentator (Ray, Stephen K., *Upon This Rock: St. Peter and the Primacy of Rome in Scripture and the Early Church* (Modern Apologetics Library) (p. 22). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.) summarizes Peter's role in the meeting thus:

When confusion arose over how the law of circumcision applied to the Gentile converts, Peter made the authoritative doctrinal decision at the first Church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), to which all those in attendance acquiesced.

That summary is what we would expect if Peter's keys put him in a position of authority over churches and other apostles. But is it appropriate?

Ray's summary asserts three points:

1. There was confusion in the meeting.
2. "Peter made the authoritative doctrinal decision."
3. "All those in attendance acquiesced" in his decision.

Point 1 is certainly true, but the text contradicts points 2 and 3.

Peter's speech does not make any doctrinal decision. It recalls his experience with Cornelius, and asks a question of those promoting circumcision for Gentiles:

Act 15:10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

He does not forbid circumcision, but admits that the ceremonial law was a burden that even Jews were unable to satisfy fully. Then he concludes with a remarkable statement that is easily misunderstood.

Act 15:11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

If he had said, "We believe that they shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ," that might be understood as a graciously worded doctrinal statement about how Gentiles are to be saved. But in fact his statement assumes the salvation of the Gentiles by grace, and asserts that "we" (Jews) must enter in by the same door. If he is making a doctrinal decision, it is not on the subject of the meeting (how Gentiles should be brought into the church), but rather on how traditional Jews can become Christians.

The Statement of James

In the light of James' statement in 15:19, Ray's third point badly twists the narrative. [Acts 15:22](#) does indeed say that "the apostles and elders" were pleased with the outcome of the discussion. But they are responding, not to what Peter said, but to what James has just said, in proposing a Scriptural basis for the salvation of the Gentiles and outlining a set of recommended behaviors. James' words suggest that he sees it as his responsibility to propose a decision:

Act 15:19 Wherefore **my sentence is**, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:

The clause "my sentence is" is the Greek clause ἐγὼ κρίνω *ego krino*, "I judge." We should note the use of the separate pronoun ἐγὼ. The verb by itself represents the first person clause "I judge," without any need for a separate pronoun, and is often used this way: Ezek 35:11 LXX "when I have judged thee"; John 5:30 "As I hear, I judge." Adding an explicit pronoun to a

Greek verb shifts the emphasis from the action to the one doing it. James is saying, “I, and not someone else, has made a decision.”

Papist commentators⁴ point out that the verb κρίνω “has an extensive semantic range” that includes mere statements of opinion. Even if it has this weaker sense in Acts 15:19, James’ use of the emphatic pronoun makes clear that he is presenting his opinion, not that of Peter. James, not Peter, is proposing a decision.

But the usage of κρίνω with the emphatic pronoun is consistently much stronger than a mere statement of opinion. This clause (with the emphatic pronoun) appears four other times in the present tense in the NT,⁵ twice negated, and all on the lips of the Lord Jesus. Other NT writers also use it in other tenses, and it appears several times in the LXX.

Consider first our Lord’s uses. These must be understood in the light of two earlier passages about his role in judgment. First, as John explains,

John 3:17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn [κρίνω] the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

The Lord’s mission at his first advent was not to judge, but to redeem. But he himself makes clear, in an extended chiasm in John 5:19-30, that the Father has committed all judgment to him, and he will one day judge all people.⁶

Three instances of κρίνω with the emphatic pronoun are in John 8. The Jewish leaders confront the Lord with a woman taken adultery, and challenge him,

John 8:5 Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?

The Lord diverts their attention to their own guilt, and they disperse without pressing their attack. Then he confronts her:

John 8:10 When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? 11 She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do **I condemn** thee: go, and sin no more.

The explicit pronoun emphasizes the tension between their judgment and his, and assert his authority over them. Without the two or three witnesses required by the law, he will not offer an authoritative verdict.

Later in the chapter, he uses the emphatic clause again, also negated.

John 8:15 You judge according to the flesh; **I judge no one**.

Again, the “I” emphasizes the contrast between their judgment and his. His non-judgment here is a reflection of the terms of his mission, as summarized in 3:17. But in the next verse, he repeats the expression to describe the time when, according to 5:19-30, he will judge, and when he does, it will be with divine authority:

⁴Butler et al, citing Sungenis.

⁵Sungenis notes only the two negated clauses, claiming that these are the only other instances of the construction in the NT, but overlooks the other NT instances and the numerous instances in the LXX, all of which show the strength of James’ statement.

⁶For analysis, see <https://cyber-chapel.org/sermons/john/notes/John5.pdf>.

John 8:16 Yet even if **I do judge**, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me.

The mood of the verb κρίνω in this verse is ambiguous. The AV interprets it as subjunctive, suggesting some measure of doubt: “Even if I were to render a judgment.” But the same form can be indicative, which would be better translated, “When I do render a judgment”⁷ In the light of the clear declaration of his coming judgment in John 5, I read the verb as indicative. “Yet when I do judge (and as I told you in John 5, I surely will), my judgment is true.” Here the idiom ἐγὼ κρίνω emphasizes the Lord’s authority to make the decisive judgment.

He uses the clause one more time, again negated:

John 12:47 And if any man hear my words, and believe not, **I judge him not**: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

Again, the verse must be understood as a declaration of the Lord’s policy during his first advent. “I, under the terms of my present mission, do not judge him at this time.” The next verse goes on to say that he will be judged, by the word that Christ has spoken, “in the last day.”

All four of these instances are spoken by the Lord. The affirmative statement in 8:16 is based on his authority as the one sent by the Father, while in the two negative ones, he is explaining why in these circumstances he is not judging, though he has full authority to do so. The idiom emphasizes the subject of the verb as the one with authority to render judgment.

The clause appears in other tenses elsewhere in the NT. Stephen, in his testimony before the Sanhedrin, quotes God’s authoritative judgment in Gen 15:14,

Acts 7:7 And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage **will I judge**, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place.

Paul rebukes the Corinthians concerning their toleration of a fornicator, and tells them his position, which (as an apostle) he expects them to respect:

1Cor. 5:3 For **I** verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, **have judged already**, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed,

The use of the clause ἐγὼ κρίνω in the LXX is instructive. It is not negated, and in every case, it is uttered by the Lord, or by a sovereign monarch, to give an official decree. Let’s consider them in chronological order.

God tells Abraham of the upcoming Egyptian captivity, but then predicts judgment on Egypt:

Gen. 15:14 And the nation whomsoever they shall serve **I will judge**; and after this, they shall come forth hither with much property.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God declares his judgment on Jerusalem, condemning the city to destruction by Nebuchadnezzar:

Ezek 24:14 [LXX; MT has different reading] I the Lord have spoken: and it shall come, and I will do; I will not delay, neither will I have any mercy: **I will judge ἐγὼ κρίνω** thee, saith the Lord, according to thy ways, and according to thy devices: therefore will I judge thee according to thy bloodshed, and according to thy devices will I judge thee, thou unclean, notorious, and abundantly provoking one.

⁷This difference in mood changes the Greek conditional from third class to first class. See any Greek grammar for discussion.

The Lord authoritatively decrees the doom of Jerusalem.

In accordance with his decree, Nebuchadnezzar destroys the city, and takes its citizens into captivity. The book of Daniel relates some of their experiences in exile. Daniel 3 describes the temptation of three Hebrew men to worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol. Honoring their faith, they refuse, and are thrown into a fiery furnace, but the Lord delivers them. As a result, Nebuchadnezzar issues a decree, using our ἐγὼ κρίνω (in the present tense, as in Acts 15:19):

Dan 3:94 [LXX; MT v. 29] Wherefore **I publish a decree**: Every people, tribe, or language, that shall speak reproachfully against the God of Sedrach, Misach, and Abdenago shall be destroyed, and their houses shall be plundered: because there is no other God who shall be able to deliver thus.

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah predict the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. But both of them also go on to predict the nation's deliverance and the fall of her oppressor, before the authoritative judgment of the Lord:

Is. 49:25 For thus saith the Lord, If one should take a giant captive, he shall take spoils, and he who takes them from a mighty man shall be delivered: for **I will plead** thy cause, and I will deliver thy children.

Jer 28:36 [LXX; MT 51:36] Therefore thus saith the Lord, Behold, **I will judge** thine adversary, and I will execute vengeance for thee; and I will waste her sea, and dry up her fountain.

Eventually, Babylon was conquered by the Persians, who permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem, first under Zerubbabel, then Ezra and Nehemiah. 1 Esdras is a Greek book that largely parallels the Hebrew book of Ezra. It records the decree of the Persian king Artaxerxes authorizing Ezra to return to Jerusalem with gifts for the temple. The king declares:

1 Esdr 8:10 Having determined to deal graciously, **I have given order** that such of the nation of the Jews, and of the priests and Levites, being within our realm, as are willing and desirous, should go with thee unto Jerusalem.

In all of the LXX examples, the use of the emphatic pronoun ἐγὼ shows that the statement is not simply an opinion, but an authoritative decree, either by a head of state or by the Lord himself. The NT examples follow this pattern. James' use of this expression in Acts 15:19 is not just a casual opinion, but an authoritative decision.

James certainly takes into account the testimony given by the apostles, Peter concerning his experience with Cornelius and Barnabas and Paul concerning the churches of Galatia. And as the leader of the Jerusalem church, his decision would not be binding on Antioch or the Gentile churches without the agreement of the representatives from Antioch, which is duly recorded (Acts 15:22). But it is he, not Peter, who formulates the decision.

In fact, in summarizing the testimony that has been offered, he refers to Peter, not by the name "Rock" given him by the Lord, but by his Hebrew name, "Simeon." It is curious that while Luke, in the narrative of Acts, always calls Peter by the name given him by the Lord (58 times), whenever people in the narrative name him, they use either "Simon" (in the story of Cornelius, 9:34; 10:18, 32, 13), or "Simeon." If the name "Peter" were a mark of special authority, and if James were simply deferring to that authority, we would certainly expect him to use the divinely-given name that emphasizes that role.

Summary

A natural reading of the account of the meeting in Acts 15 does not support the notion that Peter exercised an authoritative role. He, along with Barnabas and Paul, reported the facts of their respective encounters with Gentiles, and James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, formulated and offered a solution that was adopted by the whole group (including Peter, Paul, and Barnabas). Attempts to make Peter the decisive figure in the story must twist the basic facts of Greek grammar and linguistic usage. Those who believe that Peter's keys give him and his successors authority over the church may choose to do so on confessional grounds, guided by selective application of citations from the Fathers, but the scriptural account of the meeting in Jerusalem gives no support to their position.