

In context, in our first reading Paul and Barnabas have completed their first missionary journey. They arrived back in Antioch where they are hit in the face with cold water.

Some brothers from Judea (or Jerusalem) came to Antioch and caused a stir by saying that the Gentiles who accepted the faith must be circumcised.

On a side note, we may wonder how the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem had found out about the Gentiles converting. You may remember that during the first missionary journey, John Mark left in the middle the trip. He went to Jerusalem. We can assume that he told them about the Gentile converts. In response, they send delegates down to Antioch to tell them that they must be circumcised.

Consequently, a huge debate breaks out. It's so bad that they decide to go to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the Apostles in Jerusalem. This will lead to the first Church council, the Council of Jerusalem. There is a good possibility that on the way to Jerusalem, Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. In that letter, Paul deals with the question of whether Gentile converts must be circumcised (and thus observe the Mosaic Law) to enter into the new covenant.

A million dollar question here to ask is why did the Jewish Christian from Jerusalem argue one had to be circumcised? For the Jewish people, circumcision was the way you entered into the Mosaic covenant, and ultimately gave access to celebrate the Passover meal.

If you were a Gentile, you could do lots of things along with Jewish people such as go to the synagogue and listen to God's Word. You could celebrate Pentecost – the giving of the Law. You could celebrate the feast of Booths – God's providence of taking care of the Israelites in the desert. However, you could not celebrate the Passover meal.

This is huge problem because the Eucharist is a Passover meal. The Jewish Christians, then, are arguing that you must be circumcised to share in the Eucharist, which is central for salvation. Unless you eat my Body and drink my Blood, you do not have life within you (Jn. 6:53).

Circumcision, then, becomes a flashpoint of controversy because circumcision is the doorway to the Eucharist (the new Passover), and the Eucharist is necessary for salvation. Paul and the Apostles need to gather and discuss this problem. In the end, they will conclude that it's not circumcision, but rather baptism and faith in Christ that brings one into the new covenant and gives access to the Eucharist, our Passover meal. Thankfully, as always, the Holy Spirit worked through the Church to settle the matter. May we trust in His work today as well!