

Galatians



Grace and Obligations

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church



Introduction

In the first part of our study of the Council of Jerusalem, we were able to see how the Church of the New Testament faced its first difficult question about Christian truth. Should Gentile converts be circumcised and required to keep the Law of Moses? After nearly 20 years of preaching the gospel and establishing Christian churches, the apostles had to answer a question that had not been directly addressed by Jesus. We saw how they did this in a council, under the leadership of Peter, and sharing their authority with the elders they had appointed. After much debate, the decision was made that Gentiles would not have to be circumcised like Jews in order to be saved. They will be saved in the same manner as Jews, by grace through faith.

In this lesson, we will see that although the Gentile converts will not be required to be circumcised and keep the code of Moses, they *will* be required to do something. We will observe how the ruling of the Council was communicated to the church in Antioch, and what effect the determination of truth had in a community that had been deeply troubled by division.

Read through this entire passage, all at once. Then answer the questions on the text that follow.



ACTS 15:19-35

19 “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues.”

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 with the following letter: “The brethren, both the apostles and the elders, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greeting. 24 Since we have heard that some persons from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, 25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. **28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.**”

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. 32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them. 33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brethren to those who had sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.





Questions on the Text

A LETTER IS SENT

1. *James suggests that the Council write a letter to the Gentiles which will reinforce Peter's declaration but which will add some specific guidelines for Gentile behavior. What do you think prompts James to make this kind of suggestion?*
2. *Read I Cor. 8 and Romans 14-15:6. How does Paul's teaching in these passages illuminate the ruling suggested by James?*
3. *We have seen Paul adamantly insist that the gospel cannot be altered in any way. If, as Peter announced, salvation is a gift of God's grace received through faith, which does not require Gentiles to become Jews, why did the Council make any requirements at all of the Gentiles? How can grace (God's unmerited favor) and "necessary" (vs. 28) behavior (obligations) be compatible?*
4. *Notice that in vs. 23, the letter was addressed to the Gentiles not only in Antioch, where the problem had developed, but also in Syria and Cilicia. What does this tell us about how the apostles and elders understood the nature of the Council's decision?*
5. *See that the letter refers to "some persons" who had gone around teaching Christians in various places, although the apostles and elders had given them "no instructions" (vs. 24). What does this tell us about the credentials teachers in the infant Church needed to have?*
6. *Look at vs. 28. In using the phrase, "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" when they wrote their letter, what did the apostles and elders reveal to be their own understanding of how the Council of Jerusalem had worked?*
7. *Are all the guidelines in their letter still in force today?*
8. *Why do you suppose they appointed Judas and Silas to accompany the letter? Why couldn't Paul and Barnabas have delivered it themselves? Read also 2 Peter 3:15-18 before answering this question.*
9. *What specific ministry did Judas and Silas have?*
10. *Sometimes non-Catholic Christians criticize the Church for practices they consider to be unbiblical. Answer the following criticisms from what you've learned in this lesson:*
 - a. *Why do you have rules that you have to keep in your Church? How can you have those "days of obligation"? We are saved by faith alone, not by keeping a bunch of rules.*
 - b. *Why do you have to have an imprimatur on books that teach Christian truth? Why aren't you free to read any book you want to?*
 - c. *The Bible is clear enough for me to be able to understand it. Why do you need the Church to tell you what the Bible says? Just read it for yourself.*
 - d. *If the Church is infallible and doesn't make any mistakes, why did it used to be a sin to eat meat on Friday but now it isn't?*
 - e. *Diversity in churches is good. We shouldn't all have to do and believe the same thing.*





Questions for Reflection

One of the best ways to meditate on God's Word is to take it deeply into your life through memorization. The suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the text in the lesson. Or you may choose one of your own. For further reflection, consider these:

1. ***In your experience of Catholic life, have the Church's obligations ever seemed like a yoke you weren't able to bear, or have they seemed light, easy, and a great joy? Whatever your experience has been, talk to the Lord about it as you reflect on it, now that you understand why this is the practice of the Church. Let this reflection be an occasion to be healed or to give thanks, as appropriate.***
2. ***Have you ever found yourself resentful that as Catholics we must allow the Magisterium of the Church to have the final word on the meaning of Scripture, or have you found that authority to be the key that unlocks its treasures? Respond to the Lord about your experience, in whatever way is appropriate.***
3. ***Do you know any non-Catholics who are critical of the Catholic Church? What have you learned from this lesson about the goal of Truth that might affect the way you answer their criticism?***





Opportunities for Additional Study

For the student who wishes to reflect more deeply on the passage in the lesson, consider these:

Points to Ponder

Sometimes the Catholic Church, in her bold claim to speak the Truth, evokes the kind of response that Jesus got from Pilate when He claimed the same. When He told Pilate that He had come into the world to bear witness to the Truth, Pilate replied, “What is truth?” (John 18:37-38) That question may be cynical or it may be sincere. Even among our non-Catholic Christian brethren, the notion that only one Church can speak the Truth of Jesus seems audacious. Because there are so many thousands of groups claiming to speak Christian truth, a common response is to assume that our disagreements must only be on minor issues. Many take the attitude that if we all love Jesus in our hearts, nothing else matters. If we have fifty different ideas on baptism, so what? All that really matters is that we love and trust Jesus in our hearts. Everything else is small potatoes.

The New Testament Church, however, did not take that attitude. Why? Surely all the Christians in Antioch loved Jesus in their hearts. Why didn’t they just agree to disagree? Why was unity of belief and practice so important to them? It must be because they took seriously the prayer of Jesus in John 17:20-21. Jesus said that unity among His followers—the same kind of unity He had with the Father—would be a sign to the world that God had sent His Son into it. What an amazing statement! Jesus understood the power of supernatural unity to witness to Truth. The Church claims to speak the absolute Truth to men about God, about themselves, about the meaning of existence, and about eternity. But if there are thousands of Christian voices all speaking different things, what will the world think?

The Christians in Antioch, in addition to loving Jesus in their hearts, also needed to know the Truth about the question that plagued them so that they wouldn’t be at odds with each other and present a scandal to the world. How will the world believe that Jesus has come to give us the Truth if Christians can’t agree what it is? The work of the Council of Jerusalem, as difficult and full of tension as it might have been, bore the fruit of joy and peace (15:31,33) in Antioch. It is for this reason that the Catholic Church continues to maintain that Truth matters and to insist that there is a way to get it.

Catechism Connection

Excerpted from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

I Cor. 8:10-13 – “Scandal takes on a particular gravity by reason of the authority of those who cause it or the weakness of those who are scandalized. It prompted our Lord to utter this curse: ‘Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.’ Scandal is grave when given by those who by nature or office are obliged to teach and educate others. Jesus reproaches the scribes and Pharisees on this account: he likens them to wolves in sheep’s clothing.” (2285)

I Cor. 8:12 – “Faced with a moral choice, conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them. Man is sometimes confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult. But he must always seriously seek what is right and good and discern the will of God expressed in divine law. To this purpose, man strives to interpret the data of experience and the signs of the times assisted by the virtue of prudence, by the advice of competent people, and by the help of the Holy Spirit and his gift.

“Some rules apply in every case:

- One may never do evil so that good may result from it;
- The Golden Rule: ‘Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.’
- Charity always proceeds by way of respect for one’s neighbor and his conscience: ‘Thus sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience...you sin against Christ.’ Therefore ‘it is right not to...do anything that makes your brother stumble.’” (1786-1789)



Summary

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In this lesson, we observed that:

1. Although the Council of Jerusalem did not require Gentile converts to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic code, they *did* require certain “necessary” behavior to help Gentiles and Jews live together in the love of Christ. There was no contradiction between a gospel of grace and obligatory behavior.
2. These requirements were put into a letter and sent to all the churches. The letter was accompanied by two men who had been at the Council. They had a pastoral mission to make sure the letter was properly understood and applied.
3. The ruling of the Council brought joy to the formerly troubled community of Antioch. They were happy to have the problem resolved and were able to live in peace after they had been encouraged by Judas and Silas, the men sent by the Council.

A Message from the Authors

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God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

