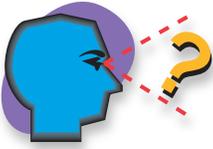


Galatians



Responses to the Questions



NOTE: BE SURE TO RESPOND TO ALL THE QUESTIONS YOURSELF BEFORE READING THESE RESPONSES IN ORDER TO MAKE THE MOST OF THIS STUDY.

A LETTER IS SENT

Acts 15:19-35

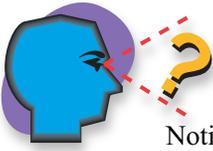
1. Peter made it clear that God made “no distinction” between Jews and Gentiles. They would both be saved in the same manner. The practical result of that ruling was that there was to be one Church, not two. Somehow, Jewish and Gentile converts would have to live together in harmony. James was the elder of Jerusalem and was very familiar with how difficult it was for Jewish Christians to accept Gentiles into the church. During all the history of Israel, the Gentiles had been the pagans, the “unclean.” He gives some pastoral guidelines to implement the doctrine that Peter had just announced, guidelines he believed would help to ease the Jewish Christians and their Gentile brethren into their new relationship. The apostles had been given the authority “to bind” and “to loose” (to allow and to forbid) by Jesus (Matt. 18:18). James recognized this as a moment in which to exercise that authority.

Note: One might ask why he chose these particular guidelines. On what basis would these have seemed reasonable to suggest? Two passages from the Old Testament are helpful here. They are Lev. 17:1-16 and Lev. 18:1-30 (read those). The first passage warns the Israelites or any stranger living among them to offer the animals they kill for sacrifice to the Lord on His altar and not on the altars of idols (“satyrs” in vs. 7). It also details a restriction God placed on partaking of blood. Likewise, the restriction applies not just to Israel but even to aliens residing in their land. There was in the ceremonial law of Moses a very strong taboo on partaking of blood—the Jews learned that “the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls” (Lev. 17:11). Blood had a sacrificial, not dietary, value. This taboo was preserved throughout Israel; it applied to Jew and Gentile alike.

The second passage in Leviticus is a long list of instructions for the Jews to follow so as to avoid sexual immorality. God warns the people, through Moses, not to behave like the pagans they left in Egypt or the pagans they are about to meet in the land of Canaan. It is clear that sexual immorality was rampant in pagan cultures; this explains why the Jews had to be carefully instructed about what constitutes sexual immorality. They had to be completely re-programmed in this crucial area of life. In particular, this passage spells out what will constitute immoral co-sanguinity for the Jews.

Putting the two passages together ought to make it clearer why James chose these particular guidelines. So as not to cause unnecessary affront to the Jewish Christians, he simply suggests that the Gentile Christians follow guidelines that would have applied to them anyway, had they lived among Jews but not become Jews. The exhortation to avoid unchastity (sexual immorality) is very appropriate to Gentile converts who had been raised in pagan cultures. Just as the Jews in Moses’ day, they needed to be re-programmed not to follow old habits of sexual behavior which would be inappropriate in the life of a follower of Christ. ▶





Responses to the Questions (cont.)

Notice what James says in Acts 15:21: “For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues.” This clearly reveals the assumption of a general knowledge of these restrictions *even among Gentiles*, since every city had a community of Jews. A comparable idea is the way that many people seem to “know” that Jews today don’t eat pork or that Catholics abstain from meat on certain days, even though they haven’t been trained in the teaching of those religions. James is implying that these restrictions fall under the category of “common knowledge.”

2. Paul makes it very clear in I Cor. 8 that the great danger the Christians in Corinth faced was to carelessly and irresponsibly place a stumbling block in a brother’s path. If a Christian had scruples about certain kinds of behavior (in this case, eating meat offered to idols) and observed a brother in that behavior, he might be emboldened to do something that violated his conscience. Paul sees this as a very grave problem. “And because of your knowledge, shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren and wound their conscience, you sin against Christ” (vs. 12). In the passage in Romans, he is even more direct: “It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak” (14: 21). We can see at work in these teachings a new law, which surpasses the Law of Moses—the Law of Love. The prohibitions in the letter of James are not given to protect against ritual defilement. They are given to preserve brotherly love, which is the outward manifestation of the believer’s love of Christ.

3. The key to understanding how grace and obligations work together is to think about the statement by Peter describing the “yoke” of the Mosaic code, which was unbearable, and the statement by Jesus describing His “yoke”: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30). What is the difference between the two yokes? Actually, this is the exact question that St. Paul examines exhaustively in his epistle to the Galatians. The full treatment of it will unfold as our study unfolds. Quite simply, the difference can be described this way: to wear the yoke of the Mosaic code was done to *earn* God’s blessing, but to wear the yoke of Jesus is done to *preserve* the blessing that cannot be earned. One yoke aimed to produce ritual cleanness, or holiness. The other yoke aims to preserve true holiness, which is perfect love of God and perfect love of man. The first yoke was “unbearable” because although the Law of Moses could describe holiness, it could not heal man’s sin enough for him to reach it. The second yoke is “light” and “easy” because Jesus has made it possible for man to have a new heart that *can* be holy. Forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ, which come through baptism, make it possible for man to observe God’s law from the heart. It is no longer beyond man’s reach to love God and his fellow man perfectly.

Yet it is still an issue of obedience. We still have to make the choice, as Adam did in the Garden of Eden, to live as sons of God. There God gave a commandment, an “obligation,” to Adam. The life of blessing he and Eve knew there (which was a free gift from God, not something they “earned”) would be *preserved* by their obedience. In Christ, we are in that same spot, although completely *healed* of our sin and made new, able to obey God in the same way Jesus did. The infant Church, in the Council of Jerusalem, is simply spelling out in some detail how the Gentile Christians can perfectly love their Jewish brethren. The “obligations” are pastoral in nature. They are practical ways that Gentile Christians can preserve the blessing they have received from God. They are loving guidelines to holiness. St. Paul understood this well and taught it constantly. The freedom we have from the Law of Moses is not a freedom from everything. It is a freedom to serve the Law of Jesus, which is the Law of Love. For the purposes of our study now, it is important to note that the apostles saw no conflict at all between a gospel of grace through faith and “obligations” spelled out in a letter. They were simply exercising



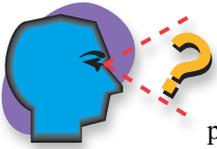


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the authority Jesus gave them “to bind and to loose” (to allow and to forbid—see Matt. 16:19; 18:18), an authority they shared with the elders in the Council of Jerusalem.

4. Since these regions represented the areas where active Christian communities existed, it is clear that the apostles wanted all Christians everywhere to understand the problem and how it was to be solved. This was not just a decision affecting one local church. It was to have universal impact, indicating that the leadership of the infant Church expected uniform obedience and behavior. St. Paul, in his epistles to various churches, always wrote with the assumption that uniform behavior throughout the churches was his goal. That’s why he used phrases like “As in all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:34) when teaching them how to behave in church. There was no room for novelty!
5. Even at this very early and enthusiastic time in the life of the Church, when the gospel was spreading rapidly and making many converts, there was a “chain of command.” A person could not “feel led by the Spirit” to simply launch out with a slightly new twist on things. Just as St. Paul knew he had to go to Jerusalem for endorsement of his teaching, the “Judaizers” should have realized they needed the apostolic “seal of approval” on theirs.
6. The apostles and elders did not hesitate to claim the Holy Spirit’s inspiration for their ruling. For them, this had been a divine-human collaboration. This was not arrogance on their parts. They must have recognized it as an occasion when Jesus had kept His promise to send the Holy Spirit to them to guide them into “all truth” (John 16:12-15).
7. These guidelines were designed for a particular time and place—they were directed to people being converted out of a pagan culture into a community in which Jewish converts had highly developed sensitivities to ritual uncleanness. They remained in place as long as those conditions existed, but as the culture changed over time (fewer Jewish converts in the church), most of them became unnecessary. These guidelines correspond to the precepts of the Catholic Church—specific instructions to the faithful in a particular time which guide them in the path of loving obedience to the dogmas of the Church. As ages change, so do church precepts. They are altered according to whether they continue to serve the function of equipping the saints for a holy life.
8. The Council wanted verbal verification of the written word. Perhaps because Paul and Barnabas had strongly supported the conclusion the Council ultimately embraced, the Council deemed it wise to send eye witnesses along with the letter. This is an interesting detail to take note of. The first Council of apostles and elders didn’t consider a written word *alone* to be sufficient for the transmission of truth. The letter was to be accompanied by human beings who could give living, breathing testimony to the truth. This is the embryonic form of the Catholic Church’s teaching that Divine Revelation comes in two modes: the written word of God and the living tradition of the church. The Church has always maintained that these two voices are necessary for the fullness of Revelation to be preserved (see CCC 80-82). Even at this very early date (before Paul’s letters were written and well before the Gospels were written), there is no concept of a written apostolic word canceling the need for a spoken apostolic word. The passage in 2 Peter is even more revealing about the attitude of the apostles towards the written word. St. Peter acknowledges that some of St. Paul’s writings are hard to understand and that they are subject to misinterpretation and distortion. Note that he says, in vs. 17, that the way to avoid being misled is to avoid the error of “lawless men.” These must be men like the ones the Council made reference to in their letter—ones who do not have the seal of approval of the apostles. The infant Church practiced tight “quality control” on the teaching Christians received: the content had to be *exactly* the same as that which the apostles





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preached and the teachers had to be authorized by the apostles. For St. Peter, it was not enough to have St. Paul's written word. Those words had to be *interpreted* within the tradition of the Church.

9. Judas and Silas, who were prophets, exhorted and encouraged the brethren with many words. They had a fruitful ministry of building up the believers in Antioch, a community which possibly had suffered deeply over the sharp difference of opinions about Gentile circumcision. Theirs was a pastoral mission. This coupling of Christian truth with pastoral direction is a beautiful icon of the meaning of Jesus' words about Truth: "Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free'" (John 8:31-32). The Truth makes men free to live the way God wants them to. It is not truth for its own sake. Truth has a *purpose*. When we submit to it, it enables us to live in the freedom of the sons of God, which means we love Him and each other much better as a result of knowing it. Judas and Silas worked among the Christians to make sure that, ultimately, the ruling of the Council of Jerusalem was not simply "rules" but a door which opened into unity, brotherly love, and *peace* (see vs. 33).

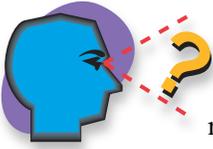
10. a. The Church of the apostles in the New Testament recognized that Christians will benefit from guidelines about how to love God and man perfectly. When our Church "obligates" us to certain behavior it does so in the same spirit as the Council of Jerusalem did it. It deems certain "necessary" behavior to be beneficial to our growth in holiness. We "do well" if we obey these obligations. If we don't, we are in danger, sometimes mortal, of breaking faith with God. In the Catholic Church we are simply continuing the pastoral practice so clearly seen in the book of Acts.

b. The "Judaizers" in Antioch and in Jerusalem were Christians. They were Jewish converts who, presumably, had been baptized. Yet although they were Christians, they had come up with a teaching that was uniquely theirs. It had not been authorized by the apostles ("we gave them no instructions"), and it created confusion and division. This continues to happen among Christians. Those who have been given authority in the Church (the apostles and their successors) have the responsibility of maintaining the truth down through the ages. One way they do this is to use the *imprimatur*, the "seal of approval" that a particular Christian book teaches the truth in a way consistent with apostolic faith. It is a practice aimed at preserving truth and unity in the Church.

c. The Council of Jerusalem sent men along with the letter they wrote to make sure it was understood properly and that it bore the fruit that the writers intended—peace and unity. The ones to whom this letter was sent were Christian people. They had the Holy Spirit, which they received at their baptism. Yet they still needed people with the apostles' authority to make sure they understood and received the letter as worthy of obedience. Apparently the leaders of the New Testament Church recognized the possibility that even a letter written by the apostles could be misinterpreted (think especially of the passage from 2 Peter) or not applied properly. Catholics continue this practice of the Council of Jerusalem by looking to the successors of the apostles (the Pope and bishops in communion with him) for the interpretation and application of the Scriptures.

d. The Council of Jerusalem set down certain "necessary" behaviors, some of which are no longer binding on us today (for example, we are no longer concerned about eating meat that has some blood in it). Circumstances change through the ages that will make obsolete or ineffective guidelines which, in another age, succeeded in their purpose of strengthening Christians in their lives of holiness. The reason it had once been a sin to eat meat on Friday is because the Church had regarded that kind of fast as a "necessary" behavior in order to bring about a deep identification with Jesus in His sufferings, just as the Church once had





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regarded eating meat with blood in it as a sin against brotherly love. Vatican II recognized that the practice of abstaining from meat every Friday had lost its meaning for many Catholics, so it reduced the number of those days of fasting, while at the same time emphasizing the need to catechize Catholics more effectively about the reasons for fasting and its practical help in the life of holiness. This change in necessary behavior issued from the pastoral wisdom of the Church, just as the original requirement to fast did and just as the requirements of the Council of Jerusalem did. Some of the conditions of how Catholic Christians can “do well” change over the centuries but not the necessity of being guided in their lives by the successors of the apostles. They still exercise the authority “to bind and to loose” for our good and the good of the Church.

e. The Council of Jerusalem wanted all Christian churches everywhere to receive its teaching and put it into practice. They realized that without some kind of central control, there was always the potential for Christians to divide from each other over questions of truth. The Catholic Church continues to maintain this kind of uniformity of truth and practice. The Church does allow for diversity in liturgy (as evidenced by the many different rites throughout the world) and in ways to live out our Christian calling (as evidenced by the wide variety of religious orders with distinctive charisms). However, the decision as to whether a practice is open to diversity is one that only the Church can make.

