

LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

INTRODUCTION PART I--SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Through the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Church teaches the fullness and the perfection of the divine revelation received from Jesus Christ. In the document on Revelation we read: "The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away, and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ch.I,sec.4). Within the same document we read that the Church's understanding of revelation is not static but is in a state of continuous growth in breadth and depth (See Ch.II,sec.8).

Writing around 180 A.D. Irenaeus reflects the wisdom of nearly a hundred and fifty years when he teaches us:

In Deuteronomy, Moses says to the people: *"The Lord God granted you a covenant on Horeb; it was not to your fathers but to you that he gave it."* Why, then, not to the fathers? Because *"the law is not intended for the upright"* and the fathers were upright men who had the virtues prescribed by the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) already written in their minds and hearts. They loved the God who created them and did no injury to their neighbor. Thus they needed no written law...

...God spoke the words of the Decalogue to all alike. These words apply to us today for they were not abrogated but extended and deepened by God coming in the flesh.

God indeed gave other precepts as well through Moses, but these were precepts proper to a time of servitude. These precepts were done away with in the new covenant of freedom, which taught men to know God as their Father, to love him wholeheartedly, and to follow his Word as faithful disciples (Against Heresies - Bk.4).

A clear understanding of the relationship of Christianity to the Jewish Torah resulted only after a long, painful struggle within the minds and hearts of the

earliest Christians. This struggle surfaced as the first major internal crisis faced by the infant Christian Church. Upon this crisis depended the catholicity of the Church.

The contents of Paul's letter to the Galatians concerned itself with this Church crisis. To better understand the contents of Paul's letter let us briefly review the background situation that stimulated Paul to write such an emotionally charged apologia and defense of Christian Revelation.

THE COVENANT OF LAW

God established a Covenant with Israel at Mt. Horeb (also identified as Mt. Sinai). Yahweh established this covenant upon obedience to particular laws. We find the essential precepts of the Mt. Sinai Covenant expressed in the Decalogue found in Exodus 20:2-17 and again in Deuteronomy 5:6-21. A Decalogue of ritual laws can also be found in Exodus 34:17-27, and a code of holiness detailed in chapters 12 through 26 in Leviticus. When all was said and done there existed over six hundred covenant laws. Through the years famous rabbis added their "hedge around the law"--numerous precepts, customs, and traditions designed to protect the law.

The covenant law was called the Torah. Strictly speaking, the Torah was the first five books of the Old Testament. Later the word was applied loosely to the entire Old Testament. The Covenant made at Horeb had indeed, in the words of Simon Peter, become *"a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear"* (Acts 15:10).

THE COVENANT OF CIRCUMCISION

The Covenant made with Israel built on the more ancient covenant established with Abraham, the forefather of Israel. Yahweh declared to Abraham, *"This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you that you must keep: every male among you shall be circumcised...that shall be the mark of the covenant between you and me...if a male is uncircumcised such a one shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant (Gen.17:7,10,14).*

We see in Leviticus 12:3 that all male Israelite children must be circumcised on the eighth day after their birth in order to share in the covenant promises made to Abraham. God established a covenant of blessing with Abraham. The

covenant and the promises made to Abraham were neither conditional nor temporary. It was an everlasting reward for Abraham's faith and love.

This was not true of the Covenant with Israel, which was conditioned upon the continual obedience of Israel to the Torah. Through Moses, God foretold that these laws would remain in force until the coming of a new Moses (see Deuteronomy 18:15,17-19).

A NEW COVENANT

The prophets of Israel foretold the establishment of a New Covenant. Jeremiah prophesied, *"The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and house of Judah"* (Jer.31:31). The prophet Ezekiel writes of the New Covenant, *"I will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them... I will make with them a covenant of peace; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them...and put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling shall be with them; I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Ez.11:19; 37:25-27).*

The Twelve Apostles along with other disciples experienced the entire public ministry of Jesus Christ. They heard His teachings and witnessed His deeds. They became the repositories of Christian Revelation. After the death and resurrection of Jesus and the reception of the Holy Spirit, their former experience with Jesus became a well of infinite depth from which the Apostles constantly drew divine wisdom and gained spiritual insight into the mysteries enacted within the life of Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit they began to penetrate the significance of His symbolic actions. They came to realize that a New Covenant had been inaugurated at the Last Supper (see Mt.26:27-28 and Lk.22:20).

We see from Luke's presentation in the Acts that the early Christian Community recognized the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon believers as the fruit of the New Covenant, inaugurated by the Lord Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection from the dead. The Church interpreted the coming of the Holy Spirit and its effects as the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy: *"Then afterward I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind."* (Joel 3:1) Joel went on to prophesy, *"Then everyone shall be rescued who calls on the name of the Lord"* (Jl. 3:5).

Peter makes clear "the name" through which salvation comes. *"This Jesus is*

'the stone rejected by you the builders which has become the cornerstone.' There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name in the whole world given to men by which we are to be saved" (Acts 4:11-12). Peter sufficiently interpreted what it meant to call upon the name of the Lord, but how did the early Church interpret "everyone"? Peter evidently taught Jesus Christ to be the Savior of the world when he said, "There is no other name in the whole world given to men by which we are to be saved" (Acts 4:12).

THE MOSAIC LAW AND THE NEW COVENANT

It was clear from the Old Testament that there would come a day when salvation would be offered to all mankind (see Is.56:3-7). How universal salvation would be applied to the non-Jew was not clear to the early Church. The Church had begun as a Jewish congregation, accepting Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. Other than to baptize and to teach, the Lord left no instructions and gave no blueprints as to how the Church was to move from being a provincial body to becoming a Church for all nations embracing all mankind.

What was the relationship of the Mosaic law to the New Covenant? The Scriptures reveal some steps taken by the Church to clarify the position of the Mosaic law in the Christian Community. The Church realized that in some way the New Covenant fulfilled the Old Covenant (see Mt.5:17-20). The fulfillment of the Mosaic law is not seen in its discontinuation but in its perfection within the New Covenant. We see an example of this when our Lord reduces all the commandments of the Old Testament to love of God and love of neighbor: *"On these two commandments," Jesus teaches, "the whole law is based, and the prophets as well" (Mt.22:40).* The Christian Community begins to understand that as the spirit of the New Covenant differs from the spirit of the Old Covenant, the form through which the spirit expresses itself must also be different. People do not pour new wine into old wineskins. It begins to question the enforcement of certain Jewish laws and customs. It begins, at least, to realize that the Lord had abrogated certain external laws and customs (see Mt.9:17; 15:10-20; Mk.7:19).

Jesus certainly taught *"salvation is from the Jews" (see Jn.4:22).* Did this imply Gentiles must become Jews in order to share in the salvation offered through the New Covenant? Many early Christians believed this; insisted upon it. They maintained Gentiles must be circumcised and observe the Mosaic law in order to be saved.

The history of the Church confirms that it is often only a crisis of contention and conflict that forces the truths of Christian Revelation into the Church's conscious awareness. If religious complacency ever existed in the Jerusalem Christian Community it ended with the ministry and martyrdom of St. Stephen. Stephen was one of the Seven Hellenistic Jewish Christians--those Jews born and reared in Gentile cities beyond Palestine. Because of their social environment they were much more open to communication with the Gentiles than were the Palestinian Jews.

As a Christian, Stephen dared to look down the road of Judaism, where he beheld a dead end. He realized that Christians had another road, a further road to travel far beyond Judaism. He became a harbinger sounding "the death knell of the Mosaic ordinances." Stephen echoed anew Jesus' prediction of the demise of temple worship. He made enemies. not the least of whom was Saul of Tarsus. Accusing Stephen of heresy before the Jewish Sanhedrin, the accusers charged that he *"never stops making statements against the holy place and the law. We have heard him claim that Jesus the Nazorean will destroy this place and change the customs"* (Acts 6:13b-14a).

After the martyrdom of Stephen a persecution arose aimed especially at the Hellenistic Jews. Many fled Palestine. The persecution created circumstances out of which a Christian Community, largely Gentiles, would arise in the city of Antioch.

PHILIP THE EVANGELIST

Philip, a companion of Stephen and one of the Seven ordained by the Apostles, took the first positive step toward receiving non-Jews into the Church. Philip fled to Samaria and preached the Gospel to the Samaritans; he received many of them into the Church. Peter and John came from Jerusalem and approved Philip's ministry by imparting the Sacrament of Confirmation to the converted Samaritans. In the case of the Samaritans, even though the Jews considered them heretics and half-breeds, they were already circumcised. With the Samaritans it was not a matter of bringing uncircumcised people into the Christian Community. However Philip went on from Samaria to encounter the Ethiopian eunuch on the Gaza road. Although the eunuch believed in Judaism, he was impeded by his physical infirmity from officially becoming a Jew. When Philip baptized the eunuch, he received the first non-circumcised person into the Church. The reception of the eunuch into the Church could have been viewed as a rare exception, fulfilling the prophesy of Isaiah 56:4-5.

PETER BAPTIZES CORNELIUS

Simon Peter clearly stated the Jewish attitude concerning relations with Gentiles. Addressing the centurion Cornelius and his household Peter said, *"You must know that it is not proper for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or to have dealings with him"* (Acts 10:38). Although the Levitical law did not forbid Jews to eat with non-Jews, it became a corollary of their law that to do so would result in ritual impurity because pagans would not observe their dietary and ritual laws. It will help to understand the problem at hand to realize the Jews made no distinction between impurity that resulted from either moral or ritual prohibitions. Impurity, regardless of its nature, severed one's relationship with God. The Jews made no distinction between a bodily impurity and a spiritual impurity when it came to union with God.

To declare that a Gentile could be accepted into the Church without circumcision was revolutionary, with repercussions on every level of Jewish life. Such a belief was not readily acceptable in the Jerusalem Christian Community. Its practice became a major source of contention and divisiveness within the Community. It produced the first major theological crisis within the Church.

While in Joppa, a city by the Mediterranean Sea, Simon Peter, the recognized leader of the Church, had a vision that altered the policy of the Church. Peter beheld within the vision a large net coming down from heaven filled with creatures forbidden by Leviticus for Jews to eat. A heavenly voice commanded Peter to kill and eat these creatures. The command shocked Peter. Not being a person given to blind, unquestionable obedience Peter refused, giving his moral reasons for his refusal, *"Sir, it is unthinkable! I have never eaten anything unclean or impure in my life"* (Acts 10:14). The heavenly voice replied to Peter, *"What God has purified you are not to call unclean"* (Acts 10:15). The same vision was repeated three times.

Peter pondered over the contents of the vision and wondered what it signified. His consternation was short lived. Concomitant with Peter's vision, in Caesarea, a port city north of Joppa, a certain Roman centurion named Cornelius had also received a vision. Cornelius was commanded to send some men to Joppa to summon Simon Peter to his home. On arriving at the house of Cornelius, Peter found him gathered with members of his family and a group of close friends, waiting to hear what Simon Peter had to say to them. Cornelius humbly said to Peter, *"All of us stand before God at this moment to*

hear whatever directives the Lord has given you" (Acts 10:33).

An extraordinary event occurred while Peter spoke to this assembly of non-Jews. *"The Holy Spirit descended upon all who were listening to Peter's message" (Acts 10:44).* It was an extraordinary event because, normally, the reception of the Holy Spirit followed Christian Baptism (See Acts 2:38; 19:4-7). What was even more surprising was the fact that these recipients of the Holy Spirit were all uncircumcised people. This event implied a by-pass of Judaism--something up to now never envisioned by the Christian Community. We are told, *"The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were surprised that the gift of the Holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, whom they could hear speaking in tongues and glorifying God" (Acts 10:45-46a).*

From that extraordinary event, Peter interpreted that Jewish circumcision was not a prerequisite for Christian Baptism. *"So he gave orders that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:48).* They had received the Holy Spirit--the Fruit of the New Covenant--they certainly should be formally received into the New Covenant.

After the baptism we are told, *"They asked him to stay with them for a few days" (Acts 10:48).* Peter's staying in the home of a Gentile and eating with them signified that the Church had taken a step toward catholicity--toward a realization that it was a new wine to be contained in new wine skins. Peter's action had sown a revolutionary seed within the Christian Community that would reap a harvest of conflict but which, when subsided, would leave a Catholic Church--a house of prayer for all the nations.

**LETTER TO THE GALATIANS
INTRODUCTION-PART ONE**

**SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS
SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK (PLEASE MEMORIZE)**

"HOW TRUE IT IS THAT GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY. RATHER, THE MAN OF ANY NATION WHO FEARS GOD AND ACTS UPRIGHTLY IS ACCEPTABLE TO HIM." --ACTS 10:34b-35

FIRST DAY: Read the Summary through The Covenant of Circumcision; Exodus 20:2-17; 34:17-27; Deuteronomy 5:6-21.

- 1. What do you understand by the Church teaching that we "await no further new public revelation" but "there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down"?**
- 2. How would you briefly describe the covenants God made with Abraham and Moses?**
- 3. In what way did the covenant made with Abraham become a foundation for the covenant made at Horeb?**
- 4. What does Deuteronomy 18:15-19 teach us about the Mosaic law?**

SECOND DAY: Read Summary: A New Covenant; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 11:19-20; Joel 3:1-5; Matthew 26:27-28; Luke 22:20.

- 1. How would you briefly describe the New Covenant foretold by the three prophets?**
- 2. In what way do you see it differing from the Mosaic Covenant?**
- 3. What do we learn about the new covenant from Mt.26:27-28 and Lk.22:20?**
- 4. How did the early Church interpret Joel 3:1-5?**

THIRD DAY: Read Summary: The Mosaic Law and The New Covenant; Isaiah 56:1-8; Matthew 5:17-20; 15:1-20; Mark 7:19.

- 1. What does the reading from Isaiah imply about salvation?**

- 2. What do you understand by the term "universal salvation"?**
- 3. Generally, how did the very early Church view its relationship with the Mosaic law and the Old Covenant?**
- 4. Mark and Matthew give a different interpretation to Jesus' teaching. What does this tell us?**

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary: The Role of St. Stephen; Acts 6:1-15, 7:54-60.

- 1. How would you describe the difference between a Palestinian and Hellenist Jew?**
- 2. What did Stephen foresee concerning the future of Judaism?**
- 3. Why did the Sanhedrin put him to death?**
- 4. What effect did his ministry have upon the Church?**

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary: Philip The Evangelist; Acts 8:4-40.

- 1. What effect did Stephen's death have upon Philip?**
- 2. What was the significance of Philip's work in Samaria?**
- 3. What was so extraordinary about Philip baptizing the Eunuch?**
- 4. What does the ministry of Philip teach you about evangelizing?**

SIXTH DAY: Read Summary: Simon Peter Baptizes Cornelius; Acts 10:1-48; Acts 2:38; 19:4-7.

- 1. What was the attitude of the early Church members towards non-Jews?**
- 2. What did Peter and the Christian Community learn from his vision in Joppa?**
- 3. What was so extraordinary about the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the household of Cornelius?**
- 4. What do you understand by the Church becoming "catholic"?**