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## A Church of Converts: Widening the Circle of Jesus' Followers

### Major Concepts

- A. **The Original Circle:** The church began with the twelve Apostles and other disciples who knew Jesus personally and eventually came to recognize him as the Messiah. At the Last Supper, in a ritual meal that was to be repeated in remembrance of him, Jesus showed the Apostles how they were to serve one another and share the word of God. Jesus' death on the cross crushed his followers, but the Resurrection and the gift of Jesus' Spirit at Pentecost turned them into courageous heralds of the Good News. Thus, Pentecost truly marked the beginning of what we now know as "the church."
- B. **The Circle Expands:** At Pentecost, the Apostles experienced a new, deeper conversion to Jesus. They also proclaimed God's deeds convincingly and baptized many persons in Jesus' name. Jesus' original followers, and those baptized by the Apostles at Pentecost, did not consider themselves as converting from Judaism but simply as following Jesus' Way. However, because the Apostles and other disciples claimed that Jesus was the Messiah, they ran into trouble with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and experienced persecution.
- C. **Paul:** Saul, whom we know as Paul, was a devout Pharisee who initially saw Jesus' followers as blasphemers. Saul persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem, committing many to prison. He then set out to arrest any Christians he found in Damascus. On the way there, however, a dramatic encounter with the Risen Jesus left Saul blind and unable to eat or drink. After being cured and experiencing conversion, Saul went into the desert to reflect on his experience. When he returned, Saul was even more zealous in spreading Jesus' message than he had once been in persecuting Jesus' followers.
- D. **Gentile Converts:** Samaritans and Gentiles began accepting the Good News, but the Jewish followers of Jesus in the Jerusalem community objected to the baptizing of Gentiles because they did not follow the Jewish Law. Meanwhile, Paul began preaching to his fellow Jews and was persecuted. Paul and Barnabas later had success in ministering to the Jewish-Gentile community in Antioch, so they undertook a missionary journey to more unfamiliar territory. They were rejected by most Jews, sometimes violently. But many Gentiles accepted Jesus, and mixed communities of Jewish and Gentile Christians soon formed their own worship groups.

- E. Crisis over the Jewish Law:** On a visit to Antioch, a group of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem rekindled the long-standing controversy over whether all Christians should be required to observe the entire Jewish Law. To settle the question, the Antioch Christians sent Paul and Barnabas to talk to the leaders in Jerusalem. As a result, the Council of Jerusalem (which later came to be considered the first official gathering of church leaders to resolve questions about religious practice) decided that followers of Jesus did not have to observe the entire Jewish Law.

## Concept A: The Original Circle

The church began with the twelve Apostles and other disciples who knew Jesus personally and eventually came to recognize him as the Messiah. At the Last Supper, in a ritual meal that was to be repeated in remembrance of him, Jesus showed the Apostles how they were to serve one another and share the word of God. Jesus' death on the cross crushed his followers, but the Resurrection and the gift of Jesus' Spirit at Pentecost turned them into courageous heralds of the Good News. Thus, Pentecost truly marked the beginning of what we now know as "the church." (Pages 25–30 of the student text)



### Review Questions: The Original Circle

**Question:** Who was Stephen, what group executed him, and for what offense?

**Answer:** Stephen was a deacon in the community of Jesus' followers. He was executed by the Sanhedrin (the supreme council of the Jews) for supposed blasphemy—for proclaiming that God did not need a temple in which to be worshiped; that Jesus was the Righteous One, the Messiah; and that the Sanhedrin had become Jesus' murderers.

**Question:** Who was part of the original circle of Jesus' followers, and what was their religious heritage?

**Answer:** The original circle of Jesus' followers consisted of the twelve Apostles and other disciples who knew Jesus personally. They had a religious heritage of Judaism.

**Question:** Describe Peter and his role in the formation of the church.

**Answer:** Peter was an illiterate, hot-tempered, married fisherman from Galilee. He was also the first to be called by Jesus, who later named Peter as the "rock" the church would be built upon. At Pentecost, Peter preached so powerfully to the crowd that three thousand persons chose to be baptized in Jesus' name, and Peter became a central figure for Jesus' followers.

**Question:** What change did the Pentecost event bring about in the Apostles?

**Answer:** The experience of Pentecost turned timid, discouraged followers of Jesus into confident, zealous heralds of the Good News.





## Text Activities: The Original Circle

### Activity 1

Using a question-and-answer format, write an imaginary interview with someone who stoned Stephen. Make sure you examine the person's feelings.

### Activity 2

If Peter walked into your classroom and you were allowed to submit two questions to him, what two questions would you ask? Write these down.



### Activity 3

Have you ever been timid or scared but then gained the courage you needed to face what confronted you? Describe in writing what brought on the change in you.



## Additional Activities: The Original Circle

### Stephen's Speech Before the Sanhedrin

If you have a student who is a good dramatic reader, or if you have access to a good recording of the Christian Testament, your students may benefit from hearing Stephen's entire speech before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1–53). The speech is complex, and Stephen's accusations against the Jewish establishment are made in the context of an overview of Jewish history from the time of Abraham and Sarah. As your students listen to the speech, instruct them to focus on the aspects of the speech that would enrage Stephen's Jewish audience. He begins by recalling the all-important promise God made to Abraham (7:5). He goes on to cite the first and second rejections of Moses by the Jews (7:27–29, 39). Stephen charges that the Jewish establishment has confined God to the Temple, thus separating God from the people (7:49–50). Finally, he accuses the Jewish establishment of having persecuted and killed the prophets "who foretold the coming of the Righteous One" (7:52) and of being generally unfaithful to God's promises (7:53).

Direct the students to list the parts of Stephen's speech that probably most angered the Jewish leadership and to offer reasons for the leadership's anger. Then raise questions like these:

- Would the Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem community have understood why Stephen's speech so enraged the Jewish authorities?
- Do you see any similarities between the charges leveled against Stephen and those leveled against Jesus?
- Can you think of a modern instance in which someone's criticism of the established order enraged those who hold power?

### Persecution Now

The student text contains several contemporary examples of people who have suffered and died because of their commitment to Christianity (see p. 27). Instruct the students to update the examples by completing one of the following assignments:

1. Using recent periodicals, research instances of people being persecuted for their actions as Christians: for serving the poor, praying in public, preaching, opposing environmentally destructive practices, helping homeless people, and so on. Then write a story—much like the story of Stephen that begins the textbook chapter—based on the persecutee's encounter with her or his persecutors.
2. Think of an instance when you witnessed someone being persecuted, picked on, yelled at, rejected, or even beaten for holding on to a positive belief. Then write a story of the persecution—much like the story of Stephen that begins this chapter of the text.

Display the news stories on a bulletin board in your classroom as a reminder to all that people are still willing to suffer for their commitment to the Reign of God.

### Images of Peter

Explore with the students their images of Saint Peter. Perhaps the most common image is Peter at the gates of heaven. Maybe some of the students can tell a joke or two (there are hundreds) about Peter at the gates or find a cartoon based on the same image. Determine the accuracy of the popular images of Peter by comparing them with images of Peter found in the Scriptures. To gain a sense of scriptural images of Peter, direct the class to read some of the following passages from the Bible:

- Mark 1:16–18 (Peter and Andrew are called by Jesus.)
- Matt. 8:14–15 (Jesus cures Peter's mother-in-law.)
- Matt. 14:28–31 (Peter attempts to walk on water.)
- Matt. 16:21–23 (Peter is scolded by Jesus.)
- Mark 14:37 (Peter falls asleep at Gethsemane.)
- John 18:10–11 (Peter assaults one of the people who arrests Jesus.)
- Acts 2:14–36 (Peter speaks at Pentecost.)

### Dramatic Reading: Pentecost

If time permits, invite the students to read the whole account of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–41). It makes a wonderful dramatic reading. If you have students who speak multiple languages, it may be effective to ask each of them to read aloud a section of the speech in a different language. Students who have a native language other than English may be able to shed some light on the experience of the crowd during Pentecost. Ask these students what it is like to hear God's word in their own language in a predominantly English-speaking country. Does it make the word more accessible? more powerful?

## Concept B: The Circle Expands

At Pentecost, the Apostles experienced a new, deeper conversion to Jesus. They also proclaimed God's deeds convincingly and baptized many persons in Jesus' name. Jesus' original followers, and those baptized by the Apostles at Pentecost, did not consider themselves as converting from Judaism but simply as following Jesus' Way. However, because the Apostles and other disciples claimed that Jesus was the Messiah, they ran into trouble with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and experienced persecution. (Pages 31–33 of the student text)



### Review Questions: The Circle Expands

**Question:** Explain how the first-to-be-baptized followers of Jesus viewed their relationship to Judaism.

**Answer:** Those baptized by the Apostles at Pentecost did not think of themselves as converting from Judaism to a new religion; rather, they saw themselves as still within Judaism but following Jesus' Way.

**Question:** Why were Jesus' followers in trouble with the Jewish authorities? How were the followers persecuted?

**Answer:** Jesus' followers got into trouble with the Jewish authorities for proclaiming that Jesus was alive and that they had seen, talked with, and even eaten with him—all this after everyone knew that he had been executed. Also, followers claimed that Jesus was the Messiah and that they were able to perform cures in his name. The majority of Christians were forced to flee from Jerusalem into the countryside, but some were imprisoned and some were executed.



### Text Activities: The Circle Expands

#### Activity 4

Find out about a group within Christianity or Catholicism that sees itself as a movement within the religion, not as a new religion. In writing, compare that group with the first Christians.



#### Activity 5

List some groups in today's society that seem threatening but toward whom it might be wise to follow Gamaliel's advice on how to react to the early Christians.

#### Activity 6

Has anyone you know been persecuted, even in little ways, for being Catholic or Christian or for trying to act in a Christlike way? In a paragraph, describe what has happened.



## Additional Activities: The Circle Expands

### The Early Christian Community

The following passages can help your students learn more about the early Christian community:

- Acts 3:1–10 (Peter's cure of a lame man)
- Acts 4:23–31 (Peter and John praying together under persecution)
- Acts 5:1–11 (the selfishness of Ananias and Sapphira)
- Acts 5:12–16 (the meetings in Solomon's portico)

Use these passages as the basis for a discussion of the following question:

- How does the life of the early Christian community compare or contrast with contemporary parish life as you know it?

### Is It a Cult or a Religion?

Numerous cults are flourishing today. Most are offshoots of mainstream religions. Many people fear the powerful influence that these cults have, especially on young people who are looking for meaning in their life and have not found it in traditional churches. In order for the students to appreciate the position of the Jews toward the early Christian community, discuss these questions with them:

- What are some of the religious cults that you have heard about?
- What do most people think about religious cults—for example, the “Moonies”? What kind of comments do people make about them?
- How would your parents and friends treat you if you joined a cult?
- What is similar about the reaction of the Jews to the early Christians and our reaction to members of cults?
- Saul's teacher, the Pharisee Gamaliel, told the Sanhedrin to leave the Christians alone. He reasoned that if the Christians were following the directives of God, the Sanhedrin would be opposing God if they fought the Christians. On the other hand, if Jesus was not the Messiah, his followers would eventually disband and die out. How would you evaluate this approach to dealing with contemporary cults? Why don't most members of established churches follow Gamaliel's line of reasoning?

The topic of cults has many complexities. If you think that your students would profit from a continuation of this discussion, here is an additional approach. The University Religious Council of the University of California at Berkeley developed this list of *characteristics of cults*:

- a. a leader who claims divinity or a special relationship with God
- b. a leader who is the sole judge of a member's actions or faith
- c. totalitarian governance
- d. total control over the daily lives of members
- e. exclusivity and isolation
- f. development of deep emotional dependence
- g. prohibition of critical analysis and independent thinking
- h. utilization of methods of ego destruction and mind control
- i. exploitation of a member's finances
- j. underemployment and exploitative working conditions

Using this list with your students, illustrate in discussion the differences between Christianity and cults. For example, Jesus taught us to judge our own actions and to be responsible. The governance of Jesus was nonexistent; Jesus



wanted his disciples to be free to choose. Rather than being exclusive and isolated, Jesus and his followers welcomed everyone. While the Holy Spirit is with us always, our uniqueness is never suppressed; the disciples were not emotional dependents. In short, Jesus' Way did not fit the characteristics of a modern cult. Nevertheless, from the Jewish viewpoint, early Christians were viewed in much the same way as we view members of cults today.

### Guest Speaker: A Permanent Deacon

Invite a permanent deacon to discuss his role in the church today. Ask him to describe how his function is historically different from that of priests or bishops. Other subjects you could ask the deacon to address include the following:

- Why has the permanent diaconate been restored? Aren't many of the deacons' jobs being done by other people now?
- Why did you want to become a deacon?
- What has being a deacon meant for your life as a husband (if married) and a professional?

## Concept C: Paul

Saul, whom we know as Paul, was a devout Pharisee who initially saw Jesus' followers as blasphemers. Saul persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem, committing many to prison. He then set out to arrest any Christians he found in Damascus. On the way there, however, a dramatic encounter with the Risen Jesus left Saul blind and unable to eat or drink. After being cured and experiencing conversion, Saul went into the desert to reflect on his experience. When he returned, Saul was even more zealous in spreading Jesus' message than he had once been in persecuting Jesus' followers. (Pages 34–35 if the student text)



### Review Questions: Paul

**Question:** What were Paul's connections to the Gentile world?

**Answer:** Paul enjoyed the privileges of Roman citizenship; his everyday language was Greek; and having grown up in a major trading city (Tarsus), he was comfortable with many Greek and Roman ways.

**Question:** Briefly describe Paul's conversion.

**Answer:** On the way to Damascus, Saul was knocked off his feet by a light from heaven, and he heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul asked who was speaking to him and learned that it was Jesus, who then directed Saul to go into Damascus. After three days in which Saul was unable to see, eat, or drink, a man named Ananias came to Saul, laid his hands on Saul's face, and restored his sight. Saul also received spiritual insight at his healing. And acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, he received baptism from Ananias as well.



## A Text Activity: Paul



### Activity 7

If God knocked you off your feet and told you to reform your ways, what aspects of yourself would you need to change? Describe these in one page.



## Additional Activities: Paul

### Interview: Conversion

Your students might find it interesting to interview a recent convert to Catholicism. Contacts might be made through catechumenate programs in their parish. The intent of the interview would be to find out what the process of conversion was like and what motivated the person to consider conversion. Questions could be developed in class before the students do their interview. (Some characteristics of conversion are included in the activity "Was Paul 'Born Again'?" These can be used for developing questions.) If the students have few contacts, interviews could be done by groups of students, or maybe a recent convert could visit your class.

### Was Paul "Born Again"?

A common expression used to describe a conversion experience is "born again." Often the definition of this expression is quite subjective and vague. Direct the students to do some research—in magazines and newspapers, and through interviews and discussions—to find out what people mean when they say that they are "born again." Ask your students to consider these questions:

- What characteristics would you expect someone who is "born again" to have?
- How might you expect this person to be different after the conversion experience?
- If someone told you that he or she was "born again" in Jesus, how would you expect that person to act?

As points of reference, consider the following characteristics that are commonly used to determine the validity of someone's conversion:

1. The moment of conversion is preceded by much serious thinking.
2. The decision to convert is made freely; no coercion is applied, neither overt nor subtle.
3. After conversion, a noticeable change of heart makes converts more open to loving God, others, and themselves.
4. All of these changes lead to a new identity.
5. Christians appreciate that humans are made in God's image; thus, they promote and preserve what is most life-giving.
6. Converts build new loving relationships, even with those who are hard to love.

Saul's conversion was very dramatic, but for most of us, conversion is a lifelong process. People are not necessarily converted just because they claim to be "born again." The process is more complicated and more gradual in most cases, and it is important to discourage students from an oversimplified understanding of this important concept.

## Concept D: Gentile Converts

Samaritans and Gentiles began accepting the Good News, but the Jewish followers of Jesus in the Jerusalem community objected to the baptizing of Gentiles because they did not follow the Jewish Law. Meanwhile, Paul began preaching to his fellow Jews and was persecuted. Paul and Barnabas later had success in ministering to the Jewish-Gentile community in Antioch, so they undertook a missionary journey to more unfamiliar territory. They were rejected by most Jews, sometimes violently. But many Gentiles accepted Jesus, and mixed communities of Jewish and Gentile Christians soon formed their own worship groups. (Pages 36–39 of the student text)



### Review Questions: Gentile Converts

**Question:** Why did Peter's community in Jerusalem object to his baptizing Gentiles?

**Answer:** Even if Gentiles accepted belief in the One God, they were not the Chosen People and did not follow the Jewish Law. Most Jewish Christians believed that Jesus, the Messiah, had come to the Jews, and that followers of Jesus were to observe the Law.

**Question:** How did the Antioch Christian community differ in makeup from the other Christian communities?

**Answer:** The Christian community in Antioch was a mix of Jews and Gentiles, not all of whom observed the Jewish Law, whereas other Christian communities were almost solely Jewish and observed the Law. Followers in the Antioch community were also different enough from the rest of the Jewish population that Romans and other outsiders called them *Christians* to distinguish them from Jews.

**Question:** How did the Antioch Christians express solidarity with the church in Jerusalem?

**Answer:** When news of a crop failure in Jerusalem reached Antioch, the Antioch community took up a collection of money and sent Paul and Barnabas to deliver it to the Jerusalem Christians, who were not only persecuted but in danger of starvation.

**Question:** On Paul's first missionary journey, what kind of reception did Paul and Barnabas receive from Jews and from Gentiles?

**Answer:** Many Jews did not accept Paul's preaching or Jesus as the Messiah, and some forbade Paul to speak in their synagogues again. A few other Jews became violent and drove Paul and Barnabas out of town.

The Gentiles who accepted Jesus were relieved at not having to accept the many laws that their Jewish neighbors followed, and Paul and Barnabas were not met with violence by the Gentiles.



### Text Activities: Gentile Converts

#### Activity 8

List at least five clubs or other groups that have rules restricting who can join them. Next, write down two probable reasons that each group restricts membership and your feelings about these reasons. Last, react in writing to this statement: *The Christian community should welcome all people.*



### Activity 9

Most parishes take up special collections for relief agencies, food pantries, shelters, and so on. Write an answer to this question: *Is giving to these collections an essential part of being a Christian? Why or why not?*

### Activity 10

Paul understood Gentiles even though he was a Jew, so he was effective as a missionary in Gentile communities. Write about someone you know who understands a certain group and is effective with them as a leader even though he or she is not one of them.



## Additional Activities: Gentile Converts

### A View of Exclusivity

One way of comprehending the desire for exclusivity among the Jewish Christians is to see it in terms of nationalism. Point out to the students that many of the early encounters with preaching the Good News to non-Jews occurred outside Judea. In Jaffa, Peter brought Tabitha back to life, and in Caesarea, he baptized Roman Gentiles. Philip preached to the Samaritans. Have the students locate Judea, Jaffa, Caesarea, and Samaria on a map.

Next, divide the class into groups of four or five students each. Distribute the following case to the groups and ask them to analyze it.

- Congresswoman Hernandez is caught in an agonizing dilemma. In two days she will have to vote on a new immigration law that will severely restrict immigration from other countries. Congresswoman Hernandez knows that if this law had been in effect thirty years ago, her own parents would have been refused admission into the United States. Also, she believes in the ideals of this country and in the tradition of welcoming immigrants who are trying to find a better life. On the other hand, many of her constituents want to stop the flow of immigrants because, at least initially, some immigrants live on welfare, populate poor areas of cities, and change the ethnic balance of cities. Ms. Hernandez knows that the United States cannot accept all who wish to enter, but she wonders if such a restrictive law is right.

Follow up with this question:

- If you were Congresswoman Hernandez, how would you vote, and why would you vote that way?

After the groups have had enough time to come to a consensus about the case, ask each group to report its stand and the reasons to support it. This discussion should reveal the strong pull toward exclusivity that we have but also the values of openness and inclusion. The Jews did not have a tradition of including new people in their religion. Thus, if people in a nation with a tradition of including immigrants want to make exclusivity laws, how much more would a people who were the Chosen Race want to maintain their special identity? This conflict was central to the development of the church. *After all, imagine what might have happened if Peter had not had his vision and the Gentiles had been excluded from membership? Would most of us be Christians today?*



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### Research Reports: Prisoners of Conscience

Paul had to flee from those who would have thrown him in jail or maybe even killed him. Peter escaped from prison with the help of an angel. We assume that people are in prison because they did something wrong, and of course, that is generally true. However, the plight of prisoners of conscience has been documented quite often in recent years. To make your students aware that many people are held in prisons around the world not for doing wrong but for fighting for justice, assign them to research the status of prisoners of conscience in countries such as South Africa, the Philippines, Guatemala, China, Israel, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and India. When the students have completed their research, have them each give a report on their findings. Perhaps a "Prisoners of Conscience" bulletin board could become a regular feature of your classroom. Some useful resources for this sort of information are *The Catholic Almanac*, *National Catholic Reporter*, and *Sojourners*.

Then bring the issue closer to home by raising these questions with your students:

- Are there prisoners of conscience in the United States or Canada?
- Have people's stance on nuclear arms, the environment, or human rights ever led them to commit illegal actions for the cause of justice, peace, or a better earth?
- Based on what you know about the early Christians, is it acceptable for a Christian's conscience to be in conflict with the rules of civil authorities?

It is important for the students to understand that sometimes it is a moral imperative to confront immoral practices.

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### Calling Christians to Charity

Here is an assignment about contributing to the welfare of others:

- Using at least two passages from Paul's epistles, write a homily that he might have given to the people of Antioch to encourage them to contribute to the collection for the Christians of Jerusalem.

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### Research Reports: Plotting Paul's Travels

Direct the students to find Cyprus and Asia Minor on a map. Then divide the class into three teams and tell them to report on one of the following projects:

#### *Team A: Paul's Travels*

- Estimate the approximate distance covered by Paul and Barnabas on their missionary trip.
- Find pictures of boats used during Roman times, boats like those that Paul probably traveled in. How were the boats powered? How safe were they?
- Find pictures of the roads that the Romans built throughout the empire. How were the roads constructed?
- What sort of tents would Paul have made? Why were tents so necessary at this time?

*Team B: Cyprus*

- Report on the island of Cyprus today. What is its ethnic makeup? population? principal source of income? What are its main cities today?
- What sort of terrain did Paul have to cover to get across the island of Cyprus on foot?

*Team C: Turkey*

- Report on Turkey. What is its ethnic makeup? population? principal source of income? What are its main cities today?
- What sort of terrain did Paul have to cover as he traveled through Turkey on foot?

When the teams have completed their research, invite them to report their results to the class.

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### Why Preach to the Jews First?

Although Jesus commissioned the Apostles to spread the Good News “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), his Jewish followers first attempted to spread the Good News among their fellow Jews. Only later did they begin to preach to people who were not of Jewish heritage. It may seem as if the Apostles were disobeying Jesus’ command, but the students will more readily understand why this happened if they consider these questions:

- When you first arrive at a meeting, class, or party, with whom do you associate?
- Why do you first hang around with people you know?
- How do you feel if you go to a party and don’t know anyone?
- Why was it only natural for the Apostles to preach to the Jews first?

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## Concept E: Crisis over the Jewish Law

On a visit to Antioch, a group of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem rekindled the long-standing controversy over whether all Christians should be required to observe the entire Jewish Law. To settle the question, the Antioch Christians sent Paul and Barnabas to talk to the leaders in Jerusalem. As a result, the Council of Jerusalem (which later came to be considered the first official gathering of church leaders to resolve questions about religious practice) decided that followers of Jesus did not have to observe the entire Jewish Law. (Pages 40–43 of the student text)



### Review Questions: Crisis over the Jewish Law

**Question:** What two aspects of the Jewish Law did the Gentile Christians object to following?

**Answer:** In general, Gentile Christians felt that the Jewish Law was too difficult to observe, that there were too many laws, and that the laws did not make sense. In particular, Gentiles objected to (1) the Jewish dietary laws, which forbade the eating of certain foods and forbade Jews from even eating with Gentiles, and (2) the requirement that Gentiles should be circumcised.

**Question:** What was Paul's perspective on the question of whether the Gentile Christians should follow the complete Jewish Law?

**Answer:** Paul felt that although parts of the Jewish Law—like loving God and one's neighbors—were valid and binding, following all the Jewish customs and laws wasn't necessary for following Jesus. What mattered to Paul was having faith in Jesus.

**Question:** What did the Council of Jerusalem decide? Why was the decision significant for the Christian community?

**Answer:** The Council of Jerusalem decided that followers of Jesus did not have to observe the complete Jewish Law, and circumcision was not required. Christians were simply asked to live together in peace and to "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication" (Acts 15:29).

The decision represented a major turning point in the church's development. Soon Christian communities consisted of more Gentiles than Jews, and Christian congregations developed their own non-Jewish identity. The growth of the church to all corners of the world was made possible, and the Council of Jerusalem set a precedent for the way conflicts in the church could be resolved.



## A Text Activity: Crisis over the Jewish Law



### Activity 11

Using initials, make a list of people you have rejected in some way. Next to each person's initials, write down what caused you problems with her or him. Reflect in writing on whether your rejection of the person seems right. Last, write a prayer for those you have rejected.



## Additional Activities: Crisis over the Jewish Law

### Reviewing Jewish Law

To reinforce comprehension of the problems faced by Gentile Christians following Jewish laws, instruct the students to read Leviticus and find some regulations that would be difficult for people today to follow. Considering the passages found by the students and the passages cited in the student text, discuss these questions:

- How would your day-to-day life be different if you had to follow these laws? [Cite one or two particular laws from Leviticus.]
- Considering the poor sanitation and lack of refrigeration in the years before, during, and after the life of Jesus, would any of these regulations have promoted better health?
- While some of the laws made a good deal of sense on the basis of health, would they have had any religious significance to Gentiles?
- Would there be many Christians if all of these laws had to be followed?

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### The Need for Unity Among Early Christians

To appreciate the need for some source of unity in the community of Christians, ask your students to consider these questions:

- What problems can arise in a family when one member marries into a different social class, religion, ethnic group, or culture? Think of some particular examples of difficulties that might occur in this situation.
- What actions and attitudes can preserve unity in a family in this situation?
- What might be some of the effects on the family if unity is not preserved?
- What might be some of the effects on the family if unity is preserved despite differences?
- Is it fair to reject those who marry out of the ordinary circle of family life?

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### Panel Discussion: Who Is a Christian?

Set up a panel of four or five students. Each panelist is to formulate his or her own criteria for deciding what characterizes someone as a Christian. The panelist must include in their formulation, answers to these questions:

- Is it enough to merely say, even if sincerely, that one is a Christian?
- How can one verify a person's claim of being a Christian? Are rituals or good works required?

The panelists should explain their responses to the class.

The panelists will likely come up with different descriptions but some common elements as to what characterizes a Christian. This exercise illustrates that it is hard to have unity on such a complex question. Thus, when the Jewish Christians asked Gentiles to follow Jewish laws, they did so to promote some sort of common practice that would show one's Christianity. After all, devout Jews believed that if one followed the Law, one was a good Jew. Jesus' teachings did not have precise laws, so it took considerable adjustment for Jewish Christians to accept the latitude of actions allowed under the two great commandments to love.

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### A Case: Law Versus Spirit

To further analyze the different outlooks on the law versus the spirit of the law, the following case might help the students experience the complexities of decision making:

- Mrs. Schneider faces a tough decision. Sitting across her desk is Teri Hilger. Teri has been sent regularly to the principal's office for various problems that she has caused her teachers. Recently Teri was caught cheating on a business math test, and when the teacher confronted her about it after class, Teri acted nastily toward the teacher. Today Mrs. Schneider is faced with Teri's most serious offense: at lunch hour Teri was caught drinking beer in her car in the school parking lot, and besides being slightly drunk, she was abusive to the dean of students.

The school's student handbook is very clear: students caught drinking on school property are to be expelled. In fact, one month before, a friend of Teri's had been kicked out for drinking. However, Mrs.



Schneider has just received a call from the pastor of Teri's parish. He had heard about Teri's behavioral problems and thought that Mrs. Schneider should know that Teri's parents are in the midst of a bitter divorce proceeding. At issue is the custody of Teri. Teri's father is presently jobless and would have a hard time supporting her. Teri's mother, a middle-level manager in a small business, is a heavy drinker if not an alcoholic. The mother is abusive when drunk, and Teri frequently has to spend the night at a friend's house when her mother gets drunk.

After explaining the case, ask the students these questions:

- If you were Mrs. Schneider, what would you do, and why? Make sure you list all the issues involved.
- What should be considered more important here, law (designed to protect society) or mercy?

After all the students have made individual decisions and written down their reasons, take a vote on courses of action. Then divide the class into groups according to the course of action advocated. For example, those who would expel Teri would form one group, those who would suspend her another group, and so on. Tell each group to establish a rationale for its course of action. Then direct each group to appoint a representative to debate the issue with representatives from the other groups.

### A Case: Changing Tradition

Here is another case that shows how changing membership rules changes a group, and yet, justice may demand the altering of traditions:

- Bob Smith belongs to a prestigious civic service organization that has branches all over the country. Since its founding eighty years before, the group has, according to its constitution, been composed of all men, usually selected from well-known firms or academic institutions. Membership has always been considered prestigious, and members find that their careers are given a boost as a result of being part of the organization. An invitation to join this group is a real honor and a sign that an executive is on his way up the corporate ladder.

Two months ago, something shocking happened—a woman applied for membership. She is vice-president of a medium-sized bank and has a law degree from a prominent university. In her application she cites her desire to serve and the many talents she can offer the organization. If she were a man, there would be no question as to her acceptance. Even though the constitution clearly excludes women from membership, the rules require that the membership committee consider all applications. Bob is on the membership committee. The woman's application is before him. She is qualified and could clearly make a contribution.

Follow up the case with these questions:

- If you were Bob, what would you do?
- What changes would take place in the organization if women were admitted?
- What ethical considerations are part of the case?
- Is it right to exclude women?

To some extent, this case parallels the situation of the early Christian community. In practice the community had been composed of Jews, and adding Gentiles would alter the composition of the Christian community. But was it right to exclude individuals from the People of God just because of their previous religious practice? Although the change to more open admission was the correct course to take, it was a difficult transition.

## Jesus and Gentiles

Read the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman from John 4:1–42. Then discuss with the students the following questions:

- Judging from this passage, what seems to be Jesus' attitude toward non-Jews?
- Would Jesus require Gentiles to follow Judaic Law?

## Are Churches Too Exclusive Today?

To emphasize that the tendency for church groups to become closed communities continues today, discuss these questions with your students:

- What are some examples of how the church or a parish can sometimes seem closed to others who share in the word of God (just as the Jewish Christians were closed to the Gentile Christians)?
- What are some ways that the church can and does extend itself to all people?

## A Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian Dialog

Direct the students to write an imaginary dialog between a Jewish Christian and a Gentile Christian from Antioch who are discussing the issue of following the Law of Moses. You might wish to review the laws of Leviticus again. The Gentile Christian might need to refer to the Scriptures for support for her or his position. When the students are done writing, invite them to role-play their dialog. Have the other class members critique the accuracy of the discussion.



Handout 2–A

## Closing Prayer

You may wish to end this chapter with the prayer service on handout 2–A, "Prayer Service: Peter, a Rock of Faith."



## Prayer Service: Peter, a Rock of Faith

**Leader:** Let us remember that we are in God's hands; God has chosen us and loves us now and at every moment. The Creator has blessed us with people who are important in our life, and God gives us a sense of our part in the church. God wants us to rejoice in our weaknesses like Saint Peter did, so that we will listen to the truth and celebrate our talents with which we can do God's work.

### Reading from the Words of Peter

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. . . . Jesus Christ . . . is Lord of all. [Acts 10:34–36]

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. . . . Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. [1 Peter 1:13,22–23]

### Prayers

**Leader:** For the gifts of our memories . . .

**All:** We thank you, Lord.

**Leader:** For all the people who have affirmed us, given us knowledge and care . . .

**All:** We thank you, Lord.

**Leader:** For helping us understand the importance of our story and the story of the church . . .

**All:** We thank you, Lord.

[Other prayers of thanks may be added here. Respond to each prayer.]

**All:** We thank you, Lord.