

Session 4 of 8 | Until the End of the Age

Binding and Loosing

Authority that serves the word of God

Did Jesus leave his Church with authority to settle disputes, or only with advice to offer?

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Matthew 18 and Acts 15 show a Church able to judge, that the judgment binds other communities, and that Catholic teaching distinguishes the deposit of faith from discipline that can change and the conditions under which a teaching is definitive.

Catholic Touchstone. The teaching office is not above the word of God but serves it. Binding and loosing includes the power to reconcile sinners with the Church. Not every exercise of authority is infallible, and the conditions are precise. (CCC 85-86; 1444-1445; Lumen Gentium, 25.)

What You Need to Know

Matthew 18 starts with a sinner, not with a power grab. The goal is to win the brother back. When a private word fails, then witnesses, then "tell it to the church," and the Church can make a judgment that stands. Jesus describes a community that can decide, not a collection of private opinions. Authority here serves repentance and communion.

Acts 15 is the first time the Church settled a doctrinal dispute. The question was whether Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. The Apostles and elders met, heard Peter, heard Paul and Barnabas, heard James read Scripture, and issued a decision. They wrote "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." Do not flatten the chapter into a contest about who spoke last or who won. Each voice has a place.

Acts 16:4 shows what happened next. Paul and Timothy delivered "the decisions" to the churches "for observance." The judgment bound communities that were not in the room. Its authority was not one preacher's persuasiveness. At the same time, be honest about the content. The letter forbade blood and strangled meat. Catholics today do not keep that rule in the same form. The Church has always distinguished the unchanging deposit of faith from disciplinary provisions that a later authority can adjust. (CCC 83.)

That leads to tonight's most important caution. Not everything a Church authority says is infallible. Lumen Gentium 25 lays out the gradation: the ordinary teaching of bishops in communion, the definitive teaching of the pope or of a council under specific conditions, and the religious assent owed to each. No Church authority can authorize disobedience to God or invent new revelation. Tonight the sealed guesses come out. Budget the time for it.

Terms, in plain words

- **Magisterium:** the Church's teaching office, the pope and the bishops in communion with him, charged with authentically interpreting the word of God. From the Latin magister, teacher.

- **Deposit of faith:** the revelation entrusted to the Church, to be guarded and handed on. It does not grow by addition.
- **Discipline:** rules of Church practice that real authority makes and can later change, as distinct from doctrine.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Deuteronomy 17:8-13. Cases too hard for local judgment went up to the priests and the judge at the place the Lord chose, and their verdict had to be followed. Israel's covenant life had a means of settling hard cases beyond private opinion. Use it to frame the question of communal authority. It is not a warrant to carry Israel's civil penalties into the Church.

Keep this distinction | leader only

Do not say every statement by a Church leader is infallible, and do not let the group say it either. Read Lumen Gentium 25 before the meeting so you can name the levels: ordinary teaching, definitive teaching, and the conditions for each. No authority in the Church can bind anyone to sin.

Voices of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch

Summary: Let no one do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Only that Eucharist is to be considered valid which is celebrated by the bishop or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Where the bishop is, there let the people be, as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. Unity is visible in a ministry, not only felt in a sentiment.

Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 8

Second Vatican Council

Summary: The teaching office is not above the word of God but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on. It listens to the word devoutly, guards it scrupulously, and explains it faithfully, and from this one deposit it draws everything it proposes for belief as divinely revealed.

Dei Verbum, 10

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Summary: In giving the Apostles his own power to forgive sins the Lord also gives them authority to reconcile sinners with the Church. Bind and loose mean that whoever is excluded from your communion is excluded from communion with God, and whoever you receive anew into your communion God will receive into his. Reconciliation with the Church and with God go together.

CCC 1444-1445

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 83.** Sacred Tradition distinguished from theological, disciplinary, liturgical, and devotional traditions that can change.

- **CCC 85-86.** The Magisterium authentically interprets the word of God and is its servant, not its master.
- **CCC 888-892.** The teaching office of the bishops and the precise scope of infallibility.
- **CCC 1444-1445.** Binding and loosing, and reconciliation with the Church.

Session Goals

1. Trace how disagreement is handled in Matthew 18 and Acts 15, and how a decision travels in Acts 16.
2. Distinguish enduring doctrine from changeable discipline using the council's own letter.
3. Open the sealed guesses and revise them without embarrassment.

Thread Watch | leader only

After Question 5, return the sealed guesses. Invite volunteers to read theirs and say what they would add now. Do not grade them. Thread A gets its first synthesis: mission, ministry, teaching, and judgment belong together. Leave room. Sessions 5 and 6 will add the sacraments, and Session 8 asks for one last revision.

Timed Plan | 75 to 90 minutes

Clock	Segment	If you only have 60
0 to 8	Opening prayer and Win	One Win question
8 to 25	Build, Questions 1 and 2	Keep
25 to 43	Build, Questions 3 to 5, with the live discovery	Drop Question 5. Assign Deuteronomy 17:8-13 for home
43 to 50	Open the sealed guesses together	Keep, but hold it to five minutes
50 to 62	The objection, built then pressed	Keep
62 to 70	Send and Live It This Week	One Send question
70 to 75	Memory verse and closing prayer	Keep

For 90 minutes, let the Build discussion breathe and add the Dig Deeper passage at the end.

OBJECTION BENCH | leader only. Answers for questions that may come up. Do not read aloud.

If someone says: *Acts 15 banned blood and strangled meat. Catholics ignore that. So the council was not binding after all, or you are picking and choosing.*

You can answer: The Church has always distinguished doctrine from discipline (CCC 83). The council's doctrinal judgment, that Gentiles are not bound to circumcision, has never changed. Its dietary provisions were prudential discipline for the circumstances of Jewish and Gentile Christians sharing one table, and the same authority that made the rule later relaxed it. Binding does not mean frozen.

If someone says: *James gave the final ruling, not Peter. So James was in charge, not the pope.*

You can answer: Peter speaks, the assembly falls silent, and James says "I judge" as the local bishop and proposes the practical terms. Both are in the text. The chapter is not a contest, and the study says so. The Catholic point is simpler: a body of Apostles and elders made a decision in the Spirit that bound other churches.

If someone says: *If the Church can bind and loose, it can make anything a sin or a virtue.*

You can answer: No. The teaching office is under the word of God, not over it (Dei Verbum 10). It cannot invent revelation, contradict Scripture, or make wrongdoing good. Binding and loosing is authority to guard and apply what was received, and to reconcile sinners with the Church.

If someone says: *Then every papal document is infallible?*

You can answer: No, and the study is emphatic about it. Lumen Gentium 25 spells out the conditions: a definitive act, on faith or morals, by the pope as universal shepherd or by the bishops with him. Most Church teaching is ordinary teaching, owed religious assent, not an infallible definition.

Answers at a Glance

One line per question, for the leader who needs to check quickly during the night. Full answers are in Part Two.

1. Win the brother. Then witnesses. Then the Church, which can judge. Authority serves repentance.
2. Circumcision for Gentiles. Peter, then Paul and Barnabas, then James with Amos. Decision within the apostolic life.
3. A letter, chosen envoys, "the Holy Spirit and us." A real decision, not a suggestion. Not every later meeting has this weight.
4. Acts 16:4: the decisions delivered to other churches to observe. Authority that travels.
5. Deuteronomy 17: hard cases go up to the priests and the judge. Israel had a court. Keep the covenants distinct.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Read aloud everything marked SAY, ASK, and READ. Keep everything marked LEADER to yourself. Share each parchment box only after the group has talked.

Opening Prayer

SAY Father of truth and mercy, teach us to seek reconciliation and to listen faithfully to your word. Guide our conversation, heal our divisions, and make us willing to be corrected. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win | Begin with experience

LEADER Invite brief responses. Anyone may pass. Take one question if time is short.

ASK 1. When people who love each other sincerely disagree, what helps them get past competing opinions?

ASK 2. Have you ever been corrected in a way that was clearly an act of care? What made it feel that way?

Build | Let the text lead

READ Read Matthew 18:15-20.

ASK 1. What is the purpose of the first, private approach? How does the process move beyond one person's judgment, and what can the Church do at the end of it?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

The purpose is to "gain your brother." The process goes from private word to witnesses to "the church," and the Church can make a judgment that stands, ratified in heaven. Jesus describes a community capable of deciding, not a crowd of isolated opinions. Notice also the setting. This is about restoring a sinner, so authority here serves conversion and communion, not humiliation. And the binding and loosing of Matthew 16 is here given to the disciples together. (CCC 1444.)

READ Read Acts 15:1-21.

ASK 2. What is the dispute? Who speaks, in what order, and what kind of evidence does each bring?

LEADER Make the group name all four: Peter, Paul and Barnabas, James, and the Scripture James quotes.

ANSWER | share after the discussion

The dispute is whether Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the Law. The Apostles and elders gather. Peter recalls what God did through him among the Gentiles, and the assembly falls silent. Paul and Barnabas report the signs God worked through them. James connects it all to the prophets and gives his judgment. The decision comes out of the Church's apostolic life, with Scripture and experience both on the table. It is not a contest about who won.

READ Read Acts 15:22-29.

ASK 3. How is the decision sent out? What does the letter claim about the Holy Spirit, and what does it actually require?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

The whole Church sends chosen men with a letter. The letter says "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." That is a claim to real authority, not a private suggestion. It also lists four requirements, including abstaining from blood and strangled meat. Hold onto that detail. The chapter shows the Church exercising authority in a concrete dispute. It does not mean every later meeting or pastoral opinion carries the same weight.

Live Discovery

SAY Keep reading into the next chapter of Acts. Find what Paul and Timothy deliver to the churches on their way, and what the churches are expected to do with it.

LEADER Allow a short search. Supply Acts 16:4-5 only if the group is stuck. Then have someone read the passage the group found.

ASK 4. What happens to the Jerusalem decision when it reaches churches that were not at the council?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Paul and Timothy deliver "the decisions which had been reached by the apostles and elders" to the churches "for observance." The judgment binds communities that were not in the room. It is authority that travels. Catholic teaching understands such authority as service to the apostolic faith. It cannot create a new Gospel or make wrongdoing good. (Acts 16:4-5; CCC 86.)

READ Read Deuteronomy 17:8-13.

SAY This is background from Israel, so keep the covenants distinct as you read.

ASK 5. What did Israel do with a case too hard to settle locally? What is the same and what is different when we turn to the Church?

ANSWER | share after the discussion

Hard cases went up to the priests and the judge at the place the Lord chose, and the verdict had to be followed. God's people had a court, not only opinions. The same: a means of settling disputes beyond private judgment. The different: Israel's civil penalties do not transfer to the Church, and the Church's authority is the Apostles' authority received from Christ. Use the parallel for the question, not for the penalties.

Open the sealed guesses | leader only

Return the envelopes now. Invite volunteers to read their guess and say one thing they would add after three weeks. No one is required to share. Hold it to five minutes. Say aloud that Sessions 5 and 6 will add the sacraments, and that everyone gets one more chance to revise in Session 8.

A Serious Objection | build it, then press it

SAY Now the objection, at full strength. It has two edges, and both are sharp.

THE OBJECTION | read aloud

"The council in Acts 15 had living Apostles in the room. Of course it was binding. That says nothing about a meeting of bishops in the year 325 or 1870. You cannot borrow the authority of the Apostles for men who were not Apostles."

"And look at what the council actually decided. No blood, no strangled meat. Catholics eat both. So either the council was not really binding, or you keep the parts you like. Either way, the claim that Church decisions bind the conscience falls apart on the first example."

ASK How does what we learned about apostolic succession answer the first edge? How does the difference between doctrine and discipline answer the second? Be specific about the council's own letter.

LEADER Let the group try to answer from the passages read tonight before you share the response. Do not rescue the discussion too early.

CATHOLIC RESPONSE | share after the discussion

The first edge is answered by Sessions 2 and 3. The Catholic claim about later councils never rested on borrowing the Apostles' personal authority. It rests on the Apostles' pastoral ministry being handed on and continuing in the Church. We saw that pattern forming in the Pastoral Letters, and 1 Clement and Irenaeus witness it explicitly. The Church understands this continuity as apostolic succession. A council of the Apostles' successors is not simply another Acts 15. The bishops exercise the pastoral ministry handed on from the Apostles, always under the word of God and in communion with the successor of Peter. (CCC 860-862; 880-882.)

The second edge is answered by the letter itself. The doctrinal judgment, that Gentiles are not bound to circumcision, has never changed and never will. The dietary rules were disciplinary provisions, prudent for that moment, about how Jewish and Gentile believers could share one table. The authority that made them later relaxed them. The Church has always distinguished the unchanging deposit from disciplinary provisions that can develop. Binding does not mean frozen. Continuity means preserving the faith and the authority Christ gave, not keeping every rule in identical form. (CCC 83; Lumen Gentium, 25.)

Send | Respond personally

ASK 1. After opening your guess, what would you now add to your answer about what the Church hands on?

ASK 2. How can you seek an accurate explanation of a Church teaching you find hard before you judge it?

Live It This Week

Sort. Pick one Catholic teaching or practice you find difficult. Decide whether it is doctrine, discipline, or a devotion. Write the answer down.

Read. Read the Catechism paragraphs on it in context. Write down the question that remains.

Ask. Bring that question to a priest or catechist this week instead of settling it with a slogan.

Scripture Memory

“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.”

Acts 15:28 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

SAY Lord Jesus, lead us into the truth and keep us from hardening our hearts. Give your Church faithful teachers and give us the humility to learn. Make our search for truth a work of love. Amen.

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used tonight, in the order it appears. Materials: RSV2CE Bibles for everyone, this guide, and the Take-Home sheets to hand out at the end.

When	Passage	Purpose
1	Matthew 18:15-20	Correction, and a Church that can judge
2	Acts 15:1-21	The dispute and the deliberation
3	Acts 15:22-29	The letter and its claim
4	Acts 16:4-5	Live discovery: decisions delivered
5	Deuteronomy 17:8-13	Hard cases in Israel
Memory	Acts 15:28	The Spirit and the decision

Dig Deeper | Galatians 2:1-10

Paul's own account of going up to Jerusalem "lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain." Even the Apostle to the Gentiles submitted his Gospel to the pillars for confirmation. Read it beside Acts 15 and ask why an Apostle would bother, if private certainty were enough.

After the meeting

Hand out Take-Home 4. Do not distribute this answer-bearing leader guide as a participant workbook.