

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson Eleven – Acts 15:1-16:5
Resolving Conflict

Conflict between believers is one of the most difficult things we face. There are those whose total outlook on Christianity has been drastically affected as the result of church split or Christian friends not speaking to each other.

Thankfully the Bible is not silent on conflict. It has much to offer on how to deal with conflict and differences in ideas in a godly way. Acts 15 is one such passage. The vital question of how Gentile believers would be incorporated into the believing community began to form in the mind of the Jewish Christians. This question, left unattended, could have torn the church apart. There is much of this same kind of discussion today, and the council of Jerusalem provides an excellent model for resolving our differences.

OPEN

- How have you seen Christians and/or congregations deal with conflict?

STUDY

- *Read Acts 15:1-21.* So far it had been assumed that Gentile believers would be absorbed into the believing community by circumcision, and that by observing the law they would be acknowledged as bona fide members of the covenant of God. Something quite different was now happening, however: Gentile converts were being welcomed into fellowship by baptism without circumcision. They were becoming Christians without becoming Jews.

1. What was the question that was forming in the minds of the Jewish leaders (vv. 1-5)?

Must a Gentile be circumcised in order to be saved?

2. Why was the issue so important?

Two reasons. First, simply because there was a growing number of Gentiles being converted. Second, because the issue was a Gospel issue. It struck at the core of what the Gospel message was: salvation by grace through faith, not through the law

3. What might be some comparable issues in today's church?

Speaking in tongues to be saved, not doing certain actions (drinking, dancing, gambling, etc.)

4. Describe carefully the process of resolving this conflict (vv. 6-21).

Apostles and elders were gathered, much debate, Peter challenged them not to apply the Law to Gentiles when even Jews can't keep it, Barnabas and Paul related the signs and wonders done among Gentiles, James agrees that Gentiles must not be held to the Law

5. What can we learn about the resolution of a disagreement from the way the Jewish leaders worked toward resolution?

Bring in the leaders and elders, have a good debate, then make a decision.

It was one thing to secure the gospel from corruption; it was another to preserve the church from fragmentation. Paul was resolutely unwilling to compromise the "truth of the gospel." At the same time, he was extremely anxious to maintain Jewish-Gentile solidarity in the one body of Christ. Once the theological principle that salvation is by grace alone and that circumcision was required but neutral was firmly established, he was prepared to adjust his practical policies.

We may say, then, that the Jerusalem Council secured a double victory—a victory of love in preserving the fellowship by sensitive concessions to conscientious Jewish scruples. As Luther put it, Paul was strong in faith and soft in love. Or as John Newton once said, "Paul was a reed in non-essentials,— an iron pillar in essentials."

6. *Read Acts 15:22-35.* What do the leaders do to make sure the decisions from the council are adequately communicated to the churches?

They penned an official letter and had it related to other churches.

7. Why do you think the Gentile believers were given a list of four behaviors from which to abstain, even though they did not have to be circumcised or obey the law of Moses to be saved (vv. 28-29)?

Some scholars have thought that these comes from Leviticus 17-18 and are meant to protect the holiness of the Gentiles. That might be the case. Others believe these four practices were part of idolatrous worship services, which Gentiles should certainly avoid. Either way, these four practices weren't forbade to ensure salvation, but (I think) to preserve purity and witness.

8. *Read Acts 15:36-16:5.* How did Paul and Barnabas deal with their sharp disagreement about whether or not to take John Mark with them on their next missionary journey?

Barnabas took John Mark with him and sailed to Cyprus. Paul chose Silas and went through Syria and Cilicia.

9. How do you respond to how they resolved this conflict?

It makes sense. They preserved the mission. In fact they doubled the impact by splitting up and travelling to different regions.

10. After all the discussion in the council at Jerusalem about Gentiles not having to be circumcised, why do you think Paul circumcised Timothy before taking him along on the journey with Silas and himself?

It was probably to avoid any conflict over that issue when they travelled to Gentile areas. Paul said, “Be all things to all people, that I might save some.” I think this was an area in which he wanted Timothy to be “all things” to the Gentiles.

11. How would you evaluate the spiritual health of the churches at this point?

I think they are growing, maturing, and demonstrating spiritual health. They are continuing to learn more of the Word. They are working through conflict and coming out stronger on the other side.

Summary: From our later perspective of church history we can see the crucial importance of this first ecumenical Council held in Jerusalem. Its unanimous decision liberated the gospel from its Jewish swaddling clothes into being God’s message for all humankind, and gave the Jewish-Gentile church a self-conscious identity as the reconciled people of God, the one body of Christ. And although the whole council affirmed it, Paul claimed that it was a new understanding granted especially to him, the “mystery” previously hidden but now revealed, namely that through faith in Christ alone Gentiles stand on equal terms with Jews as “heirs together, members together, sharers together” in his one new community.

APPLY

- Consider the principles of conflict resolution revealed in this passage. Which of them is easiest for you?

Which is most difficult?

In what ways do you need to care more for the growth and well-being of other believers?

PRAY

- Praise God that we as Christians have the message of reconciliation. Ask him to soften your heart and help you live out this message in the world.

All material taken from:
John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.