

# Handling Conflict in the Church – Acts 15:1-35

## Introduction

How many of you have a perfect family like the Lincoln family?

You never disagree, never fight or argue, and always live in perfect harmony?

Yeah, us either – even our two dogs get into a ruckus from time to time

I often tell people who I counsel through interpersonal difficulties, “Where there’s closeness there’s occasionally friction, and where there’s friction, there’s gonna be heat”

What I mean by that is whenever two or more sinners, even redeemed sinners, get close there is bound to be conflict

Because we tend to be self-centered and convinced of the rightness of our opinions;

Because we prefer to be heard and understood rather than to hear and understand;

And oftentimes because winning an argument is more important than being right we find that our relationships get out of whack and we knock sparks off of one another

That’s true in marriages, in families, and even in churches

## *The early church*

Too often we allow ourselves to have this overly optimistic view of the early church and we fail to realize that they were people just like us and that means that conflict occasionally reared its ugly head in their midst

They had their own sets of personal wants and needs and expectations that those wants and needs would be met

They had their own independent ideas about how things should be done

I can’t say for certain but somewhere during those early days two people probably fought over the color of the carpet or paint – I think maybe that was the issue that Euodia and Syntyche were disputing about in Paul’s letter to the Philippians

The early church was made up of people who were far from perfect and they didn’t always live together in perfect harmony and they needed to figure out how to handle conflict

As we look at the passage before us today we're going to see how the early church handled a very serious conflict that had the potential to bring the forward movement of the church to a screeching halt

## *Today*

We are going to see how we can determine when a conflict is worth fighting over

We are going to see how to "fight fair" and when to seek counsel

And we are going to see how to preserve the unity of the Body of Christ in spite of disagreements

## *Recap*

When we left off last week we saw Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch in Syria after their first missionary journey

During the roughly two years of ministry to the Gentiles they had experienced many ups and downs

They saw many people turn to the Lord - but they also experienced disappointment, strong opposition, and even violence as they labored to spread the gospel

In **14:27** we saw Paul and Barnabas gather the people of the church of Antioch together to give a report of all that God had done alongside and through them – much the same as we will hear from our missionaries during our upcoming **Mission Mayhem** on May 20

And Paul and Barnabas stayed to minister in Antioch for “no little time” as we read in **14:28**

I believe the events of **Galatians 2:11-21** that Phyllis just read for us took place during this time

We know that the “no little time” that Luke spoke of was around a year and I believe that Paul and Peter had their disagreement and settled things before the events that we will look at this morning

## ***Serious issue***

Whereas churches over the years have disputed over some pretty trivial matter, the issue that we are looking at today was perhaps the most important issue in church history as they sought to answer the question:

### **How are people saved?**

Of course, this account relates the concerns of a church from some 2,000 years in the past

**Their specific issues are not our issues but as we look at the details we will be on the lookout for modern parallels to these ancient concerns and we will see from their example some clues to how we should approach and handle conflict in the church**

Let's begin by reading through the passage completely

If you haven't already done so, please join me in **Acts 15** and follow along as I read **verses 1-35**

[Read Acts 15:1-35]

## **I. The Dissention (1-5)**

For those of you who take notes our first Roman numeral is **the dissension** which we will see in **verses 1-5**

### **Imagine the scene**

Paul and Barnabas have returned from their mission trip to the Gentiles on Cyprus and Asia Minor and now they are busy ministering in Antioch – and they were probably feeling pretty good about life

Remember, Antioch was the city where Barnabas had previously been sent by the church in Jerusalem because of a report that a church was flourishing there

When he arrived he found Jewish and Gentile believers worshipping and working together and being quite effective in sharing the gospel

In fact, they were so successful in carrying out the mission of Jesus Christ that Antioch was the place where believers first were called Christians and then they were the first recorded church to send out missionaries

Things were going well in Antioch

Until the wet blankets showed up from Judea to put a damper on things

There's an old song that goes, "Every party needs a pooper that's why we invited you"

Only this party didn't need a pooper and these guys weren't invited – but they came nonetheless and brought trouble with them

### ***The Judaizers***

What do we know about these men from Judea?

First, we know that they were Jewish believers who came from Jerusalem

But what isn't so obvious is that they were sincere and they meant well

We need to cut these guys some slack even as we look at how they were mistaken because it doesn't appear they set out to cause trouble but to set things right – these men thought they were the staunch defenders of truth

Their interpretation of what God was doing was flawed so their beliefs and actions were flawed but there doesn't seem to be any real animus toward the Gentiles who were being saved – by all indications they meant to help

## **A. The teaching of the men from Judea**

So these men from Judea weren't against the Gentiles being saved and welcomed into the church but they believed that Gentiles needed to come into the church under the auspices of Judaism

In these verses we see two conditions that these men from Judea believed had to be met:

## **1. Must be circumcised**

First, in **verse 1** we see that they claimed

“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Perhaps they based this idea on passages such as **Genesis 17:14** which says:

Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

And **Exodus 12:48-49**

If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.

Again, we need to acknowledge that these men weren't simply trying to be difficult at this time

For literally hundreds of years they had been steeped in the fact that the Jews were God's chosen people

And they believed they saw clear biblical support for the idea that any Gentile who wished to be accepted by God had to become a proselyte to Judaism

Which meant that he had to become religiously Jewish even though he would always remain ethnically Gentile and becoming Jewish meant submitting to ritual circumcision which was the God-given sign of the covenant God had made with Israel

## **2. Must follow all the Law of Moses**

But circumcision wasn't the only requirement; according to the men from Judea any Gentile who wished to be a Christian also had to keep the entire Law of Moses as we see in **verse 5**

Circumcision then was but the first necessary step in keeping the whole Law – a fact Paul confirms in **Galatians 5:3**

He writes, I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

When a man submits to ritual circumcision he obligates himself to keep the whole Law and that was what the men from Judea thought was necessary

Another passage that helps us understand why the men from Judea believed as they did look with me at **Isaiah 2:2-3**

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

For centuries they had believed that the Gentiles would flock to Jerusalem in the last days and be incorporated into God's chosen people

It really isn't all that strange that they thought adherence to the Law would be a part of that incorporation

So, thinking that Paul and Barnabas had been negligent in telling their Gentile converts about the requirements of the Law they headed to Antioch and began to "enlighten" the Gentile members of the church there

### ***Bringing up the problem wasn't the problem***

Again, it doesn't appear that these men set out to cause a problem but to fix what they saw as a problem

And if they thought there was a clear violation of Scripture involved it's hard to say they were wrong to confront it

Where they erred was in not considering that they could be wrong and privately seeking to understand what was going on and why before publicly going to the people to teach their view of things

### ***Their misunderstanding led to doctrinal error***

And their misunderstanding led to a grave doctrinal error

Perhaps without recognizing it they were saying that faith in the death of Christ on the cross wasn't sufficient to save  
Circumcision and observance of the Law needed to be added to that faith in order for one to be truly forgiven

### **This was not some minor disagreement over non-essentials**

The issue at hand was salvation itself and it went right to the heart of the gospel and had the potential to destroy the very foundation of Christianity

So it's no wonder the reaction from Paul and Barnabas was a strong one

## **B. The reaction of Paul and Barnabas**

If we are correct in placing the events of **Galatians 2:11-21** before this account, Paul had already been through this debate with both Peter and Barnabas

Peter had acted hypocritically in removing himself from table fellowship with the Gentiles in Antioch out of fear of some other Jews who came from Jerusalem and led others including Barnabas astray with him and Paul had needed to publically rebuke and correct Peter

Paul was understandably sensitive to this issue and so we see in verse 2 that he and Barnabas engaged in "no small dissention and debate with [the Judaizers]"

### **1. Dissention and debate**

Luke's term "no small dissention and debate" shows that the two sides of the argument meant business

The Greek translated as "no small dissention" means "to rise up in open defiance of authority with the intention of overthrowing it or acting in complete opposition to its demands"

This was not some minor disagreement – this was a heated discussion worthy of the seriousness of the issue

And they covered all the bases in the quarrel as indicated by the term "debate" which means "to attempt to learn by careful investigation"

Remember, both sides thought they were right – actually, both sides thought they were the ones on God's side

This wasn't a case of simply wanting to win an argument – they were both trying to do the right thing

Having proper motives is so crucial when involved in a disagreement in any of our dealings but especially in the church

What a disservice we do to the cause of Christ when we argue and quarrel just because we can't bear to let the other guy win

And I believe the pure motivation of the two parties is shown by their willingness to take the matter to a third party

### **2. Take it to the church leaders in Jerusalem**

In the latter part of **verse 2** we see that they had obviously come to the conclusion that they weren't going to be able to settle the matter on their own so the church in Antioch appointed a delegation to go to the mother-church in Jerusalem for a ruling

It would have been so easy to simply dig in and stand one's ground or to divide and be content with a partial victory

Remember, both sides thought they were in the right so submitting the issue to the church in Jerusalem was a step of humility that showed godly wisdom and a willingness to seek the God-honoring outcome

### **And we also need to discern when it's time to bring in outside counsel to help us mediate a dispute**

Not every matter needs to be solved "in house" and we sometimes can benefit from another set of eyes that can look at the issue from an outside perspective

## **C. The reaction of the church**

**Verse 3** describes the trip as Paul, Barnabas, and those who went with them from Antioch took the opportunity to meet with fellow believers on the way to share with them what God had been doing amongst the Gentiles

### **1. Great joy and welcome from the majority**

And we see that the news was met with “great joy” by all the brothers in Phoenicia and Samaria

And in **verse 4** we see that when they got to Jerusalem the church there along with the apostles and elders welcomed them and listened as they gave a report of all that God had done with them

Not that the fact that the church and her leaders listening meant they agreed with or accepted the things Paul and Barnabas were sharing as evidenced by what happened next

### **2. Argument from the party of the Pharisees**

As in **verse 5** we come again to that little word “but” which changes the direction of the account

And we see the other side of the dispute brought to the table as “some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.’”

These men who belonged to the party of the Pharisees had accepted Christ but they were still clinging to a form of legalism that said one must act in a certain manner in order to meet with God’s approval

And their tribe is alive and well today as there has always been a tendency to add stipulations to the gospel

We may not be quite so overt in saying that a person cannot be saved unless they do or don’t do certain things in addition to accepting Christ

But we still see cultural stipulations that get joined to the gospel when it comes to full acceptance in the church

Things like how to dress, what version of the Bible to carry, what music to listen to, whether we should sit in pews or chairs, whether or not a family home schools, whether a Christian can drink alcohol...

“We don’t drink, dance, smoke, or chew and we don’t go with girls that do”

The list goes on and on as we sometimes subtly and sometimes blatantly add our own dos and don’ts to the gospel

And I think a big part of why we do that is because we're kind of uncomfortable with the whole idea of grace

Lloyd Ogilvie put it this way: "The struggle for faith alone never ends. It's a part of our own inability to accept a gift. And deeper than that; we want to be loved because of what we do for God."

As much as we hate to admit it, we have the tendency to see grace as a good place to start or as a kind of fail-safe that will kick in if all else fails but we still think we can, and perhaps must, add in our own efforts just to be safe

## II. The Discussion (6-18)

So the table has been set and the issue is in the open and in **verses 6-18** Luke relates **the discussion** that followed  
And what Luke records is three speeches or at least the condensed version of three speeches that were given

### A. Speech by Peter (after much debate)

First we see that Peter rose to speak after there had been much debate

Remember, the term debate means to attempt to learn by careful investigation

So it seems that Peter wisely allowed the discussion to go on for some time before rising to speak so as to give an opportunity for others to air their opinions and evidence

Let's read Peter's speech in **verses 7-11** before commenting on it

And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Peter first points out that **his outreach to the Gentiles was according to God's initiative**

God had told him to go the home of Cornelius and had previously prepared Cornelius to be receptive to the Word

Then he says that **God knew the hearts of those Gentiles and bore witness to their acceptance of Christ's sacrifice by giving them the Holy Spirit**

So Peter shows definitively that divine initiation and divine acceptance of Gentiles into the church are **historical facts**

And he makes it clear that the only requirement God put on Cornelius and the others was faith

#### *Negative consequences*

Then in **verse 10** Peter lists **two negative consequences** of following the path of the legalistic ideals of the party of the Pharisees

First he says that they are guilty of **putting God to the test** – of trying to see how far they can push God

Peter used this same verbiage when Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit about their offering in **Acts 5:9** and we saw how seriously God took being tested in that instance

So Peter is not so subtly warning the party of the Pharisees of the negative consequence to themselves inherent in adding to God's plan of salvation

Then he says that requiring the Gentiles to follow the law places an **unbearable yoke** on the necks of the Gentile converts

Peter points out that if keeping the Law is required to be saved then no one is saved because no Jew has ever successfully kept the entire Law

The Law was made up of 613 regulations and many of them were so obscure or convoluted that violating some portion was inevitable

#### *Positive*

Peter wraps up his speech in verse 11 with **a positive statement**

"But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

With this phrasing Peter had to surprise the Jewish believers who were present

He doesn't say, "The Gentiles will be saved as we are saved" - in other words having come to the Cross having endeavored to follow the Law

**Rather he says we Jews will be saved by grace alone through faith alone just as the Gentiles were**

The Law means nothing when it comes to salvation – salvation is all of grace and the Law is of no effect

When arguing, it's common for most people to use the time spent when another person speaks thinking of what to say next

But when Peter finished speaking the debate didn't start up again as we read in **verse 12** "all the assembly fell silent"

What Peter had said hit home and gave those present something to consider and it seems they were respectfully considering it - which is another sign of truly wanting to understand

## **B. Speech by Barnabas and Paul**

Then Paul and Barnabas told what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles (**verse 12**)

It's interesting that the order of names given was actually Barnabas and Paul probably owing to the way they would have been viewed in Jerusalem

It seems that the eyewitness testimony of Barnabas and Paul served mainly to support Peter's argument

And as we have seen in the past the miraculous signs and wonders served merely to confirm the testimony by Peter of God's acceptance of the Gentiles by showing that God approved also of their mission to the Gentiles

Since Peter still maintained his home base in Jerusalem his testimony no doubt carried a great deal of weight but his word wasn't decisive in this instance even in light of the supporting testimony from Barnabas and Paul

## **C. Speech by James**

Because, after Paul and Barnabas finished speaking James rose to speak and we see his speech in **verses 13-18**

"Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

"After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old."

James was the half-brother of Jesus and should not be confused with the apostle James, the brother of John, who was beheaded back in **Acts 12**

This James wrote the epistle that bears his name and by all indications was the leader of the church in Jerusalem

At least it appears that he was chairing this meeting and that his word was final

He begins by acknowledging the testimony of Peter whom he calls Simeon

And he confirms that God "first visited the Gentiles" when Peter went to Cornelius and that God at that time took "from them a people for his name"

That phrase, "a people for his name" was up to this point a title reserved for the Jewish people

The Jews prided themselves on being God's people and now James makes clear that God has also accepted some of the Gentiles to be his people alongside the Jews

Peter's visit to Cornelius was a defining moment in God's salvation history

James states that, given the truth of Peter's testimony, the issue of the acceptance of Gentiles into the family of God was decided at the home of Cornelius some 10 years previously

But as valuable as personal, eyewitness testimony is, James didn't expect those gathered to rely on it alone and so he turned to Scripture to show how God had always planned this exact course of action

In **verses 16-18** James quotes from **Amos 9:11-12** and he shows how God declares that there is going to be a group of Gentiles who are called by his name – just as Israel is called by God's name and that God has made this truth known from of old

The inclusion of the Gentiles was not a divine afterthought – the prophets testified to it

In combining the working of God as attested to by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas with the Word of God as shown by Amos, James left no doubt that God had accepted the Gentiles just as they are just as he had always planned to do

### **III. The Decision (19-35)**

So, supported by the evidence James rendered **the decision** of the council in **verses 19-21**

“Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

#### **A. Gentiles don't need to become Jews to be saved**

It was James' considered judgment that the church shouldn't make it difficult for the Gentiles

The wording James uses means that they should not cause them difficulty and hardship by continual annoyance

Have you ever messed with a beetle or some other bug by putting sticks and stones in its path just to frustrate its forward progress?

That's the kind of image James is bringing to mind here – that it is unnecessary to throw useless obstacles in the way of the Gentiles and so frustrate them

In plain language, Gentiles don't need to become Jews in order to be saved

They don't need to be circumcised and they don't need to follow the Law

God accepts a Gentile as they are when they turn to him for salvation

#### **B. Draft and send a letter**

So far so good – but then James continues by determining that a letter should be sent containing three restrictions

And this is where things get a little messy for us as we try to figure out why place any requirements at all and why these three in particular

At first glance the list seems rather random and even the scholars continue to debate over the exact nature of the items on the list

If the Gentiles aren't to be troubled by the Law why bother them by laying these restrictions on them?

We don't have time this morning to dig into all of the reasoning but it seems best to view all of these restrictions as moral restrictions concerning commonly accepted practices in the Gentile world

As to “things polluted by idols” – most Gentiles came to Christ from a background of idolatry and close association with idols and they often participated in meals that were held in the temple of an idol and we know that believers are to flee idolatry and have nothing to do with it

Paul made the case that meat offered to idols was nothing but still warned the believers in Corinth to not be participants with demons through close association with idols in **1 Corinthians 10:20**

And he told them to eat without asking questions but if it becomes known that meat had been sacrificed to an idol to refrain from eating it in **1 Corinthians 10:23-28**

So it wasn't the eating of particular meat that was the core issue but the danger of lapsing into or being associated with idolatry



Then, concerning the prohibition of **sexual immorality**, fornication and marriage to close relatives was such a common sin among the Gentiles that it persisted even among Christians all too often

Paul dealt with the issue of ongoing sexual immorality in the church at Corinth in **1 Corinthians 6:12-18**

Of course sexual immorality is forbidden for all believers but in the case of the Gentiles in this particular instance there were cultural norms that had to be dealt with

The “**strangled animal**” issue is a little strange – I mean, who strangles animals anyway?

But if we look back to **Genesis 9** and God’s covenant with Noah we see that God gave mankind the right to eat meat but not if it had the animal’s life blood in it

God instructed Noah that animals are to be slaughtered by exsanguination - or draining of the blood so this restriction predates the Law by hundreds of years and is a moral issue

And if these are moral issues then they are still binding on believers today whereas merely ceremonial issues found in the Law are not

In addition to maintaining a moral stance by not attending banquets held in the temples of idols, or being involved in immoral sexual relations, or eating meat with the blood in it - by following these directives the Gentiles would also be able to live beside their Jewish brethren without offending them as we see in **verse 21**

### **C. Resulted in joy and encouragement**

And in the remainder of our passage we see that the letter was drafted as James determined it should be and it was sent with a delegation that would lend personal, verbal assent to its contents

And when the letter was presented to the church in Antioch it was received with joy because of its encouragement

And there was harmony in the church at large as we see the representatives of the church in Jerusalem, Judas and Silas, remain for a while encouraging and strengthening the church in Antioch before heading back to Jerusalem

## Conclusion

In the actions of those involved in this account we see some principles that we would be wise to apply when conflict arises in our church

First, we see that the people were passionate about doctrine and that they stood up for it very strongly as should we - but we also saw the necessity of making sure of our facts before taking a disagreement public

And we see that even though they argued quite strongly they still sought to learn from the other party – they entered into both dissention and debate – and we must be as open to understanding the other person's position as we are passionate about defending our own

And when they realized they were at an impasse they sought outside counsel with a willingness to live by whatever decision was rendered – we need to also discern when we might benefit from outside help and submit ourselves to it

Their focus wasn't on winning but on determining God's will and seeing it done

Then we see that they looked to make sure that their personal experiences squared with Scripture so that they wouldn't go astray

So they put forth their arguments and evidence and allowed their leader to make the decision

Notice that James didn't ask for a vote – and you can be certain that not everyone was satisfied with his decision –

That fact will be born out in Paul's future ministry as he has to repeatedly contend with Judaizers who simply won't give up (at which point we discover that some were no longer innocently trying to do well) –

But still, after everyone had a chance to weigh in, they submitted themselves to James as the leader of the church as they accepted and communicated his decision to the church in Antioch

### **But the most important lessons we should take from this account are these:**

The church in Jerusalem made sure that they erected no unnecessary barriers to those who desired to come to Christ

And they made absolutely certain that the gospel was not compromised by adding to it and thereby negating it

That tells us that we must also preach grace alone through faith alone and recognize the difference between doctrine and distinctives – between that which is essential and that which is preference

And then we must strive to preserve the unity of the church

Conflict in the church is to be expected from time to time but it should be rare if we are truly tolerant where we should be tolerant

We see the two sides in this account disagree quite strongly and no doubt there were those in the church who were very disappointed with the outcome of the council but still they stuck together – they accepted the decision and moved forward

And we need to seek to preserve the unity of the body by checking our motives, by assuming the honorable intentions of one another, by listening to each other in order to understand and learn, and by giving grace to each other where grace is needed – and grace is always needed

### **Where there is closeness there is often friction and where there is friction there is heat**

We just need to be sure that we major on the majors and minor on the minors so that our conflicts will be rare and that we allow that we may be wrong and seek God's way in all things

Have you ever walked into someone's home and you just knew that there had been an argument right before you got there? - Uncomfortable wasn't it?

Visitors can sense the same thing when they walk into a church

So we must work to preserve the unity of the church so that we can continue with the mission before us by maintaining an inviting atmosphere that is full of harmony and free of strife

Let's pray