

## **Conflict in the Early Church**

Acts 15

August 21, 2016

*But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”<sup>2</sup> And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.<sup>3</sup> So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.<sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.<sup>5</sup> But 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.”*

*<sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,<sup>9</sup> and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.<sup>10</sup> 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?<sup>11</sup> But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”*

*<sup>12</sup> And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.<sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me.<sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.<sup>15</sup> And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,<sup>16</sup> “‘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,<sup>17</sup> 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<sup>18</sup> known from of old.’*

*<sup>19</sup> Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” Acts 15:1-21*

After another fun weekend for many at Camp Cotubic, despite all the rain, we are returning this morning to our series on How to Handle Conflict in a Christian Way. We left off two weeks ago with Jesus giving us some very practical instruction on what to do when a brother or sister (in Christ) sins, from Matthew 18. Since we all sin, to some extent, what Jesus was most likely talking about is when someone commits a serious sin or when someone engages in a course of conduct of persistent sin. Jesus gave us four progressive steps:

1. Go directly to that person alone, in a loving and respectful way.
2. Take one or two others along – not to browbeat the other person, but to serve as witnesses – to weigh the evidence, if they too determine that it is sin, and if the person fails to acknowledge it and repent of it, then take it to the church.
3. Tell it to the church – exactly who it doesn't say, the entire church or the leaders, but if that doesn't work Jesus says:
4. "Treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

As Pastor Alex pointed out two weeks ago, Jesus continued to engage with both pagans and tax collectors, even dining with them. The goal of the four step process of reconciliation in Matthew 18 has always been to restore a sinner, first to God and then to the church.

This morning we are looking at how the early church handled conflict, just trying to determine if something was still viewed as sin or not. Believe it or not, not all conflict in the church is about sin. In fact more often than not it is not about sin. Usually it's about the color of the carpet, or how and when we are going to worship, the church budget, etc. Unfortunately how we respond to that conflict often results in sin.

But, the conflict described in Acts 15 was no little matter. In fact it says, "it was no small dissension." What exactly is "no small dissension?" It might be better depicted as a major church fight. It was a conflict that had a chance of splitting the early church in two.

The church had been growing beyond all its wildest imaginations, so much so that there was no mistaking the fact that it was all the work of God. Paul's first missionary journey was about to come to a close. He and Barnabas had been traveling in foreign countries sharing the Good News of Jesus. They had received a dramatic response, people putting their faith in Jesus Christ, left and right. They return to their sending church in Antioch of Syria and they share the good news of all that God had done, how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, non-Jews!

In the meantime reinforcements arrive and they too begin to share the Good News to Gentiles but they try and put a little restriction on the Good News. "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved!" (Acts 15:1). It was more than just custom, it was the law of Moses. This is one of those times when it would have been good to have been a woman! That's when it says "no small dissension and debate erupted" (Acts 15:2).

What we often don't get from many of the Bible stories is the sense of what the story being described really looked like. While today we have an image of the early church leaders as being saints, that's probably not the image that many others had of them during the day, especially when conflict and disagreements arose. We probably would be pretty shocked as to how they acted.

If we could have only seen how they acted and responded to one another, we would probably catch the depth of feeling regarding how critical this issue was for the early church. For us today, circumcision as a requirement for membership in the church has absolutely no meaning. Probably the only thing we can compare it to today is the act of baptism. What the early church leaders were debating was no little matter. They were debating the very act which for centuries had identified them as the people of God.

It was the sign of the original covenant God had made with his people:

<sup>9</sup> And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.”<sup>10</sup> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.<sup>11</sup> You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.  
Genesis 17:9-11 (ESV)

This is indeed no little conflict. For the Jewish Christians it signifies a clear break from their past. Acts 15 is a chapter of conflict and in it we are given a window to look into and to see the actual proceedings. How did the early church deal with the conflict, what steps did they follow, what model might it suggest for us today?

In his book, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians*, John Paul Lederach points out six principles or steps that the early church used in handling the conflict addressed in Acts 15:

### **1. Recognize and define the problem –**

This is perhaps the most important step. The story of conflict here in Acts 15 is actually pretty extraordinary when you think about it. Not only did they realize that there was disagreement and differences among them, but they were able to recognize the specific issue, and they were willing to try and resolve it. That’s really not what we do in most churches today. In many cases we know that there are differences and disagreements but very rarely do we work at trying to identify the real issue or issues, and even less than that do we try and resolve them.

Acts 15 shows that acknowledging that conflict exists, and working with it, and working through it, is a fundamental aspect of being the church. If we can learn to deal with differences and conflict in small matters, we will probably be able to do so in big matters.

Ron Kraybill, a church conflict mediator points out in his book, *Repairing the Breach: Ministering in Community Conflict*, “if you want fewer divisive and church-splitting conflicts, encourage more everyday disagreements in congregational life.” Many times we don’t know how much diversity really exists. We just assume we are all on the same page.

The first step in handling conflict in the church is just acknowledging and recognizing that it exists and identifying the specific issue.

## **2. Create the appropriate forum for processing the matter**

Just like Matthew 18, where Jesus gave the early disciples an appropriate process for dealing with someone who sins, in Acts 15 we find a process for dealing with conflict in the church. But it is not a one process fits all. The process needs to fit the situation, and each situation is unique to itself. Big decisions and big conflict usually results in more processing and seeking input from more people. Part of determining the process is determining who is going to make the final decision. More often than not that is determined by how a specific church is organized, often referred to as “the church’s polity.” Part of the problem in Mennonite Church USA today is that 15-20 years ago when the denomination began and they developed its’ polity, they never came up with a plan or a process on who exactly was going to be the decision makers when conflict developed. In Acts 15 who was it that made the final decision? The apostles and the elders, but they sought input from different viewpoints represented.

## **3. Let diverse viewpoints be represented**

One of the most striking things about what takes place here in Acts 15, what is now referred to as “the Jerusalem Council”, is the careful procedure they used in letting all viewpoints be heard. It was certainly not a meeting of only those who already agreed. There was a lot at stake here. Would the church continue to grow or would it take one giant step back? Those involved in the processing on both sides were very strong leaders and probably almost every single one of them with the best of intentions. It was necessary that they heard from everyone!

## **4. Documenting Diversity (Differences)**

This fourth step is closely tied to the previous one, but not only do we need to let the different viewpoints be represented, they need to be listened to, heard, validated and documented.

In the Acts 15 story, people are given a chance to talk, from Paul and Barnabas to the leaders and the people of Jerusalem. Was it as peaceful and sterile in real life as it is when we read about it? I’m guessing probably not. There are times it probably got pretty heated, perhaps even some name calling, even more heated than our video clip this morning might suggest.

“Documenting diversity” assumes that all people are given the opportunity to speak and for others to listen. To speak well (articulate one’s thoughts and feelings) and to be able to listen carefully is no easy task, even in the best of circumstances. It becomes much more difficult at times of high emotions and deep conflict.

There is a very important verse in our passage this morning, just maybe the most important verse of the entire passage: *And all the assembly fell silent and they listened* (Acts 15:12).

Recently I have become keenly aware of just how little we listen to one another. I don’t just mean as a church, I mean as a people in general. I relate to someone outside the church on a pretty regular basis. I’d even call this person a friend, but this person listens to absolutely nothing that other people say. I mean nothing, nada! It’s like, why bother even talking? And while this person might be at the far end of the spectrum, he’s not the only one I know who is like that, and

I think it's very symptomatic of our society today. Everybody wants to talk and get their own thoughts, feelings and ideas across. Nobody really wants to be quiet and listen. The sad and most troubling thing is, not only does it prevent us from hearing one another, it also prevents us from hearing God. The God who said, "*Be still and know that I am God.*"

### **5. Using the gifts of the entire community**

There is a reason why God calls us together as a community. And it's not because we all have the same thoughts, feelings, temperament and gifts. It's actually for the very opposite reason. It is often because of differences that he has brought us together. The Acts 15 passage demonstrates that. The early church, even its leaders, was made up of a very diverse group of men and women who often disagreed with one another on the big things that we read about. But I also imagine that they disagreed on many small things that we don't find in the Bible. It was the big things in which they were able to create a forum for the different sides to be heard, to document the differences and diversity, and to seek common understanding.

### **6. Decide upon and then implement decisions –**

There comes a point in most cases of discernment regarding conflict, especially large conflict, that a decision has to be made, and that decision or those decisions implemented. That should come only after the specific problem has been identified (recognized and defined), that all the different viewpoints have been represented and expressed, and the diversity that exists has been documented. But at some point someone from the group, often the leaders who have been given that authority by the group, or the entire group has to make a decision and implement those decisions. Eventually no decision becomes a decision.

The decision making group, otherwise referred to as "The Jerusalem Council," in Acts 15 was the apostles and the elders. The larger any organization becomes, and the more diverse, the harder it becomes to make decisions with group consensus. That is no different in the church. But there is something very unique in the church – and that is the element of the Word of God – both the written Word as revealed through the scriptures and the living Word, Jesus Christ, as well as the work of the Holy Spirit. It isn't just about how we feel or what we think is right as human beings, is it consistent with the Word of God as revealed through the Bible and Jesus Christ?

"The Jerusalem Council," the apostles and elders, after listening to the different sides, reach a decision. They document it in writing and then they send the leaders out to share it. Several leaders are chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch to help in reporting the decision. Then Paul & Barnabas have some conflict of their own over who they are going to take with them as they journey further along to share the decision of the Jerusalem Council. Barnabas takes John Mark and Paul takes Silas.

The decision was really a compromise. The physical act of circumcision is no longer a requirement of the law for the people of God. That was part of the old covenant. It is especially not required of the Gentiles. But there was some things they were supposed to abide by, three things specifically mentioned: 1) they were to refrain from sexual immorality [whatever that

meant at that time and there are many different thoughts and interpretations available]; 2) they were to abstain from the things polluted by idols [idol worship has always been looked down upon by God]; and 3) they were to refrain from eating meat that had been strangled with blood – for the Jews there was a very strong correlation between blood and life itself. The new Gentile believers were called to be sensitive to those things.

For us Christians today, there is only one of those four that we can still relate to – sexual immorality – and 2,000 years later, we still trying to define that and determine how it applies to believers today. But in the day of the early church described here in Acts 15, to the early Jewish Christians, all four were very important.

So, after the Jerusalem Council made their decision, after the results were reported both in written form and shared in person, do you think everyone was happy? Do you think everyone agreed with their conclusion? I think not! What we are not told is how people responded. I think many Jewish Christians returned to their Jewish faith. I think many Gentiles had a hard time accepting the restrictions on idol worship and food.

The process can be as great as it can be – we can nail the specific issue or issues; we can allow all sides the opportunity to voice their thoughts and feelings; we can document the diversity; and we can be in agreement about who is going to make the final decision – but in the end, very rarely is 100% consensus with full agreement and accord ever reached. The bigger the issue, the harder it is. There will always be people upset with the decision, some might even leave the community of faith – that doesn't mean one is right and one is wrong – it is just a fact of life of doing community together in a fallen, sinful, imperfect world.

What is the most important thing we can take away from the message this morning? The spiritual discipline of listening, both to God and to other committed believers. Discipline implies that it takes a constant willingness to seek the will of God.

How does God speak to us today?

Through His written Word – the Scriptures  
Through His Son, the living Word – Jesus Christ  
Through His Holy Spirit  
Through other believers

John Paul Lederach uses the phrase “prophetic listening!” He writes, “During church conflict, many prophets [whether they are right or wrong] speak often and often speak loudly. People lay claim to the Truth as if it were theirs alone. Few prophets listen. Prophetic listening is the discipline of listening with others in such a way that it helps them get in touch with what God is telling them. . .

“Our capacity to listen to God is only as great as our capacity to listen to each other when we are in conflict. We test our real capacity to listen, not when it is easy, but when it is most difficult. Listening is much more than a technique devised to improve communications. Listening is about the process of relationship, engaging Truth, and finding God.

More often than not, God does not speak to us through those who are the most loudest. He often speaks to us through those who are the quietest – through the still small voices.

Next week we conclude our series on How to Handle Conflict in the Church by looking at the role of Covenants, Creeds and Confessions throughout church history. The following Sunday, which believe it or not is already Labor Day Weekend, we begin a new series looking at *The Fruit of the Spirit*, which seems quite fitting to follow a series on conflict.

Let us Pray: