

Lesson 3 - 12 August 2012

The Council at Jerusalem

Lesson Scope: [Acts 15:1-35](#)

Lesson Focus

Chapter 15 opens with a problem in the early church. The door of faith was opened to the Gentiles, and they were now being received into church fellowship. However, not all the Jews were pleased that the Gentiles were being included.

In all ages, the church has faced similar experiences. The willingness of members to follow the formula outlined in this chapter will enable them to continue to work together in harmony. Humility and a desire for Biblical obedience will guide the group's decisions.

The church faces not only conflicts from without but also tensions from within. Following the Holy Spirit's leading and finding Scriptural solutions when such tensions arise will unify the brotherhood and magnify God's Word.

Since we are human, it is unrealistic to expect that we will have no disagreements. But it is realistic to expect that when we do face them, we will do all that is necessary to arrive at a Scriptural resolution.

Resolving disagreements requires a strong commitment to truth, an appreciation for our brethren and the asset they are to us, and a willingness to open ourselves to their opinions, scrutiny, and advice.

We also need to respect our leaders and the responsibility God has given them to investigate disagreements, understand the issues, and determine a sound conclusion to the matter.

While disagreements may sometimes seem impossible to resolve, we must remember that our agreement or lack thereof, as brethren, has a bearing on others. We will reflect either peace or discord and tension to our families and the lost world we are trying to reach.

Lesson Aim: To present principles for resolving disagreements in the church.

Theme Verse: [Romans 14:19](#). Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

Lesson Text:

Dissension

[Acts 15:1-2](#) ¹ And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, *and said*, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. ² When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

Discussion

[Acts 15:6-18](#) ⁶ And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter. ⁷ And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men *and* brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. ⁸ And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as *he did* unto us; ⁹ And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. ¹² Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. ¹³ And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men *and* brethren, hearken unto me: ¹⁴ Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. ¹⁵ And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, ¹⁶

After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: ¹⁷ That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. ¹⁸ Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.

Decision

[Acts 15:19-22](#) ¹⁹ Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: ²⁰ But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and *from* fornication, and *from* things strangled, and *from* blood. ²¹ For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day. ²² Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; *namely*, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:

[Acts 15:30-35](#) ³⁰ So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle: ³¹ *Which* when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation. ³² And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed *them*. ³³ And after they had tarried *there* a space, they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the apostles. ³⁴ Notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there still. ³⁵ Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Questions for Study

Dissension

1. Why did Paul and Barnabas disagree with those who taught the need for circumcision?
2. What was the value of Paul and Barnabas taking the issue to the leaders at Jerusalem?

Discussion

3. What important things did the apostles and elders discuss?

4. From this account, list practical pointers for resolving disagreements in the church.

Decision

5. What conclusions did the Jerusalem conference reach?

6. Why is it important that leaders give direction to controversial issues?

7. Why did the church experience rest upon receiving the letters?

Analyzing the Passage

These brethren faced the challenge of "no small dissension" (strife). The root of the problem was certain men (Acts 15:1), Judaizers, who insisted that the Gentiles must keep the Law of Moses.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived at Jerusalem, the conferring body of apostles and elders gathered to hear and dispose of the circumcision question (Acts 15:6). Peter reported on his vision and call to Cornelius's house, where he had been taught to accept the Gentiles as brethren (Acts 15:7). Requiring circumcision would logically also require keeping the whole Law, which the Jews themselves had been unable to do (Acts 15:10). A report from Paul and Barnabas on their experiences among the Gentiles reinforced Peter's testimony that Jews, as well as Gentiles, are saved by grace (Acts 15:11).

James explained how the prophecy of Amos 9:11-12 was being fulfilled through the building of the New Testament church, which included Gentiles. He advised a sound course of action (Acts 15:20) that reached beyond the letter of the Old Testament Law to embrace the spirit of the New Testament.

Chief men (Acts 15:22), men of good report, were then sent back to Antioch along with Paul and Barnabas to corroborate the conclusions of the Jerusalem conference.

Principles and Applications

Dissension

1. Disagreements are resolved when issues are confronted

(Acts 15:1-2).

Discussing the issue and knowing the differing opinions is only one step in confronting an issue. Heated debate will not solve the issue, nor will failing to communicate resolve it. Is our position Scriptural, or is it carnal and materialistic? We must be open to allowing spiritual brethren to evaluate our position.

2. God-ordained leaders are responsible to deal with disagreements (Acts 15:2). Opinions will at times be strong enough that other brethren are needed to carefully examine the issue and establish the right way to view it. Properly dealing with issues does not involve compromising to try to make everyone happy. It does involve seeking God's will without regard to whether the conclusion is as one hoped. Church leaders are burdened with maintaining a safe, Scriptural practice, and they must prayerfully exercise their authority in times of disagreement.

Discussion

3. To resolve disagreements requires a conferring of spiritual brethren (Acts 15:6). "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). Communication and cooperation are essential to a conferring relationship. Whether ministers' meeting, committee meeting, or business meeting, do we come with an open attitude to others' opinions? We must all lay down personal interests and unitedly seek the preservation of a Scriptural brotherhood and the furtherance of the Gospel.

4. Issues are resolved by recognizing God's past work among His people (Acts 15:7). Discovering how our spiritual fathers faced the issues of their day can strengthen us if we draw proper parallels to the issues we are facing.

5. The Scriptures must always be the rallying point of our faith (Acts 15:15-18). All of our ideas must yield immediately to clear Scriptural direction. The outcome of disagreements will not rest upon the power of persuasion or majority, but will be subject to the best judgment of spiritually discerning brethren.

Decision

6. Disagreements are resolved when concise direction is given (Acts 15:20). Just as children in the home are happiest when

parents are diligent in preserving peace, so in the church, brethren can function agreeably when leaders give clear, simple directions.

7. Disagreements are resolved when leaders take responsibility to inform the church of decisions reached (Acts 15:22). The church will move forward when leaders faithfully communicate how the church shall respond to the issues at hand.

8. Disagreements are resolved when the Word of God is taught and applied to present needs (Acts 15:32). Shepherding God's flock requires diligent effort from church leaders. Biblical preaching that makes specific application to issues of our day leaves little room for disagreements to grow.

Important Teachings

1. Disagreements are resolved when issues are confronted (Acts 15:1-2).

2. God-ordained leaders are responsible to deal with disagreements (Acts 15:2).

3. To resolve disagreements requires a conferring of spiritual brethren (Acts 15:6).

4. Issues are resolved by recognizing God's past work among His people (Acts 15:7).

5. The Scriptures must always be the rallying point of our faith (Acts 15:15-18).

6. Disagreements are resolved when concise direction is given (Acts 15:20).

7. Disagreements are resolved when leaders take responsibility to inform the church of decisions reached (Acts 15:22).

8. Disagreements are resolved when the Word of God is taught and applied to present needs (Acts 15:32).

9. Doctrinal issues are resolved when we understand the basis of salvation (Acts 15:11).

10. Disagreements are resolved when God's people find rest in administrative action (Acts 15:31).

11. Disagreements are resolved when leaders take time to

shepherd the flock (Acts 15:33-35).

Answers to Questions

1. Why did Paul and Barnabas disagree with those who taught the need for circumcision?

The Antioch brethren were Gentiles who had received salvation without having the background of the Ceremonial Law. These "certain men" were Judaizers who were promoting this ritualistic observance. Paul and Barnabas had not taught that circumcision was necessary, nor did they waver in their viewpoint.

2. What was the value of Paul and Barnabas taking the issue to the leaders at Jerusalem?

They were not able to resolve the issue themselves, even though they were leaders. They wanted the voice and support of the larger church body on this issue. By having other brethren examine the issue, they avoided the appearance of making a rash decision.

3. What important things did the apostles and elders discuss?

They discussed Peter's vision and God's direction that the Gentiles were to be included in the church. Paul and Barnabas recounted various incidents where God worked mightily among the Gentiles. They discussed how various Old Testament prophecies corresponded to this issue.

4. From this account, list practical pointers for resolving disagreements in the church.

Be open to having others evaluate our position. Be humble and workable. Desire to come to an agreement, and do not be satisfied to merely have a lengthy argument. Listen to opposing viewpoints. Be willing to change when principle is not at stake.

5. What conclusions did the Jerusalem conference reach?

They concluded that God was now saving Jew and Gentile alike on the basis of faith in the Lord Jesus and not through keeping the Law. They determined not to create a stumbling block for these Gentiles who were relatively new in the faith (Acts 15:19). They did not fail to give direction to practical is-

sues that were a challenge to Gentiles and to everyone (Acts 15:20).

6. Why is it important that leaders give direction to controversial issues?

Leaders can be a powerful, positive influence in helping to bring together various views. They have been delegated to make decisions on such issues.

Disagreements left to smolder can rapidly become large divisive fires. Issues that are discussed and resolved bring peace to the church because everyone knows how they should respond.

7. Why did the church experience rest upon receiving the letters?

They submitted their own ideas to the consensus of the spiritual brotherhood. Their leaders had taken time to communicate their united voice on the matter. The issue had been resolved in a Scriptural, satisfactory manner.

Summarizing the Lesson

Lo, what a pleasing sight
Are brethren that agree!
How blest are all whose hearts unite
In bonds of piety.

Formed for the purest joys,
By one desire possessed,
One aim the zeal of all employs,
To make each other blest. —Isaac Watts

Research Guide

1. Study Exploring the Book of Acts, Part 6, by Lester Bauman.
2. Study the teachings of the Judaizers and the Scriptures that reflect the voice of the early church against them.