

Acts 15:1

1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Conflict is something that is inevitable when it comes to relationships. I don't know a single marriage that doesn't have conflict at times.

Churches are not immune to conflict. I read of a church that was split on who to call as their senior pastor. Neither of the groups would back down so after some heated arguments they decided to call both men and since each group didn't want to change when they came to church they had each preacher speak at the same time. Each man tried to out shout the other. They sang different hymns and had different orders for the simultaneous services. One week a fight broke out between the groups and the police had to be called. The next day, the situation appeared in the newspaper with the headline, "Two factions, One Fellowship?"

Chapter 15 of the book of acts is a turning point for the church. You see there was a conflict that arose that if it hadn't been handled properly, it would have affected us to this day. Look at verse 1 again.

1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

What was the problem?

In any situation of conflict in a church or at home, I have learned that there are four basic responses. You have probably heard all of these at one time or another.

1. People Spiritualize the problem. "Let's not discuss the problem, let's pray about it. If we get down on our knees and pray, God will take care of everything." What is the problem with that approach?

2. People Deny the problem exists. “I don’t see the problem. I get along with everyone. Why does there need to be trouble. Let’s forget about it.” What is the problem with that approach?
3. People Trivialize the problem. “We shouldn’t be bothered by so trifling a matter. There are people who need to be saved and we need to concentrate on that.” What is the problem with that approach?
4. People lay on a Guilt trip. “We’re not doing a very good job. We need to provide better leadership.” What is the problem with that approach?

Look at how Paul and Barnabas handled the problem in verse 2.

2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

I want you to notice that in verse 2 it says that there was great dissension and debate over the issue. When is it right to have great debate over an issue?

A great theologian who lived at the time of Martin Luther once said, “On the essentials, Unity; On the non-essentials, Liberty; In everything, Charity.”

Tell me if the following are essentials or non-essentials. Let’s do it by vote with a show of hands.

1. Salvation by grace through faith.
2. Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins.
3. Jesus was born of virgin birth.
4. Jesus rose from the dead.
5. Woman should dress modestly. (For those of you who voted that this is an essential, who decides the definition of modestly?)
6. Rap music has no place in a church service.
7. Gentile believers should be circumcised in order to worship in the Jerusalem Church.

Circumcision was the outward sign that God had given to the Jews. It was meant to remind them on a daily basis that they were to be set apart from others who worshipped false gods.

Other than the obvious, why would it have been such a big issue for Gentiles to go through circumcision and keep the Law of Moses?

Look at Gal 5:2.

2 Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. 3 And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision; that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. 4 You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

What is Paul saying here?

This debate actually began when Jesus gave the Jews their assignment in Acts 1:8.

8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.

They must have liked Jerusalem and Judea but Samaria? And even to the remotest part of the earth?

They were thinking Jews not Gentiles at that moment.

You will remember that there was a rub earlier in Acts. Turn back to Acts 6.

There were 2 kinds of Jews in Jerusalem. There were Jews who were born and raised Jewish in Jerusalem and there were Jews who were raised Jewish in the Greek culture that came to Jerusalem after they were saved. A strong disagreement occurred between these two groups. Look at verse 1 of chapter 6.

1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native

Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

It seems that the Hellenistic Jewish widows were being discriminated against simply because they were outsiders.

Back to chapter 15. In this situation we have outsiders to the Jewish faith. Put yourself in their situation and try to understand how difficult it must have been for the Jews to accept the Gentiles and their culture. Why would it have been hard?

So what did they do about the disagreement? Look at verse 3.

3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. 4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

Before you judge the Pharisees, let me make a few comments. These Pharisees had gotten saved through faith in Jesus Christ. Prior to their salvation, they were important men. Men who were revered. Men who had a great deal of education. These were the elite Jews of their day but their training was hugely legalistic and ritualistic. That was their background and comfort zone.

Some of you may have been raised in a more liturgical tradition. It may be hard for you to accept a very relaxed worship service. When we pray in church we don't pray on our knees. Perhaps you liked that or perhaps you liked the structured service.

These Pharisees gave up their robes and their traditions to join the church. They were just like anyone else in the church. And they obviously were trying to hold on to what they knew. It would have been completely understandable.

So a decision had to be made. This single decision made here in Acts 15 has affected every one of us today. Look at verse 6.

6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.
7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10 "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

Once again Peter comes to the rescue. In verse 10 he calls the laws and tradition of the Jews a YOKE which neither their fathers nor they were able to bear. What is he saying?

This is a beautiful picture of a mature Christian. No man alive was able to keep the laws and traditions. Their only purpose was to point out the fact that they needed a savior anyway. And now that the Savior had come, Peter asks why the Gentiles should have to keep up with their Jewish cultural traditions.

Remember on the essentials, unity, on the non essentials, liberty. Peter was preaching liberty as these laws and traditions were no longer essentials.

Look at verse 12.

12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.
There was no doubt that God had opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles. So James, the brother of Jesus who gets saved only after the resurrection and the writer of the book of James speaks up. Look at verse 19.

19 Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.

The leaders of the church, directed by the Holy Spirit, made a two-fold decision: a doctrinal decision and a practical decision.

The doctrinal decision was that Jews and Gentiles were all sinners before God and can be saved only by faith in Jesus Christ. This was an essential.

The practical decision was to ask the Gentiles to abstain from idolatry and immorality. Why these two? Because these were prevalent among the Gentiles.

James asked that the Gentiles give up some of their rights. Eating was something that the church did together often.

Although eating the foods that James asked the Gentiles to refrain from were not of themselves evil, they would have caused the Jews much discomfort. So he asked them to willingly give up their right to eat foods that were offensive to their brothers.

The Bible says that we too should give up our rights when it might cause a brother or sister to stumble. This clearly would have done that.

How might you apply that to today? What do you give up in order to not cause your brothers and sister to stumble?

James gives his reasons beginning in verse 21.

21 For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.

Compromise is called for sometimes and sometimes not. Why was it called for in this case?

This was not doctrinal compromise. It was compromise that would facilitate unity. That is a lesson for us today.

So Paul and Barnabas were sent back with a letter containing the decision. Look at verse 22.

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas — Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. 24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 "Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

Look what happened when they reached the church in Antioch. Verse 30.

30 So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. 32 Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. 33 After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. 34 But it seemed good to Silas to remain there. 35 But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.

God spent an entire chapter to show the difference between law and grace. This message of grace should be the cornerstone of our church.

I was raised in a church that felt its responsibility was to protect the gospel. In doing so, they became very legalistic laying out many, many rules that were hard to keep. When Susan and I came out of that tradition, it was like a weight off of our shoulders. Does it sometimes show its ugly head with me? Yes it does. I like men who wear ties and I love the old hymns. But I also know that they make absolutely no difference to God.

In fact, under legalism, Christianity is no different than many other religions that want to control rather than enable. This chapter is life changing.

Let me end with Gal 5:1 which says:

1 It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”