

### *Conflict—in the Church*

1. When you are troubled, what symptoms show on your face? In your spirit?

Something was happening to the church that few had thought possible a decade earlier; its center of gravity was changing. Jerusalem was no longer the largest church or even the most important and influential. In reality, two centers of influence emerged. The church in Jerusalem still exercised a significant influence on Jewish Christians, but Gentile Christians looked more and more to Antioch for their guidance and direction. With growth came questions and conflict. A particular situation comes to a head in the chapter we are studying this week.

***Bow in Prayer:*** “Gracious Lord, let Your peace and compassion wash over us as You teach us ways of handling conflict in the body of Christ.”

***Read*** Acts 15:1-35. In this pivotal chapter, Luke outlines the impassioned discussion surrounding this conflict and the eventual solution arrived at through the Jerusalem Council.

2. a. Discuss the tensions that erupted in the relationship between the Christians in Antioch and Jerusalem from Acts 15:1-2, 24.  
  
b. Why was this issue so important? What was at stake?
3. What did the church at Antioch decide to do about it (15:2b)?
4. What does the response of Paul and Barnabas teach us about contending for the central truths of the Gospel in spite of the debate that may ensue?

On their journey to Jerusalem (a trip of about 300 miles) Paul and Barnabas paid visits to several congregations along the way.

5. Recount how the churches in Phoenicia (Acts 11:19) and Samaria (Acts 8:1 and 8:4-6) had been established. What was their reaction to hearing that Gentiles were being converted throughout Asia Minor?

6. How were Paul and Barnabas received by the church in Jerusalem? What did they emphasize in their report to the church (15:4)?
7. What happened following Paul's glowing report about the work God was doing among the Gentiles (15:5)?

**Note:** From the time of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, fellowship with God and access to the promises of God were limited primarily to Israel. Even Jesus, during His ministry, limited His work to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24), and forbid the disciples to preach among the Gentiles (Matthew 10:5-6). A Gentile could gain access to the promises of God only by becoming a proselyte. For a man, that meant he had to be circumcised. **Read** Genesis 17:9-14 for additional background.

### ***The Discussion and Decision***

8. Who gathered in Jerusalem to discuss the issue of circumcision and other Jewish laws? List some of the names of those we can assume would have been present.
9. In Acts 15:6-21 Luke summarizes what was certainly a much longer discussion. Who were the four key speakers at the Jerusalem Council?

**Reread** Acts 15:6-21 for the purpose of understanding the arguments of each spokesman. You might want to consult more than one translation.

10. a. Peter sets the stage by detailing what God originally did. What were the main points of Peter's testimony? (*This is the last mention of Peter in the book of Acts.*)
  - b. To what experience was Peter referring in verse 7? (See Acts chapter 10.)
  - c. What truth had been established at Cornelius' house?
11. a. Why do you think the audience fell silent when Paul and Barnabas spoke?

b. How did the testimony of Paul and Barnabas underscore Peter's declaration?  
The combined words of Peter, Paul and Barnabas were effective! Now it fell to James, the brother of our Lord and the recognized leader of the Jerusalem church, to conclude and sum things up.

12. a. To what does James appeal as the final authority in the matter (verses 13-18)?

b. What had been the long-standing purpose of God according to the prophetic Scriptures?

*Stop and Consider* how God led the apostles to a unanimous decision. Councils have no authority in the church unless it can be shown that their conclusions are in accord with Scripture. From the historical point of view, the Gospel was officially defined and defended at the Jerusalem Council. Most scholars date Paul's book to the Galatians shortly after the Council at Jerusalem (A.D. 49).

13. What fundamental truth regarding the Gospel was preserved?

14. What was the significance of the council's decision in light of Acts 1:8?

15. a. People today still try to gain God's approval by outward conformity to a list of rules. What examples can you provide from your own life? From observing others?

b. Why is this behavior so offensive to God?

16. What was the purpose of the Law? Why was it given? See Galatians 3:24.

*The issue concerning salvation had been settled, but there remained another problem: fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.* Many Gentile practices involved religions that were related to Greek mythology. These practices were offensive to Jews and to Jewish Christians and presented a barrier to Christian unity and fellowship.

17. From what four behaviors were the Gentile believers to abstain? In what way would this help preserve unity in the church?
18. What did the leaders (along with the whole church) do to make sure the decisions from the council were adequately communicated to the Gentile believers? **Review** Acts 15:22-29.
19. What part did the Holy Spirit play in the decision reached by the church (verse 28)?
20. Describe the impact of the Jerusalem Council's recommendations on the believers in Antioch (Acts 15:30-35).

### ***Life Lessons***

21. List the steps that were taken to resolve this conflict and the spirit of those involved.
22. What principles do you observe about godly resolution of a disagreement from the way the leaders worked toward resolution?
23. Choose one of the most significant conflicts you are facing in your personal life. On a separate piece of paper write out the details of that conflict—the cause, how it began, and the issues at stake—as clearly as you can see them. *Consider how the principles of resolution that were displayed by the church leaders in our study could be applied to your situation. Then write out the steps below that you could begin to take, by God's grace, to encourage resolution and restore unity in relationships.*