



## First Baptist Church Selmer

THE ROAD TO ROMANS • PAUL'S PERSONAL CONFLICTS • ACTS 15:1-21; 35-41 •

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### MAIN POINT

Conflict is present even amongst the godliest of individuals who live by the Holy Spirit, who are guided by Scripture, and who embrace the Lord's will, but we must seek to resolve it.

### INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic.

**What is your gut reaction when conflicts arise? Do you run away, fight back, or ignore?**

**Do you believe most people handle conflict effectively? Why or why not?**

**What is the difference between conflict management and conflict resolution?**

The Bible never shies away from uncomfortable topics or narratives. In the midst of the greatest missionary journey to date, Paul returns to Jerusalem with his missionary team to debate *"no small dissension"* around Gentile circumcision with the apostles and Jewish leaders (**See Timeline of Paul's Life on Page 4**). The powerhouse team of Paul and Barnabas would then face significant conflict, highlighted by a *"sharp disagreement"* over whether the 2nd Missionary Journey would include John Mark, a former deserter. Paul wanted to leave John Mark at home, while Barnabas wanted to give John Mark a second chance. This would lead to a major strain in the relationships of the first missionary team and give us great insight into how conflict is no respecter of persons, even those living on mission, guided by Scripture, and following the Lord's will.

### UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 15:1-5.

*1 "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.' 2 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. 3 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. 4 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. 5 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.'" (ESV)*

**What things did the teachers in this passage say the Gentiles must do? If you were a Gentile hearing that these regulations were required, how would you feel about your new faith?**

**Have you ever encountered extra-biblical rules (standards of conduct not found in Scripture) you were supposed to follow in the church?**

**If so, how should we approach handling these extra-biblical rules in the right way?**

The debate centered around one question: Did Gentiles who believed in Jesus have to follow the Old Testament rituals of Judaism to be saved? All the first believers were Jews, and Christianity was a movement that began within Judaism. Jesus Himself was a Jew. For these reasons and more, some believers viewed Christianity as an extension of Judaism and its legal requirements. They were concerned because the Antioch Christians had not entered the process of becoming Jewish converts. That process required circumcision of males and obeying all of the Mosaic laws.

**Why should conflict be an expectation within the church? In what ways can conflict be productive?**

**What was in jeopardy if the church couldn't reach an agreement about these issues? How would things be different for Christians today if the people in Acts 15:5 had been successful?**

Conflicts are inevitable. When we are in conflict with others, we need to work with them to understand the problem with all its implications and strive to resolve it. Paul and Barnabas understood that keeping adherence to the Mosaic law as a requirement for salvation was to deny that salvation is by faith alone. The conflict described in these verses involved theological as well as practical concerns. The integrity of the gospel and the unity of church fellowship were at stake.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 15:6-21.

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

*12 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. 13 After they finished speaking, James replied, 'Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,*

*16 "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, 17 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 18 known from of old."*

*19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 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. 21 For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues." (ESV)*

**What action indicates Peter's leadership role among the apostles?**

**Who do you look to in our church for leadership and guidance?**

After Peter's speech, the gathering fell silent. Barnabas and Paul recounted their work among the Gentiles, emphasizing what God had done through them. They had performed

signs and wonders by God's power. These miracles impressed the Gentiles and validated the gospel Paul and Barnabas proclaimed. The reports of Barnabas, Paul, and Peter had great impact because they were Jewish Christians who had witnessed God's grace in action.

**What was James's recommendation? How did his resolution satisfy both parties?**

**What roles do experience, sound theology, and practical considerations play in the decision-making process of a Christian leader? Why are all three important?**

James announced his opinion, perhaps as a formal motion: Gentiles would not have to become Jewish converts to become Christians (v. 19). Then James suggested a letter be sent to Gentile churches instructing believers to keep four ritual requirements in deference to Jewish Christians. Many Gentile converts and God-fearers had become familiar with Jewish rituals and regulations. Also, by being sensitive to the beliefs and practices of Jews, Gentile Christians might reach them (vv. 20-21). To resolve conflict, we should always look to the Scriptures' wisdom for guidance. We should never accept any resolution that violates God's Word.

After the letter was sent out among the brethren from city to city, we pick up again with Paul and Barnabas back in Antioch (Syria) at the start of the second missionary journey.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ ACTS 15:35-41.

*35 "But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. 36 And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.' 37 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches." (ESV)*

**Who do you think was right in the argument between Paul and Barnabas? How did God continue to work in Paul and Barnabas's separate missionary journeys?**

## **What does this passage teach us about restoring people to ministry despite their past failures?**

Believers will make mistakes and experience conflict. As we show willingness to forgive failures and give second chances, we provide others opportunities to grow and learn from their mistakes. Paul takes Silas in one direction while Barnabas takes John Mark in another. Practically, we can learn a few things from this disagreement: (1) With every conflict, there is typically one main issue, but many different opinions, (2) With every conflict, there is likely right and wrong from both sides, (3) With every conflict, someone is likely to experience hurt.

Thankfully, Scripture records that this disagreement was later resolved. Paul records in 1 Corinthians 9:6 that he and Barnabas are fellow partners in the work of ministry. We also see Paul write in Colossians 4:10 and 2 Timothy 4:11 that John Mark should be welcomed as a Christian brother and that he is useful to the ministry.

John Mark is also believed to be the writer of the Gospel of Mark. He made good use of the second chance Barnabas gave him. The Bible calls us to invest in each other, even though risks are associated with it. However, as we involve others and strive to resolve conflict in church ministry, the whole church benefits and God is glorified.

## **APPLICATION**

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

**What risks are involved in seeking to resolve conflicts? Why should we accept those risks and work to resolve conflicts?**

**Have you ever lost a friendship because of a religious dispute? What happened? What can be done to resolve the conflict?**

## **PRAYER**

Thank God for the opportunity to do life in community with others. Pray that God will bring to light this week any areas in our church life or individual relationships where reconciliation is needed.

## **COMMENTARY**

15:1-2 After their missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch (14:28). During their stay, some men traveled from Judea to Antioch. They began to teach that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved. They had to keep the customs prescribed by Moses. Paul and Barnabas contested the Judaizers' teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation—that Gentiles had to be a part of Israel, the covenant community, to become Christians. This sparked a serious argument and debate in which Paul and Barnabas rejected the Judaizers' claim. Possibly in a called meeting, the church formally designated Paul and Barnabas and some others as representatives to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

15:3-5 The Jerusalem church remained the mother church, and the apostles and elders evidently gave counsel on theological issues. They probably did not give directives to other churches. Yet the Antioch church saw the need for a broader meeting of church leaders to resolve the controversy. Thus, the Antioch church underwrote the journey of more than 250 miles to Jerusalem. The conflict described in these verses involved theological as well as practical concerns. Theologically, it concerned how a person is saved. Practically, it involved church fellowship—how saved people relate to one another. Specifically, it concerned the relationship of Jewish and Gentile Christians and how they would interact with one another. The integrity of the gospel was at stake.

15:6-8 The apostles and the elders assembled to consider Gentile conversion and fellowship with Gentile believers. "Apostles" refers to all or some of the Twelve. The elders were other leaders in the church. Verse 12 implies other church members also were present. Paul and Barnabas had engaged the circumcision party in lengthy debate. When Peter spoke, he reminded the assembly that in the early days of the Christian movement, God had chosen him to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles so they might believe. (See Acts 10). Peter had been God's messenger to Gentiles with the good news. Peter stressed that God had validated the Gentiles' conversions by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to Jewish believers at Pentecost. Only God knows the heart fully, and He gave evidence that the Gentiles' conversions were genuine. God gives the Spirit only to believers.

15:9-10 Peter declared God made no distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers. When Gentiles made a faith commitment to Christ, God cleansed their hearts as He had cleansed Jewish believers' hearts. Peter strongly implied real purity came as a result of faith; it did not come from circumcision or observing other Jewish regulations. When the

circumcision party heard Peter's account of what happened in Cornelius's house, they had affirmed God had saved Gentiles (see 11:18). Putting on the disciples' necks the yoke of legalism would be to test God by questioning whether He saved people by grace through faith and by seeking to impose a different way. Peter stressed that no generation had been able to bear the yoke of the law.

15:11-12 Peter rejected salvation by keeping the law and stated firmly: We believe we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way they are. The Gentiles' salvation became a model for Jews: Jews were saved by grace through faith even as Gentiles were. Jewish Christians rightly could cherish their law and strive to keep it, but they had been saved by grace through faith, not by the law. The whole assembly likely refers to the Jerusalem church and the group from Antioch. After Peter's speech, the gathering fell silent. Barnabas and Paul recounted their work among the Gentiles, emphasizing what God had done through them. They had performed signs and wonders by God's power. These miracles impressed the Gentiles and validated the gospel Paul and Barnabas proclaimed.

15:13 Following Paul and Barnabas, James responded. This was Jesus' half-brother (see Mark 6:3), not the apostle James or James the son of Alphaeus (see 1:13). This James had become the Jerusalem church's leader. He called for the assembly's attention. Doubtless, all ears were attuned to him because of his position in the church. Also, he may have been a conservative Jewish Christian whose outlook had changed.

15:14-19 James referred to Peter by his Jewish name, Simeon. James called attention to Peter's account of how God had intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for His name. The Greek term translated intervened means "to examine with the eyes" with the further idea of looking on (someone) to help, benefit, or provide for the person. When Peter went to Cornelius's house, God provided the Gentiles an opportunity to receive the gospel. James quoted from the Hebrew prophets Amos and Isaiah to support his argument. James announced his opinion, perhaps as a formal motion: Gentiles would not have to become Jewish converts to become Christians.

15:20 James suggested a letter be sent to Gentile churches instructing believers to keep four ritual requirements in deference to Jewish Christians. Some scholars think these may have been introduced as a way for Jews and Gentiles within the church to have a common basis for contact. But it is more likely that these were designed to elevate the moral standards of the Gentiles by prohibiting them from engaging in a number of the practices

that were associated with pagan temple rites such as animal sacrifice, sexual immorality, and idolatry.

15:21 James's reason for invoking Moses and the widespread proclamation of the law is not entirely clear. He may have meant that Jewish people who spread throughout the world via the Diaspora had made Moses' law known among Gentiles through their public reading of Scripture. Alternatively, he may have been saying that the standards he demanded of Gentiles in verse 20 reflected universal moral laws that were enshrined in the law of Moses.

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15:35-38 Paul suggested to Barnabas that they go back and visit the believers in every town where they had preached the message of the Lord. Paul cared about them and wanted to investigate their progress in the Christian faith. He also may have wanted to encourage various elders they had appointed to lead these churches (Acts 14:23). Barnabas, true to his name, wanted to take along his cousin John Mark (Colossians 4:10). However, Paul did not think it appropriate. After all, Paul probably reasoned in his heart, John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia early on in their first missionary journey—he had failed once and would probably fail them again. However, Barnabas wanted to give John Mark a second chance. He was more willing to forgive or at least to overlook John Mark's earlier failure.

15:39-41 A sharp disagreement ensued between Paul and Barnabas, and they parted company. They came to an impasse regarding the involvement of John Mark in their ministry and determined the best course of action was to minister separately. This allowed Paul to press on without fear of a second failure by John Mark. It also allowed Barnabas to continue to encourage this younger disciple. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed off to Cyprus, presumably to visit the work Barnabas and Paul had begun there earlier (Acts 13:4-12). Paul, however, chose Silas, a prophet and leader from the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:22,27-32).