

When Conflicts Arise



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 6:1–6; Acts 10:1–23; Matt. 5:17–20; Acts 11:3–24; Acts 15:1–22; Amos 9:11, 12.*

Memory Text: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Galatians 3:27, 28, NKJV*).

One of the most difficult tasks of any Christian community is to maintain unity when differences of opinion arise on matters pertaining to the identity and mission of the church. These differences can lead to devastating consequences.

Today's Christian communities are no different from those we see in the New Testament. People are people, and differences, even over important points, will come. Early Christians faced some conflicts arising from perceived interpersonal prejudices and from serious differences of interpretations of key Old Testament stories and practices. These conflicts could have destroyed the church in its infancy had it not been for thoughtful apostles and leaders who sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures to resolve these tensions.

A few weeks ago we studied how the early church experienced church unity. This week we look at how the early church solved the inner conflicts that undermined its unity and threatened its survival. What were these conflicts, how were they resolved, and what can we today learn from those experiences?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 17.

Ethnic Prejudices

Read Acts 6:1. What issue in the early church caused people to complain about what appeared to be the unfair and unequitable distribution of food to widows?

Some early Christians appeared to be prejudiced against the widows of Greek heritage in their midst and provided them with less food than the widows of Hebrew heritage. This *perceived* favoritism caused a rift in the early community of believers. Whether or not the favoritism was real, the text does not say. It says only that some people believed that it was. This conflict threatened the church's unity very early on. How fascinating that ethnic division was seen so quickly in the church.

Read Acts 6:2–6. What were the simple steps taken by the early church to solve this misunderstanding?

The early church was growing rapidly, and this growth brought increasingly heavy burdens on the apostles. The appointment of these seven men, traditionally called “deacons” (although the New Testament does not call them as such), relieved the tension in the Jerusalem church and allowed for the involvement of more people in the ministry of the church.

The apostles listened carefully to the complaints of Greek-speaking believers and asked them for a solution. The selection of the seven men to become associates of the apostles was left to this group, and they recommended seven disciples, all of them from Greek-speaking heritage. These men were said to be “of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (*Acts 6:3, NKJV*). The ministry of the apostles, which until then had been both to preach the Word of God and to distribute food to widows, was divided into two groups, each doing an equally valuable ministry for the proclamation of the gospel. Luke uses the same word, “ministry” or “service” (*diakonia*), to refer to both the ministry of the apostles in preaching the Word (*Acts 6:4*) and to the ministry of the deacons in distributing food (*Acts 6:1*).

What significance do you see in the fact that the leaders called many of the believers together (*Acts 6:2*) in order to try to work out a solution?

The Conversion of Gentiles

The conversion of Gentiles to the gospel of Jesus Christ is an event in the book of Acts that sets the stage for the greatest conflict in the life of the early church, one that would threaten its existence and mission.

Read Acts 10:1–23. What elements in this passage indicate that the Holy Spirit was at work in the hearts of many people to prepare the way for Gentiles to receive the gospel?

The vision must have seemed so bizarre to Peter. He was shocked by it because, as a faithful Jew, he had never partaken of unclean or defiled foods, as the law required (*see Leviticus 11, Ezek. 4:14, and Dan. 1:8*). However, the intent of this vision was not about diet but about the barriers between Jews and Gentiles that were hindering the spread of the gospel. Such barriers were at least as prevalent in the ancient world as they are today.

During the first decades, Christianity was basically made up of Jews who had accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah of the Old Testament prophecies. These early believers in Jesus were faithful Jews who obeyed the law as they had been taught. They did not consider the gospel of Jesus Christ as having erased or abolished the Old Testament proscriptions (*see Matt. 5:17–20*).

Read Acts 10:28, 29, 34, 35. What did Peter understand was the meaning of the vision he received in Joppa? What led him to this interpretation?

What we see happening in Acts is that the Holy Spirit had prepared the way for Gentiles to be received into the fellowship of the Christian community. And they could do this without having to be circumcised and become Jews first. What convinced Peter and his friends that this was indeed God's will was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household in a similar way to what the disciples of Jesus had experienced on the Day of Pentecost (*Acts 10:44–47*). If the Holy Spirit was given to Gentiles in the same way as it was given to Jews, then it was evident that being circumcised was not a prerequisite to becoming a believer in Jesus as the Messiah. This conclusion set the stage for a major theological conflict among early Christians.

The Spirit Is Leading

Reports of what happened in Caesarea with Cornelius soon reached the leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem, and they asked Peter to give an account of what happened. They were offended by what Peter had done because, according to their Jewish understanding of the Law of Moses, faithful Jews were not allowed to eat with Gentiles (*Acts 11:3*).

Read Acts 11:4–18. What did Peter say to explain the work of the Holy Spirit and His leading in this event? What was the main point he was making by recounting what had happened?

Although some raised questions about the legitimacy of Peter's actions and his decision to baptize these Gentiles, sufficient witnesses (*Acts 11:12*) certified that the Holy Spirit did indeed manifest His presence in the same way as at Pentecost. The guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit in this case is unassailable and the gift acknowledged. "When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life'" (*Acts 11:18, NKJV*).

Read Acts 11:19–24. What happened next in the life of the early church?

Perhaps some in Jerusalem thought that what happened with Cornelius and his household would be an exception and that such an experience would not be repeated. But that's not what the Holy Spirit intended. As the disciples of Jesus scattered beyond Jerusalem and Judea, because of the persecution that arose after Stephen's death (*Acts 8:1*), and went to Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, subsequently more and more Gentiles accepted Jesus as their Savior. This is what Jesus had predicted (*Acts 1:8*). As wonderful as this influx of Gentiles was, if we put ourselves in the place of these early Jewish believers it's not hard to see how they weren't quite sure how to react.

How might we ourselves be holding on to narrow views of the church and of our message that could hamper our witness?

The Jerusalem Council

Read Acts 15:1, 2 and Galatians 2:11–14. What are the two issues that caused serious conflict in the early church?

The threat to church unity faced by early Christians was real and difficult. Some Jewish Christians thought that salvation was possible only for those who belonged to the covenant people of God, and this implied that circumcision was a requirement. And as part of a faithful lifestyle, these Jewish believers also believed that they were to avoid any contacts with Gentiles that could possibly thwart their own salvation.

The Jews had very strict traditions in regard to their association with Gentiles. These traditions quickly became a stumbling block for the new Christian community when the apostles began to reach out to Gentiles who wished to become followers of Jesus. Because the Messiah is the Savior of God's covenant people, as predicted in the Old Testament, weren't Gentiles supposed to become Jews first and then follow the same covenant rules if they wanted to be saved?

Read Acts 15:3–22. What were some issues presented during the Jerusalem Council?

The issue here was rooted in conflicts over deeply held interpretations of the Old Testament stories regarding circumcision and relationship with Gentiles. As apostles, elders, and delegates from Antioch sat together, it seems the discussion went on for a long time without any resolution.

But then Peter, Barnabas, and Paul made speeches. Peter's speech alluded to the visionary revelation that God gave him and to the gift of the Holy Spirit, which opened the way for the mission to the Gentiles. Then Paul and Barnabas shared their stories of what God had done through them for the Gentiles. As a result, many eyes were opened to new truth. Said Peter: "We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they," meaning the Gentiles (*Acts 15:11, NKJV*). Centuries of long-held tradition were unraveling in light of the gospel.

Was there ever a time you changed your mind about how you understood a deeply held belief? What did you learn from the experience that could perhaps help you when you might again have to question your understanding of a belief?

A Difficult Solution

It took some level of trust from the church at Antioch to send representatives to Jerusalem in order to seek the best solution to their conflict. However, after hours of discussion between the apostles and elders, James, the brother of Jesus, who appears to be the leader of the assembly, made a judgment about what should be done (*Acts 15:13–20*). Clearly the council decided that Gentiles do not need to become Jewish converts, obeying all aspects of the ceremonial laws, including circumcision, in order to become Christians.

Read Amos 9:11, 12 and Jeremiah 12:14–16. What predictions did these Old Testament prophets make regarding Israel’s neighboring nations?

While James quotes from Amos 9, we see allusions to the salvation of the nations in other Old Testament prophets. It was God’s intention all along to save the entire world through Israel’s witness and experience. In fact, God’s call to Abraham included a blessing for all nations through him and his descendants (*Gen. 12:1–3*). The leading of the Holy Spirit; the ministry of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul among the Gentiles; and the conversion of many Gentiles were evidences that could not be set aside. These testimonies helped leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem realize that many Old Testament prophecies were now being fulfilled. In fact, God already had given laws guiding the presence of Gentiles in Israel and what restrictions applied to them (*Leviticus 17, 18*). James also referred to these laws in his decision (*Acts 15:29*). It became obvious to everyone that God was calling Gentiles to join His people and receive salvation in Jesus. The guidance of the Holy Spirit gave them a deeper understanding of the Scripture and revealed to them crucial truths that they had not seen before.

Acts 15:30–35 tells the response of the believers in Antioch to what was decided in Jerusalem: “The people . . . were glad for its encouraging message” (*Acts 15:31, NIV*).

We see here in Acts a powerful example of how the early church, through submission to the Word of God, along with a mind-set of love, unity, and trust, could under the guidance of the Holy Spirit avert what could have been a major crisis of unity.

What does this account teach us about how important it is for us not only to *listen* to what others are saying but to consider that they might be right, even when what they say is not exactly what we want to hear?

Further Thought: Ellen G. White, “A Seeker for Truth,” pp. 131–142; “Jew and Gentile,” pp. 188–200, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“The council which decided this case was composed of apostles and teachers who had been prominent in raising up the Jewish and Gentile Christian churches, with chosen delegates from various places. Elders from Jerusalem and deputies from Antioch were present, and the most influential churches were represented. The council moved in accordance with the dictates of enlightened judgment, and with the dignity of a church established by the divine will. As a result of their deliberations they all saw that God Himself had answered the question at issue by bestowing upon the Gentiles the Holy Ghost; and they realized that it was their part to follow the guidance of the Spirit.

“The entire body of Christians was not called to vote upon the question. The ‘apostles and elders,’ men of influence and judgment, framed and issued the decree, which was thereupon generally accepted by the Christian churches. Not all, however, were pleased with the decision; there was a faction of ambitious and self-confident brethren who disagreed with it. These men assumed to engage in the work on their own responsibility. They indulged in much murmuring and faultfinding, proposing new plans and seeking to pull down the work of the men whom God had ordained to teach the gospel message. From the first the church has had such obstacles to meet and ever will have till the close of time.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 196, 197.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What steps toward the resolution of conflicts found in the accounts we looked at this week can be applied to your church community if and when disagreements arise? Though one issue the church was dealing with here was theological, what can we learn from these accounts that can help the church when cultural, political, or ethnic issues threaten unity? What important principles can we take away from what we have seen?
- 2 Look again at the Ellen G. White quote above. Despite the positive outcome, some were still not satisfied. What lesson should we take away from this sad reality?

Summary: The early church was threatened by internal conflicts over a number of issues that could have had a devastating effect on it. We saw the way that the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and submission to the Word of God, was able to resolve these conflicts and avert schisms.

Praying for Missing Sheep

By LLOYD PERRIN

The church that I pastor in the U.S. state of Oregon has an official membership of 491 people. But only 38 percent of those members are active, a number that inches up to 44 percent if you include elderly members who are housebound because of physical or mental disabilities.

That means 56 percent of our members are inactive—a figure that I haven't found to be unusual during my decades of pastoring churches in the United States. The problem is not limited to U.S. churches. Worldwide, nearly half of all people baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church over the past 50 years have ended up leaving. But the church has an obligation to shepherd the flock. The apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 5:2, "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you" (*NKJV*).

So, we have started going through our membership records at the Milton Seventh-day Adventist Church in Milton-Freewater, Oregon. I will distribute a list of these missing members to each church officer. We will pray daily for each missing member by name and ask God to help us reconnect with them.

Surprises abounded when I gave a similar prayer challenge at my previous church in Spokane, Washington. About three weeks after we started to pray, I received a letter from a woman who had left the church 15 years earlier. The woman had quit church after failing to return a storybook from the church library. She had moved to another state and, she wrote, had been too lazy to find a way to return the book. But guilt had gnawed at her heart and then grown into a cancer that poisoned her relationship with God.

The woman wrote that she had suddenly remembered the book and felt convicted to reach out to the church. She apologized for taking the book and enclosed \$50 to cover the book's cost and 15 years of interest on its value.

I called up the woman immediately and learned that her sense of conviction had begun growing only when our church had started to pray 1,500 miles (2,400 kilometers) away. I put her in touch with her local Adventist pastor, and she became an active member of that church.

Soon we also will pray for missing Milton members. We need to find our missing sheep and invite them home.



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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Acts 11:17*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Explain the principles used by the early church to resolve internal conflicts.

Feel: Understand that internal conflicts undermine the unity and witness of the church.

Do: Seek guidance from the Holy Spirit and Scripture when conflicts arise.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Principles for Conflict Resolution

- Ⓐ What was the basis of the conflicts faced by the early church?
- Ⓑ What principles of conflict resolution are present in all the conflicts examined in this lesson? Are there some principles that are unique to the individual examples that were examined? Explain.
- Ⓒ What factors contributed to the success of the apostles in their attempts at conflict resolution?

II. Feel: Protecting the Witness of the Church

- Ⓐ Often church conflicts are ignored for long periods of time. How important is it to resolve church conflicts quickly, and why?
- Ⓑ What clues are there in each example of conflict that indicate that the unity and witness of the church was being compromised?

III. Do: The Leading of the Holy Spirit

- Ⓐ How can we be sure of the Holy Spirit's leading as we attempt to resolve conflicts today?
- Ⓑ How can we prevent our own biases from getting in the way of the direction in which the Holy Spirit is leading?

► **Summary:** The relational and theological conflicts faced by the early church were resolved promptly by the leaders of the church as they submitted to the teaching of the apostles and recognized the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Acts 15:1–22*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: While conflicts are best avoided, our response to church conflicts provides opportunities for church members to recognize the leading of the Holy Spirit and grow together.

Just for Teachers: Conflict and theological disagreement are a consistent feature of the history of the Christian church. However, a review of history suggests that positive results can come from potentially divisive situations. As you consider the provided story, help students to recognize that growth occurred when disagreement sent the church back to study the Scriptures.

Opening Discussion: Marcion was a second-century Christian who developed beliefs about God that placed him in direct conflict with the church. He separated Jesus and His Father from the Old Testament God, in part, because he could not reconcile a God of justice with a God of love. He also denied that Christ was truly human, and he claimed that Christ did not suffer on the cross. Using his beliefs about God as a basis for correct doctrine, he compiled a collection of writings that he considered were inspired and useful for the Christian. He did not consider the Hebrew Scriptures useful for the Christian, and he composed his canon from selected epistles by Paul and a heavily edited Gospel of Luke. In response to Marcion's theology, the scholars of the church used the Hebrew Scriptures and the writings of the apostles to clarify the character and nature of God, in particular showing that God could be both just and loving. Marcion's theology also helped the church to recognize that Christians still needed the Hebrew Scriptures and, further, that they needed to identify which Christian writings were inspired and thus should be considered as Scripture.

Discussion Questions: The story of Marcion shows that conflicts and even heresy can provide the church with opportunities to study and clarify its beliefs. In what ways has the Seventh-day Adventist Church grown from the result of conflict and theological disagreement? Can you think of conflicts in which the church does not seem to have found a way to grow? Why do you think that some events have led to growth and others have merely torn the church apart?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: As you examine the stories of conflict in Acts, help your class to understand why the apostles were successful in their conflict resolution. Focus particularly on the role of the Holy Spirit and how we can move past our own biases.

Bible Commentary

I. Searching for a Resolution (*Review Acts 6:1–6, Acts 11:1–18, and Acts 15:1–22 with your class.*)

It may seem surprising that conflict erupted so quickly after the establishment of the Christian church, but the reality is that wherever there are people there is potential for conflict. The conflicts of the early church included both theological dilemmas and relational issues arising from the diverse backgrounds of those accepting Christ. The apostles did not ignore the conflicts that arose in their midst. They set out to resolve them so that nothing got in the way of the mission of the church. Several important principles can be seen in their approach to conflict.

- a. The problems were acknowledged openly. Too often conflicts are ignored in the hope that, by doing so, the conflicts would disappear on their own. Conflicts need to be acknowledged and dealt with promptly.
- b. One or more people were appointed to seek a solution for the problem. The individuals chosen were well known and trusted by the congregation.
- c. The stories and opinions of those involved on both sides of the conflict were heard.
- d. Scripture was considered. For instance, at the Jerusalem Council, the leaders considered both the law of Moses, which talked about circumcision, and the prophets, who predicted that there would be Gentile believers.
- e. Evidence of the leading of God was both presented and sought after.
- f. Finally, the decision was communicated, along with the reasons for the decision. When this could not be done directly by the leaders who had made the decision, a message was sent with an individual trusted by the church.

By following this process, major divisions were avoided, and transparency and accountability were provided.

Consider This: Are all these principles transferable to the twenty-first-

century church? Explain. Which of the above principles causes the most difficulties in attempts to resolve conflict?

II. Following the Lead of the Holy Spirit *(Review Acts 11:12–17 with your class.)*

The Holy Spirit figures prominently in the story of Peter and Cornelius and at the Jerusalem Council. Peter was acutely aware of God’s paving the way for his encounter with Cornelius. He notes that “ ‘the Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them’ ” (*Acts 11:12, NIV*), and after the Holy Spirit visibly was poured out on the Gentiles, Peter concluded: “ ‘So if God gave them the same gift that he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?’ ” (*Acts 11:17, NIV*). While the visible manifestation of the Holy Spirit provided unassailable evidence of God’s leading, Peter already had identified that God was leading him to Cornelius. Likewise, at the Jerusalem Council, James identified God’s hand intervening to show His approval of Gentile believers. The apostles were clearly convinced that the Holy Spirit was guiding them in truth, as Jesus had promised before His death (*John 16:13, 14*).

Consider This: How did Peter know the Spirit was leading prior to seeing visible confirmation of the Spirit? The apostles followed the leading of the Spirit without hesitation. What is your reaction when you believe God is leading you to do something?

III. Changing Perceptions *(Review Acts 15:1, 2, 13–20 and Acts 11:18 with your class.)*

Following the leading of the Spirit is not always easy. We risk having to give up our cherished ideas, having to admit that we are wrong, and having to adjust our lives to God’s plans. This adjustment is particularly difficult in a conflict situation, because we feel the need to save face. In Acts, the Jewish believers found themselves having to give up firmly entrenched beliefs about circumcision and Gentiles that touched upon the core of their identity. There was predictable opposition; and yet, Luke also records that when believers heard the full story of how the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, they realized God truly was leading (*Acts 11:18*). The visible nature of God’s acceptance of the Gentiles helped to ease the transition in the practices of the church.

Consider This: Why did the group traveling to Jerusalem in Acts 15 take the time to tell the story of the Gentile conversion to those in Phoenicia and Samaria? Why do you think Peter framed the issue around the idea of God’s choice of the Gentiles? Were there any factors other than the visible nature of the Holy Spirit’s presence that helped the early church to accept the fact that believers did not need

to become Jews before they became Christians?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Although the lesson has reviewed church conflicts rather than personal conflicts, individual members are inevitably impacted by churchwide conflicts. This section focuses on how individual members respond when they are surrounded by conflict. Encourage members to examine personally their own cultural biases and seek God’s will when disagreements arise.

Application Questions:

- ❶ What is your normal response to conflict around you? Do you jump in and join in the argument, or do you do your best to avoid conflict? What should be your personal response when conflict erupts in the church?
- ❷ How can we find God’s will in the midst of disagreement?
- ❸ The way that early Christians understood their Jewish heritage got in the way of their understanding that Gentiles could be part of the church. How might our culture get in the way of recognizing God’s leading or how might it impact our interpretation of Scripture? Pray that God will help you to identify some of your own biases that provide obstacles to interpreting Scripture.

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The activities section contains options for communicating the lesson’s key ideas or for delving deeper into a case study in Adventist history. Each activity is designed to reinforce the importance of identifying God’s leading in the church.

Activities:

- ❶ Develop a talk or visual presentation for the youth in your church that outlines how a Christian can identify God’s leading in his or her life and in the church.
- ❷ As a class, perform an impromptu skit in which you demonstrate an understanding of how the early church resolved conflict.
- ❸ Examine Ellen G. White’s counsel to the attendees of the 1888 General Conference session who found themselves embroiled in an emotional conflict over the law in Galatians. A good starting place is Manuscript 15, which can be found on pages 163–175 of *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*. Look specifically for any principles she outlines for moving forward. Compare these principles with those used by the apostles.