

Contention Among Christians: How to Handle Conflict in the Church

Conflict is inevitable in any relationship, including within the body of Christ. Just as siblings might start with playful sock throwing that escalates into a full-blown fight, disagreements among believers can quickly spiral out of control if not handled properly. Acts 15 provides us with a powerful blueprint for resolving conflicts in a way that honors God and strengthens the church.

What Caused the Conflict in Acts 15?

The early church faced a significant theological dispute when certain Jewish Christians insisted that Gentile converts must be circumcised according to the law of Moses to be saved. These men, described as coming from Judea, were Christian Jews who had accepted Jesus as Messiah but clung to Old Testament legalistic practices.

"And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question." - Acts 15:1-2

This wasn't a minor disagreement about preferences. It struck at the very heart of the gospel - whether salvation comes by grace through faith alone or requires additional works.

Why Do Christians Fall Into Legalism?

There will always be those who seek to twist God's grace into legalism. These individuals make faith about works rather than relationship. They might insist on calling Jesus by His Hebrew name "Yeshua" instead of the Greek "Jesus," or create rigid rules about clothing, entertainment, or lifestyle choices.

The Pharisees who believed in Jesus struggled particularly with this issue. Having memorized 613 laws (365 "don'ts" and 248 "do's"), they found it difficult to embrace the freedom that comes through Christ. As Paul wrote in Galatians 5:1, "Stand fast therefore, in the liberty by which Christ has made us free. And do not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

How Should Christians Resolve Conflicts?

The Jerusalem Council provides six essential principles for biblical conflict resolution:

1. Seek Third-Party Mediation

Paul and Barnabas recognized they needed unbiased leadership to help resolve this dispute. They traveled to Jerusalem to present the matter before the apostles and elders. Never be ashamed to seek counsel - it shows wisdom and values both people and relationships.

2. Listen to Both Sides

The Jerusalem leadership demonstrated wisdom by hearing all perspectives before making a decision. As Proverbs 18:13 reminds us, "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him."

Most people present their side as completely justified while portraying others as unreasonable. Wise counselors gather all the facts before forming conclusions.

3. Apply Biblical Principles and Evidence

Peter shared the principle of grace based on his experience with Cornelius, where God poured out His Spirit on Gentiles without requiring circumcision. Paul and Barnabas provided proof through testimonies of God's miraculous work among the Gentiles. James then referenced Old Testament prophecy from Amos showing God's plan to include both Jews and Gentiles.

Effective conflict resolution requires grounding decisions in Scripture rather than personal preferences or cultural traditions.

4. Make Unified Decisions

James, as leader of the Jerusalem church, made a clear decision: "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood."
- Acts 15:19-20

Indecisiveness helps no one. Someone must take responsibility to move forward, but ideally with unified support from leadership.

5. Provide Clear Communication and Support

The council didn't just issue a decree - they sent trusted leaders to personally deliver and explain the decision. They gathered everyone together to prevent misunderstandings and provided ongoing support through teaching and encouragement.

6. Evaluate the Results

Good biblical counsel produces peace, unity, and spiritual fruit. As James 3:17 describes, godly wisdom is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy."

What About Irreconcilable Differences?

Sometimes even godly people cannot agree on ministry approaches. Acts 15:36-41 records a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over whether to take John Mark on their second missionary journey. Paul felt Mark was unreliable after deserting them previously, while Barnabas wanted to give him another chance.

The result? They parted ways - Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus while Paul chose Silas for his journey. Both approaches had merit: Paul emphasized the importance of commitment and perseverance, while Barnabas demonstrated grace and restoration.

When Is It Okay to Agree to Disagree?

The church leadership didn't intervene in Paul and Barnabas's dispute because it was relational rather than foundational. When core doctrines are at stake, unity is essential. But when the disagreement involves ministry methods or personal preferences, believers can have "unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and charity in all things."

Not every conflict requires church intervention. Sometimes allowing people to work through differences builds maturity and character. The key is ensuring that love and grace continue to flow even when we disagree.

Life Application

This week, examine your own approach to conflict. Are you quick to impose legalistic standards on others, or do you extend grace while maintaining biblical truth? When disagreements arise, commit to following the Jerusalem Council's model: seek wise counsel, listen to all sides, apply Scripture, make clear decisions, communicate with love, and evaluate the fruit.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Am I more concerned with being right or with showing Christ's love?
- Do I seek to understand others' perspectives before defending my own?
- Am I willing to submit to biblical authority even when it challenges my preferences?
- How can I demonstrate grace while maintaining important biblical principles?

Remember that conflict, when handled biblically, can actually strengthen relationships and advance God's kingdom. The goal isn't to avoid all disagreement, but to navigate it in a way that honors Christ and builds up His church.