

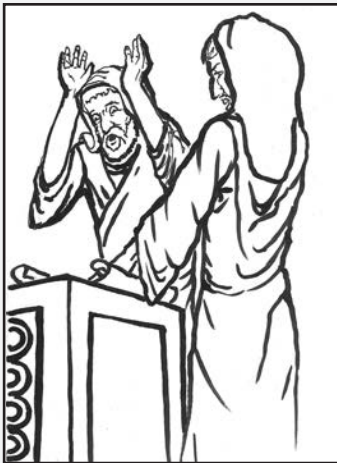
# Problems in the New Testament Church



## SABBATH—NOVEMBER 10

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Acts 6:1, 2; Acts 10:1–23; Acts 11:4–18; Galatians 2:11–14; Amos 9:11, 12.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “This is because all of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. You have put him on as if he were your clothes. There is no Jew or Gentile [non-Jew]. There is no slave or free person. There is no male or female. That’s [that is] because you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27, 28, NIV).



Christians in New Testament times disagreed over what some important Old Testament stories meant.

**ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT TASKS** that any church has is knowing how to keep peace in the church. That is hard to do when there are disagreements about who the church is and what the church should do. These disagreements can lead to awful problems.

Today’s churches are no different from the churches we see in the New Testament. People are people, right? Disagreements over important teachings will happen. Christians in New Testament times disagreed over what some important Old Testament stories meant. These disagreements had the power to destroy the church when it first started. But the Holy Spirit led church leaders to follow the wisdom from the Bible to solve these problems.

A few weeks ago, we studied how the New Testament church experienced peace and agreement. This week, we will look at how the New Testament church solved the problems inside the church that almost destroyed the peace in the church and the church itself. What were these disagreements about? How were they solved? What can we today learn from these experiences?

## GREEK WIDOWS (Acts 6:1, 2)

**In Acts 6:1, we read about a problem in the New Testament. This problem caused people to complain that the Greek widows were getting less food than the Jewish widows. What caused the problem?**

Some church members felt that the leaders showed a dislike for the Greek widows in the church. Why did the members think this way? Because they felt the Greek widows got less food than the Jewish widows. The Bible does not tell us if the leaders who served the food really felt this way about the Greek widows. But the Bible does say that some people in the church believed that the leaders did. Real or not, this problem had the power to destroy peace and rip the church apart very early on. How sad that this problem happened so fast in the church's history.

**In Acts 6:2, we read about the simple plan that the New Testament church put into action to solve this misunderstanding. What did the church do to solve the problem?**

The New Testament church grew fast. This fast growth laid heavy burdens on the apostles. The apostles were the men that Jesus chose to lead the church after He went back to heaven. The apostles chose seven men to help take care of the widows. This plan lifted some of the burden from the apostles. It also gave other people in the church a chance to do work for God. How did they come up with this plan?

First, the apostles listened very carefully to the Greek-speaking believers. Then the apostles asked these believers what they thought should be done. Next, the apostles asked the group to choose seven men to help serve food to the widows. So, the Greek-speaking believers chose seven men. All seven men spoke Greek. They also were “‘respected and . . . full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom’” (Acts 6:3, NLV). Before the church chose the seven men to help the apostles, the apostles had to preach the truth **and** give food to widows. But now part of the apostles' work was given to the seven men. The seven men took over the work of serving food to widows. In Acts, the same Greek word is used for both the preaching that the apostles did (Acts 6:4) and the work the seven men did serving food to the widows (Acts 6:1). This same word, “*diakonia*,” means service. It shows us that both jobs were equal and important in God's eyes.



**The seven men took over the work of serving food to widows.**

## NON-JEWS JOIN THE CHURCH (Acts 10:1–23)

The book of Acts tells us the story about how the non-Jews joined the church. This story is the foundation for the biggest disagreement in the early history of the New Testament church. This disagreement had the power to destroy the life and the work of the church itself.

**In Acts 10:1–23, we see proof that the Holy Spirit was at work in the hearts of many people. The Spirit led them to open the way for non-Jews to accept the Good News about Jesus. What proof do these verses show us that the Holy Spirit was at work to make this wonderful miracle happen?**

Peter must have thought the vision he saw was very strange! He was a loyal Jew. He followed the food laws about clean and unclean foods very carefully (read Leviticus 11; Ezekiel 4:14; and Daniel 1:8). He never ate any unclean foods in his life. But let us be clear. Peter's vision was **not** about food. His vision was really about the separations between Jews and non-Jews that got in the way of the Good News's success. These separations were as much a part of Bible times as they are today.

When the church first started and for the next 30 years after that, Christians were mostly Jews who accepted Jesus. These Christians were loyal Jews. They obeyed the law. So, they did not understand that the Good News put an end to some Old Testament rules (read Matthew 5:17–20).

**Acts 10:28, 29, 34 and 35 tell us what Peter believed his vision meant. What caused Peter to believe this way?**

The Holy Spirit made a way for the non-Jews to join the church. Before the non-Jews joined, they did not need to be circumcised. Circumcised means the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts is cut off. But how did Peter know that God did not want the non-Jews to be circumcised first? Because God poured His Spirit on Cornelius and everyone in his house. That is the same thing God did for Jesus' followers soon after Jesus went back to heaven (Acts 10:44–47). God gave His Spirit to non-Jews in the same way that He gave it to the Jews. So, that was proof for Peter that a non-Jew did not need to be circumcised before he joined the church. But this happening led to a big disagreement in the church.



**Peter's vision was not about food. His vision was really about the separations between Jews and non-Jews that got in the way of the Good News's success.**

**THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADS GOD’S PEOPLE (Acts 11:4–18)**

Stories about what happened in Caesarea with Cornelius soon reached church leaders in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church leaders asked Peter to explain what happened with Cornelius. The church leaders were upset with Peter. The Law of Moses said that loyal Jews were not allowed to eat with Gentiles (Acts 11:3). Gentiles are non-Jews.

**In Acts 11:4–18, how does Peter explain what happened in Caesarea and the work that the Holy Spirit did there? What does Peter want the church leaders to understand?**

Some people at the meeting had doubts about the wisdom of Peter’s behavior and his decision to baptize the Gentiles. But enough witnesses saw what happened in Caesarea. They saw that the Holy Spirit showed Himself in the same way as He did to Jesus’ followers shortly after Jesus went back to heaven. Nobody was able to say that the Holy Spirit did not lead the churches. “When the Jewish believers heard this, they stopped arguing. They praised God and said, ‘So God is allowing the non-Jewish people also to turn to him and live’ ” (Acts 11:18, ICB).

**Acts 11:19–24 tells us about the things that happened in the New Testament church after that. What happened next?**

Maybe some believers in Jerusalem thought that what happened with Cornelius and his family was not going to happen again. But the Holy Spirit had other plans. Soon after, Stephen was put to death (Acts 8:1). Many Jewish believers got scattered. They fled Jerusalem to escape the religious attacks against them. They fled to Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. They shared the Good News wherever they went. Then more and more non-Jews accepted the truth, just as Jesus promised (Acts 1:8). But it is not hard to see why the first Jewish believers were worried about the non-Jews joining their church and what they should do about it.

**Do we have “small” views or ideas about the church and God’s work? If yes, what “small” ideas do we have? How can these “small” ideas get in the way of our witness to other people? What can we do to prevent that?**



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## THE JERUSALEM GROUP (Acts 15:1, 2)

**In Acts 15:1, 2 and Galatians 2:11–14, we learn about two problems that caused a lot of trouble in the church. What are these two problems?**

The New Testament church was in real danger. Some Jewish Christians thought that only Jews will be saved. They thought that every male must become Jewish first and be circumcised. You will remember that circumcised means that the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts is cut off. Loyal Jews also believed it was their duty to avoid any contact with Gentiles. Gentiles are non-Jews.

The Jews had very strict rules against being friends with Gentiles. These man-made rules became a problem for Jewish Christians when Jesus' followers started to share the truth with people who wanted to accept Jesus. But Jesus was a Jew, right? So, did that mean that non-Jews needed to become Jews first and follow Jewish rules to be saved?

**In Acts 15:3–22, we read about the meeting of the Jerusalem Group. The Jerusalem Group made big decisions for the church. What were some of the problems that the Jerusalem Group met to discuss?**



**Peter told everyone that God poured the gift of His Holy Spirit on Cornelius and everyone in his house.**

The disagreements in the church were about the true meaning of certain stories in the Old Testament. The church leaders met together to discuss these stories. The talks went on for a long time with no agreement.

But then Peter, Barnabas, and Paul spoke. Peter hinted at the vision God gave him. He also told everyone that God poured the gift of His Holy Spirit on Cornelius and everyone in his house. This gift opened the way for Jesus' believers to share the truth with the Gentiles. Next, Paul and Barnabas talked about how God used them to witness to the Gentiles. Because of their witness, many Gentiles accepted the truth. Peter said, “ ‘We believe that we and these people [the Gentiles] will be saved the same way—by the grace [mercy, forgiveness, and power over sin] of [from] the Lord Jesus’ ” (Acts 15:11, ERV).

**Was there ever a time when you changed your mind about what you thought was true? What did that experience teach you?**

**A DIFFICULT PROBLEM IS SOLVED (Amos 9:11, 12)**

Yesterday, we saw that church leaders in Antioch sent members to the Jerusalem church to ask for help. The leaders in Antioch needed to find the best way to solve the problem about non-Jews who joined the church. The leaders from both churches spent many hours discussing the problem. Then James made a decision about what the church should do (Acts 15:13–20). James was Jesus' brother. He also seemed to be the leader of the Jerusalem Group. The Jerusalem Group made big decisions for the church. The Jerusalem Group decided that non-Jews did not need to become Jews first before they joined the church. Non-Jews also did not need to be circumcised. Remember, circumcised means that the extra skin on the end of the male sex parts is cut off.

**In Amos 9:11, 12 and Jeremiah 12:14–16, we read the special messages from Amos and Jeremiah about non-Jews. What do these special messengers from God say will happen?**

It was God's plan all along to save everyone on earth because of Israel's witness. When God chose Abraham, God promised to bless all people because of Abraham and his future children (Genesis 12:1–3). God now showed His followers proof that this promise was coming true. What was the proof? The Holy Spirit clearly led God's people. That was seen in the work for God that Peter, Barnabas, and Paul did among the non-Jews. These miracles helped church leaders in Jerusalem see that many Old Testament promises were now coming true! In the past, God gave laws to Israel to help them know the things that non-Jews should do to join Israel (Leviticus 17, 18). In James' decision, he reminds everyone about these laws (Acts 15:29). So, it becomes clear to everyone that God led the non-Jews to join His people, accept Jesus, and be saved. God's Spirit helped Jewish believers to understand this Bible truth.

When the Antioch church heard this news, they were glad (Acts 15:30–35). Acts shows us a powerful example of how the New Testament church solved an awful problem. They solved it with the help of the Spirit, Bible study, and a wish for peace.

**How important it is to listen to others, even when they say things that we may not like?**

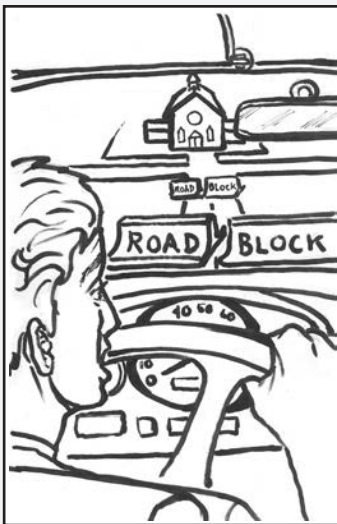


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**ADDITIONAL THOUGHT:** Read Ellen G. White, “A Seeker [someone who searches] for Truth,” pages 131–142; “Jew and Gentile [non-Jew],” pages 188–200, in *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*.

“The group who met together to solve the problem in the church included the apostles and teachers. These men were strong leaders. They started the Jewish and non-Jewish churches. The group also included many leaders from different places. Leaders from Jerusalem and Antioch were there too. Leaders from churches that had the most power to reach people with the Good News were there. The leaders made all their decisions with wisdom and respect for God, who started the church. Everyone saw that God Himself was the One who gave them the answer to their problem. They saw proof of God’s answer in the fact that God poured His Holy Spirit on the non-Jews. The leaders understood that it was their duty to do what the Holy Spirit showed them was right.

“Not every Christian was asked to come to Jerusalem and vote about what should be done. The apostles and church leaders were men who had power and the skill to judge. They ordered the leaders from the other churches to come to the meeting. For the most part, everyone came. But not everyone was happy with the church’s decision. There was a group of men who wanted power and control over the church. These men complained. They came up with new plans to stop the work of the church leaders. But God chose these leaders to teach the Good News about Jesus. From the start, many problems have tried to get in the way of the success of God’s church. That is how it always has been in the church. That is how it always will be until the end of time.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pages 196, 197, adapted.



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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What important rules have you learned this week that you and other believers can use to solve problems in your church? How can following these important rules help your church to reach a peaceful agreement?
- ② Read again the quotation by Ellen G. White from *The Acts of the Apostles* in today’s lesson study. Yes, the Jerusalem Group helped the church reach a peaceful agreement. But did you see how some members in the church were not happy with the decision? What lesson should we take away from this sad fact?