

# 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?

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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?

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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?

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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?

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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?**

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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?**

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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?**

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## 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?

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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?

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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?

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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 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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