

William Carey (who lived in the 1700's) is known as "The Father of Modern Missions." ... Before God called him to take the Gospel to India... missionaries going into foreign lands were non-existent. ... There were no accounts for them in church budgets... and certainly there were no mission agencies... or any prayer concern... to take the Gospel to other nations. ... So it was a long and arduous struggle for William Carey to have the church of his day recognize the truth... that world outreach is the Christ-given mandate of the Church.

In 1786... when William Carey laid the burden of world missions before a ministerial meeting in Northampton, England... the very powerful and eminent Dr. Ryland... (who had MANY followers)... pointed a shaky finger at him and said to him... *'Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!'*

That expressed the prevailing winds in the church at that time...

*"Advancement of the Gospel is not our concern...! And anyone who is involved in it... should be stifled and immediately shut down..."*

Satan has often (through the ages) worked from within the church... to cut off vital ministry that God was clearly directing. . ... Have you ever witnessed the sudden stoppage of a vibrant ministry... where God was receiving much glory to Himself...? ... Was it clear to you that the authoritative power... that stopped it... was not paying attention to what God wanted...?

Maybe you have experienced the other end. Perhaps you are aware of an on-going ministry... that God does not seem to be leading... and you sense that things should be done differently... or maybe even shut down.

(Listen) local churches regularly experiences ministry conflict . Two sides contend with each other... about whether or not the church should start... or perhaps even end a certain ministry. ... Or one group decides that another group is handling a ministry all wrong. ... conflict happens... doesn't it...?

What we are about to be shown from our passage in Acts today... is that #1) problems must be confronted... and #2) all sides of the argument must be given a fair hearing. ... We will also see #3) the discussion should be held in the presence of leaders who are spiritually mature and trustworthy to make wise decisions. And then... #4) everyone should then abide by the decisions.

What we are about to study in today's passage... is something that I pray we never forget as a church. You see Paul wrote a very startling warning to us in 1 Corinthians 11...

**1 Corinthians 11:18-19 (ESV)**

*For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.*

Paul warns us... not only... that we will have factions in the church... but that... .. (what did he write...?) - *they are **necessary***. ... ..

Now... why would Paul ever write... there must be factions...? ... .. (He tells us with his very next sentence...) - Because the way that they are handled... will show who is genuine in their faith... and who is not. ...

Those who are genuine... will contend for the proper way of handling factions... whenever they arise.

We need today's passage... because it shows us how to handle factions correctly. ... And when we see those who handle it correctly – those are the ones we want to align ourselves with. ... Let's pray that we will always remember today's passage and that we will handle all of our conflict in this manner . In fact let's bow our heads right now and pray for this...

**- PRAY -**

In our study so far in Acts... we have seen that the river of God's grace had overflowed its banks. Believers were attracting more and more believers to Christ. ... Things were going well – too well - for the enemy's taste... and the inevitable counterattack from Satan was about to be furiously flung at them.

**Acts 15:1**

These men were associated with the Jerusalem congregation but not authorized by it. In fact the leadership of the church back in Jerusalem... did not have any idea what they were up to. ... Let your eyes jump down to verse 24 in this same chapter...

**Acts 15:24**

You know... I have to ask... why weren’t these men from Judea authorized by the church authority in Jerusalem...? ... (What I mean by that is...) Did they even try to get the endorsement of the proper authority... ? Maybe they did... and were refused it... ... Or perhaps they simply went... without any attempt at all to have an authoritative backing...? Maybe they thought their own authority was sufficient... to alter the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. (It seems like the latter is the case. But both are just as evil.)

We certainly see a lot of conflict in the church today that is initiated by those who have a self-imposed authority. Filled with a sense of “God told me”... they believe that they are entitled to ignore God’s established system of authority. ... (Now... sometimes... God’s established authority is wrong... and needs to be challenged... but *with these teachers*... we don’t see any evidence that these self-induced experts tried to work with the proper spiritual authorities in Jerusalem... apparently they just went. They completely did an end-around... and had nothing at all to do with the proper spiritual authority.)

You know... today... that is often the case. Those who operate from a “God told me” frame of reference... will frequently ignore proper authority... They do not begin by going to the established authority... and examining the Scripture together... or seeking God together through prayer. ... Instead... trying to effect the change that they say is God’s way... they simply go ... They circumvent spiritual leadership... and they stir up a lot of ungodly contention.

These teachers travelled all the way to Antioch... (more than 300 miles of a difficult journey... under hostile and perilous conditions)... without the spiritual leadership’s consent... so that they could transform... (COMPLETELY ALTER)... the message and ministry of an entire church... while pretending that they had the authority to do so. Boy! That is audacious! That... my friend... takes Huchspa! It looks very evil.

1 Corinthians 11:19 - *there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.* The actions of these teachers... clearly shows that they were not genuine.

We know that they were not genuine... also... by the doctrine that they taught. ... They wanted to add something to the gospel. ... (LISTEN)... whenever you add something to the gospel... you no longer have the gospel. All you have is religion. ... It is no longer the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These teachers were trying to mix law and grace. This is the age-old false doctrine that tries to insist works are necessary for salvation. ... But salvation can only be - either of grace... or of works. It cannot be both at the same time. ... Trying to mix grace and works... devalues the work of Christ. ... It proclaims a less than perfect Messiah. He didn't do enough. Our savior's work is flawed. It is defective. ... If circumcision (or any other work or ritual) is necessary for salvation... then the work of Christ on the cross was not sufficient to save souls. ... We know that THAT is not true.

### **Acts 15:2**

The teachers who had come to Antioch and contended with Paul and Barnabas had sidestepped the proper spiritual authority... (the church leaders in Jerusalem.) These contenders were not genuine. Paul and Barnabas... on the other hand... did the exact opposite. They did not dodge them... they took the matter directly to God's established authority. 1 Corinthians 11:19 - *there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.*

Although I have been talking about it... let me formally acknowledge the first step of the proper way to handle a church conflict. **1. MAKE SURE**

## **THE PROPER SPIRITUAL AUTHORITIES HAVE NOT BEEN BI-PASSED.**

Division often happens in a church... because no attempt is made to try and find the mind of Christ through Scripture reasoning... and through praying together... with the proper Spiritual leadership. Paul... Barnabas... and some others from the church in Antioch... go up to Jerusalem for this very reason.

There is an informative passage over in the Book of Galatians... that fills us in... with an important detail... of what was happening at this time. You see... Paul writes about this incident again... and in it we can see something else that will help us learn how to handle conflict in the church.

### **Galatians 2:1-2**

This was the conference Paul had with the leaders and church at Jerusalem... that we are studying in Acts 15. ... Sometimes when controversy breaks out in the church... those who are not genuine want to get as many involved in it as possible. ... They let everyone know (*but... of course... only from their perspective*) what is going on. It becomes everybody's business through them.

But what did Paul... Barnabas... and Titus do...? They went... as it says in verse 2... privately... at first to the leaders. They did not make a circus out of it. ... Behind closed doors... they laid it out before the acknowledged authorities... and asked if they had somehow made a mistake.

1 Corinthians 11:19 - *there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.*

The fact that they went privately... however... is not the main thing that I wanted you to notice from this passage. It is this: Paul... Barnabas... and Titus... did not come to Jerusalem... with their minds dead-set on their position. Their heart and minds remained open for necessary change – if it was needed. They were willing to repent if they were in the wrong.

Those who are not genuine usually try to win people over to their point of view. They try to gather people to their side of the issue who will agree with them. ... Not Paul and his friends. They came with humility... checking to see if they should remain certain on their position.

The thing that absolutely astounds me about this... is that Paul and Barnabas have travelled hundreds of miles... risking life and limb (and Paul was beat up so badly... they thought he was dead.) They did all of this... in order to spread a message... that they are now looking for certainty about...?

(LISTEN...) It does not matter who the people are... when a faction breaks out in the church. It does not matter what their service to the Lord has been in the past... how much they have sacrificed or risked. HUMILITY AND SUBMISSION (now don't miss this...) HUMILITY AND SUBMISSION TO PROPER SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY IS ALWAYS CALLED FOR.

(Let me ask you...) Couldn't Paul have said... "*None of you were willing to risk your own necks – like I have. So you listen to me... I am the one who will call the shots... and this is the way it will be!*" ? ... "*I have invested a lot more than you. That gives me the right to be your authority.*"

Among those who are **not** genuine... leadership is always **dis**respected. If and when they **do** go to leadership... they demand their own way.

Now notice Paul and his companions... with them we find absolute humility... and it is evidenced by a teachable spirit.

1 Corinthians 11:19 – *there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.*

The first step of the proper way to handle a church conflict is **MAKE SURE THE PROPER SPIRITUAL AUTHORITIES HAVE NOT BEEN BIPASSED.** ... Now here is the second... **2. BE HUMBLE AND TEACHABLE (WILLING TO ADMIT THE POSSIBILITY OF BEING WRONG)**

Please turn back to our passage with me now... and we will continue our study of Acts 15...

### **Acts 15:3-5**

Once they arrived in Jerusalem... they were welcomed and they enjoyed some sweet fellowship. (We saw in Galatians that they met first in private with the leaders...) They shared with the church what God had been doing among the Gentiles and they probably celebrated it together. ... But a wet blanket was soon thrown over the celebration. The teaching that had come to Antioch seemed to be entrenched here... too.

Our first tendency is to view the Christian Pharisee joy-killers... (that we read about here in verse 5)... as evil as those who had travelled to Antioch to alter the church. But these that are in the Jerusalem church are not sidestepping the church leader's authority... and manifesting a self-imposed authority of their own. In fact... by the time the Jerusalem conference



ends... they seem to be agreement with the decision. So these will demonstrate some humility and a teachable spirit.

Now this brings me to an important point. I used to read this passage and envision these Pharisaic Christians in the Jerusalem church with long-drawn out faces. I use to picture them with sneering eyes... frowns... and crooked fingers. I thought of them as really bad people... who never should have been allowed to join the church.

But lately... I am less inclined to see them this way. Earlier in Acts we had seen how many of the Pharisees were making a genuine commitment to Christ.

**Acts 6:7 (ESV)**

*And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*

...And of course... many of these priests were Pharisees. ... When they came to Christ... their new faith would have cost them dearly! ... They would have had to make a clean break from their revered status of being a Pharisee. It meant the loss of everything they held dear... for them to be associated with Jesus. Friends... family... long-time associates... would NOW have nothing at all to do with them. Loving parents who watched them get their bar Mitzvah with distinction... and then later (through a lot of hard work) earn the dignified robe that signified them as a leader of Israel... these same proud parents now saw their sons throw it all away.

These... who I might otherwise think have no business being in the church... made a greater sacrifice... and a more serious commitment than the average member of any church today. They must have done a lot of

soul-searching before identifying themselves with the church. It must have taken a strong love for Christ to give up all that they did.

Well then... how could they have been so wrong... as to try and mix grace with works...?

I wish that I had enough time to read for you the parable that Jesus told and is often called – The Parable of the Prodigal Son. ... Because anyone who has ever felt sorry for the older son who stayed home... who did not take all of his inheritance and waste it away... but who stayed home and did everything right... and who never had a party thrown for him like the party the squandering brother received... anyone who has ever felt sorry for that older (more responsible) brother... might understand.

*“Hey Dad! This isn’t fair! I stayed home and worked my finger to the bone for you. He didn’t! And yet... you throw a party and kill a fatted calf for him...”*

The Christian Pharisees must have felt just like the Older son in this parable. The Gentiles... who Paul and Barnabas had been converting... are like the son who did not live in obedience to the father. Suddenly they burst into the scene and just like that... they are treated like the favored son.

*Can’t you just hear the Pharisee Christians...? How could God offer a relationship of love and acceptance... to anyone who has not met all the requirements that I have tried to live up to all these years...?*

I don't think that the Pharisee Christians wanted to EXCLUDE the Gentiles. I think that they just wanted them to play by the same rules. They must keep the Laws of Moses... just as we did.

The Pharisee Christians were heavily influenced by their background. ... But can I tell you something...? There isn't a single person in this room that this same does not happen to them. We are all heavily influenced by our backgrounds.

When conflict happens in a church what do we do...? ... We are drawn to the side that is most like our background. *Who is most like me and where do they stand on the issue...? Whose values are most like mine...?* ... And sadly... truth gets lost in favor of... who is on which side of the issue. "I am his friend... or I am her friend..." It doesn't matter what Scripture says...

I'm sure that it was a challenge for them... but the Pharisee Christians eventually had to drop their background influence and loyalties which were blinding them. This is what they apparently did... in order for them to agree with the outcome of the conference.

So here is our next principle for the proper way to handle a church conflict... **3. HONESTLY EVALUATE IF THERE ARE ANY BACKGROUND INFLUENCES OR LOYALTIES THAT CAN BLIND US FROM THE TRUTH.**

I mention this third one... because I believe that there is significance in the declaration in verse 5 that those who contended with Paul and Barnabas were former pharisees. We are supposed to take notice that this background of theirs played a part in the position they took.

1 Corinthians 11:19 – *there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.*

#### **Acts 15:6-12**

Principle #4 is all over these verses... Peter gives evidence of God's activity on a particular side of the issue. Then Barnabas and Paul related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. They did the same thing. They showed the activity of God on one side of the issue. So there it is. **#4. LOOK FOR WHERE GOD IS AT WORK AND JOIN HIM IN IT.** Look for the clear activity of God. Does God appear to be at work on one side of the issue...? Clear evidence of where God is at work... helps settle conflict in the church.

Number five is also an easy one to see...

#### **Acts 15:13-18**

**#5. LET THE WORD OF GOD HAVE ITS SAY ON THE ISSUE.** Where the Bible speaks either directly or indirectly... allow it to illuminate the matter.

Through this combination of passages taken largely from Amos 9:11-12... James was saying that according to the Old Testament prophets... God's people would consist of two concentric groups. ... At the core would be Israel ("the tabernacle of David), and gathered around them would be the Gentiles ("the rest of mankind,")... who would share the messianic blessings without becoming Jewish proselytes. ... Thus... everything that was happening was just as the Scriptures prophesied.

I would like for you to acknowledge something here with me... Despite the compelling experiences of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul, James turned to God's Word as the ultimate test of truth. This should be the way we evaluate events. We all have beliefs (some of them fervent), we all have experiences, and our tendency is to want to measure others by our yardstick. It is common for believers to think that their experiences, their convictions, are true and should be the norm. Different ideas are thought to be inferior or invalid. Ultimately, however, what matters is what God's Word says. The more we know God's Word, the more we read it, study it, memorize it, and meditate on it, the better we will be able to discern what is right and best in times of controversy or doctrinal disagreement.

### **Acts 15:19-21**

To the Gentile believers, he gave three restrictions:

1. Stay away from anything that has to do with idols.
2. Avoid sexual sin.
3. Do not partake of meat that has been strangled or has blood in it.

There was to be no idolatry because there is only one true God, and only He is to be worshiped. ... Sexual immorality was forbidden in all cases because it was at that time very rampant among the Gentiles. ... But why the third restriction? (The answer... once again... is immediately given to us...) "For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath"

In other words, Jewish communities existed in nearly every city, and the Gentile converts were not to do anything that would offend the Jews'

religious scruples. Do not unnecessarily push them away. Keep the door open to witness to them.

*Because we are under grace... be willing to gladly restrict your freedom for the sake of others.* ... There was not anything to be gained in earning more of God's favor by eating ONLY a specially prepared steak... but James said eat only the kosher meat... so that you won't cut off any opportunity to reach a Jew... before you speak to them. ... Paul states the same principle in 1 Corinthians 9:19-21 in regards to meat that has been offered to idols.

Don't we see another principle for handling church conflict in this...? Can you imagine how many conflicts would immediately dissipate... if we would be willing to restrict our person freedom for the sake of others...?

Unfortunately... a lot of church fights are because of demands for personal rights. James would later write in his epistle...

**James 4:1-3 (ESV)**

*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

**#6. BE WILLING TO GLADLY RESTRICT YOUR OWN FREEDOMS FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS.**

James's magnificent pronouncement carried the day! Conflict was brilliantly averted...

**Acts 15:22-35**

We have a crazy bird somewhere near our home... that doesn't seem to know the difference between daytime or nighttime. Sometimes I will lay in my bed at night with the window open and listen to it's unanswered call – wee-hoo-hoo-hoo... It reminds me of something Amy Charmichael once wrote:

*If God can make His birds to whistle in drenched and stormy darkness, if He can make His butterflies able to bear up under rain, what can He not do for the heart that trusts Him?*

- Amy Charmichael

Conflict is going to happen in the church. We have even seen that they are necessary. ... I don't like conflict and neither do you. ... They can be like experiencing a tempestuous blackness. ... But God can make us whistle like a bird in a drenched and stormy darkness. Our passage today has provided us with the way... the way to handle conflict... and the way to recognize those who are genuine.

**#1. MAKE SURE THE PROPER SPIRITUAL AUTHORITIES HAVE NOT BEEN BI-PASSED.**

**#2. BE HUMBLE AND TEACHABLE (WILLING TO ADMIT THE POSSIBILITY OF BEING WRONG)**

**#3. HONESTLY EVALUATE IF THERE ARE ANY BACKGROUND INFLUENCES OR LOYALTIES THAT CAN BLIND US FROM THE TRUTH.**

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