

Why does God allow constant debates and divisions to go on in the church of Jesus Christ? If you look at the last 2000 years of church history, you will see that it has been a history of debate. And that has troubled a lot of people. There are certain periods of church history that are discouraging to read about. And I think it is important to realize that the church has never been 100% unified in doctrine – not even in the time of the apostles. Some people idolize the time of the apostles and think, "If only we could get back to the purity of the church!" Well, let me tell you something, the apostles were frustrated with their period of time and they were looking forward to a time in history when the church would eventually hash out all the doctrines and see eye to eye. And they knew it wouldn't be in their lifetime. This chapter is just a tiny glimpse into the huge debates that Paul was constantly facing. In fact, the apostles predicted that in their own lifetime (the last days of the Old Covenant) there was going to be a great falling away. For those of you who think that our own era is the only era that is all mixed up, you've got it wrong.

And so the question arises again: "Why does God allow periods of doctrinal problems?" I think overall there has been growth in doctrine over history, and Ephesians 4 predicts that though there will be a long time in which at least some men will be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, that eventually the church will come to maturity and will come to a unity in the faith (Eph. 4:13-14). I'm firmly convinced of that. Isaiah 52 prophesies the church will eventually see eye to eye on doctrine – they will be unified. But in the meantime Jude calls us to contend earnestly for the faith. And I think this passage can help us to approach these church fights in a godly way.

But before we can look at the chapter as a whole (and I think we are going to take a few weeks), we need some background. And I am going to be using the first five verses here as a jumping off place to look at the book of Galatians, which was written somewhere between verses 2-4. In fact, if you want to orient yourself, you can write some of these dates in the margin. Chapter 15 is 49 AD. Next to verse 2 you can write that Galatians was written somewhere between verses 2-4. We are going to look at this passage by asking it five questions (and spend 95% of the time on the first question):

Why do we need to deal with the same issues over and over again (v. 1-2)?

These issues had been settled at least four times already

The first question is, "Why do we need to deal with the same issues over and over again?" You would think that once the Westminster Confession of Faith was crafted, that at least those issues would not continue to be debated. It's discouraging to find the PCA arguing over issues that were long ago settled in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

And we see the same thing here. The very issues that were being debated in this chapter were already settled four times before. Let's read verses 1-2:

And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the circumcision 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.

What were the issues at stake (as stated in Galatians & Acts; see also Hebrews)?

Culture: Is Paul destroying Jewish culture? (See false accusations against Paul in Acts 21:21.)

You know, when we have been immersed in a doctrine, we sometimes think that others who don't get it are thick-headed. You know, what could be so hard about Calvinism? It's the Gospel. What could be so hard about Covenant Theology, the moral law of God, the sovereignty of God, etc.

And it's easy to get frustrated. But sincere people can look at the same facts and come to different conclusions simply because they have been steeped in a different worldview and they have different presuppositions. So let's try to understand where these guys from Judea were coming from. And just so that you can be quite clear on the degree of confusion that was going on here – according to the book of Galatians, James, the leader in Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus, was the one who sent these folks. I don't think that James sent them with exactly this message. In fact, I'm sure of it (based on the chronology of when James was written). James understood justification by faith alone. But James did not recognize the Gentile issues as clearly as Paul did, and he didn't recognize that he himself was at odds with these people that he had sent.

These Jews who had come down from Judea had lived their entire lives following certain rules and customs that were ceremonial in nature. In fact, they were raised to be absolutely grossed out by Gentile customs of eating, washing, clothing, planting, hygiene, etc. It was drilled into them. So you have a *cultural* issue that is making Jews upset with

Paul. It's much like the debates that went on in the south over interracial marriage in the 1960's and 1970's. People got very emotional about those things. These people thought that what Paul was doing was just unthinkable socially, aesthetically, morally and culturally. In fact, all the way up to Acts 21 we find these false accusations being made – that Paul is out to destroy Jewish culture. In Acts 21:21 the apostles say, "but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs." And I say that it is a false accusation because Paul goes on to show in that chapter that he has no problems with Jews continuing to follow ceremonial laws. There were certain health benefits to them. But what Paul absolutely insisted upon was that those things could not be imposed on anyone as a condition for fellowship in the church. Yes there were different cultures, but Paul insisted that we have to get over those barriers. You can value the differences in culture, but don't use them to divide the church. So the first issue was cultural.

Politics: During the years 46-52, Zealots were putting enormous pressure upon all Jews to not keep company with Gentiles and to follow the ceremonial law.

A second issue that was driving these debates was a political one. This conference takes place in 49 AD, the same year that the book of Galatians was written. And this year marks the height of Zealot activity against Jewish compromisers. The Zealots in Israel started to take justice into their own hands starting in the year 46 AD, though the year 49 AD was the height of this Zealot activity. But it's been going on now for three years. And the Jewish Zealots were lynching any Jew that they suspected of fraternizing with the Gentiles, eating with Gentiles, not circumcising their children or in any other way compromising Jewish ceremonial law. The Zealots made the Maccabees their heroes because they killed compromisers in the 200's BC. Now you've got to realize that the Maccabees are heroes to every Jew. You ought to read their stories some time. It's marvelous to see how these guys fought against the massive Syrian armies – armies with elephants and giant machinery, and yet by God's grace, they defeated their armies over and over. Judas Maccabeas and his relatives defended Israel from annihilation from Antiochus Epiphanes. And so these Zealots really have the high moral ground in the eyes of most Jewish people. And what do you have going on in the church? You've got Christian Jews who appear to be compromising by eating non-kosher food with Gentiles. With this Zealot scare, Jews like James have a natural tendency to take a conservative drift. It's where they were most comfortable anyway.

So that is the political climate. Some of these Christians were running scared. They knew that Gentiles were coming into the church, but if they associated with them, they could run the risk of getting lynched themselves. This was serious stuff. So commentators

believe that the church was trying to play a balancing act. Since the main sign that the zealots looked for was circumcision, if they could talk the Gentiles into getting circumcised, it would alleviate the problem of persecution.

Other ceremonial laws could be optional (or others thought, could be learned later).

Salvation: Is circumcision a means of justification (v. 1)?

But look at point c – there were some people who took that position one step further. These guys were actually *requiring circumcision before they would treat Gentiles as Christians*. This wasn't simply saying, "Hey, if you guys care about us, you're going to get circumcised. And until you do, we probably ought to eat separately for the safety of both us." No, these went beyond that. So this is a second group in the church. For centuries, they had done this with Gentiles who wanted to become Jews as proselytes, and it was normal for them to continue doing it now. But some of them were adding the idea that you can't be justified; you can't be saved until you are circumcised. Those are the people in verse 1. That would be a 100% parallel with Christians today who think you can't get saved until you are baptized. And that can be confusing, because the Bible does indeed require baptism, doesn't it? You can't be a member of the church until you are baptized, so it would be easy for people to jump to the conclusion that if the sign of the covenant is needed in order to be treated as a church member, then the sign of the covenant is necessary for justification. There are churches in this city that take that position. But we believe that just as circumcision didn't save anyone, baptism doesn't save us. The baptism is a *sign* of what saves us – God's grace. And Paul says the same thing about circumcision. In Galatians he points out that Abraham was justified before he was circumcised. So obviously circumcision didn't justify him. So that's the second group.

Salvation: Are ceremonial laws a means of justification (v. 5)?

There was a third group that went even further. These were Pharisees who had been converted, and the idea of doing away with the ceremonial laws was revolting to them. They weren't content with just circumcision. They thought of Peter who ate unclean food as a gross compromiser. In verse 5 they say, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." This was not a conflict over moral laws. There really wasn't a major conflict over that. These former Pharisees were insisting that the Mosaic ceremonial laws must be followed. Later in this chapter Peter will point out that nobody was ever able to even keep the ceremonial laws. Every time a fly landed on you, you were unclean ceremonially. You could sit on things, or walk on things that would make you unclean without even realizing it. In the Old Testament God had surrounded them with so many laws of uncleanness that it taught them that every person and every baby is in need of the cleansing of God's grace. It was just a teaching tool. And all of the ceremonial laws were designed to teach people about sin and grace and to look forward

to the coming Messiah. The moral law didn't do that. The moral law is not a tutor about redemption or about grace. All it can do is show us our lost condition. But the ceremonial law was designed to teach people about Christ and His redemption. And even the ceremonial law was never intended to be a means of getting saved. If you don't understand the difference between moral law and ceremonial law, you are going to be hopelessly confused in the New Testament.

Ceremonial law for Jews: Are there any Mosaic ceremonial laws *binding* on Jews today?

A fifth issue that plagued the church was the question of whether ceremonial laws are binding on Jews or something that was optional and perhaps good. Peter followed the ceremonial laws sometimes and sometimes didn't. Paul was the same. They both said that it was optional for Jews but not binding. But some Jews strongly believed that it was binding on the Jews, even if it wasn't on the Gentiles.

Ceremonial law for Gentiles: Are Gentiles subject to the ceremonial law?

The sixth issue was whether the ceremonial law was binding on *Gentiles*. Even among pre-Christian Jews there was debate on that. In Galatians it was obvious that every aspect of the ceremonial law was being required of Gentiles, including the numerous Jewish day-keeping laws, food laws, cleanliness laws, sacrificial laws, etc. Some of those were actually a denial of the coming of Christ, since they were only to be kept until Messiah came. So it wasn't a mild issue. The book of Hebrews was later written to convince people that the ceremonial laws are no longer binding, and to make them binding on anyone is to abandon Jesus as the final sacrifice.

Circumcision vs Baptism: What are the implications of requiring circumcision? (Heb. 7:12; 1 Cor. 7:19)

The seventh issue that is addressed in Galatians is showing the implications of requiring circumcision. If it is followed as a mandate, then it initiates you into keeping the whole ceremonial law. Galatians is quite clear on that. And by the way, the Jews knew the difference between ceremonial law and moral law. Some people question that and think that Paul was doing away with all the law. That's not the case. In the Old Testament, moral law was required of everyone, but ceremonial law was only required of Jews. It separated them from the Gentiles. And there are many Scriptures that show this distinction between the moral and ceremonial laws. Let me just give you one. 1 Corinthians 7:19 says, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is keeping the

commandments of God." If there was no difference between ceremonial laws (like circumcision) and moral laws, that statement would make no sense. Paul said, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is keeping the commandments of God." If there was no difference between ceremonial and moral laws, it would be like saying, Keeping the commandments is nothing, and not keeping the commandments is nothing, but what matters is keeping the commandments of God. Patently ridiculous. Can you see the problem? What the real debate was over in Acts and Galatians and Colossians and Hebrews was the ceremonial law, not the moral law. As Hebrews 7:12 says, "For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law." The same book that says the moral law cannot change says that the ceremonial law has to change. We are not justified by either – but the big debate here is on the ceremonial law.

Should believing Jews and Gentiles continue to be separated?

The last issue that was raised in this debate is whether Jews and Gentiles should continue to be separate. There were some people who thought, "If we can't circumcise the Gentiles, we better worship separately for the good of both sides." Paul insisted that they were part of one body and better start fellowshiping as one body. According to the chronology in Galatians, Paul had brought a test case in the person of Titus to a private meeting with James, John and Peter in Acts 11. And he had settled the question then.

Settled by God in Acts 10:9-48

But God had already settled this issue long before in Acts 10, *eleven years before this meeting*. God gave Peter a vision of the unclean animals, and told Peter to eat. Peter refused three times, and three times God commanded him, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." From that time on Peter started fellowshiping with Gentiles. God had settled every issue we have just raised. And He settled it way back in chapter 10.

When controversy came up in chapter 11:2-3, Peter settled the issue a second time in 11:4-18

But in chapter 11 Peter is called on the carpet for eating with Gentiles. And Peter had to settle the question a second time. And most commentators agree that this must have somewhat alienated many Jewish Christians from Peter. It must have hurt Peter because he was the defacto leader up to that time. After that, James became the leader, with Peter taking a second seat. It seems that James and John never get in trouble with any of the Jews because they only minister to Jews. And leaders tend to have antennas

out that sense what needs to be done to keep out of trouble. This is one of the main reasons why issues are not definitively dealt with until a crisis like Acts 15 hits.

According to Galatians 2:1-10, during the visit of Acts 11:27-30 (cf. 12:25), Paul felt it necessary to push this issue of circumcision with the test case of Titus. He met privately with James, Cephas (Peter) and John (v. 9), who weren't taking the leadership that they should have been (v. 9), despite the fact that "false brethren" were in the church (v. 4). Nevertheless, Titus was not compelled to be circumcised (v. 3). [1]

Why don't you turn with me to Galatians and we will take a look at Paul's perspective on what was happening in the chapters leading up to this. Galatians 2:1-10:

Galatians 2:1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with *me*.

[This was a reference to the famine visit at the end of chapter 11, in 46 AD. And by the way, if you are interested in a chronology of Paul's life, I have a few copies on the back table. [2] Sometimes this can be very confusing since different commentaries take different positions. Verse 2:]

Galatians 2:2 And I went up by revelation [And that revelation was through Agabus, where God commanded him to go to Jerusalem], and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain.

[Acts 11 is a private meeting to settle this question. Acts 15 is a public meeting. Paul is deeply concerned that James, Peter and John are not taking the kinds of stands that will preserve the Gospel, and much of what he had labored for might be lost. Even good leaders can fail to take the stands that they should. Verse 3:]

Galatians 2:3 Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.

[Clearly, James, Peter and John recognized the truth of what Paul was saying, and they did not require Titus, who was a test case, to be circumcised. Paul was forcing the issue with Titus. But, as we will be seeing, just because leaders agree with you in one venue does not mean they will vigorously stand behind you. These guys are content to let Peter and Paul take the heat on later occasions. But here in private, they agree. Verse 4:]

Galatians 2:4 *And this occurred* because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage),

[Paul sees this as being such a serious issue that he refuses to call the third group of Judaizers believers. They are false brethren. Yet we find no discipline being taken against them. They are still here in chapter 15; still causing trouble. I find it fascinating to see the same inabilities to confront doctrinal issues then as we see nowadays. Verse 5:]

Galatians 2:5 to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.
Galatians 2:6 But from those who seemed to be something—whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man—for those who seemed *to be something* added nothing to me.

[In other words, Paul has full authority over the Galatians as an apostle to the Gentiles, and he does not need the Jerusalem three to endorse him for his authority to stand. They do endorse him, but Paul is here saying that the Galatians need to listen to him as a divinely inspired apostle. Verse 7]

Galatians 2:7 But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as *the gospel* for the circumcised was to Peter
Galatians 2:8 (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles),
Galatians 2:9 and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we *should go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Galatians 2:10 *They desired* only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

So in Acts chapter 11, during the time of the last few verses [see chronology], the issue was settled as far as Paul was concerned. He probably had a lot of anxieties over this issue going into the meeting.

But now he thought that it was settled for good.

Galatians 2:12 points out that during the time of Acts 14:27-28, Peter had operated just as Paul did – not requiring circumcision of the Gentiles for full fellowship.

In fact, Galatians 2:12 indicates that during the time of Acts 14:27-28 (the two verses immediately before Acts 15) when Paul was in Antioch, Peter had come to visit him, and Peter had eaten with the Gentiles, and was quite willing to violate ceremonial laws. Peter acted just like Paul did. Galatians says that they were in total agreement.

Yet here is the controversy still fuming on (vv. 1-2). Galatians 2:11-21 comments on the tension created when "certain men came from James" (Gal. 2:12 = Acts 15:1)

And yet when these Jews come from Judea in Acts 15:1, the old controversy erupts once again. Let's read Galatians 2:11-21:

Galatians 2:11 Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed;

Galatians 2:12 for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.

Notice that James sent the people who are causing the trouble in Acts 15. I find that remarkable. James already knows what the issues are. In verses 1-10, which occurred three years before) Paul, James, Peter and John have already come to an agreement. So why is he sending these troublemakers to investigate Paul and Barnabas? We aren't told. But given Paul's testy attitudes towards James and Peter, it is obviously a defect in

leadership. Either James doesn't have the guts to discipline these guys or he thinks Paul has made a mountain out of a mole hill. But either explanation is not good.

And all down through history there have been a majority of leaders who have a hard time being decisive. During the great Trinitarian debates (around 325 AD), it was very frustrating to Athanasius. I'll just give you one example. At the council of Nicea the word homoousian was used to say that Jesus was of one essence with the Father. He had an identical essence. On the sheet that was being signed, one of the heretics inserted the letter "i" (or actually, the Greek equivalent, which is iota) so that it said, homoiousian or "of like essence." And there were many middle of the road peace-makers who didn't understand the issues involved with that one little letter iota. After all, the Son wasn't the Father, and so being "like the Father" seemed enough of a statement. But it was a barn door big enough to drive a truck through, and the heretics used it until the Orthodox closed the loop hole. Here's the frustrating thing: in every era, the majority of the good guys (the orthodox fellas) are nice guys who just don't have the stomach to fight. They don't understand what is at stake. And they cause trouble for the people like Paul and Athanasius who do see the dangers. And as a result, the majority treat the Athanasiuses like they are unloving. Now later they become heroes, but during the debates these nice guys are constantly saying, "Why can't we all just love one another? Why do we have to fight?" And you just have to face up to the fact that you won't be popular if you are a Reformer. Truth hurts. Now I will grant that Peter, James and John all become uncompromising fighters for the truth. But I think Paul had something do with that.

But at this stage, there is just too much political pressure, social pressure, cultural pressure and peer pressure. And you can see the impact of that pressure in the next verses. Verse 13:

Galatians 2:13 And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

Galatians 2:14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before *them* all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?"

Galatians 2:15 We *who are* Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles,

Galatians 2:16 knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the

works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified...

[and he continues through to the end of verse 21.]

Obviously James was not dealing with the issue in Jerusalem, because Acts 15:1 is as bold a contradiction of the agreements reached as you could get.

Those were strong words, but they were needed words of reformation. So obviously, James was not dealing with the issue in Jerusalem. Acts 15:1 is as bold a contradiction of the agreements they had reached as you could get. I've been burned by leaders who say one thing one time and say something totally different at another meeting. And I feel hurt. I feel blindsided. I think that's the way Paul felt. And I don't think they intend to betray you or lie. But we need to be aware that there is no such thing as an infallible church leader. Of course, their *Scriptures* were infallible, but not everything they did. If this could happen to Peter, it can happen to any of us. We are all subject to error and must constantly be reforming our words and actions to the Scriptures.

The "no small dissension and dispute" in Acts 15:2 is expanded upon in Galatians 2:11-21

So when Acts 15:2 says that there was no small dissension, Luke wasn't kidding. It was an all out fight. And it didn't get settled. They finally decided that they had to take this to Jerusalem to have a General Assembly. But before we look at those last four points, and breeze through them, let me draw some application we can learn about church fights.

Principles we can learn about church fights

Conflict is unavoidable (1 Cor. 1:19)

First, they are unavoidable if God's grace is at work. 1 Corinthians 11:19 says, "For there *must* also be divisions among you..." He said "must." It's unavoidable. Any place where both error and the life giving power of God is present, there will be conflicts. Satan will make sure of it. But we must make sure of it as well. Jude tells us that we must "contend earnestly for the faith" (Jude 3). Peace is not always a sign of health. Graveyards are peaceful, but they don't have any life, do they? Don't think of conflict as a reason to leave a denomination. I worry when sin and doctrinal heresy with a

denomination no longer raises any conflict. That's a danger signal. That is definitely a time to leave. So conflict is unavoidable when there is error.

God allows divisions to arise in order to raise up leaders (1 Cor. 11:19).

The second thing that I learn from these passages we have read is that God allows divisions for a purpose. There may be other purposes, but I think 1 Corinthians 11:19 lays out one quite clearly. It says, "For there must also be divisions among you, *that those who are approved may be recognized among you.*" God uses such things to raise up leaders who will be approved and will define doctrine very clearly. Think about it this way: if it wasn't for the doctrinal controversies brought up by the heretic Arius, the church may not have gone to all the trouble of carefully defining the doctrine of Christ against all possible errors.

If it wasn't for other heretics that came along, other doctrinal clarifications such as the Trinity would not have arisen. Now people always believed the true doctrines, but they weren't carefully defined.

Almost every major doctrinal formulation arose out of controversy. So it's not necessarily a bad thing. The heresy is a bad thing, but not the struggle to oppose it

There are some issues worth fighting over and there are other issues that are not.

The third principle I learn is that there are some issues worth fighting over, and there are others that are not. In Acts 21 Paul did not consider it worth fighting over whether Jews could do ceremonial laws.

He didn't care. He in effect said, "If they want to do it they can do it. Just don't make it a mandate." And there are issues that we will have disagreements on that are not of the magnitude of the one in Acts 15 which we don't need to separate over. I think that our "Circles of Belief, Liberty and Mutual Respect" diagram^[3] that is on the back side of your outline is sensitive to this issue, and has carefully weighed the degree to which we should fight or separate over issues. If you fight tooth and nail over every issue you don't have the Biblical balance.

Some people will not be convinced by any amount of evidence.

Fourth application: some people will not be convinced by any amount of evidence. That seemed to be true of the men in verse 1 and definitely of the men in verse 5. Some of these guys troubled Paul in every church throughout the rest of his life. It's sad, but it is true that some people will not listen to reason. In Galatians, Paul questions whether they are really believers. James thought they were believers, but Paul did not. Which means

that it is possible to have tares in the church (false believers) until the Second Coming. And that's exactly what Christ's parable of the wheat and tares teaches. There were some of these guys that later get disciplined, but not everyone gets caught.

Don't wait till everyone agrees before you take action (Galatians is written immediately before the Jerusalem Council meets.)

Fifth, we shouldn't wait till everyone agrees before we take action. I think this is a most important point. When fundamental issues such as Creationism are being denied, it doesn't mean that we all go belly up and no longer fight it. Calvin and most conservative scholars today believe that Galatians was written right during this controversy in Acts 15:1-2 or possibly while traveling to Jerusalem in verses 3-5. But somewhere in verses 2-4 Paul finds out that these same Judaizers have gone to Galatia, have taught them wrongly, and within months of being planted, these churches are falling away. In Galatians 1:6 Paul says,

"I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel." Think about that: Antioch hasn't reached a conclusion yet! Nor has Jerusalem. Yet that does not make Paul any less certain of the truth, or any less bold in trying to take what corrective action he can among the churches for which he is responsible. There are times when we must take action before everyone is in agreement because the consequences are so serious. This is why our congregation takes stands that our denomination has not. For example, you cannot be an elder in this church if you do not hold to six day creationism. We took a stand on that because of the serious consequences of denying that doctrine.

Some people (like James and Peter) avoid fights, and others (like Paul) see clearly enough that they will not allow a critical issue to go unchallenged.

Sixth, some people like James and Peter avoid fights and others (like Paul) see clearly enough that they will not allow a critical issue to go unchallenged. If you are a Peter or James, don't get frustrated at the Reformers out there. On the other hand, if you are a reformer like Paul, don't write off the church. Work with it as Paul did.

Eventually there comes a time for church discipline

Seventh, there does eventually come a time when church discipline needs to be exercised – whether it is discipline in reverse (where you secede)

or the last stage of active discipline (where you remove the offending people). When you read the books of James, 1 and 2 Peter and 1-3 John, you see that James, John, Peter and Paul all believed in church discipline. What had happened in the conflicts prior to this is that once a decision was made, the troublemakers saw that they were losing, and they backed off and didn't talk about it for a while, and once the dust had settled, they started up again. And so, from one perspective it may have been tough for James, Peter or John to discipline these guys.

I think of the story of Alexandre Dumas, the French novelist. Moody Bible Institute's Daily Devotional relates that Dumas had gotten into an angry exchange with a young politician, and they had so insulted each other that they both felt that a duel was essential to save their honor.

The problem was, both men were excellent shots, and it was almost guaranteed that they would both die. So after a bit of discussion, they agreed to draw lots. The agreement was that the loser would shoot himself, and only one of them would have to die. And that sounded good to both of them. Well, when they drew lots, Dumas lost. With his pistol in his hand, he withdrew into an adjoining room, and with an air of dignity about him, he closed the door behind himself. The rest of the company waited in suspense, and when the gun shot was heard, his friends rushed into the room. When they opened the door, they found Dumas, with smoking gun in hand. He said, "Gentlemen, a most regrettable thing has happened. I missed."

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But that's what was happening with the Judaizers. They weren't playing fair. Time after time they lost the battle, and in this chapter they would lose once again. And they acted like they were submitting. But they weren't repenting of their pride or shooting themselves (in other words, leaving). They always eventually came back to haunt Paul. So eventually church discipline had to be exercised against them. Churches that do not believe in church discipline eventually find themselves worn out with the conflict and with more collateral damage than if they had taken the hard steps that God's Word mandates.

If you really care, you will eventually face conflict.

Eighth, if you really care, you will eventually face conflict.

What you are willing to fight over is what you value as vital.

Ninth, what you are willing to fight over is what you value as vital. We have to pick our battles. You can't fight over everything. So what you are willing to fight over shows you

where your top values lie. For some people peace with relatives is their top value. Holiness is not.

It is sometimes our duty to fight (2 Tim. 4:2)

Tenth, it is sometimes our duty to fight even when we are tired and wished everything would just go away. I think Peter and James wished this would just go away, but they see the light, and in this chapter they go to bat on Paul's behalf in defending the same Gospel. They are totally committed now. This is no longer a private meeting. 2 Timothy 4:2 commands preachers to "convince, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine..." And he goes on to describe the scenario in many American churches where people only want to hear what is pleasant and what makes them come away feeling good. If you just wish controversy would go away, realize that it is sometimes our *duty* to fight.

Pray for your leaders during stressful times. Pray that they would not cave in like Peter and Barnabas.

Eleventh, pray for your leaders during stressful times. Pray that we would not give in like Peter and Barnabas did. It is my nature to want to avoid fights. I hate controversies. It makes me tremble and shake when I get in front of a microphone and argue for principle. I want to be liked. I have to resist the Peter syndrome. I think the Lord has enabled me to do so, for the most part. But pray for us. It's so easy to compromise in order to avoid the God-mandated fights.

Consult with fellow leaders when the going gets tough.

Twelfth, consult with fellow leaders when the going gets tough. For me, that would be to meet regularly with my peers. For you it might be fathers consulting with other fathers, and mothers consulting with other mothers, and challenging each other to be faithful to Christ.

Ask God to providentially intervene in your fight (much like James and Peter did).

Thirteenth, ask God to providentially intervene, much like God raised up James and Peter to speak just the right words at just the right time.

There are benefits to controversy

It forces the church to clarify doctrines.

I should mention four benefits to controversies. The first was already hinted at: they force the church to clarify doctrines. The Emergent Church and Openness of God Theology is just two more irritations to deal with, but if they had not arisen, new issues for the church would not be clarified.

It helps to expose the tares

A second benefit is that it helps to expose the tares within the church. These guys are clever, and it isn't for quite some time that some of them get excommunicated or forced to leave. John talks about that in his first epistle. He says that they went out that it might be made manifest that none of them were of us. If it hadn't been for the controversy, they would never have been exposed.

It reminds me of the murder trial in Oklahoma. They never did find the body. The whole thing was being tried on circumstantial evidence, which I have a bit of difficulty with. But the reasoning of the jury was interesting. When the defense attorney gave his closing remarks, he used a trick. He said, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all." He looked at his watch and said, "Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom." The jurors, somewhat surprised, all looked at the door. After a minute, the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I therefore, put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty."

The jury deliberated, and within a few minutes returned with a guilty verdict. When the lawyer asked, "But how? You must have had some doubt; I saw all of you stare at the door." The jury foreman said, "Oh, we did look, but your client didn't." The trick backfired. And in this case, Satan's trick backfired and the enemies within were exposed. They were overconfident. It drew them out. They had already said the words that made them guilty.

It creates opportunities that would not otherwise be there (v. 3)

Acts 15:3 shows another benefit. It sometimes opens up opportunities for ministry that would not otherwise be there. Verse 3 says, "And being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren." They probably would not have made that trip apart from this controversy.

It creates inter-dependent relationships.

And finally, it creates inter-dependent relationships. The chapter as a whole illustrates how we need each other. Paul needs Peter and James and James and Peter need Paul. Even when we are being criticized, we can realize that we need each other. Dr. Mitchell preached a sermon one time and a member of the congregation pointed out several faults in him and his preaching. Instead of trying to defend himself, he looked at the woman and said, "If what you say is true, would you mind praying for me?" I thought, "Wow! What a great answer." That answer turned her from a critic into a colleague and fellow worker.

Why do we need a General Assembly (vv. 2b-3a)

We obviously don't have time to deal with the other points, but I think the issues are obvious. Why do we need a General Assembly? Because there is wisdom in many counselors.

Why is it important for us to not become bitter over disagreements (v. 3)

Why is it important for us to not become bitter over disagreements?

Because God always brings good out of whatever happens to us (Romans 8:28). He did in verse 3 and he continues to do so in the rest of this chapter. Acts 15 is the watershed chapter in this book. It has given comfort and encouragement to multiplied millions of people. And it would not be in the book of Acts apart from this controversy. If we can remind ourselves that God intends good, it can help us to not get bitter and frustrated with others during and after conflicts.

How can elders overcome frustrations with each other and fellowship (v. 4)?

Verse 4 raises another issue. We know tensions are hot. We know that Paul is frustrated with James. But look at verse 4. "And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them."

How did they avoid writing each other off? They did it by being committed to each other first, and resolving differences second. They were attacking the problem and not each other. Often fights in marriages, churches and elsewhere are not productive because the

people feel attacked. I think of the two battleships that met in the night and savagely fought each other through the night. Several crewmen were severely wounded and both ships were damaged. When dawn came, the sailors were amazed to find that they both flew the British flag. They were friends shooting at each other.

That's what many couples do with each other. They don't realize that they are on the same team. There was a couple who grew more and more bitter with each other. And the wife especially was very disturbed. She didn't believe in divorce, but one day she said to her husband, "Honey, let's pray to the Lord that he would take one of us home [to heaven], and then I'll go live with my mother!" But the Scripture calls us to be committed to each other, and then work out the differences. If we can embrace all whom Christ embraces, then (secure in our commitment to each other) we can be more open to correction and the importance of iron sharpening iron and the need to press reformation. Now obviously there is a minimum line beyond which Paul says he will not go. Beyond that line and Paul says that they were false brethren. And the circles of belief and preference outline that bottom line. That's the innermost circle. If people do not believe the doctrines of the innermost circle, I will not treat them as Christians.

How can believers have such radically different views (vv. 1-5)?

Last question: how can believers have such radically different views as are expressed in verses 1-5? Certainly some were false brethren. Paul said so. But others were not. I think part of the problem can be looking at an issue from your own limited perspective rather than trying to see the other person's perspective. Paul ministered in a Gentile context where questions arose that the Jews in Judea would never have even thought about. This is what sometimes makes for arguments between husbands and wives. I once read a facetious way of telling the difference between the sexes. "When a couple is supposed to go somewhere, the woman's first thought is: 'What shall I wear?' And the man's first thought is: 'How can I get out of this?'" Obviously that's an overblown distinction, but men and women do have slightly different perspectives; pastors of small churches and pastors of large churches bring different issues to the table. And I think this helps to explain a lot of the difference between James and Paul – just a matter of emphasis. They dovetail beautifully when you read them right.

Another explanation is that we all need the illumination of the Holy Spirit. In fact, later on in this chapter we will be seeing the critical role of the Holy Spirit in solving this problem. But without His illumination, we can be in the dark. I have counseled people who just

didn't get it. It didn't matter how clearly you stated something to them, it was like there was a veil over their eyes. And that's where we need to pray diligently for breakthroughs. There are godly men in our denomination whom I embrace in the Lord – but they are holding to bad theology. I have argued with them over their faulty views of creation, women in ministry, children segregated worship, sending kids to government schools, counseling, and other issues. And I will continue to seek Reform in our denomination and seek to bring it back to the old paths. But in the meantime, I would urge you to join me in praying that God would open all our minds to see things as He sees them, to have His priorities and to hate the things that He hates and to love the things that He loves. May we be a model church in the way in which we lovingly hold to Acts 15 principles. Amen.

A Conservative Chronology of Paul

With emphasis upon the correlation with Galatians

By Phillip G. Kayser

Date	Acts	Galations	Comments
33	Acts 9:1-19a	1:15-16	Paul's conversion

Date	Acts	Galations	Comments
33-36	[Silent on Arabia. Acts focuses only on Paul's ministry, and this period is Paul's training alone in Arabia.]	"I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia..." (1:16-17a)	Arabia. This is a three year period (see 1:18) of divine training in Arabia. The only way to avoid a contradiction between the "immediately" of Gal. 1:16 and the "immediately" of Acts 9:20 is to insert the Arabia visit between Acts 9:19a and 19b. It is helpful to note that 19b starts with <i>egeneto</i> which indicates a general passage of time (usually translated "it came to pass"). Thus there is no contradiction between Acts 9 and Gal. 1.

Date	Acts	Galations	Comments
36	<p>"Then Paul spent some days with the disciples in Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues..." (See whole context of 9:19b-25)</p>	<p>"...and returned again to Damascus." (1:17)</p>	<p>Back in Damascus. Notice that this period of time was just "some days" (Acts 9:19b). So it should be considered to be part of the "three years" of Gal. 1:18.</p>

Date	Acts	Galatians	Comments
36-37	<p>"And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples... but Barnabas... So he was with them at Jerusalem, coming in and going out... but they attempted to kill him. When the brethren found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus." (Acts 9:26-30)</p> <p>"Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days, but I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother." (Gal. 1:18-19)</p>	<p>Jerusalem visit #1. This is not three years after Gal. 1:17, but three years after Gal. 1:15-16 – after his conversion. Each of the sequences in Galatians 1-2 (signaled by ἐπιπεῖτα in 1:18; 1:21 and 2:1) is being measured from the time of Paul's conversion and calling to be an apostle (the central topic of the whole passage).</p>	

Date	Acts	Galatians	Comments
<p>37-43</p>	<p>[Acts is silent about these years mentioned in Galatians, but Acts 9:30 and 11:25 make clear that these years took place during the time of 9:31-11:24.]</p>	<p>"Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God in me." (Gal. 1:21-24)</p>	<p>Often called the silent years of Paul. From Paul's home base of Tarsus (see both 9:30 and 11:25) Paul ministered throughout Syria and Cilicia. Note that much ministry has been occurring among the Gentiles by Peter, Barnabas, Paul and other disciples in 9:31-11:24.</p>

Date	Acts	Galations	Comments
43	<p>"Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." (Acts 11:25-26)</p>		<p>Antioch. Paul is still ministering throughout Syria and Cilicia, but is now based out of Antioch instead of Tarsus.</p>

Date	Acts	Galations	Comments
44	<p>"And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world..." (Acts 11:27-28a)</p>	<p>"And I went up by revelation" (Gal. 2:2)</p>	<p>Agabus' prophecy of famine. I have placed this event in 44 AD, 1½ -2 years before the famine trip, because of the sequence in Acts 11:27-12:1. Acts 12:1 places the events of Herod's last year at "about that time," so there is some wiggle room. Some scholars believe that the prophecy and collection could have been after Herod's death, but my chronology is following Luke's order. This gave a little less than 2 years for Paul to organize collections in the various churches. Notice also that Paul's subsequent trip to Jerusalem was because of a "revelation" (Gal. 2:2)</p>

Date	Acts	Galations	Comments
44	<p>"now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some of the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword... an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died." (Acts 12:1-24)</p>		<p>Death of James and Herod. The death of James occurred in the spring of 44 and the death of Herod Agrippa I likely occurred on the festival of August 1 of 44 AD (the other alternative festival being March 5).</p>

Date	Acts	Galatians	Comments
44-46	"then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea... (Acts 11:29-30a)	"... remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do" (Gal. 2:10)	Collections were being organized by Paul for the poor in Jerusalem who would be suffering shortly from the prophesied famine. The admonition of Peter and James to remember the poor was something Paul was already demonstrating he was eagerly involved in.
46	"... famine throughout the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar." (Acts 11:28)		Year of famine. Most scholars tie this to 46 AD based on evidence from Josephus.
46	"... and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:30)	"Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me. And I went up by revelation, and	Relief visit to Jerusalem. This is visit #2 (as numbered in Galatians as well as Acts). Those who make Galatians 2:1-10 equal the Jerusalem council have to

Date	Acts	Galatians communicated to them..." Gal. 2:1-10	Comments
			<p>ignore the relief visit of Paul, which was clearly the second visit to Jerusalem. Note that this was 14 years after his conversion. (Jews always used inclusive time reckoning, so both year 33 and year 46 would be counted.) This places Paul's visit in 46 AD, Thus the 11:27-30 – circumstances that led to the trip 12:1-24 events in another section of the church that happened about the same time. 12:25 – returning to Paul's story, and connecting the Jerusalem trip with the events immediately preceding the first missionary journey of Acts 13-14.</p>

Date	Acts	Galations	Comments
<p>Acts 11:30 and 12:25 are thus referring to the same trip. (Note that both the NU Text and the Majority text read, "And Barnabas and Saul returned to Jerusalem..." rather than the TR "from Jerusalem." It is a recap. Thus, though preparations started for collections in 44 AD (11:27-29), Acts 12:25 makes clear that the actual trip to Jerusalem (11:30) took place significantly after the death of Herod (see the large gap of time implied in 12:24 – "and the word of God grew and multiplied").</p>			
<p>47-49</p>	<p>Acts 13:1-14:26</p>	<p>[Not in the sequence of chapter 2, but referenced in 4:13-15.]</p>	<p>Paul's first missionary journey was a little over two years. Based on weather patterns and journey information that we have, it is likely that Paul left Antioch in the spring of 47 and returned in the summer or fall of 49 AD.</p>

Date	Acts	Galatians	Comments
<p>Note that there was a great deal of zealot activity against Jewish "compromisers" between 46-52 AD, with heightened activity during the years 48-49. F.F. Bruce explains, "Zealot vengeance was liable to be visited on Jews who fraternized with Gentiles, and Jewish Christians who shared table-fellowship with their Gentile brethren were exposed to such reprisals. If Gentile Christians could be persuaded to accept circumcision, this (it was hoped) would protect Jewish Christians against zealot vengeance. The persuasion would be more effective if Gentile believers were assured that circumcision was a condition required by God from all men who wished to be accepted by him" (<i>Galatians</i>, p. 31). This helps to explain Galatians 6:12: "As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these would compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ."</p>			

Date	Acts	Galatians	Comments
49	Acts 14:27-28 "so they stayed there a long time" (v.28)	Gal. 2:11-16	Paul's confrontation of Peter in Antioch. Also, Galatians written during this period. Since there is no mention of a year or years (as is done elsewhere by Luke – see 11:26; 18:11; 19:10; 24:27; 28:30), this "long time" was likely less than a year – perhaps the summer quarter or slightly more.
49	Acts 15:1-29		Jerusalem Council. Fall of 49
49-50	Acts 15:30-35		Antioch ministry. Winter of 49 – spring of 50.
50-52	Acts 15:36-18:22		Paul's 2nd Missionary Journey. April 50 AD – Sept. 52.

Appendix B

The Date and Place of Galatians

Summary of Arguments in Defense of the "South Galatian Theory" and a date of 49 AD.

By Phillip G. Kayser

1. Since the time of Ramsay, it has been conclusively shown that the cities of Acts 14 were included in the Roman province of Galatia. Thus the cities of Acts 13-14 are clearly within what would be termed "Galatia." There would be no better term to group these disparate groups as one group than "Galatians."
2. Paul's habit of defining regions is generally to use Roman nomenclature. Greg Herrick says, "Paul seems to prefer provincial titles when referring to churches "(cf. "Macedonia" in [2 Cor. 8:1](#); "Asia" in [1 Cor. 16:19](#); "Achaia" in [2 Cor 1:1](#)). The apostle also speaks of Judea, Syria and Cilicia²³ (cf. [Gal. 1:21](#)), but never of Lycaonia, Pisidia, Mysia and Lydia. It appears logical and consistent then to say that the term 'Galatia' in [Galatians 1:2](#) and 3:1 is probably a provincial designation in which case the letter could have been sent to the churches of the south."
3. Paul addresses the Galatians in Greek, not Celtic.
4. Paul mentions Barnabas three times in Galatians 2:1,9,13, and does so as if Barnabas was already well known by the Galatians. Yet Barnabas never visited North Galatia. He was however on Paul's journey to South Galatia (Acts 13-14).
5. Acts 20:4 mentions the names of people who helped to carry the offerings from various regions. It is clear that "the churches of Galatia" sent an offering by their hand (1 Cor. 16:1). Therefore it is significant that none of the people carrying the offering are North Galatians, but there are two South Galatians mentioned: Gaius of Derbe and Timothy of Lystra.
6. Acts mentions Jewish people traveling to South Galatia, but there is no mention of such to North Galatia. Indeed, North Galatia was so dangerous, and so lacking in Jews, that it is unlikely that these

Jewish adversaries would risk going that far. However, this is not conclusive.

7. On the South Galatian theory, the Galatians are influenced away from the true Gospel within a year, whereas on the North Galatian theory, it is (at best) a decade. The former fits Paul's complaint, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6). The latter view does not.
8. The North Galatian theory requires an assumption that churches were planted in North Galatia, something very difficult to square with Acts.
9. Historically it was believed that the order of Paul's writings were Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans. This fits the South Galatian theory much better.
10. It is unlikely that Acts 15 is the meeting mentioned by Paul in Galatians 2:1-10 for the following reasons: 1) The Galatians 2:1-10 meeting is the second trip Paul made to Jerusalem (see Gal. 1:16-2:1) whereas the Acts 15 trip is clearly the third trip Paul made to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-29 being trip one, Acts 11:27-30/12:25 being the second trip and Acts 15 being the third). 2) It is difficult to believe that Paul would not have mentioned the Jerusalem decree in Galatians when that would have settled the question at hand without any debate. 3) Acts 15 is a public meeting whereas Galatians 2 emphasizes that the meeting was private (Gal. 2:2). 4) It is difficult to imagine even Peter engaging in the behavior mentioned in Galatians 2:11-14 after the clear decree in Acts 15. 5) It appears that Paul is listing his visits to Jerusalem in order (this is the force of the **Epeita** ["then"] clauses in 1:18; 1:21 and 2:1).
11. Since the only evidence we have of a "famine throughout all the world" (Acts 11:28) is in 46 AD (see Josephus), the famine trip (Acts 11:27-30; cf. 12:25) likely took place in 46 AD. Since Galatians 2:1 indicates that this second trip to Jerusalem took

place 13-14 years after his conversion (in Jewish reckoning, parts of a year count as a year), that would place Paul's conversion in 33 AD (about three years after the death of Jesus). This is a workable chronology.

12. The "first" or "former" visit to Galatia mentioned in Galatians 4:13 would be on the outgoing journey (up through Acts 14:20) and the second visit to the Galatian churches would have been the return trip in Acts 14:21-25.
 13. This means that the letter to the Galatians was written between Acts 15:2 and Acts 15:5, in 49 AD.
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1. All of this assumes a "South Galatian Theory" on the book of Galatians. Most conservative scholars today (along with Calvin) are convinced that Galatians is being written to the churches planted by Paul in his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). See Separate documents at the end of sermon which argue for the "South Galatian Theory," a date of 49 AD for the book of Galatians, and which gives a detailed chronology of Paul's life up through Acts 15. This is a complicated subject, and it is sometimes helpful to have a timeline and a summary of arguments.↩
2. See Appendix A for a Conservative Chronology of Paul's Life up through Acts 15.↩
3. See Appendix C for the DCC Circles of Belief, Liberty and Mutual Respect (as of 9-2007).↩