

Oneness in Christ

When Conflicts Arise

Lesson #7 for November 17, 2018

Scriptures: Acts 6:1-6; 10:1-23; 11:3-24; 15:1-22; Matthew 5:17-20; Amos 9:11-12; Galatians 3:27-29.

1. Why do differences of opinion arise in Christian churches? Shouldn't we all be following Scripture and come to the same conclusions? Why are there thousands of different Christian groups even though they are using the same Bible? This lesson will talk about dealing with one of the most difficult tasks in Christian communities, maintaining unity while dealing with differences of opinion.
2. We can learn a lot by what happened to the early Christians as they faced conflicts. Some of those conflicts arose because of interpersonal prejudices; some arose because of cultural differences; others arose because of differences in interpretation of Scripture.
3. In our previous lessons, we have talked about the basis for church unity. In order to maintain that Christian unity, we must learn how to deal with differences that arise.
4. One of the first major conflicts that arose in the Christian church is spelled out in Acts 6:1.
Acts 6:1: Some time later, as the number of disciples kept growing, there was a quarrel between the Greek-speaking Jews and the native Jews. The Greek-speaking Jews claimed that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of funds.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Acts 6:1). New York: American Bible Society.
5. Notice that it does not specifically say that there was favoritism, just that some people felt that there was. So, even slight differences of opinion and feelings can cause difficulties.
Acts 6:2-6: ²So the twelve apostles called the whole group of believers together and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the preaching of God's word in order to handle finances. ³So then, brothers and sisters, choose seven men among you who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and we will put them in charge of this matter. ⁴We ourselves, then, will give our full time to prayer and the work of preaching." ⁵The whole group was pleased with the apostles' proposal, so they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a Gentile from Antioch who had earlier been converted to Judaism. ⁶The group presented them to the apostles, who prayed and placed their hands on them.—*Good News Bible.**
6. Those seven individuals who were chosen are known as *deacons* from the Greek word *diakonia*. The New Testament never used the word *deacon* to designate those seven. The Greek word *diakonia* is used to refer not only to what these new individuals were doing but also to the ministry of the apostles themselves.
7. From what happened in Acts 7&8, we know that those so-called deacons were also fantastic apostles and evangelists. Based on their names, it is quite clear that all seven of the men who were chosen to be deacons were from among the Greek-speaking or Latin-speaking believers. When the apostles met together to replace Judas, they chose a man who had been a follower of Jesus almost from the beginning. Those seven deacons were chosen because they were "of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." (Acts 6:3, *NKJV**)
8. So, how did they go about choosing the new deacons? It seems clear that they called many

of the believers together so that all could share in the decision-making.

9. The next major crisis that occurred was actually brought on by actions of the Holy Spirit Himself. Read Acts 10:1-23. This is the familiar story of Peter staying with Simon the Tanner in Joppa, seeing the vision of a sheet coming down with those wild animals in it, and being told to arise and eat. Peter, of course, refused. That sheet came down and the command was repeated three times. He still refused. A little later when he went downstairs, there were three men waiting outside to speak to him. Cornelius, a Roman centurion, had received a vision and had seen an angel from God telling him to send those men from Caesarea to Joppa to call for a man named Simon Peter.
10. Peter felt comfortable inviting the three men to stay overnight with them. Did he consult with Simon the Tanner before he extended that invitation? In any case, by the next morning, they were ready to start on their way back to Caesarea. Peter knew that when he got back to Jerusalem, there would be many questions about his behavior. So, he invited six believers from Joppa to go with them to observe everything that happened. (Acts 10:23,45; 11:12) He took six because in court, the testimony of six witnesses confirmed a fact.
11. We know that during the first decade or so of the growth of the Christian church, almost all of the converts were Jewish. To convince those Jews that the gospel needed to be spread also to Gentiles was a major challenge.
12. But, Jesus Himself had made it clear that the gospel was supposed to go to everyone.

Matthew 5:17-20: ¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teachings come true. ¹⁸Remember that as long as heaven and earth last, not the least point nor the smallest detail of the Law will be done away with—not until the end of all things. ¹⁹So then, *whoever* disobeys even the least important of the commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be least in the Kingdom of heaven. On the other hand, *whoever* obeys the Law and teaches others to do the same, will be great in the Kingdom of heaven. ²⁰I tell you, then, that you will be able to enter the Kingdom of heaven only if you are more faithful than the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees in doing what God requires.”—*Good News Bible*. * [Italic type is added.]

Also consider what Jesus said as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20.

13. When Peter arrived at the home of Cornelius, Cornelius had prepared for his arrival by inviting family members and friends. It was a large gathering at his home. Cornelius fell down before Peter as if to worship him, and Peter hastened to tell him to stand up. Try to imagine the irony of that scene. Peter was a humble Jewish fisherman; the Roman centurion, in charge of many Roman soldiers from the Roman Empire, was bowing down to him!
14. After some formalities, Peter was invited into the home and he began to speak to those Gentile inquirers. He reviewed a lot of history, some of which they probably were already familiar; and then, before he finished speaking, he was interrupted by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on those present.

Acts 10:44-48: ⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who were listening to his message. ⁴⁵The Jewish believers who had come from Joppa with Peter were amazed that God had poured out his gift of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in strange tongues and praising God’s greatness. Peter spoke up: ⁴⁷“These people have received the Holy Spirit, just as we also did. Can anyone, then, stop them from being

baptized with water?"⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay with them for a few days.—*Good News Bible*.*

15. As you can imagine, reports of what had happened quickly reached Jerusalem. As soon as Peter got back to Jerusalem, he was called in for questioning by the church leaders.
16. After reporting the details of the story, he came to this conclusion:

Acts 11:12-18:¹² “**The Spirit told me to go with them without hesitation. These six fellow-believers from Joppa accompanied me to Caesarea, and we all went into the house of Cornelius.**”¹³ He told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, ‘Send someone to Joppa for a man whose full name is Simon Peter.’¹⁴ He will speak words to you by which you and all your family will be saved.’¹⁵ And when I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came down on them just as on us at the beginning.¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’¹⁷ **It is clear that God gave those Gentiles the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ; who was I, then, to try to stop God!”**¹⁸ **When they heard this, they stopped their criticism and praised God, saying, “Then God has given to the Gentiles also the opportunity to repent and live!”**—*Good News Bible** (Acts 11:12-18). [Bold type is added.]

17. Peter told them specifically that the Spirit directed him to go with those men who had come from Cornelius. How did the Holy Spirit communicate that message? (See Acts 10:20.) Do you think the people in the house of Cornelius received the ability to speak in any language wherever they went as they were trying to spread the gospel just as did the first apostles at Pentecost? Ellen White goes on to say that, thenceforth, Cornelius and his family were messengers for the gospel.

The conversion of Cornelius and his household was but the first fruits of a harvest to be gathered in. From this household a wide-spread work of grace was carried on in that heathen city.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 139.3.

18. What was the next major step in this process of getting the gospel to the Gentiles?

Acts 11:19-24:¹⁹ Some of the believers who were scattered by the persecution which took place when Stephen was killed went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, **telling the message to Jews only.**²⁰ **But other believers, who were from Cyprus and Cyrene [Libya], went to Antioch and proclaimed the message to Gentiles also, telling them the Good News about the Lord Jesus.**²¹ The Lord’s power was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

²² The news about this reached the church in Jerusalem, so they sent Barnabas to Antioch.²³ When he arrived and saw how God had blessed the people, he was glad and urged them all to be faithful and true to the Lord with all their hearts.²⁴ Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and many people were brought to the Lord.—*Good News Bible*.* [Bold type and content in brackets are added.]

19. Do you suppose that some of the people from Jerusalem were hoping that conversions like that of Cornelius—who was already a follower of the Jewish religion—would be a one-time event? When Barnabas realized what was happening, he called for Paul from Tarsus to help.

20. Read Acts 8:1. After the death of Stephen, an intense persecution of Christians began in and around Jerusalem. Believers were scattered to Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and, no doubt, other places as well. And wherever they went, they carried the gospel with them. It is interesting to note that we do not know even the names of the people who went from Cyprus and Cyrene—which is in present-day Libya—to Antioch and began spreading the gospel freely and openly to Gentiles as well as to Jews.
21. Are there some cultural, linguistic, or ethnic barriers that keep us from spreading the gospel? Do even things like the style of worship cause divisions in our church?
22. After a year or so of evangelism in Antioch by Paul and Barnabas and with all those others who were working along side of them, the Holy Spirit told those people to set aside Paul and Barnabas to go forth on a missionary journey. They traveled first to Cyprus and then into Pamphylia and then into Asia Minor—present-day Turkey. On that journey, which lasted for about two years, Paul was stoned and left for dead at Lystra. But, when they returned to Antioch, the news of the successes they had had on that journey inspired the people.
23. But, it also raised some real disputes pitting Paul and Barnabas against some of the other Jewish believers who were saying: “You cannot be saved unless you are circumcised as the law of Moses requires.” See Acts 15:1-2.
24. About that same time, Peter went to Antioch. Having had that experience with Cornelius, he felt comfortable, at first, mingling with the Gentiles and eating with them. But, when some Jewish believers from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch, Peter and others—including Barnabas—began to withdraw from their association with the Gentiles.
- Galatians 2:11-14:** ¹¹ But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him in public, because he was clearly wrong. ¹²Before some men who had been sent by James arrived there, Peter had been **eating with the Gentile brothers** and sisters. But after these men arrived, he drew back and would not eat with the Gentiles, because he was afraid of those who were in favour of circumcising them. ¹³The other Jewish brothers and sisters also started acting like cowards along with Peter; and even Barnabas was swept along by their cowardly action. ¹⁴When I saw that they were not walking a straight path in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you have been living like a Gentile, not like a Jew. How, then, can you try to force Gentiles to live like Jews?”—*Good News Bible*.* [Bold type is added.]
25. Was Paul, the former Pharisee of the Pharisees, justified in his public redress of Peter? This is one of the clear evidences that Peter was not the first “pope.”
26. Very quickly the Jewish believers began to realize that if Paul and Barnabas and others like them who were evangelizing Gentiles continued with the success that they had had so far, there would be more Gentile believers than there were Jewish believers. That worried the Jewish believers a great deal.
27. As we know from the Old Testament, the Jews had very strict rules about who they should associate with and how. When that terrible conflict arose over this issue, the church at Antioch very wisely chose to send Paul and Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to consult with the leaders to see what consensus could be reached.
28. Read Acts 15:3-29. It is very heartening to see that although this was a tremendous challenge to the early church, they were able to resolve it. What do you think of the restrictions that they ended up writing for the Gentiles? Do those restrictions have anything to do with the gospel itself? Or, salvation? Why did they support those particular restrictions?

29. It seems clear from subsequent history that they made a wise decision. Do we always do that well when differences arise in our church?
30. Don't you think the church members in Antioch were praying fervently during the time the conference was proceeding in Jerusalem?
31. Notice that in Acts 15:28 it says specifically that the Holy Spirit was in agreement with the members of that group in making the decisions that they did. Did they just say that because they wanted to impress those who read their conclusions? Or, did they receive some direct communication from the Holy Spirit? How would that communication have been given?
32. In that discussion, two or three important things surfaced: Read Amos 9:11-12 and Jeremiah 12:14-16. Clearly, there are numerous references in the Old Testament, suggesting that the Jews were responsible to spread the gospel to the entire world. (Genesis 12:1-3)
33. Another important point is to notice that the one who was apparently in charge of the meeting was not Peter, but rather, James, the older stepbrother of Jesus. Don't you wish you could have a full transcript of the discussions that occurred at that Jerusalem conference? What else would we learn if we had such a record? Would it give us a more clear understanding of the relationship among Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and the church leaders in Jerusalem?
34. Read Acts 15:30-35. Fortunately, the believers in Antioch were very happy to hear the directions they got from the church leaders in Jerusalem.
35. However, some were not happy about what had happened.

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** 196.1-197.0. [Bold type is added.]

36. Have you ever known about any conflict which arose in one of our modern Seventh-day Adventist churches in which those who lost the vote left the church? Or, made accusations against those who voted against them? What about the topic of the ordination of women?
37. Is it clear in your mind what principle should be followed in dealing with conflicts within the church community? It should be clear that such conflicts cause problems. **How should we go about seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit on such occasions?** Do you see any pattern in what we have studied in this lesson regarding how the conflicts were resolved?

38. Are you willing to set aside your own personal biases and accept what appears to be the leading of the Holy Spirit when such conflicts arise?
39. Through the centuries, the Christian church has had an enormous number of conflicts arise. We are reminded that Satan is alive and well!
40. Many of those conflicts have arisen over differences in understanding major theological issues. There have been differences over the understanding of the divinity of Christ, which books should be included in the Bible, etc.
41. Think about Satan's side in the great controversy. When Christ was buried in that tomb, did Satan think that he was close to winning the great controversy? When he saw the rise of the Christian church, he must have been very, very frustrated. And, no doubt, he and his co-laborers did everything they could to prevent any expansion of the Christian church and when that failed, then, to cause any perversion in the church.
42. Notice the following six principles that seem to guide the church in resolving major issues.
- a. The problems were acknowledged openly. Too often conflicts are ignored in the hope that, by doing so, the conflicts would disappear on their own. Conflicts need to be acknowledged and dealt with promptly.
 - b. One or more people were appointed to seek a solution for the problem. The individuals chosen were well known and trusted by the congregation.
 - c. The stories and opinions of those involved on both sides of the conflict were heard.
 - d. Scripture was considered. For instance, at the Jerusalem Council, the leaders considered both the law of Moses, which talked about circumcision, and the prophets, who predicted that there would be Gentile believers.
 - e. Evidence of the leading of God was both presented and sought after.
 - f. Finally, the decision was communicated, along with the reasons for the decision. When this could not be done directly by the leaders who had made the decision, a message was sent with an individual trusted by the church.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 95.
43. Would those be good rules for us to follow?
44. Clearly, the Holy Spirit played a major role in resolving each of those conflicts. Is one of our problems today that we are not very clear on the Holy Spirit's guidance? For example, when Peter was on that rooftop and saw that sheet come down and three times said, "No," how did he receive the instructions from the Holy Spirit to go with those visitors? How was that message communicated?
45. How do you suppose the believers who were former-Pharisees felt when Peter told the story about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his family and friends?
46. When some conflict arises in your church, do feel like you need to jump in to be a part of it? Should we be praying that God will guide us in identifying our own biases and prevent us from making mistakes that could harm our local churches?

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