

Acts 15:22-41

Conflict And Unity

Learning Objectives

- Examine conflict in life and ministry.
 - Discuss how we might respond to conflict in a Gospel-centered way.
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Pray for your time together as a small group.

? Share about a time when you dealt with conflict with another person. What happened?

Leaders' Note: This could be a familial conflict, friendship, colleague, or even a situation in ministry. Think broadly!

Read Out Loud: Previously In Acts

We left our early church leaders, Paul and Barnabas, in the midst of responding to a disagreement they were having with the teachers of the church in Antioch. The teachers had been adding circumcision as a requirement for Gentile conversion to Christianity. Paul and Barnabas brought this issue to the other apostles, and they agreed that circumcision was not necessary for salvation, though certain other cultural practices (like abstaining from meat sacrificed to idols) might be honored as a way to prevent fellow believers from struggling in their faith.

Leaders' Note: For this set of materials we'll primarily focus on Acts 15:36-41, though we feel it is valuable to read through the whole passage. If your group members have questions regarding the first half, we encourage you to discuss them outside of normal study time.

Read Out Loud: Acts 15:22-41 (NIV)

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

³⁰ So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³² And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. ³³ And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

³⁶ And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." ³⁷ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

? What does a unified team look like? Conversely, what drives wedges between people?

Possible Answers: You can take this in lots of different directions: marriage, athletics, work, friendship, ministry, etc. Common purpose. Working together. Willingness to overlook personality differences or other potential areas of conflict. Of one mind.

Personality differences, sin, different value systems, experiences, etc.

? As believers, we're going to encounter situations of disagreement with people--both in and out of the church. Discuss the following three scenarios, and how you might pursue unity in the midst of conflict. Then, you can come up with a few of your own scenarios!

Leaders' Note: We want you to have a great time brainstorming and working through this exercise, but also recognize that this is more "introductory" to our study. Please don't spend more than 5-10 minutes here.

Scenario	Possible Answers
1. Your co-worker has a differing vision on the project you're working on together.	<i>Ask a neutral third party to pick your direction and move forward together in it. Choose to lay aside your preference to pursue unity instead. Share your concerns in a constructive way rather than belittling or attacking their ideas.</i>
2. A friend of yours attends a church where the organ is played each and every Sunday, and they insist this is the only "proper" way to pursue worship.	<i>Focus more on the lyrics and truths about the Gospel found in the music you both worship to rather than dividing over style. Discuss worship as a holistic lifestyle rather than just musical expression.</i>
3. Your roommate thinks it's okay to lie to your	<i>Try to get at the root of why this is your</i>

landlord about how something was broken, and this makes you uncomfortable.	<i>roommate's response: Is it past experiences? Misguided theology? Fear about financial repercussions?</i>
4.	
5.	
6.	

? In this passage, we see two early church leaders have “a sharp disagreement” (vs. 39) in regards to John-Mark. Why doesn’t Paul want Mark to come on their journey? Why do you think Barnabas disagreed with that decision?
Possible Answers: Paul sees John-Mark as unprepared for this journey and sees potential risks for their mission based on his desertion of Paul during his ministry in Pamphylia. Barnabas sees value in developing John-Mark as a leader and looks more to his potential. “Barnabas” means “Son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36). Of course he wants to give John-Mark another chance and develop him!

? Unity doesn’t necessarily mean a lack of conflict, but rather how you approach it. In the midst of their disagreement, where do Paul and Barnabas find unity?
Possible Answers: Both Paul and Barnabas are concerned with growth of believers and advancement of the Gospel.

Brief References on John-Mark and Paul’s History:

Acts 13:13, “From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.”

Colossians 4:10, “My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)”

2 Timothy 4:9-11, “⁹ Do your best to come to me quickly, ¹⁰ for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹ Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.”

? In verses 39-40 we see Paul and Barnabas decide that going separate ways is the best for their relationship and ministry at this point. How should we handle disagreements, especially when we feel passionately about an issue?

Possible Answers: Sometimes separating ourselves from the situation is for the best to preserve a relationship! We should check our own hearts to see if God is revealing something about an area of sin or stubbornness in ourselves. We should consider what we bring to the table in the disagreement. We may need to recognize that "agreement" is not ultimately possible, but that unity should still be pursued.

? In 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul asks Timothy to bring Mark to him, indicating that over time, the root cause of Paul's disagreement with Barnabas had been reconciled. What motivations, both good and bad, do we have for pursuing reconciliation?

Possible Answers: We want unity. We desire peace. We want to imitate Christ. We want life to be easier for us. We want our lives to appear free of conflict and to have an image that looks good to others, etc.

Read Out Loud:

The Gospel message in and of itself is a conflict resolution method! We are in conflict with God through our sin, and He took on the punishment for that so we could have true reconciliation with Him. If you'd like to consider this more, a few passages that speak to this are Romans 5:9-11, 2 Corinthians 5:17-19, and Colossians 1:21-23.

Leader's Note: If you have time, you may want to look at the listed passages and discuss them further as a group.

Optional Transition: We're next going to look at a passage from Matthew that helps provide us with some further direction about how to address conflict in a way that honors Christ.

Read Out Loud: Matthew 18:15-17 (NIV)

¹⁵ If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

? In light of this passage and others, how do we engage in conflict in a way that honors Christ and others?

Possible Answers: Bringing concerns to a person first, communicating clearly, removing self from the situation, focusing on the big

Additional Resources

- *Peacemakers:*
<http://peacemaker.net/project/the-four-gs/>
- *Sermon: The Church On Fire: Acts 15:36-41*
<http://www.hopecc.com/sermons/the-church-on-fire-acts-1536-41/>

picture, including wise counsel if necessary, “responding” rather than “reacting.”

? What benefits did Paul and Barnabas’ conflict bring? How might God use our conflict for His glory?

Possible Answers: God used their splitting up to spread the Gospel in two different directions, rather than one. To lead us to glorify God, to help us serve others better, to help us grow to be more like Christ (see 1 Cor. 10:31-11:1).

For Discussion and Accountability

? Are you a conflict creator? Is there someone you need to reconcile with this week, and how can you start that process?

? Is conflict hindering your life or ministry? How can you thread the Gospel through your conflict, towards yourself and others?