

**How Do Christian Congregations
Resolve Their Conflicts?
Sermon on Acts 15:5-18
June 26, 2005
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
Pastor Karl Walther**

Introduction: Conflicts Arise in Congregations

Jesus informed his apostles: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* Amen.

Dear fellow Christians—for whom Christ has resolved the biggest conflicts:

“How do Christian congregations resolve their conflicts?”

That’s a good question – isn’t it? – because any time not-yet-perfect Christians get together to listen to the Lord together and to serve the Savior together, there will naturally be some conflicts.

Having said that, God has been very gracious to us here at Saint Mark’s, because we are not a very conflicted congregation. Some examples: I hear no one disputing our message that all of us are hopelessly sinful by nature. I hear no one disputing our message that God – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – has forgiven all our sins by Christ’s death on the cross. I hear no one disputing that we need to continue to trust and to teach as truth every syllable of the Bible—and we need to continue washing away sins in Holy Baptism, and to continue feeding souls with Holy Communion. So, hasn’t the Lord blessed us with a wonderful unanimity?

Our church body – the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod – is also not all that conflicted. Yes, you may have heard that this summer’s synod convention could be a bit contentious. It will deal with the questions: “How are we going to live within our financial means, as a synod?” and specifically, “How are we going to fund our worker training system?—especially our prep schools, including Luther Prep here in town.” But again, our church body is not preparing to dispute parts of the Bible this summer.

In contrast, one church just down the block belongs to a church body called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. They also are holding a synod convention this summer. Their main point of contention? “Shall we – or shall we not – allow practicing homosexuals and lesbians lead our congregations as pastors?” Thank God the dear Lord has graciously preserved us from such a conflict!!!

Theme: How Do Christian Congregations Resolve Their Conflicts?

God’s Word to us today starts with the earliest set of Christian congregations in conflict. This section of Scripture will end with that conflict resolved. And the verses in between should prove instructive to us as we ask: HOW DO CHRISTIAN CONGREGATIONS RESOLVE THEIR CONFLICTS? We’ll find that – for these folks, at least – conflict resolution was a four-step process....

Part One: Christian Congregations Cultivate Christian Honesty

It was probably about the year forty-nine AD—nearly two decades after Christ’s triumph over Satan on our behalf. The scene was the same as that one—the city of Jerusalem: at that time, the capital city of the Christian church.

The Apostle Paul and his traveling companion Barnabas had just gotten done with their first missionary journey: to Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey—as we’ve heard during the past three weeks. The two men had returned to Antioch of Syria. And now, conflict among the Christian congregations caused Paul and Barnabas to travel three hundred miles to the south, to Jerusalem, to meet with the other leaders of the church.

God’s Word to us today is printed on the first inside page of your bulletins, and it starts this way: ***Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." The apostles and elders met to consider this question.***

So, there were *some believers* in conflict with other believers. Both sets were Christians, but one set was in the wrong here—because this was a doctrinal issue, dealing with the teaching of God’s Word.

The one set of believers *belonged to the party of the Pharisees*. This group was formed some two centuries earlier. It was a group that realized that all the trouble the Jews kept getting into in the Old Testament was from their failure to follow God’s Word. So, this group began more strictly to follow God’s Old Testament Word.

Well, with that background you can understand their contention: *"The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."* That was, after all, God’s Old Testament Word. Not following God’s Old Testament Word was what got them into trouble before. So, now they needed to follow God’s Old Testament Word.

And notice: *the apostles and elders met to consider this question*. Interesting, isn’t it? In a conflict – as Americans – our first inclination would be to subject things to a fair vote: a democratic ballot. Our second inclination might be to split the difference: to develop a consensus, to craft a compromise. But God’s way, at least this time, was for his designated leaders honestly to take responsibility for handling the situation....

And that’s a good place for us to stop and to say, “Okay, those two verses were the early church’s first step toward resolving their conflict.” How Do Christian Congregations Resolve Their Conflicts? Well, this suggests to us Step One: Christian Congregations Cultivate Christian Honesty.

In this case here, the one group honestly spoke what it believed. The other group honestly – even sharply – disagreed. And the leaders didn’t dishonestly sweep the issue under the rug. They didn’t dishonestly shirk responsibility for the issue. And they didn’t immediately rush to compromise and please everybody. They met for an honest discussion of the issue.

In the same way: Christian Congregations Cultivate Christian Honesty.

Part Two: Christian Congregations Consider Christ’s Gospel

Well, what came of the discussion? God’s Word reports it to us in basically three phases—each of which is very instructive for us.

First of all, we read: ***After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.*** It was maybe ten years earlier that God had sent Peter to a *Gentile* by the name of Cornelius. He was a chief soldier among the Romans. Peter spoke *the gospel* to Cornelius and his household, and they *believed*.

And Peter comments upon that situation: ***God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.*** In fact, the

Holy Spirit immediately inspired Cornelius and the members of his household to praise God in foreign languages—just the way the apostles did at Pentecost. Peter says: ***God made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.*** And all of this: apart from circumcision, apart from the celebration of the Passover and other festivals, apart from the blood sacrifices of animals and all the other provisions of the Old Testament.

So, Peter sums it up: ***Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?*** “We Jewish people couldn’t keep the provisions of the Old Testament, because of our sinful stubbornness. The Gentile people won’t be able to keep the provisions of the Old Testament because of their sinful stubbornness. And that’s why God sent someone to complete and to do away with the provisions of the Old Testament—to save us from them and from our sinfulness!” That is: ***We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.***”

Praise God it’s the same for you and me! Praise God that Jesus doesn’t require the shedding of our blood; instead, he shed his blood for us! Praise God that Jesus doesn’t require a Passover Lamb from us; instead, he is our Passover Lamb! Praise God that Jesus doesn’t require us to celebrate festivals for him; instead, he has prepared a festival for us, and it is paradise!

That’s the important stuff! Christ Jesus saved us! Secondarily, though, did you catch that that’s the second step in the process here for conflict resolution? How Do Christian Congregations Resolve Their Conflicts? Here we have Step Two: Christian Congregations Consider Christ’s Gospel.

In this case here, Peter basically said, “I don’t see what the problem is. Our sinful failures under the Old Testament doomed us. Our glorious Savior under the New Testament rescued us. Let’s stick with our Savior! And let’s have new believers follow him exclusively, as well.”

In the same way, when they face conflict: Christian Congregations Consider Christ’s Gospel—and finally, it’s his good news that rules.

Part Three: Christian Congregations Consult Christian Experience

Did the Gentiles need to be circumcised and to obey the law of Moses? Peter began by appealing to Christ for the answer. Another apostle and his friend weighed in with collateral evidence. We read: ***The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.***

Paul and Barnabas now told about their first missionary journey. They told how the Holy Spirit had set them apart and sent them off. They told how Paul struck the sorcerer blind, and how the proconsul came to believe. They told how the whole region of Antioch of Pisidia had gotten to know God’s Word. They told about the miracles in Iconium. They told about Paul raising the lame man to his feet—and about Paul himself rising to his feet, after he was stoned and left for dead. Essentially they said, “That wasn’t in vain! All of that happened while we refrained from subjugating the Gentiles to all those Old Testament laws. We’re not going to go back and reverse all of what God has so marvelously done.

And you could say that’s a third step in a good Christian conflict resolution process. How Do Christian Congregations Resolve Their Conflicts? Step Three: Christian Congregations Consult Christian Experience.

In this case here, Paul and Barnabas basically said, “We followed a path under which we did not obligate new believers to the Old Testament regulations. God made that work well—astoundingly well. Let’s not jeopardize it! ”

In the same way, when they face conflict: Christian Congregations Consult Christian Experience. They realize that their personal history under Christ is also God’s gift to them.

Part Four: Christian Congregations Conclude According to Christ’s Word

So, we’ve heard Peter and Paul speak to the issue at hand. Peter appropriately appealed to Christ’s gospel. Paul rightly cited Christian experience. Now James: leader of the church at Jerusalem, the son of Joseph and Mary, the half brother of the Lord—he has the final word, because it is God’s Word.

Listen in: *When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon (Peter) has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this – the Word of God is in agreement with this! – as it is written in Amos chapter nine, verses eleven and twelve.*

"After this I, the Lord, will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it. David’s line of kings ended in exile. But the Lord Jesus returned to become the great King to end all kings from David’s line: the King of kings and Lord of lords.

And here’s the purpose: *that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and also all the Gentiles – all those people who don’t follow the provisions of the Old Testament – also all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages."*

So, James is saying: “Don’t you see? God’s Word settles this situation! God’s Word itself said that a time was coming, after the Savior had come, when God’s people would not be obligated to the Old Testament. Now is that time!”

And there you have – obviously – the fourth step for Christian conflict resolution. How Do Christian Congregations Resolve Their Conflicts? Step Four: Christian Congregations Conclude According to Christ’s Word.

In this case here, James was in a position to determine: “This is what the Lord says!” From there, he was able to make a suggestion to resolve the conflict, it won over the assembly, and the spread of the gospel – also for our sakes – was no longer in jeopardy.

And aren’t you glad? Aren’t you glad that Christ, according to his Word, rescued you from having to make blood sacrifices for your sins? Aren’t you glad that Christ, according to his Word, rescued you from having to watch everything you eat and touch and do, in order to remain ceremonially pure? Aren’t you glad that Christ, according to his Word, rescued you from having to travel to Jerusalem three times a year in order to visit with him, face to face? God’s Word ended those conflicts for you!

In the same way, when they face conflict: Christian Congregations Conclude According to Christ’s Word. A proper appeal to Scripture ends all discussion for believers.

Conclusion: Christ Resolves Conflicts in Congregations

So, How Do Christian Congregations Resolve Their Conflicts? Although it might not necessarily operate in this order, God’s Word to us today suggests the following.... Step One: Christian Congregations Cultivate Christian Honesty. Step Two: Christian Congregations Consider Christ’s Gospel. Step Three: Christian Congregations Consult

Christian Experience. And Step Four: Christian Congregations Conclude According to Christ's Word. That's the way Christ resolves conflicts in congregations.

But to conclude: aren't you glad that's not the way Christ resolved your greatest conflicts? Your great conflict with sin—Christ didn't toss it your way and say, "Wrestle with this awhile"; no, Jesus took your sin on himself, and he died for it. Your great conflict with death—Christ didn't bounce that back your way and say, "Give it your best shot dealing with death"; no, Jesus himself underwent death, and he defeated it for you.

And that means there will come a day when all our disputes and conflicts will disappear in Christ's amazing love forever. God, speed the coming of that day! Amen.

The angels informed Jesus' apostles: *This same Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.* That's God's promise—and you can count on it! Amen.