

Faith Mennonite Church
Seek Peace & Pursue It
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Lessons from Conflict Resolution in the Early Church

Acts 15:1-35

When I was a child growing up in the Mennonite Church there were a number of important rules we followed in our family. For we girls, this included not wearing slacks and not cutting our hair. These restrictions came from adherence to scriptures such as Deuteronomy 22:5 that forbids women from dressing like men and vice versa and 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul writes that long hair is a woman's glory. Several generations earlier, some communities of Mennonites used these and related scriptures to regulate the length of women's sleeves and their bonnet strings, and at times women were denied communion if they strayed from these rules.

When I became old enough to participate in our regional youth group, I soon learned that, as a young woman, I could be the secretary or treasurer, but the president and vice-president positions—like pastoral positions in our churches at the time—were limited to men. In reality, we worked as a group and no one really had more power than another. And while I was still in high school, my church invited a female seminarian to fill our pulpit for three Sundays one summer. Before that happened, my father, the pastor, preached a series of sermons, offering an interpretation of scripture that would allow for women to preach. I'm not sure my father would have begun this work if it weren't for the fact that this seminarian was a friend of one of my sisters. Her personal story of the call to ministry made my father take another look at scripture.

From the birth of the church, as recorded in the New Testament, until today, each generation of Christians has faced issues of change, of faithfulness, of relationship to the customs of the past and the current culture, and of the role of personal experience and reason in interpreting scripture. As time passes, some issues that caused conflict at an earlier time seem petty (such as clothing rules); others (such as racial integration or the abolition of slavery) are monumental. We are fortunate to have the case study, preserved in Acts 15, that gives us a picture of the early church deep in the work of discernment. Although the issue at hand, the inclusion of the Gentiles, is now long-ago settled, it can be instructive as we grapple with the issues and conflicts of our day: racial and socio-economic disparities, immigration, sexual diversity, and lifestyle practices that are choking the life from our planet.

The conflict over how a Gentile, a non-Jew, could enter the Christian community was already developing during the time of Jesus' ministry. The mid-first century was a time of great change in the Roman empire. Greater mobility meant that people were exposed to new religions and cultural practices. Many people found Judaism attractive because it "had a long tradition, a book, and an ethic."¹ It wasn't uncommon for "God-fearers" to attend Jewish synagogues so Christians and Jews alike grappled with the question of how to integrate these people into their worship life.

It's important to remember that, at this time, Christianity was not a separate religion; it was still a sect within Judaism. Like the Roman culture around it, Judaism was also going through a period of change, and different groups within Judaism had distinct ideas of what was central. The Pharisees "focused on obedience to God;" others focused on sacrificial worship. "Followers of Jesus focused on the person of Jesus as the incarnation of all that was promised in the Old Testament."²

Church of the Brethren theologian Robert Bowman identifies two questions that the early Christian community faced: 1) how to integrate non-Jews into the life of the community and 2) what parts of faithful Jewish/Christian practice were essential for non-Jews and which were negotiable?

¹ Robert Bowman, "Bible insight for the teacher: Acts 5:1-35," *Gather Round curriculum*. Summer 2012

² Ibid.

Acts 15 suggests that the church began integrating Gentile Christians in some regions before there was consensus in the entire church. In Acts 10 we have the account of Peter's vivid and visceral dream of a sheet of (ritually) unclean animals being set before him with the command from God that he kill and eat them. Just as Peter had sometimes argued with Jesus when he followed as a disciple, he now argued with God: "No way! I've never eaten anything that was profane or unclean." (v. 14) But God was insistent that these things were now made clean. This dream preceded and prepared Peter for his encounter with the Roman centurion Cornelius, who became a believer and was immediately baptized, without time for an adequate catechism in Jewish practice. In a similar way, the missionary Paul found Gentiles receptive to the story of Jesus as he traveled and he did not feel compelled to school them in the full understanding and practice of the Mosaic law.

This evidently felt too haphazard for some of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. A few of them, without first consulting with the leaders, set off for Antioch to put things right: "If you're going to be real Christians, you have to be fully Jewish, and that requires the rite of circumcision and following the laws of Moses." But the Christians in Antioch pushed back and they sent a delegation back to Jerusalem to refute the demand.

The account that Luke gives in Acts 15 of what we often call "the Jerusalem Conference" had several features:

1. There was much debate: things were not swept under the carpet and neither was there an official pronouncement before hearing from various sides.
2. There was time for silence and listening: first to hear Peter speak of his experience of being chosen to help bring the message of the good news to the Gentiles, and then for Barnabas and Paul to tell of the "signs and wonders that God has done through them among the Gentiles."
3. There was reflection on scripture, as the apostle James, recited a text from the prophet Amos, that referred to God's blessing on the Gentiles. James was reminding the listeners that there was more to scripture than simply the Torah, the law of Moses.
4. Finally, they did not vote but reached a sense of what "seemed right to the Holy Spirit and to us" and they agreed on guidelines that all would follow, Jewish and Gentile Christians alike.

Loren Johns, a NT professor at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, IN, notes that the church as portrayed in Acts 15 was exercising a four-fold way of coming to understand God's will that has operated throughout church history. They appealed to 1) tradition; 2) Scripture; 3) reason; and 4) experience. At the time of the 16th-century Reformation, the reformers, especially Martin Luther, elevated Scripture above the others, in part because it had been sadly neglected.³ Today, many Christians, including Mennonites, believe that one can and should rest a case on any issue entirely on Scripture. But that is not what the Bible itself portrays. Acts 15 provides for a multi-faceted approach.

As we reported in the July newsletter, the leaders of Central Plains Mennonite Conference are inviting all of the churches in our conference to take part in several regional listening and discernment consultations this fall, prompted by the marriage guidelines that we adopted this past year, which place us at variance with one aspect of the *Mennonite Confession of Faith*. These won't be exactly like the Jerusalem conference, but they will provide some of the same elements. There will be time for representatives from our congregation to share our experience of welcome and inclusion of LGBT persons and our process last year to clarify our marriage guidelines. There will be time for representatives from each of the congregations to share, in circle groups, personal hopes and fears as they enter into discussion about same-sex relationships. Similarly they will share scripture passages that have shaped, and perhaps changed, their thinking. Together the groups will listen for the voice of the Spirit in determining how we, as congregations and as a conference, maintain unity and continue to work at an issue that has caused much pain.

³ Loren Johns, "Homosexuality: Discerning Together the Will of God." Sermon preached at Walnut Hill Mennonite Church, October 23, 2011.

“Many scholars have concluded that Luke, the writer of Acts and the Gospel of Luke, was interested in emphasizing peace and unity within the growing church”⁴ and between church and society. Acts 15 may thus be an idealized account. If we read Galatians 2, Paul describes the same situation in quite a different way, with more disunity, even an open dispute between Peter and himself about attitudes and actions toward Gentile Christians. This can remind, and reassure us, that processes of change and discernment are never easy and rarely smooth. But this is the work of being the church: listening for the voice of God calling us to live more fully into the kingdom of grace, healing, and hope. In the coming weeks we will be selecting persons who will represent us at the regional discernment meetings, but we can all begin now the important task of praying for the process and practicing the important skills of listening to the experiences and concerns of others who hold opinions different from ours. Let's roll up our sleeves!

⁴ Ibid.