

A BIBLICAL PATTERN FOR SOLVING PROBLEMS (Acts 15:1-35)

Acts 15 records the second big problem the Church faced. We studied the first problem in Acts 6. The problem of Acts 6 was smaller than the problem of Acts 15. In fact, the problem of Acts 15 is one of the biggest problems in Scripture.

Though it was great, the Jerusalem church still had a weakness:

The Jerusalem church was a Jewish church. Many priests became believers (Acts 6: 7). These probably continued to sacrifice animals in the temple. And some Pharisees became believers (Acts 15: 5). These taught that all believers must obey the law of Moses! Acts 21: 20 says that all of the believers in Jerusalem were zealous for the Law. To be a member of the Jerusalem church, a believer had to become a Jew first. Judaism was the door to the Jerusalem church. This was the root of the problem.

In this lesson we will look at five biblical steps to solving a problem.

1. _____ before you try to solve it!

What is the problem? That is the first question to ask. We see the problem at the beginning of Acts 15.

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question (Acts 15: 1-2).

It is good to state the problem as a question or a group of questions.

There were hot questions circulating in the Jerusalem church. And believers did not agree on the answers. So they called a big meeting or *council in Jerusalem. Before you look for the answer, be sure you can state the question in your own words. Otherwise, you will not recognize the answer when you find it!

2. Allow full and open _____ at a meeting.

Notice the words *“after much discussion”* in Acts 15: 7. This shows us that they gave people time to talk. Paul and Barnabas *“reported everything God had done through them”* (Acts 15: 4). This report may have taken several hours or days. They reported about the work in Antioch, Cyprus, Perga, and Galatia. All took time to listen.

Then others began to give a different view. Leaders gave them time to talk. 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”* (Acts 15: 5).

Another name for these born-again Pharisees is **Judaizers*.

- They emphasized Judaism, the religion of the Jews.
- They were believers. But they needed to grow in grace.
- They were still depending on the Law, rather than grace alone.
- In Jerusalem, most all believers were Jewish. So emphasizing Jewish customs did not offend those in Jerusalem.
- But outside of Jerusalem, some Judaizers were stumbling blocks to the Gentiles.
- A few of them went to Antioch. There, they troubled Gentile believers.
- Likewise, in Galatia, they led Gentile believers away from Christ to Moses (Gal. 5: 1-4).

In Jerusalem, Paul walked in step with Jewish believers. There, he even paid for animal sacrifices (Acts 21: 17-26). To those under Law, Paul became under Law (1 Cor. 9: 19-23). But he did not allow the Judaizers to force their Jewish culture on the Gentiles. In the end, Paul and the Jerusalem leaders rejected the view of the Judaizers (Acts 15: 24). We do not need two Saviors. Following Moses is not necessary. Faith in Jesus Christ is enough!

What are three rules for a discussion?

- _____.

Love is never rude (1 Cor. 13: 5).

- ***Talk about _____, not people.***

Never use words to attack someone who disagrees with you.

- ***Do not allow tongues and interpretation or _____ to end discussion.***

Some pretend to use spiritual gifts against their enemies. No one can argue with “Thus says the Lord.” Therefore, do not allow either side to take this approach. This would be an abuse of spiritual gifts. Allow free discussion. Then the group can come to its own conclusion. The group does not need one person to tell them what God thinks!

3. Listen to those with _____ related to the problem. They took time to listen to the experiences of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15: 4). These men told about the Greek believers in Antioch, Syria. And they told about their first missionary trip.

Next, everyone in the Jerusalem meeting took time to listen to Peter’s experience.

Peter emphasizes salvation by grace. Note his words. *“No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (Acts 15: 11).*

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It is interesting to compare Peter's words in Acts 15: 11 with Galatians. Take a few minutes to read Galatians 2: 1-21. There, Paul rebukes Peter for forcing "*Gentiles to follow Jewish customs*" (Gal. 2: 14).

Paul emphasizes to Peter that Jews are "*justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law*" (Gal. 2: 16). Paul says that no one will be justified by keeping the Law.

This is the same message we hear Peter giving in Acts 15: 11. Paul probably wrote to the Galatians before the Jerusalem meeting of Acts 15. And it is likely that Peter's trip to Antioch (Gal. 2: 11) was also before the Jerusalem meeting of Acts 15. (Bible teachers are not sure about the order of these events.)

This is a possible order of events with approximate dates:

EVENT	SCRIPTURE	DATE (A.D.)
Jesus ascended to the Father in heaven.	Acts 1:9	30
Paul met Jesus on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus	Acts 9:1-19	31-32
Paul studied the Scriptures for 3 years in Arabia.	Between Acts 9:21-22; Gal. 1:17-18	32-34
Paul proved to the Jews in Damascus that Jesus is the Christ.	Acts 9:22; Gal. 1:17; 2 Cor. 11:32-33	34
Paul took his first trip, as a believer, to Jerusalem. He met Peter and James.	Acts 9:26-27 Gal. 1:18-19	35
Paul and Barnabas taught in Antioch, Syria for 1 year.	Acts 11:25-26 Gal. 1:20	39
Paul took his second trip to Jerusalem. He and Barnabas carried an offering from Antioch. This was to help during the famine. On this visit, they met privately with Jerusalem church leaders.	Acts 11:27-30 Gal. 2:1-10	44
Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary trip.	Acts 13-14	46-47
Peter went to Antioch, Syria	Between Acts 14:28 & 15:1; Gal. 2:11	48-49
Judaizers who claimed to be from James went to Antioch. They influenced Peter, Barnabas, and others. Paul rebuked Peter	Acts 15:24; Gal. 2:12-21	48-49

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in front of them all.		
Judaizers led the Galatians astray from grace.	Gal. 5:1-4	48-49
Paul wrote to the Galatians	Gal. 1-6	49
Paul went to Jerusalem for a third time. He and Barnabas went for the Church council.	Acts 15	49

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 (Acts 15: 12).

Experience did not decide the case. But neither did the lack of experience decide the case. We do not base belief completely on experience. But we do listen to it. Experience is a good teacher.

4. Apply the _____ to the problem.

- The Word is a light for our paths (Ps. 119: 105).
- The Scriptures are our guide. They are the foundation for our faith (2 Tim. 3: 16).

James, the brother of Jesus, quoted a verse from Amos 9: 11-12 (Acts 15: 16-18). The verses from Amos focused on God's big purpose. Why did God restore David's fallen tent or kingdom through Christ? So that the Gentiles would seek the Lord.

5. Separate the _____ from the lesser parts of the problem.

Sometimes there may be several issues or parts of a problem. But there is usually one part of a problem that is more important than the other parts. This was true at the Jerusalem meeting. The biggest question was **"How can Gentiles be saved?"** The answer was by trusting in Christ without following Moses.

There was also a lesser part of the problem. The lesser question was ***“How can Gentiles relate to Jewish believers?”***

“You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15: 29).

These three food requests would help keep peace between Jews and Gentiles. It would keep the Gentiles from being a stumbling block to the Jews.

Also, notice that there is a fourth thing the Jerusalem Council required of Gentiles. That was to abstain from sexual immorality (Acts 15: 29).

The Jerusalem meeting solved the greater and the lesser parts of the problem. They decided how Gentiles should relate to God and others.

The second commandment is like the first (Matt. 22: 37-40). How we relate to God comes first. But it is also important how we relate to others. So the Jerusalem Council asked the Gentiles to give up a little of their freedom. That way, all believers could relate to each other. How believers relate to each other is always part of the problems we must solve.

HOMework

Think of a problem/conflict which you have faced in the past or are currently facing now. Without mentioning names (we deal with issues, not people), summarize the conflict. Then fit it into the following framework for finding a godly solution.

1. Identify the problem.
2. When and how can you facilitate open discussion of the problem?
3. Who can you listen to who may have experience in this area? How can you incorporate them into the discussion?
4. What scriptures might apply to the problem?

5. What is the greatest issue in the problem? What are the lesser issues?
6. How was the issue resolved? (Or, how do you, in faith, see the current issue being resolved?)