

Acts 15 - John Karmelich

I want to discuss the topic of "conflict resolution". We all have to deal with it at times. My question of the moment is how does God want us to deal with it? Obviously, God doesn't have a finger that comes down from the sky to say "go that way"! Our issues have to be dealt with and decisions made. I bring that up because in effect that's what we get in Chapter 15. It mostly focuses on the question of, "Is God through with Israel (as a unique entity)?" That's the underlying issue. The actual question debated and being dealt with is, "Since people can just be saved by having faith in Jesus what about Israel?" It was a major debate in this chapter. Yes it got resolved and a statement issued from the Jerusalem church on what non-Jewish Christians should do to not offend Jewish Christians.

To me, the issue isn't so much the specifics of that question. The text shows a biblical example on how to dealing with conflict resolution. That's why the chapter has two conflicts that are both resolved. The second one focuses on Paul as he's about to embark on his second missionary journey. Yes there is lots to say about the specifics of the conflicts and I'll get to all of that. I simply want you to notice here that the issues got resolved and people accepted the church's decisions after the debate. In my life, I've had to accept decisions I wasn't crazy about. I knew my arguments were heard and I respected the authority of those placed in charge. Even in cases where one is falsely accused, (as we'll read later in this book) it's still a matter of accepting God's will in dealing with such issues.

OK John, you're preaching to adults who've dealt with such conflicts all our lives. You're stating what's obvious to most of us. Yes, but we need to realize biblical models exist to deal with conflict resolution as we read in this chapter. There is a time for debate even within the church and then decisions have to be made, right or wrong after hearing all the evidence. Yes there are times where we're not heard and I know many people suffer unfairly in life. This chapter isn't about those issues. It focuses on how we're to make tough decisions. The issue involves hearing the case fairly and then making a decision. I know it sounds obvious but the point is God lays out for us how to deal with conflict resolution here. Then in the second situation in this chapter, we get a "split" as Paul and Barnabas separate as they can't resolve their disagreement. They didn't hate each other. They just went their separate ways when they couldn't agree on a decision. So yes, issue specifics are important (especially on essential church doctrine), but it's also a matter of realizing, sometimes we have to get together, hear all the arguments and come to an agreement. Other times we must go our separate ways. Obviously such decisions should involve prayer and then make the best decisions possible once we hear the evidence.

With that said, let's get to specifics. By this point in the book of Acts, it's now about 10-15 years since Jesus rose from the dead. Besides the "home church" in Jerusalem, the other key church in Acts at that time was in a city called Antioch a few hundred miles north, which is in Turkey today. Paul was based there and his first missionary journey began and ended there. This chapter opens with people who were Pharisees who now believe in Jesus traveling from Jerusalem to Antioch to say in effect, "The Gentiles who believe in Jesus must convert to Judaism in order to be saved". These guys wanted to circumcise the non-Jewish believers. The underlying issue is 1) Do people have to become Jewish to be saved and 2) If you don't have to be Jewish to be saved, what does that mean about Israel as an entity? (For those who don't know Israel has a separate destiny from the church. More on that in later Acts lessons!)

This led to a big "Pow Wow" in Jerusalem. Christians from the Antioch church including Paul traveled there to settle the matter. Speeches were made including Paul stating a case why it wasn't necessary for Gentiles to become Jews to be saved. Then Peter told of the first Gentile converts (Back in Chapter 10) that occurred about 10 years earlier. Finally we get a quote from the book of Amos given by James (a

half-brother of Jesus who became the church leader there). What this came down to was "what does it take to be saved". The conclusion of the debate was one is only saved by faith in Jesus. The purpose of "works" has nothing to do with our salvation. "Works" is strictly about being a good witness for Jesus as we go through our lives and giving evidence to others of our faith in Jesus!

Think about it this way: If it were possible for us to "mess up our salvation" I'm sure we'd find a way to do it. That's why salvation's strictly and 100% based on 1) our faith that Jesus is God, 2) Jesus paid the full price for our sins and 3) belief that He's in complete charge of our lives. I assume you believe that or else you wouldn't be reading this far in the lesson.

That leads to the next aspect of "conflict resolution". Remember the Antioch church was waiting to see how this played out. Those two churches are about 200 miles apart. To me the letter that the Jerusalem church in conclusion wrote was interesting. The letter doesn't say anything about our faith in Jesus. It's not a list of obvious sins to avoid such as stealing or murder. Those are "givens"! What the letter does focus on besides the fact the non-Jewish Christians aren't required to convert to be saved is listing stuff that really bothers Jewish Christians. In other words what we read from that letter (that obviously Luke got a copy of when he wrote this book) is a handful of things that Jewish people find offensive to them. The issue for non-Jewish Christians isn't to avoid doing these specific things to be saved, it's about not being offensive to their fellow believers in Jesus. The list was essentially three things: food offered to idols, not eating blood and sexual immorality.

It may help to remember one of my favorite lines about Christianity: Am I free to drink alcohol? What I like to respond is I'm free to drink all the alcohol I want. The question is how much do I want! I want to be a good witness for Jesus as I go through my life. While I'm far from perfect, we must realize that we're called to use our lives as a witness for Jesus. We should go out of our way not to offend as a witness for God. For example, if we're making a dinner for religious Jewish people, we'd learn about a "Kosher diet" as to not offend our guests. That's the issue at play here. The way the issue got resolved was not to focus on the basics of Christianity or how God calls us to live, but to state, "Here's ways we are to avoid offending our Christian brothers and sisters from a Jewish background".

Obviously there's a lot more to the story, but I'm giving the shorter version here. The chapter moves to the story of how Paul was about to start his second missionary journey. On the first one Paul and a man named Barnabas led the journey. During that journey "John-Mark" quit in the middle of it. By the way that's the Mark who wrote the Gospel of Mark. Yes his relationship got better with Paul before the end of his life, but at this point Paul and Barnabas were at odds, because Barnabas wanted to take Mark on the next journey and Paul didn't because he "quit" the first time. They each decided to go their separate ways. So Paul left with a man named Silas who was also part of the Antioch church. Barnabas went on his own journey, but Luke follows Paul's life through the rest of the book. Yes, I've got more to say for this story, as well as the first one, but I figure that's enough introduction for one lesson.

What I hope everyone gets out of this is ways to properly and biblically deal with conflict resolution. It never bothers me when I get my chance to speak my peace but then I'm out voted, or the higher ups go a different way. That's part of life. Again I try to think of using my life to be pleasing to God. In some cases it means going my own way and in other cases it means accepting a decision and moving on. In both cases, I'm sure there was a lot of prayer prior to decisions being made, decisions were made for us to proceed in life. Yes life is often trial and error. To quote another of my favorite expressions, "God gave us a brain and He expects us to use it!"

With that stated, I ask each of us to "use our brain" as to whether or not to stop here or read the rest of the lesson. I'll leave that up to each of you to pray and yes use our brains! With that said, on the same page where you downloaded this summary is a detailed lesson on this chapter. That one is on a verse-by-verse basis. To read that, click on one of the other two links on this chapter. If you want, you are always welcome to e-mail me and I hope you like this. Thanks, John