

When Contention Arises within the Church

Acts 11:1-18

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How should contentions within the church be handled by fellow members? Even before it is necessary that a church court step in to adjudicate a conflict, how should fellow brothers and sisters seek to resolve a matter over which they disagree?

Most theological conflicts within a church can be prevented by adhering to confessional standards that bind all members of a church together under the same understanding of Scripture in matters of doctrine, worship, and church government (through the Confession of Faith, Catechisms, Covenants, Directory of Public Worship, and Form of Church Government).

But even when explicit subordinate standards are formally adopted in unifying the membership on those points of doctrine, worship, and church government, there will still arise disagreements in application of doctrine and worship among brothers and sisters within the same church that yet need to be addressed. How are such contentions and conflicts to be handled among you who profess the same faith?

Let us consider the godly example of Peter when he faced the opposition of certain Jewish believers after his ministry to Gentile believers in the house of Cornelius. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are: (1) The Accusations Brought against Peter (Acts 11:1-3); (2) The Defense of Peter (Acts 11:4-17); (3) The Contention Resolved (Acts 11:18).

I. The Accusations Brought against Peter (Acts 11:1-3).

A. After Peter had spent some days with Cornelius and the Gentile believers, teaching and guiding them in biblical doctrine and practice (Acts 10:48), he and the six Jewish believers who had accompanied him as witnesses to the work of the Spirit, set their course for Jerusalem.

1. The Lord has now opened the door to salvation and membership into the Church of Jesus Christ to Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles (in three distinct stages where representatives of each group receive the New Covenant blessing of the Holy Spirit in an extraordinary way, so as to outwardly confirm that Jesus Christ has only one Church that is visible and universal—not three distinct churches or hundreds of distinct churches). That one universal church is indeed divided into particular churches based upon nations and geographical regions, but ought not to be divided over different doctrines, forms of worship, or types of church government (the Old Testament Church of the Jews did not know such divisions as God appointed; John 17:20-21; 1 Corinthians 1:10). That was the purpose of our Solemn League and Covenant (1643): to bind together the Churches of Scotland, England, and Ireland and their posterity in a blessed unity and nearest uniformity in doctrine, worship, and church government.

2. Perhaps Peter anticipated some controversy in Jerusalem among the brethren over his role in preaching to Gentiles, in administering baptism to Gentiles, in receiving Gentiles into the Church of Jesus Christ, and in eating and fellowshiping with uncircumcised Gentiles and their unclean food. For Peter brings along with him to Jerusalem the same six Jewish believers who had witnessed the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Cornelius and those gathered in his home.

B. It would seem that news concerning the salvation of Cornelius and the Gentiles and Peter's role in preaching to them and in extending to them the right hand of fellowship had reached the Jewish Church in

Jerusalem before Peter arrived (Acts 11:1). The apostles and the many other Jewish believers had likely heard some second-hand (or third-hand) reports that quickly traveled from Caesarea to Jerusalem while Peter continued for some days with Cornelius and the Gentile converts, grounding them in the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

C. When Peter finally arrives in Jerusalem, some of the Jewish converts (the circumcised) waste no time in contending with him (Acts 11:2—“contended with him”—i.e. they were contending and disputing with Peter—not one time, but repeatedly—Greek imperfect tense). The verb used here does not refer to a minor disagreement, but to a disagreement that leads to taking opposite sides. There is no evidence that this contention had yet led to some ecclesiastical trial before the apostles (nor that the other apostles were of the party that was disputing with Peter). This appears to be a case of Jewish believers making accusations against Peter, even before they had heard Peter’s explanation as to what had actually happened.

D. The accusations were two in number (Acts 11:3): (1) Peter had gone into the home of those who were uncircumcised Gentiles; (2) Peter had eaten the unclean food in fellowship with these uncircumcised Gentiles. You see, the Holy Spirit makes it clear that it was not merely because Peter associated with uncircumcised Gentiles, but also because Peter had eaten their unclean food with them—the two parts of the Old Covenant to which these Jewish believers were steadfastly clinging were the need of converted Gentiles to be circumcised and to follow the dietary laws of the Old Testament.

1. Their primary concern does not seem to revolve around the gospel being preached to Gentiles or Gentiles, for this was commanded by Jesus both before and after His ascension (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). Their primary concern was that Peter did not insist that these Gentiles be circumcised and follow the dietary laws.

2. These Jewish converts did not understand the intended purpose of God and the legal accomplishment of Christ in abolishing these outward Old Covenant ordinances by the death of Jesus Christ in making Jews and Gentiles into one new man in Christ. These were not issues that were immediately settled in the minds of Jewish believers as we see from the need of a Synod to settle the matter (Acts 15).

E. What can be learned from how these Jewish converts were accusing and contending with Peter (at home, church, work)?

1. **The Jewish believers in Jerusalem made accusations and assumed conclusions against Peter without having any first-hand testimony from Peter or the six witnesses.** Self-assured ignorance of facts is the height of arrogance and pride. How often are we ready to make accusations and assert pronouncements when we have not done our homework and are speaking out of darkness rather than from light? We must learn not to be hasty in pronouncing judgment until we have taken the time to gather information about one another. How do we want others to treat us? Contention that proceeds from ignorance is not only unnecessary and hasty, but is also sinful (Proverbs 19:2; Proverbs 25:8; Proverbs 29:20).

2. **The Jewish believers in Jerusalem began by making accusations rather than by asking sincere and honest questions** (Proverbs 15:28). Dear ones, unless there is some published position or statement, or unless you have heard with your own ears from the source, or unless there is some statement by two or three credible witnesses to the words or position of another brother or sister, it is always best to begin by asking questions in order to gather facts; and then to continue with follow up questions; and then to restate in your own words what you hear from that brother or sister; and then to ask him/her is this what you were saying or is this what you meant? Only then will you be fairly representing one another. So often this takes too much time, and we would rather be hasty than be right (to our own shame).

3. **The Jewish believers in Jerusalem formed a sizeable group to approach Peter, no doubt by means of spreading unconfirmed information, rather than looking for the most peaceful way and**

least conspicuous way to approach Peter (Matthew 18:15-17). Attempting to have the loudest voice possible by joining voice to voice is not the right or the best way to approach brothers or sisters when it would better promote peace within the church and within the family to come privately. Those who form a multitude rather than coming individually are most likely not looking to resolve a controversy peacefully, but are more likely looking to force an agenda or opinion.

4. **The Jewish believers in Jerusalem made accusations without knowledge not merely against another brother or sister (that would be bad enough), but they aggravated their sin by making ignorant charges against an apostle and minister of Jesus Christ** (1 Timothy 5:19). Paul makes it clear that elders who do grievously sin and err should be rebuked publicly—there is to be no partiality (1 Timothy 5:20). But because of the possible damage that may be directed against the gospel ministry and against the ambassador of Jesus Christ, the directive by Paul is that we be especially careful that accusations be handled in the most discreet and orderly manner against the minister of Jesus Christ. So likewise all these principles should be applied at home and at work in order to avoid conflict and seek peace.

5. If you are interested in peace and reconciliation, don't follow the example of these Jewish believers in Jerusalem. If you are only interested in stirring up trouble, bringing division, and making a name for yourself, then follow the example of these Jewish believers in Jerusalem; for that is what will likely be achieved.

II. **The Defense of Peter (Acts 11:4-17).**

A. The accusations have been brought, and the air is filled with contention. This is a tense situation that if handled wrongly could completely blow the Church in Jerusalem apart into many fragments and divisions. We have learned what example not to follow—the example of the Jewish believers is more likely a recipe for destruction than for healing. But now we consider the godly example of Peter and how his reply not only prevented the splintering of the church, but brought those contending with him to glorify God for what the Lord had done.

B. How does Peter address these accusations and at the same time promote reconciliation among the brethren?

1. **Peter gave them the facts concerning the case that the Jewish believers in Jerusalem needed.** We have considered these events in detail in previous sermons, so we will not detail them again. However, Peter's summary of the facts.

a. Peter makes it clear that God gave him a vision of a sheet lowered from heaven (Acts 11:4-10) in which were unclean animals (according to the dietary law of the Old Testament). Peter was commanded to kill and eat these unclean animals. Peter resisted saying he had never eaten any such unclean animals—in other words, Peter is saying he was not at all predisposed to eat of these unclean animals (Acts 11:8). However, the Lord rebuked Peter with these words, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common (i.e. unclean, Acts 11:9). This was repeated two more time, and then the sheet with the unclean animals was taken up into heaven. **Peter's point here is that he was not looking for this vision, but God gave it to him as His own revealed will.**

b. Next, Peter informs the Jewish believers in Jerusalem that just as the vision ended, there appeared three men at his gate sent by Cornelius, who called for Peter to accompany them to the home of Cornelius. Peter makes it clear that it was not because he was favorably inclined of himself to go, but because the Holy Spirit commanded him to go, and he took six other Jewish believers with him (Act 11:11-12). **Again, Peter's point here is that it was God who commanded him to go, and he simply obeyed.**

c. Then, Peter relates to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem that Cornelius, the Gentile and Roman centurion, also received a vision from God in which he was told to send for Peter (Acts

11:13-14). **Thus, God both gave Peter the vision and command to go to Cornelius, and gave to Cornelius the vision and command to send for Peter.**

d. Finally, Peter puts the matter beyond the objection of the Jewish believers by declaring that while he was yet at the beginning of his sermon, the Holy Spirit came upon them just as He had done with the apostles and Jewish believers on the Day of Pentecost in fulfillment of the promise of Jesus. Peter in effect puts the question to them, “How could I resist God” (Acts 11:15-17)?

(1) Thus, Peter makes it clear that he would have resisted God had he discounted the fact that God had made uncircumcised Gentiles clean and righteous through the death of Christ and had baptized them by His Spirit into the same Church of Jesus Christ. “How could I resist God, and how could you, Jewish believers, likewise resist what God has done?” So Peter gives them the facts that God revealed to him. They needed the truth, and Peter gives it to them. He did not share with them his own opinions, but gave to them the revealed will of God.

(2) For biblical reconciliation to be reached, we cannot conveniently forget the issue that separates you from a brother or sister, nor can we simply agree to disagree when a matter is likely to arise again and again and produce contention (this may be a matter for elders to resolve, but every attempt with a brother or sister should be taken).

(3) Though the Jewish believers began with accusations, it should be noted that they did hear and listen to what Peter presented to them—they weren’t tuning Peter out, as if nothing that Peter might say would alter their mind. There definitely will be no resolution to contention if we are not willing to carefully listen but are already strategizing what to say in our own mind.

2. **Second, Peter addresses these accusations and promotes reconciliation by not becoming defensive, but rather being easily entreated, even if he was not gently or respectfully entreated** (James 3:17). Peter offers a defense, but he is not defensive. It is not easy to avoid becoming defensive when you are attacked by someone. That is why we need the wisdom that is from above, not our own worldly wisdom. That why we need the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5: longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, temperance or self-control. When lies and misrepresentations are brought against you, you must counter them with the truth (speaking the truth in love), but it should be apparent that you are more concerned for the glory of God than even for your own name. Take the attacks that you receive and use them as arrows from the Lord to teach you and train you in godliness.

3. **Third, Peter addresses these accusations and promotes reconciliation by not exerting his mere authority.** Peter was an apostle of Jesus Christ, gifted to heal the sick by his mere shadow (Acts 5:15) and to raise the dead (Acts 9:36ff), but he doesn’t try to pull rank on these Jewish believers by saying he won’t lower himself to respond to their accusations.

a. Sometimes we who are in authority (whether in the church or home) react in anger when we are challenged, or react in pride and put ourselves upon a pedestal implying, “Who do you think you are to question me?” This type of leadership will only further provoke those who have questions or who make accusations. Peter’s example is for us all if we would prevent contention and seek reconciliation, even when others don’t follow a right and respectful protocol. Now reconciliation still may not come, but at least if we take such conciliatory steps, we will have a clear conscience before God that we did not add fuel to the fire—that we were peace makers, not trouble makers.

b. Paul does at times appeal to the authority God has given to him as an apostle, but he does so not to exalt himself, but that the truth revealed to him will not be discounted but received. Paul makes it clear that even his apostolic authority is for the good and edification of the church and not for her destruction (2 Corinthians 10:8).

c. Those who are led can see how authority is used: whether for them or against them, whether for their good or for their harm, whether out of love or out of self-centeredness, whether for their edification or for their destruction. Lawful authority is from God alone and is to be used by those who

have learned to submit to God's absolute authority, knowing they will give an account for how they have use it. We can only properly exercise authority when we have learned to submit to God's authority and those God has lawfully placed in authority over us. Peter used his apostolic authority to bring peace, not contention.

III. The Contention Resolved (Acts 11:18).

A. Here we see the fruit of Peter's godly example. Contention was smothered by peace, patience, meekness, and self-control. Instead of seeing the salvation of Gentiles as some threat to them as Jews, they reciprocated the peace they saw in Peter, and glorified God for the salvation of the Gentiles.

B. Peter's approach was the peaceable way to respond to contention brought against him. If that peaceable approach had not been met with a reciprocal peace, then stronger measures would no doubt have been necessarily followed by Peter and the apostles against those who were disturbing the peace of the church. But dear ones, we are love bound, covenant bound, and duty bound to seek first to disarm those who contend rather than seeking to destroy those who contend. That same wisdom that is from heaven above is first pure, then peaceable (James 3:17). We are commanded to seek peace and pursue it in the church, at home, and at work (Psalm 34:14). Amen.

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