


**A Five-Day Devotional Journey**
**July 13 - 19, 2008**

Acts 15:1-35

ברזל בברזל ואיש פני-רעהו:

Iron on iron; and a man (on) the face of his friend.

*Proverbs 27:17 Literal translation*

## When Church Gets Messy

### 1 They disagreed, arguing vehemently

**Read.** Acts 15:1-5 NLT

While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved." Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone's joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses."

**Think.**

- If time permits, read Genesis 17 for a glimpse at the origins of circumcision as a covenant symbol. How might this passage appear to support the Pharisees' argument in Acts 15? From the vantage point of someone strictly Jewish, why was circumcision and the law of Moses so important? Wasn't this whole issue settled back in Acts 10 with the conversion of Cornelius? Why is this still such a huge issue now?
- How do Paul and Barnabas respond to the demand that gentiles be circumcised? Why are they so passionate about this issue?
- What does the church in Antioch decide to do? What does this demonstrate about the character of that church and its leadership?
- How do you typically respond when faced by the prospect of disagreement: Avoidance? Denial? Compliance? Frontal attack? Or \_\_\_\_\_? Why do you think you respond this way?

**Pray.**

Abba, help me not to fear but also not to feed on conflict. Show me how to disagree with others in healthy ways.

**Live.** Find your voice when faced with disagreement this week.

**Sparks.**

In the context of relationships sparks can be a good thing – the spark of affection, encouragement and the simple pure joy of being around each other.

"Flying sparks" are another matter. Sparks from the friction of disagreement, argument, and debate. These we seemed trained to avoid at all costs. The very fact that sparks are flying is typically taken as an indicator that something is amiss. Something is broken. Something is wrong in paradise. We seek smooth relationships that are friction free and devoid of those unpleasant bumps of disagreement. So when sparks fly so do we – off to a kinder gentler job, friendship, marriage, church.

**But there the ancient Hebrew signpost stands:**

**Iron on iron. Not sword in perfectly fitting scabbard, or hammer on velvet pillow. Iron on iron, sword on sword.**

**Yes, flying sparks are good, too.**

Flying sparks are a wonderful indicator of life. They are an indicator that two (or more) people are in authentic relationship and are being real with each other – rather than human and doormat or robot. "Iron on iron, and a man (on) the face of his friend." As we would put it, "a man gets in his friend's face."

It's vital to observe that it's iron on iron, not a sword in your friend's face, or worse, their back. Real friends embrace the friction and learn how to fight fair and are even invigorated in a more "lively" and passionate exchange of thought.

It's one aspect of early church life we can always stand to brush up on. The early church was not a fight free zone. They knew how to fight, and they grew as a result. What we see as a mess to avoid, they saw as an anvil on which their relationship with each other and the Lord would be forged and strengthened and matured. Acts 15 is a *tour de force* in fighting fair – a profile of how one group successfully functioned "iron on iron."

## 2) Long discussion

**Read.** Acts 15:6-12 NLT

So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: “Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. God knows people’s hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.” Everyone listened quietly as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

**Think.**

- How does Peter weigh in on the issue of gentile circumcision? What arguments does he make? What weight would his voice carry in the Jerusalem church?
- What contribution do Paul and Barnabas make?
- In addition to the voice of scripture and tradition brought by Jewish believers, what other sources of authority are appealed to in this meeting? How does this process of conflict resolution/ decision making compare with what you’ve experienced in your church? Your small group? Your workplace? Your family?

**Pray.**

Lord Jesus, help me to embody the counsel of your word to be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

**Live.**

Meditate on James 1:19-20 every day this week.

## 4) It seemed good to the Spirit and to us

**Read.** Acts 15:22-29 NLT

Then the apostles and elders together with the whole church in Jerusalem chose delegates, and they sent them to Antioch of Syria with Paul and Barnabas to report on this decision. The men chosen were two of the church leaders—Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas. This is the letter they took with them: *“This letter is from the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem. It is written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings! We understand that some men from here have troubled you and upset you with their teaching, but we did not send them! So we decided, having come to complete agreement, to send you official representatives, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are sending Judas and Silas to confirm what we have decided concerning your question. “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell.”*

**Think.**

- What strikes you about this letter? How would you rate it as effective communication?
- Whom did the church send with the letter to the church in Antioch? How are these men described? Why these men?

**Pray.**

Lord, empower me to really be a “son of encouragement” this week at home, at work and at church.

**Live.**

Send someone a letter of encouragement this week.

## 3) When they had finished, James stood...

**Read.** Acts 15:13-21 NLT

When they had finished, James stood and said, “Brothers, listen to me. Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. And this conversion of Gentiles is exactly what the prophets predicted. As it is written: *‘Afterward I will return and restore the fallen house of David. I will rebuild its ruins and restore it, so that the rest of humanity might seek the LORD, including the Gentiles— all those I have called to be mine. The LORD has spoken— he who made these things known so long ago.’*

“And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood. For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations.”

**Think.**

- How does James weigh in on the issue of circumcising gentiles? To what does he make appeal? What is his bottom line decision?
- What is the point of the four prohibitions he did insist upon? Why these four items?
- What current “hot topics” are you personally having to work through in your church or small group? What help and practical pointers do you see in this passage for navigating more intense discussion on our own current issues?

**Pray.**

Holy Spirit, help me to sort through issues that tend to get everyone up in arms — and when all is said and done, to see and reflect your heart in each one.

**Live.** Prayerfully identify any ways in which you may have made following Jesus more difficult for yourself or others than it need be.

## 5) Great joy throughout the church

**Read.** Acts 15:30-35 NLT

The messengers went at once to Antioch, where they called a general meeting of the believers and delivered the letter. And there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.

Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke at length to the believers, encouraging and strengthening their faith. They stayed for a while, and then the believers sent them back to the church in Jerusalem with a blessing of peace. <sup>[34]</sup> *But Silas decided to remain there.]*\* Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch. They and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord there.

\* Most scholars regard verse 34 as a later addition by well-meaning scribes'

**Think.**

- What effect did the letter have on gentile believers?
- What did Judas and Silas do? What impact did they have?
- The church has just weathered a major storm of debate, and seems to be all the stronger for it. What one key lesson have you learned this week about conflict resolution? In which areas of life (family, work, church, neighborhood) do you tend to experience conflict most frequently? In what specific ways can you begin applying lessons you’ve learned from Acts 15 to real life situations you may be facing?
- If time permits, read Galatians 2:1-21 for additional insights from Paul’s perspective of this whole debate in Acts 15. How does Galatians 2 add to your understanding of the events in Acts 15?

**Pray.**

Lord, even in conflict, let me be a source of strength and encouragement to others as we work through the harder stuff of life.

**Live.**

Have that conversation you’ve been avoiding due to fear of conflict.