

## **Essential Choices: Unity over Dissension**

Acts 6:1-7; 11:1-18; 15:1-35, 36-41; John 17:20-23

*Getting to Yes* is a classic book on *negotiation*. Since its original publication nearly 40 years ago, the book has been a perennial best-seller.

It is based on the work of the Harvard Negotiation Project, an initiative to train lawyers, diplomats, business executives, labor leaders, educators, and families in non-adversarial bargaining.

Updated and revised over the years, *Getting to Yes* offers a step-by-step strategy for negotiating personal, professional, and international disputes.

The authors advocate collaborative, back-and-forth communication to distinguish between felt needs that are *firm* and those that are *flexible*, so that both sides can shape a wise and durable agreement that meets the legitimate concerns of both parties to the extent possible and takes the interests of the wider community into account.

*Getting to Yes* recognizes that negotiation is a fact of life. People have different needs—and differing points of view. Few of us readily accept decisions dictated by someone else. We want to participate in decisions that affect us, and we do this, at times, by negotiation.

So . . .

if you're a kid, and want your parents to get you a dog, read *Getting to Yes*  
If you're an employee, and want a raise, read *Getting to Yes*.  
If you're tangled up with someone in the church, read *Getting to Yes*

*And* look at how the apostles in the book of *Acts*, dealt with "complaints" and "sharp disagreement" and "dissension" to protect the unity and witness of the Church.

The apostles not only applied the best of human wisdom to disputes as they arose in the early church; they had a far greater resource in the person of the Holy Spirit—the direct, personal, presence of God within and among them.

This morning we're going to observe how the NT apostles in the face of an intractable, centuries-long dispute, got to "Yes!"

To provide background for this, it is essential to know how important unity is to Jesus. In his last extended teaching to his disciples before his death, recorded in John 14-17, Jesus did two things to prepare the Church for unity. He prayed for the apostles.

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one (John 17:11).

And Jesus prayed for us.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me . . . (John 17:20-23).

At the same time, Jesus also promised the Holy Spirit, who would *help* us to *be* one.

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:25-26, ESV)

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, . . . he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:7,13-14)

This teaching accomplished two things for the apostles. It convinced them that unity in the Church is absolutely essential; and they would be given the Holy Spirit, the Helper they would need, to successfully choose **unity over dissension**.

We see them making this choice three times in Acts: in Acts 6 when *complaints* arose over the daily distribution of food; in Acts 15 to resolve *dissension* over the place of Gentiles in the Church; and also in Acts 15, when Paul and Barnabas had a *sharp disagreement*.

This morning we're going to look at the most *intense* of these three conflicts, the deep, bitter, long-standing hostility between Jews and Gentiles as it erupted in the early church over the question of whether Gentile believers had to comply with Jewish Law.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the event that precipitated this dissension. When the disciples fled persecution in Jerusalem, they traveled as far as Antioch, sharing the Gospel with Jews and Gentiles. When a great number believed and turned to Jesus, the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to be pastor of this mixed church of Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11.19-21).

A year later, the Holy Spirit sent Barnabas and Paul even further into Gentile territory to preach the Gospel with the outcome of more churches, also mixed groups of Jews and Gentiles.

Now the expanding church had a dilemma that flared into open conflict when Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch. If you have your Bible—or a Bible app on your phone—turn to Acts 15, starting with verse 1.

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "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.

Wisely, Paul and Barnabas referred this thorny issue to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for an authoritative judgment.

As a sidebar to the message, this is why it is wise for any local church to have what our Hispanic brothers and sisters in South Florida call "a covering," by which they mean, a wider church family with ultimate authority over local expressions of the church—as a "safety net" (so to speak) for disputes and difficulties such as this.

When the appeal from Antioch came to Jerusalem, the apostles and elders, in turn, also acted with wisdom; they convened a council of church leaders

[who, in verses 6-7] met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them . . .

In describing the scene, Luke reports the decisive impact of three speeches: the first by Peter, the second by Barnabas and Paul, and the third by James, the brother of Jesus, all of which led to a resolution that the apostles and elders summed up in this revealing phrase in verse 28.

“It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”

In that council, the apostles and elders achieved a church-changing breakthrough in a racial conflict that has stymied national leaders and diplomats through the centuries.

They were able to do this because they had help of the Holy Spirit—*as do we*, whenever we strive for **unity over dissension**.

We’re going to look at each of these speeches, in turn, to see how the Holy Spirit helped the council to resolve dissension.

**1.** First, Peter tells about the **direct communication** of the Holy Spirit.

He recalls the time, recorded in Acts 10, when he had a vision—a sheet coming down from heaven, filled with all kinds of animals and birds and reptiles, and a voice that said: “Rise, Peter, kill and eat.” In the vision, Peter objected, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” Peter’s response was exactly what a good Jew would say. The vision was repeated three times and Peter woke up, perplexed. Just then a message came from Cornelius, a Roman soldier, a Gentile, saying that an angel had told him to invite Peter to his house to hear what Peter had to say—again, something a law-abiding Jew would not do. But, thinking of the vision, Peter went, and preached the Gospel to Cornelius and his family. While he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit descended on everyone, on the whole household of Gentiles, just as on the day of Pentecost.

At the council, Peter reminds the apostles and elders of this emphatic communication by the Holy Spirit—verses 7-11.

“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

By a vision, and the direct action of pouring out the Holy Spirit on Gentiles, Peter declared, the *Holy Spirit has already settled this question*.

Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to lead the disciples into all truth, and the Holy Spirit, by this **direct communication** and action, revealed this truth to Peter and the early Church.

**2.** The second ones to speak were Barnabas and Paul, in verse 12

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

I would describe this as the **visible work** of the Holy Spirit, granting signs and wonders through the apostles Paul and Barnabas, as they traveled from city to city preaching the gospel to Jews *and* Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas were not tooting their own horn. They had no capacity, in themselves, to do miracles. Signs and wonders could come only by the Holy Spirit as confirmation of the impact of the Gospel among both Jews and Gentiles.

A book that helps me understand the point that Barnabas and Paul are making in their speech is titled *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby.

Blackaby contends that in seeking direction from God, we must not decide what we want to do, and ask God to bless this. Instead, we find out what God wants to do, and join him in what *he* is doing! As we nurture a deep, personal relationship with Jesus, he will reveal *his* plans and purposes to us—by the Holy Spirit.

When we listen, we will *hear* what the Spirit is saying.  
 When we pay attention, we will see what the Spirit is doing.  
 Then we can partner with God in what he has *already* started.  
 And when we join God in what *he* wants to do,  
 God will accomplish through us things that only *he* can do.

In their speech, Barnabas and Paul are saying to the gathering.  
 This is what Spirit of God is doing.  
 He is proclaiming the gospel to Gentiles.  
 They are receiving Christ as Savior  
 The Holy Spirit is confirming this by signs and wonders.  
 We need to be doing what God, by the Holy Spirit, is already doing!

There are times, by the **visible work** of the Spirit,  
 that we can see what the Spirit is doing among us,  
 and that gives direction as we work through the tangles we encounter.

**3.** Finally, James, the earthly brother of Jesus and also an apostle,  
 stands to speak, in verses 13-15, to describe the **enduring revelation**  
 and apply the **characteristic wisdom** of the Holy Spirit.

“Brothers,” [James] said, “listen to me. Simon has described to us how  
 God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.  
 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written . . .

James goes on to quote the prophet Amos (Amos 9:11-12)  
 as one of many OT references that describe God’s intention  
 to bring Gentiles into his worldwide plan of salvation.

From the very beginning of salvation history,  
 the first time God spoke to Abraham, God promised:

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:3)

And at the culmination of salvation history—in Jesus!—  
 as understood and interpreted in the NT, the apostle Paul said:  
 in Ephesians 2:13-16

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought  
 near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us  
 both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by  
 abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he  
 might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making

peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

James quotes Scripture—the *enduring revelation* of the Holy Spirit—as the foundation for all the wisdom we apply in conflict.

Then in his summary speech, he goes a step further to apply the *characteristic wisdom* of the Holy Spirit to the dispute—wisdom that he describes in the NT book by his name, in James 3:17-18, as “wisdom from above”—that is, insights given by the Holy Spirit in accord with the character of God.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

In his speech James does two things:

First, he takes a strong stand for the truth of salvation by grace, based on the *enduring revelation* of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. And, second, by the *characteristic wisdom* of the Holy Spirit, he proposes a doable way for Jews and Gentiles to associate in the Church, specifically, to ask Gentiles to practice sexual purity and to respect the food preferences of conservative Jewish disciples.

In all three speeches, the apostles built their rationale with the help of the Holy Spirit: for Peter, the **direct communication** of the Spirit; for Barnabas and Paul, the **visible work** of the Holy Spirit; for James, the **enduring revelation** and **characteristic wisdom** of the Spirit.

There is much to be said, amid disputes and dissension, for applying the best *human* insights and practices for managing conflict, such as the ones in *Getting to Yes*.

- to take prompt action to resolve disagreements
- to interact with respect and courtesy
- to listen attentively to discern the underlying interests of all parties
- to propose ways to meet the needs of all parties to the extent possible.

Still, *above and beyond* the best human insights, we have the help of the Holy Spirit:

his **enduring revelation** in Scripture,  
his **visible work** in our midst,  
at times, his **direct communication**  
and always, his **characteristic wisdom**;

so that, when we encounter conflict,  
we **can** work our way through to a resolution  
that "seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

One of my favorite verses in the New Testament is 2 Corinthians 1:20.

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in  
Christ. And through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

Jesus calls us to unity.

He has prayed for us; he is praying for us, even now in heaven.

He has given us the Holy Spirit to help us.

He has provided helpful human insights and counsel.

We have **all we need** to strive wisely and successfully,  
as the early church did, to protect the unity of the church.

All of this is a *guaranteed* "**Yes**" in Christ Jesus!

All that remains for us is to say, "**Amen! Let's do it!**"

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