



Session 4: Dealing with Differences – Leader’s Notes

This session explores how the early church handled problems and conflicts. Its purpose is to identify healthy ways to deal with differences while supporting the community’s call to spread the good news about Jesus.

Sample responses to questions based on Acts

1. What situations prompt serious discussion among Christians?

The first situation that prompts discussion is the fairness of the food distribution to widows; there’s inequity between the Greek and Hebrew widows.

Teaching about salvation, both in practice and word, is a source of conflict that stirs debate among Christian leaders. Discussions center on obedience to the law of Moses, including circumcision, as well as adherence to customs and traditions.

Choosing missionary partners sparks conflict and discussion.

2. How do Christian leaders recognize and solve problems?

Problems are brought to the attention of the leadership. They solve the problems by discussing topics and coming to an agreement.

In the case of the food distribution, a plan is developed and executed. In the situation concerning obedience to the law, salvation by grace is emphasized as paramount. Peter testifies to God’s work in the Gentiles and clarifies that the Holy Spirit lives in the Gentiles, who aren’t circumcised, not just the Jews who are circumcised – meaning that circumcision isn’t a requirement to become a Christian.

Yet, many leaders want to continue the traditions and customs because of the past dedication to the law. They’re concerned that doing away with certain practices may lead to confusion and offend adherents to traditions. To solve this problem, a letter is written specifying the basic, abbreviated rules everyone agrees to follow.

Problems resurface when Paul visits those in the middle of purification rites; Paul opts to comply with the custom even though it’s not required from the new believer’s point of view.



3. Describe times when Christians seem to “agree to disagree” and part ways. How does parting ways affect the Christian community?

Paul disagrees with Barnabas about the worthiness of Mark for a missionary journey. They agree to disagree on this matter. As a result, Paul takes Silas on his journey while Barnabas takes Mark. Parting ways allows them to reach more people with the good news, fueling growth of the community.

4. What faith traditions cause friction among Christians and Christian communities?

In the early Christian community, there are conflicts surrounding food and food preparation practices. Faith traditions that people may disagree about today include baptism, keeping of the Sabbath day (which day?), and medical intervention.

Sample responses to questions based on Acts and personal experiences

1. What situations prompt disagreements among Christians today – in the local community or the broader Christian community?

There are many areas of disagreement among Christians. Some that come to mind include school choice (public school, private school, or homeschool); the rights of sexual minorities; the rights of immigrants, particularly those who have entered the country without proper documentation; whether to expend resources on shoring up the church or doing outreach (some may see these as mutually exclusive or feel that resources allow focus on just one element).

2. What happens to problems you see? Are they dealt with and resolved quickly, do they fester and worsen, or do they resolve themselves without intervention?

Very often, problems aren't addressed quickly so they worsen. Looking at the story of the problem resolution and resurfacing with Paul, though, I can see that some problems seem to be resolved, only to be brought up again by a different group.



Also, sometimes, we think problems are resolved without intervention, as discussions stop. But often, the problems are hidden where they fester and become more difficult to deal with.

In some cases, problems are dealt with quickly and don't cause disruption or challenges later. For example, a decision on how to move forward is made, a person is confronted, etc.

3. How do you deal with differences and disagreements with other Christians? What are positive and negative aspects of your approaches? How might you change how you or others handle conflict?

Sometimes I keep quiet about my disagreement if I don't think I can bring the problem to resolution or I believe others won't accept or hear my point of view. At other times (though less frequently now), I may say something and realize later that my concerns were irrelevant or focused on the wrong aspect of a problem.

I've learned to speak up when it's appropriate, when I have direct involvement with an issue, and when the topic is worthy of pursuing like mindedness. For example, I recently gave a book to someone who works with small groups; the resource offers approaches she may not have considered otherwise. This situation wasn't an active conflict but one in which we differed. She received the book and applied just one idea from the book with excellent results. In fact, I was surprised that she dug up this jewel that I had missed – even though I'd read the book twice!

What I've learned from this experience is that it makes sense to trust people with whom I may disagree, recognize that their approaches may make sense in certain environments, and collaborate for the best possible outcomes, rather than saying one way is bad and another good without qualification. This way of handling conflict can enable everyone to learn and improve the ministry.

4. What role does tradition and culture play in disagreements?

Tradition and culture play a significant but often unrecognized role in disagreements. We may be influenced by church tradition or western culture or regional culture. It's a worthy challenge to dissect a disagreement and determine whether its source centers on Christian beliefs or cultural preferences.



5. How can remembering core beliefs benefit the Christian community?

Remembering core beliefs reinforces our common purpose. This commonality shows us that even though we disagree, our disagreements don't change our salvation through grace. It can also show us that different customs may help us reach people for Christ.
