

## Finding the right path in ethical decision making

1. Prepare to **respond** to life's circumstances.
2. Start with the **end** (character & community) in mind.
3. God's Spirit is a **compass** more than a road map.
4. Stay in your **lane** to reach the goal.

*The ethical path is not always consensual, certain, or clear for two reasons.*

1. We often face competing and conflicting Biblical values.
2. We are influenced by competing and conflicting personal values (**fear & love**).

## False beliefs lead to powerful FEARS

1. We fear that differences will lead to divisions, and conflict will lead to combat. Neither of which we believe we can handle.

So we:

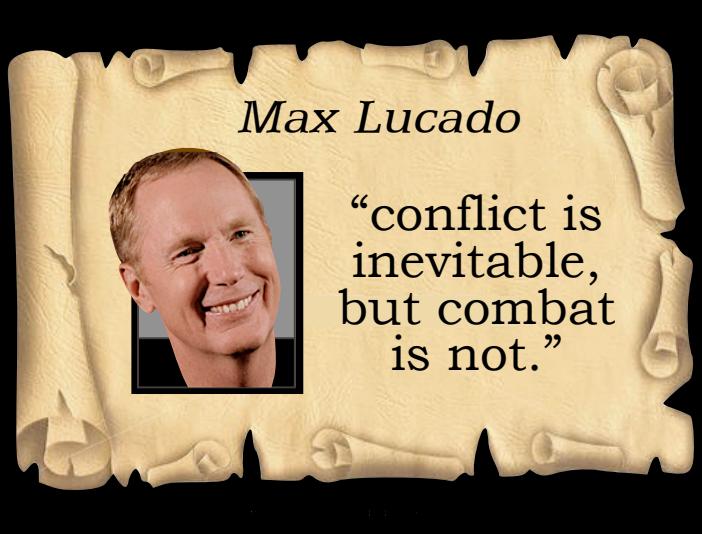
- shut down, shut up, cop out, whine & worry



or we:

- double down, lawyer up, and fight to the death to save our image.

*In both cases we fail to show up to minister as the Body of Christ.*



## Acts 15

"<sup>1</sup> And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." . . . <sup>6</sup> And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter."

1. Competing Biblical values exist and they present opportunities for either a loving or a fearful **response**.

### Examples:

- **Rahab?** truth telling / saving Israeli spies
- **Biblical covenants?** Law / Grace, Moses / Jesus
- **disobedient disciples?** forbearance / discipline
- **material poverty?** short term relief / long term reform

## How did the early church respond?

"<sup>7</sup> And after there had been **much debate**, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, **you know** that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, **bore witness** to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; <sup>9</sup> and He **made no distinction** between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore **why** do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> But **we believe** that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are. <sup>12</sup> And all the multitude kept silent, and they were **listening** to Barnabas and Paul as they were **relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles**. . . . <sup>15</sup> And with this the words of the Prophets agree, **just as it is written**, . . ."

2. Wisdom comes through **servant leaders in communion** - with the Holy Spirit & the Body of Christ.

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2. We fear that debate will mean winners and losers, those who are right and those who are wrong. We do not believe we can be wrong and still be loved and respected.

**Observation #1** - There is no mention of prayer for revelation, a Biblical rule (proof text) for guidance, or turning to a strong-man leader for all the answers.

**Observation #2** - There is an appeal to both general & special revelation.

### GENERAL REVELATION

Reasonable mind



Science

### SPECIAL REVELATION

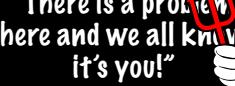
Renewed mind



Scripture

**Observation #3** - The real conflict is not with those who differ with us but with the challenge of God's imperfect people finding wisdom within an imperfect world.

"There is a problem here and we all know it's you!"



"You got that half right!"

**Observation #3** - The real conflict is not with those who differ with us but with the challenge of God's imperfect people finding wisdom within an imperfect world.

"Our challenge here is to set our pride aside & work together to resolve it to the glory of God."

"To do that I must see you as a partner and not as a problem."

We must attack the problem



not one another!

**Observation #4** We too often seek to be "in the right" as opposed to "in the light."

Prosecutors  
Judges  
Police  
Pastors  
Nations  
Scientists  
Husbands  
Politicians  
Churches  
Parents  
Psychiatrists  
Plato



"We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light."

**Observation #5** Be careful when you claim to have heard directly from God because that shuts down all dialogue or drives the stakes in any debate way up.

"God told me . . .!"

**What about:**

"seeing as in a mirror dimly"  
"being subject to the prophets"  
"seeming good"  
"the Body of Christ"  
"reasoning together"

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3. We fear that we may make the wrong choice and be taken out of the game. We believe that God can only use those who get it right.

<sup>19</sup> Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, <sup>20</sup> but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath." <sup>22</sup> Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send . . . <sup>25</sup> it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you . . . <sup>28</sup> For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: <sup>29</sup> that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

**3. Decisions need not always be certain** - there is room for humility & flexibility.

**The means are just as important as the ends** - consensus, cultural sensitivity, & courageous faith.

### 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2

"Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone;"

### Philippians 2:25-26

"But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier,"

### 1 Corinthians 16:3-4

"And when I arrive, whomever you may approve, I shall send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me."

### Acts 6:2-4

"And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom,'"

### Much of divine wisdom is not rule dictated but principle guided.

- 1. Marriage** — *1 Cor. 7:39* "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord."
- 2. Giving** — *2 Cor. 8:13* "For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality"
- 3. Sabbath** — *Rom. 14:5* "One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind."

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- We fear that we may make the wrong choice and be taken out of the game. We believe that God can only use those who get it right.
- We fear that unresolved ideological conflicts destroy loving relationships. We believe that the kingdom is all about being right.**

<sup>36</sup> And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." <sup>37</sup> And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. <sup>38</sup> But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. <sup>39</sup> And **there arose such a sharp disagreement** that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. <sup>40</sup> But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord."

**4. When there is no consensus, creative compromise of personal convictions without yielding on Kingdom values is a part of wisdom.**

### Some lessons from Acts 15

- Conflicts provide and opportunity for a response - growth & witness.
- Wisdom comes through servant leaders in communion with the Spirit and the Body of Christ.
- Decisions need not always be certain.
- Creative compromise is sometimes wise and necessary.

### Closing thoughts

- Don't confuse a necessary culture war with the world and an unnecessary civil war within the church.
- Welcome conflicting values as an opportunity to grow in wisdom and witness to the world.
- Have your say without demanding your way.
- Listen, question, seek trusted leader's advice, work for consensus, and act in good faith.
- Be a peace seeker and a peace maker.
- Lighten up. God can and often has to use our imperfect decisions.