

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Just for outline purposes, if you're tracing along the structure of the Book of Acts, we're in the fourth major section of Acts, beginning with "The Birth of the Church," Acts 1–5. Then chapter 6:1 through about 9:29, "Persecution Leads to Expansion." Then Acts 9:30 through chapter 12, "The Acts of Peter, and the Beginnings of Gentile Christianity." Rather structured and sort of bookish. Nothing particularly thrilling in these titles, but if you're reading along in a book of the Bible it helps to at least keep some kind of flow and direction going. Then Acts 13 through 15 is the fourth section, "The First Missionary Journey and the Jerusalem Conference." Tonight we're in the second part of that fourth section—"The Jerusalem Conference," a real conflict in the church.

That causes us to look at the theme of the biblical answer to the resolution of conflict. How early Christians went about dealing with their conflict. It's somewhat interesting to me to be approaching this particular topic on the eve of a very important church gathering in our own family, the Assemblies of God. Beginning tomorrow, all of our elders are going to be meeting in Springfield, Missouri, to discuss the matter of the discipline of Jimmy Swaggart, one of the ministers of the Assemblies of God whose reputation and fame, of course, is world renown. There are probably two clear issues that are being dealt with by that group which have caused division among some of those within the body of the Assemblies of God. One has to do with the actual rehabilitation terms. As to whether or not the rehabilitation that is given to him will be consistent with the rehabilitation that has been given to every other minister who had been guilty of the same offense or whether he will be treated in a special category because of mitigating

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

circumstances. The second issue that many of you would not be aware of is a by-law one. That is, who has final say—the local district or the General Council. The Assemblies of God is a network of sovereign local churches, and also sovereign districts. When there is a dispute between one of our fifty-seven District Councils and the General Council, it's sort of like reading the history of 1861 to 1865 in the United States—is it a matter of Federalism or is it a matter of state rights? Which body ultimately prevails?

Those are the issues being decided in the event—the Louisiana recommendation is that his pulpit ministry only be curtailed three months. If that is not bought by the General Council, then it becomes a jurisdictional dispute. Our leadership is in prayer, much the same way as the Early Church prayed in regard to their leadership when they faced a very severe conflict that we find in Acts 15. In fact, I would agree that the conflict we're dealing with in Acts 15 was far more severe in its impact upon the Early Church than the conflict the Assemblies of God is dealing with right now. For one thing, the conflict certainly involved the spiritual well-being of far more people in the church. This conflict basically involves one person and how the church is going to go about its discipline. But in the Jerusalem church conference, they're dealing with an issue that was essential to the membership of a vast body of the church. That conference, if it had a different result, could have disenfranchised—in effect—all of those who had come to faith in Christ who were not culturally Jewish. It was a monumental conference. Although its effects are not as fresh to us because they're two thousand years old, nevertheless, the issues at the time were exceedingly real and the impact of that conference is still being lived out in us today. That's why most of us Gentiles consider ourselves as part of the family of God and heirs to the Old Testament covenant that was made to Abraham and part of the community of greater Israel through faith. It was a result of the resolution that came out of this important council.

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

Sometimes we look in an idealized way at the Early Church and we're guilty of saying things like, "I wish I could go back and be part of the Early Church." I too have that nostalgic frame. I would like to go back to those days. However, in going back to them, we must remember that the Early Church was very, very similar to the contemporary church. That it did not consist of any perfect people, and that, in fact, from church to church, the quality of spiritual life greatly varied. From the character of an Ephesian church, which appeared to be grounded deeply in the Word and very stable, to ongoing to the charismatic mania character of the Corinthian church, which appeared to be chasing the latest fad and personality. Wide degrees of differences. Even within the most mature church, the oldest church, the founding church—the church in Jerusalem—there could be from time to time grave problems. This is the second grave problem that the Jerusalem church faced. The first one being, in Acts 6, a dispute on how to care for the social needs of Hellenistic or Greek-speaking widows. The church came to absolute stymie until it was able to deal with that conflict. Once it dealt successfully with the conflict, then we read that the church went on and multiplied.

Here again, the church is at a point where it must deal with its problems. That's a lot like personal life, isn't it? If we let problems go on indefinitely without resolving them, then we get stuck and we cannot grow past that problem because we're continually rehearsing and rehashing the problem that we're in. Sooner or later, if there's to be growth, if it's in a church or in us as an individual or within a family relationship, there must be at some point a resolution to that problem. And if there is not, then either the church or the individual or the family is going to become unwound and undone and cease to be effective. Because if you do not deal with the problem, you cannot stay still forever. But if you deal with it successfully, then you can go on and get beyond it.

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

That's one of the reasons why, as I approach this meeting, I'm very encouraged, because I believe we're coming to grips with a very significant problem. I believe that there will be a successful resolution for the body of Christ, and that, ultimately, out of it will come a greater growth for the family of God within the Assemblies of God.

Conflicts must be resolved. We can't ignore them. We can't sweep them under the rug. We can't pretend like they don't exist. I think we do ourselves an injustice in the church of Jesus Christ if we try to pretend that the church is a place where people never get into quarrels with one another, never have disagreements with one another, and are always smiling and happy. That is not the case.

There are always underlying reasons for conflicts. I want to look, for just a moment, at the underlying reasons and the immediate reason for the particular conflict before us in Acts 15.

Things don't just suddenly happen. If, for example, you have a flash point of anger, generally behind that flash point there are things that build up, that trigger the flash. So in Acts 15, there is a triggering event which brings about the discussion of conflict. There are many years of accumulation of matters that not have been dealt with underlying the issue.

In fact, by the time we open the Scripture to Acts 15, we are in the year 49 A.D. The church is almost three decades old. If you look at what has happened in that period of time, you will see that, in the last fifteen years of those thirty years, there has been a dynamic missionary expansion of the church. The first fifteen years of the church, the growth was within the Jewish cultural sector. It was in Jerusalem and Judea. It was among people who were in close social ethic and language proximity to one another. Once we pass that early stage, however, we got into bringing the gospel to the Gentiles, first to Cornelius, then to Antioch. And now we have the first missionary journey, which has resulted in the establishment of churches in far-flung places.

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

The Jerusalem church has watched all this happen. Yet many within the Jerusalem church have not changed their perspectives of what God is doing among the Gentiles. In fact, we see almost a hesitance in the Jerusalem church to reach out and fulfill the Great Commission. The Lord had said to it, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). In Acts 1:8, He had said to them, “Go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost part of the world.” We found that the church in Jerusalem actually did not do that of their own freewill and volition. The way the gospel began to get to the uttermost parts of the world was as a result of the persecution that occurred from Stephen’s preaching, and the reason why Stephen was persecuted was because he spoke against the Law and this place, that is the temple. He was not persecuted simply for preaching the Resurrection. The apostles had preached the resurrection and they were not executed. But Stephen had read the implications of the Christian faith to his enculturated Jewish audience and said “If Christ has risen from the dead, why then are we still keeping the Law of Moses with religious devotion? It is not the basis anymore for salvation. And why are we participating in temple ordinances, animal sacrifices and priestly observances when Christ has set us free from the yoke that all of that has brought? Those were only a prototype to lead us to Christ.” (Acts 7). Stephen was beginning, like the Book of Hebrews, to read out the implications of the Christian faith.

There were many within the Jerusalem church that did not see that. In fact, we begin to see two groups of people that should immediately raise our antenna. Priests come in, in Acts 6:7. And in Acts 15:5, we find that Pharisees come into the church. When you’ve got a priestly group that is still participating in temple worship, and you’ve got the Pharisees, with all the legalism that is involved in Pharisaism, you are going to potentially have them carry into their Christian life some of their pre-Christian ideas.

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

This, of course, is always a struggle in the church. When I have led a new members class, one of the things we always deal with is people coming from various traditions or non-Christian backgrounds; we all bring with us our preset ideas and we're trying to form community and sometimes it's not easy because we carry so many different perspectives with us.

When you get a highly legalistic emphasis like the Pharisees had, you've got that jammed into the church and, of course, they're going to be backing a party that looks somewhat doubtful about all these non-Jewish people, these Gentiles, coming into the church.

So the net result of all this is that the Jerusalem church never had a missionary conference, never once in its history had it had a missionary conference. And it never sent anyone out to do missionary work. The only involvement the Jerusalem church had in missions was when they heard that something was going on somewhere else, started by somebody else, and then said, "We ought to send somebody to look it over." But never within its own life did it originate a movement that said, "God's heart beats for the whole world and we need to be involved. Get out your faith promises. Get your people involved in volunteering for missions. Let's carry this good news everywhere." They had not done that.

By the way, that's not to say that the Jerusalem church wasn't a great church. It's just to say that, in that area, they had a severe weakness and limitation and that long underlying problem with the Jerusalem church is building up this issue now which we face in Acts 15. Sooner or later, we're going to have to deal with that kind of thing, the long-range spirit of the place.

I want to note, as a kind of counterbalance, the Jerusalem church had some good things going for it. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. They had the greatest leaders any church could ever have. How would you like to be a part of a church that had twelve pastors like Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas and the others? A great collection of pastors and

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

leaders. They had supernatural signs and wonders aplenty. Phenomenal events occurring, such as the shadow landing on people and their being healed. They had tremendous love for one another, so much so that they sold everything they had and lived in common. They were tested in trial.

They had been through the fire of persecution and they had stood the test. They were a praying church. We find occasions, again and again, in those early chapters of Acts reflecting how much the Jerusalem church prayed. Yet with all those things, they still had a deficiency.

That ought not to surprise us. As you look around, any church that you're going to be a part of, you're going to choose to be a part of, because you identify with that church's strengths more than you criticize its weaknesses. But you're also going to find that any church is going to have some weakness or need or some area which you feel, "If we could only get this area up." That's biblical. You are not going to find the perfect church on earth. So the choice is which one you can most identify with. Can you, then, be a contributing part of correcting any perceived deficiency (biblical deficiency, for example)? I want to say "biblical deficiency" because some deficiencies aren't really spiritual deficiencies. They're just matters of opinion.

But here in the Jerusalem church there was a clear deficiency. The church had not explicitly and voluntarily sought to fulfill the Great Commission. That's the underlying problem. That leads to the immediate problem, which is in 15:1, "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: '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 [No small argument here. Notice: "sharp dispute and debate"]. 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. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed along with other believers to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders and they reported everything that God had done through them” (Acts 15:1–4, NIV).

The immediate cause is that some of the people in Judea, who later in the Scriptures are called Judaizers, leave their safe base in Judea. They had not themselves been missionaries. There is a distinction between those who carry the gospel to an area where the gospel has not been there and establish a church, and those traveling ministers who come later who never build the work but who now come to somehow inform the saints of a doctrine or a United States idea which is non-essential to the well-being of that church, but who come in and polarize the community of believers.

That happens all the time. America —because we’re so affluent—not only sends out the genuine missionaries to establish the church of Jesus Christ, but we also send out all the “one-issue” people. And all the “new wave” people. And all the “fad people,” who themselves have never lent in starting the church of Jesus Christ from scratch, who are wonderful for going in and confusing the saints and setting them against one another in doctrine. We see that all over the world today. It’s a tragedy when it happens.

Here are the Judaizers. They have had no hand in planting the church in Antioch, no hand in the missionary journeys. But they now take it upon themselves to more fully inform and Christianize these people who are already Christians, to lead them into a deeper life. Which in their

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

vernacular was “be circumcised.” That was the mark of Jewishness, after all. It was in the male’s sexuality that God had cut His covenant. The very idea in the Bible of a covenant means “to cut.” And that making of a covenant with Abraham had been expressed through the physical act of circumcision. They are saying that, in order to be part of the community of faith, one must have something physical to distinguish them, and that is the mark in their sexual organ—circumcision. What is the condition of becoming a believer? Is it some religious act? Is it some liturgical act? Is it some mandate of the law? The issue is joined here. This greatly disturbs the believers at Antioch. There are those who, in today’s church world, say that what we really have in the New Testament is an expression of the sovereignty of the local church. However, what we see in Acts is the local churches linked up with one another. Thus, when there was a problem in one church, it affected the whole. So the one church at Antioch sends delegates to the Jerusalem church to discuss this matter and to deliberate on a policy that will not simply be effective at Antioch, but also at Jerusalem, and be effective everywhere the churches are planted. It’s not simply, in the Early Church, a matter of this local church here electing its own leaders and doing its own thing, and this little church over here electing its own leaders and doing its thing, and this big church having its elders and doing its thing. The churches have no interconnection with one another. That’s not what’s presented to us in Acts. The churches had interconnection with one another. We’ve looked at the underlying issues and every problem does have underlying issues. What are the long-range issues, the underlying issues, the broad issues? Then what’s the triggering event that flushes all these things out into the open and makes you deal with the problem? Generally, we deal with problems when we become so uncomfortable we’d rather deal with a problem than run from it. I am the last person in the world to deal with a problem. If I can stay away, I will try to wait it out as long as I possibly can. Some are not like that. You’re quick on the trigger and

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

ready to draw blood right away on an issue. But I don't want to deal with it. Maybe I can wait it out. But finally, when our pain, our angst, becomes so great that we'd rather deal with the problem than continue to live with the pain, then we start getting resolution of what we're dealing with.

How is a church problem solved? I would suggest that there are some things that are vital ingredients here.

#### **I. The problem, if it's going to be solved, must be clearly defined.**

What is the problem? The problem is defined as an issue in verse 5, "Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses'" (NIV). Not "or"—"both." The males are to be circumcised and all are to keep the law of Moses, which means, keep the law of Moses in all of its binding effects upon diet, custom, time and habit. It's to become fully, culturally Jewish.

Unless one does that, unless one becomes Jewish, he cannot become Christian. So there is kind of a threshold issue here. An issue before the issue of being saved—you can't be saved unless you become a Jew first. Become a Jew and then be saved.

At least by stating the issue clearly, everyone knows what's involved. This is why rumors are such an insufficient way of dealing with problems. Rumor never gets at what the real issue is. Rumor simply chases things around in a very vague sense. Or talking around issues rather than dealing with them directly. But this doesn't really ultimately solve the problem unless it's a very minor problem that can be solved by politeness. What is the issue? Here it's dealt with.

#### **II. The second thing that occurs after the issue is defined is that there is a full and open discussion.**

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

The text says “apostles and elders.” This, by the way, was an issue that did not involve all the membership of the church. It’s obvious that the church of Jerusalem was so big it could not all fit in one assembly. So what we have is the spiritual leadership of the church. The text in verse 7 says, “After much discussion.” In other words, everyone who had an interest in what was going on was free to share from their heart. I think, sometimes, the reason why we do not get good resolution on conflicts is that we prematurely preempt someone’s input. We look at what they’re saying and say, “That’s stupid!” When you tell someone that what they’re saying is stupid, what do they do? Clam up! And their anger goes inward. They still have their opinions, but they’re now not going to talk about their opinion with you because you think they’re stupid. I’m sure I’ve been guilty of doing that very thing to people, inferring.

You also inhibit discussion when you make a personal attack against someone. You don’t deal with the issue. Instead you deal with the personality. “The problem with you is...” It can become a name-calling event real quick. We cut off discussion when we attack personalities. It’s really critical, if we’re going to get resolution, that we really deal with the issues and all the issues get laid on the table. We take time to deal with them. It’s painful. It’s painful to take that kind of time to deal with issues. Sometimes there are no shortcuts.

The Jerusalem church is a church council: no utterances of tongues and interpretations. There are no prophetic words in the deliberative body. In fact, this is a rule of the Assemblies of God in foreign fields—all business meetings automatically are to exclude, in the course of deliberation, the utterance of tongues with interpretation and prophecy. What happens then is that groups which have differing opinions will begin prophesying against one another. Instead of doing the hard work of arguing from the Scripture, someone immediately wants to get up and say, “Thus

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

sayeth the Lord!” How in the world do you argue with someone who says, “Thus sayeth the Lord!”?

There’s none of that in this council, but there is full discussion. We’re not told how long it took but given the fact that it was the kind of high level meeting it was, I’d assume it was days, many long hours and everybody that wanted to speak and needed to speak and contribute to this issue did; a full hearing.

If people are going to be part of the solution of the problem, then they must be part of the process of solving it. The church is not meant to be a dictatorial kind of group where one person—the minister or the head lay person or whatever—simply lays down God’s rule for everyone else.

We’re meant to be a community and when we have a problem that affects us all as a community, then we’re to come together and hear the word of Isaiah, “‘Come let us reason together,’ sayeth the Lord.” And not simply depend upon the personality to lay down doctrinal truth. Truth is not found in a majority vote. It’s not found in a scintillating personality. Truth is found by careful examination of God’s Word and applying that Word to the particular problem that we’re dealing with.

The third area where the church successfully went about resolving this conflict: They not only define the issue and have a full discussion, but the third thing they did was...

**III. They took the time to listen to people who had had a sense of the Lord’s genuine leading in their life.**

It wasn’t prophecy and it wasn’t tongues with interpretation. But they took time especially to listen to Peter and his recounting of his meeting with Cornelius, because that was the key moment. God was using that as a formative moment to help the church to later deal with the whole issue of what to do with all of the Gentiles. If it knew what to do with one Gentile, then it

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

would know what God thought of all the Gentiles. That first Gentile that was converted—how was he converted? Through some arm-twisting by an evangelist from Jerusalem? Through some wonderful act of an apostle? No, not at all. That person was sovereignly converted, the Holy Spirit fell upon him. They began to speak in other tongues simultaneous with their conversion. It was an act which only God could have originated. Therefore, it meant that if God had sovereignly saved them—who was the church to reject the salvation? That basically is what Peter is saying. He's giving his account as a godly person who had been thrust out in the issue by the Lord, and he says, "I have something to contribute on this."

It's not by experience that they decided on the issue. But experience should be listened to. Sometimes in the Pentecostal arena of the church we have been accused by our brothers of solely relying on experience. The opposite to solely relying on experience is not having any experience at all, and using that non-experience as an excuse for your belief. Which also, then, if you base your belief on your non-experience, means your non-experience is of itself an experience and then you're basing your belief on your experience. Both are argued from experience, although one's argued from non-experience and the other from experience. Both are experiences.

The issue is not resolved by experience, but it is listened to and it is weighted as one of the important factors in the decision.

Of course, what was really helpful in conflict is that there had been people praying about that conflict. If we get into our conflicts of life and we have no sense of the Spirit's presence in our life, then we simply get into a human-locked situation in which we can't get a resolution because there is no Spirit of God breaking through in our consciousness. It's very important that there be people, in a decision such as this, who've really heard from the Lord.

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

By the way, it should be noted that Peter shares his experience, but, who's presiding over this church council? If Peter is the first primate of the church, does it strike you as strange that in the first time the church gathers for its first ecumenical conference, Peter is not presiding at all? James is presiding. He's the chairman of the meeting. Peter's one of the witnesses and his word is not even the final determinative word. It's James' word that reaches the consensus in the group.

#### **IV. The fourth step in resolving the conflict is to apply the Word.**

There had been much discussion. Peter shared his experience. And now James, the brother of the Lord, called "Old Camel Knees" (that was his nickname within Early Church tradition, because it was said he spent so much time in prayer that his knees had become leathery), speaks up. We know from reading his letter, "James," that he is kind of on the continuum between works and grace, and there is a little bit more of an emphasis on the fact that your Christian life should produce fruit. So perhaps up until this conference, the Judaizing party could have maybe considered James as leaning toward them. I don't know it for a fact, but it may have been a possibility. It made him an excellent moderator for a conference. If you are going to have a good resolution, you need to have someone presiding to keep an even hand on the situation, and not tilt their prejudices until the right time.

James now comes in, and what does he do? He takes a passage out of Acts 6, like a living piece of leaven, he grabs it and jams it into the present moment. He says, "Here, what we're discussing was foreseen by the prophets." "After this, I'll return and rebuild David's fallen tent" (Acts 15:16, NIV). "David's tent"... his kingdom had fallen. It'd so fallen down that royalty is in a carpenter's shop. That's how bad the tent of David had fallen. "Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it [Why is God going to restore this fallen tent of David, this kingdom of David?], that the

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

remnant of men may seek the Lord [His whole purpose is to reach out to the world], and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages” (Acts 15:16-18, NIV). James says, “Since the Word says ‘this is my judgment,’ we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (see Acts 15:19). So he takes the relevant part of the Word.

By the way, I’d like to note something. It is not necessarily the position who is able to quote the most Scripture that prevails in the Jerusalem conference. If you just took sheer quantity of Scripture, the quantity of Scripture was on the side of the Judaizers. They could pull out all the texts that say, “Be circumcised.” They could pull out all the texts that say, “Keep the Sabbath.” They could pull out all the texts on the dietary, kosher laws. They could pull out all that stuff from Leviticus and Deuteronomy, especially, and slap it on the crowd and have the weight of the quantity of Scripture. But it is not the bulk that counts. It’s if one reading is consistent in meaning through the Scripture and unites it all rather than divides it. Jesus says that the Scriptures can’t be broken. They can’t be set against themselves. So there is a theme that is coming through that in the Old Testament, God used these laws to build a covenant people, to shape them. By the way, the wisdom of that is seen in the fact that all the other nations that were contemporary to Israel had fallen from the scene. Who knows any more about the Philistines or the Hittites or others? They have been amalgamated into other cultures, and there’s not one of them that is a separate entity today in the world. They’ve worked through the bloodstream and religious fiber and cultural fiber of other people. The Jews alone have maintained their identity. How did they do that? Because God gave them a means of marking time—the Sabbath and Holy Days—a means of culture, a means of religious expression and liturgy that bound them together as an ethnic group. He did this because He wanted, through that ethnic group, to bring His

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

Scriptures and bring His Messiah. He wanted that cohesion to adhere until such a time as the Messiah would come forth. Then the cultural thing, which brought them together, could lapse. And the Lord, who is revealed through the family of Jacob, can then be worshipped, and a new identity cohere around Him in whom there is the truth and the Spirit of liberty rather than the spirit of obligation.

The weight, the quantity of Scripture, was on the side of the Judaizers. But the Spirit of the Scripture was on the side of James and the church. “The letter killeth,” as Paul says in Galatians, “but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6).

### **V. The fifth thing that is really important in resolving a conflict is to separate the major from the minor issues.**

In doing so, if at all possible, to save face, to let some people have their face saved. It is no good to simply win an argument and then have the person you win it from go away feeling that everything has been stripped from them.

There was something that especially bothered the position that had advocated the Judaizer view. That is, when they sat down at a table and things were set in front of them that had been offered to idols, had been strangled, or were served rare and bloody—that was offensive. That would be as offensive to them as possibly most of us sitting down at a table and someone showing up with nothing on their plate but an eyeball of a cow. Most of us would have great difficulty in eating if we saw this eyeball rolling around on a plate. Since one of the important ingredients of the early Christian church was table fellowship—having communion with one another, not going to Coco’s, but taking the time to make a meal at the house and spending hours together and culminating that meal with communion—how in the world can you have table fellowship when you’re retching at your stomach from the terrible dietary tastes of the person you’re having

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

fellowship with? The whole idea of eating something strangled, something bloody, something offered to idols, was offensive and it broke fellowship.

So the church said, “Yes, it is by grace we are saved through faith, but let us promulgate a rule which says the Gentiles, not as a condition of their salvation but as a matter of courtesy and keeping fellowship among us, will abstain from these things. And also immorality—immorality being the one permanent thing, not a cultural thing, but a permanent thing. Since with many of the Gentiles immorality was a part of eating feasts as well, it would be natural that it was associated with matters of food.

Can you imagine the Early Church splitting over the issue of eating strangled things? We always must learn what issues are major and what issues are minor, and what we can do to agree on the basics and what we agree on is not a basic to Christian faith.

We simply say there are issues which bind us all as Christians, and whom Christ receives, let not the church reject. The church ought never to draw its circle smaller than the circle Jesus has drawn. If Christ has included you, the church includes you. Neither are we to draw the circle larger than Christ has drawn it. Same size. Draw the circle to the size Christ has drawn it. If there are distinctives, mark them as distinctives which are held by us because of biblical reasons, but they are in a different category from those things which are commonly believed by all believers. We can contend for those distinctives, but we don't have to be contentious about them.

So there was some satisfaction here. There was an attempt to preserve fellowship and save face. They make a distinction between the major issues—salvation by grace—and the minor issues—strangled meat, blood, pollution of idols. And, of course, they inserted that immorality part because that was a problem with the Gentiles that needed correction.

**VI. Then the sixth step to resolving the conflict was to clearly communicate the decision.**

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

What good does it do to arrive at a decision and nobody know what it is, if it's not commonly understood by everyone? So when the decision is fashioned, they then send a letter, and they specifically outline in the letter what has been decided. Then backing up the letter, in addition to Paul and Barnabas, who are to take the letter to the churches that are Gentile in origin, they send two of their own from Jerusalem to also come along and explain the spirit of the Jerusalem church, to corroborate the written letter by the living word and bring encouragement to the church. It's very important to have clear communication in the resolution of a conflict.

**VII. Even when you've got it resolved, there are still going to be some people that are unhappy.**

That is going to be the case all through the rest of the New Testament. When you open Paul's letters, you'll find him dealing, time and again, with this group called the Judaizers, who want to add works to faith and who find it uncomfortable to have a doctrine proclaimed by grace through faith. They are the party that rejected the Jerusalem council decision and continually agitated to overturn it, and who advocated circumcision and the keeping of the law of Moses. Not everybody will always be happy as the result of the decision. But basically, the church as a whole has moved and made its decision. It will move ahead and grow and expand more greatly than ever because its base has been strengthened. Its defenses have been shored up. It's now ready to move forward. The cause of Christ will be strengthened and the mainstream of the church will go ahead and be stronger than ever. Ultimately, those who resist sound biblical counsel will wither away and die. Which is what ultimately happened to the Judaizers.

Paul has a fierce word for the Judaizers. I would never approach the kind of language that Paul used. In Galatians 5:12, he becomes so frustrated in dealing with these people who were tearing up the churches he had planted, they themselves not having planted them themselves. But they're

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

coming in with their peculiar theology and farming the land he had tilled for the gospel. He had heard one too many sermons on circumcision from this group. He finally said in desperation and exasperation, "I wish they would emasculate themselves!" That's how upset he gets.

The house rules at The Men's Bar at the National Press Club in Washington DC displays a quotation from the Holy Rule of St. Benedict, a directive of conduct issued by this early monastic order. "If any pilgrim mock comes from distant parts with wish as a guest to dwell in the monastery and will be content with the customs which he finds in the place, and do not perchance, by his lavishness, disturb the monastery, but is simply content with what he finds, he shall be received for as long a time as he desires. If indeed he find fault with anything or expose it reasonably and with the humility of charity, the abbot shall discuss it prudently lest perchance God had sent him for this very thing. But if he be found gossipy in the time of his sojourn as guest, it shall be said to him, honestly, that he must depart. If he does not go, let two stout monks in the name of God explain the matter to him."

I'd like to lead us in a special prayer for our church leadership.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our heavenly Father, we want to thank You for this church, the Assemblies of God, one of Your families in this world who's bearing witness to Your name. Who's carried Your gospel to over a hundred and thirty countries in this world. Its missionary force serves You with stout hearts and fervent spirit. Its national leaders and churches are making a difference in this world for You. We thank You for the churches and the Bible Institutes that have been raised up all over the world, for the feeding programs and the hospitals and the schools, for the missions of mercy and help and healing, for the literature outreach, the television outreach, the radio outreach going on, the thrust into the Iron Curtain, the creative thrusts being undertaken now into the Muslim world, the

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

witness in Europe, the witness on college campuses, the witness to gang members, to drug addicts, to teens, to the blind, to the deaf, to the needy, to the destitute. We thank You, Lord, for what You have done in these seventy-five years of experience within this church. We are at a moment in our body where there is conflict among us. A conflict, not of a choice of so many, but yet a conflict that must be resolved, a conflict that must be dealt with. We ask that Your Holy Spirit will come in a powerful way into the meeting this week. As the elders of our church gather from all over this nation and the world, may they come and hear from You and reach a decision that winds up building Your body. It's been difficult, Lord, for those of us associated with this church, at times, to even want to admit to a neighbor that we are part of an Assemblies of God church, because of the way that name has been tarnished this last year. We pray that the church will have a fidelity to You, the Lord of the church, and its reputation is in Your care and keeping. These terrible blows, which have come against the purity and power of the church, we ask that You would take every weapon that has been fashioned against this advance of the gospel through the Assemblies of God and break that weapon and use this church powerfully for You. May its best days be just ahead. Surely we're in the battle, so hot because the enemy has tried so hard to derail effective witness and missionary work for You in this world. We lift up a standard and barrier of prayer around this church and its leadership, that it may be powerful for You in this world. That every weapon fashioned against it will be broken, whether that weapon be division among brethren or whether it be outright assault from the enemy. We pray that amongst all the church, there will be a spirit of humility and brokenness and openness and tenderness toward You, and that You will be exalted. May the news reports out of the meeting carry honor and glory to Your name. We pray more than the protection of the name Assemblies of God. We pray that the name of Jesus Christ will be lifted up and exalted in this whole matter. And what has

## **A BIBLICAL PATTERN OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### **Acts 15**

seemed like such a heavy burden and defeat will become a glorious victory in the name of Christ.

We pray that, for any conflict we may be in on a personal level, that You will also cause Your will and Your way to prevail in us, that the glory and the honor might be Yours and that in our life there might not be found anything which would be deficient toward You. We seek these things, Lord Jesus, in Your name, grateful for Your presence among us, through Christ our Lord.

Amen.