

# The Great Debate, Part 1

By Phillip G. Kayser · Acts 15:6-21, Part 1 · 2007-9-9

Here's the Chinese word for conflict (wei ji).

危机 (wēi jī)

It is made up of two symbols. The first symbol 危 (wēi)<sup>[1]</sup> means danger and the second symbol 机 (jī)<sup>[2]</sup> means opportunity. And that's a rather positive outlook on conflict. Some people think that nothing good can come of conflict. All they can see is the danger component of conflict. And because we have this built in tendency to avoid danger, these people intuitively avoid all conflict just as they would try to avoid danger. Other people are constantly picking fights because they can only see the benefits that will accrue if they win. They are focused mainly (and sometimes only) on the opportunity side of the equation. But all conflict is potentially double-sided. There are dangers and there are opportunities.

## Conflict poses dangers and opportunities

When you have two people vying for the same parking stall, there is always the potential for the vexed shopper to come out and start beating on your car. It happens so rarely that it may not dissuade you, but there is danger. I hung around in order to be a witness for one such situation that looked like the guy who lost the parking stall would use a club not just on the car but on the other driver too. It didn't happen, but there is danger that had to be weighed with the opportunity of getting a stall nearer to the store. I think that guy is going to think twice before he does that again. When children fight over a toy, there is the danger that mom might intervene with a paddle, but there is also the opportunity to get something. When we disagree with our culture on the many moral issues that we are facing there are dangers of alienation, persecution, being misunderstood; but there is also the opportunity to make a positive difference in our culture, to please the Lord and to advance His kingdom.

And in this chapter we have all kinds of conflicts. There are differences of opinion over what the facts of the situation are, and over values, methods, interests and the goals that God wants us to have. Anyone who thinks that an argument can be settled simply by logically looking at the facts hasn't been in too many arguments. Rarely are arguments settled by simply looking at the facts. People are notoriously capable of adjusting the meaning of facts to suit their desired outcome, whether those facts are statistics, eyewitness accounts, testimonies or even Bible verses. You've seen cults use the Bible, haven't you? And even godly Christians can come away from a conversation where many Bible verses have been thrown around, without coming to agreement. If you have

watched court room scenes you know how two people can look at the same facts and interpret them differently. We see that in this chapter.

## The confusing, multifaceted issues involved in the debate

This "mystery" of there being one body made up of Jews & Gentiles on equal ground had not been revealed before, but was now being taught everywhere by prophets (see v. 32 with Eph. 3:3-6).

Because we live in the twentieth century it is hard for us to appreciate how notoriously difficult it was for that first century church to settle this debate. And I have struggled on how to even communicate this to you this week and next week. I want to communicate the fantastic theology of this chapter (and we are going to do that). But I also want us to learn godly methods of conflict resolution (because this is a fantastic chapter for teaching that). The problem is, I can't separate those out into two sermons. So I've ditched good homiletic form (and you are used to that) in order to communicate both things at once. And as we go through this, I think you will see the reason.

As you read this chapter you might be tempted to think: "What's so hard about this? Why don't they just go to the Bible? Even I can understand the answer to this question!" But I want to point out that the Bible was being used by both sides in this debate. I want you to turn with me to Ephesians 3 and you will see in this passage that having Jews and Gentiles in one body was a mystery, or as some people translate it, a secret. Even though it is *consistent* with what the Old Testament prophesied, it wasn't revealed in the Old Testament. It was kept secret. In Peter's speech, he appeals to new revelation, not the Old Testament. In James' speech, he appeals to the Old Testament, but he simply shows how the Old Testament dovetails with Peter's new revelation and is consistent with that revelation. He says, "with this the words of the prophets agree" (v. 15). So the new revelation was consistent, but he doesn't say it was prophesied by the Old Testament.

Ephesians 3:3-6. "... how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets:" [and here comes the mystery that he says had never been revealed prior to the New Testament apostles and prophets:] "that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel..." It wasn't a mystery that Gentiles would be saved under Messiah. That was clearly prophesied in the Old Testament. What was so new and revolutionary about this was that after the Gentiles got saved, they would stay Gentiles, and yet they would be in Israel; in the church. That's the mystery. This was so outside the box of Jewish thinking that they couldn't get it. It didn't make sense to them. Anytime Gentiles got saved before, they became *Jews* by getting circumcised and following the ceremonial laws. For example,

Esther 8:17 says, "Then many of the people of the land became Jews..." They didn't stay Gentiles. This is why the Judaizers in the church had strong arguments from the Old Testament. Exodus 12 and other passages mandated circumcision. And now it is looking like Paul is standing in opposition to Old Testament ceremonial law. He's the one who is feeling on the defensive. He's the one under attack. They've got the Old Testament to back them up. (Of course, we will see in Acts 15 that all the apostles have the same revelation.)

I want you to look just a few verses earlier at Ephesians 2:11-22 to get a feel for what Paul was preaching. This was the message that was so controversial. Chapter 2:11.

Ephesians 2:11 Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—

Ephesians 2:12 that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Ephesians 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off [far off from what? From the Commonwealth of Israel, its covenants and all of its blessings. "you who once were far off"] have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Ephesians 2:14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation

[the ceremonial law was the middle wall of separation that divided between Jews and Gentiles. Verse 15:]

Ephesians 2:15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, *that is*, the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, [that's a reference to ceremonial law. This is not the moral law that was abolished. This was "the law of commandments contained in ordinances." It's the ceremonial law. He goes on:] so as to create in Himself one new man *from* the two, *thus* making peace,

[That's the only way that Jews and Gentiles could be made one while staying Jew and Gentile. The ceremonial law had to be abolished. The mystery would be impossible apart from it. Verse 16:]

Ephesians 2:16 and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.

Ephesians 2:17 And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.

Ephesians 2:18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

Ephesians 2:19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,

[He is saying that they are a part of Israel without getting circumcised. Amazing. Verse 20:]

Ephesians 2:20\* having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets [that's a very significant phrase], Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*,

Ephesians 2:21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord,

Ephesians 2:22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

That was a radical message. Let me just give a side note with regard to prophecy and why it was so needed until the New Testament was completed. Look at Ephesians 2:20 again. "having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*," The only way this new form of the church (made up of Jews and Gentiles) could be established is if God gave new revelation. The new revelation of the apostles and prophets is what established the Jew-Gentile form of the church. Previously I showed how once a foundation is laid, you don't keep laying it; you build on top of it. Some people say there are prophets today. No. Just as there aren't multiple Christ's in every age since there is only one cornerstone, there aren't multiple apostles and prophets in every age since there is only one foundation. And that foundation has already been laid in the first century. Everything the apostles and prophets taught is recorded in the New Testament. So there aren't prophets today.

The objection that some people raise to the ceasing of prophecy is that there wouldn't have been any need for prophets if their only role was inspired revelation. One of my friends pointed out that they obviously were all giving Scripture. (But I would point out, neither did most of the apostles.) He said, "They were constantly prophesying. How many prophecies would you need to have to settle this issue?" And Acts 15 together with Ephesians 3 explains why the prophets were needed: This idea that Gentiles should not be turned into Jews, but should be welcome as full citizens was so radical, and faced so much opposition and conflict, that God had to send prophets all throughout the empire to keep teaching and reinforcing the new revelation. Look again at Ephesians 3:3-6. That's exactly what this says. The mystery made known to Paul in verse 3 is the same mystery that verse 5 says, "has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets." That's why prophets were needed. And by the way, Luke was one of those prophets. He was not an apostle. But he was just as much part of the revelational foundation of Ephesians 2:20. Charismatics often try to make a huge distinction between apostles and prophets. They say that prophets weren't inspired and infallible in their communication of revelation; only apostles were. And they try to give their proof of what books should be in the canon by somehow connecting each book to an apostle. Supposedly Mark wrote his Gospel under the oversight of Peter, and Luke wrote His books under the oversight of Paul. And because there was oversight, there was infallibility. But according to 2 Peter 1:20-21 that is simply not the way any Scripture was written. The person who wrote it was inspired and kept from error, not simply someone who read the manuscript. So this is an artificial divide. This text in Ephesians 2-3 unites apostles and prophets as equally part of the revelational foundation for this mystery form of the church. And just as some apostles wrote Scripture, some prophets wrote Scripture (such as the non-apostolic writers of Mark, Luke, Hebrews, James and Jude). Now with that as a background, go back to Acts 15, and look at verse 32. It says,

"Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words." The prophets and apostles were constantly teaching and reinforcing this inspired, new revelation.

And if that was the *only* issue at stake, it would be an issue that would require the Jerusalem council. It was tough for Jews to get it. But there were a host of other complicating issues as well. And I've listed some of the questions that probably went through the minds of believers.

### Is Paul out to destroy Jewish culture? No. (vv. 8-11,12,19)

Is Paul out to destroy Jewish culture and make all Jews into Gentiles? The answer from this council was "No." That's a misunderstanding of Paul. In fact, James says in verse 19 that it was the *Gentile* culture that was being destroyed by Jews. It was the *Gentiles* were being troubled. So Jews can continue to value their culture. But verse 23 makes clear that Jewish and Gentile believers are brothers. That's a whole new way of thinking.

### Are the Jerusalem leaders trying to undermine Paul? No (see v. 25).

Another question that may have come into the mind of Paul was, "Are the Jerusalem leaders trying to undermine my ministry?" According to the book of Galatians, that question may have occurred to others as well because everyone knew that James had sent the people in verse 1 (see Galatians 2:12). And the answer that James gives is clearly "No." His message is the same as Paul's message. In verse 24 they rebuke the Judaizers and said that they had not authorized them to say what they did in Acts 15:1,5. In verse 25 James calls them "our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord." They were clearly not undermining Paul.

### Are James and Paul preaching two totally different Gospels? No.

In Galatians it is quite clear that some were saying that James and Paul had two different Gospels. But Peter, James and the elders all affirm that there is but one Gospel, and it is the same as Paul's. The Gospel message is justification by faith alone, through grace alone, based on the merits of Christ alone. As verse 11 says, "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

### Shouldn't we be sensitive to Jewish culture? Yes, to an extent (see vv. 20-21).

Another concern that many Jews were fighting for (and it was because they were evangelizing fellow Jews) was the need to be sensitive to Jewish culture. If we start looking too much like Gentiles, the Jews won't even listen to us. And verses 20-21 absolutely agree with that statement. They indicate that this was a valid concern. Verse 21 says, "for Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in

every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath." That's the reason why these four additional ceremonial laws are being imposed.

### If we can be sensitive to Jews on the issues brought up in verses 20 and 29, why can't we be sensitive to Jews by having everyone circumcised too?

But there would be some people at the Conference who would immediately pull out their bibles and say, "If we can be sensitive on those four issues, why can't we be sensitive on the subject of circumcision? Why can't we impose circumcision out of sensitivity to the Jews?" That sounds like a legitimate objection. Lack of circumcision was *the* primary issue that hindered evangelism among the Jews. But to give in on that point would obliterate the mystery of Jew and Gentile being united as part of one body. To circumcise them turns them into Jews. That would be to overthrow this new revelation of the mystery.

### Didn't a good God give circumcision and the ceremonial laws? Yes.

But a good exegete of the Bible would have been able to give all kinds of Scriptures which showed that a *good God* gave circumcision and all of the other ceremonial laws. No one denied it. But still, it could have seemed like an insult to God to no longer mandate that these laws of a good and gracious God be celebrated. You can see why there is confusion.

### Aren't there advantages to being circumcised as a Jew? Yes – "much in every way" (Rom. 3:1-2)

Another question that came up to Paul was, "Aren't there distinct advantages to being circumcised as a Jew?" And none of the Jews at this conference denied it. Paul himself says in Romans 3:1-2, "What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way!" His answer was that there is much profit to circumcision, in every way. And he proceeds to give the first and foremost of those benefits to circumcision.

Now that fact may have confused not only them, but maybe has confused you right now. Maybe you thought that there was no benefit to circumcision. But there was. For example, I believe all of the ceremonial laws had health benefits. In 1 Corinthians 7:19 Paul said that he didn't care if a Gentile wanted to get circumcised. He was welcome to do it. But he insisted that we could not for a moment give in to the mandate for circumcision. And the deeper you get, the more complex this debate becomes. It's hard to settle in a simple five minute discussion. Too many Christians are content to have a shallow worldview. They don't want to do the study needed to have a consistent worldview.

Isn't that a contradiction of Galatians 5:2? No. Galatians 5 refers to circumcision and justification whereas Romans 3 refers to other issues.

I can just imagine somebody standing up and saying, "Now wait a minute! I'm confused. Just before this conference convened. Paul wrote the book of Galatian churches the book of Galatians. And in that book he said in chapter 5, "if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing." In that same chapter he called the ceremonial law a yoke of bondage. Now he seems to be saying that there are advantages to circumcision." Which way is it? Isn't that a contradiction?

And this is where Peter's message is so critical – that there is no salvation through any kind of law keeping, whether it would be the moral law or the ceremonial law. We've got to clearly distinguish between outward benefits to some ceremonial laws (Romans 3), and the fact that there is no law keeping connected to justification (Galatians). Our works are never part of our justification.

Is circumcision allowed? Of course.

So is circumcision allowed? Well, yes, if it is only a cultural thing. But it is absolutely not allowed if people are preaching that you have to get circumcised to get saved. We know that not even baptism can be such a condition. So if you don't look to the fine details of the apostle's arguments, you could get confused initially. I think that many of these delegates were very confused. That's why the need for the conference, and that's why the need for such clarity in Paul's epistles.

Is circumcision mandated? No.

Is circumcision recommended? It depends.

I won't comment on every question in your outlines. But I can hear a confused Jew asking the question in point L – "Let me try to clarify Paul. Are you saying that circumcision is not mandated, but it is recommended?" And the answer is that it totally depends upon the motive and goals of the person getting circumcised. In Acts 16:3 Paul had Timothy circumcised. That was not an inconsistency with his absolute refusal to have Titus circumcised. It was a different situation. Timothy was already a mature and justified believer. He was recognized as a leader in the church. He was not trying to earn his salvation. But Paul recommended that he get circumcised because they were working with Jews in almost every city. Timothy could be far more effective witnessing to Jews if he got circumcised. But circumcision, ceremonial laws, good works and anything but faith was removed from the question of justification. Are you beginning to get the feel for the theological issues that were being discussed?

Is circumcision a means of justification (v. 1)? No.

Are ceremonial laws a means of justification (v. 5)? No.

If ceremonial laws are not binding, isn't it inconsistent for this council to impose four ceremonial laws (15:20,29)?

Here's another question: point O. If ceremonial laws are not binding, why does the Jerusalem council impose ceremonial laws in verses 20 and 29? Is that not inconsistent? A Gentile could be arguing, "Let's make a clear slate and do away with all ceremonial law." And the answer is that the New Testament does not do away with all ceremonial laws. Passover transferred over into the Lord's Supper. There were a lot of things that fell away (especially animal sacrifice), but the core remained the same. The Lord's Supper is clearly a ceremonial law, but it was one that was framed for and consistent with the universal scope of the Messianic kingdom. The same is true of baptism. And it's interesting that Hebrews (the big book to deal with this ceremonial law question) does not say that all ceremonial law was completely done away. It says, "For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law" (Heb. 7:12). Change is different from completely doing away with something. And I will on a later Sunday be preaching on why those four ceremonial laws are so perfectly suited to the New Testament age. It wasn't just a temporary concession to the Jews. I believe those were binding.

Should believing Jews and Gentiles continue to be separated? No.

Point P. Should believing Jews and Gentiles continue to be separated? Isn't that what the ceremonial law does? Here might be their argument: "If Jews are *optionally* allowed to keep those laws (as Paul, Peter and James are all saying), then they are *optionally* allowed to be separated from Gentiles. And that's all we were doing when we separated from the Gentile believers in Antioch. Why is Paul getting on Peter's case? Is separation not optionally allowed? After all, we are getting persecuted by the Zealots when we fellowship with Gentiles." Can you see how they could come to that conclusion? And Paul said "No" in Galatians and this Council says "No." If you separate, then you are destroying the mystery of the Jew-Gentile body, and you are *defacto* imposing ceremonial law as a mandate if you want to be a full class citizen. They said, "No. No way." But you can see how the objection would appear to be reasonable until the apostles explained the ramifications.

Does that mean every local church has to be integrated? No.

Yet some might wonder if that meant that every local church had to be racially integrated? "Do we have to have quotas of how many Jews and Gentiles are in every synagogue? And then, what about translation issues?" There are practical issues of culture and preference to be considered. People often feel more comfortable in their cultural comfort zones. But the issue is not whether integration must happen, but



whether a Gentile can ever be excluded if he felt comfortable with Jewish culture. And the Jerusalem council says that Gentiles can't be excluded from any level of the Jewish church or vice versa. Cultural preference for a church? No problem. Exclusion of Gentiles from a church? No way.

I think you can see with this little listing that there were a lot of issues that complicated things. It's no wonder that the debate lasted so long. And the amazing thing to me is that they were able to settle the questions, and settle it so clearly that in verse 22 Luke says, "Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church" etc to send the delegates with this letters. It pleased them. That's the degree of unity that they had. That's amazing. And this week I want to begin looking at the necessary ingredients for being able to settle any complex disagreements like this one.

## The necessary ingredients for being able to settle complex disagreements

### Broad representation (v. 6) will help ensure broad acceptance.

The first ingredient was broad representation. Verse 6 says, "Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter." This was not something just imposed by the apostles. The elders were all involved. The benefits of this are at least twofold: 1) It would ensure that all perspectives were being discussed and addressed. Just because you are a leader doesn't mean that you know all of the concerns, fears and frustrations of those you are representing. You need to find out. 2) Second, it would ensure that less misunderstandings would emerge from the conference. If every leader is involved, you don't have to debate the same subject over and over again. So the first principle is that broad representation helps to ensure broad acceptance.

### People's concerns must be heard (v. 7)

Procedural integrity and satisfaction (see vv. 5,7,12,13,23ff)

The second ingredient for success was that all of the people's concerns were being heard. Verse 7 says, "And when there had been much dispute..." The apostles did not dominate the discussion. They allowed people's voices to be heard. And in your outline I have broken this down into three parts. There was first of all procedural integrity. Think about what would happen if I went to General Assembly and got all my friends to support me on a vote. I told them to go to all the microphones in the room and speak to the issue, and as soon as they were done defending my position, I would make a motion to close off debate. That would be terrible, would it not? Roberts Rules of Order don't allow that because it would deny procedural satisfaction to the parties. Roberts Rules mandates that after a speech *for* an issue someone who is *against* it needs to be able to speak. It enforces fairness. Obviously they didn't have Roberts Rules of Order in this first General Assembly, but it is just as obvious that everyone was allowed to express their opinion. We aren't told how many days this dispute went on, or who the

contributors were. But we know from verse 5 that the Judaizers were allowed to voice their opinions. No one could argue that they weren't give a fair shake to try to prove their positions Biblically.

A second procedural issue that helped to ease tensions was that they met on more neutral ground. Emotional levels were just too high in Antioch, so they went to Jerusalem. In one sense, Jerusalem was more friendly ground for the Judaizers, but it was the Judaizers who were going to get hammered, so it was not necessarily a bad thing. At least Jerusalem was more neutral than Antioch where the debate originated.

Third, it is quite clear in this chapter that everything was done decently and in order. There was speaking and there was listening. Verse 12 says, "then the multitude kept silent and listened..." Verse 13 shows that James waits till Paul and Barnabas had their say before they started speaking. There wasn't interruption or cutting people off. That's procedural fairness. No leaders were using bullying tactics to get their way.

The final act which showed procedural integrity was that their decision was committed to writing and distributed. This allowed the whole church to see the decision. It was objective, written, something people could read in black and white. It wasn't an agreement worked out in a back room. That makes everybody mad.

Let me illustrate why procedural integrity is so important. I could give a lot of illustrations from our denomination, but let me give an example from a University. A small group of administrators decided over lunch that they would develop a new master's program for their school. They had two options for developing this: 1) They could involve all the faculty committees, but it would take months to develop, and they were in a hurry. 2) The other alternative was to get the administrators to sit down and develop it and present it to the faculty for approval, and they could get that done in less than a week.

Thinking that they were doing a big favor to the overworked faculty, they hammered everything out in a few days: they designed the curriculum, set degree requirements, wrote course descriptions and assigned faculty to teach the various courses. And then they called a meeting to announce this exciting new development. But when they presented the wonderful, helpful work that they had done, there was a major revolt. There were accusations and heated comments. As Collins describes it, "The meeting ended when the initiators raised the white flag, gave the bound proposal to the faculty, and quickly exited the conference room."<sup>[3]</sup> But here's the kicker. A number of months later, the faculty committees turned in their proposal that they had hammered out, and it was 95% the same as the original proposal. In fact, much of it hadn't even been retyped. The main difference was that the new proposal had gone through the proper channels, let everyone's concerns be heard; it was debated and talked about and it produced widespread ownership of the final result. Sometimes we can have perfectly good intentions and goals, yet mess things up by not following a procedure that will enable people in the conflict to be satisfied.

Let's apply this to the here and now. Our church doesn't have a conflict at this point. But this could apply to the issue of voting. Everyone is united on the subject, but Elder Swab reminded me that it would be good to include the whole congregation in our discussions of voting so that the whole congregation has a sense of ownership. And I thought that was a great idea. We plan to put the issue on the web forum for debate, input and discussion. Who knows, but maybe this method might bring issues to our minds that we hadn't even thought about. It gives procedural satisfaction.

But don't just apply this to big groups. In the family, a dad does have the authority to make executive decisions, and sometimes those are important. But the Bible says we are to dwell with our wives with understanding. If you never listen to their input, you are hardly dwelling with them with understanding. Procedural satisfaction is a small price to pay for increased unity.

Psychological satisfaction (v. 22; vv. 5-7, vv19-21 with vv. 23-29; v. 28; v. 21)

A second aspect of this true listening and hearing of concerns is psychological satisfaction. Verse 22 again: "Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church..." It pleased them. There was psychological satisfaction. When people looked back on the Jerusalem council they were able to feel like they had been treated with respect, that their concerns were listened to and addressed, and their contributions to the discussion were recognized. There is nothing worse than feeling like you are a pariah who is simply being tolerated, but not really listened to. If people are snickering when you talk and making fun of your speech, it's going to be hard to take the group seriously. And yet that can easily happen between siblings in families. And it needs to be nipped in the bud because it denies those families a sense of psychological satisfaction.

And these people who were arguing for circumcision had Biblical arguments that they could raise. Here's how the council sought to give psychological satisfaction. 1) First, it gave the opponents a voice (vv. 5-7). It's a repeat of what we talked about before, but it's important. They listened.

Second, their spokesman James wrote the letter. Now he wasn't actually their spokesman. James had the same message that Paul did. But they obviously trusted James. Galatians 1 says that James sent them. He followed the ceremonial law. So these guys are not going to be as nervous about James writing the proposal. Now, they do get a rebuke in verse 24 for having misrepresented James. James says, "to whom we gave no such command." But still, he was a leader that they trusted. And that helped to promote psychological satisfaction. In the PCA we do this by having people who represent different interests to serve on study committees that are controversial.

Third, their spokesman, James, also selected representatives to go along with Paul and Barnabas to make sure that it was Jerusalem folk who helped communicate the decision. This avoids any danger of accidental miscommunication.

Fourth, the letter gave a gracious way for the opponents to admit they were wrong. It calls attention to the fact the Holy Spirit had decided this question in Acts 10 and the Scriptures concurred with this new revelation. In one sense the Pharisaic party could save face by saying that they hadn't realized that there was new revelation from God. So it provides a gracious way for them to back out of their position.

Fifth, the letter showed sensitivity to the concerns of both the Pharisaic party and Paul's contingent.

A good sign that you have achieved psychological satisfaction is if both parties can shake hands after a decision is made, even if one of them did not get their way. Of course, it takes maturity for a person to not be a sore loser.

Not sweeping issues under the carpet (vv. 9,10,11,15,19,20,21,23,24,25,28,29)

And this brings up the third element of truly being heard in a conflict, and that is that the group does not sweep issues under the carpet. None of the issues I raised under Roman numeral II were swept under the carpet in Acts 15. This incredibly difficult debate confronted head on every one of the issues and resolved them the way the apostles had already agreed to three years before (see Gal. 2:1-10). So we are not talking about caving in. Paul did not cave in on any of the issues. The book of Galatians is quite clear about that. Peter goes to bat for Paul's concerns, and James speaks to both Jewish and Gentile concerns. Both Peter and the letter rebuke the Judaizers for imposing ceremonial law and circumcision and makes it clear that they were out of line. It rebukes them. Every issue is dealt with.

In families it is sometimes easier to just avoid conflict by caving in. Other times issues involving children are just ignored, hoping that they will go away. Other times they are confronted, but as soon as there is any movement in the right direction, the argument is dropped before full resolution is achieved.

Let me make a recommendation for those of you who have difficulty achieving procedural, psychological and substantive satisfaction in your family debates. I recommend that you start using Jay Adam's Family Conference Table idea.<sup>[4]</sup> I have several packets on the back table that I copied to help you get started on this. This has helped more families enter into true solutions to their conflicts, simply because it uses a procedure by which everyone feels like they are being heard. People have told me that initially it feels artificial and strange. But I would encourage you to persevere in doing it just the way he suggests. You don't need to use this formal approach if you don't have any problems in communication. But it sure helps when tensions are high.

Let me use an analogy. We don't *always* use Roberts Rules of Order in our session, and our new Presbytery is thinking of not using them unless a conflict comes up. But Robert's Rules of Order (as formal and artificial as they sometimes feel) make everyone feel like they have a chance to be heard, it helps objectify the discussion and get it down

on paper, and it helps people walk away from a discussion feeling like they have been honored and respected, even if they lost the vote. At least they have been heard. But the only reason the formal use of Roberts Rules needs to be applied is if we are unable to achieve the same goals without them. That's the way I view Jay Adam's Family Conference Table Rules. If you haven't been able to achieve full and happy resolution of your differences without it, then use this to teach your family Biblical habits of communication and resolving of differences. So pick up a copy from the back table.

### Patience (vv. 1-5, 7,12,13)

Let's just pick up two more ingredients that I think the Chinese church is so good at and that the Western church needs to learn. Point C states that there is the need for patience. It was patience that sent them to Jerusalem rather than having a church split.

Patience is also seen in verse 7. "And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them..." He had been biding his time, and that can be tough – especially when you already know the answer. When you already know the right answer, like Peter did, it is sometimes easy to give the answer without letting people process through their issues. I used to do this in our marriage. I was Mr. Answer Man for my wife, and I would sometimes give answers before she had even fully expressed her opinions. I can assure you that it wasn't always what was needed or appreciated. What was needed was for me to listen to my wife's heart, her reasoning, the things that were falling between the cracks with my leadership. We shouldn't be too quick to answer or we will miss what the real questions are. And the real questions are sometimes hard for people to state. You sometimes have to ask a lot of good questions before they say, "Yeah. That is what I am concerned about."

I started this sermon with a long list of complicated and intertwined fears, concerns, issues and doctrinal problems. I'm sure some of those may have been missed by the leadership because they were thinking primarily of about the doctrinal concerns that were being compromised. But if full resolution to a conflict is to be had, it must be approached with patience and much listening. James says, "let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath..." That's exactly what Peter was doing. He was swift to hear, trying to ask the right questions to let the concerns from all sides be voiced. And it was only after much dispute, that Peter felt he had enough information to begin addressing the problem. Verse 12 shows the same patience on the part of Barnabas and Paul. Verse 13 shows the same patience on the part of James. Verse 13 says, "And after they had become silent, James answered..." I think that a lot of family and church conflicts could be solved if the leaders would simply spend more time listening, asking questions to clarify, and guiding the discussion so that everyone has a chance to contribute before they come down with their decree. You would be surprised at the wisdom that can come from your children as you each come with Bibles to the Family Conference Table and try to figure out what the Bible has to say about the conflict that

you are having. I have learned a lot from my family when I have been quicker to hear than to speak.

### Gifted leadership must be allowed to speak and lead (vv. 7-21)

But this does not mean that the leaders abandon their responsibilities to make decisions. Point D says that gifted leadership must be allowed to speak and lead. After processing through all the issues and concerns, Peter, Barnabas, Paul and James wrap it all up and help the body to make a decision. So on the one hand they didn't use their office to close off debate and tell people – "Hey, we're inspired, and you guys just need to listen up." And I find that fascinating. If the apostles did not do that, then neither should we. How many times do we fathers make a decision without ever discussing it, even though we know it will make for hurt feelings? These apostles wisely involved the whole body, and presented it to the whole body to sign onto. But without their leadership it probably would not have happened.

And every denomination, no matter how grassroots it is, has wise men who help an assembly to come to conclusions. They write the decisions. And the decisions might be changed and fine tuned on occasion by the assembly, but without wise men who can write a consensus document, you wouldn't get very far in a General Assembly of 1200 leaders (which is what it was this past summer). There are some men, like David Coffin, who are so good at writing documents that move things in a Biblical direction and yet provide consensus, that I often hope that he will eventually speak to an issue. I strongly disagree with him on points, but he is an incredibly gifted man, and I value him. Gifted leadership must be allowed to speak. And the comments made by Peter, James, Paul and Barnabas carried the day. Commentators believe that this letter in verses 22-29 was largely written by James.<sup>[5]</sup> But the whole assembly signed on. That's what verses 22-23 say. And the whole assembly was pleased.

Next week I may share an example of a court case that almost split the PCA in the 90's. It looked like the two sides were so deeply entrenched into their respective positions that an agreement was impossible. Up to one third of the denomination was planning to leave, yours truly being one them. We just didn't see any way of reconciling. But by being very careful to follow the next point that we will look at next week, the 1000 delegates came to a unanimous decision. It was astonishing. Now we all agree that it was a compromise, but no Biblical principles were compromised. It was a compromise, but it was a compromise that pleased us all very well and glorified God.

And that is my prayer for your families and businesses and other associations that you work with. Dad's will sometimes have to make executive decisions that aren't popular. But what a blessing it would be to have such great communication going on that misunderstandings are resolved, slight compromises approved, and all of our families have verse 22 true of them – they get behind the dad and say, "It pleases us well." Let's pray that this would be the case. Amen.

(to be continued in next sermon)

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1. Pronounced "weigh" with a rising tone. ☐
2. pronounced "tchee" with a high flat tone. ☐
3. This whole illustration was taken from Gary R. Collins, *Conflict Management and Counseling* (Word, 1991), pp. 130-131. While Gary Collins tends to put far too much weight on psychology in his writings, this book did have some helpful ideas. ☐
4. See Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing House, 1973), p. 321-332. ☐
5. See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* , p. 742 for linguistic similarities between the book of James and this letter in Acts 15. ☐