

# Explore the Bible Series for July 27: Jerusalem: Facing Conflict

July 22, 2008

• Acts 15:1-28

It has been said that the problem with living in the world is that occasionally one must interact with other people. The problem is that whenever two individuals are together for long enough, conflict will occur. Regardless of what type of relationship they share, differences of opinion will arise. In general, people approach conflict in one of three ways. Some seek to avoid conflict at all costs even if it means abandoning their personal preferences.

At the other extreme, some people welcome conflict by asserting that their way is the only “correct” way and demanding others submit. Finally, many people try to ignore conflict, hoping that it will simply go away and leave things unchanged. In the book of Acts we read about a conflict that threatened to split or stifle the growth of the early church. It was a conflict that both theological, in that it dealt with the meaning of salvation, and practical, in that it effected evangelism and fellowship within the church.

As we read the story, we see an example of how God desires His followers to deal with conflict. God calls on us to resolve any conflict in such a way that both sides of the issue are benefited, the relationship is preserved, and God is glorified.

## **Agree to Resolve the Problem (Acts 15:1-2)**

For a number of years following the resurrection of Jesus, the beliefs of His

followers were widely seen as comprising a new sect within Judaism. All of the earliest converts were Jews who maintained some connection to the rituals and ceremonial law of Judaism after accepting the Gospel. As these believers spread beyond Judea, they came into contact with Gentiles.

Through the missionary work of men like Paul, many of these non-Jews believed, accepted their message, and were baptized. Some of the Jewish leaders within the church thought that these new converts should be required to adhere to Jewish law in order to be a true believer. Paul, Barnabas, and others disagreed.

Rather than causing emotionally-heated argument, the two groups decided to resolve their disagreement peacefully before a judge in Jerusalem. Just as too often happens today, they could have either disregarded the problem and allowed bitterness to grow or insisted on their different opinions and created a fight. Instead, they chose to face and resolve the matter in a way that would please God.

### **Discuss the Issues (Acts 15:6-12)**

Once everyone involved had gathered in Jerusalem, each side presented their arguments before James and the other leaders of the Jerusalem church. There are at least two things to take note of in these verses. First, one of the overarching concerns of everyone was likely to preserve the unity and reputation of the young church. It is often true that you can tell the most about a group of people by observing how they disagree.

At the Jerusalem Council, it appears that a genuine search for God's will trumped any personal agendas. It appears that there was a sincere desire for open discussion. Second, there was a clear desire to discuss and consider the arguments of each side. Each side had sound reasons and used them to persuade the others.

Today it can be easy to face differences of opinion with the attitude that “it has never been done that way before,” and close off any further discussion. But there would never be any growth or development if there were no differences which were openly discussed. Conflict can be a good opportunity to examine our beliefs and determine why we hold them.

### **Look at the Scriptures (Acts 15:13-17)**

While it is important to openly discuss and examine particular beliefs and practices periodically, we should always be sure no final decision be reached without consulting the Bible. Any brief look at the history of the church reveals that there have been many times when large crowds followed those who could offer convincing, but erroneous statements of belief.

The followers fell for the eloquent speech and forgot to assess what was said according to the consistent witness of Scripture. When Peter referred to the past history and traditions of the people, James looked into their sacred texts (which we now have as the Old Testament) and was convinced by what he found there. There are a number of issues confronting churches today such as the place of women in ministry which have honest believing supporters on both sides.

As churches wrestle with these issues, God wants us all to remember that he has provided assistance and guidance in the pages of His Word. It is up to us to look beyond carefully crafted human arguments and consider what God has said in the pages of the Bible whenever we are faced with conflicting opinions.

### **Reach a Consensus (Acts 15:22-28)**

Finally, after carefully weighing the various arguments, the members of the Jerusalem Council determined that Gentiles should not be required to adhere to Jewish Law as part of becoming a believer and follower of Christ.

While it appears that James and Peter were clearly seen as leaders, neither of them simply imposed their position on the rest. They continued debating the issue peacefully until the rest of the leaders were convinced and then sent word throughout the region concerning their consensus.

The church has one head – Christ. No other human has been given sole authority to unilaterally make decisions concerning the direction of the church. God speaks to all believers and leads each into the Truth. Because of this, whenever we face conflict within the church, we should always be careful to get input from all and refuse to move forward until agreement has been reached.