

## The Great Debate (part 2)

### Acts 15

Introduction:

A preacher came to the breakfast table with a cut on his cheek. His wife asked him what had happened. And he said, “Well, I was concentrating on my sermon so much that I cut my face while shaving.” His wife joked with him and said, “Maybe you should concentrate on your shaving and cut your sermons.” And that’s what we sort of had to do last week – to cut the sermon in half. We didn’t cut the time, but we did cut the sermon in half. In fact, you could park on chapter 15 for a long time because it is a critical passage for the doctrine of salvation, for Presbyterian church government, for cross cultural missions, eschatology and for conflict resolution. And what we have been doing is mixing some of those elements together, but focusing on the conflict resolution. And we will finish that subject today.

Last week we looked at the Chinese word for conflict : 危机 (wēi jī) and saw that it is made up of two characters, 危 (wēi) meaning danger and 机 (jī) meaning opportunity. We saw how we can get ourselves into difficulties if we focus only on the danger side of the equation and avoid all conflict or if we focus only on the opportunity side and are too quick to pick fights.

We then looked at 16 factors that complicated this debate and made it extremely difficult to wrap your head around. It was no wonder that there was confusion and conflict. In Ephesians 2-3 Paul made clear that this was a mystery that had not been revealed in the Old Testament. And Paul said that this was why God was bringing so much revelation from apostles and prophets – it was to help churches accept and adjust to this new reality. I won’t repeat what I said about all of those theological, emotional, cultural and personal issues that divided people and confused them. But those issues were important for two reasons: 1) they guide our theology and practice and 2) secondly, they give us hope. Here’s how they give us hope: If the first century church was able to resolve such a complicated mess and come to a conclusion that verse 22 says pleased everyone, then we can have hope of similar success in our vexing conflicts.

And so a good chunk of the sermon was devoted to uncovering the necessary ingredients for resolving complex disagreements. We looked at two principles in this chapter related to fairness in how we present. We looked at four essentials found in this chapter for achieving procedural

satisfaction. And I cannot emphasize enough how important procedural satisfaction is. We then looked at five essentials found in this chapter for achieving psychological satisfaction (such as verse 22 talks about). If you can have a discussion where one side loses, and yet that side can shake your hand and say that it was a great discussion and they really appreciated how you handled it, you have accomplished something major. And I won't remind you of the other necessary ingredients that we looked at. I guess we will need to take these sermons together to get the full picture.

### ***E. The difference between Biblical absolutes and personal interests must be teased out***

#### **1. Biblical options in promoting a Biblical absolute**

But we have arrived at point E. If we are going to be effective in resolving complicated disagreements we have got to get good at knowing the difference between biblical absolutes and personal interests. Too many times in our arguments we confuse those two. There is nothing wrong with a personal interest. Sometimes it is important that both the interests and the absolutes be maintained. Some people act as if personal interests must always be sacrificed. And that is simply not true. For example, here is an absolute that Christ gave in Matthew 10:32-33: In the context of discussing fear of persecution - of those who destroy our bodies (v. 28), Jesus said, **whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.** Some early Christians thought that this meant that fleeing from persecution was a failure to confess Christ before authorities. These Christians walked up to the magistrates office and told him that they were Christians who would refuse to deny Christ. And usually, they were arrested, tortured and executed. And there were thousands of these Christians who would deliberately try to be martyrs because they felt that was the only way they could keep from violating this Biblical absolute to confess Christ and not deny Him. Now obviously if we are captured, we must confess that we believe in Jesus. But they were going way beyond that.

You have to admire their courage in denying their own personal interest. No one likes to be tortured. So it was in their own personal interest to not get tortured and to not leave their families destitute. But the Bible gives quite a few options that allow some personal interests to be pursued. In fact, that same chapter calls upon believers to flee when they are persecuted – to even flee from city to city to avoid the authorities. Here are some other

options: In Acts 22 Paul used the law against the persecutors. In Acts 23 he appealed to a friendly civil magistrate to protect him from an unfriendly one. In Acts 25 he appeals to a higher court.

And even when it comes to conflicts with believers, we still need to realize that there are many options when trying to balance both personal interests and Biblical absolutes. One situation might call for ignoring the issue for a time (1 Peter 4:8), while another calls for a rebuke (Luke 17:3), and another requires giving in and willingly being defrauded (1 Corinthians 6:2). Another situation might call for negotiation (Matt 18:15) or mediation (Matt 18:16), or binding arbitration (1 Cor. 6:4-5) or taking someone to church court (Matt 18:16-20). The point is that we frequently become blind to options when we are confronted with a win-lose conflict over a Biblical absolute. We get so emotionally involved in trying to win the debate on a Biblical absolute that we become blind to the fact that the same goal might be able to be achieved in different ways. That's one of the reasons for the Family Conference Table packets that we had available last week. That family equivalent to Roberts Rules of Order is an artificial way of become more objective so that all the options can hopefully come to the surface and be looked at. Emotions cloud our thinking, and so that helps to take some of the emotion out of the discussion.

## 2. Illustration

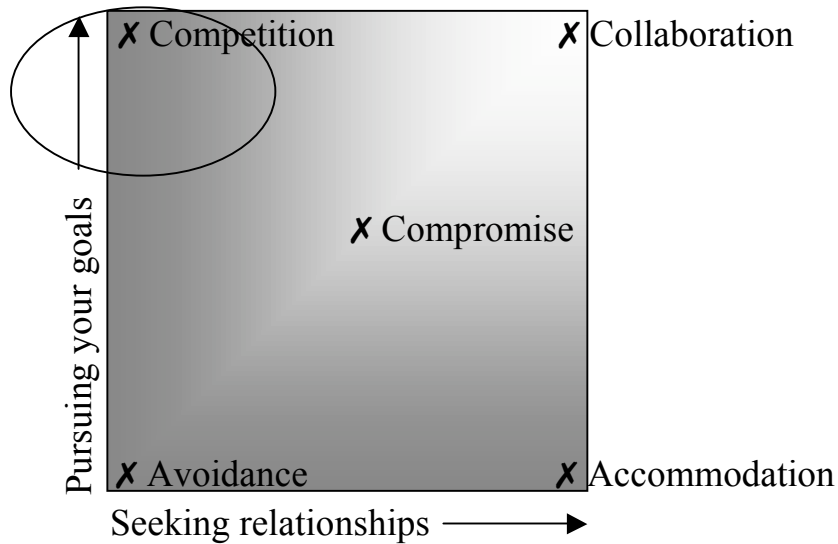
Let me give a modern illustration of this. From 1987-1996 it seemed like the PCA had non-stop fire-fights at the General Assembly. Now there were great things happening too, but wow, there were a lot of fights. There were at least five different Reformed philosophies represented in the denomination, and a lot of the issues were being debated from quite different perspectives. And frequently they were talking past each other – lots of miscommunication. Debates sometimes got very heated, and on more than one occasion a commissioner either had to come back to the microphone later to repent of hot words said or had to be rebuked. I did not enjoy these assemblies, but they were important for hashing out major controversies.

I remember one fight in particular in 1994 that looked like it would split our denomination in two. It started with the Chen case (Judicial Case 93-3), in which the General Assembly overturned the discipline of a local church, and overturned the Presbytery who had upheld the local church. And they didn't deny that the guy deserved to be disciplined. I think it was because a majority were scared to death that there might be civil liability of the whole denomination should there be lawsuits in such cases. If it had just been a decision on that particular case, it wouldn't have been such a crisis.

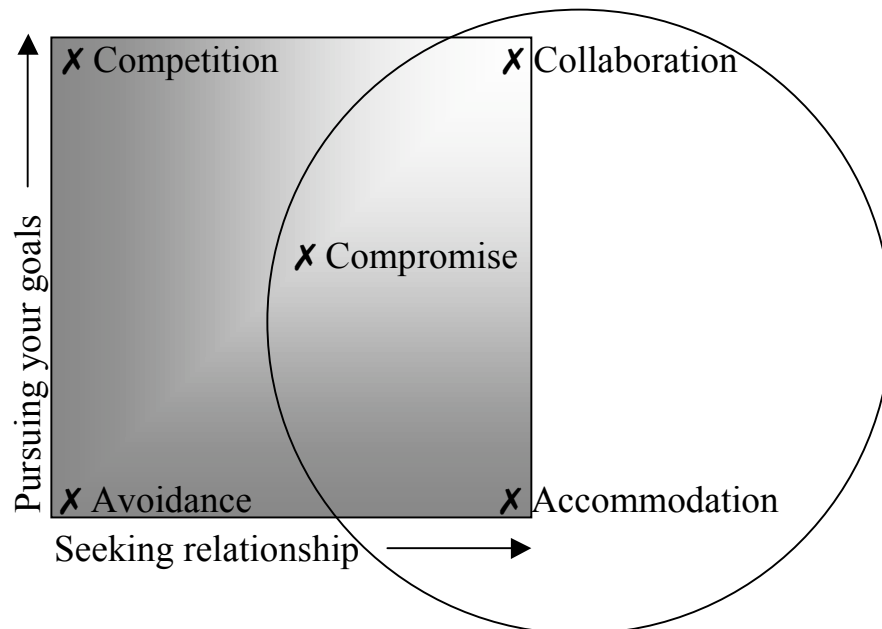
But according to their reasoning, it looked to us like they were completely removing discipline from the church. There was a minority opinion of the court that was quite excellent, but it looked like the panel that decided the case was using this to push a political agenda. That prompted men to line up for hours to sign a protest. But the debate branched out much further than this into a general philosophy of discipline, church connectionalism and church government. And the strange thing is that there were good people on both sides of the debate. There were legitimate concerns on both sides. But they became entrenched in what they thought were Biblical absolutes they could not give in on. And though there were no doubt many other personal interests that came into the equation, what was presented for debate was not those interests – both sides thought they had Biblical absolutes.

Now (as I mentioned) at that time there were at least five different factions who took sides for different reasons. We didn't quite have a majority even with two factions united on this issue. But because of the critical nature of this decision, and how it looked like it was guaranteed to split the church, a study committee was erected to try to bring recommendations of what to do. I didn't meet a single person who had much hope that this problem would be resolved. It seemed unsolvable. "O ye of little faith." Even the men on the committee that I talked to didn't have a lot of hope that this could be resolved. But they all wanted to be on the committee because the stakes were just too high.

Based on your charts, I will tell you what was going on. Each side had a bunch of goals that they were seeking to preserve at all costs. They were over here on the left hand side of the chart on the mark called competition. When you are over here, you are bound and determined that your position win and that the other position loses. With competition it is usually a win/lose proposition. You aren't interested in hearing about their concerns, fears, and personal issues. It's Biblical, and that's that.

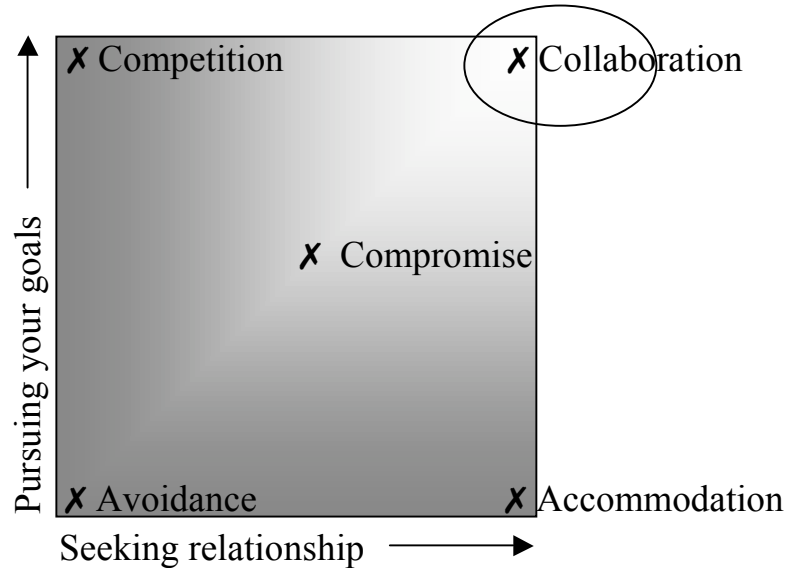


But God did a neat work over the next two years. With the realization that close friends would be divided, people began to wonder why an intelligent person like so-and-so would disagree with my obviously Biblical position. They knew the other side was not liberal. They knew they loved the Lord. They knew that they were seeking to follow the Scriptures, though the rhetoric didn't always show it. They were wondering what was going on. Thankfully, before the committee met to dialogue, they spent much time in prayer which I think helped to set the tone for the rest of what followed. Then one of our guys, I believe it was Dr. Morton Smith, asked the men on the other side a question that was something to this effect (though not in these exact words): "Before we discuss the judicial procedures which we all seem to disagree about, I want to hear about *your* fears and *your* concerns should *our* interpretation prevail. I want to understand how we can satisfy *your* concerns."

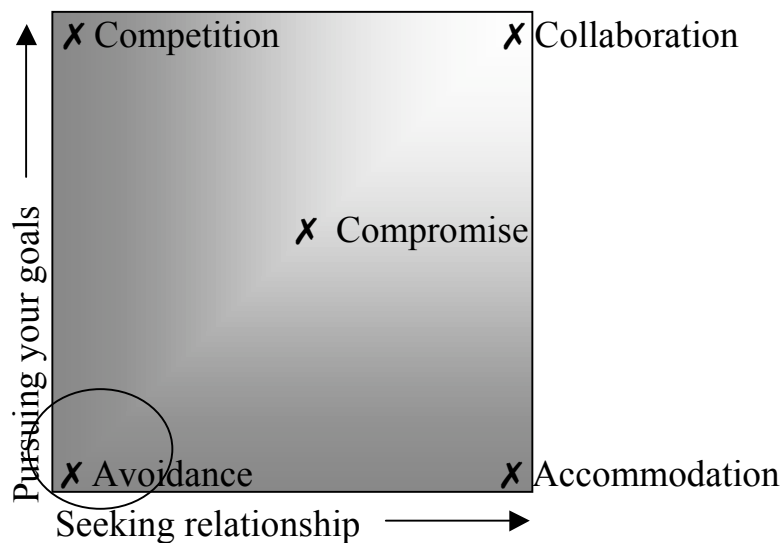


That's a question that was seeking relationship. The one who asked the question had no intention of giving up his Biblical goals. But for the first time these men began asking the questions related to the right half of the chart. They knew that they couldn't just totally accommodate the other side's position because it would put them into what they considered to be Biblical compromise (at least our side did). But they were starting to ask the questions of relationship to see if there would be any area of either accommodation, compromise or collaboration. Obviously, collaboration is the best because it is 100% a win-win situation.

Well, to continue our story, leaders from the other group gave two or three issues that they genuinely feared. Our men assured them that we wouldn't desire such an outcome either. That is not our intent. We are with you on that. We just think that your personal concerns need to be addressed in a different way. And then our side proceeded to share the interests that we were greatly concerned about, and that we believed would be absolutely destroyed if their interpretation prevailed. At least some on the other side were at least somewhat surprised. Then, rather than trying to decide right away who was right and who was wrong on the issues (which would have been an impossible task – we still disagree on those things), they first of all tried to figure out if there were any non-principial compromises that each side could make to ensure that the other party's fears were allayed and their interests were being met. Remarkably, because of the way they showed concern for each others best interests, a compromise was worked out that neither side believed would violate the Bible, and which both sides were very happy with. Sometimes compromise can be a Biblical place to be – not Biblical compromise, but compromise of our interests. But in this situation we ended up with full collaboration. We didn't have to compromise either our interests or the Bible. The compromise was simply on *how* to implement the Biblical absolutes and the personal interests of each side.



It wasn't a solution that either side considered perfect, but all sides agreed that it would completely alleviate their concerns. When this committee's report on judicial procedures was brought to the General Assembly in 2006, it was adopted – to everyone's total amazement. I said last week that it was a unanimous decision because I didn't see any hands raised in that assembly of about a 1000 delegates. But apparently I was wrong. When I looked it up in the Minutes, there were 17 people who voted against the compromise. I also found it interesting that a lot of the delegates who had voted earlier had left the assembly, and eventually left the denomination. They took this corner of avoidance down here at the bottom of the page.



They were no longer trying to pursue their goals, and no longer trying to pursue their relationship. There is a time for avoidance. Even that can be a Biblical option. Romans 16:17 says, **Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.** That's as clear a command as you can get. Avoid them. So this corner is on occasion an option. But it is the least desirable option of all. The point of this chart is that while all of the x's on the chart can be Biblical options at one time or another, the ideal is to have collaboration. And sometimes you can have it even when it seems impossible.

But back to our story, I was blown away by how a seemingly impossible task of the committee was achieved by sorting out the difference between Biblical absolutes and personal interests – and seeking to achieve both. And that's what they did in this chapter. And that's what I want to focus on for the remainder of this sermon.

### 3. The Biblical Absolutes in Acts 15

#### a) We must submit to what God has clearly spoken (vv. 7-9,15-17)

*(1) The Pharisees (vv. 1,5) could appeal to Genesis 17:14,27; 34:14,15,17,22; Ex. 4:24-26; 12:48-49; Ezek. 44:7,9)*

There were Biblical absolutes in this chapter that no one felt they could compromise. The converted Pharisees could appeal to Biblical absolutes. So could the apostles. One group of Jews had misinterpreted the Biblical absolute, but it was discussed head-on. So the question is, "Are there issues that need to be won, even if we end up on the top-left-hand corner of competition?" And the answer is, "Yes." The first issue is submission to the infallible revelation of God. And both sides wanted to submit to God's Word, and they both thought the other side did not. Ironically, they had a common starting point, and they thought that was one point of division. Does it sound like some of the modern debates that Reformed people get into? Both sides felt like the revelation of God was being compromised if their side didn't win.

But at least they had a common starting point. That's not always the case. I've had people that I finally had to part fellowship with because I could not convince them of the inerrancy of Scripture. That is an absolute without which we can't discuss anything. If you don't have the inerrancy of



the Bible, you don't have anything absolute. I don't treat a person as a Christian if they don't have that fundamental of the faith.

Now the Pharisees had a lot of Scriptures that they could appeal to. Though verse 1 is exaggerated, it is based in part on the Old Testament. **And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.** After the huge debate in Antioch (and Galatians 1-2 talks about that), it seems they had softened the message a little bit and had left the salvation part out. In verse 5 they say simply, **it is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.** They don't say "necessary to salvation," because that would be impossible to prove from the Old Testament. But they do say it is necessary. And there were plenty of Scriptures they could appeal to.

In Genesis 17, all of Abraham's Gentile servants are circumcised. We know from chapter 14 that he had 318 trained servants who were born in his household who could go to war. So during the first circumcision, there was a massive application of the rite to Gentiles. Hundreds of people were circumcised, only two of whom were part of Abraham's immediate family: Abraham and Ishmael. To be in the covenant, Gentiles in Genesis 17 had to be circumcised. And if they were *not* circumcised, Genesis 17:14 says that they were cut off from the covenant. That's a powerful text for the converted Pharisees to appeal to.

Genesis 34 is the case of Dinah. And in verse 22 it says, **Only on this condition will the men consent to dwell with us, to be one people: if every male among us is circumcised as they are circumcised.** Argument – you can't have one people in the church without circumcision. Granted, maybe Paul has proved his point and Gentiles can be converted. But we aren't one people until they get circumcised. Maybe some of these Christians were thinking like dispensationalists – that God has two peoples and two purposes, and never the 'twain shall meet.

These Jews could also appeal to Exodus 4 where Moses was almost killed by an angel for refusing to circumcise his son. Or they could appeal to Exodus 12 where foreigners were forbidden from partaking of the Passover unless they got circumcised. They could argue: "These Gentiles should not take communion. We've got Scripture to back that one up."

Or Ezekiel 44:7 and 9 which says,  
**Ezekiel 44:7 When you brought in foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in My sanctuary to defile it—My house—and when you offered My food, the fat and the blood, then they broke My covenant because of all your abominations.**

**Ezekiel 44:9** Thus says the Lord GOD: “No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart or uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter My sanctuary, including any foreigner who *is* among the children of Israel. Case closed. Gentiles have to get circumcised. And we saw last week that they got pretty emotional when Paul was teaching otherwise. It was a butting of heads over Biblical absolutes. We’ve got to give them credit for using the Scriptures.

***(2) But the apostles could appeal to God’s revelation too:***

But the apostles could appeal to God’s revelation too. Last week we read from Ephesians 3 that this doctrine of Jew and Gentile in one body was a mystery that had not been revealed before *as it had been revealed* to the apostles and prophets of the New Testament.

**(a) Peter appealed to clear new revelation (Acts 15:7-11)**

But in verses 7-11 of our chapter, Peter appeals to the crystal clear revelation of God in Acts 10 that they may no longer ostracize uncircumcised Gentiles; they could no longer call them unclean; they were to be baptized and included in the covenant; and they were one people with Israel. As James summarizes Peter’s argument in verse 14: **Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.** In the Old Testament that was not true. Gentiles (*ethne*) referred to the nations and stood in contrast with the people of God. Now we have many nations (many Gentiles) as part of the one people. That’s the mystery of Ephesians 2-3. So the first clear revelation that Peter appeals to is the one given through him in Acts 10 and then argued again in Acts 11.

**(b) Galatians is God’s clear new revelation – though it hasn’t been distributed beyond Galatia yet, it is the will of God.**

Then Paul and Barnabas are given the floor in verse 12. Paul’s book of Galatians has just recently been written. And though it has probably not been distributed very widely yet, it is clear from that book itself that Paul has already given oral communication of this infallible revelation to everyone here. And He argued that many Gentiles before the time of Abraham were saved without being circumcised. Abraham himself was saved before circumcision. In fact, Abraham was saved 24 years before he was circumcised. That’s the length of time between Genesis 12 and Genesis 17. And he gave other hints from the Old Testament that circumcision was only

a temporary provision. So in verse 12 of this chapter, Paul and Barnabas are given the floor to communicate more. We aren't told much of what they said.

**(c) James said that the new apostolic revelation was consistent with Old Testament prophetic revelation (Acts 15:14-18)**

Then James gives his exposition of Amos 9:11-12. And that is a marvelous text on eschatology, which we may look at on another Sunday. But for now I just want you to notice three things: 1) First, verse 17 indicates that Gentiles can be called by God's name and still be Gentiles. If they were circumcised you couldn't still call them Gentiles. During the time of Moses, it was not until the Gentiles were baptized and circumcised and became Jews that they would be called by God's name. And there were many, many Gentiles who became Jews. For example, Esther 8:17 says, **Then many of the people of the land became Jews...** But Amos 9 is prophesying a time when the Gentiles would not be forced to be circumcised before they would be called by His name. It's not stated explicitly, but it is implied.

2) The second thing to notice is that this means that God was not blindsided. This was not a change of plan. Verse 18 says, **Known to God from eternity are all His works.** Though He hadn't revealed all the details of the mystery in the Old Testament that he gave to Peter and all the apostles, He knew about it and hinted it would happen.

3) The third thing to notice is that James uses the term "prophets" – plural, in verse 15. It's not just Amos where this hint can be found. Many Old Testament prophets hinted the same thing. Isaiah 60 prophesies Gentiles getting saved, and subsequent to their salvation it speaks of these saved people as Gentiles, and these Gentiles are serving God. They are still called Gentiles while being treated as His people. Isaiah 66 speaks of the Gentiles being saved, nursed by the Jews, brought up by Jews and being one with the Jews. In fact, verse 21 says that God will make some of the Gentiles into Levites and priests. But they are still called Gentiles. Isaiah 19 speaks of a day in our future when Israel, Egypt and Assyria will all be saved as nations. And verse 25 says, **whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, saying, "Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.** Egypt will still be Egypt, yet called "My people" just as much as Israel was. These are only hints in the Old Testament, but they show that the Old Testament is totally consistent with this new revelation.

My favorite passage along these lines is Psalm 87 which speaks of how Zion, the city of God, will one day be the spiritual birth place of people

from all over the world. It says, **I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to those who know Me; behold, O Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia: ‘This one was born there.’** [He is saying that people from Philistia, Tyre and Ethiopia will be considered as if born in Zion, or Jerusalem. That means that they are part of Israel. Next verse:] **And of Zion it will be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her; and the Most High Himself shall establish her.’ The LORD will record when He registers the peoples [The Gentiles]; This one was born there.’**

So even though both sides appeal to Scripture, they disagree. And it becomes clear that the Pharisees had taken the Old Testament passages out of context and had misapplied them to this New Covenant situation.

### ***(3) Lessons to be learned:***

#### **(a) We should be careful with our methods of interpretation**

##### **(i) Context is king.**

And the reason I bring this up is that Christians get into arguments all the time over what they *consider* to be Biblical absolutes. But they mess up because they don't consider fundamental principles of interpretation. The first principle is that context is king. Doin't yank a passage out of context. The passages the Pharisees appealed to were intended for the time from Abraham to Christ. They weren't applicable to the New Testament. And even at the time they were given in the Old Testament that was clear. We won't look today at the ceremonial laws given in verses 20 and 29, but when you read them in Leviticus 17-18 it becomes clear that those laws were treated different in the Old Testament as well. They applied both to Jew and to the Gentile who was living in the land, whereas the rest of the ceremonial laws did not. So context is important. The Pharisees were not being sensitive to context.

##### **(ii) Our interpretation cannot contradict other Scripture.**

Second, our interpretation has to fit with the rest of the Scripture. The moment you try to explain away a verse so that it will fit with your system, you know that you are misinterpreting it. There are no contradictions. You shouldn't have to explain anything away. Every verse should fit.

##### **(iii) We should be careful not to carelessly proof-text.**

The third principle of interpretation is that we need to be careful not to carelessly proof-text. Just because a verse sounds like it fits, doesn't mean that it does. And of course the classic joke on proof texting is the person who wants to find God's will for his life. He closes his eyes, opens the Bible and puts his finger on a verse. It said, **Judas hanged himself**. Thinking that doesn't make any sense, he tried it again. This time his finger landed on the verse that said, **go and do thou likewise**. Getting nervous, he tried one more time. This time the verse said, "What thou doest, do quickly." Proof texting can get you into trouble because it often doesn't take seriously the context, audience, time period and other factors. This was the issue with the Pharisees.

**(b) We should exercise humility in debate and show teachability.**

And finally, when it comes to discussing absolutes with each other, we need to exercise humility. Be teachable. Be open minded. Don't immediately box yourselves into only one option: "I'm going to win this one or blow up the ship trying." Too many people blow up the ship trying. If we would approach such discussions with teachability and humility, we might be able to resolve far more conflicts – especially when both sides love the Lord. Keep in the back of your mind – I may be wrong in my interpretation. I don't think that I am, but I want to at least listen when the Scripture is being discussed.

**b) Jews can't treat these Gentile churches as non-Christian. Uncircumcised people without the ceremonial law can believe, be baptized in the Holy Spirit and saved (vv. 7-10)**

And I won't take the time to go through all the absolutes. But let me quickly point out that there *were* absolutes that had to be handled carefully by both sides. One issue that was critical is that blood-bought saints, who were justified, baptized by the Spirit and pleasing to God were being excluded from the church by some and treated as unbelievers. That is serious to God. He says, **Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me**. So Peter gets hard on them in verses 8-10. Peter points out the irony of this prejudice, since eleven years before this Conference, Cornelius and his relatives were admitted to the church without circumcision. And he wasn't going to retroactively kick them out. So Peter tells them to stop it in verses 7-10 and to submit to God's revelation. I have

had to do the same thing with Identity Movement racists who have visited our congregation and started making racist statements about blacks. Racism cannot be tolerated in this congregation. According to Peter it was a testing of God.

**c) We can't read people's hearts, but God can. And God saw that Cornelius was a believer (v. 8).**

Another absolute is that God alone can read men's hearts, and for us to try to do so is to play God. Verse 8 says, **God who knows the heart...** The Pharisees thought they knew better. They thought, "These Gentiles are not saved." And Peter points out that God who knows their hearts has already declared them to be saved without circumcision. There are lots of arguments that would be over and finished and settled if we would quit reading people's hearts and leave that business to God.

**d) No one has been able to perfectly keep the ceremonial law (v. 10)**

Another thing that was clear is stated in verse 10. God made it impossible to keep the ceremonial law, and for a minority to try to base salvation on keeping the ceremonial law is hypocritical in the highest degree. Verse 10 says, **Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?** He is in effect saying, "Get serious guys! Is there anyone here who has actually kept the ceremonial law perfectly? You would have to keep it perfectly if it was the basis for salvation." The term "yolk" was a technical term used by new proselytes to Judaism when they adopted the ceremonial laws of Israel. They were said to "take up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven."<sup>1</sup>

And Peter said those ceremonial laws were impossible to keep, and therefore by definition could not be the basis for salvation. If you stepped on a dead bug accidentally, you would become unclean. If a fly landed on you, or you sat on a seat that an unclean person had sat on, you had an emission, etc., etc, you became unclean. Jews were surrounded with laws designed to teach them of their need of a Savior and of the coming of Jesus. They weren't designed for all time.

**e) Jews are saved in exactly the same way as Gentiles (vv. 8,11)**

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<sup>1</sup> FF Bruce, *The Book of Acts (NICNT)*, p. 290.

Another thing that the apostles were not planning to budge on is that no one is saved by law-keeping. 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.** This was a do or die Biblical absolute: justification by faith alone, through grace alone, based on the merits of Christ alone and something which would bring glory to God alone.

**f) God was powerfully at work among the Gentiles apart from the ceremonial law (v. 12)**

A sixth absolute was that God was powerfully at work among the Gentiles apart from the ceremonial law. To deny that was to deny the apostleship of Paul. And really, it was also a denial that the kingdom had come and that Messiah had come. So there were Biblical issues to fight about. Don't get on the case of those who are engaged in theological debate. Theological soundness is important.

**4. Personal Interests in Acts 15**

**a) Jewish interests**

*(1) Danger of persecution juxtaposed to danger in testing God (v. 10).*

But there were also personal interests that were valid concerns. And because I dealt with some of these in the first sermon, I won't go into them in depth. But there was a danger of persecution from fellow Jews. As I pointed out previously, the Zealots were lynching fellow Jews who ate with Gentiles. And some of these people were thinking, "It would be a lot easier if the Gentiles would just get circumcised." It's such a small concession. But we've already seen that mandating circumcision would destroy the mystery of the Jew-Gentile body. That was a principle that no one could budge on. So when dealing with this personal interest, the danger of persecution is juxtaposed with the danger of testing God. Verse 10: **Now therefore, why do you test God...?** It's like drawing a column of pros and cons. "You can offend unbelieving Jewish Zealots (and risk danger there) or you can offend God (and risk danger there)." Well, stated that way you know what you have to choose.

*(2) Fear that Jewish culture was being destroyed (brought up again in Acts 21:21) was answered by vv. 20-21,29 and the fact that there were apostles to the circumcision (Gal. 2:7-9).*

But the second Jewish interest was simply a big misunderstanding. I got a story from a lady in Kentucky. She said,

“After directory assistance gave me my boyfriend’s new telephone number, I dialed him and got a woman. ‘Is Mike there?’ I asked. ‘He’s in the shower,’ she responded. ‘Please tell him his girlfriend phoned,’ I said and hung up. When he didn’t call back, I dialed again. This time a man answered. ‘This is Mike.’ ‘You’re not my boyfriend!’ I exclaimed. ‘I know’ he replied, ‘That’s what I’ve been trying to tell my wife for the past half-hour.’”

Wow! A huge misunderstanding. But there was that much emotional misunderstanding from the Jews over what Paul was doing with the Gentiles. They accused him of trying to destroy Jewish culture and to turn Jews into Gentiles. No wonder they were upset. Acts 21 shows that this was a lie. Paul was not out to destroy the Jewish culture. He was trying to unite Jewish and Gentile believers into one body while still respecting both cultures. So that is a very legitimate concern that is addressed very pastorally by this council. While they can’t give in on the circumcision question, because that would violate clear apostolic revelation from God, they could still be sensitive by asking the Gentiles to follow four ceremonial laws listed in verses 20 and 29. And by the way, those laws (as given in Leviticus 17-18) were always imposed on Gentiles, whereas other ceremonial laws were not. So it’s not as if they are coming up with something new. This is a perfectly logical decision. And I hope to speak on it at a later date. Those laws are so grossly misinterpreted by some.

***(3) Comfort with tradition juxtaposed to realism about the ceremonial law (v. 10)***

A third personal concern was comfort. It’s more comfortable doing it the way we have always done it. And Peter’s response in verse 10 is, “Look. Neither our fathers nor we have ever been able to completely keep the ceremonial law. So if you are talking about comfort, get real. It would be far more comfortable not to have to keep these ceremonies.” It’s amazing how resistant we can be to change. I’ve had relatives whose fears of the unfamiliar in technology have made them value the way things have been done for hundreds of years, and they’ve ended up taking three times longer to do a job. For a hobby that can be OK, but it can be disastrous in business as you become less and less competitive. Discomfort with change can be juxtaposed with realism about the disadvantages of what you are comfortable with.



***(4) Shame over peer pressure (Gal 2:11-13 countered with shame of hypocrisy (Gal. 2:11-21).***

Galatians 2:11-21 highlighted a sinful interest that Peter, Barnabas and other Jews had – wanting to look good in the eyes of their friends and fellow Jews. Shame can make people do really strange things. And it's amazing what it made Peter and Barnabas do in Galatians 2. They were willing to be hypocrites rather than facing the shame of friends thinking poorly of them.

The Smith's confessed to this sin over their own family tradition, which they were very proud of. And they had much to be proud of. Their ancestors had come to America on the Mayflower. Their line of ancestors had included Senators, Pastors, & Wall Street gurus. In fact, it was such an interesting history that they decided to compile a family history book; kind of a legacy for the children. They hired a well known author. But there was one problem. They felt ashamed of one ancestor. It was great-uncle George who was a criminal and had been executed in the electric chair. And when they discussed this with the author and explained that they didn't want his stain to ruin the book, he told them not to worry. He would handle it very tactfully. When the book appeared, the family quickly turned to the section on Uncle George. There, they read "George Smith occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution, was attached to his position by the strongest of ties, & his death came as a real shock." Now I'm sure the guy who told me that story made it up. But covering up the truth can be even more embarrassing than admitting to the truth. How many times have Christians lied to make themselves look good, little realizing the even greater shame they would face when the lie was exposed? And that was certainly the case with Peter and Barnabas who were boldly confronted by Paul about their hypocrisy. How embarrassing! So not all interests are legitimate interests. But through dialogue you can make clear that making the wrong decision will be far worse than facing the music now.

***(5) Fear of compromise answered with new revelation (vv. 7ff, 32) being consistent with Scripture ("with this the words of the prophets agree" – v. 15).***

A fifth interest of at least some of the Jews was that they didn't want to compromise the Scripture. They really had a legitimate concern with what they considered the dishonesty of calling these Gentiles part of the new Israel. But Paul's epistles show that baptism took the place of circumcision. And James does a good job of showing that Peter's revelation of salvation to the Gentiles does not make them a separate saved people. There aren't two

saved peoples. There is one people of God. So that interest could only be answered through theological dialogue. And in Paul's epistles he goes to great lengths to demonstrate this truth.

***(6) Fear of offending God answered with 1) God's displays of power among Gentiles (v. 12), 2) God's commands with respect to Cornelius (vv. 7ff), 3) Scripture (vv. 16ff).***

Fear of offending God was answered with Paul showing the incredible acts of God's power among the Gentiles in verse 12. So obviously God wasn't too offended. But more importantly, it was answered through the commands God gave to Peter, that Peter didn't want to do initially, but which God insisted that He do. In effect they were saying, "It is more likely that you will offend God if you ignore God's clear commands in Acts 10, 11 and in this chapter."

***(7) Offense of social sensibilities answered with 1) God loves the Gentile believers, 2) God is working with them, 3) we need to be sensitive to their sensibilities too.***

A seventh interest that the Jews had was that they didn't want to offend the social sensitivities of other Jews, and thus lose their opportunities to witness. And this was a legitimate concern that was addressed by the letter in verses 23-29. But verse 21 makes that very explicit. So what the apostles were doing is that they were answering the theological questions with clear theology. It doesn't matter how many personal interest equations you might bring to bear against my theological position, it won't faze me. Theological issues have to be answered from the Bible. But the personal interest questions can be answered by both Scripture and the raising of other personal interests. Compromises can be made for the good of all in the area of personal interest.

#### **b) Gentile interests**

***(1) This was playing havoc with the Gentiles (v. 19), and the same sensitivity being shown to Jews (Acts 15:20-29) should also be shown to the Gentiles (see 1 Cor. 9:19-23).***

But what about the Gentiles? They have concerns as well. Verse 19 says, **Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God.** Talk about a hazing ceremony! The

ceremonial law was placing as many obstacles in the way of Gentiles becoming Christians as you could get. Paul was saying, “I understand your concern about wanting to be effective in evangelism among the Jews. I do to. I live like a Jew when I am seeking to win Jews. But let’s be consistent. We must be willing to act like Romans in order to win Romans. The ceremonial law cannot stand in the way. Let’s not put stumbling blocks in front of the Gentiles.” The only four ceremonial laws that the Jerusalem church insisted must apply to Gentiles, Leviticus 17-18 also applied to Gentiles in the land. In other words, these laws weren’t laws designed to separate between Jew and Gentile. They were appropriately applied for all time.

***(2) Are Jews going to treat us as second class citizens (Gal. 2:11-21)? Answered by new revelation, Old Testament, church leaders, precedent, rebuke and letter.***

One of the biggest Gentile interests was to be respected and no longer treated as second class citizens. It’s hard to live constantly with racial prejudice. And this Council did much to alleviate that problem.

***(3) Will we have to get circumcised and become Jews? Unanimous answer. No.***

Another question which we won’t beat to death is, “Will we Gentiles have to get circumcised and become Jews?” And the unanimous answer of the apostles was, “No.”

***(4) Will we really have to give up bacon and sausage? Answered with letter.***

Will we have to give up bacon and sausage? And the Jerusalem Council said, “No.”

***(5) Isn’t the ceremonial law fulfilled in Christ? Aren’t we in the New Covenant? Isn’t this the age when the “mystery” of one body (Jew and Gentile) had been revealed by the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20; 3:3-6). Answered unanimously by Peter & James and the brethren.***

***(6) Is Paul’s apostleship being contested? Answered 1) being given the floor (v. 12), 2) saying that James did not authorize the Judaizer’s demands (v. 24), affirming Paul and Barnabas (vv. 25-26), supporting***

*Paul with a commission (vv. 30ff), and prophecies of Judas and Silas regarding this new mystery (v. 32).*

**5. Tips for uncovering the interests (the fears, needs, concerns, frustrations, or desires for recognition, safety, etc).**

We've already dealt with the last two interests last week, so I won't explain them now. But let me end by summing up a few principles that can help us to untangle the difference between Biblical absolutes and personal interests just like they did.<sup>2</sup>

**a) Look for options and alternative solutions.**

One illustration that is often used in conflict resolution books is the fictitious parents who were trying to settle an argument between two of their children. The children were fighting over the last orange in the house. The exasperated parents grabbed the orange, cut it in half and gave half to each one. And many people might think that this was a good solution. Let's just share. But child A ate her orange and threw the peel away while child B left the inside of the orange on the table and proceeded to use her orange peel in a cookie recipe. She wanted more orange peel, but decided to make do. Perhaps a silly illustration, but it does show that our strongly held positions are often not an either/or dilemma. It's not "Either I get the orange or you get the orange." It might be, "Why don't you eat the orange and I want to use the peel."

An English teacher was trying to explain the problem with double negatives. And he said, "In English, "a double negative forms a positive. In some languages, such as Russian, a double negative is still a negative."

"However," the teacher continued, "there is no language wherein a double positive can form a negative." A voice from the back of the room piped up. "Yeah, right."<sup>3</sup> The moment you say "never," somebody will try to prove you wrong. But my point is, look for options. Look for alternative solutions. I don't know how many times I have counseled people who have thought that there were only two options, and they have dug in their heels because they have thought the other option was not acceptable. Try to think outside the box.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of these points were suggested through the Institute for Dispute Resolution and Collins' book, *Conflict Management and Counseling*.

<sup>3</sup> SOURCE: Pastor Tim <http://www.cybersalt.org/cleanlaugh>

**b) Realize that some personal interests are often held to more vigorously than principle, even when those personal interests may be sinfully expressed.**

Second, realize that because of sinful human nature, there may be situations where people will not abandon their interest no matter how much good logic you might throw at them. You may have to deal with their interest before they are even willing to listen. One book wrote:

“Not long ago, a woman administrator at a university, angry and tearful, went into the president’s office to contest her termination. Within the first five minutes, she made it known that she was extremely upset and intended to sue the university for sexual harassment, sexual discrimination, and unlawful termination of her employment. A typical reaction from many administrators would have been to say, “Fine, we will see you in court!” The administrator might have hoped to discourage the woman’s charges by pointing out it would be years before the issue would be decided by a court of law.

“In this particular case, instincts were restrained as the lawyer-administrator searched for the reasons behind the woman’s anger. In doing so, he learned that she really did not disagree with the basis of the termination, but she had several needs in securing her next position – needs that had not been recognized by those handling the personnel matter. She really was not interested in a lawsuit, but such a threat was the only way she knew to express her dissatisfaction and draw attention to her interests. By searching for the reasons behind the former employee’s positions, the lawyer-administrator gained an understanding of her needs, which, in this case, could be satisfied without the university spending additional money.

“Months later, she wrote the administrator, and after describing her new position, ended the note by saying, ‘Thanks for all the help.’ There is no doubt years of litigation were avoided as a direct result of the administrator’s search for reasons behind the teacher’s positions.”<sup>4</sup>

That was clearly a sinful reaction on the part of the woman, but her needs for employment were so great that she probably would have never caved in – even after she got a job, because of how her security had been threatened. But that story also illustrates the next two points.

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<sup>4</sup> Gary R. Collins, *Conflict Management and Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 91-92.

**c) Resist the temptation to discuss issues before uncovering what the interests are (v. 7a)**

The third tip is that it is often wise to resist the temptation to discuss issues before uncovering what the interests are. When I was in China, a lady asked me a question related to how to make your child obey. I could have jumped straight into 15 principles of child rearing, but I asked several questions to try to uncover what was going on. In fact, I spent several minutes delving into the situation before answering. Jonathan was there, and he was surprised I didn't give her a quick answer, because the answer was quite easy. In a few minutes he realized that it was a good thing. It turned out that her disobedient son was 20 something years old, was not a believer, was not living at home, and that she was seeking to be a controlling mother. Giving an answer that would apply to a four year old would not have met her needs. In the first phrase of verse 7 it is clear that the apostles allowed a long period of discussion before finally coming to a conclusion. And that is significant, because as apostles they had the authority to just lay down the letter of the law through revelation. But they wanted to hear what the interests and other complicating factors were.

**d) Seek reasons for why those interests are held.**

A fourth tip is that it is usually wise to find the reasons for why those interests are held in the first place. You would be surprised at the variety of reasons people give. In the 1994 General Assembly case I discussed, there were several reasons people gave for voting with the majority. And some of the reasons they had I would agree with and others I would not. Several of the reasons Jews might have sided with the Judaizers were reasons that could be answered even better without going the extreme rout of the Judaizers. They could be answered by agreeing with the apostles. So if you can understand the underlying reason for the interest, you can help them solve the interest in a different way.

**e) Ask questions, listen and be alert to the unstated.**

Fifth, ask questions, listen and be alert to unstated assumptions that people might have. In verse 8 Peter hints at this problem when he indicates that God alone can know the heart. He is implying that at least some people had faulty assumptions. And last week we looked at other reasons for listening in verses 6,12 and 13.

**f) Search for common interests.**

The last tip is to search for common interests. There were three common interests that these factions had. 1) First, they all wanted to be faithful to Scripture. 2) Second, they all wanted to see God's kingdom grow. That is obvious in verses 3 and 12. The Jews in verse 3 were delighted with how the church was growing among the Gentiles. They had a genuine interest in the kingdom. In verse 12 they listen with attention. And the apostles capitalize on that common interest. 3) Third, they both were concerned with obstacles to unbelievers becoming Christians. The Jews were only thinking about the obstacles to Jewish unbelievers and the Gentiles were mainly thinking about obstacles to Gentile unbelievers. But they wanted the Gospel to go forth unhampered. The Gentiles in verse 31 did not find the restrictions on their liberty in the letter a problem. They found its sensitivity to be very encouraging. Why? They had reached common ground.

***F. Back up the decision with actions and words (vv. 22-35)***

One last point: make sure you aren't all talk and no action. Some people think that if you simply talk about your problems, you have solved the problem. Why? Because you feel better temporarily. One spouse will listen to a barrage of frustration from the other one for ten minutes, and because he or she hasn't said anything mean in response, but was gentle and understanding, they think that everything is hunky dory. They feel good because they have gotten it off their chest. But issue has never been solved.

Notice the follow-through of the Jerusalem Council: 1) They made a decision in verses 19-22, 2) wrote a letter to the churches in verses 23-29, 3) backed up the letter by sending delegates from the different factions to show their agreement in verse 30 and (finally) 4) had Judas and Silas continue to minister among the Gentiles to make sure that everything was cleared up and smoothly running in verses 32-33. Until things have been acted on, they aren't solved. In fact, the more times you talk through issues without taking action, the worse things get.

I want to reiterate what I said at the beginning. A seemingly impossible stand-off between the Judaizers and Paul was so thoroughly resolved that verse 22 says it pleased everyone. That is my desire for each of you. Obviously, this chapter doesn't say everything that could be said about conflict resolution. But I hope it has given you enough information that it has given you hope for your own conflicts. Christ is the Prince of Peace and He wants us to learn to be peacemakers too. If you want far more help than I

can give in one sermon, I urge you to buy and study the book, *The Peacemaker*, by Ken Sande. The organization that put that out also has helpful worksheets and materials for children. Most of the men at DCC have been through that book. But I recommend that the rest of you read it and apply it. That book has just about everything you will need to resolve conflicts in a godly way. Let's pray.