

7. When Conflicts Arise (4Q 2018—Oneness in Christ)

Biblical material: Acts 6:1–6; Acts 10:1–23; Matt. 5:17–20; Acts 11:3–24; Acts 15:1–22; Amos 9:11, 12; Gal. 3:27, 28.

Quotes

- Acts 15 is the center of the book of Acts. In the story-flow of Acts, the Jerusalem council resolves crucial issues and enables the gentile mission to go forward with the approval of the Jerusalem church. The council helps portray the unity of the church and helps explain the church’s transformation from being essentially Jewish toward being a predominantly gentile community freed from laws characteristic of Judaism. *Michael Morrison*
- The core of the problem is that up until Paul, Christianity was a messianic movement within Judaism. The people that were accepting Christ in Jerusalem (and even Antioch) were not rejecting the Law, they remained fully “Jewish” in every sense... This conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile (Pauline) Christians was the first major problem in the church. *Phillip J. Long*
- Disunity will come to the church when the majority seeks to impose convictions on the minority in areas that are not defined by the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Ordination should be a policy determined at the division level; it cannot become Fundamental Belief No. 29, because there is no consensus on the issue in the Church. The worldwide unity of the Church will be assured when the focus is maintained on Jesus and our shared mission outlined in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Disunity will result when all are required to come to an agreement on issues over which we have developed no consensus... We must avoid the temptation to continue to more narrowly define the truth so as to exclude those who have a different perspective. *Gordon Bietz*

Questions

What do we learn from the experience of the early church about ways to resolve conflicts? What does the Jerusalem Council teach us about how we should run our church? What are the significant features of “conflict resolution” we see operating here? How does this show unity being maintained despite differences of belief?

Bible summary

Acts 6:1–6 refers to the issue of supposed discrimination over food distribution in the early church, and how this was resolved. Acts 10:1–23 details Peter’s vision of the sheet of unclean animals, illustrating how the gospel was to go to the foreigners. Jesus makes it clear he is not setting aside the law (Matt. 5:17–20). Peter gives a report back to the leaders in Jerusalem about foreigners accepting the gospel (Acts 11:3–24). Acts 15:1–22 provides details of the Jerusalem Council and how they resolved the issue of gentile believers. In Amos 9:11, 12 the Lord refers to all nations “called by my name.” “There’s no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female—you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s children, and you are heirs of the promise!” Gal. 3:27, 28 FBV.

Comment

While our church experience is very different nearly 2000 years on from the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, it remains a very useful example of how the church dealt with what was a major issue. In fact for those early Christians, the primary issue they faced was how to deal with the change from Judaism. For there was no “thus saith the Lord” that indicated circumcision, feast days, dietary laws, ritual uncleanness etc. had been done away with. When it came to the decisions made in Acts 15, they did not take issue with anyone who continued to believe that such aspects were important. However for the foreigners, they gave only four requirements.

As we debate matters such as ordination without regard for gender in our church councils, we should take a leaf out of those early believers’ book. First, they made sure that their conclusions were Biblical, and most importantly, that they asked for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Since we have always believed in “present truth” and that this is progressive, we should certainly make the Holy Spirit central as he leads us into all truth.

Adventist theologian Raoul Dederen recommends following the same principles in our General Conference Session, “inasmuch as the latter is an assembly set up on conformity with the pattern set by God to that effect in Acts 15. This pattern includes a design that is representative and “conciliar” in character. Inspired by the scriptural model, we have labored at implementing it in the life of the church, and it seems to have worked effectively. The extent to which this conciliarity is achieved may vary, but conciliarity is what Seventh-day Adventists desire, profess, and, I hope, constantly seek afresh.” “The Church: Authority and Unity,” *Ministry* (Supplement), May 1995, p.8.

What is perhaps most interesting about the Jerusalem Council is what they did not do. They did not take a vote. James simply says, “It seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (Acts 15:28 FBV). Nor did they demand compliance, or threaten any sanctions for disobedience. They simply advised, “You will do well to observe these requirements” (verse 29, FBV). And as we see later, even their counsel was not seen as absolutely mandatory since Paul discusses the issue of food sacrificed to idols subsequently. The basis for the decision is “we shouldn’t make it difficult for foreigners who turn to God.” (verse 19, FBV). The solution was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and then implemented.

James White give this excellent conclusion: “The report of that blessed meeting at Jerusalem to settle a festering difficulty, commences on this wise: ‘For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us.’ And the brethren which were from among the Gentiles in Antioch, and Syria, and Cilicia, ‘rejoiced for the consolation.’ Differences settled in this way frequently seem more than settled, and generally remain settled; while those disposed of by the exercise of mere church authority are seldom really settled at all.” *Life Sketches* (1880), p.407.

Ellen White Comments

I saw that this door at which the enemy comes in to perplex and trouble the flock can be shut. I inquired of the angel how it could be closed. He said, “The church must flee to God’s Word and become established upon gospel order, which has been overlooked and neglected.” This is indispensably necessary in order to bring the church into the unity of the faith. {EW 100}