



## Introduction

In a civilized society, where tolerance is king, conflict over differences is unacceptable. The idea many people accept is that they should just get along, accepting everything and everyone, with no standards, no values, no right or wrong. To quote an old expression, “I’m OK. You’re OK.” In short—don’t rock the boat!

The problem is that this idea exists only in a fairyland—a land of make-believe. In the real world, where people live and rub shoulders, elbows nudge and fingernails scratch. People experience arguments in homes, fights on playgrounds, and wars between nations. If history, much less the Bible, tells us anything, this will continue until the Lord returns.

If you have attended a local body of believers for any length of time, you have probably already noticed that the fallen nature rears its ugly head concerning such unimportant matters as the type of seating in the sanctuary, the size of the tile in the entry, or the color of paint in the powder room. In light of eternity, these issues are trivial. These senseless arguments are abhorrent to God. *But there are times in the church when issues—doctrinal issues—are of such extreme importance that they cannot be ignored. Eternal consequences hang in the balance.*

We must have a clear perspective of historical conflicts within the church. I am not speaking of the Inquisition or church splits over inconsequential matters, but of legitimate controversy concerning the truth.

## Historical Perspective

Martin Luther’s study of the Scriptures led him to rebel from the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and as a result the clash between the Roman Church and the Reformers began. So you ask, “Are disagreements a bad thing?” Not necessarily! If you could have asked the Reformers who lost their lives during that time, they would have indicated the need for fighting for the truth. Obviously we should understand the potential cost of any fight, realizing the futility of actually dying for matters with little significance.

Some people think Luther overreacted, forced the issue, and pulled the trigger, causing an unnecessary conflict. He should have given it a little more time, talked it out, and come to a mutually agreed-on solution. Actually Luther did not want to leave the Roman Catholic Church. He continued to work together with church leaders. Rather than a spur-of-the-moment reaction, Luther exhausted every avenue to resolve the discord. Knowing the potential cost of rebellion, his continuing disagreement with the teaching of the Roman Church grew to what we know today as the Reformation. *Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing!*

## Biblical Perspective

The Reformation is an illustration of a conflict that is not necessarily a bad thing. But the Scriptures provide numerous examples as well. Consider four instances in both the Old and New Testaments when a *Confrontation with Truth* takes place between individuals.

## Rebellion from Truth

God gives the Law to Moses (Ex. 19-23) and, following his reading of the Book of Covenant to the people (Ex. 24), the nation said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!” Immediately Moses returned to the mountain for forty days to receive the stone tablets and instructions concerning the tabernacle (Ex. 24-31). During those forty days the people desiring to have the presence of God in their very midst built a golden calf (Ex. 32). In a little more than a month from their

promise to do all the Lord had said, defiance and rebellion against God grew and they broke the first two commandments, idol worship. When Moses reached the foot of the mountain, he heard the people celebrating and he saw the golden calf. Tablets flew and anger grew. Moses then inquired of Aaron, “What did this people do to you, that you have brought *such* great sin upon them?” There was a confrontation with truth. As a result, the nation repented (Ex. 33) and the covenant was renewed (Ex. 34). Conflicts are not necessarily a bad thing if they reveal rebellion from the truth!

### *Perversion of Truth*

During the earthly ministry of Christ, clashes occurred not with ordinary folk, but with religious leaders. At first glance, that seems strange. But when Christ explained that those devout teachers “seated themselves in the chair of Moses” wrongly interpreting the Law concerning murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, and loving their enemies (Matt. 5:21-44) and wrongly applying the Law concerning giving, prayer, fasting, money, anxiety, and judging (Matt. 6:2-7:1), you begin to understand why there was a confrontation with truth. Particularly this would become evident when Jesus proclaimed, “I am the way and the truth!” This fray highlighted the difference between truth and error. Again, disagreements are not necessarily a bad thing if they reveal perversion of the truth!

### *Hypocrisy and Truth*

Peter was in Antioch fellowshiping with Gentile believers (Gal. 2:11-14). When Jewish believers came from Jerusalem, Peter separated himself from the Gentile Christians fearing what the Jews would think. Paul confronted Peter concerning his inconsistency in “the truth of the gospel.” Again, conflicts are not necessarily a bad thing if hypocrisy concerning the truth is revealed!

### *Clarification of Truth*

The Council at Jerusalem in Acts 15:1-21 addressed a clarification of truth. Jewish believers held the position that a person is not saved by grace through faith alone. In addition, they said circumcision is required. Since this insistence on additional requirements for salvation was contrary to the teaching of Paul and Barnabas, they were called to Jerusalem to defend and discuss this issue. At the conclusion of their interaction, the council confirmed that salvation is indeed by grace through faith alone, as Paul penned in Ephesians 2:8. Again clarification of the truth is brought to light!

### **Today’s Theological Conflict**

During the past twenty-five years sabers have been rattling between those in the Reformed and the Free Grace camps over the issue of what is often called “lordship salvation.” Much has been said, some in an unflattering and even in a scandalous manner. But all in all, this clash remains primarily within the leaders’ tents (in seminary classrooms or theological writings) and most of the troops are unaware or worse, do not care, thinking this is much to do about nothing and saying, “It’s all about semantics—get over it!”

However, lordship salvation and its relationship with the interpretation of James 2 concerning faith and works is a REAL issue. Do you need only to receive the gift of salvation in Christ as Savior through faith alone, or do you need to add additional requirements (such as baptism, turning from sin, submission to lordship, or any other effort)? If there is not sufficient evidence of good works in someone’s life, is that proof he was never saved? These issues are not some skirmish over minor matters. This is a D-Day invasion where many lives are at stake—the issue is **salvation!** It cannot be dismissed as merely semantics.

### **Clarifying the Controversy**

Over time theological frameworks evolve. We see life and theology through grids that are a result of all our experiences, teachers, studies, etc. As a result, all new information approaches our unique viewpoint for processing and we accept or reject the information. My own theological grid changed drastically while attending university. Growing up in the Mormon Church resulted in a framework out of phase with orthodox, evangelical thinking. On my office wall hangs the letter of excommunication from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. It hangs as proof of my changed spiritual perspective since receiving Christ as my Savior. I see

things differently now—I had previously misunderstood the biblical relationship of works and faith.

At a seminary where I taught for a number of years, students came from various church backgrounds. Once in a *Spiritual Life* class, one particular student was formerly a Roman Catholic. He would continually confuse and inject his former Catholic concepts (his old grid) with biblical, evangelical concepts. His framework was in the process of radical change. Once during a class discussion, he blurted out, “But, wait, wait, I thought that, ugh, ugh”—pause—“Forget it, I was confusing my old Catholic teaching with this course.” He was in the process of adjusting and developing a new theological grid that would be the reference point for evaluating spiritual truth.

It does not matter how you arrived at your theological grid to this point; but one thing is certain, it affects how you understand the current conflict regarding lordship salvation.

In the movie, *A Few Good Men*, a career marine officer in charge of a strategic military base, played by Jack Nicholson, was questioned at a court-martial trial as to the accuracy of the facts presented. On the witness stand Nicholson sat with stern countenance, staring right through the prosecuting attorney. The attorney and the officer sparred back and forth, with the presiding judge intervening to keep order. The frustrated attorney finally asked, “I want the truth?” With no response forthcoming, the attorney asked again, while raising his voice, “I want the TRUTH!” Nicholson leaned forward and, with a husky voice filled with contempt, said, “*You can’t handle the truth.*”

In the movie different people had different ideas of what was meant by truth. The officer stretched the truth to fit his particular circumstances and situation. Rules were bent and different standards were applied to ensure national defense, at least from his viewpoint. Obviously the movie was make-believe. However, in reality, how we handle *the truth* in the church, in seminaries, and from behind the pulpit, is a critical matter.

Since there is **only** one correct interpretation of any given passage, we must strive to grasp it and determine if it supports or is at odds with our doctrinal positions. If contradictory, our doctrine must be realigned with the Scriptures to conform to *the truth*. How we embrace Truth is critical.

As previously discussed, conflict is not necessarily a bad thing, even when different theological positions clash. Particularly this is true if error is shown to exist when the light of the truth of Scripture is cast on it. Then the body of Christ will be the WINNER every time!

What makes up your spiritual grid? Is it being sharpened in study and debate, or are you locked into automatic pilot, deflecting all ideas that do not conform. Remember, “You stop learning when you stop asking questions!”

*Clarity of the truth is the issue;  
do not be afraid of conflict!*



## Perception of the Truth

## Concluding Thought