

THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM.

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Inasmuch as there was a council at Jerusalem (which council was temporary, for a specific object, and under the declared guidance of the Holy Ghost), many Christians now assume divine warrant for other councils, associations, conferences and assemblies, whose organization shall be self-perpetuating, with supervision and control over a number of churches, and whose decision shall be final.

Let us look at this original council, and see if there is anything in its organization, duration and authority which warrants such assumptions. The church at Jerusalem was the first local New Testament church. At the persecution of Stephen, members of this church were "scattered abroad." "Some traveled to Antioch, preaching the Lord Jesus. Many believed and turned to the Lord. When tidings of these things came to the ears of the church which was at Jerusalem, they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch; who, when he came, exhorted them all that with full purpose of heart, they would cleave unto the Lord. And much people were added unto the Lord." (Acts 11:22,23). After the departure of Barnabas and Paul from Antioch, "certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren 'except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses ye cannot be saved.'" (Acts 15:1). This the church at Antioch regarded as contrary to the teachings of Barnabas and Paul, and as an infringement upon their Christian liberty. Also, the requirement to be "circumcised," appears to have been conveyed as a command from the church at Jerusalem; for reply was, "we gave no such commandment." We now note –

1. The question to be settled was not the propriety or duty of circumcision, any where and every where, but whether any command

of its observance was from [R1087 : page 5] the mother church at Jerusalem to the church at Antioch.

Circumcision was one of those Jewish practices that did not subvert morality or true piety, and was left in observance in the churches gathered among the Jews.

Now whilst this council did not pretend to settle the propriety or impropriety of circumcision for all people, it did decide concerning those who "went out from us troubling you" – the church at Antioch – "saying you must be circumcised," – "to such we gave no such commandment." See Acts 15:24.

The one local church, guided by the Holy Spirit, as we shall see, took the occasion to decide also, "that we trouble not them which from among the Gentiles are turned unto God."

2. This convention was not composed of ministers and delegates alone, nor of ministers and "elders" alone, nor of bishops and presiding elders and deacons alone, but of the one local church at Jerusalem. Note the language – "When they," (the messengers from Antioch), "were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and the apostles and elders." v. 4. Again: "Then pleased it the Apostles and elders with the whole church." v. 22. The apostles and elders were members of the church, just as "men and brethren" were members of the church. The men were not a separate class from the brethren. The address to the "angel" – minister – of the church at Ephesus was an address to the church at Ephesus, as the context shows. See Rev. 2:1. So here. Hence when Peter and James, (the latter was pastor of the church), arose to speak, they addressed "all the multitude, men and brethren."

3. The decision was not the mere judgment of men; whether clergy or laity or both, but the decision of the Holy Ghost – for "it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us." v. 28.

4. Lest these converts from the Gentiles might infer that because they were not under obligations to observe one of the laws of Moses, they were alike exempt from all others, even such as were necessary to morality and true piety, and the canon of Scripture being not yet fully established, the church at Jerusalem, guided by the Holy Ghost, directed in reference to non-observance of heathen vices around this church and said "abstain from pollution of idols and fornication and from things strangled and from blood." Let the reader now fix in his memory the fact that the council at Jerusalem was not a body of clergymen, with delegates gathered from different provinces or districts, to decide whether a church should be formed or not, and how it should be formed; nor was it a body of clergymen and delegates met to declare that the acting pastor of a local church, within the boundary of an "association" was heterodox, and not a suitable person to be installed over another church, but it was simply one local mother church having the mind of the Holy Ghost, answering a pertinent inquiry from a child, another local church; and then, the canon of Scripture not fully complete, and the church at Jerusalem being guided by the Holy Ghost, gave instructions in reference to certain vices, which if practiced would have been subversive of true piety. This was the work and the manner of it.

Now, until these modern "councils, associations, conferences and assemblies" can show that they are, in their organization and duration, like the precedent in Jerusalem, and having also the voice of the "Holy Ghost" in the formation of their creeds, regulations and edicts, we shall challenge their assumptions, and maintain for ourselves the strict independency of the local church, guided by the now complete and inspired word.

