

ATTAINING CHRISTIAN LIBERTY.

– ACTS 15:22-33. – JUNE 8, 1902. –

"Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free." – Gal. 5:1.

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY is to be sharply differentiated from the liberty of license, lawlessness, anarchy; and this lesson furnishes a good illustration of this fact. To the Jews who had been under the Mosaic ritual and its washings, fastings, feasts, new moons, sabbaths and holy days, Christian liberty meant a release from a considerable measure of these institutions, many of which were typical and educational – suited to the "house of servants," but not appropriate to the "house of sons." To the Gentiles, to whom God had never given the Law, and who were therefore not under any of its provisions or conditions or requirements, but who were under certain superstitions, wrong appetites and customs, Christian liberty meant the abrogation of all [R3018 : page 167] wrong customs and superstitions, and, additionally, the imposing of a law; – not the Mosaic Law and its institutions and ceremonies, however, but "the Perfect Law of Liberty;" the "Law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus" – restraints of the will of the flesh, under the law of love. (Jas. 1:25; Rom. 8:2.) We are not to be surprised that both Jews and Gentiles, coming from opposite directions into the Church of Christ and its perfect law of liberty, were somewhat confused and bewildered respecting its requirements and proprieties.

It was nearly twenty years after the day of Pentecost that the conference noted in our lesson took place in Jerusalem. It was held for the purpose of reaching a decision respecting this very subject – the Law of Christ, its bearing upon Gentile converts, and upon Jewish converts – to what extent the Mosaic requirements were abolished as regarded the Jews, and to what extent the Law of Christ put restraints upon the converts from amongst the Gentiles, and to what extent these

two classes, previously separated socially and religiously, by the requirements of the Mosaic Law, might now come together with full brotherly fellowship and affinity, without the violation of the consciences of any, and without unnecessary restraint of the liberties of any.

The Church at Antioch had become the center of Christianity amongst the Gentiles, and Jews born in Gentile lands. Its Gentile surroundings, no less than its membership, tended to cultivate in it a broad spirit of Christian liberty; – some of its membership, under the influence of brethren who had come from Jerusalem, feared that it had gone too far in the matter of Christian liberty, and held that Gentiles, upon accepting Christ through faith, should likewise accept Judaism and the Mosaic Law, and come as fully under the conditions of these, including circumcision, as tho they had been born Jews. Certain brethren who had recently arrived from Jerusalem accentuated these fears, and as a result there was quite a dissension in the Antioch Church, amounting, as the Greek word shows, almost to a schism, a split. But the right spirit evidently prevailed; because, instead of splitting over a vexed question, each party respected the conscientious convictions of the other, and it was wisely determined to appeal the matter to the Church at Jerusalem for such words of counsel and advice as its leaders, the apostles and elders, should see fit to give. The Antioch brethren evidently had full confidence that God had appointed the apostles, and that their conclusion on the matter would ultimately be the correct one. At the same time, knowing that the brethren at Jerusalem were surrounded by the Judaizing **[R3018 : page 168]** influence, tending rather to narrowness of view as respected the Mosaic customs, they sent their two leading representatives, Paul and Barnabas, to present before the Jerusalem Council the views which seemed to the majority of the Church to be the correct ones, – that thus the entire subject might be fully, fairly, thoroughly investigated, and the mind of the Lord determined as accurately as possible.

This was a beautiful spirit – the right spirit; far more commendable in God's sight and in the judgment of sound-minded men than any immoderate course they could have taken. People who take the immoderate course are generally those who do not have sufficient faith in the Lord as the real Head of the Church, and in his overruling providence in the affairs of those who are seeking to know and to do his will; – they are generally those who feel too much self-assurance, as did even the meek Moses, when he erred in smiting the rock in the wilderness the second time saying: "Ye rebels, must we fetch you water out of this rock?" – Num. 20:10.

The truth has nothing to lose by fairness, openness, and a reasonable moderation and the turning on of all light obtainable. And while the Church at Antioch evidently had great confidence in Paul and Barnabas, they properly also had great confidence and respect for the apostles at Jerusalem, and reasoned that since these men all gave evidence that they were truly the Lord's special servants and mouthpieces, it would be strange indeed if meeting together and hearing all that could be said on both sides of the question, they could not arrive at a unanimous decision respecting the Lord's will, that would assure the Church in general. We commend this noble principle which is as applicable now as it was then. Today, however, as we cannot refer questions to the living Apostles, we must refer them to the recorded teaching of our Lord and the apostles, – seeking assistance in this amongst the brethren who appear to have the best knowledge of God's Word and the greatest insight into the divine plan.

EN ROUTE TO THE JEWISH CONFERENCE.

The journey from Antioch to Jerusalem brought Paul and Barnabas in contact with many of the household of faith, a few, here and there, in almost every city through which they passed. Of course, the brethren were glad to hear, as these ex-missionaries were glad to tell them, of God's favors upon their missionary labors in Galatia and vicinity; and altho the brethren reached were almost exclusively

Jewish converts, it is with pleasure we read that the report "caused great joy unto all the brethren." (Acts 15:3.) This shows that they had the true Christian spirit – that they had largely, if not completely, lost the Jewish prejudice and jealousy, as concerned the giving of the gospel to the Gentiles. It shows us that with the majority of the previously Jewish brethren the contention for the Mosaic Law and ceremonies implied no opposition to the Gentiles themselves, but merely a confusion of mind concerning the Lord's will on these subjects; – they had not yet discerned the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the divine plan, as they subsequently learned these, and came to appreciate the perfect Law of Liberty wherewith Christ make free indeed, in the true sense, all who become truly his.

Arrived at Jerusalem, the representatives of the Antioch congregation were met with a hearty welcome, for such is the significance of the Greek word rendered "received," in verse 4. As they had given to the others en route, so the returned missionaries gave the Jerusalem brethren detailed accounts of the Lord's blessing upon their journey, telling what miracles and wonders he had wrought, that a considerable number had believed, and how loyal, faithful and enduring were some of these newly-found brethren in Christ, who had previously been aliens, strangers, Gentiles.

There is some reason for believing that previous to this Paul and Barnabas and Titus had made a visit to Jerusalem, in which they did not, as now, appear publicly before the congregation to give their testimonies, but had secret conferences with the apostles and chief brethren, Paul explaining to them what he understood to be the perfect Law of Liberty under the New Covenant – the will and plan of God regarding the gospel amongst the Gentiles. It would appear that the apostles had been largely influenced by those presentations, altho they had not uttered any public testimony on the subject, nor engaged in any manner in the missionary work amongst the Gentiles. Apparently they had not considered it necessary to stir up the subject to any extent, and thus possibly to breed more or less of strife amongst the Jewish

converts. Thus the subject had been left for some years for gradual development and enlargement of heart and mind on the part of the believers. This thought is based upon the Apostle Paul's statement in his letter to the Galatians, on this subject. – Gal. 2.

But now the question of receiving Gentiles, and how they should be treated, and what were their obligations, etc., came up in a natural way, without forcing – rather, it forced itself for decision. The apostles and elders heard the reports of God's blessing upon the Gentiles, and offered no objection, evidently being quite in accord with the matter from the first; but, as was to be expected, there was dissatisfaction amongst brethren who previously had been Pharisees. This sect of the Jews was firmly set, not only for the Law of Moses and all of its ceremonies, but also for many additions and accretions to it; so that they were quite dissatisfied, we remember, with our Lord's observance of the Law, which we know was perfect. These, in all honesty, objected that the missionaries were too lax, too slack in their work, and that all believers should be required to be circumcised and to keep the Mosaic laws respecting fasts, new moons, sabbath days, washings, etc.

Thus the question was brought forward, and a special meeting was appointed, at which the apostles and elders heard all that was to be said on the subject, – and we read that there was "much dispute." We do not want to say a word in favor of disputes, wrangling, etc., amongst the Lord's people. On the contrary, we understand the Scriptures to teach that wranglings in general are improper, out of order, injurious to the interests of the Church and of the truth; – because such wranglings and disputes are generally about things to no profit, but to the subverting or unsettling of the believers, and especially of those who **[R3018 : page 169]** are new or weak in the faith. But it is a different matter when the question is an important one, as was this under discussion; and at such a time dispute, in the proper manner, with the spirit of love, with force and yet with kindness, love and gentleness of word and manner, is most appropriate.

We rejoice that there was such a spirit of broadmindedness in the early Church as is represented by this statement – we rejoice that when an important subject was to be considered, with a view to knowing the mind of the Lord, that there was fullest liberty granted for as much dispute or debate, in a proper manner, as was necessary to bring the whole subject before those who had it under consideration. There is a difference, however, between disputes and discussions inside the pale of faith and disputes outside **[R3019 : page 169]** that boundary. As the Apostle says, "He that is weak in the faith receive ye [do not reject him because he has not such full, strong, vigorous faith as we should like to see], but not to doubtful disputations" – do not receive him to dispute his doubts, – what he does not believe. Let him have a full opportunity for hearing the faith discussed; if his doubts do not then disappear probably he himself will disappear, – drop out of the assembly. In harmony with this we are not to recognize disputes respecting the *foundation principles* of the gospel of Christ. The Church is composed only of those who recognize the foundation – that Christ died for our sins, for our redemption from sin and from its penalty; and that all who would share his blessing must accept these simple facts of his death for us and his resurrection by the power of God for our ultimate deliverance; – and then in harmony with their desire to be his disciples they must make a consecration of themselves to him, to do his will and to serve his cause. These foundation principles of the Church of Christ are not subject to dispute. Those who reject these are not of the Church and should not be heard in the Church. They are intruders; doubtless wolves in sheep's clothing, of evil and not of good intentions and ultimate results.

But as respects discussions amongst those who are truly the Lord's on any point of importance, – opportunity for freedom of discussion, within reasonable limits, is absolutely necessary to spiritual health and progress. To shut it off means to crush proper activities of thought, and in many instances means to accumulate a force which would ultimately result in an explosion, which would be damaging in some respects at least. Let us remember, in this matter,

the Golden Rule; and let us accord to others differing from us the same reasonable liberty, inside the boundaries of foundation principles, that we would like to have them accord to us, if our positions were reversed.

The fact that the question at issue was – the obligation of Gentile converts to the Law, is not to be understood as signifying that the Law of Moses was recognized as being of binding force upon Jewish converts. All were bound to concede that the Law-Covenant had saved none – that Christ's fulfilment of it brought all under divine grace. It was more a question of usage – the Jews were used to circumcision which preceded the Law, used to abstaining from pork, not only merely because the Law forbade it, but because aside from the Law they considered it unclean. What the Jew did in the exercise of his liberty he thought the Gentile should be forced to do; – a very common error with many. It requires development to learn to use our consciences and liberty and to let others use theirs, even tho they differ.

When a fair hearing had been granted to both sides of the question, Peter, one of the leading apostles, and doubtless the eldest, rehearsed his experiences with Cornelius; then Paul and Barnabas were heard, and James closed the discussion. All upheld the teachings and practices of Paul and Barnabas, and cited the leadings of the Lord's spirit, as well as the prophecies of the Old Testament in corroboration of this position which, doubtless, as above suggested, they had held tentatively for some time, tho they only now thought it necessary to make a public statement regarding it. The conclusion was satisfactory to the apostles and elders and the whole Church; and an answer in harmony with this was sent to the friends at Antioch, Syria, and throughout Silicia – the regions which had been affected by the Judaizing teachers. It is here that the lesson proper begins.

To give weight to the letter, two of the prominent brethren of Jerusalem were sent with Paul and Barnabas and the letter, that they

might confirm the letter orally, and thus establish the hearts of those who had been somewhat troubled by the false teachings. The letter first disclaims any authority for those persons who had, however honestly intentioned, taught error with truth, and confused the hearts of the believers on the subject of circumcision and the Law. It states also the conclusions of the conference, and commends Barnabas and Paul, calling them "beloved," and noting the fact that they had hazarded their lives in the Lord's cause. The decision rendered is expressed as being the mind of "the holy spirit and us." We may reasonably presume that the meaning of this is that the Church not only found the teachings of the Scripture and the leadings of the divine providence to be in favor of the acceptance of the Gentiles to Christian liberty, without becoming Jews or coming under the Law, but that this finding of the Lord's will was not against the wishes or prejudices of the apostles and elders at Jerusalem; – that it found a ready echo, a hearty response in their hearts.

RECOMMENDATION RESPECTING OUTWARD CONDUCT.

God's dealings and instructions commended themselves both to their hearts and to their reasons, and covered four points. **(1)** Abstaining from meats offered to idols, which might appear to be giving sanction to idol worship. **(2)** Abstaining from the eating of the blood of animals. **(3)** Abstaining from eating things that had been strangled, in which the blood would remain, which would imply the eating of blood. **(4)** The avoidance of fornication.

In considering these rules we are to keep in memory the circumstances and conditions of the times, and the objects sought to be attained. **(1)** The idol worship which prevailed at that time had connected with it a great deal of sensuality, which would be contrary to the spirit of Christ in every sense of the word. **(2)** The object was to permit a ground of fellowship and brotherhood between those whose previous experiences and instructions had been lax, and those whose

previous instructions had been rigid. And the things here required of the Gentiles were not [R3019 : page 170] merely features of the Mosaic Law, for the forbidding of the use of blood, and the explanation that it represented the life, was given long previous to Moses' day – to Noah after the flood, when he and his posterity were granted the privilege of eating meat, because of the changed conditions and the impoverishment of the race, and the need of more stimulating food. The use of blood was still more common then than now, being used not only in blood puddings, but also as a drink mixed with wine, as some today use beef extract blended with wine.

The message was received in faith by all, and caused universal rejoicing in the Church. There was a general recognition of the Lord's providential care in the Church's affairs, and this faith and confidence in God prepared all parties to receive the message on this subject, which they believed God would assuredly give them, and which they had rightly looked for through the channels which God had previously been using for their blessing and edification. Thus we have a lesson respecting the proper course of the Lord's dear people today, – not to carry disputes, even on important matters (not fundamental) to the length of rupture, division, but, with hearts anxious to know and to obey the truth, inquiry should be made of the oracles of God, and the results, after a fair hearing of all the testimony, should be conclusive, satisfactory, and bring consolation – peace and joy – so that the unity of the faith in the bonds of love may continue within the walls of Zion.

The two brethren who came as representatives of the Jerusalem Church were prophets, or public teachers, and, as was intended, they exhorted the Church in harmony with the letter they bore, and confirmed and strengthened them. Thus what might have been a serious rupture, resulting in much damage and in many roots of bitterness, antagonisms, etc., became really a means of increased blessing to all connected therewith, because wisely and properly handled. May such occasions be likewise treated by the Lord's people today, and with similar blessed results, under the guidance of the same

Lord and Master who more than eighteen centuries ago guided by his Word and spirit.

THE LIBERTY WHEREWITH CHRIST HAS MADE US FREE.

Our Golden Text is a precious one. The value of true liberty amongst the Lord's people cannot be overestimated. It becomes a part of their very life. It was because, under a wrong conception of union, this spirit of true liberty was crushed out of the Church shortly after the apostles fell asleep in death that the "dark ages" resulted, – with all their ignorance, superstition, blindness, persecution, etc. The Reformation movement of the sixteenth century was but a re-awakening of the spirit of liberty mentioned in our text, – liberty to think inside the foundation lines of the doctrines of Christ; – liberty to believe as much or as little more, in harmony with this, as the mental conditions and circumstances will permit, without being branded as a heretic or persecuted by brethren, either in word or deed.

Strange to say, a peculiar combination – of too much liberty and too little liberty – is creeping over nominal Christendom today. The too little liberty feature objects to any discussion of the doctrines of Christ, and the teachings of the apostles, for fear some differences of opinion should be manifested. This is an endeavor to have an outward "union" without a union of the heart and a union of the head. It is injurious, both to those who hold the error, which cannot be exposed, and injurious also to those who hold the truth and who permit themselves thus to be bound, and hindered from growth in grace and knowledge by the proper exercise of the liberties wherewith Christ has made his people free. The general trend along this line favors the covering over, the concealment, of truths as well as errors, in a wrong assumption that the appearance of union will serve the purpose of real union, and be really effective as respects the prosperity of the true members of the body of Christ. **[R3020 : page 170]** Such a false union, however, is coming and will be effected, and to such extent cause

prosperity in the nominal church, but only for a brief season, when the time of trouble shall overwhelm all.

On the other hand the too great liberty which we see drawing on, is that represented by the teachings of the higher critics and evolutionists. Their teachings are given in quiet, in the theological seminaries, at the fireside, in the daily interchanges, and in the pulpit; and any attempt to contradict these false doctrines is tabooed, as being calculated to stir up strife, and destroy the unity of the Church. Thus the too great liberty and the too great bondage are working together in the nominal church systems today, to thoroughly expel and ostracize the truth, and all who love it and wish to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free. It is calculated to install and multiply and qualify and honor the error, which so rapidly is gaining control, altho the control be generally denied. Let all who are the Lord's people, and who have tasted of the liberty wherewith Christ makes free, see to it that they stand fast in that liberty, and as soon as an attempt is made to restrain it, if not sooner, let them get out completely from all the bondages of human systems, that they may stand firmly and loyally with the Lord, our Redeemer, our Instructor, our King.

The question may arise, Does this direction to abstain from meat offered to idols conflict with the Apostles' later teachings addressed to the Corinthians? (I Cor. 8.) We answer, No. The Apostle is not advocating the eating of meat previously offered to idols; but on the contrary, is answering some who so practiced. He is admitting the logic of their argument, that an idol being nothing but so much wood or metal or stone the meat could be neither benefited nor injured by the offering. But he shows that the restriction should be practiced in the interest of some of less logical mind who would be unable to comprehend this and who would thus be led to defile their consciences, and thus into sin; – which might abound more and more, eventually, to their destruction. For the voice of conscience must be obeyed: it is at our peril that it is violated – no matter how erroneous

and superstitious may be its standards. Let conscience be educated; but let its ignorance never be violated. Every violation of conscience is so much of character destruction. All need to remember this in respect to their own consciences as well as in dealing with others – especially with children.

