

SETTLING DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES

– ACTS 15:1-35. – MAY 23 –

Golden Text: – "We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they." – V. 11.

THE season of peace and prosperity, growth in knowledge and in numbers in the early Church, was followed by a season of contention and differences at Antioch. Paul and Barnabas returned from their missionary tour, and reported to the congregation which had sponsored their journey expenses. Together they, the Church and their missionaries, rejoiced in their mutual service for the Gentiles. The cause indeed was quite prosperous everywhere. Then came from Jerusalem, the headquarters of the Church, certain brethren, Hebrews by birth, who, perceiving that the Gentile Christians ignored circumcision, raised a great commotion on that score, claiming that circumcision would not save without Christ, neither would Christ's salvation be operative without circumcision. The minds of many were disturbed, and for a time a split in the Church seemed probable. But better counsels prevailed and their beloved brethren, Paul and Barnabas, were sent to Jerusalem as a committee to confer with the Apostles and Elders there. Our lesson tells of this Conference and its results.

Incidentally we remark upon the wisdom shown by these early Christians – they had "the spirit of a sound mind." They had indeed great confidence in Paul and Barnabas and realized that under their ministrations they had already received great blessings from the Lord, which fact rather contradicted the idea that they could not be esteemed proper subjects for Divine favor without circumcision. They did wisely, therefore, to consider that the will of the Lord on the subject was positive and that his will would be indicated through the Apostles, of whom our Lord had said, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye

shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven." These Apostles, then, might properly be expected to know and to be able to advise, whether circumcision would be a bounden obligation upon the Gentiles as upon the Jews, or whether they would be loosed from that obligation which had been placed upon Israelites – upon all of Abraham's family.

THE JERUSALEM CONFERENCE

The kindly deference of the Apostles, one to the other at the Conference, is quite marked in this account. It is also noticeable that they based their conclusions on the subject on what they found written in the Scriptures (the Old Testament) and their leadings of Divine providence. Gradually for several years the Truth had become more and more plain to them; how that the special favor of God to the Jews had given place to a general favor toward people of every nation, so that all men everywhere believing in the Lord, accepting his promises and consecrating their lives in harmony therewith, might **[R4374 : page 117]** henceforth have equal privileges and advantages with those of Hebrew birth. They knew of God's covenant relationship with that nation, and it took time for them to become convinced that the Divine program had taken another step forward. Similarly in the end of this age there are many who realize that only a "little flock" has been called and has responded, sacrificed, under the present High Calling. It is difficult for these to grasp the thought that a change of dispensation is at hand and that God intends to complete the work of this age for the "elect" and to inaugurate a new work for the new age, for the non-elect, for the benefit of "all the families of the earth."

The conclusions of the Conference are given us in few words, namely, that so far as God is concerned, he had recognized believers of Gentile birth by his holy Spirit in just the same way in which he had recognized believers of Hebrew birth, "and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith."

(Acts 15:9.) What more could be asked? And these Gentiles had received all this favor of God without having come under the *bondage* of the Law Covenant. Why, they wisely asked, should we put a yoke upon them, when God has made no such requirement? They realized that the Law Covenant was indeed a yoke. More than this, that it was so heavy a yoke that neither they nor their fathers had been able to bear it. Christ had relieved them of the yoke of the Law Covenant. Why should they put it upon brethren to whom the Lord had never given it?

Going beyond this, even, they recognized that in some respects the Gentile, free from the Law, never having come under that yoke, held the superior position of the two; hence the statement, "We (Hebrews) believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ *we* shall be saved, even as *they* (Gentiles)."

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

We have in Vs. 22-29 the decision of the Apostles on the question. They not only wrote it out, but sent it at the hand of two of their trusted brethren, Judas-Barnabas and Silas, with Paul and Barnabas, that they might have the matter in written and in oral testimony. The declaration was that the disquieting teachings had not been authorized by the Apostles at Jerusalem. Then they briefly summed up, not as Law, but as "necessary things," the following:

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- (1) Abstain from sacrifices to idols;
- (2) And from blood;
- (3) And from things strangled;
- (4) And from harlotry.

It was not intimated that abstinence from these things would make them Christians, for nothing but faith in Christ and

consecration to him and endeavor to walk in his steps could constitute them Christians. By these recommended abstentions they declared, "It will be well with you"; you will find these recommendations profitable to you as followers of the Lord. As a matter of fact, the Apostle Paul has pointed out most forcefully that "Love is the fulfilling of the Law," because love for God would control the life as respects holiness, and love for our neighbor as respects earthly justice. The things here recommended were necessary to a preservation of the fellowship of the "Body" composed of Jews and Gentiles of their different education and sentiments. Without discussing whether or not harm could come to the meats sold in the markets, by reason of pagan ceremonies in connection with their killing, the advice was that these be abstained from, because Jews certainly would consider the eating of such meats as participations in the heathen idolatry – even though from the broad standpoint of fact the idol, being nothing but wood or metal or stone, could neither profit nor injure the food. Nevertheless, it was advisable that the Gentile Christians abstain from the use of their liberty in this direction, out of deference to the weaker brethren, Jews and Gentiles, who could not so deeply philosophize and whose consciences might be injured.

A similar thought attaches to the prohibition of the use of blood. To the Jew it was forbidden, and under his covenant it was made a symbol of life – to partake of it would imply responsibility for the life taken. Moreover, in the typical ceremonies of the Law the prohibited blood was used as a symbol representing the sin-offering; for by the blood atonement for sins was effected. To emphasize these typical lessons the Jew had been forbidden to use blood. And there may be other, sanitary, reasons connected with the matter, which are not yet known to us. These prohibitions had never come to the Gentiles, because they had never been under the Law Covenant; but so deeply rooted were the Jewish ideas on this subject that it was necessary to the peace of the Church that the Gentiles should observe this matter also. The things strangled

meant animals taken in traps, whose blood was not shed or drained out by bleeding to death, as the Jewish Law required of all meats that should be eaten. This restriction was necessary to the harmony between the two branches of spiritual Israel – that which came from Judaism and that which came from the Gentiles.

If they did not wish to be contentious and cause divisions in the Church, the Gentile brethren would surely be willing to restrain or sacrifice their liberty respecting these matters. The fourth restriction specified was "fornication," the Greek signifying "harlotry." It is difficult to understand why one moral precept should be thus separated from others and placed on the list with ceremonial requirements. We incline rather to ask, Why not have included profanity, drunkenness, idolatry, adultery, false witness, murder, etc.? Are we to understand that the Gentiles are free to commit all the crimes in the calendar not stipulated by this Conference, and merely counseled respecting meats offered to idols, or that have died by strangulation – and the use of blood and fornication? Surely not. Rather all the requirements of the Law are included in the one law of the New Creation – Thou shalt love the Lord and thy neighbor.

Love would cover idolatry, profanity, murder, theft, false witness, adultery, but the law of Love would not so thoroughly cover the items enumerated by the Counsel. These were necessary, proper, and we are to recognize the authority of the Apostles to "bind things on earth," and that they were so guided in their public utterances that they bound nothing unnecessarily, nothing contrary to the Divine will. It is our opinion, therefore, that these items thus superadded to the Law of Love should be observed by all spiritual Israelites as representing the Divine will. As a matter of fact nearly all the butchering for our markets is in harmony with the Jewish regulations, although many Jews decline to recognize this and eat only such meats as have been inspected and approved by their rabbis. **[R4375 : page 117]**

The wise course pursued brought its good results. Harmony prevailed, unity of spirit, fellowship amongst the members. The secret of this lay in the fact that the Lord was recognized as having the supervision of the Church's affairs, and as guiding her course and directing her way through the appointed channels, the Apostles. Similarly to-day, where honesty of heart prevails amongst the Lord's people, schisms, divisions, should be unknown. The Lord's guidance and instruction should be sought – his Word through the Apostles. Moreover, the Lord has been pleased since the Apostles fell asleep to use faithful brethren in the Church as finger-boards to indicate the right path, in harmony with his Word through the Apostles and prophets. The thing necessary is the pure heart and the honest conscience and the humble spirit.

"We would be one in hatred of all wrong,
One in our love of all things sweet and fair;
One with the joy that breaketh into song,
One with the grief that trembles into prayer,
One in the power that makes Thy children free
To follow truth, and thus to follow Thee."

