

THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

– *MAY 28. – ACTS 15:22-33. –*

THE FIRST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF THE CHURCH – "THE SPIRIT OF A SOUND MIND" IN SETTLING DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES – THE YOKE OF THE LAW COVENANT VS. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY – THE DECISION OF THE APOSTLES ON THE QUESTIONS AT ISSUE – LESSONS FOR OUR DAY – LIBERTY IS NOT LICENSE.

**"The Liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free."
– Galatians 5:1.**

WHEN St. Paul and Barnabas had made their report to the Church at Antioch, both the congregation and their missionaries rejoiced in their mutual service for the Gentiles. The Lord's Cause was indeed quite prosperous everywhere for a season. But this period of peace, prosperity, growth in knowledge and in numbers was followed by a season of contention and differences at Antioch. From Jerusalem, the headquarters of the Lord's work, there came certain brethren, Hebrews by birth, who, perceiving that the Gentile Christians ignored circumcision, raised a great commotion on that score, claiming that as circumcision would not save without Christ, neither would Christ's salvation be operative without circumcision.

The minds of many in the Church were disturbed by these assertions, and for a time a split in the Church seemed probable. But better counsels prevailed; and their beloved brethren, St. Paul and Barnabas, were sent to Jerusalem, as a committee to confer with the Apostles and Elders there. Today's Study 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." (2 Timothy

1:7; James 3:17,18.) They had indeed great confidence in St. Paul and Barnabas, and realized that under the administrations of these two faithful brethren the Church at Antioch had already received great blessings from the Lord; and that this fact rather contradicted the idea that they could not be esteemed proper subjects for Divine favor without circumcision. They acted wisely, therefore, in considering that the Lord's will on the subject was positive; and that His will would be indicated through the Apostles, to whom He 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." (Matthew 16:19; John 20:21-23.) The Apostles might therefore properly be expected to know whether or not the Gentile Christians were free from that obligation which had been placed upon all the descendants of Abraham.

THE JERUSALEM CONFERENCE

At the Conference, the kindly deference of the Apostles, one to the other, is quite marked. It is also noticeable that they based their conclusions on what they found written in the Old Testament Scriptures and on their leadings of Divine providence. For several years the Truth had gradually become more and more plain to them. They saw 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 who believed in the Lord, accepted His promises and consecrated their lives in harmony therewith, might henceforth have equal privileges and advantages with those of Hebrew birth. They knew of God's covenant relationship with the nation of Israel; 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 of God, and has responded, sacrificed under that High Calling. It is difficult for these to grasp the thought that a change of dispensation is at hand; and that God

purposes to complete the work of this Age for the Elect and then to inaugurate a new work 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 bestowing upon them 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; 10:44-47.) What more could be asked? These Gentiles had received all this favor from God without having come under the bondage of the Law Covenant. Why, they wisely asked, should they put a yoke upon the Gentiles when God had made no such requirement? They realized that the Law Covenant was indeed a yoke so heavy 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 not given it? – Romans 3:19.

Even going beyond this, they recognized that in some respects the Gentiles held the superior position; for they were free from the Law, never having come under that yoke. 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

In Verses 22-29 of today's Study we have the decision of the Apostles on the question at issue. They not only wrote it out, but sent it at the hand of two of their trusted brethren – Judas Barsabas and Silas – with St. Paul and Barnabas, that the Church at Antioch might have the matter in both written and 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: (1) Abstain

from meats offered (sacrificially) 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 one a Christian; for nothing but faith in Christ and consecration to Him and endeavor to walk in His steps could constitute any one a Christian. 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" (Romans 13:10); for love for God would control the life as respects holiness, and love for our neighbor as for ourselves would control as respects earthly justice.

THE NECESSITY FOR THESE RESTRICTIONS

The things recommended by the Conference were necessary to a preservation of the Body of Christ, composed of Jews and Gentiles of 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 the killing of animals, the Conference advised that these be abstained from, because Jews would certainly consider the eating of such meats as participation in heathen idolatry – even though from the broad standpoint of fact the idol, being nothing but wood or stone or metal, 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, **[R5892 : page 138]** 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. (Leviticus 17:10-14.) Under the Law Covenant, blood was made a symbol of life; and to partake of it would therefore imply responsibility for the life taken. Moreover, in the typical ceremonies of the Law the prohibited blood was used as

a symbol to represent the sin-offering; for atonement for sins was effected by the blood. To emphasize these typical lessons the Jew had been forbidden to use blood. There may be other reasons, sanitary or otherwise, connected therewith, but not yet known to us.

These prohibitions had never come to the Gentiles; for 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 were to 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 – previously separated by the Law Covenant. If the Gentile brethren did not wish to be contentious and cause division in the Church, they would surely be willing to restrain or sacrifice their liberty respecting these matters.

The last restriction specified was harlotry. The idol worship which prevailed at the time of our Study had connected with it a great deal of sensuality, which would be contrary to the Spirit of Christ in every sense of the word. It is difficult, however, to understand why one moral precept should be thus separated from others and placed on the list with ceremonial requirements. We incline to ask why were not included profanity, drunkenness, idolatry, adultery, false witness, murder, etc. Are we to understand that the Gentiles are free to commit all crimes not stipulated by this Conference?

Surely not! Rather, all the requirements of the Law are included in the one Law of the New Creation – Love for God and man. Love would cover profanity, murder, theft, false witness, adultery; but the Law of Love would not so thoroughly cover the items enumerated by the Council at Jerusalem. We are to recognize that the Apostles

were Divinely authorized 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.

GOOD RESULTS FROM THIS WISE COURSE

The message sent by the Conference to the Church at Antioch was received in faith by all, and caused great rejoicing in the Church. 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 affairs of the Church, and as guiding her course and directing her way through the appointed channels, the Apostles.

Similarly today, where honesty of heart prevails amongst the Lord's peoples, schisms, divisions, should be unknown. The Lord's guidance and instruction should be sought – His Word through His Apostles. Moreover, since the Apostles fell asleep, the Lord has been pleased 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 to each is the honest conscience, the humble spirit, and the pure heart.

We rejoice at the evidences that in the early Church there was such a spirit of broadmindedness as is represented in today's Study. We rejoice to know that when an important subject was to be considered, with a view to discerning the mind of the Lord, there was full liberty granted for as much dispute or debate, in a proper manner, as was necessary to bring the entire subject before those who had it under consideration. There is a difference, however,

between discussion inside the pale of faith and disputes outside that boundary. As St. Paul says, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations" – do not receive him to dispute his doubts – what he does not believe. (Romans 14:1.) Let him have a full opportunity for hearing the faith discussed. If his doubts do not then disappear, he will probably drop out of the assembly.

AS TO WHO COMPOSE THE CHURCH

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 redemption from sin and its penalty; that all who would share His blessings must accept the simple facts of His death for us and His resurrection by the power of God for our ultimate deliverance; and that then, in harmony with the desire to be His disciples, they must consecrate themselves fully 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 principles are not of the Church, and should not be heard in the Church. They are intruders – doubtless wolves in sheep's clothing – of evil intentions and ultimate results.

But as respects discussions amongst those who are truly the Lord's, opportunity for freedom of discussion on any point of importance, 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 the Golden Rule in this matter. Let us accord to others the same reasonable liberty, inside of foundation principles, that we would like to have them accord us, if our positions were reversed.

LIBERTY IS NOT LICENSE

Our Golden Text is a precious one. The value of true liberty amongst the Lord's people cannot be over-estimated. It becomes a part of their very life. But because of a wrong conception of union, the spirit of true liberty was crushed out of the Church shortly after the Apostles fell asleep in death; and the Dark Ages resulted, with all their ignorance, superstition, blindness, persecution, etc. The Reformation movement of the Sixteenth Century was only 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 mental conditions and circumstances will permit, without being branded a heretic or persecuted by brethren, either in word or in deed. **[R5892 : page 139]**

Strange to say, a peculiar combination of too much liberty and too little liberty is creeping over Christendom today. The too little liberty feature objects to any discussion of the doctrines of Christ and the teachings of the Apostles, for fear that some difference of opinion should be manifested. This is an endeavor to have an outward union without a union of heart and of head. The general trend along this line favors the covering over, the concealment, of truths as well as of errors, in the wrong assumption that the appearance of union will serve the purpose of real union, and will be really effective as respects the prosperity of the true members of the Body of Christ. Such a false union is coming, however, and will cause prosperity in the nominal Church, but only for a brief season. The culmination of the Time of Trouble will overwhelm all.

On the other hand, the too great liberty feature is that represented by the teachings of Higher Critics and Evolutionists. Any attempt to contradict these unscriptural doctrines is tabooed, as tending to stir up strife and thus to destroy the unity of the Church. Thus the too great liberty and the too great bondage features are

working together in the nominal church systems to expel and ostracize the Truth and all who love it, all who wish to "stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free." Let all who are the Lord's people and who have tasted of true Christian liberty see to it that they stand fast in that liberty; and as soon as an attempt is made to restrain their liberty, if not sooner, let them get completely out from all the bondages of human systems, in order that they may stand firmly and loyally with the Lord, our Redeemer, our Instructor, our King.

