

## THE VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

Acts 15:12

The Jerusalem Conference finally broke up with an experience meeting. Peter's masterful stroke about how all men are saved silenced the critics, but the finishing touches came when Peter and Barnabas related some of their experiences during their missionary excursions which God had wrought among the Gentiles. These experiences clinched the arguments of Peter, and were the positive proof of the doctrine declared by him.

This missionary report was given from humble hearts. They related to that group what great things the Lord had wrought. He was the source of power and blessing, and they were simply the instruments through which He worked.

Let us note that the multitude kept silent in the light of these experiences. No argument can meet an experience. In the fourth chapter of Acts we have the story of some vicious men who determined to lay cruel hands on Peter and John because they had healed a lame man, but seeing the man who had been healed standing with the Apostles, they could not do anything. They could not deny the fact, and they could not explain it away. They were silenced by the fact. The report of what God had done among the Gentiles could not be met with argument. Prejudice melted before the warmth of these experiences.

The force of the early Christians was not in their powerful sermons as measured by eloquence or logic but was due to their testimonies of personal experience. They went everywhere telling what great things the Lord had done for them. This type of ministry is sorely lacking in the average church today, yet, it is a most effective method of presenting God's truth.

People are ready to listen to a man who has had a great experience. They are not interested in theories. They care very little about strange philosophies, but they are interested in experiences. Great experiences of God's saving grace will answer every argument against it.

The real test of things is the practical application of them to every-day life. If theories are not livable, they are worthless. The doctrine that God will save the Gentiles on the same conditions that He saved the Jews needed testing by facts. Where are the Gentiles that have been saved thus? Let them testify. The doctrine must stand or fall by the fruit of it in life. If Paul's doctrine cannot stand alone, it must fall. But there was ample proof of it. He had brought a group of Gentiles with him who were ready to bear testimony that they had been saved by the grace of God. The report of Paul and Barnabas was not a theory but an experience.

## THE PRESIDENT SPEAKS

Acts 15:13-21

Ever bear in mind that the president or chairman of this Council was James, "the Lord's brother." Through those Nazarene years and after the Lord Jesus became a Rabbi, His brothers did not believe on Him; that is, they did not see in Him the promised Messiah, and yet, within twenty years this brother is not only a Christian, but is pastor of the original church in Jerusalem and the author of a New Testament Epistle. Jesus, his brother, is now his Lord. James was a conservative Christian Jew and laid special emphasis on obedience to the law. He was ascetic in disposition and had come to be known as a leader of all believers who remained "zealous for the law," and who preferred still to keep "the customs which Moses had delivered to them."

His position, then, on the pending question was of great importance. Should he side with "the strict constructionists" the Council would be sadly divided, and the program would be greatly hindered by the unsettled controversy. On the other hand, if he agreed with

Peter and the missionaries, the whole force of the Council would be behind Paul and Barnabas; and the gospel they preached of salvation through faith alone in the crucified Nazarene would have free cause and be glorified. We can well imagine with what absorbing interest the assembly awaited the words of the great leader. They were not long left in doubt.

James accepted at once Peter's testimony to the divine call of the uncircumcised Gentiles through his ministry. He endorsed what Peter had said. And he immediately proceeded to remind them that what Peter had said was in fulfillment of God's promises in the prophetic scriptures hundreds of years before. Reasoning from the premise thus outlined, James does not leave the Assembly long in doubt as to his conclusion. In giving his judgment James speaks for the whole church, and his verdict is masterly in conception and expression.

James continues his exhortation by appealing to all of them not to lay burdens on the Gentile converts. They needed help and not hindrance. They were the trophies of God's grace and should be prized as such. James appeals for sympathetic fellowship between the Jews and Gentiles since they were one in the sight of God, and had been saved alike and were called to the same task. He recognized that the Jews had a claim as well as the Gentiles and that it would not be fair to give everything to either the one or the other, and so he proposes the middle course. He would not have the Gentiles troubled with the Mosaic ceremonialism, but they must so conduct themselves as not to outrage Jewish sensitiveness on certain matters of observance. He suggests that a letter be written, setting forth this verdict for the guidance of both elements in the church.

#### THE CHURCH'S FIRST LETTER

Acts 15:22-35

#### I. The Messengers. Verse 22.

Having discussed thoroughly this Gentile matter, it was now resolved that a deputation be sent to Antioch with a letter which would put their minds at rest who were troubled about the attitude of the Judaizers. It was a wise arrangement of the Council to send their own representatives down to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas bearing the written instructions, that there might be no question as to the mind of the apostles and elders. The men chosen for this mission were Silas and Judas. The letter was drafted under the immediate direction of James, it would appear, for only once again in the New Testament does the salutation "greeting" occur, and that is in James 1:1.

#### II. The Message. Verses 23-29.

The letter itself is notable both for what it says, and what it does not say.

##### 1. The Salutation. Verse 23.

##### 2. The Repudiation. Verse 24.

There is first an explicit disavowal of all responsibility for the false teaching of the men of Judea. The apostles had not authorized either their mission or their teaching.

##### 3. The Commendation. Verses 25-27.

The commendation is very hearty. One can feel the warmth of the words, "Our beloved Barnabas and Paul," and can appreciate the justice as well as the generosity of the acknowledgment of the risks they had taken for love of Christ and the souls of men. We should not withhold praise when and where it is due. We are generally very generous with blame.

A free interpretation of verse 26 is: "These men have staked all they had on Christ." They had risked all, even life itself, for Christ's sake. Such men can be trusted on a mission like this. Men will believe the testimony of such men above the word of all posers.

(1) Christ hazarded His life for us.

- a. He could not have saved us by ethical rules. It cost Him His life to save men. It was no easy task.
- b. He staked all for the sake of our souls. Our salvation was not a bargain-counter affair. Christ sought no easy way to obtain it; He bore our sins. All the sins of all men from all ages, past, present, and future, were laid upon Him. It was not a partial salvation, neither in the price paid for it, nor in meeting the demands of a broken law, nor in the results effected. It was complete in every detail.
- c. He suffered all for us. He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor. He was holy, yet for our sakes He became as sin. He was eternal, yet for our sakes He became a man, the lowliest of men, the servant, in order that we might be saved.

(2) Christ requires that men hazard their lives for Him.

- a. He becomes our Lord as well as our Saviour. He requires that we give Him our lives as well as our souls; that we serve Him as well as trust Him.
- b. A Christianity without a hazard in it is a Christianity that will discover nothing, settle nothing, convince no one, and accomplish nothing.
- c. Christian leaders who have changed the course of civilization have been men who have staked their all on the will and word of God. They have not waited for easy times, nor for pleasant places, nor for encouragement, nor for golden opportunities. They have forged ahead in the face of most stubborn opposition; they have fearlessly faced the worst of foes; they have hoisted their banners on the most dangerous parapets of godless frontiers.
- d. Faith in Christ is a daring spirit. It drives men into danger. It moves men to make great ventures. It sends men with the message of salvation into unknown lands, into undiscovered regions, into the camps of cannibals. Real faith is most daring. Read the eleventh chapter of Hebrews for a list of names of men and women who risked their lives for their faith in Christ.

(3) There have always been some who would hazard their lives for Him.

- a. The Christian courage found in those early disciples was a most remarkable thing. They were humble people, unknown beyond their small communities, unlearned and untaught, unschooled in public services, and unrecognized by the church and state; yet when they drank of the fountain of the wisdom and love of Christ they became martyrs and heroes.
- b. In every age there have been some who were willing to go to jail or to the stake for their devotion to Christ. They counted not their lives dear to themselves.
- c. Our missionaries have been fine examples of men and women who have hazarded their lives for Christ. Some have crossed the ocean in times of war when their vessels were targets of enemy torpedoes. Some have gone into jungles infested with wild beasts. Some have faced vicious cannibals. They have staked their lives against these dangers to win the souls of men. They have hazarded all for Christ's sake.

4. The Decrees. Verses 28-29.

The decrees are introduced by the assumption that the verdict of the Jerusalem church is the verdict of the Holy Spirit, that He and they came to this decision. They had taken upon themselves the duty of determining what the mind of the Spirit was. This must have been done by discussion and prayer together.

Four abstentions are enjoined. The Gentiles must "abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication." The first three concern ceremonial purity and the fourth concerns moral purity. The caution about abstaining from these things did not indicate that they were conditions of salvation. But the new converts would do well to let these things alone. The

church at Jerusalem wanted to make it easy for the Gentiles to be saved, and for them to observe simple, practical rules in their daily living. Some would make the whole world believe just as they believe, do just as they do, and worship just as they worship. It is always well to observe those things which are helpful.

III. The Outcome. Verses 30-35.

The homecoming of the missionaries, accompanied by the delegates of the Council, was an occasion of great joy to the disciples in Antioch. The assembling of the multitude of believers, the reading of the letter of the Council, and the exhortations of the prophets from Jerusalem, Judas and Silas, made it a red-letter day in the Syrian Capital. The great doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus of Nazareth was established upon impregnable foundations; and no ceremonial observance was regarded as essential to its completeness and efficiency. The section closes with the peaceful dismissal of the messengers of the Council, while the pioneer missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, with many others tarried in Antioch, "teaching and preaching the word of the Lord." No Christian and no church has a monopoly of either truth or wisdom.