

THE JERUSALEM CONFERENCE

Acts 15:1-12

Wherever and whenever the gospel has been preached there have always been some who were ready to compromise it, change it, or propose a substitute for it. There are some who seek to change the teachings of Christ to fit their traditions.

These men who came down from Judea proposed a new way of salvation. They tried to hinder Paul in his efforts to preach Christ. They taught error as if it were truth. Just as they told people they had to be circumcised in order to be saved, in the present day some are telling the people that they have to be baptized in order to be saved. Such religious quacks are not interested in winning lost people to Christ. They prey on church members. They seek to proselyte those who hold to contrary views. They try to build up their own organization by tearing down others. These fanatics have a closed mind to all except their own theories, yet they think that all others are blind except themselves and those who see exactly as they do. Such an attitude is religious bigotry.

This argument for circumcision as a prerequisite to salvation indicates that opposition to God's truth frequently comes from the most unexpected sources and in unanticipated ways. There have always been false teachers, false doctrines, and false reports associated with every good cause.

It is interesting to observe that such disturbances always come with a pretense of holiness and an appearance of genuineness and a word of authority. But their program is a destructive one rather than a constructive one. They create discord instead of unity. They fill the minds of the people with confusion instead of confidence and solidarity.

Usually such disturbances are precipitated by some self-appointed leader going to an extreme on some minor point and magnifying it out of proportion. A minor point becomes a major matter. Such disturbances may be expected by all who seek to propagate God's truth. Opposition will seek to block the way or to center the attention on worthless things, while the major matters are forgotten.

Paul and Barnabas stood firm in their convictions and withstood these false teachers. They did so at the risk of their liberties and their lives, but the teachings of their Lord was dearer to them than life. It is to the everlasting credit of these men that they fearlessly withstood these religious quacks. God has never left Himself without a witness. He has never left His cause without a supporter.

The correct answer to opposition is not always found in an argument. Certain brethren were sent to Jerusalem for fuller, wiser counsel about the matter of dispute. These new missionaries felt the need of reinforcement if they were to contend for the faith with firmness. The contention of these missionaries was that the question of salvation hung on faith or circumcision. One must be the way of salvation, not both of them. The Jews had always held that circumcision was the true way, but Christ had taught differently. The answer to this dispute was of vital importance not only for them but for all time to come.

There was the desire for all the light they could get on the problem with which they were wrestling. Since the church was a self-governing body, it sent a committee to Jerusalem. The members of the committee went at the action of the church. As this committee headed by Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem they preached along the way and told of how God had saved the Gentiles. Their message brought gladness to the hearts of all who had enjoyed an experience of grace, but it stirred the prejudices of the Jews. Additional unbelievers were converted under their preaching along the highway.

As they preached they rejoiced. They did not tell of the thorny paths they had traveled, nor of the opposition they had encountered. They were not peddlers of woe, nor bearers of pessimism, nor prophets of defeat, but they magnified their victories and their blessings. They set a good example for all ministers, and all churches and all committees. We have a gospel of goodwill, so let us gladden the world with it. We have a story that will make men sing for joy even when they are in prison and in sorrow, so let us not keep it to ourselves. We have a gospel that will drive the gloom from the hearts of men and that will open the doors of liberty to them, so let us proclaim it to them.

When the committee met with the apostles and religious leaders in Jerusalem they did not argue their case. They rejoicingly told their brethren how the Lord had saved the Gentiles by the same grace through which others had been saved. They doubtless had some of the saved Gentiles in their company who testified as to what the Lord had done for them. No argument was equal to a fact.

This incident presents Christianity in a new light. It is very evident that the first churches were democracies. This is obvious in their methods of settling the disturbances that arose.

A democracy is a government where every person is somebody. It grants to each individual the right to his personal opinions. In a democracy people are taught to respect the views of others. They may not be accepted, but they must be respected. Whoever refuses to respect the rights and views of another is out of place in a democracy. In a true democracy men may freely express their opinions. While others may disagree with the views stated they are honor-bound to respect the rights of those holding such views.

Well, the party arrive at Jerusalem and are formally received by the church, the apostles, and the elders there, and without delay they "rehearsed all things that God had done with them." They must have had a profoundly interesting report. We can imagine how astonished and thrilled the listeners were as Paul and Barnabas related their experiences and told of the founding of churches throughout Galatia, in which were both Jews and Gentiles who confessed the name of Christ. "But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." Almost certainly, where good work is being done, there will be somebody who has an objection to raise, a criticism to offer, or some word of discouragement to speak. These people are Christians, but constantly remark, "But-so-and-so." "Certain of the Pharisees who believed" expressed themselves to the effect that this good work needed safeguarding; these Gentile converts must toe the line of the Law. verse 5. These men were so rooted in tradition and so loyal to the Law as to imagine that there was an element of danger in the Gospel.

Some days after the criticism was spoken, a great assembly met to consider this matter. There were present at that assembly Paul and Barnabas and certain others from Antioch, the objecting "Pharisees who believed," "the apostles and elders," and a "multitude of the Jerusalem church members." Here, as at Antioch, there was much discussion, in which, it appears, the members of the church joined.

After this general discussion, Peter arose and addressed the assembly. He said, "Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe." How all eyes must have turned upon him, who was recognized as the Apostle of the Circumcision, and how especially anxious Paul would be, wondering what line Peter would take. Peter's address was eminently practical. One never to be forgotten lesson found in it is that God chooses men for specific tasks. Here he declared that God called him to the task of delivering the gospel to the Gentiles.

God calls men to salvation. They never would turn to the Lord if He did not call them. Let no man claim that he turned to the Lord of his own will. The shame for sin is put in the heart of man by the Lord. The desire for salvation, the disposition to repent of sin and to accept Christ, and the hunger for righteousness are all the works of God's Spirit. They are never solely acts of man.

God calls men into the ministry. He lays His hand on an individual and definitely calls him from his work and from his natural desires to enter the ministry. God calls ministers to specific churches and fields.

A man whose course is divinely ordered feels secure in his efforts. Many difficulties and obstacles may arise, but if he is sure that God has called him, has directed his course, and is with him, his courage will not waver.

Peter's address to the Council at Jerusalem consists of two parts:

1. A statement of facts. Acts 15:7-9.

Knowing that there was no getting around facts, Peter did not hesitate to emphasize them. He took his stand on an event, the conversion, through his instrumentality, of Cornelius and other Gentiles, and on their knowledge of it. The salvation of these Gentiles had not been conditioned on their submission to circumcision, or on any other ceremonial rite. In the light of these facts, what right had they to require of the Gentile converts what the Holy Spirit did not require of them. If the Lord had chosen to release the Gentile brethren from this yoke, Peter reasoned, who are we that we should require them still to bear it? Then he reminded them that these Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit when they had exercised saving faith and their hearts had been cleansed. These were the facts, and, of course, no one was prepared to deny them.

Peter taught the equality of men in the sight of God by saying that He "put no difference between us and them." This was a radical doctrine, according to the conception of the Jews.

This is a doctrine we need to learn. Many of us hold it in theory but not in fact and in practice. It is difficult for some of us to acknowledge that God loves the low as well as He does the high, the wicked as well as He does the upright, and the indecent as well as He does the decent. It is not easy for some to believe that God loves all men irrespective of their color, their nationality, their social standing, their background, and their station in life. But no one can be a true follower of Christ until he is lifted to that plane.

There is no case too hard for God. There is no sin too vile for His grace. There is no record too black to be cleansed by His blood. There is no soul out of His reach. His love includes all. His call goes out to all. His grace and salvation are offered to all.

2. An appeal. Acts 15:10-11.

On the basis of these facts, Peter makes an appeal which was very impressive, and left his hearers without an alternative. He says in effect, "We Jews were not saved by circumcision, so why should we impose this rite upon the Gentiles as a condition of salvation? These were saved by grace, and we Jews can be saved in no other way."

Peter was thoroughly convinced that Christianity was not a something added to Judaism, but was a new revelation and a new Gospel. His address brought the Council face to face with the fact that God Himself had, in the case of Cornelius, settled the admission of an uncircumcised Gentile and his household to all the rights and privileges of Christian discipleship, and He did not require him and his to enter the Christian church through a Jewish gate.

In one immortal sentence Peter answered all disputes about the plan of salvation. He said, "We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they." Verse 11. No wonder then that Bible believing people refuse to hear those who tell us we have to be circumcised to be saved, or we have to be baptized to be saved, or we have to unite with the church of which they are members to be saved. "We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved."

Peter's masterful statement completely silenced all the critics. No argument can meet an experience.

Paul and Barnabas made use of the opportunity afforded them. They did not do so by adding any argument to that of Peter, but by simply rehearsing what wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles through them. It was not a rehearsal of what they had done or said, but of what the Lord had done through them.

It would seem as if the whole Council must come to the conclusion--if God has set His seal of approval on the conduct and work of our missionaries, who are we that we should withstand God?