

Acts - Commentaries by Things New & Old

Christian Truth: Volume 24, Apostles in Council, The: Obedience to the Word

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Acts 15

With the novel sight of a so-called Ecumenical Council recently in session at Rome, under the presidency of the Pope as the assumed successor of the Apostle Peter, one turns instinctively to the inspired account of the only council at which Peter and the other apostles were present, to learn what likeness, or the reverse, can be traced between that and the one which was held at Jerusalem.

To Jerusalem Paul and Barnabas went up, with others whose names are not recorded, delegated by the assembly at Antioch to confer with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. But Paul went up by revelation (Gal. 2:2). God's mind as to his journey thither, and conference with the apostles, had just been clearly expressed. He went as delegated by the assembly, but he went because divinely directed. Neither Peter, nor James, nor John, summoned a council, and invited Paul and Barnabas to come up to it. It was the arrival of these laborers with others from Antioch which brought the question to a point, and made the apostles and elders come together about this matter.

It was an epoch of great importance in the Church. The truth had spread among the Gentiles, and the great center of missionary work was removed from Jerusalem to Antioch. Peter and John at an earlier day had gone out from Jerusalem to Samaria, seen the work there, acknowledged it, and returned to the metropolis of Judea. Now Paul and Barnabas had started from Antioch on a journey so fruitful in blessed results, and returned to that assembly with tidings that God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. To stop this work, if possible, was the aim of the enemy, and means were shortly found for attempting it. Certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." The din of controversy was now heard, to be silenced only by the letter from the council at Jerusalem. There, and there alone, could the evil which threatened the Church be averted. To it, therefore, Paul and Barnabas went up, where the full results at which these false teachers aimed were unequivocally brought out. At Antioch they had only urged on the Gentiles circumcision after the manner of Moses. But at Jerusalem the real aim of this teaching was fearlessly divulged: "It was needful to circumcise them [the Gentiles], and to command them to keep the law."

There, if anywhere, the supporters of this doctrine could carry their point. To settle this, the apostles and brethren met. The discussion was doubtless earnest; it was certainly free; and, though Peter was present, he did not preside, or interfere with the freedom of speech of any of its members. Many, apparently, spoke before he did, and Paul and Barnabas and James spoke after him. Peter's speech was important, but the remarks of James were most needful. Peter's address was a fitting prelude to the recital by Paul and Barnabas of the miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them, as that of James was a fitting conclusion. Peter reminded them of what God had done by him for the Gentiles, and how those from among the Jews who believed should be saved even as the converts from the Gentiles. James took different ground, and turned to Scripture, which threw light on the subject.

They were subject to the Word, and hence, after James had spoken, all discussion ceased; and the conclusion he expressed was adopted and committed to writing: "Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: but that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood."

But the use of the Word here demands more than a passing notice. The question was one which evidently stirred many hearts. It was felt, on both sides, to be a vital one; hence God's mind about it was most important. Never before had there been such a gathering of the Church for consultation; apostles and prophets were there with the Holy Ghost in their midst (v. 28), yet no fresh revelation was that day vouchsafed them. The wisdom of this we can surely discern; God would teach us the competency of the written Word to decide questions of doctrine and practice which concern the welfare of the assembly. No new interpretation was then brought out, nor the passage quoted opened up by any new light which James threw on it. He quoted Amos, who had predicted that on some of the Gentiles the Lord's name should be called. Hence the work of grace among them was not a matter on which the Word was silent, though they at Jerusalem, till that work began, might not have anticipated it.

Whose Word was it? It was His who maketh these things known "from the beginning." But what about circumcising the Gentiles? On this the Word was silent. It clearly intimated blessing for the Gentiles without their becoming Jews; but, though this was foretold, of their being circumcised there was not a word. Should they then supplement the Word? No, they bowed to it. They interpreted its silence correctly. It said nothing about the question, so they imposed no such condition on the Gentiles. Thus the very silence of Scripture was shown to be expressive and, must we not add, instructive. And in this assembly where four, certainly, out of the eight writers of the New Testament were present, three of whom took such a prominent part, all bowed to the silence of the Word as expressing God's mind on the subject.

But, while giving a voice to the silence of Scripture, they could not allow anything it had said to be disregarded; so the word of God to Noah and his sons was brought forward as binding on believers from among the Gentiles, as it had been on the Jews. God was wiser than man. Man's deductions from analogy as to what was suited for God's people were all wrong, for the Lord had said nothing about it; but to what it had said, though for ages the Gentiles had lost it, now that they owned the authority of the Lord, they must submit. How carefully the door was closed against all theories of development to bind men's consciences where God had not enjoined it, and how clearly they taught that what the

Word did say, believers must hearken to and obey.

Thus the council ended, and the discomfiture of the pharisaic party in the assembly, and the joy of all the Gentile converts, and an example for after ages of perfect subjection to Scripture, as containing His mind, who makes things known from the beginning.

