

THE CONFERENCE AT JERUSALEM

—May 23.—Acts 15: 1-6, 22-29—

“Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.”—Acts 15:11.

Circumcision was given to Abraham and his posterity as a sign or mark by which they attested faith in the divine promises. It was obligatory upon every Jew who would maintain his relationship to the divine promises, and it is still obligatory upon that nation. (Gen. 17:14) We are not to forget, however, that a Jew, no less than a Gentile, is reckoned as losing earthly nationality in becoming a Christian. To all such, “old things pass away, all things become new.” They are thenceforth “new creatures” in Christ Jesus, members of the “holy nation.”

Inasmuch as circumcision in the flesh as a mark in the flesh had been observed for over eighteen centuries by all recognized as God’s people, it should not surprise us to find that some of the early Christians, previously Jews, concluded that it was still obligatory upon all who had become children of God. All the broad distinctions between the Law Covenant and the New Covenant were not clearly distinguished at first,—even the apostles appear for a time not to have distinguished clearly on all points. Nevertheless, the Lord had held them, as the special guides of the new dispensation, and had prevented their making declaration on the subject, until in his due time the matter was brought clearly to their attention; and then they were guided aright.

The Apostle Paul seems to have been the first to get a broadly comprehensive view of the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the “New Covenant provisions; and we are not to forget that he was probably helped miraculously to this clearness of perception by being granted “visions and revelations” more than all the others. Barnabas, his companion in his missionary tour, was naturally the first to share this knowledge, and was evidently in full sympathy with the Apostle Paul in resisting the teachings of certain Jews who attempted to Judaize the erstwhile Gentiles who chiefly constituted the Antioch church. That the church was in good spiritual health is evidenced by the fact that they were anxious to have the truth, whatever it might be. Accordingly they requested that Paul and Barnabas and certain of their company might consult with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem respecting the propriety of circumcision and the general observance of the Mosaic law on the part of those who were not Israelites by birth. And this plan was followed.

It was now nearly twenty years since our Lord’s resurrection; and as a result of the efforts put forth by believers, Christians were now to be found in little groups throughout Asia-Minor and Syria. The brethren made use of the journey to Jerusalem as an opportunity to refresh the hearts of God’s people in the various cities enroute, and these fellow Christians in turn gladly entertained them as members of the Lord’s body;—setting a good example of hospitality.

Arrived at Jerusalem, they were warmly welcomed by the apostles and friends of the truth who had heard much concerning their missionary journey and its good results. Evidently, before they got to a statement of the real object of their visit, a class similar to those who had gone down to Antioch took exceptions to the method which the brethren had used amongst the Gentiles. They probably inquired, Were all the believing Gentiles whom you evangelized commanded to be circumcised, and instructed that they should keep the law of Moses? This opened up the question at once, and led to the announcement that the settlement of this question was the very object of their visit. Accordingly a council of the apostles and elders was called.

Verses 7-21 give probably but a small portion of the discussion. It would seem that the question, What is the responsibility of converts amongst the Gentiles toward the law of Moses? had never come up for consideration previously, and the apostles, it would appear, were without very positive convictions until they began to discuss the subject. Peter, one of the oldest of the disciples, and a man of strong character, pointed out that God had made choice of him as the one who should be first to open the Gospel door to the Gentiles; how Cornelius was the first of these converts, and how God poured out the holy Spirit upon him and thus recognized him as a son and joint-heir with Christ, while as yet he was uncircumcised, thus proving that circumcision was not essential to divine reconciliation and sonship in the household of faith under the New Covenant. He doubtless also called attention to the fact that our Lord, who instructed them to teach all nations and to baptize those who believed, gave no instructions in reference to circumcision or any of the commands of the Mosaic law. He argued, therefore, that they had no right to put upon the Gentiles, as a yoke of bondage, the law of Moses, which God had not put upon them, but only upon the

Jews, and which the Jews found it impossible to bear, and from which they (believing Jews) had to be liberated through the merit of Christ.

Then Paul and Barnabas told how God had greatly blessed their ministry amongst the Gentiles, performing many miracles, etc., and in every way attesting his blessing upon their work; and yet that work had nothing in it respecting obligation to Moses’ law or God’s command to Abraham and his seed—circumcision.

James, our Lord’s brother, was the president or chairman of the meeting, and after hearing the foregoing coincided with Peter, Paul and Barnabas, adding to the argument by citing from the prophets evidences (1) that the Gentiles would be received into divine favor and (2) that the reception of the Gentiles was not to make them Jews, but that, on the contrary, God had certain blessed provisions for the Jews to be fulfilled subsequently,—“After this, I will return and build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen down.” Since Israel is to be recognized in the future by the Lord as distinct from the Gentiles, it follows that the particular national mark which distinguishes Jews from Gentiles was not to be abolished—was not to be made general amongst Gentiles, even after they believed and became God’s people.

The results of the conference were satisfactory to all present, and it was decided to send a statement of the results to the Antioch church, both by writing and orally by Judas and Silas.

Probably only the substance of the letter is given in the brief recorded statement; but it is sufficient to show clearly that those who claim that the apostles were confused upon the subject so as almost to make a split in the church, are greatly mistaken, for in so many words they positively declare that those who went out from them and troubled the church at Antioch, almost unsettling their faith and peace with the statement, “Ye must be circumcised and keep the law,” were not representatives of the apostles, and had received no such commandment or teaching from them. It is refreshing and strengthening to our faith to note that the Lord’s promise, specially to bless and use the apostles and keep them from error in their teaching, was remarkably fulfilled, as in this case. Our Lord’s words to them were, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven; in other words, I will so particularly direct you that you will make no mistakes in respect to what you will command and in respect to what you will forbid.

The statement, “It seemed good to the holy Spirit and to us,” should not be lightly supposed to signify that the apostles “guessed at” the mind of the spirit, nor that they put their own judgment on a par with that of the holy Spirit. We are to remember that they had special gifts of the spirit which guided them into the understanding of the Lord’s will and they merely assert here that not only was it the guidance of the holy Spirit, but that they themselves were so in sympathy that they rejoiced that the holy Spirit had not put the bondage of the law upon the Gentile converts.

The Christians at Antioch were already well instructed concerning the terms of the New Covenant, faith and the various added virtues and graces presented to us in the Pauline epistles. Such matters were not entered into by the council at Jerusalem nor referred to in the letter which they wrote in reply. The inquiry was merely respecting the obligation of the converts to be circumcised and keep the other features of the Mosaic law. The answer ignored every feature of that law, except four points; and the first three of these were mentioned no doubt as a basis of common fellowship between those who had been Jews and those who had been Gentiles, namely (1) abstaining from meats that had been offered in sacrifice to idols; (2) abstaining from animal food that had not been killed after the manner of the Jews; (3) abstaining from the eating of blood. It would be almost impossible for those who had been reared as Jews to ignore these three points, and if the converts from the Gentiles did not observe them it would be a constant barrier to their social intercourse. Furthermore, the observance of the first restriction would be a benefit to those who were coming out of Gentile darkness, in that it would break them off from old customs which might be injurious. It was the custom among Gentiles at that time that much of the meat sold in their markets should first be offered in sacrifice to some idol. The Apostle Paul shows, however (1 Cor. 8:4), that, as an idol is nothing, the offering of the meat in the presence of nothing could do no harm to those who were able to understand the situation aright; but to others it might seem like sacrilege. He therefore advised the church to abstain from eating meat offered

* See June 15, 1919, issue for critical examination of Covenants

to idols, lest it should make a brother to offend. The restriction as to the method of killing animals was that it should not be by strangulation, which would leave the blood in the veins, but by the Jewish method of bleeding them to death, which extracts the blood. Abstinence from the eating of blood in any form has probably also a sanitary reason back of it, in ad-

dition to a typical significance; for "the life is in the blood."

The mention of fornication was probably considered wise, for altho it should be understood as part of the law of Christ, yet, nevertheless, since this evil was very common at that time amongst the Gentiles and in some cases even a part of their religious service, it was thought well to specify it.

THE FAITH THAT WORKS

MAY 30.—JAMES 2:14-23.

"I will show thee my faith by my works."—James 2:18.

Many have supposed a conflict of opinion as between the Apostle Paul's teachings and the teachings of James respecting faith and works. We hold however, that, rightly understood, their teachings are in fullest accord. The Jewish Law Covenant was emphatically a covenant of *works*, while the basis of acceptance under the *New Covenant is *faith*. The law said. *Do and live*; the Gospel says, *Believe and live*.

The Apostle Paul, writing to those who knew the law and who had been trained under it to expect everlasting life as a reward of faithful performance of the requirements of that law, was obliged to show that absolute obedience to that law is an impossibility as respects the fallen race of Adam; and hence that "by the deed of the law shall no flesh be justified in his [God's] sight." If, then, justification and eternal life could not be obtained by any through the works of the law, how could they be obtained? The Apostle proceeds to show that our Lord Jesus has kept the entire law blamelessly, that he thus had secured all the rewards promised to "him that doeth these things;" namely, everlasting life and all the divine blessings. The Apostle further shows that, while none can hope for eternal life through keeping the law, they may hope for it and obtain it in another way—not by doing works that would be approved under the Law Covenant, but by having a faith which would approve them under the New Covenant, and secure to them such measure of the covering of Christ's righteousness as might be necessary to compensate for all the deficiencies and imperfections of their natures which hindered them from performing the full demands of the law. Thus he tells us: "The righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit."

The Apostle Paul did not for a moment mean to say that a mere intellectual assent was sufficient. His teachings are in fullest accord with James' statement in this lesson, that a faith that produced no efforts or works toward righteousness would be a dead and valueless faith—or worse, a condemning faith.

Nor should James here be understood to ignore faith, and to teach that works of the law would be able or sufficient to justify sinners or make them heirs of eternal life. It is probable that some in the early church, having come to realize that Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth, and that we are "justified by faith in his blood," went to the opposite extreme, as some do today, claiming that the conduct of life is immaterial, if only the faith be maintained. It is probable that James had this class of persons in mind when writing this epistle. He therefore guards the reader on this point—not to think that a mere *belief* or *faith*, that makes no impression upon the life, and is unaccompanied by any efforts so to live as would be pleasing in God's sight, would be a faith of any vitality, or that would do any real good. That is but the kind of belief that devils have.

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As an illustration, he points out that, as a blessing unaccompanied by food would not satisfy a hungry person, so faith unaccompanied by works would accomplish nothing. If the challenge were put, "Show me thy faith without thy works," it would be very difficult to answer it. How could faith be shown, except by works? On the other hand, it would be taking a very proper position to say, "I will show thee my faith by my works."

Abraham is called the father of the faithful; and of him it is written, "Abraham *believed* God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." But, as the Apostle points out, Abraham's faith was not of the kind that brought forth no fruitage of good works and obedience. On the contrary, God tested Abraham's faith, and his faith was proved an acceptable one by works of obedience; faith and works co-operated in his case, and must do so in every case, else the faith will not be acceptable.

The points to be kept clearly in mind in this lesson are (1) that no works which fallen men could do would be perfect works; consequently, none of them could be acceptable to God. (2) The Christian is acceptable to God through the exercise of faith under the terms of the New Covenant. It is this faith that counts in his acceptance, because he is unable to perform works that would be acceptable. (3) His acceptable faith must be proved by his efforts to do, so far as he may be able, the divine will. (4) Since works alone would not justify, and since faith must precede good works before they will be acceptable, and since the good works, when accepted, are not accepted on account of their own perfection, but on account of the faith which makes them acceptable, therefore it follows that it is the faith that justifies us where works could not justify us, and that the works do not set aside faith, but merely attest the genuineness of the faith.

There is a grand lesson here for all who desire to please God. It is our faith that is pleasing to him—we at first having nothing else; but if the faith remains alone, without effort to produce fruits of righteousness in the life, it becomes a dead, a putrid thing, offensive to both God and man. He whose life is one of self-gratification and sin dishonors and injures any faith which he professes. Further, it is our experience that whoever fails to live in harmony with his faith will not be permitted to maintain it very long. It is to such as have some faith without corresponding efforts toward good works that the Lord sends "strong delusions that they may believe a lie."—2 Thes. 2:11.

Let us remember that the Lord's people are "living epistles known and read of all men;" that it is the works that are read rather than the faith, and hence the importance of the Golden Text, which should more and more be the sentiment of every follower of Christ,—"*I will show thee my faith by my works.*"

"RAIMENT WHITE AND CLEAN"

"They shall walk with me in white [robes]; because they are worthy. The overcomer shall thus be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name in the presence of my Father, and in the presence of his angels."

Rev. 3:4, 5.

Under the symbol of white raiment the Lord throughout his Word represents the righteousness of those whom he accepts as his people. Their righteousness in the future state will be personal righteousness or holiness; and the guarantee of this is the promise that all who are accounted worthy, as "overcomers" of the world to be joint-heirs with Christ in the heavenly kingdom, will in the resurrection be granted new, perfect, spiritual bodies, free from sin and impurity of every kind, and fully in harmony with their new wills or characters developed during the trial-time of this present life. That will be a time of which the Apostle speaks, saying,— "When that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away." Those who attain to that glorious condition are symbolically represented as being clothed in

white linen, representing their personal purity, completeness and perfection at that time: as it is written, "to her [the bride, the victorious church] was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white; for the fine linen is the *righteousness of saints.*"—Rev. 19:8.

Thus, seen, the church in glory will stand arrayed in its own righteousness—the "righteousness of the saints;" but at the present time the saints have no righteousness of their own in which to present themselves at the throne of grace. As expressed by the prophet, "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." The very best of humanity, it must be confessed, are so imperfect in thoughts, words, and deeds as to be wholly unfit for a share in God's kingdom or for any notice or favors at his hands. However, human necessities only