

Messenger and Visitor

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The Jerusalem Conference and the Sabbath.

It is a curious illustration of the vagaries of thought and doctrine into which men of honest intention sometimes fall, that there are at the present day religious teachers who would persuade Christians to surrender the observance of the first day of the week, which, from the first, Christians have been wont to hold sacred as the day of their Lord's resurrection, in order to revert to the keeping of the seventh day as observed by the Jews. If anyone is looking for arguments to meet the contentions of these seventh day advocates, there is, as it seems to us, a very clear and valid argument to be found in the Bible lesson for next Sunday. The question before the apostles and elders, with Paul, Barnabas and other brethren, met in conference with the church in Jerusalem, had respect to the relation of Gentile converts to the Mosiac law. What was it necessary to ask of the Gentiles by way of conformity to Jewish law and custom? The answer to this question, as the apostles and elders conceived it, is simply and plainly given. But there is no mention of the seventh day. The apostles and elders knew certainly that the Gentiles were not accustomed to observe the Sabbath, yet they laid no injunction upon the Gentile Christians in regard to the Sabbath nor ever hinted that they would be expected, even as a concession to the Jewish conscience or on any other ground, to keep holy the seventh day. If the keeping of the seventh day was in the Divine mind a matter of perpetual obligation upon Christians, can we suppose that the apostles and elders at Jerusalem would have been ignorant of this most important fact? and, if they knew it, is it conceivable that they should permit such an occasion as that of the Jerusalem conference to pass without the slightest intimation to the Gentiles that, as Christians, it would be necessary for them, in this matter, to conform to Jewish custom?

It may be said that this is a negative argument—that it is founded upon silence and not upon positive statements. That is true; but it should be borne in mind that the burden of proof in this case rests not upon the Christian who keeps the first day of the week religiously, but upon those who charge him with wrong doing because he does not forsake the universal and immemorial Christian custom in order to keep the seventh day. It is for them to show that any injunction has ever been laid upon Gentile Christians to keep the seventh day. Again an argument from silence is not necessarily a weak argument. It may be one of the strongest possible. There are instances in which the probability is so great that, if a fact or a duty was understood to exist, it would be affirmed, that the fact of its not having been affirmed is proof sufficient that it did not, or was believed not to, exist. The case under consideration, as we have shown, was of this character. If the apostles believed that it was a perpetual duty of Gentile Christians to keep holy the seventh day as the Jews did, it is inconceivable that they should say nothing about it, when the question before them was one distinctly respecting the relation of the Gentiles to Jewish laws and observances. This argument, however, does not stand alone. It is strongly supported by the whole tenor and spirit of the New Testament. One will search the volume in vain for any intimation that the Gentile Christians were under obligation to keep the Jewish Sabbath or to observe the seventh day at all as a day of rest and worship. In some of Paul's epistles he deals more or less at length with matters of Christian duty, and warns his Gentile converts against evils

into which they were especially in danger of falling. But there is never so much as a hint in any of these epistles that it is a matter of duty, or even of expediency, that they should observe the Jewish Sabbath. On the contrary it is seen frequently to be the apostle's great endeavor to draw their minds away from the standpoint of Judaism and its ceremonialism—its observance of "days and months and seasons and years," lest they should lose the consciousness of the fulness of their liberty and the largeness of their inheritance in Christ.

The Christian Sabbath rests upon a sufficient basis of authority. It has been as truly given of God to the Christian world as the seventh day Sabbath was given to the Jews. It is a sacred inheritance of priceless value which we do well to guard with jealous care. Intelligent Christian faith is not likely to surrender this inheritance in order to substitute therefor another day because it has the stamp of Judaism upon it. Yet the minds of some in not a few Christian communities are being troubled in these days by teachers who, with specious arguments, endeavor to persuade them that duty to God demands that they should surrender this gracious inheritance from many Christian centuries in order to keep the seventh day. Such teachers are working on precisely the same lines as those men who troubled Paul and "subverted the souls" of Gentile believers by teaching that it was necessary that the Gentiles should be circumcised and keep the law. Paul says he gave no place to these men—not for an hour. And there is certainly no more reason why place should be given to an enslaving Judaism in the nineteenth century of Christian faith than in its first.

The Old and the New.

The irrepressible conflict between the old things of Judaism and the new things of Christianity, which has been all along more or less apparent as we have followed the series of lessons in the Acts, comes very prominently into view in the lesson for next Sunday. The labors of Paul and Barnabas, with other men of like spirit, had resulted in the conversion of large numbers of the Gentiles to Christ. The Christian community in Antioch, was largely of Gentile origin. These preachers had been led to proclaim the gospel freely to the Gentiles and invite them through faith to enter directly into the fulness of its blessing. Paul especially—and Barnabas it would seem—was in full accord with him—had been led by the Spirit into very clear light in this matter, and stood in no doubt as to the position which the Gentile believer occupied in the church. He had perceived and proclaimed that what was essential to the salvation of Gentiles, was their acceptance of Jesus Christ as Son of God and Saviour of the world, and a life in harmony with such a faith. The specific laws, rites and ceremonies of Judaism formed no essential part of Christianity. Salvation by faith was the dominant note in Paul's preaching. He would not perplex and hinder the youthful vigor of Christianity with swaddling bands and crutches of Judaism. In Christ Jesus the significant thing was not circumcision, but a new creation. Christ had not come to make all men followers of Moses, but to make them sons of God. The purpose of the gospel was not to convert Gentiles into Jews, but to break down the wall of partition, by making of the two one new man, so making peace. Christ had become the end of the law for righteousness to every believer. Beyond estimation is the service which for all time Paul, under the guidance of the Divine Spirit rendered to the church and to the world in contending so effectively that the freedom of the gospel should not be constrained by the shackles of an outworn ceremonialism.

It is easy to see how different from Paul's was the conception which was entertained of the gospel by some men of considerable influence in the church. These said—it is necessary to circumcise the Gentile converts and to command them to keep the law of Moses. They may have been very good men according to their light. Considering their education, it is not surprising that they argued that the institutions which God had given through Moses must remain for all time. For this we need not blame them too severely. But the principal fault of these Judaising

Christians who opposed Paul and wore out his patience by their attempts to "subvert the souls" of the Gentile believers was their invincible prejudice which kept them blind in the midst of light. Peter had been slow to believe that the gospel was to unite Jews and Gentiles in a common fellowship, but when he saw that the Gentile believers received the Holy Ghost as well as those of the Jews, his prejudice vanished; and Paul and Barnabas, when they came to Jerusalem about this matter, found in Peter a valiant supporter of their cause.

Those who base their judgment as to the right or wrong of a proposed course of thought or action, wholly upon the past are liable to be led astray. It is wise to ask not only what has God done in the past but also what He is doing now. A conservatism that shuts its eyes to the light and ignores plain facts, is not a wholesome brake upon the wheels but an obstacle upon the track of progress. However, God's train has the right of way and will not come to disaster, whatever attempts there may be on the part of Judaizers and men of like spirit to occupy the track.

The meeting at Jerusalem, of which an account is given in the passage before us, has generally been designated "the council of Jerusalem." It is much more properly described as a conference. Paul and Barnabas on the one part, and certain teachers from Judea, on the other, had determined in the interests of harmony, to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question respecting the position of Gentile believers in the church and their relation to the law of Moses. After the Apostles and elders at Jerusalem, with the whole church, had heard from Barnabas and Paul on account of their missionary labors and the fruits of their ministry among the Gentiles, and had heard also what those had to say who contended that it was necessary that the Gentile converts should be circumcised and keep the law, they—the Apostles and elders with the concurrence of the whole church, guided as they believed by the Holy Spirit—drew up a brief statement respecting the duty of the Gentile converts. This they addressed to the Gentile brethren of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia and committed it to two trusted men of the Jerusalem church, Judas and Silas, who were to visit the churches and more fully explain the subject to the Gentile Christians.

The deliverance is wholly fraternal and without ostentation. There is no hint of right or power on the part of the Apostles or the Jerusalem church to lord it over their brethren elsewhere. That was the self-appointed task of the Judaizers. It is quite evident that Peter does not regard himself as having a commission to settle every question that may arise in the church. If he is in any peculiar sense "the Vicar of Christ," he seems quite unconscious of the fact. The deliverance is not elaborated from any profound principle. It may be described as common sense advice adapted especially to the then present conditions—"a *modus vivendi*," Dr. McLaren calls it. The eating of blood and of things strangled would be especially offensive to the Jew and for that reason, if no other, it was expedient that the Gentile Christians should avoid such food. The eating of meat offered in sacrifice to idols was to be avoided for a like reason, and also because, as Paul elsewhere shows, it involved a peculiar temptation for weak brethren. But Paul does not mention the deliverance from Jerusalem in this connection or hold that the eating of meat offered to idols was forbidden to a Christian on any other ground than that of expediency. The third prohibition had regard to a positive sin which however was so common among the Gentiles and regarded by them so lightly that a special injunction against it seemed necessary.

Editorial Notes.

—The sermon in the Germain St. church on Sunday morning last was on Christian citizenship, Pastor Gates having reached the thirteenth chapter in his series of expository discourses on the Epistle to the Romans. The sermon was an able and impressive setting forth of the principles underlying the duties of Christian citizenship involved in the Apostles' admonitions to the Christians of Rome. It was heard with great interest, and we have no doubt, with much profit. Such themes are not too frequently discussed in the pulpit. Any pastor who undertakes to present in a series of discourses the teaching of one of Paul's epistles will no doubt find himself called upon to deal with a number of practical subjects of great importance, which in the ordinary way of selecting subjects for pulpit discussion are apt to be passed over.

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To the Alumni Friends

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