

Sabbath School Lesson #8 – The Jerusalem Council – 18-24 August 2018

Christ visited the Gentiles to save them. The apostle Peter described this visit in these words: “But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they” (Acts 15:11). And so “there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek; for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him” (Romans 10:12).

Sunday: The Point at Issue – A glance at the experience of the church at Antioch shows that the issue was the new gospel that denied the power of Christ to save. The Gospel was first brought to them by brethren who had been scattered by the persecution that arose on the death of Stephen. These brethren came to Antioch “preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them; and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord” (Acts 11:19-21). Then the apostles sent Barnabas to assist in the work; and he, “when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith; and much people was added unto the Lord” (verses 22-24). Then Barnabas found Saul, and together they laboured with the church in Antioch for more than a year (verses 25-26). There were in the church prophets and teachers, and as they ministered unto the Lord, and fasted, the Spirit of Christ spoke to them, telling them to separate Barnabas and Saul to the work to which He had called them (Acts 13:1-3). So we see that the church there had had much experience in the things of God. They were acquainted with the voice of the Spirit of Christ, that witnessed that they were children of God. And now after all this, there came in some “false brethren” who said to them, “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye can not be saved.” That was as much as to say, all your faith in Christ – all the witness of His Spirit – is nothing without the sign of circumcision. The sign of circumcision, without faith, was exalted above faith in Christ without any outward sign. The new gospel was a most direct assault upon the Gospel, and a flat denial of Christ.

With such a teaching that denied Christ, it is no wonder that Paul styles those who presented this teaching, “false brethren,” who had, as other versions strongly expresses it, “sneaked in” (Galatians 2:4). To the Galatians he said of them, “There be some that trouble you, and would pervert the Gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:7). The apostles and elders, in their letter to the churches, said of those men, “Certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls” (Acts 15:24). And they further added that they “gave no commandment” to them (verse 24). That is to say, these teachers were “false brethren,” who were not recognised by the apostles as teachers, who were speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves. There have been many such since that time. So vicious was their work that the apostle said, “Let them be accursed.” They were deliberately seeking to undermine the Gospel of Christ, and thus to destroy the souls of the believers.

Monday: Circumcision – The false brethren had said, “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye can not be saved.” Literally, ‘You have not power to be saved.’ This put all the power of salvation in the outward sign of circumcision. Paul declares, “In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love” (Galatians 5:6). Circumcision has no power, uncircumcision has no power, but faith alone, working by love, is mighty to save. That which the false brethren wished to enforce was not real circumcision, for that is not outward, but in the heart, and consists solely in obedience to God’s law through faith (see Romans 2:25-29; 4:7-11). Abraham was righteous by faith alone, was in fact, really circumcised in heart “with the circumcision made without hands,” by the Spirit, before he received the outward mark, which was not real circumcision, but only served as a sign, a reminder to him that circumcision consists in worshiping God in the spirit, and having no confidence in the flesh (Romans 4:2-11; Colossians 2:10-11; Philippians 3:3). So these Christians of Antioch, who had been converted from heathenism, just as Abraham was, and had received the Lord Jesus, were circumcised with the true circumcision. The “false brethren” wished them to give up the reality for the empty sign.

Tuesday: The Debate – Jesus said, “It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are Spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). The people of Antioch and Galatia had trusted in Christ for salvation; now there were some who

sought to induce them to trust in the flesh. They did not tell them that they were at liberty to sin. Oh, no; they told them that they must keep the law! Yes, they must do it themselves; they must make themselves righteous without Jesus Christ. For circumcision stood for the keeping of the law. Now the real circumcision was the law written in the heart by the Spirit; but the “false brethren” wished the believers to trust in the outward form of circumcision, as a substitute for the Spirit’s work; so that the thing which was given as a sign of righteousness by faith, became only a sign of self-righteousness. The false brethren would have them circumcised for righteousness and salvation; but Peter said, “Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we believe to be saved.” Just as Paul wrote, “With the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Romans 10:10). “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14:23). Therefore, all the efforts of men to keep the law of God by their own power, no matter how earnest and sincere they may be, can never result in anything but sin. “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).

Peter said to them that sought justification by works, instead of by faith in Christ, “Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (Acts 15:10). This yoke was a yoke of bondage, as is shown by Paul’s words, that the “false brethren” sneaked in “to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage” (Galatians 2:4). Christ gives freedom from sin. His life is “the perfect law of liberty.” “By the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20), but not freedom from it. “The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Romans 7:12), just because it gives the knowledge of sin by condemning it. It is a signpost, which points out the way, but does not carry us. It can tell us that we are out of the way; but Christ alone can make us walk in it; for He is the way. Sin is bondage (Proverbs 5:22). Only those who keep the commandments of God are at liberty (Psalm 119:45); and the commandments can be kept only by faith in Christ (Romans 8:3-4).

Wednesday: The Apostolic Decree – The so-called apostolic decree “added nothing” to the gospel preached by Paul. It was not new, but simply restating the truth. The Jerusalem council did not have a monopoly of truth. The brethren in Antioch did not need to go to Jerusalem to learn the truth, or to find out if what they had was the genuine article. The fact that truth was first proclaimed in a certain place, does not prove that it can be found only there, or that it can be found there at all. In fact, the last places in the world to go to with the expectation of finding or learning truth, are the cities where the Gospel was preached in the first centuries after Christ, as Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, etc. Paul did not go up to Jerusalem to them that were apostles before him, but began at once to preach.

Thursday: The Letter from Jerusalem – The matter of circumcision was discussed at the Jerusalem council and a letter sent to churches. Paul did not go up to Jerusalem in order to get a difficult point settled. He did not go up to the apostles and elders to find out whether he had been preaching the truth or error for seventeen years. Those who were leaders among the brethren “added nothing” (Galatians 2:6) to him. He had seen the Lord Jesus, and he knew whom he had believed (2 Timothy 1:12); and as he had not received the Gospel from any man (Galatians 1:11-12), he did not need that any man should teach him what it is (1 John 2:26-27). He went up “by revelation” (Galatians 2:2) of the Lord. The Lord knew that the brethren in Jerusalem needed his testimony, and the new converts needed to know that those whom God sent spoke the words of God, and all spoke the same thing – “speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you” (1 Corinthians 1:10). They needed the assurance that as they had turned from many gods to the one God, the truth is one, and there is but one Gospel for all men. The Jerusalem council had no monopoly of truth. Paul says, “Whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me; God accepteth no man’s person” (Galatians 2:6). There is no man or body of men on earth, that has a monopoly of truth so that whoever wishes it must come to him. Truth is independent of men. Truth is of God, for Christ, who is the shining of His glory, and the very impress of His substance (Hebrews 1:3), is the truth (John 14:6). Whoever gets the truth, must get it from God, and not from any man, just as Paul received the Gospel. God may and does use men as instruments, or channels, but He alone is the Giver. Every man on earth may be the possessor of just as much of the truth as he is willing to use, and no more (see John 7:17; 12:35-36). No popery in all this.