FUSION OF JEWS AND GENTILES IN ONE BODY IN CHRIST.

THE first terrible persecution of the Christian community in Jerusalem compelled many disciples to seek refuge in foreign lands. Besides greatly extending the sphere of Christian influence, this enforced emigration had a wonderful effect in enlarging their ideal. Within a few years a small society of spiritually minded Jews developed a separate religion, which struck firm root in all the principal cities of the Greek world, and aspired to universal dominion over the hearts and lives of all mankind. Believers in Christ perceive in this transformation a signal proof of the inspired wisdom which guided the counsels and shaped the destiny of the primitive Church: philosophic historians discern in it a remarkable instance of the powerful action of spiritual forces on human society.

The Gospel record of the Founder's life by no means prepares the reader for this rapid expansion. For though He comprehended the whole human race within His own spiritual horizon, and made no secret of the ultimate destiny of His Gospel, Jesus was careful during His lifetime to limit the practical horizon of His disciples to Jews alone. When He sent them forth before His face, He expressly forbad their going into any way of the Gentiles, or even into any city of the Samaritans. He habitually restricted His own ministrations to the house of Israel: on the rare occasions on which He departed from this rule He studiously reminded His followers that the exceptional concession was due to preeminent faith, and even assumed

a semblance of cruel disdain in repulsing the petition of a suppliant Gentile.[1] Not until the very eve of the Ascension did He directly include Samaritans and Gentiles within the scope of their commission. Even then the date of their conversion remained hidden behind the impenetrable veil of futurity: the disciples were still allowed to cherish the illusion, fostered by the language of Hebrew prophecy, that the incoming of the Gentiles was destined to swell the triumph of the older Israel, and to forget their Master's warnings that the approaching downfall of the material temple of God was to pave the way for the establishment of a spiritual worship throughout the world.

A succession of events combined to bring about the actual conversion of the Gentiles. The first impulse was given by the persecution which drove forth a number of Christian refugees into the cities of the Gentiles. The subsequent admission of Gentiles to baptism was determined by an express revelation of the will of God through visions and outpouring of the Spirit to Peter and his companions, and through them to the whole Church. This event in reality revolutionised the position of the Church, though the momentous consequences with which it was pregnant were hardly realised at the time: for it decided once for all the principle that Greek and Jew should be baptized into one common faith, and both seal the same covenant with God in Christ. Its earliest fruit was seen in the growth of a mixed community in Antioch, not wholly Jewish nor wholly Gentile, for whom was coined the new name of Christian. A great number of devout Gentiles of the same type as Cornelius were constant attendants on the worship of the synagogue. We come across the mention of this habit incidentally in the Pisidian Antioch and in Iconium; Pauline history exhibits its prevalence at Corinth and Ephesus likewise, and leaves no doubt that it existed

[1] Luke vii. 9; Mark vii. 27.

generally in every Greek city that contained a synagogue. These men valued the Hebrew Scriptures and were attracted by Hebrew theology and morality, but shrank from circumcision and the burdensome obligations which it entailed. Many, therefore, when brought into contact with Christian preaching in the synagogue, found in the offer of baptism without circumcision the very revelation they had learnt to crave, and welcomed gladly the opportunity of entering into covenant with God without, at the same time, submitting to the bondage of the Mosaic law. But the conversion of individual Greeks attracted little attention for a time: for these Gentile sympathisers were not accounted true members of the synagogue; their presence was barely tolerated, perhaps in hope of their conversion, perhaps from interested motives; and they bore the badge of social and religious inferiority in their uncircumcision, so that their adhesion to the new creed would excite at first little observation. For several years, too, the process of conversion was from circumstances very gradual; for Judaism was strongly intrenched within the citadel of the Church. Synagogues afforded the only local centres for the propagation of the Gospel; the preachers and the mass of the audience, converted and unconverted alike, were thoroughly imbued with Jewish sentiment: even Paul himself was content apparently for a while at Antioch to address himself to the Jew first; no jealousy was yet aroused on the part of the Circumcision; they gave at least no sign of active opposition to the growth of a Gentile Church in Antioch, but acquiesced silently in the baptism of other Gentiles as they had before in that of Cornelius.

But the burning words of Paul in Asia Minor, his direct appeal from his Jewish to his Gentile hearers, their enthusiastic response, and his successful mission in concert with Barnabas amidst them, heralded a new departure, and awakened a well-founded apprehension amidst Jewish

Christians that loyalty to the ancient faith would be swept away by the flood of new converts pressing in from the cities of the Greeks. For the Gentile converts had already gained a sure foothold within the Church by baptism. Their inheritance of God's grace in Christ, of His promises, and His Spirit, had been sealed to them by Divine sanction. Under Paul's preaching they had firmly grasped the doctrine of Christian freedom, and were prepared to maintain their equality with the Jew before God. They possessed in the Church of Antioch a central stronghold from which to propagate their faith: above all they had now apostolic leaders as richly endowed with the Spirit, and as highly favoured with the Divine blessing, as any that the rival Church in Judæa could boast: they wanted only numbers and organisation to obtain the ascendency in the local churches outside Palestine, and were rapidly accumulating these additional elements of strength. They were manifestly tending to absorb the forces of the larger Gentile world; and the promise of the future belonged to them as surely as the favour of God had rested on Israel in the past.

On the other hand the church of Palestine was strong in centuries of unbroken connexion with the service of God; they were heirs of the ancient faith, depositaries of God's Word, children of the patriarchs and the prophets; they were also living witnesses of all that Christ had said and done and suffered on earth from His birth to His ascension: and all its members were deeply pledged to the maintenance of circumcision and the Law. Heroic struggles against Greek idolatry had imbued every pious Jew with patriotic pride in the fulfilment of his religious obligations. The spirit of religious exclusiveness had sunk deep into the hearts of the nation, and the prescription of centuries forbad free intercourse with Gentiles. The Jewish Christian had inherited these traditions equally with the unconverted Jew, and was imbued from his birth with equally strong

prejudices. Communion with the uncircumcised and the unclean was originally no less abhorrent to him than to the unconverted: and the prospect of Gentile supremacy in the Church must have been wellnigh intolerable to the mass. This strong current of feeling prompted a last desperate effort to impose on Gentile converts the rite of circumcision with its attendant legal obligations, and led to a dangerous crisis in the Church. Though their right to baptism could not be impugned in the face of express intervention from heaven in its favour, it was still open to Christians to contend that according to God's Word circumcision was also an essential condition of God's covenant, and that therefore baptism alone was not sufficient for salvation without the addition of circumcision. This claim was put forward at Antioch by Christians from Judæa with a certain measure of support from Jerusalem; they disparaged the independent value and privilege of Christian baptism in comparison with the earlier rite, and insisted on this being still the indispensable channel of God's covenanted blessings.

It is not recorded by what specious reasoning they sought to reconcile this dishonour of the Christian ordinance with true faith in Christ. Enough that their argument struck at the very existence of Gentile congregations within the pale of the Church, and subordinated Christianity afresh to those fetters of Judaism which it had begun to shake off; yet they claimed to speak in the name of their Church, for they refused to listen to the remonstrances of Paul and Barnabas, or to bow to the authority of the Church of Antioch. This issue, once raised, urgently called for a decisive answer; there could be no more peace in any mixed communities until some basis of agreement had been devised. For the two views propounded were irreconcilable: Jewish exclusiveness could not coexist with a law of perfect freedom for the uncircumcised in a single com-

munity of Christian brethren. The Church was thus brought face to face with the most formidable danger that had yet beset her. Disruption seemed imminent—a disruption which threatened her very life. For how could a divided Church, which should exhibit in one section the unbounded license of Gentile communities, severed in their infancy from the restraints of Scriptural and Christian tradition, and in the other the narrow sectarianism of a Jewish brotherhood tied down to every ordinance of the Mosaic ritual, carry throughout the world the gospel message of faith in a holy Saviour and universal brotherhood between man and man? Thanks to the courage and wisdom with which the leaders of the Church faced the crisis, and to the mutual forbearance inspired by Christian brotherhood in the hearts of the disciples, this catastrophe was averted, and a reasonable compromise effected by means of a friendly conference at Jerusalem under the leadership of Peter and James, Paul and Barnabas, generally known by the name of the Apostolic Council. This treaty of peace did much more than avert the immediate danger of schism: it finally swept aside the most serious obstacle to the union of Jew and Gentile in one communion, and enabled them without disloyalty to the laws and customs of their fathers to form a single brotherhood, and participate in the blessings of a common faith.

Let us now turn to the history of this council in Acts xv. 1–33.[1] The Church of Antioch took the initiative in negotiation, prompted doubtless by its chief ministers Barnabas and Paul, who themselves headed an embassy to Jerusalem for the express purpose of putting an end to controversy and restoring peace and harmony. The occasion for this course is stated distinctly: Christians from

[1] This history is confirmed and illustrated by a personal narrative in Gal. ii. 1-10, but the interpretation and application of the language is beset with difficulty, and I have therefore judged it advisable to rely here on Acts alone.

Judæa had urged on their brethren at Antioch the necessity of circumcision for salvation, in persistent opposition to the doctrine and practice of Barnabas and Paul. The only effectual protest against the interference of these strangers was an appeal to the decision of their own Church, for they refused to recognise any other authority. That this was the real purport of the embassy is manifest from the reply of the council, which bases its action on the reported language of these Christians from Judæa.[1] Before entering on the question of doctrine the letter deals with the personal question, repudiating the right of the agitators to speak in the name of the Church, warmly commending the sacrifices of Barnabas and Paul for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and accrediting two ambassadors to return with them to Antioch.

But the controversy had gone too far for either party to rest content with personal courtesies. The issue had been distinctly raised, whether or no the obligation of circumcision was universal, and a decision had become imperative. There could be no more peace in any mixed congregation until the claims of the Mosaic law on Gentile converts had been distinctly defined, and the future policy of the Church determined. There was however at this period no constituted authority capable of mediating between the two sections. For the exclusive control of Christian doctrine had passed out of the hands of the Twelve as soon as the Church outgrew the stage of infancy. Peter himself had long ago been called to account, and stood on his defence before his brethren. The Twelve were probably unknown by face to the brethren of the Gentiles, and Jerusalem had ceased to be the central seat of government for the whole Church. The sister Church of Antioch, though indebted to Jerusalem for its origin, had grown up independently, and had herself initiated the recent mission to Cyprus and Asia

[1] Acts xv. 24.

Minor. They had commissioned Barnabas and Paul for its execution, had received their report, and thoroughly identified themselves with the principle of Gentile freedom to which they owed so large a measure of their success. Hence the importance of a conference between the two Churches: for a conference it was—not a surrender of independence nor voluntary submission on the part of Antioch. The choice of ambassadors proclaims the attitude of that church: they deputed Barnabas and Paul, the very men who were most deeply committed to the cause of Gentile freedom and most determined in its support, to represent them at Jerusalem; they desired, in short, to protest against the interference of Christians from Judæa. An embassy for redress of a grievance implies no sacrifice of independence.

Nor did Barnabas and Paul for their part leave any doubt about the attitude they proposed to assume. They did not await the verdict of Jerusalem before committing themselves afresh to a decisive line of action on the vital question in dispute, but proclaimed to enthusiastic hearers in every city on their way what abundant blessing God had granted to their past labours among the Gentiles, and went forward in assured hope of future triumphs.

Resolute however as was the attitude of Paul and Barnabas, the issue of the appeal to Jerusalem was by no means certain, seeing how deeply the whole community was pledged to the maintenance of circumcision. By this token God had sealed His covenant with all the seed of Abraham, expressly ordaining the circumcision of every male child of Abraham without exception. How then could children of Abraham presume to set His Word at nought, and sanction disobedience to His command on the part of brethren who claimed to be likewise children of Abraham and heirs of God's promise to the Fathers? Notwithstanding, in spite of reverence for God's Word, of

pious scruples and traditional prejudices, the required concession was made, and Gentile converts were pronounced exempt from the obligation of circumcision with its attendant legal burdens. For Peter and James threw all their influence into the scale and procured a final verdict in favour of freedom. Nor did the Council assent lightly or hastily without expressing their solemn sense of the responsibility they incurred in setting aside the plain letter of the Law and reinterpreting the Word of God for the benefit of these adopted children of Abraham. The language in which they embody their resolution, *It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us*, declares their conviction of the real presence of the Spirit in their assembly. They were emboldened in their resolve by a firm faith that Christ was present by His Spirit among them, guiding their decision, and bestowing His express sanction on the fresh legislation which was needed on behalf of the new Israel. They were sure that they spoke the mind of Christ.

Moreover these terms were not unconditional: the proposed treaty took the shape of a bargain, and stipulated that Gentile converts should observe on their side four definite rules of abstinence. So much is declared to be necessary, *i.e.* an indispensable minimum for brotherly communion between the two Churches. For the uncleanness of the Gentile in Jewish eyes was a formidable stumblingblock in the way of Christian union; this was partly moral, partly ceremonial, the two being bound up together in the Law; accordingly the prohibitions included both kinds. The previous address of James states clearly the principle on which the council grounded this claim. They did not urge that these restrictions were essential to salvation, or binding upon Gentiles in themselves, but that the public reading of the Law in Jewish synagogues rendered the practices extremely offensive to their Jewish

brethren. Presented in this light, as a reasonable concession to the scruples of their brethren, the rules found ready acceptance at Antioch; they were doubtless observed by that Church in good faith until they became obsolete, and were not without their value in combating idolatry and impurity, and in fostering a due regard for the conscientious scruples of Christian brethren. Probably the other existing Churches also accepted them, for Paul himself deposited the *resolutions*[1] in the hands of the brethren in Asia Minor. But this is the last mention of them; and it is certain that Paul himself did not regard the ceremonial rules of abstinence as permanently binding on the Church at large, for in his First Epistle to the Corinthians a few years later he treats the subject of uncleanness on a purely Christian basis and with apostolic freedom, without any reference to the ceremonial law. His open breach with the synagogue, and the increasing growth of the Gentile element, had apparently rendered the ceremonial rules already obsolete.

It remains to examine the structure of the council with a view to determining what authority it possessed for enforcing or recommending its decisions throughout the Church. It was composed of three classes—apostles, elders, and brethren. The apostles and elders welcomed the embassy on its arrival and assembled at once to hear the purport of their commission. Apparently no others were present at their first meeting, but an incidental reference to the audience as a *multitude* proves that many other brethren were invited to take part in the subsequent debates; and the concurrence of the whole Church with the apostles and elders in the final resolution is expressly

[1] Our versions of Acts xvi. 4 introduce the idea of authoritative legislation by the mention of *decrees*; but the Greek substantive corresponds to the expression used in xv. 25, *It seemed good unto us*, and really means no more than *resolutions* of the council.

recorded. Moreover the official letter to Antioch runs (according to the correct text) in the name of *the apostles and elder*[1] *brethren*, omitting all mention of the elders.

The title of Apostles was practically limited at Jerusalem to the Twelve, perhaps including James. But a comparison of Acts ix. 27 with Galatians i. 19 shows that the expression *the apostles* should not be interpreted as denoting the presence of the whole body or even of a majority. The large discretionary powers vested in the Twelve at an earlier period might perhaps suggest that the apostles present in the council still exercised supreme control over the government of the Church, and that the brethren who took part in the deliberations were merely subordinate assessors whose presence lent additional weight to their judgment. But the language of Peter altogether negatives this theory: for he pleads no commission from his Master, claims no direct inspiration from on high, but appeals to his brethren as one of themselves, takes his stand on reason and argument like any other advocate, offers his personal testimony of God's past dealings, enforces his advice by lessons drawn from experience, and appeals to their common faith. Evidently the assembled brethren had a real voice in the decision.

This conclusion is confirmed by previous history. The special commission of the Twelve was not to govern the Church, but to bear witness of the Christ by word and deed. For this latter function they were eminently qualified by their antecedents; they were not only chosen witnesses of His life on earth, but were beyond all other men depositaries of the mind of Christ; and being further endowed with special gifts of the Spirit, they became at first exclusive teachers of their brethren. The prerogative

[1] The true force of the word *elder* in this passage is to distinguish the brethren of the older Church, Jerusalem, from *the brethren of the Gentiles*, who belonged to the younger Church of Antioch.

of judgment with which they were in consequence invested, gave them unlimited supremacy in the counsels of the infant Church; but their real concern even then was with the hearts and consciences of men; and so essentially spiritual was their authority that, when circumstances threw into their hands the administration of church funds, they hastened to divest themselves of the charge because it interfered with the preaching of the Word. After the dispersion of the Church no trace remains of this exceptional supremacy of the Twelve as a body. Peter and John long continued central pillars of the Church, James the son of Zebedee gave his life for the Gospel, but the rest of the Twelve were overshadowed by other brethren whom the Spirit quickened here or there to do the work of Apostles, though perhaps without the name. Detached congregations were formed in widely separated localities, and an urgent demand arose for personal leadership and local government, while the rule of the Twelve fell silently into abeyance. Even so early as the baptism of Cornelius Peter appeared before the Apostles and brethren at Jerusalem to justify his conduct, acknowledging the united voice of the Church to possess sovereign authority on questions of discipline and doctrine. His language before the council manifests afresh the same deference to the judgment of his brethren.

Who then were these elders and brethren who took counsel with the apostles in this eventful crisis, and decided by their voices the future of the Church? They were without doubt members of the local Church. The Christian institution of elders was distinctly local like the Jewish, from which it was borrowed: Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the several cities in Asia Minor in which they had founded churches, and this they did as a matter of course, doubtless according to a pattern already existing in earlier Christian communities. Paul likewise

afterwards committed the charge of the Ephesian Church to local elders. When the Christians of Antioch determined to send relief to the brethren in Judæa, they sent it to the elders at Jerusalem; whence we learn incidentally that these embraced the whole of Judæa within their province. The Pauline contribution was in like manner presented to a meeting of the elders.[1] So here again the council claim jurisdiction over the Christians who had gone down from Judæa to Antioch, as members of their own Church, and pronounce a formal reprimand upon them. For the Temple was still the natural centre of worship as well as sacrifice for the Church of the Circumcision; the apostles still probably made Jerusalem their headquarters for common prayer, instruction, and counsel; and brethren from all parts of Palestine resorted at least three times a year to the holy city; hence the Church of Palestine long retained its unity. Even the Samaritan converts seem to have transferred their allegiance to the Temple at Jerusalem (perhaps in consequence of Christ's words recorded in John iv. 22); for the Church throughout all Judæa and Galilee and Samaria is described in Acts ix. 31 as one Church.

That an enormous majority of those present belonged to this local Church in Palestine might have been safely inferred from circumstances in the absence of any specific reference to a gathering of brethren from without; but the letter to Antioch goes beyond this presumption, and establishes the fact that it was definitely restricted to these members, and that no other brethren were admitted to a voice in the resolution; for their description of Barnabas and Paul as *our beloved Barnabas and Paul* definitely separates the deputation from the members, and defines their position as outside the council. Though heartily welcomed as representatives of a sister Church,

[1] Acts xxi. 18.

granted an attentive hearing, and allowed fully to report the spread of the Gospel among the Gentiles, they were not invited to vote on the final issue or take part in drafting the formal resolution.

This exclusion of Paul and Barnabas proves conclusively that the absence of representatives from other Churches was not due to accidental circumstances, but to deliberate policy; in short, the *raison d'être* of the Council consisted in their representing the Palestine Church. Exactly the same limitation prevails in their assumption of authority. On their own members, who had presumed to interfere with the internal peace of a foreign Church, they pronounce an unqualified rebuke for usurping a right to speak in the name of the Church without due sanction. With the Church of Antioch and its branch Churches in Syria and Cilicia, on the contrary, they negotiate on a footing of equality by drawing up proposals of agreement and deputing representatives on their part to present them.

Whether, therefore, we survey the general history of the crisis, the attitude of Paul and Barnabas, and subsequent independence of the Pauline Churches, or the structure of the Council, the exclusion of representatives from foreign Churches, and the position taken up towards those Churches, we are driven to the conclusion that the council neither had, nor claimed, ecclesiastical jurisdiction outside the local Church. There is therefore no true analogy between it and the general councils of later centuries, with which it has scarcely any common features except the name of council. The institution of general councils belongs to the history of Christian emperors; they were summoned by imperial mandate, attended by bishops from the various provinces of the empire, derived their legislative powers from the systematic organisation of the Church under Roman rule, were supported by the framework of

imperial power behind them; and wielded accordingly extensive powers as supreme arbiters of doctrine and discipline throughout the civilised world. The Council of Jerusalem, on the contrary, had neither representation, jurisdiction, nor support from lawful authority, outside Palestine.

Are we therefore to conclude that its decision had little effect on the future destiny of the Church? By no means; it was indeed of vital importance to its welfare. For the growth of Christianity in those days depended not on legislative enactments, but on spiritual influence, and the moral authority of the Apostolic Council was immense. The apostles and elder brethren who met in Jerusalem comprehended amidst their number almost all the living fathers of the Church; brethren of the circumcision, not in Palestine alone, but throughout the world, looked up to them with perfect confidence as original witnesses of the life and work of Christ, and sure interpreters of God's ancient Word. The issue brought before them by Paul and Barnabas on behalf of the mother Church of the Gentiles involved, as we have seen, imminent peril of a disastrous schism, which was only averted by the assent of the brethren after mature deliberation to the proposals of Peter and James. The immediate result was to relieve Gentile converts from the obligation of circumcision, to raise the standard of purity among them, and to foster on both sides a more tender regard for the conscientious scruples of their brethren. But the immediate result was of light account in comparison with the far-reaching consequences. What did it matter that the enforcement of the treaty depended on mutual agreement, and that its details were subject to revision at the discretion of either party. Its terms were placed on record, and the solemn sanction of the assembled Church of the Circumcision to this basis of union could never be recalled. From this

date began a real fusion of Jew and Gentile within the Church, and a decisive parting between Judaism and Christianity. When Jewish Christians decided to accept uncircumcised converts as baptized brethren, they made a final choice in effect between the spirit of Christian brotherhood and the traditional letter of the Law. They began to turn their backs upon the synagogue, and henceforth drifted ever farther apart from their own countrymen, while they drew together into closer union with their Gentile brethren in the faith. So effective a breach was then made in the middle wall of partition that the eventual union of Jew and Gentile in one universal Church was brought from this moment within the horizon of Christian hope and faith. The unavoidable isolation of Christian communities scattered here and there over the surface of the civilised world precluded indeed for the present any kind of central administration. The federation of local Churches was the utmost approach to outward unity feasible during the apostolic age. But that generation was charged with the duty of laying foundations on which future generations were to build. The special function committed to the Apostolic Council was to heal the ancient feud between Jew and Gentile, to bury their hereditary animosity in the new covenant of baptism, and knit the bonds of brotherly union so firmly that they might eventually become altogether one in Christ. This victory over deep-seated jealousies of race and creed was a signal triumph of Christian grace. For the two races had stood apart for centuries. Their reconciliation in Christ, and mutual co-operation in building up the fabric of the universal Church, was the surest earnest possible of the future union of all mankind, without distinction of race or nation, in one perfected body of Christ.

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