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A PRECEDENT IN REUNION DISCUSSIONS.

BY THE REV. W. S. HOOTON, B.D.

ONE reason why the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is of such unique value is the too little recognized fact that its carefully selected incidents are not merely (as of course they are) vital points in the development of primitive Church history, but also enshrine seeds of guidance for the Church of Christ in all ages, as conditions and problems arise, infinitely varied and not in the least foreseen or even foreshadowed in those early days. This is one mark of Divine inspiration, as well as of the unique value already mentioned. No human author could have put together a series of key-incidents affording unfailing guidance for the Church in all generations and countries. Historical sense may enable an acute author to distinguish critical points and set them in telling proportion, omitting others less necessary for record; though St. Luke had special inspiration even here. But to select exactly the points which are suitable for guidance, e.g. no less in the missionary operations of the Church in Oriental countries like India and China than in the problems and perplexities of the Western Church at home—and that too in this far remote twentieth century—is something far beyond human insight or foresight. If the matter could be put to the test, it would doubtless be found that no difficulty has beset the Church of Christ, through all the ages, which could not have been solved if His servants had been content to settle it in accordance with some principle of eternal application which could have been discovered, by sincere and prayerful seekers, embodied in some incident or incidents either definitely recorded in the Acts or reflected in the Epistles of the New Testament.

The Council at Jerusalem, described in Acts xv., has probably been indicated by many writers and speakers in the course of the past few years as enshrining in this manner principles of immeasurable value for the solution of the Reunion puzzle. There is no claim to originality in the subject thus put forward; but the moment seems opportune for a closer examination of the principles so clearly applicable, as well as of certain difficulties not so clearly met by this case, and for suggesting, possibly, some points not hitherto noticed.

I. There is no question about the startling aptness of the precedent. Here were two parties to a controversy. One side took its stand upon what it understood to be a ceremonial obligation of direct Divine command and perpetual binding force. The other side pointed to the irresistible fact that God had Himself vouchsafed unquestionable tokens of His approval to those who had not fulfilled the alleged obligations, and on this ground they pleaded for the liberty so manifestly sanctioned and commended.

Can the Baptist have deeper convictions on the necessity of adult baptism and immersion than the Judaizer had about circumcision? In the one case the question is merely of the interpretation of a command—in part, of a word: in the other, two interpretations may well have seemed impossible. Can the most rigid view of Episcopal grace and order exceed the rigidity of that which was alleged—and apparently upon such unassailable grounds—to be the sole door of entrance to the covenant of Divine favour? That ancient situation was far more hopeless in appearance than any difficulty of our own. For Judaistic observances meant to the Judaizer literally everything. But to St. Paul they spelt—if reliance were placed on them for salvation and Divine favour—nothing less than spiritual death, and the very negation of the Gospel of Christ. On the other hand, consider the present position of our Reunion controversy. If any considerable number of people ever really believed that Nonconformists were outside God's covenant of grace, that opinion, at any rate, has had its death-blow in the Lambeth message. On such a point the Judaizer could yield nothing: and some of the leading Apostles themselves were, before the Council, no more free from such prepossessions than some of our Bishops have been from corresponding prepossessions in our own day. If *such* a difficulty could be settled in authoritative conclave then, why not our problem of less far-reaching proportions? The Council, too, was held in the Judaizers' stronghold. No favour was likely to be shown to Gentile laxity in Jerusalem itself, under (seemingly) a president famed for strict reverence for the law of God, in the very heart of all the influences of early prepossession and hoary tradition. It was a bold challenge of faith on the part of St. Paul and his comrades: and their faith and courage were amply vindicated.

And how was the matter settled? Without going too much

into detail, two points are very noticeable and important, apart from what is the leading secret of all—sincere submission to and expectation of the Holy Spirit's guidance in authoritative Church assembly. Apart from this—or rather as methods of discovering and recognizing this guidance—there are two marked features of the Council, viz. the two-fold appeal to Scripture and experience. This is how the Spirit's working is recognized and the Divine guidance acknowledged. These are the eternal lines for the discovery of the will of God. Not alleged experience alone, let us mark. That involves serious risk (of which there are many present-time warnings) of claiming the guidance of the Spirit of God for doctrines or practices which are in flat contradiction to the Word He has Himself inspired. Modernism and Romanism err equally in this way, though in different directions. It is true that the Spirit has not ceased to lead God's people forward ever still: it is true that the Living Voice may still be heard: it is true also that earnest deliberations in authoritative Councils may claim true guidance if sought on the prescribed lines. But it is not true that the Spirit of truth will ever contradict Himself. He will not tell us to-day what is exactly opposite to what He told Apostles nineteen centuries ago.

So we find that the eternal fount of truth was explored under the guidance of the revered James, before any decision was attempted. And the voice of prophecy—the voice of God through His Word—was confirmed by what Peter had told of Cornelius and his party, and by what the first foreign missionaries related of their experience among the heathen. (It is largely the testimony from the foreign field that is so convincing in the Reunion controversy too.) Perhaps it might be truer to say that it was these notable testimonies which for the first time shed full light upon the ancient prophecy and revealed in a flash to St. James, who quoted it, the true bearing of what he had known from childhood but never understood. Thus in the older Scriptures are enshrined those eternal principles of guidance which we have already recognized in the new, and the march of events continually interprets them to watchful souls humbly depending upon the Spirit's teaching, so that with Spirit-taught wisdom they bring from the fathomless depths of that inexorable storehouse things new as well as old!

The prophecies, interpreted thus by experience, showed that the commands of the Law (equally inspired for their special and

limited purpose) were not universal or perpetual. There is no contradiction here, but only the shining forth of true interpretative light. Thus was a difficulty, as insoluble as any that could be imagined, proved to be easily reconciled to teachable souls. The experiences at Cæsarea, at Antioch and elsewhere, proved that God Himself had settled the question—even as He has settled ours if we will but own it! “God, which knoweth the heart, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as He did unto us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.” So said St. Peter, mindful of that first marvellous scene of Gentile conversion, to which he had been led himself by three-fold vision and providential connexion of circumstance. “Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.”¹ “Theory and prejudice had to yield, when true witness was borne to God’s will and work. What was the use of arguing about the position of the Gentiles under the new dispensation, when it was proved by reliable witnesses that God had declared for their admission on equal terms with His favoured people?”²

One other lesson of special significance before we proceed to the difficulties which seem peculiar to our case and less easily touched by the precedent. The matter was settled as it were in a moment when the guidance of the Holy Ghost was really sought. “It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us . . .”³ That is the true way! They could never have dared to write that in their letter if they had not submitted to His guidance with a full heart and a clear conscience. Did those servants of Christ despairingly aver that such a radical difference could “never be settled in their day”? That it would be a fatal mistake to hurry things? That discussion must be *very* cautious and gradual and detailed, lest we fall into something worse? That to welcome the Christians of Antioch would only mean to split the Church at Jerusalem?

We know they did not. And we know why. They were men of courage and of faith—men, above all, *willing to follow the Spirit wherever He led*; ready to *do*, not only to talk and confer. Such

¹ Acts xv. 8, 9, 12.

² *Missionary Ideals*, by the Rev. T. Walker, p. 155.

³ Acts xv. 28.

men were not the men for tiny doses of reconciliation ; for helpless palliatives and endless procrastination. Because they were willing for anything, they surrendered their prejudices : and it is when we do that that we get to know His will and find grace to do it. And prejudices can be surrendered in five minutes as easily—more easily than in a hundred years, if there be the ready will.

No doubt there were many who would not submit. St. Paul soon found that. But whatever the result, he would never have counselled caution and the continuation of a scandal to God's kingdom, and the negation of God's truth, for fear of fresh splits and worse divisions. We shall wait for ever if we wait for everybody.

All this sounds terribly one-sided and ill-balanced perhaps. But wait a moment. We are now turning to our acknowledged special (but not therefore insoluble) causes of perplexity.

2. And first to a very practical obstacle. The Church was then fairly small and manageable. It was not indeed so ideally free from internal discord as is often fondly imagined : yet it was, as yet, one single entity ; and it was, moreover, easily possible for those primitive leaders to point to Jerusalem as a recognized centre and to gather there representatives of all who were concerned. How difficult it is for us, now, to gather in any one place any really representative assembly of even those parts of the Christian Church which are ready honestly to repent of their discords and to seek God's way of restoration without dictating beforehand what that way must be ! And in consequence it seems inevitable that every severed branch should discuss by itself first of all its own standpoint, with all the interminable further difficulties of deciding how a more general and an authoritative Council could be called.

This obstacle has two most unhappy results. Discussions of that order need special grace indeed if each body is not to prejudge some vital aspect of the case which the more balanced constitution of a more representative Council might at least help to present in truer proportion. Opinion may easily harden thus, and prejudice deepen. The ultimate Council, if ever arrived at, is less likely to be free to follow *wherever the Spirit may lead*. Or, if the conclusion be that an ultimate General Council is impossible, there will be even greater difficulty in securing balanced considerations in any quarter whatsoever.

The second unhappy consequence is that such processes inevitably prolong that heart-breaking procrastination which has already been in our view.

But surely we cannot believe that such perplexities are wholly insurmountable. Our quarrel with current opinion is that they are everywhere assumed to be so! No two situations are absolutely similar in *details*. We cannot expect Acts xv. to cover us completely here. Its thrilling narrative of simple obedience gives us *all the principles of guidance*. It is our duty, and especially the duty of the Church's leaders in all its branches, to apply those principles, unchanging as they are, to the changed details of our current problems. That may well be admitted to be a formidable task; but it is not so nearly impossible as it is well-nigh always hopelessly assumed to be—at any rate as far as early action is concerned. God would enlighten our minds to-day, as He enlightened theirs, to see new things both in Scripture and in experience, if all were really open to His teaching and desirous of it. It is mainly a fault of the will, after all. The difficulties suggested even by this statement of the matter are great indeed; but if the scandal of our divisions means all that it is constantly declared to mean to the cause of Christ and the souls of men, is it not appalling to find that every responsible declaration on this subject seems to assume that it cannot be settled for years if not for generations? May a corporate sin, any more than an individual one, be condoned for an indefinite period? God has surely some better thing than that prepared for faith, and courage, and *surrender to His will*, faith, courage, and *surrender on all sides*. Are we sure that immediate and full concord is not as much a matter of life and death for us as it was for them?

It is important also to recall the fact already briefly named—that whatever our special difficulties, they had one which we have not, and which must beforehand have seemed insuperable. For none could dispute that circumcision was an ordinance of God, and the Law of Moses of Divine obligation. We may easily underestimate the seriousness of this factor from long custom of viewing these institutions in their due proportion, and fully comprehending their temporary and local significance: but the battle had then to be fought and won, and the attitude of many of the leaders showed how little idea even they had of the truth at first, and how dull

they were in comprehending it, or even timid in acting accordingly, however plain the Divine intimations of it had been.

How different is the case with us ! The most convinced Presbyterian can never plead that government by elders is a distinct command of God. The most ardent advocate of Episcopal succession cannot point to anything more than disputable inferences, or ignore the significance of local differences in Episcopal organization. In this respect our task in composing disagreement ought to be much easier.

One other perplexity in our case must not be forgotten. The logical consequence of what has been said, and of much else that could be considered, might appear to be that many of our differences in organization and discipline might well be allowed to continue side by side in a reunited Church. That, of course, was the case in the matter of circumcision. It was impossible indeed, after the Council, loyally to teach that these legal observances were essential or connected with saving truth ; but presumably the Jew was free to continue them if he wished, and also to circumcise his children. The full significance of the great principle then promulgated would only gradually permeate the Church, especially with the growth of the Gentile element. St. James himself emphasized the object of the decree as a due concession to *Gentile* believers, and at least one view of his closing words is that the Law of Moses would still be widely read and obeyed.¹ St. Peter probably contemplated such a dual arrangement when he said that " we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they."² (Notice how he excludes the ordinances from connexion with salvation.) St. Paul later wrote that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision was anything, but faith working through love.³ Nay, just after the Council, he himself circumcised Timothy to meet Jewish objections.⁴ These side-lights probably reveal the attitude of the Church. The ordinances had nothing to do with salvation, which is by grace for Jews as well as Gentiles : but they were apparently legitimate for Jewish believers, though they may often have led to a false ground of confidence.

From a practical point of view our case is very different. It is true that the Lambeth message has been widely interpreted on rather

¹ Acts xv. 19, 21.

² *Ibid.*, ver. 11.

³ Gal. v. 6.

⁴ Acts xvi. 3.

similar lines. But take the crucial case of Episcopacy. In very early times, Alexandria might organize its Church on rather different lines from (say) Antioch, without any schism or danger of it. But it would have been difficult, if not impossible—at any rate as a lasting arrangement—for different groups of Christians to be differently organized in any one city—say Rome. Now that is our position. In every town—practically in every village—Episcopal and Presbyterian or some other form of government exist side by side; and such a state of things could scarcely continue harmoniously in a reunited Church, as the Lambeth decisions of course fully recognize. This is going to be perhaps the great testing-point: but once again solution is not impossible if we unitedly exclude the controversial spirit, and instead show the apostolic spirit of humility, faith, and self-effacement; and if there be no bigoted predetermination to reserve from discussion any form of government whatsoever, or any particular interpretation of any such form.

3. One aspect of this great precedent at Jerusalem requires separate treatment. Yet more vividly does it illustrate the *varied* application of principle to detail. The encyclical letter acknowledged certain necessary exceptions. These have been described as indicating a compromise. That seems extremely dubious as an explanation. For one thing, the term has acquired an unenviable meaning, and we may be certain at any rate that these were not the men to sacrifice principle for peace. But even if the less invidious usage of the word may be intended, it is unquestionable that one at least of the exceptions was a matter of essential morality. And without going into discussion on the other points, the opinion may be ventured that possibly not one of them was of merely ceremonial import, but that they were *exceptions of vital principle in view of the local and temporary conditions of the infant Churches of that era*, while possibly also enshrining considerations of eternal necessity. That is all we need. It means this—that here we have, alongside of any permanent principles the narrative may contain, a sample, a specimen, of detailed difficulties capable of infinitely varied forms of expression, but all soluble on the line of general principle. There will always be special reservations, probably, in every settlement.

What will they be in our case? Probably not chiefly matters savouring at all of ceremonial observance, though such matters cannot entirely be overlooked. There is a powerful though not

perhaps relatively large section of our own Communion which greatly insists on some such things which cannot be conceded. But we are now dealing with a vastly larger body of Christians, in both hemispheres, far outnumbering our own Communion, and caring nothing for points of ceremony—not to mention the very large number of our own people to whom ceremonies are of little or no importance. No: the radical exceptions in any Reunion would be mainly in matters of doctrine. On the side of practice, broad general agreement might be attainable with far less difficulty: it is in doctrinal laxity that the real peril of any widely embracing scheme of Reunion, however otherwise successful, would lie. Never can we be thankful enough that successive Lambeth Conferences have consistently maintained, as a *sine qua non*, acceptance of the Bible, and upon its truths as expressed in the Creeds. Even here we are not free from the snare of the "non-natural" interpretation—one of those disguising phrases so ominously prevalent, concealing the real fact of an interpretation which not merely is most *unnatural* but positively contradicts the meaning of words, and practically inserts a "not" into almost every vital article of the Christian Faith. That matter needs to be settled, and is imperilling all the Churches and threatening widespread apostasy. But already there are complaints that this Lambeth reservation is too stringent. On the contrary, it is the vital safeguard against a mechanical union lacking spiritual efficacy. These are the conditions in our day which require reservations parallel to those of the Jerusalem encyclical. To abandon Episcopacy itself, root and branch, would be a trifle compared to the sacrifice of this.

If any attempt be made to argue that precisely the contrary is the case, and that this adherence to apostolic doctrine is exactly the sort of burden which is too heavy to bear in this generation, the answer is clear. We might get unity on other lines, but it would not be Christianity. Nor would it be the kind of unity attained at this ancient Council, which rested not merely on experience but upon the appeal to the Scriptures. Is it alleged that experience proves the necessity of relief for the modern mind in face of modern science and modern criticism? That is only half the apostolic Council's appeal—nay, far less than half: it is practically not any real appeal at all. For there are many to dispute this very alleged experience itself. We *know* the effect of faithfully

ministering and witnessing to the eternal truths of the Bible and the Creeds in the power of the Holy Ghost. We see it in changed lives, evidences of saved souls—in earnest soul-seeking at home and missionary endeavour abroad. Is it equally beyond dispute that the effort to relieve sceptical minds by surrendering Bible truth about the Fall, the Nature and Work of our Lord, and other central doctrines, produces equal fruit of the Spirit, equal missionary zeal? This is a consideration of primary importance, for it touches the root of the only side of the apostolic appeal which the advocates of such a method can pretend to imitate. But the other side, which they cannot even pretend to follow, is yet more important. Experience, even if far more specious in appearance than this, is illusory if not backed and confirmed by the Word of God. It is easy to imagine what St. Paul or St. John would have said to those who claim to remain in the fold while throwing doubt on Christ's Deity, the necessity and efficacy of His Atonement, the reality of His Resurrection and His Return. In these earliest days of all, the days of the Jerusalem Council, these questions were not to the fore as others were—however soon they were, in some cases, to show themselves. In our generation the danger-point is here, and here must be the reservations—or shipwreck.

W. S. HOOTON.

[NOTE.—In order to avoid misunderstanding, it should be stated that this article was written and the MS. in the Editor's hands before the publication of recent articles treating the Jerusalem Council in somewhat similar fashion.—EDITOR.]

DR. HEADLAM has issued the last number of the *Church Quarterly Review* under his editorship. He has established such a high standard that it will be difficult for even Mr. Matthews and his King's College colleagues to maintain its excellence. The July number has two contributions from the Editor on Divorce and Arabia, and we should not be surprised to learn that the writer of *The Reign of Folly* is also the versatile Professor. If he is not, we hope the new Editorial Board will retain him on its staff. Mr. Gavin deals with contemporary life in the Greek Church, Mr. Conran writes on the Reports of the Archbishops' Committees of the National Mission and the Dean of Carlisle has many acute remarks in his short paper on Moral Theology. The late Archbishop of Melbourne describes Church Constitutions and the articles on Charlotte Mary Yonge and the Sutta are well balanced and informing. As usual the book reviews are well and carefully done.