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"NOT SLOTHFUL IN BUSINESS : FERVENT IN SPIRIT."

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Poetry.

A Song of Earth.

Oh call the earth a sacred place,
For everywhere we turn, we trace
A loving Father's hand,
A hand in benediction laid
Upon the humblest things he made
When this bright world was planned.

Oh! call the earth a hallowed place,
Her hillsides flow with rills of grace;
The footsteps of our Lord
Are lingering yet beside her streams,
And still through earth his crown light beams,
To guide to Love's reward.

Oh! call the earth a blessed place,
For here they ran their heavenward race,—
Our loved ones gone before.
And still their saintly memories stay
To walk with us the thorny way
Unto the thornless shore.

Oh! call the earth a happy place!
For only sin its light can chase,
And turn its bliss to pain.
Blame self and sin, but not the earth,
For countless woes that here have birth,
And here like tyrants reign.

Oh! call the earth a glorious place,
To souls that live in His embrace
Who life and light hath given.
Call it a school for angel-youth—
A conquering battle-ground for truth—
A highway into heaven!

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Ecclesiastical.

The First Council.

PREJUDICES of education, especially in the religious department, are ordinarily strong and tenacious. Of this we have an illustration in the descendants of Abraham. Their system of religion had been communicated to them in a manner which left no room for doubt as to the Divinity of its origin. In their estimation it was not only superior to every other system, but also in itself peculiarly excellent and sacred. Hence they were careful to teach it to their children, and spared no pains to connect it as a whole and in detail with their earliest and most durable associations. Thus the facts and principles of the system became ingrained with their very natures, and had an influence over their modes of thinking and all their habits of life. We do not, therefore, wonder that Christianity was slow in dispossessing them of these prejudices. An entire change at once in all their views; an intellectual revolution that should effectually displace a deeply rooted theory, could have been produced only by a miracle. The importance which they had always attached to certain forms and rites, would naturally remain, and the tendency would be strong to endeavor to combine the Jewish and the Christian systems. Not understanding that the one was temporary, and preliminary to the other, and finding it difficult to see how one Divine system could supersede another, they were very apt to conclude that the second must be, not an abrogation, but a continuation, of the first—a supplement, rather than a substitute.

The Apostles were thoroughly instructed by the Holy Spirit in this matter, and it was well for the early Churches, and for all that should succeed them, that they were thus enlightened. But for their clear apprehension of the gospel system, and their plain exposition and faithful defence of its principles, "as the truth is in Jesus," it would have been soon corrupted. They stood near the fountain, and, during their period of labor, guarded well the stream from all foreign admixture.

We have seen that Paul and Barnabas, after their first missionary excursion, returned to Antioch, in Syria, and for a time prosecuted their labors in that city. Now they are thinking of a second tour, with a purpose to visit the Churches which they have gathered and set in order in Asia Minor, and then proceed to new fields, when a trouble springs up that occasions them much annoyance and anxiety. The Church

in Antioch is composed of both Jewish and Gentile converts, all received, and living happily together, on equality. But their quiet is disturbed by visitors from churches in Judea, who are Jews, who think they have a mission to perform, and doctrines to teach, affecting points about which the Apostles have been silent. They insist, with respect to Gentile members, that they must be required, at least in one particular, to obey the Levitical law. Their language is very explicit and positive: "Except ye be circumcised, after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." The Jewish members are predisposed to accept the theory as plausible, and Paul and Barnabas are concerned for the result. They regard this teaching as subversive of the plan of salvation by grace. The idea is, that circumcision is an act of merit, and necessary to Divine favor. It substitutes a legal righteousness for the gratuitous justification which the gospel declares to be God's mode of saving sinners. Paul and Barnabas enter earnestly into the discussion; but, not succeeding in the settlement of the matter, it is agreed that they and a few others shall go up to Jerusalem, and get the opinion of the Apostles and Elders, touching the disputed point. The expenses of the deputation are provided for by the Church, and in their journey they pass through Phenice and Samaria, relating at each place the principal facts of their mission to the heathen, and "cause great joy with all the brethren."

On their arrival, they find that the erroneous notion which has been propagated at Antioch, is prevailing to some extent among the disciples in Jerusalem. The converted Pharisees are especially tinged with it; for they are from a sect distinguished for attachment to forms and ceremonies as religiously meritorious. Paul has much solicitude with reference to the result, and seeks private interviews with the more important persons, that he may explain his views, and secure their influence in the right direction. A meeting of the Apostles and other ministers is held, and the question is submitted and warmly debated. At length Peter arises and speaks. His words are few; but they are to the point. He gives no direct opinion; but his meaning is plain. There are the facts; such are the obvious, legitimate inferences. God has accepted the Gentiles, and signified their acceptance in a manner not to be misapprehended. Why should we impose conditions of salvation which he has not imposed? He makes no difference, in the bestowment of his gifts, between the Jews and the Gentiles; why should we make distinctions in favor of either? Both are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, and come into his Church on precisely the same terms. It is good to hear this veteran again, he is so simple, explicit, and pertinent.

Paul and Barnabas now give an account of their labors and successes among the Gentiles, repeating essentially their report to the Church at Antioch, and are heard by a large audience, with the deepest interest. They do not argue the question, for they have brought it before the brethren for advice. But their statement of facts is really an argument of great power, sustaining the position taken by Peter.

The next speaker is James, the son of Alphaeus, or as sometimes called, Cleophas, and cousin-german of our Lord. His remarks are not extended; they comprehend much in little. He first shows how the facts which have been communicated by previous speakers are the fulfilment of prophecy. He quotes from the prophet Amos, and declares that the predictions concerning the conversion of the Gentiles are silent respecting the adoption of the Jewish ritual and customs as prerequisite to their acceptance. Then he gives his views as to the course proper to be pursued, and shows himself to be a judicious peace-maker. His plan may be called a compromise, not of truth and error, but of partisan feeling. On the one hand, he would have the Jewish Christians abandon their untenable position with respect to the circumcision of the Gentile converts; on the other, he would have the Gentile Christians instructed to carefully abstain from certain heathen

customs and vices which are peculiarly offensive to the Jewish disciples.

This proposition commends itself to the approval of "the Apostles and Elders, and the whole Church," as eminently fair, and they choose two men of excellent character, to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch, as the bearers of a letter containing the opinion which has been agreed upon by all to whom the question was submitted. The letter is fraternal and explicit, with no assumption of legislative powers, no dictatorial air.

The two messengers, Judas and Silas, execute their commission with promptitude and fidelity, and the incipient schism is healed. All irritation growing out of a diversity of opinion subsides; the Church at Antioch is again what she was, and the sun of prosperity shines brightly on her prospects.

We have now had before us what is ordinarily denominated the First Apostolic Council. The name is unimportant, provided we correctly understand the precise character of the thing. But we shall egregiously err, if we associate this meeting of Christian brethren at Jerusalem, in the year fifty, with such Councils as were held in subsequent centuries, and which, in most cases, were engines of spiritual despotism.

The Council was not appointed by Peter, or by any of the Apostles. It was not formally called by any Church, or number of Churches. Indeed, it was not summoned at all as a Council. The Church at Antioch needed advice upon a question affecting her own welfare, and likely, if not soon and wisely disposed of, to affect the purity and peace of all the Churches, even the new ones in heathen provinces. To whom should the brethren directly interested look, but to just such advisers as were to be found at Jerusalem? There were men who had passed three years under the tuition of the Great Teacher, and had been seventeen additional years under the special guidance of the Holy Spirit in evangelical service. No part of the New Testament was written, and the contestants had no document of any authority to which they could appeal for direction. It was fitting that such a matter should be referred to men qualified to give a right decision. They therefore deputed brethren, in whom both parties had confidence, to lay the question before the Apostles and other Christians, and invite their opinion. We have no account of any formal organization of the Council. It was virtually a meeting of the Church. As James was acting pastor, he probably presided; for, after an extended discussion, he summed up the whole matter, and proposed the outline of a result; and there is internal evidence that he was the writer of the letter communicating the opinion of "the Apostles, and Elders, and brethren." None of the proceedings indicate that the Council intended to legislate for the Churches, or in any way limit their independence. Advice was courteously asked and frankly given. Had nothing more than this been done in later ages, there would have been little interference with the doctrine and discipline of the Churches, and primitive simplicity would not have been so lost in complicated legislation and hierarchical assumptions. Councils in after times did not wait till their advice was solicited, but gave it unasked, and in authoritative forms, and popes and kings and emperors enforced their decrees with fire and sword.

In the effect of the decision in this case, we see how easily good men are satisfied and kept together. Different opinions were honestly entertained, and earnestly advocated. This discussion was becoming warm, and even threatening; but there were candor and kindness enough to submit the question in dispute to a judicious umpire. The men who were to decide it were all Jews; but the Gentile Christians were willing to trust them. The result differed, probably, from the anticipations of both parties, and yet both were satisfied; "they rejoiced for their consolation." None of them were self-willed. Their minds were open to conviction; and when the grounds of the decision were explained, they not only acquiesced, but fully ap-

proved it as right. How much better is the spirit of conciliation than the spirit of strife! There is always a Christian way of settling difficulties. Here is an example that augments our favorable estimate of primitive Christians. They "endeavored to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace;" they "studied the things that make for peace, and things whereby one may edify another."

In the discussions of this deliberative meeting, it is refreshing as well as instructive to observe the deference that was paid to the indications of the Divine will. What God has said and done was carefully noted and made the basis of judgment. In no form had he said that the Gentiles should not be required to obey the Mosaic law. But Peter distinctly understood the Divine manifestations at Cesarea, in the case of Cornelius and his friends, as determining the question beyond dispute. The facts communicated by Paul and Barnabas fully authorized the same conclusion. James learned from the prophecies the very lesson which the facts conveyed. Thus, throughout, the supremacy of God was recognized, and his will honored. How different this from the action of the Council of Trent, in 1545, in placing an open Bible upon a splendid throne, but in every decree ignoring it and outraging both its spirit and principles! Councils are of very questionable utility; but they are the safest when they are merely advisory, and when they fall back reverently upon the Divine teachings, and fairly interpret Scripture in support of their decisions.

Another interesting feature in these discussions, is the entire silence of all parties upon a question which has since awakened much controversy. Ever since the days of Calvin, if not longer, it has been contended that baptism was instituted as a substitute for circumcision. We search the New Testament in vain for any statement or implication with respect to such a substitution; and when we press this argument, we are told that the silence of the inspired Book is itself an implication that the fact of such a substitution was well understood. By such reasoning, every error of the papacy may be justified. But if this theory of the substitution of a Christian ordinance for a Hebrew rite is to be accepted, it is singular that, in all the cases of baptism recorded in the New Testament, there is no allusion to it in any form; and it is equally singular that in all the writings of the Apostles, containing explanations of Christian doctrines and duties, not a word is said with reference to any such arrangement. If the Jewish Christians understood this to be as represented, how could so many of them, having been both circumcised and baptized, insist that the Gentile Christians who had been baptized, should also be circumcised? Most singular of all is it, that in this Council no mention was made of the alleged substitution. If such were the understanding of the Apostles upon this point, why did they not refer to it, and cut short the debate by simply declaring that their Master had substituted the one act for the other? Christian Jews insisted that Christian Gentiles should be circumcised as a condition of eternal life, while none insisted that baptism was such a condition. Circumcision was represented as indispensable to salvation. Paul and Barnabas did not so understand the plan of God's mercy, and they opposed such teaching as subversive of the doctrine of grace. But it does not appear that they gave any hint as to the substitution now so confidently taught. And when the question was transferred to Jerusalem, why did not some one suggest this theory as an easy method of settling the whole difficulty? Why did not the letter sent to Antioch by special messengers present this as the solution of the vexed question? The circumstances demanded a frank statement of what was known upon the subject. If the Apostles knew of any such superseding, they would surely have divulged it. The truth is, they knew of no such thing; they knew that baptism was no more a substitute for circumcision than the Lord's Supper was a substitute for the passover. They were both new ordinances of a new dispen-