

Keeping the Unity of the Spirit

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Table of Contents

1. The murmuring of the Grecians.	1
2. The work at Samaria.	2
3. The conversion of Cornelius.	2
4. The controversy as to the Law.	3

During the first twenty years of the Christian era, we find, as related in the Acts of the Apostles, circumstances arising which seriously imperilled the oneness of heart and soul which so happily marked believers at the beginning. The occasions were these:-

1. The murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews (Acts 6).
2. The gathering out of the church from amongst the Samaritans (Acts 8).
3. The conversion of the first Gentiles — Cornelius and his friends (Acts 10, 11).
4. The controversy as to the law of Moses and the Gentiles (Acts 15).

In each case we see how the disruptive forces at work were checked and defeated, and a brief survey of them may not be without its usefulness for us today.

Two things stand out prominently, and must be carefully distinguished. First, the wisdom of God, that wrought providentially behind the scenes; second, the grace and wisdom of the apostles and early Christians, which was the human element in the case.

As to the former we can only observe it with wonder, and pray that at the present time, when disruption has been so sadly achieved, a like providence may yet be operative towards God's saints. As to the latter, let us note and inwardly digest with exercised consciences that at least we may learn how better to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4: 3). We shall thereby prove afresh how these God-breathed Scriptures are profitable "for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

1. The murmuring of the Grecians.

All the disputants in this case were Jews nationally. The only differences were matters of upbringing and tradition. The Grecians, or Greek-speaking Jews, whose ancestors had for long been outside the boundaries of Palestine, naturally had a different view of things from the Hebrew-speaking Jews, who had been carefully guarded in the land under the strictest regime. Suspicions therefore were easily excited and quickly expressed. The matter in question was wholly of a mundane order.

The workings of God's providence in this case are not clearly manifested. The human side, however, is distinct enough. We would specify three things.

First, the apostles dealt with the difficulty, as soon as it was apparent. They did not wait for it to spread and grow. "Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth!"

Second, they would not suffer themselves to be diverted from their great work of ministering the word by any such dissensions, but cast the responsibility of a godly settlement upon the whole body of saints.

Third, the believers at large recognized that it was an occasion to express and confirm their interest in these Grecians, who were more or less strangers in their midst, and hence chose as overseers men whose names indicate that they were mainly selected from the Greek-speaking saints. Unselfishness triumphed. Suspicions were allayed.

2. The work at Samaria.

No dissension was actually manifest here. It was a case of prevention rather than of cure. The antipathy between Jew and Samaritan was of long standing. Such Scriptures as 2 Kings 17: 24-41, and John 4, enlighten us as to it. With these before us, it is easy to see how Philip's very successful evangelistic labours opened up a dangerous question. On the one hand, the church in Jerusalem might wish to repudiate any real connection with believers from amongst their despised rivals. On the other hand, it would have been natural for the Samaritan church to have nursed its own feelings, and refused to be in any way guided by the authority of the apostles at Jerusalem. In this way the scandal of division might early have appeared in the form of a Samaritan "church" and a Jerusalem "church."

In contrast with the first occasion, the main thing mentioned in this chapter is the providential working of God. Philip preached, many believed and were baptised, but no Holy Spirit was given. The usual procedure was in this case suspended, and it was not until the two apostles came upon the scene, with prayer and laying on of their hands — symbolic of the identification of the apostles and the Jerusalem saints with the believers in Samaria — that the Holy Spirit was given. By this simple variation on God's part it became out of the question for the Jewish saints to repudiate the Samaritan, or the Samaritan to declare their independence of the Jewish.

On the human side we have only to notice the fact that the apostles were subject to the leading of God. They did not attempt to give rein to natural prejudices by denouncing Philip as irregular in his proceedings, or seizing upon the absence of the gift of the Spirit, as a reason for discounting, if not entirely disowning, the whole work at Samaria. They bowed to the sovereign grace of God, and selected from their number, to go to Samaria, two who ranked amongst the very chief of the apostles — Peter and John.

3. The conversion of Cornelius.

This was perhaps an even more critical moment than the foregoing, inasmuch as the Jewish feelings in regard to Gentiles were far more pronounced than against the Samaritans.

The providential actions of God were many. The angelic messenger to Cornelius; the vision granted to Peter; the instantaneous giving of the Spirit upon reception of the Gospel, without baptism having taken place, as was the case with the Jew in Acts 2, which rendered it impossible for any Jew, however great his natural prejudices, to forbid the baptism and formal reception of these Gentile believers. All these show us how God was at work, manipulating events so that every barrier, which might have withstood the thorough fusion of both Jew and Gentile in the one body of Christ, was swept away.

On the human side the outstanding feature was the action of Peter, in taking "certain brethren

from Joppa" (Acts 10: 23), "these six brethren" (Acts 11: 12), with him.

By this wise act he not only made sure that there was ample witness of what really transpired, but he did away with any suspicion that he acted behind the backs of his brethren. There was nothing underhand, no attempt to settle a thorny question apart from fellowship with his brethren.

The effect of this is seen in Acts 11. When in conference at Jerusalem certain brethren of extremely circumscribed views raised difficulties, the evidence was so conclusive that they ended by admitting God's work amongst the Gentiles, and glorifying God for it.

4. The controversy as to the Law.

This was perhaps the most dangerous crisis of all. Though Gentiles were admitted into the fellowship and privileges of the church, yet there were many Jewish believers who wished to maintain a Judaized or legalized form of Christianity, and therefore to Judaize the Gentile converts. This was stoutly resisted by Paul and those with him.

Galatians 2: 1-5, throws light upon this occasion, showing how uncompromising Paul was because he saw that vital truth was at stake. It shows also the working of God's providence inasmuch as it was "by revelation," that Paul went up to Jerusalem about this matter. The church at Antioch "determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain other of them should go up" (Acts 15: 2); but behind the scenes was that revelation to Paul, which was the governing factor.

On the human side we notice three things: —

First, the obedience of Paul and his companions to the revelation. They might naturally have felt that they were throwing away their case - which they knew to be right and of extreme importance - by consenting to go for a settlement into the city where the influence of their opponents was so great. They waived all natural feelings and calculations, and **obeyed**.

Second, free but sober discussion was allowed. The case was freely stated on both sides. No attempt to score points, by descending to a level sometimes displayed by barristers arguing in law courts, is recorded. There was much discussion, as verse 7 states. The truth is great, and therefore it fears no investigation.

Finally, Peter cited **facts** and James cited **Scripture**, and then stated his judgment, founded upon both, to which judgment all those present agreed. Facts, and Scripture which interpreted the facts, carried the day. There was no appeal from these things. They were conclusive, and to them all bowed.

Is it not evident that had similar wise procedure been followed, aided by similar desires for the unity of the saints of God as members of the body of Christ, the history of the church through the centuries would have been very different from what it has been?

And is it not equally evident, that even though the history of the church has been so full of failure and disruption, our responsibility to keep the unity of the Spirit still remains, and that these. Scriptures may help to make us wise, unto salvation from further disruptive tendencies?