

THE CHURCH ... and the first Seventh Day Adventists
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(Acts 15:1-19)

And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question."

The Church Disturbed

" And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church . . . and they declared all things that God had done with them. But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter." The first Church Council handled one of the most controversial points in doctrine. Let it be said in all fairness that these advocates of Moses were believers, and there is every reason to say they were utterly sincere. They could not reconcile this new freedom with the age-old practice of keeping the law. Liberty could lead to licence, and it was incumbent upon all Christians to maintain the standards of moral and spiritual law as outlined by the patriarch. Gentile converts should be circumcised, and reminded of their obligation to honor God's word. Faith was wonderful, but faith without works was dead. The chief value of Christ lay in the fact that He would enable man to keep the law—a thing which in his own strength man would never be able to do. When the apostles heard these views, they realized that a problem of major importance had arisen to threaten the unity of the Church.

The Church Discerning

The meeting was far from quiet ; feelings and exchanges were animated. "And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us ; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. 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." When Peter's opinion was endorsed by James, and when as Chairman of the meeting he said, " My sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God," it became obvious that the Church had decided one of the greatest issues ever to challenge her authority. Converts were to avoid giving unnecessary offence to unbelievers ; but having done that, they were freed from circumcision requirements, and were not obliged to conform to this part of Mosaic law. The Church had discerned that "the law was a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ"; that since the death of Christ had fulfilled every demand of Moses, in Him mankind had been freed from legal slavery. This great decision was written by the scribes, and sent to all the churches ; and while many people refused to accept the ruling, the apostles nevertheless had clearly stated what in their opinion was the mind of Christ.

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The Church Deciding

This decision led to outstanding changes in the practice of the early Christians. From time immemorial the religious services had been held on the Sabbath, but now the old order was rejected. In after days, Paul often entered into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, because such an assembly provided an opportunity for him to preach. But when the Christians met together, they chose the first day of the week—the day of resurrection (Acts 20:7). There is no record of any Christian meeting in New Testament days being held on the seventh day. There is no record of any inspired message commanding the Christians to observe and keep the law of Moses. Modern teachers might suggest that the apostles made a mistake ; that they went out of the will of God ; that they sinned in leading the Church astray. Yet if this were the case, the same teachers must explain how God blessed these misguided men, and used their ministry to evangelize a lost world. I have met the most charming Christians among Seventh Day Adventists, and I readily admit that their company has been a sheer delight. I have met others of the same faith whose charm has been less conspicuous. Their desire to keep the Sabbath —and to make all others do likewise—has been extremely fanatical. It is not enough to keep the Sabbath day holy. True Christians will keep every day holy, for in the sight of God Wednesday holiness is as necessary as Sabbath holiness.

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