

The Church at Jerusalem

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The place occupied by the church at Jerusalem in the years immediately following Pentecost stands out in marked contrast to its early decline from the important and useful service one would expect it to have rendered to the expanding cause of the gospel and the infant churches to which the Word of God was giving birth over a wide area. The Jerusalem church which in the first flush of its new-found spiritual life Luke describes as *'having favour with all the people'* (Acts 2:47) could describe a great majority of its fellowship less than three decades later as being *'zealous for the law'* (Acts 21:20). A further ten years and it had been driven into exile, but not before it had practically ceased to exist as a vital spiritual power. What were the reasons for this sad collapse? In this article it is proposed to examine three of the basic difficulties which beset the Jerusalem assembly.

The composition of the early Jerusalem congregation peculiarly adapted it to have the widest of sympathies in the future witness of the gospel to all nations. The feast of Pentecost brought to the city Hebrew-speaking Jews, Greek-speaking Jews of the dispersion, and proselytes who were Gentiles by birth. No doubt there were some of the latter also among those whom the mighty outpouring of the Spirit fused into the fellowship of the church. There were certainly not lacking men whose hearts were open to the Lord's working in whatever sphere He chose, as is clearly seen in the activities of those who were forced to leave Jerusalem subsequent to the persecution which followed Stephen's death (Acts 11:19-21). Barnabas is also an outstanding example of breadth of vision. There were, of course, the others whose deeply ingrained Jewish orthodoxy made them look with suspicion upon anything that had a Gentile connection. Nor, considering the debauchery of the Gentile world and the Jews' great respect for the holiness of God, need we be unsympathetic with their concern that a lack of vigilance might allow the church to be leavened with a low Gentile morality. The life of the Spirit, however, was the answer to that fear, and *'they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers'* (Acts 2:42).

In fact, the life of the Spirit can never be disassociated from practical holiness. What is regeneration at all, Christ's life born within us, if it does not mean holiness? The life of the Spirit proved to be a powerful unifying factor and source of testimony in the early Jerusalem church. Not that the assembly was free from imperfections. Witness the subtle, simulated holiness of Ananias and Sapphira. But even that could not withstand the searching scrutiny of the Spirit of life, and the result was that *'of the rest durst no man join himself to them'* (Acts 5:13). Holiness, Christ revealed in men and women, was a sufficient hedge about the church to protect it from the destructive influences of the world and the flesh.

The persecution that followed the death of Stephen caused a great diminution in the ranks of the Jerusalem believers (Acts 8:1). But it seems that the wrath of the 'powers that be' was vented largely upon those of a less orthodox Jewish background, namely the Grecian Jews who comprised a considerable proportion of the church. Others were left unmolested, among them James the brother of our Lord who was later to emerge as the undisputed leader of the group. These were believers many of whom still clung tenaciously to much of the old, ceremonial observance of Judaism and who, as a result, occupied a position of much higher standing with the Jewish authorities. The result of this purging of the fellowship was that the Jerusalem church was now more united in its outlook than it had ever been on the externals of the assembly life, and this outward uniformity gradually began to

predominate over the much deeper unity of the Spirit.

One of the most deadly enemies of the spiritual life of a local church is a traditionalism which systematizes the church's worship and witness into a ritual of cold formality. In all probability, many of the priests who were obedient to the Lord (Acts 6:7) brought their loyalty to tradition over with them, but traditionalism does not need to be inherited from the past. It has an immense capacity of developing right in the present, wherever God's people tire of pursuing the ever-onward path of the Spirit and want to settle down, content with what they have already apprehended of Christ. There are many sincere companies of God's people throughout the world today who are as tradition-bound as the Pharisees of old, but who are perfectly sure that practically everybody else in Christendom is suffering from the malady except themselves. In Jerusalem, the tradition consisted of certain observances of the ceremonial law which were added to life in Christ as a condition of fellowship, and it was these outward trappings of church order that stimulated the attitude of superiority which looked askance at everybody who did not accept them.

The church that has settled down into the comfort of uniformity is in dire straits spiritually. Uniformity is usually the crystallization of attitudes and practices which at one time meant life and blessing. Do we attach particular importance to the way we do things in our church life? Do we think that a particular divine blessing rests upon our heads because we kneel or stand when we pray, because we go in for long meetings or short ones, because we prepare our messages or 'trust the Spirit,' or because of a multitude of other things? Are we convinced that of each one of these alternatives one is right and the other is wrong? Have we fallen into the snare of believing that everything is done in the Spirit simply because the pattern is right to our way of thinking? And conversely, do we feel that if anyone dares to question the validity of any part of our little traditional rut, he is spiritually sub-standard?

It is one of the great paradoxes of scripture that only that is conducive to spiritual life which is consigned to death. The '*grain of wheat*' which must '*fall into the earth and die*' (John 12:24) can be applied to so many aspects of our spiritual walk. No less can it be applied to the form of the local church. Every 'scriptural pattern' itself must go to the cross as did the Son of God, else it will die a death of isolation as it did in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church was a prey to the spiritual destructiveness of uncrucified, scriptural patterns. Within the scriptural bounds of a developing spiritual life there is ample room for a wide divergence of thought and outlook, as a perusal of the lives of some of the great saints of God down through the centuries will adequately demonstrate. Life is the mark of the church, not uniformity.

It is, of course, much easier to gather together a company of people on the basis of a common allegiance to an accepted form, to say that a person belongs to us if he recognises a certain type of spiritual ritual or speaks a certain spiritual jargon, but not otherwise. These are things which the natural man can understand and upon which he can make a decisive judgment whatever the condition of his own spiritual life, or should he even have no spiritual life at all, but once conformity takes the place of the life of the Spirit (and it can do so almost imperceptibly), it presages the end of that very thing it is meant to conserve, the purity of the church. One of the great weaknesses of the Jerusalem church was this substitution of a legalistic uniformity for the unifying influence of divine life.

Legalistic uniformity in the life of a local church cuts at the very root of the life of the Spirit. It is also based upon a fallacious interpretation of scripture. Let it be said at once that uniformity is by no means dependent upon the existence of a clear-cut 'official line.' Meetings may not be conducted according to a set of written rules, but let us not be foolish enough to think that because we have not produced a book of church order by which to regulate our proceedings we are, therefore, doing everything in the

Spirit. The unwritten law can be as deadly as any liturgy has ever been, sometimes even more so, for it can bring us into slavery to a tradition without our ever being aware of it.

The irony of the conformity imposed by the Jerusalem assembly was that, although it was particularly meant to conserve spiritual life, it so constricted it that the church's witness was more to form than to Christ, and the vital testimony of a reproductive spiritual life ultimately died out. There is a subtle mental transfer which it is only too easy to make from the importance of the life of the Spirit to some ceremony which is supposed to denote it.

Take, for example, baptism and the Lord's table. Both are the subjects of direct commandments from the Lord, so we may feel that people who are devoted to Him should have a sense of obligation to observe them. But is the converse equally true, that all who do observe them are to be assumed as people devoted to the Lord? Many people may answer this question in the negative, but in actual fact how often do we act as if that were the case? 'Is so-and-so born again?' 'Well,' comes the answer, 'he is baptized and partakes of the Lord's table.' In other words, 'We may assume so.' What has actually happened is that, in the mind of the person who replied, there has been a transference of thought and emphasis from the Lord to the form. It is the beginning of the process which ultimately ends with the predominance of the form and the Lord's dethronement.

We may well be zealous to obey what the Lord has asked of us, but let us always remember that the life of Christ is greater than the baptism, and the Lord Himself is greater than His table. It was precisely this, the failure to recognise that the Lord was greater than the ceremonies He instituted, that was the terrible downfall of much of Phariseism. The Jerusalem church was following hard in its train.

Uniformity is based upon a misunderstanding of scripture. Here again the Pharisees erred, for they reduced scripture to a cold, legal code, and in the process, rejected the Spirit of life and liberty. Some may talk much of the scriptural pattern of the church, but it is very plain that scripture lays down no pattern at all for the church in the sense of a blueprint such as was given for the construction of the Tabernacle and of the Temple.

The Bible is not a book of regulations to govern mechanically the most minute details of our daily lives, but a demonstration of divine, eternal principles which have to be applied, and can only be applied to our circumstances through personal devotion and obedience to Christ. *'The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life,'* as Paul so aptly reminds us (2 Corinthians 3:6). How easy it is to search through the scriptures for some precedent which will answer the need of some little point at issue, and then to think that it should be enforced as law. But the Word of God is living. The Bible is but an expression of the living Christ. When we allow that living Word to produce an expression of Christ within us, the honor of the Lord will mold our every action to glorify Him in the exercise of the glorious freedom of the Spirit.

God has left us many warnings in the pages of scripture, and few are more poignant than the barrenness of the church at Jerusalem, the church which graced the dawn of the Christian gospel radiating the grace and authority of its ascended Lord. Its inner life sapped by the creeping paralysis of tradition, hedged about by a wall of uniformity which kept the people of God out (but who would want to scale the wall for the air of superiority that reigned within?), it ended up as merely--the first Christian denomination.

The Danger of One-Man Rule

The church is peculiarly the sphere of the Lord's predominance. Paul well sums up the fact in his words to the Ephesians, *'And he hath put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all'* (Ephesians 1:22-23). Little wonder that one of the great battles of the ages has been to dethrone Christ from His place of rightful pre-eminence in the midst of His people. The fact of spiritual leadership through those particularly set apart by God need not be questioned, and there is ample scope for it within the fellowship of the assembly, but we must also remember that it is a small step from spiritual leadership to human enthronement.

Principles for the administration of the local church are clearly set down in scripture. Spiritual rule and direction are in the hands not of one man, but of a body of elders. Nowhere is any particular method prescribed whereby these elders should be set apart, but this is completely in consonance with the nature of New Testament revelation which is primarily concerned with divine principles and is not merely a book of organizational procedures.

The church at Jerusalem initially seems to have been governed by the apostles themselves, and it was quite natural that they together should form the administration of the original Christian assembly. Later, however, we find leadership exercised by a body of elders, and the apostles were freed for a ministry over the ever-widening area of the influence of the gospel. This, of course, was of particular importance at the outset of the church's history when the ministry and authority of apostleship were exercised directly through gifted men, and not through the completed revelation of the written Word as it is today. Nevertheless, even taking into account the unique position of the apostles of that early age, it is important to note that, during their period of rule within the Jerusalem church, they administered its affairs jointly.

The spirit of regeneration is the spirit of fellowship and should characterize every level of church life. Most important of all is that it should be strongly established in the assembly leadership, else where is the example to the flock of which Peter speaks (1 Peter 5:3), and if fellowship cannot find a very practical demonstration among elders who are supposed to have reached a certain degree of spiritual maturity, it is difficult to know how this most basic of all things can be expected to characterize the lives of those who are so much less advanced in the way of truth. The relationship of elders to the local church is clearly brought out by Peter (1 Peter 5:1-4). They are shepherds of the flock, but under-shepherds who are themselves under the authority of the 'Chief Shepherd.' The administration of the local church is not, therefore, congregational in concept. Everybody does not have a right to have a say in everything. It is not a democracy. But neither is it a dictatorship. It knows the rule of no single man, but the pre-eminence and rulership of Christ to whose authority elders and others, all alike, must equally bow.

Following the transition of the leadership of the apostles to that of the elders in the Jerusalem assembly we find the gradual emergence of one man who ultimately dominates the scene, namely James the brother of our Lord. Initially, James appears on the administrative scene as first among equals. He was, for example, spokesman or chairman for the company as in the discussion on circumcision recorded in Acts 15, and such a spokesman is obviously necessary. It is hardly practical that all the elders should be required to speak in unison! But James eventually came to occupy a position which was much more than this. From being first among equals, he became first pure and simple.

The development of James's position can be traced in the book of Acts. Early mention of the church makes reference to *'the apostles and the brethren'* (Acts 11:1). Later, however, James comes in for

special mention. *'Tell these things unto James, and to the brethren,'* says Peter as he announces his deliverance from gaol (Acts 12:17). Still later, when Paul is making his final visit to Jerusalem, we read, *'Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present'* (Acts 21:18).

Now we must not be thought to disparage the ministry of James in Jerusalem. He was a man of outstanding qualities and, looking at things from a natural point of view, he guided the assembly with admirable grace and wisdom through considerable difficulties. His saintliness of character is attested by the name which history has given to him, James the Just. He was the perfect peacemaker who always saw both sides of any dispute, but it is obvious from the position he occupied that he was also of very considerable strength of character. He held an exquisite balance between the more moderate of the Jerusalem believers and the thorough-going legalists. There may have been a few rebel extremists, but the outcome of the discussion on circumcision recorded in Acts 15 indicates that James carried the loyalty of the church with him as a whole. Of the decision reached, scripture records that *'it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church'* (Acts 15:22).

What was the attitude of James to the Judaizing teachers from Jerusalem who were to cause so much confusion in the churches, and who were the means of influencing even such stalwarts of the faith as Peter and Barnabas (Gal. 2:11-13)? Those who fomented the discussion which brought Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-2) had certainly exceeded the terms of their commission, whatever exactly that was. The letter circulated to the churches from Jerusalem speaks quite clearly of them. *'Certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls; to whom we gave no commandment'* (Acts 15:24). It is not absolutely clear whether this means that these people separated themselves from the church or went out bearing their message with the church's blessing. The least we can say is that what they preached in Galatia and Antioch did not have the approval of Jerusalem, and it may also be that they were self-appointed in their position as teachers. But in writing to the Galatians Paul distinctly speaks of certain such teachers coming from James (Galatians 2:12), and we must conclude that they were persons held in trust by James; a trust which they knowingly or unknowingly abused in the perplexity they created among the believers.

Is it too much to suggest that this shows up a certain weakness in, James's powers of discernment? Of his moderation there is no doubt; he certainly did not go all the way with the extreme legalists within the church, although he may have exercised a tolerant spirit towards them. At the same time, he was well aware of the danger of such extremism, and of the militant nature of its advocates. Men who could cause such havoc, and whose persuasive powers were such as to sway the minds of Peter and Barnabas, were obviously men of very strong personality, and we have to believe either that James did not fully understand this, or that he did understand it and was largely in favour of the influence they would exert.

There is still another factor which this brings to the fore, and that is the influence that James's dominant position in Jerusalem exercised upon those who went out from the assembly. There seems to have been an unmistakable air of authority which attached itself to those who were James's emissaries. He may not at all have set his seal of approval upon what these Judaizers were teaching, but the delicate balance which he maintained between the two Jerusalem factions may have given them reasonable ground to believe that what they were teaching was not distasteful to him. When Paul speaks of the influence these men had upon Peter, the distinct inference is that what weighed most with Peter was the authority of James which lay behind it all. James's position overawed him, and when he saw the strength with which it was upheld by others, it was just too much for him (Galatians 2:12-13). James's personality exercised an influence far beyond the confines of the Jerusalem church.

What we have said has been in no sense to denigrate James, but simply to demonstrate that, with all his excellent qualities, he was a fallible human being subject to the limitations of all men. It was not wrong that his gracious nature should have gifted him admirably as a conciliator, nor that he should have had such a wide influence, but his venerated position of dominance in the assembly and out of it created a situation where his very conciliatory gifts could become a snare, and his weaknesses were perpetuated unchecked along with his strengths. His influence was effective not only when he was right, but also when he was wrong.

No man is free from the liability to err, a fact which is equally true in matters affecting spiritual judgment. The complexity of human nature with its innate prejudices and subtle temptations to self-pleasing is such that infallibility is something we can expect only when we know even as also we have been known. Even the apostle Paul did not presume upon the measure of his discernment. 'I think that I also have the Spirit of God,' he says. It is, of course, true that as one man may err, so may a body of elders, but it is also true that the latter is part of divine order as a spiritual check upon the lack in an individual. Philip was deceived in the baptism of Simon the sorcerer, but correction came through the discernment of Peter (Acts 8). There is no man who does not require a loyal opposition, and the Lord has provided for it in an eldership that is subject to Him. Sad is the position of any man who cannot accept a spiritual check from others who fear the Lord in a spirit of humility.

James seemed to have no such opposition. He ruled as the gracious despot with exquisite tact and wisdom, but unquestionably as the man in the seat of power. A benevolent spiritual despotism carries with it tremendous dangers. To work under it can be one of the easiest things in the world, provided a person is tainted, as most people are, with the faculty of hero-worship, and is bowled over by the benevolence. Best of all, it can allow a complete relinquishment of any sense of personal responsibility. Everything can be left to God and James. Its dangers, however, lie mainly in its effect upon the realm of human personality, and since that in turn affects the whole life of the church, the dangers are far-reaching and profound.

One of the most unfortunate factors is that the gracious despot will always find many more disciples of his despotism than of his grace. Many may be attracted to him by his love, but they will leave to dominate others by his absolute authority alone. Witness the Judaizers of Galatians 2. It is remarkable that although the Son of God had all the authority in the world, He never asserted it upon His disciples. *'No longer do I call you servants,'* He said to them, *'for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth; but I have called you friends; for all things that I heard from my Father I have made known unto you'* (John 15:16).

There is no adequate substitute for the principle the Lord Himself has laid down, the principle of His pre-eminence in the church, and the under-shepherds through whom He rules and guides His flock. One man, be he ever so saintly, is a poor substitute for the direct rule of Christ.

The end was sad--very sad. James, whose piety had for long protected him from the hands of wicked men, was eventually seized and executed. The church, stunned by the loss, could find no man of comparable character to occupy his position. Only God was left. So the church at Jerusalem went into retirement.

The Danger of Centralization

The church at Jerusalem was the beginning of what would today most probably be called a 'movement.' So far we have been concerned with certain factors pertaining to the local aspect of the Jerusalem assembly. We now want to look more particularly at its influence in a wider sphere.

First we must look at the scriptural principles governing the relationship of one local church with another. The New Testament does not categorically state the independent and autonomous nature of each assembly, but neither do we find any precedent or principle within its pages which would allow the practice of any one person or a group of persons exercising authority over a number of churches. The idea of one church exercising jurisdiction over other churches is equally foreign to the Word of God. On the other hand, the only organized unit recognized in scripture is the local church, and consequently it is the only recognized sphere of administrative authority. What may possibly appear as an exception to this is the ministry of apostles such as Paul, but Paul's very defense of his apostleship is an indication that he could claim the ear of the churches not as a right because of the position he held, but only according to the measure of his spiritual stature and ministry. This was so in spite of the fact that the peculiar nature of the apostleship in the days of the church's infancy and before the written revelation was completed placed him in a position which no man occupies today.

The many different metaphors used of the church in the New Testament bespeak a close-knit, practical unity of believers in work and witness, and it is always in this context that scripture lays down principles of church rule and authority. If we really accept the fact of Christ's dominant presence in the midst of the two or three, then the imposition of rule from any external source is nothing less than a usurpation of the authority of the Lord.

The independence of each local congregation of Christians was a largely accepted fact for some time after the apostolic era. Even when monarchical bishops superseded the rule of elders, there was no thought of the bishop's superintendence over a number of churches. The conception of a diocese was a later development, and the earliest monarchical bishops held a similar position to that of a parish priest today. Yet the tendency towards the federation of the churches into a close-knit organizational unit was not absent even in New Testament times. That this should be so is a well-nigh inevitable outcome of the innate human love of authority. The church at Jerusalem is particularly interesting in this connection because we see there actions which demonstrate a clear recognition that it is not the place of one church to exercise jurisdiction over another, while, on the other hand, the urge to maintain a position of pre-eminence and rule over other assemblies is most marked.

Spiritual consultation and fellowship know no local barriers, and can be of the utmost value. The church at Jerusalem with all its weaknesses contained a wealth of experience which stemmed from an intimate knowledge of our Lord during His earthly ministry. It was both natural and allowable that every advantage should be taken of this source of spiritual counsel. It was on this basis that Paul and Barnabas, along with others, formed a deputation to take the question of circumcision up to Jerusalem, resulting in what has come to be known as the Council of Jerusalem.

Circumcision was a question on which most of the believers in Jerusalem held decidedly strong views, but they were quite aware that the rite had not been accorded any place as a condition of fellowship in the church at Antioch from which the deputation had just come. However much they may have disagreed with the stand taken by the Antioch assembly, there had been no thought of trying to legislate for them, and we can well understand that, if they had thought it was within their competence to lay down the law on such matters for others outside their own circle, the question at issue would have been the subject of serious deliberation long before it was raised by the visit of Paul and Barnabas. The fact of the matter was, however, that the Jerusalem church fully recognized, in theory at least, the independence of each local assembly. The result of the Council was, therefore, in the nature of advice, not the promulgation of a law. Its purpose was not to regulate the conditions of church fellowship, but to encourage easier social relationships between those of a Jewish and a Gentile background.

The nature of the outcome of the Jerusalem get-together is further indicated by Paul's discussion of some of the same matters in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 10). Very obviously, if he had considered the edict of the Jerusalem church final, there would have been no point in discussing the matters further and, incidentally, of giving advice which was quite contrary to what had already been recommended. It would simply have been a matter of laying down the law, and no further deliberation would have been admissible. The principle is perfectly clear. Advice from the church at Jerusalem was to be welcomed; advice from Paul, or any other spiritual person for that matter, was to be equally welcomed; but finally it was the responsibility of the church in question to decide the matter in the fear of the Lord. Paul did not feel duty-bound to accept the Jerusalem edict as law. Neither did the assemblies. Their direct relationship with the Lord dominated everything.

Yet this is but one side of the story. Theoretically, the stand taken by the Jerusalem church was clear and right. But the church's life was beset by a most perplexing contradiction, a double standard. There was one standard for the Gentiles in the midst of whom the Spirit's work could simply not be denied. For the Jerusalem believers there was another standard, the imposition of a rule which amounted to an addition to faith in Christ as a condition of fellowship. Here we see the warfare of the flesh against the Spirit, not in the experience of the individual believer, but in the life of the assembly itself; a warfare between the spirit of self-importance that must bring everything and everybody under its sway, and the Spirit of life and liberty through which Christ dwells in the midst of His people wherever they be, making them responsible to and dependent upon Him alone.

We cannot read the events relating to the church at Jerusalem without gaining a sense of its dominance and spiritual self-esteem. But God did not honour it. More and more the Jerusalem church occupies the place of a spectator in the great advances of the gospel--a very interested spectator no doubt, but with very little place of active involvement in the spread of the truth abroad. What we find, however, is a subtle effort, in the midst of protestations of spiritual freedom, to impose upon the assemblies in general the conformity into which the Jerusalem church itself had already settled.

Jerusalem's sense of superiority is not without illustration in the New Testament. The eminently reasonable recommendations of the Council are couched in language which would suggest that, although what was said was given purely by way of advice, yet it was expected to be obeyed--and no nonsense. And, of course, it was accepted with rejoicing, for it was good advice, but all advice may not be so good just because it comes from Jerusalem, and 'advice' which is always and automatically obeyed is a command. Again, what of the request to Paul that he '*should remember the poor*' (Galatians 2:10)? The poor were the Jerusalem believers themselves. The assembly appeared to suffer from a chronic poverty and had been the recipient of generous aid from believers in other parts. Paul may have accepted the exhortation as an impetus to the mutual sense of responsibility, love and grace which should characterize all the Lord's people, but it is very probable that the Jerusalem church had something quite different in mind. They may have tended to feel that contributions to them from others was their due in much the same way as people throughout Jewry contributed to the Temple funds.

Then there were the Judaizers whose baneful influence necessitated Paul's writing his letter to the Galatians. They had come from Jerusalem, and some at least had brought tidings from James (Galatians 2:12). That they carried with them a certain air of authority is only too plain from the confusion they caused. From where did their sense of importance come? Even if we believe that they were self-appointed to their ministry of bondage, and the evidence is more to the contrary, their self-esteem can be traced to no other source than that they came from the 'mother church.' Had their ministry produced the intended results, it would certainly have added to the sphere of that same mother church's

jurisdiction. That it did not do so was due simply to the grace of God.

There seems little doubt that we are dealing with a definite attempt on the part of the Jerusalem church to bring other groups of believers under its control. This may have been done in all sincerity and without a full awareness that the churches were being centralized into a mere human organization, but it was none the less deadly for that.

We have noted the attitude of the Jerusalem church itself. What we must now consider is the attitude of others to it. One aspect of this has already come to our notice. The Council recommendations were accepted in Antioch, not as divine oracles, but with pleasure and good common sense. This healthy outlook was no doubt due, in good measure, to those who bore the tidings, Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas, humble men who were well-grounded in divine principle and were neither inflated by a sense of self-importance nor overawed by an exaggerated sense of the importance of the assembly from which they had just come. This, however, had not been the case in Galatia where the Judaizers gained the ear of the believers out of all proportion to their spiritual authority (if they had any) or their importance. The mere fact that they came from James or Jerusalem not only lent weight to their over-estimation of themselves as having the word of God, but induced others to a veneration of them and their message that was in no way warranted.

Peter is a pertinent example. His complete upset is a sad warning of how even spiritual experience and maturity can at times fail God when faced with human authoritarianism disguised as divine. In perhaps the most graphic spiritual encounter of his whole career, the vision of *'a certain vessel descending, as it were a great sheet, let down by the four corners upon the earth'* (Acts 10:11), Peter entered into an understanding of the revelation of the church. The implications of what God showed him he at first resisted, but ultimately had to accept. There was no mistaking the voice of God.

Even the brethren at Jerusalem, when Peter related to them what had happened, had no option but to believe. *'And when they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God'* (Acts 11:18). But these precious, God-given lessons Peter all of a sudden casts aside. The Judaizing teachers almost certainly possessed neither his experience nor his maturity, but they came from James and Jerusalem. This fact took precedence over all else. In fear of James and Jerusalem Peter abandons fear of God (Gal. 2:12). What a demonstration of the almost unconscious tendency to look to Jerusalem instead of to the God of Jerusalem. Yet if Peter found himself bereft of spiritual judgment through the temptation of a misplaced subservience to a 'mother church,' what could be expected from the community of ordinary believers who would soon be overawed by the same authority that overawed Peter? Paul challenged Peter openly (Galatians 2:11). Paul was not perturbed. His respect for the Jerusalem brethren was great, but his respect for the Lord was greater still.

The story of the Jerusalem church is a grave warning against the dangers of centralization and authoritarianism. These ultimately lead to a dispute with the authority of Christ, for He, actively present in the midst of His people, is the Head of the church. Christ alone stands as the Mediator between God and men. To the church God has granted authority to represent Him in the world, but no human being or group of persons has the authority to represent God to the church, for Christ dwells there in person.

God graciously forestalled this early move to centralize control of the churches under one human authority. Jerusalem had to be set aside. There is no indication that Antioch in apostolic days ever became the center of veneration that Jerusalem had been, or ever had ambitions in that direction, but it was from there that the Spirit gave His impetus to the preaching of the Word that was to go forth into all the world.