

# ***Sabbath School Today*** **With the 1888 Message Dynamic**

## ***The Book of Acts*** **Lesson 8. The Jerusalem Council**

The parallels between the Jerusalem Council and the 1888 General Conference are uncanny. Both events were prompted by controversy over what is required for salvation. Historians date the Council as taking place in A.D. 49 or as late as 51, about two decades after Christ ascended to heaven, after beginning His church on earth.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church developed out of the Millerite disappointment in 1844. About two decades later, in 1863, the church was formally organized. By 1864 Ellen White had received several visions which guided the fledgling believers into a recognized group, although light was still developing. Like the early Christian church, disagreements arose and the issues needed to be resolved to preserve unity.

Jesus had predicted that wherever the true gospel was preached, it would cause division, even within families (see Luke 12:51-53). Not surprisingly, the issue in both situations concerned keeping the “rules.” Humans tend to feel self-righteous when they see others not keeping the rules as conscientiously as they think they do.

In the early Christian church there were “Judaizers” who were claiming that in order to be saved, converts to Christianity needed to be circumcised “according to the custom of Moses” (Acts 15:1, *New American Standard Bible*). In essence, they wanted Christians to become a kind of subset of the Jews rather than simply followers of Jesus. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* describes these dissenters as “‘Jews that would not be persuaded.’ The word translated ‘unbelieving’ has the idea of an unbelief breaking out into rebellion, and so describes well the character of these Jews who persecuted Paul and Barnabas.” [1]

The fact that they were demanding that converts become circumcised “proves what is not elsewhere plainly stated in Scripture, that Paul and Barnabas had not required their Gentile converts to be circumcised. Here opens the account of the first major controversy in the Christian church.” [2]

“These apostles [Paul and Barnabas] were at the center of the dispute, for the demands of the Judaizers presented a direct condemnation of the work that these two missionaries had done ... They had proclaimed salvation through faith in Christ. Now they could not stand by silently while their converts were told that the acceptance of God’s grace through faith was not sufficient, but that external rites must be performed in order to obtain salvation. ... The fact that the early church referred the vexing question of circumcision to a council of the apostles and elders at Jerusalem is a highly significant precedent for church organization. It stands against the theory that a final decision in ecclesiastical matters should be made by one man acting as an autocrat.” [3]

The final decision made by the brethren at Jerusalem apparently was unanimous (Acts 15:22).

How does this parallel the General Conferences held in the late 1880s and 1890s? Like the early Christian church, Seventh-day Adventists were winning converts with their message that the return of Christ was soon. We also were teaching how important God's moral law remained as a standard of Christian living, and the role of the Sabbath in the last days. The Adventist evangelists easily won the arguments against the need for keeping the seventh-day Sabbath rather than Sunday. As a recognized entity, we had organized and were guided by the special revelations given by God through Ellen White.

Paul was the special messenger to the early Christians through whom God gave revelations. Both the Adventists and the early church began by preaching the joyful gospel of righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Both began to experience criticism and fights for supremacy several years after the beginning of their existence.

Ironically, the early Christians' issue was whether circumcision should be required by honoring the laws given by God through Moses. The Adventists' issue was whether keeping that same law was required for salvation. Both groups sought to add an act done by the believer to merit salvation. In both situations, the messengers of the Lord strongly opposed such a perversion of the gospel but were persistently challenged by those who were pushing their own agendas.

"During the summer of 1884, E. J. Waggoner wrote ten articles on the law and gospel and their relation to one another. In his September 11, 1894 *Signs* article he dealt more specifically with the law in Galatians and departed from the accepted Adventist position that the law in Galatians referred to the ceremonial law. It was during the 1884-1885 school year that E. J. Waggoner began to present the same views at Healdsburg College. Although some were pleased with Waggoner's writing and teaching, others became very concerned. Uriah Smith, Chief Editor of the *Review*, and G. I. Butler, President of the General Conference, were the most outspoken in their concerns." [4]

President Butler pressured Ellen White to settle the matter, expecting her to "call our good *Signs* brethren to an account' at the upcoming [1886] General Conference ... for their 'minority' views, and their 'much vaunted doctrine of justification by faith.'" Later, W. C. White remembered that "there has been a desire on the part of some, that Elds. Waggoner and Jones should be condemned unheard." [5]

Ellen White finally recommended that the matter be openly discussed, which was to take place some two years later at the 1888 General Conference. This was wise advice, but unlike the Jerusalem Council did not achieve unity on the issue. Did the church accept the message discussed at the 1888 Conference?

"However, the important issue is not whether *the church* accepted the message. Ellen White says that 'Satan succeeded in shutting [it] away from our people, in a great measure' (cf. *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 234, 235; 1896). The church never had a

fair chance to consider it undistorted and unopposed. The issue is whether *the leadership* accepted it.” [6]

For many years our church has based many arguments in favor of the seventh-day Sabbath on the demands of the Ten Commandment law. We rarely hear preaching or teaching on the other unique tenant of our faith, which is God’s solution to the sin problem, collectively referred to as the “cleansing of the sanctuary.” We are in danger of becoming a single-issue denomination with most of our people thinking the Ten Commandment Sabbath is the church’s only real issue. (There are other denominations who believe as we do regarding the Sabbath and the state of the dead).

The message given in 1888 was a unique understanding of the heart change God wants to give us who are willing to consent. Once we realize salvation is indeed a free gift for us to accept, the Holy Spirit will work in our hearts a cleansing that is thorough and genuine, not us going through the motions of keeping God’s law.

“Israel had been told to build the tabernacle that the Lord ‘may dwell among them’ (Exodus 25:8). But they had come to consider that what really counted was the *doing* of the sundry services. This same mind-set of the Jews can be our peril. If we merely transfer what they did on earth to a similar routine carried out in heaven and forget that sin is the problem, we remain under the old covenant without hope. They failed to understand that the services had been given because of the sin problem. God and sin could not abide together. One or the other had to go. Thus there was war in heaven and thus it became evident that the real sin is the will to exterminate God.” [7]

—Arlene Hill

#### **Endnotes:**

[1] *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 295.

[2] *Ibid.*, p.305.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 306.

[4] Ron Duffield, *The Return of the Latter Rain: A Historical Review of Seventh-day Adventist History From 1844 Through 1891*, p. 60 (2010 ed.).

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[6] Robert J. Wieland and Donald K. Short, *1888 Re-examined*, p. 26 (1987); emphasis in the original.

[7] Donald K. Short, “*Then Shall the Sanctuary Be Cleansed*,” p. 49 (CFI ed., 2018); emphasis in the original. This new edition of Donald K. Short’s timely book is now available from: <http://cfibookdivision.com/TSSBC/TSSBC-sales.html>

#### **Notes:**

Pastor Paul Penno’s video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

<https://youtu.be/HUUlicc-NQQ>

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