

THE FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH -- Dr. N. Lee

1. Peter's Report about Cornelius at the General Assembly of Jerusalem

Around 49 A.D., at the First General Assembly of some Presbyters of Christ's Church delegated by their Congregations and/or their Presbyteries, Peter again reminded the Elders (and also other of the brethren in attendance) about what had been happening. Declared Peter:

"You know how, 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, Who knows the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost even as He did to us, and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.... We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ [the Spirit-anointed One], we shall be saved even as they."

Calvin comments: "The elect are enlightened to faith, by the special grace of the Spirit.... Since God ordered the teaching of the Gospel to be brought to the Gentiles, He consecrated them to Himself -- so that they might be no longer be profane....

"The Gentiles were ingrafted into the people of God, without circumcision.... The Holy Spirit fell on them.... It is the Spirit of regeneration alone Who distinguishes the sons of God from outsiders.... God sealed His gracious adoption in Cornelius and his relatives, with the visible grace of the Spirit....

"The method of cleansing, is twofold. (1) Christ, by daily destroying our sins for which He once [and for all] made atonement by His blood -- offers and presents us, pure and righteous, in the sight of the Father.... {2) mortifying the desires of the flesh by His Spirit, He reforms us in sanctity....

"It would not be such a difficult thing to satisfy the Moral Law -- if it were satisfied only with bodily obedience, and did not demand Spirit-ual righteousness.... But we must not listen to any human voice that is in opposition to the judgment of the Spirit of God!

"We hear what the Spirit pronounces here through the lips of Peter...about their ability and power.... It must therefore be concluded that even believers, after they have been born again by the Spirit of God, and are eager for the righteousness of the Law -- yet [only] fulfil the half of it, and even far less than half....

"We are not dealing with what the grace of the Spirit is capable of doing, but with what the measure of grace which God distributes to each of His Own in this life is able to do.... He promises the grace and help of the Spirit to the faithful -- so that they may fight against the desires of the flesh and subdue them....

"There was no reason...to be hesitant about conceding, freely and clearly, that it was possible -- with the Holy Spirit as the Performer." At least to some considerable extent. "For the grace of the Spirit must be put within limits [within fallen and therefore imperfect human beings during our present earthly life], in order to conform to the promises....

"A more difficult Question suggests itself here: 'Has **the Law** not been given for the purpose of forcing men to obey God? For there would have been no point in that happening -- unless the **Spirit of God** were guiding the faithful in **the keeping** of it.'"

Answer: "We have the present help not only of the grace of the **Holy Spirit** to direct us, but **also** of the **free forgiveness** of sins.... We are **justified by the grace** of Christ.... He **regenerates us by His Spirit**.... I certainly admit that we are regenerated unto newness of life by the grace of Christ." Thus Calvin.

In his *Institutes*, Calvin goes on. There, he insists regarding both Old Testament saints like "Abraham and Isaac and Jacob" as well as New Testament Gentile saints like the Samaritan Christians and the Japhethitic Christians of Cornelius's household -- that "the purchase of eternal salvation belonged to believers under the Old Testament just as much as to us.

Indeed, as Peter testifies, they were endued with the same **Spirit of faith** by which we are regenerated to life (Acts 15:8). When we hear that **that Spirit which is...a kind of spark of immortality in us**...dwelt in like manner in them -- how can we presume to deny them the inheritance?"

So, then, continues Calvin, "**the Holy Spirit** declared by the mouth of Peter that it is by faith alone that the heart is purified (Acts 15:9).... Hence, in the Acts of the Apostles, we have the expression 'purifying their hearts by faith' (Acts 15:9)....

"Peter's words are [that] 'whosoever trusts in Him [the Lord Jesus Christ] shall receive remission of sins' (Acts 10:43)... The **grace** of Christ **was poured out** in such rich abundance [Acts 10:44].... All saints have been saved by it alone -- not by the merit of their own life or death. As Peter distinctly testifies (Acts 15:11)."

Matthew Henry comments:¹⁵¹³ "Peter rose up, and addressed himself to the Assembly -- 'Men and Brethren!' -- as did James afterward.... And here, he [Peter] put them in mind of the call and commission he had...to 'preach the Gospel to the Gentiles'.... 'God made choice' among us Apostles, of one to 'preach the Gospel to the Gentiles.' And I was the person chosen, 'that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the Word and believe'....

"'God Who knows the hearts...bore them [the Gentiles who believed] witness' that they were His indeed, by '**giving them the Holy Ghost**. Not only the graces and comforts, but **the extraordinary miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost**. 'Even as He did unto us' **Apostles**. See [Acts] chapter 11:15-17....

"Those to whom **God gives the Holy Ghost**, He thereby 'bears witness' [too] that they are His. Hence we are said to be '**sealed**' with that **Holy Spirit** of promise -- 'marked' for God.... He has already settled and determined [this,] by no less an indication than that of **the gift of the Holy Ghost**."

As Dr. F.F. Bruce comments: "Peter, as Leader of the Twelve [Apostles], spoke out unambiguously.... God had given an evident token of His acceptance of Gentiles. For **the Holy Spirit came upon them**, as they listened to Peter -- **just as He had come upon the Apostles themselves, on the first Christian Pentecost**.

"Cornelius and his household had not even made an oral confession of faith -- when **the Holy Spirit came upon them**. But God, Who reads the hearts of men, saw the faith within them. And if **God accepted these Gentiles and cleansed their hearts by His Holy Spirit**..., why should further conditions now be imposed on them which God Himself plainly did not require?"

2. Barnabas & Paul's Report that God's Spirit had wrought miracles among the Gentiles

Writes Luke: "Then all the multitude kept silence. Then they hearkened unto Barnabas and Paul rehearsing what signs and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. And...they...held their peace."

Calvin comments: "Luke means by these words that **the Spirit of God** reigned in that Assembly in such a way that they yielded to the argument straight away.... Certainly, **when the Spirit presides** -- He is effectual enough to put an end to all disagreement.

"‘They hearkened unto Barnabas and Paul’.... In their account, Paul and Barnabas aim at showing that their Apostleship among the Gentiles was approved by God. Seeing that it had been confirmed and ratified by miracles -- which are, as it were, the seals of it."

Matthew Henry comments: "An account of what Barnabas and Paul said in this Synod...did **not need** to be related [by Luke]. For they only gave in a narrative of what was recorded in the foregoing chapters -- ‘what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them’.... The conversion of the Gentiles was itself a wonder, all things considered -- no less than a miracle. Now ‘if **they received the Holy Ghost by the hearing of faith**’ -- why should they be embarrassed?..."

"‘All the multitude...kept silence, and gave audience to Paul and Barnabas’.... The best explication of the word of grace is the accounts given of **the operations of the Spirit of grace**. These, ‘the multitude’ will with ‘silence give audience to.’ They that fear God, will most readily hear them that can tell them ‘what God has done.’"

3. James said Peter's Spirit-ual experience with Cornelius fulfilled Amos's prediction

Luke **in-spir-edly** records that "after they had held their peace, James answered, saying: ‘Men and brethren, hearken unto me! Simeon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His Name.

"And to this agree the words of the Prophets. As it is written [Amos 9:11-12], ‘I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down. And I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up -- so that the rest of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles upon whom My Name is called’ -- says the Lord Who does all these things."

Comments Calvin concerning this James: "He was one of the twelve Apostles..... Someone who was inferior in rank, would never have excelled over the Apostles like that. For Paul honours him with the title of ‘Apostle’ [Galatians 2:9].... Christ placed the Apostles before the other Teachers of the Church....

"The impudence of the Pope is clearly refuted by the fact that the decree of the Council is determined by the authority of James, rather than of Peter.... Let the men of Rome now go and boast that the Pope is the head of the Universal Church because he is the successor of Peter who allowed another to be **over** him!"

Also the *Westminster Confession of Faith* twice cites Acts 15:15f, where the Jerusalem General Assembly's Moderator James appealed not to Church precedent or tradition but rather to the **Spirit-inspired** Amos -- in the **Holy Bible alone**. For *sola Scriptura* was his authority for what he proposed should then be done!

The *Confession* 1:8s cites Acts 15:15f as authority for the proposition that "in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto...the [**Spirit-inspired**] Old Testament in Hebrew...and the [**Spirit-inspired**] New Testament in Greek." And the *Confession* 1:9y cites it as authority for the proposition that "the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture..., it must be searched and known by other places" in Holy Scripture.

Matthew Henry comments regarding "the speech which James made to the Synod" that "he did not interrupt Paul and Barnabas. Though, it is likely, he had before heard their narrative. But he let them go on with it -- for the edification of the company, and [so] that they might have it from the first and best.... But 'after they had held their peace' -- then, James stood up.

"'You may all prophecy [or forthtell God's Word], one by one.' First Corinthians 14:31. God is the God of order [First Corinthians 14:33-40]. He {Moderator James} let Paul and Barnabas say what they had to say -- and then he made the application of it." **Pentecostalists and pentecostalizers, note well!**

"He [James] refers, himself, to what Peter had said concerning the conversion of the Gentiles.... 'Simeon [Simon Peter] hath declared...how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, in Cornelius and his friends, who were the first-fruits of the Gentiles'.... The grace of God was the rise of it!... He [James] confirms this, with a quotation out of the Old Testament.... 'It is written,' Amos 9:11-12, where it is foretold."

4. James said none should further keep ceremonials but all must keep God's Moral Law

Continued the Apostle James: "Known to God are all His works, from the beginning of the World. Therefore my opinion is, that we not trouble them which from among the Gentiles have turned to God. But that we write to them that they abstain: [1] from pollutions of idols, and [2] from fornication, and [3] from things strangled, and [4] from blood[shedding]. For [5] Moses from olden times has in every city them who preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day."

Careful consideration of the above advice of James to the General Assembly, reveals two important matters. We now state them.

First, Christians -- whether Hebrews or Gentiles -- ever since Calvary should not observe any of the Older Testament's ceremonial laws (such as circumcision), which had pointed men to and stopped at Calvary. Second, also Gentile-Christians should just like Hebrew-Christians

keep the Adamic and Noachic and Mosaic Decalogue -- specifically five Commandments of which James had just mentioned, representatively.

Comments Calvin: "The Apostles took nothing on themselves imperiously, but reverently followed what was laid down by the **Word of God**.... They did not feel it an irksome thing or consider it out of keeping with their dignity to profess themselves students of [the **Spirit-inspired**] **Scripture**.

"We must also note from this that the use of [**Old Testament**] **prophetic teaching** is still held in esteem. Whereas certain [**dispensationalistic**] **lunatics** would like to drive it out of the **Church**." Note how Calvin here calls any downgrading of the Old Testament, **lunacy**!

"By appealing to the evidence of 'the Prophets' in the plural while quoting only one passage [Amos 9:11-12], he [the Assembly's Moderator the Apostle James] means that...they [the Old Testament Prophets] all speak with one mouth.... Or rather, **the Spirit of God speaks in all of them**...

"There will be **one** Church, of Jews and Gentiles.... The Kingdom of Christ can only be established, if God is invoked **everywhere throughout the whole World**....

"The **Spirit of God** carefully impresses through the Prophet [Amos] that Christ would not come until the kingdom of David has perished.... Isaiah [11:1] announces that a shoot will spring forth from a despised and ignoble trunk.... In restoring the Church, God has the wonderful method of building it out of ruins....

"The **Gentiles** are not to be kept out of the Church by the disagreement about **ceremonies**. For they had been admitted by God." Not so, however, as regards God's **Moral Law**!

Explains Calvin further: "We know how strictly the Lord commands the avoidance of those things which are in conflict with the outward profession of the faith, and which contain any appearance or suspicion of **idolatry**." Thus Calvin's understanding of the **First** and the **Second** Commandments of the Decalogue!

Calvin continues: "As far as '**blood**[shedding]' and 'what is strangled' are concerned -- it was not only the Jews who were prohibited [from this].... **This Law had been given to the whole World**, immediately after the flood (Genesis 9:4f)." Nay more, it had even prior to that been written on the heart of Adam as the Forefather of the entire human race (Romans 2:14-16 & 5:5 & 5:14). "Those who were not utterly degenerate, had an **aversion to blood**[shedding]" Thus Calvin's understanding of the **Sixth** Commandment of the Decalogue.

Calvin goes on: "To **fornicate**, raged everywhere.... There is nothing absurd about James including a common corruption.... He is considering...a depraved and corrupt custom of men, which had departed from the first **Law of nature and the order established by God**. Fornication is an accursed thing in God's sight." Thus Calvin's understanding of the **Seventh** Commandment of the Decalogue.

Finally, concludes Calvin: "It would be superfluous to lay down anything for the Jews -- to whom the teaching of the Law was familiar, and was read every **sabbath**." Of course, that

was the situation of all godly mankind within the ark, as regards the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue -- just prior to and as part of the Adamic and Noachic ordinances of God's Moral Law. Genesis 2:1-3 & 4:3 & 7:4-10 & 8:6-12 & 9:5-6.

Hence, these same decalogical provisions against idolatry and bloodshed and fornication and sabbath desecration -- were to obtain also in the Christian Church! They are here mentioned *pars pro toto* -- as part of the whole of **the Moral Law of the Ten Commandments** for all men at all times.

In his *Institutes*, Calvin adds¹⁵²² that "to prevent the Church from erring, it is guided by the **Holy Spirit**.... The instance is when the Apostles assembled in Council, [and] announce to all the Gentiles...that they should 'abstain from pollution of **idols** and from **fornication** and...from **blood**' (Acts 15:20-29)....

"It is **not** the property of the Church to disregard the limits of the **Word of God**, and wanton and luxuriate in enacting **new laws**. **Does not the Law which was once [and for all] given to the Church, endure for ever?**

"**Whatsoever** thing I **command** you, observe and **do** it! You shall not add thereto, nor diminish from it!' (Deuteronomy 12:32)....

"That was said of **the [Moral] Law**, which was followed by **the Prophets** and the whole **Gospel**... These are **fulfilments** of the **Law** -- **rather than additions or diminutions!**" Thus Calvin.

Matthew Henry comments¹⁵²³ that James said: "I give it as my opinion or judgment. Not as having authority **over** the rest, but as being an adviser **with** them.... His advice is that circumcision and the observation of the **ceremonial law** be by no means imposed....

"There are many from among the Gentiles that are turned to God in Christ, and we hope there will be many more.... Let the **essentials** of religion -- which an awakened conscience will readily receive -- be...impressed deeply upon them!... 'The Kingdom of God...is **righteousness** and peace and joy **in the Holy Ghost** [*cf.* Romans 14:17]....

"It would be well that in some things which gave most offence to the Jews, the Gentiles **should** comply with them.... They [the Gentiles] must not humour them [the Jews] so far as to be circumcised.... [But] it does not therefore follow, that they must act in a continual contradiction....

"The Gentile converts [must] abstain... 'from **pollutions** of **idols** and from **fornication**'.... They should have no manner of fellowship with idolaters in their idolatrous worships....

"Secondly, fornication and all manner of uncleanness.... They [*viz.* Gentile-Christians] should be publicly warned to abstain from pollutions of idols and from fornication...which..., as the other two [things, *viz.* stranglings and bloodsheddings], are designed to be always abstained from. As those...had been forbidden by **the precepts of Noah** (Genesis 9:4f) **before** the giving of the law of Moses....

"‘Moses hath of old, them that preach him in every city’ -- his writings...’being read in the synagogues **every sabbath-day**’.... That Word of God which is ‘written’ to us, should also be ‘preached.’ Those that have the Scriptures, have need of Ministers to help them to understand and apply the Scriptures."

One further observation. The advice of the inspired Apostle James and the comment of the uninspired but blessed Reformer Calvin -- the advice that both Hebrew-Christians and Gentile-Christians be required to keep the Pre-Mosaic ‘Adamic’ and ‘Noachic’ Decalogue (Genesis 1:28 & 2:17-25 & 9:1-7) -- agrees with that also of the Hebrew Talmud.¹⁵²⁴

5. The Spirit and therefore also the General Assembly gave a decree for all Christians

"Then it pleased the Apostles and Elders, with the whole Church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.... They wrote letters by them, after this manner:

"‘The Apostles and Elders...send greeting to the brethren...in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia.... It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you.... For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us...that you abstain from foods offered to idols, and from blood...and from fornication. From which, if you keep yourselves, you shall do well!’" Acts 15:22-29.

So, then -- **because it seemed good to the Holy Spirit** -- therefore it seemed good also to "we" Commissioners of the General Assembly in Jerusalem (Acts 15:28) to decree that all Christians, whether Hebrews or Gentiles, must start to keep and/or continue to keep the ‘Noachic’ Decalogue against murder and adultery *etc.* On the other hand, it was similarly decreed that no Christians, whether Hebrews or Gentiles, should henceforth keep the ceremonial laws which pointed to Christ and were fulfilled and terminated by Him at Calvary.

This decree was **decided by the Holy Spirit Himself** at the General Assembly of Jerusalem, and therefore subsequently handed down to the congregations for them to observe it. An Assembly Committee consisting of the Apostles Paul and Barnabas together with Judas and Silas was commissioned to itinerate, and to hand over and explain the decree to the congregations.

"And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees to keep -- which had been ordained by the Apostles and Elders which were at Jerusalem. And **so** were the churches **established** in the faith, and **increased in number daily**." Acts 16:4-5.

Calvin here states in his *Institutes*:¹⁵²⁵ "The Apostles and Elders of the Primitive Church...sanctioned a decree...by which they commanded all...to abstain from...**idols**...and from **blood**[shedding] (Acts 15:20f).... Here, **nothing** new has been instituted or decreed by the Apostles.... They [the Apostles] seem nevertheless to prohibit them.... This is **not a new law** enacted by the Apostles, but a **Divine and eternal Command[ment] of God**."

Elsewhere too, Calvin also comments:¹⁵²⁶ "When the Apostles and Presbyters [here] link themselves as associates to **the Holy Spirit**, they do not attribute anything to themselves independently. But this expression amounts to the same things as their saying that **the Spirit**

was their **Leader and Director**, and it was by His dictation that they came to a decision about what they are writing....

"The Apostles deny that the decree which they are transmitting to the Gentiles was a fabrication of their own brains, but maintain that they were merely the Ministers of **the Spirit** -- so that with the authority of **God** they are **commanding** something that **origin-ated** with **Him**, and which they are faithfully handing on.... I deny that the Apostles added anything to **the Word of God**." Ecclesiastes 7:29 cf. Romans 1:18-32 & 2:14-16.

As also the *Westminster Confession of Faith* declares:¹⁵²⁷ "God gave to Adam a **Law**...by which He bound him and all his posterity to...perpetual obedience.... This Law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and as such was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai in **Ten Commandments**.... Genesis 2:17; Romans 2:14-15; Ecclesiastes 7:29.... Besides this Law...called Moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel ceremonial laws -- all which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament....

"The Moral Law does for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof.... Romans 13:8-9; Ephesians 6:2; First John 2:3-8.... **Neither doth Christ in the Gospel any way dissolve but much strengthen this obligation**. Matthew 5:17-19; James 2:8; Romans 3:31.... Neither are the forementioned uses of the Law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it -- **the Spirit of Christ**...enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully which the will of God revealed in the Law **requireth to be done**. Ezekiel 36:27; Hebrews 8:10; Jeremiah 31:33."

This means exactly what it says. Those who rant and rave against the need for also Christians to keep the Ten Commandments, are false-prophets devoid of "the Spirit of Christ."

Matthew Henry comments:¹⁵²⁸ "**It seems good to the Holy Ghost**, and to us' -- that is 'to us' **under the conduct of 'the Holy Ghost'** -- and by direction from Him.... The Apostles...were endued with spiritual gifts extraordinary -- and knew more of the mind of God than any, since those gifts cease, can pretend to.

"Their infallibility gave an incontestable authority to their decrees. But they would not order anything because it 'seemed good to **them**'!... They knew it **first** '**seemed good to the Holy Ghost**'....

"The difference of the style of the true Apostles from that of the false[-apostles], is very observable. They [the latter] that were for imposing the ceremonial law, were positive and **imperious**.... The Apostles of Christ -- who only recommended '**necessary things**' -- are mild and gentle....

"They [the Gentile recipients of the letters from the General Assembly] were confirmed particularly in their opinion against imposing of the ceremonial law.... When they saw the testimony not only of the Apostles and Elders, but of **the Holy Ghost in them**, against it -- they were established....

"The design of this decree being to set aside [**not the Moral Law** but only] the ceremonial law..., they were by it established in the Christian Faith in general and were the more firmly

assured that it was of God. Because it set up a **Spirit-ual** way of serving God.... That **Spirit** of tenderness...which appeared in these letters, plainly showed that the Apostles and Elders were herein under the guidance of Him Who is Love."

So "it seemed good to the Holy Ghost...that you abstain from...**idols**, and from **blood**...and from **fornication**. From which, if you keep yourselves, you shall do well!" Acts 15:28-29.

The General Assembly then chose its Ministers Barnabas and Judas Barsabas and Paul and Silas to go and explain the Spirit's decalogical declarations to the individual congregations. As the Members of that Deputation then went through the cities, they delivered those decalogical declarations to the congregations for the latter to observe those decrees ordained by the Apostles and Elders at the General Assembly in Jerusalem. "And **so** were the churches **established** in the faith, and **increased in number daily**." Acts 15:22-32 & 16:4-5.

So the First General Assembly of the **Bible's** Presbyterian Church, obeyed the **Holy Spirit** and His decalogical declarations of His **Moral Law**. Consequently, the individual congregations then did so too. That is what then promoted true '**Church Growth**' -- so that the congregations then daily **increased in numbers**.

They did so through **obeying the Spirit's Ten Commandments** -- and not through gimmickry, gimp, or gobbledegook. This was a million lightyears away from today's multitudes of neo-pentecostalized "Presbyterian" churches, with their user-friendly 'happy clappies'; their jazzy 'jumps-for-Jesus'; their 'witty ditties'; and sometimes even their 'holy handkerchiefs.'

Hardly better, are today's Evanjeljelish "Presbyterian" Churches -- with their **idolatrous** depictions of "Jesus" and their grotesque Gibsonesque "Christian movies." Worse yet are the modernistic or apostate 'presbyterian' denominations -- with their antinomian whitewashing of abortions and their 'ordinations' of libertine lesbians. From **all** such, also we -- together with the First General Assembly of the Bible's Presbyterian Church -- need to turn away!

Despite their many other errors, all brands of Muslims do. So too, and much more so, should all those who claim to believe the Bible -- and who call themselves 'Christ-ians.'

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