

ARTICLE VIII.

CRITICAL NOTE.

PAUL'S TRANSFORMATION IN CHARACTER: A WITNESS
TO THE POWER OF DIVINE GRACE.

THE fame of Paul in Christian history rests chiefly upon the twin pillars of his missionary labors and his interpretation of the person and work of Christ. Along each of these lines his influence upon succeeding Christianity has been of the most vital sort conceivable; so that the church of to-day, whether in its world-conquest or in its most generally accepted view of Christ, can hardly be imagined apart from what he did and thought. And yet, great as are these aspects of Paul's service to Christianity, it is at least possible that his personal character is an even more valuable asset to Christ's cause to-day, because of its incontestable witness to the power of Divine Grace to change utterly a human life.

On any conception of the exact mode and manner of his conversion, a spiritual chasm yawns between the pre-Christian and the Christian Paul. Readers of Mr. Harold Begbie's "Twice-born Men," with its straightforward, convincing portrayal of the marvelous transformation in character wrought recently in some of the men of darkest London by the manifest power of God, will have the change in Paul most vividly suggested to their minds. It is of course true that these men were redeemed from unspeakable vice and degradation, which could not be said of the scrupulously moral, even ascetic Saul of Tarsus; but in cataclysmic suddenness of experience, in total and abiding change in the viewpoint and purpose of life, there is unmistakable identity. Furthermore, there is in Paul a transformation in personal character just as far-reaching as in the cases of these men, and scarcely less astonishing, all things considered.

This transformation is best seen on the side of his affec-

tions. His utter devotion henceforth to God as revealed in Christ needs no comment. It pervades his life like a delicate fragrance. Even more significant, however, of the change in him, is his new tenderness and sympathy for his fellow-men; and this deserves greater emphasis than it commonly receives. The wonder only grows, the more one considers the difference, here, between the Pharisee and the Christian.

1. It is but glimpses that are given of Saul of Tarsus before the journey to Damascus, but they are flash-light portraits of a dark and gloomy soul. He is first seen as a youth, studying the classics of his race in the great school of Gamaliel. Having adopted with that intensity which was his lifelong characteristic the narrow Pharisaic ideal of legal righteousness, it is his consuming ambition to work it out in his life as it has never been worked out before. It is said that Gamaliel himself was a broad-minded man, with sympathy for other viewpoints than his own; and certainly the speech attributed to him, recorded in the book of Acts (v. 34-39), bears out this claim. But Saul of Tarsus shows no slightest trace of such breadth. If Gamaliel's attitude was appreciated by him at all, it only provoked a more extreme reaction, as is proved by the next picture.

Here Saul is seen acting in violent opposition to Stephen, the man of vision. The latter's presentation, so inspiring and illuminating to-day, of God's dealings with Israel as a progression, reaching its climax in Jesus and a spiritual religion which should far transcend the limits of Jerusalem and its Temple, and embrace all nations in a great democracy of faith — this was blasphemy to Saul, the contradiction of everything he held dear, and he would stamp it out, even if it took false witness and stoning to do it. Here the thing to be noted is not the cruelty of putting Stephen to death, nor even the baseness of using false witnesses against him. It is far more the darkness of soul which could see no beauty or desirableness in the picture Stephen painted of God and of religion, could feel no response but hate to the heralding

in Jesus of a new and glorious day for every son of the Heavenly Father. Can this be the man who later wrote: "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye all are one in Christ Jesus"? (Gal. iii. 28).

A final glimpse of the pre-Christian Paul he himself supplies in his speech before Herod Agrippa II., as found in Acts xxvi. Here he tells (ver. 10-11) of his part in the general persecution of the church which followed upon Stephen's death,—how he put Christians into prison, voted to condemn them to death, and even tried to force them to revile Jesus and renounce their faith. He was pursuing them relentlessly, even to cities outside Jerusalem, and finally as far as Damascus. In it all the impression of his darkness of soul at this time is deepened. There is no slightest suggestion of sympathy for the unfortunate objects of his fury. He is as hard as adamant. The name of Jesus, which could not but call up to many, even of the orthodox, memories of a beautiful and beneficent life, has no appeal for him. Rather let him be reviled as the lowest of the low, and this pestilent sect be rooted out. The pre-Christian Saul, in short, stands forth about as forbidding a character, and as difficult to think of as loving and beloved, as one of Mr. Harold Begbie's hardened men.

2. And then, to him as to them, comes the cataclysmic change. A new man is born. No wonder the figure of a "new creature" (e.g. 2 Cor. v. 17; Gal. vi. 15) was a favorite with Paul. In himself he had such daily witness to the transforming power of Divine Grace as must have staggered, often, his belief in his own identity. He finds his soul, "cribbed, cabined, and confined" before, become a roomy, sunlit place. The once all but dried-up stream of his sympathies now sweeps on, a mighty river, eager to bless a world. "I am a debtor," he cries, this once self-centered, race-proud Pharisee, "both to Greeks and to Barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish" (Rom. i. 14). Oh, the wonder of it!

Readers of Paul's writings will require no proof of the great-hearted love of this transfigured personality for even the least lovable, seemingly, of his fellow-men. How beautifully his deep affection lights up his very earliest letters! The Galatians, in their soul-peril, are his "little children," of whom in his more than father — yes, in his very mother-love, he is again in travail, until Christ be formed in them (Gal. iv. 19). To the Thessalonians he has been as a loving nurse to her helpless charge: he has imparted to them not only the gospel, but his very soul as well. When he must needs be parted from them, his heart remains behind, and his one prayer is to be able to come back. They are his "glory" and his "joy," his very "crown of glorying" (1 Thess. ii. 7, 8, 17-20). And what manner of people were these but lately — yes, even then? Such that Saul of Tarsus, in the old days, would have counted himself polluted had they but touched the hem of his sweeping robe; and that not only because they were Gentiles, but more because they were morally vile. Their condition may be realized through reading between the lines of Paul's earnest warnings to them (e.g. Gal. v. 19-21; 1 Thess. iv. 3-7); their new faith had not yet freed them entirely from the foulness of heathenism, out of which they had lately come. Saul the Pharisee, in the narrowness and hardness of his self-righteousness, would assuredly have loathed them, but Paul the Christian — oh, how he loves and pities them, even as his Saviour loved and pitied him, when he reached down from his throne in glory and arrested his persecuting fury on the Damascus road.

Is not this a transformation in character equal to that in any of Mr. Harold Begbie's men, and is it not a thing which dwarfs by comparison all Paul's other contributions to Christianity, apart from which they had been but the "sounding brass and clanging cymbal" of his own thought, had they indeed been possible at all? It would seem so; and it would appear, also, that in this present time, when the basis of Apologetic has come to be so largely spiritual, the Church

should rejoice more in, and rest more solidly upon, this her first great spiritual miracle — the transformation in character of Saul of Tarsus.

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HISTORY NOT EXPLAINED BY EVOLUTION.

[FROM ADVANCE SHEETS OF WRIGHT'S "ORIGIN AND ANTIQUITY OF MAN."]

THERE is no invariable law of progress in human history. The various elements at work in society tend in all directions. As a matter of fact, degeneration and disintegration seem as likely to take place as real progress and advancement. Among the common people in Egypt there has been no progress for six thousand years, and the same is true respecting most ancient centers of civilization. . . . The civilization of Europe and America lighted its torch from the altars of the decaying civilizations of Greece and Rome, and they, in turn, lighted theirs from altars of Babylonian and Egyptian wisdom. But whence did Egypt and Babylonia derive the fire with which to kindle the flame upon their altars? This mystery is so great that we are forbidden to speak with derision of those who insist that the wisdom of Egypt was given by direct inspiration from heaven or was handed down from a prior original direct revelation. We prefer, however, to say that its mystery is that which surrounds all the great geniuses whose careers have swayed and blessed or cursed the world. A candid study of history will compel one more and more to recognize the dependence of the race upon a few great leaders in thought and action.