

THE SECOND EPISTLE OF ST. PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS.

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BY the courtesy of the editor I am allowed to offer to the readers of the *CHURCHMAN* three articles on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. In the first I attempt an impression and an analysis. In the second I shall attempt a translation of some passages remarkable either for beauty or for obscurity, adding a few notes. In the third I shall attempt to apply the Epistle to the trials and the questions of our age.

I

Discarding the arid technicalities of introduction, let us approach the Epistle with detached and living interest, as though reading it for the first time. To do this is easier in the case of this Epistle than it would be in the case of some others; for it has been less amply treated than most. Admirable scholars, like Plummer, have, indeed, done much to elucidate it. Yet nothing has been done for this Epistle comparable with that which Lightfoot did for the Epistles to the Galatians, Colossians, and Philippians. I do not aspire to emulate Lightfoot, save in the spirit of reverence and thoroughness, which has set the standard to every future student of St. Paul. Yet I trust to add something to the believing comprehension of this wonderful document, still inviting the hand of the master.

When St. Paul arrived at Thessalonica in the autumn of 57 A.D. the prospects of the Gospel were overcast, and the spirit of the Apostle was correspondingly dejected. The Churches of Galatia were threatening defection. The Asiatic seaboard was seething with tumult provoked by his preaching at Ephesus. Corinth had lapsed into wild disorders. Immoralities were practised by Christians in that city, which shocked even the pagan inhabitants. The spirit of faction, native to the Greek mind, had broken out in the Church. The outbreak was embittered by Jewish rancour. Rival sects were being formed, whose chiefs arrayed themselves under the names of venerated teachers, such as Apollos, Cephas and Paul.

The most insolent of these sectaries arrogated to themselves the title of "Christ's Own." Scandals at the public worship of the Church, and even at the Holy Eucharist, were notorious. Spiritual gifts were profaned by fanatical abuses. The reputation of Christians for sanity was jeopardised. The fundamentals of the Gospel were questioned; and some went so far as to hold that God could not be known at all.

As the news of these troubles reached the Apostle, his spirit declined, his physical frame was sapped of its energy. Leaving Ephesus he sought relief in change of scene. He came to Troas. There a door for the Gospel was opened to him. Sick at heart he could not enter in. Taking leave of them he crossed to Macedonia. He longed for the coming of Titus; but Titus came not. Restless and disappointed he moved towards Corinth. At Thessalonica he halted; and there at last he met Titus returning from Corinth after a stay of some months. Would he bring consolation to the Apostle, or would he complete the tale of his distress?

We can without difficulty reconstruct the interview between St Paul and Titus by means of this Epistle. The beautiful and moving letter is, as it were, woven round the thread of Titus's narrative. The young emissary detailed the long and intricate negotiations which he had conducted to a happy fruition. He described the crisis; the revulsion of feeling; the humiliation and repentance of the Church. St. Paul's first letter had been effectual. They were filled with the compunctions of divine sorrow. They were renouncing the false opinions. They were once more loyal. Of the majority this was all true. The rivals of St. Paul were discredited and their followers were wavering.

Upborne by the flood of joy with which these tidings filled his soul, the Apostle gathered up his depleted powers for a great effort. Conscious of the fulness of divine inspiration, mingling details of time and place with doctrine and appeal, touching with amazing versatility topics widely remote, he framed one of those letters "full of weight and power" at which his opponents trembled, and which the Church has canonised as inspired with an inspiration different in kind and in degree from all human inspirations. Such are the conditions out of which arose the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. The general tenor of that Epistle is clear, and yields itself up to patient analysis. Before, however, attempting that analysis,

let me offer a few observations on the style and structure of the Epistle.

Acknowledging that a certain similarity exists between this and the other epistles of St. Paul, we must also acknowledge that it is widely dissimilar from them. It is unique. It bears some resemblance to the Epistle to the Philippians. It bears hardly any resemblance to the first Epistle to Corinth. Its beauty, variety and delicacy are concealed from English readers by the clumsy and inaccurate translation in our Authorised Version. The pathos of the exordium, the solemn cadences of the fifth chapter, the vivid apologia of chapter eleven, can only be appreciated by those who can read the original. It is the despair of translators. One critic compares its eloquence to that of Demosthenes. The Epistle contains three sections. The first, consisting of the first seven chapters, deals with the Christian ministry. The second, consisting of chapters eight and nine, deals with the Collection for the poor saints in Judea. The third, consisting of the last four chapters, recurs to the Ministry, but treats it in connection with the cruel, groundless and ridiculous slanders cast on the Apostle by his rivals.

I cannot here omit a brief notice of the disintegrating hypothesis which finds favour in some quarters. A rage for the disintegration of ancient literature seized the German mind towards the close of the eighteenth century. One critic assailed the unity of the Homeric poems. Another laid hands on the Pentateuch. A third put Isaiah on the dissecting table. Semler, who is styled by Tholuck, "the father of modern rationalism," applied the method of disintegration to this epistle. He declared that the last four chapters, excepting the valediction, were no part of the Epistle; but were a separate letter previously written by St. Paul, and bound up accidentally with this Epistle. In support of this view Semler asserted that the contents of the last four chapters are inconsistent with the contents of the first nine. They are rancorous and vituperative, breathing animosity and distrust. The first nine are calm, affectionate and full of hope. St. Paul, he declares, could not have written the four chapters immediately after writing the nine chapters, without convicting himself of that levity which he so vigorously repudiates. Semler was followed by a second critic, who pulled the Epistle still further to pieces. He in turn was followed by a third, who declared that the Epistle is nothing but a set of notes collected from St. Paul's pocket-

books, and woven together by some person unknown. Thus the disintegrators have reduced the most beautiful and animated of St. Paul's writings to a fortuitous concourse of apostolic atoms.

For these lucubrations there is no vestige of external evidence. There is not a manuscript, not a version, which exhibits the Epistle in any form save that with which all men are familiar. The evidence alleged is internal evidence. I think it may be said, without a breach of charity, that subjective rationalism has coloured the view of the disintegrators, who, differing among themselves on many points, are agreed on one, namely, on evacuating the supernatural from the Epistle. To effect this they tore the fabric into pieces more or less numerous ; for they were all of one mind in thinking that a patchwork of fragments could hardly be the vehicle of supernatural communications.

In analysing the Epistle we will avoid the opposite methods of servile orthodoxy and of shallow rationalism. The former takes too little account of the emotions agitating St. Paul as he was writing. The latter treats the Epistle as a medical officer treats a corpse at a post-mortem examination.

The end which the Apostle had in view was the completing and perfecting of Christian life at Corinth. " Perfect holiness in the fear of God, " he writes ; " this we pray, for even your full equipment." In four short years the building on the one foundation laid by God had become woefully decayed and defiled. He will repair and cleanse the temple.

He begins by disclosing his love for them, his passion for the Gospel, the intensity and variety of his sufferings for that Gospel. He dwells on his recent calamities in Asia, on the consolations afforded by the compassion of God ; he had felt again the communion of Christ's sufferings ; for he had suffered that he might help those who suffered, and had been consoled that he might console others. He had been forced reluctantly by events to defer his promised visit to Corinth. But he repels indignantly the base insinuation that he had vacillated in purpose or trifled with the truth. He had indulged no levity either of affection or of conviction ; he had deferred his visit merely out of love, for he would not come a third time in sorrow. Let not the Corinthians mistake the nature of these experiences ; they were incidents in the triumph of **the Victor, Jesus ; St. Paul was led a captive by his Lord adoring His**

train and diffusing the fragrance of His Gospel wherever he went. From the glory and the shame of that triumphal progress no Christian must shrink.

At this point the grand theme of the Epistle comes large and luminous into view. The miseries just recited were inseparable from the faithful discharge of his Ministry. He and the other Apostles were Ministers of a New Covenant more glorious, more permanent than that of Moses. The qualifications for the Ministry were from God. The containing vessels were frail and earthy, but the treasure contained was divine. Life and death contended for the mastery in his bodily frame ; but the life was the life of Jesus and the dying was the death of Jesus. But even if life must be surrendered, if the outer man must perish, he would not shrink ; for he knew that he had a building of God not made with hands eternal in the heavens, should this earthly tabernacle be dissolved.

Did this language seem to them the language of ecstasy, let them recollect what the Christian ministry really is. Its constraining motive was the love of Christ ; its author was God Himself ; its matter was the Incarnation and the Atonement ; its appeal was to the world to be reconciled to God through the Sinless One made sin for sinful man. Oh, that his Corinthians will pay back what he has given them by accepting the grace of God with a whole heart ! They are not really hesitating. Titus has reported their loyalty and love. They have cleansed the temple ; let them perfect holiness both in flesh and spirit. This section of the Epistle closes with a graceful and generous eulogium on Titus, whose tact, zeal and patience have achieved the reconciliation between the Corinthians and their Father in the faith.

Abruptly he turns off to touch on the Collection for the saints at Judea. Handling the topic with admirable address he reminds Achaia of its professions of liberality made a year before. The Churches of Macedonia were poor. They had subscribed with astonishing generosity. Let not the city of the two seas, whose marts were laden with produce of East and West, be found unworthy of her fame and of her wealth. The contributions should be placed in the hands of chosen Commissioners, of whom Titus should be one. The Apostle concludes the section by a glowing apostrophe to the grace of God and of its all-sufficiency, which eighteen centuries of Christian experience have verified in part ; alas ! how small a part.

One topic more remained. The rivals of his teaching and of his status must be exposed. They had called him a madman, a visionary, a rogue conspiring with others to make a good thing out of the Gospel. He condescends to refute these calumnies. The calumniators are "Apostles overmuch." They put on the garb of meekness ; but are in fact greedy, grasping, and despotic. They preach a Jesus who has no reality ; their Christ is neither truly a Jew nor truly a man. Forsaking the spirit of liberty and love, they propagate principles of servitude and bitterness. Do they challenge him for proofs of his Apostleship ? they should have them in plenty. Hebrews, are they ? What else is he ? Ministers of Christ are they ? Which of them can match the catalogue of labours, sufferings and perils endured by him for the Gospel's sake ? Have they seen Christ ? He has had visions and revelations sufficient to turn the head of any man, and such as might have turned his own, but for the correcting "thorn in the flesh."

But he has said enough ; he will glory no longer save in that weakness over which broods the power and presence of Jesus. For the rest, let his censors be silent ; and let the Church make haste to receive him in purity and peace. He is preparing to come for the third time. His apostolic authority shall be exercised among them, unless they can before he arrives purge themselves wholly of the old leaven and welcome him with one heart penitent and reformed. For they must surely know, that, unless they are like reprobate metal, Jesus Christ is in them. Paul cannot believe that they will fail under that supreme test ; let them examine themselves and so spare him the pain of examining them severely when he comes.

The Epistle draws to a close with a few eager and tender sentences which sound the note of cheerful hope, passing into the commendatory invocation of the sacred Trinity.

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