

THE EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS AS AN APPEAL TO GENTILE CHRISTENDOM.

BY THE REV. C. CAMERON WALLER, M.A., D.D., Principal of
Huron College, Canada.

THE epistle is definitely addressed to Gentiles. It is probable that they were, if not actually suffering from an inferiority complex, at least hardly aware of their wonderful position and the opportunity opening before them. An appreciation of the environment of the times is certainly helpful to a right understanding of the force of the appeal which the epistle made in the first century and still makes in the twentieth. (The writer of these notes holds the view that the Epistle was written from Rome while St. Paul was in prison, that it is really a circular letter and that it is the "Epistle from Laodicea" mentioned in Colossians iv. 16. None of these points is absolutely essential to the argument.) Scarcely sufficient attention has been given to the development of the Church in the first century as a Gentile organisation. It is hardly necessary to point out that in the early years after Pentecost the Christian Church was essentially Jewish in character. The two outstanding differences between a Jew and a Christian Jew in those years were that the Christian Jew believed that Jesus is Messiah (Christ) and Lord, with all that faith implied and that the Holy Spirit had come in a new way at Pentecost. But the Jewish Christian still kept sacrificial feasts and worshipped in the Temple, and despised Gentiles and failed to apprehend or appreciate the Divine plan of salvation for the world. After Gentiles were brought into the Church and the decrees of the Council of Jerusalem were passed and promulgated, there still remained in every community where Jewish and Gentile Christians lived together a feeling of superiority on the part of the Jew. It seems inconceivable that this superiority would not in many cases develop a corresponding inferiority complex among the Gentiles. Socially St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians i. 26, "Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble" are called. To a certain extent the social inferiority felt by Gentile Christians to Jewish believers would be offset by other caste distinctions which were not exclusively Jewish privileges. Here and there a Proconsul accepted the Faith, and in a place like Philippi almost certainly a number of Roman citizens were members of the Church, and there were Christians in Cæsar's household. The sense of inferiority to the Jew might not be apparent, but the Roman citizen would almost inevitably look down on one who did not possess it. Hence perhaps the stress in Philippians on the citizenship which is in Heaven, which plebeian and patrician must alike share in the kingdom of Heaven.

Jerusalem as a national centre and the Temple as the heart of Judaism were to be done away, as St. Peter wrote about the same

time as St. Paul wrote this letter, "The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Peter iv. 17).

The downfall of Jerusalem was going to affect the Church. Direct Jewish persecution of Gentiles was going to cease. It was very important that Gentile Christendom should be aroused to its power, and become conscious of its high calling.

Christianity too was coming into conflict with Roman Imperialism. As long as Christianity was regarded as a sect of Judaism it was safe. But as soon as the Christian Church reared its head as an independent religion claiming men's allegiance to Christ as King and demanding loyalty to Him, and so, in the eyes of the Roman, setting up an *imperium in imperio*, and rebuking the idolatries and immoralities of the heathen world, the Church was facing a great conflict. The writer believes that St. Paul's real object in appealing to Cæsar was, if possible, to secure a recognition of Christianity by Imperial Rome. As a matter of history it took 250 years before it was granted, and it is easy to point to some of the abuses which crept in with the recognition. But we are concerned at the moment with the first century and not the fourth, with A.D. 60 or 61 and not 311, and with 1935 more than either.

The Gentile Churches had already been made to learn their unity and power in the thankoffering raised in Galatia, Asia, Macedonia and Achaia for the poor saints at Jerusalem. But it had not had the desired effect of reconciling Jewish Christians to Gentile Christendom.

St. Paul was a prisoner at Rome. There he had a first-hand view of the power, extent, organisation, unity and wonder of the Roman Empire. In every single point the Church as the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ is superior.

Is Nero the official controller of all the wealth and power of Imperial Rome? Christ, raised from the dead, at God's Right Hand in the Heavenly places, is "far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named and . . . Head over all things to the Church." Are Gentiles regarded as "dogs" and "aliens" and "without God," despised alike by Jews and Roman citizens? "Ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens of the saints and of the Household of God."

Are Gentiles excluded from the Temple at Jerusalem on pain of death? "Ye are built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief Corner Stone—in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." Are the children of Abraham alone to inherit the covenant promises? "The Gentiles are fellow heirs of the same body and partakers of His promise in Christ by the Gospel." Was personal loyalty to the Emperor the ideal and test of all Roman subjects? St. Paul's prayer for the Gentiles is "that Christ (the royal title) may dwell in your hearts by faith."

Had the Roman legions, chiefly the foot soldiers with their well-known equipment, practically conquered the known world?

Each member of the Church is urged to take "the whole armour of God"—each piece described a spiritual counterpart of the arms of the Roman legionary—and "to stand" to arms.

The foregoing are only a few of the more prominent points which stand out in the Epistle as one reads it in the light of the contemporary history. It is a trumpet-call to the Church to awake to its privileges and responsibilities—St. Paul makes two prayers for the individual (i. 17-23). The point is that the eyes of the understanding may be opened to see and know the hope of the calling, the riches of the glory of the inheritance and the greatness of His Power toward us who believe.

The Church through Christ has something to offer which nothing else can give or do. The second prayer (iii. 14-21) is for the individual to be "strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man—that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith—that rooted and grounded in love we may know the love of Christ and be filled with all the fulness of God."

Herein lies the remedy for any inferiority complex. We belong to Jesus Christ. He has redeemed us. He has forgiven our sins. He has equipped us. He has made us members of His Household. He has enrolled us in His army. He has made us stones in His Temple. On earth we are members of families. St. Paul has a word for the Home life which is so important a factor in all human life and was a matter of concern even to the state in the first century. Wives and husbands, children and fathers, masters and slaves must each learn in their respective relations to apply the principles of Jesus Christ.

Rome was described by a contemporary writer as the sink to which all the filth of the Empire flowed. St. Paul warns his readers "not to walk as other Gentiles" (iii. 17-22). He asks them not even to name the sins of impurity (v. 3-6). He urges them "to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness." "It is," he says, "a shame to speak of those things which are done of them in secret."

These things were written for the Gentile Church in the first century. A like conflict is still pressing hard upon us. "We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

If in all the long history of the Christian Church there were, broadly speaking, ever any more startlingly difficult and perplexing years than A.D. 64-75 we do not know. But the same truths and the same glorious spirit and the same practical message which the ambassador of Jesus sent from his prison home may help us in the present time of stress and difficulty.

With Christ we are on the winning side. "Wars and rumours of wars" are not to trouble us. The present menace of an exaggerated nationalism should drive us to a fuller consciousness of our position as members of Christ. With Him we are on the winning side. Apart from Him we are helpless. The ultimate test of loyalty to the

Roman Empire was to sacrifice or burn incense to the statue of the Emperor. The test and the only test for us is, "Does Christ dwell in my heart by faith?" If so, it will be manifest in my life.

If we look round at the different churches of the Gentile world as their life is indicated in the epistles addressed to them, we find party spirit rampant in Corinth, a difference between Euodia and Syntyche in Philippi. Whether there were two women or two parties is not of special import. Their differences led them to pull opposite ways. St. Paul entreats them to be of one mind in the Lord. Everywhere that Jewish influences were manifest there was a lack of unanimity in the great task of Evangelism. How are we better to-day? The process of healing our unhappy divisions goes on very slowly, and will continue to do so, until the urgency of the moment is visualised by the rank and file of the membership of the Church. "Is Christ divided?" St. Paul asked the Corinthians. If diversities of ministries are the gift of the Holy Ghost through the Ascended Christ, can we not be a little more tolerant of differences, and a little more certain of our oneness in the Body of Jesus Christ? We look with hope for some kind of international co-operation through the League of Nations or agreement between some of the major powers in the world's political arena. But why do we not realise the essential unity in Christ of all believers and seek with our whole heart that unification of all the members of Christ's Church militant here on earth for which Christ Himself prayed? It was the spirit of Unity which St. Paul advocates in Ephesians, which enabled the Church to live through those 250 years of persecution. The spiritual unity in the One body is part of our Christian Faith. I believe one Holy Catholic Apostolic Church. Is it not time that the members of Christ's body agreed that we recover the sense of proportion and put the first and important things in the first place? Are not we in the Ministry taking for granted that the people to whom we are sent to minister have a knowledge of the rudiments of Christianity: that they know the saving power of grace, that they have experienced forgiveness of sins, that they know how to meet temptations without falling. And because it is assumed that they know these things they are not taught as they should be. Men and women who should be efficient Christian soldiers find their hearts failing for fear, and we have altogether forgotten that Jesus said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

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