

*THE KEYNOTE OF THE EPISTLE TO THE
HEBREWS.*

CONCERNING the leading characteristics of the Epistle to the Hebrews, there is general agreement among critics. The Paulinism of its doctrine is unmistakeable. The writer is either Paul himself, or else one who has sat at the feet of Paul; who not only agrees with him in teaching those truths which every preacher of Christianity must have published, but has also imbibed from him all that we regard as characteristic in the Pauline method of presenting Gospel truths. Nor is it only in the substance of its doctrine that this Epistle is Pauline; the language also is so in a high degree. There are many coincidences of expression with Paul's acknowledged letters, which either prove common authorship or, if they do not, at least shew that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews was well acquainted with some of Paul's epistles, in particular that to the Romans. On the other hand, one cannot but be impressed by the fact, of which Origen took notice, that the Greek of the Epistle to the Hebrews is of a rhetorical character, unlike that of Paul's writings; so that even if we believe that the Apostle commissioned the writing of the Epistle and adopted it when written, still it would be reasonable to think that he had employed in the composition the hand of some other person.

But it seems to me that even this suggestion of the Alexandrian critics fails to take account of what I regard as indications of a date a little later than that of the circle of Pauline writings. The question of the final perseverance of

the saints—in other words, the question whether it is possible that one who is really a child of God can totally and finally fall away, is one that has been warmly debated among Protestant theologians. Those who on this subject speak in the language of most confident assurance have always found passages in Paul's writings most apposite for quotation, such as, "being confident of this very thing, that He who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." But I do not know whether it has been sufficiently remarked that, if one had to derive a system of doctrine from the Epistle to the Hebrews alone, controversy on the subject of which I speak could scarcely arise; for it would be determined in quite the opposite way. The danger of his disciples falling away seems to be weighing heavily on the writer's mind. He recurs to the subject again and again, multiplying his exhortations and his warnings.

In the piecemeal way of reading the Bible common among us, it is easy for us to miss the drift of a long passage. In Church or in family reading a chapter is usually read at a time; in their private study of Scripture many look out not even a chapter but a text, seeking to find, it may be in some incidental words, a proof by which to establish a doctrine, and scarcely troubling themselves to enquire how their interpretation fits in with what goes before and after. In this way it happens that the vast majority of those who from time to time read a chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews never trouble themselves to enquire what the whole Epistle is about; what the special object with which it was written; what the then immediate dangers of the Church which the author desired to counteract. Of those who do so enquire a great many give what I account a wrong answer. For example, a common answer might be that the design of the writer is to shew the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, or else that his design is to exhibit

the high dignity of our blessed Lord. Yet I do not think that there is reason to believe that the readers of the Epistle were either ignorant on these topics, or that they had begun to doubt on them, and needed to have their ignorance enlightened or their doubts removed. It is true that the topics of our Saviour's dignity, and of the superiority of the dispensation which He founded to any which had preceded it, do occupy a large part of the Epistle, but these topics are not the conclusions which the argument is to establish, but the acknowledged truths which serve as premisses. The writer's object is not so much dogmatic as practical; not so much to prove the fundamental doctrines of our faith as to draw out the practical duties which the recognition of these doctrines imposes. Thus the Epistle opens by contrasting the former dispensations in which God spake to the fathers by the prophets, with the new dispensation of which his blessed Son was the Mediator; but it is in order to draw the practical conclusion, that the dignity of the Messenger throws a greater responsibility on those to whom the message has been sent, makes the duty of adherence to it the greater and the danger of falling from it more terrible. No sooner has the writer, in the first chapter, asserted the superangelic character of the Son of God than he hastens to draw the conclusion, how much more dangerous the rejection of the word spoken by the Son than of that dispensation which had been given by the instrumentality of angels: "*Therefore* we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip,"—or, as the Revised Version has it, "lest haply we drift away from them;"—"for if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?"

The keynote here struck is sustained throughout the entire Epistle. The danger of his disciples falling away,

the terrible penalties which apostasy would entail; these are topics which the writer has always in view and from which he never wanders far. My readers must forgive me if I draw out the proof at length; for I know how deceitful is the expectation that readers told to "see" such and such a passage will actually look out for it, even when the book referred to is so easy of access as the Bible; and therefore that no impression can be conveyed of the frequency with which a topic recurs without making the quotations at full length. The writer, then, of the Epistle to the Hebrews, having spoken of our Lord's superiority to angels, proceeds to compare Him with the legislator of the Jewish dispensation, and goes on: "Moses indeed was faithful in all his house as a servant, but Christ as a son over his house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end." Then, having warned his disciples by the example of the Jews to whom Moses spoke and who, as we read in Psalm xcvi. provoked God to swear in his wrath that they should not enter into his rest, he proceeds: "Take heed, brethren, lest haply there be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God; but exhort one another day by day, so long as it is called To-day, lest any of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin; for we are become partakers of Christ, *if* we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end." Then, having reminded them of the fate of those who had been rebellious and disobedient and whose carcasses fell in the wilderness, he exhorts again: "Let us fear, therefore, lest haply, a promise being left of entering into rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it;" "For indeed we have had good tidings preached to us, even as they had; but the word of hearing did not profit them:" "Having then a great high priest, who hath passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." Then,

having spoken somewhat on the high priesthood of Christ, he comes back to his warnings in words the sternness of which has made them hard to be received: "As touching those who were once enlightened, and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, and then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame:" "But beloved we are persuaded better things of you; and we desire that each one of you may shew diligence unto the fulness of hope, even to the end, that ye be not sluggish, but imitators of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises." The writer then sets forth at length the superiority of Christ's atonement to the Mosaic sacrifices, and returns to his constant topic of exhortation: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope that it waver not, for He is faithful that promised; and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as ye see the day drawing nigh. For if we sin wilfully, after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and a fierceness of fire which shall devour the adversaries. A man that hath set at nought Moses' law dieth without compassion on the word of two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment think ye shall he be judged worthy who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the spirit of grace? for we know Him that said, Vengeance is Mine, I will recompense; and again, The Lord shall judge His people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

The writer then reminds his disciples of the proofs of the sincerity of their faith which they had already given, and exhorts: "Cast not away therefore your boldness which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience that, having done the will of God, ye may receive the promise. For yet a very little while, He that cometh shall come and shall not tarry. But my righteous one shall live by faith; and, if he shrink back, my soul hath no pleasure in Him. But we are not of them that shrink back unto perdition, but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul."

In the passage just cited occurs nearly the only instance in which a charge of bias can, with any appearance of justice, be brought against the translators of the Authorized Version. For, without any authority from the original, they interpolate the words "any man": "The just shall live by faith; but if *any man* draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him," an interpretation apparently recommended by dislike to the doctrinal inference suggested by the literal translation, "The just shall live by faith; but, if he draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him."

After this the writer, having in his noble 11th Chapter sung the praises of faith, returns to exhort his disciples to patience under the temporal sufferings they were undergoing. He reminds them of the example of Christ in enduring the contradiction of sinners, "that they wax not weary, fainting in their souls." He tells them of the purposes for which their Father saw it good that they should receive chastening, and he proceeds: "Follow after peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord; looking carefully lest there be any man that falleth short of the grace of God," or, as it is in the margin of the Revised Version, "that falleth back from the grace of God:" "lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby the many be defiled; lest there

be any fornicator or profane person, as Esau, who, for one mess of meat, sold his own birthright; for you know that, even when he afterwards desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears." I have made quotations from the Epistle at great, I only hope not wearisome, length; but without very full quotation it would not have been possible to exhibit how the whole letter is pervaded by the thought that the faith of its readers was being subjected to severe trials, tempting them sorely to apostasy; that they had need of patience and endurance to hold fast the good confession they had made; and must be reminded of the rewards of perseverance, as well as admonished by Old Testament examples, of the irretrievable ruin which would follow falling away.

Now I hope it will not be imagined that I wish to make out that there is a difference of doctrine between the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews and St. Paul; that I am arguing that this Epistle could not have been written by St. Paul because, to state the matter coarsely, St. Paul was a Calvinist and the writer of this Epistle an Arminian. Such an idea could only be suggested to any one by our unhistorical method of reading the New Testament, our habit of searching it only in order to find out a text which may furnish a ruling on some point of modern controversy, regardless what were the circumstances of the Sacred Writer, what the thoughts of which his mind was full, and whether it was of that controversy it was his object to speak. I have no desire to disparage the importance of the subjects on which in modern times controversy has arisen, what are the beginnings of the spiritual life, what the signs by which it manifests itself, whether the subject of it can recognize these signs by infallible indications, and what confidence he can build on them for the future. But it may easily be that if our thoughts are full of these ques-

tions, we may fail to throw ourselves into the circumstances of the Sacred Writer, and to perceive what were the thoughts and feelings of which his mind was full. In the present case, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews has not in his thoughts the case of the secret decadence of the spiritual life in the soul of one whose heart had at one time burned with zeal for the Gospel cause, but whose love had grown cold, and concerning whose restoration doubts might well be entertained. He has to deal with a patent fact; the case of a Church learning, by bitter experience, to know the truth of our Lord's warning, that there are those in whom the word of life is sown who, "when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness, but have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time; and afterwards, when tribulation or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended." In the Church here addressed there had been some who, under the pressure of persecution, withdrew themselves from the Christian meetings, and forsook the assembling of themselves together: nay, the apostasy had carried off some who had enjoyed the highest consideration in the Christian community, and had given the strongest evidence of their fitness to advance its interests. Men who had not only been admitted into the Church by baptism, but who had even been partakers of the supernatural gifts of the New Dispensation, who had been enlightened, and had tasted of the heavenly gift, and had been made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and had tasted of the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, had fallen away. What marvel, when the demon of unbelief had struck down his victims in such high places, if the one predominating thought of the Preacher to the little band who still remained faithful was, Will ye also go away?

When we thus read the Epistle, with an eye less to its dogmatic than to its historic interest, we find ourselves,

I think, in a period a little later than that represented in Paul's epistles. There was no time in the Church's history when some apostasies did not occur. Even in our Lord's lifetime there were those who "went back and walked no more with Him"; yet this sin was not the pressing danger at the time when the Church had not yet lost her first love, and when persecution against her had not been organized. Even in the first days, as we learn from the Acts of the Apostles, the preaching of the Gospel was a work of danger. The missionaries were liable to be set upon by tumults of mobs, or dragged before tribunals. Yet there they had protection, as in the case of Gallio, in the contemptuous toleration of the Roman magistrates for a silly superstition condemned by no law. Accordingly, the diseases of the Church were such as beset a state of worldly prosperity, and Paul, about to visit Corinth, dreaded that God would humble him among them, and that he must be forced to bewail "many who had sinned already, and had not repented of the uncleanness and lasciviousness and fornication which they had committed." It was later that persecution assumed a systematic form, and that Christianity became an unlawful profession; so that, as we learn from the Epistle of St. Peter, "Christian" became a title of accusation, and "to suffer as a Christian" was an intelligible phrase. The celebrated letter of Pliny shews clearly that, though trials of Christians had not formed part of that magistrate's previous experience, the thing itself was no novelty. And he conceived himself to be taking a humane view when he decided that, whatever the Christian profession might be, the refusal to apostatize from it was a piece of obstinacy which might be properly punished with death. In the time of the Epistle to the Hebrews, however, the rigour of persecution had not proceeded so far against the Church addressed. Imprisonments and loss of property were the extreme punishment inflicted. Of these they had had their

share; they had been "made a gazingstock by reproaches and afflictions." Some of their society were in bonds, towards whom the rest fraternally exhibited compassion. The spoiling of their goods was inflicted on them, and they took it joyfully. But, elsewhere, the malice of their enemies had gone further; and those to whom the Epistle was addressed could not say, as these others, "that they had resisted unto blood, striving against sin." I am disposed to think that "they of Italy," from whom in the Epistle a salutation is sent, could even then tell of that Neronian persecution which was probably a time of trial, though less severe, for Christians all over the empire.¹ However this may be, it seems to me that this Epistle exhibits a greater strain on Christians from external persecution, greater consequent temptation to apostasy, than the Pauline epistles, and that therefore it may probably be referred to a somewhat later date.

Though I have been discussing the Epistle to the Hebrews historically, without reference to any modern controversy, it may not be out of place to add a few words about that doctrine of what is called the final perseverance of the saints, to which several passages in this epistle wear a hostile aspect. And perhaps I shall seem to be uttering a paradox if I say that the doctrine in question, even if theoretically false, is practically true. Yet there are many cases where it is practically more important to enunciate a general proposition than to attend to the exceptions and limitations which must be taken into account if we want to bring it into accordance with strict theoretical truth. We make practical use with great advantage of the theorems of theoretical mechanics, though there are no mathematical lines or circles

¹ This view of the date of the Epistle is that of Renan, who places it before the destruction of Jerusalem, but after that Neronian persecution in which Paul is commonly believed to have suffered martyrdom. But for the reason mentioned in the preceding sentence I cannot agree with Renan, that Rome was the Church addressed.

to be found in nature, no systems of forces so simple as those which our theory contemplates. Or, to take an illustration which more fairly represents what I have in my mind, we are obliged for practical purposes to lean on our own understanding, to adopt the conclusions which, after weighing the arguments as best we can, appear to us most reasonable. Yet it might be objected that we are not infallible, and therefore not entitled to rely on the decisions of our own intellect. It may easily be that we make a mistake; that what seems to us absurd or incredible may be really true, what seems practical wisdom may be downright foolishness. We cannot deny it. If we were to formulate into an abstract proposition any assertion of our immunity from error, we should, no doubt, be stating a falsehood. Yet, in practice, we not only habitually forget our fallibility, but we do so wisely; for all our powers of action would be paralysed if we allowed any doubts suggested in the region of theory to descend into that of practice and prevent us from taking with energy the course which, after the best prudential calculation we could make, appeared to us the best. And so, in many other cases, it is practically wise to banish from our minds contingencies for the occurrence of which we must even make provision. We do not know whether we shall be alive to-morrow, and a prudent man must make provision for the possibility that he may not; yet he would do ill in brooding over the thought of his mortality, and he is bound in prudence to make his plans for the morrow as carefully as if he were absolutely sure of being alive to carry them out.

If even yet I have not made my meaning clear, let me by a different illustration come a little closer to the matter in hand. Imagine that we had to preach a wedding sermon, and that some one recommended us to address the newly married couple as follows:—"You have promised to love each other to your life's end, and you think it certain that

you will do so ; but in real truth you can have no certainty whatever that your feelings will not change. Many marriages have begun as fairly as yours, and love has been succeeded by indifference, nay, by dislike and unfaithfulness." Could we reject the suggested topics solely on the ground that they stated what was not true? Can we deny that such changes of feeling as have been described do from time to time occur? Why, the most trusting bride will allow her friends to provide by settlements for the possibility that her husband may prove unworthy of the trust she places in him. Well, then, can we say that, if estrangement takes place after marriage, it proves that the love originally professed had not been sincere ; and that therefore, conversely, one who was assured of his own sincerity might also be assured against the possibility of change in the future? I do not know that this can be said either ; but it is certain that, even if there were theoretical truth in such an address as I have imagined, it would be practically false ; and that it would be mischievous if one was cruel enough to deliver it, and the parties foolish enough to give heed to it. For why is it that true affection resents as an insult the suggestion of the possibility of its discontinuance? Is it not because there cannot be love without trust, and trust is incompatible with doubt, the entertainment of which would very speedily bring its own justification and fulfil its own prophecies by undermining the affection it assailed? Well, whatever reason we have for trusting in the affection of a fellow creature, we have infinitely more for trusting in the love of Christ. We may discover that we have been mistaken in our opinion of a fellow creature, and that one on whom we had bestowed our affection was really unworthy of our love. It can never happen to us to find that we have thought too highly of Him. It may happen that one on whom we had bestowed our love withdraws affection from us, and that we find it hard to go on loving without return. That dis-

appointment can never befall our love to Christ. Men may prove inconstant, but He abideth faithful; He cannot deny Himself. What remains, then, to doubt, but the frailty of our own hearts? Well, if experience of human inconstancy does not deter two human beings from exchanging pledges of lifelong affection with each other, and if in thousands of cases we find by a better experience that their vows, made in God's sight and blessed by his Church, do receive, in answer to faithful prayer, grace and strength which exalt human affection into sacred duty, which preserve it unshaken through the trials and changes of life, so that sorrow or adversity borne together only draws it closer; labour endured for the other is no toil; unkindness, even injuries, received from the other find ready indulgence and forgiveness; still more may we be sure that faithful prayer will bring grace and strength to preserve unshaken that union with Christ on which our spiritual life depends.

I do not know how to assert final perseverance as a theory. I can say nothing to encourage a backslider to trust in the memory of a dead past, and rely that his recollections of the love of former days in themselves contain a pledge of future restoration. But to those who hold fast by a present faith in the Son of God I can confidently say, Doubt not, but earnestly believe in the faithfulness of Him in whom you trust. "He will perfect that which concerneth you; He will not forsake the work of His own hands."

GEORGE SALMON.
