

ST. PAUL'S CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

XV.—THE LIKENESS OF SINFUL FLESH.

THE text *Romans* viii. 3 has already been considered in connection with the Pauline doctrine concerning the significance of Christ's death. We then found reasons for coming to the conclusion that the text does not, as is usually supposed, properly refer to Christ's death, but rather alludes to the redeeming virtue of Christ's holy life in the flesh, showing, as it does, that subjection to the flesh is no inevitable doom, and giving promise of power to believers living in the flesh to walk after the spirit. Such I still hold to be the true import of the words: "God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and with reference to sin, condemned sin in the flesh." But it is obvious that these words raise questions on which we have not yet touched—questions having an important bearing on the Pauline doctrine of the flesh. God sent His Son in the flesh. Was Christ's flesh, in the apostle's view, in all respects the same as ours? Would he have applied to it the epithet "sinful" as he does to the flesh of ordinary men in the expression "flesh of sin" (*σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας*)? There have always been theologians ready to answer these questions in the affirmative. And along with this view of what St. Paul believed concerning the flesh of Christ goes usually, if not by any logical necessity, a certain theory as to what he meant to teach in reference to the atoning function of the Redeemer. In discussing the apostle's doctrine concerning Christ's death I judged it best to make no reference to that theory, and to confine myself to a positive statement of what seemed to me to be the gist of his teaching on that subject. But an opportunity now offers itself of making some remarks on the theory in question, which may help to confirm results already arrived at, and throw some addi-

tional light on the apostle's whole way of conceiving Christ's earthly experience in relation to the problem of redemption.

The answer to the question concerning the moral quality of our Lord's flesh depends, or has been thought to depend, on the interpretation of the expression "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (*ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας*). Opinion is much divided here. There are two debatable questions: (1) Is the emphasis in the word *ὁμοιώματι* to be placed on the likeness, or on an implied unlikeness? (2) Do the words *σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας* constitute a single idea, implying that sin is an essential property of the *σὰρξ*, or are the two words separate, so that *ἁμαρτίας* expresses only an accidental, though it may be all but universal property of the flesh? Either of the alternatives may be taken in either case, yielding four different interpretations. The second alternative under (1) is combined with the first under (2) by Baur, Zeller and Hilgenfeld, and the resulting interpretation is as follows: St. Paul regarded sin as an essential property of the flesh, but he hesitated to ascribe to Christ sinful flesh, therefore he said not that God sent Him in sinful flesh, but that God sent Him in *the likeness* of sinful flesh, meaning likeness in all respects *sin excepted*. Others, among whom may be specially mentioned Lüdemann,¹ combine the two first alternatives; and, while agreeing with the fore-mentioned writers in taking sinful flesh as one idea, differ from them by holding that it is the apostle's purpose to teach that God furnished His Son with a flesh made exactly like ours, like in this respect that it too was a flesh of sin. Not that the apostle meant thereby to deny the sinlessness of Jesus. For though *ἁμαρτία* was immanent in the flesh of Christ as in that of other men, it was only objective sin, not subjective; it never came to *παράβασις*; it was prevented from doing so by the Holy

¹ *Die Anthropologie des Apostels Paulus*, 1872.

Spirit, who guided all Christ's conduct, and kept the flesh in perfect subjection. A third class of interpreters, such as Hofmann, Weiss, etc., combine the two second alternatives, treating *σὰρξ* and *ἁμαρτία* as separable ideas, and taking *ὁμοίωμα* as implying limitation of likeness in respect of the sinfulness of ordinary fallen human nature. Finally, Wendt combines the first alternative under (1) with the second alternative under (2), and takes out of the words the sense: Christ's creaturely nature was exactly the same as ours, to which sin adheres only *per accidens*, and the sinfulness of our flesh is referred to not to indicate *wherein* Christ was like us, but *wherefore* He was made like us.

None of these diverse interpretations can be considered exegetically self-evident. They are all, from the point of view of verbal exegesis, legitimate, and our decision must depend on other considerations. The view supported by Baur has a good deal of *primâ facie* plausibility; but assuming his interpretation of *ἐν ὁμοιώματι* to be correct, it appears to me to be an argument in favour of the separability of the ideas of flesh and sin. For why should it be supposed that the motive of the limitation is mere shrinking in reverence from applying a principle to Christ which is firmly held by the writer as a necessary truth? If the apostle believed that where *σὰρξ* is there is, must be, sin, *ἁμαρτία* at least, if not *παράβασις*, would he who was so thoroughgoing in all his thinking have hesitated to ascribe it to Christ also? Would he not rather have done what, according to Lüdemann, he really has done, viz., ascribed to Christ's flesh *ἁμαρτία*, and then sought to guard His personal sinlessness by emphasizing the indwelling of the Divine Spirit as the means of preventing objective sin, *ἁμαρτία*, from breaking out into *παράβασις*? Surely he was much more likely to do this than to adopt the weak expedient of covering over a difficulty with a word.

The first alternative under (1) is therefore decidedly to be

preferred. The emphasis lies on the likeness not on an implied unlikeness. This conclusion is confirmed by the construction I have put on the didactic significance of the whole passage. If the apostle's aim was to insist on the redemptive value of Christ's successful transit through a curriculum of temptation, then he had a manifest interest in making the similarity of the conditions under which Christ was tempted to those in which we are placed as great as possible. The battle with sin must be very real for Christ as well as for us—not a sham fight. If in order to that it was necessary that Christ's flesh should be the same as ours in all respects, why then so it must be. Whether it was necessary or not is a difficult question, on which opinion may differ. Was that question present to St. Paul's mind, and if it was did he mean to pronounce an opinion upon it? It is commonly assumed that the problem was in his view, and that we here have his solution. Is this really so?

That so deep a thinker had asked himself the question: What about our Lord's flesh, was it wholly like ours? is probable. But that he was prepared to dogmatize on the question is not so likely. What if he was in a state of uncertainty about it, feeling the delicacy of the question, and the pressure of two contrary religious interests, each vitally important: on the one hand, the necessity of guarding the sinlessness of Jesus; on the other, the equal necessity of making His curriculum of temptation most thoroughly, even grimly, real? I do not think it matters much for the ascertainment of the apostle's mind on this point whether we take the expression "sinful flesh" as analytic, with Baur, or as synthetic, with Wendt. Synthetic or not, the two ideas "flesh" and "sin" had become, as we saw, very coherent in his thought. For all practical purposes "sinful flesh" had assumed for him the character of a single indissoluble idea, at least with reference

to ordinary men. And just on that account he could not well get past the question: Was Christ's flesh an exception? was there in His case no law in the members warring against the law of the mind? But it does not follow that he was ready with his answer. The question is a puzzle to us, why should it not be to him? And if it was, what could he do but say, Christ came in the likeness of sinful flesh *to the extent of being subject to very real temptation to sin and all that that may involve?* That is what, when the previous context is taken into account, he in effect does say in this much contested passage.

And so it results that the true interpretation of the text, Romans viii. 3, after all does not enable us to answer the question propounded, but leaves it an open question for theologians. As such, however, the most representative theologians of the Church have not treated it. The decided tendency of orthodox theology has ever been to regard the question as closed, to the effect of holding that Christ's flesh differed from that of ordinary men in being free from that law in the members warring against the law of the mind, whereof the apostle complains.¹ But there have never been lacking some Christian thinkers who have been unable to acquiesce in this decision. The grounds of dissent have been such as these: If Christ's personal sinlessness be loyally maintained, the interests of faith are sufficiently safeguarded. The more difficult it was for Christ to be sinless, the more meritorious. The utmost that can be said against the flesh in any case is, that it makes holiness difficult by supplying powerful sources of temptation. That is all that is meant by the expression "objective sin."

¹ In an Article on the phrase *ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας* in *Zeitschrift für Wissenschaftliche Theologie*, 1869, Overbeck remarks that from Marcion to Baur interpreters have assigned to *ὁμολογία* a negative sense, similarity as opposed to likeness, in relation to *ἁμαρτία*. He characterizes the history of the interpretation of this word as that of the almost uncontested reign of an exegetical *monstrum* of patriotic controversial theology.

Properly speaking, what the apostle calls "flesh of sin" is not sinful. Sin and sinlessness belong to the person and not to the nature.¹ The flesh as such is in no case bad. It is the inversion of the right relation between flesh and spirit that is sin.² Only in case the flesh as we inherit it made perfect holiness impossible, would it be necessary for Christ the sinless One to have a flesh uniquely endowed. But the apostle's view is not that perfect holiness, blameless walking in the spirit, is impossible for Christians. He exhorts Church members to perfect holiness by cleansing themselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit,³ and treats Christ's moral triumph over temptation as a guarantee for the fulfilment of the righteousness of the law in Christian men walking not after the flesh but after the spirit.⁴ If that be possible in us, with the flesh as we have it, it was possible *a fortiori* in Christ even in a flesh in all respects like ours. Finally, by what means could Christ's flesh be made different from ours? By the power of the Holy Ghost? But moral effects cannot be produced by mere physical power. "The function of the Holy Ghost is influence and never mere power,"⁵ and its proper sphere is the will, not the material frame.

I proceed now to make some observations on the theory of atonement, which is usually associated with this "heterodox" view as to the flesh of Christ. I have been accustomed to call it the theory of "Redemption by sample."⁶ The name, though not accepted by the advocates of the theory, sufficiently indicates the principle. That principle is that Christ did for Himself first of all what needs to be done for us, and did it by living a perfectly holy life in a

¹ So Porcher du Bose: *The Soteriology of the New Testament* (1892), p. 202.

² So Beyschlag: *Neutestamentliche Theologie* (1892), vol. ii. p. 41.

³ 2 Cor. vii. 1.

⁴ Rom. viii. 4.

⁵ Du Bose: *Soteriology*, p. 208.

⁶ Vide *The Humiliation of Christ*, pp. 47, 253 ff.

human nature in all respects like ours. He sanctified the sample of human nature which he assumed, and so laid a sure foundation for the sanctification of humanity at large. Christ on this view was at once the thing to be redeemed, its redemption, and the thing redeemed,¹ and His work was "through His own self-perfection to perfect us."² A peculiar significance is attached to the death of Christ by some exponents of the theory. What took place in the crucifixion was that sin in Christ's own flesh was judicially condemned and executed, and so the power of sin in the flesh in principle overcome and abolished for all Christians.

Before making critical remarks on this theory, it may be proper here to point out the precise relation in which it stands to the view of Christ's flesh, with which it is associated. The state of the case I take to be this. The theory of atonement in question demands that Christ's flesh be in all respects like ours, but holding this view does not necessitate adoption of the theory. Redemption by sample requires that Christ's flesh be a sample of the corrupt mass to be redeemed. But Christ's flesh might be that, and yet redemption proceed on another principle. The identity of the Redeemer's flesh with ours would fit in to the theory of Redemption by *self-humiliation* quite as well as to the theory of redemption by self-redemption. It would mean simply that Christ's temptations would be very fully assimilated to ours, and so become a very strong ground of hope. Possibly Christ's experience of temptation would sufficiently resemble ours without such identity. In that case, the theory of redemption by *self-humiliation* could afford to leave the question as to Christ's flesh open. On the other hand, the theory of redemption by self-redemption cannot allow the question to be open. Hence the relevancy of a criticism on that theory in this place. We criticise a theory which ex-

¹ Du Bose: *Soteriology*, p. 227.

² *Ib.*, p. 286.

cludes our view as to the vagueness of St. Paul's statement that God sent His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.

This theory, then, seems very open to criticism in the construction it puts on the crucifixion. In the first place if the *ἀμαρτία* in Christ's flesh was a thing which could be completely kept under by the holy will of Christ (as is admitted on all hands), was it not morally insignificant, and therefore not a thing calling for judicial condemnation and execution? Is there not something theatrical in this pouring out of the vials of Divine wrath on the flesh of Christ for the objective sin latent in it? It is impossible to read the eloquent declamations on this topic, in the writings of Edward Irving,¹ *e.g.*, without feeling that the whole affair is utterly unreal, without any fact-basis, a pure theological figment. Then, on the other hand, one fails to see how the judicial condemnation on the cross of potential sin in Christ's flesh is to benefit us in the way of preventing the vicious bias in our flesh from breaking out into transgression. For though the objective sin of the flesh in Christ's case happily proved innocuous, it is far enough from being harmless in our case, *teste* St. Paul. How then are we to be benefited? How will the condemnation of Christ's flesh in His death deliver us from our body of death? Shall we say to ourselves: in that death my flesh was crucified? Alas! the faith-mysticism will not help us here. The faith-mysticism may act on the imagination and the heart, but hardly on the flesh. It will remain as obstinately as ever opposed to all good, for anything the condemnation of Christ's flesh on Calvary effected. Instead of faith-mysticism, then, must we have recourse to sacramental-magic, and say that in the Lord's Supper the Lord's resurrection-body, purged from potential sin by the fire of the cross, passes into our bodies and becomes there a trans-

¹ Vide *The Doctrine of the Incarnation Opened* (Collected Writings, vol. v.), and the account of his view in *The Humiliation of Christ*, p. 254.

forming influence, spiritualizing, sublimating our carnal frames into the likeness of Christ's risen humanity? That certainly was the way Irving's adventurous spirit took in carrying out his pet theory. It seems the only course open, and it is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the theory.

If the stress of Christ's work be placed, as perhaps on this theory it ought to be, on the life rather than on the death of the Redeemer, then the redemptive value of our Lord's experience lies in His heroic struggle to maintain perfect holiness in spite of the sinful flesh. Now here at least we are in contact with a fact. The condemnation of Christ's flesh on the cross has all the appearance of being a pure figment, but Christ's battle with temptation was an indubitable, stern reality to which value must be assigned in every true theory of redemption. The only question is, how can it be made to tell for our advantage? The Apostle's answer to this question, so far as I can make out, is this: Christ's holy life in the flesh shows that for men living in the flesh bondage to sin is not the natural and inevitable state; it is a judgment on the actual condition of bondage as what ought not to be and need not be. Further, as the whole of Christ's earthly experience was in the view of the apostle an appointment of God for a redemptive purpose, that sinless life is a promise and guarantee of Divine aid to holy living for all who believe in Jesus. Jesus walked in the Spirit while in the flesh, and to those who believe in Him God will communicate His Spirit to enable them to do the same. Finally the culmination of Christ's victorious life in the Spirit in a resurrection into pneumatic manhood from which all gross fleshliness has disappeared, gives us a sure ground of hope for the ultimate redemption of our body out of the natural into the spiritual, out of the corruptible into the incorruptible. An objective sentence of illegitimacy on the reign of sin in the flesh, an incipient and progressive emancipa-

tion therefrom through the strengthening of the spiritual powers, with the prospect of completed emancipation hereafter: surely these together constitute a not inconsiderable boon! It is difficult to see what more we could have on any theory unless it were some physical process of transformation carried on in the flesh even now.

Just this the advocates of the theory of redemption by sample seem to think their theory secures. Their way of thought is so different from mine that it is with diffidence I attempt to expound it, but the position taken up is something like this. Christ is not now in process of redemption; the process is complete so far as He is concerned, and the fact must tell for our advantage. Christ and we are organically one. He is one with us, and we are one with Him—one with Him risen, not in hope only, but somehow even at the present time. The risen Christ has it in His power to make us now what He Himself is. And by what means? By sacraments, especially by the sacrament of baptism. Once more the sacramental *Deus ex machinâ*. The links of thought here are not easily traceable. It may be due in part to the fact that the prominent exponents of the theory are connected with churches deeply tinged with sacramentarianism that so much stress is laid on ritual in connection with the process of salvation. Be that as it may, the logic of sacramentarianism is too subtle for me. That the completely self-redeemed Christ should be able in the case of Christians to hasten the process of redemption through the exceptional powers He has attained is conceivable. According to the apostle He is eventually to change our vile body into the likeness of His glorious body, and for anything we know the process might conceivably begin before death, or at the moment when a man becomes by faith a new creature in Christ Jesus. But why should baptism be the instrument in this miraculous process? How comes it that a mere

rite possesses such tremendous significance as to be "an integral part of the Divine act or process of incarnation,"¹ whereby the individual incarnation of Christ becomes gradually the collective incarnation of redeemed humanity? The reply may be: We cannot tell; it is enough for us that such is the fact as declared in Pauline texts, like *Romans* vi. 3, 4, and still more remarkably in the Lord's great commission to His apostles before His ascension. "All power is given unto Me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore and teach all nations, *baptizing* them." What is this but an intimation from the risen One, that He is at length in possession of a power to raise humanity up to God, to impart His own risen humanity to men, and that the instrument by which He is to effect that great result through the agency of His disciples is *baptism*.² We are not here concerned with the exegesis of supposed proof texts, but simply with the point of view in support of which they are adduced. Practically the outcome is salvation by *sacraments*. This is what redemption of men by the self-redemption of Christ ends in. Christ fought a battle with the flesh unaided save by the Holy Spirit who dwelt in Him in all possible fulness. His victory makes the struggle easier for us, not merely by ensuring for us the aid of the Divine Spirit through whom He conquered, but by introducing into the very flesh, which is the seat of our foe, the mysterious powers of His heavenly humanity through the use of consecrated spiritualized matter in the forms of water, bread, and wine. This recourse to sacramental grace as the mainstay is, in my view, a confession of failure. It is the mountain labouring and bringing forth a ridiculous birth. It is more and worse. The *reductio ad absurdum* of a certain theory of redemption, it is at the same time a melancholy perversion and caricature of Christianity.

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¹ Du Bose: *Soteriology*, etc., p. 358.

Vide Du Bose: *Soteriology*, etc., p. 354.