

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

ST. PAUL'S CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

XIX. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.

THE title of this article is somewhat vague, but what I have in view is to consider such questions as these: How does the apostle conceive the Christian life in reference to its beginning, how far does he recognise the idea of growth as applicable to that life, what features of that life occupied the place of prominence in his mind?

1. The leading Pauline Epistles contain various forms of representation bearing on the first of these questions. One of the most important and striking occurs in the earliest of the four. I refer to the statement in *Galatians* vi. 15: "Neither circumcision is anything, nor uncircumcision, but a *new creation*" (*καινή κτίσις*). A certain controversial colouring is discernible here. The supreme importance of the new spiritual creation is asserted against those who set value on rites. As against these St. Paul says in effect: the one thing needful is the new creation; without a share in it the rite of circumcision will do you no good; and if you possess it, the want of circumcision will do you no harm. It is easy to see that the antithesis gives much sharpness and point to the thought expressed by the phrase *καινή κτίσις*. The apostle conceived of Christianity as a new world ushered into being by the divine fiat, and taking the place of an old world worn out and doomed to dissolution. To his opponents he says in effect: God has created a new world in Christ, which is entitled to assert to the full its right of existence. Speak to me no more of circumcision and uncircumcision, Jew and Gentile: these distinctions belong to the old world, which by the very advent of the new has received notice to pass away. Thus viewed, the new creation refers not so much, at least directly, to the religious life of the individual Christian, as

to the whole comprehensive social phenomenon denoted by the term Christianity. But there is little room for doubt that the individual reference was also present to the apostle's mind. For the very antithesis between the new creation and ritual implies that the former is ethical. The new creation is a moral creation, and it is such for the Church collectively, because it is such for each member of the Church. It consists of a community of men who have become partakers of a new life through faith in Christ, and it is because it is so constituted that the *καινή κτίσις* is the marvellous thing it is represented to be. Accordingly we find that immediately after mentioning this new creation St. Paul goes on to speak of individual members of the Christian commonwealth in these terms: "As many as walk by this rule, peace be upon them and mercy, even upon the Israel of God." The members of the mystic Israel are thus represented as persons who walk by the rule, or have for their watchword: circumcision nothing, uncircumcision nothing, the new creation everything; and the adoption of this motto is possible only for those who are conscious of a new spiritual life within them.

It is not surprising therefore to find the apostle in a later epistle expressly stating what in the earlier he rather hints than says, viz. that every man who believes in Christ is a new creation. The important text containing the statement is 2 *Corinthians* v. 17: "Wherefore if any one in Christ, a new creation, the old things passed away, behold new things have come into being." The sentence is characterised by laconic energy and reveals intense conviction. It is an echo of the prophetic oracle: "Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold I do new things,"<sup>1</sup> and is directed against the Judaists who were enamoured of the old. For the apostle Christianity is the new thing spoken of by the prophet, and

<sup>1</sup> *Isa.* xliiii. 18, 19.

he claims for it, as only what is due to its importance, that in its interest all old things, not excepting even Christ after the flesh, shall be forgotten, as they are by him for his part. But there is much more in his mind than this controversial meaning. When he speaks of a *καινή κτίσις* he has in view a marvellous moral phenomenon that has made its appearance in every man who has truly believed in Christ. A great transformation has taken place. The believer has become in thought, feeling, aim, a new man; old characteristics have disappeared, and new ones have taken their place. If we inquire what the old things vanishing, and the new things replacing the old are, the context helps us to an answer. We find a very significant hint in the words of verse 15: "He died for all that the living might *no longer* live to themselves, but to Him who for them died and rose again." The *μηκέτι* implies that those who believe did formerly live for themselves, and the change that has come over them consists in their resolving to do so no longer. The new creation then, for one thing, signifies selfishness giving place to self-sacrifice for Christ's sake.

Passing from the Epistle to the Corinthians to the Epistle to the Romans, we find the idea of a new creation recurring under slightly altered forms of expression. In the sixth chapter the apostle speaks of an *old man* (*παλαιὸς ἄνθρωπος*) implying of course a new, and he represents Christians as called to walk in *newness of life*.<sup>1</sup> The same chapter gives us additional information as to what the newness consists in. In the sequel Christians are exhorted thus: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body that ye should obey its desires."<sup>2</sup> The new man, that is, is one who is free, or at least strives to assert his freedom, from the dominion of fleshly desire, and who seeks to make all his members instruments of righteousness. At the commencement of chapter xii., where begins the hortatory

<sup>1</sup> Rom. vi. 4-6.<sup>2</sup> Rom. vi. 12.

part of the Epistle, the same truth is suggested by the exhortation to Christians to present their bodies a living sacrifice characterised as a rational service (*λογικὴ λατρεία*, in tacit contrast to the ritual service of the Levitical system under which brute beasts were offered in sacrifice). The exhortation is virtually a summons to mortify the lusts of the flesh, so that the life in the body may be pure and holy. And he is a new man who so puts to death unholy desire and lives a temperate life. The same exhortation recurs in *Romans* xiii., accompanied with some details as to the things to be shunned.<sup>1</sup> Here the doctrine of the new life is stated in altered terms, being represented as a *putting on of Christ Jesus*, Christ being conceived as a new garment to be worn by the Christian in place of an old one. The figure suits a connection of thought in which believers are exhorted to a change of bodily habits; for habits are a garment of the soul. It also supplies us with a link of thought wherewith to connect the two characteristics of the new creation which have come under our notice—self-sacrifice and self-control in reference to personal habits (*ἐγκράτεια*).<sup>2</sup> That link is Christ. Christ by His redeeming love supplies the motive to self-sacrifice; by the same love and by the purity of His life He furnishes the motive to temperance. It is true that in exhorting to put on Christ the apostle makes no express allusion either to Christ's love or to His holiness. But the exhortation plainly implies that Christ is the model. To put on Christ is to have Christ's habits, to be Christ-like. It further implies that Christ is a power within which generates a new moral habit; and if it be asked, Whence has He this power? the answer may be found in another place, where the apostle says: "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body."<sup>3</sup> The implied truth is that

<sup>1</sup> *Rom.* xiii. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Gal.* v. 23.

<sup>3</sup> *1 Cor.* vi. 20. Note the *δὴ* after *δοξάσατε*. It implies that to glorify God in

temperance, Christian sobriety and purity, not less than self-sacrifice, naturally spring out of the sense of redemption. They are a debt of honour we owe to Christ the Saviour of men.

Comparing the teaching of St. Paul with that of our Lord on the present topic, we find in both the doctrine that the Christian life begins with a decisive change, but expressed in different terms. In the Synoptical Gospels Jesus speaks of repentance and conversion, and in the Fourth Gospel the change of mind denoted by the words *μετάνοια, ἐπιστροφή* is figuratively described as a new birth. The apostle's name for the same experience is, as we have seen, a new creation. The name is well chosen to convey an idea of the greatness of the change, and on that account it commended itself to the mind of one whose experience amounted to nothing short of a mighty religious revolution. The phrase is the reflection of a momentous spiritual history. It was further welcome to the apostle as applicable not only to individual experience, but to the collective body of phenomena which owed their existence to the Gospel. Conscious of a new creation in himself, he also saw a new creation all around him, and he applied to it a title which was at once a claim and an argument for the recognition of a great and startling novelty. Finally, we cannot doubt that another recommendation of this name to him was the implied ascription of the revolution it denoted, whether in the individual or in the community, to God as its author. It was meant to suggest that He who at the beginning made the heavens and the earth, had in the end of the world uttered the fiat, let the new heavens and the new earth be. An express recognition of the creative causality of God in the apostle's own experience, occurs in the remarkable words of 2 *Corinthians* iv. 6 : " It was the God who said, ' out of darkness let light shine,'

the body is the self-evident duty arising out of the consciousness of redemption.

who shined in our hearts, giving the illumination consisting in the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

It is obvious that while well fitted to express the phenomenal aspect of the new life, as presenting to discerning eyes a great startling change, the figure of the new creation much less aptly than the figure of the new birth expresses the nature of that life and its relation to what went before. The latter figure conveys the thought that the new life is not a creation out of nothing, having no relation to antecedent conditions, but rather a manifestation in power of what was there before in germ, the divine element in human nature made dominant. This relation, so far from being suggested, might rather seem to be negated by the Pauline phrase.

The apostle, however, did not mean to deny the existence of a divine element in what theologians call the "natural" man. On the contrary he expressly recognises it in *Romans* vii. under the name *the law of the mind*.

2. We pass now to the second topic, viz., how far the idea of growth is recognised in the Pauline literature in connection with the Christian life. In the Synoptical presentation of Christ's teaching the idea of growth in the kingdom of God is very strikingly and adequately stated in the parable of the blade, the green ear, and the ripe corn.<sup>1</sup> The thought therein suggested is that in the kingdom of God, as in the natural world, life is subject to the law of gradual development, proceeding towards the ultimate state of maturity by regular and well-defined stages, which must be gone through successively. It must be admitted, perhaps, not without a feeling of disappointment, that we search in vain for a similarly clear conception in the Pauline epistles. In none of these, not even in the later Christological epistles, can we discover any such distinct and significant recognition of a law of growth; and if we confine our attention to the four

<sup>1</sup> Mark iv. 26-29.

leading epistles, we can find no sufficient ground for the assertion that St. Paul represents the Christian life as an organic process of growth. On the other hand, it would be going too far to say that in the Pauline mode of conceiving the matter the Christian life springs into existence complete from the first, undergoing no subsequent change, and needing none because fully answering to the ideal.<sup>1</sup> This view might indeed be held compatibly with the admission that there are texts which suggest another mode of regarding the matter. The theory of a new life complete from the first is not justified by experience; it was not justified by St. Paul's experience any more than by ours. He found no perfect Christians in the churches to which he wrote letters; very much the reverse. Hence the frequent occurrence of texts containing exhortations, encouragements, reproaches, threatenings, suggesting the idea that the new life is at first a rudimentary imperfect thing requiring improvement, a tendency rather than an attainment, a struggle rather than a victory achieved. Notwithstanding such passages, however, it has been maintained that the notion of a new life complete from the first is involved in some Pauline utterances, and a protest has been taken against attempts at harmonising the two sets of texts by the construction of a dogma of gradual sanctification, according to which regeneration should be merely the point of departure for the new life, to be followed by a progressive amelioration, an increasing power over the flesh. The Pauline ideal, it is contended, is a new life in Christ perfect from the first, a death to sin and a resurrection to holiness, accomplished not gradually but *per saltum*. If the reality fall short, the ideal is not to be sacrificed or lowered; the reality is rather to be regarded as a fault to be corrected, the ideal being kept constantly before the eye in

<sup>1</sup> So Reuss in his *Theology of the Apostolic Age*. Pfeiderer takes the opposite view, at least in the first edition of *Paulinismus*. I have not noticed any modification of his opinion in the 2nd edition.

its uncompromising grandeur and unearthly beauty as a stimulous to the task of self-correction.<sup>1</sup>

The one thing we seriously object to in this representation is the assumption that St. Paul regarded the Christian ideal as realizable at the outset. That he might invest the beginning of the Christian life with an ideal significance, representing it as a death to sin and a resurrection to a new life (ideas both excluding lapse of time), is very conceivable; that he did this in fact we believe. But that it was a surprise to him that nowhere did he find young Christians in whom the ideal significance of faith was fully realized, is not so easy to believe. It might have been a surprise to him when he was himself a young Christian, as it is apt to be to all beginners. For in the blossom of the new life Christians feel as if their spiritual being were already complete, and the advent of the green fruit is a surprise and a disappointment to them, and hence it is commonly construed wrongly as a mere lapse or declension. But twenty years' experience must surely have helped to correct such crude ideas, and taught the apostle to cherish moderate, sober expectations in reference to beginners, and to recognise, if not with full understanding of its rationale, at least virtually, that the divine life is not a momentary product, but a process, a problem to be worked out, an organic growth.

Such a conception accordingly we do find, though mainly in the later epistles. The exhortation, "work out your salvation," suggests the idea of a problem to be solved.<sup>2</sup> The comparison of the church to the human body growing up to the stature of manhood suggests the idea of organic growth.<sup>3</sup> The metaphorical expression "rooted in love"<sup>4</sup> suggests a comparison of the Christian life to a tree planted

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Reuss' whole chapter on Regeneration in his account of the Pauline Theology (*Théologie Chrétienne*, vol. ii., p. 135).

<sup>2</sup> *Phil.* ii. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Eph.* iv. 11-15.

<sup>4</sup> *Eph.* iii. 18.

in a good soil and growing from a small plant to the dimensions of a forest tree.

Rudimentary hints of a doctrine of growth are not wanting even in the four leading epistles. The idea of growth is clearly recognised in regard to humanity at large, if not in reference to the individual, in the comparison of the law to tutors and governors who have charge of an heir during the time of his minority.<sup>1</sup> The word *καρπὸς*, in the text where the apostle sets the *fruit* of the Spirit over against the *works* of the flesh,<sup>2</sup> readily suggests to us the idea of gradual growth, knowing as we do that ripe fruit is the slow product of time. Yet it is doubtful if this thought was present to the apostle's mind. Equally doubtful is it whether we are entitled to lay stress on the word "soweth" in the text: "He that soweth to the spirit shall of the spirit reap life everlasting,"<sup>3</sup> as it is probable that the whole earthly life is here regarded as the seed time, the harvest falling in the life hereafter. The surest indication of a doctrine of growth in grace to be found in the Epistle to the Galatians is contained in v. 5, where the Christian is represented as waiting for the hope of righteousness. Assuming that the righteousness referred to is to be taken subjectively, we find in this text the idea that personal holiness is an object of hope and patient expectation. The ideal is thus projected into the future, and we are by implication taught not to fret because it is not at once realized. We are to wait for the realization of the ideal in a mature spiritual manhood, with the patience of a farmer waiting for the harvest, who knows that growth is gradual, there being first the blade, then the green ear, and only then the full corn in the ear.

Among the hints of a doctrine of growth in the other epistles belonging to the main group may be mentioned the following:—

In 1 *Corinthians* the apostle describes the members of the

<sup>1</sup> *Gal.* iv. 1, 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Gal.* v. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Gal.* vi. 8.

church as *νήπιοι*, to whom he could give only milk,<sup>1</sup> while he claims to be in possession of a wisdom which he could teach to the more advanced, denominated *τέλειοι*.<sup>2</sup> But as showing that the full significance of the doctrine was not present to his mind, it has to be noted that he speaks of the infantile state of the Corinthian church as something blameworthy, associating with the epithet "babes" the attributes of unspirituality and carnality.<sup>3</sup> The tone here is markedly different from that of the words put into the mouth of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now,"<sup>4</sup> which tacitly recognise that spiritual children cannot be expected to have the understanding of spiritual men. It resembles rather the tone of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews when he complains of his readers as being destitute of manly intelligence, and like children having need of milk. Only there was this difference between the Corinthian and the Hebrew Christians, that the latter were in their second childhood—they had *become* as children, while the Corinthians were in their first childhood, and had only recently become converts to Christianity. Blame in the case of second childhood, spiritual dotage, was certainly called for; but ought not much allowance to be made for beginners?

In 2 *Corinthians* iii. 18 the apostle represents Christians as undergoing transformation through contemplation of the glory of the Lord Christ. "We are being changed into the same image from glory to glory." The present tense suggests a process continually going on. The expression "from glory to glory" may also point to a steady gradual advance, though it may mean from glory in Him to glory in us.

In *Romans* vi. 14 the apostle remarks: "sin shall not reign over you, for ye are not under law, but under grace." This statement does not teach a doctrine of gradual sanctification, but it leaves room for it. Sin dethroned may still

<sup>1</sup> iii. 1.<sup>2</sup> ii. 6.<sup>3</sup> iii. 1.<sup>4</sup> *John* xvi. 12.

attempt to regain its lost sovereignty, and we know that when a change of dynasty takes place in a country there is generally a more or less protracted period of trouble during which members of the degraded royal family endeavour to get themselves restored to power. Sin dethroned therefore may continue to give trouble as a pretender. In the 12th chapter of the same epistle occurs this exhortation: "Be ye not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed in the renewal of the mind to the effect of your proving what is the will of God, the good, and acceptable and perfect." This transformation of character and this proving of the divine will so as to verify its characteristics, imply a gradual process, lapse of time, a thing done bit by bit, a progressive experience enlightening the mind in the knowledge of God's will, and bringing our life more and more into conformity with it. A process of growth is equally implied in the text v. 3, "We glory in tribulation, knowing that tribulation worketh out patience and patience attestation, and attestation hope." The working out of patience is a process involving time, and, what is still more to our present purpose, the result of the process, patience, and the consciousness of being tested and attested, whence come self-reliance and calm assurance, is something we could not possess antecedent to experience. That is to say, these are Christian virtues developed by the discipline of trial, which no beginner can possess.

The result of our enquiry, on the whole, is this: In the Pauline letters and especially the controversial group, there is no formulated doctrine of growth enunciated with full consciousness and deliberate didactic purpose. But there is a doctrine of growth latent in these letters; there are germs which we may use in the construction of such a doctrine. Moreover there are facts in the life of the churches alluded to in these letters which we may employ in verification of the doctrine, though not so used by the

apostle himself. For example: there is the lapse of the Galatian Church into legalism and of the Corinthian Church into various sorts of errors in opinion, and the party contentions prevailing therein, and there is the scrupulosity about meats and drinks spoken of in the Epistle to the Romans. We may use these phenomena as helping us to form a vivid idea of the characteristics of the green ear, or let us call it the stage of the crude fruit in the divine life, between the blossom and the ripe fruit. St. Paul dealt with these as *faults*. But are they not more than faults accidentally occurring, are they not phenomena which reappear regularly with all the certainty of a fixed law? As sure as after the blossom comes the green crude fruit come there not in the experience of Christians after the time of first enthusiasm is past, such features as these: joylessness, a religion of legal temper and mechanical routine, scrupulosity, opinionativeness, censoriousness, quarrelsomeness, doubt? Then, on the other hand, what is that spirit of adoption whose presence and influence within the churches to which he writes the apostle misses and so greatly desiderates, but one of the most outstanding characteristics of Christian maturity, of the stage of the ripe fruit in Christian growth, when a believing man at last begins to have some conception of the true character of the new life and some practical acquaintance with its blessedness? The advent of that spirit St. Paul viewed as the sign that the world at large, humanity, had arrived at its majority, and it is an equally sure sign of the arrival of the same important epoch in the spiritual life of the individual. Thus might we find valuable materials for the construction of a doctrine of gradual sanctification advancing through well-marked stages, not merely or even chiefly in the didactic statements of the apostle, but very specially in his complaints against and exhortations to the Churches to which he addressed his epistles.

3. The last point we proposed to consider refers to the salient features of the Christian character as conceived by St. Paul. Two of these, sobriety and devotion to Christ, have already been mentioned as among the moral phenomena of the new creation. To these has now to be added charity, *ἀγάπη*, which makes the list of the cardinal virtues in the Pauline ethical system tolerably complete. It might seem due to the prominence given to it in the first Epistle to the Corinthians that a fourth should be added to the number, viz., spiritual knowledge or insight. The apostle there claims for the pneumatical man as against the psychical, knowledge and appreciation of the things of the spirit of God.<sup>1</sup> Such knowledge he evidently regarded as an outstanding mark of distinction between the two classes of men, one of the prominent phenomena of the new creation. The man of the new creation knows the mind of God, the man who is outside this creation is not able to know. The psychical man has the five senses of the soul, but not the sixth sense of the spirit. Of this St. Paul was doubtless strongly convinced. Yet it would be contrary to the whole spirit of his teaching to mention anything of the nature of gnosis, even though it be spiritual gnosis, alongside of charity as if of co-ordinate importance. In the same epistle, further on, he expressly represents knowledge as of no account in comparison with charity. "If I know all mysteries and all knowledge and have not charity, I am nothing."<sup>2</sup> In another place he remarks, "knowledge inflates, charity edifies."<sup>3</sup> The knowledge thus depreciated relates to divine things, but that does not prevent the apostle from assigning to it a place of secondary importance. Gnosis, theological gnosis especially, is very good in its own place, but it tends to make a man think more highly of himself than he ought. No fear of that in the

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. ii. 14, 15.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. xiii. 2.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. vii. 1.

case of love ; it builds up a solid structure of real, not imaginary, Christian worth.

Very significant of the sovereign place which ἀγάπη occupied in St. Paul's esteem is the fact that in his enumeration of the fruit of the Spirit he names it first,<sup>1</sup> not without a controversial reference to the religious contention which vexed the churches of Galatia. Yet charity, in the sense of love to the brethren, is not the absolute first for him. Devotion to Christ takes precedence. Witness the stern word : " if any one love not the Lord, let him be anathema." St. Paul's charity is great ; he loves weak brethren, and out of regard to their scruples denies himself the use of his Christian liberty.<sup>2</sup> He loves even those in the churches who regard him with distrust as a dangerous revolutionary, setting aside the divine law, changing venerable customs, as is shown by his diligence in making collection for the poor disciples in Jerusalem, though fully aware what hard thoughts they cherish regarding him there. His charity rises superior to party divisions and embraces all who belong to the Israel of God, strong or weak, Jew or Gentile, friendly or hostile to himself. He loves moreover all without, and yearns to do them good as he has opportunity, especially to bring to them the good tidings that they also may believe. But there is one class of men whom he can regard only with abhorrence : those who have had opportunity of knowing Jesus Christ, in His goodness, wisdom and grace, yet love Him not, but think and speak evil of Him. That for St. Paul was the unpardonable sin. He can love all but those who, knowing what they do, dislike Jesus. And in further proof that devotion to Jesus is the supreme virtue for him it may be added that he loves all men, but these, for Christ's sake. He considers the scruples of the weak because Christ died for them. He loves the poor in Jerusalem because, though

<sup>1</sup> *Gal.* v. 22.

<sup>2</sup> *1 Cor.* viii 11, 13.

they distrust him, they are disciples of Jesus, though very imperfectly understanding His teaching. He loves the honest-minded among his opponents because they are fighting for what they consider to be the truth in Jesus. He loves the whole world because he believes all mankind have a place in Christ's Saviour-sympathies. It is not meant by these statements to insinuate that St. Paul exercised charity by calculation, and after deliberate reflection on motives. His Christianity was too vigorous and healthy for that. I mean that Christ had so possessed his soul as to become the inspiration of his whole life, the latent source of all his impulses, the supreme end of all his actions.

A. B. BRUCE.

*DEVOTION TO A PERSON THE DYNAMIC OF  
RELIGION.*

NOTHING is easier than to create a religion ; one only needs self-confidence and foolscap paper. An able Frenchman sat down in his study and produced Positivism, which some one pleasantly described as Catholicism minus Christianity. It stimulated conversation in superior circles for years, and only yesterday Mr. Frederic Harrison was explaining to Professor Huxley that this ingenious invention of M. Comte ought to be taken seriously. An extremely clever woman disappeared into Asia and returned with another religion which has distinctly added to the innocent gaiety of the English nation. One never knows when a new religion may not be advertised. The Fabian Society is understood to be working at something, and each novelty receives a good-natured welcome. No person with any sense of humour resents one of these efforts to stimulate the jaded palate of society unless it be paraded a season too long and