

ST. PAUL'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS GREEK
PHILOSOPHY.

Ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔγνω ὁ κόσμος διὰ τῆς σοφίας τὸν θεόν (1 Cor. i. 21). This statement of the inadequacy of human philosophy to discover or know God is one of incalculable importance in the history of Christian thought. To understand the significance of the words we must place them in their historical connexion. In this part of the Epistle to the Corinthians St. Paul is recalling to his readers the circumstances of his first visit to them, and the subject matter and manner of his preaching on that occasion. He says in chapter ii. 1-5: "I, brethren, when I came unto you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the mystery of God. For I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God."

If these words had stood alone, and if we had been ignorant of the circumstances which immediately preceded the Apostle's mission to Corinth, they would have presented many difficulties. As it is, the narrative in Acts xvii. 16-xviii. 1 explains everything. It explains why *σοφία* should have come to be so prominent a subject of discourse and argument—a glance at a concordance will show how the words *σοφός* and *σοφία* seem to haunt the Apostle at this crisis—it explains also why St. Paul dwells on the simplicity of teaching, and also why he should have come in fear and trembling.

The most interesting incident in St. Luke's account of

St. Paul's visit to Athens is his encounter with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. It is the first recorded contact between the wisdom of the world and the preaching of the Cross. We may be certain that it was a moment of intense interest for St. Paul, and that he could listen with earnest attention to the Greek philosophic theories of life and knowledge, presented as they would be with the utmost dialectic skill and eloquence by men who defined philosophy, in their Master's words, as "an activity which, by means of words and arguments (*λόγοις καὶ διαλογισμοῖς*), procures the happiness of life" (Sext. Emp. adv. Math., xi. 169, speaking of Epicurus, cited Ritter, iii. 405). The word and tense (*συνέβαλλον*, Acts xvii. 18) describing the encounter imply a vigorous and sustained disputation. The arguments are not reported at length in the Acts, but it is clear from St. Luke's words that the subjects of the Apostle's preaching were the revelation of God as Creator and Ruler of the world; and secondly, Jesus and the Resurrection.

On the part of the Epicureans and Stoics the dispute seems to have been conducted in a tone of supercilious contempt. This new teacher was a *σπερμολόγος*, an unscientific pretender to knowledge, bringing in strange and amazing doctrines (*ξενίζοντα*); some dismissed him with a sneer (*ἐχλεύαζον*); others desired a further hearing, but few indeed were convinced.

All this agrees with St. Paul's account in the Epistle of his arrival at Corinth. "He came in fear and trembling." The response to his preaching of Jesus and the Resurrection in Athens had been little else than contempt and ridicule. Would the same gospel be met with the same reception in Corinth? Was philosophy, in fact, destined to be a fatal barrier to the progress of the gospel?

It was a critical moment in the history of Christianity. The question had arisen and must be decided whether

Christianity could make terms with any system of human philosophy. For an apostle to the Gentiles the decision was of special importance. For the question would be asked at the outset by every intellectual enquirer after Christ whether, in accepting Christianity, he was bound to renounce philosophy.

Greek philosophy had done so much for the elevation and purification of religion and life, its aims were so closely akin to the aims of Christianity, its scope and even its expressions seemed so capable of being merged in the Christian ideal, again philosophy had proved so attractive to the best and loftiest characters of the pre-Christian epoch that St. Paul might well have hesitated in his repudiation. But St. Paul does not hesitate. He makes no compromise and suggests no eirenicon with the wisdom of this world. What he preaches is a *σοφία* founded on the Incarnation. Philosophy, indeed so far as it was represented by the schools of Epicurus and Zeno, had repudiated the preaching of the Cross (*ὁ λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ*). To these philosophers it was a *μωρία*, an "unwisdom" or "foolishness." For with that term St. Paul sums up in the Epistle the reception given to the gospel at Athens.

And while for one moment the Apostle, in a vein of irony, accepts the reproach of *μωρία*, in the next he turns the charge back against his opponents. It is not the preaching of the Cross, but the wisdom of the world, which is in a true sense a *μωρία*: *οὐχὶ ἐμώρανεν ὁ θεὸς τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ κόσμου* (1 Cor. i. 20), and *ἡ σοφία τοῦ κόσμου τούτου μωρία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ ἐστίν* (1 Cor. iii. 19). For what is the test? The test is success. The philosophy which best achieves its end is the true *σοφία*, that which fails to achieve its end is a *μωρία*. And St. Paul claims for the preaching of the Cross that it achieves the end of philosophy, both on its speculative and ethical side.

Σοφία or philosophy is defined by Aristotle to be a science

of the highest objects (*ἐπιστήμη τῶν τιμιωτάτων*, Arist. Eth., vi. 7), in other words, a science of the Divine; it is *θεολογική*, that by which God is apprehended. With this definition St. Paul would agree. In 1 Corinthians i. 21 he implies that *σοφία* is a *γνώσις τοῦ θεοῦ*, and both in the Acts (xvii. 23, 30) and in the Epistle he contends that the *σοφία τοῦ κόσμου* had failed to apprehend God—*οὐκ ἔγνω ὁ κόσμος διὰ τῆς σοφίας τὸν θεόν*. On the other hand, he claims for the preaching of the Cross that it is *θεοῦ δύναμις*, as well as *θεοῦ σοφία*.

As *θεοῦ σοφία* it is a divine apocalypse by means of the indwelling *πνεῦμα*, which every Christian possesses—*ἡμῖν δὲ ἀπεκάλυψεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος*. *Τὸ γὰρ πνεῦμα πάντα ἐρευνᾷ, καὶ τὰ βάθη τοῦ θεοῦ* (ii. 10). And again: *ἡμεῖς δὲ νοῦν Χριστοῦ ἔχομεν* (ii. 16). Thus is Christian philosophy founded on the Incarnation. The Christian discerns God because Christ discerns Him. It was a high claim, which at once placed Christian philosophy in a position distinct from and more authoritative than the wisdom of the Greeks. The recognition of a divinely implanted perceptive faculty creates a new philosophic standpoint. "The main evidence of the Revelation to us consists in its harmony with the voice of the spiritual faculty within us," says Dr. Temple (*Bampton Lectures*, p. 204).

The preaching of Christ crucified is no less effective in moral action: it is *θεοῦ δύναμις*, a divine force (1 Cor. i. 24), issuing from the Resurrection (Phil. iii. 10), working in the Christian with a view to salvation (Rom. i. 16). St. Paul's life and teaching and spiritual experience are to be viewed in the light of the *σοφία*, which he thus explains. The Apostle is throughout conscious of the working of the divine power within him (*κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ*, Eph. iii. 7). "I can do all things," he says (Phil. iv. 13), *ἐν τῷ ἐνδυναμοῦντι με*, *i. e.* not necessarily and specifically *Χριστῷ*, but by the force within me, which is my very

life. This indeed is St. Paul's revelation ; the Christian philosophy is the Christian life, a divinely implanted power which enables Christians to discern and to live. It is the higher instinct which the Christian may trust, as the lower creatures trust the lower instinct (Jer. viii. 7).

Such is St. Paul's exposition of the divine *σοφία* in contradistinction to the human *σοφία* which has failed to see God or to guide life. The point, however, may still be raised whether in these strictures on *ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία* the Apostle intended to condemn and reject philosophy in general, or those forms only of Hellenic philosophy which had been presented to him in persuasive eloquence (1 Cor. ii. 4) at Athens, the schools, namely, of Epicurus and Zeno. No doubt the conclusions of the Athenian philosophers were those which he was mentally combating in this passage, and which he emphatically repudiates in favour of Christian philosophy. And indeed, though originally confirming lofty conceptions, both of those systems had grown degenerate at this epoch. The only ethical end of Epicureanism was to avoid pain and escape the evils of life. Stoicism denied any reality except that which was material ; regarded as things indifferent or defensible the impurities and falsehoods of pagan life, which Christianity has unconditionally condemned ; and found itself "compelled to admit that true virtue, and with it true knowledge also, is far from the reach of man." (Ritter, *Hist. of Philosophy*, iii. 596).

Such teaching was absolutely incompatible with Christianity, and with a philosophy founded on the Incarnation. But it by no means follows that the highest and purest thoughts of the great thinkers of Greece were to be repudiated. In that large claim which St. Paul makes for Christianity in Philippians iv. 8 the nobler gifts with which Hellenic philosophy has endowed mankind are assuredly included.

In retaining the word *σοφία* in the Christian vocabulary, St. Paul must have foreseen the possibility of some unwelcome associations gathering around it in the progress of history. But here are two reasons which may have determined him in the retention of a word charged with alien meaning.

1. For three hundred years *σοφία* had had an acknowledged place in Hebrew religious nomenclature. To the Greek-speaking Jew it represented *Chokmah*, or wisdom, and round "wisdom" a literature had grown up, and associations of the highest spiritual importance had gathered. Accordingly, to the Jew *σοφία* brought a well-established meaning, very different from that which it conveyed to the Greek. "Wisdom" is a divine emanation, created before all other things (Ecclus. i. 1, 4); the source of all knowledge; the artificer of all things (Wisdom vii. 22). It is therefore the creative power of God, "By Thy wisdom Thou formedst man" (Wisdom ix. 2). Again, "Wisdom ordereth all things graciously" (Wisdom viii. 1); it is "a breath of the power of God, and a clear effluence of the power of the Almighty, . . . an effulgence from everlasting light, and an unspotted mirror of the working of God, and an image of His goodness" (Wisdom vii. 25, 26). A word laden with such thoughts was too precious not to be employed afresh as a help for the expression of Christian truth.

2. But what must have influenced St. Paul more than anything else in his retention of *σοφία* was, doubtless, the use of that word, or of its Aramaic equivalent, by our Lord Himself (St. Mark xi. 19; St. Luke vii. 25), and the ascription of the same divine *σοφία* to the Child Jesus (St. Luke ii. 40, 52).

It was inevitable that the Christian use of *σοφία* should bring it into relation with successive schemes of philosophy as time went on. This has sometimes been done with the

happiest and most reassuring results. At other times a new philosophy has seemed to threaten the existence of Christianity. Sometimes, again, Christian dogma has been put into the mould of the current philosophic system, and when the philosophy has passed away the form of doctrinal expression has remained. This has been a fruitful and unceasing cause of dissension among Christians. One of the most important tasks, therefore, of each Christian epoch is to clear away the accretions which have gathered round its truths owing to the surviving expressions of philosophic systems which have themselves been discredited and forgotten, and to restate Christian doctrine in forms which rest on an original basis of apostolic teaching.

As a first step in this endeavour it may be of service to examine the use and avoidance in the New Testament of current philosophic terms. This we propose in a subsequent paper to do in the hope that an examination of this kind may help to reveal a principle on which fresh scientific theories or discoveries should be treated from time to time by Christian thinkers.

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