

*HISTORICAL COMMENTARY ON THE EPISTLES
TO THE CORINTHIANS.*

I. INTRODUCTORY.

IN the following notes it will be necessary from time to time to refer to the writer's *Historical Commentary on the Epistles to the Galatians*. It would be absurd to say again anything that is sufficiently said there, and the method which was gradually developed in the writing of that commentary will here be presumed from the outset. The same chronology also will here be assumed: this is not the place to discuss again the old questions that have already been sufficiently treated. Without desiring to force opinions on others, we have to assume the system which we think probable in points that lie outside of, but close around, our present subject.

It must also be clearly understood that, where theological or doctrinal points are touched upon, that is not done for their own sake, but for the sake of historical facts underlying them. The present writer has neither qualification nor wish to write on such points; but it is sometimes important to establish a date or some other part of history in connection with them.

Our main purpose is to estimate the light thrown by the Epistles on the state of Corinth in the first century after Christ. Here we have a Roman *Colonia* in the heart of Greece, capital of a Roman province, commercial and administrative capital of the whole country of Greece, containing a certain proportion of Roman population, descendants of the Italian colonists of 46 B.C., and a much larger proportion of purely Greek population. What can we learn about society in that great, and wealthy, and luxurious city on the great highway of imperial communication, a meeting-place of many roads, thronged always by travellers and by resident strangers in addition to its own proper citizens?

II. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN *Galatians* AND *Corinthians*.

The Epistles to the Galatians and to the Corinthians were written at a short interval from one another. There is no reason to think that there was any change of the slightest importance in Paul's plans and methods during the interval. It is not as in the interval between *Thessalonians* and *Galatians*: during that interval, shorter though it was, there is good reason to think that Paul attained clearer consciousness about his method and order of placing his Gospel before the Roman world: his Gospel remained the same, but his plans for appealing to the Gentile world had become more fixed and definite.¹ But, on the contrary, between *Galatians* and *First Corinthians*, there is no ground for imagining that Paul's views and method had altered a jot. Yet, amid a general agreement in the point of view, how profound is the difference between the two Epistles!

The reason for this difference lies partly in the different character of the races addressed, and partly in the varying dangers to which they were respectively exposed.

The people of Galatian Phrygia and Galatian Lycaonia were essentially an Oriental race, with an admixture of the western element strong enough to serve as a model and a stimulus to the native population, and thus to affect them greatly, but not strong enough to change radically the people, or to eliminate the Oriental spirit, but rather destined to melt into the native element.

The people of Corinth were a typically European people, familiar with every device and invention of an over-stimulated civilization, essentially a worldly and material set of persons, seeking money and pleasure and success, excellent representatives of the worst side of rich "civilized" society, with little of the highest elements of Græco-Roman civilization.

In Galatia Paul had to deal with a somewhat backward

¹ *St. Paul the Traveller*, p. 260.

race, but one recently touched and stimulated by contact with Greek art and literature, and with Roman organization and practical skill, a race naturally rather slow, simple, readily disposed to admire the bold and confident and educated foreigner. In Corinth he addressed himself to a people of diametrically opposite type, among whom a too prematurely developed civilization was entirely divorced from morality, a people keen-witted, pushing, self-assertive, conceited, highly trained, criticising all men, questioning all things, not apt to believe in anything or anybody.

True religion has to steer a course equally far removed from the barbarism of primitive savagery and the barbarism of precocious material civilization. Christianity found the Galatians on their way up out of the former, and the Corinthians far on their way down into the latter.

Hence the contrast in many respects between the respective letters. Paul uses the tone of authority with the Galatians, of compliment and reasoned argument (though claiming official authority) with the Corinthians: he urges on the naturally self-willed Greeks the virtue of obedience, and on the "slavish" Phrygians the importance of freedom; he bids the Corinthians punish the violation of law, and warns the naturally "unpitying" Phrygians not to be too severe in punishing transgression. He loves the Galatians: he esteems the Corinthians.

Again, we observe everywhere that the difficulties and dangers besetting those early Gentile Churches belong mostly to one or other of two classes: they spring either from the influence exercised by Judaism, or from the influence of Pagan society and surroundings and early training. Every one of the Pauline Churches was exposed to both kinds of danger; none were wholly free from either influence. But some were exposed more to the one kind, some to the other.

Among the Galatic Phrygians we saw that, when Paul

wrote to them, the great and pressing danger lay on the side of Judaism: a part, apparently a majority, of the Galatian congregations were inclined to adopt the Jewish ritual. But that imminent danger did not blind Paul to the other danger that was equally pressing on them; and part of the later chapters is devoted to the dangerous influence of Pagan society and religion and education.

In Corinth it was precisely the opposite. Paul's special purpose was to ward off the forces of Paganism—chiefly in education and society—which threatened to unbalance and unhinge the constitution and morality of the Church. Yet Judaism was also able to exert a dangerous influence in Corinth, and he had to turn his attention to that side also, especially in the second Epistle.

But the grand difference between *Galatians* and *Corinthians* lies in the general character of the thought. The Galatian letter, when properly read, is found to be full of allusions to the practical facts of society and life, though from North-Galatian misapprehension these facts are little noticed by the commentators. Paul explains to the readers his position and doctrines, and his attitude towards opponents, by illustrations drawn from the sphere of practical life. From that short letter we can restore at least some outline of the system of family law, of inheritance, of the external organization of education, of city life, and so on, familiar to Paul's Galatian readers. The attention of his readers must have been, naturally, turned more to that side of things; and Paul takes advantage of their special interests to put his ideas before them and to rouse in them the emotions and recollections which he desires.

In the Corinthian letters it is very different. A Historical Commentary finds much less to seize upon in them. They largely treat difficulties in practical life, and yet these are discussed from the speculative, philosophic, thinking side. Illustrations drawn from the external side of social organi-

zation are rare. Even where questions of society are referred to Paul's decision he judges them so purely on general moral principles that we learn little about specially Corinthian society.

Here, again, we see the contrast between the Phrygian people, with its Oriental cast of mind, and the Greek race. This may seem strange and even self-contradictory to some, who have not lived among these races, for business, trade, skilled workmanship, would seem to be the inheritance of the Greeks as contrasted with the Orientals—now and always. But one that comes in close contact with the Oriental villagers learns how entirely wrapped up they are in the matters of material life. You need never talk to them of ideal motives; they can neither conceive them nor believe in them. They know of no motive for action except a material one (apart from religious enthusiasm). But amid a group of the humblest Greek villagers, you are safe to talk of ideals, and you readily enlist their interest in them: in fact, unless you take them on this side, you will never succeed with them.

We have once more to repeat the remark that the right interpretation of Paul's Epistles—*Romans* being a partial exception—must be founded on a vivid conception of the contrast between the Greek and the Oriental character, and of the eternal conflict between the two, which has always been going on in Asia Minor, and is now being waged there in a more marked and acute, and therefore more easily intelligible, form than at any previous time except during the early centuries of the Empire. The two periods of acute conflict in that land, when the natural forces of society are struggling towards the establishment of a balance between themselves, and the realization of a higher form of expression, have been about B.C. 25–A.D. 200, and since A.D. 1878.¹ The two periods ought to be always

¹ In order to show that this is not a mere random statement springing out

together in the student's mind ; and we read in Paul's Epistles to the Churches the outlines of the ideal reconciliation between the Greek and Oriental nature in the borderlands, as he explained it to each in the way that they could most easily apprehend.

It is often asserted that a description of the Corinthian Church is given in i. 26. That view we cannot accept. The context plainly shows that the verse is to be taken as a description of the Christian Church in general, rather in contrast to rich, clever Corinth ; see § VIII.

III. PAUL'S ATTITUDE TO JUDAISM.

A word is here required about Paul's attitude towards Judaism. It is absolutely necessary to bear in mind, though many are too apt to forget, that Paul was not an opponent of true Judaism. He could say to the end of his life with perfect truth and with a clear conscience, "I am a Pharisee, and a son of Pharisees," and assert that he was "as touching the Law blameless." He held fast to all the spiritual side of the Law ; he fully appreciated its moral elevation ; he was (as we hope to show more fully elsewhere) throughout his life the great champion of the true Law in the Roman Empire, and a firm believer in its ultimate triumph over the Empire. But he hated the formalism, the dead works, of the Law ; and he fervently believed that in the Law nothing except its formalism was opposed to Christ, and that, when the Law was set up as an opponent of Christianity among the Gentiles, the life had gone from it ; it could not resist Him and live. When we read some of the harsh things said about the Law, for example, to the Galatians, we are apt to lose sight of the fact that Paul is there speaking of the Law as it appeared to the Galatians

of the attempt to illustrate the Epistles, we may be permitted to add that the main thought and intention in the writer's *Impressions of Turkey* is to illustrate this principle in detail.

—as a series of hard and fast rules of ritual, as a system of observing days and months and seasons and years, as identified with belief in the moral efficacy of physical and bodily ceremonies. Paul would not even desire to abolish the mere ritual of Judaism; his action to Timothy, difficult as it is for us to sympathize with, proves that he would retain it. Only the most heartless and unprincipled of impostors could have acted as Paul did to Timothy, unless he were fully persuaded that the Jew must be always a Jew in the fullest sense, that he is always “a debtor to do the whole Law.” But Paul would prevent the Gentiles from incurring that debt.

It is not here the place to dilate more on this topic, still less to debate whether Paul was always philosophically consistent in his attitude to Judaism. But it is urgently necessary to protest against the too common exaggeration of Paul’s hostility to Judaism. He certainly believed that he was the true friend and champion of his nation and his father’s religion, and that his words addressed to the Sanhedrin were entirely consistent with his words addressed to the Galatians.

IV. THE OPENING ADDRESS (i. 1-9).

We can now better appreciate the special characteristics of the opening verses of the Epistle. We take together the introductory address—the heading of the letter, so to speak (i. 1-3)—and the opening paragraph (i. 4-9).

Much in them belongs to the ordinary forms of politeness in letter-writing: it was necessary and invariable to state at the beginning the names of the writer or writers and of the recipients of the letter, along with some courteous greeting and good wishes: titles were commonly added to the respective names by the Romans (who were, to a large extent, the inventors of titles): then followed regularly an invocation or an expression of thanks to the

Divine power. In cases of haste or in unusual circumstances some of these polite accompaniments were often omitted.

Paul adopted the ordinary forms of epistolary courtesy, with similar occasional omission of some of the forms in special circumstances; only he gave a Christian expression to the titles and sentiments. On the subject see the remarks and references in *Hist. Comm. Gal.*, § V. Here we need only notice any details that are special to the Corinthian letter. These are three:

1. Sosthenes is named as joint author of the letter. It has been pointed out that¹ the occurrence of a name in the superscription of any of Paul's letters, attaches far more importance to the person so mentioned than the sending of greetings from him at the end of the letter. It is extraordinary that this so obvious truth has been disputed. The case is exactly as when we find the superscription in a Roman letter:²

Balbus et Oppius salutem dicunt M. Ciceroni.

Both Balbus and Oppius take responsibility for the contents and sentiments of the letter, though probably one of them alone is responsible for the exact language. So Hellmuth points out with regard to the above letter, showing that Balbus is the author, and Oppius merely the joint-author.³ So we have pointed out with regard to such letters as this.⁴ Canon Evans has also stated the point with perfect accuracy and clearness in his admirable *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (to which I am more indebted than to any other work on this Epistle): "his name is

¹ *Hist. Comm. Gal.*, § II.

² Cicero, *Epist. ad Att.*, IX. 7A.

³ Hellmuth, *Sprache d. Epistologr. Galba u. Balbus*, p. 30. He says, *daraus schliesse ich dass Balbus der alleinige Verfasser des Briefes ist, und dass Oppius seinen Namen nur beifügte, um seine Zustimmung zu dem Inhalte der Worte zu erklären.*

⁴ *Hist. Comm. Gal.*, § II. p. 238.

associated to show that he shares, if not in the Epistle" [*i.e.*, presumably, its composition], "at least in the views and counsels contained therein, and indorses them."

The superscription of the Epistle is lengthened by titles and epithets from the simple form, which would be

Paulus et Sosthenes Corinthiis salutem dicunt.

But the bare technical simplicity of Roman usage was alien to the warm and emotional nature of Paul.

2. He associates with the Corinthians "all that in every place call on Christ Jesus our Lord." The question has been much debated why this addition is made to the common type of introductory Pauline formulæ, and many varying opinions have been maintained. On our principles of interpretation there can be no hesitation. The words stand in close relation to the burden of the letter. The Corinthians are in the process of losing unity. They have not yet split into religious parties and schisms; but Paul sees that the process has begun, which, if unchecked, must result in that; and a great object of the Epistle is to stop the process in its beginning. Hence he refers to the unity of the entire body of Christians.

A very similar thought occurs in the famous epitaph of Avircius Marcellus, written about A.D. 192 as a protest against the Montanist schism. The Phrygian Saint lays great stress on the unity in feeling and practice which he had found prevailing everywhere from Rome to Mesopotamia.¹

3. Paul compliments the Corinthians on their knowledge of truth and their ability to express it: "that you, namely, were in every way enriched in him, in all skill of discourse or argument, and in all kind of intelligence," as Canon Evans renders the words.

¹ *Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia*, Pt. II. pp. 711, 723.

Gnosis, which is here the Divine gift to the Corinthians, is apparently distinguished from *Sophia* (which is spoken of so frequently in the Epistle). *Gnosis* is the apprehension of the truth, *i.e.* knowledge united with moral power to carry it into action. *Sophia* is the empty and powerless wisdom of mere verbal philosophy: add an idea, and you have the true *Sophia* of God, which Paul so often mentions.

Considering how severely Paul is about to inveigh against philosophy, and considering the character and interests of the Corinthian Greeks, it was peculiarly important to compliment them in this way at the outset. They have the true knowledge, and are advancing in it: why should they spend time and energy in empty philosophizing? The importance of this will become clearer in the sequel.

V. THE PARTIES IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH.

It is declared by the Apostle that in Corinth "every one of you saith 'I am of Paul,' and 'I of Apollos,' and 'I of Cephas,' and 'I of Christ.'" The attempt has been made by many commentators to specify the character of four supposed parties which used these four expressions as signs and badges of their respective views; but it may be doubted if the attempt has been made on the proper lines, or if it can be successful. Especially, as Alford says, "the German commentators are misled by too *definite* a view of the Corinthian parties," p. 464; and "much ingenuity and labour have been spent in Germany on the four supposed distinct parties at Corinth, and the most eminent theologians have endeavoured, with very different results, to allot to each its definite place in tenets and practice," p. [45]. Such attempts are on a radically false principle.

Let us rather attempt to determine in what way Paul conceived that the divisions arose. This he shows very clearly.

Perhaps the most obvious quality in the Greek race is its

disposition to criticise and to argue. Paul makes it clear that the Corinthians had been fond of criticising their teachers, of comparing them with each other, of discussing all their qualities and characteristics, of arguing about them.

Out of this quality arises factiousness: those who compared Paul favourably with Apollos joined battle with those who exalted the style of Apollos above that of Paul; and gradually the rival disputants were forming themselves almost unconsciously into factions, just as in later times the admirers of rival colours in the circus formed themselves into hostile parties. That is the fault which Paul regards as the fundamental evil in the Corinthian Church, and sets himself at once to combat.

Hence he begins (i. 10) by beseeching them all to speak the same thing, to have the same mind and the same judgment, *i.e.* to be on their guard against the tendency to argue, to dispute, to see always the difference in their neighbours' views and remarks from their own, and never to have sufficient perception of the agreement between them. As they discussed and criticised the teaching of their teachers, they almost came to maintain that Christ, as expounded by Paul, was different from Christ, as expounded by Apollos or by Peter, and that all three expositions of the Christ differed from the true idea of Christ.

It is obvious that Paul has in his mind a similar thought to that which is stated in *Galatians* i. 6, 7, where he speaks of the "other gospel" preached by the Judaistic emissaries in Galatia: there he maintains¹ that, while the gospel set forth by the older and leading Apostles may be called

¹ Such is the interpretation of that difficult passage advocated in *Historical Comm. Gal.* p. 265. I should now say that that interpretation gives the thought which was implicit in the mind of Paul, but which was not expressed by him explicitly to the Galatians, though now it is fully stated to the Corinthians. The interpretation of the American Revisers, towards which, on p. 264, I indicated a leaning, must be adopted: it contains in embryo the same thought which is matured in this passage of *1 Corinthians*.

“another gospel,” it is practically identical with his, except when it is perverted by the errors of their would-be followers. We see elsewhere the evidence of the presence in Paul’s mind of an idea that the Corinthians were too prone to see in the teaching of his successors “another Jesus” and “another gospel” from his (see 2 *Cor.* xi. 4).

But, as Paul declares (i. 13), Christ cannot be made into shares in that way, *i.e.* it is the one identical Christ whom Paul and Apollos and Peter preach. If you consider that they set before you different Christs, then you are making Paul or Apollos or Cephas your Saviour, and (if one may say so) believing that your special favourite, whether Paul or one of the others,¹ is your crucified Redeemer. The absurdity of their position is set forth in the indignantly ironical questions of i. 13, which are given as sufficient disproof. As soon as the Corinthians cease to say the same thing, and dwell on their differences of opinion, they go astray and “pervert the gospel” (as it is expressed in *Galatians* i. 7).

The third of these ironical questions is remarkable—“Were ye baptized into the name of Paul?” This is coordinated with the other, “Was Paul crucified for you?” The Saviour’s death for them, and their reception by baptism into the Name, are selected as the two great facts. The impossibility and absurdity of any teacher being put in Christ’s place in these two relations is taken as too patent to need words. It is certainly a noteworthy point that these two ideas should be, as it were, bracketed together; but the importance lies in a direction foreign to our purpose and subject.

¹ Of course in i. 13 we must understand that in the question “Was Paul crucified for you?” we have to take Paul merely as the first of the list, and to add in thought the others—“Was Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, crucified for you?”

VI. THE DIGRESSION ON BAPTISM.

Here, in a very characteristic way, the allusion to baptism suggests to Paul a digression. He had rarely taken part in this office. He had baptized none of the Corinthians except Crispus and Gaius—Crispus, the former ruler of the synagogue in Corinth; and Gaius, who was deputed by the Church to entertain all guests (a highly honourable duty in eastern lands, delegated to some distinguished member of the community). And then he recollects, as an after-thought, that Stephanas and his household were also baptized by him—perhaps Stephanas, who was with him in Ephesus as he wrote, reminded him—and so, to guard against any possible slip of memory, he adds, “Besides, I know not whether I baptized any other”; but, if so, they were an insignificant number.

The rite of baptism Paul did not count as part of his work. There are diversities of gifts and ministrations, but all come from the same source (xii. 4 ff.): “Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel.” Paul delegated this duty to his assistants and companions. He now expresses thanks to God that it had been so ordered that he had as a rule delegated to others this duty—a duty so important that his own performance of it might have caused misapprehension among the Corinthians.

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