

THE ETHICAL TEACHING OF ST. PAUL.

(9) CASES OF CONSCIENCE.

THE entry of a religion like Christianity into a world like that of the Roman Empire led inevitably, in the minds of those who received it, to many grave practical problems which demanded all the patience and sagacity of the Apostles for their solution. The life of the Christian disciple had indeed undergone a marvellous transformation, a transformation so great that all the familiar metaphors of change—from bondage to liberty, from darkness to light, from death to life—are exhausted in describing it. Yet in many ways the old life went on as before, with little or nothing to mark the beginning of the new order. Converts to Christianity remained in the same homes, in the same city, with the same neighbours, at the same occupations, eating and drinking, buying and selling, marrying and giving in marriage, as in the days that were past. Indeed, it was this very intimacy between the new present and the old past that thrust into sharper prominence the questions that immediately began to arise: How ought a Christian slave to act towards a heathen master? If a dispute arose between Christian men, how was it to be settled? must the disputants carry the case before a heathen tribunal? If a wife became a Christian, must she separate herself from an unbelieving husband? And, especially, what ought a man to do when, by partaking, in the social intercourse of daily life, of meat that had been offered in sacrifice to idols, he found himself in danger of appearing to countenance the very idolatry with which his faith was at war? Questions of this kind—questions, i.e., not of absolute right or wrong, but of moral expediency—would be answered very differently even by Christian men, according as they understood,

or partially understood, or altogether misunderstood, the true genius of Christianity. Then from these differing judgments, and the differing lines of conduct consequent upon them, it would be but a little way to that ugly censoriousness with which in every age of the Church some of the servants of Christ have always been ready to visit any departure from their own standards of right and wrong. Such in point of fact the New Testament shows to have been the case in several of the Churches founded by St. Paul. We may take as examples the Church at Rome and the Church at Corinth.

In Rome, as we learn from the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters of the Epistle to the Church in that city, there were some (probably a small minority in the Church) who judged it right to mark certain days by special observances (xiv. 5), and to abstain wholly from the use both of meat and wine (xiv. 2, 21). Others made light of such scruples; they had faith to eat all things; they esteemed every day alike. Thus there arose the two parties to which the Epistle makes reference—the weak and the strong. Had they been wise enough and Christian enough to respect each other's position and to show mutual forbearance, nothing further need have been heard of the matter; for differences of the kind referred to are likely to continue while the world lasts. Unhappily, both sides showed themselves at fault; the strong held the weak in derision; the weak passed judgment on the strong, or, in the face of a protesting conscience, went over to their side and so brought darkness and death into their own souls.

At Corinth the question, though similar in principle, was different in origin.¹ The opposing parties bore the same name as in the Roman Church, but in this case the weak

¹ See 1 Cor. viii.-x. I have not thought it necessary to discuss the origin of the scruples of the Roman Christians. A useful note on the subject will be found in Sanday and Headlam's Commentary, p. 399.

were not vegetarians; their scruples had to do only with the eating of meat which had been offered in sacrifice to idols. To eat of such meat—and in a city like Corinth it was not easy to avoid doing so—was in their eyes to partake of the sin and guilt of idolatry. “Not so,” rejoined the strong; “an idol is nothing; there is no God but one; why then, should we not eat?” And here, as at Rome, the liberty of the strong was in danger of becoming a stumbling-block to the weak, “the brethren for whose sake Christ died.”

In each case St. Paul deals with the question at length, and in such a manner as to lift the whole discussion out of the region of the local and temporal into that of the universal and abiding. In themselves the questions discussed have no interest for us to-day whatsoever; they are as remote from our modern life as any of the dead and buried controversies of the past. Yet such is the Apostle’s treatment of them that these chapters in the Roman and Corinthian Epistles still speak to us with authority, still lay upon us warm, compelling hands of life and power. It will be our endeavour now to gather up some of the chief ethical principles which emerge in the course of this twofold discussion.

I

To the weak St. Paul says that their scruples are a mistake, but that nevertheless, until conscience is sufficiently enlightened to get rid of them, they have no alternative but to respect them.

That the Apostle’s judgment was wholly with the strong his language in both Epistles makes abundantly plain. “We that are strong,” he writes,¹ thus openly associating himself with one of the parties in the dispute. “We know,” he says, “that no idol is anything in the world, and that there is no

¹ Rom. xv. 1.

God but one"¹; and therefore "all things are clean."² "I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean of itself."³ "Meat will not commend us to God: neither, if we eat not, are we the worse; nor, if we eat, are we the better."⁴ "Blessed," he exclaims, "is he whose conscience is unvexed by scruples."⁵ But he whose conscience will not suffer him to eat meat is weak, weak in faith; in other words, "he does not fully appreciate what his Christianity means; in particular, he does not see that the soul which has committed itself to Christ for salvation is emancipated from all law but that which is involved in its responsibility to Him."⁶

Nevertheless, though a man may be conscientious and yet be in the wrong, his conscience, weak and uninstructed as it is, must still be obeyed. Enlightenment can never come by disobedience. The passages just quoted which vindicate the theory of the strong are in almost every case completed by words which justify, and indeed necessitate, the abstinence of the weak, so long as they remain weak. "We know," says St. Paul, "that there is no God but one . . . howbeit, in all men there is not that knowledge,"⁷ and therefore, he means, not the same liberty of action. "All things indeed are clean: howbeit it is evil for that man who eateth with offence." "Nothing is unclean of itself; save that to him who accounteth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." What is needful is that "each man be fully assured in his own mind," for "he that doubteth is condemned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; and whatsoever is not of faith is sin."⁸

¹ 1 Cor. viii. 4.

² Rom. xiv. 20.

³ Rom. xiv. 14.

⁴ 1 Cor. viii. 8.

⁵ Rom. xiv. 22.

⁶ Denney, *Expositor's Greek Testament*, vol. ii., p. 700.

⁷ 1 Cor. viii. 4-7.

⁸ Rom. xiv. 20, 14, 5, 23.

We have here the enunciation of a twofold moral principle of the highest practical importance. On the one hand the Apostle makes it plain that over-scrupulousness, so far from being a virtue to be proud of, is rather a weakness to be got rid of; it is a sign of little faith and of an imperfect understanding of the meaning of Christianity. "Fatty degeneration of the conscience," as it has been wittily called,¹ is an ailment to which a certain type of religious persons is peculiarly liable, and there is nothing which they more need to be assured of than that an "enlarged" conscience is as certainly a sign of bad moral health as an "enlarged" heart is of bad physical health. So long as they regard their super-sensitiveness with Pharisaic self-complacency there is small hope of their cure. On the other hand, St. Paul asserts unhesitatingly the supremacy even of the weak conscience. If it is at fault, it must be enlightened; but enlightened or unenlightened, it must be obeyed. It may be, it often is, an ignorant and blundering guide; yet it is the best a man has, and he must submit himself to it. The path of obedience is always the path of growing light, but to disobey is to turn our feet and our face towards that night in which the light that is within us is become darkness. "May we not," says Newman, "look for a blessing *through* obedience even to an erroneous system, and a guidance even by means of it out of it? Were those who were strict and conscientious in their Judaism, or those who were lukewarm and sceptical, more likely to be led into Christianity, when Christ came? . . . I have always contended that obedience even to an erring conscience was the way to gain light, and that it mattered not where a man began, so that he began on what came to hand, and in faith."² And such also is the contention of St. Paul. He

¹ The phrase occurs in that clever book *Isabel Carnaby*, but it was used several years before by a writer in the *Spectator* (Dec. 26, 1891).

² *Apologia*, p. 206.

is sure that the scruples of the weak are mistaken ; he is equally sure that it is at their souls' peril they do violence to them. It may seem a hard saying, yet it is justified by experience. A wounded conscience who can bear? It is able, as Thomas Fuller says, to unparadise Paradise itself. "Others persuaded," writes Archbishop Laud in his diary, "but my own conscience loudly forbade me . . . Ah! how much better had I suffered martyrdom with Thy proto-martyr upon his commemoration day, than done the pleasure of too faithless, careless friends . . . I am not stoned for my sins but stoned by them."¹ But there is a worse penalty of disobedience than the agony of remorse ; by disobedience conscience may be stifled, it may be silenced, it may be slain. " 'It is one thing to have a conscience,' answered Agellius, 'another thing to act upon it. The conscience of these poor people is darkened. You had a conscience once.' 'Conscience, conscience,' said Juba. 'Yes, certainly, once I had a conscience. Yes, and once I had a bad chill, and went about chattering and shivering ; and once I had a game leg, and then I went limping ; and so, you see, I once on a time had a conscience. O yes, I have had many consciences before now, white, black, yellow, and green ; they were all bad ; but they are all gone, and now I have none.'"² That is what comes in the end of treating conscience as an irksome monitor to be silenced and got rid of at the first opportunity.

II.

From the weak St. Paul turns to the strong ; it is with them he is chiefly concerned ; it is to them most of his counsels are addressed. As we have seen, he admits un-

¹ See Mozley's *Essays Historical and Theological*, vol. i. p. 146. The sin to which the extract refers was the marriage by Laud, when a young clergyman, of a woman who had been divorced.

² Newman's *Callista*, ch. iv.

hesitatingly the rightness of their main contention ; in matters of meat and drink they were under a law of liberty ; they were not wrong, they were right, when they insisted that the watchword, " all things are lawful," which was so often upon their lips, and which probably they had learned from his, did apply in cases such as these. They were wrong when they made this saying to be the conclusion of the whole matter. Christian liberty is indeed a great thing, to be fought for if need be to the last ; but liberty to whose exercise prudence and charity set no limits quickly ceases to be Christian. " All things are lawful for me," says St. Paul, " but not all things are expedient." And if a thing be not expedient, then, for me, the Apostle means, neither is it lawful ; my liberty is so far limited. This expediency is of two kinds :

(1) Expediency in our own interests : " All things are lawful for me ; but I will not be brought under the power of any." ¹

(2) Expediency in the interests of others : " All things are lawful ; but all things edify not." ²

On the first of these sayings St. Paul does not dwell and it is not necessary to dwell here. It sets forth what may be called the common sense of the matter : " such and such a thing is in my power ; I will take care that it does not get me into its power. I will never by abuse of my liberty forfeit that liberty in its noblest part." ³ Lawful things are unlawful to those who cannot use them lawfully ; and the moment any indulgence, however innocent in itself, threatens to gain the upper hand, and the slave to sit in the master's seat, it is time to assert oneself and to

¹ 1 Cor. vi. 12.

² 1 Cor. x. 23.

³ Findlay, *Expositor's Greek Testament*, p. 818. An admirable exposition of the whole subject may be found by the same writer in an article entitled " Law, Liberty, and Expediency," in the *Monthly Interpreter*, vol. i. p. 292.

say plainly, "I will not be brought under the power of any." "Enjoying things which are pleasant; that is not an evil: it is the reducing of our moral self to slavery by them that is. Let a man assert withal that he is king over his habitudes; that he could and would shake them off, on cause shown; this is an excellent law."¹ And this is the first of the laws by which St. Paul fences about the law of liberty.

Of expediency in the interests of others St. Paul has many things to say, or rather he has one thing to say and he says it many times: great is liberty and greatly to be praised, but greater is love, and in the presence of love liberty must bow her head and moderate her claims. This is the burden of his message in all that he writes to the strong, whether at Corinth or Rome: "Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling-block to the weak."² He knows better than they do all that can be urged in their behalf; he sees more clearly than they can the foolishness of the scruples of the weak, but he will be a victim to no theory, his own or other men's. St. Paul lived in a real world, with his feet well planted on the solid earth, and he never forgot that in a world like ours a man's duty has to be determined, not by abstract reasonings concerning rights and liberty, but by the actual circumstances in the midst of which he lives, and by the consequences, possible or probable, of his conduct amid those circumstances. We are not so many Robinson Crusoes living our own self-centred lives, remote from all the rest of the world; we are bound up with each other in the bundle of life; we are members one of another, so that if one member suffer all the members suffer with it. And for such men in such a world the Apostle lays down one of the first conditions of united well-being when

¹ Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Lect. 2.

² 1 Cor. viii. 9.

he says, "Let no man seek his own but each his neighbour's good"; "Let no man be a stumbling-block in his brother's way or an occasion of falling"; "Let us follow after things which make for peace, and things whereby we may edify one another."¹ Nor does he hesitate to press the application of the principle to its utmost limits; the strong must sacrifice anything rather than that the weak should perish: "If because of meat thy brother is grieved, thou walkest no longer in love . . . it is good not to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor to do anything whereby thy brother stumbleth."² And in so saying St. Paul lays no heavier yoke on the shoulders of others than he gladly wears himself: "Give no occasion of stumbling, either to Jews, or to Greeks, or to the church of God; even as I also please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved."³ "If meat maketh my brother to stumble, I will eat no flesh for evermore, that I make not my brother to stumble."⁴

But, it may be asked, is not this to press too heavily upon the forbearance of the strong? Do the scruples of the weak deserve such tender consideration? Would it not be better, in the interests of the weak themselves, to stand up to them boldly and tell them plainly that they are in the wrong? Sometimes, doubtless; it must be remembered, however, that St. Paul is dealing with a case in which the exercise of the liberty of the strong is known to end in the emboldenment, though not the enlightenment, of the conscience of the weak, and to be, therefore, an occasion of falling. And in such a case, St. Paul declares, a Christian man has no alternative—he must

¹ 1 Cor. x. 24; Rom. xiv. 13, 19.

² Rom. xiv. 15, 21.

³ 1 Cor. x. 32, 33.

⁴ 1 Cor. viii. 13.

renounce his freedom; the cheques which law has signed he cannot honour until they are counter-signed by the hand of love. To this conclusion the Apostle was led and held by a threefold motive: the peace of the Church, the claims of brotherhood, and the sacrifice of Christ.

The feeling for the Church was always much stronger in St. Paul than it is in many of his disciples to-day, and it was well-nigh inevitable that in a discussion of this character the ideal of mutual upbuilding¹ should sooner or later come into sight. The Christian belongs to a community, so that his life is not simply his own private affair; it is a part of the life of the community to which he belongs, and in which he has power both for building up and casting down. It is to this that St. Paul refers when he writes, "Let us follow after things whereby we may edify one another. Overthrow not for meat's sake the work of God."² The tie of obligation is tightened still further when the Apostle reminds the strong that they for whom he pleads are their brethren. They may be ignorant and foolish, but this claim at least they have—they are not strangers and aliens, they are fellow-citizens, children of the same household, cared for by the same Divine love. "If meat maketh my *brother* to stumble"³—when the matter stands thus how can a man hesitate? Moreover, did not Christ die for "the weak brother," even as for all others, and shall we refuse the sacrifice of meat or drink for one for whom He spared not His own life? "We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves, . . . for Christ also pleased not Himself." This is the supreme motive, and

¹ τὰ τῆς οἰκοδομῆς τῆς εἰς ἀλλήλους (Rom. xiv. 19).

² Rom. xiv. 19, 20.

³ It is worthy of note that the word "brother" (or its plural) occurs five times in Rom. xiv., and four times in the parallel chapters in 1 Cor.

for every man whose heart lies open to its appeal the conclusion of the whole matter.

III.

Our exposition may close with St. Paul's warning against judging addressed to the weak and strong alike. "Thou," he writes to the weak, "why dost thou judge thy brother"? "or thou again"—and here he turns to the strong—"why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment-seat of God. For it is written,

As I live, saith the Lord, to me every knee shall bow,
And every tongue shall confess to God.

So then each one of us shall give account of Himself to God. Let us not therefore judge one another any more."¹

The temptation of the weak is to censoriousness, the temptation of the strong to contemptuousness. He whose conscience holds him with a tight rein often judges unjustly the larger liberty which others feel themselves free to enjoy; their inability to condemn what in his eyes is so plainly wrong he attributes to moral blindness. On the other hand, liberal-mindedness, in defiance of its own principles, often breeds contempt; it will see in the scruples of those who look at life with other, and perhaps smaller, eyes only a broad target for the shafts of scorn. And in so doing, St. Paul says, the weak and strong are equally at fault, and for the same reason: "For we shall all stand before the judgment-seat of God . . . each one of us shall give account of himself to God." That is to say, our responsibility for our life—for our narrowness and our breadth, for our scruples and our freedom—is not to each other, but to God. Who art thou that judgest the servant of another? to his own lord he standeth or falleth.

¹ Rom. xiv. 10-13. See also *vv.* 3 and 4.

The habit of judging is to be condemned on many grounds, but this surely is the head and front of its offending: it is an irrelevance and an impertinence, an invasion of the Divine prerogative. The Father hath committed all judgment to the Son, and who are we that we should seek to share His judgment-throne with Him? Of what use is the multitude of our hasty ill-informed judgments since He is to revise them and Himself to judge us all? "Blessed," it is written, "are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy"; but they to whom, in the white dawn of the Judgment Day, God will find it hardest to show mercy, will they not be those who have sought to take the work of judgment out of His hands, and in haste and bitterness have condemned their fellow-men? Our judgments God will judge; and is there one amongst us who will not have upon his head at that last great day sins many enough and heavy enough and black enough to answer for that he must needs add to them this sin also? Wherefore let us set a watch before our mouths, let us keep the door of our lips, and let us not judge one another any more.

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