

*THE PROBLEM OF THE EPISTLES TO THE  
THESSALONIANS.*

THE ordinary reader of the Thessalonian Epistles finds them interesting, comforting, stimulating. They bear on their face all signs of genuineness. The tender affection of St. Paul for the loved Church that he had founded amid much tribulation glows in his words. His teaching is comparatively simple ; there is no very deep penetration into Divine mysteries. Doctrine is of a simple kind ; it seems to sound the same chord as the Apostles' Creed. The Father, the Son, and Holy Ghost are here. The death and Resurrection and future coming of Christ are here. But beyond these there is little dogma or redemptive doctrine, No one turns to these Epistles to learn clearly the way of salvation, the secret of the forgiveness of sins. Prayer is here, and praise is here ; the laws of holiness, the duty of order, and of submission to authority ; the sin of neglecting work. Such are the themes. They harmonize exactly with the Christian teaching of other Pauline writings ; and yet we feel that they do not go as deeply down into the strata of experience or of the work of God's grace as all the other Epistles. There is a certain elementary character in the teaching which does not fail to impress itself. Jesus Christ is here the historic Person, not the Head of the Body, in Whom we are united to God and to one another.

Similarly, in the opening address, St. Paul is not "the Apostle of Jesus Christ," as in nearly all his other letters, but only the personal teacher whom they knew and loved.

All this elementariness and simplicity harmonizes well with the fact, which is easily determined and is admitted, that the Thessalonian Epistles are the earliest of St. Paul's letters. So far as we know, he wrote no letters to the Churches which he founded on his first missionary journey.

And as to the second, while the Churches of Galatia and Philippi were founded before that of Thessalonica, they were not addressed by letter till a later date—in the case of Galatia some four years later, in the case of Philippi at least twelve years.

So there is a harmony between the features presented by the Epistle and the chronological facts which we gather elsewhere ; nor is there anything in the style or language or the character of the thought to arouse any suspicion adverse to the Pauline authorship.

And yet, viewed from another point, these Epistles present us with a problem which seems, when it is once appreciated, one of some difficulty. So long as we have in our minds only a vague idea that these letters were written to the Thessalonian Church some years after the planting of that Church, as is the case in all the other Epistles, we feel that everything fits well with this view. It is only when accurate study forces upon us the two following facts that we become conscious that there is a difficulty to be overcome.

1. The first fact is that, according to the Acts (chap. xvii.), the planting of the Church—mainly a Gentile Church, at Thessalonica, was extremely rapid. A very short interval lay between the time when Thessalonica was worshipping idols (chap. i. 9), and the time when the Church of Thessalonica was worshipping Christ, and not only that, but anxiously looking for His appearing. “Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from Heaven, even Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come.”

When we compare the slow and tedious processes of mediæval and modern missions to the heathen with that sudden triumph of the Cross within a period which at first sight, it would appear, was limited by a few weeks,

we are startled. We turn from one explanation to another. We ask, was this thing altogether supernatural? or, is St. Paul exaggerating the marvel of their conversion? or, is the writer of the Acts, ignorant of the real chronology, condensing a long period into the space of a few weeks?

Both Epistles and history seem to stand the critical test. The journeys of St. Paul, while St. Luke was with him, are given with great accuracy, as also are those in the intervals during which St. Luke was absent on a mission; and there is a straightforwardness about these Epistles which silences all but wanton criticism.

2. But there is a second fact which increases the difficulty presented by the above. The first Epistle was written very soon after St. Paul left Thessalonica; the second, not long after the first. Professor Ramsay (*St. Paul the Traveller*) makes out carefully certain dates, which, though they do not quite agree with those of the older chronology, as represented in Dean Alford's Table in the Introduction to the *Acts*, nevertheless, place the writing of the Epistles as near to the time of the founding of the Church as did the older chronology. According to Professor Ramsay, St. Paul left Thessalonica May, A.D. 51. After his stay at Berea he reached Athens, August, 51; and in October he has arrived at Corinth, and soon Timothy and Silas come to him there from a visit of inspection at Thessalonica, to which they had been specially sent from Athens by the Apostle little more than a month before. And the writing of the first Epistle immediately followed the coming of the messengers. ("When Timothy came *even now*," ἄρτι, "just now," German, *eben jetzt*.) That the writing of the Epistle was early in the Corinthian stay is further shown by the story of the Acts, which requires a year and a half at Corinth after the coming of Timothy. The Apostle, according to Ramsay, left Corinth in March, 53.

Unless, then, St. Luke is confused and unreliable in these statements of time, which he seems to give in a straightforward way, a period of about five or six months only can be allowed to separate the Apostle's leaving Thessalonica and his writing the first Epistle.

It is the careful reading of the contents of that Epistle (we are now dealing with the first only) which introduces the second remarkable fact which rivets our surprised attention. Though, as we have already seen, it is in dogmatic fulness and in other ways less advanced than other Epistles, yet it is evidently written to a community of a remarkably earnest character, and showing no symptoms of raw youth, or of inability to stand alone. The Apostle writes with all the confidence and assurance which he uses in any other Epistle, with the conviction that he is addressing a Church founded securely, ministered to by its own pastors, and developed to a degree which had already commanded the admiration of a wide region which had profited by its earnestness. "For from you hath sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith to Godward has gone forth, so that we need not to speak anything."

If this be not the language of flattering exaggeration—if it contain sober truth, what are we to think of the astonishing results of this European mission introduced not more than a year and a half before into heathen Macedonia, and only within twelve months into Thessalonica? And this surprise is vastly intensified when we bring together, as we have done, the two facts, that the actual ministry at Thessalonica is described as only one of a few weeks (see Acts xvii. 2, a period which Ramsay calculates may possibly be extended to some five months), and that the Epistle, written but six months after the close of the Thessalonian ministry, addresses a well-known and highly spiritual and energetic Church?

The passage quoted is not the only one which speaks of the wonderful maturity of this infant Church. But if the reader will be good enough to lay down this article and read through that Epistle in its entirety, holding clearly the idea in his mind that it is an Apostolic letter to a Church in which no baptized person was of one year's standing, the impression on his mind will be much stronger than that which could be produced by a selection of quotations.

We shall assume that the reader has now re-perused the Epistle. Similar impressions, impressions in some respects stronger, will be received from a rapid reading of the second Epistle, which must have followed the first after a lapse of but a few months, and while the same companions were still by the writer's side. The second Epistle—save for the curious episode of the Man of Sin (and imagine *that* addressed to a Church of a year's standing, in any mission of the modern Church!)—resembles the first in many ways, utters the same undeveloped language of Christian dogma, but addresses the same living faith in Christ. It warns against the same sin of living “disorderly,” chiefly, it would seem, in the direction of allowing ordinary regulated life to be interfered with by excited expectations of the second Advent. (See chap. ii. 1-3 ; iii. 6-11.)

It is when we read of the painfully slow progress of most modern and mediæval missions that our astonishment at this mission reaches its height. Even the rapidity of conversion at Uganda under the labours of the Church Missionary Society is cast into the shade. For first, the period of incubation of the Church in Uganda was much longer ; and secondly, the spiritual development of the baptized Buganda people does not at all resemble that of the Thessalonians. Does any one suppose that these African believers could have been addressed, within a year or so of the first

proclamation of the Gospel in their territories, in words like these: "We exhort you, brethren, to know them that labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake . . . and we beseech you, warn the disorderly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be long-suffering towards all" ? Or again, "Ye are all sons of light and of the day ; we are not of the night or of darkness. . . . Let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." It will be allowed that nowhere has a Church been reared from the very first stone and then spiritually developed to the point reached by the Thessalonians within the period, or anything like it, which the Epistle and the Acts indicate in this case.

Does it all seem *incredible* ? We confess that for a considerable time, since first realizing the chronological difficulty, it seemed to us that there must be an error somewhere. Are the dates wrong ? Was St. Paul much longer at Thessalonica, or did a much longer time elapse before the writing of the letters ? But no. The crowded events of the second missionary journey will not allow of an earlier arrival at Thessalonica—the later history will not allow us to postpone the sending of the Epistle. Many reasons seem to make it impossible to assume anything of forgery or deception. We quite dismiss this hypothesis though Baur defended it (see Dr. Salmon's answer to him in his "Introduction"). The peculiar views of the second Advent which belonged to the very first age, the touching anxiety so tenderly alluded to (chap. iv.) as to the fate of those who had died in the interval between their conversion and Christ's expected immediate return, convince the reader that all is genuine here. These delicate touches are not those of a second century forger.

We think, however, that there are circumstances which in some degree mitigate the great difficulty of the problem. The preaching of St. Paul in that city was first in the synagague. There he was heard by Jews and *religious proselytes*. These had already been drawn out of heathenism, and had been prepared for purer teaching by Jewish influence, while still not sharing the Jewish national spirit. We find among the converts rapidly made at Thessalonica "some of the Jews, of the devout Greeks" (*proselytes*), "a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few." May it be possible that it was to these devout Greeks that St. Paul wrote, "Ye turned unto God from idols," referring to their previous first step from paganism to monotheism, so that they had already drawn a notable degree nearer to the true position? This would perhaps mitigate the difficulty, but we can scarcely believe that this is the full explanation. We believe that these conversions from idols were in many cases direct, and are led to inquire whether there is room in the narrative for such a mission directly addressed to Gentiles.

We seem to see an interval between verses 4 and 5 of Acts xvii.—an interval which leaves unrecorded that preaching to the heathen which, according to St. Paul's invariable practice, must have taken place. It was probably his success in this mission to those outside which led to the attack on the house of Jason, so suddenly named in the narrative. Of this period, if such there were, we have no record; but it must have been in this period that direct conversions from the heathen took place, as mentioned by St. Paul in the passage quoted from the close of the first chapter of the first Epistle.

There is another mitigation of difficulty in assuming that many of the devout Greeks, and of the pagans as well, may have been not rude, but cultivated and thought-

ful people. The letter does not read as if it had been addressed to ignorant persons, whose mental status must have delayed their appreciation of thoughtful addresses. We are thus enabled, perhaps, somewhat to lessen the difficulty of the rapid founding of the Church.

Not so, however, the difficulty of the great development and fame of the Church within a year of its conversion. That remains on record in the Epistle, and it is indeed an astonishing chapter in Church history.

The reader who is in full sympathy with St. Paul will enter into the feelings of overwhelming joy with which he watched these triumphs in the battle of the Lord. He had been shamefully treated, but had had some real success, at Philippi. He had been mocked and snarled at at learned, haughty Athens; He had begun to feel that Corinth was going to treat him differently. And now the coming of Timothy with authentic news a few days old at most from Thessalonica—that city whose Jewish people were so far less noble than the Bereans—gave him the first real uplifting which he had experienced since the gentle heart of the woman of Thyatira and the manly breast of the Roman jailor had opened to the message of the Lord.

Would he not set all the marvellous work done to the working of the Holy Ghost—that spirit which bloweth where it listeth—which, leaving proud Athens in its ignorance, melted so many hearts at Thessalonica, and led them on so fast towards the condition in which it became, within a year, possible for St. Paul to write thus:—

“ Rejoice evermore ;  
 Pray without ceasing ;  
 In everything give thanks ;  
 Quench not the Spirit ;  
 Abstain from all appearance of evil ;  
 And the very God of Peace sanctify you wholly ” ?

This is the solution which satisfies best the terms of the



problem of the Epistles. And this solution will be welcomed most by those who, even if they have never seen great things follow their preaching or teaching, are sure that it is in His power to grant great things still to His Church, and to work wonders, as He did in that ancient city, where the mission of the Apostle within a few short weeks planted a living and prosperous Church by the quays, and in the quaint, overhanging houses of the famous seaport known still to the world as Salonika.

G. R. WYNNE.