

THE BRIEF VISIT TO CORINTH.

It has generally been assumed by those who believe in an intermediate visit of St. Paul to Corinth between the writing of 1 Corinthians and of 2 Corinthians,¹ that the visit is to be explained by entirely changed circumstances in the church. The new trouble was rising, though it had not come to a head ; Paul crossed the sea to quell it, but in vain. He suffered a painful collapse in the presence of his enemies and returned to Ephesus a broken man, though later he succeeded in accomplishing by letter, and by the mediation of Titus, what he had failed to achieve in person. It is possible ; it is interesting, dramatic, touching ; but there is a great deal of evidence against it. Of course we must not ignore the evidence in its favour. One of the keynotes of 2 Corinthians, in both its parts, earlier and closing chapters alike, is "weakness." This makes it very probable that things happened at the painful intermediate meeting which confirmed the impression in vulgar minds : "He a saint of God ? Your Paul is a weakling." It is true this view can hardly be regarded as certain. Conceivably, as often as St. Paul was face to face with his converts—strange many-sided man that he was—he created mainly an impression of gentleness "as when a nurse cherisheth her own children" (1 Thess. ii. 7). It may have been as unexpected as it was unwelcome to those who held him cheap when he began thundering at them in his letters (2 Cor. x. 10). We might set aside an isolated hint of disparagement as indicating merely that they despised his lack of Grecian grace ; but the passages are too numerous ; and therefore it remains more probable that somehow, on his visit of severity and amendment, he showed his softer side, not to say his limitations.

But the fiction of a collapse or entire breakdown must be

¹ See *Corinth and the Tragedy of St. Paul* in EXPOSITOR for July.

repelled ; and that for several reasons. (1) He assures the Corinthians that his only motive for changing his plan of travel—for breaking his word to them, if they liked to put it so—was that he might “ spare them ” (2 Cor. i. 23). In other words, he was perfectly confident still of his apostolical authority and of his power to compel their recognition of it. To speak as he does would be a falsehood if he had already tried by his personal presence to quell the storm, and had failed. More, it would be a blunder of the kind that are “ worse than crimes.” How could he utter such boasts, if unfounded, in the presence of those who had lately been estranged from him, and might rebel again ?

(2) Paul, in writing his letter of reconciliation to the Corinthians, tells them how terribly he had suffered “ in Asia ” (2 Cor. i. 8). It was not then while he was at Corinth that the worst sufferings in which that church had a sad interest were caused. It was not to his face that the most shameless calumnies were uttered, but later and behind his back. Even Dr. Massie,¹ who believes in the dramatic collapse of St. Paul, slips into a truer view when expounding the verse just quoted ; “ probably ” it “ refers to the deadly nervous prostration he endured at Ephesus after he had received news of the Corinthian desertion at its worst.” Quite so ; but had it not been at the very “ worst ” sooner, if he was defied and insulted to his face ? The belief in such a scene is “ improbable, though shared by many commentators. . . . We cannot see why Paul did not secure satisfaction on the spot, if he was present when the insult was launched ”² ; or alternatively (as has been said above) we cannot see how Paul could be confident in regard to the future if he had failed in the past.

¹ Century Bible, *ad loc.*

² Bousset. On some points, however, Bousset is disposed to acquiesce in uncertainty and vagueness. That course avoids the dangers of hypothesis, but forfeits its advantages.

(3) There is another consideration which seems to be of importance, though I have not seen attention drawn to it. Paul indicates (vii. 14) that there had been some difference of opinion between Titus and himself. He had "gloried" to Titus of the fundamental, permanent loyalty of the Corinthians; and facts justified him. We cannot wonder, upon any view, if Titus shrank from the terrible task assigned him, or if he tended to form a gloomier estimate than Paul himself of the state of the Corinthian church. Yes; but with what moral right could Paul give these assurances if he had been openly flouted? Or with what propriety could he tell another and a younger man that it "would all end happily" when sending Titus into the hornets' nest and remaining himself at a safe distance? Therefore, while we must believe in an intermediate visit, we cannot think that it was the season or scene of the insult to St. Paul. Whatever painful things happened here (ii. 1), there was no disastrous collapse, no helpless failure.

But, if the new troubles followed rather than called forth Paul's brief visit, we must find some other motive for his going to Corinth. Perhaps we may recognize this in the scandal of 1 Corinthians v.; it will not do, within a brief space of time, to multiply supposed troubles in that church great enough to interrupt Paul's work at Ephesus (1 Cor. xvi. 9). This is a trouble which we know of; and assuredly it was grave. The interpretation we are proposing is all the better if in some respects it coincides with traditional views. We must expect to trace a continuous development in the situation at Corinth. It has been argued above that the later situation was new, yet nothing is more probable than that it grew straight out of the older trouble. Here one may notice a plea put forward on the traditional side in defence of the unity of 2 Corinthians, and of all that goes with that assumption, by Dean Bernard.¹ Paul suspects (xii. 21) a

¹ *Expositor's Greek Test.*

leaven of secret vice in his enemies. The opposition to him is by no means unconnected with a lax view of sexual sin. We hold this to be a fair inference, and a valuable guiding clue; but we think that justice can be done to it without blinding ourselves to those other facts which show that changes had taken place. The old leaven still worked for evil. Yet it took new forms, and blended with fresh elements of mischief.

Has the question ever been fairly faced,¹ how 1 Corinthians v. was likely to be received at Corinth? Let us recall to mind the facts. The church, all sections apparently,² had combined in a letter to St. Paul, which laid before him point by point those topics on which they felt their need of guidance. Yet this ugly scandal was nowhere mentioned. It came to him by rumour—good rumour, not idle gossip; rumour which he was in a position to verify, had that been necessary, by cross-examining the church's delegates; notorious rumour indeed—still, it was only by this accidental notoriety that Paul learned of it. The matter formed no part of the church's report to their founder. They preferred to deal with it themselves, not upon Pauline lines. The Greek or Pagan spirit was so strong, the charm of enlightenment so great (1 Cor. v. 2), that the whole church was for a policy of acquiescence. That being so, how is Paul's thunderbolt likely to be received? Not surely with immediate submission! It is anything but strange if he finds that he has to cross the Ægean in order to make sure of obedience, and if he judges it worth while to do so.

Again, has it been pondered with sufficient care what is likely to have been the fate of the unhappy offender? We

¹ I learn from Drescher's article in *Studien u. Kritiken*, for 1897, that the question has at least been raised by Klöpffer and in a sense by Heinrici.

² The argument would only be strengthened if we held that it was the special friends of Paul who wrote to him.

all, in these modern times, shrink from believing too robustly in miracles. Even Cardinal Newman, describing in *Callista* a successful case of exorcism, leaves Juba in a crushed condition, half rational, half a man. They thought differently in Bible days. Paul himself, in the Epistles now before us, tells us, as a thing no one could question, what miracles he had wrought at Corinth—"the signs of an apostle . . . signs and wonders and mighty works" (2 Cor. xii. 12). He was in dead earnest when he doomed the man to bodily death for his soul's salvation. He expected the sentence to be executed.

But, it may be said, what if the man repented? Professor Findlay¹—why, I do not know, except that the other view is painful—takes repentance for granted. Would even repentance arrest such a sentence? There is the "leading case" of Job; he fell into deep misery at the Satan's hands, but he was restored again. Yes; but Satan's instructions in regard to Job were carefully limited: at first he might touch everything dear to Job except his person; then he might touch his person but not his life. *Of course* this left restoration possible; it was Job's delusion—natural, but groundless—that God was embittered against him, and that a miserable death was impending. St. Paul, as prosecuting counsel on behalf of the King of heaven, had demanded a very different penalty, or had suggested very different instructions to Satan. Were they really revocable? Ought even an apostle to fulminate a death sentence—for the offender's own salvation, too!—if a little sorrow, a decorous amendment, may serve as a substitute? We should surely take for granted that Paul expected, and even—dreadful thought!—in a sense desired, the man's death.

¹ Expositor's Greek Test. *ad loc.* Prof. Findlay also says that, if Paul succeeded in this matter, no one afterwards at Corinth could call him weak. Christ encountered unbelief and scoffing. Had Christ wrought no wonders?

We assume then that 1 Corinthians was received, read, evaded. There was no definite refusal to obey ; but the case was hung up, and Paul's representatives could gather that nothing was to be done. Paul therefore is summoned, and presses for the church's concurrence in the awful sentence. That had been part of his original programme ; he and the church were to act together (1 Cor. v. 3, 4). For this very reason he does not rely on his personal authority alone. He strains every nerve to carry them with him ; he seems to make headway, but nothing is yet decided. Suddenly—one may conjecture—the case settles itself ; the man dies. There is not of necessity an Ananias scene. There may have been ! The lightning from St. Paul's eye might well blast the soul pertinaciously guilty of a scandalous life, if the offender sat in his place in the assemblage. Or as Paul pleaded, and the church, half-convinced, still hung back, a messenger may have burst in with the news : “ You need debate it no longer. *He is dead.*” Fanciful, perhaps, in detail ; but does it not grow naturally out of the known situation ? It needs no argument that such a visit would indeed be a visit ἐν λύπῃ, and such a triumph almost more terrible than failure. It would shake the tender heart of Paul to its very depths. He was not the man to press his advantage home. If he swooned or sickened on receiving the news, it would be no wise unworthy of his great and gentle spirit ; yet the half-sullen minds of certain Corinthians, themselves perhaps not impeccable, might receive an impression of weakness from his behaviour, if it did not even suggest darker suspicions. And yet for the moment surely all opposition to his wishes would disappear. And he might return, with very little delay, to the work that called him at Ephesus. And, before leaving, he would give the promise as to his future movements, which he afterwards retracted. *If there was an intermediate visit, he must then have spoken of a future*

visit. Yes, I'll come back soon. I'll come right across. I'll travel by you into Macedonia, and from Macedonia return to you a second time (2 Cor. i. 16).

He left, of necessity. Hardly had he left, when a band of Judaizing fanatics reached Corinth. Or, if they had been already present—quiet and undetected; awaiting their opportunity—they saw their chance now and began to get to work. Their policy here¹ was to attack Paul the man, and thus indirectly but effectually discredit his Gospel. Everything he had done or been or said was questionable—not exactly wrong; at first, that certainly would not be affirmed; but they would untiringly “hint a doubt and hesitate dislike.” He came to you without a certificate of Christian character?² Really these precautions—mere forms in general, mere forms with him; oh, certainly, certainly—but they ought never to be omitted! By the way, have you seen my own certificate? Here it is: I should like every one to see it. Look, there are the names of some of the apostles on it—the Jerusalem apostles, I mean of course; *dear* men! Such a privilege to know them! It gives one an idea what a servant of Christ may be!—He took no salary from you, did he? It was generous? My friend, he didn't dare.³ He wasn't confident of his position. But it's amiable in you to take the charitable view of the man. Yet did I not hear something about a collection? For Jerusalem? Well, you make me smile! You may accept my assurance that not a penny of this celebrated “collection for the saints” has got to Jerusalem. It isn't likely to do so! These accounts will never be audited!⁴ Oh, it's a pretty game⁵ to surrender the small profits and play for the high stakes!—He's vain,⁶ he's always praising himself.—He's cunning;⁷

¹ In Galatia the policy had included further elements.

² iii. 1. ³ 1 Cor. ix. 4 14, 15. ⁴ 2 Cor. viii. 20, 21.

⁵ xii. 16. ⁶ iii. 1, xi. 16. ⁷ xii. 16.

he made a fair show, I've no doubt. You poor things never saw the man as he really is. He's a wonderful fellow—at a distance ;¹ very brave—with the pen ! But what a poor creature he is when you get him in a room with you ! He can't even *speak* like an educated gentleman. It's " contemptible ! "—By the way, I wonder whether he writes those celebrated Epistles himself ? Perhaps he is the sort of clever fellow who pulls the strings and gets others to do the work. He does write himself, did you say ? [Through an amanuensis ? Ah ! By the way, aren't there other names as well as his at the head of these letters ? Yes ? I thought so. I wonder now what kind of epistle it would be, if Paul wrote quite by himself !²—And what cruelty ! The man " destroys " the church with those ruthless sentences of his !³

But beyond all these lay the really damning charge. These are strange illnesses he suffers from, are they not ? Your poor brother so-and-so, who died under a cloud, and is hardly cold in his grave yet, was in " Satan's " hands, was he, for his sins ? Then in whose hands is the holy Paul when he falls into fits or faintings ?⁴ He works cures ; why doesn't he cure himself ? No one who was in good standing with God could be allowed to suffer as he does.⁵ Our God is just ! Our God is faithful to His friends ; and He knows how to deal with hypocrites, too. That man rebuke sin ! Black and rotten at the heart—black and rotten at the heart—if we could only see it without disguise ! So the innuendo culminated ;⁶ and we can hardly doubt that, like other schismatic patrons of a higher sanctity, these critics passed sentence on themselves by appealing to all the discontented, and by joining hands, in defiance of their own most serious principles, with the lax school. Paul was wrong because he was a sick man, and therefore a bad man. Paul was also

¹ x. 10. ² x. 1. ³ x. 8, xiii. 10. ⁴ xii. 7.

⁵ iv. 12, xii. 9, etc. ⁶ xiii. 6.

wrong because he was "so hard" in checking vice at Corinth.

The Judaizers' campaign over-reached itself. It was only too successful. At some meeting of the church, one of its members—not one of the godly visitors from Palestine—took up the charges hinted or whispered by the intriguers, made them his own, dotted every I, crossed every T, and shouted the accusations in public. One thinks of this new party to the quarrel as a good-hearted, wrong-headed child of impulse, honest and well-meaning, but a fool. "He *must* say it! He had feared it before, he was convinced of it now; the good friends from Jerusalem had opened his eyes. He was in their debt. The whole church was in their debt. Paul was a bad man—a worthless hypocrite!" And the whole array of proofs came tumbling out. The Judaizers might have been glad to carry on their campaign of secret calumny for a little longer. But their hand was now forced; and they doubtless supported their champion's remarks with some inward anger at his folly, and with many verbal professions of reluctance, through which their real animus peeped at every phrase. The church was in an uproar. It did not accept the outrageous charges, but it was not in a state to silence them.

And so the news came to Paul. He had been ill at Corinth under the pressure of his sad experiences there—his terrible experiences, if they were in the least such as we have conjectured. He now quickly grew worse. Not in a mere phrase, but in sober earnest, he thought it would kill him. And it was nothing less than a miracle of God's goodness to find strength presently returning to his shattered nerves, and a faint dawn of hope illuminating the despair of his mind (i. 8-10).

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