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The Epistles of Paul

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THE EPISTLES OF PAUL

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

IMPORTANCE OF PAUL'S WORK

It is impossible to put too much emphasis on the life and work of Paul as the great interpreter of Christ. He has been misunderstood in modern times as he was during his career. Some accuse him of perverting the pure gospel of Christ about the Kingdom of God into a theological and ecclesiastical system. He has been accused of rabbinizing the gospel by carrying over his Pharisaism, while others denounce him for Hellenizing the gospel with Greek philosophy and the Greek mystery-religions. But out of all the welter of attacks Paul's Epistles stand as the marvellous expression of his own conception of Christ and the application of the gospel to the life of the Christians in the Graeco-Roman world in which they lived by eternal principles that apply to us today. In order to understand Paul's Epistles one must know the Acts of the Apostles in which Luke has drawn with graphic power the sudden change of the foremost opponent of Christ into the chief expounder and proclaimer of the gospel of the Risen Christ. The Acts and the Epistles supplement each other in a marvellous way, though chiefly in an incidental fashion. It is by no means certain that Luke had access to any of Paul's Epistles before he wrote the Acts, though that was quite possible for the early Epistles. It does not greatly matter for Luke had access to Paul himself both in Caesarea and in Rome. The best life of Paul one can get comes by combining the Acts with the Epistles if he knows how to do it. Paul is Luke's hero, but he has not overdrawn the picture in the Acts as is made clear by the Epistles themselves which reveal his own grasp and growth. The literature on Paul is vast and constantly growing. He possesses a fascination for students of the New Testament and of Christianity. It is impossible here to allude even to the most important in so vast a field. Conybeare and Howson's *Life and Epistles of St. Paul* still has value. Sir W. M. Ramsay has a small library on Paul and his Epistles. Stalker's masterful little book on Paul still grips men as does the work of Sabatier. Deissmann's *St. Paul* continues to throw light on the great Apostle to the Gentiles. Those who wish my own view at greater length

will find them in my various books on Paul (*Epochs in the Life of Paul*, *Paul the Interpreter of Christ*, etc.).

THE REASON FOR HIS EPISTLES

In a real sense Paul's Epistles are tracts for the times, not for the age in general, but to meet real emergencies. He wrote to a particular church or group of churches or persons to meet immediate needs brought to his attention by messengers or letters. Dr. Deissmann contends strongly for the idea of calling Paul's Epistles "letters" rather than "Epistles." He gives a studied literary character to "epistles" as more or less artificial and written for the public eye rather than for definite effect. Four of Paul's Epistles are personal (those to Philemon, Titus, and Timothy) beyond a doubt, but in these which can properly be termed personal letters there are the principles of the gospel applied to personal, social, and ecclesiastical problems in such a pungent fashion that they possess permanent value. In the earliest group of Paul's Epistles, he reminds the Thessalonians of the official character of the Epistle which was meant for the church as a whole (³¹⁷1 Thessalonians 5:27). He says also:

"But if any one does not obey our word by the epistle, mark this one, not to associate with him, that he may be put to shame"
(³¹⁴2 Thessalonians 3:14).

He calls attention to his signature as proof of the genuineness of every epistle (³¹⁷2 Thessalonians 3:17). He gave directions for the public reading of his epistles (³¹⁶Colossians 4:16). He regarded them as the expression of God's will through the life of the churches and he put his whole heart into them. Two great controversies stirred Paul's life. That with the Judaizers called forth the great doctrinal group (1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans). That with the Gnostics occasioned the Epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians (Laodiceans) and this controversy ran on into the Pastoral Epistles. Each Epistle had its particular occasion which will be pointed out in due season. But even in the short ones like Philippians, Colossians and Ephesians Paul deals with the sublimest of all themes, the Person of Christ, with a masterfulness never equalled elsewhere. Even in I Corinthians, which deals so largely with church problems in Corinth, two great chapters rise to the heights of real eloquence (Chapter 1 Corinthians 13 on Love and Chapter 1 Corinthians 15 on the Resurrection). Romans, the greatest of his Epistles, has the fullest discussion of Paul's gospel of

grace and Chapter 1 Corinthians 8 has a sweep of imagination and a grasp of faith unsurpassed. Hence, while denying to Paul the artificial rules of the rhetoricians attributed to him by Blass, I cannot agree that Paul's church Epistles are mere incidental letters. It is not a question whether Paul was writing for posterity or for the present emergency. He wrote for the present emergency in the most effective possible way. He brought the whole gospel message to bear upon the varied and pressing problems of the early Christians in the power of the Holy Spirit with the eloquence of a mind all ablaze with the truth and with a heart that yearned for their souls for Christ. They are not literary epistles, but they are more than personal letters. They are thunderbolts of passion and power that struck centre and that strike fire now for all who will take the trouble to come to them for the mind of Christ that is here.

DATES OF HIS EPISTLES

Unfortunately there is not complete agreement among scholars as to the dates of some of Paul's Epistles. Baur denied the Pauline authorship of all the Epistles save 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans. Today some deny that Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles, though admitting the others. Some admit Pauline fragments even in the Pastoral Epistles, but more about this when these Epistles are reached. There is more doubt about the date of Galatians than any of the others. Lightfoot put it just before Romans, while Ramsay now makes it the earliest of all. The Epistle itself has no notes of place or time. The Epistles to the Thessalonians were written from Corinth after Timothy had been sent from Athens by Paul to Thessalonica (^{<S101>}1 Thessalonians 3:1f.) and had just returned to Paul (^{<S106>}1 Thessalonians 3:6) which we know was in Corinth (^{<H105>}Acts 18:5) shortly before Gallio came as Proconsul of Achaia (^{<H102>}Acts 18:12). We can now feel certain from the new "acclamation" of Claudius in the inscription at Delphi recently explained by Deissmann in his *St. Paul* that the Thessalonian Epistles were written 50 to 51 A.D. We know also that he wrote I Corinthians while in Ephesus (^{<S103>}1 Corinthians 16:8) and before pentecost, though the precise year is not given. But he spent three years at Ephesus in round numbers (^{<H103>}Acts 19:8,10; 20:31) and he wrote just before he left, probably spring of A.D. 54 or 55. He wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia shortly after leaving Ephesus (^{<H102>}2 Corinthians 2:12) apparently the same year. Romans was written from Corinth and sent by Phoebe of Cenchreae (^{<S101>}Romans 16:1f.) unless Romans 16 be considered

a separate Epistle to Ephesus as some hold, a view that does not commend itself to me. Deissmann (*New Testament in the Light of Modern Research*, p. 33) accepts a modern theory that Ephesus was the place of the writing of the first prison Epistles (Philippians, Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians) as well as I Corinthians and Galatians and dates them all between A.D. 52 and 55. But we shall find that these prison Epistles most naturally fall to Rome between A.D. 61 and 63. If the Pastoral Epistles are genuine, as I hold, they come between A.D. 65 and 68. Bartlet argues for a date before A.D. 64, accepting the view that Paul was put to death then. But it is still far more probable that Paul met his death in Rome in A.D. 68 shortly before Nero's death which was June 8, A.D. 68. It will thus be seen that the dates of several of the Epistles are fairly clear, while some remain quite uncertain. In a broad outlook they must all come between A.D. 50 and 68.

FOUR GROUPS OF PAULINE EPISTLES

I. A.D. 50 to 51.

First Thessalonians.

Second Thessalonians.

Chief topic Eschatology. To correct misconceptions in Thessalonica.

II. A.D. 54 to 57.

First Corinthians.

Second Corinthians

Galatians

Romans.

Chief topic Justification by Faith. Defence against the Judaizers.

III. A.D. 61 to 63.

Philippians.

Philemon.

Colossians.

Ephesians (Laodiceans).

Chief topic Christology. Defence against the Gnostic perversions of the Person of Christ.

IV. A.D. 65 to 68.

First Timothy.

Titus.

Second Timothy.

Ecclesiastical Problems to the fore.

DEVELOPMENT IN PAUL'S THEOLOGY

The study of Paul's Epistles in the order of their writing is the best possible way of seeing his own growth as a theologian and interpreter of Christ. Sabatier long ago laid emphasis on this point in his book *The Apostle Paul* as did Matheson in *The Spiritual Development of Paul*. It is a tragedy to have to read Paul's Epistles as printed in the usual Greek text of Westcott and Hort and the English translations, beginning with Romans and ending with Philemon. In the manuscripts that give Paul's Epistles Romans comes first as the largest and most important, but Titus and Philemon come after II Timothy (the last just before his death). We know something of Paul's early preaching how he laid emphasis on the Messiahship of Jesus proven by his resurrection, Paul himself having seen the Risen Christ (⁴⁰²Acts 9:22). This conviction and experience lay at the foundation of all his work and he never faltered concerning it (^{417B}Acts 17:3). In the earliest sermon of which we have a full report Paul proclaims justification by faith in Christ with forgiveness of sins (^{413B}Acts 13:38f.), blessings not obtained by the law of Moses. In the unfolding life of Paul he grappled with great problems of Jewish rabbinism and Greek philosophy and mystery-religions and Paul himself grew in stature as he courageously and victoriously faced Judaizer and Gnostic. There are scholars who claim that Paul surrendered to the appeal of Gnostic sacramentarianism and so went back on his great doctrine of justification by faith, not by works. It will be shown at the proper time that this view misinterprets Paul's attitude. The events given by Luke in the Acts fit in with the self-revelation of Paul in his own Epistles as we read them. Each one of the four groups of Epistles has a slightly different style and vocabulary as is natural when one comes to think of it. The same thing is true of the plays of Shakespeare and the poems of Milton. Style is the man, Buffon says. Yes, but style is also a function of the subject. Particularly is this true of vocabulary which has to vary with the different topics treated. But style in the same man varies with different ages. Ripened old age mellows the exuberance of youth and the

passionate vehemence of manhood. We shall see Paul himself in his Epistles, letting himself go in various ways and in different moods. But in all the changing phases of his life and work there is the same masterful man who glories in being the slave of Jesus Christ and the Apostle to the Gentiles. The passion of Paul is Christ and one can feel the throb of the heart of the chief of sinners who became the chief of saints in all his Epistles. There is the Pauline glow and glory in them all.

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