

Notes on Biblical Exposition

By J. Gresham Machen, D.D., Litt.D.

Professor of New Testament in Westminster Theological Seminary

II. THE WITNESS OF PAUL.

"Paul an Apostle, not from men nor through a man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead, and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia . . ." (Gal. 1: 1, 2, in a literal translation).

Human Merit vs. the Grace of God

LAST month we called attention to the fact that the very first word of the Epistle to the Galatians, after the bare name and title of the author, is the unpopular word "not." Unlike many men in the modern Church, Paul was not afraid to say "Not" or to say "No"; he had no sympathy with the feeble notion that a man can speak the truth without opposing error: and so this Epistle is a fighting epistle from beginning to end.

The enemy against which Paul is fighting in the Epistle can be reconstructed fairly well from the Epistle itself. Paul was fighting against the doctrine that a man can earn a part, at least, of his salvation by his own obedience to God's law; he was fighting against the doctrine that a man is justified not by faith alone, but by faith *and* works.

That doctrine was being propagated by certain teachers who had come into the Galatian churches from the outside. These teachers were men of Jewish race; and since they sought to induce Gentile people to "Judaize"—that is, to adopt the Jewish manner of life—they are commonly called "Judaizers."

The Judaizers agreed with Paul about many things: they agreed in holding that Jesus was the Messiah; they seemed to have no quarrel whatever with Paul's lofty doctrine of the deity of Christ; they believed in the resurrection of our Lord from the dead. Moreover, they even held, no doubt, that a man must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ if he is to be saved.

But their error lay in holding not only that a man must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ if he is to be saved, but that he must also do something else—namely, keep at least a part of the law of God. Salvation according to those Judaizers, in other words, is attained partly by the grace of God and partly by the merit of man.

The Modern Judaizers

The particular form of merit which they induced men to seek was the merit of keeping the law of Moses, particularly the ceremonial law. At first sight, that fact might seem to destroy the usefulness of the Epistle for the present day; for we of today are in

no danger of desiring to keep Jewish fasts and feasts. But a little consideration will show that that is not at all the case. The really essential thing about the Judaizers' contention was not found in those particular "works of the law" that they urged upon the Galatians as being one of the grounds of salvation, but in the fact that they urged any works in this sense at all. The really serious error into which they fell was not that they carried the ceremonial law over into the new dispensation whither God did not intend it to be carried, but that they preached a religion of human merit as over against a religion of divine grace.

So the error of the Judaizers is a very modern error indeed, as well as a very ancient error. It is found in the modern Church wherever men seek salvation by "surrender" instead of by faith, or by their own character instead of by the imputed righteousness of Christ, or by "making Christ master in the life" instead of by trusting in His redeeming blood. In particular, it is found wherever men say that "the real essentials" of Christianity are love, justice, mercy and other virtues, as contrasted with the great doctrines of God's Word. These are all just different ways of exalting the merit of man over against the Cross of Christ; they are all of them attacks upon the very heart and core of the Christian religion. And against all of them the mighty polemic of this Epistle to the Galatians is turned.

The Authority of Paul

But it is time to return to our word "not" in the first verse of the Epistle. We have seen that that word is typical of the whole Epistle, since this letter is a polemic from beginning to end. But the particular reference of the word in this verse is not directly to the false gospel of the Judaizers, but to their personal attack upon Paul. The Judaizers had not been able to gain an entrance for their false teaching so long as the authority of the great Apostle remained beyond dispute. So they had proceeded to undermine that authority as best they could; they had said that Paul was at best an apostle of the second rank—that he had not been with Jesus in Galilee as had Peter and the others of the original Twelve, and that consequently whatever authority he possessed had come to him only through them.

It is against this attack that Paul utters the "not" in this first verse; in this verse he defends his apostolic authority, not his gospel. But of course the defence of his apos-

tolitic authority was altogether for the sake of his gospel; he is not interested in his apostolic prerogatives for their own sake, but only for the sake of the message which those prerogatives had been given him to proclaim. Hence the "not" of this verse is a very weighty word indeed; it involves, indirectly at least, the whole mighty conflict between pride in human goodness and the all-sufficiency of the Cross of Christ.

With this understanding, let us see how Paul defends his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He is "an apostle," he says, "not from men nor through a man."

When he says that he is not an apostle *from* men, he denies that the *source* of his apostleship was found in men. So far, perhaps, even the Judaizers may have agreed with him; they may perhaps have admitted that ultimately his authority to preach came from Christ.

But the real point of his defence comes in the following words. "My apostleship not only did not come *from* men," he says—so much perhaps even his opponents admitted—"but it did not come even *through* a man." There is where the dispute arose. The Judaizers said that if Paul had any authority at all it came *through* those who had been apostles before him, but Paul says that it came to him directly from Christ without any human intermediary at all: not only was the source of his apostleship divine, but also the channel through which it came to him; the Lord Jesus did not use any intermediary to give him his commission as an apostle, but appeared to him directly on the road to Damascus.

Paul's Commission and Ours

Thus in the words, "nor through a man," Paul refers to a prerogative that differentiates him sharply from ordinary Christians.

Every humble Christian can in a certain sense go with Paul in the former of the two phrases that we have just discussed. Every humble Christian can say: "My commission comes to me not from men but from Christ." Of course, the ordinary Christian cannot say, as Paul could say, that his commission is an apostolic commission; for by the term "apostle" is designated a high function that has not been continued in the Church. Nevertheless, even the very humblest Christian can say that he has a commission which has come to him not from men but from God. That is true of a preacher, and it is just as true of the sexton who sweeps out the church and of the treasurer who takes care of the funds.

But we ordinary Christians, whether preachers or sextons or treasurers, cannot go with Paul in the second of the two phrases: we cannot say that our commission did not come to us *through* a man; for as a matter of fact it did come to us through some true evangelist who preached the gospel to us, or through some faithful pastor or teacher, or through some godly parent. Christ gave us our commission, but He used human emissaries in doing so; we are not eyewitnesses of the risen Christ. But in the case of Paul there was no such human emissary; to him Christ appeared on the road to Damascus and gave him directly his high commission.

The reference to Paul's conversion is plain in the words that immediately follow those with which we have just dealt. "I am an apostle," says Paul, "not from men nor through a man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father *who raised Him from the dead.*" The reference to the resurrection of Christ is not, at this point, a mere general reference to something that was fundamental in the Christian faith, but Paul is thinking specifically of the fact that his apostleship came to him from the *risen* Christ. "I am an apostle," he says, "through Jesus Christ—yes, and through God the Father, since God the Father raised Christ from the dead and is concerned in all that the risen Christ does, including that call to me that came on the Damascus road."

The Contrast Between Christ and Man

So far we have explained the words that Paul uses in this verse. But it is to be wondered whether all readers are aware of the stupendous implications of those words. When Paul says, "Not through a man *but* through Jesus Christ," has it struck the reader that that is a very strange contrast; does it seem at all strange that the Apostle should set Jesus Christ sharply over against humanity in this way, as though He belonged in an entirely different category, as though "a man" and "Jesus Christ" were two entirely distinct things?

If it does not seem strange to us, that is simply because our Christian conviction about Jesus Christ has become so ingrained in us that the wonder of it has been lost from view. Thank God that it does not seem strange to us! But to most modern historians, both within and without the Church, it seems very strange indeed.

A Contemporary Witness

Who was this "Jesus Christ" who is separated thus by Paul so sharply from ordinary humanity and is placed on the side of God? Who was this person who is treated thus as a stupendous heavenly being to whom divine honors were to be paid, along with the honors paid to the eternal God, the Maker of heaven and earth? Was He a mythical personage of remote antiquity, around whom the legends of the ages would have been free to grow?

Not at all. He was a Jewish teacher, a contemporary of Paul, who had lived in Palestine and had died a shameful death only a few years before this Epistle was written. He was a person one of whose brothers Paul had actually met (Gal. 1:19). The genuineness of the Epistle to the Galatians is admitted by all serious historians, whether friends or foes of Christianity. The Epistle was admittedly written, then, by Paul; and the date of it can be fixed within rather narrow limits. It was written not later than about A. D. 55, only some twenty-five years after the death of this Jesus of whom Paul speaks. When, therefore, Paul speaks of Jesus Christ as in such contrast with humanity and as standing so clearly on the side of God, he is not speaking about a personage of the dim and distant past, but about one of his own contemporaries. How shall so strange a phenomenon be explained?

The real Christian will have no difficulty in explaining it. "Paul speaks of Jesus as God," he will say, "because as a matter of fact Jesus *was* God, because He was the eternal Son of God who came voluntarily to this earth for our salvation, worked redemption for mankind, rose from the dead, and is now seated on the throne of all being to be worshipped and glorified by all who are His."

But to most modern historians, who regard Jesus as a mere man, the first verse of Galatians, together with all the rest that Paul says, presents a very strange problem indeed. How did a mere man, a Jewish teacher, come to be regarded thus as God, not by later generations but by one of His own contemporaries?

One God, Yet Christ Is God

The thing would not be quite so strange if Paul, who attests this strange view of Jesus, had been a man of polytheistic training and belief. Had he believed in many gods, the adding of one more would not be quite so difficult to understand. But as a matter of fact Paul was a monotheist of the monotheists. Pharisaic Judaism of the first century was nothing if not monotheistic; it held with heart and soul to the doctrine that there is but one God. Paul shared that doctrine, both before and after his conversion, to the full. How, could such a monotheist, such a believer in the awful separateness between the one God and the world that He had made, possibly come to exalt a mere man, Jesus, to the godhead and pay to him the reverence which belongs only to God?

That Paul does just that is attested not only by our verse but by his Epistles from beginning to end. He does, indeed, in certain passages, speak of Jesus as a man. In Rom. 5:15, for example, he contrasts the one man, Adam, with "the one man, Jesus Christ"; and a similar contrast between "the first man" and "the second man" occurs in the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians. So also in I Tim. 1:5, Paul speaks of the "one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." But in these passages the

careful reader receives somewhat the impression that the Apostle regards it as a strange thing, worthy of special note, that Jesus Christ should be a man as well as something other than man. At any rate, these passages do not in the slightest invalidate the fact that in the Epistles as a whole, as in our verse in Galatians, Jesus Christ is separated sharply from ordinary humanity and placed clearly on the side of God. Everywhere Paul stands in a truly religious relationship to Christ. Christ is for him not primarily an example for faith but the object of faith; his religion does not consist merely in having faith in God like the faith which Jesus had in God, but in having faith in Jesus.

That fact is enough to give the thoughtful historian pause. Who was this Jesus who could be exalted to the throne of God not by later generations but by a man of His own generation, only a few years after His shameful death?

But we have not yet mentioned what is perhaps the most surprising thing of all. The surprising thing is not merely that Paul holds this stupendous view of Jesus, but that he does not argue about it, that he seems to be under no necessity whatever of defending it against attack within the Church. Even the Judaizers, so far as we can see, had no quarrel with Paul's lofty view of Christ. Paul said: "I am an apostle not through a man but through Jesus Christ"; the Judaizers said: "No, you are an apostle not through Jesus Christ but through a man"; but it never seems to have occurred to anyone in the Church to say: "You are an apostle through Jesus Christ and therefore you are an apostle through a man, since Jesus Christ was a mere man."

Certainly, at any rate, whatever may have been the attitude of the Judaizers, it is perfectly clear that even if they did differ from Paul about the person of Christ, the original apostles—Peter and others of the Twelve—gave them no slightest color of support on this point. The Judaizers may possibly have appealed to those original apostles on another point—namely, the attitude that was to be assumed in the Church toward the Mosaic law. Even that appeal—supposing they did make it, which is by no means perfectly certain—was, as we shall see, an utterly unjustified appeal. But with regard to the person of Christ, at any rate, they did not venture to make any appeal to the original apostles at all.

Here, then, we have the truly amazing thing. Not only does Paul hold to his stupendous view of the person of Christ, but he assumes that everyone agrees with him about it; in particular, he assumes that Peter agrees with him, and others of the intimate friends of Jesus. Those men had seen Jesus subjected to all the petty limitations of human life, as He had walked with them on the Galilean hills; and yet they agreed perfectly with the lofty view, which

(Continued on page 15)

asserted His own right to legislate for the kingdom of God, notwithstanding the divine authority He attached to the already existing legislation, finds its explanation in the fact that He regarded Himself as one with the Father in rank and dignity. This utterance of Jesus is, therefore, in complete harmony with His other utterances concerning the Old Testament and not at all contradictory to the supposition that He looked upon the Old Testament as completely trustworthy.

Infant Baptism

Editor of CHRISTIANITY TODAY:

May I ask you to give the Scriptural teaching concerning infant baptism? Is there an inexpensive book on the subject which would be satisfying to one who believes in baptism of believers only?

*Yours truly,
Mrs. H. F. C.*

NO doubt there are books on the subject of infant baptism that have proven satisfactory to those who believe in the baptism of believers only—in the sense implied. Otherwise it is hardly likely that there would be so many who adhere to that position. We do not think, however, that there is any book that advocates the baptism only of those who have come to years of discretion that ought to be satisfying to Christian men and women; and that because we believe that the practice of baptizing infants has the sanction of Scripture as well as the sanction of the vast majority of those who call, or have called, themselves Christians.

It is admitted that the New Testament does not explicitly either command or forbid the baptism of infants. In this respect the practice of infant baptism is to be compared with the change of the holy day from the seventh to the first day of the week. It is also true that there is no example of infant baptism recorded in the New Testament. It is equally true, however, that there is no instance of a woman partaking of the Lord's Supper recorded in the New Testament. It will hardly do, therefore, to take the position that nothing is a Christian duty that does not rest on an express command of Scripture or that cannot cite a practice sanctioned by the founders of the Christian church.

But while there is no express command or example yet the baptism of infants seems to be clearly implied. The New Testament mentions the baptism of "households"—of Lydia (Acts 16:15), of the jailer at Philippi (Acts 16:32), of Stephanas (I Cor. 1:16). These incidents should, it seems to us, be interpreted in the light of the fact that "house" and "household" as employed in Scripture includes little children. When so interpreted it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the apostles baptized infants. If now these "household" baptisms are inter-

preted in the light of the fact that children were members of the Church and partakers of the covenant blessings under the Old Testament dispensation it seems even more difficult to escape such a conclusion. Otherwise the position of children under the New Testament dispensation would be inferior to that which they enjoyed under the Old Testament dispensation. No doubt there are those who seek to escape this conclusion by maintaining that children were not members of the Old Testament church. In order to do this, however, they are forced to maintain that circumcision was not a sign and seal of the spiritual covenant of grace but that its significance was purely national. Such a notion we regard as quite untenable. When it is remembered that under the New Testament dispensation baptism has taken the place of circumcision it seems clear that the absence in the New Testament of any express command to baptize infants is an argument for rather than an argument against the practice. If in the New Testament dispensation the children of believing parents were not to be regarded as members of God's church and sharers of the blessings of the covenant of grace—as they were under the Old Testament dispensation—then it is reasonable to suppose that there would have been a plain, unequivocal pronouncement to that effect either by Christ Himself or by His apostles. As a matter of fact we find such statements as those recorded in Matt. 19:14; Acts 2:39; and I Cor. 7:14.

A fundamental question in connection with the question of infant baptism is the question whether the individual or the family is the unit of the Church. As the rule at least, those who object to infant baptism hold that the individual is the unit of the Church while those who approve the practice regard the family as the unit. We think the evidence conclusive that according to the Scriptures the family is the unit. It would take too much space to cite this evidence but in both the Old and the New Testament it is the "People of God" who constitute the church and always the promise is unto us and our children. When the Scriptures are interpreted in the light of the fact—for fact we hold it to be—that the family is the basic unit of the Church, it is almost always the case that it is recognized that they sanction the baptism of infants.

While it has only an indirect bearing on the question of the teaching of Scripture it is a highly significant fact that the immense majority of Christians have always practiced infant baptism. The practice seems to have been practically universal in the early church and only in recent times has it been opposed by any considerable number of Christians.

It is needless to say that we do not hold that infants should be baptized in order that they may be saved. Rather we hold that the infants of believers should be baptized

because they have a birth-right membership in the visible church. Hence the question that confronts such a child when it reaches years of discretion is not whether it will "join" the church but whether it will leave the church. No doubt those baptized in their infancy often give no evidence in their later life that they belong to the church invisible, but that is also true of many baptized as adults. It is obvious that the question of the relation of the children of believers to the church as well as the manner in which they should be instructed and trained is closely related to the question of infant baptism.

Notes on Biblical Exposition— Concluded

Paul presents in his Epistles, of Jesus as the Son of the living God.

That fact presents to the modern naturalistic historians, who reject the picture of Jesus which the New Testament contains, a serious problem. According to those historians, Jesus was a mere man, and His first disciples regarded Him at first as such. That, then, according to these historians, was the original, the "primitive," view of Jesus; Jesus presented Himself and was first regarded, as a mere prophet of righteousness, or at most as a purely human Messiah. Yet the plain fact is—a fact which no historian can deny—that if that was the original view of Jesus it gave place to a totally different view not in some later generation but, as attested by the Epistles of Paul, in the very first Christian generation, when the intimate friends of Jesus were leaders in the Church.

The rapidity of the transition is very strange. But still more strange is the utter absence of any conflict at the time when the change was produced. The absence of conflict, the absence of any throes of transition, is eloquently attested by the Epistles of Paul. What we are asked by naturalistic historians to believe is that the true, the original, the "primitive," view of Jesus as just a great religious teacher, proclaiming the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, suddenly gave place, just after His shameful death, to a totally different, a totally incongruous, view, and that that mighty transition was effected without the slightest trace of any conflict in the Church!

That is really too much to believe. No, the matter-of-course way in which Jesus, as the Epistles of Paul attest, was regarded as a supernatural person in the earliest apostolic Church shows that there was something in His person from the very beginning that justified such a view.

Such is the witness of Paul to Christ. It is not dependent upon details in the Epistles, but is involved, rather, in the total phenomenon which the Epistles present. It has not been invalidated in the slightest by modern research.