

Notes on Biblical Exposition

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VIII. THE CALL OF GOD

"For ye have heard of my manner of life formerly in Judaism, that excessively I persecuted the Church of God and laid it waste, and advanced in Judaism beyond many contemporaries in my race, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when He who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me through His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia and again I returned to Damascus." (Gal. 1:13-17, in a literal translation.)

The Conversion

IT has been shown in the last number of CHRISTIANITY TODAY that Gal. 1:12 enunciates the thesis which is to be proved in the first main division of the Epistle. "I received the gospel," Paul says in effect, "not by instruction from men but by direct revelation from Jesus Christ."

The first proof of this assertion is found in Paul's life before his conversion: certainly he was not then coming under the influence of the original apostles, but was an active persecutor. "Ye have heard," Paul says, "of my manner of life formerly in Judaism, that excessively I persecuted the Church of God and laid it waste, and advanced in Judaism beyond many contemporaries in my race, being more exceedingly zealous (than those contemporaries were) for the traditions of my fathers."

We learn something more about those traditions from Phil 3:5, where Paul himself, in one of the Epistles that are universally accepted as genuine by modern criticism, says that he was "as touching the law a Pharisee." Since he was a

Pharisee, it is natural, when he speaks of the traditions of his fathers, for us to think especially, though perhaps not exclusively, of the Pharisaic additions to the written Law.

"Such," Paul says in effect, "was my life before my conversion. Far from coming nearer to Christ, I was if anything moving farther away. I was an active persecutor of the Church of God; I was as far as possible from becoming a disciple of those from whom the Judaizers say that I received my gospel."

Then came the conversion. It was not according to Paul what it is according to modern naturalistic historians, the result of a psychological process; but it was utterly sudden, and was brought about by a sovereign act of God. "When He who set me apart," says the Apostle, "from the very beginning of my life—from my mother's womb—and called me through His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me that I might preach Him among the Gentiles . . ." Three acts of God are here mentioned. In the first place, God set Paul apart from his mother's womb. Although Paul did not know it, God had really, from the very beginning of his life, designated him for the special work of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. In the second place, God carried out that plan, which He had had for him from the beginning, by calling him through His grace. There is no doubt whatever but that this divine call is to be regarded as having taken place definitely and specifically at the conversion. The word "call" in such connections does not refer to the plan of God from all eternity; and it does not refer to the general divine ordering of a man's life in the execution of that plan: but it refers to the majestic divine act by which at a definite moment of time the divine purpose becomes effective in those who are saved. Such a "call" is more than a

mere invitation; it is, rather, a call which brings its answer with it; it is what the Shorter Catechism calls "effectual calling." That sovereign call of God came to Saul of Tarsus when he saw the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus and became instead of a persecutor a servant and an apostle.

The Revelation of God's Son

But if the call refers to the conversion, what is referred to by the revelation of God's Son which is mentioned next, as the third of the things which God did in the case of the Apostle. At first sight, it might seem to be something subsequent to the call and hence something subsequent to the conversion. Paul says: "When He who (1) set me apart and (2) called me (at the conversion) was pleased (3) to reveal His Son in me that I might preach Him among the Gentiles . . ." At first sight, it might seem as though three successive acts were here mentioned: (1) the setting apart, (2) the call, (3) the revelation of God's Son. Thus the revelation of God's Son in Paul would not be identical with the conversion but would be some later event in the Apostle's life.

There are, however, other indications which tend to show that this view is incorrect and that it is really the event on the Damascus road which is referred to here as it is referred to by the "call" which has just been mentioned. The trouble with regarding the revelation of God's Son as an event distinct from the conversion is that it seems to be treated as the turning-point in Paul's life, the event with reference to which all subsequent events in the experience of the Apostle are to be dated. Paul tells what did *not* happen immediately after this event, then he tells us what happened three years after it, etc. But surely the event which is treated in this way as the

turning-point in Paul's life can only be the conversion.

At any rate, it would seem clear that if the revelation of God's Son is not the conversion it must at least be placed very soon after the conversion and in close connection with it. We might think, for example, of possible revelations within the three days of blindness which the Book of Acts mentions as having followed immediately upon the event on the road to Damascus.

But is it really necessary, from the form of the sentence, to regard the revelation of God's Son as being subsequent to the "call"? That does not seem to be by any means perfectly clear. Paul first designates God by means of the two outstanding things which He had done for him in his life taken as a whole up to the time of the writing of the Epistle; he designates God as the One who had set him apart and had called him. When he tells what the One so designated had done to fit him particularly to be a preacher to the Gentiles. It is perhaps not necessary to reflect upon the question what the temporal relation is between this third act of God and the other two acts. Paul may mean simply to say: "When the One who can be designated as the One who set me apart and called me was pleased (whether before or after or simultaneously with the calling) to reveal His Son in me that I might proclaim Him among the Gentiles . . ." In that case, the revelation of God's Son in Paul might be regarded as having taken place on the road to Damascus and as being, like the call, identical with the conversion.

Paul's Meeting with Christ on the Damascus Road

It must be admitted, indeed, that another difficulty seems to arise against this identification. If the revelation of God's Son here spoken of was a revelation *in* Paul, it seems at first sight to be designated as an inner, rather than as an external, revelation. But if so, how can it be identified with that meeting of Paul with Christ which is described in the ninth and twenty-second and twenty-sixth chapters of the Book of Acts? In that meeting, not only the Book of Acts (which is under fire in modern criticism) but also

Paul himself in one of his universally accepted Epistles says that he actually saw Christ, so that the revelation at that time was an outward and not merely an inward event. In I Cor. 9:1 Paul says, (plainly with reference to the conversion): "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?"; and in I Cor. 15:8 he says that Christ "appeared" to him, the verb "appeared," which is here used, being the passive voice of the verb "to see," which is used in the other passage, so that "appeared" in Greek is the same as "was seen." Moreover, Paul evidently regarded his meeting with Jesus on the Damascus road as being entirely different from such an experience as that which he describes in II Cor. 12:1-4.

That does not mean that this latter experience did not possess high value; it does not mean that it was a mere illusion. But Paul speaks of it with the utmost reserve and with the utmost reluctance. He was caught up into the third heaven, he says, but whether in the body or out of the body he does not know, and the words that he heard were unspeakable. Indeed, he even hesitates to use the pronoun "I" in speaking about that experience; he ventures only to say, with regard to the recipient of it: "I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago . . ." When he speaks about his meeting with Christ on the Damascus road, on the other hand, there is none of this reserve. Far from having to be forced to speak about that meeting, as about the strange experience described in II Cor. 12:1-4, he made it basic in all his preaching; he presented it publicly to his converts (or, as it is perhaps more accurate to say, to those who by the presentation of it became converts) "among the first things" (I Cor. 15:3). Evidently he regarded it as a plain matter of fact, attested by the senses like any other event. It was not merely an inner experience, according to Paul, but a happening in the external world.

If that be so about Paul's meeting with Christ on the Damascus road, how can it be that event that is referred to in our passage when Paul says that God revealed Christ *in* him? Paul plainly regarded the event on the Damascus road as an external event, whereas in our passage the revelation of God's Son is designated as a revelation *in* him and not as a revelation *to* him.

Revelation to Paul or to Others?

This difficulty, when taken with the difficulty already mentioned, that the revelation of God's Son seems, at first sight at least, to be presented as subsequent to the call and not identical with it, made it not altogether surprising that so able a scholar as Bishop Lightfoot adopted an interpretation totally distinct from those that we have so far considered. Lightfoot held that the revelation here referred to is not at all a revelation either to Paul or within Paul's soul, but a revelation through Paul to others. The wonderful change in Paul's life, since it was wrought by the grace of Christ, was a revelation of Christ to all who might behold it. On this interpretation, the use of the preposition "in" in the phrase "in me" would be similar to that in verse 21 when Paul says, "They glorified God *in me*." "When God was pleased," Paul would be made by this interpretation to say, "to reveal His Son in me by the revelation of His Son's power in my whole life . . ." An objection to this view is usually found in the fact that the passage seems to put the revelation of God's Son in Paul as something prior to the proclamation of God's Son by Paul to the Gentiles—something which had that proclamation as its purpose—whereas if Lightfoot's interpretation is correct the revelation of God's Son in Paul would seem rather to be identical with that proclamation of God's Son or continuously contemporary with it. This objection is perhaps not quite decisive, and the interpretation against which it is raised is at least not beyond the bounds of possibility.

However, the commoner view, that the revelation of God's Son in Paul does refer to the Damascus event or to something immediately subsequent to that event and closely connected with it, and that it does refer to a revelation that had Paul as its recipient, is also not impossible. Why may not Paul be referring here to an inner aspect of what he designates elsewhere as an external event? If the conversion was wrought by a revelation of God's Son *to* Paul, does that exclude the fact that it was also a revelation of God's Son *in* Paul?

A special reason for the use of the preposition "in" here is perhaps to be

found in the parallelism with the immediately following phrase, "among the Gentiles." In that latter phrase we have to use the preposition "among" in English. But in Greek it is exactly the same preposition as the preposition "in" which occurs in the phrase "in me." Quite possibly the parallelism is intentional. "God revealed His Son *in me*," Paul says, "that I might preach Him *in the Gentiles*; God revealed Him in the little sphere of my life that I might proclaim Him in the large sphere of the Gentile world."

The Value and the Limitations of Exegesis

Thus three interpretations are possible in this difficult passage. By the revelation of God's Son in Paul, Paul may be referring (1) to his meeting with Christ at his conversion, (2) to a revelation closely following upon the conversion, or (3) to the revelation of Christ to the world which was found in the wonderful change which Christ wrought in Paul's life.

Which of these three interpretations is correct? We confess that we do not know, though we lean rather strongly to the first. That confession of our ignorance may be painful, but at least it is honest.

In making the confession, we are particularly desirous of not being misunderstood. We are not falling in the slightest into the current agnosticism about the interpretation of the Bible; we are not acquiescing at all in the current impression that the Bible can with equal propriety be made to support (1) Christianity and (2) a non-doctrinal religion which is almost the diametrical opposite of Christianity. We are by no means acquiescing in the notion that everything in the Bible may be "interpreted" to mean its exact opposite, and that there is no disputing about interpretations any more than there is disputing about tastes. On the contrary, we believe that in the great body of its teaching the Bible is as plain as day, and that no honest man who really attends to it can reasonably be in doubt as to what it means. It is perfectly clear, moreover, that the real issue in the Church of the present day concerns not the question what the Bible means but the question whether, meaning what it plainly does, the Bible is true or false.

But if there are many things in the Bible that are plain, there are some things that are obscure, and it is important not to be too cocksure in our views about those things. Sound and cautious exegesis will demolish many a sermon, but it is salutary in the end; and few things are more needed than sound and cautious exegesis is needed today. Contact with the really great exegetical tradition of the Christian Church will preserve us from many vagaries; it will keep us from many dan-

gerous by-paths; it will save us from the sad waste of time into which some devout people fall.

Let us not be ashamed, therefore, to say sometimes with reference to the interpretation of the Bible: "We do not know." But on the other hand, let us never rest complacently in that ignorance, but let us strive rather by diligent study and by earnest and prayerful meditation to learn more and more of what God has said to us in His Word.

Authority in Religion

By William Bittle Wells

"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the traditions of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." (Col. 2:8.)

THE religious world today is characterized by an ominous confusion. It is to be found not only in all the various religious groups, but equally in the individual. Much of it, if not all, can be attributed to the fact that there is no agreement as to what is the final source of authority in religion.

When the chief priests demanded of Jesus, "By what authority doest thou these things?" they struck the key-note in all religion. Take away external authority, which is the foundation stone upon which the whole structure of any religion rests, and we have only a shell left, devoid of any semblance of vitality.

In spite of this self-evident truth, the rejection of accepted authority in religion is being advocated by many who have in the past, at least, been called "Christians." Of course, those who hold to "the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints" find in the Scriptures the only and final source of authority. Strange as it may seem, however, the great majority of men and women have not been really concerned about this subject, and have been willing to leave it to others for settlement. Unfortunately, however, while assuming this mistaken attitude, they are being misled by pseudo-science, which, although being disclaimed by the real scientist, has yet fastened its false and terrible tentacles upon the weak in faith.

This condition is being fostered by those teachers of the Gospel who have forsworn their original faith, and broken their sacred vows to preach the true Word of God. Yet, like blind leaders of the blind, these apostate Ministers are seeking to be prophets in their own right, and pose as

the equal or the superior of the great Apostle Paul, whose writings, in incongruous self-defense and with a strange inconsistency, they must and do disclaim.

This incoherent state of mind and consequent condition in the church generally take on unusual significance because they are so wide-spread. We can account for it, possibly, on the ground that, to some extent at least, society is intellectually disintegrating. The explanation of this condition is to be found in the fact that we are living in a purely scientific age. Logic, therefore, is at a low ebb. As proof of this, the churchman today accepts and seemingly believes in things that are diametrically opposed.

An excellent example of this is found in the statement by a prominent preacher, who says:

"In religion as in all fields of thought and endeavor, the final authority is the experience of the individual in his search for truth. . . . This point of view is not so startling, after all, because an external authority has just as much authority as we individually are disposed to give to it. . . . That is to say, the final appeal is within and not without."

This statement might well be passed by were it not for the fact that it emanates from one who is supposed to be a Christian, and who, accordingly, is supposed to accept the belief, held by civilized and uncivilized peoples alike, that there is some kind of a God—an ultimate authority, apart from, independent of, and infinitely transcending the individual consciousness—who rules over all. Thus we have the anomalous and contradictory situation wherein one rejects the authority of the Scriptures to which he is ostensibly devoting his life, and which he is paid to support and expound; and who, in making an appeal for individual authority in religion, must, of necessity, displant