

CHAPTER 7

Just half a century ago the theologians of Christendom were startled by the publication of Ferdinand Christian Baur's treatise on Paul. It was an epoch-making book. The author's critical researches had led him to assert the unquestionable authenticity of the Epistles to the Romans, the Corinthians, and the Galatians. And fastening on these writings as our safest guides in historical inquiries respecting the character and rise of primitive Christianity, he went on to demonstrate its Pauline origin.

"These authentic documents," he urged (to quote a recent writer), "reveal antitheses of thought, a Petrine and a Pauline party in the Apostolic Church. The Petrine was the primitive Christian, made up of men who, while believing in Jesus as the Messiah, did not cease to be Jews, whose Christianity was but a narrow neo-Judaism. The Pauline was a reformed and Gentile Christianity, which aimed at universalizing the faith in Jesus by freeing it from the Jewish law and traditions. The universalism of Christianity and, therefore, its historical importance and achievements are thus really the work of the Apostle Paul. His work he accomplished not with the approval and consent, but against the will and in spite of the efforts and oppositions, of the older apostles, and especially of their more inveterate adherents who claimed to be the party of Christ."¹

If we are to understand the sequel to the present argument, we must rescue from its false environment of German rationalism the important truth which Baur thus brought to light and distorted.² We must needs recognize the intensely Jewish character of the Pentecostal dispensation. And in this connection we must also apprehend the twofold aspect of the death of Christ. The Cross was the manifestation of Divine love without reserve or limit; but it was also the expression of man's unutterable malignity. Did reverence permit us to give play to imagination on such a subject, we might suppose the death of Christ [was] accomplished by the Roman power in spite of protests and appeals from an aggrieved and downtrodden Jewish people. More than this, we might suppose "the King of the Jews" [was] given up to death on grounds of public policy, yet treated to the last with all the respect and homage due to His personal character and royal claims.

And who will dare to aver that the atoning efficacy of the death of our Divine Lord, however accomplished, could be less than infinite? But mark the emphasis which Scripture lays upon the *manner* of His death. It was "the death of *the Cross*." No element of contempt or hate was lacking. Imperial Rome decreed it, but it was the favored people who demanded it. The "wicked hands" by which they murdered their Messiah were those of their heathen masters, but the responsibility for the act was all their own. Nor was it the ignorant rabble of Jerusalem that forced the Roman government to set up the cross on Calvary. Behind the mob was the great Council of the nation. Neither was it a sudden burst of passion that led these men to clamor for His death. Hostile sects forgot their

1 "The Place of Christ in Modern Theology," by Principal Fairbairn, D.D., p. 267.

2 A dozen years before Baur's "Paul" appeared, the truth thus attributed to him was discussed at the then celebrated "Powerscourt meetings" in Ireland!

differences in deep-laid plots to compass His destruction. The time, moreover, was the Paschal feast, when Jews from every land were gathered in Jerusalem. Every interest, every class, every section of that people shared in the great crime. Never was there a clearer case of *national* guilt. Never was there an act for which *a nation* could more justly be summoned to account.

But Infinite mercy could forgive even that transcendent sin, and in Jerusalem itself it was that the great amnesty was first proclaimed. Pardon and peace were preached, by Divine command, to the very men who crucified the Son of God! But here prevailing misconceptions are so fixed that the whole significance of the narrative is lost. The apostles were Divinely guided to declare that if, even then, the "men of Israel" repented, their Messiah would return to fulfill to them all that their own prophets had foretold and promised of spiritual and national blessing.³

To represent this as *Christian* doctrine, or the institution of "a new religion," is to betray ignorance alike of Judaism and of Christianity. The speakers were Jews--the apostles of One who was Himself "a minister of the circumcision." Their hearers were Jews, and as Jews they were addressed. The Pentecostal Church which was based upon the testimony was intensely and altogether Jewish. It was not merely that the converts were Jews, and none but Jews, but that the idea of evangelizing Gentiles never was even mooted [raised for debate]. When the first great persecution scattered the disciples, and they "went everywhere preaching the Word," they preached, we are expressly told, "to none but to the Jews."⁴ And when after the lapse of years Peter entered a Gentile house, he was publicly called to account for conduct that seemed so strange and wrong.⁵

In a word, if "To the Jew first" is characteristic of the Acts of the Apostles as a whole, "To the Jew only" is plainly stamped upon every part of these early chapters, described by theologians as the "Hebraic section" of the book. The fact is clear as light. And if any are prepared to account for it by Jewish prejudice and ignorance, they may at once throw down this volume, for it is here assumed that the apostles of the Lord, speaking and acting in the memorable days of Pentecostal power, were Divinely guided in their work and testimony.

The Jerusalem Church, then, was Jewish. Their Bible was the Jewish Scriptures. The Jewish temple was their house of prayer and common meeting place (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:42).

3 Though the Revisers have reproduced St. Peter's words in one important passage which the Authorised Version has misread, yet to take these simple words in their plain and obvious meaning is to risk being looked upon as either fool or faddist. The words are: "Repent ye therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that so there may come seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send the Christ who has been appointed for you, even Jesus; whom the heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, whereof God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets....Ye are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers" (Acts 3:19, &c.). The whole passage should be carefully studied, and by all means see Alford's notes, showing how fully and definitely all this refers to Jewish hopes and promises.

4 Acts 8:1,4; cf. 11:19. It is noteworthy that at this time all the believers went out preaching *except the apostles*. And yet there are those who maintain that preaching is an exclusively apostolic function!

5 Acts 11. The words "they that were of the circumcision" might seem to suggest that there were Gentiles at that time in the Church. But, as Dean Alford says, Luke uses the phrase from the standpoint of the time when he was writing: "In this case *all* those spoken of would belong to the circumcision."

Their beliefs and hopes and words and acts all marked them out as Jews. Hence the amazing number of the converts. On the day of Pentecost alone three thousand were baptized (Acts 2:41). Soon afterwards their company would seem to have more than trebled.⁶ At the same time of the sin and death of Ananias and Sapphira, still further "multitudes, both of men and women," were added to their company. And at the time of the appointment of the men who, by a strange vagary of tradition, have been misnamed "the deacons,"⁷ it is recorded that "the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly, and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7). Nothing was further from the thoughts of these men than "founding a new religion." On the contrary, while hailing the rejected Nazarene as their national Messiah, they clung with passionate devotion to the religion of their fathers.

But what bearing has all this upon the question here? The Jews had crucified the Messiah. But now, when vengeance swift and terrible might have been expected to fall upon that guilty people, Divine mercy held back the judgment and called them once again to repentance. The testimony was full and clear, and it was confirmed by a signal display of miraculous power. But what was the answer of the men who sat "in Moses' seat"--the accredited leaders and representatives of the nation (Matt. 23:2)? By the murder of Stephen they re-enacted, so far as it was in their power to re-enact, the supreme tragedy of Calvary. Having regard to all the events which marked the interval, that further crime betokened a more deliberate hate, and therefore a greater depth of guilt, even than the Crucifixion itself. There was no popular clamor now to blind their judgment. When, some months before, in a formal meeting of their national senate the plot to murder the apostles was first mooted [raised for debate], it was one of the great doctors of the Sanhedrin who intervened on their behalf.⁸ Gamaliel's words, moreover, and the action which the council took on them, give proof how entirely the position and teaching of the apostles were within the scope of Jewish beliefs and hopes, and how thoroughly they were regarded as a Jewish sect.⁹ But these men were so blinded by religious rancor that no voice, human or Divine, could avail to restrain them.

Heaven's best gifts, when perverted or abused, often turn to what is virulently bad; and religion, when divorced from spiritual life, appears to have some mysterious power to narrow and harden and deprave the human heart. "It cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem!" (Luke 13:33.) The pathos of the words does not conceal their scathing irony. Among common men, however evil or degraded, a prophet might pass unharmed: *religious* men alone would persecute and murder him! In every age, indeed, religion has been the most implacable enemy of God, the most relentless persecutor of His people.

6 Acts 4:4. If "the number of the *men* came to be about five thousand," it is reasonably certain that the whole company was double this number at least.

7 They are never so called in the Acts. Indeed, our English word "deacon" has no equivalent in ancient or in Biblical Greek, and if the Revisers had been true to their avowed principles of translation, the word would have disappeared. Διάκονος is used twenty-two times in the Epistles, and should be rendered "minister" in every case, and especially in Phil. 1:1, and 1 Tim. 3:8 and 12, where ministers are distinguished from bishops. In the Gospels it occurs eight times, and always as equivalent to "servant" in the common acceptance, save in John 12:26, where it is used in a higher sense.

8 Acts 5:21, 33-40. I use the word murder advisedly, for under the Roman law the Jews had no power to put anyone to death. See John 18:31. The crucifixion was a *judicial* murder; the stoning of Stephen was murder pure and simple.

9 Acts 5:34-40; cf. 22:3. A quarter of a century later they were still known as "the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5). See Chapter 8 page 1.

Witness the tombs of the prophets! Witness the blood-stained pages of the Church's history! The Christian martyrs in unnumbered millions--for though their names are written in heaven, earth has kept no record of them--the best and purest and noblest of mankind have been tortured and done to death in the name of *religion*.¹⁰ How just is the infidel's taunt that it radically vitiates the standard of human morals!¹¹

The men by whose hands the "first martyr" died were the very men who had been "the betrayers and murderers" of Christ. In times of riot or excitement, mobs will commit excesses which, in his better moments, every man of them would deprecate. But these men were not of the class that mobs are made of. The high priest presided. Around him were the elders and the scribes. By the great Council of the nation it was that the deed was done. Its members were the acknowledged religious leaders of the people. Many of them, like Saul of Tarsus, himself the formal witness of the death, were men of blameless life, of untiring zeal and intensest piety. And as the cruel stones were showered upon that face which had shone like an angel's as they looked on it, it was hatred to the Nazarene that fired their hearts. Their King they had driven out. Stephen was the messenger sent after Him to declare anew their deliberate purpose to reject Him (Luke 19:14). This was their answer to the heaven-sent testimony of Pentecost. "All manner of sin" against the Son might be forgiven; they had now committed that deeper sin against the Holy Ghost, for which there could be no forgiveness (Matt. 12:31,32).

During the forty years of Jeremiah's ministry the first destruction of Jerusalem was delayed. So now, well nigh forty years elapsed before the crash of that still more awful judgment which engulfed them. God is very pitiful, and then, as now, "He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words, and misused His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people till there was no remedy" (2 Chr. 36:15, &c.). But though the public event which marked their fall was thus deferred, the death of Stephen was the secret crisis of their destiny. Never again was a public miracle witnessed in Jerusalem. The special Pentecostal proclamation (Acts 3:19-26) was withdrawn. The Pentecostal Church was scattered. The apostle of the Gentiles forthwith received his commission, and the current of events set steadily and with continually increasing force toward the open rejection of the long-favored people and the public proclamation of the great characteristic truth of Christianity. Within that truth lies concealed the key to the mystery of a silent Heaven.

10 The victims of the so-called Christian persecutions have been wildly estimated at over fifty millions! Of the victims of *pagan* Rome, I have never seen any estimate. And pagan persecutions also were in the name of religion! From the death of Abel in primeval times down to the massacres of Armenian Christians today, religion has heaped up the tale of human guilt and sorrow.

11 Mill's "Autobiography," p. 40.