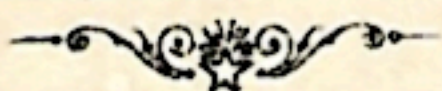


PAUL

A Typical Presbyterian



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A Sermon by
EGBERT W. SMITH

Author of
"The Creed of Presbyterians"



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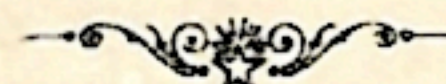
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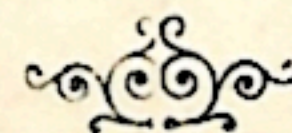
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"Be ye imitators together of me."—
Philippians 3:17 R. V.

I realize most fully and gladly that the points on which the evangelical churches differ are as nothing compared with those in which they agree. I participate most joyfully in that growing sense of the unity of all believers in Christ which has been one of the striking features of our modern Christian consciousness. In fact, the differences in the week-to-week preaching of the various denominations are differences not so much in substance of doctrine as in emphasis and point of view.

But the emphasis and point of view are not unimportant. While they do not affect the fundamentals, they go far to shape and color one's religious experience, and to determine the type of Christian into which one will develop.

Among the famous Christians of history there is one, it seems to me, who stands as the typical representative of that doctrinal attitude and emphasis which in

modern times we call Presbyterian. I refer to the Apostle Paul. "Brethren," he says, "be ye imitators together of me." Let us consider some of the points comprehended in this injunction.

Background of Eternal Love.

Let us note for one thing that Paul viewed his Christian experience against an infinite background of Divine love. This is the Presbyterian doctrine of predestination or eternal election; by which we mean that Paul looked upon his Christian experience, not as an absolute beginning, but as the fruitage of a pre-existing love of God, in the light of which it stood explained and glorified.

Any artist will tell us that a lake or a castle painted without a background appears flat, superficial, trivial. It is the background of wood or sky or mountain that gives it dignity, proportion and truth to nature. The traveler in England may look at her Abbey, her Parliament Houses, her Tower, her cathedrals and monuments and battlefields, but if he knows nothing of English history, he sees them with blind eyes. To be seen aright, they must be looked at against the background of England's mighty past, out of which they sprang, and in whose light alone they can be understood and appreciated.

As in nature and national life, so it is

in spiritual life. The life of God in the soul Paul always saw against that infinite background of Divine love out of which it came, in whose light alone it could be appreciated, the contemplation of which never failed to thrill Paul's heart with a rapture of adoring gratitude.

How does he begin his letter to the Ephesians? "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, according as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself."

To the Thessalonians he writes: "We are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth."

To Timothy he writes: "God hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began."

Our religious life is no mushroom growth of a day. It roots back into a past eternity. I remember as vividly as if

it were yesterday the spot where I was standing years ago when this Pauline conception first became real to me; when there broke upon my mind the amazing truth that before creation's dawn, before the morning stars sang together or the sons of God shouted for joy, away back "in the beginning" God had a thought of me, and that thought was love. Before He found a place for the universe in His hand He had found a place for me in His heart. As He says in Jeremiah, "Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee."

Divine Constancy.

Let us note again that Paul had a victorious confidence in the constancy of this Divine love. This is our Presbyterian doctrine of final perseverance; by which we mean that Paul believed with his whole heart that God's love for him was not only from everlasting, but to everlasting; and, having yielded himself to the mighty current of that love, he never doubted whither it would bear him.

"We know," he says, "that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens."

"Absent from the body and present with the Lord."

Looking death in the face, he calmly says: "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me in that day."

This joyful conviction of the unchanging steadfastness of the Divine love he labors to impart to his fellow-Christians. To the Philippians he writes: "Being confident of this very thing that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ." To the Romans he writes: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Sovereignty and Providence.

Let us note again that Paul magnified the sovereign, all-embracing all-controlling purpose of God.

How are the affairs of men and the universe governed? To this stupendous question Paul answers, "According to the

purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will." This Divine purpose embraces and controls what? "All things," says Paul, or, as our catechism words it, "whatsoever comes to pass."

Paul's creed is not that "whatever must be, must be," but that whatever God has decreed and purposed shall be. The one expression attributes the course of events to a blind mechanical necessity, the other to the intelligent purpose of a personal God. The one is fatalism, the other is the Presbyterian doctrine of Divine Sovereignty, Foreordination, Providence.

The Bible does not say, "Whatever must be, must be." It says: "That that is determined shall be done." It says again: "The Lord of hosts hath sworn, saying, 'Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand.'" Both in Scripture and in our Standards the glorious truth stands clear that our human lives and our sensitive human hearts are held, not in the iron cog-wheels of a vast and pitiless Fate, not in the whirling loom of a crazy Chance, but in the Almighty hands of an infinitely good and wise God.

Unspeakably comforting it is to the Christian heart, amid the storms and darkness of this earthly pilgrimage, to

know that every trial, every burden, every bereavement, every sorrow has been foreseen and foreappointed by a wisdom that cannot err and by a love that cannot change—

"That every cloud, that spreads above
And veileth love, itself is love."

Instinctively in its sorrow the heart clings to this faith, feeling that in fatherly kindness the affliction was foreordained, for reasons wise though unknown, and saying in trust though it be in tears, not, "It is chance; it is ill-fortune," but "It is the Lord, let Him do what seemeth Him good." "For we know," says Paul, "that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." And that purpose of good to us for which all things work together, is just this, to make us Christ-like. So Paul declares in the next sentence, "For whom He did foreknow He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son." To the children of God the Divine Providence is simply their Father's training-school, in which every event both great and small is an appointed lesson, set for them by the hand of infinite love, to bring out in them more and more the beauteous image of their Redeemer.

But does not this Divine purpose, so prominent in Paul's mind and creed, do

away with human freedom or the necessity of human effort? A striking illustration to the contrary we find in Paul's own experience. On his voyage to Caesar at Rome, the vessel is caught in a violent storm and driven helpless and half-sinking before the unceasing fury of the tempest. God says to Paul: "Fear not; thou must be brought before Caesar, and behold I have given thee all them that sail with thee." Here is Divine foreordination—all shall be saved. Shortly after, as the sailors are secretly preparing to escape in the boat from the doomed ship, Paul says to the centurion and soldiers: "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved." Here is free agency and the efficiency of second causes, liberty in the midst of certainty, a human will that CAN. The soldiers cut the boat adrift, the vessel is wrecked, but all escape safe to land. Here are two undeniable facts: "All shall be saved;" "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved." Here are two co-operating factors, Divine foreordination and human free agency. It was God's purpose to save all lives on the ship. It was Paul's purpose to use the human means within his reach. God has a purpose and is at work. Paul has a purpose and is at work. And the result of the forces correlated and co-working is the saving of all on board, the exact fulfilment

of the pre-announced "purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will."

The Presbyterian Church follows Paul in laying a tremendous emphasis on the Divine name, as, with uplifted radiant face, she says: "The LORD reigneth; let the earth rejoice."

Exaltation of God.

And that leads us directly to our next statement, that Paul had an ineffable sense of the Divine transcendence, of the infinite goodness and greatness of God. Says Prof. George P. Fisher, of Yale University: "A profound sense of the exaltation of God is the keynote of Calvinism." It was also the keynote of Paul's religion.

Paul had found from experience what every thinker has discovered, that if one thinks far enough along any line, he comes to a mystery. Think of God, and you come to the mystery of the Trinity. Think of Jesus Christ, and you come to the mystery of the Incarnation. Think of human conduct, and you face the mystery of how to reconcile the certain fact of Divine Sovereignty with the equally certain fact of free agency.

Look out on the orderings of Providence, and you see dark mysteries of inequality and apparent injustice. Think back along human history, and you arrive at that

initial mystery into which every other mystery in religion roots back, of why God permitted sin to enter the world. What is 'true of religion is equally true of science and philosophy. In these realms also, think far enough in any direction, and you reach an insoluble mystery. And the simple reason of it is that the finite is encompassed on every side by the infinite, which must forever outreach the utmost grasp and measure of the finite.

To these surrounding and challenging mysteries Paul had one triumphant answer. That answer was "God." Paul knew that in that infinite Mind and Heart lay the holy and loving solution of every problem and the holy and loving explanation of every mystery. A rejoicing sense of the absolute goodness, wisdom and all-sufficiency of God was the heart of Paul's religion, as it is the heart of Calvinism.

In those profound ninth, tenth and eleventh chapters of Romans, Paul contemplates some of the darkest mysteries of the Divine dealing, but the survey, instead of raising doubts of God, furnishes but fresh cause for adoring wonder, and brings him to his knees crying, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past tracing out! For who hath known the

mind of the Lord or who hath been His counsellor? For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things; to whom be the glory forever, amen."

Right Use of Reason.

Let us note again that Paul laid great stress in religion upon the right use of the human reason.

There is and has always been a type of Christians who would make religion merely a sentimental and emotional thing. They put no thought into it. They know little and care less for doctrine. They eschew theology. And as for a dogma, it is but a cur to be kicked about the streets. It is such Christians as these that justify, perpetuate and spread abroad the ruinous impression that Christianity has nothing to do with the reason; that it shrinks from the test of reason; that it moves entirely in the region of the sentiments and emotions.

This type of religion is not the Pauline type. Paul believed in and honored the human reason. He did not think of it as the measure of truth, for there are realms of truth, as we have seen, which transcend our human grasp. But he looked upon it as the divinely given instrument for the investigation of truth, the testing of truth, the teaching of truth, and the defense of truth.

In the first epistle to the Thessalonians, written when there was probably no other portion of the New Testament in existence, he lays down a principle of supreme importance. "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good." "Bring everything to the test of enlightened reason; use all your God-given faculties upon it; and hold fast what you find to be good." He exhorts Timothy to study, to give attendance to reading and to doctrine. His own sermons and letters are masterpieces of thought. In them he lays a mighty grip, not only on the feelings, but on the reasoning powers of his converts, that they might be established in the sound doctrine, and able also to convince the gainsayers. "In malice," he says, "be babes, but in mind be men."

This intelligent type of Christianity has always been, as the world knows, the characteristic type of the Presbyterian Church. She has been pre-eminently and pronouncedly a doctrinal and teaching Church. Her standards of mental training and sound scholarship for the ministry have been the highest known among the churches; and for centuries among all the nations where she has flourished, she has been the powerful promoter of education. Says a former United States Commissioner of Education: "The Presbyterians, by universal consent, stand for intelligence."

A religion that does not inspire and exalt the emotions is no religion; but a religion that is emotional merely or mainly is almost sure to evaporate before the sun reaches noon. Our Church believes that the men and women who are best able to bear the burden and heat of the day, and who are found at their work when the sun goes down, are the men and women whose Christian faith is rooted and grounded in enlightened reason. Her appeal has always been that of Paul, "In malice be babes, but in mind be men."

The Goal of Character.

Paul laid a supreme emphasis upon character. He loved and preached the great doctrines because he knew that they alone could nourish and build up great characters. No man ever realized more vividly than Paul that truth is in order to godliness.

In his epistle to the Romans we see him adding truth to truth, in a masterly and majestic series, till in the twelfth chapter the purpose of it all leaps into view: "Therefore, brethren, I beseech you by the mercies of God that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed."

In another epistle the glorious truths are marshaled one after another till in the seventh chapter comes the impact of them all: "Therefore, having these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

In another brief epistle the profound doctrines of election, predestination, regeneration, atonement are all made to lead up to this supreme appeal: "Therefore, I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called."

And so in all Paul's epistles; his supreme aim and achievement for himself and his converts was character.

Does he stand here also as the type of the followers of John Calvin? Has the Pauline creed produced in them the Pauline character? Let history answer.

Said James Anthony Froude, the famous historian and professor of history at Oxford, himself not a Calvinist: "The Calvinists abhorred as nobody of men ever more abhorred all conscious mendacity, all impurity all moral wrong of every kind so far as they could recognize it. Whatever exists at this moment in England and Scotland of conscientious fear of doing evil is the remnant of the convictions which were branded by the Calvinists into the people's hearts."

The early edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, toward the close of its prejudiced article on predestination, states that it "feels bound in justice to make this remark" that Calvinists have been "the highest honor of their own ages and the best models for imitation of every succeeding age."

The mature conclusion of Thomas Carlyle, after a lifetime of biographical and historical study, was: "That Calvinism had produced in all countries in which it really dominated a definite type of character and conception of morals which was the noblest that had yet appeared in the world."

Scores of such testimonies I could give. One more must suffice. It is from John Morley, the English statesman and author, the friend and biographer of Gladstone. Himself an agnostic, he cannot be accused of partiality, yet he says, in his recent life of Cromwell: "Calvinism has exalted its votaries to a pitch of heroic moral energy that has never been surpassed. They have exhibited an active courage, a resolute endurance, a cheerful self-restraint, an exulting self-sacrifice, that men count among the highest glories of the human conscience."

Beyond question the Pauline type of character has come down to us through our Calvinist forefathers. God grant that

we may pass it on to the generations yet to come.

Spiritual Versus Ceremonial.

Let us note again that Paul had small thought or care for external forms and rites as compared with inward spiritual life and truth.

In the early Church some were great sticklers for circumcising the converts, while others bitterly opposed it. As a matter of expediency Paul circumcised Timothy, and when some tried to make it a matter of necessity he refused to circumcise Titus. From Paul's spiritual point of view such excitement over a mere outward ceremony was much ado about nothing. "Circumcision," he says, "is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God."

In another church there was hot discussion and sharp division over what Christians should eat and not eat; in regard to which Paul lays down the great spiritual principle that "The Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost."

Even the ceremony of baptism, though a ministerial act, Paul separates by an immense distance from his higher ministerial functions. To the Corinthians he writes: "I baptized none of you save Crispus and Gaius, and also the house-

hold of Stephanas. Besides I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel."

This was Paul's attitude and this has always been the attitude of our Church. To the preaching of the Gospel she has ever given the place of honor in her public worship and has always thought far more of the spirit of worship than of the form and order of worship. Realizing that as outward forms multiply they invariably tend to become the cheap and showy substitute for inward spiritual life, our Church has always stood for a decent and orderly simplicity of worship. Her attitude toward mere externals appears in the humorous reply of an old Scotch elder, when sounded on the burning question whether or not his minister should wear a gown, "Let him attend to his own wardrobe; he may preach in his shirt sleeves for aught I care, if he only preaches the truth as it is in Christ."

Church Organization.

Let us note, further, that a fully organized Pauline church had elders and deacons.

The words elder and bishop in Paul's language are different names for the same church officer. Every elder was a bishop, and every bishop was an elder. I could

easily prove this by a few quotations from Paul, but it will be sufficient to cite the statement of Bishop Lightfoot, the most scholarly prelate of the Church of England. "It is a fact," he says, "now generally recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament the same officer in the church is called indifferently bishop or elder."

When Paul, therefore, writing to the Philippian church, addresses his letter "to the saints at Philippi with the bishops and deacons," we see what the apostolic form of church organization was; and we note that the Presbyterian form is the same, with two kinds of officers in each church, bishops or elders, and deacons.

Condition of Membership.

Despite his emphasis upon doctrine, Paul recognized but one condition of membership in the Church of Christ.

When the heathen jailer cried out: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" the instant reply was: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house." He believed, and on the ground of that faith Paul received him by baptism into the visible body of Christ's people.

When churches prescribe conditions of membership other than the simple condi-

tions of salvation they are guilty of the unscriptural incongruity of making it harder to get into the Church than into Heaven.

Here again the Pauline is the Presbyterian practice. Our Church demands nothing whatever for admission to her fold except a credible profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The applicant is not asked to subscribe to our Standards or assent to our theology. He is not examined as to his orthodoxy, but only as to his faith in and obedience to Christ. If he trusts and obeys Christ as his personal Saviour and Lord, the door of the Presbyterian Church is open to him, and all the privileges of her communion are his.

Attitude to Other Christians.

Let us note again that Paul cherished a most liberal and brotherly spirit toward other Christians of every name and class.

Many of the Corinthian believers had denied Paul's apostleship and renounced his leadership. The church was split into rival sects. Some called themselves Paul Christians, and some Peter Christians, and some Apollos Christians, and a fourth class went the others one better and called themselves Christ Christians.

To this Corinthian church Paul gives a lesson of brotherhood in the very opening of his epistle. He gathers them all and

all other Christian believers into his big, brotherly embrace as he begins, "Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the Church of God which is at Corinth, with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, their Lord and ours: grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Imbued with the Pauline spirit, our Standards are said to be the only ones in existence which make explicit and authoritative recognition of other evangelical churches as "true branches of the Church of Jesus Christ." Our Confession of Faith declares that our fellowship and communion "is to be extended unto all those in every place, who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus."

We dismiss members to Baptist, Episcopal and other Christian churches in precisely the same form and with the same affectionate confidence as though we were transferring them to churches of our own name. Returning good for evil, we recognize our Episcopal fellow-clergyman as a true minister of Christ and our immersionist brother as having been validly baptized. We unchurch no true Christian. We have no crochet or peculiarity of any kind to dig a gulf between us and other followers of our Lord. We respond with all our hearts to the "Amen"

of the Methodists. We join with our brethren in any psalmody that puts the crown upon the brow of Jesus. And most lovingly do we invite our fellow Christians of every name and denomination to partake with us of the emblems of His broken body and shed blood. Like St. Paul we say both in word and act: "We are all one body in Christ."

Devotion to Christ.

Finally, we cannot fail to see that in Paul's breast there glowed a martyr spirit of devotion to Christ.

To his friends he said, when they sought to dissuade him from the dangerous path of duty, "What mean ye to weep and to break my heart? For I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And nine years later he did lay down his life with joy "for the name of the Lord Jesus."

How does our Church stand this last and greatest test of the Pauline spirit? With humble pride I reply that the Presbyterian has been the martyr Church of history. In those days when spiritual tyranny was numbering its victims by the hundreds of thousands; when in England, Scotland, Switzerland, Holland, France, men had to recant their faith or seal their testimony with their blood, nearly all the

martyrs were Calvinists. Calvinism has nerved more men and women to die for Christ, with thanksgiving in their hearts and psalms upon their lips, than any other creed.

Said the Methodist Conference in its address to the Presbyterian Alliance of 1896: "Your Church has furnished the memorable and inspiring spectacle, not simply of a solitary heroic soul here and there, but of generations of faithful souls ready for the sake of Christ and His truth to go cheerfully to prison and to death. This rare honor you rightly esteem as the most precious part of your priceless heritage."

My hearers, are we worthy to appear in this great succession? Are we worthy to march under a banner baptized in the blood of martyrs in number without number? We are worthy, if we can say with Paul, "To me to live is Christ; yea, I am ready not to be bound only but to die for the name of the Lord Jesus."

NOTE.

A full discussion of this subject is found in Dr. Smith's book, "The Creed of Presbyterians," which may be had of the Presbyterian Committee of Publication, Richmond, Va. Price: Paper, 25 cents; cloth, 50 cents.

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