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ARTICLE III.

IS PAUL A COMPETENT WITNESS?

BY REV. EDWARD F. WILLIAMS.

ONE of the most important questions we can ask relates to the confidence we are justified in placing in the testimony which Paul gives concerning the Person and the Redemptive Work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Few deny that Paul himself believes in the deity of Jesus, that he preaches this belief of his to others, or that he affirms as a fact not to be set aside that the death of Christ is the ground upon which God forgives sin. Is this testimony true? Can we accept it without modification, and with it testimony in reference to related doctrines or fundamental truths of the gospel furnished by this leader in the early church?

The importance of this inquiry appears when we remember that the position is sometimes taken, that in order to learn accurately the teaching of the apostles as to primitive Christianity, we must confine ourselves to the first three Gospels, or the Synoptics, and receive as of secondary value the testimony which comes to us through the Fourth Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles. The Fourth Gospel, it is said, is of late or uncertain date, is a semi-philosophical or mystical treatise in which the reports of the words and deeds of Jesus are ideal rather than historically exact. The book of the Acts, some affirm, does not give an account of events which actually occurred, but was written to show how the opposing schools of Peter and Paul were harmonized, while the Epistles of Paul and the remaining books of the New Testament are to be used as

aids in filling out the mental picture we fashion from information obtained from Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Logically, therefore, no doctrine can be emphasized as essential unless it be clearly taught, or at least implied, in the first three Gospels. Going "back to Christ" with this presupposition as to the character of the New Testament, we can discredit every statement in it which is not first made in the Synoptics, or treat it as of secondary importance, and reject as of doubtful value those special doctrines which seem to have had a firmer hold upon the minds of Peter and Paul and the author of the Fourth Gospel than upon the minds of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We can go further, and throw doubt upon the historic accuracy of more than three-quarters of the New Testament, and with even more confidence call in question the credibility of the Old Testament. With the historical books of the Old Testament out of the way, and the doctrine of Evolution, as it is sometimes held, accepted as our guide through the earlier eras, it is not a difficult task to reduce the scriptural system of sacrifices to a relic of superstition, the prophecies to conjectures of gifted and observant men, the fulfilment of which is confined to the period in which they lived, to make the Old Testament a book of religion higher in grade and purer in its teachings than the Vedas or than the writings of Confucius or Buddha, but with no rightful claim to the position which Jews and Christians have unitedly ascribed to it as a book from God, and unique in the literature of the world.

Having proceeded thus far, we can limit our field of interpretation to the first three Gospels, and even here be under the necessity of examining only those passages where agreement is absolute, since if expressions occur which are peculiar to a single Gospel they must be explained in such a way as to bring them into harmony with statements of similar intent in the other two Gospels. One

can thus rid one's self of the obligation to accept the account of the supernatural birth of Jesus as historical, or to believe him to be more than a man in whom God dwelt to an unusual degree, or to look upon his death as a prearranged event in a divine plan, and as forming the ground upon which forgiveness of sin is rendered possible. Those who manage thus to persuade themselves that a large part of the Bible is unhistorical, that the evangelical doctrines as formerly held are untrustworthy, still admit, many of them at any rate, the uniqueness of the position of Jesus among men. His ethical teachings are admired and made prominent. We have a gospel of love, of social relations, beautiful pictures of a kingdom of God, but no terrific denunciations of sin and guilt, no proclamation of indispensable conditions of faith and personal righteousness which one must meet before one can obtain citizenship in that kingdom.

We do not deny that there are those who, although placing the prime emphasis upon the testimony of the Synoptics, accept also, as of great, even if of secondary, importance, the testimony of men like Paul, Peter, and John. For so much we are grateful. But what we want to be sure of is this, Can we trust Paul and Peter and John absolutely? Or must we take their words with some hesitation or doubt as to their exact historical value? Or, limiting the question to the one person whose witness to Jesus we are now considering, Is the testimony of Paul the learned Jew inferior in value to that of Matthew the publican, who was one of the twelve, or to that of Mark, who was not one of the twelve, or to that of Luke, who was also outside the apostolic body, and about whose conversion we have no accurate knowledge? In other words, is the testimony of Mark and Luke, who owe their position as witnesses for Christ to the relation they bear to Peter and Paul, to be accepted, and that of the principals to be

rejected? From the standpoint of an unprejudiced critic such a position seems singular and unjustifiable. But, inasmuch as it has been assumed, and that too by men whose opinions we cannot afford to overlook, we are compelled in self-defense, or rather as earnest seekers after the truth, to ask why such a man as Paul is not a credible witness to that portion of the gospel which he presents, or why we should seek to pare down his words so as to bring them into what we think to be harmony with statements in the first three Gospels? Are we sure that there is in reality any disagreement between them?

We require of a witness that he be personally acquainted with the facts in regard to which he testifies, that he know them at first hand, that his opportunities for knowing them be abundant and complete, that he actually make use of these opportunities, and that his character for veracity be well established. The testimony of a man with these qualifications is immensely increased in value, or convincing power, when it comes from a person whose previous attitude toward that about which he testifies has been an attitude of uncompromising hostility; so that, in giving his testimony, not only does he abandon the religious belief he has received from his forefathers, but sacrifices all his cherished hopes of life, and in addition devotes himself to a career which, in this world, promises no other reward than that of a good conscience.

That all these conditions involved in the formation of a trustworthy witness are met in the case of Paul, no candid student of his life can successfully deny. It should also be remembered that Paul wrote some of his letters at as early a date as that assigned to the Synoptics. Nor may we overlook the fact that Luke did not compose the treatise which bears his name till after he had been associated with Paul for a considerable time, and had learned to look at the person of our Lord, and to consider the nature and

purpose of his mission on earth from the standpoint of Paul; that Mark, to some extent certainly, had been under the influence of Paul, though to a greater extent under that of Peter, before he wrote the second Gospel. Why then should we accept the testimony of Mark and Luke as unquestionable, and treat that coming from Peter and Paul as of doubtful value? Is it because Mark and Luke write of events which occurred in the daily life of Jesus, that they report his words and deeds without comment, while Paul, especially, dwells upon the teachings of Jesus in their world-wide and universal significance, and upon conclusions drawn from them through their application to human need? Is it to be doubted that Paul had as good an opportunity to gather material for a Gospel like one of the Synoptics as Mark or Luke, or that, had he made use of this opportunity and written a Gospel, that Gospel would have been as credible as either of the three we now have? Why withhold confidence when he writes as he does in the Epistles? He is writing to intelligent people who have accepted Christ as their Saviour, and are anxious to know more fully and accurately the reasons for their faith in him, and to be instructed as to the kind of life they ought to lead. Can we not trust a man like Paul when he is presenting his views on subjects like these? Is it going too far, to say that Paul's testimony concerning the Deity of Christ, the nature and purpose of his mission, is as worthy of confidence as the statements in the Sermon on the Mount? In the latter we have statements of universal truths which need only to be read to be accepted; in the Epistles we have statements of doctrines and experiences which we need only test for ourselves to be satisfied of their truthfulness.

It is sufficient here to refer to a few only of the more prominent features of Paul's life. He was born in Tarsus, "no mean city," the capital of Cilicia. Here he

began his education as a Jewish youth of promise, and completed it at one of the most famous rabbinical schools of Jerusalem. As a zealous follower of "the law" of the stricter sort, he seems almost immediately, after finishing his education, to have begun to persecute those who, a few years later, were called "Christians," and about whose peculiar belief, and the reasons for it, he must have had many opportunities to learn. Suddenly he changed his opinions as to the character of the religious sect whose members he had pursued even unto death, associated himself with them, and became an earnest defender of the person whom he had regarded as an impostor or a fanatic, and whose influence he had sought to withstand and destroy. For the sake of argument one might admit that the account of the conversion of Paul is somewhat exaggerated, unhistorical; but one cannot escape the conviction that he went through some sort of an experience somewhere, on one of his persecuting tours in his early manhood, which changed entirely his mental attitude toward the teachings of Jesus, as well as his personal relations toward Jesus and his followers. That Paul bears favorable testimony to Jesus and his followers after this experience no one denies.

Nor does any one, so far as I am aware, deny his competency to testify concerning what he regards as his own conversion, or that he is justified in speaking of that experience as an incontrovertible fact in his life. This testimony is valuable in proving that such a man as Jesus once lived in Jerusalem, taught doctrines which seemed to contradict those deemed essential in Judaism, died on the cross and was buried. In other words, Paul's testimony concerning himself strengthens our confidence in him as a witness for historical events in the life of Jesus. Paul must have met men in Jerusalem and elsewhere who had known Jesus personally, had talked with him, had listened to his discourses, had witnessed his miracles. He himself

may have been in Jerusalem when the opposition to Jesus was drawing to its height, when the question of his arrest and condemnation to death as a blasphemer was under frequent, if not constant, discussion in Jewish circles, when the doctrines he had taught were considered, when after the crucifixion the resurrection was reported, when rumors were rife as to frequent appearances in bodily form to the disciples, when the events of Pentecost and the rapid increase in the number of those who believed in the Messiahship of Jesus were subjects of common conversation. As a defender of his faith as a Jew, Paul must have persuaded himself that it was true, and that he had good grounds on which to justify his career as a persecutor.

Such a person is certainly competent to speak about another person in whose opinions and deeds he himself has a peculiar interest. Paul must have known many of the facts about Jesus even before he made up his mind to persecute his followers. Possibly he may have seen him in or near Jerusalem. But, as has been said, he must have seen many who knew him well. When he spoke of Jesus he spoke of one about whose actual existence and mission as a religious teacher he had full and abundant knowledge. Nor was there any reason why he should not report facts as they were. Most New Testament students accept the testimony which Paul gives to the historical character of Jesus the man, but with not a few the doubt begins when Paul claims that Jesus is more than man, is the Son of God, and therefore divine in his nature, and has been sent into the world on a divine mission. The doubt grows stronger as Paul affirms that this man rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, where he cherishes a personal interest in those who dwell on the earth. The doubt reaches its climax when the supernatural character of Jesus is affirmed, and he is presented to his followers, and by them to all other men, as worthy of unwavering confidence,

and as an object of worship. Without denying the competency of Paul to testify as to matters of history in the life of Jesus, many say they cannot receive his testimony in matters which transcend the realm of human experience. But Paul was keen enough to discern the truth wherever he might find it, and so well balanced as to render it improbable that he would be thrown off his guard in the search after truth by reports of exciting scenes connected with Pentecost, accounts of miraculous deliverances from prison, or the boldness and earnestness of those who had been known as the personal adherents of Jesus. These events served at first rather to confirm him in the opinion that Jesus had died as an impostor and that his followers were self-deceived fanatics.

If we keep in mind the endowments of Paul, his age (at least thirty at the time of his conversion), the thoroughness of his Jewish training, his associates, his prospects, the social position which as a Christian he forfeited, we can see at once that he would not change his belief as "a Pharisee of the Pharisees," or his attitude with reference to Jesus, save for reasons which to him were irresistibly convincing. In accepting Jesus as the Messiah, apparently he had everything to lose. Were the claims of Jesus grounded in fact, then neither he nor any other reasonable man could hesitate to admit them. That Paul did admit them, and defend them, is evidence that he held them to be both reasonable and true. That he risked his life and endured constant hardships for a generation without wavering, in their proclamation and in their defense, is proof of his opinion of the man whom his brethren as to the flesh put to death. Furthermore, he speaks on all occasions from personal experience, as one who knows, as one who has made trial of Christ and his salvation. He has seen the Lord. He has recognized him as his Lord. From him he has learned what the gospel is. He has found it

to be, what its author declared it to be, power, peace, assurance of eternal life.

How emphatic is his testimony as given in Galatians, Romans, and Corinthians, letters about whose genuineness there is no question. "For I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not after man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. i. 11, 12). This is the person, writes Paul, who "gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us out of this present evil world, according to the will of our God and Father" (i. 4). Nor is this all: "I have been crucified with Christ: yet I live; and yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me" (ii. 20). The appreciation of the value of this gift appears in the words which follow: "I do not make void the grace of God, for if righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nought" (iii. 21). "The righteous shall live by faith; and the law is not of faith. . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us" (iii. 11-13). "God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them which were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (iv. 4, 5). Here is testimony as to deliverance from the power of the law, and from its curse, through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The deliverance is possible because the Son of God was made a curse for us. This testimony, which from this single Epistle might be greatly extended, the Galatians certainly accepted as true. They knew that its author believed it to be true, that he wrote to them out of his own experience, and that he had endured many hardships in preaching to them the gospel to which in his letter he constantly refers.

Testimony equally important and no less striking is furnished by the Epistle to the Romans. In the first chapter Jesus is affirmed to be the Son of God, "promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures, concerning his Son, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead" (ver. 3, 4). Paul says that his message which concerns itself with the life, death, resurrection, and teachings of this person, is his gospel, the gospel with which he has been put in trust, and which he presents not as his own gospel, but as "the gospel of his Son" (i. 9). In this gospel there is "revealed a righteousness of God" which is in contrast to that "of the law," which is "by faith unto faith." This gospel is "the power of God unto every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (i. 16, 17). This gospel is for all, for "there is no distinction; for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, by his blood, to show his righteousness, because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God; for the showing of his righteousness at this present season; that he might himself be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus" (iii. 22-26). The same thought is expressed in chapter x. 4, "For Christ is the end of the law unto righteousness to every one that believeth." He who has this righteousness is at peace with God. "Being justified by faith, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . and let us rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (v. 1). The ground of this peace is the fact that Christ died for us. "For while we were yet weak, in due season Christ died for the ungodly" (v. 6). "God commendeth his love to us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ

died for us. Much more, then, being justified by his blood, shall we be saved from the wrath of God through him. For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by his life: and not only so, but we rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received this confidence" (v. 8-11). "For if, by the trespass of the one, death reigned through the one, much more shall they that receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one, even Jesus Christ" (v. 17). Nor is this all; for, "if we have become united with him by the likeness of his death, we shall be also by the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away, that so we should no longer be in bondage to sin; for he that hath died is justified from sin. But if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him; knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more: death hath no more dominion over him. For the death that he died, he died unto sin once: but the life that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Even so reckon yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus" (vi. 5-11). "But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto sanctification, and the end eternal life" (vi. 22). Bondage to sin is the source of perpetual struggle and burden. In despair the apostle cries out, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (vii. 24). The joy of this deliverance finds expression in the words, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and death" (viii. 1, 2). The ground of this deliverance is that God, recognizing the weakness and

inability of the law, "sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, condemned sin in the flesh" (viii. 3). Then follow descriptions of the wonderful privileges of the sons of God, who, as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, are to be glorified with him.

Is it said that Paul as a Jew was inclined to explain the death of Christ in accordance with the spirit and original intention of the Jewish sacrifices, and that we should therefore be on our guard lest he pervert for us the actual teachings of Christ? We must not forget that as a Jew Paul was liberal enough to carry the gospel to the Gentiles, and to insist, when one of the twelve stood up against him, that in their acceptance of the gospel they should be subjected to no burden of Jewish ritual. He taught them that men are justified, not by obedience to law, but by faith, and that that is circumcision which is of the heart and not of the flesh. Of all the early preachers of the gospel Paul was freest from Jewish prejudice, and most likely to present the gospel in its actual form and original simplicity.

The testimony given in the letter to the Romans is briefly this: Men are helpless sinners. They cannot be justified before God by an obedience rendered in their own strength, to the law written in their own hearts, or by obedience to the Jewish law. Freedom from condemnation and peace with God come through faith in Jesus Christ, who, as the Son of God and the descendant of David, was sent into the world an offering for sin, that as many as believe in him may have eternal life. The assertion of divine Sonship is unqualified, and the fact affirmed that the death of the divine Son is the only ground of the sinner's justification.

These statements are in harmony with Matt. xxvi. 28, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is shed for many unto remission of sins." That reference is here made to

an expiatory offering, says Meyer, in the edition of 1890, edited by Professor Bernard Weiss, is undeniable. "The words 'unto remission of sins,' added by the evangelist, indicate with perfect accuracy the purpose of the shedding of blood in the establishment of the covenant, since that man only who has been freed from guilt through forgiveness of his sins (the ground of the offering of blood or the reason for it) can enter into covenant with God." The apostle and the missionary are at one in believing and asserting, that, "without shedding of blood, there is no remission."

In the letters to the Corinthians references to the death of Christ are less frequent than in the letter to the Romans, but they are none the less emphatic or clear. The testimony they bring as to the opinion of their author concerning Christ is all the stronger in that these references are, as it were, casual, and not of set purpose. Paul writes as if he took it for granted that his readers would know that the ground of their hope of eternal life is the voluntary death of Christ in their behalf. The quotations must be few. "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" (1 Cor. i. 13.) "We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness; but unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (ver. 23). "Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (ver. 30). "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified" (ii. 2). "Through thy knowledge he that is weak perisheth, the brother for whose sake Christ died" (viii. 2). What assertion could be clearer that Christ died for men? In the fifteenth chapter, in which the mysteries of the resurrection of believers are unfolded and connected with the death and resurrection of Jesus, Paul declares, as of the

utmost importance, that he delivered first of all that which he received, "how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (ver. 3), and that, after appearing to others, he "appeared to him, also, as to one born out of due time, and unworthy to be called an apostle, because he had persecuted the church of God" (ver. 8-9). In the account of the establishment of the Lord's Supper as a perpetual feast for all believers to enjoy, Paul says, "As oft as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come" (xi. 26). On him alone can we rest our faith; for "other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (iii. 11).

In the second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle begs those whom he addresses to remember what the gospel is, "the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. iv. 4). "For the love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all therefore all died; and he died for all, that they which live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto him who for their sakes died, and rose again" (v. 14-15). Still more emphatic is the declaration, "Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf: that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (v. 21). Thus, while in these epistles speaking primarily of the life believers ought to lead, and of the temptations and peculiar sins against which they were to guard themselves, the apostle reminds the Corinthian Christians again and again of their personal indebtedness to Christ, who died for them, that through his death they might be reconciled unto God.

Is such testimony to be rejected because it is the testimony of a person whose manner of thought differed from that of the writers of the first three Gospels, because he was philosophical and abstract in his presentation of truth rather than concrete and direct? Is not the Saviour whom Paul honors, the Saviour of Matthew, of Mark, of Luke?

Does he not, with them, bear witness to the descent of Jesus from the house of David, as well as to his divine Sonship? Does he not speak with as much clearness as they, of the crucifixion of Jesus, of his burial, resurrection, and ascension? Does he not as earnestly as they urge men to find God through faith in his Son? Does he not say more than once that he preaches Christ, and Christ as directly revealed to him from heaven by Christ himself? Why should testimony be set aside because it is presented in a more logical form, with clearer reference to prevailing philosophical and rabbinical opinions, than is done in the Gospels? Paul believed his testimony to be worthy of confidence. Multitudes of those to whom he preached, believed it to be true.

Where it was questioned, as for a time in Corinth, he was at pains to show upon what grounds he was worthy of confidence as an apostle, and equal in dignity to the very chiefest of the apostles. He preached and wrote out of his personal experience. He verified the truths of the gospel before presenting them to others. What he has to give, he gives from knowledge which has come to him through no intermediary, but from Christ himself. This supernatural revelation is so clear and convincing that he can no more set it aside than he can set aside the consciousness of his own existence. He knows what the gospel is. He understands its value for men. That value he has himself tested. What better testimony could we desire? It is independent of that found in the Synoptics, but is in harmony with it. It is given from a point of view which only a man like Paul could occupy. It is colored through and through with his personality. It was a testimony which cost the man who uttered it the loss of everything men count dear in this world, and brought him to a martyr's death. Were this man to visit us to-day, to enter our assemblies and begin to speak "as Paul the

aged," "Paul the prisoner for Jesus' sake," Paul the evangelist, who would venture to call in question his competency to give us the primitive gospel? His personality would be convincing. The tones of his voice, his reverent spirit, his intense sympathy with sinful, unbelieving men, the long years of his service, would compel belief in his message. Were he to assert the supernatural birth of Jesus, the necessity of his death as the ground, and the only ground, upon which God can forgive sin, who of us would withhold confidence in his words? His words are with us in his epistles, in the results of his work. We cannot deny that in native ability he was the equal of any one of the twelve. He was better educated than any one of them. He was as anxious to discover the truth about Jesus as any one of them. As certainly as Matthew the publican, apostle though he was, must Paul have known what Jesus taught, what his teachings were intended to accomplish, what they did accomplish. Nor could he have known less about Jesus than Mark or Luke knew. How then can we escape the conclusion that Paul's testimony as to the fact and nature of sin, the need and ground of its forgiveness, the purpose of the death of Christ, the means we are to use to secure the benefits of that death, is of *prime* importance, and is not to be relegated to a subordinate place among the revelations made to us in the New Testament?