

*HISTORICAL COMMENTARY ON THE EPISTLES
TO THE CORINTHIANS.*

XII. RELATION OF THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH TO THE
CRIME.

THE view stated in § XI., that the crime was a proof of failure to rise above the level of Corinthian Pagan society, and not of declension from the Greek standard, is entirely confirmed by Paul's language in the sequel. It is plain that, in the letter which the Corinthian Church had sent to Paul, the crime was not mentioned.

The Corinthian officials¹ had written to Paul a report of their present condition and prospects. So far were they from feeling any humiliation at the crime and any righteous anger at the criminal (such as Paul considered proper in the circumstances), that the report was full of self-gratulation. They felt how much they had gained by their conversion, how they had advanced in knowledge, in insight, in sympathy with divine things. They were full of hope, and joy, and confidence, and prosperity. They were "puffed up" (v. 2)² and full of "glorying" (v. 6).

The former of these two words is often in Paul's mouth during this letter: elsewhere he only once uses it (*Col.* ii. 18). The second word and its derivatives express the idea that is most typical in both 1 and 2 *Corinthians*.³ The tone of Paul's mind, as he addresses the Corinthians, is greatly determined by their attitude. As he faces them, the thought suggested to him is of persons rather presumptuously and dangerously self-confident and boastful; and he is continually talking of the false and the true grounds for glorying.

¹ See § xiii. ² Φυσιόμαι, iv. 6, 18, 19; v. 2; viii. 1; xiii. 4.

³ *καύχημα, καυχάομαι, καύχησις*, 34 times in *Corinthians*; 16 times in all the rest of the Pauline Epistles.

The Corinthians boasted of their prosperity, primarily of their spiritual prosperity, but also of their worldly success: the hand of God was with them, and aided their enterprises. The paragraph, iv. 6-13, and the references to their wealth, both the true and the false wealth,¹ show this clearly.

It is impossible to suppose that the Corinthian officials suppressed all reference to the crime from desire to conceal their own faults. That is not compatible with other evidence of their character and conduct. It is plain that they had no idea that there was any crime. Had the act been one which was beneath the standard of surrounding Pagan society, the Church must have felt that there was something about it requiring defence, and they would not fail to speak of it, to explain it, to justify it. But their silence shows that they were quite unconscious of anything wrong about it. Their moral judgment remained, in this respect, on its old level, having neither seriously risen nor fallen. It is their callousness, their utter insensibility, that Paul rebukes.

It appears from iv. 18 that one cause for the Corinthian self-gratulation was that Paul was not going to visit them a second time: "some are puffed up, as though I were not coming." This can only mean that a message had been sent, or an impression conveyed to them, that a visit from Paul was not needed—that the Corinthians were doing well, and could go on without a visit to confirm and strengthen them. We have already observed² that the repeated mention in Acts of visiting and thorough confirmation of the Galatian Churches implies the strong need there was for strengthening those Churches; and, conversely, Paul seems to have so put his previous letter,³ stating that he was not at present intending to visit Corinth,

¹ See the quotations and remarks in the *Expositor*, Feb., p. 94.

² *Hist. Comm. Gal.*, p. 403 f.

³ v. 9, a lost letter.

that this was felt to be a compliment to the strength of that Church. We get the distinct impression that during his first two years' residence at Ephesus Paul had been receiving very good news from Corinth, but that at last bad news came to him and immediately called forth the Epistle which we are studying. Timothy was already going to them by way of Macedonia; a letter also was now sent to them by special messenger;¹ and Paul himself was coming, iv. 19.

It may be observed that this is the same procedure which, as we saw reason to understand, occurred in the case of the Galatian Churches. Bad news came from them: Paul at once sent on a letter by a speedy messenger, and himself followed at a short interval. In the Galatian letter he did not so clearly intimate his intention of coming; but his expressed wish that he were now among them (*Gal.* iv. 20) was supplemented by a verbal message.

XIII. SOURCE OF PAUL'S KNOWLEDGE OF THE CRIME.

In studying the difficult questions that arise in connexion with the crime, we ask how and where he got his information about it.

As was stated in the preceding section, he did not get his knowledge from the letter of the Corinthian Church; but he does not state who informed him. It is clearly shown in the Epistle which we are studying that Paul derived information from at least three different sources; and the share of the different sources is marked out with unusual distinctness. Hence this Epistle is specially valuable as a study in regard to Paul's sources of information, and his way of using them and referring to them. The situation is more clearly put in this Epistle than in any other; but

¹ On the messenger, see § XVI.

much that we see in it may be taken as applying to the others. Paul's sources here were three.

1. Information from third parties, travellers who were coming and going. These may without doubt be understood to be Christians: Paul was not likely to discuss with Pagans the conduct of his own "children." In the constant lively intercourse that was going on between Ephesus and Corinth—two neighbouring stations on the great route between East and West—he must have had many opportunities of acquiring information in this way. In some other cases he would not be likely to have such frequent opportunities. There would be far less intercourse between Corinth and Philippi than between Corinth and Ephesus. But travelling was wonderfully common, easy, and certain at that period. Until a very recent time there has never again been in Europe anything comparable to the means and frequency of travel under the Roman Empire.

To this class belonged the representatives of Chloe, i. 9.

2. Paul had received from the Church at Corinth an official letter, reporting good progress and success, asking his advice on various practical questions, stating the opinions held in the Church, and urging certain arguments. We shall find frequent references made to this letter, and quotations from it; for Paul often quotes Corinthian opinion before he corrects or completes it. His advice often must be regarded in the light of their opinions and arguments, before we can properly understand it. He did not require to advise them to do what they were already doing rightly. He directs his advice towards the subjects in which they have to be corrected. Unless this is borne in mind, his advice would sometimes appear one-sided.

A single letter taken apart from a continued correspondence must always be difficult to comprehend. The receivers are on the outlook for a reply to their questions and arguments. They catch the retort which depends for its effect

on their own previous statement. Much in Paul's Epistle is obscure for that reason; and we must always be on the outlook for any hint as to the character of the letter which the Corinthians had sent him.

We shall be ready to suspect quotation—in the first place when an idea recurs over and over again without being one that is obviously and characteristically Pauline: such are the allusions to knowledge, to the freedom which knowledge confers to do all things, to wealth, to boasting and being puffed up—and, in the second place, where any statement stands in marked contrast either with the immediate context or with Paul's known views.

The letter from Corinth was brought by three messengers, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, who are marked out by their names as probably freedmen and men of business (see § VIII.). It is not necessary to suppose that they were sent for the express and single purpose of carrying the letter. It is much more in keeping with ancient custom that some or all of them were going on business to Ephesus, and were entrusted with the letter. This mission gave them additional honour and importance. The Greek cities often employed such envoys (*πρέσβεις*) to Rome, using their services and so economizing expense: the envoys were rewarded with a public inscription recording their services and with the increased dignity at the time.

We may confidently assume that the letter was composed by the officials of the Church. There was not yet, apparently, a single Episkopos; and the Presbyteroi,¹ or a small committee of their number, would most probably be charged with the duty. The view has been stated elsewhere that the institution of a single Episkopos was due in considerable degree to the importance and necessity of maintaining the unity of the entire Church by constant intercommunication

¹ They are doubtless meant as *κυβερνήσεις* xii. 28, *προιστάμενοι* 1 *Thess.* v. 12 (*ηγούμενοι* is not Pauline).

between the scattered parts. A letter, in the last resort, is likely to be mainly the composition of one man.

Considering the character and institutions of a Greek city, we need hardly doubt that the letter was finally submitted to the approval of the entire Ekklesia or Church; but this probably was merely for acceptance or rejection, for no amendment or discussion was now permitted in the meetings of the whole body of citizens under the Empire, while the Christian Ekklesia may be assumed to have felt entire confidence in its directors, and to have forthwith endorsed their composition.

3. The envoys who were honoured with the duty of bearing the letter were doubtless charged with many verbal messages, and practically would give a report to Paul of the state of the community. This would be understood by the whole Church at Corinth; and, where Paul mentions any fact which was not in the letter, the Corinthians would naturally presume that Stephanas and the others were his informants, unless he expressly mentioned some third party.

We must, therefore, conclude that the envoys gave Paul the information which called forth the strong language of the fifth chapter. Probably they showed themselves as unconscious of the serious nature of the crime as the other Corinthians were, and exemplified that lowness of moral standard which Paul rebukes.

XIV. THE JUDGMENT OF PAUL.

After censuring strongly the laxness of the Corinthian judgment on the crime (v. 2), Paul contrasts their indifference with his own severe judgment (v. 3-5). This remarkable passage is a striking example of the difficulty that the nineteenth century must sometimes experience in attempting to understand the thoughts of the first century. It plunges the reader into circumstances and ways of thinking which it is hardly possible for him to comprehend: and he is apt

to interpret the passage by reading into it the ideas of a later time. Some serious misconceptions of it can be cleared away; but we may despair of being able ever fully to understand the meaning that it bore either to the writer or to the original readers.

The exact words are so important that they must be quoted in full: the form differs a little from the Revised Version. "For I, at any rate, being absent in body but present in spirit, have already, as if really present, formed the decision in respect of him that hath so wrought this thing, in the name of the Lord Jesus, you being gathered together and my spirit, in association with the power¹ of our Lord Jesus, to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord."

1. This passage must be connected with the preceding verse, not with the following. The particle *μέν*, with which it opens, is not here to be understood as pointing forward to a following *δέ* (understood or expressed): we must take *μὲν γάρ* together and "connect with the last verse."² It expresses the contrast between the attitude of the Corinthians and the attitude of Paul towards the crime.

2. This passage has been frequently interpreted as describing a formal judicial decision and sentence passed on the offender in the most solemn and awful fashion. So far as I have observed, that grave and solemn sense is universally taken from the words: they are read as carrying with them excommunication and worse, or even, as some say, a miraculous punishment. The fact that here Paul speaks without consulting the Corinthian officials has even been regarded³

¹ To bring out the distinction of *σὺν τῇ δυνάμει* from the usual *ἐν δυνάμει*, which would imply acting "in and with the power of God."

² Quoted from Alford's note on 2 *Cor.* ix. 1, where he refers in illustration to the sentence now before us. Compare Meyer-Heinrici "*das μὲν solitarium ist zu fassen: ich wenigstens.*"

³ So *e.g.* Wordsworth.

as a proof that they had no power in the matter, but that Paul alone, without their presence or assent, was empowered to judge and decide and condemn the guilty person to the extremest penalty both spiritual and physical, merely intimating to the Church the sentence which he had passed.

Any such view can hardly stand the test of reasonable consideration.

(1) It supposes that Paul judges and condemns on mere hearsay evidence—evidence of whose nature he gives the Church no account—without hearing any defence, without giving the accused party any intimation that he is being tried. Such a parody of justice could be paralleled only by the very worst acts attributed to the Inquisition in its worst period.

(2) The supposed sentence of excommunication, and worse than excommunication, remained a mere *brutum fulmen*, which was never put in effect. The Church in Corinth judged the case, and decided on a much milder sentence, which Paul entirely approved (see § XVI.).

(3) Paul does not here represent himself as pronouncing a formal sentence: he continues his remarks in a tone so different as to constitute an extraordinary anticlimax, if the decision and sentence were already pronounced. He discusses the principles involved in judging such a case (assuming that the Corinthians will judge it). He concludes in v. 13 by quoting from *Deuteronomy* xxiv. 7 the sentence to be pronounced on the man who is found guilty; and the sentence is very much milder than that stated in v. 3-5. But it is merely irrational, and unjust to Paul, to suppose (as some practically do) that he first expresses in violent anger too strong a sentence, and then cools down so far as to demand a much milder punishment a little later.

Alford sees that v. 3-5 does not actually convey a formal sentence, and interprets it as "a delegation to the Corinthian Church of a special power, reserved to the Apostles

themselves, of inflicting corporal punishment or disease as a punishment for sin." But there is no word in v. 3-5 that suggests delegation of Paul's power to others: there is merely a statement of Paul's own opinion.

The clue which must guide us is the grammatical construction. We saw that v. 3-5 is to be connected with v. 2. Paul contrasts the indifference of the Corinthians with his own vehement condemnation, not of *this man*, but of any *such person*, *i.e.* any person guilty of such conduct as has been attributed by rumour to this man. This is not a case for inaction: it is a case for instant action, but action according to the rules of justice and moral principle. The lazy, contented, self-satisfaction of the Corinthians must be sharply checked.

The words "I have judged him" (*κέκρικα*), then, do not imply a legal judgment, but an expression of Paul's opinion on a mere report of the case. It is the first step, as it were, in a legal case: the matter has been reported, so to say, to the *prætor*, and he decides that there is a case, and sends it for investigation before the proper tribunal, stating the severe view which the law takes of such cases, if proved.

3. What exactly does Paul mean, and what did the Corinthians understand him to mean, by the terrible words in which he expresses his opinion? Here I confess my inability to decide. It is a case where the habits and ways of thought in another time and amid another people are peculiarly hard to understand or to sympathize with. But we must try at least to place before ourselves some analogous cases.

The expression "to deliver such a one unto Satan" is also employed by Paul in 1 *Timothy* i. 20 about Hymenæus and Alexander, who had made shipwreck concerning the faith, "whom I delivered unto Satan that they might be taught not to blaspheme." But the circumstances there are too obscure to afford any help in the present case.

A path which at least seems promising—though possibly the appearance is only deceptive—is to inquire what meaning the Corinthian readers would attribute to the words. They had been accustomed in their Pagan life to very similar formulæ, in which a person who had been wronged by another and had no other way of retaliating, consigned the criminal to the god, and left the punishment to be inflicted by divine power. These forms played a great part in ancient life, and many examples of them have been preserved to our time. We find divine wrath and punishment thus invoked against thieves, slanderers, poisoners, assassins, an adopted child who had raised his hand against his foster mother, users of false weights, persons who refused to restore money deposited in their care, and so on: even a mere advertisement of lost property was accompanied commonly by a curse consigning to divine punishment any one that found and did not restore the lost article.

In such cases the sufferer, who entrusted his vindication to the divine power, was said to make way for the god as his champion.¹ The god was conceived as a judge, whose power was set in motion by this formal supplication. We know of such actions in two ways—sometimes from the invokers of divine aid, who wrote out and left at the temple a formal statement of their appeal with the reasons for it,² and also regularly commemorated by a dedication and inscription the aid that they had received and the punishment inflicted on the wrong-doer—sometimes from the wrong-doer, who, when punished, recognised his fault, and dedi-

¹ παραχωρεῖν τῇ θεῷ: the goddess is often mentioned instead of the god in these inscriptions, but we need not observe the distinction of sex.

² This class of invocation passes by insensible steps into the class of magical *devotiones*, consigning one's enemies to the gods of death. The essential difference between these classes is that in one the god is invoked to avenge real injury, in the other to gratify personal spite. That is a real and serious difference, and was recognised in ancient times, the latter class being illicit and secret. Yet it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins.

cated an inscription (accompanied doubtless by a gift), confessing his sin and glorifying and propitiating the divine power which had punished him.¹

In these invocations, the god was asked or tacitly expected to punish the wrong-doer by bodily disease; fever—in which the strength wastes through the effect of “subterranean fire” without special affection of any part—was regarded as the favourite weapon of the god; but any bodily affliction which came on the accursed person was regarded, alike by the invoker and by the sufferer, as the messenger or weapon of the god.

The Corinthians who read Paul’s judgment, v. 3-5, could hardly avoid interpreting it by the analogy of that Pagan custom, which had been familiar to them and doubtless often practised by them until about two or three years ago. Even yet they were not very far removed above the old Pagan level. One must ask the question, Would they not take Paul’s judgment as a Christianized form of the Pagan usage? The criminal is handed over to Satan (who, however, is here treated as the instrument in divine hands); and, if there subsequently befell him any bodily suffering, it would be regarded as the divine act to the end that he might repent and learn.

XV. PRINCIPLES IN JUDGING THE CRIME.

Paul proceeds to point out two important considerations which must be taken into account by the Corinthian Church in judging this case.

1. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump,” as the proverb is. One sin and one sinner, if regarded with indifference, may ruin the whole Corinthian Church. The old leaven of their Pagan ways must be completely cleared

¹ Some account of this interesting class of “confessions” is given in *Expository Times*, Oct., 1898-Jan., 1899—“The Greek of the Early Church and the Pagan Ritual,”

out, and they must devote themselves to Christ, to live His life.

The allusion to leaven, at first a mere figure of speech, leads Paul to work out the figure into an allegory. If sin is the leaven, then Christ is the Unleavened, and the life of Christ is the Unleavened Feast; and we Christians ought to keep the Feast, and live the life, in all perfection and purity (v. 7, 8).

It is unjustifiable to find here an allusion to the season of the year when Paul was writing, as if the celebration of the Passover at the moment suggested to him the comparison of Christ with the unleavened Passover bread. As we see, that comparison is suggested by the proverb which he quoted in v. 6.

Moreover, if Paul had been giving instructions to the Corinthians as to how they should celebrate the Passover, he would have done so beforehand, and not in a letter which could not reach them until the feast was ended. It is probable that Paul did write this epistle in the end of winter or the early days of spring, and that xi. 18-34 and x. 1-11 were written with a view to the coming Passover of the year 56 (Friday, March 19, according to Lewin).¹

2. Christians must not associate with immoral persons. Such was the instruction given by Paul to the Corinthians in his previous letter; he now explains (evidently in reply to some criticism on their part), that the rule² must not be taken in the sense that they should exercise a censorship over their Pagan neighbours (v. 12, 13), and refuse to meet them in society.

¹ The date in the autumn of the preceding year (*St. Paul the Traveller*, p. 275), is erroneous. The two Epistles were not separated by so long an interval as that dating would require. Paul, when once his attention was directed to the unsatisfactory state of the Corinthian Church, never relaxed his efforts (as we hope to show in discussing the Second Epistle: see also § XVI.).

² The rendering of *vv.* 9, 11 in R.V. seems correct. It takes the aorist in 9 as referring to the old letter, and in 11 to the new; but this harshness is mitigated by the context (especially *vv.*) and the general sense of the passage.

The tone of society and the code of morals in Pagan cities were of so low a standard that, if the Christians carried out that extreme principle, they would have to go out of the world altogether. But it was always part of Paul's teaching that his converts should not retire from the world, but should live their life in the State, and try to conquer the world around them. The Corinthian Church should confine its judgment and censorship to its own members. But within its own bounds it must exercise strict supervision, maintain a high standard of morality and conduct, and expel any unworthy member. Christians must refuse all intercourse with a Christian who has sunk from (or failed to rise to) the necessary standard of Christian morality. They must not even eat in his company: this implies that they are not to invite him or accept his invitation, but not that they are to go away from any society in which he appears (for that is covered by v. 10).

Such are the chief principles involved in judging the crime; and the judging of it is a duty that must be discharged.

XVI. THE RESULT.

It would be interesting to know what was the issue of this case. The references which are made to it in 2 *Corinthians* are too vague to show exactly what occurred, but they throw some light on the progress of the case.

It was, probably, not very long after sending off this letter to Corinth that Paul left Ephesus. He had intended to remain there till Pentecost was past, but the riot of some of the trades connected with the temple forced him to leave prematurely. He was at this time feeling very anxious and despondent about the Corinthians, as he says in the opening of 2 *Corinthians*; and this feeling lasted through his stay at Troas, where he went on leaving Ephesus. He expected to meet Titus in Troas, with news from Corinth;

but in this he was disappointed, and his anxiety drove him on to Macedonia, where he found Titus, and was cheered with a good report.¹

Titus was able to assure him that the Corinthians had been deeply touched and stirred up by Paul's letter. Their insensibility to the serious nature of the crime had disappeared; they realized its true nature; they were full of sorrow and of repentance; they apologised for their conduct, explaining how they had only failed to see clearly, but had not wilfully erred; they were eager to judge the case and to punish the offender (2 *Cor.* vii. 7-11).

But now a new consideration came in. The offender had been as unconscious of the crime, and as free from deliberate intention to err, as the rest of the Church. He proved this by the profound sorrow and humiliation which he felt. In those circumstances, when the trial was held, the sentence inflicted was not so severe as Paul had indicated. But, clearly, this result was not unanimous; a minority were of opinion that they should implicitly obey Paul, and inflict the full sentence.

This situation was reported by Titus; and Paul replied (2 *Cor.* ii. 6-10) that the punishment inflicted by the majority was sufficient, and a severer one was not required, as suggested by the minority.² They should now feel able to forgive and console the offender, lest in his humiliated position he might despair and "be swallowed up with his overmuch sorrow."

Paul had regarded this as a case testing whether the Corinthians were obedient (2 *Cor.* ii. 9); *i.e.*, probably, obedient to God rather than obedient to Paul. Now he knew that the Christian idea was raising them gradually to

¹ Titus was making the coasting voyage from Corinth to Troas along the Macedonian shores, and hence Paul could count on meeting him all the sooner if he sailed along the coast in the opposite direction.

² This is implied by "contrariwise" and "the more" (marginal reading rightly) in 2 *Cor.* ii. 6-7.

its level. He cordially accepts their decision, and forgives him whom they forgive.

Incidentally we remark that it is hardly possible to avoid the conclusion that Titus carried to Corinth Paul's letter (1 *Cor.*)¹ and was to bring back an answer and to report on the case. Then, when Paul had to leave Ephesus suddenly, he must have sent a message to Titus bidding him come round by the coasting voyage to Troas. Finally, when his arrival was delayed, Paul went on and met him in Macedonia, perhaps at Neapolis, the harbour of Philippi.

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JOSEPH: AN ETHICAL AND BIBLICAL STUDY.

PART III.

“THE BLANK IN THE TENT.”

(GEN. XXXVII. 29-35.)

THE most absolutely interesting track in all this world to follow is that of a good man's life. The Bible leads us often along such tracks, and no book does this so enticingly; but at no point does its spiritual genius beguile us to a finer interest than when it leads us into the life of Joseph. It gives us here a delicate and genial narrative and makes a soft appeal to our heart. It inclines us to love Joseph with an immediate impulse, so chaste and goodly he is!—a streak of true light shining in a little world of wildness and license, where the darkness not only does not comprehend but hates; and it pleasantly entangles us with concern as to the working out of the purpose which was to make him a man. For from the first some higher harmony seems to find and touch the strings of his life and to set them vibrating. He comes before us with a spiritual rhythm in his life, and he is at once intensely interesting.

¹ *St. Paul the Trav.*, p. 234.