

THE ETHICAL TEACHING OF ST. PAUL.

(8) ASCETICISM TRUE AND FALSE.

THE history of asceticism fills a large chapter in the history of the Christian Church ; yet it is by no means a peculiarly Christian movement. Indeed, notwithstanding the real affinity between Christianity and the truth which underlies the exaggerations of asceticism, it may with good reason be argued that the movement is not really Christian at all, and that its place in Christian history is due rather to influences working from without than to the natural development of Christianity from within. However this may be, there is, of course, no doubt that, wholly apart from Christianity, ascetic ideals have exercised a strange and powerful fascination over the minds of men. Especially was this so in the East at the beginning of the Christian era, and it was therefore inevitable that, sooner or later, the preachers of the new faith would be called upon to define their gospel in relation to this strong and omnipresent rival. The claim of asceticism to be the guide of human life could not be avoided, and the Epistles of St. Paul show plainly that he at least had faced the issue. We shall, of course, look in vain, in writings so fragmentary and occasional in their character, for a discussion of the whole question ; yet, brief and few as the references to the subject are, they illustrate once more the splendid sanity which always marks the Apostle's handling of large and complex ethical problems.

As a preliminary to our exposition of St. Paul's teaching on the matter, it will be well clearly to understand in what sense the term "asceticism" is employed. As commonly used it covers a wide variety both of faith and practice, and unless this be kept in mind serious confusion may result. When, e.g., one Christian teacher tells us that asceticism is a misapprehension of the genius of Christianity, an

another that the Christian view of life is in the best sense of the word an ascetic view, they are evidently not thinking of the same thing. The truth is, asceticism is of two kinds. There is an asceticism which has its root in the necessities of sinful human nature; and this the New Testament honours and enjoins. There is also an asceticism for the origin of which we must look outside Christianity in the oriental idea of the antagonism between mind and matter; and to this the New Testament will give place, no, not for an hour. These, then, are the two branches of our subject: "the asceticism of dualism," which St. Paul condemns, and "the asceticism of self-discipline," which he enjoins.¹

I.

St. Paul's condemnation of asceticism is to be found in the Colossian and Pastoral Epistles. The following are the two most important passages:

"If ye died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, do ye subject yourselves to ordinances? Handle not, nor taste, nor touch (all which things are to perish with the using), after the precepts and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and severity to the body; but are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh." (Col. ii. 20-23.)

"The Spirit saith expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils, through the hypocrisy of men that speak lies, branded in their own conscience as with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by them that believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it

¹ The phrases are Lightfoot's. (*Colossians*, p. 105, footnote.)

be received with thanksgiving : for it is sanctified through the word of God and prayer " (1 Tim. iv. 1-5).¹

To enter into a discussion of all the important and debatable points raised by these two passages would carry us far beyond the limits of this paper. Following the guidance of Lightfoot, we shall assume without discussion that the heresy referred to in the Pastoral Epistles is practically the same as that which disturbed the Church at Colossæ, and that "incipient Gnosticism" describes with sufficient accuracy the nature of both. Oriental mysticism and Jewish ritualism had joined hands in the production of a religion of regulations which forbade marriage, and the eating of meat, and sought to govern the whole life of grown men by petty prohibitions : "Handle not, nor taste, nor touch." It is this practical result of the Gnostic creed rather than the creed itself which concerns us now. The Apostle's condemnation is almost startling in its severity : he smites and spares not : this false asceticism is the doctrine of devils ; they who proclaim it are liars and hypocrites. But St. Paul does more than denounce ; few as his words are, we shall find, if we examine them, that they go to the very root of the matter ; they indicate the grounds on which to-day, not less than in the first century, asceticism stands condemned. Putting together the two passages quoted above there are four counts in the Apostle's indictment.

1. To begin with, asceticism attaches a wholly unreal value to the meats and drinks about the use of which it has so much to say. All these things, the Apostle writes, with a touch of scorn, "are to perish with the using" : we use them, and there is an end of them ; and are we Christian men, whom God has called to be citizens of eternity, to put our necks under the yoke of a system whose supreme concern is about what we shall eat and what we shall drink ? Moreover, as all experience testifies, peddling

¹ See also Titus i 13-14.

casuistry of this kind usually ends in the perversion of the moral sense; over-concern in that which is least is next of kin to unconcern in that which is greatest; we tithe the herbs of the garden and neglect the weightier matters of the law.

2. In the Epistle to Timothy St. Paul adopts a different argument. Now he meets the apostles of asceticism on their own ground, and boldly declares that the things which they would set aside as unclean are the gifts of God which men ought gratefully to receive: "Every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it be received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified through the word of God and prayer." Need it be pointed out that even this great saying does not contain the whole philosophy of human life and that no man has a right to make it the charter of untrammelled licence? St. Paul says one thing at a time, and in using the large liberty which these words undoubtedly give us we have no right to forget the limitations which the Apostle himself elsewhere suggests. Nevertheless, the word needed to be spoken, and it still needs to be remembered. All God's gifts to men are good and for their thankful use; and though because some habitually misuse them others are sometimes compelled wholly to abstain from their use, yet this disuse is not a merit in itself; it is but a temporary expedient to meet a more or less temporary need. It is the fearful prevalence of drunkenness, e.g., which alone can make abstinence from wine a duty; in a nation wholly sober the demand to abstain might justly bring upon itself the rebuke of St. Paul: "Drink will not commend us to God: neither, if we drink, are we the worse: nor, if we drink not, are we the better." Temperance

¹ "This, to me," writes Charles Kingsley, "is the master truth of Christianity! I cannot make people see it, but it seems to me that it was to redeem man and the earth that Christ was made Man, and used the earth" (*Letters and Memories*, vol. i. p. 72).

reformers need to be on their guard lest through their bad advocacy of a good cause they let in by a side door the very foe which St. Paul strove to expel nineteen centuries ago.¹

3. The asceticism of dualism is not only philosophically false, it is practically useless: it is not, St. Paul declares, "of any value against the indulgence of the flesh."² Elsewhere (1 Tim iv. 8), he does indeed allow that "bodily exercise"—by which is meant not so much gymnastics, but physical asceticisms such as are referred to in the verses immediately preceding—"is profitable for a little"; but this slight concession leaves his general judgment unaltered, that tried by its results asceticism is a failure; it makes indeed a great "show of wisdom" in its "severity to the body," but it is powerless to subdue the lusts of the flesh. If it be thought that in so saying the Apostle errs on the side of extravagance, that such a rigorous handling of self as asceticism commends must at least do something to hold down the brute in man, it may be sufficient answer to point to the dark side of the history of monasticism. It should, however, be remembered that when St. Paul speaks of the "flesh," he means, "not merely the body, but the whole unregenerate personality, the entire unrenewed self that thinks, and feels, and wills, and desires, apart from God"³; and what his words declare is the powerlessness of any "ordinances" of men to keep down *that* self. Asceticism may, it is true, put an end to this or that sensual vice by removing the opportunity for its gratification, but it works

¹ The Apostle's advice to Timothy to "be no longer a drinker of water" (Tim. v. 23), was probably as much a protest against false asceticism of this kind as a counsel for the benefit of his health.

² I follow the rendering of the R.V.; it ought, however, to be said that it is sharply questioned by many competent scholars; see, e.g., A. S. Peake in the *Expositor's Greek Testament*, vol. iii. p. 535. Indeed the difficulties besetting every possible rendering are so great that Hort was led to suspect a primitive corruption of the text for which no probable emendation has been suggested.

³ Maclaren's *Epistle to the Colossians*, Expositor's Bible, *in loc.*

no real change ; the devil puts in a new viceroy, and some of the old officials get superannuated, but the government remains what it was ; uncleanness and drunkenness are dismissed, but pride and uncharitableness fill the vacant seats, and so the last state of the man is no better, and perhaps even worse, than the first.

(4) Finally, asceticism is in its spirit and its methods wholly alien to the genius of Christianity : “ If,” reasons St. Paul, “ ye died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world do ye subject yourselves to ordinances ? ” What have Christian men to do with an elaborate system of prohibitions which at best only touch the outside of life ? From the Christian point of view the whole thing is antiquated and superfluous ; it belongs to a state of things that is past, and for us to go back again to it would be as absurd as for a sixth-form boy to go back to the A.B.C. book of his infancy, or for a grown man voluntarily to submit himself to the petty restrictions of his childhood. Besides, what does such asceticism propose to do for us that cannot be better done by the Gospel of Jesus Christ ? Christianity works from within outwards ; it reforms by renewing ; it overcomes the world not by flight but by the gift of a new nature, against which the temptations of the flesh are powerless ; it makes men to be partakers of the life of Christ and so sharers with Him in His triumph over sin. “ Handle not, nor taste, nor touch,” says asceticism ; “ Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh,” says Christianity. Let history judge between them.

II.

Before passing to the second branch of the subject of this paper it may be instructive to inquire very briefly into the subsequent history of the ascetic movement in the Christian Church. St. Paul's condemnation and warnings

notwithstanding, the tendencies which we have already seen at work, even in the days of New Testament Christianity, continued steadily to gain in strength and influence. Celibacy, abstinence of various kinds, retirement from the world, grew more and more in favour as marks of a special and peculiar sanctity, until, at the beginning of the fourth century, the ascetic spirit found in monasticism its most perfect expression. From that time forward, and throughout many centuries, the movement grew with the growth, and strengthened with the strength of Christianity itself. We have a curious and interesting illustration of the ascetic bias of the Church during this period in several references to fasting which found their way into some of the early copies of the New Testament and ultimately into our Authorised Version, but which our Revisers have rightly rejected.¹ Of the strange and hideous austerities by which the votaries of asceticism sought to outvie their fellow-saints and to commend themselves to their Maker, it is needless here to speak. The story may be read in all its repulsiveness in the pages of Gibbon or Lecky, or in the *St. Simeon Stylites* of Tennyson.²

How are we to explain this sudden and all but universal lapse of the Church from the sweet reasonableness and simplicity of its early life and faith? Anything more unlike the religion of Jesus and St. Paul than the grotesque extravagances of the "pillar-saints" of the fifth century it is difficult to conceive. What facts enable us to bridge

¹ The following are the texts referred to: Matt. xvii. 21; Mark ix. 29; Acts x. 30; 1. Cor. vii. 5. (See an article "Fasting in Holy Scripture," by Dean Farrar, *EXPOSITOR*, 4th series, vol. i. p. 339.)

² See Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, chapter 37; Lecky's history of *European Morals*, vol. ii. Nor ought it to be said that the last chapter of this long and painful story has yet been written. Every age presents examples of the strange fascination which asceticism exercises over earnest minds of a certain type. The recital of Lacordaire's self-inflicted austerities—to take but one example—is one of the most harrowing and pitiful in modern biography. (See his life by Dora Greenwell.)

the seemingly impassable chasm? What first gave life to the ascetic movement was the undoubted truth which underlay all its perversions and which not even its later enormities ought to hide from us—the truth, viz., that only by rigid self-restraint can a being such as man is attain to fulness of life. The early ascetics saw, whatever else they may have failed to see, that in a world like ours the call of God must be a call to renunciation; they took with all seriousness the words of Jesus that if a man would be His disciple he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Him. The bent thus given to their minds was strengthened enormously by the laxity and immorality of the early Christian era. When we remember that, as one writer has truly said, “the world has never been so ingeniously and so exhaustively wicked as in Rome during the first century,” it is no marvel that good men grew stern, and asked themselves if their first duty towards such a world was not to separate themselves wholly from it. Then, to reinforce such feelings, came the thought so long cherished of the early return of our Lord: what were home and pleasure and business when at any moment the Judge might be at the door?

◊ Hora novissima, tempora pessima sunt; vigilemus
◊ Ecce minaciter, imminet arbiter, ille supremus—¹

it must have been the cry of many hearts long before the lonely monk in the cloisters of Clugny poured out his deathless song. And, finally, a movement towards asceticism, eastern in its origin but well nigh world-wide in its reach, lent its treacherous aid from without, and in its doctrine of matter as the source and seat of evil furnished a quasi-philosophical justification of a manner of life for

¹ “The world is very evil;
The times are waxing late:
Be sober and keep vigil;
The Judge is at the gate.”

which already so many causes had united to prepare the way.¹

The ascetic movement has been very variously judged. To writers like Gibbon and Lecky it is a hideous scar, a long and blackened waste such as huge, invading armies once left in the line of their march. "A sordid and emaciated maniac," writes Lecky, "without knowledge, without patriotism, without natural affection, passing his life in a long routine of useless and atrocious self-torture, and quailing before the ghastly phantoms of his delirious brain, had become the ideal of the nations which had known the writings of Plato and Cicero and the lives of Socrates and Cato."² Other writers, however, like Dean Church, while admitting the repulsive details to which Mr. Lecky calls attention justly refuse to endorse a verdict which so inadequately recognizes the spirit and aim which "gave meaning and elevation to what was extravagant and disagreeable." The point cannot be better stated than in the Dean's own words: "When we remember what were the enormous, blind, intractable forces on the other side, in the days when it arose, of fierce, reckless, unrestrained sensuality, it seems as if nothing but such an enthusiasm, as inconsiderate and unmeasured, could balance or swing back, on a scale necessary for the progress of the world, the tremendous, ever-renewed and accumulating pressure in favour of self-indulgence. The severity of the early

¹ "The contest of Christianity with the Eastern religions," says Milman, "must be traced in their reaction upon the new religion of the West. By their treacherous alliance, they probably operated more extensively to the detriment of the Evangelic religion than Paganism by its open opposition. Asiatic influences have worked more completely into the body and essence of Christianity than any other foreign elements; and it is by no means improbable that tenets, which had their origin in India, have for many centuries predominated in, or materially affected, the Christianity of the whole Western world." (*History of Christianity*, vol. ii. p. 31.)

² *History of European Morals*, vol. ii. p. 107.

Church was a rebound and strong medicine against the ruinous dissoluteness of the decaying Empire, which no remedy but an heroic one seemed able to stay. . . . All these histories of monks, which lend themselves so easily to our sarcasms, and seem to us almost as disgusting as immorality itself, may be viewed in another way—as the crude, clumsy, distorted, absurd sketches of beginners, who yet have the heart and boldness to try to copy a great and difficult model. They are like the stiff, ungainly figures, drawn by the early masters, of the saints and hermits themselves, which in the hands of the later ones, come to forms of the highest nobleness and beauty. But the early steps must have been passed to reach the later perfection.”¹

Yet even Dean Church does not deny that the ascetic movement ended, as all such movements must end, in failure. It failed because it was rooted in a false philosophy; it failed because it misunderstood both man and God. Healthy human nature protests against any doctrine which makes self-denial to be an end in itself, or pronounces misery more acceptable in God's sight than happiness. Asceticism did both, and therefore, long and stubborn as its hold on life might be, it carried within it the seeds of its own decay. There is no need to deny that during its long career it may have served some useful end; but it belongs now to the past, and it is difficult to believe that having once on the world's scale been tried and found wanting, it can ever again find a place among the accredited allies of Christian morality.

III.

The “asceticism of dualism” stands condemned alike at

¹ *Occasional Papers*, vol. i. pp. 223-225. A defence of asceticism on somewhat similar lines may also be read in Strong's *Christian Ethics*, p. 312; Illingworth's *Christian Character*, p. 50; and Mr. Hugh Black's *Culture and Restraint*. I very gladly take the opportunity of drawing attention to the full and lucid discussion of the whole problem contained in the last-named book.

the bar of scripture and of history. Has, then, the ascetic principle no place in the Christian scheme of life? And if so, what is the meaning of those calls to self-denial and cross-bearing which we hear so often from the lips both of our Lord and His Apostles? The answer lies in the distinction to which reference has already been made in the earlier part of this paper: there is a true as there is a false asceticism, and the New Testament insists on the one as plainly as it repudiates the other. We may construct a scheme of life from which all ideas of discipline, restraint, repression are excluded, but whatever noble elements it may contain it will have no right to the Christian name. The saying that not renunciation but consecration is the true ideal of life wears no doubt an attractive look; the anti-thesis is a false one, nevertheless; in a life like ours room must be found for consecration and renunciation alike.

It is here that the apostles of faith are sometimes compelled to join issue with the apostles of culture. When it is urged that self-renunciation is a species of self-maiming, and that the goal to perfection is to be reached by the path of self-development, it has to be pointed out that all such reasoning ignores the crucial fact of sin. If sin were not, then might culture have its perfect work, and lead man on to perfect life; but sin *is*, and that single fact changes entirely the whole aspect and character of the problem. "The self which we seek to develop is, here and now, a sinful self, and incapable, therefore, till its sin is overcome, of any true development at all."¹ All thought, therefore, of symmetrical completeness in our present life has to be set aside in face of the imperious necessity laid upon us by the presence of moral evil. Development still remains our goal, but stern experience teaches us that for beings such as we are it is attainable only by the way of discipline and rigorous self-control. In such self-control (*ἐγπάρευα*) St.

¹ Illingworth's *Christian Character*, p. 45.

Paul sees one of the fruits of the Spirit's indwelling life.¹ "Mortify your members which are upon the earth," he cries in the very Epistle in which he proclaims the vanity of a false asceticism: "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, the which is idolatry."² "If by the spirit," he says again, "ye mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live."³ "They that are of Christ Jesus," he declares, "have crucified the flesh with the passions and lusts thereof."⁴ And if there be any other commandment, it is summed up in the saying of Jesus, "If thy hand or thy foot causeth thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from thee: it is good for thee to enter into life maimed or halt, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into the eternal fire. And if thine eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast it from thee: it is good for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into the hell of fire."

The meaning of all this is unmistakable. These New Testament phrases—self-denying, putting to death, crucifying, cutting off the right hand, plucking out the right eye, and the like—bear witness to the gravity of the problem which sin has created. They had their origin in

¹ Gal. 5, 23. *Ἐγκράτεια* covers, says Findlay, "the whole range of moral discipline, and concerns every sin and passion of our nature." The "temperate" man of the New Testament is he who not only abstains from excess in the use of strong drink—he does that, of course—but who holds himself well in hand, and keeps all the steeds that are yoked to the chariot of life well bridled and well bitted. The tongue, the hand, the foot, the eye, the temper, the tastes, the affections, all are made to feel the curb of his strong control.

² Col. iii. 5. Dr. Maclaren criticizes with justice the Revisers' translation of *νεκρώσατε*: "It is a pity," he says, "that the R.V. has retained "mortify" here, as that Latinized word says to the ordinary reader much less than is meant, and hides the allusion to the preceding context. The marginal alternative "make dead" is, to say the least, not idiomatic English. The suggestion of the American revisers, which is printed at the end of the R.V., "put to death," is much better, and perhaps a single word, such as "slay" or "kill," might have been better still."

³ Rom. viii. 13.

⁴ Gal. v. 24.

nothing morbid or unreal, but in a resolute facing of the facts of life. They do not deny nor discourage the desire for fulness of life; they point out what for us men must be always the way to it. No modern apostle of culture ever yearned for perfection's heights with more eager longing than did St. Paul, but he never forgot that only "with toil of heart and knees and hands" can the "path upward" be won and the "toppling crags" be scaled.

The distinction between the asceticism which the New Testament commands and that which it condemns will now be clear. Christian asceticism is primarily prudential; it is an expedient forced upon us by the necessities of our sinful state, good not for its own sake but only as a means to an end. "The morbid tendency that is sometimes found in human nature to take a voluptuous delight in pain" finds no encouragement in the New Testament; self-inflicted pain can be justified only as the vinedresser's use of the pruning knife can be justified, that the vine "may bear more fruit." "I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage," says St. Paul, but with no hint of delight in such austerity for its own sake, only "lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected."¹ "If," said Jesus, "thy hand or thy foot causeth thee to stumble"—mark, *if* they do; they may not; it is not necessary that they should; but if they do, then there is but one thing for it—"cut it off and cast it from thee." Christian asceticism, I repeat, is primarily prudential. "It springs from no underestimate of the goodness of God's creation, but simply from the recognition of man's tendency to sin, and consequent need for the avoidance of temptation. He cannot trust

¹ 1 Cor. ix. 27. Even in 1 Cor. vii., where it may be thought that the Apostle leans to the ascetic view of marriage, Stevens is, I think, right in his contention that it was a natural though mistaken eschatology, rather than any ascetic depreciation of marriage, which furnished the motive of his argument. (*Theology in the New Testament*, p. 449.)

himself, and so he must fly. But the man who feels this must be humbled by the feeling. Hence the Christian ascetic is as far removed as possible from all thought of accumulating merit by his austerities. They result expressly from his demerit, and are a perpetual reminder of its existence."¹

GEORGE JACKSON.

ICONIUM.

THE object of this paper is to put together a picture of Iconium and its people in the first century after Christ. The attempt would be entirely vain, owing to the paucity of information, were it not for the intensity of municipal patriotism among the citizens of an ancient city. In modern times that character is not sufficiently remembered by many scholars, who are misled by the modern facts. The contrast between ancient and modern feeling is remarkable.

In most Scottish cities of the present day knowledge of, and interest in, their early history belong only to a few antiquaries: the mass of the citizens know and care nought about such matters. In Aberdeen the speaker in the Town Council, who wishes to persuade his audience, does not quote early history; if he were to begin a speech by appealing to his hearers' pride in "the Red Harlaw," some would hardly know what he meant, others would regard him as an amiable enthusiast whose opinion about present business could be of no possible value. Patriotism is far from weak in the hearts of such citizens, though they are a little ashamed of manifesting it outwardly, and suspicious of, or amused by, those who show it more openly; but their patriotism is mainly for country and race.

But to the mind of the ancient Greek citizen his city

¹ Illingworth's *Christian Character*, p. 48.