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**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ST. PAUL'S
EPISTLES**

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SYNOPSIS

It is difficult to separate the psychology of the Epistles from the psychology of St. Paul himself, because the Epistles contain so much autobiographical material.

The subject divides itself into two sections, firstly the psychology of the Individual, secondly the psychology of the Church as a group. Only the first section is discussed in this paper, and it is sub-divided into four headings: (1) Motives, (2) Thought, (3) Spiritual Intuition, (4) Christian Conflict.

1. The main motives of Christian living are faith and love, the psychology of each of which is briefly discussed. As a subsidiary motive, the Second Advent plays some part.

2. Christian thinking is positive, and the will plays a part in directing thought and conduct.

3. Spiritual insight is a particular form of intuition, without which a man cannot appreciate the things of God.

4. Christian conflict is the result of tension between the new principle of life, spiritual life, and the human inheritance, the flesh, and continues throughout the life of the Christian. The psychology of the conflict is discussed.

WHEN one commences to pass in review the Pauline Epistles, with the purpose of studying their psychological implications, either manifest or hidden, it soon becomes apparent that it is all but impossible to separate the writings from their author. Theoretically it should be possible to examine the doctrines of the Epistles in isolation from the character of the writer, and to extract from them those elements which are concerned with psychology as distinct from theology. It soon becomes evident, however, that the personality of the Apostle himself is so intermingled with his doctrinal and exhortatory material, that it is all but impossible to separate the one from the other. In single verses and in whole passages, the Apostle introduces autobiographical references to his own spiritual experiences and conflicts in order to illustrate his doctrine and reinforce his authority. For example, the seventh chapter of Romans, the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth chapters of the second Corinthian letter, and much of the Galatian letter, are almost entirely biographical. A study of the Epistles becomes therefore a study both of the writings and the man himself. These two closely intertwined strands present far more material than could be expounded in a paper such as this, and all I can hope to do is to describe in outline a few of the leading themes, and to make brief comments upon each of them in turn.

Seeing that all these letters are addressed either to individual Christians or to Christian churches, our study must concern the psychology of the Christian individually, and group psychology as revealed in the Apostle's teaching concerning the communities of believers forming the Christian churches.

This gives us two main divisions, firstly the psychology of the individual believer, and secondly the psychology of the Church as a body of believers. To deal with the psychology of the group as found in the Church would require a paper to itself. I shall limit this paper to the psychology of the individual Christian. To clarify our thinking further, and for purposes of description, I shall consider the psychology of the individual Christian under the following headings: firstly Christian motives, secondly Christian thinking, thirdly Christian intuition, fourthly Christian conflict. I have omitted the subject of mystical experience, for this also would demand a paper to itself. The other subjects open up such immense fields of thought, that I can do little more than make a brief and superficial survey of the ground in the hope that it may stimulate further thought and research.

I

Firstly, then, let us consider the motives lying behind Christian living. Modern psychology has made us familiar with the doctrine that the motives which lie behind conduct and actuate it are emotional rather than intellectual. Intellectual cogitation may sort out conflicting motives,

and give direction to the emotional impulses which clamour for expression, but intellect does not supply the energy necessary for the initiation of action. The intellect is the seat of judgment, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of different lines of action, and, in combination with the imagination, foreseeing the results likely to ensue. We may think of the intellect as a kind of sieve, separating off the less useful elements of the instinctual and emotional drives, and letting through those which can be turned into behaviour advantageous to the individual. To use another analogy, intellect is like the man at the steering wheel of a car. He decides the speed and direction of the car, and guides it accordingly, but the driving power which propels the car lies hidden within the engine. So instincts and emotions form the motive powers for conduct, whilst the intellect sits in the seat of authority and decides the lines along which conduct shall proceed.

When we turn to the Epistles we discover that the two main motive forces of the Christian life are faith and love. Speaking of his own experience, the Apostle writes: "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" (Gal. 2: 20); and "the love of Christ constraineth us" (2 Cor. 5: 14). In these two statements the Apostle epitomizes his extended teaching on the subjects of faith and love.

(a) Firstly, then, let us consider faith and its method of operation.

It is evident on the surface that faith is something more than belief in historic facts. The intellectual acceptance of a historic fact *per se* has no driving force because it leaves the emotional life untouched. Faith is concerned with the will, and with the emotions, as well as with the intellect. Whilst faith without reason becomes superstition, belief founded only upon logical reasoning is not faith. Faith is at once an attitude of mind and a mental action in which the whole personality is involved. In Dean Inge's most valuable book on *Faith and its Psychology*, the author points out that Christian faith is something more than the acceptance of the authority of an historic Christ; it depends on the presence of the living Christ dwelling within us by His Spirit. "If Christ was divine as the Church teaches, and in the sense which the Church teaches, His revelation cannot have been purely external or purely historical and static, but must be given to and through the Christ-like elements in our consciousness. In fact, it seems to me that the doctrines of the Divinity of Christ and of the indwelling Spirit of Christ stand or fall together" (p. 136).

The Epistles contain very few references to the earthly ministry of our Lord or to His recorded sayings. They expound at length the truths about the living and ascended Christ, and the indwelling in the believer of His Spirit. Hence faith becomes trust in, and reliance upon, and complete obedience to a living Person. It is no dead intellectual theology or philosophy, but a living dynamic. In his prayers for the Ephesian saints in the

first chapter of the Epistle he prays that they may know "the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to that working of the strength of his might which he wrought in Christ when he raised him from the dead" (Eph. 1: 19, 20).

Faith in a person necessarily involves an emotional relationship. It involves more. Modern psychology tends to stress more and more the importance of introjected or unconscious images in the mind, whether these images be good or bad (cf. W. R. D. Fairbairn, *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*). These images contain powerful emotional charges which become externalized in behaviour. So when St. Paul prays "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Eph. 3: 17), we may interpret it psychologically as the introjection of a good image, the Christ-image, into the mind. A new driving force is introduced into the life of the Christian, shaping and directing conduct from within.

(b) The other leading motive in the Christian life is love. Over and over again in the Epistles stress is laid upon the importance of love, love to God and love to one's fellows. It is interesting to note in passing that the great chapter on love (1 Cor. 13) was written, not by St. John, the apostle of love, but by St. Paul. The love of which he writes is something very much more than a mere sentimental feeling. It is a positive, constructive influence, finding its expression in service. "Knowledge puffeth up, but love edifieth" (1 Cor. 8: 1). "Through love be servants one to another" (Gal. 5: 13). Although love has a strong emotional content, it is something more than an emotion. Those who are familiar with MacDougall's writings will recollect that he classes love amongst the sentiments. He thinks of sentiments as complex structures containing several elements of instinctual and emotional origin bound together, and directed toward some object or group of objects. Love is of this nature, for it contains more than one component. Love may be narcissistic in quality, that is to say it may be centred more in the desire for satisfaction in the lover than in the welfare of the loved object. The over-possessive mother illustrates narcissistic love. She loves her children as part of her own ego which she must retain at all costs. The love described in the epistles is selfless and sacrificial. For example, we read: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church and gave himself up for it" (Eph. 5: 25). "Love seeketh not its own" (1 Cor. 13: 5). "The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men" (1 Thess. 3: 12).

We have, then, behind all Christian living and service these two great positive and constructive motives, faith and love.

(c) The apostles allow no place for fear as a motive. Fear is negative, paralysing, or even destructive. It belongs to the evil rather than to the good side of life, and leads to bondage rather than to freedom.

There is, however, one aspect of the teaching found in the Epistles which borders on fear, and is put forward as a subsidiary motive for good

living. I refer to the eschatological passages. The Apostle obviously believed in the possibility of the Second Advent during his lifetime. Furthermore this great event was to be followed by the judgment seat of Christ where "we must all be made manifest . . . that each one may receive the things done in the body according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor. 5: 10). The Second Advent was the hope set before the believer, and becomes a ground for exhortation that he may not be ashamed before Christ at His coming.

The belief in the imminence of the Second Advent thus became a subsidiary motive to the main ones of faith and love. The unseen Lord, served in love and faith, will hereafter become the Judge before whom all must appear, but the fear of final rejection or of eternal perdition is entirely omitted from Pauline teaching in so far as it applies to the believer. The motive is positive rather than negative. It is not that the believer will be rejected, but that he shall so live that he may be accepted as a faithful servant, pleasing to his Lord.

II

When we turn to the thinking, reasoning side of St. Paul's doctrine, we find that he has not much to say directly on the subject. Indirectly, however, logical reasoning plays a considerable part in the exposition of Christian doctrine. The most notable example of this is to be found in the first eight chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. These chapters contain a continuous logical argument, or series of arguments, setting forth the universality of sin, justification by faith as opposed to justification by keeping the law, the peace and security which ensue, newness of life and victory over sin, and finally the freedom and assurance associated with life lived on the spiritual plane. The latter part of the seventh chapter is a brief diversion from the main argument, and deals with the conflict of soul through which the Apostle passed. I shall return to this later. In its sustained argument, in its length, and in its brilliant advocacy of the doctrines it teaches, this passage, beginning with the seventh verse of the first chapter, and ending with the close of the eighth chapter of Romans, stands alone in Scripture.

In his exhortations concerning the conscious thoughts of the Christian, the apostle again lays stress on the positive rather than on the negative side. For example, in the fourth chapter of the Philippian Epistle, he gives positive directions. Anxiety is to be laid aside, and free expression of our needs is to be made in prayers to God. This is the equivalent of the mental catharsis so stressed by the Freudian school, the only difference being that free release is to be found in prayer to God rather than in talking to the psychoanalyst. This is followed by a positive promise of

the peace of God which will put a guard upon the heart and the thoughts. Finally, the apostle exhorts his readers to fill their minds with good, pure and lovely thoughts. There is no suggestion here of fighting evil thoughts. Any direct attack upon evil thoughts is almost certain to meet with failure. The more they are attacked, the more they remain central in consciousness. In communion with God in prayer, and in filling the mind with good thoughts, evil thoughts become peripheral and fade away as darkness flees before the rising sun.

It is interesting to note that, by implication, St. Paul lays great emphasis on the place of the will in controlling and directing mental processes. In the passage in Philippians already quoted he tells his readers, "In nothing be anxious"; and later he exhorts them to think on certain things. Earlier in the same Epistle he writes: "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2: 5). He tells the Ephesians: "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind." He takes it for granted that men have the ability to control and direct their rational and emotional attitudes. This may be contrasted with the deterministic attitude of the Freudian school in its doctrine that our beliefs, emotions, and even our reasoning, derive from unconscious processes over which we have no control. As we shall see later, however, the Apostle describes evil or sinful promptings from within over which he has no conscious control.

III

Let us now consider what the Apostle has to say about spiritual insight, or spiritual intuition. The outstanding passage dealing with this subject is in the second chapter of the first Corinthian Epistle, verses 6 to 16. The late Professor Arthur S. Peake in his Commentary wrote a very clear paraphrase and commentary on this passage, part of which I quote:

"He [St. Paul] proceeds to explain how it is that the Spirit can reveal. He thoroughly explores all things, even the depths of God's being and purpose. And He alone can reveal the mind of God since He alone can know it. Just as the spirit of each man is alone able to know the thoughts and emotions within him, so only the Spirit of God can know God's innermost experiences. It is that all-searching Spirit that we have received. And this Spirit-given knowledge is not merely possessed, it is uttered in Spirit-given words, the speaker combining spiritual truth with spiritual expression. But spiritual things can only be imparted to those who are fit to receive them. Man, as he is by nature, cannot accept them; he looks on them as folly, nor has he the capacity to apprehend them, because they respond only to spiritual tests which he is unable to apply.

"But the spiritual man tests everything, for the spiritual is the higher realm and commands those beneath; whereas the natural man

has no competence to estimate the spiritual, he lives on a lower plane. No one, Scripture says, has apprehended the mind of the Lord so as to instruct Him. And since by union with Him we have His mind, we are equally beyond human judgment."

In the passage St. Paul contrasts the spiritual man with the natural man. The word "natural" occurring in this passage is a translation of the Greek word *psuchikos*, an adjectival derivative of *psuche*, the "soul". The spiritual man is he in whom the *pneuma* prevails. In the Epistles, as in the whole of the New Testament, "soul" stands for animal life, the life of the mind and the body. It is contrasted with the spiritual side of man's being. It is included in the flesh, that is that part of man's nature which he inherits from his human ancestry, as distinguished from the spirit which is derived directly from God. It is important to note that the flesh is not synonymous with the body, except where the context indicates the contrary.

The natural man is the man who lives on the temporal, material plane, whilst the spiritual man lives on the eternal, divine plane, and is in direct relationship with the Spirit of God. The natural man, living on the lower plane, has no insight into spiritual things. They belong to a different realm, and he cannot know them. Under the influence of the Spirit of God, man receives spiritual insight, his eyes are opened to a new realm of truth.

Intuition or insight is somewhat similar to extra-sensory perception with which the parapsychologists have made us familiar. In the ordinary way we attain knowledge by means of our senses, our sensory perception, and our reasoning. There is another form of knowledge which has a different quality, and may be termed intuitive knowledge. It has a large affective element, as contrasted with the neutral or cold nature of much intellectual knowledge. Intuitive knowledge feels that a thing is true. In the course of psychological analysis it often happens that a patient believes certain things about himself, founding his belief on the authority of the analyst and on logical grounds. This, however, is not sufficient. One day he may suddenly gain insight, and, looking within, he sees the truth as true within himself. He has achieved intuition. This process is the result of the removal of the repression which has hitherto held things down in the subconscious or unconscious mind. When the repression is removed, the patient sees things in a new way. It is no longer a matter of intellectual acceptance of a proposition. The realization comes that it is certainly true in a way not seen before. So it is with spiritual insight. It is quite possible for a man to have a good theoretical knowledge of Scripture, and to accept the main doctrines of the Christian faith with his intellect, and yet to remain entirely lacking in spiritual apprehension. Then one day his mind becomes enlightened, and his knowledge takes on an entirely new aspect. It becomes warm and powerful instead of cold

and dead. Canon Streeter in his book entitled *Reality* gives a very fine exposition of the two kinds of knowledge in the fourth chapter, headed "Two Ways of Knowledge." He points out that we attain knowledge not only by scientific observation and classification but in addition by the inner experience which we call intuition. Speaking of the life of plants and animals he says: "How and why is it that I can take for granted as being something perfectly familiar a mysterious entity which no one has ever seen, heard, touched, measured, or weighed? I do this because I have direct experience within myself of this mysterious something; I feel it rather than know it." Later on he says: "Whenever therefore I speak of life, I am interpreting the observed fact of behaviour in the light of an inward experience of my own." It is this direct experience, this inner experience of my own, which is present in spiritual intuition. The Apostle speaks of these spiritual experiences as "things which eye saw not and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man, whatsoever things God prepared for them that love him." This is the wisdom "which none of the rulers of this world knoweth," a wisdom concerning not the future life, as some have interpreted the text, but an inner apprehension of present spiritual reality.

IV

Turning now from spiritual insight to spiritual conflict, it cannot be doubted that St. Paul regards the Christian life as a conflict from start to finish. In several autobiographical notes he describes his own experience of the conflicts through which he has passed. For example, in the first Corinthian letter, he says: "I therefore run, as not uncertainly; so fight I as not beating the air: but I buffet my body and bring it into bondage lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected" (9: 26, 27). Toward the close of his life, in the second letter to Timothy, he says: "I have fought the good fight" (2 Tim. 4: 7). In the seventh chapter of Romans he describes at some length the warring elements which he discovers within himself: "The good which I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I practise" (v. 19). Again: "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man, but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members" (vv. 22, 23). Much divergence has arisen among theologians as to whether this passage in Romans 7 applies to St. Paul's experience before his conversion, or describes his experiences as a Christian. W. H. Griffith Thomas writes: "This chapter is to be interpreted of the unregenerated soul, not of the regenerated Christian." E. H. Gifford, in his commentary, writes: "He deals not only with what is accidental and peculiar, but with what is

essential, so that his experience is realized by every believer as his own." J. A. Beet in his commentary says that "it has been much discussed whether the section [vv. 15-25] describes a justified man or a man still unforgiven. The latter view was held by Origen, the earliest known commentator, and by the Greek Fathers generally. The former is said to have been held by Methodius, a martyr who died A.D. 310; and was adopted by Augustine and the Latin Fathers generally. It was revived in the West during the Middle Ages; and by the Reformers."

It seems to me that the conflict here described is present to a greater or lesser extent in every normal man, Christian or otherwise. Surely there is present universally in man a moral sense. It may differ in quality in men of different races and religions, and according to the upbringing received by individuals, but a sense of right and wrong is part of human mentality. Side by side with all the evil inherent in human nature, there is some realization of what is right, an ideal to be striven for, together with a sense of failure to reach that ideal, and a sense of guilt resulting from failure. Hence the conflict. "To me, who would do good, evil is present." If we translate this into modern psychological terms, we should say, with Freud, that each man has in him a super-ego, and the super-ego has a twofold character or function. In the first place it contains an ego-ideal, the sort of person I should like to be. It contains also a censoring and punitive aspect, which exerts a censorship, or repressive force, upon the crude impulses arising from the id. It punishes the individual if these impulses break through into conscious thought or action. Guilt and remorse ensue, and these may have a profound effect upon mental and physical health.

Jung has explored the dark side of personality, and describes it as the shadow self, a self not altogether bad, but alien to our ordinary waking, conscious life. When a man becomes a Christian important psychological changes occur. Through his knowledge of forgiveness, he comes to terms with the punitive aspect of his super-ego. His former guilt and remorse pass away, and he obtains deliverance from the tyranny of conscience. At the same time his ego-ideal assumes a new pattern, a pattern founded on the image of Christ which he has now introjected.

Although Christian conversion brings about a resolution of the immediate guilt conflict, and brings about a sense of peace and of fellowship with God, it seems to me that it introduces a new source of conflict into the mind. With the assimilation of a new set of values, and with the introduction of new and higher motives, there arises, as time goes on, a keener perception of the evil nature still present. The shadow self is not abolished, and a perpetual warfare ensues between the flesh and the spirit. As St. Paul puts it, "the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary the one to the other" (Gal. 5: 17). It is as though two natures were present in one personality, natures described

by the Apostle as "the old man" and "the new man". The old man is at once a menace and a challenge.

This dichotomy of personality is clearly apparent in the seventh chapter of Romans. The Apostle speaks of another self, which he calls sin, which acts independently of his conscious self, and is hated by him. In modern psychological language we should describe this as the upsurging of incompletely repressed material. Such material exists in the subconscious rather than in the unconscious, but it is often activated and driven upwards by unconscious emotions and instincts. It is doubtful whether any emotional or instinctual material once present in the mind is ever annihilated. It may be completely repressed, so that it produces no further effects, or it may be transmuted into useful channels by the process known as sublimation, but it cannot be destroyed. The conflict with evil within ourselves is best resolved, not by direct attack, which often only accentuates the difficulty, but by substituting higher motives for lower ones. As higher motives occupy more and more of the conscious field, lower motives recede into the limbo of the unconscious. Moreover the deeper instincts, with their strong mental drives, have their energy directed more and more along good channels, so that the old bad channels gradually dry up from inanition. "Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5: 16). By this means, love takes the place of hate and resentment, humility cancels pride, the will of God replaces self-will. Gradually the centre of gravity alters its position, so that things which were once uppermost in consciousness sink to the depths, and the spiritual and Godlike material rises to the surface. Although this process is partly unconscious, it is in part dependent upon the will of the individual. He may encourage or discourage the new spiritual principle within him, either "walking after the flesh" or "walking after the spirit."

The Christian conflict consists, therefore, not so much in direct attempts to suppress the evil within, for such direct attacks bring the evil into the centre of consciousness, and are likely to issue in defeat. There should be a continual substitution of good for evil, a continual attitude of living on the spiritual plane. Direct attack is negative, and increases the conflict; substitution is positive, and resolves the conflict by leaving no room for evil.

Finally, it is to be observed that conflict is bound up with life as we know it; it is part of its very essence. As Jung has pointed out, life without conflict would become stagnant and sterile, for it is out of conflict that achievement arises. It is the stimulus to action, and a root of progress. The crown of life is for him who has fought a good fight.

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