

THE LETTER AND THE SPIRIT.

THERE are some writers whose works have little or no individuality about them, whose writings have no personal stamp that marks them as their own. Others there are whose literary offspring are at once recognizable by their likeness to their author, whose works faithfully reflect their strength or their weakness, their habits of mind, their personal feelings ; so that we feel as if we had known the author and lived with him. Of this latter sort is St. Paul, of whom we may say that we learn to know him from his writings, and then understand his writings by our knowledge of him. Luther says of him that his words are not dead things, but living creatures, having hands and feet ; meaning, doubtless, that, by the fulness of life and force with which they were charged, they became capable of growth, of acquiring new meanings, of adapting themselves to a wider significance than that which originally pertained to them.

And especially in certain pairs of words, which the great Apostle habitually joins together by way of contrast, we may trace the marks of the tremendous spiritual convulsion which he had experienced. When he had been brought out of darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God—when old things passed away, and all things became new—when the things that had been gain to him, those he counted loss for Christ—

he must have felt that his life had been cut into two parts, and that a great gulf was fixed between them. And so he came to identify with the first part of his life the law—the system of ordinances in which he had lived till the great light shone round about him on the road to Damascus; and, with the second part, the gospel—the liberty wherewith Christ had made him free. Accordingly, all his conceptions grouped themselves around these two parts of his life; and so he spoke of the law and grace, of faith and works, of the flesh and the spirit, of the letter and the spirit, of darkness and light, not always with direct and conscious, but always with some explicit or implicit, reference to the two opposite systems by which, in the two periods of his life, he had been dominated. And the after history of some at least of these words would form an instructive chapter in the history of theology. Faith and works—coins first issued fresh from St. Paul's mint—how have these been rubbed and worn as they have passed current through various theological schools, until at last the Apostle's image and superscription have almost become unrecognizable. Indeed, it has been well pointed out by Archbishop Whately, that there is an advantage in using non-scriptural terms for theological purposes, because then the scriptural words remain in their own proper sense, and do not come down to us with accumulated theological associations.

But to confine ourselves for the present to the words which I propose to discuss in the present paper, Letter and Spirit. The Greek word for *letter* (*γράμμα*) is used by St. Paul with various shades of meaning. In Galatians vi. 11, for the characters in which he writes: "Ye see in what great letters (*πηλίκους γράμμασιν*) I have

written to you :” in 2 Timothy iii. 15, for the writings of the Old Covenant, “the holy writings” (τὰ ἱερά γράμματα) : in Romans ii., of the written law possessed by the Jews, as opposed to the natural law by which the virtuous heathen were guided : “The uncircumcision which is by nature, that fulfils the law, shall judge thee who, with the letter and circumcision (διὰ γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς—surrounded by, in the midst of, the written law and the ordinances), dost transgress the law ;” and (περιτομή καρδίας ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι) “the circumcision of the heart is in the spirit, not in the letter.” So, again, in Romans vii. 6, he speaks of Christians as being bound to serve God “in the newness of the spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter (ὁ παλαιότητι γράμματος).” And in 2 Corinthians iii., where he is speaking of the openness of apostolical service, and of the Corinthians being “the epistle of Christ, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God ; not on tables of stone, but on fleshly tables of the heart,” he adds : “It is God that made us sufficient to be servants of a new covenant—a covenant not of writing, but of spirit (οὐ γράμματος ἀλλὰ πνεύματος) : for the writing, the written thing (γράμμα) killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” And immediately afterwards he contrasts the service of ministration of death in writing (ἐν γράμματι) engraven on stones, the ministration of condemnation, with the ministration of the spirit, the ministration of righteousness.

We see, then, how in his use of this word γράμμα, St. Paul rises from the mere written characters to the thing written, as the Hebrew Scriptures, and thence to the covenant or system which consists in a written law ; and so he comes to use it in opposition to the spirit—

the dead, unchangeable, inflexible thing written, as opposed to the living, changing, life giving spirit, until at last he declares that the written thing, the letter, kills, but the spirit gives life. And from this it is easy to trace how the letter, the thing written, comes to mean the unchanging, fixed, hard law, which is the same always, and for all men; while the spirit, the breath, which bloweth where it listeth, and none can tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth, comes to signify the inner meaning, the principle, the ever-varying self-adapting soul which underlies and animates the letter. And thus the literal meaning of a law or a statement is often opposed to its spirit; literal obedience is opposed to conformity to the spirit of the law; a literal translation is opposed to rendering the spirit of an author. So Jeremy Taylor, in his "Holy Living," says, "We must obey the letter of a law, without doing violence to the reason of the law, or the intention of the lawgiver."

As, then, we owe to our Lord's Parable of the Talents the word "talent," to signify a gift of intellect entrusted to a man to be used, so to St. Paul's use of *γράμμα* and *πνεῦμα* we owe the terms "letter" and "spirit," to denote the dead rule or law and the inner purpose and principle which animates it. And we may remark, in passing, the contrast between the Biblical use of *λόγος*—the word spoken or unspoken, and *γράμμα*—the written document. While "the letter" kills, "the word" of God is living and working (Heb. iv. 12: *ζῶν γὰρ ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐνεργής*). The "word" of God lives and abides for ever¹ (1 Pet. i. 23: *διὰ λόγου*

¹ I assume that the participles refer to *λόγος*, and not to *θεοῦ*, for reasons set forth by Alford, De Wette, &c.

ζῶντος θεοῦ καὶ μένοντος). Nay, the spoken words (John vi. 63 : here ῥήματα, not λόγος) are spirit and life. So that when, in theological language, we speak of the *written word*, we are using language which is certainly not scriptural, and which seems not very far from a contradiction of Scripture. The letter killeth — St. Paul said it of the Old Covenant, but it holds good no less of the New—the letter, so far as it is merely letter, killeth, but the Spirit is the giver of life.

We go on to discuss, first, how St. Paul came to say of the Old Law, that the letter killeth.

When Moses came down from the mount with the two tables of the testimony in his hand, we are told that the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables. Here then was a letter which, if any ever did, demanded the most awful and reverential treatment. But when Moses found that the people had made a calf, and were worshipping it, “Moses’ anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them there before the mount.” Of the second tables we are told that Moses himself hewed them at the command of God, and that he wrote the ten commandments upon them at the dictation of Jehovah. These, then, would be far less intrinsically sacred (if sacredness can inhere in any material thing) than the first; yet even these were deemed worthy of being placed by themselves in the Ark of the Covenant, which stood between the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, as the visible symbol of the Divine Presence. But in the darkness which settled on the Chosen People in later days, both the ark and the tables of the law disappear. We know nothing as to how they perished, only we read in the Second

Book of Esdras, "The light of our candlestick is put out, the ark of our covenant is spoiled;" so that, whatever date is assigned to the book, and it is apparently later than the Christian era, it is at least evident that, according to Jewish tradition, the sacred tables, the very visible testimony of God's favour, which had been graven in the awful presence of Jehovah, had fallen into the hands of the unbelieving heathen. Surely here, in the destruction of the first tables, "the work of God," by Moses, and in the desecration of the second by impious hands, was warning enough to the Jewish people that no text, however venerable, no "letter," however sacred, was of any value except for the sake of the revelation which it contained. And yet, throughout the whole later history of the people, after the tendency to worship other gods, the gods of the nations round about, had been crushed and burnt out of them by the Captivity, we find the worship of the law, the "stupid fetish-worship of the dead letter,"¹ utterly overlying and stifling and killing the free spirit which alone could teach their hearts. This it was, to quote Canon Farrar's article just referred to, "which led to the superstitious folly of counting the letters of the law, which were said to be 815,280, the middle letter of the Pentateuch occurring in Leviticus xi. 42." The law, which was given for a witness and a revelation of God's righteousness, was degraded into a mere matter of jugglery, an inexhaustible store of charms and letters and numbers, quite unconnected with any moral or spiritual significance. And as with the text, so with the interpretation. The weightier matters of

¹ Canon Farrar, in THE EXPOSITOR, vol. v. p. 375.

the law—judgment, mercy, and faith—were overruled, and all their ingenuity was bent upon such questions as the fringes and colours of garments, the wicks of candles, the distance that might be walked on the Sabbath, and if there is anything more insignificant than these. And thus the letter killed the conscience; men mixed up the eternal laws of right and wrong with frivolous questions of meats and drinks, of new moons and Sabbaths: their conscience needed to be purged from dead works before they could serve the living God. The man who regards the mixing of two fabrics in a fringe, or the walking of a yard too much on the Sabbath, as—I do not say of equal importance, but—in the same category with infractions of the moral law, will very soon learn to regard them as of equal importance, and to lose all sense of sin as distinguished from breach of etiquette. “How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?” was a favourable specimen of the casuistry of the Jews when Christ came. And—we may remark parenthetically—it is one at least of the difficulties which they have to surmount who regard Jesus as the mere product of his age and surroundings, how such a character and such teaching could be evolved from the moral conditions of his day.

But when Christ came, and taught that God regards the outward act, not in itself, but simply as an outcome and evidence of the condition of the heart and will; when He declared that all the law and the prophets hang upon the great commandment of love to God and love to man; and when St. Paul taught that “he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law,” and that meat commendeth us not to God, for that the kingdom of God

is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; then surely the reign of the letter was over, and the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus would make men free from the bondage in which their consciences had been held. Not so. As "new Presbyter was but old Priest writ large," so the old worship of the letter reappeared in Christendom, and the exegesis of the Fathers, though not so abjectly puerile nor so grossly superstitious as that of the Rabbis, was yet tainted by the same faults. To take but one instance, and that the greatest of the Fathers. Augustine, unequalled as he is in many respects as an interpreter, yet absolutely revels in mystical numbers and allegorical interpretations. Thus, in the *De Doctrina Christiana*, from the 40 days of our Lord's fasting he deduces all Christianity. 4 signifying *time*—as the 4 seasons of the year, the 4 parts of the day—shews that we are to fast from *temporal* things. 10, or 3+7, is God and man; 3 being the Trinity; 7, or 3+4, being man—3, the spiritual part, heart, soul, and mind; 4, the corporeal, or the 4 elements. Again, in the 153 fishes of the second miraculous draught, 1+2+3+&c., up to 17, being 153, he finds the great multitude which no man can number who shall be on the right side in the judgment, as the fishes were caught on the *right* side of the ship. Augustine, indeed, was so filled with the Spirit, the Divine life was so strong and pure in him, that these things in him do but set off by contrast the brightness of his more rational exegesis. But in Origen it sometimes seems as though the letter, the literal sense of Scripture, had vanished altogether, and the spiritual meaning of the writers was to be gained by distilling from

their writings some kind of sublimated essence, and leaving the letter for less advanced Christians. "The fundamental principle of Origen," says Quinet, "was, 'The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.' But is it not clear that the spirit too may become too powerful, and kill the letter, and usurp its place?" Indeed, literalism, beginning in worshipping the letter, ends in destroying it. When every verse of the Bible, to quote good old Thomas Scott, is supposed to be replete with spiritual edification, men soon begin to find recondite doctrines in the simplest facts, and then to overlook the facts for the sake of the doctrines.

It is hardly possible to discuss this subject without saying something at least on the principles of the interpretation of Scripture. It is well known that Origen, reducing to a system that which other writers from Philo downwards had held unsystematically, affirmed that there is in Scripture a threefold sense—the literal, the moral, and the mystic, corresponding severally to the body, the soul, and the spirit of man. And¹ he goes so far as to assert that in some cases, as in passages where there is no moral instruction to be gained, or when something inconsistent with the highest morality seems to be asserted, the literal sense must give way altogether to the mystical. Now it is clear that St. Paul, in such a passage, for instance, as that in Galatians iv., where Ishmael and Isaac are the two covenants, does give considerable warrant to the principle of a mystical sense in Scripture; and so again does St. Matthew in his application of the passage from Hosea, "Out of Egypt have I called my son." But with regard to such passages it may at least be

¹ Cf. Hagenbach, *Dogmengeschichte*, § 33.

said that, on the strictest theory of inspiration, it would appear that the New Testament writers were under a very special Divine guidance, and that no one without such special guidance would be warranted in finding such apparently far-fetched allusions in them; while, on a less strict theory, it may be admitted that St. Paul appears to have been almost incapable of distinguishing between the literal and the figurative, and that to him the mystical seems sometimes to have been the only interpretation. The use of the Old Testament in the New is, however, far too wide a subject to be treated of incidentally: it may suffice to say that, whatever explanation we may give to the phenomena of the above-mentioned passages, it is certain that the mystical sense of Scripture is in the early Christian writers for the most part simply a license to let the imagination run wild, and that by its free use any doctrine can be found in any passage. And yet, paradoxical as it may sound, mysticism is but another form of the worship of the letter. For when it was held that every word of Scripture is the direct utterance of the Holy Spirit, it was not unnatural to infer that in even the apparently simplest passage there were hidden beneath the surface treasures of wisdom and knowledge which only the spiritual could search out; and so an excessive veneration for the letter led men to undervalue the literal sense, and to exalt the spirit to the destruction of the letter.

For us in the present day the mystical interpretation of Scripture is hardly likely to possess much attraction. Those who wish to see a favourable specimen of it will find it in the devotional commentaries of the late Isaac Williams, a writer of most devout and tender spirit, and

deeply read both in the Scriptures and in the Fathers. They will find in them many exquisite and edifying thoughts, but they will probably rise from them with the conviction that the "mystical sense" is the product of much devout imagination and ingenuity, with but little of real critical insight. Protestant interpreters, for the most part, have agreed in ignoring it: with them, the danger has been that of superstitious reverence for the letter. When the Reformation broke through the clouds which had so long hung over men's minds, and thought and inquiry awoke, the authority of the Church, on which had been based the multitudinous abuses and superstitions of mediæval Christianity, broke down at once and for ever. But then, as men's belief in Christianity as a Divine revelation happily remained unshaken, it became necessary to find some other basis on which their faith could rest securely; and such a basis was found in the infallibility of Scripture, a doctrine which had indeed been always held, but which had been overgrown and smothered by the doctrine of the infallibility of the Church. Thenceforward there was but one standard of truth and falsehood, the writings of the Old and New Covenant. And when by translation and the printing-press the Bible was brought within the reach of the mass of the people, it was natural that it should be received with deep and genuine reverence. We, indeed, who are familiar with the Bible from childhood, cannot picture to ourselves the effect which it must have produced upon those to whom it came with the freshness of a new and surprising discovery. But it was not in this age that the letter was able to overpower the spirit. When men resorted eagerly to the Bible for that instruction in righteousness which they

had sought in vain from their former teachers, they were not likely to exalt it into an idol; it is not till the first freshness of faith has faded that religion becomes less spiritual, and, being no longer able to lift itself up to God, stops short in any lower object. It was not in the age of the Reformation, but rather in the age of the Latitudinarians, that the grosser and, so to say, more carnal views of inspiration sprang up. As long as the hearts of men responded to the spiritual teaching of the Bible, there was no need to formulate any theory of its origin and authority. Luther, though he expressed himself strongly as to the Divine authority of Scripture, yet never failed to acknowledge its human side. It was not till the later *consensus fidei* of the Lutheran Church that the doctrine was announced that "God not only caused his Word to be committed to writing by means of Moses and the prophets and apostles, but also has till now watched over and guarded that writing, that it might not be vitiated by the craft of Satan nor by any human fraud."¹ When theologians asserted the Divine authority of the Hebrew vowel-points and the divinely-guaranteed purity of the Greek of the New Testament, literalism had probably reached its extreme point.² Against such teaching a reaction was sure to come, and it appeared first in the mystical school,³ who insisted on the unprofitableness of the letter unless it was stirred into life by the living spirit; and, afterwards, in that great rationalistic movement which has so powerfully affected the religious thought of Protestantism.

¹ "Consensus repetitus fidei Lutheranae." Quoted by Hagenbach, *Dogmengeschichte*.

² See Hagenbach, p. 556.

³ Christian Hoburg, for instance, says, "Die Schrift ist ein alt, kalt, und todt Ding, das nun eitel Pharisäer machet" (The written letter is an old, cold, dead thing, which only makes vain Pharisees).

Indeed, the party of advanced rationalism has no more powerful allies than those divines who assert the verbal inspiration of Scripture; nor is anything that Bishop Colenso has written so dangerous to a reasonable faith as the utterance of a dignitary of the Church of England from the Oxford University pulpit, that "every book, every chapter, every sentence, every word, nay—for where shall we stop?—every letter, of the Bible is the direct utterance of the Most High."

"The letter killeth." The bondage to the mere written document is destructive of that freedom which, in theology as well as in every other branch of knowledge, is essential to life. The lawyer, to whom precedents and enactments are everything, and common sense and equity are nothing; ¹ the politician, who enforces a clause of an obsolete treaty to the destruction of a people's liberty; the public functionary, who cannot transact the simplest piece of business without going through all the forms which are applicable to the most complicated; the king, who will rather be scorched than have his chair drawn back by the wrong official; the theologian, with whom a single text outweighs the whole tenour of Scripture—all these are instances of the working of this principle. And in every department of life it is very easy to fall under the bondage of the letter. It is far easier to go by a rule than by a principle; to repeat a formula by heart, than to apply it to varying cases; to forgive an offending brother seven times, than to maintain a forgiving spirit. But the man who is a slave to a formula, who exalts means into ends, and thinks mint and anise and cummin as important as

¹ Compare Burke's saying, that "no man comprehends less of the majesty of the English Constitution than the *Nisi Prius* lawyer, who is always dealing with technicalities and precedents."

judgment, mercy, and truth, will have none of that spiritual life and vigour, none of that elasticity of step, which belongs to those who, being led of the Spirit, are not under the law. And, in like manner, the expositor of Scripture who makes it his chief business to vindicate the accuracy of the letter in points of detail, or to reconcile the Mosaic cosmogony¹ with the conclusions of astronomical or geological science, will miss very much of that teaching of the spirit which they may gain for whom the letter is but the earthen vessel in which the spiritual treasure is conveyed. The religious teacher or the moral philosopher, who cannot rise above his own special system, or the form in which truth has presented itself to him, into a higher region, will leave no lasting impression on human thought. For in all things the Form is transient; the visible and tangible perishes and decays; only the Substance, the spiritual reality, is eternal.

It would be hard to find a better instance of this principle than in the words which our Lord spake when He brake bread and blessed it on the night before his crucifixion: "This is my body, which is given for you: do this in remembrance of me." On the letter, the words, of this utterance, controversy has raged for centuries. Christians have imprisoned, persecuted, put to death their fellow-Christians on account of their interpretation of them. Men have asserted

¹ Compare a sermon by Dr. Pusey, delivered at Oxford, on Sunday, November 3, 1878. "To theology, all explanations of the details of the six days of creation are indifferent. The mission of Moses was to announce the Creator to a benighted world, and that man was the work of God's hands, formed in his own likeness. . . . In what sense the word day is to be explained—whether Moses speaks of twenty-four hours or of unlimited periods, &c.—of all this and more, genuine theology says nothing, and is even jealous over herself lest she should seem to invest any physical theory with the sacredness of Divine truth."

passionately, and others have denied not less passionately, that when Christ said, "This is my body," He meant us to understand that, when his rightly-appointed ministers should in all after time take bread, and say over it the words which He then said, He would Himself be present then and there under the visible form of bread. What is the literal meaning of the words? Are they to be taken literally or in a figure? In what relation do they stand to other sayings of his? How are we to comply with the direction, "Do this"? These are the questions which men have hotly disputed, and in disputing have suffered to escape the delicate and subtle fragrance, the essence, the spirit, which was contained in them. And in this controversy the letter, the dead and unchanging form, has often destroyed the life of the great central ordinance of Christianity, and has evacuated it of its life-giving power. Not only so: but Protestants, at least, may be allowed to say that the literalism of the Mass has destroyed the life of the Communion; that what was meant for a germ of life, changing, perhaps, its outward form according to the varying circumstances and æsthetic capacities of the Christian society, has been petrified once for all into a form, a ceremony, a letter.

Or take the other great Christian sacrament. That the washing of water typifies the cleansing of the soul in the act of union with Christ—that by baptism we are buried and risen again with Christ—that as many of us as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ—these are living, fruitful, life-giving truths. But the precise metaphysical operation of baptism—whether its effect is the same on all recipients, whether it conveys any secret influence to the soul, or whether its

efficacy consists simply in bringing the baptized into contact with the life which circulates throughout the Christian body—these are controversies which may be unavoidable, but which have a deadening effect upon the soul.

Or take another ordinance—the observance of the first day of the week. It was a true instinct that led Martin Luther to say of this great Christian festival, “If anywhere the day is made holy for the mere day’s sake—if anywhere any one sets up its observance on a Jewish foundation, then I order you to work on it, to ride on it, to dance on it, to feast on it, to do anything that shall remove this encroachment on Christian liberty.” For he knew that in this case, as in others, the letter killeth; the hard, inflexible, stern commandment, the observance for the sake of the observance and not for the sake of a higher end, takes all the life out of the institution. But the essence of the observance, the principle of keeping a fixed proportion of our time sacred from our ordinary work, and using it for the highest spiritual ends—this belongs to the spirit that giveth life.

And not less is it true in the life of each several Christian that the letter killeth, while the spirit quickeneth. Forms of devotion, observances, whether ordained by the Church or invented by ourselves, outward helps to the religious life, of whatever kind, which we have found useful to us, are very apt to assert a kind of dominion over us; we think we cannot do without them; we fancy that our spiritual life depends upon them. But soon we discover that any kind of fixed unchangeable method has a tendency to kill; it makes our religion a timorous scrupulous thing; whereas the

Spirit, the free and life-giving Spirit, quickens our devotions, and sends fresh pulses of life throughout all our religious system. Not that we can do without the letter, the fixed and formal element, in our religion; the Spirit needs a body in which to dwell, a *γράμμα*, a writing, to express it; but neither in our interpretation of the Scriptures, nor yet in our religious life, must the letter be allowed to supersede the spirit, or to be exalted into a position of independent authority.

And it may be that on her power of rightly adjusting the claims of the letter and the spirit the future of the Christian Church depends. For modern society with its manifold developments, modern science with its far reaching investigations, modern thought with its daring independence—all present to the Church problems which she must solve, or else renounce her claim to universality. The Church of the twentieth century can no more be the Church of the nineteenth, or of the sixteenth, or of the fourth, or of the first century, than the grown man can wear the garments of his boyhood or his infancy. Two obvious courses are open to her. She may adhere obstinately to the letter, to the traditions of the past, to the forms which she once found adequate to her requirements, and so she may forfeit the future by a blind allegiance to the past. Or else she may break altogether with the past, she may fling her traditions to the winds, and throw herself into the full swing of modern progress. In this way the future may be hers, but she loses the sobering, steadying, and ennobling influence of the past; she forfeits the accumulated wisdom and piety and spiritual experience of nineteen centuries. But there is another, a more difficult, but a nobler and more fruitful,

path open to her. She may preserve the letter by obeying the spirit; she may bring out of her treasury things new and old, interpreting the old by the new and moderating the new by the old; she may admit that forms which suited the twelfth century would have been superstitious for the sixteenth, and that expressions of doctrine which edified the sixteenth may be meaningless to the nineteenth. In this way, and in this way only, she may reconcile the claims, so often pronounced irreconcilable, of the letter and the spirit, of the past and the future, of the form and the substance. In this way she may avoid the two extremes, equally pernicious, of supposing that God's revelation of Himself to man ceased in the first, or in the sixteenth, or in any past century; or, on the other hand, that God never revealed Himself at all till now; of attributing either to the past, or to the present, or to the future, a monopoly of the teaching of God's Spirit.

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.

R. E. BARTLETT.

STUDIES IN THE LIFE OF CHRIST.

XII.—THE LATER MIRACLES.

THE thought and action of Christ so lived in harmony that neither could move without the other; the progress of one was the progress of both. Hence the very qualities that distinguish his later from his earlier teaching distinguish his later from his earlier works. In the very degree that the former becomes, in the region of the spirit, transcendental, expressive of a