

sible. The inner separation is the spiritual wellspring of the social energy of holiness; and if the springs be not constantly replenished, the streams will inevitably run dry.

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*HISTORICAL COMMENTARY ON THE EPISTLES
TO THE CORINTHIANS.*

XXII. THE CORINTHIAN VIEW REGARDING MARRIAGE.

IN the preceding section we take the view that the Corinthians had proposed to Paul the question whether the right principle of life was that all persons ought to marry. We must now ask what was their intention in putting this question.

The answer has already been distinctly indicated in the reasoning which led up to the determination of the question which they proposed to the Apostle. The letter of the Corinthians was (as we have seen already at various points) a decidedly ambitious performance. They discussed, with much philosophic acumen and with strong reforming zeal, the nature of society, the character of man, the relation of man to God, and other similar topics, and they were well satisfied with the letter which embodied their opinions. It was (as they felt) able, religious, and on a lofty plane of morality. They were eager to regenerate and reform society, and they were satisfied that they knew how to do so. The questions which they put to Paul on this subject were calculated to show clearly what answer must, in their opinion, be given to them.

In no part of the Roman Empire was there current at that time any idea of the advisability and the superior purity of monasticism and the permanent separation of the sexes. The Corinthians were entirely under the influence of prevailing views, and were as firmly persuaded

as all the leading official moralists were, that the admitted and palpable degeneracy of society was connected with the unwillingness to marry, which was spreading widely among the most fashionable and corrupt section of society in the empire. The most vicious part of society was the one where celibacy was commonest. The classes which were purest in life—the Jews and, at a long interval behind them, the old-fashioned Pagans—were those among which marriage was almost universal. They drew the obvious conclusion: make marriage universal, and vice will disappear.

That such was the drift of the Corinthians' argument is clear from Paul's reply. He fully admits (vii. 2-5) the truth that lies in their reasoning, and is involved in human nature. Among other things they had evidently referred to the preference for childlessness, which was characteristic of fashionable society under the Empire, and Paul quite agreed with their views on this point. Marriage should be a real union. A married couple ought to live together regularly. They may, by mutual consent, live separate occasionally for a time, with a view to religious and devotional purposes: such temporary separation was a recognised custom in society, and Paul saw no reason to interfere with it, but rather inclines to commend it. Still he safeguards himself by adding (vii. 6) that he only allows, but does not enjoin, such periodic temporary separation.¹

But this view of marriage as a safeguard from evil is not a high one: it is not Paul's. "I would," says he (vii. 7),

¹ Canon Evans rightly sees that vii. 6 refers only to the custom alluded to in vii. 5. It is an unfortunate result of the prevalent misapprehension of the question discussed by Paul, that many interpreters take vii. 6 to mean, "I permit, but am far from enjoining, marriage." Canon Evans, though sharing that misapprehension, felt the inevitable sequence of thought between the two verses 5 and 6, as every one must to whom Greek has become a living tongue. Could we hear Paul read aloud his letter, the tone of voice would permit no doubt on the connexion and the sense.

“that all men were even as I myself”; and that they needed no such safeguard, but could live on a higher plane and look on marriage from a nobler point of view. But such is not the case, and men must guide their life according to their own nature. They have “each his own gift from God,” each his own special weakness and special strength. Paul never legislates as if all were like each other or like himself. All must judge according to their own nature and conscience—in the spirit of God.

In vii. 10 ff. the subject is taken up afresh from a different side; but, as we shall see in a following section, the tone of advice is the same. Every man is quite justified in remaining in his present condition, unmarried or married: in other words, the suggestion, which was evidently made by the Corinthians, that the unmarried should be urged to marry, was strongly repudiated by Paul.

It was the insistence of the Corinthians on that lower view of marriage that led Paul to devote some attention to it. They were not able to rise above current philosophy and popular morality. Their zeal to reform society opened up to them no lofty or mystic views, but kept them on a strictly utilitarian level. Marriage was a useful thing for the purpose on which they were bent, and was deserving of every encouragement. Ardent reformers usually have a *nostrum*, and the Corinthians had their complete cure for the ills of society. They were ready and eager to take the laws of nature under their own special care, and see that they were carried out. Many people have shown the same zeal to protect nature and her laws, since the Corinthians wrote.

But, indubitably, the prominence which—in his desire to acknowledge fully the proportion of truth in their letter—Paul gives to the lower view of marriage, led to much misapprehension. Misapprehension was exaggerated, not long after his time, by another cause. The revolt from the

impurity of common society led to an exaggeration of the spiritual value of mere physical purity of life, however attained. The distorted views of life which spread widely in Christian circles inevitably produced complete misconception of Paul's views. His language to the Corinthians lent itself readily to misinterpretation, and the age was not one which would wait to compare passage with passage, and weigh each, in order to form a reasoned theory of Paul's views as a whole. Many sentences in this chapter, taken by themselves, could easily be read as inculcating that marriage is an evil, permissible only because it saves the world from still greater evils; and they have been so read.

But to suppose that the Corinthians could have been thinking of the problems of monasticism, and could have questioned Paul as to whether the virtues of celibacy were not such as to render it a specially laudable and meritorious course, is quite anachronistic. People on their plane of thought and knowledge could not have entertained such thoughts.

XXIII. WAS PAUL MARRIED?

We have seen that, on the commonly accepted view as to the question which is here discussed by Paul, it is not possible to find any distinct evidence as to Paul's own condition. Good and trustworthy authorities read different meanings in the passage. But, as we have now determined the form of the Corinthians' question, the case is changed. It appears hardly probable that, if Paul had never had a wife, the Corinthians would have put to him the question, "Is it to be regarded as a duty incumbent on all Christians to marry?" Had he been unmarried always, the question answered itself.

But it must be acknowledged that this argument is subjective, and depends much for its value on individual feel-

ing. There is little real argument on the point to be deduced from Paul's own words here or elsewhere. He often urges his own example on his converts, but never in reference to such a matter as this. He urges on them to live a life as entirely devoted to the Divine purpose as himself: he was absolutely certain that the Divine will had wholly occupied his mind and powers, and he wishes that others were like him in that respect. But he never could hold, he never held, his own action to be a pattern to others in such matters as marriage. He never would have said, "Marry as I have married," or "remain unmarried, like me."

To my individual judgment it appears that Paul's mind shows a peculiar power of universal sympathy, which is more characteristic of a man that had been married. But, on the other hand, who can venture to set any limit to his marvellous power of comprehending the mind and feelings of his converts?

The question of Paul's marriage or celibacy has considerable importance for the interpretation of the chapter which we are now studying. Evidence on the question has usually been sought from vii. 7 and 8. This, however, seems to misconceive the force of those verses. When Paul wishes (vii. 7) "that all men were even as I myself," he is not thinking of his condition as regards marriage, but of his nature and character. His words carried more meaning, doubtless, to those who knew him personally than they do to us; those who had been acquainted with him knew how impossible to him an impure life was, how inevitable purity was to him. But even to us the words are full of meaning, as is set forth in section XXV. on "Marriage and the Divine Life."¹

When one looks at the case dispassionately, it seems altogether inconsistent with the context that Paul, who is

¹ See also p. 382 at top.

here emphasizing the injudiciousness of laying down any universal law, and the necessity of conceding much to the individual varieties of situation, should express the wish either that all men were married and widowers, or that all men were unmarried.¹ It is reasonable and natural that he should wish that all men were of such character that a perfectly pure life was as easy to them as to himself; but it is altogether absurd that he should say, "I would that all men were widowers," or "that all were celibate." The first of these two alternatives is so supremely absurd that we may almost sympathize with those many interpreters who have recoiled from it and have championed the less absurd alternative "that all should be celibate." The latter has been the more dangerous interpretation, because it is less palpably absurd. But no one who has any real sympathy with Paul's spirit can imagine him expressing, even in the most abstract fashion, the wish that there could or should be one universal rule—no marriage, no union between man and woman in the world.

The expression in vii. 8 is not to be taken as a new subject and a new paragraph; it is only a summing up of vii. 1-7, as we shall see in the following section. The rendering of the Authorized Version brings that out clearly.² The Revised Version takes a view, and emphasizes it by an arrangement of the paragraphs, which we must think false. It is peculiarly unfortunate that in a Revised Version there should be so many cases in which we must recur to the older version, even while we acknowledge that in the overwhelming majority of cases the changes made in the Revised Version are either needed, or, at least, not wrong. But it must be granted that paragraph arrangement is often in-

¹ According to the two theories, which alone are possible as to Paul's condition: either he was a widower, or he had never married.

² As Canon Evans simply gives the Authorized Version without criticising it, we may claim him as holding the opinion stated in our text.

adequate to express the closely welded thought of Paul's Epistles.

XXIV. REMARRIAGE.

The question of "the unmarried and widows" comes up in vii. 8. Who are "the unmarried"? (*ἀγάμοις*), and why are they thus mixed up with the question of remarriage?

There is no question that in classical Greek *ἄγαμος* meant "one who has never been married," and *ἀγαμία* "celibacy." It would not be easy to find any justification for taking *ἄγαμος* in the sense of one who, after being married, has lost his wife. Yet that sense has been championed in this passage by many commentators, who have been misled by the desire to make *ἀγάμοις* the masculine corresponding to *χήραις* the feminine. Some of these champions of a false Greek even allege that there was no Greek word for "widower," and therefore that Paul had to press the word *ἄγαμος* wrongly into his service for the occasion. But Paul knew Greek better than those commentators, who had not troubled to consult the lexicons before they asserted a negative.

Paul used *χήραις* preferably to *χήροις*—though generally a masculine term is used when both sexes are to be included—because the feminine is much the more characteristic idea in this case, just as English "widow" is the simple and "widower" the derivative (contrary to the usual practice in such pairs of terms). He here sums up "those who have never known marriage (*ἀγάμοις*) and those who have been married and widowed." In vii. 8 the Apostle sums up and repeats the advice of vii. 1-7: to remain without a consort is a respectable, honourable course of life, if they remain pure in that situation "like me":¹ otherwise marriage is their only way of living rightly.

¹ Here, as before, all attempts to deduce from the personal reference evidence whether Paul was a widower or celibate rest on misunderstanding.

Moreover, in vii. 39, 40, it is clear that Paul thought the question of marriage was not altogether the same for a widow and a widower. A widow occupied, in his view, a distinct and peculiar position as regards remarriage, and he is much more decisive in his advice to widows than to any other class of persons. As we have already seen,¹ his opinion was that, though a widow was perfectly free and right in marrying again, yet she was "happier" to remain in her widowhood (vii. 40). That is the only case throughout this much misunderstood chapter in which he expresses a distinct opinion against marriage.

But, as to widowers, Paul evidently thought that the question to them was not essentially different from the question in the case of unmarried men. The widow occupied a special and peculiar position; not so the widower. There was therefore no special advice needed for him.

Thus, from every point of view, we see that Paul in vii. 8 sums up his advice as affecting (1) all as yet unmarried persons; (2) widows. There was no third class requiring special treatment. If in any small degree widowers differed from the first class, they may be taken under the second class.

The opinions stated in this chapter, so far as we have yet seen them, must be pronounced eminently sensible and practical and suitable. But, at the same time, there is an evident want of the loftier tone that is characteristic of Paul's mind. We have seen that the prominence of the plain but rather commonplace tone is due to the necessity under which Paul was placed of considering the Corinthians' questions from their own point of view. But we must proceed to ask how far his conception of the Christian life as the Divine life was permitted to appear, even in addressing the Corinthian "wise" men, a not wholly sympathetic audience.

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¹ See § XXI. p. 286.