

SAINTS PETER AND PAUL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

WE cannot too often remind ourselves that Christ was a Jew, that the twelve Apostles were Jews, and that the first converts on the day of Pentecost, and for several years after, were also Jews. Christ worshipped in the Temple and, after the resurrection, the Apostles continued to frequent it. Paul was a Hebrew born of Hebrews and was finally apprehended at Jerusalem, in the Temple itself. There is conclusive evidence that Jewish converts in Apostolic times continued to observe the Jewish Sabbath, as well as the Christian Sunday, and also the Mosaic laws regarding clean and unclean foods.

For Peter and Paul the burning question was : must gentile converts be circumcised and follow the other prescriptions of the Mosaic law before they could become Christians ? Yet this is to simplify the issue overmuch. The practical question was whether the gentiles were to be bound by the Mosaic law as developed, complicated and codified by successive generations of Jewish Scribes ?

How detailed and strait such regulations had become may be illustrated by an example taken from the Mishna. This code of law, though not written till as late as A.D. 200, reflects the spirit, if not the letter, of this rabbinic legislation. The Mishna poses the question : may a Jew dine with a gentile ? It replies that in certain circumstances he may. He may even drink wine offered to him by his gentile host ; but only if the flask is unsealed before his very eyes. Should he go from the room after the wine has been opened he may not drink from it again. If he does so, he is guilty of idolatry, for, during his absence, the gentile may have offered a libation from it to his false deities.¹ Had such regulations been made binding upon gentile converts, the effect on the spread of Christianity does not need stressing.

The most significant contacts between Peter and Paul in the New Testament arose from this problem. We must therefore outline the progressive stages by which the problem was settled.

The conversion of the gentiles had been promised by God when He made His covenant with Abraham. God said to him :—

“ I will make of thee a great nation ; and in thee shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed.” Gen. xii, 2.

In the New Testament Simeon had foretold that Christ should be :—

“ A light of revelation to the gentiles.” Luke ii, 32.

and finally Christ, after his resurrection, gave the Church its universal charter :—Matt. xxviii, 18.

“ Go ye, therefore, make disciples of all nations.”

¹ Mishna : Treatise on Idolatry, Chap v, sections 5 and 6.

But it is not surprising that the Apostles did not immediately act upon this command after Pentecost. During his earthly life, Christ attempted no mission to the gentiles. He said explicitly :—Matt. xv, 21–28,

“ I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

His brief visit to the Samaritans was an exception to this rule and did not void the general principle. Similarly, when he sent out his disciples two by two, he forbade them to preach to the gentiles and the Samaritans. Pentecost brought about no immediate change. We read in the second chapter of Acts :—

“ Now there were staying in Jerusalem devout Jews from every country under heaven ; and when this sound befell, the multitude came together and was confounded, because each one heard them speaking his own language. But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them : ‘ Ye Jews and all that dwell in Jerusalem . . . give ear to my words . . . let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, even this Jesus whom ye crucified.’ They therefore that accepted what he said were baptized and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” Acts ii, 14–41.

Not till after the stoning of Stephen, when a persecution broke out in Jerusalem was the gospel preached to the Samaritans. But the Samaritans were not gentiles. They practised circumcision, accepted the Pentateuch, and observed the Mosaic law, or at least their own interpretation of it. No gentiles had yet been received.

Now comes the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch by Philip, recorded in Acts viii, 26–32 :—

“ But an angel of the Lord spake to Philip, saying, ‘ Arise, and go southward on the road descending from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ And he arose and went. And behold, an Ethiopian . . . a minister of Candace queen of the Ethiopians . . . had come to Jerusalem to worship, and was returning; and as he sat in his carriage he was reading the prophet Isaiah.”

After a brief instruction from the Apostle he was baptized. This man was a Jewish proselyte, otherwise neither would he have gone to the Holy City to worship, nor is it likely that he would have been reading Isaiah. Most of our evidence regarding Jewish proselytes is of a later date than this incident. Christ had said to the Pharisees :—(Matt. xxiii, 15),

“ ye compass sea and land to gain a single proselyte,”

but how far a proselyte was allowed to join in Jewish worship, and whether at this time any were circumcised and stood on an equal footing with the Jews, we cannot say. It seems more probable that the Ethiopian was not circumcised, and therefore his status would certainly have been inferior to that of a born Jew. Possibly then, the Ethiopian was the first gentile convert to be baptized. But it is certain that this incident

did not establish a norm of conduct for the early Church, nor is it again referred to by Luke who, however, twice records the vision to St. Peter at Joppa, and three times the conversion of St. Paul. Repetition was a device which Luke used only when wishing to stress the outstanding importance of an event. This solitary baptism may conceivably have been regarded as an exceptional intervention of God, just as in earlier times Ruth had been admitted to membership of the Jewish nation.

Now we come to the vision of Peter at Joppa, an event whose importance can scarcely be over-estimated, for it is not less important in the providential plan for the conversion of the gentiles than St. Paul's conversion on the Damascus road. We note also, that whilst Paul was the Apostle of the Gentiles "par excellence" it was to Peter and not to Paul, that the vision was granted. The vision at Joppa took place after the conversion of Paul, and it is significant that though God had already revealed to Paul that he was to be the apostle of the gentiles, though he had been appointed an apostle directly by God, yet he did not preach to the gentile world till after the vision of Peter, but confined his attention to the synagogues at Damascus, and to the Grecian Jews at Jerusalem.

The vision of St. Peter at Joppa is too well known to need quoting in full. We will select those facts which have special bearing on our subject. It is clear that Cornelius the centurion was a proselyte. He is spoken of as "devout and God-fearing," the usual New Testament phrase for such a man. He prayed at the ninth hour according to the custom of the Jews. It is equally certain that he was not a full proselyte. When entering the Centurion's house Peter said :

"Yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him ; yet God hath taught me to call no man unclean or defiled." Acts x, 28.

Clearly Peter knew that his revelation applied not merely to Cornelius and his household, but to the gentiles in general. This incident at Joppa marks the turning point in the history of the conversion of the gentiles. It was accepted by most as definitive. After this gentile converts were held as of equal status "de jure," if not always "de facto" with the Jewish Christians.

Four circumstances give to the Joppa incident its definitive character. First, an angel appeared to Cornelius preparing him for Peter's visit. Secondly, Peter's own vision was three times repeated. We give Peter's own summary of the event :—

"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and beheld in ecstasy a vision, a sail descending like a great sheet, being let down by four corners from heaven." Acts ii, 5.

(One cannot but remark that Peter is very precise about the mechanics of the vision, which is not to be wondered at when we remember his

nautical background. Had God vouchsafed a similar revelation to Paul, He would doubtless have employed not a sail, but a tent.) Peter goes on:—

“And I gazed upon it, and considered it, and beheld therein the animals of the earth. And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Arise Peter, kill and eat.’ But I said, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing defiled or unclean hath ever entered my mouth’. But a voice answered from heaven a second time, ‘What God hath cleansed do not thou hold defiled.’ This befell thrice.” Acts ii, 6–10.

Peter made his way to the centurion’s house and while he was instructing Cornelius and his household and friends the Holy Ghost came upon the gentiles, so that “they spoke with tongues and glorified God.” And the faithful of the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because on the gentiles also the Holy Ghost had descended. Then Peter said:—“Can anyone withhold the water, that they should be baptized, who have received the Holy Ghost even as ourselves.” Then he commanded that they should be baptized. This outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the third sign which gave to the incident its definitive character.

The New Testament argument for the primacy of Peter is one of converging evidence. The confession of Peter and Christ’s reply, recorded in Matt. xvi, 16–19, is the most explicit passage, but elsewhere there are other texts which confirm this truth. So in this incident the authoritative attitude of Cephas is evident. The Jews who accompanied Peter must have been shaken to the core by the whole episode. They had received no vision as had Peter, but they follow him, probably for the first time in their lives, across the threshold of a gentile house. Peter tells them to baptize, and they do so. To say that they would have obeyed any of the other apostles just as readily is to beg the question. God, who does not work haphazard, ordained in fact, that this tremendous revelation should be made to Peter and to no other. The subsequent narrative emphasizes this:—

“Now the Apostles and the Brethren throughout Judæa heard that the gentiles also had accepted the word of God. But when Peter went up to Jerusalem, they of the circumcision found fault with him saying, ‘Thou didst visit men that are uncircumcised and eat with them.’” (Acts xi, 1–3.)

Peter recounted his vision to them. “Then they held their peace and glorified God.” We may note here that the other apostles accepted Peter’s action without protest, that only the more recent converts from among the Jews objected, and that only after this incident do Paul and Barnabas make their first gentile converts.

Yet the influence of the Judaizers was to remain strong. Not till after the destruction of the temple did this baneful influence practically dis-

appear. Paul and Barnabas were constantly meeting with opposition from the Christian Judaizers. During the second visit of Paul to Antioch we read :—

“ Now some came down from Judæa and taught the brethren, saying, ‘ Unless ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved.’ ” (Acts xv, 1.)

Faced with this opposition Paul and Barnabas, after discussion, decided to go to Jerusalem and to appeal to the apostles there. We cannot be absolutely certain of the date of this incident which led to the convening of the Council of Jerusalem, but if we place it in the year A.D. 49 we shall not be far wrong. Those present at the Council, a very considerable number, were sharply divided. The majority heard of the conversions effected by Paul and Barnabas among the gentiles with joy ; but some believers from the sect of the Pharisees maintained that these converts must be circumcised and forced to obey the law of Moses. There was much argument. Then Peter arose, and appealing to the Cornelius incident said :—

“ Brethren, yourselves do know that in the early days God made choice among you, that through my mouth the gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe . . . Now, therefore, why do ye provoke God, that ye should lay a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither ourselves nor our fathers have been able to bear.” Acts xv, 7-11.

Then, says Acts, “ the whole multitude held their peace.” Paul had not spoken. He was content to wait and to let Peter fight his battle for him. Nor was his trust misplaced. Peter’s words once again settle the matter, and only after the main issue had been settled do Paul and Barnabas give an account of their work among the gentiles. The pre-eminent position of Peter at this first Council of the Church is sufficiently obvious to anyone reading the account of it with an unbiased mind.

We are now in a position to review a passage from Galatians often quoted by Protestants, especially those of the Bauer and Tübingen school, to show that Paul ignores the position of Peter if not actively opposing it.

The epistle is a counterblast against the Judaizers who had been active in Galatia. Paul begins by relating his conversion, and stresses the fact that he received his revelation direct from Christ. He tells how, after his conversion he retired to Arabia before returning to Damascus. Then follow some significant words in Gal. i, 18-21 :—

“ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him fifteen days. And none other of the Apostles did I see save James.”

The Clementine vulgate has :—

“ Deinde post annos tres veni Jerosolymam videre Petrum.”

The Greek has, ἱστορήσαι Κηφᾶν Here we may remark that with only one exception, Paul, though writing in Greek retains the Aramaic name Cephas, rather than the Greek "Peter." It may reasonably be argued that he did this of set purpose, and as a Jew he would readily appreciate the implications of the Aramaic word which had never been used as a proper name before Christ had given it to Simon. Also the use of the verb ἱστορέω demands something stronger than the word "visit." Liddell and Scott give as its primary meaning "to enquire about a person or thing." It was even used in classical Greek of enquiring of an oracle. This stronger sense is supported by the researches of Moulton and Milligan. We believe that there is everything to be said in favour of translating the passage:—

"I went up to Jerusalem to enquire of Cephas."

Paul continues:—

"Then after fourteen years I went again to Jerusalem. Now I went in obedience to a revelation, and laid before them the gospel which I preach among the gentiles . . . for fear that I had been running or might run in vain." Gal. ii, 1-2.

He states that he did this privately before James, Cephas and John, who were reputed as pillars, and adds, "and they extended to Barnabas and myself the right hand of fellowship."

"For fear that I had been running or might run in vain." Strong words these. Despite direct revelation from Christ, Paul submits his doctrine to the scrutiny of the other Apostles and in particular, it would appear, to Peter, for though James, Cephas and John are mentioned together, yet in the preceding verses Peter alone is mentioned.

Now comes the passage upon which many non-Catholics place such stress:—Gal. ii, 11-14.

"But when Peter came to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was self-condemned. For before some came from James he used to eat with the gentiles, but after they had come he withdrew and held aloof from them, fearing those of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews dissembled along with him, and thus even Barnabas was led away by their pretence. But when I saw they were not walking aright according to the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, 'If thou, for all that thou art a Jew, livest like a gentile and not like a Jew, by what right dost thou constrain the gentiles to live like Jews?'"

The words, "I withstood him to his face," have become something of a slogan amongst many Protestants. Here, they allege, is a direct refutation of Peter's pre-eminent position. But if we study the passage carefully, we shall on the contrary find in it strong evidence for the unique position of Cephas. We have St. Paul's inspired words for it, that Peter was reprehensible, and that he acted from human respect. But Paul

does not reproach him for having taught false doctrine. He was too well acquainted with Peter's mind to make that charge. Nor does he blame Peter for the material act of observing the Mosaic law, for Jewish converts, and more probably Paul himself, still refrained from unclean foods, nor were they forbidden to do so. Peter was culpable for the scandal which he caused to the recent gentile converts. He did not compel them by word to observe the Mosaic law, but such was the veneration in which he was held that his sudden change of front exercised a moral compulsion upon them, for if even Barnabas who had travelled with Paul and knew him so intimately was led astray, we can imagine the effect of Peter's action on the gentiles. That Barnabas should act so is an additional indication of the dominant influence of Cephas, for Barnabas had a mind of his own. He had first received the recently converted Paul, when others had avoided him through fear; then, having been Paul's friend for some years, he parted with him, because the Apostle of the gentiles refused to allow John Mark to travel in their company. That such a one should weaken because of the mere example of Peter is no proof against Peter's position, but rather tells in its favour. We must distinguish between Peter's actions and Peter's office; infallibility does not imply impeccability. Christ renamed Simon, calling him the "rock-man," rather on account of his office than his personal character, and so, in later times, private individuals, such as St. Bernard and St. Catherine of Sienna have censured the Sovereign Pontiff for private weakness in no uncertain terms; yet not for a moment did they call into question the supreme authority of the Pope.

To sum up, no two saints are so closely linked together in tradition and the liturgy as are Saints Peter and Paul. We rightly think of them as working together in harmony and in the same spirit though in different places, and a careful reading of the New Testament confirms this traditional view. Bauer, and his followers were so influenced by the Hegelian doctrine of thesis, antithesis and synthesis that they were bound to distort scripture to fit into their preconceived plan. But by the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul in Rome, during the same persecution, Divine Providence has seen to it that no church should be able to urge Paul against Peter. Of Peter we may say that as Christ had prayed for him that his faith should not fail, so in the end neither did his charity fall short, but he laid down his life for the Lord whom he loved so well.

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