

The Tolerance of Paul

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The Christian movement at its inception was not just a way of life in the modern sense, but a way of life founded upon a message. It was based, not upon mere feelings, not upon a mere program of work, but upon an account of facts. In other words it was based upon doctrine.

Certainly with regard to Paul himself there should be no debate; Paul certainly was not indifferent to doctrine; on the contrary, doctrine was the very basis of his life. His devotion did not, it is true, make him incapable of a magnificent tolerance. One notable example of such tolerance is to be found during his imprisonment at Rome, as attested by the Epistle to the Philippians. Apparently certain Christian teachers at Rome had been jealous of Paul's greatness. As long as he had been at liberty they had been obliged to take a secondary place; but now that he was in prison, they seized the supremacy. They sought to raise up affection for Paul in his bonds; they preached Christ even of envy and strife. In short, the rival preachers made of the preaching of the gospel a means to the gratification of low personal ambition; it seems to be about as mean a piece of business as could well be conceived. But Paul was not disturbed. "Whether in pretense, or in truth," he said, "Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (Phil. 1:18). The way in which the preaching was being carried on was wrong, but the message itself was true; and Paul was far more interested in the content of the message than in the manner of its presentation. It is impossible to conceive a finer piece of broad minded tolerance.

But the tolerance of Paul was not indiscriminate. He displayed no tolerance, for example, in Galatia. There too, there were rival preachers. But Paul had no tolerance for them. "But though we," he said, "or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). What is the reason for the difference in the apostle's attitude in the two cases? What is the reason for the broad tolerance in Rome, and the fierce anathemas in Galatia? The answer is perfectly plain. In Rome, Paul was tolerant, because there the content of the message that was being proclaimed by the rival teachers was true; in Galatia he was intolerant, because there the content of the rival message was false. In neither case did personalities have anything to do with Paul's attitude. No doubt the motives of the Judaizers in Galatia were far from pure, and in an incidental way Paul does point out their impurity. But that was not the ground of his opposition. The Judaizers no doubt were morally far from perfect, but Paul's opposition to them would have been exactly the same if they had all been angels from heaven. His opposition was based altogether upon the falsity of their teaching; they were substituting for the one true gospel a false gospel which was no gospel at all. It never occurred to Paul that a gospel might be true for one man and not another; the blight of pragmatism had never fallen upon his soul. Paul was convinced of the objective truth of the gospel message, and devotion to that truth was the great passion of his life. Christianity for Paul was not only a life, but also a doctrine, and logically the doctrine came first.

But what was the difference between the teaching of Paul and the teaching of the Judaizers? What was it that gave rise to the stupendous polemic of the Epistle to the Galatians? To the modern Church the difference would have seemed to be a mere theological subtlety. About many things the Judaizers were in perfect agreement with Paul. The Judaizers believed that Jesus was the Messiah; there is not a shadow of evidence that they objected to Paul's lofty view of the person of Christ. Without the slightest doubt, they believed that Jesus had really risen from the dead. They believed, moreover, that faith in Christ was necessary to salvation. But the trouble was, they believed that something else was

also necessary; they believed that what Christ had done needed to be pieced out by the believer's own effort to keep the Law. From the modern point of view the difference would have seemed to be very slight. Paul as well as the Judaizers believed that the keeping of the law of God, in its deepest import, is inseparably connected with faith. The difference concerned only the logical - not even, perhaps, the temporal - order of three steps. Paul said that a man (1) first believes on Christ, (2) then is justified before God, (3) then immediately proceeds to keep God's law. The Judaizers said that a man (1) believes on Christ and (2) keeps the law of God the best he can, and then (3) is justified. The difference would seem to modern "practical" Christians to be a highly subtle and intangible matter, hardly worthy of consideration at all in view of the large measure of agreement in the practical realm. What a splendid cleaning up of the Gentile cities it would have been if the Judaizers had succeeded in extending to those cities the observance of the Mosaic law, even including the unfortunate ceremonial observances! Surely Paul ought have made common cause with teachers who were so nearly in agreement with him; surely he ought to have applied to them the great principle of Christian unity.

As a matter of fact, however, Paul did nothing of the kind; and only because he (and others) did nothing of the kind does the Christian Church exist to-day. Paul saw very clearly that the difference between the Judaizers and himself was the difference between a religion of merit and a religion of grace. If Christ provides only a part of our salvation, leaving us to provide the rest, then we are still hopeless under the load of sin. For no matter how small the gap which must be bridged before salvation can be attained, the awakened conscience sees clearly that our wretched attempt at goodness is insufficient even to bridge that gap. The guilty soul enters again into the hopeless reckoning with God, to determine whether we have really done our part. And thus we groan again under the old bondage of the law. Such an attempt to piece out the work of Christ by our own merit, Paul saw clearly, is the very essence of unbelief; Christ will do everything or nothing, and the only hope is to throw ourselves unreservedly on His mercy and trust Him for all.

Paul certainly was right. The difference which divided him from the Judaizers was no mere theological subtlety, but concerned the very heart and core of the religion of Christ, "Just as I am without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me" - that was what Paul was contending for in Galatia; that hymn would have never been written if the Judaizers had won. And without the thing which that hymn expresses there is no Christianity at all.

Certainly, then Paul was no advocate of an undogmatic religion; he was interested above everything else in the objective and universal truth of his message.... Paul was not interested merely in the ethical principles of Jesus; he was not interested merely in general principles of religion or of ethics. On the contrary, he was interested in the redeeming work of Christ and its effect upon us. His primary interest was in Christian doctrine, and Christian doctrine not merely in its presuppositions but at its center. Christianity {cannot} be made independent of doctrine.