

Symptoms of the Disease

Doubtless, when the Apostle warned the Elders—“from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (v. 30)—he already saw symptoms of the disease which soon after broke out in the Asiatic Churches, “the philosophy and vain deceit” with which the Epistle to the Colossians deals (ii. 8), a disease to the ravages of which in a more virulent form the Apostle, writing at a later period, looked forward with increased dread (comp. e.g. i Tim. iv. 1, 2 Tim. iii. 13).

Two points in the description of these errors stand out. (a) The false teachers would speak “perverted things”... The Apostle is here represented as alleging, not that their doctrines would be wholly and absolutely false, but rather that in their hands Christian truth would be warped, and the proportion of its different elements lost. Such appears to be the character of the system of teaching impugned in the Epistle to the Colossians. That did not so much involve a denial of the central truths of Christianity as lay a wholly undue stress on human “traditions” and on elementary precepts.

St. Paul does not stigmatize it, as he stigmatized the teaching which had leavened the Galatian Church, as a gospel “different” from his own (Gal. i. 6). Such, too, was certainly the character of the errors which the Apostle had in view in the Pastoral Epistles. “The duty laid on Timothy and Titus is not to refute deadly errors, but to keep themselves clear, and to warn others to keep themselves clear, of *trivialities* which took the place of true religion.”

He condemned such teachings as “trashy and unwholesome stuff.” (b) And in the second place the motives of these false guides would be on the same low and earthly level as their doctrine. Their ambition would be “to draw away the disciples after themselves...”

They would abuse the gift of personal influence, and exalt a following of themselves into a standard and test of faith. Of such a degradation of the pastoral office the Epistles reveal St. Paul's habitual dread and condemnation.

Thus, at the close of the almost contemporary Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle suddenly digresses into a vehement warning: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned: and turn away from them.

For they that are such serve not our Lord Christ, but their own belly; and by their smooth and fair speech they beguile the hearts of the innocent" (xvi. 17 f.). In the later Epistle to the Colossians a similar note of caution is sounded in the words: "Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you"... and the instructions given to Titus (iii. 10) as to the treatment of "a man that is factious" (...comp. 2 Tim. iv. 14, Titus i. 11).

It is clear that St. Paul, as time passed on, was keenly alive to the danger lest on the one hand the simplicity of the Gospel should be corrupted and its exacting strictness relaxed, and lest on the other hand personal discipleship to some designing teacher of this lower type should in the minds of his converts take the place of membership in the Church of Christ (comp. 1 Cor. i. 11 ff., iii. 21 f., iv. 6 f.). The warning which he is represented in the Acts as urging on the Ephesian Elders is wholly in keeping with what the Epistles disclose as to his habitual anxiety on the subject.

(The Credibility of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles by Frederic Henry Chase, London: Macmillan and Co., 1902, ebook, 268-271, Text and Paragraph Structure Modified)