THE IRONY OF PAUL

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In a controversy with Adolf Deissmann, following the publication of the German scholar's provocative study of Paul, in 1912, Sir William Ramsay published a cogent paper on the epistles of Paul as documents of literature. He wrote in the course of his argument:

'If one be required to select any one passage to serve as a specimen and proof of Paul's power in pure literature, it would probably be well to offer the first four chapters of First Corinthians. These four chapters form a special section of the whole letter; they were written or dictated in all probability at one effort, and are clearly divided from the next section. I should take this passage, not as one of the most famous or the most exquisite pieces in his letters; it has not the continuous and lofty dignity and beauty of chapter xiii, or of chapter xv.12-49, or of Ephesians i-iv; but it is eminent in respect of the great variety of feeling and effect which it exhibits. Most of the devices for attaining literary effect are here brought into play, not with any purpose of ostentation, but simply because the alternations of feeling dictate or demand them. The dominant emotion changes backward and forward between thankfulness, hope, protective love, disappointment and the keenest irony or even sarcasm. The tone is sometimes one of affection, sometimes of congratulation, sometimes of sharp rebuke, sometimes of deep thankfulness. At one moment Paul writes in the elevated and remote spirit of the mystic, at others in the anxious spirit of the careful pastor.'

Above all, as Ramsay proceeds to show, a subtle irony infuses his style, and indeed the opening chapters of the epistle can scarcely be understood without realisation of this tone. Paul is answering a letter from Corinth and something in its content, some naive parade of philosophy, some inappropriate confidence in a local intellectualism, prompted
alarm in the founder of the church, and then the restrained irony, which pity and concern held back from scorn, of a man of supreme intelligence faced with the perilous assumptions of those who mistake sophistry for wisdom, and words for understanding.

Paul recalled that he had approached Corinth with some care. He had spoken to the Stoics of Athens with deep understanding of their philosophy. That such thought was not alien to his own mind had also been demonstrated to a rustic audience in Lystra.2 There were also aspects of Greek philosophy which he despised3 and doctrine in which he saw no possibility of Christian contact. Of the latter sort was the teaching of Epicurus, or at least what that teaching had become in the hands of Epicurus’ followers.4 In Corinth Paul sensed a shallow intellectualism which made him determined not ‘to preach the Gospel in philosophic terms’,5 lest the truth which he desired above all else to stress should lose its impact and meaning. This is what the determination to ‘know nothing else’6 but the simplicities of his message means. It is not a repudiation of the intellectual approach of the recent Areopagus address, but a demonstration of the writer’s acute awareness of the peril of pandering to the pretensions of the Corinthian audience.

Corinth was not Athens — nor Philippi, nor Tarsus. It was the most cosmopolitan of the cities of the Mediterranean, with the possible exception of Rome itself. Vicious, prosperous, without deep roots in tradition, the people of Corinth were too ready, with the facility of immigrant communities, to adopt the vices rather than the virtues of the land of their adoption, and to conform to Greek ways with little of deeper understanding. The letter deals with no fewer than five major problems. W. Baird lists them as division, morality, secularism, worship, and death.7 Philosophy, or what Corinth understood by that much tormented term, underlay all these problems. No common habit of thought gave the Christian group stability, coherence, and a form of unity, as it no doubt did in churches formed from synagogue communities. The Jews were a minority. There was no Old Testament background. The New Testament was hardly begun. The Old Testament had not the accepted authority which it had at
Berea in its more solidly Jewish community. Speculation, debate, conjecture were rife. It was, in short, a situation which has much to teach the modern world. For the first time since the first century, the world we live in is again a world of cities, with a mass of problems most relevant to today. Corinth might be London, New York, Sydney or Auckland, with its cosmopolitan shape emerging.

The character and spirit of a community colours for good and ill, the church in its midst. 'The Christian letters,' wrote Ramsay 60 years ago in his exposition of the apocalyptic epistles, 'need to be constantly illustrated from the life of those cities, and to be always read in the light of a careful study of the society in them.' Ramsay developed his thesis primarily with reference to the 'seven churches of Asia', the recipients of the apocalyptic letters, but it was demonstrably true elsewhere, and especially of Corinth. The Christian community on the isthmus was marred by some of the endemic faults of the Greek city at large. Two of them emerge in the first four chapters — faction and philosophical speculation, and they were not unrelated.

Paul turns rapidly to the first major problem of Corinth, that of division. The Greeks 'had a word for it'. It was stasis. Primarily it meant a stance, or taking a stand. Then by evolution it came to mean a party in the state, the result, presumably, of 'taking a stand' upon a certain issue. Then, such were the black and white mental attitudes of those who invented democracy, and seldom proved able to apply it, the word came to mean the spirit of discord, party spirit, the vice of sectarianism. It is still visible in Greek politics. Luke uses the word twice in his Gospel, and five times in Acts. It is used concerning the rift in the early Church over Peter and Paul. It is used again over the division between the Pharisees and Sadducees which Paul deliberately provoked. It was the vice of Greek history. Thucydides analyses its terrible effects in his sombre third book. Faction inhibited the coherence which might have preserved Greek freedom in the face of the threat of Macedon, and later of Rome. Paul, hearing disturbing reports from Corinth, was alarmed lest the old weakness of the Greek spirit should find a lodgment in the new community.
The climate was perilously favourable. The city was a melting-pot, a tangle and a mixture of races. The languages of all the Mediterranean were heard on its streets. The Church, which, like the net in the parable, draws all manner of fish ashore, had gathered its congregation from people of different races, different social background, and different orders of society. There were Jews and Greeks, Italian traders, Phoenician sailors, girls emancipated from the temple-service of Aphrodite, civil servants, the bourgeoisie, slaves and freedmen...

Three dynamic leaders had ministered in Corinth, Paul, Peter and Apollos — or, if the second-named had not been there in person, he was at least a symbol of a certain interpretation of Christianity. Paul had stressed his doctrine of liberty. Rescued himself from the harsh mental bondage of Pharisaism, he may have over-emphasised the ‘freedom’ of Christianity, and found his doctrine corrupted by lesser minds. Peter found the path from Judaism longer and more arduous. The leader, or one-time leader of the Corinthian synagogue, was a member of the church, and no doubt round Crispus a Jewish element would cohere, who found it easy to interpret new doctrine in old patterns.

Apollos was a Jew of Alexandria, a diligent student of the Old Testament. In the great Egyptian city, for two centuries, Jewry had sought to interpret its ancient literature to the Greeks. Apollos was probably a convert of John the Baptist, but his Christian education was completed in or around A.D.54 by that much-travelled couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who had met him at Ephesus. It is not clear what he preached, but it is a fact that Alexandria was the home of an allegorising school of interpretation from which ‘typology’ derived a remote but definite influence. Barclay quotes an example from the Epistle to Barnabas, an Alexandrian work dated between A.D.70 and A.D.100. The writer, strongly antagonistic to Judaism, was eager to show that the Old Testament had an esoteric significance, only clear in a Christian context. For example, quoting Genesis 14:14 and 18:23, the writer argues that Abraham had a household of 318 people. The figure 300 is represented by tau, a capital T in shape, which is the likeliest form of the cross.
number 18 is iota-eta, which happen to be the first two letters in the Greek form of Jesus. This is taken to be a prophecy of ‘Christ crucified’. Remote and fantastic interpretation can always find an audience as every age will demonstrate. Perhaps Apollos gathered his followers thus. Or perhaps he was the centre of those who sought, as Alexandrians certainly would be strongly tempted to seek, for an intellectual interpretation of Christianity, to transform, in a word, a religion into a philosophy.

There was perhaps a task of co-ordination awaiting some able teacher in Corinth. Each group held a measure of truth. Each, duly respecting the others, had some contribution to understanding to make. Each, doggedly promoting its own chosen principles could pervert true doctrine. The three groups are still to be distinguished. Few people are rounded and balanced in their interpretation, and beyond the need of another’s corrective emphasis.

Paul returns to the theme in Chapter 3. The saving element in the Corinthian ‘stasis’ was that the leaders involved gave no encouragement. Peter has a charming word to say of Paul.23 There is no sign of division between Paul and Apollos. The reaper cannot claim the crop, Paul points out, developing words spoken at Sychar.24 Many play their part. Paul recognised that his eighteen month’s stay in Corinth had only been a scattering of seed......

Of the Corinthian factions, those who carried into the Church a Jewish attitude, and those who, in the same environment, brought the characteristic pose of the Greek, caused the first concern. The Jews, said Paul, ‘sought a sign’. It was a deep-seated mental malady. Theudas, in A.D.45, led multitudes into the wilderness and to disaster with the promise that he would divide the Jordan like another Joshua.25 Almost twenty years later, a certain ‘Egyptian’ led 30,000 dupes up the Mount of Olives, with the promise that he would destroy the walls of Jerusalem.26 Their misconceived messianism begat this quirk. A humble Christ who offered no spectacular demonstrations, a faith which called for daily dogged living, for simplicity, and endurance, ‘stumbled’ them.

The Greeks ‘sought philosophy’, and found the religion of the Crucified absurd. And yet the Greeks, like their own
intellectual posterity, had no substitute to offer. ‘How can I say more, unless I have the word of some God?’ the great Socrates had asked, four and a half centuries before, after he had spent his last day piling reason on reason for believing in immortality. ‘The word’ of his aspiration was ‘made flesh, and dwelt among us’, said John’s Prologue. This was Paul’s message.

There were those who laughed outright and rejected all such doctrine. There were others who responded, but were unable to shake off in the Church the attitudes native to their mind. Paul remembered how he had come to Athens fresh from the disconcerting experience of being mistaken for yet another preacher of odd doctrine, another itinerant sophist making a living from an eclectic stock-in-trade of ‘wisdom’, and a ready tongue. His determination to be simple in Corinth was no repudiation, as was remarked above, of the brilliant sermon on the Areopagus. It was certainly a firm resolve to have nothing to do with the pseudo-intellectualism of an entirely different community, which had revealed to him by letter a disturbingly perverse tendency to import into Christianity the shallow speculation which was too common a corrupting fault in Greek thinking.

Ironically, Paul points out, ‘not many wise, not many powerful, not many noble...’ were included in the Corinthian community. True, there was the city treasurer, and the ex-rabbi of the synagogue, but generally speaking the congregation was a cross-section of the population at large, with few pretensions to high culture. Paul was determined not to conform to their conceit by rephrasing his message in words which diminished its essential content.

He was quite capable of discussing the theme on philosophic levels. He had demonstrated that of Athens, and clear marks of his familiarity with Greek philosophic thought are visible in the Corinthian epistles. Consider the closing verses of Chapter 3: ‘Let no one deceive himself about this; whoever of you imagines that he is wise with this world’s wisdom must become a “fool” if he is really to be wise... It is written: He seizes the wise in the craftiness’, and again: ‘The Lord knows that the debates of the wise are futile’. Any well-read Greek in Corinth would remember immediately
the story of Socrates. Report had it that the oracle of Delphi had declared Socrates to be the wisest of all men. The account continues (Plato is quoting Socrates speaking at his trial):

'But see why I say these things; for I am going to tell you whence the prejudice against me has arisen. For when I heard this, I thought to myself: "What in the world does the God mean, and what riddle is he propounding? For I am conscious that I am not wise either much or little. What then does he mean by declaring that I am the wisest? He certainly cannot be lying for that is not possible for him. And for a long time I was at a loss to know what he meant; then with great reluctance I proceeded to investigate him somewhat as follows:

I went to one of those who had a reputation for wisdom, thinking that there, if anywhere, I should prove the utterance wrong and should show the oracle: "This man is wiser than I, but you said I was wisest." So examining this man — for I need not call him by name, but it was one of the public men with regard to whom I had this kind of experience, men of Athens — and conversing with him, this man seemed to me to seem to be wise to many other people and especially to himself, but not to be so; and then I tried to show him that he thought he was wise, but was not. As a result, I became an object of dislike to him and to many of those present; and so, as I went away, I thought to myself: "I am wiser than this man; for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either. I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know I do not think I know either."

It is the vice of all shallow philosophy that it breeds pride. Humility is the prerequisite of all virtue. Humility is also the mark of all true scholarship and all learning. 'They would doubtless have become excellent scholars if they had not been so fully persuaded of their own scholarship,' said Quintilian writing some years later than Paul of
certain of the lesser kind. And how true it is, as every teacher knows. Greek philosophy lent itself to this vice. It was disputatious, and it is the temptation of the debater to score points, to sacrifice rhetoric to truth, and to exalt language above real thought. Hence the pejorative use of the words ‘sophist’ and ‘sophistry’. Such degeneration was the perpetual vice and peril of all sophistry.

Paul’s allusive attack is strikingly clever. An educated Corinthian would catch the flavour of a truly Greek irony in his use of the word ‘wise’, and know that he was referring to that ‘cleverness’ into which the lesser aspirants to philosophy were and still are prone to degenerate. To nonplus an opponent by evading the issue, or catching at words, was the lowest form of the cult, and like Euripides, long before him, Paul viewed the eristics with little favour. He now tosses two quotations from the Old Testament into argument. He chooses the second because of the word ‘dialogismoi’ in the Septuagint version, which adds a little in translating. The Hebrew is correctly rendered in the Authorised Version: ‘The Lord knoweth the thought of men that they are vanity.’ The Vulgate also translates literally: ‘...scit cogitationes hominum.’ Paul uses the wider word, ‘dialogismoi’. It is frequently used in the New Testament for ‘thoughts’ and indeed is a favourite word with Luke. But Luke, like Plutarch soon after him, used the term in the sense of a reasoning or debate, discussion of an eristic or contentious flavour. This is the turn Paul gives to the word in the present context, where he follows the Septuagint rendering.

The distinction between the ‘wise man’ and the ‘fool’ is another reference to the Stoic philosophic vocabulary, which an informed Corinthian reader would not miss. There is a Stoic ‘paradox’ which declares that only the wise man is free, and all fools are slaves. Another Stoic ‘paradox’ emerges unmistakeably in verse 21: ‘For all things are yours.’ It ran in Cicero’s survey: ‘In quo virtus sit, ei nihil deesse ad beate vivendum.’ ‘He in whom is virtue, wants nothing for the blessed life.’ It was a thought congenial to Paul, and the reference is recognisable in the verse. And then, in a gush of fervour, often characteristic of Paul’s style as he finishes a piece of closely woven argument, or emerges from some passage of specific advice, the philo-
Sophic theme is swept into Christian poetry and rises sublimely.\(^{39}\)

Stoic doctrine is still in Paul's mind as he passes into Chapter 4. 'You are rich, you have reigned as kings...' Like the word 'perfect', used with equal irony in 2:6, the imagery of wealth and royalty was common in Stoic speech, and sometimes provoked the scorn of critics. Horace, in a context far less serious, closed his first Epistle with a thrust not unlike Paul's own in 4.8.\(^{40}\) 'In a word,' run the satirist's three closing hexameters, 'the wise man stands second to God alone, rich, free, honoured, handsome, the king, finally, of kings, and above all sane — unless he happens to be troubled with a cold.' On such simple demonstrations of frailty, high pretensions founder.

Further instances of Paul's intimate acquaintance with contemporary philosophic thought could be listed. For example, in 8:7 it is the Stoic term for conscience which he slips into his Christian argument, that 'faculty of moral judgment which recognises responsibility towards God'.\(^{41}\) Nor is it unnatural that Paul should find interest in both Socrates and the Stoics, for both, unlike the Ionian and Eleatic philosophers, preoccupied with their cosmology and logic, had made ethics their deep concern. 'Socrates,' said Cicero,\(^{42}\) 'was the first to call philosophy down from heaven, place it in the cities of men, introduce it even to our homes, and compel it to inquire of life, of morals, and of things good and evil.' The Stoics had done no less. That is why the school so commended itself to serious Romans, and had led Paul in Athens to think that the Stoics might not be far from the kingdom.

At the same time, he did not think Stoicism a substitute for Christianity, nor a framework of thought into which his own message could be fitted. Philosophy, like the mystery religions, had words and ideas which could be absorbed and sublimated by Christianity. That was all, and the closing two verses of Chapter 3 are a striking example of his whole attitude. And are not the last four verses of the chapter, packed as they are with allusion, and fusing the whole theme in the warmth of their climax, an equally striking illustration of Ramsay's contention that Paul was a master of pure literature?
One or two questions arise from the argument. First, is it legitimate to restate Christianity in the terms of contemporary thought? The answer which would have commended itself to Paul is implied in the recently discovered 'Gospel of Thomas', a collection of Christian logia from Nag Hammadi in Egypt some of which seem authentic. Among the sayings was this small parable:

'The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who was carrying a jar full of meal. While she was walking on a distant road the jar broke. The meal streamed out behind her on the road. She did not know. She had noticed no accident. After she came into the house she put the jar down. She found it empty.'

Recent attempts, from Bultmann to Tillich, to align Christianity with contemporary thought, have done precisely that. The firm resistance of Paul to the Corinthian preoccupation with wisdom, shows, as this theme has sought to demonstrate, how clearly he saw the peril of dissipating content in such adaptation.

Secondly, the question of a Christian philosophy arises. Is there, in fact, a Christian philosophy? The word, of course, as the dictionary shows, has a wide range of meanings, but if it is taken in the sense of a system of principles on which life is ordered and arranged, then Christianity assuredly implies a philosophy. The Epicureans and the Stoics, sundered in so much else, agreed on one principle. They sought a way of life, and few ancient philosophers would have thought of philosophy apart from this plain ethical implication.

Christianity similarly took it for granted. Catching up a saying of Christ, those who first became aware of Christianity called those who professed it 'the people of the Way'. Hebrew religion had always implied conduct. The Decalogue was part of the Law, and in the Law's last formulation 'justice, justice' was set before the people as their preoccupation and pursuit. Proverbs, in two chapters, sets wisdom 'in the market-place', almost in the phraseology of Cicero's description of Socrates. Later Jewish thought found it easy to develop the ethical and reflective attitudes of their Greek environment. 'The choice of the term wisdom to denote the religious teacher', writes C.H. Toy, 'points to a phase
of life which came after the great prophetic period, and probably indicates the influence of the Greek atmosphere in which the Jews lived from the close of the fourth century on.' In that atmosphere Paul's own mind was formed, and he did not find it uncongenial. He simply knew its perils.

In conclusion, turn again to the two images of Chapter 3, the foundation and the temple. Paul had come to Corinth from Athens. He wrote from Ephesus. In Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus, great temples rested on vast blocks of hewn stone. The Greeks knew well that it was what lay beneath which gave steadiness, permanence, and grace to what stood above. The beauty of the Parthenon, Athena's great Doric shrine, still astonishes the world. Its foundations, firm and unshaken after twenty-four centuries, rest on the great rock of the Acropolis. The picture of it was surely in Paul's mind, tangled with a saying of Christ, when he wrote to Corinth of 'no other foundation'.

On such substructure of natural and hand-cut stone the Greeks built worthily. The mellow Pentelic and Parian marbles were precious enough, but Paul passes into fantasy when in the same passage he speaks of gold, silver, and precious stone. Or did he know of the legend of Asia's hill-country, which Ovid had put into verse a bare half century before? It was a legend which, in Lycaonia, had led to the tragic mistake of Lystra, when Paul and Barnabas were taken for Hermes and Zeus. The house of Philemon and Baucis, which stood, tradition would have it, on the site of the temple of Zeus-Before-the-Gate, had been transformed by the strange visitors into just such a fabric of fairy-tale extravagance as Paul here envisages for the Corinthians' building. 'And while they wondered,' wrote Ovid, 'their old house was changed into a temple. Marble columns took the place of the forked wooden supports; the straw grew yellow and became a golden roof...'. Let them build in such fashion on a base so rich, not meanly and pettily in such wood and mud-brick, bound with stubble, as the huts which housed the peasantry of the Peloponnese from then till now.

Above the ruined market-place of Corinth, there still stands on a low ridge with a far view down the Corinthian Gulf, a
few columns of Apollo’s temple. The Romans left the building standing, alone amid the desolation, when they sacked Corinth in 146 B.C. A century later, when Julius Caesar rebuilt the city, the ancient Doric shrine still stood, dominating the city centre, as its remnants do today. ‘You,’ Paul tells the Church, ‘are God’s temple in the place.’ The Greek temple was kept scrupulously clean. Euripides’ Ion pictures the Samuel of Greek drama, Ion the temple-boy, sweeping the steps of another shrine of Apollo, the famous seat of the oracle at Delphi, and scaring off the birds with bow and arrows. The Greek temple was simple, and housed only one deity. It stood high for all to see, Athena at Athens, Poseidon on the high promontory of Sounion, Apollo above Corinth’s agora. No Corinthian would miss the point. Let them build grandly and conspicuously, a clean dwelling-place for their God, unshared, elegant, enduring.

It is fine strong writing, with words and imagery relevant to the experience of the one who wrote, and of those who read. A man writes well when he writes from conviction, and with a burning passion to persuade. And such a man, deeply versed in the interwoven cultures of his day, caught in a great historic movement, and fervent for a cause, frequently writes prose of purpose and power beyond the need and call of its immediate occasion. Hence the universality of these chapters of Paul.

NOTES

1. Published in The Teaching of Saint Paul in Terms of The Present Day LIV, pp. 412ff.
5. 1 Cor. 2:5.
6. 1 Cor. 2:2; Acts 18.5.
14. Ch. 82, 83.
15. A fact, incidentally, to be borne in mind when reading the difficult passages about glossolalia.
23. 2 Pet. 3:15, 16.
25. Acts 5:37 is another occasion.
32. Plato, *Apology* 21 B.C.A.
33. See Headlam’s note on *Iphigenia in Aulis*, 1.333, p. 84 note.
37. Listed no. 5 in Cicero’s list: *Paradoxa Stoicorum* 33-41.
41. Moffatt, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 110, 111.
42. *Tusculan Disputations* 5.10.
47. 1:20 sqq, 8:1 sqq.
52. Euripides, *Ion*, *init.*