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## THE TRUE STIGMATA

“ I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus ” (Gal. vi. 17).

THIS expression used by St. Paul has been explained in various ways. It has been made to refer to the scars on his body which enemies had inflicted because of his love and loyalty to Christ. Or it has been held that St. Paul's fellowship with Christ was so real and intimate that he came to manifest in his body the passion scars of our Lord. There is no doubt that St. Paul knew the “ fellowship of Christ's sufferings ”. Even granting that the influence of mind over matter is such that the crucifixion marks can be reproduced psychologically, the important question is whether such marks would necessarily prove spiritual status or have moral value.

In the context in which this phrase occurs we find that the apostle was insisting that external marks such as circumcision were unimportant as proof of spiritual and moral condition (Gal. vi. 15). He could hardly, therefore, mean that scars in his hands, feet, side and head were important as settling beyond dispute his title to being called a Christian. The final test of Christian worth is moral and spiritual likeness to the Lord Jesus Christ. His reply to those people who questioned his right to be regarded a true Christian was that he manifested in his life the moral qualities commended by Christ. Christlikeness is the criterion by which to judge Christian character and attainment. He might have cited his contribution to Christian thought ; the Churches he had founded ; the excellent Christian leaders he had trained ; his mystical experiences. For him none of these, nor all of them taken together, could prove beyond dispute that a man was a genuine Christian. In the last analysis St. Paul considered himself a Christian only to the extent to which he was Christlike (Rom. viii. 9).

He confronted his critics with a bold challenge. There must be a norm by which Christian worth could be judged. Various tests were suggested in the Apostle's day ; many more have been popular since. Tradition, creed, authority, miracle, social service have all been regarded as proof of Christian excellence. Yet all these are possible to people who have little if any experience of the living Lord, and who fail to reveal either the Spirit

of Christ, or the fruits of that Spirit. What were the characteristics of Christ which the apostle regarded as normative? We find them described in a context where an appeal was being made to Christians to cultivate the disposition of Christ. "Let this mind (disposition) be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. ii. 5-8).

When we examine the essential qualities of this disposition we find that the first impressive feature was humility. Our Lord laid aside the form and privileges of Deity during His great humiliation involved in the Incarnation. "He humbled Himself." The next virtue was His perfect and willing obedience. He accepted the will of the Father. "He became obedient unto death." Then our Lord became the supreme example of sacrificial service. He was not only "obedient unto death", but "even unto the death of the cross". When Christ identified Himself with us in the Incarnation, He committed Himself to our experiences and circumstances (sin excepted); He also incurred our liabilities, the most important of these being death (Heb. ii. 14). Even so, to die in the manner He did was more than might be expected. The extent of His obedience and sacrifice are thus supremely illustrated by His willingness to "endure the cross, despising the shame". Here, then, we have the essence of our Lord's disposition set forth. Humility in the Incarnation; perfect obedience in His life and ministry; supreme self-sacrifice in the death of the Cross.

We have now to examine the character of St. Paul and ascertain to what extent he bore the "marks of Christ". He was not humble by nature; Pharisees seldom were. His background and training were not conducive to the virtue of humility. Being a "Hebrew of the Hebrews" and a free-born Roman citizen did not encourage a humble attitude. Yet we find St. Paul in intense moments of intimate self-revelation seen to be a deeply humble man. He describes himself as "Chiefest of Sinners", as "the least of all saints". He intimated his willingness to serve such undistinguished people as the Corinthians, "your servants for Jesus' sake", folk whom he would have despised in other days. Again he does not take credit to himself for any moral excellence; "I am what I am by the grace of God". This mark of Christ, humility, was certainly seen in St. Paul.

To what extent did he accept the discipline of obedience?

At the outset of his Christian career God's purpose for his life and service was made known. "He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel : for I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." He gladly accepted his commission. Others questioned it, but St. Paul never lost sight of it. He, too, became obedient unto suffering and death. When Christians tried to persuade him to shun Jerusalem, because to go there meant imprisonment and persecution, his reply was magnificent : "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart ? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Obedience to the will of God was the keynote of his ministry (Rom. xii. 1-2). In the matter of obedience he followed his Lord. This characteristic of Christ was reflected in him.

The final test to which we have to submit him is that of self-sacrifice. This is the supreme test. How far was Paul willing to follow his Lord ? To what extent had he been baptised into the Master's Spirit ? His actions are more important than his utterances in proving his readiness to pay the supreme sacrifice, and to show the same spirit toward those who were persecuting him, as did his Master. In the book of the Acts we read : "having stoned Paul they drew him out of the city, supposing him to be dead." The Apostle was not dead, however. "Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city." It was at Lystra that this happened and we might reasonably have expected that he would henceforth have shunned the city. However, what we read is that "when they (Paul and Barnabas) had preached the gospel to that city (Derbe) . . . they returned to Lystra . . . confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter the Kingdom of God". He accepted suffering, even unto death, as obligatory upon Christians. He was ready to serve at Lystra even though he had been stoned there.

There is, however, another revelation of how like his Lord this man was. He, like the Saviour, had suffered more from the Jews than from other people, yet his passionate love for them could not be killed. In the Roman letter he unburdens his heart concerning them. "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I

have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." I believe his meaning to be, that if a similar sacrifice for the Jews as Jesus made for the world were necessary, or possible, he was prepared to make it. Just as our Lord felt on the Cross some kind of separation from the Father, so Paul was ready to be separated from the One he loved best in order to bring Israel to salvation. To such an extent Paul had been "conformed to the image of Christ" and had partaken of His Spirit.

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