STEPHEN AND PAUL

by PETER COUSINS

MR. COUSINS, a Cambridge graduate, is in charge of the teaching of Divinity in a large London school and is Secretary of the Christian Education Fellowship department of the Graduates' Fellowship. That Stephen exercised a greater influence on Paul than Paul realized at the time has been thought probable by many, though denied by others; Mr. Cousins adduces specific arguments in favour of accepting such an influence.

IT is a commonplace to speak of the Book of the Acts as containing both an "Acts of Peter" and an "Acts of Paul." A. C. Headlam thus summarizes Holtzmann's list of parallels (*HDB* I, p. 31): "Both begin their ministry with the healing of a lame man; both work miracles, the one with his shadow, the other with napkins. Demons flee in the name of St. Peter and in the name of St. Paul. St. Peter meets Simon Magus; St. Paul Elymas and the Ephesian magicians. Both raise the dead. Both receive divine honours. Both are supported by Pharisees in the council." Similarly, it is accepted that Peter is shown as concerned with the mission to the Jews and Paul as evangelizing the Gentile world. Even a cursory reading of the Acts, however, shows that things are not quite so simple as this analysis would suggest; Luke does not first describe the Jewish mission of Peter, and then make a clean break to record the conversion and Gentile mission of Paul. Rather does he handle his material like a composer, who introduces a few notes or a rhythmic figure into a composition some time before he states the theme based on them which later dominates the work. Or, to put it differently, Luke, being a sound historian, realizes that great changes do not come about in isolation; the trained observer can see how what appears like a sudden reversal has been prepared for by numerous comparatively unimportant events.

The Book of Acts hinges about chapters 6-16; if the size of the hinge is objected to, one can only answer that history does not often pivot on a pin-point! With the appointing of the Seven we see the beginning of the movement that is to bring the Gentiles into the Church. This is followed by the death of Stephen and the consequent scattering of the Jerusalem Christians. From this

dispersion results the evangelization of Samaria and the conversion of the Ethiopian ennuch, who was doubly excluded from the old Israel. Meanwhile, the future apostle to the Gentiles is pressed into the service of the risen Christ and begins to prepare for his life's work. Peter now reappears, but with a difference, for his activity recorded in 9:32-43 is set in a part of Palestine which had a more mixed population, and we must see in this some sort of continuance of the work begun in Samaria. The movement that began with Stephen's death continues, however, and in the house of Cornelius the Spirit falls upon Gentiles whom Peter thereupon has baptized. The importance attached by Luke to this episode is shown by his repeating the story in full when Peter gives an account of his actions to the Jerusalem church, and by the explicit statement of the circumcision party: "Then to the Gentiles also hath God granted repentance unto life." Luke continues by describing the position in the (Gentile) church at Antioch, and here Paul returns to the story, spending a year helping there, and accompanying Barnabas to Jerusalem with the famine relief donations. Chapter 12 contains the account of Peter's imprisonment and miraculous escape and the statement (most significant in this context) that "he departed and went to another place." Thus the apostle of the circumcision leaves the scene, and throughout the rest of the book Paul plays the leading part, so that whereas in 13:2 we read of "Barnabas and Saul" the order is later reversed and we hear only (with certain meaningful exceptions) of "Paul and Barnabas." Peter's only reappearance is an important one, however. It occurs in chapter 15, where he points out that Paul's attitude to the Gentiles has long ago been approved in principle when the household of Cornelius was baptized. It is clear that he is not concerned to produce a new policy; the question has already been settled during the critical period after the death of Stephen. From this time we hear no more of Peter; the way is clear for Paul to press on with his task.

From this summary it is clear that Paul's mission to the Gentiles was not the revolutionary step that some have thought. Other men had laboured and he had entered into their labours. In the providence of God, it was Stephen's life and death that prepared the way for Paul's great achievements. Paul was Stephen's heir, and the purpose of this study is to show how closely the two are linked.

First we may notice certain external points of contact. Both

were Hellenists, although it would appear that in Paul's case this led to an exaggerated attachment to Jerusalem and the externals of Judaism, whereas Stephen sat more loosely to these. Stephen's success as a miracle-worker and controversialist led to opposition from the leaders of various synagogues, among whom we notice "them of Cilicia" (6:9). Surely the young rabbi from Tarsus will have been to the fore in this controversy, which he must have remembered when in later days he too "spake and disputed against the Hellenists, but they went about to kill him" (9:29). He will first have heard from the lips of Stephen some of the powerful arguments with which he "confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is the Christ" (9:22). A more obvious contact occurred at the death of Stephen. Paul was among those who were cut to the heart and ground their teeth in fury. He stopped his ears at the blasphemy that claimed to see Jesus standing on the right hand of God; he looked after the garments of Stephen's murderers. Later the position was to be exactly reversed. Paul's conversion occurred while he was still guiding the train of events started by Stephen's death. Like his victim, he had a vision of the risen Christ, but the ears that had been stopped previously were now opened and he heard the voice of Stephen's Lord Jesus. It is his eyes that are closed now, for the vision on which Stephen had gazed unswervingly was sufficient to blind Paul. And the accusation is: "Why persecutest thou me?" In the person of Stephen, Paul had been attacking Stephen's Master. The vision that had comforted Stephen in death now leaves Paul himself apparently dead, but also by the paradox of faith brings him new life.

These external points of contact are plain and point to a marked parallelism between Stephen and Paul, but there are other links which do not appear at first sight. It seems likely, for example, that Paul would not have become a Christian had he not witnessed Stephen's death. Why did he not help in stoning Stephen? Why in his vision on the Damascus road is he spoken of as kicking against the goads? Why did the death of his enemy only lead to greater hatred of the Church? The simplest explanation is that he had already been half convinced by Stephen but had repressed such thoughts. If he was already subconsciously being influenced in this way, he might well draw back from actually stoning Stephen and would be the more impressed by his defence and death. Was Paul the member of the council from whom Luke learned the vivid eyewitness phrase with which

he describes Stephen's appearance? Did Paul see Stephen's face "like the face of an angel"? His renewed conviction that the man who died thus was in the right would naturally lead to intense agony of soul — Christ used his goad on Saul — and being once more repressed would find expression in increased activity directed at stamping out the Church, and with it the memory of Stephen. New birth may be a sudden experience, but the process of conversion in which a man turns to God can be as long and traumatic as natural birth.

There is reason to believe that Stephen's influence on Paul went further than this, and that much that we are disposed to regard as Pauline doctrine derives from Stephen (and ultimately, no doubt, from Jesus).[1] What could Paul have learned from Stephen?

Stephen was accused on two counts. First, he had spoken against the Temple, saying that Jesus would destroy it; second, he had attacked the Law, and said that Jesus would destroy the customs delivered to Israel by Moses (6:11-14). Judging by the defence he made, these two charges were linked, and Stephen had both claimed that the Temple would be destroyed (thus blaspheming against God, whose house it was) and also as a corollary foretold the end of the sacrificial and ceremonial system (blasphemy against Moses.) His defence is a survey of Israel's history in which he makes two points. The first is that the Temple is no necessary part of God's plan. Abraham was called by God in Mesopotamia, God was with Joseph in Egypt, and spoke to Moses in Midian. In the wilderness, worship was offered, not in the Temple, but in the tabernacle, whose pattern had been divinely revealed. This sufficed the nation even after the entry into Canaan, until Solomon built a house for God. Not content with thus briefly dismissing the Temple, Stephen quotes Is. 66:1, 2a, which points out the folly of expecting God to dwell in a building and goes on to speak of the "humble and contrite in spirit" as truly pleasing to God.

Now this rejection of the Temple appears more than once in Jewish anti-Christian propaganda. Jesus was accused of saying that he would destroy the Temple; Paul was said to "teach all men everywhere against this place" (21: 28); Stephen died for it. According to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus did in fact say: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,"—a saying that the Evangelist interprets as referring to "the temple of his body." In the Marcan account of the trial of Jesus, the saying appears

[1] See R. A. Cole, *The New Temple* (London, 1950).

slightly garbled but with significant additions which bear out the Johannine interpretation: "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands." The word used in each case is *naos*, referring to the shrine, the place where God dwells. We thus find an equation: God's shrine = the body of Jesus = the temple which Jesus will build. Here in fact is adumbrated the "Pauline" idea of the Church as the Body of Christ and the Temple where God may dwell (see, e.g. Eph. 2:19-22). During the long period of retirement after his conversion, Paul will have had plenty of time to dwell on the words of the man who was ultimately responsible for it, and as he thought the Spirit will have shown him how it is that the "humble and contrite in spirit" of Isa. 66 can become the very Temple of God.

The other strand running through Stephen's defence is his answer to the charge of encouraging disobedience to the Law of Moses. What he does is to turn the accusation back on his hearers by pointing out that they are the ones who are guilty of disobedience and that in this they are maintaining a long and dishonourable tradition. The patriarchs rejected Joseph; the Israelites at first refused Moses' authority and later rebelled against him and God when they worshipped the golden calf. Having persecuted the prophets, Israel has now acted in character by murdering the Messiah. This is in the true prophetic tradition, but it would not be welcomed by the unregenerate Saul of Tarsus. Later, however, he came to adopt a similar view of Israel's history and in Rom. 10:21 he quotes Isa. 65:2, as a summary of her attitude — "a disobedient and contrary people."

Lastly we may notice a turn of phrase employed by Stephen which is yet characteristically Pauline. He says that once Israel had forsaken God, He "gave them up to serve the host of heaven" (7: 42). This is an Old Testament concept (see, e.g., Ps. 81: 12) and expresses God's sovereignty in allowing men to reap the harvest of their own misdeeds. Paul used it in Rom. 1: 24-32 with reference to Gentiles, but the idea is the same—the inevitable results of sin are God's judgment on it. He apparently believed, however, that something similar had happened to Israel, for in 2 Cor. 3:14 and Rom. 11:25 he refers to Israel as being "hardened", although in the latter passage he thinks of this as only temporary. Just as the rejection of Moses led to God's withdrawing from His people, so does the rejection of Jesus produce a hardening in Israel.

It is not denied that the Pauline ideas mentioned above were in some measure the common property of the Jerusalem church. What does seem very likely is that these ideas were mediated to Saul of Tarsus through the man at whose death he assisted, and with whom he had engaged in controversy. Stephen's work was thus threefold. Eloquent, Spirit-filled and intelligent Hellenist that he was, one can imagine no more likely candidate for the post of apostle to the Gentiles. Instead, in the providence of God, he was used first in death to create a state of affairs in which the Gentile mission might be inaugurated and accepted in principle; secondly to drive his *alter ego* to faith in Christ; and thirdly to provide him with ideas which took root and have been bearing fruit in the Church ever since.

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