DID THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH ADVOCATE UNIVERSAL MARRIAGE? A STUDY IN INTERPRETATION.

GREAT and undeniable is the debt which students of New Testament history owe to Professor W. M. Ramsay for the freshness he has infused into their subject by his unusual capacity for transplanting himself into the times when the history was in making. To acknowledge and even to exaggerate this debt is more natural and more graceful than to weigh it in the balances. But the most fascinating freshness must abide within its due limits; and Professor Ramsay, like his great predecessor Baur, sometimes suggests to those more phlegmatic workers who cannot boast his flashes of insight or his stimulating inspiration that theories of New Testament history must not be pushed at the expense of one portion of its material, New Testament exegesis. In some recent and most interesting articles[1] entitled *Historical Commentary on the Epistles to the Corinthians* Professor Ramsay has started and strenuously advocated what is, in part at any rate, a novel theory of interpretation for the seventh chapter of the first epistle. It has been commonly supposed that St. Paul's Corinthian correspondents had in their letter consulted him on the question—answered in the affirmative by some among them—'Is not celibacy a duty?', and that the Apostle in his reply justifies marriage, at the same time pointing out where and when celibacy has its place. But Professor Ramsay holds that the 'common view is erroneous' (i 288); that the Corinthian officials (i 203) had proposed to him a church rule 'urging' marriage (ii 297), and that St. Paul in his reply 'pleads for the right of celibacy' (ii 297); his main object being, however, not to decide the question 'whether marriage or celibacy

[1] These articles are to be found in the *Expositor*, Sixth Series, vols. i and ii.

is the better way of life' (i 284), but to assert the right of all to 'judge for themselves' (i 288).

Professor Ramsay's picture of the situation may be outlined as follows. The letter from the Corinthians was the 'decidedly ambitious performance' of men 'eager to regenerate and reform society' and 'satisfied that they knew how to do so.' Accepting the prevailing view that the 'palpable degeneracy of society was connected with the unwillingness to marry' and that 'the most vicious part of society was the one where celibacy was commonest . . . they drew the obvious conclusion—Make marriage universal and vice will disappear' (i 380, 381). They therefore 'proposed church rules' urging church members 'to marry' (ii 297), and laid their views self-complacently before St. Paul. The Apostle admits the benefits of marriage as a moral safeguard, but 'strongly repudiates' the suggestion of rule or pressure. The situation so depicted is held to account for the fact that St. Paul is content in this chapter to look at marriage from the lower standpoint: it was not likely that when he was seeking to check the over-estimate of marriage he would glorify the married state as he does in the Epistle to the Ephesians (v 22 f), where he makes it the symbol of the union between Christ and the Church. St. Paul, then, admits that as a moral safeguard marriage has its place, but in the same breath insists 'on the inexpedience of enforcing marriage on all, and on the advantages that celibacy might offer, amid the practical difficulties of their situation in Corinth, to a certain limited number of persons' (ii 296).

Certain artistic touches with which Professor Ramsay gives colour to his picture may be left unnoticed for the present while we test the correctness of its drawing. Does St. Paul's mode of expressing himself in this chapter justify this *bouleversement* of the commonly accepted interpretation? To put it briefly, we are told to see marriage as the admission, celibacy as the assertion. But take the first two verses, even as Professor Ramsay explains them: 'It is "quite honourable" (i 288), it is "permissible," it is "not wrong" (i 286), it is "a fine thing, an excellent thing[1]" (i 287), to "remain unmarried"; but because

[1] It will be observed that the last two explanations of *καλόν* are more positive than the other three and do not therefore quite consort with them. Nor am I quite sure that they consort so well with Professor Ramsay's theory.

of the fornications [so rife among you] let each man have his own wife and let each woman have her own husband.' Now if St. Paul was pleading for the right of celibacy against a rule for universal marriage, would not the reverse order have been more natural,—'By all means, as you propose, let each man and woman marry if they will, but leave them free not to marry if so they will'? As the sentences stand in the text, their phrasing and order are in favour of celibacy being the admission and marriage the assertion. So far, then, the natural exegesis is against Professor Ramsay's theory. But there is another hostile consideration. Is the phrase *μὴ ἅπτεσθαι γυναικός* ('not to come into connexion with a woman') entirely satisfied by the rendering 'not to marry'? Does it not betray its origin in the same asceticism as those 'doctrines of men' in Col. ii 21, 'Handle not (*μὴ ἅψῃ*), no, nor taste, nor even touch'? It has the air of a quotation from the Corinthian letter where it maintained, or at least presented, the view that the natural human instinct was given only to be curbed, if men wished to live the higher life. And we can more readily understand how St. Paul could admit the permissibleness of a practice based on such doctrines than how he could make a point of asserting it. Further, while it is altogether suitable to say, 'It is quite honourable to be unmarried,' it is not so suitable to say, 'It is quite honourable not to come into connexion with a woman.' Surely the run of St. Paul's thought is—'It is a fine thing for the few who can do it, for those who, like myself, find self-control easy and practicable. But human nature is not commonly built that way: for the mass, celibacy would cause more evils than it would cure.' Celibacy is allowed and even praised, but marriage is advised.

This view is supported by the verses which immediately follow (3–5). They contain a caution against attempted asceticism in the married state: marriage must be real marriage. It is quite consistent with our view of verse 1 for St. Paul to admit in verse 5 that a temporary asceticism, a temporary abstinence from what absorbs for the time being, may conduce to temporary spiritual elevation. But (as I understand verse 6) he concedes, he does not enjoin, such temporary abstinence. He does not 'plead for the right' of a virtual celibacy, but warns against the perils even of such a temporary asceticism, perils to which

all were exposed except those who had the special 'gift' of self-control or a passionless nature. In a word he pleads with his correspondents for a frank consideration of the fact that men, for the most part, are men. And the careful instructions in these verses (3–5) are scarcely in harmony with Professor Ramsay's contention that St. Paul's chief aim is to defend the 'individual right of judgment' (i 286).

The existence of the same ascetic tendency may be discerned between the lines of the paragraph on divorce (verses 10 ff.). The married man or woman who for spiritual purposes desired or practised the perilous suspension of full marriage relations might easily be led to think of dissolving wedlock altogether as a permanent obstacle in the way of the higher life. With the command of the Lord behind him, St. Paul forbids such a dissolution in the case of Christians, betraying the same fear of the moral break-down of asceticism in his prohibition of re-marriage if the dissolution does take place (verse 11). Without any definite command of the Lord he forbids it even when it would free a Christian from union with a heathen: he allows it only if the heathen is not content to remain: in that case, compulsion (where it could be exercised) would mean perpetual disturbance, and 'in peace hath God called us.' The conscience of the Christian partner is not, in such circumstances, bound to resist separation. Asceticism through divorce is, in all probability, one of the tendencies against which St. Paul is pleading in this paragraph.

But his attitude is brought out with greater distinctness in verse 28. He has just given it as his opinion that, 'on account of the present stress,' it is well for Christians not to marry: such shall have tribulation in their human relations and he desires to spare them. So he advises—'Art thou unbound to a wife? Seek not a wife.' 'But,' he says at the same time, 'if thou marry, thou hast not sinned, and if the virgin marry, she hath not sinned.' Does not this manner of speaking suggest at once that he is defending marriage against some who charge it with being a *sin*, a failure to reach the highest? Of course the clause may be explained, 'Though I plead for the right to be celibate, I do not say, "Thou hast sinned".' But, after what St. Paul had said in verse 2 and in verse 9, such a disclaimer was quite

out of place. The most natural interpretation of his argument here is that he is pleading for freedom to marry.

But, objects Professor Ramsay, it is 'quite anachronistic' to attribute to the Corinthian Christians the idea that celibacy was 'a specially laudable and meritorious course' (i 383). Why anachronistic? He admits that Judaism was 'able to exert a dangerous influence in Corinth' (i 22). It is almost universally acknowledged that there were Judaistic leanings in certain members of the church, causing incipient divisions and outspoken preferences for particular teachers, and, later on, as we gather from the Second Epistle, violent commotions, due, as it would appear, to the presence of Judaistic missionary agitators. It was probably through Judaizing missioners that Essene asceticism found its way not long afterwards to Colossae and the banks of the Lycus; and Essene asceticism was only a strong development of a tendency affecting religion generally at that time. Is it then 'quite anachronistic' to suppose it possible that similar views had reached Corinth in a similar way? More than twenty years before this Epistle was written, Philo, in the fragment called *Apology for the Jews* and preserved by Eusebius in his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, writes of the saintliness (ὁσιότης) of the Essenes, who inhabited many cities and villages and populous tracts of Judæa, and none of whom ever married but all practised continence. So also Pliny the Elder, writing in his *Natural History* (v. 17), somewhere about the date of this Epistle, says that the Essenes 'live without women, renouncing all sexual love.' In their consuming desire for a Levitical purity they strove to outdo even the Mosaic law by avoiding the defilement which, according to Lev. xv 18, was temporarily involved in sexual relations and which was regarded as interfering with special communications from God (Enoch 83; and, in this chapter, verse 5)[1]. This is one of the traits in which Essenism and the earliest Christianity, though by no means identical, were nearly akin; and the conjecture that the Essenes were a Jewish sect with Greek culture has some evidence in its favour altogether apart from the intercommunication between Jerusalem and the

[1] See also *Expositor*, Sixth Series, vol. ii, p. 297, where Professor Ramsay distinguishes the bishops and deacons (the practical workers) from the apostles and prophets (the recipients of divine revelation), and says 'Paul has [these latter] much in mind when he pleads to the Corinthians for the right of celibacy.'

Peloponnese at the date which Josephus assigns to the origin of the sect (about B.C. 144)[1]. I cannot feel that the subsidiary argument from anachronism is a strong one.

But Professor Ramsay has other subsidiary arguments which must not be passed by. For example, he seeks to minimise the extent of Corinthian immorality, and questions whether Corinthian society was so grossly and specially corrupt as to excite a reaction towards asceticism and evoke from the Apostle urgent advice to marry as a safeguard. 'It may be doubted,' he writes (i 282), 'whether there was much difference between the tone there and in the Aegean world generally.' He believes that St. Paul's argumentative distinction in chap. vi between food and fornication is directed not 'against the criminality of a Nero, but against the naturalistic theories of educated, thinking, and comparatively well-living men' who had 'boldly stated in their letter and had turned to their own use—of course with a view to full Christian freedom—the philosophic doctrine that man is the measure of all things,' adhering to the 'frankly confessed and universally held theory on the subject in Pagan society . . . that every requirement of the body was in itself natural and right and ought to be satisfied fully and healthily in whatever way and time and manner the individual found convenient.' It may be true that the Apostle is thinking of such men in chap. vi, though it may be doubted whether they 'boldly stated' their views in a letter which (as Professor Ramsay believes) contained proposals for a church rule in favour of universal marriage as the remedy for the viciousness of society. In fact, it is reasonably doubted whether St. Paul refers to the letter at all before chap. vii. But, whatever may be the occasion of chap. vi 12 ff., there still remain the 'various passages from ancient writers' which commentators quote 'to show that Corinth was a specially vicious city' (i 282). Any one may see in Wetstein's note on 1 Cor. i 2 how they stretch downwards from Aristophanes and Plato, through Cicero, Strabo and Lucian, to Chrysostom, from the fourth century B.C. to the fourth century A.D., and bequeath to us substantives, verbs, adjectives and adverbs coined from the name of Corinth itself to be vivid, localised

[1] See Mr. F. C. Conybeare's article on the 'Essenes' in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, i 768. Professor Cheyne favours Zoroastrianism as the effective influence for foreign admixture. See 'Essenes,' *Encyclopaedia Biblica*.

synonyms for sexual pollution. From its unique geographical position as a house of call for sailors and travellers of all nationalities on their way between Asia and Rome, and from its religious position as the great seat of the worship of Aphrodite, with her temple and her thousand courtesan priestesses, the city of Corinth had become a proverb for gross naturalistic indulgence even among the naturalistic cities of heathendom.

That this excessive impurity had so seriously infected the Corinthian church as even, by the help of an exaggerated idea of Christian freedom, to be surpassed within its pale, may seem to some to be proved by what is usually called the 'case of the incestuous person' referred to in chap. v,—'such fornication as is not even among the Gentiles, that one of you hath his father's wife. And ye are puffed up and did not rather mourn so that he who had done this deed should be taken away from among you.' But Professor Ramsay seeks to minimise this also. He sees nothing in the case that would have shocked 'ordinary society in Corinth or any other of the Greek cities of the Aegean coasts' (i 109). He lays stress on the laxity of marriage custom and law among the Greeks, and points out that 'marriage of uncle and niece, or aunt and nephew, had always been freely permitted in Athens.' Hence he denies that the church, in condoning the crime, had sunk 'below its Pagan level' (p. 110). He does not, however, adduce any exact example of such a union as is in question, and in order to make his point he has to assume that the woman had separated from her husband before the stepson married her. In the absence of evidence we cannot refuse him his conjecture, which is rendered additionally necessary for him by his acceptance of the conventional view that the 'wronged' man in 2 Cor. vii 12 is the father, who is therefore still living. But the idea of divorce is scarcely encouraged by the phrase, 'his father's wife' (*γυναῖκα τοῦ πατρός*); which at least suggests that, if the father was still living, she was still his wife, though cohabiting incestuously with the stepson. This situation has indeed its own difficulties, which might however be solved by a fuller knowledge of the circumstances; but it has this advantage, that it explains at once the clause, 'as is not even among the Gentiles.' Professor Ramsay has to face this difficult clause as best he may, and it must be confessed that he faces it boldly. For *Gentiles* he

practically reads *Romans*. St. Paul, he affirms (i 110), 'is, beyond all doubt, referring to the [stricter] Roman and Imperial law, which (though not the immediate ruling law in the Greek cities) was certainly known in a general way in the Corinthian *Colonia*.' This has the air of a *dernier ressort*, and it is hard to believe that St. Paul by the word *Gentiles* means practically *Romans* when he is writing to a city the bulk of whose population was (as Professor Ramsay considers) 'purely Greek' (i 19). Nor is it indubitably concordant with the text when he explains the 'puffed up' attitude of the church not by the view taken of this particular crime but by the general tone of 'self-gratulation' in the letter (i 203). In the text the expression 'puffed up' is connected too closely with the crime and with the absence of the mourning that should have led to expulsion, to allow of entire satisfaction with a vague generalisation. On the whole, then, we must still maintain that both Corinth and the Corinthian church were specially 'vicious,' the city for a Greek city, and the church for a Christian church; and that Paul, in face of a natural reaction in favour of asceticism, was not unlikely to have advised marriage as requisite in most cases 'on account of (i. e. to prevent) the fornications.'

Professor Ramsay advances in support of his theory another possible element in the historical situation—the effect produced throughout the Empire, and therefore upon the writers of the Corinthian letter, by the legislation of Augustus for the encouragement of marriage and the penalisation of celibacy. 'It is not improbable,' he writes, 'that the Corinthians actually quoted the public law, as it existed under the Roman Empire. It is at least highly probable, and indeed practically inevitable, that they were thinking of that legal duty. . . . By a succession of laws [Lex Julia B. C. 18, repeated in a severer form as Lex Papia Poppaea] that Emperor had endeavoured to make marriage universal. . . . He sought to check the modern tendency to immorality. . . . Society approved in theory his principle, which in practice it disregarded. His method was that of compulsion. . . . It was the part of [the Emperor's subjects] to pay implicit obedience to all his orders. Against that theory [of the Empire] Christianity protested: it claimed the right of individual judgment' (i 287 f.). In a word, the Corinthians had strengthened their case for a 'church rule' urging marriage by quoting Augustus and a public opinion which

said, 'uideo meliora proboque, deteriora sequor.' Accordingly, their complete question as propounded to St. Paul was (i 289), 'Is it [not?] to be regarded as a duty incumbent on Christians to marry, as the Jews and the Roman law maintain?'

This hypothesis is ingenious, but it is scarcely supported by the evidence at our disposal. First of all, St. Paul gives no hint that either Jewish practice or Roman law is within his purview. This is, no doubt, an argument from silence, but it is not necessarily a weak one. St. Paul has a principle which he inculcates in writing to the Romans, 'Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers.' If he were arguing for celibacy, though a breach of the 'public law,' of the 'legal duty' of which 'it is highly probable and indeed practically inevitable that the Corinthians were thinking,' would he say nothing in justification of his unusual attitude? Perhaps Professor Ramsay's phrases just quoted suggest something more definite than he really means; for if the 'Roman and Imperial law' penalising incestuous marriages was not 'the immediate ruling law in the Greek cities' (i 110), it is hard to see why the Roman laws penalising celibacy can, without risk of misunderstanding, be included for the Corinthians within the scope of 'legal duty,' when it is only meant that (like the Roman law against incest) it was 'known in a general way in the Corinthian *Colonia*' (i 110). But there are various reasons why it is unlikely that the Corinthians quoted or even thought of the Roman law. Speaking with great diffidence, in the presence of Professor Ramsay, on this department of the subject, I would venture first of all to question (as the result of consultation with some who have a right to be heard on this point) whether the Lex Julia and Lex Papia Poppaea (frequently in title amalgamated into Lex Julia et Papia Poppaea) ever applied or were ever intended to apply to any except (as the nature of the penalties suggests) Roman citizens, in the strict sense of the appellation, within the bounds of Italy. The aim of Augustus in these laws promoting marriage appears to have been, primarily, to carry out more effectively the long-standing Roman policy of increasing as far as possible the Roman citizen section of the population, and, secondarily, to enrich the treasury[1] with the

[1] Tacitus *Annals* iii 25 'Incitandis caelibum poenis et augendo aerario' (as to the aim of the Lex Papia Poppaea).

bequests forfeited by those who came within the scope of the penalties. When, under the Lex Papia Poppaea, prying informers laid their informations against citizens in all parts of the empire ('quod usquam ciuium,' Tacitus, *Annals* iii 28) they seem to have gone further than the law contemplated, and had their wings clipped by a commission under Tiberius. It is extremely improbable, therefore, that these laws affected provincials in any way, even in a *colonia* like Corinth, where, though it was a *colonia ciuium Romanorum*, the citizens were citizens in the less strict sense of the term. The immigrant colonists of Corinth had been mostly Roman freedmen, together with a large number of Jews; and the population at the date of the Epistle consisted mainly of Greeks, who ranked not as *ciues* but as *incolae*[1].

Professor Ramsay, however, alleges a public opinion in favour of these laws, and makes it so far affect the Corinthians that they would naturally quote them. Is this supported by evidence? The Lex Julia, though pressed with all the influence of Augustus, was at first defeated amid tumultuous opposition, and before it was passed at a later date it had to be modified and its operation postponed for three years[2]. The unpopularity of the Lex Papia Poppaea was intensely aggravated by the establishment of an inquisitorial system of informers (*custodes legum*) paid by a commission on the fines they brought into the treasury. The laws were perpetually evaded and entirely failed of their designed effect. By an irony of legislation both Papius and Poppaeus, the consuls of the year when the second law was passed and who accordingly gave their names to the law, were both unmarried. After ten years of 'intolerable annoyances' the laws were perforce relaxed, and 'their subsequent history as known to us is that of their mitigation[3].' It is hard to believe, therefore, that even a theoretic public opinion (*Expositor*, i 288) in favour of marriage had been fostered throughout the Empire by such irritating and futile legislation, and that the quotation of it by the Corinthians is otherwise than 'improbable.' As a consequence

[1] See Prof. Ramsay's article on 'Corinth' in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, i 481, and *Expositor* (as above cited), i 19.

[2] See Dr. Moyle's article on *Lex Julia et Papia Poppaea* in Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*.

[3] See Furneaux, Tacitus' *Annals* (2nd ed.), i 487.

I cannot as yet accept this historical incident as a strong buttress of the theory that the Corinthians advocated universal marriage.

Another ancillary argument Professor Ramsay draws from St. Paul's celibate condition. On this point he has changed his mind in the course of writing his articles. In § xxiii (i 384), premising that 'the question of Paul's marriage or celibacy has considerable importance for the interpretation of the chapter,' he argues that St. Paul must have been married, or the Corinthians could never have asked him their question in the interest of marriage. But in § xxvi (ii 298) he announces his abandonment of this view in the words, 'This view seems to me now to be a mistake, and this chapter appears hardly quite fully intelligible except on the supposition that Paul had never been married.' His new view is employed for the purpose of maintaining that St. Paul is defending himself in our chapter for being a celibate, he having been 'touched on a sore point by the Corinthian question whether it would not be advisable that all Christians should be married like the Apostles and the Jews generally' (ii 301). 'The Corinthians, tacitly or explicitly, had contrasted St. Paul's conduct with that of the other Apostles.' This he regards as proved by the relation of chap. ix to chap. viii. While the last verse of chap. viii 'leads on naturally (ii 300) to the assertion of his right to be a model to them,' Professor Ramsay sees in ix 1 ff. a 'defence against attack or disrespect,' an attack exhibiting itself in the fifth verse as an attack upon him for not being married like the other Apostles. This view, as it seems to me, turns the argument of chap. ix upside down. St. Paul is citing his own surrender of rights or liberties in order to urge upon the 'strong' and 'spiritual' a similar surrender on their part for the sake of the weaker and less enlightened. The undertone of defence appears to strike at those who compared him invidiously with the other Apostles. To such he replies, 'I am an Apostle just like them,' and then he argues: 'I have rights like them. Among these is my right to maintenance not only for myself but for a wife also, if I chose to have a wife and take her about with me. But this right I forego. Imitate me in foregoing rights, the right, for example, of eating and drinking with a clear conscience what has been offered to an idol.' But Professor Ramsay makes this a reply to an attack upon Paul

for being single[1]. Surely, however, it is a reply to an assumption or suggestion of his enemies that he did not assert his rights because he was not sure of his position as an Apostle: his tone in the passage is due to his being aware of this mode of sapping his apostolic authority. Is not this explanation sufficiently simple and sufficiently comprehensive? As a matter of fact he asserts his right, not to be single, but to be married. But he must be asserting his right to be single if chap. ix is to be a support of Professor Ramsay's view that in chap. vii he is criticising the Corinthians for advocating marriage and that the Corinthian question has 'touched him on a sore point,' the sore point of his celibacy.

In conclusion, I cannot feel that it is a strong argument to say that the view of marriage in chap. vii must be the view of the Corinthians and cannot be Paul's because he has a higher estimate of it at chap. xi 3 and in the Epistle to the Ephesians. In this chapter St. Paul is dealing with facts and necessities at Corinth. He is combating the dangers of celibacy on its fleshly side, and is advising marriage as, on that side, the most effectual preventive. He does not enter into the question of marriage in its higher aspect as when in the Ephesian Epistle he uses it to illustrate the union of Christ and His Church. The aspect of marriage as a moral safeguard is the aspect likewise in 1 Tim. iv where the question is—the safest condition for practical church work; while the censure pronounced in the same epistle upon those forbidding to marry discloses the existence of the ascetic tendency which underlies 1 Cor. vii. As to the fact that St. Paul (if with Professor Ramsay we may assume him to be the author of Ephesians and 1 Timothy) enjoins marriage in the latter without reservations such as our chapter contains, and in the former elevates marriage to a loftier plane than our chapter appears to conceive,—the common explanation is not to be despised, that, at the later date, there is a change in his outlook due to the recession of the Parousia and the consequent widening of his eschatological horizon.

In spite, then, of Professor Ramsay's interesting ingenuity, there seems no sound reason why the old interpretation of 1 Cor. vii should not still hold the field.

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[1] See also a more recent article by Professor Ramsay in the *Contemporary Review* for March 1901, pp. 388–9.