

St. Paul's Conception of Christianity  
Alexander Balmain Bruce  
*The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 6:761-766. [1895]

The author of *The Kingdom of God* exhibits anew in this volume both his scholarly grasp on the problems of New Testament theology and his power of placing them before us in a most attractive form. Prof. Bruce has all the restraint and sobriety of the true historical spirit, and keeps entirely clear of the "vigor and rigor" of historical theorizing so well known from a certain class of German writings. With the exception of when he happens to speak of "the scholastic theologian," he invariably brings to the consideration of each question a fair and well-balanced judgment. To the character of "the scholastic theologian" Prof. Bruce evidently has a deep-rooted antipathy, which, by destroying the calm objective tone of his writing, here and there robs it of one of its greatest charms. The historical spirit hardly does justice to itself when it blinds its follower to the abiding importance of one of the great sister departments in the field of theological study, or to the legitimacy of the methods applied by this department in virtue of the laws inherent in its own nature. Theologians themselves should be the last to foster the vulgar notion that one of the great branches into which with logical and historical necessity their science has developed, is dying and ready to drop off. It is by mutual appreciation only that they can enforce the lesson which Prof. Bruce has so beautifully expressed in the following words:

"There must be differentiation of function: Apostles, prophets, teachers, gifts of healing, talent for administration, the power of speaking with tongues. The diversity need not create disorder. It finds its unity in Christ. . . . But also to carry out the program, there is wanted a spirit of self-abnegation and magnanimity such as animated the apostle Paul. We are so apt to imagine that our function is the only important or even legitimate one, and to regard men of other gifts as aliens and rebels. It is so hard to realize our own limits, and to see in our brethren the complement of our own defects; and to grasp the thought that it takes all Christians together, with all their diverse talents and graces, to shadow forth, even imperfectly, the fullness of wisdom and goodness that is in Christ."

One feels throughout the book that in Prof. Bruce the historic and apologetic spirits are both equally developed. Perhaps this is more perceptible in the present case because the author was still fresh from the writing of his *Apologetic*. He seems still to breathe the air of Apologetics. In one or two points this circumstance has materially influenced the treatment of his subject. First the author strikes an apologetic note in speaking of Paul and Paulinism. Once and again we are reminded that we need something to help us assume a sympathetic appreciative attitude towards the Pauline theology, and to overcome the prejudice arising from the fact that the terms of St. Paul present a somewhat artificial appearance, and belong to the region of theology rather than to the region of religious intuition. In such controversial writings as the four great epistles, the role of the prophet or seer is replaced by that of the theological doctor. It is interesting to observe what means Prof. Bruce employs to prepare the reader for overcoming this prejudice, and to supply his need of a sympathetic point of view wherefrom to approach the teachings of the great Apostle. To be sure, to such as are accustomed to the old way of considering the contents of the Pauline epistles as a part of revealed truth, this whole apologetic attitude will appear somewhat out of place. If the Holy Spirit judges it wise to assume the role of a theological doctor, or for once to speak in terms of theology instead of in terms of intuition, they will nevertheless retain the consciousness of listening to a divine voice, in presence

of which an invitation to lay aside prejudice or to assume a sympathetic attitude sounds more or less incongruous. But evidently this is a frame of mind which Prof. Bruce does not fully share. Without explicitly saying so, he nevertheless makes us feel that the subjective manner of approaching the contents of the Pauline theology possesses for him the greater interest. The title of the book, *St. Paul's Conception of Christianity*, sufficiently indicates that we have before us, *e mente auctoris*, not so much the section of the history of revelation identified with the name of the great Apostle, but rather the analysis of the Christian consciousness of the converted Pharisee, Paul. And, if we place ourselves with the author on this standpoint, it becomes perfectly natural to seek for means of conciliating the modern consciousness to the rough edges and sharp points of Paul's vigorous doctrinal reasoning. Of course we do not here criticize Prof. Bruce's apologetic standpoint. But we strongly incline to the belief that it does not favor the faithful reproduction of so bold and uncompromising a character as St. Paul's. Under its influence the tendency will be to smooth down rather than to bring out what was most characteristic in the Apostle's spirit and form of thought.

The first means employed to reconcile us to the Pauline system of doctrine consists in emphasizing the part which the Apostle's subjective experience played in producing it. To this factor Prof. Bruce assigns the greater share in the production of the Pauline theology. He deprecates this derivation of its prominent elements from Jewish or Alexandrian sources, as applied by Pfleiderer in his *Urchristenthum* and in the second edition of his *Paulinism*. In almost every case where Prof. Bruce takes issue with this modern idea, he substitutes for the historic evolution a psychological, subjective one. We have no objection either to this principle in the abstract or to the use made of it for an apologetic purpose. The only question in our mind is whether the author everywhere applies it in accordance with the historical facts. There is reason for doubting this in regard to his analysis of Paul's religious history previous to his conversion. If we understand Prof. Bruce correctly, nearly the whole content of the specifically Pauline Gospel is believed by him to have lain in St. Paul's mind in a state of ferment before the critical event on the road to Damascus, as the result of his fruitless struggle after righteousness on the one hand (Beyschlag), and of his familiarity with the Christian belief concerning Jesus and the process of thought thereby originated on the other hand (Pfleiderer). If this be so, we are compelled to ask, where is the need of still interpolating a supernatural factor in his conversion? The logical outcome of this view would seem to be the visionary hypothesis. Now the author, we hasten to say, expressly repudiates this hypothesis. But nevertheless we receive the impression that in such a state of mind as is here attributed to Paul, little more than a slight touch was needed to change his personal attitude towards the ideas that had already gathered in his mind. In other words, it is not so much a revelation that wrought the momentous change in Paul's life as rather a conversion. In Galatians, however, we find that Paul, while evidently implying both, speaks in terms of revelation and not of conversion. Could he truthfully have done so if the principal ideas of his Gospel had been familiar to him before his conversion as the result of a psychological struggle? Only by assuming that the conversion implied not merely a change of will in an already undermined Jewish consciousness, but also the communication to Paul's mind of a new content of religious truth, can we successfully refute the visionary hypothesis. The statements of the Apostle himself, as we have seen, compel this assumption. Prof. Bruce's view, while hardly doing justice to Gal. 1, no longer allows a valid inference to the necessity of the supernatural in explaining the conversion.

Another instance of explanation on the basis of subjective experience is found in Prof. Bruce's interpretation of the Pauline term "flesh." The ethical significance of this term is due to the fact

of the body being the seat of appetites and passions of a very obtrusive character, which, though neither in themselves nor in their effects the whole of human sin, yet constitute its most prominent manifestation, especially in the case of a Christian. No store is put by the alleged derivation of this element of Paul's anthropology from Hellenism. Still Paul thought as badly of the flesh as Philo did, and both did so on practical grounds of experience, the only difference being that the latter did and the former did not, theorize on the subject. Very cogent in this connection is the refutation of the view of Holsten and others, to the effect that the matter of flesh is, according to Paul, essentially evil. But hardly warranted by the evidence is the psychological basis on which Prof. Bruce's own explanation of the Pauline term is made to rest. Paul is made an earlier St. Augustine in that he had to pass through a serious struggle with very common forms of temptation arising from the flesh in the specific sense, that is, from sexual impulse, and that not only before but also after his conversion. Prof. Bruce confesses that it costs him an effort to put such words on paper, because they will shock pious readers; but he is forced to do so because he believes that along this road we will most readily arrive at an understanding of what St. Paul means by his many strong words concerning the flesh. That pious readers may be shocked by such words we hardly consider the most serious objection to the hypothesis. Not only does the slight exegetical basis on which it is constructed tell against it, but it also leaves wholly unexplained how Paul could ascribe a number of manifestly spiritual sins to the flesh as their source. This difficulty we have never seen explained satisfactorily by the defenders of the realistic view of the flesh. Beyschlag is the only one who has attempted an explanation so far as we know, and he ends by seeking the source of sinfulness not so much in the flesh as such, as rather in its inherent selfishness, thus virtually confessing that the term flesh has with Paul an ethical meaning. We, on our part, are convinced that Paul's doctrine of the flesh has a much more profound psychological basis, and reveals a deeper insight into the character of sin, than the hypothesis defended by Prof. Bruce admits.

A second method by which the apologetic treatment of Paul's thought is facilitated consists in the distinction taken between religion and theology, between faith and knowledge in the contents of Paulinism. This distinction is set forth in the discussion of the Epistles to the Thessalonians. Prof. Bruce justly rejects, on chronological grounds, the view of Weiss and others, that these epistles contain a less developed form of Paulinism, antedating the pronounced type which the Apostle's teaching assumed under the stress of the Judaistic controversy. But he has his own hypothesis for explaining the difference between them and the four controversial epistles. The Epistles to the Thessalonians "show us the form in which St. Paul judged it fitting to present the Gospel to nascent Christian communities; when he had in view merely their immediate religious needs and capacities, and had no occasion to guard them against errors and misconceptions." "This view," it is further said, "sets the Apostle's character in an interesting light. It makes him appear a Paulinist, so to speak, against his will. He preached Paulinism, that which was most distinctive in his way of apprehending the faith, under compulsion; when free from the constraint of false and mischievous opinions, he taught the common faith of Christians in simple, untechnical language." Here again we take no issue with the explanation of the peculiar character of the Epistle to the Thessalonians in itself. But we must protest against the broad inference rashly drawn from it that Paul was a Paulinist under compulsion and in spite of himself. His tact in withholding from infant churches or from unconverted Gentile hearers the detailed dogmatic formulation, by no means justifies the inference that Paul himself attached little value to the latter outside of the sphere of controversy. This inference is flatly contradicted by numerous declarations in the other epistles. To the Galatian churches also Paul must have preached

after this primitive fashion, and yet he rebukes them for having turned aside from the specific Gospel of grace and calls this the only Gospel. Prof. Bruce seems to have felt the difficulty of reconciling these statements with his theory. He admits that in the Gospel preached to the Galatians the more pronounced dogmatic formulas were potentially given, and that therefore Paul could truthfully say that Christ was openly set forth crucified before them. But, if this be the true relation in Paul's mind between the primer-Gospel and the developed teaching, it is hardly correct to say that Paul made much of the distinction between religion and theology and drew the unavoidable inferences against his will. Paul was too much of a thinker to bear any ill will against what was logically involved in his premises. His defense of his theology is throughout an enthusiastic one. We are not sure but this whole distinction between religion and theology is largely modern and foreign to the Apostle's mind. It should never be forgotten, least of all by Prof. Bruce who attaches so much weight to the principle of explaining Paulinism from Paul's experience, that the Apostle had passed in a crisis from Judaism to Christianity, and that thus the results of the later Judaistic controversy had been anticipated and, as it were, typified in his own consciousness. Prof. Bruce himself has beautifully developed this on page 38. Plainly, however, this fact renders it highly improbable that Paul ever consciously dissociated in his own mind the simple primer-Gospel of religion from the developed theological gospel of controversy in the sense of attaching a higher value to the former than to the latter.

But it is not merely in speaking about Paul that the author assumes this apologetic position. The Apostle himself is portrayed with predilection as the great apologete. The Pauline apologetic revolves around the three great questions: What end does the law serve? What guarantee is there for ethical interests, for real personal goodness, under the religious program of righteousness by faith? If the benefits of Christ are open to all men on absolutely equal terms, what becomes of the Jewish election and prerogative? On the principle alone that to Prof. Bruce's mind the apologetic side of Paul overshadows all his other features, can we account for the peculiar view that chaps. 9-11 constitute the center of the Epistle to the Romans. It is easy, further, to see how the prominence given to this element in the Apostle's thought may give rise to a certain disproportionateness in the treatment of individual doctrines. Thus, e.g., the whole doctrine of the Holy Spirit is discussed by Prof. Bruce as a subdivision of the Pauline apologetic. Paul's teaching on election is set forth in its national bearing on the destiny of Israel only, whereas the very important individual application of the same idea in the Apostle's thought is entirely neglected.

A third form in which the author's apologetic interest manifests itself appears in limiting the sources of Paulinism to the four controversial epistles. The Epistle to the Thessalonians is the only one of the other writings of which a short resumé is given beforehand. Indeed we are left more or less in uncertainty as to Prof. Bruce's actual position in regard to the critical questions. We might infer from one or two statements that the authenticity of all the thirteen epistles is accepted by the author, but the words are such that a different view is not positively excluded. Be that as it may, the choice of the four great epistles is professedly made in the interest of scientific claims. This cannot mean, of course, that for one who believes in the genuineness of the other epistles, a discussion based on the whole group would cease to be scientific; it evidently means that in the judgment of others, who disbelieve, such a treatment of the subject would lose its scientific character. Now, unless the book openly professes to be written for the apologetic purpose of convicting readers of the latter class, we think it an unnecessary and unjustifiable concession to negative criticism to construct Paul's system from four epistles only.

There are some instances in which Prof. Bruce gives striking evidence of independence of mind by coming exceedingly near to what scholastic theology has long believed to be the meaning of the Apostle. Foremost among these we would count the exegesis at Rom. 5:12, where the rendering of the Vulgate *in quo* is conceded to be, though not grammatically, yet essentially correct. Paul, says Prof. Bruce, finds the solution of the problem of universal sin and death in the great principle of solidarity or the moral unity of mankind. Sin as contrasted with righteousness in the famous parallel between Adam and Christ is primarily an objective force fighting not so much in man as over him. "The idea of objective sin may appear objectionable on ethical grounds; . . . yet modern science will teach even the freest theological thinker to be cautious in pressing this objection; for by its doctrine of heredity it has made it more manifest than ever that the solidarity of mankind is a great fact, and not merely a theological theory." All this is excellent and it would be more excellent still if the author had seen his way clear to combine the Pauline statement elsewhere as to the condition of the natural man with this theory of the genesis of sin in Rom. 5. The refusal to combine the two on the ground simply that Paul has not explicitly formulated the combination is hardly justified. That the combination does not go to the root of the matter is no serious objection either. Paul was not bound to explain everything; the first genesis of sin in Adam he could leave a mystery. But what he could not do was to leave two such fundamental trains of thought as the two chapters Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15 reflect, uncombined. The exegesis of 1 Cor. 15 is, of course, a question by itself, but, however explained, the contents of this chapter will have to be subsumed under Rom. 5 in order to reach a clear and consistent idea of the Pauline doctrine of sin.

Prof. Bruce makes haste to qualify his statement in regard to Rom. 5 by restricting the meaning of death to physical dissolution, thus accepting the idea of Lipsius and Kabisch (op. *Presb. and Ref. Rev.*, 1894, p. 139). But, as he is not willing to ascribe to Paul the corresponding unethical view of life, this restriction leaves the parallelism between the Adam source of death and the Christ source of life in a halting condition. The author thinks further that in Paul's mind the eternal destiny of man depended on his personal transgression, and that in all spheres the curse is, to a large extent, an unrealized ideal because never operative unchecked by a redemptive economy. This, he says, covers infant salvation. We confess that we are not able to see how, on the view here propounded, there remains any room for infant salvation at all. Infants have not as yet personally sinned, and, therefore, cannot be saved from sin in that sense, and as to the other result of Adam's act, physical death, they are not saved from that because they have to undergo it. Salvation here would have to mean a prevention of the development of sin.

Very instructive is the eleventh chapter, "Without and Within," where the various theories regarding the relation between the objective and subjective sides of Paul's doctrine of salvation are lucidly stated and the compatibility and equal importance of both are forcibly demonstrated against all attempts to resolve one side into the other, attempts which have wrought more havoc to the understanding of Paulinism than anything else. On the other hand, we cannot ascribe much value to the author's theory concerning the later origin of the subjective train of thought, and he himself fitly characterizes the sketch of its evolution as "ideal history."

On the much-mooted questions of the Pauline Eschatology Prof. Bruce has little to say. He closes his very meager treatment of them, and at the same time his book, with the following words: "I

had rather read this chapter (1 Cor. 15) as a Christian man seeking religious edification and moral inspiration, than as a theologian in quest of positive dogmatic teaching. The spirit of the whole is life-giving, but the letter is *δυσερμηνευτον*, and while some interpreters feel able on the basis of it to tell us all about the millennium, and others find therein a universal *αποκαταστασις*, when God shall be all in all and to every human spirit, I prefer to confess my ignorance and remain silent.”

The book contains at the end a somewhat extended note on Wendt’s comparison of the teaching of St. Paul with that of our Lord in the Synoptical Gospels.