

Christian Conflict

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There has been so much controversy and fighting amongst believers, carried on in a not very becoming spirit, that to many Christians the whole idea of conflict has become highly objectionable, and the natural swing of the pendulum has carried them into a mental attitude which comes perilously near to being that of "peace at any price." Others again there are, who though unwilling to definitely compromise with evil and therefore prepared to separate from it in the last resort, yet cannot bring themselves to resist it in any way that would involve conflict and fighting in the cause of truth.

There are of course some Christians of a combative spirit. Being naturally pugnacious they do not need to be urged to fight, they only need to be urged to fight a *good* fight, and to let it be the fight of *faith*. The rest of us, however, are more in danger of displaying the spirit of fear, rather than that of power and love and of a sound mind, and consequently of being ashamed of the testimony of our Lord; we need, as a result, to remember that we are each called to be "a good soldier of Jesus Christ."

There is no escaping conflict while we are in this world. The situation is such that in one way or another we are bound to meet it, even though we diligently avoid it. We may indeed borrow the figure which the prophet Amos used in connection with the day of the Lord and say that it is, "As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him." The more we scheme to escape fightings without, the more likely we are to fall victims to the conflict produced by uneasy misgivings and fears within.

One distinction must be clearly drawn at the outset; there is much conflict experienced by Christians which is by no means proper Christian conflict. Proper Christian conflict is described in such Scriptures as Ephesians 6, and 2 Corinthians 10, with sundry allusions to it in other of Paul's epistles. What is described in Romans 7 and Galatians 5 is conflict truly, and of a sort that no Christian can well escape, yet it is of a preparatory nature, as being fitted to qualify the believer who goes through it and learns the lessons that it is designed to teach, to take up the wars of the Lord as a good soldier of Christ.

Romans 7 gives us the earliest experience that can be spoken of as conflict. It is an old saying that it takes two to make a quarrel, and what that chapter details for us is an experience that must be utterly unknown until the renewed mind, the "inward man" is possessed. As born of the flesh we are flesh and nothing else, and consequently the reign of flesh is absolute and undisputed; it is only when born again that we possess the "inward man" of which Romans 7: 22 speaks, and conflict becomes a possibility. True, the conflict described in that chapter is a very one-sided affair. The victory seems to lie wholly with the flesh, for the cry is, "The good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do," and consequently, "I am carnal, *sold under sin*." Had it been "The evil which I would not, that I *sometimes* do," or even, "that I *frequently* do," it would have left room for an occasional gleam of victory. As it is, the gloom of defeat is unrelieved. The "inward man" is there, but in practice is overwhelmed by the flesh. The "law of the mind" is subjugated and rendered impotent by "the law of sin which is in the members."

If we ask — what has produced this distressing experience? the answer is — the law. The chapter opens with a statement as to the law, and the relation to it of both the Jew and the Christian. It goes on to detail the practical workings of the law upon the renewed mind, and one of its most significant features is the omission of all reference to the Spirit of God. Now it is not God's purpose or desire that

anyone should remain permanently in this distressing condition of impotence and defeat. Hence Romans 8 follows, and this chapter begins with Christ and the Spirit of God. The law is only mentioned in verse 3 to be dismissed as supplanted by God's own act in and through the death of Christ, and the rest of that wonderful chapter is simply full of the Spirit of God, the varied capacities He fills, and His many activities.

The two chapters, then, are in sharpest contrast — Romans 7, the action of the law upon the renewed mind, only making it acutely conscious of impotence and defeat; Romans 8, the action of the Spirit of God, making it conscious of liberty, life, relationship, coming glory and present omnipotent love which leads to believers being not only victorious, but "more than conquerors."

Still, even so, the conflict described is in the main an internal one, preparatory to the believer being able and fit to enter into the conflict which is properly Christian. It is, so to speak, the clearing up of a condition of civil war and internal strife. Only when that is settled can the wars of the Lord be entered upon by any of us.

Galatians 5 has the same internal conflict in view, but approaches the subject from a different angle. If Romans 7 is the flesh versus the inward man instructed and enlightened by the law, Galatians 5 is the flesh versus the Spirit, and the position is exactly reversed. The renewed mind, directed and urged forward by the law, is no match for the flesh; but the flesh is no match for the Spirit. Still, by the possession of the Spirit the personality and individual responsibility of the believer is not suppressed. He has to walk in the Spirit, and then, and only then, he does not fulfil the lusts of the flesh. Then it is that he does not do the things that otherwise he would.

When we turn to Ephesians 6 we have a conflict contemplated which is distinctively Christian. The Ephesian epistle sets forth the Christian calling and the church's place according to the splendour of the thoughts and purposes of God. All is made known to us that we may be in the power and strength of these great realities, and thus live our lives in this world, and fulfil our various earthly relationships and responsibility according to them. When the apostle reaches the final point in his epistle (Eph. 6: 10), he assumes that his readers are standing in the full power and enjoyment of these realities, and instructs them as to the whole armour of God which they must take and wear if they are to stand.

The greatest possible testimony in this world is the saint standing in the full consciousness and enjoyment of the calling and the purposes of God. Hence the devil and his agents always make the most strenuous efforts to dislodge such an one from the spiritual *condition* which alone makes the *position* an effective testimony. His efforts consequently are directed against the truth, the righteousness, the peace, the faith, the practical salvation, the Word of God, and the prayers which are the preserving elements of Christian life; and to maintain these seven things, and wear them as the armour of the soul, needs no small measure of diligence and watchfulness.

Jude, in his epistle, exhorts us to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints," and he does not close his brief word without intimating in verses 20 and 21 that our spiritual condition must be sound if we are to earnestly contend aright. Our contention, however, and the conflict it may entail — which is obviously one branch of proper Christian conflict — is carried out in the world of men. The conflict of Ephesians 6 lies behind all that. It takes place not in the visible world of men, but in the unseen realm of spirit. "Our struggle is not against blood and flesh, but against principalities, against authorities, against the universal lords of this darkness, against spiritual power of wickedness in the heavenlies. For this reason take to you the panoply of God" (Eph. 6: 12, 13, N.T.).

We know but little about these great spiritual forces of evil which are at the disposal of Satan. We

are permitted to get an occasional glimpse of their activities in Scripture, as, for instance, in Daniel, where we see them engaged in endeavouring to thwart God's purposes in regard to Israel. It is probable, too — alas! — that we know still less as to any actual conflict with them, inasmuch as we are so little, if at all, in the spiritual condition, coupled with the knowledge of the full Christian position, which makes it worth while to them to attack us. Still they exist, and doubtless are the originators of many of those trying, yet obscure trials and testings, which can only be met by having on the whole armour of God.

If any of our readers find the contemplation of conflict such as this rather terrifying, we would like to reassure and encourage them by mentioning a fact which is not apparent in our authorised translation. The Greek word translated "rulers . . . of this world" ("universal lords," N.Tr.) is *kosmokrator*, world-ruler. These evil spiritual beings bear rule, but their power is restricted to the limits of the *kosmos* or world-order which has been affected by sin. In 2 Corinthians 6: 18 we have God assuring any of His saints, who may suffer by reason of faithfulness in separating from the world, of His Fatherly grace and protection, and He presents Himself as the Almighty, the *pantokrator* = the Ruler of all things. We shall not tremble before the rulers of the world-order if we realize that we are under the protection of the Ruler of all things.

Another phase of proper Christian conflict comes before us in 2 Corinthians 10: 3-5. The conflict of Ephesians 6 is, as we have seen, mainly defensive: the only offensive weapon named being the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. Here the conflict is essentially of the aggressive, offensive order, and there are weapons: the word is plural, for there are more than one. These weapons are effectual to "the pulling down of strongholds; casting down imaginations [or, reasonings, margin] and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." Here is a task which involves conflict indeed! To pull down strongholds of stone or iron is easy compared with dismantling strongholds of unbelief and of the powers of darkness, and casting down the vain reasonings of darkened yet proud and self-satisfied minds, so that the whole soul and mind, and every thought in that mind, is in subjection to God with a glad and ready obedience like the obedience of Christ.

Is this the objective of Christian warfare? Does the servant of Christ go forth into the world with the Word of God with such a task before him? Then we instinctively and at once feel that nothing but superhuman and miraculous power can avail. To pit mere human eloquence, or learning, or skill, or intellect against such strongholds; to attempt to wheedle men round the corner of their rebellion and self-will by those arts and sciences which appeal solely to the sentiments and emotions, is worse folly than that of attacking Gibraltar with a pea-shooter. Nothing but the power of God will do.

Yet the power of God works *through His people* to this end, and through weapons which are not carnal but mighty *through God*. What are these weapons? Well, see the apostles in Acts 6! Well clad in that spiritual armour which enabled them to turn aside the attempt of the "world rulers of this darkness" to divert them from their true service to "serving tables," they address themselves to their proper business saying, "We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word." The ministry of the Word, or as 1 Corinthians 1: 18-21 puts it, "the preaching" — "the preaching of the cross," is one great spiritual weapon. Prayer is another.

When it is a question of the Word as the link between our souls and God the order is, first the Word of God and then prayer. He must speak to us before we speak to Him. When it is the Word flowing as testimony from us to men, the order is, first prayer and then the ministry of the Word, for we must begin by recognizing our absolute dependence on God, and speak to Him before we speak for

Him.

Neither prayer nor the ministry of the Word, if carried out after the apostolic pattern (see 1 Cor. 2: 1-5), would strike the man of the world as powerful weapons. As a man after the flesh he would only appreciate fleshly weapons, and if religiously inclined, he would wish to enlist, in the good cause of bettering humanity, all the usual agencies which experience has shown to exert an influence on men's minds. His human weapons will produce human results which doubtless often carry with them a certain amount of human benefit. Spiritual weapons alone produce *spiritual* results. If we use these which God has appointed, then they become "mighty through God" to accomplish *Divine* results. The spiritual weapons we have named are not of course the only ones. In Matthew 17: 20, 21, for instance, the Lord Himself mentions faith and fasting in addition to prayer, as spiritual weapons.

It is of course very much easier to use a carnal weapon, if we happen to possess it, than a spiritual one. If a man is naturally brilliant and consequently able to wield "excellency of speech or of wisdom," he will find it far easier to move people by an oration sparkling with gems of rhetoric or knowledge, than to be a vessel of God's power through faith and prayer and fasting; and he may even deceive himself into counting all the surface results of the former methods as genuine! Yet only that which is wrought by the power of God abides.

Many of our readers may entirely agree with us that it is very easy to pick up carnal weapons and use them in connection with the work of the Gospel, since they are so lavishly used in Christendom today, and heartily applaud our calling attention to it in these pages. Yet we would remind them — and, indeed, all of us — that it is just as important to use spiritual weapons only in seeking the edification and perfection of believers, and in the necessary conflicts for the maintenance of the truth. We have before now seen well-instructed Christians use very carnal weapons in the endeavour to stop their less-instructed brethren using carnal weapons in their Gospel work! This will not do.

We have been set free from servitude to sin that we may be servants of God. Then let us remember in the conflicts that His service engenders that not only must the power be that of His Spirit, but the weapons we use such as are in keeping with His Spirit and sanctioned by His Word.