

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

THE Four Gospels, it may be reasonably concluded, were written by the Evangelists whose names they bear, and to whom they were ascribed by the almost unbroken tradition of seventeen centuries. That tradition derives consistency and strength from the society within which the Gospels originated, and for whose spiritual requirements they were written—the Church of believers in Christ, which early spread over the Roman world. The Church as it passed beyond the borders of the Holy Land preserved its continuity still with the mother Church of Jerusalem. Hegesippus,¹ a Jewish Christian writer of the second century, tells how on his journey from the East to the West he met a great number of bishops, and found the same doctrine held by them all; from which it is clear that the life, the thought, and

¹ Euseb. H. E., IV. 22.

the activity of the Churches of Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome were governed from the first by the traditions of the Life and Teaching of the Lord which came down from the Apostles. Considering the importance attributed to the works of Apostles and Apostolic men, it would be strange if the Church which recognised the Four Gospels as precious above all others and gave them currency—making copies of them and using them early in the Christian assemblies for worship and instruction—should have lost all trace and knowledge of their authors. It is nothing wonderful that the Evangelists themselves do not put their names in the title-page of their Gospels. Not one of Plato's dialogues designates him the author; we owe the attribution to literary tradition. The tradition within the Church of the authorship of the Gospels is equally worthy of acceptance. The Evangelists whom Irenæus quotes by name without the shadow of a doubt, the Apostles and those who followed them referred to and quoted by Justin Martyr, the St Matthew and St Mark noticed by Papias, the St John named by Theophilus of Antioch, are not pseudonymous writers, but the Apostolic and inspired authors of our Four Gospels. It is as certain as anything in the history of literature can be that St Mark and St Luke wrote the Gospels attrib-

uted to them. Difficulties have been raised by criticism regarding the authorship of the First and Fourth Gospels, yet even they are held by advanced critics to be somehow closely associated with Matthew and John, the Apostles of the Lord. The Four Gospels, therefore, being essentially of the character of contemporary records, contain a consistent and trustworthy history of the Life and Work and Teaching of Christ, written by men who had adequate opportunities of ascertaining the facts and took pains to set forth in their narratives the truth regarding Him.

Whilst the Gospels are a veracious record of the work of Christ in human redemption, the Church is the living witness from the beginning both to them and to Him. The Church existed before the Gospels. First of the New Testament Scriptures came, in all probability, the Epistles of St Paul, who had none of the written Gospels. The casual and occasional character of these Epistles has been more and more recognised of recent years, but this does not detract from their value as an interpretation of the Person and Work of Christ and as a witness to the facts of the history. Though in St Paul's Epistles and the other New Testament books there is no certain reference to written documents containing the words of Jesus, and but

scanty references even to the incidents of His life in detail, the Gospel writers and St Paul draw from the same fountain-head, the fundamental presuppositions of St Paul's Epistles and the other New Testament writings being in entire accord with the Gospel presentation of the Person and Teaching of Christ. It is little to say that the New Testament writings form a consistent and homogeneous whole, the Person of Christ being the keystone which binds them all harmoniously into one, the Spirit of Christ giving them their vitality and moral power.

From the death of St Paul about 65 A.D. to the martyrdom of Polycarp in 155 A.D. the history of the Church flows through a dark tunnel, where the remains of early Christian literature are scanty and the light of tradition uncertain and dim. Yet the chain of early witnesses through that period is of great strength. Polycarp unites the generation of the Apostle John, the last survivor of the Twelve, with that of Irenæus and its manifold literary and ecclesiastical developments. Even in the first quarter of the second century one of the early Apologists, Quadratus, could appeal to personal testimony: "The works of our Saviour were ever present; for they were real, being the men who were healed, the men who were raised from the dead, who were not only

seen at the moment when the miracles were wrought, but also were seen continually, like other men being ever present, and that not only when the Saviour sojourned on earth, but also after His departure for a considerable time, so that some of them survived even to our times.”¹

More impressive even than this testimony of eyewitnesses are the evidences of the working of a creative force of the first magnitude, which is met everywhere within the Roman empire by the middle of the second century. Its effects are seen from Antioch of Syria to Carthage and Gaul, and from Bithynia on the Black Sea to the Nile and the borders of Ethiopia. They are found in a network of communities calling themselves by the name of Christ, united under a simple rule of Church organisation, by the observance of common rites, and by an ardour of devotion to their Divine Master which opposition and persecution are unable to quench. They attribute their new life, with its lofty moral purpose, its benevolent activity, and its heavenward aspirations, to Him who was born of the Virgin, suffered under Pontius Pilate, rose from Joseph’s sepulchre, and ascended to God’s right hand. “The archives for me,” says Ignatius, “are

¹ Euseb. H. E., IV. 3.

Jesus Christ, the inviolable archives of His Cross, and Death, and Resurrection, and faith which is through Him.”¹ He speaks of himself as “having fled to the Gospel as to the flesh of Jesus,” and declares “the excellence of the Gospel to be the Advent of the Saviour, His Passion, and His Resurrection.” And here is another witness: “God gave up His own Son a ransom for us, the Holy for the unholy, the Innocent for the wicked, the Righteous for the unrighteous, the Incorruptible for the corruptible, the Immortal for the mortal. For what else could cover our sins but His righteousness? In whom was it possible for the unholy and ungodly to be justified but in the Son of God alone? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable contrivance! O unlooked-for blessing, that the transgression of many should be hidden in the Righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!”² That is the voice of a soul out of the second century whose name has not come down to us, but clearly a follower of St Paul, and one whom Luther and the Reformers would have claimed as spiritually kin with themselves.

But all this spiritual life goes back to those Four Gospels already acknowledged to be pre-eminent, and exercising their primacy because

¹ Ign. Philad., viii. 2.

² Ep. ad Diognetum, ix. 2-6.

they alone, and they sufficiently, meet the spiritual necessities of the living and expanding Church of Christ. The process by which they and the other Scriptures of the Christian Church came to be regarded as of Divine authority has already been noted. They are, in the first instance, preferred and put in circulation because they contain a record by Apostles and Apostolic men of the Divine Founder of Christianity, and an interpretation of His great work as the Revealer of God and the Redeemer of men. Whatever has to do with Christ is in special demand, and the Apostles and their followers from their nearness to Him are at once reliable witnesses and authorities to be held in special reverence. It was thus that not only the Gospels directly telling of Christ, but the Scriptures as a whole, came to be called "the Lord's Scriptures" (*κυριακὰ γραφὰ*).¹ In this way the writings which come from the hands of Apostles acquire that sacredness and authority which belong to them from the earliest notices of them.

It must be remembered that the Bible of the first Christians was the Old Testament. What it was to the Evangelists and St Paul and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and to our blessed Lord Himself, we learn from the

¹ See for references Zahn, GK. i. 96 f.

Christian Scriptures. To the first Christians it was Holy Scripture (*ἱερὰ γραφαί, ἱερὰ γράμματα*) and Scripture *par excellence* (*ἡ γραφή*), and it is quoted in the New Testament with "as it stands written" (*ὡς γέγραπται, γεγραμμένον ἐστί*) and other such phrases. We may be sure that Marcion,¹ who would have none of Judaism or of anything that pertained to that dispensation, and who therefore rejected the Old Testament, was not the first to feel the need of a Christian canon of Scripture. The very existence and use of the Old Testament Scriptures, and the taste begotten thereby, could not fail to awaken very early the desire within the Church for a similar collection of sacred books with Christ for their centre. We see the process far advanced by the close of the second century.¹ To Origen, and even to Clement of Alexandria, and to Tertullian and Irenæus, the New Testament Scriptures were already on a level with those of the Old. The books of the New Testament (*τὰ τῆς καινῆς διαθήκης*) were revered by those great Fathers and within the Church as much as those of the Old (*τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης*). Of those sacred Scriptures, the Gospels were earliest in evidence. They were read in Justin's day (150 A.D.) in the weekly assemblies of the Christians. They were

¹ See p. 49 ff.

translated into the tongues of people beyond the Greek-speaking world. Heracleon wrote a commentary upon St John. Barnabas quotes St Matthew's Gospel with the formula, "As it is written" (*ὡς γέγραπται*). Even the heretic Basilides (125 A.D.) quotes a new Testament writing as Scripture (*ἡ γραφή*), showing how quickly this feeling towards the new body of writings had established itself. It was thus that the heart of the Church, seeking for edification, was directed to the Gospels and those other Apostolic writings which yielded quickening and impulse to the spiritual life of the faithful, and gave them a place of honour and sacredness beside the Old Testament Scriptures.

This placing of the Gospels and the New Testament books on a level with the Old Testament Scriptures implied the consciousness and the belief of the inspiration of these books. Theophilus of Antioch calls St John the Evangelist inspired (*πνευματοφόρος*), and declares that the writings of Prophets and Evangelists agree "because all the inspired men (*πνευματοφόροι*) have spoken by one Spirit of God." Irenæus speaks of the Fourfold Gospel as held together by one Spirit (*ἐνὶ δὲ πνεύματι συνεχόμενον*); and the Muratorian Fragment refers to the facts of the Lord's life as declared in the Gos-

pels by "one guiding Spirit" (*uno ac principali Spiritu*). By the time of Clement and Origen the word "given by inspiration of God" (*θεόπνευστος*) is applied to the New Testament as it was applied by St Paul to the Old (2 Tim. iii. 16).

It was into the channels marked out by the Four Gospels that there flowed all the traditions circulating among the first believers which were necessary for the faith and life of Christians. Oscar Holtzmann, in his 'Life of Jesus,' refers to this, regretting we have no more. "For our knowledge of the whole of this Gospel literature,"—referred to by St Luke in the preface to his Gospel,—"it was a disastrous circumstance that already in the second century the Church took the Gospels which were then current, sifted them, and made a selection amongst them. These writings which from her point of view were the more valuable she retained to be read in the services of the community; such as were less valuable, or in her opinion were hurtful to the faith of the community, she excluded from use in Divine worship." We cannot be too thankful that the heart of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, who was promised to lead her into all truth, chose as it did. Even if there had been preserved to us those earlier and presumably fragmentary Gospels to which St

Luke refers, we have no reason to believe that they would have set before us another Christ, or would have handed down any word or act of His out of accord with that sinless Life and Divine Teaching mirrored in the Four Gospels.