

OBSERVATIONS ON THE CONVERSION AND APOSTLESHIP OF ST. PAUL

BY LORD LYTTTELTON
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The object of this paper is to present in an abbreviated form the famous argument of Lord Lyttelton in defense of Christianity based on the conversion of the Apostle Paul. A few words about the man himself and about the interesting circumstances in which this treatise was written will properly introduce the subject.

George Lyttelton was born at Hagley, Worcestershire, England, January 17, 1709, and died on Tuesday morning, August 22, 1773, aged sixty-four years. He belonged to a distinguished "family of long descent and gentle blood, dwelling for centuries on the same spot." Educated at Eton and Oxford, he soon afterwards entered Parliament, "and for many years the name of George Lyttelton was seen in every account of every debate in the House of Commons." From this, he advanced successively to the position of lord commissioner of the treasury, and of chancellor of the exchequer, after which he was raised to the peerage. He was also a man of "letters and his closing years were devoted almost wholly to literary pursuits. He was a writer of verse as well as prose and Dr. Samuel Johnson has furnished us with his biography in his "Lives of the Poets." Outside of his books, which comprise nine octavo volumes, his Memoirs and Correspondence make two additional volumes that were compiled and edited by Robert Phillimore in 1845.

The eighteenth century was the darkest period religiously in the history of England since the time of the Reformation. It was the age of the great deists, agnostics, rationalists and unbelievers, when "all men of rank are [were] thought to be infidels." Like so many of the literary men of his time, George Lyttelton and his friend Gilbert West were led at first to reject the Christian religion. On the Sabbath forenoon before he died, in an interview with Dr. Johnson, Lyttelton said, "When I first set out in the world I had friends who endeavored to shake my belief in the Christian religion. I saw difficulties which staggered me," etc. In his biography of Lord Lyttelton, Dr. Johnson adds, "He had, in the pride of juvenile confidence, with the help of corrupt conversation, entertained doubts of the truth of Christianity." His intimacy with Bolingbroke, Chesterfield, Pope and others of the same kind had no doubt influenced him in this direction. Rev. T. T. Biddolph tells us that both Lyttelton and West, "men of acknowledged talents, had imbibed the principles of infidelity. * * * Fully persuaded that the Bible was an imposture, they were determined to expose the cheat. Lord Lyttelton chose the Conversion of Paul and Mr. West the Resurrection of Christ for the subject of hostile criticism. Both sat down to their respective tasks full of prejudice; but the result of their separate attempts was, that they were both converted by their efforts to overthrow the truth of Christianity. They came together, not as they expected, to exult over an imposture exposed to ridicule, but to lament over their own folly and to felicitate each other on their joint conviction that the Bible was the word of God. Their able inquiries have furnished two of the most valuable treatises in favor of revelation, one entitled 'Observations on the Conversion of St. Paul' and the other 'Observations on the Resurrection of Christ.'" West's book was the first published. Lyttelton's work appeared at first anonymously in 1747, when he was thirty-eight years of age. The edition which lies before me contains seventy-eight compact pages. It is addressed in the form of a letter to Gilbert West. In the opening paragraph he

says, "The conversion and apostleship of St. Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation." Dr. Johnson remarked that it is treatise "to which infidelity had never been able to fabricate specious answer." Dr. Philip Doddridge, who became Lyttelton's most intimate religious friend, speaks of it as "masterly," and, "as perfect in its kind as, any our age has produced." Testimonials of this kind might be multiplied indefinitely.

Let us now turn to an examination of the book itself. Lyttelton naturally begins by bringing before us all the facts that we have in the New Testament regarding the conversion of St. Paul; the three accounts given in the Acts; what we have in Galatians, Philippians, Timothy, Corinthians, Colossians and in other places. (Acts 9:22-26; Gal. 1:11-16; Phil. 3:4-8; 1 Tim. 1:12, 13; 1 Cor. 15:8; 2 Cor. 1:1; Col. 1:1, etc.) Then he lays down four propositions which he considers exhaust all the possibilities in the case.

1. Either Paul was "an impostor who said What he knew to be false, with an intent to deceive;" or
2. He was an enthusiast who imposed on himself by the force of "an overheated imagination;" or
3. He was "deceived by the fraud of others;" or, finally,
4. What he declared to be the cause of his conversion did all really happen; "and, therefore the Christian religion is a divine revelation."

I. PAUL NOT AN IMPOSTOR

More than half his argument (about forty pages) is devoted to the first of these propositions, which is really the key to the whole situation. Is * this story of Paul's conversion so often repeated in Acts and Epistles a fabrication, put forth by a designing man with the deliberate purpose and intention of deceiving?

Lyttelton at once raises the question of motive. What could have induced him while on his way to Damascus, filled with implacable hatred against this whole sect, to turn around and become a disciple of Christ?

1. Was it wealth?

No, all the wealth was in the keeping of those whom he had forsaken; the poverty was on the side of those with whom he now identified himself. So poor had they been, that those among them possessed of any little property sold whatever belonged to them in order to provide for the dire necessities of the rest. Indeed, one of the burdens afterwards laid upon Paul was to collect means for those who were threatened with starvation. Such was the humble condition of these early Christians, that he often refused to take anything from them even for the bare necessities of life, but labored himself to provide for his scanty needs. To the Corinthians, he writes, "Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling place; and we toil working with our hands." (1 Cor. 4:11, 12. See also 2 Cor. 12:14; 1 Thess. 2:4-9; 2 Thess. 3:8, etc.) In his farewell to the elders of Ephesus, he appeals to them as knowing it to be true that, "I coveted no man's silver or gold or apparel. Ye yourselves know that these hands ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me" (Acts 20:33, 34). He forsook the great Jewish hierarchy with its gorgeous temple and its overflowing treasuries, where his zeal in putting down the hated sect of the Nazarene would have been almost

certainly rewarded with a fortune. He cast in his lot among the poverty-stricken disciples of Jesus Christ, among whom it was his ambition to be poor. Near the end of his life he presents to us the picture of an old man shivering in a Roman dungeon and pathetically asking for a cloak to be sent him to cover his naked and suffering limbs during the severity of an Italian winter.

2. Was it reputation!

No; those with whom he united were held in universal contempt; their Leader had been put to death as a criminal among thieves; the chiefs of the cause that he had espoused were illiterate men. On the other hand, the wisest and the greatest men in all the land indignantly rejected the teachings of this new sect. The preaching of Christ crucified was to the Jew a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness. There was no reputation for the great disciple of Gamaliel in parting with his splendid honors and identifying himself with a lot of ignorant fishermen, He would only be execrated as deserter and betrayer of the Jewish cause, and he might rest assured that the same bloody knife that slew the Shepherd of the scattered flock would soon be unsheathed against himself. All the reputation that he had so zealously built up was gone the hour that he went over to the new religion, and from that day on contempt was his portion. He was accounted as the filth of the world and the offscouring of all things. (1 Cor. 4:13)

3. Was it power he was after?

We know what men have done to get into positions of prominence and dominion over their fellows., Mahomet, the popes, . and many others, put forth spiritual claims so as to promote thereby their own temporal ends. How was it with Paul? His whole career was marked by a complete absence of all self-seeking. He had no eye to worldly ambitions. He interfered with nothing, "in government or civil affairs; he meddled not with legislation; he formed no commonwealths; he raised no seditions; he affected no temporal power." He assumed no pre-eminence over other Christians. He regarded himself as not worthy to be called an apostle, as less than the least of all saints, as the chief of sinners. Those engaged in like work he called "fellow-laborers" and "fellow-servants." Even if the truth was spread by those hostile to him, through "envy and strife," so long as Christ was proclaimed, "therein I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (Phil. 1:18). He did not lord it over the churches, even over those that he himself had founded. To the Pauline party in Corinth he exclaims, "Was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Cor. 1:13). "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). Those who, from selfish motives seek for influence over people pander to them and flatter them [as, e. g. did Absalom]. There was nothing of this with Paul. He rebuked the churches unsparingly for their sins, and did not hesitate, if need be, to incur their displeasure. , Disclaiming all pre-eminence and, position and power, he preached Christ and Him crucified as the head, and hid and buried self behind the cross. Earth to him was nothing. His eye was fixed on "the recompense of reward" (Heb. 11:26).

4. Was his motive the gratification of any other passion!

Impostors have pretended to receive divine revelations as a pretext in order that they might indulge in loose conduct. Was it so here? No; for all Paul's teachings were in the most absolute antagonism to any such purpose. "His writings breathe nothing but the strictest morality, obedience to magistrates, order, and government, with the utmost abhorrence of all licentiousness, idleness, or loose behavior under the cloak of religion." Writing to the Thessalonians, he utters the challenge, "Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and righteously and unblameably we behaved ourselves toward you that believe" (1 Thess. 2:10).

"We wronged no man, we corrupted no man, we took advantage of no man" (2 Cor. 7:2). The whole teaching of the Apostle is in the sternest and most uncompromising hostility to everything but the highest and holiest ideals.

5. *Was it a pious fraud?*

That is to say, did Paul pretend to receive a divine revelation in order to give him prestige in advancing the teachings of Christianity? But Christianity was the one thing he had set out to destroy. To become a Christian was to incur the hatred, the contempt, the torments and the violent deaths suffered by Christians in that day. Why then this sudden change in Paul's own views regarding the unpopular teachings of the Nazarene? Would he have endured "the loss of all things" and exulted over it, for what he knew was a fraud? Would he have spent a life of the most arduous toil to induce others to make every earthly sacrifice while he knew that behind it all he was practising a delusion? It would be an imposture as unprofitable as it was perilous, both to himself the deceiver and to the others whom he deceived. The theory confutes itself. Only the sternest conviction that he had received a divine revelation could have induced Paul to pass through what he himself had suffered, or to have asked others to do the same. "If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most pitiable" (I Cor. 15:19).

But had he practiced a deception, he could not have successfully carried it out. Men sometimes act capriciously. Suppose that Paul "just did it" without any motive that can be imagined; then he must have ignominiously failed in his attempt to perpetuate such a fraud. How could he, e. g., have become such an adept in the mysteries and secrets of the new religion as to be an authority and an apostle of it, if he had to depend for his special knowledge on information received from men who knew well by bitter experience that he was their capital enemy? It must have come in another way, and his own account makes it plain. "For neither did I receive it [the Gospel] from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:12). Had he fabricated the story of his conversion he would certainly have located it in a place so remote or hidden that there could be no witnesses to refute. [Joe Smith, e. g., and the golden plates of the Book of Mormon.] Instead of that the miracle of Paul's conversion, with its great light from heaven exceeding the brightness of the sun, is placed in the public highway near Damascus; at noonday, when their senses could not be deceived, and when all the accompanying soldiers and commissioners were with him on the spot. Had there been a shadow of disproof, how promptly the Jews in Damascus would have nipped the falsehood in the bud by the testimony of the witnesses who were present with Paul at the time. Or, when the Apostle stood on the castle stairs in Jerusalem and told the whole story, why did not the Jewish authorities silence him at once and forever by showing that nothing of the kind had ever taken place, and proved it by the abundant evidence of the competent witnesses who were with him—if it were not true? It was an event that took place before the eyes of the world, and would be made at once a matter of the strictest scrutiny. And the truth of the fact was so incontestably established that it had become a matter of common knowledge. The Jews said the utmost they could against Paul before the Roman court, and yet Paul appealed directly to King Agrippa in presence of Festus as to his own personal knowledge of the truth of the story. "For the king knoweth of these things, unto whom also I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things is hidden from him; for this hath not been done in a corner" (Acts 26:26)---"a very remarkable proof both of the notoriety of the fact, and the integrity of the man, who, with so fearless a confidence, could call upon a king to give testimony for him, even while he was sitting in judgment upon him." Moreover, how came it that Ananias went to meet such an enemy in Damascus, if the story of his

conversion was made up? If Paul was an impostor, then all his miracles were simply tricks or sleight-of-hand. Nevertheless, he, a despised and hated Jew, set himself to the appalling task of converting the Gentile world-teaching doctrines that shocked every prejudice and at which they were wont to mock in derision. Arrayed against him were the magistrates with their policy and power, the priests with their interests and craft, the people with their prejudice and passions, the philosophers with their pride and wisdom. Could he by feats of jugglery in presence of a shrewd, hostile people strike Elymas the sorcerer, blind; heal a cripple at Lystra; restore the pythoness at Philippi; shake open with a prayer the doors of a prison; raise the dead to life, etc., so that thousands were converted and great pure churches renouncing all sin and dishonesty, established throughout the Roman world? Our author shows that this would be impossible without divine help and therefore he concludes that he has proven (1) that Paul was not a cheat telling a trumped-up story about his conversion, and (2) if he were, he could not have succeeded.

II. PAUL NOT AN ENTHUSIAST WHO IMPOSED ON HIMSELF

This second argument covers twenty pages. Was Paul a deluded enthusiast whose overheated imagination imposed on him so that he imagined to be true that which had never really taken place? Lord Lyttelton makes an analysis of the elements that enter into the make-up of a man of this type. He finds these to be five.

1. *Great heat of temper.*

While Paul had intense fervor, like all great men, yet it was everywhere governed by discretion and reason. His zeal was his servant, not the master of his judgment. He possessed consummate tact which proves self-control. In indifferent matters he became "all things to all men;" to the Jews he became a Jew, to them that are without law as without law, to the weak he became weak-all, that he might gain some (1 Cor. 9:19-23). "His zeal was eager and warm, but tempered with prudence, and even with the civilities and decorums of life, as appears by his behavior to Agrippa, Festus and Felix; not the blind, inconsiderate, indecent zeal of an enthusiast."

2. *Melancholy.*

He regards this as a prominent mark of misguided zeal. He finds nothing of it in Paul. There is great sorrow over his former ignorant persecution of the church, but there are no gloomy self-imposed penances such as melancholy fanatics inflict upon themselves. He had a desire to depart and be with Christ, but there was nothing morbid about it. It was all based on the revelation that he already had of the rewards that awaited him in the life to come. He tactfully met the Athenians adroitly claiming to be the interpreter of "The unknown god" whose altar they themselves had erected. He never hesitated to avert injustice by claiming his privileges as a Roman citizen. He was the very antithesis of gloominess. In whatever state he was, he had learned to be content. Neither his actions, nor his writings, nor his interested greeting and salutations, show the slightest tincture of melancholia.

3. *Ignorance.*

This charge could not be laid up against the Apostle. Brought up at the feet of the great Gamaliel, he appeared to be master not only of Jewish, but also of Greek (and Roman) learning.

4. *Credulity.*

As a resident of Jerusalem, Paul could not be a stranger to the fame of the miracles wrought by Jesus. He had the facts of the resurrection of our Lord, of Pentecost and all the

miracles wrought by the Apostles tip till the death of Stephen. Far from being credulous, he had barred his mind against every proof and refused to believe. "Nothing less than the irresistible evidence of his own senses, clear from all possibility of doubt, could have overcome his unbelief."

5. *Vanity or self-conceit.*

Vanity and fanaticism usually go together. Men of this type flatter themselves that on account of their superior worth they are the recipients of extraordinary favors and gifts from God, and of these they make their boast. There is not one word in his Epistles, nor one act recorded in his life, in which the slightest mark of this appears. When compelled to vindicate his apostolic claim from wanton attack he does it effectively, but in the briefest way and with many apologies for being compelled to speak thus of himself (2 Cor. 11:1-30). When he had a vision of heaven, he modestly withheld his own name and covered it up in the third person. For fourteen years he observed absolute silence in regard to this special mark of the divine favor (2 Cor. 12:1-12). Would this be the way a vain man would act? Neither is Paul that planteth, nor Apollos that watereth, anything, but God who gives the increase. (1 Cor. 3:4-7). Instead of self-conceit, he writes of himself in terms of the most complete abnegation. Everywhere it is "not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). His modesty appears on every page.

6. *Enthusiasm.*

But now suppose that in some way wholly unaccountable, Paul had actually been swept away by enthusiasm at the time, and imposed on himself, by imagining the events that took place. Lyttelton's reply is that such a thing was impossible. He here uses the argument that has since been employed so effectively to dispose of Renan's vision theory of the resurrection of our Lord. In such circumstances men always see what they expect to see. An imagined vision will be in accord with the opinions already imprinted on one's mind. Paul's purpose was clearly fixed. At his own request he had been clothed with authority to persecute the Christians, and he was now on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus on this very errand. He looked upon Christ as an impostor and a blasphemer who had justly been put to death. All his passions were inflamed to the highest degree against His followers. He started on his northward journey "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). "And being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto foreign cities" (Acts 26:11). "There was the pride of supporting a part he had voluntarily engaged in, and the credit he found it procured him among the chief priests and rulers, whose commission he bore." In these circumstances a wild enthusiast might indeed imagine he saw a vision, but it would be one urging him onward to do the thing which he had started out to accomplish. With nothing having happened to change his opinions or alter the bent of his mind, it would be as impossible for him, in a moment, to have imagined the complete revolution that is recorded in the New Testament as it would be for a rapid river to "carry a boat against the current of its own stream." We might add, as well expect the mighty rushing river itself, without any cause to stop in its course and rush violently backward up a steep mountain side, as to expect the whole current of Paul's thought and feeling and imagination and purpose to be instantly reversed without any cause. It could not take place. And it would have been just as impossible for all those who were with him to have experienced the same delusion, for they also saw the light above the brightness of the noonday sun and they heard the voice from heaven, although they understood not the words. But suppose it were a meteor that burst upon them? How then account for the words that Paul heard speaking in the Hebrew tongue and the dialogue which followed? How account for his going to a certain spot in Damascus, in

accordance with instructions here received? How account for the knowledge that Ananias had, and that led to their interview? How account for the miracle after three days whereby Paul's blindness was healed? And how account for the mighty works and wonders afterward wrought by Paul, all consequent on this first revelation? [Following the suggestion of, perhaps, Krenkel, a New England professor is credited with teaching that at his conversion Paul had simply an epileptic attack. But, had all the company that were with him a like attack at the same instant, for they all saw something? And, moreover, no disorder of this or any other kind can account for the facts in the case. Paul's marvelous lifework revolutionized the history of his age, and his influence is powerfully felt yet, after nearly two thousand years, all over the world. One is almost tempted to say that if such is the result of an attack of epilepsy, what a pity that such a professor as this had not a similar attack. Then possibly he, too, might yet be heard from in the world.]

III. PAUL WAS NOT DECEIVED BY OTHERS

This third possible solution Lyttelton dismisses with a single page. The fraud of others could not have deceived him; for, (1) It was morally impossible that the disciples of Christ could have thought of such a fraud at the instant of Paul's greatest fury against them. (2) It was physically impossible for them to do it. Could they produce a light brighter than the midday sun; cause him to hear a voice speaking out of that light; make him blind for three days and then return his sight at a word, etc.? There were no Christians around when the miracle of his conversion took place. (3) No fraud could have produced those subsequent miracles which he himself actively wrought and to which he, so confidently appealed in proof of his divine mission.

IV. CHRISTIANITY A DIVINE REVELATION

Our author considers that he has furnished sufficient evidence to show (1) that Paul was not an impostor deliberately proclaiming what he knew to be false with intent to deceive; (2) that he was not imposed upon by an overheated imagination, and (3) that he was not deceived by the fraud of others. Unless, therefore, we are prepared to lay aside the use of our understanding and all the rules of evidence by which facts are determined, we must accept the whole story of Paul's conversion as literally and historically true. We have therefore the supernatural, and the Christian religion is proved to be a revelation from God.

Endeavoring as closely as possible to follow the original and yet considerably in my own language, I have sought to give the essence of Lord Lyttelton's matchless argument which has been blessed to thousands of doubting souls. May this outline lead to candid examination, as such an examination should inevitably lead to Him whom Paul saw in the midst of the glory near the gate of Damascus.

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