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The Epistle of Truth

THE REV. EDWIN HIRST, M.A., A.R.C.M.

(This is the second instalment of the Rev. Edwin Hirst's Studies in the Second Epistle of John. The first article appeared in the January issue and further articles will follow (D.V.) in subsequent issues.)

THE ELDER.

UNTO THE ELECT LADY AND
HER CHILDREN, WHOM I LOVE
IN TRUTH; AND NOT I ONLY,
BUT ALSO ALL THEY THAT
KNOW THE TRUTH; FOR THE
TRUTH'S SAKE WHICH ABID-
ETH IN US, AND IT SHALL BE
WITH US FOR EVER:

GRACE, MERCY, PEACE SHALL
BE WITH US, FROM GOD THE
FATHER, AND FROM JESUS
CHRIST, THE SON OF THE FA-
THER, IN TRUTH AND LOVE.

I rejoice greatly that I have found certain of thy children walking in truth, even as we received commandment from the Father. And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote to thee a new commandment, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we should walk after his commandment even as ye heard from the beginning, that ye should walk in it. For many deceivers are gone forth into the world, even they that confess not that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Look to yourselves, that ye lose not the things which we have wrought, but that ye receive a full reward. Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God; he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and

the Son. If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting : for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works.

Having many things to write unto you, I would not write them with paper and ink : but I hope to come unto you, and to speak face to face, that your joy may be fulfilled.

THE CHILDREN OF THINE ELECT SISTER SALUTE THEE.

(The text is that of the Revised Version arranged as in The Modern Reader's Bible).

THE MEANING OF TRUTH

(2 St. John, verses 1, 2)

“WHAT is truth ?”¹ This is perhaps the most famous question which history records. It is also one of the most searching of questions, for truth has ever been the object of man's quest, and the aim of his sincere desires. On asking the question Pontius Pilate awaited no answer, so perhaps he spoke either carelessly or even cynically. Yet, in view of the peerless sincerity and crystal clear innocence he noted in Christ of Whom he asked the question, it might be that he betrayed a wistful longing which had crept into his soul. Seeing falsity and treachery about him, and perceiving it also in his own heart, it may be that he gained a momentary glimpse of ultimate truth as he faced our Lord. How near was he to The Truth ! But like many more, he feared to be confronted by it.

The Greek word meaning truth has a fundamental content, for it means *reality* as opposed to the false and to what is mere seeming and pretence. Thus it serves as a sure guide for the life that finds expression in thought and action. A moment's reflection will reveal its supreme value as a reliable guide in a moral universe such as ours. This being so, the search for truth is an absolute necessity. We cannot escape it. Even though such a search may involve labour and toil, perhaps even suffering, these trials are to be counted but of small cost in comparison with the treasure of truth. Just as testing and temptation are necessary in the formation of

¹ St. John xviii. 38.

character, so is toil necessary in the quest for truth. The primary aim of such searching toil is the illumination and instruction of the mind, so that by the exercise of true knowledge and judgment, the true might be embraced and the false refused. That the ultimate aim in the quest for truth goes much deeper than this we shall presently see. The question is of supreme importance. As health of body depends largely upon the rightness of its foods, both as to quality and quantity, so does health of mind depend upon its vital food, which is truth. We may be sure that God does not mock us. He gave us the capacity both to apprehend truth and to follow it in our daily lives. So, in endowing us with both the need and the desire for truth, He encourages us to pursue the path of our quest in the assurance that truth can be found, and being found, we may treasure it as a gift from Him Who is "the way, and the truth, and the life."

The apprehension of truth depends upon the exercise of moral judgment, and therefore upon God's moral character ; and a knowledge of the truth involves the obligation to act upon it. St. John says : " If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in the darkness, we lie, and do not the truth."¹ We see, then, that within, the truth has a moral urge, and that without, it involves a moral mode of life.

Some knowledge of the truth is given to all men. Were it otherwise, it would be impossible to live with even a fraction of success. It is by our knowledge of the truth that we check one idea with another on a basis of comparison. That we might do this, some knowledge of the truth is given to us all ; for just as conscience is the endowment of all men, so also is some knowledge of the truth. It is by conscience that men judge character and conduct both in themselves and in others, making comparisons with an ideal formed from their sense of absolute goodness. In a similar manner, some standard of truth operates in men by which the true and untrue are discriminated. This knowledge of truth is capable of more and more development, just as other aspects of human knowledge may be developed. Hence, a full and satisfying knowledge of the truth is inevitably the pursuit of true men. " Truth is the end of the intellect ; man does think, and he may think right or wrong ; to think right is to

¹ 1 John i. 6.

attain truth so far as this thought has gone. Men always desire to reach some truth, for their plans will break down if they are calculated on a basis of error ; but this is to desire truth as a means, not as an end. To desire truth as an end is to desire the perfect correlation of mind to Reality. And this is a good in itself, so clearly a good as to impose upon all who have understood its nature an obligation to seek it. The end is not to acquire masses of information, though that may be a means to the end and must be included in it, if it is perfectly attained ; the end is perfect intellectual correlation with Reality."¹ If this is so, no one will deny the supreme value of truth. Anything short of this must inevitably militate against successful living. Even misleading ideas can do this, for thought, creed, and conduct are closely connected. Whenever any concept is revealed as untrue, moral judgment demands its adjustment, whilst deliberate falsification is condemned as a gross injury against the deceived.

When we apprehend truth, whatever form it may take, we realize that there must be an ultimate truth. Further, as truth is observed and understood as truth only by those who have possession of a moral faculty, which in turn demands personality, it seems that the ultimate truth can only be found in a perfect personality.

This argument may be illustrated in several ways. A negative implies a positive. The "No Road" notice does not necessarily imply that progress is stopped. It may mean, and usually does, that another way is open. Our forefathers probably thought that the Atlantic Ocean was an impassable barrier to the West, and that it was foolish and dangerous to court unknown dangers by attempting to cross it. The Ocean seemed to say : "So far, and no farther." Yet human ingenuity, expressed in coracle, boat, sailing-ship, steamship and aircraft, has found a way.

Again, untruth is known to be untruth because it can be tested by a standard of truth. Untruth, then, by its very existence, and by being apprehended as untruth, implies the existence of truth. Conscience offers its support to this thought. By its standards of obligation expressed in terms of "should," "ought" and "must," the right is seen as true and the wrong as untrue.

¹ Archbishop Temple, "Christus Veritas," p. 27.

These considerations would seem to imply an ultimate truth. This Ultimate Truth we believe to be God.

It must be remembered that in our finite state we are not able to know the entire truth. As attempts have been made to reach and know it, much labour has been expended in making comparisons which have been checked, and then checked over again. Accordingly, some have thought that truth is always in the making rather than something which is fixed and complete. But is it not more accurate to say that it is man's knowledge of the truth which is always in the making? Truth must first be there to be known at all, for it is not made as man develops his knowledge. Scientific research shows this. The colours of the rainbow were there before the prism revealed the spectrum. As men examined the spectrum, knowledge of the truth about light was increased, but that knowledge did not make the light. Perhaps the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews had a thought similar to this in his mind when he wrote "He that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that seek after Him."¹

It seems, then, that truth must have an eternal embodiment in a personality which, to be true, must be perfect. In God alone is this to be found, for His character has neither contradiction nor untruth in it, but constitutes the perfection of all true values in Goodness, Truth and Beauty.

Truth is a characteristic word in the Johannine writings. In the Gospel it occurs twenty-five times, and in the Epistles twenty times, of which no fewer than five occur in the Second Epistle. For the Apostle, "the truth" meant the absolute Divine reality. Nothing short of that was or could be the truth. One of the outstanding instances of this is to be found in the First Epistle: "My little children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue; but in deed and truth. Hereby shall we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before him, whereinsoever our heart condemn us; because God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things."² In commenting on this passage, Dr. Plummer says, "by loving in deed and truth we shall attain to the knowledge that we are morally the children of the Truth."

¹ Heb. xi. 6.

² 1 John iii. 18-20.

To be of the Truth "is to have the Truth as the source whence the guiding and formative influences of thought and conduct flow."¹ In St. John's thought it is evident that here he personifies "the Truth," using the words almost as an equivalent for God. This is in conformity with Christ's words to the Pharisees when they objected to His teaching, for He maintained that His speaking and teaching of the truth was a standing proof that He was of God. "If I say truth, why do ye not believe Me? He that is of God heareth the words of God: for this cause ye hear them not, because ye are not of God."² The same line of thought is to be found in Christ's witness before Pilate, which called forth the question with which we began our considerations. "Pilate therefore said unto Him, Art Thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a King. To this end have I been born, and to this end am I come into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth My voice."³

The Apostle claims that it is out of a definite regard for the recipients of this letter that he writes to them. "The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not I only, but also all they that know the truth; for the truth's sake which abideth in us, and it shall be with us for ever."⁴ That abiding love had in it some character of the truth of God, for it bore no tinge of insincerity nor any trace of hypocrisy. Only the man who has found the truth of God could cherish such sentiments, for they are born of God only, the source and embodiment of both love and truth.

TRUTH REVEALED

(2 St. John, verse 3)

Belief in God as the source and embodiment of truth is of little use unless we are convinced that God communicates His truth to men. It is the desire to know more of His mind and will which lies behind all attempts to reach Him in

¹ "The Epistles of St. John," p. 87.

² St. John viii. 46, 47.

³ St. John xviii. 37.

⁴ 2 John 1, 2.

prayer and worship. The psalmist's cry is the expression of humanity at its highest level—

“As the hart panteth after the water brooks,
So panteth my soul after Thee, O God.
My soul is athirst for God, for the living God :
When shall I come and appear before God ? ”¹

Love of God inspires this longing, for as God is love, it is natural that love should be the expression of the soul made in His image. Even when fear has been the inner urge, as it has been in the heart of primitive peoples, the desire for God is there.

In giving men this desire for Himself, God does not make a jest of His creatures. He seeks to satisfy their needs, and all through the ages there is evidence to prove that God has never left Himself without sufficient witness to lead men to Himself. This truth may be read in the book of nature, the book of humanity, the book of history, in the story of the Church, and in the Book of Books—the Bible itself. But God gave a supreme revelation of Himself to men in a manner that they might best understand. That revelation stands as the lasting communication of His truth to men. “God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through Whom also He made the worlds.”² These words stress the striking contrast between the partial revelation of God through the prophets and the perfect revelation through His only-begotten Son. Bishop Westcott has aptly emphasized this: “That which is communicated in parts, sections, fragments, must of necessity be imperfect; and so also a representation which is made in many modes cannot be other than provisional. The supreme element of unity is wanting in each case. But the Revelation in Christ, the Son, is perfect both in substance and in form.”³ This statement is very true, for growth in grace and knowledge cannot but be progressive. This does not mean that God could not have given a complete revelation of Himself, but that the human medium of communication was not able to grasp His whole truth. God did indeed use,

¹ Psalm xlii. 1, 2.

² Heb. i. 1.

³ “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” p. 4.

and still uses, men as His instruments. He used them as living agents, as each in turn learned something of Himself. But being imperfect men, they could neither know nor utter the entire and complete truth of God. Yet through them, He did speak to mankind, fragmentarily indeed, by means of laws and prophecies, by types and pictorial methods of teaching, each agent thus contributing to the knowledge of the truth. But Christ, being the Son, could speak to men with a tone of authority and finality. His message was not fragmentary, but complete and final.

As we turn to His teaching, this authoritative tone is impressed clearly upon our minds. Perhaps one instance will serve as an illustration, *viz.*, His teaching about worship. We all share the instinct and urge to worship, but it needs some form or order for its expression. At once, the question of the God Whom we are to worship, as also the question of how we are to worship Him, become subjects of vital importance. Worship must be something more than mere formality if it is to be true. Moreover, it implies a measure of knowledge regarding the object of worship. Christ stressed this fact in His talk with the woman at the well. "Ye worship that which ye know not: we worship that which we know."¹ The true worship of God thus assumes the existence of a revelation of the character of Him Who is worshipped and its expression is seen as the human response to that revelation. Job felt this in his own heart as he said:

"Then call Thou, and I will answer;
Or let me speak, and answer Thou me."²

The same thought is uttered by Samuel: "Speak; for thy servant heareth."³ The life of religion expressed in worship must be the response of man to a responsive reality. In this connection it has been well said that "the unique feature of a religious attitude to reality, that feature which distinguishes it from a scientific or philosophic attitude to reality, is the implicit assumption that reality responds to such claims upon it from the human side as are consistent with its own inherent nature. But this attribution of responsiveness to the object of religion carries with it a necessary corollary. Response is a kind of attitude or relation existing

¹ St. John iv. 22.

² Job xiii. 22.

³ 1 Sam. iii. 10.

between two terms. That which issuing from the one is response, on reaching the other is receptivity. And what is thus received by the second comes as an answer to a previous request."¹ In worship, that responsiveness reaches a lofty level, aiming at the cultivation of a life centred in God. Thus, "instead of asserting the necessity for reality to respond to the claims which we make upon it, we submit to the necessity that we should respond to the claims which reality makes upon us. Our religion becomes our response to God, more than God's response to us."² Worship thus becomes communion, and for communion to be a really worthy thing, it must have truth as its base and foundation. "God is a Spirit," said our Lord, "and they that worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."³ Hence, whether we consider Him Whom we worship or our attitude in worship, that worship must be true and conditioned by the revelation which God has given of Himself to men. St. John knew how supremely important was this fact, for he seems to emphasize it at the outset of his letter by associating himself with "all they that know the truth."⁴ Untruth was being spread abroad in false teaching. This would inevitably issue in false worship, proceeding as it did from a false idea of God. Such circumstances are ever fatal to true worship; for when worship becomes severed from truth the danger of degeneration into mere superstition is always present, superstition being but worship divorced from truth. To worship God in spirit and truth, some knowledge of the truth is a necessity.

God willed that men should know of Himself, so He revealed Himself fully in the Incarnate Son. In this connection, Christ claimed to be "the truth." There is little wonder, then, that the Beloved Disciple used that term, "the truth," for the revelation which God gave in the Son. This he had obviously learned from his Lord. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one cometh unto the Father, but by Me. If ye had known Me, ye would have known My Father also: from henceforth ye know Him, and have seen Him."⁵ These words are Christ's answer to Thomas when he

¹ Valentine, "What Do We Mean by God?" p. 44.

² Valentine, "What Do We Mean by God?" p. 45.

³ St. John iv. 24.

⁴ 2 John 1.

⁵ St. John xiv. 6, 7.

asked : " Lord, we know not whither thou goest ; how know we the way ? " ¹ The wish to know the way finds its answer in " I am the way." The manner in which they were to know is indicated by His claim to be " the truth." The wish to know whither He was wending His way (which He said was to the Father ; so that where He was to be they might also be) finds its reply in His claim to be " the life." Here is a splendid summary of Christian doctrine, and by faith, the faithful follower finds the fullness of each claim amply fulfilled in his experience. Even the Pharisees recognized the truth in Christ, though they were not willing to be led by it. " Master, we know that Thou art true, and carest not for any one : for Thou regardest not the person of men, but of a truth teachest the way of God." ² It was a tremendous admission which they made, even though a snare was secreted in the soft words of their speech. But St. John plainly sets out from the first to reveal his Lord as " the truth." " The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth." ³ Up and down the Gospel, this truth is substantiated. Its witness is heard and demonstrated before the Jews, the Pharisees, the crowds which congregated to hear Him, the disciples, and even before Pilate. It was to bear witness to the truth that He came into the world. His followers were to know the truth which should make them free. On His withdrawal from the world of time and space, He promised the gift of the Spirit of Truth, Who should lead them into all the truth. Perhaps we gather the urgency and importance of all this most of all as we listen to Him praying His High-Priestly Prayer, interceding for His followers. " Sanctify them in the truth : Thy word is truth. As Thou didst send Me into the world, even so sent I them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth." ⁴

Being the Son of God, Christ could reveal the Father as the ultimate Truth, and the God He so revealed to men is no theoretical God, as is the creation of some philosophical systems, but a Living, Loving Person, Who can and will

¹ St. John xiv. 5.

² St. Mark xii. 14.

³ St. John i. 14.

⁴ St. John xvii. 17-19.

respond to the call of those who seek after Him. To bear witness to Him and to make Him known to men by His teaching and His death, was the purpose of His mission, for by these, eternal life is obtained. Christ gave expression to God's character in a human life and so answered the request: "Shew us the Father."¹ Christians have known and still know Him as the Truth of God. Their experience all down the ages demonstrates the truth of His own witness concerning Himself. "Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice."² If we would know of the Father, the source of all truth, we must turn and listen to Him who came to reveal the Father. This is the Father's will endorsed by His own words: "This is my beloved Son: hear ye Him."³

¹ St. John xiv. 8.

² St. John xviii. 37.

³ St. Mark ix. 7.

THE DECLINE OF RELIGION

By Cecil P. Martin. (George Allen & Unwin, Ltd.) 10s. 6d.

The present study, offered by a layman who has an abundance of both scientific, medical, and philosophical knowledge at his disposal, will command attention, and not least the attention of the clergy. It is not to be expected that all will accept his conclusions. His approach to the subject reveals a strong bias of dissent from organised Christianity under Episcopal leadership, and at times both impatience with and a lack of understanding of the history and genius of our Episcopal Churches. This is particularly emphasised in the chapter Ecclesiasticism. The decline of religion is attributed to the rise and progress of modern science, the feeling of unreality of which some are conscious in the contemporary presentation of Christianity, and to the difficulties of reconciling the existence of pain and evil with the belief in an all-good and all-powerful God. It is clear that the author is in close touch with those who question the Christian Gospel. As a result of such contact he says: "The modern rejection of the Bible is not therefore due to a lack of evidence or to inconsistencies in the available evidence, but arises either from an insuperable conviction of the absolute impossibility of some Biblical events or to an aversion of admitting them" (p. 193). He has a hope for the future, but, as stated on p. 239: "The fact of Jesus Christ therefore stands to-day as clear, as distinct, and as insistent as ever, and each one of us has to settle for himself where he stands in relation to it."

E. H.