

The Epistle of Truth

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(This is the concluding instalment of the Rev. Edwin Hirst's Studies in the Second Epistle of St. John.)

TRUE HOSPITALITY

(2 St. John, verses 10-11)

(Continued from last issue, p. 285.)

The Apostle viewed the matter from a pastoral standpoint. St. Paul's words to the Elders of the Ephesian Church are most illustrative in this connection. The pastor's charge is not to be borne lightly, for in some large measure the safety of the flock depends upon him. "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops (R.V. margin "overseers"), to feed the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood."¹ St. John well knew that if his converts were to extend an official welcome to these men who were not truly Christian brethren, but impostors, harm rather than good would be the net result. Just as indiscriminate charity has in it the possibility of confirming men and women in evil ways, so also a warm hearing given to these false teachers would have confirmed them in their course. Charity must of necessity have its limits. "St. John is at once earnestly dogmatic and earnestly philanthropic; for the Incarnation had taught him both the preciousness of man and the preciousness of truth."² Truth is indeed of great price, but when half the truth is passed off as its entire sum and substance, it constitutes a grave danger. Tennyson has emphasized this for us:

"A lie which is half a truth is ever the blackest of lies."³

The injunction given in the letter extends even to the matter of withholding salutation: "Give him no greeting." The Apostle here speaks of a familiar and fraternal Christian

¹ Acts xx. 28.

² Liddon, quoted Plummer, *Epistle of St. John*, p. 139.

³ *The Grandmother*, St. 8.

salutation. A salutation is a serious matter in the East. Such greetings are strictly regulated on terms of rank and age. They appear to have been exchanged between friends, but rather rarely amongst the unacquainted and strangers. A good deal is expressed in mutual greetings. They frequently betray national characteristics. Our "Good morning," or "Good day," really means "God bless you to-day," and is a brief but effective confirmation of faith in God. The characteristic Hebrew salutation was "Peace be unto you." Thus the Hebrew longing for peace found expression. Living as they did in an area which had been the cock-pit of the near East, and with their own history chequered as it had been by war, there is no wonder that they wished for peace. "Peace be unto you," with its customary response "And unto you," was a mutual wish between two persons that the full blessings and peace of the Jehovah-covenant might be assured. Peace was the very condition under which they wished to live and to ply their trades. The usual Grecian greeting was a wish for the happiness of the person thus addressed—"Chaire" ("Welcome"). The word is derived from the verb meaning to rejoice, to be happy, glad or pleased. This shows how the Greeks highly valued light-heartedness, joy, beauty, and sweetness in life. The salutation appears in its Christian form in the Epistle to the Philippians—"Rejoice (chairete) in the Lord."¹ The robust Roman greeted his friend with a wish for his personal health—"Salve"—"A health to you." Health and strength seemed all in all to the Roman, for he believed implicitly in the gospel of physical fitness. Perhaps the best rendering of St. John's phrase is: "Give him no God-speed." In his *New Testament in Modern Speech*, Dr. Weymouth gives "farewell" and "welcome" as suitable rendering of "chairein," the Greek word here used. This word frequently occurs in the usual salutation with which Greek correspondence began. In this form it occurs twice in our New Testament. "The apostles and the elder brethren unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greeting."² "James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are of the Dispersion,

¹ Philippians iii 1; iv. 4.

² Acts xv. 23.

greeting."¹ The similarity of these salutations leads us to presume that St. James penned the draft of the apostolic communication of the findings of the Jerusalem Council. One illustration of the likeness of these two greetings to contemporary letters will suffice. A letter bearing a date in the year A.D. 54 begins: "Ammonios to his father Ammonios, greeting."² Other forms of salutation occur in the correspondence of the period, as for instance "heartiest greetings," and "good cheer"; but Christians seemed to use the form "chairein" to convey wishes for Christian graces to the recipients of their letters. It is more than possible that this greeting is the original source from which comes the mutual salutation of minister and people in our Book of Common Prayer. The minister says: "The Lord be with you;" the reply is "And with thy spirit." Probably the casual observer would presume that "spirit" should be spelt with a capital letter, meaning the Holy Spirit. Such is by no means the case. The minister prays that the Lord may be with His people, and in turn the people pray that the Lord might be with the minister as he conducts the service. The doctrine of the Priesthood of the Laity finds expression in these few words. They occur at a point in the service where confession of faith is followed by humble prayer. At the beginning of this petitionary section the tone is set by minister and people praying for each other that Christ may be in their hearts, guiding their worship. This mutual salutation is sometimes used before the sermon. At such a moment it is charged with deep significance; and were its spirit more fully realized, preaching would be characterized by much more power, and listening would be marked with much more attention.

By means of a stern warning, the Apostle emphasizes the injunction neither to receive nor greet false teachers. He says: "He that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works." This also seems strangely severe, but, viewed in the light of attendant circumstances, it could scarcely be otherwise. Life in the pagan world was tinged with religious significance at almost every point. It comes before us in a pointed manner in the matter of meals offered to idols. St. Paul had to deal with the problem, for it had arisen in the

¹ James i. 1.

² Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, p. 23.

Corinthian Church. It was certainly true that meat which had been offered to idols was not changed in substance, for idols had no reality. Yet there was a definite difference in the ideas of the idol worshipper, and sharing in a meal where the meat had been thus offered was considered as tantamount to idol worship. The gravity of the situation was sometimes aggravated, in that acceptance of an invitation to a feast might actually imply fellowship with an idol. Christians who had met around the Lord's Table could not partake of any other feast. Whilst the idol might be nothing more than the stock of a tree or a graven image, and the thing sacrificed to it be but a piece of flesh, the cup and the bread of the Lord's Feast were neither a mere cup nor yet mere bread, but the means of a communicated life, a fellowship with the Lord of the most sacred kind. No wonder St. Paul warned the Corinthians: "The things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have communion with devils. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot partake of the table of the Lord, and of the table of devils."¹ Many heathen feasts had that characteristic. Amongst the Oxyrhynchus Papyri is an invitation which reads like an invitation to a ceremonial rather than to a private feast: "Antonius, son of Ptolemaeus, invites you to dine with him at the table of the Lord Serapis in the house of Claudius Serapion on the 16th, at 9 o'clock." It was a difficult situation for the Christian, and, had he consented to partake in such a feast, it might have been understood as acquiescence in the polytheism of the heathen world. Against any such acknowledgment, St. Paul protested: "Though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or on earth; as there are gods many, and lords many; yet to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him."² Yet the position created by these itinerant false teachers was more subtle than this. Dr. Deissmann tells us that "the roads on which Paul the missionary travelled were also trodden by the emissaries of Isis and Serapis, of the God of the Jews and of the Great Mother of

¹ 1 Cor. x.[20, 21.

² 1 Cor. viii. 5, 6.

Phrygia."¹ These came into the open, and their teaching was understood as representative of a definite system. Not so the "deceivers," for they posed as Christians whilst their teaching belied the name of Christ. St. John saw that safety was not to be found but in rejection of both the teachers and their teaching. Toleration might be understood as acceptance. One fears that, even in these enlightened days, the plea for toleration is at times but an attempt to escape from the responsibility of careful thinking on matters of great moment. Broadmindedness may be used as a cloak to cover either indolence or ignorance. It is sometimes said in excuse that correct conduct is of more importance than a correct creed—"It doesn't matter what a man believes so long as he leads a good life."² Such an attitude is a betrayal of both reason and conscience. Creed and conduct are inevitably connected, the one conditioning the other. We act upon our beliefs, and in the long run conduct will square itself with creed. What we believe is of supreme importance. Were it true that belief is secondary to conduct, few would profess any belief at all, and the result would be chaos. Here is one of the difficulties of the present age, as Mr. C. E. M. Joad has somewhere pointed out: "Not having anything particular to believe in, we find nothing very particular to do. A man's real difficulties only begin when he is free to do as he likes; and the present generation to whom nothing that is desired is forbidden, finds nothing or very little, to desire."

It is not surprising that St. John saw danger in extending hospitality to these false teachers. To receive them might be to give countenance to their teaching and even to become tainted with it themselves. The test his people were to apply was the Eternal Sonship of the Master; and whosoever denied or questioned that doctrine was not a true Christian but a deceiver.

Truth and untruth can never be effectively mingled. Nor yet can they stand side by side. Christ's words about no man being able to serve two masters are still true. The Christian is sometimes accused of intolerance, but he knows

¹ *Paul*, p. 227.

² See Pope's lines, *Essay on Man*, Epistle 3, line 303.

"For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight;
He can't be wrong whose life is in the right."

that he has a priceless possession to preserve. However, the honest doubter should at least be respected, for he may ultimately be won for Christ. Tennyson saw something of this :

“ There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the Creeds.”¹

Yet the Christian must never go beyond Christ. Loyalty to the truth and to Him must be the guide. Perhaps the best maxim will be : “ In things essential, unity ; in things doubtful, liberty ; in all things, charity.”

TRUTH AS A RULE OF LIFE

The characteristics of a true pastor stand out in this Epistle. St. John is no hireling who careth not for the sheep, for “ he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, beholdeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth, and the wolf snatcheth them, and scattereth them.”² On the contrary, it is clear that there is in him much of the character of the Good Shepherd who layeth down his life for the sheep. The Apostle's personal concern for the welfare of these Christians is plainly apparent. In warning them of their danger, he set positive precepts before them for the right guidance of their lives. Against the specious theories of the “ deceivers,” he urged the truth of the Incarnation as the very heart of Christianity. Without that, there could be no salvation. The Christian scheme depends upon the fact that the Saviour is the Son of God, the Word made flesh. If that could be truly denied, Christ would have been a mere man. Under such terms, He could be regarded as a great teacher, but even then He would be merely a man. Consequently, the world would be without a Redeemer, for the truth still stands, that :

“ They that trust in their wealth,
And boast themselves in the multitude of their riches ;
None of them can by any means redeem his brother,
Nor give to God a ransom for him :
(For the redemption of their soul is costly,
And must be let alone for ever).”³

¹ *In Memoriam*, xcvi. St. 3.

² St. John x. 12.

³ Psalm xlix. 6-8.

Dr. Moffatt has translated the passage into modern English as follows, but it will be noted that he begins the section at verse five, and omits verse eight, which both the Authorized and Revised Versions place in parenthesis :

“ Why should I be afraid when times are bad,
and all around I see my treacherous foes,
men who rely upon their riches,
and boast of their abounding wealth ?
Why, none can buy himself off ;
not one can purchase for a price from God
life that shall never end.”

Man can redeem neither himself nor his brother. He needs a Saviour, and a Saviour who is less than God can never satisfy the needs of sinful souls.

The Apostle is ever practical, so he gives his people plain principles upon which to plan their lives. They were to “ love in truth ” and to act “ for the truth’s sake,” even as he did. Theirs was also to be a life of “ walking in truth.” Christians had been named the people of “ the Way,” and theirs was the way of truth.¹ The truth was to abide in them because he who had the truth had both the Father and the Son. For them, truth was ever to be the principal rule of life.

Men still accept standards which serve as ideals and rules for living. These rules often find spontaneous expression. Quite unconsciously, and at times indirectly, they betray themselves in the use of maxims, in sayings, in habits, in business methods, and in countless other ways. Occasionally, however, such principles of conduct are unsuspected by a man’s closest friends, and only come to light after death. One such instance is revealed in Dr. Stalker’s book, *Imago Christi*, where the author tells of how it fell to his lot to examine the papers of a deceased friend. This friend had lived his life amid men of the world and was thus exposed to all the temptations of business life. It was his well-worn and well-marked Bible which revealed the guiding principles of his life. On the fly leaf were words which indicated the source and spring of his consistency : “ Oh, to come nearer to Christ, nearer to God, nearer to holiness ! Every day to live more completely in Him, by Him, for and with Him.

¹ Acts ix. 2.

There is a Christ ; shall I be Christless ? A cleansing ; shall I remain foul ? A Father's love ; shall I be an alien ? A heaven ; shall I be a cast-out ? ”¹

Truth is the standard of Christian living, and nothing short of the truth will ultimately suffice. That truth is found in Him Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Further, there is a promise for them that abide in Him : “ If ye abide in My word, then are ye truly My disciples ; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”² To know and to do has been the aim of all true men, and these dominating desires have become the guiding impulses of their lives. Investigators have often arrived at their conclusions only after much sacrifice, and it would be impossible to estimate the energy expended in their efforts. Yet knowledge is useless unless one is free to experiment, and to put that knowledge into effective action. This desideratum is frequently dependent upon co-operative effort, whether it be in the development of thought, or science, or in the subjugation of the forces of nature for the service of men. The wealthiest man would be but poor if stranded upon an island where gold had no market value, and formed no basis of current exchange. In comparison, the humble labourer who could toil with his hands to supply his own needs and those of others would be far the richer. Yet “ to know ” and “ to do ” are ultimately one, for knowledge must express itself in the energy of free effort. In the same way, freedom must be conditioned by knowledge. Freedom is never mere licence. The man who claims unlimited freedom to exercise every whim and passion, is fit but to live in a world of one inhabitant, namely himself, and of all slaves he is the most bound, for he is bound by the chains of self's own forging.

“ The truth shall make you free ” is Christ's enduring promise. This is true of all life ; but supremely is it so in the two greatest impulses of life, viz., religion and science. Both of these impulses are dedicated to the pursuit of truth, and being so dedicated, they must work in harmony. Truth is necessarily one, its source being one. The Christian believes that it takes its origin in the one ultimate Being whom he knows as God. Knowledge is the quest of humanity and,

¹ *Imago Christi*, p. 156.

² St. John viii. 31, 32.

being made in the image of God, man can strive to reach that unity of knowledge which abides in the Godhead. The so-called laws of nature are really the laws of God, and the unity which reigns in the realm of nature points not to chaos, but to order and rule, found in the ultimate Being of Truth, God Himself. When man strives to find the ultimate source of being, he is seeking to know God. The paths of religion and science both lead to the same destination which is the ultimate truth of God. The scientist who strives to understand the mysteries of matter and energy ; the physician who aims at a point beyond symptoms in an effort to reach the cause of physical sickness, that he may assist in the healing work of nature ; the philosopher who compares experience so as to arrive at a basis both of being and conduct ; the religious thinker who seeks to know God and His will for man ; all are engaged in one great co-operative task for the welfare of human souls. In this quest, no one can be truly satisfied by reaching a point short of the goal. Man may proceed far in his search for God, and he may reach a point where his belief in a Supreme Being is upheld both by reason and experience. But " a God whose existence can be supported by the traditional proofs has never been and never will be worshipped save by small coteries."¹ The Christian has something more than that, for he knows that God has met him in his quest. For God has revealed Himself in the Incarnate Son, Whom to know is life eternal. It is for this very reason that the Christian Faith offers a scheme in following which all sincere efforts to know God can meet in Christ. There is much in the highest of Pagan thought which reaches up to that which finds fulfilment in Christ. Hebrew thought and revelation foreshadow Him. Since His first advent, men of every age have looked back to Him. Because He is the Eternal Son, no contradiction of the truth is in Him. Hence, every aim to attain true knowledge and to apply it finds satisfaction in the Christian scheme. It is true that truth is like a jewel with many facets, but of these facets untruth can never be one. Knowing this, the Apostle would not tolerate teaching which denied Christ's eternal Sonship. He had the truth, who had both the Father and the Son. Christ had said : " I and the Father are one " ;²

¹ Lothouse, *The Father and the Son*, p. 10.

² St. John x. 30.

and in the truth of that statement, which He vindicated in His life's mission, the necessity for the formation of a hierarchy of intermediate beings in the Gnostic emanations was unnecessary either for God's communications with man or for man's communications with God. In His Son—the Incarnate Word—the Father had spoken of His truth.

This rule of truth finds a sphere of activity in all departments of life. It may be recalled how the old teaching of the Book Deuteronomy was marked out for Christ's own sanction: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."¹ Heart, soul and mind—these collectively stand for the whole man. The *heart* typifies the moral side of human nature and includes the emotions, will and purpose. The *soul* is that spiritual part of man which marks him off from the brute creation and makes him one who can commune with his Creator. The *mind* is the thinking faculty in man—the organ of moral thought and knowledge. By the knowledge and application of that truth man is free to find full self-expression in life. He can thus obtain freedom from his lower instincts, and at the same time he is able to serve God and his fellows. These terms are inevitably connected for all the things of God. Knowledge is related both to the Author of truth and to those who share in that truth within the life of humanity which God created. Mankind obtained its origin from Him, so the individual must exercise his gift of knowledge in relation to that life of which he is a part, for no man liveth or dieth unto himself.² Thought is thus lifted from a secular matter into a holy pursuit dedicated to God's glory and also to man's understanding. Human toil is also ennobled by the attempt to dedicate its discharge to truth. Christ Himself was a man of toil, and He gave a new dignity both to the pursuit of the things of God and to honest effort in the common things of life—

"Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time."³

Labour bears the stamp of the mind, for all action is the

¹ St. Matt. xxii. 37.

² See Rom. xiv. 7.

³ Longfellow, "A Psalm of Life."

outcome of thought ; thought and toil are thus joined in true personality, and man bears the stamp of the Divine image upon himself in that he can both pursue knowledge and apply it. The Bible presents the Father as the Supreme Reason of the universe and the Eternal Word as the revealer of that Reason to man ; so there is no wonder that Christ said : " My Father worketh even until now, and I work."¹ We ought to learn that man degrades himself and mars the Divine image upon him if he scamps his work. This dictum is applicable to all labour, whether it be that of the mind in the realm of science, art, literature or music, or in that sphere where manual labour alone is involved.

Life, however, is found in the exercise of the whole man. The spirit of man cries out for satisfaction.

" As the hart panteth after the water brooks,
So panteth my soul after thee, O God."²

This is still the insistent cry of the soul. Life is greater than everything else, and it is found in the soul's communion with God. Into its sphere is swept every other interest as being of service in its pursuit—science, art, and labour alike. From this it is clear that he who has gained the whole world but has lost his soul does not know true life. No wonder, then, that Christ's prayer was that his people might know the Father and Him whom He had sent ; for that was life eternal.³ Consequently, knowledge of God Who is the truth must ever issue in worship and adoration, in prayer and mystic musing ; so that, when the soul has breathed the pure air of the Divine, toil might be assumed in His name for the betterment of humanity. This was Christ's way. He did not linger on the mount of Transfiguration, glorious as that celestial communing might be which there He enjoyed. On the contrary, He came from the mount to free a burdened soul on a parent's loving plea. Later, according to the theme of His discussion on the mount with His visitors from the spirit realm, He trod the road that led to Calvary. Christians must do the same, returning from their worship of God strengthened for the service of their fellows.

¹ St. John v. 17.

² Psalm xlii. 1.

³ St. John xvii. 3.

By following this rule of life, Christians became, as St. John says in his Third Epistle, "fellow workers with the truth." He regards Truth as an active force in the world. The Truth is none other than Christ Himself; it is personified in Him, for as the Son, He shares in the nature of God Who is Truth. This goes beyond anybody of abstract theories or principles, for Truth is resident in Him Who, as a perfect personality, God as man, revealed the Father to His creatures. In Him is life which is life indeed. Yet beyond the dignity of participating in the task of telling the news of salvation (for the Father still works through humble human beings) there is that gracious gift of sonship for all who accept Him as the Truth, and follow Him. "As many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."¹

¹ St. John i, 12. 13.
