

“The Brethren”

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THE New Testament has many names for the Christian community. Each one has its own particular importance which has to be cherished by every one of us. One name, however, has come down to us from Christ Himself. He used it when He appeared to Mary Magdalene on the Resurrection day, saying : “ Go unto my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God ”. On another occasion, He said to His disciples : “ All ye are brethren ”. Then, when once speaking to Peter, He said : “ When thou hast turned again, stablish thy brethren ”.

It seems that from the use of this term, “ brethren,” as a name for Christ’s followers, there grew the collective term, “ Brotherhood ”. St. Peter says that we are to “ love the brotherhood ”. Here, the Apostle alludes to the whole Christian body considered as a community. So, while heeding the Apostle’s exhortation, we should remember that love for individual Christians can only be deep and broad when it grows out of love for the whole body of which we are members. If we lose this sense of the corporate life of the Christian world-wide community, we lose the universalism of the Gospel, and we lose our sense of the scope of Christian love.

St. Paul clearly had this in mind when he considered the full sweep of the Christian commission, which was to the whole world. Perhaps two things impressed it upon him at the time of his conversion. First, there was the bond which joined Christ to His followers. When the risen Christ spoke to him at the Damascus gate, He asked : “ Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me ? ” He did not ask why he was persecuting the Church, or His followers. He asked, “ Why persecutest thou me ? ” Later, in the interview, Christ thrust His point home once again : “ I am Jesus whom thou persecutest ”. So one of the first lessons which the converted persecutor had to learn, was the vital connexion between Christ and His followers. They were, and still are, in very truth, His mystical body. Secondly, there was the expression of that bond in life itself. We may say that one of the most momentous greetings the world has ever known was exchanged between Ananias, the disciple at Damascus, and the sightless Saul of Tarsus. There were no recriminations, no questions, and no reservations. The sainted disciple met the new believer with the greeting : “ Brother Saul ”. It is more than possible that this greeting saved the converted persecutor to the Church, so that he might become Paul the apostolic protagonist. We can now understand why Paul took the name, “ brother,” most seriously. He has taught us that believers are expected to look on each other as brethren “ for whose sake Christ died ”.

The terms “ brother ”, together with its cognate, “ sister,” has a most honourable place in the New Testament vocabulary. It had previously held an important position in the Old Testament. Apparently, the Christian Church took it over from Judaism in a most

natural way. Yet, as it was with everything else that our Lord touched, He transfigured it in the handling. In its Christian connotation, its meaning was deepened, and its spiritual content widened. So, when we study this term, " brother," as it is used in the New Testament, we find that it is used in at least four different ways. These aspects may be termed the universal, the racial, the paternal, in its relation to the family, and the communal, or religious.

There seems to be an universal ring about the precept in Leviticus xix. 17 : " Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart : thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbour, and not bear sin because of him ". That sense of universal brotherhood under God appears again in the Gospels. In this connexion, our Lord quoted the Royal Law to the inquiring lawyer, saying that by the injunction of the second commandment of the law, we must love our neighbours as we love ourselves. It is well to remember, then, that there can be no brotherhood without a common Father. St. James works this out for us. " If ye fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well : but if ye have respect of persons, ye commit sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors." Love is the sovereign law that includes all mankind. We are called upon to love others within the universal brotherhood of mankind as we love ourselves. This point has an important place in the race problem which poses itself to us on every hand. God made all of us, and He so loved the world that He gave His Son to redeem it. Consequently, our love must be no less inclusive than is His.

The racial aspect of this subject is stressed in Rom. ix. 3 when St. Paul says : " I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh." This view also appears in the Old Testament. In Exodus ii. 11, we are told how Moses left the surroundings of the Egyptian court, where he had been reared, to see something of the life of his own race. " It came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown up, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens."

This term, " brother," was even used of cognate peoples. In Numbers xx. 14, we read of a message sent by Moses to the king of Edom. " Moses sent messengers from Kadesh unto the king of Edom, Thus saith Israel thy brother." Though separated, the Israelites and the Edomites were descended from Abraham through Israel and Esau, the sons of Isaac.

Even allies were sometimes regarded as brethren. Amos spoke as follows in his woe of doom upon Tyre. " For three transgressions of Tyre, yea, for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof ; because they delivered up the whole people to Edom, and remembered not the brotherly covenant." Amos regarded as utterly wicked and unjust their rejection of the brotherly covenants made between the people of Tyre and Israel in the reigns of David and Solomon.

In this connexion it might be observed that monarchs or heads of governments still address each other as brothers to signify equality of office. This custom goes back into antiquity. Instances of it are to be found in the Old Testament. In 1 Kings ix. 12, 13 we find Hiram of Tyre addressing King Solomon in this way. " Hiram came out

from Tyre to see the cities which Solomon had given him ; . . . and he said, What cities are these which thou has given me, my brother ? ”

The family aspect of this matter, which is probably the most familiar side of it to all of us, next calls for attention. It is fairly clear that the other uses of this term take their origin from this source. We recognize as brothers and sisters those who are born of the same parents. James and John were brothers : so were Andrew and Peter. Then for sisters, we have Martha and Mary. But the name is used also of those who were not entirely of the same parentage on both sides. Joseph, when in Egypt, was addressed by his ten brothers who had come to Egypt from Canaan to buy food, declaring : “ We thy servants are twelve brethren, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan ”. Yet we know that they were not all the sons of the same mother.

Confusion besets us, however, when we find the name of brother given to near kinsmen, as well as to those who are brothers by birth. In Gen. xiv. 16, Lot is named as Abraham’s brother, although he was really his nephew. Then again in Gen. xiii. 8, we read how Abraham spoke to Lot in a spirit of sweet reasonableness saying, “ We are brethren ”.

Difficulties are encountered in plenty when we come across passages like St. Matt. xiii. 55-6. “ Is not this the carpenter’s son ? is not his mother called Mary ? and his brethren, James and Joseph, and Simon, and Judas ? And his sisters, are they not all with us ? ” In explanation of this passage, it has been maintained that Christ’s “ brethren ” were either His cousins or Joseph’s children by a former marriage. These views seem to have been put forward, however, to support the rather late theory of Mary’s perpetual virginity. Whilst we have already given instances which could support these claims, it must be said that Christ was Mary’s first-born child. We never find Him mentioned as her only child. Moreover, it must be stated that the New Testament has a definite designation for a nephew. It is used of St. Paul’s unnamed nephew in Acts xxiii. 16, where he is described as : “ Paul’s sister’s son ”. It should also be noticed that the relationship between Barnabas and John Mark is clearly defined by a definite term, namely, “ cousin ”. Furthermore we find a real distinction drawn between Christ’s brethren and His disciples in at least two places. In St. John ii. 12, we read : “ He went down to Capernaum, he, and his mother, and his brethren, and his disciples : and there they abode not many days ”. We have a similar distinction in Acts i. 14 : “ These all with one accord continued steadfastly in prayer, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren ”. It must be said that pious sentiment inclines to the view that Christ was the Virgin’s only child ; but pious sentiment is a notably unreliable basis upon which to build an exact Theology. There can be no disrespect to either our Lord or His mother, and no disparagement of His position as God’s only-begotten Son, if we take the words “ his brethren ” as meaning what they naturally seem to imply. It cannot detract one iota from the wonder of the Saviour’s incarnation, or from His unique relationship with the Father, if we accept this view. Devout and sincere believers can be found taking each of these explanations, and not one of them would surrender anything to the other in their devotion to our Lord.

There is a wealth of material at our disposal when we turn to the communal, or religious use of this term. One of the classic instances of its use in the New Testament is that by our Lord Himself : “ He stretched forth his hand towards his disciples, and said, Behold, my mother and my brethren ! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, he is my brother, and sister, and mother.” As we have already mentioned, St. Paul was addressed by Ananias as “ Brother Saul ”. In Rom. xvi. 1, Phoebe the deaconess is mentioned as “ our sister ”, but in a spiritual sense. Another telling instance in this connexion is 1 Tim. v. 1, where St. Paul is writing about spiritual relationships in Christ. “ Rebuke not an elder, but exhort him as a father ; the younger men as brethren ; the elder women as mothers ; the younger as sisters, in all purity.” Then again, if we are right in thinking that “ The Elect Lady and her children ” of II John refers to a Church, the closing words of the letter are pointed indeed : “ The children of thine Elect sister salute thee ”.

Many instances of a similar kind are to be found in the Papyri, and through these, a flood of light is thrown on the New Testament use of this particular term. One of these is rather strange. A letter dated in 168 B.C. has been discovered, where a woman named Isias writes to her husband who was “ in retreat ” in the Serapeum at Memphis, urging him to return home. The outstanding thing about the letter is that, according to a well established Egyptian usage, she addresses her husband as “ brother ”. We know that the man was her husband because there is a reference in the letter to their child. Another recovered letter, of the first century B.C., is from a man named Hilarion to his wife Alis, whom he addresses as his “ sister ”. Some other interesting letters from the same century have come to light, written to each other by members of a religious community, where the terms “ father ” and “ brother ” clearly do not refer to family connexions, but to membership of the same religious community connected with the Serapeum at Memphis. Another fascinating personal letter comes from the second century of our era. In it, the village priest of Hermopolis is writing to the camp prefect at Dionysias asking him to pardon, “ just this once,” a deserter named Paulus. The letter begins : “ To my master and beloved brother Abinnaeus the Praepositus, Kaor, Papa of Hermopolis, sends greeting ”. It ends : “ I pray for your health for many years, my lord brother ”. While we know that the Church took the term, “ brethren,” from Judaism, we have to recognize that it was also used in a much wider field than that of the Christian Church. For instance, it was used to distinguish members of a funeral society, whose task it was to embalm the dead for burial. The term was also shared with what we would now call the “ fellows ” of a religious corporation like that at the Serapeum at Memphis.

The terms “ brother ”, “ sister,” “ brotherhood,” and “ brother-love ”, are terms of great sanctity in the Christian world. They remind us of our oneness in Christ and of our equality before Him Who is not only our Saviour, but also our Elder Brother. It is clear from the Fourth Gospel that Christ’s followers were known as “ the brethren ” from an early age. It says of “ the disciple whom Jesus loved ” that the “ saying . . . went forth among the brethren, that

that disciple should not die : yet Jesus said not unto him, that he should not die ; but, if I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee ? ” We have also seen that Christ used the term Himself. Point has been given to this by a comment of Dr. J. E. L. Oulton in his book, *Holy Communion and Holy Spirit*, showing the significance of the wider family of The Brotherhood. He says, “ The Passover was the great family meal of the Jews. The Biblical account of its institution spoke of the household as the normal unit for those who gathered together to eat it. And this aspect of the feast was in our Lord’s day emphasized by the Pharisees, for whom the Passover was essentially a home feast at which the father of the house acted as a kind of priest. The Lord’s mother was then in Jerusalem, and presumably his brethren also ; but he did not join in the Paschal Supper with them. The ‘ family ’ meal is shared instead with his disciples. And thus at the end of his ministry he gives effect to words spoken by him at an earlier stage : ‘ Who is my mother ? and who are my brethren ? And he stretched forth his hand towards his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren ! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, he is my brother, and sister, and mother ’. ” In something of the same strain James Strahan writes : “ The Hebrews were remarkable for the intensity of their family feeling. . . . Later, under that inspiration, and the leading of the Spirit, there developed slowly but surely an ethical idea which is the preparation for the perfect Christian type of the family. ” Christians are a family because God is their Father, and Christ, as the only-begotten Son of the Father, is their Elder Brother. Because of this, the distinctions of race, class and sex, are of no account. “ As many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ. There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and no female : for ye all are one man in Christ. ” There is no wonder, then, that St. Paul took the term “ brother ” most seriously. We hear him speaking in 1 Cor. viii. 11, of “ the brother for whose sake Christ died ”. We also hear how he pleaded with Philemon to accept Onesimus back into his household, “ no longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved ”. With such “ irresistible words he stamps even the most insignificant brother with a value for eternity and impresses upon the enlightened indifference of the saints in Corinth and in Rome the duty of tender brotherly consideration, making all Christians together collectively responsible for the mutual care of souls ”.¹ The Christian Church is a brotherhood in Christ. It is a multitude whom no man can number. Those who belong to it have one spiritual head, our Lord Jesus Christ. They are sanctified in Him, “ called to be saints ” and are, therefore, being made holy and set apart for their Master’s use. For, as Ignatius says : “ Wheresoever Christ Jesus is, there is the Catholic Church ”. Even though there may be distinctions of office within the Church, we are still, in the Petrine phrase, “ The Brotherhood ”. All the ministries of the Church are ordained for one end, and one end only, the “ perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ ”. Moreover,

¹ Deissmann, *Paul*, p. 209.

one of the characteristics which should mark the life of the Brotherhood is "Philadelphia", or "Brother-love". This term is almost completely a coinage of Christian thought. It may be compared with Agape, which is Christian love. And it is perhaps well to bear in mind the point made by Sanday and Headlam, commenting on Rom. xii. 10, that whilst Agape is universal, Philadelphia "represents affection for the brethren; that is, for all members of the Christian community".

It is for us to give due regard to this conception of the Christian Church as the Brotherhood which is in Christ. It has two important aspects which we cannot ignore. These are our individual union with Him through faith, and our corporate union one with another through our individual union with Him.

St. Peter and Papal Claims

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UNDoubtedly Simon Peter, the big fisherman, the impulsive, impetuous, and devoted disciple of Jesus Christ, was a real leader among the apostles, and their chief spokesman.

It was Peter, on behalf of the other apostles, who made the great confession: "We believe, and are sure that thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (John vi. 69). But he was only voicing what was the belief of all the others. They too had the same belief regarding Jesus Christ as Peter had, as witness Matt. xiv. 33, where it is recorded that "Those who were in the ship, i.e., the Twelve, worshipped him, saying, Truly thou art the Son of God". See also John i. 49, where Nathanael said to Jesus, "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the king of Israel".

In the first twelve chapters of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles Peter is undoubtedly the outstanding figure, the chief spokesman, and the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. But after his release from prison (Acts xii), he disappears almost entirely from view; and except for his speech at the Council in Jerusalem, there is very little record of his later activities. We read that he travelled about with his wife (1 Cor. ix. 5) that he visited Antioch (Gal. ii. 11). There is a tradition that he acted as Bishop of Antioch for seven years; and he possibly worked in the provinces mentioned in 1 Peter i. 1. There is also a late tradition that he was Bishop of Rome, and died as a martyr there.

Turning to the four Gospels we find it recorded that our Lord said to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. xvi. 19). But at a later date our Lord said the same thing to *all* the apostles, "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. xviii. 18).

It is interesting to read what some of the Early Fathers wrote about this particular verse of Scripture. Jerome wrote that "All the