

and was still." The baffled invader (probably Sennacherib) is regarded as the world-power arraying itself in impotent fury against Jehovah.

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THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

XI.

CONCILIATORY AND HORTATORY TRANSITION TO POLEMICS.

"This I say, that no one may delude you with persuasiveness of speech. For though I am absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the stedfastness of your faith in Christ.

"As therefore ye received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and builded up in Him, and established in your faith, even as ye were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.—Col. ii. 4-7 (Rev. Ver.).

NOTHING needs more delicacy of hand and gentleness of heart than the administration of warning or reproof, especially when directed against errors of religious opinion. It is sure to do harm unless the person reproofed is made to feel that it comes from true kindly interest in him, and does full justice to his honesty. Warning so easily passes into scolding, and sounds to the warned so like it even when the speaker does not mean it so, that there is special need to modulate the voice very carefully.

So in this context, the Apostle has said much about his deep interest in the Colossian Church, and has dwelt on the passionate earnestness of his solicitude for them, his conflict of intercession and sympathy, and the large sweep of his desires for their good. But he does not feel that he can venture to begin his warnings till he has said something more, so as to conciliate them still further, and to remove from their minds other thoughts unfavourable to the sympathetic reception of his words. One can fancy some

Colossians saying, "What need is there for all this anxiety? Why should Paul be in such a taking about us? He is exaggerating our danger, and doing scant justice to our Christian character." Nothing stops the ear to the voice of warning like a feeling that it is pitched in too solemn a key, and fails to recognise the good,

So before he goes further, he gathers up his motives in giving the following admonitions, and his estimate of the condition of the Colossians, in the two first of the verses now under consideration. All that he has been saying has been said not so much because he thinks that they have gone wrong, but because he knows that there are heretical teachers at work, who may lead them astray with plausible lessons. He is not combating errors which have already swept away the faith of the Colossian Christians, but putting them on their guard against such as threaten them. He is not trying to pump the water out of a water-logged vessel, but to stop a little leak which is in danger of gaping wider. And, in his solicitude, he has much confidence and is encouraged to speak because, absent from them as he is, he has a vivid assurance, which gladdens him, of the solidity and firmness of their faith.

So with this distinct definition of the precise danger which he feared, and this soothing assurance of his glad confidence in their stedfast order, the Apostle at last opens his batteries. The 6th and 7th verses are the first shot fired, the beginning of the monitions so long and carefully prepared for. They contain a general exhortation, which may be taken as the keynote for the polemical portion of the epistle, which occupies the rest of the chapter.

I. We have then first, the purpose of the Apostle's previous self-revelation. "This I say"—this namely which is contained in the preceding verses, the expression of his solicitude, and perhaps even more emphatically, the declaration of Christ as the revealed secret of God, the inexhaustible

storehouse of all wisdom and knowledge. The purpose of the Apostle, then, in his foregoing words has been to guard the Colossians against the danger to which they were exposed, of being deceived and led astray by "persuasiveness of speech." That expression is not necessarily used in a bad sense, but here it evidently has a tinge of censure, and implies some doubt both of the honesty of the speakers and of the truthfulness of their words. Here we have an important piece of evidence as to the then condition of the Colossian Church. There were false teachers busy amongst them who belonged in some sense to the Christian community. But probably these were not Colossians, but wandering emissaries of a Judaizing Gnosticism, while certainly the great mass of the Church was untouched by their speculations. They were in danger of getting bewildered, and being *deceived*, that is to say, of being induced to accept certain teaching because of its speciousness, without seeing all its bearings, or even knowing its real meaning. So error ever creeps into the Church. Men are caught by something fascinating in some popular teaching, and swallow it without knowing where it will lead them. By slow degrees its tendencies are disclosed, and at last the followers of the heresiarch wake to find that everything which they once believed and prized has dropped from their creed.

We may learn here, too, the true safeguard against specious errors. Paul thinks that he can best fortify these simple-minded disciples against all harmful teaching by exalting his Master and urging the inexhaustible significance of His person and message. To learn the full meaning and preciousness of Christ is to be armed against error. The positive truth concerning Him guards beforehand, by preoccupying mind and heart, against the most specious teachings. If you fill the coffer with gold, nobody will want, and there will be no room for, pinchbeck. A living grasp of Christ will keep us from being swept away by the

current of prevailing popular opinion, which is always much more likely to be wrong than right, and is sure to be exaggerated and one-sided at the best. A personal consciousness of His power and sweetness will give an instinctive repugnance to teaching that would lower His dignity and debase His work. If He be the centre and anchorage of all our thoughts, we shall not be tempted to go elsewhere in search of the "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" which "are hid in Him." He who has found the one pearl of great price, needs no more to go seeking goodly pearls, but only day by day more completely to lose self and give up all else that he may win more and more of Christ his All. If we keep our hearts and minds in communion with our Lord, and have experience of His preciousness, that will preserve us from many a snare, will give us a wisdom beyond much logic, will solve for us many of the questions most hotly debated to-day, and will show us that many more are unimportant and uninteresting to us. And even if we should be led to wrong conclusions on some matters, "if we drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt us."

II. We see here the joy which blended with the anxiety of the solitary prisoner, and encouraged him to warn the Colossians against impending dangers to their faith.

We need not follow the grammatical commentators in their discussion of how Paul comes to invert the natural order here, and to say "joying and beholding," instead of "beholding and rejoicing" as we should expect. No one doubts that what he saw in spirit was the cause of his joy. The old man in his prison, loaded with many cares, compelled to be inactive in the cause which was more to him than life, is yet full of spirit and buoyancy. His prison-letters all partake of that "rejoicing in the Lord," which is the key note of one of them. Old age and apparent failure, and the exhaustion of long labours, and the disappointments and sorrows which almost always

gather like evening clouds round a life as it sinks in the west, had not power to quench his fiery energy or to blunt his keen interest in all the Churches. His cell was like the centre of a telephonic system. Voices spoke from all sides. Every Church was connected with it, and messages were perpetually being brought. Think of him sitting there, eagerly listening, and thrilling with sympathy at each word, so self-oblivious was he, so swallowed up were all personal ends in the care for the Churches, and the swift, deep fellow-feeling with them! Love and interest quickened his insight, and though he was far away, he had them so vividly before him that he was as if a spectator. The joy which he had in the thought of them made him dwell on the thought—so the apparently inverted order of the words may be the natural one and he may have looked all the more fixedly because it gladdened him to look.

What did he see? "Your order." That is unquestionably a military metaphor, drawn probably from his experiences of the Prætorians in his captivity. He had plenty of opportunities of studying both the equipment of the single legionary, who, we may say, sat for his portrait in the 6th chapter of Ephesians, to the prisoner to whom he was chained, and also the perfection of discipline in the whole which made the legion so formidable. It was not a multitude but a unit, "moving altogether if it move at all," as if animated by one will. Paul rejoices to know that the Colossian Church was thus welded into a solid unity.

Further, he beholds "the stedfastness of your faith in Christ." This may be a continuation of the military metaphor, and may mean "the solid front, the close phalanx" which your faith presents. But whether we suppose the figure to be carried on or dropped, we must, I think, recognise that this second point refers rather to the inward condition than to the outward discipline of the Colossians.

Here then is set forth a lofty ideal of the Church, in

two respects. First there is outwardly, an ordered disciplined array; and secondly, there is a steadfast faith.

As to the first, Paul was no martinet, anxious about the pedantry of the parade ground, but he knew the need of organization and drill. Any body of men united in order to carry out a specific purpose have to be organized. That means a place for every man, and every man in his place. It means co-operation to one common end, and therefore division of function and subordination. Order does not merely mean obedience to authority. There may be equal "order" under widely different forms of polity. The legionaries were drawn up in close ranks, the light-armed skirmishers more loosely. In the one case the phalanx was more and the individual less; in the other there was more play given to the single man, and less importance to corporate action; but the difference between them was not that of order and disorder, but that of two systems, each organized but on somewhat different principles and for different purposes. A loosely linked chain is as truly a chain as a rigid one. The main requirement for such "order" as gladdened the Apostle is conjoint action to one end, with variety of office, and unity of spirit.

Some Churches give more weight to the principle of authority; others to that of individuality. They may criticise each other's polity, but the former has no right to reproach the latter as being necessarily defective in "order." Some Churches are all drill, and their favourite idea of discipline is Obey them that have the rule over you. The Churches of looser organization, on the other hand, are no doubt in danger of making too little of organization. But both need that all their members should be more penetrated by the sense of unity, and should fill each his place in the work of the body. It was far easier to secure the true order—a place and a task for every man and every

man in his place and at his task—in the small homogeneous communities of apostolic times than it is now, when men of such different social position, education, and ways of thinking are found in the same Christian community. The proportion of idlers in all Churches is a scandal and a weakness. However highly organized and officered a Church may be, no joy would fill an apostle's heart in beholding it, if the mass of its members had no share in its activities. Every society of professing Christians should be like a man of war's crew, each of whom knows the exact inch where he has to stand when the whistle sounds, and the precise thing he has to do in the gun drill.

But the perfection of discipline is not enough. That may stiffen into routine if there be not something deeper. We want life even more than order. The description of the soldiers who set David on the throne should describe Christ's army—"men that could keep rank, they were not of double heart." They had discipline and had learned to accommodate their stride to their comrades' power; but they had wholehearted enthusiasm, which was better. Both are needed. If there be not courage and devotion there is nothing worth disciplining. The Church that has the most complete order and not also stedfastness of faith will be like the German armies, all pipeclay and drill, which ran like hares before the ragged shoeless levies which the first French Revolution flung across the border with a fierce enthusiasm blazing in their hearts. So the Apostle beholds with joy the stedfastness of the Colossians' faith towards Christ.

If the rendering "stedfastness" be adopted as in the Rev. Ver., the phrase will be equivalent to the "firmness which characterizes or belongs to your faith." But some of the best commentators deny that this meaning of the word is ever found, and propose "foundation" (that which

is made stedfast). The meaning then will either be "the firm foundation (for your lives) which consists of your faith," or, more probably, "the firm foundation which your faith has." He rejoices, seeing that their faith towards Jesus Christ has a basis unshaken by assaults.

Such a rock foundation, and consequent stedfastness, must faith have, if it is to be worthy of the name and to manifest its true power. A tremulous faith may, thank God! be a true faith, but the very idea of faith implies solid assurance and fixed confidence. Our faith should be able to resist pressure and to keep its ground against assaults and gain-saying. It should not be like a child's card castle, that the light breath of a scornful laugh will throw down, but

"a tower of strength

That stands foursquare to all the winds that blow."

We should seek to make it so, nor let the fluctuations of our own hearts cause it to fluctuate. We should try so to control the ebb and flow of religious emotion that it may always be near high water with our faith, a tideless but not stagnant sea. We should oppose a settled conviction and unalterable confidence to the noisy voices which would draw us away.

And that we may do so we must keep up a true and close communion with Jesus Christ. The faith which is ever going out "towards" Him, as the sunflower turns sunwards, will ever draw from Him such blessed gifts that doubt or distrust will be impossible. If we keep near our Lord and wait expectant on Him, He will increase our faith and make our "hearts fixed, trusting in the Lord." So a greater than Paul may speak even to us, as He walks in the midst of the golden candlesticks, words which from *His* lips will be praise indeed: "Though I am absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order and the stedfastness of your faith in Me."

III. We have here, the exhortation which comprehends all duty, and covers the whole ground of Christian belief and practice.

“Therefore”—the following exhortation is based upon the warning and commendation of the preceding verses. There is first a wide general injunction. “As ye received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,” *i.e.* let your active life be in accord with what you learned and got when you first became Christians. Then this exhortation is defined or broken up into four particulars in the following clauses, which explain in detail how it is to be kept.

The general exhortation is to a true Christian walk. The main force lies upon the “as.” The command is to order all life in accordance with the early lessons and acquisitions. The phrase “ye received Christ Jesus the Lord” presents several points requiring notice. It is obviously parallel with “as ye were taught” in the next verse; so that it was from their first teachers, and probably from Epaphras (i. 7) that they had “received Christ.” So then what we receive, when, from human lips, we hear the gospel and accept it, is not merely the word about the Saviour, but the Saviour Himself. This expression of our text is no mere loose or rhetorical mode of speech, but a literal and blessed truth. Christ is the sum of all Christian teaching and, where the message of His love is welcomed, He Himself comes in spiritual and real presence, and dwells in the spirit.

The solemnity of the full name of our Saviour is most significant in this connexion. Paul reminds the Colossians, in view of the teaching which degraded the person and curtailed the work of Christ, that they had received the man Jesus, the promised Christ, the universal Lord. As if he had said, Remember whom you received in your conversion—*Christ*, the Messiah, anointed, that is, fitted by the unmeasured possession of the Divine Spirit to fulfil all

prophecy and to be the world's deliverer. Remember *Jesus*, the man, our brother;—therefore listen to no misty speculations nor look to whispered mysteries nor to angel hierarchies for knowledge of God or for help in conflict. Our gospel is not theory spun out of men's brains, but is, first and foremost, the history of a brother's life and death. You received *Jesus*, so you are delivered from the tyranny of these unsubstantial and portentous systems, and relegated to the facts of a human life for your knowledge of God. You received Jesus Christ as *Lord*. He was proclaimed as Lord of men, angels, and the universe, Lord and Creator of the spiritual and material worlds, Lord of history and providence. Therefore you need not give heed to those teachers who would fill the gulf between men and God with a crowd of powers and rulers. You have all that your mind or heart or will can need in the human Divine Jesus, who is the Christ and the Lord for you and all men. You have received Him in the all-sufficiency of His revealed nature and offices. You have Him for your very own. Hold fast that which you have, and let no man take this your crown and treasure. The same exhortation has emphatic application to the conflicts of to-day. The Church has had Jesus set forth as Christ and Lord. His manhood, the historical reality of His Incarnation with all its blessed issues, His Messiahship as the fulfiller of prophecy and symbol, designated and fitted by the fulness of the spirit, to be man's deliverer, His rule and authority over all creatures and events have been taught, and the tumults of present unsettlement make it hard and needful to keep true to that threefold belief, and to let nothing rob us of any of the elements of the full gospel which lies in the august name, Christ Jesus the Lord.

To that gospel, to that Lord, the walk, the active life, is to be conformed, and the manner thereof is more fully explained in the following clauses.

“Rooted and built up in Him.” Here again we have the

profound "in Him," which appears so frequently in this and the companion Epistle to the Ephesians, and which must be allowed its proper force, as expressing a most real indwelling of the believer in Christ, if the depth of the meaning is to be sounded.

Paul drives his fiery chariot through rhetorical proprieties, and never shrinks from "mixed metaphors" if they more vigorously express his thought. Here we have three incongruous ones close on each other's heels. The Christian is to *walk*, to be *rooted* like a tree, to be *built up* like a house. What does the incongruity matter to Paul as the stream of thought and feeling hurries him along?

The tenses of the verbs, too, are studiously and significantly varied. Fully rendered they would be "having been rooted and being builded up." The one is a past act done once for all, the effects of which are permanent; the other is a continuous resulting process, which is going on now. The Christian has been rooted in Jesus Christ at the beginning of his Christian course. His faith has brought him into living contact with the Saviour, who has become as the fruitful soil into which the believer sends his roots; and both feeds and anchors there. The familiar image of the first Psalm may have been in the writer's mind, and naturally recurs to ours. If we draw nourishment and stability from Christ, round whom the roots of our being twine and cling, we shall flourish and grow and bear fruit. No man can do without some person beyond himself on whom to repose, nor can any of us find in ourselves or on earth the sufficient soil for our growth. We are like seedlings dropped on some great rock, which send their rootlets down the hard stone and are stunted till they reach the rich leaf-mould at its base. We blindly feel through all the barrenness of the world for something into which our roots may plunge that we may be nourished and firm. In Christ we may be "like a tree planted by the river of water;" out of Him we are

“as the chaff,” rootless, lifeless, profitless, and swept at last by the wind from the threshing floor. The choice is before man—either to be rooted in Christ by faith, or to be every rootless.

“Being built up in Him.” The gradual continuous building up of the structure of a Christian character is doubly expressed in this word by the present tense which points to a process, and by the prefixed preposition represented by “up,” which points to the successive laying of course of masonry upon course. We are the architects of our own characters. If our lives are based on Jesus Christ as their foundation, and every deed is in vital connexion with Him, as at once its motive, its pattern, its power, its aim, and its reward, then we shall build holy and fair lives, which shall be temples. Men do not merely grow as a tree which “grows green and broad, and takes no care.” The other metaphor of the building needs to be taken into account, to complete the former. Effort, patient continuous labour must be put forth. More than “forty and six years is this temple in building.” A stone at a time is fitted in its place, and so after much toil and many years, as in the case of some mediæval cathedral unfinished for centuries, the topstone is brought forth at last. This choice, too, is before all men—to build on Christ and so to build for eternity, or on sand and so to be crushed below the ruins of our fallen house.

“Stablished in your faith, even as ye were taught.” This is apparently simply a more definite way of putting substantially the same thoughts as in the former clauses. Possibly the meaning is “stablished by faith,” the Colossians’ faith being the instrument of their establishment. But the Revised Version is probably right in its rendering, “stablished in, or as to, your faith.” Their faith, as Paul had just been saying, was stedfast, but still it needed yet increased firmness. And this exhortation, as it were, trans-

lates the previous ones into more homely language, that if any man stumbled at the mysticism of the thoughts there, he might grasp the plain practicalness here. If we are established and confirmed in our faith, we shall be rooted and built up in Jesus, for it is faith which joins us to Him, and its increase measures our growth in and into Him.

There then is a very plain practical issue of these deep thoughts of union with Jesus. A progressive increase of our faith is the condition of all Christian progress. The faith which is already the firmest, and by its firmness may gladden an Apostle, is still capable of and needs strengthening. Its range can be enlarged, its tenacity increased, its power over heart and life reinforced. The eye of faith is never so keen but it may become more longsighted; its grasp never so close but it may be tightened; its realization never so solid but it may be more substantial; its authority never so great but it may be made more absolute. This continual strengthening of faith is the most essential form of a Christian's effort at self-improvement. Strengthen faith and you strengthen all graces; for it measures our reception of Divine help.

And the furthest development which faith can attain should ever be sedulously kept in harmony with the initial teaching—"even as ye were taught." Progress does not consist in dropping the early truths of Christ Jesus the Lord for newer wisdom and more speculative religion, but in discovering ever deeper lessons and larger powers in these rudiments which are likewise the last and highest lessons which men can learn.

Further, as the daily effort of the believing soul ought to be to strengthen the quality of his faith, so it should be to increase its amount—"abounding in it with thanksgiving." Or if we adopt the reading of the Revised Version, we shall omit the "in it," and find here only an exhortation to thanksgiving. That is, in any case, the main idea of the clause,

which adds to the former the thought that thanksgiving is an inseparable accompaniment of vigorous Christian life: It is to be called forth, of course, mainly by the great gift of Christ, in whom we are rooted and builded, and, in Paul's judgment it is the very spring of Christian progress.

That constant temper of gratitude implies a habitual presence to the mind, of God's great mercy in His unspeakable gift, a continual glow of heart as we gaze, a continual appropriation of that gift for our very own, and a continual outflow of our heart's love to the Incarnate and Immortal Love. Such thankfulness will bind us to glad obedience, and will give swiftness to the foot and eagerness to the will, to run in the way of God's commandments. It is like genial sunshine, all flowers breathe perfume and fruits ripen under its influence. It is the fire which kindles the sacrifice of life and makes it go up in fragrant incense clouds, acceptable to God. The highest nobleness of which man is capable is reached when, moved by the mercies of God, we yield ourselves living sacrifices, thankofferings to Him who yielded Himself the sin-offering for us. The life which is all influenced by thanksgiving will be pure, strong, happy, in its continual counting of its gifts, in its thoughts of the Giver, and not least happy and beautiful in its glad surrender of itself to Him who has given Himself for and to it. The noblest offering that we can bring, the only recompense which Christ asks, is that our hearts and our lives should say, We thank thee, O Lord. "By Him therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually," and the continual thanksgiving will ensure continuous growth in our Christian character, and a constant increase in the strength and depth of our faith.

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