

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

XV.

WARNINGS AGAINST TWIN CHIEF ERRORS, BASED UPON  
PREVIOUS POSITIVE TEACHING.

“Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a feast day or a new moon or a sabbath day: which are a shadow of the things to come; but the body is Christ’s. Let no man rob you of your prize by a voluntary humility and worshipping of the angels, dwelling in the things which he hath seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast the Head, from whom all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and bands, increaseth with the increase of God.”—Col. ii. 16–19 (Rev. Ver.).

“LET no man *therefore* judge you.” That “therefore” sends us back to what the Apostle has been saying in the previous verses, in order to find there the ground of these earnest warnings. That ground is the whole of the foregoing exposition of the Christian relation to Christ, as far back as verse 9, but especially the great truths contained in the immediately preceding verses, that the cross of Christ is the death of law, and God’s triumph over all the powers of evil. Because it is so, the Colossian Christians are exhorted to claim and use their emancipation from both. Thus we have here the very heart and centre of the practical counsels of the Epistle—the double blasts of the trumpet warning against the two most pressing dangers besetting the Church. They are the same two which we have often met already—on the one hand, a narrow Judaizing enforcement of ceremonial and punctilios of outward observance; on the other hand, a dreamy Oriental absorption in imaginations of a crowd of angelic mediators obscuring the one gracious presence of Christ our Intercessor.

I. Here then we have first, the claim for Christian liberty, with the great truth on which it is built.

The points in regard to which that liberty is to be exer-

cised are specified. They are no doubt those, in addition to circumcision, which were principally in question then and there. "Meat and drink" refers to restrictions in diet, such as the prohibition of "unclean" things in the Mosaic law, and the question of the lawfulness of eating meat offered to idols; perhaps also, such as the Nazarite vow. There were few regulations as to "drink" in Judaism, so that probably other ascetic practices besides the Mosaic regulations were in question, but these must have been unimportant, else Paul could not have spoken of the whole as being a "shadow of things to come." The other class of outward observances is that of the sacred seasons of Judaism, the annual festivals, the monthly feast of the new moon, the weekly Sabbath.

The relation of the Gentile converts to these and the other observances of Judaism was an all-important question for the early Church. It was really the question whether Christianity was to be more than a Jewish sect—and the main force which, under God, settled the contest, was the vehemence and logic of the Apostle Paul.

Here he lays down the ground on which that whole question about diet and days, and all such matters, is to be settled. They "are a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ." "Coming events cast their shadows *before*." That great work of Divine love, the mission of Christ, whose "goings forth have been from everlasting," may be thought of as having set out from the Throne as soon as time was, travelling in the greatness of its strength, like the beams of some far-off star that have not yet reached a dark world. The light from the Throne is behind Him as He advances across the centuries, and the shadow is thrown far in front.

Now that involves two thoughts about the Mosaic law and whole system. First, the purely prophetic and symbolic character of the Old Testament order, and especially

of the Old Testament worship. The absurd extravagance of many attempts to "spiritualize" the ritual and ceremonies of Judaism should not blind us to the truth which they caricature. Nor, on the other hand, should we be so taken with new attempts to reconstruct our notions of Jewish history and the dates of Old Testament books, as to forget that, though the New Testament is committed to no theory on these points, it is committed to the Divine origin and prophetic purpose of the Mosaic law and Levitical worship. We should thankfully accept all teaching which free criticism and scholarship can give us as to the process by which, and the time when, that great symbolic system of acted prophecy was built up; but we shall be further away than ever from understanding the Old Testament if we have gained critical knowledge of its genesis, and have lost the belief that its symbols were given by God to prophesy of His Son. That is the key to both Testaments; and I cannot but believe that the uncritical reader who reads his book of the law and the prophets with that conviction, has got nearer the very marrow of the book, than the critic, if he have parted with it, can ever come.

Sacrifice, altar, priest, temple spake of Him. The distinctions of meats were meant, among other purposes, to familiarize men with the conceptions of purity and impurity, and so, by stimulating conscience, to wake the sense of need of a Purifier. The feasts of the Passover, and the others, set forth various aspects of the great work which Christ does, and the Sabbath showed in outward form the rest into which He leads those who cease from their own works and wear His yoke. All these observances, and the whole system to which they belong, are like outriders who precede a prince on his progress, and as they gallop through sleeping villages, rouse them with the cry, "The king is coming!"

And when the King *has* come, where are the heralds? and when the reality has come, who wants symbols? and if that which threw the shadow forwards through the ages has arrived, how shall the shadow be visible too? Therefore the second principle here laid down, namely the cessation of all these observances, and their like, is really involved in the first, namely their prophetic character.

The practical conclusion drawn is very noteworthy, because it seems much narrower than the premises warrant. Paul does not say—therefore let no man observe any of these any more; but takes up the much more modest ground—let no man *judge* you about them. He claims a wide liberty of variation, and all that he repels is the right of anybody to dragoon Christian men into ceremonial observances on the ground that they are necessary. He does not quarrel with the rites, but with men insisting on the necessity of the rites.

In his own practice he gave the best commentary on his meaning. When they said to him, "You *must* circumcise Titus," he said; "Then I will not." When nobody tried to compel him, he took Timothy, and of his own accord circumcised him to avoid scandals. When it was needful as a protest, he rode right over all the prescriptions of the law, and "did eat with Gentiles." When it was advisable as a demonstration that he himself "walked orderly and kept the law," he performed the rites of purification and united in the temple worship.

In times of transition wise supporters of the new will not be in a hurry to break with the old. "I will lead on softly, according as the flock and the children be able to endure," said Jacob, and so says every good shepherd.

The brown sheaths remain on the twig after the tender green leaf has burst from within them, but there is no need to pull them off, for they will drop presently. "I will wear three surplices if they like," said Luther once. "Neither if

we eat are we the better, neither if we eat not are we the worse," said Paul. Such is the spirit of the words here. It is a plea for Christian liberty. If not insisted on as necessary, the outward observances may be allowed. If they are regarded as helps, or as seemly adjuncts or the like, there is plenty of room for difference of opinion and for variety of practice, according to temperament and taste and usage. There are principles which should regulate even these diversities of practice, and Paul has set these forth, in the great chapter about meats in the Epistle to the Romans. But it is a different thing altogether when any external observances are insisted on as essential, either from the old Jewish or from the modern sacramentarian point of view. If a man comes saying, "Except ye be circumcised, ye cannot be saved," the only right answer is, Then I will not be circumcised, and if *you* are, because you believe that you cannot be saved without it, "Christ is become of none effect to you." Nothing is necessary but union to Him, and that comes through no outward observance, but through the faith which worketh by love. Therefore, let no man judge you, but repel all such attempts at thrusting any ceremonial ritual observances on you, on the plea of necessity, with the emancipating truth that the cross of Christ is the death of law.

A few words may be said here on the bearing of the principles laid down in these verses on the religious observance of Sunday. The obligation of the Jewish sabbath has passed away as much as sacrifices and circumcision. That seems unmistakably the teaching here. But the institution of a weekly day of rest is distinctly put in Scripture as independent of, and prior to, the special form and meaning given to the institution in the Mosaic law. That is the natural conclusion from the narrative of the creative rest in Genesis, and from our Lord's emphatic declaration that the sabbath was made for "man"—that is to say, for

the race. Many traces of the pre-Mosaic sabbath have been adduced, and among others we may recall the fact that recent researches show it to have been observed by the Accadians, the early inhabitants of Assyria. It is a physical and moral necessity, and that is a sadly mistaken benevolence which on the plea of culture or amusement for the many, compels the labour of the few, and breaks down the distinction between the Sunday and the rest of the week.

The religious observance of the first day of the week rests on no recorded command, but has a higher origin, inasmuch as it is the outcome of a felt want. The early disciples naturally gathered together for worship on the day which had become so sacred to them. At first, no doubt, they observed the Jewish sabbath, and only gradually came to the practice which we almost see growing before our eyes in the Acts of the Apostles, in the mention of the disciples at Troas coming together on the first day of the week to break bread, and which we gather, from the Apostle's instructions as to weekly setting apart money for charitable purposes, to have existed in the Church at Corinth; as we know, that even in his lonely island prison far away from the company of his brethren, the Apostle John was in a condition of high religious contemplation on the Lord's day, ere yet he heard the solemn voice and saw "the things which are."

This gradual growing up of the practice is in accordance with the whole spirit of the New Covenant, which has next to nothing to say about the externals of worship, and leaves the new life to shape itself. Judaism gave prescriptions and minute regulations; Christianity, the religion of the spirit, gives principles. The necessity, for the nourishment of the Divine life, of the religious observance of the day of rest is certainly not less now than at first. In the hurry and drive of our modern life, with the world forcing itself on us at every moment, we cannot keep up the

warmth of devotion unless we use this day, not merely for physical rest, and family enjoyment, but for worship. They who know their own slothfulness of spirit, and are in earnest in seeking after a deeper, fuller Christian life, will thankfully own "the week were dark but for its light." I distrust the spirituality which professes that all life is a sabbath, and therefore holds itself absolved from special seasons of worship. If the stream of devout communion is to flow through all our days, there must be frequent reservoirs along the road, or it will be lost in the sand, like the rivers of higher Asia. It is a poor thing to say, keep the day as a day of worship because it is a commandment. Better to think of it as a great gift for the highest purposes; and not let it be merely a day of rest for jaded bodies, but make it one of refreshment for cumbered spirits, and rekindle the smouldering flame by drawing near to Christ in public and in private. So shall we gather stores that may help us to go in the strength of that meat for some more marches on the dusty road of life.

II. The Apostle passes on to his second peal of warning,—that against the teaching about angel mediators, which would rob the Colossian Christians of their prize,—and draws a rapid portrait of the teachers of whom they are to beware.

"Let no man rob you of your prize." The metaphor is the familiar one of the race or the wrestling ground, the umpire or judge is Christ, the reward is that incorruptible crown of glory, of righteousness, woven not of fading bay leaves, but of sprays from the "tree of life," which dower with undying blessedness the brows round which they are wreathed. Certain people are trying to rob them of their prize—not consciously, for that would be inconceivable, but such is the tendency of their teaching. No names will be mentioned, but he draws a portrait of the robber with swift firm hand, as if he had said, if you want to know

whom I mean, here he is. Four clauses, like four rapid strokes of the pencil do it, marked in the Greek by four participles, the first of which is obscured in the Authorized Version. "Delighting in humility and the worshipping of angels." So probably the first clause should be rendered. The first words are almost contradictory, and are meant to suggest that the humility has not the genuine ring about it. Self-conscious humility in which a man takes delight is not the real thing. A man who knows that he is humble, and is self complacent about it, glancing out of the corners of his downcast eyes at any mirror where he can see himself, is not humble at all. "The devil's darling vice is the pride which apes humility."

So *very* humble were these people that they would not venture to pray to God! *There* was humility indeed. So far beneath did they feel themselves, that the utmost they could do was to lay hold of the lowest link of a long chain of angel mediators, in hope that the vibration might run upwards through all the links, and perhaps reach the throne at last. Such fantastic abasement which would not take God at His word, nor draw near to Him in His Son, was really the very height of pride.

Then follows a second descriptive clause, of which no altogether satisfactory interpretation has yet been given. Possibly, as has been suggested, we have here an early error in the text, which has affected all the manuscripts, and cannot now be corrected. Perhaps on the whole, the translation adopted by the Revised Version presents the least difficulty—"dwelling in the things which he hath seen." In that case the seeing would be not by the senses, but by visions and pretended revelations, and the charge against the false teachers would be that they "walked in a vain show" of unreal imaginations and visionary hallucinations, whose many-coloured misleading lights they followed rather than the plain sunshine of revealed facts in Jesus Christ.



“Vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind” is the next feature in the portrait. The self-conscious humility was only skin deep, and covered the utmost intellectual arrogance. The heretic teacher was swollen with what after all was only wind, like a blown bladder; he was dropsical from conceit of “mind,” or, as we should say, “intellectual ability,” which after all was only the instrument and organ of the “flesh,” the sinful self. And, of course, being all these things, he would have no firm grip of Christ, from whom such tempers and views were sure to detach him. Therefore the damning last clause of the indictment is “not holding the Head.” How could he? And the slackness of his grasp of the Lord Jesus would make all these errors and faults ten times worse.

Now the special forms of these errors which are here dealt with are all gone past recall. But the tendencies which underlay these special forms are as rampant as ever, and work unceasingly to loosen our hold of our dear Lord. The worship of angels is dead, but we are still often tempted to think that we are too lowly and sinful to claim our portion of the faithful promises of God. The spurious humility is by no means out of date, which knows better than God does, whether He can forgive us our sins, and bend over us in love. We do not slip in angel mediators between ourselves and Him, but the tendency to put the sole work of Jesus Christ “into commission,” is not dead. We are all tempted to grasp at others as well as at Him, for our love, and trust, and obedience, and we all need the reminder that to lay hold of any other props is to lose hold of Him, and that he who does not cleave to Christ alone, does not cleave to Christ at all.

We do not see visions and dream dreams any more, except here and there some one led astray by a so-called “spiritualism,” but plenty of us attach more importance to our own subjective fancies or speculations about the ob-

scurer parts of Christianity than to the clear revelation of God in Christ. The "unseen world" has for many minds an unwholesome attraction. The Gnostic spirit is still in full force among us, which despises the foundation facts and truths of the Gospel as "milk for babes," and values its own baseless artificial speculations about subordinate matters, which are unrevealed because they are subordinate, and fascinating to some minds because unrevealed, far above the truths which are clear because they are vital, and insipid because they are clear. We need to be reminded that Christianity is not for speculation, but to make us good, and that "He who has fashioned their hearts alike," has made us all to live by the same air, to be nourished by the same bread from heaven, to be saved and purified by the same truth. That in the Gospel which the little child can understand, of which the outcast and the barbarian can get some kind of hold, which the failing spirit groping in the darkness of death can dimly see as its light in the valley—that is the all-important part of the Gospel. What needs special training and capacity to understand is no essential portion of the truth that is meant for the world.

And a swollen self-conceit is of all things the most certain to keep a man away from Christ. We must feel our utter helplessness and need, before we shall lay hold on Him, and if ever that wholesome lowly sense of our own emptiness is clouded over, that moment will our fingers relax their tension, and that moment will the flow of life into our deadness run slow and pause. Whatever slackens our hold of Christ tends to rob us of the final prize, that crown of life which He gives.

Hence the solemn earnestness of these warnings. It was not only a doctrine, more or less, that was at stake, but it was their eternal life. Certain truths believed would increase the firmness of their hold on their Lord, and thereby would secure the prize. Disbelieved, the

disbelief would slacken their grasp of Him, and thereby would deprive them of it. We are often told that the Gospel gives heaven for right belief, and that that is unjust. But if a man does not believe a thing, he cannot have in his character or feelings the influence which the belief of it would produce. If he does not believe that Christ died for his sins, and that all his hopes are built on that great Saviour, he will not cleave to Him in love and dependence. If he does not cleave to Him so, he will not draw from Him the life which would mould his character and stir him to run the race. If he do not run the race he will never win or wear the crown. That crown is the reward and issue of character and conduct, made possible by the communication of strength and new nature from Jesus, which again is made possible through our faith laying hold of Him as revealed in certain truths, and of these truths as revealing Him. Therefore, intellectual error may loose our hold on Christ, and if we slacken that, we shall forfeit the prize. Matters of curious interest belonging to the less plainly revealed corners of Christian truth may, and often do, act in paralysing the limbs of the Christian athlete. "Ye did run well, what hath hindered you," has to be asked of many whom a spirit akin to this described in our text has made languid in the race. To us all, knowing in some measure how the whole sum of influences around us work to detach us from our Lord, and so to rob us of the crown which is inseparable from His presence, the solemn exhortation which He speaks from heaven may well come, "Hold fast that thou hast; let no man take thy crown."

III. The source and manner of all true growth is next set forth, in order to enforce the warning, and to emphasize the need of holding the Head.

Christ, as Head, is not merely supreme and sovereign. The metaphor goes much deeper, and points to Him as the

source of a real spiritual life, from Him communicated to all the members of the true Church, and constituting it an organic whole. We have found the same expression twice already in the Epistle, once as applied to His relation to "the body, the Church" (i. 18), and once in reference to the "principalities and powers." The errors in the Colossian Church derogated from Christ's sole sovereign place as fountain of all life natural and spiritual for all orders of beings, and hence the emphasis of the Apostle's proclamation of the counter truth. That life which flows from the head is diffused through the whole body by the various and harmonious action of all the parts. It is "supplied and knit together," or in other words, the functions of nutrition and compaction into a whole are performed by the "joints and bands," in which last word are included muscles, nerves, tendons, and any of the "connecting bands which strap the body together." Their action is the condition of growth; but the Head is the source of all which the action of the members transmits to the body. Christ is the source of all nourishment. From Him flows the life-blood which feeds the whole, and by which every form of supply is ministered whereby the body grows. Christ is the source of all unity. Churches have been bound together by other bonds, such as creeds, polity, or even nationality; but that external bond is only like a rope round a bundle of fagots, while the true, inward unity springing from common possession of the life of Christ, is as the unity of some great tree, through which the same sap circulates from massive bole to the tiniest leaf that flutters at the tip of the farthest branch.

These blessed results of supply and unity are effected through the action of the various parts. If each organ is in healthy action, the body grows. There is diversity in offices; the same life is light in the eyes, beauty in the cheek, strength in the hand, thought in the brain. The

more you rise in the scale of life the more the body is differentiated, from the simple sac that can be turned inside out and has no division of parts or offices, up to man. So in the Church. The effect of Christianity is to heighten individuality, and to give each man his own proper "gift from God," and therefore each man his office, "one after this manner and another after that." Therefore is there need for the freest possible unfolding of each man's idiosyncrasy, heightened and hallowed by an indwelling Christ, lest the body should be the poorer if any member's activity be suppressed, or any one man be warped from his own work wherein he is strong, to become a feeble copy of another's. The perfect light is the blending of all colours.

A community where each member thus holds firmly by the Head, and each ministers in his degree to the nourishment and compaction of the members, will, says Paul, increase with the increase of God. The increase will come from Him, will be pleasing to Him, will be essentially the growth of His own life in the body. There is an increase not of God. These heretical teachers were swollen with dropsical self-conceit; but this is wholesome, solid growth. For individuals and communities of professing Christians the lesson is always seasonable, that it is very easy to get an increase of the other kind. The individual may increase in apparent knowledge, in volubility, in visions and speculations, in so-called Christian work; the Church may increase in members, in wealth, in culture, in influence in the world, in apparent activities, in subscription lists, and the like—and it may all be not sound growth, but proud flesh, which needs the knife. One way only there is by which we may increase with the increase of God, and that is that we keep fast hold of Jesus Christ, and "let Him not go, for He is our life." The one exhortation which includes all that is needful, and which being obeyed, all ceremonies and all speculations will drop into their right place, and become

helps, not snares, is the exhortation which Barnabas gave to the new Gentile converts at Antioch—that “with purpose of heart they should cleave unto the Lord.”

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

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THOUGHTS.

1. **The Word.**—There are many languages and many tongues, and one Voice sounds through all. “The floods lift up their voice, the heavens declare the glory of God. Day unto day poureth forth speech. . . . It is not a language, neither are they words, the voice whereof cannot be heard . . . their sound is gone out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.”

Colour, sound, form, are each a language. And some speak through the one and some through the other, and some through two or all three. And the sculptor cannot speak through colour or sound, or the musician through form or colour; but the painter speaks through colour and form and not through sound. And the poet without either speaks in all, and calls each into his service.

But if we will we may know an inward Word of Life which expresses that which gives colour, sound and form their glory, their truth, their being. Thus likewise the elements are a language. And we may know as one that Voice which sounds through air and cries in fire and murmurs in water and whispers through earth.

The Word is the meaning and the meeting-place of all words; the whole of which each language is a part. All true utterance is therein, the Spoken Thought of God; including in the range of expression all that we know as consciousness and will, as reason and personality, all that we need as a Way, as a Truth, as a Life; showing us that from which our fatherhoods are named, endowing us with the very desire for Truth which some blindly think that Christ cannot satisfy; the witness of that Unity from which all true fact springs.