

“ FAITHFUL IS THE WORD.”

FIVE passages in the Pastoral Epistles repeat with slight variations the sentence, “ *This is a faithful saying* ” (1 Tim. i. 15, iii. 1, iv. 9, 2 Tim. ii. 11; Tit. iii. 8). The Greek text is identical in all. Our English Bible disguises this recurrence in 1 Timothy iii. 1, by substituting the adjective *true* for *faithful*. The motive for this alteration is obvious if the translators were right in regarding it as a mere preface to the next sentence, the change would be almost a necessity. But this interpretation is highly improbable: for it assumes that the subsequent words, “ *If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work,* ” existed already as a current *saying* in the Church, and that St. Paul did no more than endorse their truth; whereas they are more naturally read, apart from the preface, as the apostle’s own independent assertion of a bishop’s responsibility. Nor does the original at all justify the introduction of this idea of *truth* into the text. The Revised Version has, with its usual fidelity to the Greek, restored the word *faithful*, and emphasised it by placing it at the beginning of the sentence. But this restoration of the true text forces us to seek a fresh interpretation for its meaning; for the subsequent assertion, though *true*, cannot be designated as a *faithful* saying.

The same perplexity confronts the reader in the later passages in which the words recur. Our English versions again attempt to interpret them as an emphatic preface to a subsequent clause, in spite of the connecting particle “ *for* ”; which indicates, both in 1 Timothy iv. 10 and in 2 Timothy ii. 11, that the next clause is not an essential part of the previous sentence, but contains additional arguments in support of the former teaching. Nor can that interpretation otherwise satisfy an intelligent reader. For in 1 Timothy iv. 10 there follows a vivid picture of a devoted life animated

by trust in a living Saviour ; in 2 Timothy ii. 11-13, a series of solemn warnings that our participation in Christ's future glory is conditional on our present participation in His death and sufferings, and on our present fidelity to Him ; in Titus iii. 8, an exhortation to the preacher to be diligent in enforcing Christian duties on his flock. It would be a misuse of language to designate each of these successively as *a faithful saying* : all alike bear the stamp of original argument or exhortation emanating directly from the mind of St. Paul.

An earlier passage (1 Tim. i. 15) throws considerable light on the meaning of the word "*faithful*" : for in describing the revelation *that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners as faithful*, the apostle evidently means that it was an assurance on which the penitent sinner could rely ; it contained a pledge on God's part to man's salvation, most worthy of acceptance. But the same difficulty again presents itself as to the word "*saying*" ; for St. Paul was not there quoting any previous saying of Christ or His apostles, but was himself embodying in new language, and expressing with apostolic authority and power, the central mercy of Divine redemption.

A glance at the original furnishes the key to this enigma ; we perceive that our English versions have given a false colour to the sentence by rendering the original "*logos*" (the Word) as "*a saying*," and that the first step to understanding St. Paul's meaning is to remove this arbitrary gloss of our English translators. The deep meaning with which that Greek term was invested in the Alexandrine and Christian theology of the first century is well known ; the opening of St. John's Gospel presents "*the Word*" in mystic grandeur as a Divine personality, the living voice of God embodied in the person of the Lord Jesus, when He dwelt visibly among men. Elsewhere it was the common word by which any ordinary speech of men or any written

language of Scripture was described. It ranges, in fact, from the simplest to the deepest thoughts of theological language, and it is the province of criticism to determine everywhere its true rendering. In more than thirty passages of the New Testament the Authorized Version has employed "*saying*" as its English equivalent, always with reference to some definite spoken language, or some distinct passage of Scripture. The Revised Version has done well to displace it from many passages of St. John's Gospel, notably from viii. 51, 52, 55; for in the conversation there recorded, Christ referred evidently not to any particular *saying*, but to the importance of keeping His own and His Father's *Word*. On the other hand, it is difficult to understand why it is banished from John xii. 38 and Romans xiii. 9, where definite words of Esaias, of Moses, and of Christ are quoted, seeing that it is retained in the case of other quotations.

But our present concern is with one particular sentence of St. Paul. "*Faithful is the Word,*" whose life and power have suffered fatally by mistranslation. Five times he repeated this one emphatic sentence, as if to print it indelibly on the memory of the Church. On the first occasion he added a definition of the Word by way of explanation (1 Tim. i. 15): it was "*the Word, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*" Now this definition does not point to any single message of grace and mercy elsewhere recorded, but to the Gospel as a whole. It thus furnishes a key to St. Paul's conception of the Word, as the entire revelation of the Father's love manifested in the incarnation. The Gospel was not then embodied in the canon of Scripture, nor had it yet taken shape as a formal system of doctrine.¹ The Word which presented itself to the mind of St. Paul was the preached Word, of

¹ The notion of a formal creed or confession of faith is not conveyed by the original of 2 Timothy i. 13, which suggests a mere outline whose details are to be filled up hereafter.

which he had been made a minister, and which he now committed to his disciples to be treasured as a sacred deposit and transmitted pure and unalloyed to the future Church. This idea of the Word differs fundamentally from St. John's, for he nowhere ascribes to it a distinct personality or identifies it with the person of Christ. But there is this much in common in the two ideas, that St. Paul here regards the Word in its unity as a whole, ascribes to it a spiritual life of its own, and asserts for it the definite quality of faithfulness. Just as the Epistle to the Hebrews figuratively describes the Word of God as living and active (iv. 12), so St. Paul here contemplates it as endued with a spiritual character corresponding to the character of the God whose will it expressed. His description of God's Word as *faithful* answers to his description of God Himself as *faithful* because He will not suffer His people to be tempted above that they are able : he claims thereby for the Word that it is a sure foundation on which the penitent can build, a rock that cannot be shaken, and an immovable anchor of the soul.

Now then let us try to grasp the full meaning of this repeated utterance, *Faithful is the Word*. It is an ejaculation which came straight from the heart of St. Paul, as he dictated his latest words of counsel to his children in the faith. The very nature of such a sentence forbade any direct connexion with the immediate context ; these abrupt outbursts of strong feeling are of necessity more or less isolated : the key to its meaning must be sought therefore below the surface in the mind of the writer, and the sentiment pervading the whole epistle, rather than in any particular words or phrases. Now the tone of the Pastoral Epistles differed from his earlier, as did the circumstances of the writer and of those whom he addressed. His personal labours for Christ were drawing to a close ; his active life of missionary enterprise had ceased, perhaps for ever ; and

he was condemned to the compulsory inaction of a prisoner. But his care for the Church was none the less absorbing because he was precluded from active labour on her behalf; His mind only ranged the more widely over her distant future; his thoughts were busy with her internal organization and with the new dangers assailing her from within; and his counsels united the wisdom of mature experience to the clearness of apostolic vision. For the Churches which he had planted had outgrown their early struggles and established their position as regular communities: but outward success was developing new forms of spiritual danger; false teachers had sprung up within the fold; professing Christians had learned to wield in a selfseeking spirit the weapons of verbal subtlety and legal casuistry which had belonged to the rabbi and the philosopher, and to pervert with false traditions the original simplicity of the Gospel. On what safeguard then did St. Paul rely for the steadfast maintenance of the faith once delivered? On the abiding witness of *the Word*. In that Word he recognised the only infallible teacher of faith and morals; he trusted in the sure guidance of its sound and wholesome doctrine. Observe the earnestness with which he beseeches Timothy to preserve this sacred deposit committed to his charge. He had himself proved its efficacy in his deepest personal need; he had tested its power throughout his many years of apostolic ministry; and now, as he approached the goal of his Christian race, he was filled with an eager desire that his children might bear on undimmed this steadfastness of Gospel truth, to light the coming generations. Therefore, as he wrote, his fervent conviction of its value broke forth from time to time in the enthusiastic ejaculation, "*Faithful is the Word.*"

In the First Epistle to Timothy the remembrance of God's personal mercy in committing that glorious Gospel to a blasphemer and persecutor like himself calls forth this first

outburst of thankful adoration. “*Faithful is the Word, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief*” (i. 15). Thoughts of God’s all-embracing love and of the Gospel’s saving power for all classes of society, for all men, for woman as well as man, run in succession through the second chapter, till at its close he winds up with his apostolic amen, “*Faithful is the Word*” (iii. 1). The pernicious delusions of the latter times rise up before his prophetic eye and call forth his apostolic warning; but he is inspired with new courage by the thought, “*Faithful is the Word*” (iv. 9). The second epistle dwells with equal earnestness on the value of the Gospel whereunto he had been appointed a preacher and an apostle, on the sound words which Timothy had heard of him, and the good thing committed to Timothy, which he charges him to commit in his turn to faithful men who should be able to teach others also. For its sake he gladly suffers as an evildoer, even unto bonds: he exults in the contrast between his own bonds and the freedom of the Word of God, which is not bound, but has power to save; and breaks out once more into the ejaculation, “*Faithful is the Word*” (ii. 11).

The Epistle to Titus, though largely occupied with the practical requirements of Christian life, strongly urges the importance of sound doctrine as the basis of Christian morals, and couples the duty of holding fast the faithful Word with blamelessness of life: here again St. Paul’s faith in the Word finds fit expression in his favourite ejaculation, “*Faithful is the Word*” (iii. 8).

Rescued, in short, from the obscurity in which our English versions have buried it, this sentence stands out as a noble testimony by an aged apostle to the Word which he had preached so long and so triumphantly. He has bequeathed it as one of his latest watchwords to the Christian soldier: and it well deserves to be remembered

in these latter days. For the dangers of the Church have not passed away; while her very success, the grandeur of her work, the glorious development of her institutions, and the enthusiasm kindled on her behalf tempt men to forget sometimes the importance of *the Word* as her divinely appointed guide and safeguard. We too need to repeat often, as St. Paul loved to do, "*Faithful is the Word.*"

F. RENDALL.
