

## ST. JOHN'S "LAST HOUR."

(1 JOHN II. 18-27.)

THE Apostle John is an old man ; he has lived through a long day. The way of the Lord that he teaches is by this time a well-marked path, trodden by the feet already of two generations. Amongst his "little children" he counts many grey-headed "fathers" in Christ, who "have known Him that is from the beginning." In his lifetime, and since the hour when he heard the elder John say on the banks of Jordan, "Behold the Lamb of God!" centuries seem to have passed ; the cumulative effect of ages—what the Gentile Apostle called "the ends of the world"—has been accomplished and a thousand years transacted in one day.

Though new in seeming, and surpassing all that heart of man conceived, there is nothing that is sudden and hasty, nothing of raw or rash invention, nothing fugitive or tentative in the things of which St. John writes. These teachings are as old as they are new (*vv.* 7, 8) ; they belong to the universal and divine order ; they reveal and impart "the eternal life, which was with the Father," and is lodged in His bosom beyond the range of time. Swiftly laid, the foundation of the apostles is no less surely laid. While "the world is passing away and the lust thereof," while it trembles and rocks as in the throes of a moral dissolution, while threatenings from without and apostasies within their ranks frighten infirm and dubious believers, those who do not "*know* that they have eternal life," the note sounded by this Epistle is that of serene assurance, of

absolute stability attaching to the apostolic witness concerning Jesus Christ. The veteran leader, whose eye has long watched and his voice guided the battle, proclaims the victory already won. "Our faith" has proved the temper of its weapons upon the world's stoutest armour. Its "young men have overcome the wicked one"; its martyrs "have overcome him because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony." The Christian brotherhood has shown itself to possess "an unction" which "teaches it about all things," and holds it safe from poisonous error. In Ephesus, for example, faulty as the Church there was, it has "tried them which call themselves apostles, and they are not," and has "found them false" (Rev. ii. 2, 3, 6). Whatever trials yet remain, whatever conflicts are preparing for the kingdom of God in that strange future which John read in the isle of Patmos through the mirror of prophecy as in a riddle, the faith that he and his companions have delivered to the saints is secure in the keeping of the Spirit of truth. It has no foes to meet more dangerous than those already foiled and beaten.

Time has vindicated the bold inference that the aged Apostle drew from his experience. The disciples of Jesus "have known the truth, which abideth in us and shall be with us for ever." The apostolic era was a rehearsal of the Church's entire history; and the New Testament, in which that era condensed itself, contains all the principles and forces that are needed to subjugate the world to Jesus Christ. St. John has but one thing to say to his successors: "Abide in Him." The allurements of the heathen world which his converts had once loved (*vv.* 15-17), and the seductions of false prophets arising amongst themselves (*v.* 26), are alike powerless to move those who build upon this rock. They have chosen the good part, and it will not be taken from them.

As for the recent seceders from the apostolic communion, their departure is a gain and not a loss ; for that is manifest in them which was before concealed (*vv.* 18, 19). They bore the name of Christ falsely: *antichrist* is their proper title ; and that there are "many" such, who stand threateningly arrayed against His servants, only proves that His word is doing its sifting and judicial work, that the divine life within the body of Christ is casting off dead limbs and foreign elements, that the truth is accomplishing its destined result, that the age has come to its ripeness and its crisis : "whence we perceive that it is the last hour."

We may best expound the paragraph under review by considering in order the crisis to which the Apostle refers, the danger which he denounces, and the safeguards on which he relies—in other words, *the last hour*, *the many antichrists*, and *the chrism from the Holy One*.

1. "My children, it is the last hour—we perceive that it is the last hour." Bishop Westcott, in his rich and learned Commentary on this Epistle, calls our attention to the absence of the Greek article : "*A last hour* it is (ἐσχάτη ὥρα ἐστίν)"—so the Apostle literally puts it ; and the anarthrous combination is peculiar here. (St. Paul's, "*A day of the Lord* is coming," in 1 Thessalonians v. 2, resembles the expression.) The phrase "seems to mark the general character of the period, and not its specific relation to 'the end.' It was a period of critical change." *The hour* is a term repeatedly used in the Gospel of John for the crisis of the earthly course of Jesus, the supreme epoch of His death and return to the Father. This guides us to St. John's meaning here. He is looking backward, not forward, and speaking the language of memory more than of prophecy. The "last hour" is the last of a succession of hours, the end of some day that is expiring. The venerable Apostle stands upon the border of the first Christian age. He is nearing the horizon, the rim and outmost verge of that

great "day of the Lord" which began with the birth of the first John, the forerunner, and would terminate with his own departure: himself the solitary survivor of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb. The shadows were closing upon John; everything was altered about him. The world he knew had passed or was passing quite away. Jerusalem had fallen; he had seen in vision the overthrow of mighty Rome, and the Empire was shaken with rumours and fears of change. The work of revelation, he felt, was all but complete. Those deadly opposers of the truth had risen, who were foretold in the words of Jesus, and in the teachings of Paul so well remembered at Ephesus; the Satanic apostasy within the Church, foreboding the last judgment, had reared its head. The finished truth of the revelation of the Father in the Son was now confronted by the consummate lie of heresy which denied them both (*v.* 22).

A last hour it certainly was; and it might be (who could tell?) the last hour of all. The Master had said concerning John, "If I will that he tarry till I come!" Many deemed this to signify that the beloved disciple would live on earth until the Lord's return in glory. He relates the incident in the appendix to his Gospel (ch. xxi.), without giving his own opinion for or against this notion; he only states the exact words of Jesus, and intimates that so much was never promised. But this saying might well excite the desire for such a favour. And why was John kept waiting for so long, when all the rest had been summoned away?

It may seem strange to us that the inspired apostles should have known almost nothing of the duration of future history; but even from Himself, in the days of His flesh, our Lord confesses that this knowledge was veiled: "Of that day or hour knoweth no man, not even the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but the Father only." Christ left His disciples in all matters of the times and seasons, and leaves them still, to wish and hope but not to *know*. And so the

wise Apostle writes humbly, and with guarded caution, keeping the hour of the advent an open question. He was not permitted to see into the next century. He presided over the completion of the grand creative age, and he saw that its end was come. Clearly it was *his* last hour; and for aught he knew it might be the world's last, the sun of time setting to rise no more, the crash of doom breaking upon his dying ears.

The world passes through great cycles, each of which has its last hour anticipating the absolute conclusion. The year, with its course from spring to winter, from winter to autumn, the day from dawn to dark, image the total course of time. You have watched the sun set on a still summer evening, yielding yourself to the influences of the hour—the light slowly waning and the shadows creeping stealthily from their ambush upon you, the colours dying out of earth and sky, the sounds of life ceasing one by one, the chill night wind striking on your cheek and whispering amongst the trees the riddle of fate that no man reads—and you have had the strange sense that all was over! a foretaste of life's and the world's last hour; you came away doubting if that sun will rise again! The great epochs and "days" of human history have a similar finality. Each of these periods in turn sensibly anticipates the end of all things. The world is seen sweeping in its orbit towards the gulf, and grazes the edge to escape it for that time, and to set forth upon a wider circuit which must bring it to the final plunge. Like the moth wheeling about the taper's flame and flitting by with singed wings to fall at last consumed, like some huge creature of heavy flight powerless to soar to the mark of its desire, but that circles in ascending spires, passing its goal many times till it lands spent upon the summit—such appears to be the destined course of the world towards judgment. Many great and notable days of the Lord there have been, and perhaps will be, many last

hours before the last of all. The earth is a mausoleum of dead worlds ; in its grave-mounds, tier above tier, extinct civilizations lie orderly interred. Eschatology, like everything else in Scripture, has its laws of development—"the blade, the ear, and the full corn in the ear." Each "day" of history, with its last hour, is a moment in that "age of the ages" which includes the measureless circumference of time.

2. The Apostle John saw the proof of the end of the age in the appearance of *many antichrists*. He could not say that "the Antichrist" had come whom the Church looked for to herald the second coming of the Lord Jesus ; but "even now" there were many who deserved this name, and their appearance was the signal of a crisis which, for aught one could say, might be the prelude of the final scene of judgment.

The word "antichrist" has, by etymology, a double meaning. The Antichrist of whose coming St. John's readers had "heard," if identical, as one presumes, with the awful figure of 2 Thessalonians ii., is a rival or mock-Christ, a Satanic caricature of the Lord Jesus ; the "many antichrists" were not that, but deniers, indeed destroyers of Christ ; and this the epithet may equally well signify. So there is no real disagreement in the matter between St. Paul and St. John. The heretic oppugners of Christ, starting up before John's eyes in the Asian Churches, were forerunners, whether at a greater or less distance, of the supreme antagonist, messengers who prepared his way. They were of the same breed and likeness, and set forth principles that find in him their full impersonation.

These antichrists of St. John's last hour, the opponents then most to be dreaded by the Church, were teachers of false doctrine. They "deny that Jesus is the Christ" (v. 22). This denial is other than that which the same words had denoted fifty years before. It is not the denial

of Jewish unbelief, a refusal to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah; it is the denial of Gnostic error, the refusal to admit the Divine Sonship of Jesus and the revelation of the Godhead in manhood through His person. Such a refusal makes the knowledge of both impossible; neither is God understood as Father, nor Jesus Christ as Son, by these misbelievers. To "confess" or "deny the Son" is in effect to "hold" or "not to hold" the Father (v. 23). The man who in this way "denies the Father and the Son," he is "the antichrist" and "the liar" (v. 22). His denial negatives the central truth of Christianity, as St. John conceives it; it dissolves the bond which gives unity and force to the entire new covenant, and nullifies the Gospel absolutely. The nature of the person of Christ, in St. John's view, is not a question of transcendental dogma or theological speculation; in it lies the vital point of an experimental and working Christian belief. "Who is he," the Apostle cries, "that overcometh the world, except he that believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (v. 5); and again, "Every one that believeth that Jesus is the Christ, is begotten of God" (v. 1). The saving and the conquering faith is that which beholds in the man of Nazareth and Calvary the Son of God seated at the right hand of power.

The traditions of the rise of heresy point to the attempts made about this time, and especially in St. John's province of Asia, to divide Jesus Christ (whose Messianic title had now become His proper name) into the human *Jesus* on the one hand, son of Joseph and Mary, mortal and imperfect as other men; and *the Christ*, a Divine æon or emanation, that descended upon Jesus, and was associated with Him from His baptism till the moment of His death, when He cried, "Why hast Thou forsaken Me?" This was, evidently, to make of Jesus Christ *two* beings, to break up His Divine-human person, as the disciples had known Him, into

shadowy and discrepant fragments. Those who taught this denied that "Jesus is the Son of God." They denied "Jesus Christ come in flesh" (iv. 2, 3); they renounced the Incarnation, and thereby abandoned the basis laid in Christianity for fellowship between God and man, and closed the way of access to the Father given us in the Son of His love.

This error, which beset the Church for generations, and has deeply affected its development, grew from the philosophical notion of the incompatibility of the finite and infinite, or, in other words, the absolute separation of God from the world. With this axiom were involved the postulates of the illusive nature of phenomena and the intrinsic evil of matter—assumptions that implicate in their fatal coil every truth of religion, both doctrinal and practical, and that struck at the root of apostolic faith. To St. John's mind, there was no lie to compare with this. Those who brought such maxims with them into the Church could never have been Christians: Christ Jesus the Lord was, from the outset, to them a non-reality; the critique of their philosophy dissolved the facts about Him into a play of the senses, a Docetic spectacle. The manifestation of the Divine in Jesus, upon this theory, was a train of symbols, grander and fairer it might be than others, a shadow still of the heavenly things and not their "very image," a parable of ideal truth that each man must unriddle as he could. To maintain this was to take away all certainty from the Gospel, and all fellowship from the Church. Never could we arrive, starting from such premisses, at "the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God."

In passing from St. Paul's chief Epistles to this of St. John, the doctrinal conflict is carried back from the atonement to the incarnation, from the work to the nature of Christ, from Calvary to Bethlehem. There it culminates.

Truth could reach no higher than the affirmation, error could proceed no further than the contradiction, of the completed doctrine of the Person of Christ as it was taught by St. John. The final teaching of Divine revelation is daringly denied. The Apostle justly specifies this as the conclusive issue. For Christ is all and in all to His own system. "What think ye of the Christ?—what do you make of *Me*?" is His crucial question to every age. The two answers—that of the world with its false prophets and seducers (ii. 19; iv. 5), and that of the Christian brotherhood, one with its Divine Head—are now delivered in categorical assertion and negation. Faith and unfaith have each said their last word. The manifestation of God the Father in His Son has come to its close, and called into play the antagonisms with which it has to deal. Subsequent debates of Christ with Antichrist will be only the repetition and unfolding, the application upon an ever enlarging scale, of what is contained, and in principle settled and disposed of, by the word of the Apostles of the Lord, and within the pages of the New Testament.

3. While the Apostle John insists on the radical nature of the assaults made in his last days upon the Church's Christological belief, he points with entire confidence to *the safeguards* by which that belief is guaranteed.

(1) In the first place, "*you*,—in contrast with the anti-christs, none of whom were really 'of us' (v. 19)—you have a chrism from the Holy One (*i.e.* Christ); all of you know" the truth and can discern its verity (vv. 20, 21). Again, in v. 27, "The chrism that you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need that any one be teaching you. But as His chrism teaches you about all things, and is true, and is no lie, and as it did teach you, abide in Him." *Chrism* is Greek for anointing, as *Christ* for anointed; St. John's argument lies in this verbal connexion. The chrism makes *Christians*, and is wanting to

*anti*-Christs. It is the constitutive vital element common to Christ and His people, pervading members and Head alike.

We soon perceive wherein this chrism consists. What the Apostle says of the chrism here he says of *the Spirit* afterwards in chapter v. 7: "It is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth." And in chapter iv. 6 he contrasts the influences working in apostolic and heretical circles respectively as "*the spirit* of truth" and "of error." The bestowal of the Spirit on Jesus of Nazareth is described under the figure of *unction* by St. Peter in Acts x. 38, who tells "How God anointed (*christened*) Him—made Him officially the Christ—with the Holy Spirit and power."<sup>1</sup> It was the possession, without limit, of "the Spirit of truth" which gave to the words of Christ their unlimited authority: "He whom God sent speaketh the words of God, for He giveth Him not the Spirit by measure" (John iii. 34, 35). Now out of that Holy Spirit which He possessed infinitely in His Divine fashion, and which His presence and teaching continually breathed, the Holy One gave to His disciples; and all members of His body receive, according to their capacity, "the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot receive," but "whom" He "sends" unto His own "from the Father" (John xiv. 17; xv. 26, etc.). The Spirit of the Head is the vital principle of the Church, resident in every limb, and by its universal inhabitation and operation constituting the Body of Christ. "The communion of the Holy Ghost" is the inner side of

<sup>1</sup> In the Early Church, as it is still in the Eastern Churches, the rite of *Uction*, along with the *Imposition of Hands*, followed immediately upon *Baptism* and formed an integral part of the same *Sacrament*. It was not till the 13th century that the Roman Church formally separated the two latter acts from *Baptism*, making them a distinct *Sacrament of Confirmation*. Before this time the chrism in the West appears for a while to have been used both in *baptism* and in the *imposition of hands*. The impartation of the Holy Ghost was specifically connected with the latter act, reserved for the bishop, while any priest baptizes.

all that is outwardly visible in Church activity and fellowship. It is the life of God in the society of men.

This Divine principle of life in Christ has at the same time an *antiseptic* power. It affords the real security for the Church's preservation from corruption and decay. The Spirit of God is the only, and sufficient, Infallibility on earth. He is our pledged protector against mortal sin and ruinous error, being the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Truth, who "abideth with you," said Christ to His people, "and He shall be in you." It is His office to teach no less than to sanctify. To the true believer and faithful seeker after the knowledge of God He gives an instinct for truth, a sense for the Divine in knowledge and in doctrine, which works through the reason and yet above the reason, and which works collectively in the communion of saints. For this gift St. Paul had prayed long ago on behalf of these same Asian Christians: "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him—the eyes of your heart enlightened to know" the great things of God (Eph. i. 17–23). This prayer had been answered. Paul's and John's children in the faith were endowed with a Christian discernment that enabled them to detect the sophistries and resist the blandishments of subtle Gnostic error. This Spirit of wisdom and revelation has never deserted the Church. Through centuries rife with all kinds of ignorance and perversion the apostolic truth has been preserved to this day, and Scripture retains—it has recovered and extended after every eclipse—its unique authority.

· "You know, all of you" (v. 20)—this is what the Apostle really says.<sup>1</sup> It is the most remarkable thing in the passage. "I have not written unto you," he continues,

<sup>1</sup> οἴδατε πάντες, not πάντα, is the best-attested reading. See R.V. margin, and Westcott's *Additional Note* (in his Commentary) on ii. 20.

"because you know not the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth." He appeals to the judgment of the enlightened lay commonalty of the Church, just as St. Paul when he writes, "I speak as to men of sense; judge ye what I say." We look in spiritual matters too much to the opinion of the few, to experts and specialists—priests, councils, congresses; we have too little faith in the Holy Spirit dwelling in the Church, in the *communis sensus* of the body of Christ and the general suffrage of the citizens of the Divine commonwealth. Yet, however we may disguise the fact, it is with this grand jury that the verdict ultimately lies.

St. John's "chrism" certainly did not guarantee a precise agreement in all points of doctrine and of practice; but it covers essential truth, such as that of the Godhead of the Redeemer here in question. Much less does the witness of the Spirit warrant individual men, whose hearts are touched with His grace, in setting up to be oracles of God and mouthpieces of the Holy Ghost. In that case the Holy Spirit must contradict Himself endlessly, and God becomes the author of confusion and not of peace. But there is in matters of collective faith a spiritual common sense, a Christian public opinion in the communion of saints, behind the extravagancies of individuals and the party cries of the hour, which acts informally by a silent and impalpable pressure, but all the more effectually, after the manner of the Spirit. The motto of Vincent of Lerinum, so disastrously misapplied by Newman, is after all both true and indispensable: "Quod ubique, quod semper, quod *ab omnibus*."

(2) To this inward and cumulative witness there corresponds an outward witness, defined once for all. "You know *the truth* . . . that no lie is *of the truth*. . . . *That which you heard from the beginning*, let it abide in you" (vv. 21, 24).

Here is an objective criterion, given in the truth about

Christ and the Father as John's readers heard it from the Apostles at the first, and as we find it written in their books. Believing that to be true, the Church rejected promptly what did not square with it. In the most downright and peremptory fashion St. John asserts the apostolic witness to be a test of religious truth: "We are of God: he that knows God hears us; he that is not of God hears us not. By this we recognise the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (iv. 6). His words echo those of Christ addressed to His first disciples: "As the Father sent Me, even so send I you . . . He that receiveth you, receiveth Me" (Matt. x. 40; John xx. 21). St. Paul made the like claim when he said, "If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things that I write unto you, that they are a commandment of the Lord" (1 Cor. xiv. 37). And this touchstone, however contested, is equally valid to-day.

Here is the exterior test of the inner light. The witness of the Spirit in the living Church, and in the abiding apostolic word, authenticate and guard each other. This must be so, if one and the self-same Spirit testifies in both. Experience and Scripture coincide. Neither will suffice us separated from the other. Without experience, Scripture becomes a dead letter; without the norm of Scripture, experience becomes a speculation, a fanaticism, or a conceit.

(3) The third guarantee cited by St. John lies outside ourselves and the Church: it is neither the chrism that rests upon all Christians, nor the apostolic message deposited with the Church in the beginning; it is *the faithfulness of our promise-giving Lord*. His fidelity is our ultimate dependence; and it is involved in the two safeguards previously described.

Accordingly, when the Apostle has said, in verse 24, "If that abide in you which ye heard from the beginning, ye too shall abide in the Son and the Father," he adds, to make all

sure, in the next verse; "And this is the promise which He promised us—the eternal life!" It is our Lord's own assurance over again, "Abide in Me, and I will abide in you . . . Verily, verily, I say unto you, If any one keep My word, death he will never see" (John viii. 51; xv. 4). The life of fellowship with the Father in the Son, which the antichrist would destroy at its root by denying the Son, the Son of God pledges Himself to maintain amongst those who are loyal to His word, and the word of His Apostles, which is virtually His own. On the rock He builds His Church; "the gates of death will not prevail against it," while it stands upon the true confession of His name. To the soul and to the Church, the individual believer and the community of faith, the same promise of life and incorruption is made. So long as we hold His word, He holds by us for ever.

He has promised us this (*αὐτὸς ἐπηγγείλατο*)—He who says, "I am the resurrection and the life." No brief or transient existence is that secured to His people, but "the eternal life." Now eternal life means with St. John, not as with St. Paul a prize to be won, but a foundation on which to rest, a fountain from which to draw; not a future attainment so much as a present divine, and therefore abiding, possession. It is the life which came into the world from God with Jesus Christ (i. 1, 2), and in which every soul has its part that is grafted into Him. Understanding this, we see that the promise of life eternal, in verse 25, is not brought in as an incitement to hope, but as a re-assurance to our troubled faith. "These things have I written unto you," the apostle says, "concerning those that mislead you" (v. 26). Christ's word is set against theirs. The promise of Christ stands fast, the unchanging rock amidst the tides of opinion and the winds of doctrine; unsapped by doubt, unshaken by the storms that break up one after another the strongest fabrics of human thought

and policy. Error cannot prevail against the truth as it is in Jesus. "Our little systems have their day"; but the fellowship of souls which rests upon the foundation of the Apostles has within it the power of an indissoluble life.

Such are the three guarantees of the permanence of Christian doctrine and the Christian life, as they were conceived by St. John and are asserted by him here at his last hour, when the tempests of persecution and sceptical error were on all sides let loose against the Church. They are the witness of the Spirit in the soul, the word on the lips of the Apostles transmitted by their pen, and the living Christ, the pledged executor of His own promise of eternal life.

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#### MR. CHARLES' APOCALYPSE OF BARUCH.

It is curious that just at the very time when traditionalists were congratulating themselves over the conversion of Harnack to critical orthodoxy (and certainly they have a right to such congratulation, for the preface to his new work on the *Chronology of the Early Christian Literature* is the biggest stroke of luck, from a controversial point of view, that has ever fallen in their way) there should have appeared in England a piece of critical investigation of which one could say with perfect confidence that it was "made in Germany"; for there is nothing except the title page to the contrary, and it displays all the methods of modern criticism, which for all practical purposes is Teutonic criticism, to the best advantage. So much so that we should not wonder if the book did not furnish a good field for a trial of strength between those who hold that there is always a presumption that a book is a unit and has an author, and those who hold that ancient books are very rarely single compositions, and that they hardly ever belong