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The Epistle of Truth

THE REV. EDWIN HIRST, M.A., A.R.C.M.

(This is the fourth instalment of the Rev. Edwin Hirst's Studies in the Second Epistle of St. John. These valuable articles on "The Epistle of Truth" will be concluded in our next issue.)

TRUTH AND UNTRUTH

(2 St. John, verses 7-9)

TWO notes are sounded clearly in this letter. First, there is that of commendation. "I rejoice greatly that I have found certain of thy children walking in truth, even as we received commandment from the Father."¹ Next there is the note of warning. "For," says the Apostle, "many deceivers are gone forth into the world, even they that confess not that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh."² Grave danger was threatening these people. It was all the more serious because it paraded under another guise, so the Apostle plainly places truth over against untruth, warning the people of their threatened peril. The term he uses for these disseminators of dangerous doctrines is a strong one. He calls them "Deceivers." The word is rather rare in the New Testament, but its cognate verb is in fairly general use, particularly in the Johannine writings.

It might be well to turn aside to examine this verb before drawing attention in some detail to the actual danger. "Making to wander" or "leading astray" is the meaning. If the reference is to ships, it means "to drive from their course." The general thought is that of misleading another person, or of actually leading him into error. The Papyri are again helpful. A recovered letter of the second century says "we have collapsed and fallen from hope, being deceived by the gods and trusting in dreams."³ This is strongly

¹ Verse 4.

² Verse 7.

³ Milligan, *Greek Papyri*, p. 23.

reminiscent of Christ's own words : " Take heed that no man lead you astray."¹ But it is equally true that we may lead ourselves astray. " If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."² By such a procedure we do in our own selves the work of the great deceiver, Satan.

These " deceivers " were already at their labours in the Church, leading men astray. Their teaching was the equivalent of a denial of Christ's incarnation. They went even further and denied the possibility of such an act on God's part. It seems strange that such beliefs should have been existing at so early a stage of Christian history, especially within the circle of the Church itself. They had resemblances to two doctrines which ultimately were condemned as false and heretical. Evidently they were incipient forms of Docetism and Gnosticism. Both of these systems were more fully developed in the second century. Yet, even at so early a stage, the Apostle saw what would be the ultimate result if they were either harboured or indulged ; hence his unceasing efforts to emphasize the fact of the Incarnation, which both of these systems denied.

It seems that both Docetism and Gnosticism developed from an original desire to preserve the unity of the Godhead. God was the spiritual principle of the universe, and as such was transcendently holy. When emphasized apart from immanence, transcendence always tends to remove God away from the world, practically banishing Him from His creation, and making approach to Him impossible except through many intermediaries. Because Christ was divine, the Docetists held that His earthly body was not a truly natural body like that of the rest of humanity, but a body which seemed (from " dochein," to seem, to appear) to be real. Some maintained that from His infancy to His ascension, Christ's body was but a phantom, yet having the appearance of reality. Others allowed that the body was a true body, but at the same time did not believe that Christ was born at Bethlehem. They held that Christ descended upon the man Jesus at the Baptism, and departed from him before the Passion. In either case, Christ was not real, but

¹ St. Matthew xxiv. 4 : " Take heed that no man deceive you," A.V.
" Take care that no one misleads you," Weymouth and Moffatt.

² 1 John i. 8.

merely that which seemed or appeared to be so. Such doctrine involved a denial of the Incarnation and the Atonement alike, for if Christ was too sacred to share our lot, He neither lived nor died nor rose again for us men and for our salvation. There is no wonder then, that when he encountered this idea even in an incipient form, the Apostle attacked it as destructive to the basic truth of the Gospel.

Knowledge of these two systems comes to us mostly from the writings of Christian thinkers who opposed them, for little of the original writings of these "Deceivers" have survived. However, sufficient evidence is preserved to enable us to reconstruct the basis of their doctrines.

It should be remembered that it was a restless world into which Christ was born. St. Luke gives pictures of it both in his Gospel and in the Acts. Of the Jewish world, he said: "the people were in expectation, and all men reasoned in their hearts concerning John, whether haply he were the Christ."¹ Writing of Athens, which was representative of the Greek intellectual world, he said: "All the Athenians and the strangers sojourning there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing."²

Religion was not dead, but the pagan cults and philosophies, for all their fine thoughts, were found deficient in moral force. God was not known as Love, so there was little love in that age. Yet the very restlessness shown in efforts to attain new knowledge in the realm of morals, philosophy and religion, revealed a need which craved for satisfaction.

The Pax Romana had made communication easy within the Empire. Further, a period of reaction had set in after the wars of expansion, and, as usual, reaction was accompanied by scepticism. In such an atmosphere, magic and the occult arts flourished, superstition being rife almost everywhere. Yet there was that eager reaching out for something higher, better and nobler, which has already been mentioned. Sober Roman piety, Greek philosophy, and Oriental mysticism had met together. Out of this mingling of cults emerged the Mystery Religions in which it was claimed that higher knowledge was revealed to those who had been solemnly initiated into the circle of the faithful.

¹ St. Luke iii. 15.

² Acts xxvii. 21.

Such circumstances of intellectual unrest provided a favourable background for Gnostic teachers and systems to flourish.

Gnosticism is a generic term for that variety of systems which laid primary emphasis on knowledge. It has been called a philosophy of religion, but in reality it is more a philosophy of existence than of religion. Its fantastic speculations, however, do not merit the name of philosophy—a term which connotes a careful investigation of facts. Of this aspect Professor Jevons says: "Philosophy consists in reflecting upon experience for the purpose of discovering whether experience, as a whole, has any meaning; and, if so, what meaning."¹ Dr. Plummer summarized the matter as follows: "Gnosticism, though eminently philosophic in its aims and professions, was yet in its method more closely akin to poetry and fiction than to philosophy. If on the one hand it was intended as a contrast to the *pistis* (faith) of the Christian, on the other it was meant to supersede the *philosophia* (philosophy) of the heathen. While it professed to appeal to the intellect, and in modern language would have called itself rationalistic, yet it perpetually set intelligence at defiance, both in its premises and in its conclusions."²

Gnosticism might aptly be described as a series of speculative hypotheses regarding the origin of the universe and its relation to the supreme Being. Its leaders struggled with two problems. First, they sought to know who was the Supreme Principle of the universe and what part He played in creation. Secondly, they wrestled with the age-long problem of the origin of evil and its entry into the world. Like the Docetists, they believed that matter was evil, and for this reason they maintained that God must inevitably be far removed from creation. If contact with God was sought, they believed that it was possible only through intermediaries who were called "Æons" or "Angels." This belief in emanations and angels opened the door to all kinds of fantastic theories and speculations which were most repulsive to Christian principles. No wonder St. Paul directed Timothy, amongst other things, not to "give heed to fables and endless genealogies, the which minister questionings,

¹ *Philosophy, What is it?* p. 23.

² *Epistles of St. John*, p. 21.

rather than a dispensation of God which is in faith."¹ In time, these aeons came to be regarded almost as lesser deities, and, with the same insight, the Apostle warns the Colossians to "Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ,"² Or again: "Let no man rob you of your prize by a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, dwelling on 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."³

Many have been the attempts to account for the origin of evil and its continued presence in the world. In considering this matter, the Gnostics took refuge in a dualistic conception of the universe. God was the Spiritual Principle, but being absent from the world, they held that its creation was due to the activity of aeons, or to some lesser deity whom they named "Demiurge" and identified with Jehovah of the Old Testament. Matter being thus regarded as evil, finite, and limited in every way, it was held that it could have no direct connection with the spiritual and unseen. As a consequence, Christ was revered as an aeon, perhaps the highest and loftiest of the emanations from God; but it was held that He could not have had direct contact with a human body, for being matter, the body must of necessity be evil. Thus it was argued that Christ was not truly human, but merely a phantom.

The Christian could not view either Christ or the world in this light. If, as they believed, in Christ "dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily,"⁴ being "the Word made flesh," He was no aeon, not even the loftiest of aeons. Further, the world remained an unsolved riddle under dualistic principles. The Christian rejected that theory also, believing that what was indistinct to the finite mind of man was clear to the infinite mind of God. It was God's "good pleasure which he purposed in him unto a dispensation of the fulness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ, the

¹ 1 Timothy, i. 4.

² Colossians ii. 8.

³ Colossians ii. 18, 19.

⁴ Colossians ii. 9.

things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth."¹

The Gnostic principles, the supremacy of knowledge, the evil of matter, and dualism, produced directly opposing results in moral teaching and conduct. On the one side, it was argued that if matter was evil and knowledge the only essential, the body must be crushed and beaten so that the spiritual being might attain even higher and still higher knowledge. This developed on one side into extreme asceticism. On the other, it was argued that the body might be allowed to experience every passion, no matter how vile and impure; and that, in contrast, the soul should increase in knowledge. This developed into a life of licence, profligacy, and immorality. No wonder, then, that St. Paul had asked: "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein?"² St. John saw what would be the trend of events if these "deceivers," bearing their false doctrine with them, went about unhindered among the people. He warned them of their danger and exhorted them: "Look to yourselves, that ye lose not the things which we have wrought, but that ye receive a full reward."³

The Apostle went further, saying: "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God."⁴ The Revised Version rendering here quoted rests on superior manuscript authority than that followed in the Authorized Version. The expression has a sarcastic ring, and evidently refers to those "advanced" thinkers who claimed that they had gone beyond the Gospel revelation, having reached something higher and more enlightened. Dr. Moffatt translates the passage thus: "Anyone who is 'advanced' and will not remain by the doctrine of Christ, does not possess God." Christ's teaching must proceed in front as the Christian journeys to the Celestial City. Even as an officer leads his men in battle, so must the Lord's teaching lead and guide Christians. He who advances must advance in that teaching. It is impossible to go beyond it, as the "deceivers" claim to have done. The Apostle does

¹ Ephesians i. 10.

² Romans vi. 1, 2.

³ 2 John 8.

⁴ 2 John 9.

not criticize progress in Christ's teaching, for we must all grow in grace. It is that teaching which has left Christ behind that he roundly condemns, for in reality it is a repudiation of His teaching. Here is a warning for these days. Together with a commensurate standard of scholarship, active witness to the truth of the Evangel must find a prominent place in the heart of every Christian teacher.

A desire to possess the truth is manifest in humanity, and Christ came to reveal that truth in His teaching. The double emphasis on the teaching of Christ as expressed in verse nine of this Epistle makes that clear. This does not mean teaching about Christ, nor yet teaching which is Christian, but it means direct teaching by Christ Himself. The first two modes of teaching are common enough at the present time, but it is the last which matters, and its content is in the Gospel. Christ claimed Divine authority for that teaching: "My teaching is not Mine, but His that sent Me. If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God, or whether I speak from Myself."¹ Because of that teaching, He was condemned by the Sanhedrin. "Then the high priest rent his garments, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy: what further need have we of witnesses? behold now ye have heard the blasphemy: What think ye? They answered and said, He is worthy of death."² Our Lord's teaching was never merely theoretical. It went beyond the theoretical God of the philosopher, known as "The Absolute" or "The Infinite," to a Holy, Spiritual Person who is Life and Love. After all, personality is alike the dominant thought in religion and a primary fact of life. "In Him was life; and the life was the light of men."³ "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life."⁴

It is manifest that God wills that His creatures should know the truth. The appetite of the mind is curiosity, and its true food is truth, which is to be found in Christ. St. John was anxious that his people should know this blessed truth and the starting point, indicated by the entire New

¹ St. John vii. 16, 17.

² St. Matthew xxvi. 65, 66.

³ St. John i. 4.

⁴ St. John iii. 16.

Testament in the search for it, was, and still is, the truth of the Incarnation. Christ became man that He might redeem humanity. Archbishop Temple makes this point emphatically clear. "The men who wrote the books of the New Testament believed that, in Jesus Christ, God Himself lived and walked about among them. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. They start from there." It is important to bear in mind the distinction between the abstract idea of God, which is ultimately hypothetical, and the living, active Person of God, who is Love. The first does not affect life in its most sacred aspects. The second maintains a definite relationship between the Creator and the creature. The creature can live in the power of the Creator, sharing in His truth as revealed in Christ. Happy, then, is he who abideth in the teaching, for he "hath both the Father and the Son."¹

TRUE HOSPITALITY

(II St. John, verses 10-11)

Human nature is such that few people who hold strong views on a controversial subject find it easy to tolerate the opposite point of view. History furnishes many instances which can be cited in support of this statement. In the past, for instance, many men have suffered imprisonment, torture, and even death itself, for holding just and true opinions, which happened to be unacceptable to authority. In our own day, the state ruler with plenary powers is intolerant of nonconformity with his views, and resorts to various coercive measures such as fines, imprisonment, or expulsion, in order to give full expression to those views.

Again, the popular statesman of to-day may, owing to a public expression of views on some question which runs counter to generally accepted opinion, become the unpopular and unwanted statesman of to-morrow.

However, unfortunate though it be, intolerance is a phase of human nature which is not always content to be passive. It tends to become offensively active, and when such intolerance touches religion and professed forms of faith, it sometimes breaks out in bitter persecution. The persecution of the English Protestants under the Marian restoration of

¹ 2 John 9.

Romanism serves as a good example, for : " In the three years of the persecution three hundred victims had perished at the stake."¹

Often we are surprised and pained to perceive that it took centuries even for Christians to learn the principle of religious tolerance. The lesson has not yet been fully learned. It must be also admitted that some have accepted it because circumstances have compelled them so to do. In days of success they have refused to do this, but in days of adversity and humiliation which have succeeded those of success, they turned an ear to its monitions. Religious strife has been bitter in the past, and it is not cleansed of all bitterness even in these enlightened days. So much has this been in evidence that people sometimes speak almost proverbially of the " odium theologicum "—" the hatred of theologians." This is hurled at Christians in particular, because of Christ's lofty standard of life for His people. Yet when men venture to sit in judgment, religious controversies should be judged in the light of contemporary circumstances, if full justice is to be accorded in any given case. During its career, Christianity has suffered violently at the hands of the intolerant. Yet that fact constitutes no excuse for the exercise of intolerance against others.

In this connection, the Apostle John has been harshly judged for some of his words in this Epistle. They fall heavily upon our ears and understanding in these days of wide toleration. Because of this fact alone they demand due consideration ; yet that consideration will reveal features of far wider significance. " Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God ; he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting : for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works."² This injunction is indeed severe, and has an added strangeness in that it comes from him whom we fondly name the Apostle of Love. Its severity is almost without parallel in the New Testament. St. John was experiencing what St. Paul had previously known : " Beside those things that are without, there is that which presseth

¹ Green, *A Short Story of the English People*, p. 361.

² John ix. 11.

upon me daily, anxiety for all the churches."¹ Spiritual oversight was no easy matter. The infant Churches faced dangers both without and within. On the one hand, there was the ever-present possibility and probability of persecution; on the other hand, that of false doctrine and lapses from grace. The Apostle had no illusions about either danger; the former had to be endured if it came; with regard to the latter, he was particularly zealous to preserve doctrinal purity among his people. Opposing doctrines could be dealt with, for they came into the open. Polluted teaching which sought to pass itself off as the pure doctrine of Christ was another matter, and not always easy either to trace or combat. St. John had one acid test, however, and that was the Godhead of Christ. The danger lay in those teachers who, to quote St. John's words, "confess not that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh."² Thus the Apostle set a standard by which such false teachers were to be judged.

This warning was not issued simply because of a possibility which might arise. It was no hypothetical matter, for such instances of ill-advised hospitality had actually been known. The apostles themselves exercised an itinerant ministry. Later there were others who, like them, went about on evangelistic and teaching missions. Christians were accustomed to receive such travelling teachers and to give them hospitality. The *Didache* throws a measure of light upon this custom: "Let every one that cometh in the name of the Lord be received, and then, when ye have proved him, ye shall know, for ye shall have understanding between the right hand and the left. If he that cometh is a passer-by, succour him as far as ye can; but he shall not abide with you longer than two or three days unless there be necessity."³ Again, "Every true prophet, who is minded to settle among you, is worthy of his maintenance. In like manner a true teacher also is worthy, like every workman, of his maintenance."⁴ Further, these itinerant teachers were accorded special privileges. One is specifically mentioned in the matter of the liturgy. A form of Eucharistic thanksgiving is prescribed in Chapter Ten. Yet exception regarding its use is

¹ 2 Cor. xi. 28.

² 2 John 7.

³ Chapter xii. 1, 2.

⁴ Chapter xiii. 1, 2.

permitted to the prophets, for the Chapter ends with this admonition: "Suffer the prophets to give thanks as much as they will." St. John has in mind no passing Christian travellers who might be in need of Christian hospitality, but he was thinking of those who went out on teaching missions posing as Christian teachers, and whose avowed aim was to gain adherents to their teaching. In writing the words: "If anyone cometh unto you," the Apostle writes in the same strain as did St. Paul to the Corinthians when referring to a proposed apostolic visit: "Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will; and I will know, not the word of them which are puffed up, but the power. For the Kingdom of God is not in word, but in power. What will ye? Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of meekness?"¹ It was as fellow Christians with their hosts that these travelling teachers accepted Christian hospitality. Actually, however, they were impostors, for in preaching a Christ who was not God incarnate they had no right to be heard in the Christian Church. By forsaking the true foundation fact of the Christian Faith, they had ceased to be Christians. Such seems to have been the Apostle's opinion. St. Paul had faced the self-same difficulty, and we find him expressing almost equally strong sentiments on the subject: "If any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema."²

¹ 1 Cor. iv. 18-21.

² Galatians i. 9.

THE ROOT OF OUR TROUBLES.

By J. H. Oldham, D.D. 6d. S.C.M.

Two Broadcast Talks in which the theme is developed that the root of our troubles is the mistaken conception of man upon which all social systems are built, viz., the conception that Man is an independent being. He is not. He is dependent upon God, whether he acknowledges it or not. Capitalism, Communism, National Socialism all fail here. God must have His rightful place.

The egocentric outlook is equally mistaken when men seek to achieve their purposes by co-operation.

The "common good" may be nothing more than the good of an enlarged "I."

Man is essentially dependent on nature, on his fellow beings and on God.

H. D.