

"Hold that fast which thou hast."

Rev. 3: 11.

E. Dennett.

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As those who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, and who have before us the prize of our calling on high of God in Christ Jesus, we are but little concerned with the rapid flitting by of the times and seasons. If it has any voice for us, it is only to remind us that the night is far spent, and the day is at hand; and that it behoves us to have our loins girt about, and our lights burning, in the prospect of the speedy return of our Lord.

One special aspect of our responsibility in view of this prospect is brought before us in the scripture at the head of this paper. It is found in the message to Philadelphia. Passing by the question now as to what constitutes Philadelphia — a question of ever-increasing importance, and which ere long, if the Lord will, may be fully discussed — attention may yet be directed to the fact that overcoming in this church is totally different from that in the other six. In the five preceding churches - with the exception perhaps of Smyrna — it is overcoming by separation, or preservation, from the evil in their respective spheres of responsibility. In Laodicea it is by getting out of one state into another; in a word, by acquisition of what is lacking. But overcoming in Philadelphia is simply maintaining — maintaining that which is already possessed. Thus, "Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh (i.e. by holding fast) "will I make a pillar in the temple of my God," etc. The encouragement to hold fast, the reader will mark, is the Lord's coming. "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast," etc.

Another thing is obvious. The need of the exhortation sprung and springs from the fact that there was a danger of losing the precious heritage which had been entrusted to them. Hence to retain the truth would involve conflict, as it has ever done all down the line of the history of the Church until the present moment, and as it will increasingly do until the Lord descends from heaven to gather His own into His presence for ever.

Will our readers therefore suffer the word of exhortation? The conviction has been forced upon us, and it is deepened daily, that the one important thing, the one incumbent responsibility at the present moment, is to "hold that fast which we have." With some — as the saints in Sardis for example — the first duty is to recover that which they have lost; for pulpits from which once were proclaimed the doctrines of grace and the all-sufficiency of the Scriptures are now filled, in many cases, with the advocates of a rationalistic infidelity or of Romish superstitions. Many, on the other hand, and ourselves amongst the number, can thank God that they have hitherto been preserved from the desolating influences of evil doctrine. Our danger is of a subtler kind. It is not open enemies that we have to dread; every true soldier of the faith delights in warfare with such. Our foes are rather they of our own household — foes therefore in the garb of friends — those who stand by and permit the truth to be frittered away. It cannot indeed be denied that truths

which, when first recovered and proclaimed, were used of God to rouse thousands of His people out of their slumbers, and which encouraged many to forsake all they held dear for the joy of fuller communion with the mind of the Lord, and for the still deeper joy of a more intimate knowledge of Himself, are now either loosely held — held in a way that involves no reproach, no cross — or being tacitly surrendered.

If this tendency increases, the question of Pilate may again be heard, "What is truth?" The truth is Christ, every part of it being but a ray of the glory that shines from His glorified face at the right hand of God. To hold fast that which we have therefore is to hold fast the truth of all that He is in His person, in His work, in His union with His people, in His headship of the body, in all the relationships into which He, in grace, has entered with His own in all the offices which He condescends to fill, and, in a word, in all His divine unfoldings in the precepts He has given to His people. Well then may He challenge us to hold that fast which we have, because it is in reality fidelity to Himself which is thus enjoined. Who of us is willing, by the grace of God, to respond to His appeal? To do so must, we again remind you, involve conflict. Take, for example, the truest Philadelphian the Church has ever seen - the apostle Paul. Was there ever a moment in his history after his conversion when he could rest from warfare, and from warfare for the truth with those who bore the name of Christ equally with himself? At Antioch he was utterly alone: Barnabas for the moment forsook him, and Peter was the chief adversary, so that Paul had to withstand him to the face. (Gal. 2.) What a temptation it must have been to a tender heart like that of Paul's to have yielded the point in charity for the sake of peace! If he had, what would have been the consequence? This we cannot tell; but it is certain that at that moment the maintenance of the truth of God depended entirely on the fidelity of Paul. He was the only one in that Church at Antioch who held that fast which he had; and if he had let the standard fall, what other hand was there to grasp, and to raise it aloft once again, and to lead on to victory? Nor is this a solitary example. Again and again, in times of danger and controversy, he is found alone, and solely because he would not, through the mercy of God, sacrifice one iota of the sacred deposit which the Lord Himself had committed to his charge. So now in proportion to our fidelity we shall be alone; and it may yet again become true, as the prophet declares, that he that departeth from evil will be accounted mad. (Isa. 59: 15, marginal rendering.)

Do we then advocate controversy? Nothing is more withering to the soul — for it is a deadly poison — than controversy, as usually understood. No; what we plead for is a full ministration of Christ, and faithfulness in the defence of the whole truth of Christ. But even if the truth is held and defended apart from Christ, it is of no value, rather an immense damage to the soul. Hence none but those who are walking in communion with a living Christ can hold that fast which they have, in the sense of this scripture; for no keenness of intellect, no argumentative power, will avail in this battle; nothing but the word of God wielded in the power of the Holy Ghost. On this account the exhortation is prefaced by the announcement, "Behold, I come quickly." The Lord would thus have His soldiers fight as momentarily expecting to see Him face to face. A hymn puts the question

"Shall we of the way be weary,

When we see the Master's face?"

In like manner, who could tire in the conflict for Christ and His truth, when our hearts are cheered and warmed by the expectation of being caught away from the midst of the strife to meet the Lord in the air?

One caution is necessary. If as the days grow darker, and the characteristics of the perilous times are more and more manifested, conflict for the truth should, as it must, become hotter and hotter, let us with all the more diligence keep our hearts. We must cherish constant and tender affection for all the saints of God, and this can only be done as long as our hearts are in communion with the heart of Christ. If conflict makes us hard or severe, we must unsparingly judge ourselves. Like Israel in the land under Joshua, after every battle we must return to Gilgal, so that in all our warfare only the weapons of the Spirit of God may be employed. (See 2 Cor. 11: 6.)

May the Lord Himself raise up and qualify many who shall be faithful standard-bearers for Him and His truth in this day of confusion and error! E. D.