

Truth is the Test

From notes of an address on the Second and Third Epistles of John, by F. B. Hole.

(Extracted from Scripture Truth Vol. 39, 1956-8, page 17.)

One can hardly read these two short epistles without being struck by the number of times that the Apostle John uses the word, "Truth." If I remember rightly it occurs five times in the Second Epistle and six times in the Third.

In the first chapter of his Gospel he tells us that, "the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." Of course God had shown forbearance and grace in Old Testament times, for He ever was a gracious God, and proclaimed Himself to be such. Again, many things that were true and real were made known to Israel through Moses, but when it comes to the absolute thing we have to turn to Christ. In Him the grace of God was fully revealed and the truth of God fully manifested. Many true things were made known in the law, but reality itself shone forth in Christ. In Him the revelation of both was complete.

Doubtless we have all discovered that we are living in a world that is very unreal. Again and again we find something that is imitation ousting the genuine article. This is what characterizes particularly the age in which we are living. Man is very clever and inventive and we discover things are not just what they profess to be, and there is a great element of unreality. Pontius Pilate recognized this, for as a Roman judge he was continually concerned with the crookedness of human life.

You remember his famous question, "What is truth?" But having asked it, he turned his back on the One who was the truth, and went out to the false and fickle world. Not many hours before the Lord Jesus had said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." He is the way to God the Father; He is the truth concerning Him, and the life in which He can be truly known. It is no good talking to your dog about human affairs, for it does not understand them, possessing canine life only, and not human life. So, alas! multitudes around us, being dead in their sins, know not the truth. They only possess the life of Adam, and have not the life which is in Christ Jesus. But in Christ we are introduced into the world of Divine realities.

When the Apostle John wrote these two Epistles he was confronted with that which was imperilling the truth. The adversary was coming in very strongly and that in a twofold way. First of all, men had appeared actively propagating error as to Christ, and if teaching as to Him be falsified, everything is marred, since He is the truth. These first century deceivers were known as "Gnostics," a term derived from the Greek word for knowledge. They claimed to be the knowing ones. The Apostles of our Lord were as to the things of the world, "unlearned and ignorant men," so the Gnostics claimed to be able to lead on to improved and more intellectual teaching. They did not abide in that which was "from the beginning." The word translated, "transgresseth" in 2 John 9, really means "**goes** forward," that is, they claimed to be making an advance on earlier ideas in what they taught. In reality their fancied developments were destructive.

So the Apostle wrote to a certain Christian woman and her children, warning them against these false teachers. They evidently went from house to house, just as they do today. They were to be definitely refused entrance and no fellowship to be accorded to them even in a verbal way. If a woman and even children were to be so uncompromising in their refusal of such fundamental error, such an attitude to the false teacher and his teachings must mark every one of us. Here is practical instruction as to what to do when such men or women come knocking at our doors. Receive them not nor bid them

God speed. I remember one of them coming to my house when I lived in Bath. I certainly did not receive him nor bid him God speed. I resisted him, and very soon he revealed an un-Christian spirit. The wolf threw off the sheep's clothing.

The five references to truth are in the first four verses. Love is in the truth and it circulates amongst all that have known the truth. Having known the truth, they love for the truth's sake, and so truth comes into display; not merely existing in pleasing notions or beautiful words, but expressing itself in love, which is the Divine nature.

Then again of true saints it can be said that the truth "dwelleth in us and shall be with us for ever." In his first Epistle John has told us that "The Spirit is truth" (1 John 5: 6). That being so, the truth dwells in us, since we are indwelt by the Spirit. But also Christ is the truth, and as we shall for ever be in His presence the truth will be with us for ever. In Christ everything is adjusted in its true light. God is fully revealed: man has been fully exposed: God's thoughts and purposes made manifest: all things set in right perspective. Hence grace and mercy reach us from the Father and the Son in truth and love.

One thing more remains, brought out in 3 John 4. The truth that is set before us objectively in Christ, and that dwells in us subjectively by the Spirit is to govern our actions. We are to walk in truth, and walking signifies activity. All our activities, whether in thinking, speaking or doing, are to be governed by truth. If these children of the "elect lady" were so governed, a similar life is incumbent upon all of us. A saint young or old walking in truth is a lovely sight. No wonder John rejoiced greatly when he saw it; and it is equally lovely when it is seen today. We must today, as much as in the first century, protect it by refusing the false doctrine that would destroy it.

But there is a second thing which imperils the truth and that comes to light in 3 John; not the propagation of false doctrine but the rigid maintenance of official status and what is considered to be outward correctness. Of this Diotrephes was a sad example, whereas Gaius, to whom the epistle was addressed, was marked by walking in truth and being a fellow-helper to the truth. As we read this epistle we see again that the truth is of the first importance and everything else is tested and measured by **it**. Gaius walked in truth because the truth was in him, and all this was the source of great joy to the Apostle.

In those days there were men of earnest zeal who went out preaching the word, just as those men of Cyprus and Cyrene did, when the disciples were scattered abroad, as we read in Acts 11: 19-20. Arrived at the place where Gaius lived he received them hospitably and brought them forward on their journey after a godly sort, though he had not previously known them. At the end of 3 John 5 there are not two classes — first, the brethren, and second, strangers. It is rather, "the brethren and to strangers." Gaius did not receive and help these stranger-brethren because he had known them and liked them, but because they were devoted to the Name of Christ, and were separate from the world, not receiving help from that quarter, and because they were publishing the truth.

This latter point is made very plain at the end of 3 John 8. In helping these undistinguished servants of God, Gaius was helping the truth and all of us should do what he did. John does not say we may receive such, if we are so inclined: he says that **we ought** to do so. It is imperative and not optional.

And this emphasises another thing: what is important is not the man but the truth that he brings. There was the tendency then and there is certainly the tendency today, in some quarters at least, to make the man of all importance, so that if he is accredited as "spiritual," what he says must be accepted. The man accredits the message he brings. What we see here is the reverse of this. The message of truth that is brought accredits the man who brings it; just as in the Second epistle the error

that is brought discredits the man who brings it.

The same thought underlies what is said of Demetrius in 3 John 12, since he had not only a good report of all but also "of the truth itself." Note, it is not that he bore witness to the truth, but that the truth bore witness to him. Demetrius was not the standard by which truth was tested. The truth was the standard by which Demetrius was tested; and having been so tested he stood approved.

With poor Diotrephes it was far otherwise. Just why he took so strong a stand against these stranger-brethren and others who received them, and even against John himself, we are not told. It may have been the uprising of clericalism, excessive zeal for imagined points of teaching or procedure, and the like; but what we do know is what underlay his high-handed doings. What was really the matter with the man? He loved to have the pre-eminence among the saints. That great and important "I," that we sometimes speak of, was to the fore. He was out to establish a dominating position for himself.

Like the Apostle we condemn Diotrephes, but let us not forget the fact, which confronts us in Jeremiah 5: 31. In the midst of Israel there was much false teaching and by it the priests acquired a dominating place, but, said the Lord "My people love to have it so." The people wanted their sinful pleasures and were quite content to let the priests do their religious duties for them.

That has been re-enacted in the history of the church, and a forceful modern Diotrephes may be quite welcome, even to saints, if they wish to avoid personal exercise of heart and live easy-going, semi-worldly lives. The fact is that history repeats itself. It does so since human tendencies are always the same. Following Diotrephes, we deny the truth instead of helping it. Great is the truth and ultimately it will prevail. The men who bring us the truth may be open to much criticism as to awkwardness of speech or manner. The truth criticises us.

We are living in days when the truth is being attacked on all hands. Let us remember that Christ is the truth, and as He Himself said to the Father, "Thy word is truth." That truth has reached us in "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3), and let us contend earnestly for it, since it is of priceless value. And may we have grace everyone of us to be so characterized by it that we walk in truth. The eye of the Lord is upon us, and that is what He looks for, as we wait for Him.