

ART. IV.—CHURCH DIFFICULTIES CONSIDERED IN  
THE LIGHT OF THE FIRST EPISTLE OF ST. JOHN.

WE live in very difficult times. The minds of men are in a state of unrest and agitation. There are difficulties both without and within ; difficulties in politics, and difficulties in religion ; difficulties abroad, and difficulties at home ; difficulties outside the Church, and difficulties in the very heart and centre of it. Now, these Church difficulties are often the cause of the greatest perplexity to Christian minds. They harass Christian people more than those in politics. People do not see what they think they ought to see in the Church of God. They meet with grievous errors boldly taught by those who are the Church's officers, and who are sworn to maintain its truth ; and, even amongst those who are faithful to the truth, they are constantly meeting with very sad defects. Now, if we had been led by the Scriptures to expect a perfect Church, consisting only of perfect men, we might well be disturbed by all we see ; for we must all subscribe to the words of David, " I have seen an end of all perfection." We have to consider, therefore, whether this is the teaching of the Scriptures, and examine carefully what is the description there given of the true, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

With this view, let us examine into the first Epistle of John the Apostle. The date of the Epistle is not accurately known, but it is supposed to have been written about the year A.D. 81, and to have been one of the last, if not the last, of the Apostolic Epistles. It may give us, therefore, an insight into the state of the Apostolic church towards the close of the Apostolic government ; and may also teach us important lessons as to the manner in which the Apostles treated the difficulties prevailing in their times. Let us study, first, the difficulties in the days of St. John ; and secondly, the manner in which he treated them.

I. *The difficulties.*

(1.) There were great doctrinal heresies in his day, and these of the most alarming character. They did not merely affect nice points, or refined distinctions, but they struck at the very foundations of the faith. They were cankers on the root of the tree, and were of such a desperate character as to destroy the whole Christianity of the Gospel.

There were some who denied the *Messiahship* of our Blessed Saviour, and actually went so far as to maintain that Jesus was not the Christ, or the Messiah. To these St. John refers in ch. ii. 22 and ch. v. 1.

Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist that denieth the Father and the Son.

Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him.

There were some who denied the *Incarnation*, and maintained that our Blessed Saviour had not really come in the flesh. To these he refers ch. iv. 2, 3, and 2 Epistle 7.<sup>1</sup>

There were others who denied His *Divinity*, and who did not believe in Him as the Son of God. To them he refers ch. iv. 15, and v. 5, 10.

(2.) Here, then, were three great terrible, doctrinal heresies, any one of which was sufficient of itself to destroy the whole foundation of Christianity. But this was not all; for in addition to this there was a terrible and most dangerous heresy in practical life.

The great heretics of those days were called, and, I believe called themselves, Gnostics. According to Bishop Wordsworth, writing on the authority of Irenæus (i. 6, 20), "They alleged that by reason of the spiritual seed in them, and of their superior spiritual knowledge and communion with the light, they were free to act as they chose, and were not polluted thereby, and were not guilty of sin." It was against this terrible, practical heresy that the Apostle aimed the main force of his Epistle. From one end to the other he is occupied in maintaining the practical results of true knowledge, or true light. To take one example, refer to that often misquoted passage in ch. iii. 6, &c.<sup>2</sup> The one object of that passage is to show that if we have a blessed hope in the Lord Jesus the effects must be practical. Throughout the passage the word used is in the present tense, indicating habit. The sixth verse describes two habits in contrast one with each other, the habit of abiding in Him, and the habit of sinning. The word rendered "commit," or "committed," is the same as that employed in John vii. 19: "None of you keepeth the law." So that the whole point of the passage is that when there is a new birth there will be a new life; that he that *doeth* righteousness is righteous, and not merely he that talketh about it, or he that claims to have a certain spiritual knowledge, or *γνωσις*, raising him above the claims of practical conduct; that there is a clear, marked, visible, practical, difference between the sons of God and the sons of the devil; for that in practical and habitual life the one class do right, and the

<sup>1</sup> I would throw out in passing the consideration whether the doctrine of transubstantiation is not a virtual denial of the reality of the manhood of our Lord.

<sup>2</sup> "Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him."

other wrong. So he says, verse 10: "In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness, is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother." The passage, therefore, has not the slightest reference to the theory of the sinless perfection of the believer, but is aimed point-blank at the fatal Gnostic heresy, that if a man had light and knowledge he was raised by them above the claims of practical conduct, so that by virtue of the light that was given him, his practical misconduct would not be sin in him.

Now, I fully admit that we have a great many evils in our dear old Church of England. We have Rationalism and Ritualism, and ever so many other isms perpetually cropping up amongst us, and no one deplotes them more than I do. Could we not all weep fountains of tears at the cruel unfaithfulness by which the dear old Church of England, the faithful old witness for truth, has been disgraced and dishonoured by many of her sons? But is the Church of England now in a worse position than the Church of the Apostles in the days of St. John? I venture to express the strong opinion that our position, instead of being worse, is not nearly so bad. We have heresies taught amongst us, I fully admit. But are they worse than those in the days of St. John? Have we anything worse than the three great denials, that Jesus was the Christ, that Jesus had come in the flesh, and that Jesus was the Son of God? If we were to give up those three great truths, the Messiahship, the humanity, and the divinity of the Lord Jesus, what should we have left? And so again with reference to sin and sinlessness. We have had, I know, strange ideas put forth in modern times; but not worse than those of the Gnostics, though, I must say, apparently very much the same. We learn, therefore, with reference to *difficulty*, that there is nothing new under the sun. There was heresy then, and there is heresy now. There was Gnosticism then, and there is something very like it now. If there is any difference between the year A.D. 82 and 1882, it is rather in favour of the latter date, and it is not for the wise man to be unsettled, alarmed, and panic-stricken, because the old enemy is still at work with his old weapons. For 1800 years he has been using them with all his power, but he has not yet succeeded, and, as I firmly believe, he never will. So we are not to be terrified, as though some new thing had happened to us; but should calmly, peacefully, and hopefully buckle on our armour, and be prepared to contend resolutely for God.

II. Such being the difficulties in the days of St. John, our next business is to consider how he treated them, and so endeavour to learn lessons of practical wisdom as to our own conduct in these difficult times in which we live.

It is very plain that he did not act on the "do nothing" principle, but thought it his duty to contend with all his power for the faith. It was to this sense of active duty that we owe the existence of this Epistle.

Nor did he act on the "run away" principle. He did not say that because heretics had got into the Church therefore he must go out, and so launch forth into empty space, compelled to stand alone because he could find no church in the world in which there was no possibility of the inroad of a heretic. But as a vigorous and well assured witness for Christ he remained where he was, and faithfully contended for the truth.

With this in view, let us rapidly glance over a few points in the Epistle.

(1.) St. John laid down clear, strong, decisive statements of sound doctrine.

He makes the most unqualified statements as to the person of our Blessed Saviour, as to His humanity, ch. iv. 2, and His divinity, ch. iv. 15; while in the opening verse of the first chapter he gives an account of the solid evidence of personal acquaintance on which his convictions rested: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of Life."

He is as clear as possible on the subject of Atonement. He aims straight at the Gnostics, and points out the true safety of the believer. He shows that our safety consists not in a fancied sinlessness, but in the full propitiation through the precious blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. "If we say we have no sin," *i.e.*, in our hearts, "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." "If we say that we have not sinned," *i.e.*, in our practice, "we make him a liar, and the truth is not in us." But "if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins."

He is equally clear respecting the new birth. He did not consider Christian victory to be the exclusive privilege of those who fancy that they have attained to what they call a "higher life;" but he laid down the great broad principle, and laid it down as plainly as words can express it, that wherever there is a real new birth there then is victory, for he says with the utmost decision, "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world" (ch. v. 4).

(2.) He boldly denounced error. In all these matters he laid down a clear basis of solid scriptural truth. But he went further than this, and spoke of error in a manner exceedingly contrary to the fashion of our own day. The modern fashion is to be so liberal as to suppose that those who differ from us on great, essential, clearly revealed truths are right as well as ourselves.

But there was none of that pseudo-liberality to be found in St. John. He was, what the world would call "bigoted" enough to believe that the opposite to truth was falsehood, and he spoke of such falsehood in language that we who are not inspired men should scarcely venture to employ. For example, in ch. ii. 22, he plainly said that whoever denied that Jesus was the Christ was a liar. In ch. iv. 3, he declared that if any one denied the real manhood of the Lord Jesus, he was the spirit of Antichrist. And in ch. v. 10, that if a man did not believe the divine testimony to the Son of God, he thereby made God a liar. This was strong, plain language, and utterly opposed to those modern ideas which appear to imply that men believe in no such thing as distinctive truth.

(3.) The Apostle taught very clearly, as I have already shown, that true knowledge, and true light, must lead to practical conduct. Read the Epistle carefully through with this Gnostic heresy in your mind, and you will find a flood of light thrown on numberless passages, as, for example, such as ch. ii. 29 and iii. 3.<sup>1</sup> But the point to be particularly observed is the standard of this practical conduct. The Gnostics made their own knowledge their standard. They claimed to have light and knowledge, and to be right in all they did according to their own light. But against this most delusive notion St. John aimed his heaviest battery. He showed perfectly clearly that there is only one standard, and that that one standard is not our own light, or our own knowledge, or our own fluctuating attainments, according to which the same thing may be right to-day and wrong to-morrow; but that it is one fixed and unchangeable standard, being nothing else than the *Commandments of God*. Now St. John is often spoken of as the Apostle pre-eminent for spirituality. People tell us, though I utterly differ from them, that St. James is pre-eminent for practical character, and St. John for spiritual life. We must not stop to debate the question. We may accept it as the creed of Christendom. Now what is the teaching of this most spiritual Apostle? of him who was beloved of the Lord, and who undoubtedly taught us more than any other, of the doctrine of mystical and loving union with the Lord Jesus? I venture to reply that there is not one of the Apostles, not St. James, or St. Paul, nor any other, who made such a point, as he does, of the commandments of God as the one standard of practical conduct. It is true that in ch. iii. 3, he teaches that the perfect character of our Blessed Lord is our standard, for he there says: "And every man that hath this hope in Him purifieth himself,

---

<sup>1</sup> "If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him."

even as He is pure." But there is no real difference, for the life of the Lord Jesus was the perfect fulfilling of the law of God. There is not an Apostle who spoke more clearly of the complete propitiation as the one foundation of hope, or of the commandments as the one standard of life and practice.<sup>1</sup> If, therefore, we desire to contend for the faith as he did, we must never accept any lower standard, nor for one moment be content with our own light as our guide. According to St. John, if the commandments of God are broken then there is sin, whatever we may think of it, for "sin is the transgression of the law." And so, on the other hand, if we desire the mind of the Lord Jesus Christ, and if there be real love of God in our hearts, we must not be content to go floating about wherever we may fancy that love leads us; but we must be guided simply by His own revealed will as given in His own inspired word, for there we read, "This is the love of God that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not grievous."

(4.) In dealing with error, he showed very clearly his own confidence in truth. Believers will be powerless against error if they cannot themselves answer the question, "What is truth?"

Our Lord said to His disciples (Luke xii. 29), "Neither be ye of doubtful mind;" and we may all be perfectly certain that so long as there is a doubtful mind in ourselves we shall never be the means of helping others to the assurance of faith. Thus the Epistle of St. John abounds in declarations of his knowledge. The word *γινωσκω*, to know, from which the Gnostics derived their name, occurs not less than twenty-five times in this Epistle, and if you examine your Cruden's Concordance, you will find the words, "We know," occurring no less than sixteen times in these five short chapters. St. John did not say "we feel," or "we think," but "we know." And if my readers look at the character of this knowledge, they will find that it was not merely the result of inspiration, but the consequence of the calm consideration of well-established evidence. According to i. 1, the ear, the eye, and the hands were all called in as witnesses. He had heard the teaching of our Lord; he had witnessed His miracles, and he had handled his risen Saviour; and so, after having weighed the evidence, and thoroughly considered the facts, he was brought to an unchangeable conviction, and might have said, as St. Paul did, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him against that day."

Now, this is the kind of assured trust that we all require in

---

<sup>1</sup> As this may surprise some of my readers, let them turn to one or two passages, ch. ii. 3, 4; iii. 24, v. 3.

these difficult times. We want to learn the lesson which St. Paul taught the Thessalonians (2 Thess. ii. 2), "That ye be not soon shaken in mind or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter, as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand." We want not merely to know the truth, but to know that we know it. We want to be kept in calm repose on the rock, in the full persuasion that the truth is clear, and the evidence for that truth impregnable. We do not want to be driven hither and thither by every wind that bloweth; or to be hurried into wild extravagance by every new fancy that arises. But we do want to be firmly assured that what is written in the Scriptures, that is sufficient, and that what God has revealed, that is infallible; that so we may be able to use the clear language with which this Epistle concludes (v. 18, 19, 20):—

*We know* that whosoever is born of God sinneth not.

*We know* that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness.

*We know* that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

EDWARD HOARE.



#### ART. V.—THE LATER HISTORY OF JERUSALEM.

1. *Coins of the Jews.* By FREDERIC W. MADDEN, M.R.A.S., Member of the Numismatic Society of London, &c. With 279 Woodcuts and a Plate of Alphabets. London: Trübner & Co. 1881.
2. *Le Temple de Jérusalem, Monographie du Haram-es-Chérif, suivie d'un Essai sur la Topographie de la Ville-Sainte.* Par le Cte. MELCHIOR DE VOGUÉ. Paris: Noblet et Baudry. 1864.
3. *Stirring Times; or Records from Jerusalem.* Consular Chronicles from 1853 to 1856. By the late JAMES FINN, M.R.A.S., Her Majesty's Consul for Jerusalem and Palestine from 1849 to 1863. Two vols. London: Kegan Paul & Co. 1878.

**T**HE Biblical interest of Jerusalem is of such paramount importance, it is so sacred, so manifold too and various, comprehending, as it does, both the Old Testament and the New, that very often it is viewed as exhausting the subject. Moreover the destruction of the Holy City by the Romans—in fulfil-