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THE GOSPEL AS A GOSPEL OF WITNESS; THE THREE WITNESSES — 1 JOHN 5:6-10

IT has been said that Apostles and apostolic men were as far as possible removed from common sense, and have no conception of evidence in our acceptation of the word. About this statement there is scarcely even superficial plausibility. Common sense is the measure of ordinary human tact among palpable realities. In relation to human existence it is the balance of the estimative faculties; the instinctive summary of inductions which makes us rightly credulous and rightly incredulous, which teaches us the supreme lesson of life, when to say “yes.” and when to say “no.” Uncommon sense is superhuman tact among no less real, but at present impalpable realities; the spiritual faculty of forming spiritual inductions aright. So St. John, among the three great canons of primary truth with which he closes his Epistle, writes — “we know that the Son of God hath come and is present, and hath given us understanding, that we know Him who is true.” So with evidences. Apostles did not draw them out with the same logical precision, or rather not in the same logical form. Yet they rested their conclusions upon the same abiding principle of evidence, the primary axiom of our entire social life, that there is a degree of human evidence which practically cannot deceive. “If we receive the witness of men.” The form of expression implies that we certainly do.

Peculiar difficulty has been felt in understanding the paragraph. And one portion of it remains difficult after any explanation. But we shall succeed in apprehending it as a whole only upon condition of taking one guiding principle of interpretation with us.

The word witness is St. John’s central thought here. He is determined to beat it into our thoughts by the most unsparing iteration. He repeats it ten times over, as substantive or verb, in six verses. His object is to turn our attention to his Gospel, and to this distinguishing feature of it — its being from beginning to end a Gospel of witness. This witness he declares to be fivefold.

(1) The witness of the Spirit, of which the fourth Gospel is preeminently full.

(2) The witness of the Divine Humanity, of the God-Man, who is not man deified, but God humanified. This verse is no doubt partly polemical, against heretics of the day, who would clip the great picture of the Gospel, and force it into the petty frame of their theory. This is He (the Apostle urges) who came on the stage of the world’s and the Church’s history as the Messiah, under the condition, so to speak, of water and blood; bringing with him, accompanied by, not the water only, but the water and the blood.

Cerinthus separated the Christ, the divine AEon, from Jesus the holy but mortal man. The two, the divine potency and the human existence, met at the waters of Jordan, on the day of the Baptism, when the Christ united himself to Jesus. But the union was brief and unessential. Before the crucifixion, the divine ideal Christ withdrew. The man suffered. The impassible immortal potency was far away in heaven. St. John denies the fortuitous juxtaposition of two accidentally united existences. We worship one Lord Jesus Christ, attested not only by Baptism in Jordan, the witness of water, but by the death on Calvary, the witness of blood. He came by water and blood, as the means by which His office was manifested; but with the water and with the blood, as the sphere in which He exercises that office. When we turn to the Gospel, and look at the pierced side, we read of blood and water, the order of actual history and physiological fact. Here St. John takes the ideal, mystical, sacramental order, water and blood — cleansing and redemption — and the sacraments which perpetually symbolise and convey them. Thus we have Spirit, water, blood. “Three are they who are ever witnessing.” These are three great centres round which St. John’s Gospel turns. These are the three genuine witnesses, the trinity of witness, the shadow of the Trinity in heaven.

(3) Again the fourth Gospel is a Gospel of human witness, a tissue woven out of many lines of human attestation. It records the cries of human souls overheard and noted down at the supreme crisis moment, from the Baptist, Philip, and Nathanael, to the everlasting spontaneous creed of Christendom on its knees before Jesus, the cry of Thomas ever rushing molten from a heart of fire — “My Lord and my God.”

(4) But if we receive, as we assuredly must and do receive, the overpowering and soul-subduing mass of attesting human evidence, how much more must we receive the Divine witness, the witness of God so conspicuously exhibited in the Gospel of St. John! “The witness of God is greater, because this” (even the history in the pages to which he adverts) “is the witness; because” (I say with triumphant reiteration) “He hath witnessed concerning His Son.” This witness of God in the last Gospel is given in four forms — by Scripture, by the Father, by the Son Himself, by His works.

(5) This great volume of witness is consummated and brought home by another; He who not merely coldly assents to the word of Christ, but lifts the whole burden of his belief on to the Son of God, hath the witness in him. That which was logical and external becomes internal and experimental.

In this ever-memorable passage, all know that an interpolation has taken place. The words — “in heaven the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth” — are a gloss. A great sentence of one of the first of critics may well reassure any weak believers who dread the candour of Christian criticism, or suppose that it has impaired the evidence for the great dogma of the Trinity. “If the fourth century knew that text, let it come in, in God’s name; but if that age did not know it, then Arianism in its height was beaten down without the help of that verse; and, let the fact prove as it will, the doctrine is unshaken.” The human material with which they have been clamped should not blind us to the value of the heavenly jewels which seemed to be marred by their earthly setting.

It is constantly said — as we think with considerable misapprehension — that in his Epistle St. John may imply, but does not refer directly to any particular incident in, his Gospel. It is our conviction that St. John very specially includes the Resurrection — the central point of the evidences of Christianity — among the things attested by the witness of men. We propose in another chapter to examine the Resurrection from St. John’s point of view.

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