

THE DOCTRINAL WITNESS OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

THE recent Conference of Church of England Modernists has drawn attention to the Fourth Gospel. In calling it the Fourth Gospel we are not minded to deny that it is the Gospel of St. John, the beloved disciple. Indeed, we should be doing violence to our reason, or our reasons, if we did otherwise than believe it to be the eye-witness and ear-witness of him who leaned on the bosom of the Master. But our chief aim is to denote the historic value of this Gospel which, if it is not the eye-witness of the last years of Jesus was assuredly the eye-witness of the first years of His Church. In both cases it is of supreme value as a witness to that consciousness which has been the unique claim of the Catholic Church.

Two preliminaries will clear a way to the centre of our thesis.

A. The Fourth Gospel is a product of Eastern, not Western Christianity. It is a delicate point of history to decide whether it came from Jerusalem or from Ephesus. In either case its witness to the historic development of the Church can hardly be overrated. If it sprang from Ephesus, it arose out of a Christian consciousness which was definitely the work of St. Paul. If it sprang from Jerusalem, it arose from a Christian consciousness which, at the time of writing, owed little or nothing to St. Peter.

B. The oral instruction which Jesus had given His apostles had its limitations ; although it may well be doubted whether it had the limitations of written instruction. It is clear that human intelligences could not retain in a state of active consciousness all the sayings and doings of some three years, so filled with activity as to leave little time even for food-taking. But the human mind is so constituted that it

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can retain in a state of inactive memory impressions which any passing phenomenon may rouse to activity. Thus even such a passing phenomenon as the scent of a wild-flower may reawaken the memory of such a disparate impression as a song or a friend. It is evident that if Jesus had the design of founding a divine Society and had given instructions to His followers about carrying out this design, His followers could hardly be expected to keep all the details of His plan in a state of active remembrance. If a master entrusts his workman with the setting-up of a complicated machine, he puts it together and again undoes it piece by piece, meanwhile giving his workman directions as to the fitting of each part. At the end of all this fitting-up, undoing, and explaining, the workman has no very explicit remembrance of any one piece or process. But he is confident that in the mere act of piecing the various parts together the master's minute directions will suggest themselves. Something analogous would of necessity happen to the men whom Jesus entrusted with the delicate fitting-up of the Kingdom which was to be of no nation and was to have no end. They could not carry in their minds the explicit remembrance of all He commanded them. But time, with its unfolding needs, would recall what He said, and sometimes the very words of His direction.

It is significant that Our Blessed Lord explicitly taught this doctrine in speaking of the function of His Holy Spirit. "The Paraclete, the Holy Ghost Whom the Father will send in My Name, He will teach you all things, and bring all things to your mind (*ὑπομνήσει*), whatsoever I shall have said to you" (John xiv. 26). This throws light upon the following texts :

Matthew xxvi. 75 : "And Peter remembered (*ἐμνήσθη*) the word of Jesus, which He had said, Before the cock crow, thou wilt deny Me thrice."

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Luke xxiv. 6 : “ Remember (*μνήσθητε*) how He spoke unto you when He was yet in Galilee, 7. Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again. 8. And they remembered (*ἐμνήσθησαν*) His words.”

John ii. 17 : “ And His disciples remembered (*ἐμνήσθησαν*) that it was written.”

John ii. 22 : “ When therefore He was risen again from the dead, His disciples remembered (*ἐμνήσθησαν*) that He had said this.”

John xii. 16 : “ These things His disciples did not know at first : but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered (*ἐμνήσθησαν*) that they had done these things to Him.” (This is a singularly valuable text, showing a period of unconscious memory which was awakened to consciousness by the event.)

Acts xi. 15 : “ And when I ” (i.e. Peter) “ had begun to speak, the Holy Ghost fell upon them, as upon us also in the beginning. 16. And I remembered the word (*ἐμνήσθη δὲ τοῦ ῥήματος*) of the Lord, how He had said, John indeed baptized with water ; but you shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost.” (This is perhaps the most striking passage. It shows how events in the life of the Church recalled to the memory of the Apostles the words and directions of Jesus.)

DIVISIONS OF DOCTRINE

It is clear that the growth of the Church rapidly recalled to the mind of the Apostles the directions for forming the Church which Jesus had given. We may sum these doctrines up under three heads :

I. Sacramental Truth. II. Dogmatic Truth. III. Ethical Truth. Elsewhere we have pointed out that this seems to be the meaning of John xiv. 6 : “ I am the Way (Ethical Truth), the Truth (Dogmatic Truth), and the Life (Sacramental Truth).”

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I—SACRAMENTAL TRUTH

We have called attention (*Theology* : September) to the striking sacramental doctrine of St. John. The earliest years of the Church witnessed a rapid development of the sacramental system. It would be natural that timid souls should demand the assurance that this development was within the intention of Jesus. The Fourth Gospel seemed written to reassure them.

Only a patient study of the series of chapters from the first to the sixth will give the full value to St. John's sacramental doctrine :

- Chapter I. HOLY ORDERS (Calling of the Twelve).
- „ II. MATRIMONY (Marriage Feast at Cana).
- „ III. BAPTISM (CONFIRMATION) (Dialogue with Nicodemus).
- „ IV (V). PENANCE (Dialogue with the Samaritan Woman).
- „ VI. HOLY EUCHARIST (Dialogue with Jews—and Peter).
- „ (XII. 1-8. Extreme Unction ?)

1. According to St. John, it is clear that Jesus chose not only twelve apostles from the people, but chose one apostle, St. Peter, from the Twelve (i. 42). He (Andrew) brought him (Peter) to Jesus. And Jesus, looking upon him, said, "Thou art Simon, the son of Jona : thou shalt be called Cephas, which is interpreted, Peter." Elsewhere (*Our Reasonable Service*, pp. 88, etc.) we have analysed the witness of the Fourth Gospel to the Petrine claims. Indeed, we have ventured to suggest that even if the Fourth Gospel is not of St. John, its witness is hardly less strong. It must ever remain, perhaps, the greatest argument for the claims of St. Peter that within a few years of his death the powerful Eastern Church should have accepted as authentic Christianity a book which singled

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out St. Peter as much from the Apostles as the Apostles were singled out from the rest of the Church.

The Eucharistic doctrine of the sixth chapter is significantly completed by the teaching of the Crucifixion as a Sacrifice. The Church of to-day teaches emphatically that the greatest of the Sacraments, the Holy Eucharist, is also a Sacrifice. Now, with the exception of the phrase, "This is My blood of the New Testament, which shall be shed for many unto remission of sins" (Matt. xxvi. 28 ; cf. Mark xiv. 24 ; Luke xxii. 20), there is no insistence on the sacrificial character of Our Blessed Lord's death on the Cross in the Synoptic Gospels. The Epistle to the Hebrews had insisted on the fact that Jesus was a High Priest. It remained for St. John to add that this Priest was Victim as well as Priest. The beloved disciple had learned this from his first master, the Baptist, who when "he saw Jesus coming to him, saith, Behold the Lamb of God. Behold Him who taketh away the sin of the world." The liturgical development within the Church which colours so deeply the strong imagery of the Apocalypse is responsible for the Fourth Gospel recalling those otherwise unrecorded testimonies to the sacrificial character of the death—and indeed of the life—of Jesus.

II—DOGOMATIC TRUTH

The two great dogmatic doctrines are : A. The Incarnation. B. The Blessed Trinity. St. John's witness to both these doctrines is of supreme value.

A. The Incarnation. Two main doctrines had to be safeguarded : the Divinity (and personality) of the Son. We have elsewhere pointed out (*Our Reasonable Service*—The Logos of St. John) that the Fourth Gospel is essentially written for the Hebrews ; to whom it reveals the fact that in God there is a co-equal and con-substantial Son. To the Hebrew mind " Word of

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God ” would convey the idea of neither con-substantiality nor—what is of greater importance—of personality. To the Hebrews, therefore, the revelation could come only in terms of “ the Son of God.” This is the thesis of the Fourth Gospel.

But the phrase “ Son of God ” would convey no revelation to the Greek mind, saturated as it was with bodily and even incestuous begettings of the gods of polytheism. To the Greek mind it had to be made clear that the Son of God had not a corporeal but an immaterial begetting. The first fourteen verses of the Fourth Gospel are but a Preface in which St. John, the Hebrew, says to the Greeks : “ Son of God = Word of God. Do not interpret Sonship as a corporeal but as an immaterial relation.” It is the necessary preface of a Hebrew Gospel to a Greek world.

B. The second doctrine to be safeguarded in the Incarnation was the humanity of Jesus. It is significant that, though modern rationalistic criticism has seen in the Christ of the Fourth Gospel only a transcendent being who scarcely touches the earth, the facts are so clean contrary that Arianism found in this Gospel its chief foothold amongst the books of the New Testament. No other Gospel gives such perplexing proofs of the humanity of the Logos !

It is only after realizing St. John’s insistence on the humanity of Jesus that we can appreciate his doctrine of Mary, the Mother. It is our own personal opinion, based on texts and arguments too manifold to be set out at length, that no other Evangelist gives St. Peter or the Blessed Virgin the exalted function given by St. John. It is this apostle of the divine, eternal Sonship of the Word who has recognized, as no other Evangelist has recognized, the Mother’s function not merely over the birth (Matt.) and bringing-up (Luke) of Jesus, but over His apostolic life (John ii.) and His sacrificial death (John xix. 26).

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B. The Doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine of the Undivided and Co-equal Three is complete only when it is recognized that the Holy Spirit is a Divine Person distinct and proceeding from the Father and the Son. Had we only the Synoptics, we should know only the function of the Holy Spirit in the hallowing and mission of the Sacred Humanity of Jesus. To St. John alone do we owe the idea that the Holy Spirit was the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, and that He was to be sent by Father and Son alike (John vii. 39—xiv. 16, etc.). This completes the doctrine of the Trinity.

III—ETHICAL TRUTH

It is significant that nowhere is the doctrine of the three Theological Virtues more developed than in St. John's Gospel. His Moral Theology, which deals sympathetically with the forgiveness of adultery (chaps. iv. and viii.), easily ascends to the heights of Mystical Theology (chap. xxi. 15-19). But to speak on this is to touch a theme almost unsuspected by modern students of Mystical Theology.

This bare, undeveloped outline of what is taught in the Fourth Gospel must be of supreme interest to a generation which is realizing that Christianity did not come into the world as a book, but as a Person. Moreover, this Person publicly trained and taught a group of persons, to whom He promised a Spirit which would recall to their minds, in the event, whatever He had said to them. It is surely an astounding thing that within a few years of His dying this Spirit-guided group should have "recalled" all the great principles which are the very essence of a Church claiming to be not merely the Body, but the mouth-piece of the Master.

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