

The Importance of Doctrine

From the Epistle: 1 St. John v. 4. ff.
Book of Common Prayer pp. 170-171

4 For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. 5 Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? 6 This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. 7 For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8 And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. 9 If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. 10 He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. 11 And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.

There is a simplicity and straightforwardness to today's Epistle that flies in the face of that grand distaste for the two "d-words" — "doctrine" and "dogma"— that have been very much out of fashion in Western civilization, even for centuries. In the 1700's and onward, and perhaps in New England especially, those who fancied that enlightened minds had no need of the burden of such unpleasant impositions from the past moved into forms of religion that were much easier to embrace, and more palatable to high sensibilities. So the annoying, impolite, and uncomfortable details associated with the Atonement were rejected in favor of a God who welcomes all, unquestionably and amiably, into the fold, without need of the acknowledgment of sins and repentance from them. This is the seed-ground of Deism and Universalism —retooling God to conform Him to the very nice, proper people that we know ourselves to be. With the addition of the supposed unquestionable witness of science against things supernatural, it seemed to be even easier to cast aside such relics as the forthrightly stated particulars of Christian belief that the Church had always taught and proclaimed.

But what has been the result? Think of a Europe all but bereft of the widespread influence of Christianity. Or of an America in which novel doctrine and practice has sprung up everywhere like vigorous weeds in a garden, crowding out the crops and making the search for the bona fide a very difficult one, indeed. The only certainty left in such a void is that there is no certainty.

Observe today's text, however. It speaks in uncompromising terms. And although we may not like the stricture of correct doctrine, and may be obligated to deal with our human impulse to break all bounds, we, the Church —as well as the culture to which we are called to carry the Gospel— are in desperate need of the confidence of "home truths". So let's begin.

The world, says St. John, is something to be overcome, not embraced. If we do not get the upper hand through our faith, the world surely will get it. The Apostle elsewhere in 1 St. John has defined the world for us:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof... (1 In. 2:15-17)

The world is all of life that goes on merrily, happily, without fear of consequence, in total disregard of the Law of God and even contempt and hatred for it. It is rushing onward away from the light of God into darkness, in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

We escape its fate through believing that Jesus is the Son of God: this Man, Jesus, man though He was, was yet the divine Son of God, whose sacrificial death was sufficient for the removal of all sin. But He does not just appear on the scene without credentials: This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. He was baptized in water by John the Baptist at the commencement of His ministry to prove His willingness to surrender to required ordinances of men, though He needed no cleansing from sin. But His shed blood was payment in visible, hard cash, displayed before the witness of the whole universe, and of all ages, that redemption in full had been accomplished. Water and blood have a way of bringing everything down to an elemental level. No high philosophy here. No room for men to waste time theorizing and pontificating endlessly about this and that. This is the basics.

Nevertheless, *it is the Spirit [also] that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.* Although we deal with hardcore matter in the form of water and blood, we are dealing as well in the realm of the supernatural, that which cannot be seen, measured, or assessed by human means. It is the Spirit of God that interprets the significance of all of the acts of the Son of God. Without the influence of the Spirit, the Gospels remain mere stories with no relevance to the experience of men. The Spirit, given to believers at baptism, bears witness in our hearts and lives to the "innumerable benefits procured unto us" (BCP p. 81) by the saving acts of Christ. The Spirit also supplied us with the Scriptures which are our infallible source of truth.

Next, we are assured that the Blessed Trinity joins in witnessing the Sonship of Christ: *For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.* If God the Father, Himself, offers the most affirmative statement possible about this Man, Jesus Christ, there is no higher court of appeal for testimony to which anyone, anywhere, can turn: *And lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased* (Matt. 3: 17). The Apostle is summoning into that defiant, unbelieving earthly court that would question both the humanity and divinity of Christ, every possible source of evidence on His behalf. There is just too much at stake in determining what one finally believes about Jesus.

The verdict, of course, will come very soon after the presentation of testimony, and the allowance of input from all sides. The court will not remain in session forever, allowing men to go on presenting arguments and counter-arguments. Their stubborn refusal to accept the testimony already offered can be interpreted as nothing other than rejection of the truth:

He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son.

That blessed one —the believer— who bows to the truth and submits himself to it, actually and really becomes indwelled by it, and his heart testifies to its veracity. But the one who rejects it has actually passed judgment on God Himself, and declared Him a *liar*. Think of it: how could it be possible for the created to ever place itself in such a stance with respect to the Creator?!

The Epistle concludes with yet another plainly stated element of Christian doctrine: *And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.* "Here it is," says St. John, "plain and simple. God has indeed granted us that which every human heart desperately longs for: a destiny that will survive the ravages of death and the grave. Ultimate vindication from this vale of tears where our sorrows overtake our joys; where our sins outnumber our acts of selflessness; where unrighteousness, through every available means, whether it be through avarice, or pride, or wanton disregard for what is just and beautiful, always seems to win the day. God hath given to us eternal life, where every noble impulse will find its fulfillment, where every charitable act will receive its just reward. *And this life is in his Son.*"

Without this *eternal life* spoken of, men possess, in essence, merely a life principle that animates their bodies and minds. But this principle cannot bridge the chasm that separates the soul from God in this life, nor deliver it from that greater death which without the grace of eternal life it must ultimately face.

How could this Apostle of Love, as St. John is often called, have stated the case more plainly? It is love that squeezes out of us, on others' behalf, that which we know is in their best interest. It is surely not love that withholds the truth because men judge it to be displeasing and beneath their dignity. The Church has been given the charge to present this truth in our day. But there is a very real sense in which the Church requires great preparation to do so. We must first aim the truth, in full force, against all the darkness in our own lives. We cannot proclaim what we don't live. We must also come to terms with the record of church history, and its present divided state, that have tended to impress the unbelieving world that our doctrine is far more human than divine. These are intensely humbling processes. But humility together with Christian love will serve to put the Church back in that place of bearing the Good News of salvation, a place of hope, wisdom, and guidance that can never be occupied by any other human agency.

Our message is still there, waiting for us to proclaim it.

Lord, make us worthy. Make us able.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.