

*THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS IS THE SPIRIT OF
PROPHECY.*

(REVELATION XIX. 10.)

THE phrase "the testimony of Jesus" occurs six times in the Apocalypse (i. 2, 9; xii. 17; xix. 10 bis; xx. 4), and nowhere else in the New Testament; and commentators are by no means unanimous as to the exact meaning of the words. Some, as Ewald, explaining "the testimony of Jesus" to signify, testimony borne or teaching given by Jesus, the Christian Revelation in fact; others, such as Alford and de Wette, maintaining that the genitive is objective, and means, testimony borne to Jesus by men and angels; while others again, such as Lee, in *The Speaker's Commentary*, think that the phrase is ambiguous and combines equally the subjective and objective aspect of the *μαρτυρία*.

At first sight it would seem as if the strongest arguments were those in favour of the subjective genitive, testimony borne by Jesus. The idea of testimony or witness is a leading one in the Fourth Gospel, and there it is always of witness borne by some one or something. Again, in four of the five passages cited above, the Word or Commandments of God, where, of course, the genitive is always subjective, is conjoined with the testimony of Jesus: "John . . . bare witness of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ" (i. 2). "I . . . was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (i. 9). "Her seed [the woman's], which keep the commandments of God, and hold the testimony of Jesus" (xii. 17). "I saw the souls of them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, and for the word of God" (xx. 4). Moreover, taking the word witness in its narrowest meaning, we find that the demeanour and words of Jesus,

when on His trial, did, as a matter of fact, make a profound impression on the imagination of the Apostolic Church. Years before S. John wrote down the details of that memorable scene where The Truth "bears witness unto the truth," S. Paul, in charging Timothy to "keep the commandment," recalls, as a supreme example of steadfastness, "Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed the good confession" (1 Tim. vi. 13).

And so in the Revelation itself one of the special titles of Jesus Christ is "the faithful witness," "the faithful and true witness" (i. 5; iii. 14), who at the close of the book "testifies the things" recorded by the seer (xxii. 20). Thus is emphasized the fulfilment in Jesus of one of the promised functions of Messiah, "Behold, I have given him for a witness to the peoples" (Isa. lv. 4.).

It may then be regarded as certain that in the mind of S. John the expression "the testimony of Jesus" primarily connoted the witness borne by the Incarnate Son to the world concerning the Father and His gracious dealings with men; but it by no means follows that the other aspect of the phrase, the witness borne by the Church concerning her Divine Master, was absent from his thoughts.

The two indeed are complementary, or rather different methods of regarding the same thing; for the new revelation given by Jesus of the relations of God and man, includes of necessity a revelation of His own Person and Work in the Divine economy; and, we may ask, what is, and always has been, the testimony borne to Jesus by the Church save the lesson learnt from His own lips?

It was stated just now that the exact phrase "the testimony of Jesus" only occurs in the Apocalypse. Yet we find two very similar expressions in S. Paul's Epistles (where, however, *μαρτύριον* is used, not *μαρτυρία*), "The testimony of Christ" and "The testimony of our Lord."

“The testimony of Christ was confirmed in you,” he reminds the Corinthians (1 Cor. i. 6). “Be not ashamed,” he exhorts Timothy, “of the testimony of our Lord” (2 Tim. i. 8).

In both these cases the most suitable meaning is preaching concerning Christ, the objective genitive; and of course this is the meaning which would naturally rise first to the mind of a man actively engaged, as was S. Paul, in evangelization, one who knew that to the Eleven Christ had said, just before His Ascension, “Ye shall be my witnesses . . . unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts i. 8), and who remembered that the same Christ had appointed him a witness of the things wherein he had seen and should see the Lord Jesus (Acts xxvi. 16).

We now turn to the difficult passage which we have selected for elucidation. This is the first occasion on which the writer notes that he fell down before the feet of the angel-interpreter to worship him. And the terms in which the angel declines to accept such worship are very similar in both cases, yet with illuminating variations—

(1) “See thou do it not: I am a fellow-servant with thee, and with thy brethren *that hold the testimony of Jesus*: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (xix. 10).

(2) See thou do it not: I am a fellow-servant with thee, and with thy brethren *the prophets*, and with them which keep the words of this book: worship God (xxii. 9).

It is not easy at first sight to see the connexion between the positive command, “Worship God,” and the reason that follows, “*for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*” This clause has nothing corresponding to it in the later answer of the angel, and yet it is the later answer that supplies an explanation of that which is difficult in the first. When we compare the two replies of the

angel we perceive that "thy brethren that hold the testimony of Jesus" are the same as "thy brethren the prophets," and in this correspondence lies the explanation of the connexion between the command and the reason alleged for it.

It is as if the angel had said: Not only is worship of me unreasonable, inasmuch as thou and I belong to the same order of being, but also thou art a prophet, and therefore thou oughtest to know and be guided by the true spirit of prophecy, and in regard of the object of worship the teaching of the prophets is necessarily determined by the testimony of Jesus. What did Jesus say when the tempter suggested that at the cost of one act of disloyal homage He might gain "all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them"? Jesus then testified, "It is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve."

It can, I think, scarcely be doubted that the testimony against all forms of secondary worship incidentally borne by Jesus on the mount of temptation is alluded to in these words of the angel to S. John. And yet this does not exhaust the significance of these suggestive words. That this is so will appear when we have examined the phrase, "the spirit of prophecy."

Prophecy here refers exclusively to the ministry of the prophets of the apostolic and sub-apostolic Church, in the ranks of whom the writer of the Apocalypse claimed a place. It would be irrelevant here to discuss at length the place that prophets occupied in the apostolic Church. S. Paul places them next to apostles in his enumeration of the degrees of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians xii. and also in Ephesians iv. They were the acknowledged recipients of a special gift from God, rather than members of a regularly ordained ministry, and we can see now that as a distinct order they had no necessary place in the Church after it became definitely separated from Judaism;

for the institution of prophets was that which gave Christianity at the first its right to exist in the Jewish mind. It gave the Church a *locus standi* in the Jewish world.

John the Baptist was not merely the last prophet of the Old Covenant. He revived the conception of prophecy as an actual present day force among men. The example of John the Baptist made men familiar with the prophet as an irregular yet legitimate exponent of spiritual truths in the Mosaic system. It would, I think, convey a completely false idea to say that the leaders of the Church seized on this idea in order to gain recognition from Jews. The thing happened quite naturally, and was not part of an ecclesiastical policy.

The relation of the Catholic Church to the Jewish Synagogue was that of a sucker to the parent-plant. In the case of plants that are propagated by suckers it is necessary that the young plant should continue to draw its nourishment from the parent-stock, remain in fact part of the old plant, until it has put forth its own roots. Then it is necessary that the connexion between the two be severed.

So it was in the beginnings of the Gospel. The Catholic Church from the very outset contained within it germs of development not only of an independent life, but of a life antagonistic to Judaism; and yet for some years, almost for a generation, the Catholic Church was, did not merely seem to be, but was an organization within the confines of Judaism, much as the various religious orders—Jesuits, Franciscans, etc.—enjoy now an independent life within the wide embrace of Romanism.

It was the institution of prophets that gave the Church its *locus standi* in Judaism; for although after the election of the Seven we read that "a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts vi. 7), yet it is evident

that all through the period covered by the Acts the official hierarchy in general were hostile, bitterly hostile, to the new movement. They felt that it was the deadly enemy of their system, and at the same time they could not yet convince the majority of their fellow-citizens that they were right. "Thou seest, brother," says S. James to S. Paul, "how many myriads there are among the Jews of them which have believed; and they are all zealous for the law" (Acts xxi. 20).

This divided allegiance was, of course, bound to come to an end as the Church developed; but it did last for a considerable time, and was doubtless justified in the popular mind by the manifestation of prophetic functions in the Christian Sect or Way.

It is significant that the institution of prophets lingered on in the Churches of Asia Minor, which were notorious for their Jewish proclivities, long after it had ceased to exist as a distinct order elsewhere.

The characteristic function of prophecy has, of course, never ceased in the Christian Church, though we do not now call it by that name. "He that prophesieth," says S. Paul, "speaketh unto men edification, and comfort and consolation" (1 Cor. xiv. 3). The foretelling or forecasting of future events was, as in Old Testament times, a very subordinate and accidental function of the prophet. Moreover, in many cases, though not in all, the inspiration of the prophet needed recognition by the inspiration of those to whom he spoke. "Let the prophets speak by two or three, and let the others discern" (1 Cor. xiv. 29). By this direction S. Paul meant that those who had the gift of "discernings of spirits," though possibly unable themselves to prophesy, should discriminate between the utterances of the prophets, between those which were truly in accordance with the divinely guided mind of the Church, and those of less authoritative nature,

The Church, then, had a test by which true prophecy might be distinguished from false, and it is scarcely doubtful that, however the test might vary in form or fashion from time to time, it depended ultimately upon the Church's belief concerning the Person and Work of Christ our Lord. We have an example of this in the First Epistle of S. John (iv. 1-3). "Beloved," says the Apostle, "believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit which confesseth not Jesus is not of God." When these words were written the Church was being agitated with the Docetic controversy, and the objective reality of the Incarnation was the test-question, the answer to which determined whether one who claimed to be a prophet was worthy of credence on any subject whatsoever affecting the Christian life.

We are now in a position to grasp the other aspect of the words: "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." They do not only mean that the testimony borne by Jesus as regards worship being due to God alone is that which should guide prophecy, but also that genuine Christian prophecy is essentially characterized by its bearing testimony concerning Jesus; as S. Paul reminds the Corinthians, "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. iv. 5).

We touch here a foundation-principle of Christianity. I cannot do better than quote the words of Prebendary Row (*Manual of Christian Evidences*, chap. ii.): "Christianity stands in marked contrast to every human institution, in that its entire system, its inner life, and its sole principle of cohesion are based on the personal history of its

Founder. . . . To this the entire history of man presents nothing parallel. . . . Three great religions, exclusive of Christianity, are now existing in the world . . . viz., Brahminism, Buddhism, and Mohammedanism. Two of these have known founders, whose memories are held in deep veneration by their adherents. Yet the essential principle of each consists in a body of dogmas, and not in a personal history; and their religions would still remain complete and entire if the personal history of their founders were forgotten. . . . But to remove the person of its Founder out of Christianity would be its destruction. Its key-stone would be removed from its arch, and its whole superstructure would collapse."

These words of Prebendary Row express clearly, and by no means too strongly, the great truth that Christ is Christianity. Christianity has sacred writings, a theology, and an organization, but it *is* not any of these things. It could conceivably exist without them. Without the living indwelling Christ both Bible and Church organization were dead. What Jesus said of His relation to His disciples has the widest possible application: "Apart from me ye can do nothing."

"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." Any Christian preaching that does not either bear testimony to Jesus directly, or rest and depend on the testimony borne to Him by the Church throughout the ages, is but sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

It would be impossible now to enter upon a discussion of that testimony. What has Jesus been to nineteen centuries of saints? The magnificent hyperbole of the Fourth Gospel would alone adequately answer: "I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written." For the Incarnate Son and Word, who is the Life of the Body of the Catholic Church and the Life of the individual members thereof,

manifests Himself "by divers portions and in divers manners" as the Church advances through the generations, and the individual grows in grace. Lord Houghton's lines partly express the ever growing, deepening, widening of the testimony borne to Jesus by the spirit of Christian prophecy:—

Mohammed's truth lay in a holy book,
Christ's in a sacred life.
So while the world rolls on from change to change,
And realms of thought expand,
The letter stands without expanse or range,
Stiff as a dead man's hand;
While as the life-blood fills the glowing form,
The Spirit Christ has shed
Flows through the ripening ages fresh and warm
More felt than heard or read.

N. J. D. WHITE.