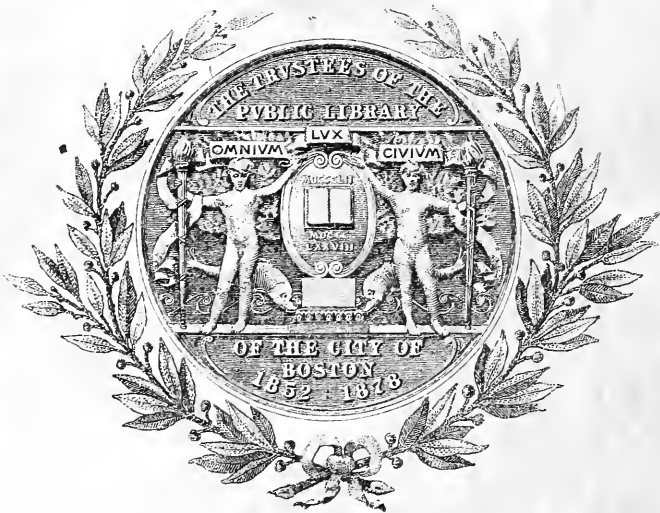


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IS LOYALTY TO TRUTH
ESSENTIAL TO CHURCH
MEMBERSHIP?

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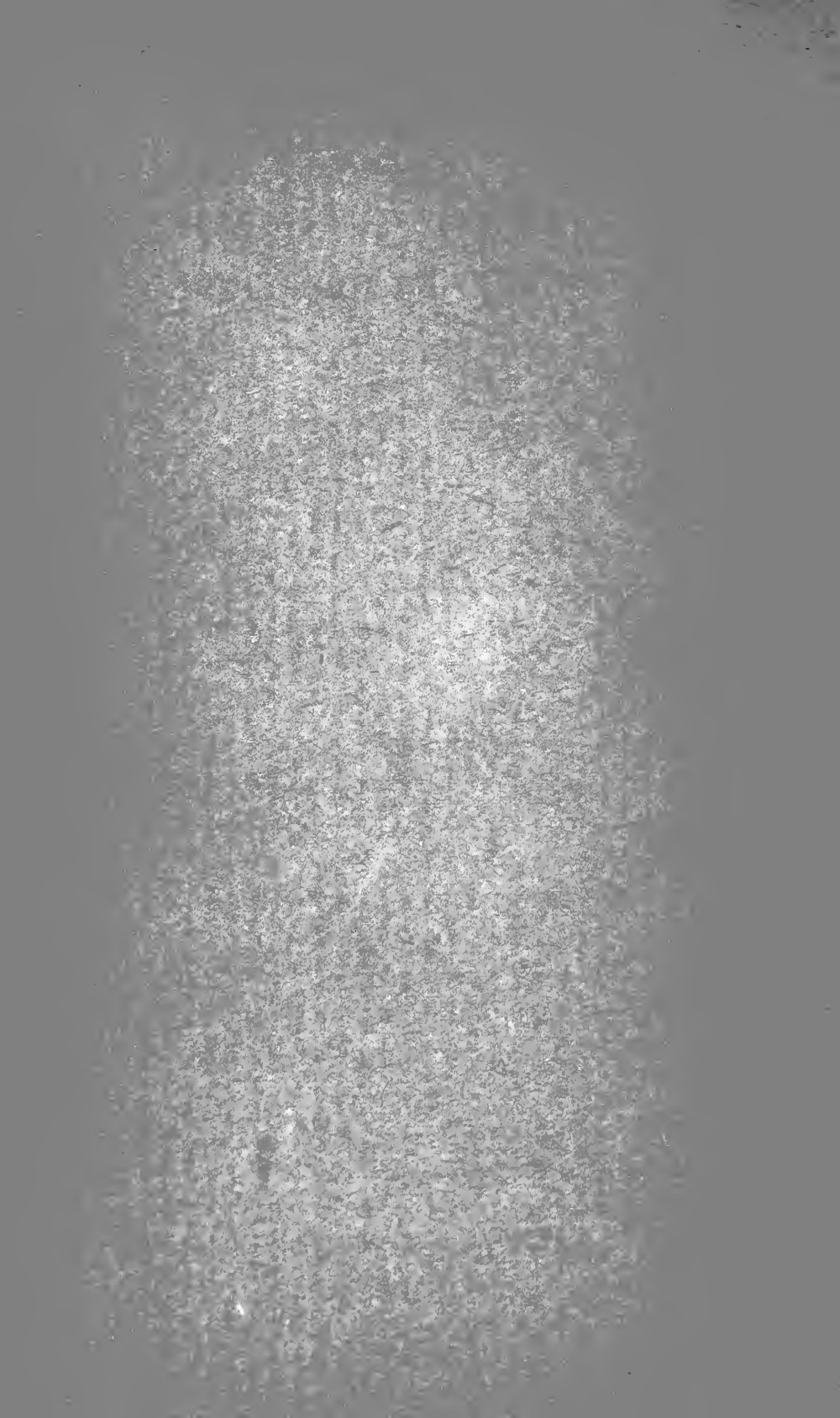
REV. THOMAS VAN NESS.



Second Church in Boston

Founded 1649

Copley Square



Dr. F. H. Brown.

March 10, 1921

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IS LOYALTY TO TRUTH ESSEN- TIAL FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

"Know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free."

John 8:32.

One of the most solemn, one of the most dramatic incidents in human history is that narrated by the Evangelists, where Jesus, a prisoner, charged with treasonable acts and seditious intent, stands before the Roman governor Pilate, to answer for his life. It is no moment for parable or symbolic picture, no fit time for oriental imagery. The representative of the Imperial government, with a practical and hard common sense seldom surpassed, drives straight at his mark and asks his prisoner blunt, direct questions. To them he wants answers equally simple and understandable. Is Jesus attempting to found an earthly kingdom? No. Comes the answer, clear and strong, "for if so, then would my servants fight but now is my kingdom not from hence." Well, then, if Jesus is not attempting to change political conditions, what is he attempting to do, what cause has he at heart?

Breathlessly we await the reply, for so much is dependent upon it. Surely if Jesus feels himself to be a God, no other than the second person of the adorable Trinity, if he has come to earth to die in order that his blood may wash away sin; if the end he has in view is to establish a scheme of

redemption, different from any which up to that time has been known, then he will surely testify to the fact ; he will say, "I am come not simply as Cæsar's rival ; for on my divine side I am myself the very King of Kings and Lord of Lords," or he will assert before Pilate that he left his kingly throne in heaven to come to earth for the very purpose of dying a slave's death in order that all mankind might be set free from sin. Some such answer I say we should expect, if we knew only the prevailing theology of today and were unacquainted with the gospel narrative. As it is, what do we find Jesus saying?

"To this end was I born and for this cause came I into the world, that I might bear witness to the truth."

Some weeks before his trial and crucifixion, at a time when his disciples were plunged into sorrow because of the news that they were soon to lose their master, Jesus turns to them and says, "I will pray the Father and he shall give you another comforter that may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth."

These statements, together with such others as where he recommends to his Jewish compatriots "to know the truth for the truth will make them free" show us, conclusively I think, that the founder of Christianity valued sincerity, truth, that is, the knowledge of things as they actually are, far above mere form, ceremony, ritual or religious service.

Outside of his simple request to his followers to remember him at the passover supper, when they ate the bread and drank the wine, I can find no word in all the gospels which leads me to assert that Jesus instituted anything like a ceremonial ; neither can I find a word which makes me suppose that he taught a doctrine of atonement. He certainly says

nothing about Adam and Eve, or the fall from grace ; does not in any slightest way hint at the doctrine of a Trinity, nor suggest himself as the second person of that Trinity. He nowhere lays down a creed to which it is necessary for his followers to assent before they can become his disciples, and when he sends forth a band of preachers and teachers, he does not, directly or indirectly, hint at Articles of Belief which they must carry with them to the heathen world. Now all this is the statement of the merest truism, yet when we look around at the Christian Church as at present constituted we find, strange to say, an adherence to forms, rites and symbols unknown to Jesus himself, and a declaration of belief in certain theological articles which in their essence are as far removed as possible from the simple theistic faith held by the master.

Here, for instance, is one branch of the Church which asserts the actual transformation of bread and wine into the veritable body and blood of Christ ; which goes further and proclaims the destiny of certain human beings to be, after death, eternal and irredeemable torment ; which places Jesus in the Godhead and allows prayers and votive offerings to his earthly mother, and which even assumes authority in cases of sin and promises pardon and indulgence to repentant wrongdoers.

Here is another branch of the Christian Church which holds to the necessity of immersion ; a third affirms the authority of the Bible and the entire perfection thereof, teaching its immediate inspiration by God himself ; a fourth founds its authority on the Apostles' Creed ; a fifth makes

the Nicene creed its test, a sixth the "Westminster Confession," and so through the list of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Greek faiths.

One not acquainted with the facts would suppose that in a matter of so much importance as religion, where the faith accepted is to help or harm a man throughout all his life and count upon his future destiny, the greatest care would be exercised by him before joining a denominational church. Surely one might suppose that minor and unimportant considerations would weigh very little in comparison to the question, "Does this Church stand for the Gospel of Jesus?" or "Do its teachings approach nearest to the truth?" But what do we see on all sides of us? People attending certain churches and giving to them financial support when if you ask them squarely, "Do you believe the doctrines of the Church you are attending?" will answer you, "No, not fully," or they will say, "But you know Lutherans do not believe that any more," or "Presbyterians are not actually required to give assent to the Westminster Catechism," or "Our Methodist Church lets us believe pretty much what we like, and does not ask us to subscribe to the Church formulas."

I have listened to the reasons given by people for preferring one church to another and have remained silent before them from sheer inability to understand their moral point of view. Apparently the truth or falsity of the denominational position does not seem to enter the least into their calculations. One person selects such and such a church because of the music, the choir, the hearty congregational singing. Another likes the liturgy and the form of worship, never asking whether that liturgy embodies the truth or whether the

form of worship is in accord with Christ's explicit teachings. A third has selected a church because it is centrally located, just around the corner, and after all, as he will tell you, "it doesn't make much difference, for one church is about as good as another."

Imagine, if you will, the Apostles in this same happy-go-lucky state of mind. After they separate at Jerusalem James settles down at Jericho and commences to attend a particular synagogue because he is so delighted with the Rabbi or Reader who goes on expounding the Torah and the Mishna, placing stress on fasts and feasts and purifications and washings and the blood atonement of goats and doves and offering of the first fruits, just as though Jesus had never lived and taught a different and more spiritual gospel.

Matthew makes a permanent home in Alexandria and goes to the Egyptian Temple because of the calm stateliness and perfect order of the proceedings. He is pleased with the intoning of the priest and the solemn splendor of the wall decorations ; particularly is he pleased with the worship paid the divine child and mother, the Queen of Heaven, Isis, and the Savior Horus.

Peter, who goes to Rome, is equally enraptured with the Greek service. It is so æsthetic and beautiful. Every small detail is correct and well established. All the most courtly and elegant people of Athens and Corinth attend, and even in Rome and Antioch it is becoming more and more the acknowledged and fashionable thing to be present at the Hellenic service. So Peter, not desiring to identify himself with the little Judaic sect, known by the unpopular name of Nazarene, which has no social standing in Rome, finally gives his allegiance to the Greek gods and is regularly found in his proper place at all the great Temple services.

You smile at this picture and call it far fetched, and yet why is it? I do not see why it was more incumbent on the people of the first century to be true to the Master's teachings than for us of the nineteenth? If the idea of truth, of loyalty enters so little into our preferences today, why, to a greater extent, should it have entered into the preferences of those early disciples? Or put the question the other way, if it seems absurd even to hint at the Apostles being untrue to their leader and guide; if we cannot imagine them so careless and lax in their religious convictions, is it not equally wrong and absurd for us to be so indifferent and careless?

I can well understand how the first Christian services in comparison to the Jewish, Egyptian or Hellenic seemed cold and barren. Here on the one hand were buildings massive and splendid exhibiting in their structure the highest forms of classic art; the liturgies were elaborate, the forms of worship spectacular and impressive. To go out from such a temple and from witnessing such a service, and to go into some crypt, catacomb, or simple room of a house, and see at one end nothing but a plain table upon which was a cross, hideous symbol of law (as though one today should set up in a church the image of a gallows), to hear nothing but the singing and reciting of Hebrew psalms, or merely to listen to an Elder preach, can you imagine a greater contrast?

Push back the dial of time, and how would we have chosen?

* * * * *

As we look over our churches today, we find them in their formal and published utterances giving greater or less assent to such doctrines as total depravity, transubstantia-

tion ; the Triune Godhead ; intercession of saints ; redemption through an atonement ; an eternal Heaven for the redeemed, an eternal darkness for the unredeemed ; and a probationary or purgatorial state for those who do not die in mortal sin.

Are these doctrines true? Do they stand for facts?

Can we go back to the gospels and find any evidence for them in the actual words and teachings of Jesus?

Take the various creeds of Christendom and one and all of them are founded on the same corner stone, on the belief universally held when Protestantism first arose, that some 6000 years ago man was originally created perfect and placed in the Garden of Eden. There, because of disobedience, he fell from his state of perfection and innocence, that is, he became a sinner and as a punishment lost his immortality and was doomed in time to die. Thus, through Adam's transgressions, punishment and death came into the world and God's justice lay heavy on man, but a way of escape was planned, a method of redemption provided. Jehovah's own son left his throne in the heavens above the clouds, came to earth disguised as a Galilean teacher, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell, and on the third day afterwards he arose again from the dead in the veritable flesh body he had while on earth, and ascended up into heaven where he seated himself on the right hand of the Father Almighty to be thereafter known as the Savior of mankind, whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

Now there is not a person in Boston who has not at his disposal the means of knowing that those first chapters in Genesis are purely legendary, that is, that they are not the

record of actual events, but statements of what certain old and poetic writers conceived to be the facts.

Back in 1590 a thoughtful Churchman, by name Acosta, in commenting on the Edenic story of animal and human creation having all taken place in one little corner of the world, said, "who can imagine that in so long a voyage men would take the pains to carry foxes to Peru. Truly it were a thing worth the laughing at to think so. It was sufficient for men driven against their wills by tempest in so long a voyage, to escape with their own lives without busying themselves to carry wolves and foxes and to nourish them at sea."

From Acosta's time, more and more plainly was the absurdity seen of supposing that all animals had been created at one place—in the Garden of Eden—and then afterwards, through the agency of Noah's descendants, been distributed over the earth's surface. In the same way it soon became equally evident that death had been in the world long before Adam's time; for animal remains and skeletons were found deposited far down in the earth's strata and these must have been there thousands of years before Adam ever lived; then, too, as further confirmation of the great age of the world, scientists unearthed the skeletons of prehistoric man and anthropologists showed the gradual development of the human hand and of the human cranium. Archæologists demonstrated the slow development of towns and cities; historians traced the rise and growth of clans, communities, and states. Philologists proved the gradual evolution of language, which far from starting as a complex and involved system began away back on the confines of the

animal kingdom in cries and shrieks little better than those of beasts, and through ages and ages attained unto the beauty of form and grammatical construction of the Greek or Hebrew tongue.

Thus in every department of human knowledge has the old time basis of theolgy been disproved ; in multitudinous ways has it been shown beyond the possibility of doubt that man instead of starting perfect either in physical structure, mind, or spirit, started much as the child starts today, and has grown up and out from infancy and animality into the intellectual and exalted creature which he is.

No Harvard professor who would teach otherwise would for a moment be tolerated at Cambridge ; no intelligent man in the company of his peers would maintain otherwise ; no text book used in school or college, on geology, anthropology, archæology, philology, or sociology, states otherwise, and yet, scarcely believeable does it seem, our churches, that is, the majority of them, go on preaching and teaching as though nothing at all had happened in the years since Luther's day to disprove entirely the whole scheme of special creation, of man's fall from grace, and his need of being saved from the consequences of that fall. As Mr. Savage once said, "There are thousands of men all over the United States who are supporting evangelical churches, who scout the very idea of their believing in the fall of man, but they take pews and let their wives and children sit there, maintaining a scheme and method for delivering people from a catastrophe that never happened."

Can we reconcile such a position with that of the Master's when he stood forth and said, "For this cause came I into the world that I might bear witness to the truth?"

How think you a young man in college reconciles in mind the teachings of his astronomical professor who tells him that the blue of the sky is not the floor of heaven, that this world is a flashing, whirling ball in space to which there is neither up nor down, with the teaching of his creed which asserts that Christ arose from the grave and in bodily form did go up into the heavens. How is the medical student to reconcile the well known facts of waste and repair, the continual change of mortal structure with the opposite statement of a resurrection of the identical body possessed at the time of death, or the further assertion that the body remains intact in the grave until the last trump shall sound, then Jesus shall descend again to earth and judge both the quick and the dead.

Are these church creeds to be taken in a purely figurative sense as embodying what once was literally believed, but what today is outgrown?

Very well, so be it. We can respect them for what they once were, statements of the highest and best knowledge to which men had attained, but if they are that and purely that, then what do men and women mean when each Sunday they arise in Church and in the most open and solemn manner preface the recital of these ancient historic creeds with the words "I BELIEVE."

Do they or do they not so believe? And if the words they utter do not express their present actual beliefs, are they intellectually honest, are they following the precepts and spirit of Jesus in so asserting?

* * * * *

Let us understand one another plainly on this point. I am not finding fault with my neighbor's belief. I am far

from desiring to enter into a controversy with him. My motive, I hope, is far nobler. If in spite of all the thousand and one facts proving the reverse he still prefers to believe that once upon a time God made all the animals of the earth, and man, and placed them in a garden, that this created man, because of eating certain forbidden fruit, was cursed and driven forth from the garden, that thus he lost his birthright to heaven and needed a divine being to restore it to him, that such a divine being was found in the very son of God himself, who came down from an actual heaven right above us, and lived as a mortal upon the earth until he was executed upon a cross, who then, although buried, arose from the grave, took on his man's body and ascended up again into the sky where he sat down on the heavenly throne by the side of his Almighty Father; that from his celestial home he is watching the actions of man, and that by and by he will again descend to earth to pass judgment upon the deeds of all those who are then living and all those who in ages past have lived; I say if this is the real belief of my neighbor, and if he gets consolation from it I have no right to quarrel with him, nor complain. No, far from it. As a good citizen of the United States (which allows fullest freedom and toleration) I ought to do all in my power to make men of differing opinions respect my neighbor's belief, and obtain for him that same sanctity in religious worship which I ask for myself.

The point at issue, however, is a far different one. The question I ask is, "Does the Christian Church of today follow out the command of its Lord and founder and try to ascertain the truth, try to find out things as they actually are?" Does it make the search for truth and the adherence to it the one thing of primary importance? A church

may be a very valuable thing in a community as a philanthropic institution, as a social organization, as an æsthetic impulse. It may do large work for charity, for purer government, for right conditions, for a cleaner, better form of civilization, and yet not be especially committed to the truth. The Mormon Church in Utah did most of these things. It organized crude, ignorant settlers and immigrants into a compact social organism; it turned a desert into a productive land; it built up farms, villages and towns of no mean order, and indeed it would be hard for any Protestant denomination in the West to point to more splendid *practical* results. Yet I scarcely think because of these exterior benefits any one of us would want to give allegiance to the Mormon system of belief.

* * * * *

My words this morning are not addressed especially to Roman Catholics; to Moravians; to Orthodox Greeks; to Lutherans, or Methodists, but they are addressed to those of English stock, descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers, to the children of the sturdy independents, to those who still have something in their blood of that heroic integrity which insisted on loyalty to what was considered true.

If, when this Church was founded, men and women had been so careless of religious convictions, if they had said "It's a matter of no importance what the Church of England teaches, we can still attend the established organization and think what we like;" I say, if this lack of sincerity had then existed, the civilization which we now enjoy in New England, the moral fibre of these six states, would have been impossible. Are not future generations equally

dependent upon us? Will they not revere or despise our memories in just the proportion that we do show steadfast loyalty to what we know is true and right?

* * * * *

Again there comes floating down through the ages that calm and solemn statement, "For this cause came I into the world that I might bear witness to the truth." Again I hear the call, "Follow thou me."

O, may it be given to us to indeed follow his example and bear witness to the truth, though we stand as it were one man over against ten thousand.

The truth as it is in the Infinite God.

The truth of all men being his children.

The truth of his unending revelation, speaking even now to our souls as in the old days he spake to Moses, Elijah, and Paul.

The truth concerning immortality not of body, but of our spirits.

The truth that love shall never lose its own.

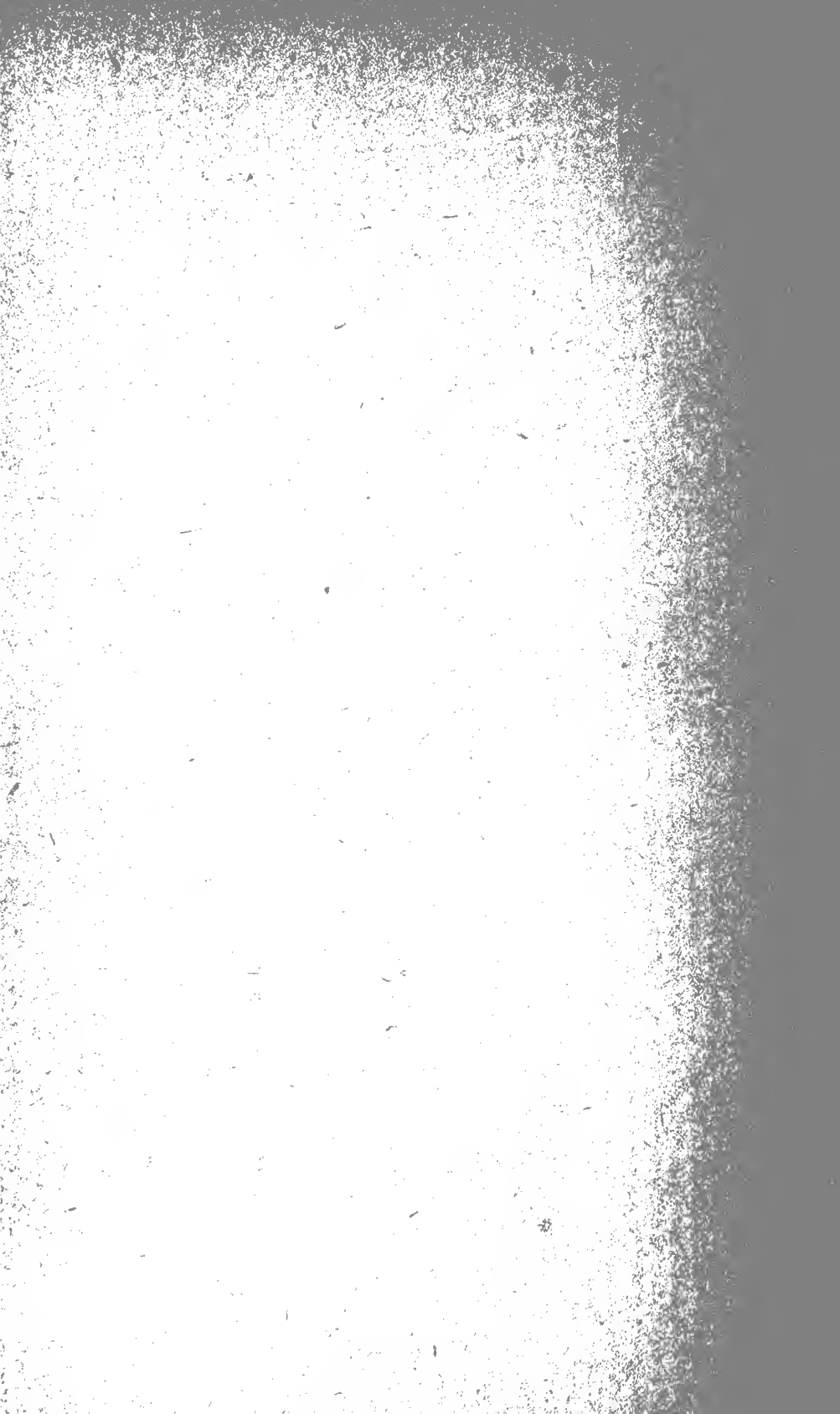
This truth waxes not old. It cannot be changed. It shall abide with us, the Eternal Rock of the Ages, our help, support and comfort through life.

"Comfort" did I say? Yes, for only when you ascertain the truth and are faithful to it do you get real peace of mind.

Give then your lives to following out this Truth, for the Truth seeker is indeed the God seeker.

It may be in these coming days that you shall know disappointment, sorrow, and blighted hopes. It may be that, like a sailor, you will find on life's voyage the daylight fading out and the old religious landmarks vanishing.

But as the wind howls, and the storm enwraps you in its power, sail on, and trust the great ocean of existence. God is there, in the storm as in the calm. He has given for your help the spiritual compass. Its sensitive little needle always points the way and can be trusted. Note its leadings and you may know exactly where you are, in spite of the dark and storm, and whither you are going, and that shall renew your courage. More ; it shall be your comfort until the new day breaks, when sorrow and sighing shall flee away, when there shall be no more pain and when the faithful shall cease from their labors and the weary be at rest.





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