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THE FIRST EPISTLE OF ST. JOHN

Few attentive readers of the First Epistle of St. John will be inclined to believe that if the Fourth Gospel had never been written, it would have been possible to write the Epistle. We may even go further and say that if the Fourth Gospel had never been written, or had been accidentally lost, it would have been impossible to understand the Epistle in anything but a limited sense. Although it is based on presuppositions which run all through the New Testament, the ideas which it contains are nowhere explicitly set out except in the Gospel, and the coincidence in language and thought between the two books is as close as it possibly can be.

It is a meditation on the main themes of the Gospel with some practical conclusions based on them which are set forth in the plainest and most uncompromising language. It is obviously the work of an old man who is quite sure of his own position, and equally sure that his readers will understand his teaching and, in the main, accept it without question. It contains little direct controversy, or formal argument. The Greek in which it is written is simple in the extreme and has an obvious Aramaic tone.

In it all the familiar Johannine topics are present and all the familiar Johannine words—the existence of the Logos from the beginning; His manifestation in the flesh in a form which could be seen with the eyes, gazed upon and handled; the necessity for His death for the salvation of His people; the opposition between Light and Darkness, Truth and Falsehood, God and the World. The fact of sin is perhaps more stressed than it is in the Gospel, but this is easily accounted for by the probable rise of an antinomian spirit, fostered by a perversion of the teaching of St. Paul. An objection has been made that the technical word *ἰλασμός*, which is not found in the Gospel, is used in the Epistle, but this is nothing but a formulation of the saying of Jesus, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends". Christ is represented as the Saviour of the whole world, but this is no more than a repetition of the comment by the Evangelist on the saying of Caiaphas that it was

expedient that one man should die for the people, and of the saying of Jesus that if He was lifted up from the earth, He would draw all men unto Him.

Speaking generally, the doctrinal emphasis of the Epistle is on the Divine Sonship of Jesus, His Messianic character and the reality of the Incarnation. There can be little doubt that the stress which is laid on the doctrine that Christ came in the flesh and that He came not by water only, but by water and blood, is intended to refute an incipient form of Docetism and may even be aimed at the beginnings of the heresy of Marcion.

From a practical point of view emphasis is laid on the duty of keeping the commandments of God and of Christ which, as a reminiscence of a saying in the Synoptic Gospels, are said to be "not grievous". As in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Epistles of St. Paul, the keeping of the Commandments is summed up in love to God and to our neighbour. This duty is enforced and given its compelling motive in the words: "In this was manifested the love of God in us that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." Thus the fullness of Christian doctrine and the whole cycle of Christian duty are for ever united in a few words as they were never united before and as they can never be united so effectively again.

The mystic side of the author's character is displayed in his insistence on the abiding of the believer in God and on the impossibility of a man committing sin so long as his relation to God and His Son continues to be an effective reality. But St. John had too sure an appreciation of fact to be a believer in the actuality of sinless perfection. Although he says that those who abide in God do not sin, and that whosoever is begotten of God does not commit sin, he also makes the uncompromising statements that if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, and that if we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar. Still he can say in one of the most wonderful passages in the New Testament: "Now are we the children of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that if He is manifested, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." It is to be noted that in the two passages in which it is said that he who is begotten of God does

not sin (iii. 9 and v. 18) the Perfect Participle is used, which denotes a final and complete condition, and the same tense is used in ii. 29. This seems to refer to the completion of a process which is now only in its initial stages.

St. John does not deal with the question of the relation of Christians to the Jewish Law. He seems to have had no scruples about ceremonial observances, nor any wish to deal with those who felt such scruples. But perhaps one of his most pregnant thoughts is that Sin is lawlessness, although by this he is undoubtedly referring to the moral Law.

Specific traces of the teaching in the Synoptic Gospels are rare, but there is nothing in the Epistle which contradicts this teaching. We have already noticed the parallelism between the saying, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light", and the brief comment in the Epistle that the commandments of God are not grievous. There is also an echo of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount in the saying that every man who hates his brother is a murderer.

The difficult passage at the end of the Epistle about the distinction between sins which are unto death and those which are not may have been suggested by the teaching concerning the sin against the Holy Spirit. The same idea is found in a more explicit form in Heb. vi. 4-6 and there is an allusion to a wilful sin for which no sacrifice remains in Heb. x. 26. These passages caused much perplexity to the early Church as may be seen from such books as the *Shepherd* of Hermas and from some of the writings of Tertullian.

The so called "Futurist Eschatology" which is so prominent a feature in the Synoptic Gospels and in the early Epistles of St. Paul is hardly referred to. But there is a significant reference to the Day of Judgment and to the Coming of the Lord Jesus. Moreover, the presence of many antichrists and false prophets in the world is noted as a sign that the last days have come.

There is little explicit teaching in the Epistle about the work of the Holy Spirit, which is remarkable in view of the teaching about the coming and work of the Spirit to be found in the Fourth Gospel. But that the Spirit of God exists and works in the Church is clearly stated, and a test is given by means of which the teaching of the true Spirit may be distinguished from that of the false spirits. This test (iv. 2) has a close affinity with the saying of St. Paul that no man can say that Jesus is Lord but

by the Holy Spirit and with the saying of Jesus that it was the Father who had revealed to Peter that He was the Christ. Perhaps it was from a feeling that something was lacking in the theology of the Epistle that prompted some unknown writer to add the words about the Three Heavenly Witnesses which stand in the *Textus Receptus* in v. 7.

In the Epistle Jesus is spoken of as the Paraclete. This does not contradict the teaching of the Gospel where the Spirit is spoken of as *another* Paraclete, but it closely resembles the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews about the Divine Intercessor who has entered in within the veil.

In a word, the Epistle is the kind of book which we should expect to have from the last survivor of the Twelve, who was acquainted with the whole cycle of Christian doctrine, if not with all the writings which now make up the New Testament, although it is possible that he may have known them all.

But he writes, as does the author of the Gospel, as one having authority, who knows what others have written, but who prefers to give his thoughts in his own words with a brevity and point which no other writer has equalled and which can only be compared in this respect with some of the teaching of Jesus recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. He writes as one who knows that the Church has to strive and suffer to preserve its faith and as one who is well aware that it is not a perfect body, although it has in its faith the potentiality of becoming such.

The Author of the Epistle also shows us incidentally what manner of man he was. We lose much by failing to observe the distinctive character of each of the writers of the books of the New Testament. This is partly a result of the idea that prevailed so long that the writers of these books were the passive instruments of the Spirit that inspired them as they wrote. The modern theories which would ascribe the Gospels to some kind of community thinking or to the tendencious compilation of late and unknown authors, and which would regard some of the Epistles as pseudonymous centos of Apostolic teaching, naturally tend to blind us to the personality of their writers. But the man who wrote this Epistle, which displays such an unusual combination of vehemence and severity with sincere love for his readers, is surely very like the John whose character is portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels as one who wished to call down fire from heaven on those who would not receive his

Master and who asked that he might be allowed to sit on the right or left hand of that Master in His Kingdom. His character is also very like that of the man who is said to have fled from the bath when Cerinthus entered it and who yet spent many days in seeking out and finding the young disciple who had fallen into evil ways. He had not had the experience of one who had denied his Lord and been forgiven, like St. Peter, nor had he, like St. Paul, persecuted the Church and so come to regard himself as the chief of sinners. He does not cry out in anguish of soul, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?", nor does he have quite the same human touch as St. Peter where he warns his readers to pass the time of their sojourning here in fear, or explicitly show the same sympathy with those who are enduring a fiery trial, or give the same detailed advice to slaves, to husbands, to wives and to the Elders of the Church. It was not for nothing that Peter was chosen to be the chief of the Apostles and to be the first to preach Christ to the Gentiles.

Peter was a man of wide and deep human feeling, who knew what it was to trust in himself and to fail, to sin and to be forgiven. John knew well enough that sin existed in him as in other men, but he had passed through no such crises, and seems to have been one, at least in his later years, who was more remarkable for deep thought than for administrative action among all manner of people. But the nature of "The Son of Thunder" was still there, and shows itself in the sharp antitheses which he draws between God and the world, between light and darkness, and between sin and obedience to the Law of God.

The writings of such a man, like those of St. Paul, need careful interpretation. One statement in them must be weighed against another, and the similarity between the way in which the facts of life are regarded by him and by some of the Old Testament Prophets must be kept in mind.

The author of the Gospel and Epistle tells us in plain terms why he wrote his books. The Gospel was written in order that its readers might believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing they might have life in His name. The Epistle opens with a solemn asseveration that the Man whom its author and his companions had heard, seen and handled was the Word of Life, who had been eternally from the beginning. But the reasons given for writing the Epistle are practical: first,

that its readers might have fellowship with those who had seen the Incarnate Christ; secondly, that the joy of its author might be fulfilled; thirdly, that the readers of the Epistle might not sin; and fourthly, that they might know that they had eternal life.

If the author of these books intended to produce faith in his readers, it was no academic or theoretical faith in a dogma or a proposition, but faith in a Person, a faith which works by love and which ends in works. It is a faith which overcomes the world, and in this expression is included all that is evil in man's nature, all that keeps him from fellowship with God and from understanding what the Fatherhood of God means to him.

The book begins with the assertion that any man who does not believe that the Christ has come in the flesh is a liar and anti-christ, and ends with the statement that this belief frees a man from sin and leads him to absolute truth. It seems necessary to translate the word *ἀληθινός* which occurs in the last verses of the Epistle by the word "real". We have no other word which so nearly expresses its meaning. "We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding that we may know Him that is real. And we are in him that is real and in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the real God and eternal life."

But what are we to make of the last words of the Epistle which are probably the last words to be added to the New Testament? After the exalted mysticism of the preceding verses it seems an anticlimax to come down to earth and to translate them, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols". There was no duty which the ordinary Christian so resolutely performed as the avoidance of graven images in any form. Even the representation of Christ under anything but a symbolic form was long avoided. It is true that the word *εἶδωλον* means "an idol" in the sense in which we commonly use the word all through the Greek Bible, but it never had this meaning in Classical Greek, where it denotes an appearance. Plato can even say that a dead body is the *εἶδωλον* of the departed spirit—the appearance and not the reality.

It is perhaps not unreasonable to see in this passage which insists so strongly that Christians are in possession of the "real" God a use of this word by way of contrast in the sense of "un-realities". It would seem fitting that the New Testament should end with a warning against the greatest danger that

besets us, namely forgetfulness that the Incarnation and the revelation of God which came to us through it are the only realities, and that all else is no more than appearance. To the natural man the world with "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" and also with its cares, its sorrows and its pain is the great reality. All else is "the great perhaps". Those who never lose sight of the things of sense are called "realists"; those to whom they are of secondary importance are dismissed as idealists. But to St. John, although he begins his Gospel and Epistle with an asseveration that his faith is based on an event which happened in time and space, all these things are appearances. The one reality is God revealed in Christ. This is the real God and eternal life, a life that may be lived here and now.

Surely to imagine that a man who wrote in this way, who is so obviously in earnest and so sure of his readers, founded his belief on visions fashioned out of his personal conviction of how this event ought to have happened, and not on the way in which it did happen, is as great a psychological impossibility as can be imagined. There is no writer who is capable of rising to such heights of spiritual contemplation, and who yet has his feet so firmly planted on earth among the common events of history, such as the birth, teaching, action and death of a man, as the author of the Fourth Gospel and the Epistle of St. John, if we take him at his word. If we do not take him at his word, how are we to account for the most fruitful spiritual truth that the world has ever known springing from falsehood, or at best from a man-made myth, moral teaching which is practical to the verge of bluntness springing from baseless visions, and a long life of devoted service springing from a fictitiously intimate connection with a person whom the devotee had probably hardly seen and whom he certainly idealised to the point of misrepresentation?

Lord Bacon tried to popularise the use of the word "idol" in the sense of a false appearance when he spoke of the "Idols of the Tribe" and the "Idols of the Cave". If any beliefs were ever Idols of the Tribe, or Idols of the Cave, they are certainly the irrational and syncretistic opinions supposed to have haunted the minds of the first generation of Christians which, according to certain critics, were almost the only source of the Four Gospels and of the Fourth Gospel in particular. No precept

could more worthily conclude the Johannine writings and indeed the New Testament as a whole than this which we may perhaps render, "Beware of false appearances". It is a restatement in the language peculiar to its author of the plainer statement of St. Paul that the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are unseen are eternal; and it is also a warning to beware of theoretical methods of getting rid of awkward facts which have no basis in probability, no similarity to any known working of the human mind, and go far beyond all that we know of the capacity of unaided human morality. We live in an age when the things which the Apostle regarded as passing illusions beset us on all sides, and in a world in which we must pay some attention to them, if our physical life is to be preserved. But to regard them as the most important factors in life, or even to regard them as eternal realities, is fatal. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."

The Gospel and the Epistle form a unity. The Gospel is the ground: the Epistle is the inference. The Epistle sets before us not only the good life, but eternal life in the fellowship of God which may be lived here and now: the Gospel shows us that such a life has been lived on earth by one who has made it potentially possible to all His faithful followers. "He that has this hope set on Him ought to walk even as He walked." The Early Church made no mistake when it chose the eagle as the emblem of a man who could soar so high "above the smoke and stir of this dim spot which men call earth", and yet had a starting point and an abiding place firmly established and grounded in the facts of history.

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