

THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN: ITS LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTENT.

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FIRST PAPER.

Nothing can be plainer to one who deeply and candidly studies the First Epistle of John than the fact that it is not an epistle. It is most unfortunate that this misleading title has become so firmly attached to the document; for, on the one hand, no attempt to change it could have the slightest prospect of success, while, on the other, such a name obscures the real nature of the book and has led to no end of misinterpretation. The writing lacks every peculiarity of letter-writing, as one may see by comparing it with the epistles of Paul, genuine letters if any letters were ever written. The literary affinities of John's writings are with the Wisdom literature. With this, the uncanonical books as well as the canonical, the author may be fairly presumed to be well acquainted. These affinities, however, extend only to literary form. In spirit this "epistle" is unmistakably, even aggressively, Christian. The lack of continuity of thought, so perplexing to those who persist in regarding this as epistolary in literary form, becoming appropriate and even characteristic in a composition of the Wisdom order.

This is not put forward as any new discovery. The lack of epistolary features in this writing has always been felt, and has frequently been acknowledged, by Christian scholars who have undertaken to expound it. The difficulty is that they appear to have lacked the courage of their convictions, and could not persuade themselves to treat the book as they felt it should be treated. For example, Dr. Horatio B. Hackett, one of the greatest exegetes that America has produced, in the notes that he used to dictate to his classes, said: "The ideas in the Epistle are not presented with any strict method, but fol-

low each other with a freedom characteristic of a familiar letter." The candid recognition of fact in the first clause is as clear and characteristic of Dr. Hackett, as his inability to break away from traditional conclusions in the second. Bishop Westcott, in his excellent commentary on the book, remarks: "It is extremely difficult to determine with certainty the structure of the Epistle. No single arrangement is able to take account of the complex development of thought which it offers, and of the many connections which exist between its different parts." But after this judicious comment he proceeds to do what he declares to be impossible—he makes an extended "analysis" that purports to show entire continuity of thought.

Dr. Salmond, in the Hastings Bible Dictionary, quite agrees with these distinguished scholars in both particulars. He says of the book: "It has nothing of the formal structure, the systematic course, the dialectical movement of these (the Pauline Epistles) * * * It takes the form of a succession of ideas which seem to have no logical connection, and which fall only now and then into a connected series. They are delivered, not in the way of reasoned statements, but as a series of reflections and declarations given in meditative, aphoristic fashion." That is excellently said; it goes right to the heart of the matter. And yet, will it be believed that, in the very teeth of this, Dr. Salmond proceeds to give us an elaborate "Order of Thought," which fills two closely printed columns, and extends to nearly two thousand words!

All these and other like inconsistencies would disappear in a moment, if eminent scholars would have the courage to treat the book as they declare that it should be treated. We must set aside from the beginning of our study all notion that this is a letter, and look upon the writing as a tractate, a literary production of the Wisdom type, whose distinguishing mark is not continuity of thought, but the very reverse. In other words, we have here a collection of brief Essays or Thoughts, more or less connected through their mutual relations to a general

theme. A brief Prologue states this theme, and an equally brief Epilogue sums up what the writer regards as the chief things established by what he has written. This gives to the collection a quasi-methodical air that it would otherwise not possess.

It would not be correct, however, to say that the book consists of disconnected paragraphs, but the connection of its component parts is rather that of variations on one theme, than the logical nexus that we expect in a letter, still more in a theological discussion. Sometimes the closing sentence of one Thought has obviously suggested the opening sentence of the next; sometimes one paragraph is found to be a development of some idea contained in or germane to a paragraph preceding; sometimes little or no connection between parts can be traced without a too ingenious exegesis; we may even find abrupt and complete transition of thought. Such phrases as "I write unto you," which are not infrequent, and the continual use of endearing address, "little children," "brothers," "beloved," are not at all inconsistent with this view of the literary form of the Epistle. This form of personal appeal is frequent in the Wisdom literature, and is well known to readers of the Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon; but the form of address in the Wisdom literature, "my Son," has been changed to more distinctly Christian salutations. There is as little question that the book was written *for* Christians, as that it was not addressed *to* Christians.

The full meaning and significance of this book can be appreciated, it is believed, only as it is interpreted from the point of view above defined. But there is, of course, an alternative theory of the literary characteristics of this writing, and certain German critics have not hesitated to adopt it—namely, to hold that the author attempted to write a letter, and failed for lack of skill. Baur saw in the book an "indefiniteness" a "tendency to repetition," a want of "logical force," that gives the Epistle "a tone of child-like feebleness." It is, in short,

precisely such an Epistle as John might have been expected to produce in his dotage. But why, one asks, should we demand that every writing be orderly, logical, definite and free from repetitions, on pain of being pronounced childish? It is the dotage of criticism that proposes such a critical test. What would be the result if such a canon were applied to literature outside of the books of the New Testament? Were Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius and Pascal in their dotage, and has the world been wrong all these centuries in accepting their writings as belonging to that small collection of literature that is all pure gold? S. G. Lange also found in the writing the "feebleness of old age," but why should we not rather see in such a criticism the feebleness of the critic? The lack of insight, of literary taste and feeling, shown in such criticisms is pitiful rather than blameworthy; and there has been a plentiful sufficiency of just such inept writing in the productions of Germans famous for their Biblical scholarship and historical learning. One need have no hesitation in saying that the student of this Epistle who cannot feel its unique power, cannot discern its vigor, vividness, originality, freshness, and above all, its spiritual insight, ought by all means to devote himself and his powers to some other pursuit than literary criticism.

Giving to the theory of the literary form and characteristics of the Epistle as above set forth a provisional acceptance, let us study the document in detail, and see what light is thrown on the writing and its meaning.

Prologue 1:1-4.

This is strikingly like, and as strikingly different from, the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel. It introduces us at once to the two fundamental ideas of the writer, which he is here announcing, a Person and a Fact. The Person is here, as in the Gospel, the Word, eternal, source of Life. The Fact is the Incarnation or earthly manifestation of this Revealer of the Father, not stated explicitly, as in the Gospel ("the Word was made flesh") but

implicitly ("the life was manifested.") This fact has a threefold attestation: hearing, sight, touch. Thus early the Apostle makes plain his antagonism to the form of Gnosticism known as Docetism. Jesus was no phantom, but the Word became man and lived a real human life. To this the writer bears personal testimony. And the object of this testimony and announcement is to bring his readers into fellowship with Him, and so into fellowship with God and His Son. In such fellowship is the consummation of the Christian's joy.

The theme of the book is thus plainly stated, and its method foreshadowed. It is to consist of a series of meditations, through which will run these two threads: the new spiritual life that has its source in the eternal Word; and that fellowship with Him which is the highest privilege and joy of believers.

i. *God is Light*—1:5-7.

In the first meditation the Apostle sums up again his whole message. He is not afraid of repetition; he knows how useful, how indispensable, it is to the teacher; but he does not merely repeat, he adds something. His object he has already declared to be the establishing of Christian fellowship on the basis of fellowship with God. But fellowship rests on mutual knowledge, and it is therefore first of all necessary that we should know God. This is the message that makes fellowship possible: God is Light. Light is a higher potency of God's manifestation of Himself than Life. But this does not refer primarily to manifestation; it designates the divine essence, it describes what God is, not what God does. He possesses in fullest perfection and intensity that spiritual nature which may be typified to us by Light. In Him all goodness, all perfection, dwell; He is absolutely pure and glorious. In verse 7 God is described as not only Light, but as "being in the Light"—that is, He radiates light, clothes Himself with it as a garment. God is therefore self-communicating by His very nature, and imparts

Himself to man, and man is able to receive Him. As flower to the sun, so man made in the divine image instinctively turns to God. And as Light, God is also Life, for light is the fundamental and indispensable condition of our existence. Darkness is the negation of light, and signifies the contrary of all that God is, the sphere of life and conduct un-divine, opposed to God.

Revelation of what God is determines man's relations to Him. Hence, says the Apostle, if we claim fellowship with God, and yet our entire life is in a sphere outside of God, opposed to God, we make a claim patently false and we have no connection with the divine fulness of truth. For truth is not only thought but action, not merely speculation but character. I do, therefore I am. A Christian life is impossible where there is no correspondence between profession and moral action, where faith is disjoined from ethics.

And hence, on the other hand, if we live in the sphere of God's character and influence, two results follow. First, Christian fellowship, a common interest and life among believers. True fellowship with God is here represented as coming through, or at least as being proved by fellowship with men, our fellow-believers in Christ. This first result is a result of relationship with others, but there is another, for life in the Light cannot fail to have its effects on him who lives it—he is cleansed from all sin. Not forgiveness of *sins* merely—that the believer receives at the moment he passes from death to life; that is justification—but cleansing from *sin*, sanctification. The verb used here, *katharizei*, is in the present, not the aorist, and hence does not signify an act performed once for all, as in justification, but a continuous process, little by little, as life in the Light continues. Sanctification is here attributed to the blood of Christ, blood and life being generally convertible terms in the Scriptures. No sanctification is conceivable that is not the effect of Christ's power of life working in the believer who lives in the Light.

ii. *Our Advocate*—1:8—2:2.

The mention of sin leads to this new meditation. A question naturally presents itself: How has he that walks in the Light anything more to do with sin? Can he be a Christian and still sin? May he not, should he not, expect perfection? Is he not free from the law, and may he not assert that sin is an accident of conduct, not a principle of life within him? The question is a perplexing one, to which the easiest answer is a general denial. The Antinomian solves the problem at a stroke: the Christian is freed from the law and cannot sin, for without law there is no transgression. No, says the Apostle, this answer is inadmissible. Denial of sin and of the need of cleansing is an evidence that one is not walking in Light but in darkness. We still *have sin*—a phrase peculiarly Johannine, which distinguishes between the sinful principle and the sinful act, which latter he describes by the verb *sin* or *commit sin*. Denial of sin is not merely falling into error, it is entering on an altogether false and godless course of life. We know the assertion to be false, yet persuade ourselves that it is true, and so we lead ourselves astray and the truth cannot be in us as an informing and transforming power. Without consciousness of sin, there can not be even the beginning of the life of truth, much less continuance in it.

If sin thus besets us (cf. Heb. 12:1, "the closely clinging sin") how shall we be rid of it and of its consequences? By confession, says the Apostle. But confession does not relate to sin, rather to sins. The denial is made in the abstract, but the confession is to be made in the concrete; the specific, overt acts of transgression are to be acknowledged, openly, before all men. We are indeed conscious of sin, but we cannot successfully contend against it as a principle or state; we can only oppose its manifestation in specific cases. Hence we can gain deliverance from sin only through forgiveness of sins. This forgiveness is rooted in the character of God;

it is because He is faithful to His promises and righteous that He will not only forgive (that is, remit the consequences of our sins, as a debt owed Him), but will in addition cleanse us from everything that is not in accord with His own character. Both the last verbs are in the aorist; this may be simply the aorist of completed action, the writer looking forward to the end; or it may have been the Apostle's thought that, as the sins confessed are specific, so are the forgiveness and the cleansing.

But a man may recognize the true character and permanence of sin, and yet maintain that he has not sinned. Pelagius taught that some men keep the law of God perfectly and are saved by their obedience. Not so, says the Apostle. Such denial of sin is blasphemous; by it we would degrade God, if that were possible, from the realm of truth into that of falsehood, since we proclaim that He has dealt falsely with all men in treating them all as sinners. The whole of God's revelation assumes sin as a premise, implies that normal relations between God and man have been interrupted. But for this there would have been no need of God's Son coming into the world. By such denial of the thing fundamental in revelation, all possible fellowship with God is destroyed, and His words, as spirit and life, a power laying fast hold on men and transforming them, have no place in our hearts.

I am writing these things to you, continues the Apostle, that you may not sin at all (the verb denotes the single act, not the state). He is not merely warning them against the danger of converting his teaching about forgiveness into license for continuance in sin, but is rather aiming to produce in them the completeness of life in the Light. In spite of abiding sinfulness of nature, their purpose should be not to fall into specific acts of transgression. This is the double goal: cleansing from sin and freedom from sins. Yet it may happen that the Christian will be carried into sins that contradict the tenor of his life; it will be possible therefore to say of him, *hemarte*, he sinned, but not *hamartanei*, he lives in sin. If this has

happened to him who is walking in the Light, let him not despair, for we (note the significant change of pronoun, not the sinner only, but all Christians) have an Advocate, Counsellor, Helper, with the Father. This word Paraclete is the same used by Jesus of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, etc.), but this is not inconsistent with its use here, for everywhere in the New Testament the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Both the humanity and the deity of the Mediator are here recognized in the double name. Two conditions of successful mediatorship are implied by the Apostle, both of which were fulfilled in Jesus Christ: (1) He was fitted for His mediatorial office and work by His character—He is the “righteous” one (corresponding to the “righteous” God of 1:9) who has accomplished perfectly all that is revealed to us of the Father’s nature; (2) the case advocated must be in conformity with the divine righteousness. This was accomplished by His taking away our unrighteousness. He is Himself a propitiation or means of reconciliation with God, in behalf of the sins of all men. He is the high-priestly offering through which sin is expiated. And this expiation is not merely in behalf of Christians, but of the “whole world”—words that have the broadest possible meaning, which it is not possible to restrict by any honest exegesis. If the propitiation does not in fact effect the salvation of all men, the failure is not due to the extent of the propitiation—that is sufficient in worth and dignity to secure the salvation of every man that comes into this world.

iii. *Obedience the Test of Love*—2:3-6.

The Apostle’s general object is to make known the Word, that men may be brought into fellowship with Him. He has just declared the remedy for sin, and now proceeds to point out the signs of its efficacy. How are men to be sure that they know God as Light and Jesus Christ as Advocate and propitiation? What evidence can they give to others that they possess such knowledge? Mere

profession is nothing. We perceive that men know God by this test: they possess character like God's. Knowledge no less than fellowship produces assimilation of character, and so tends to manifest itself in conduct that accords with God's nature. For the commandments are the expression of what God is, and what we must be if we are in fellowship with God who is Light. To profess fellowship with Him and yet not keep His commandments is not only obvious falsehood—there is no correspondence of word to fact—but shows that the whole character is false. Truth is in a man when it is an active principle, regulating his thought and action—this cannot be said of the man whose conduct contradicts his profession. In any man who keeps God's word, not His commandments merely, but the spirit of the law as well as the letter—the love of God has been perfected, because love is the fulfilling of the law. The truth is not merely in him, but has reached its consummation—love is perfect, because obedience is complete. This is true, whether "love of God" is objective or subjective genitive, whether it means the love that God shows us, or the love of which God is the object, or has the still larger sense of the love that is characteristic of God. This divine character in us is not only the proof to others that we love God, and are walking in the Light, but is the test by which we know ourselves to be united to Him. It follows, therefore, that he who professes to abide in God, to be in full and permanent fellowship with Him, must live the Christ-life, not as a necessity laid upon him, but as an obligation that he has voluntarily assumed. Not the mere semblance, but the reality, of godliness must be his. This imitation of Christ is the infallible mark of the Christian—that we follow the Christ-pattern in a life of humiliation, suffering, sacrifice, is proof that we are in union with Him.

iv. *A Commandment New and Old*—ii. 7-11.

The mention of the love of God naturally suggests brotherly love. The Apostle puts his teaching into a

paradox. The commandment is new or old according to the point of view. Brotherly love is no new commandment, because from the beginning of proclaiming the gospel, the word of God to man, love has been the law of life. The gospel is nothing else than a message of love from God, and its end is to make men love God and their fellows. On the other hand, Jesus Himself calls the commandment a new one, because it was given by Him in a new form and with a new sanction, "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" This was a new and stronger incentive to brotherly love; resting on this foundation and enforced by this example, it was indeed a new commandment. While this duty was enjoined by the gospel from the first, the words and works of Christ have become better understood, and so the commandment has been found in more complete accord than was at first perceived with the facts of Christ's life on the one hand, and with the facts of Christian experience on the other.

This love of our fellows, perceived to be characteristic of their Master, must be realized in His followers. It has been brought into the world only through the example of Christ, and it can be attained by us only through fellowship with Him. The paradox is shown to be justified by the change that has been produced through the proclaiming of the gospel of love: Because the power of evil has been broken—it has not yet passed away, but is now in the act of passing, is being drawn aside as a curtain—and the genuine light is shining, the kingdom of God, the reign of righteousness has begun to triumph. But whether a man is still in the darkness or the light, whether he really belongs to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Satan, is a matter about which he may deceive himself. It is in vain for one who hates his brother—not his neighbor, merely, but a fellow-Christian—to profess himself a member of Christ's kingdom. His moral condition is the exact opposite of that which he claims, and doubtless sincerely believes, to be his. On the other hand, he that loves his brother is not merely in

the kingdom of God, but abides there in a condition of stability and certitude. His love is not the cause of his fellowship with God, but the consequence and proof of that fellowship. He will never cause others to fall—on the contrary, his character will be an inspiration and help to them—but lack of love is a prolific source of offences.

Finally, love clarifies the vision, while hate blinds the eyes. To see the truth, light and love are necessary; hatred means loss of the very faculty of seeing, and the life of the hater is one continual stumbling in the dark.

v. *The Writer's Purpose*—ii. 12-14.

The Apostle now states in a different form his purpose in writing these meditations. He puts his thought into six terse sentences, rhythmical in their balanced form—Hebrew poetry, in short—and these naturally fall into two triads. He first addresses all his readers by the affectionate title, “little children,” and declares that he is not teaching the first principles of the Christian faith, for he is writing to those whose sins are forgiven, and know the ground of that forgiveness to be what Christ has done. They have therefore already made considerable progress in the faith, and he is desirous to lead them to maturity (cf. Heb. vi. 1). They have already experienced in part the word of God, they have known something of the blessedness of fellowship with Christ; he purposes exhorting them to continuance in the faith, to attainment of nobler heights of Christian character. He then addresses the two classes into which they may be divided—fathers and youths, the men of experience and the men of action, thinkers and soldiers. Christians are indeed one in the experience of the forgiveness of sins, but their other experiences differ largely with their ages and circumstances. The fathers, or elders, the more mature and thoughtful Christians, have learned to know Christ, Him who has existed from the beginning. This knowledge is conceived as the fruit of past experience and still abiding, not as a process now continuing—the verb

is aorist, not present. The young men, the possessors of soldierly qualities, vigor and bravery, have conquered the Evil One, the prince of the realm of darkness—not that their victory is in fact complete, but it may be so regarded, in view of what they are and of what they have already accomplished.

The second triad is a repetition of the first, but with some significant, if slight, modifications. The most striking of these is perhaps the change from “I am writing” to “I have written,” as if the Apostle would have said, “I am writing to you, yes, I assert it again, that it is for these reasons.” The general address is also slightly changed, and becomes “little ones” instead of “little children,” but more important is the change of reason: I have written to you on the ground of your Christian character and experience, because you have learned to know the Father. They manifest this knowledge by correspondence of character to profession, by exhibition of brotherly love. There is no change in the address to “fathers,” but a very significant addition to the words spoken to young men: “because you are strong” (that is, they are well qualified for active and aggressive service “and God’s word abides in you,” so that they are in contact with the source of strength—in these two facts is to be found the certainty of their victory.

vi. *Love of the World*—ii. 15-17.

The Apostle has given his new-old commandment; he now adds another. “Love not” is as important as “love.” Love determines character; love discloses character; hence the object of love is all-important. Love of the world and love of the Father are absolutely incompatible, for the world is everything that God is not. The “darkness” of i. 5, 6 and ii. 9, 11 is the evil principle, the world is the sphere of its working—both are God’s antithesis. Note the emphasis achieved through the order of the Greek words: “If any one love the world, there exists not (whatever he may say) the love of the Father in

him." All fellowship with God is necessarily destroyed by this love, and the love of which God is both source and object cannot animate and inspire one whose moving principle is love of the world. Because in moral and spiritual things, as well as in physical, no stream rises higher than its source. The things in the world, all that constitute it what it is, do not come from God and hence cannot lead men to God, but keep them in bondage to the world. The desires that have their source in the flesh, and find their satisfaction in physical pleasure; the desires whose gratification constitutes the higher mental pleasures; unregulated mental activity, unrestrained intellectual curiosity; the thousand vices, whether physical or mental, that are rooted in self-assertion, arrogance, pride—these are the "things that are in the world" and make the love of it incompatible with the love of God. Not only so, but the love of the world is as different from the love of God in its end as in its source. The world, the order of things opposed to God, is passing away—like a screen or curtain that hides God from men, it is pushed aside, and those whose love has made them a part of it must vanish also. Only in harmony with God, in fellowship with God, practically evidenced by the doing of His will, is there assurance of permanence. The world is transitory, God is unchanging and eternal. He that does His will, he only, abides forever.

vii. *Antichrist*—ii. 18-28.

And now the Apostle speaks a word of solemn warning to his readers. The "last hour" is at hand—not necessarily the immediate end of all things, the consummation of the age and the final judgment, but a critical period, a time of change and sifting. This is proved by the divisions among Christians themselves, and the consequent temptations to desert the faith and break off fellowship with God. "My little ones," says the writer, addressing his readers with the double authority of age and experience, you have heard that the "last hour" will be pre-

ceded by the coming of Antichrist—not merely an opponent of Christ, but one who takes the place of Christ, becomes His opponent by assuming His guise. Antichrist is therefore he whose character is the negation of all for which the name of Christ stands. But already there are among us many manifestations of this Antichrist; those who, like Judas, have been numbered among the disciples of Christ, and for a time were indistinguishable from them, but were never in real union with Christ, and so were never truly of us. If they had ever been really of our fellowship they would have continued with us—their apostasy shows that their fellowship was but a sham. Now their masks have fallen and they stand revealed in their true characters; and by this disclosure they are shorn of the greater part of their power for evil. But you are not like them, for to you the Holy Spirit has been given and you have a special gift of discernment. This is why I have written to you, because you understand the truth and know the absolute contrariety between falsehood and truth. And who is the liar above all others, if not he who denies that Jesus is the Messiah? It cannot be doubted that here John refers not to the Jew but to the Gnostic, who affirmed that the æon Christ descended on Jesus at His baptism and left Him before the passion, and so denied the indissoluble union of the divine and human in the one personality of Jesus Christ. This, says the Apostle, is to be Antichrist, for to deny the Incarnation leads inevitably to a denial of the eternal oneness of the Father and the Son.

This is no mere abstract dogmatic disputation, but a most practical matter: since God has fully revealed Himself in Christ, and in Him alone, one who refuses to acknowledge Christ as the Son of God of necessity loses knowledge of the Father, even though he professes to revere Him. Conversely, such is the eternal and essential unity and mutual indwelling of Father and Son, that he who acknowledges the Son is thereby brought into vital relations with the Father. Therefore, guard yourselves

from every declension from the truth; hold fast the teaching you have had from the beginning, and you will as a natural and inevitable result abide in fellowship with the Son, and therefore with the Father. And this fellowship, this vital relation to God through His Son, is the promise that He has Himself given you—this is life eternal, the final scope of Christ's redemptive work, the consummation of the Christian faith.

I have written these things, the Apostle concludes, as a warning against those whose aim is to lead you away from the truth, away from God. But you do not need a human teacher, you have only to listen to the Holy Spirit that has been given you, to learn what is true and what is false, and by holding fast to His teachings you shall continue in the divine life and fellowship. So then, in the face of all enemies and temptations, constantly endeavor to maintain your fellowship with God, in order that, when Christ shall come again, we may have the boldness of those who are friends of the Judge, and not the shame of those who are consciously under His condemnation.

Concluded in next number.