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# The Evangelical Quarterly

APRIL 15th, 1946

## THE DISCIPLE WHOM JESUS LOVED

ONE of the many remarkable features of the Fourth Gospel is the emergence towards its close of a mysterious figure described as the Disciple whom Jesus loved. He appears for the first time at the Lord's Table and plays a leading part in the solemn scene of dismay when the shadow of Judas's treachery has fallen upon the devoted company. He appears again as a leader in the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morn; and finally he appears at the memorable scene of Peter's rehabilitation after his painful lapse. He is vouched for as the author of the Gospel or at least as the ultimate authority for its contents. It is not surprising that this enigmatic personage should have aroused the interest of students and lovers of this Gospel; nor that the unanimous voice of tradition from earliest times should have identified him with John the son of Zebedee.

The question of his identity is, of course, of first-rate importance, and scholars have devoted immense labour to its solution. But there is another perhaps minor question that might also closely concern us. What is the meaning of the descriptive title that he gave himself or that was given to him?

In each of the short narratives in which he appears the Anonymous Disciple is found in association with Peter, and is accorded some sort of precedence over Peter: as if he stood nearer to the Master, enjoyed a greater measure of His confidence, or understood better the demands of tense situations. Can it be that we have here a lingering trace of ancient rivalries? We know how, at Corinth, men said, "I am of Paul and I of Cephas and I of Apollos"; each one magnifying the teacher to whom he felt he owed most. What if in Ephesus one said, "I am of Peter", and another said, "I am of John"? And the followers of John sought to maintain the dignity of their master by exalting the Disciple whom Jesus loved alongside of or even above the Disciple whom Jesus had called "The Rock"?

We know, moreover, that rivalries existed among the Twelve even when Jesus was present with them, leading to disputes which they sometimes referred to His arbitration. Which of them would be greatest? Which was most deserving because he had given up most for His sake? Most touching of all, which of them loved Him most? Such emulation, even when it was noble, He must gently rebuke; and in the end Peter, who had been loudest in his claims, had fully learned his lesson. After his fall he can still say, "Thou knowest that I love Thee", but he cannot say, "I love Thee more than these". Among the Disciples of Jesus Christ there can be no self-exaltation or odious comparisons, not even when it is a matter of service to or love of the Lord. This man did not describe himself as the Disciple who loved Jesus. That would have implied merits of his own, if not superior merits, and for such a claim he knows there can be no room in the Christian fellowship.

But—the Disciple whom Jesus loved? True, the Lord is now subject. It is He Who acts. But is there not, even so, some pretension to superiority, as if the Lord of them all had singled him out for His special favour and regard, and given to him alone a greater share of His love? Then indeed the old emulation has returned in a new form. There have been always "Those of John" for whom this is the obvious and natural meaning of the phrase. But what if it should be read in the light of Paul's saying, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief"? Or this, "He loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*"? Then it would mean something entirely different. In describing himself as the Disciple whom Jesus loved he would not be claiming any privilege denied to others and specially reserved for himself, or any private distinction of which he may in any way be proud. On the contrary, he is acknowledging that the only significant thing about him is the fact that Jesus loved him, a plain obvious generality until it is seen in all its glory with the eyes of complete humility.

This is assuredly the right meaning, and it contains one of the hardest lessons in the Christian course. We all have our varied dignities and distinctions, capacities and achievements, and our natural inclination is to maintain them against all comers. We have our different records of loyalty and zeal in the service of our common Lord, and we would not have them made light of. There are many facts about us that we would

fain have duly recognised, and in the struggle for recognition the fact that Jesus loved us pales into a pious platitude. The man who knew himself only as "The Disciple whom Jesus loved" would have us likewise see that this is the one great significant, wondrous, incredible fact about us, beside which all else is but vain-glory. To see this clearly is to attain the higher reaches of the Christian Life.