

it with the general plan of the poem ; and it is linked with what precedes and follows by cantos (viii., and xviii., xix.) that are practically prologue and epilogue.

The song soothes the surface of his pain—

“The lesser griefs that may be said,”

and that hover, like the loud-voiced servants of a bereaved household, round the inner sanctuary, where the children sit—

“Cold in that atmosphere of death.”

And though the deeper grief within is as yet un- stirred, it is made more bearable. The passers-by,

he tells us, sneer at his song. One accuses him of pandering to human weakness, a second of parading his sorrow, a third of indulging it to the neglect of science and politics. Yet he *must* sing, and as we follow him through the second of these beautiful poems, his song of pilgrimage (xxii.—xxvi.), we find that renewed expression has brought him new relief. For he has reached a point at which, as the epilogue (xxvii.) tells us, he feels that memory, though bitter, is yet less bitter than sweet :—

“‘Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.”

Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

BY PROFESSOR THE REV. RICHARD ROTHE, D.D.

CHAPTER IV. 1-6.

‘Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God ; because many false spirits have 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. Every spirit which confesseth not that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God ; and this is the spirit of the Antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it cometh ; and now it is in the world already. Ye are of God, my little children, and have overcome them ; because greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. They are of the world ; therefore speak they what is of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God : he that knoweth God heareth us ; he who is not of God heareth us not. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.’

THE first six verses of this chapter form an episode, the motive of which is very simple. John having pointed his readers to the (supernatural, holy) spirit received from Christ as the infallible sign of their real fellowship with Him, it strikes him forcibly that they might easily make an indiscreet use of this remark to their own destruction. He reflects on the fact that a *false* demoniac spirit is common in the world, more especially in the circle of his readers, and that they may easily be blinded and led astray thereby. In order not to be misunderstood, he accordingly warns them expressly against this spirit of error, and stirs them up to prove the spirits by means of an infallible test, which he indicates to them. In doing so he returns to a theme which has already been discussed in ii. 18-27. Here, however, his remarks (vers. 1-6) form a mere episode ; for he soon returns (ver. 7) to the theme, of which he had just been treating, namely, to the question of brotherly love.

Ver. 1. *The proving of the spirits*, which John demands here, is also required by Paul (1 Cor. xii.

10), who, among the gifts of the Spirit, makes special mention of the discerning of spirits. The spirits mentioned are to be understood of “spiritual gifts,” supernatural manifestations of the Spirit. John thinks in particular of the spirits of the prophets, among which there were so apt to be also spirits of pseudo-prophecy, in accordance with the Lord’s own prophetic word (Matt. xxiv. 11, 24). He accordingly says plainly, *many false prophets* have gone out into the world, thus assigning a reason for the warning and exhortation given in the beginning of the verse. He says *have gone out*, because these false prophets have been sent down to the earth from out of the supermundane world of demoniac spirits.

In those days this warning was specially needed. At the time, when a Christian spirit had just begun to form in the world, it was of special importance that false elements should not be entertained by these bearers of the life of the Church. Later on, the Christian spirit transmitted in Christendom was of itself a definite criterion for the distinguishing between the genuine and the false spirit. But

in those days this criterion had yet to be established. This demand, however, to prove the spirits, is valid for all times. There is always in Christendom a great variety of spirits. Inasmuch as the gospel penetrates into the inmost depths of the spiritual life, it stirs up all the elements thereof, and brings to the light its most varied manifestations, which are in conflict with one another. This conflict of Christian spirits necessitates a proving of the spirits. They cannot all be Christian, for they exclude one another. Even for him, who moves in a limited circle, there is a great diversity of spirits. They appear in his own heart through contact with the gospel; and he dare not trust them simply because they come forth from his own heart. For owing to the radical operation of the gospel there is awakened in us not only the best, but also the worst; and it is a matter of common Christian experience that it is only after our conversion that we begin to contend with many an evil spirit. Hence the necessity of proving the spirits. They must be proved, whether they are of God, not whether they are in themselves full of vitality and vigour. Even among the spirits that are not of God, there are very many which are exceedingly energetic and attractive. The point to be decided is, whether they are of God, whether God can have fellowship with them, whether they are compatible with Him. The richest spiritual life, which should rob us of our God, pervert our thought of Him, and evacuate that thought of its real vitality—in spite of all its richness and energy, such a spiritual life should be rejected. A spiritual culture, which is incompatible with piety, and whose richest blossom consists in the discernment that the Godhead is a nullity, must be false, however splendid it may seem to us, and is not of God. God, however, is the ultimate anchorage of all truth.

John speaks of false prophets, *i.e.* of such as are not opposed to piety, but give themselves out as its servants. Even among such as in point of fact preach piety and seek to labour in its behalf, he distinguishes between false and genuine prophets. He knows, therefore, of a spurious piety and of an enthusiasm for it. He accordingly, in what follows, specifies an unambiguous criterion, whereby the spirit of spurious piety may be recognised.

Ver. 2. Here and in the following verse John specifies the criterion whereby we may know the spirits, whether they are of God. This note is

meant, in the first instance, only for the historical circumstances of that time, and for the definite sphere of the readers of this Epistle. By itself alone it is by no means adequate in every case for the Christian growing of the spirits. We find a similar criterion in 1 Cor. xii. 3. *Jesus Christ* is to be taken as one historical term (as in iii. 23, v. 6); "Christ" is not to be taken as a predicate. *Is come in the flesh* expresses the reality of the historical appearing of the Redeemer, His real humanity (John i. 14; 1 Tim. iii. 16; Rom. i. 3 f.), in opposition to the docetic notion of Him.

Taken in a wider sense, however, this description of the false spirit in the Christian world as Docetism will always be found correct. No spirit is of God which takes up a negative attitude towards the historical, real human appearing of Jesus Christ; whoever does not recognise God, the revelation of God, in the historical Jesus Christ, and is not drawn to this revelation, is not of God. It is all one whether he admits the supernatural, divine side of the Redeemer, and only denies His historical, human reality, or whether he denies also His ideal side. John says the same thing as the Lord Himself has said, namely, that what is in man is manifested in connexion with Him; the godless heart fleeing all contact with Him, whereas the man of godly disposition is drawn towards Him. A speculative recognition of Christ as the Son of God may go hand in hand with a want of sense for the real, human revelation of this eternal, divine Son; and in this case also the apostle does not recognise the spirit which is of God. Accordingly the fundamental heresy in the Church is, that this historical manifestation, which bears the name Jesus Christ, is little appreciated or even denied. Whatever is substituted for this may have a grand sound; but it works harm. That from which the whole activity of salvation in the Christian world proceeds, is the beholding of this human, historical life of Christ. This is the real sanctuary of humanity; and he who attacks this is the real spirit of the Antichrist. To labour, on the other hand, for its elucidation and for its fuller restoration is the proper task of all who work for God in the world with a clear consciousness of what they are doing. He whom the historical Jesus Christ repels has not the spirit which is of God; he whom He attracts has assuredly something of that spirit. Hence, in all periods of the Church's history, those tendencies have been the

most destructive which have more or less expressly proclaimed indifference to the historical Christ, and nothing can grieve the Christian spirit more than to see men labouring in cold blood, or even with joy, at the destruction of this image of Christ which has been set up in the world. On the other hand, a critical study of His historical life is something necessary.

Ver. 3. In accordance with John's usual manner, the thesis, which has just been expressed in an affirmative form, is once more expressed in a negative form. On the clause, "every spirit," etc., Sander remarks admirably that what is spoken of is not primarily the person, but the teaching. So long as we are still conscious of having joy in the historical Christ, so long we may be sure that we are not in the way of Antichrist. On the other hand, indifference to the historical Christ is the most suspicious symptom.

John is not alarmed at seeing an antichristian spirit in Christendom, and still less should it now discourage us. The powers of darkness in the world, which are opposed to the working of God in it, must bestir themselves and stand out prominently. But we should be very careful in branding anything as antichristian; in doing so we should abide by the principle enunciated here by John. Wherever we do not meet with the denial of the historical Christ, we should not speak of an antichristian tendency; nor should we do so when we meet the denial, not of the fact itself, but only of a certain form in which it has hitherto been represented. The spirit of Antichrist does not as yet dwell in any one who feels an interest in retaining the old Jesus Christ in the history of humanity. We should not repel such an one from us, nor separate ourselves from him, but should rather make an attempt to come to an understanding with him.

Ver. 4. While John warns his readers of the danger which threatens them from the side of the heretical false spirits, he by no means seeks to alarm or scare them. He accordingly adds an encouraging statement. They are not to be afraid of these false spirits, nor to let themselves be intimidated by them; for in virtue of the new nature and the new life, which they have received in their birth of God, they already possess the victory over them (ii. 13 f., v. 4 f.; John xvi. 33). It is evident that it seems to him of vast importance that the Christianity of his readers should be of a joyous kind, and that this joyousness depends

upon the Christian, in spite of his humility and contrition, setting a great value upon himself, *i.e.* upon the new life that he has received, which is quite compatible with the keenest consciousness of his own weakness, of the vessel into which this new life has been put. The blending of these moods is the mood which is truly conducive to the Christian's well-being.

Ye have overcome them, *i.e.* the false teachers, namely in principle. It is not to be understood of an overcoming of the false teachers, which has already actually taken place. The ground of this overcoming is found in the fact that God (not exactly the Spirit of God), in virtue of their being begotten of God, is in them, and is greater, *i.e.* stronger, than he that is in the world, *i.e.* the prince of this world, the devil, whose children the antichristian false teachers are (iii. 8 ff.). The change wrought in him by the new birth has really translated the Christian into a divine life and nature. If he is certain of this, he is at the same time assured of his victory over everything that is contrary to God. This state of matters is meanwhile to the Christian an article of faith. If he looks at himself, in comparison with the world and the forces in it, with the natural eye, he certainly cannot seem to himself to be greater than they; and also in his own experience it only too frequently becomes clear to him that he, as the weaker, succumbs to the world. But he should and can believe, not indeed that *he* is stronger than the world, but that the Spirit of God, which is in him, is mightier than the world and its spirit; and, in the consciousness of his own weakness, he should keep this fact constantly before him. It would be fatal self-deception if he were to try to convince himself that he is not weak. But he should clearly distinguish between himself and Him that dwells in him; and in proportion as he acknowledges to himself his own weakness, he should also recognise the invincible power of his God. The hotter his conflict with the world is, he should all the more look away from himself and his own strength; and he should also all the more cleave in faith to the God who dwells in him, and overcome with His aid. Even over against the world the Christian should not conceal this lofty self-consciousness, the consciousness, namely, that he bears in him something which the world cannot possibly overcome; and only when this noble self-consciousness (the consciousness of God) is evident in the whole bearing of the

Christian, will the world cease to misunderstand his humility and contrition, and to look upon them as mere abjectness.

Ver. 5. It is stated here why the power, which is operative in the false teachers, has just been described as "he that is in the world." The reason is, that these false teachers are themselves of the world. In support of this statement, John points to the relation which they assume to the world. The world, he says, at once acknowledges their teaching as its own; and this is manifest from the approval with which it greets them. Seeing they are of the world, their teaching is also the teaching of the world and pleases the world. To John it is exceedingly natural that these false teachers speak what is of the world. He is not surprised to find, that within Christendom something is made out of the gospel, which is directly at variance with its real nature. Having come into the world, the gospel must naturally submit to be interpreted in the sense of the world; and it is very natural that the gospel should find admittance into the world precisely in the corruption of it. In the gospel as thus corrupted the world hears its own echo; and that is what it desires. John here looks at heresy from the point of view of a corruption of the gospel by the carnal mind; and this has been found to be the case throughout the history of the Church. This corruption has different forms, according as it is either the narrow and self-complacent understanding of the world that corrupts it, or the sensual and selfish heart of the world that takes offence at the holy mind and temper of the gospel. Both forms, however, amount to substantially the same thing; and the one can never be without the other. Wherever this worldly spirit can be shown to be the source of a peculiar way of treating the gospel, we have no reason to spare it.

The world heareth them. In the first place, it understands them; and, secondly, it applauds them. That the world only understands a false conception of the gospel, whereby the latter is drawn down into the world's own erroneous sphere of knowledge, is intelligible enough. But that the world is not aware of the contradiction into which such an erroneous way of dealing with the gospel puts the latter with itself is not to be justified. That the world persuades itself that such a sense of the Gospel is the real mind of Christ is a delusion, which it cannot cherish altogether *bonâ*

fide, and for which the world is consequently responsible. That, however, which is most distressing is, that the world finds entire satisfaction in such teaching. It should be wearied with itself, and should feel that it needs a word, which is not worldly in its origin, in order to be delivered from itself. Instead of that, it joys in itself. It is the mark of a small mind to find pleasure in hearing the echo of itself. Every noble mind looks away beyond itself, and seeks something higher, bowing down before it. The Christian especially cannot comprehend this self-satisfaction of the world; and he is consequently mistrustful of every feeling of self-satisfaction that he finds in himself. He has every reason to fear that it springs from some remaining worldly disposition within him. The more he loathes his own old nature, he has the more reason to be satisfied with himself.

Ver. 6. The last remark in ver. 5 leads John to a new way of stating what he has just been asserting as to the criterion of Divine and godless spirits. Just as the worldly spirits must, from the nature of the case, be welcomed with joy by the children of the world, and thus reveal their real character, so it must be also with the spirits which are of God. They that approve the word of those that are of God—*they*, and they only, can know God truly and be of God. Now, however, we Christians are of God (a fact of which we are assured by experience); consequently, he who is of God must approve of us; and only he who approves of us, *i.e.* of our proclamation, our teaching, can be of God. We have, therefore, in the circumstance, whether one approves or not of our word, a sure test whereby to distinguish the spirit of truth from the spirit of error.

When he says "we," John thinks especially of himself and his fellow-witnesses. "Knowing God" and "being of God" are substituted for one another without any explanation. They mutually condition one another; the one is always implied in the other. The "spirit of truth" is the Holy Spirit.

What the apostle says here, every Christian must still say. In proportion as he is born again, he must presume himself to have a clear consciousness as to that which is God's word; he must have the conviction that he speaks in God's name, and he must also judge that the contradiction which he meets with is a contradiction of God Himself. But the Christian must not forget that he has this consciousness and conviction only "in proportion

as he is born again"; and he will accordingly not always regard the object of the contradiction of the world as the word of God itself, but also the imperfect manner in which he knows how to understand and express it. The general principle stated here must be supplemented by the other, that in so far as we are not yet of God we are not known and heard even by those who have a mind for God and are drawn to Him. Our frequent experience of opposition, even on the part of those whom we presume to have susceptibility to our message, should humble us; and we must earnestly examine ourselves in order to see whether the admixture of the old man does not corrupt our proclamation, and in what respect it does so. We must not without more ado apply that test for the distinguishing between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error to our own proclamation of the

Divine word. Still it is true, at all times, of the original apostolic proclamation of the Divine word. He who does not hear the writings of the apostles is assuredly not of God. Wherever in a human mind there is lacking an appreciation of sacred Scripture, and of the grace and truth which stand written on its front, we have every reason to assume a total lack of feeling for the Divine. In proclaiming the Divine word we must continually fall back upon the Scriptures. Only by doing so can we really effect a separation of the spirits by the proclamation of the gospel. We must also occupy ourselves daily with sacred Scripture, because all the experiences which we have as regards the attitude of our own heart towards it are of a thoroughly unambiguous nature. And we must put confidence in the judgment which we have found in Scripture regarding ourselves.

The Gospels and Modern Criticism.

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III.

MR. HALCOMBE claims to have settled the Gospel difficulties by putting St. John first, retaining the other Gospels in the common order, but dissecting and reconstructing St. Luke. He is satisfied that he has succeeded, and points out in proof that any one, after mastering his "constructive principles," could tell at sight from which Gospel any particular section came, without any previous knowledge of the Gospels.

So of old the Ptolemaic astronomers insisted that they must be right in making the earth the centre of the universe, and the sun a satellite revolving round the earth, because they could account on this supposition for all the motions of the heavenly bodies. Their system of cycles and epicycles, processions and recessions, was beautifully complete. Were they not able to predict an eclipse? Moreover the circle was a perfect figure, worthy of the divine perfection of the Creator, incomparably superior to the battered and distorted ellipse.

It is easy to construct a system. If you carefully analyse and arrange the facts, leaving nothing out of consideration and exaggerating nothing, it will be impossible to refute you. The question is,

whether your system is natural, self-evident, and capable of asserting its own truth, or a mass of improbabilities, strung together in defiance of law and habit and ascertained fact.

Copernicus maintained that the sun was the centre of the solar system. Galileo supported him. Kepler discovered the laws of the motions in an ellipse. Newton hit upon the idea of gravity. Gradually an easy and natural explanation of the movements of the heavenly bodies was produced, and the result is that no one now believes in the Ptolemaic system, or if any one occasionally advocates a return to it, he gets no hearing from scientific men.

Mr. Halcombe himself seems to be astonished at the "constructive principles" on which the Evangelists, according to his theory, worked. He admits that no other books were ever composed on such literary rules. To my mind it is a sufficient refutation of his scheme that it would be just as easy and far more natural to adopt Tertullian's order in reality, and put St. Mark last instead of third. Then, at least, we should secure symmetry. We should say that St. John came first and gathered the choicest fruit, St. Matthew reaped