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# AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

PROF. F. F. BRUCE, M.A.\*

## II. Jesus reveals Himself to the World (John 1: 18—12: 50)

(b) MINISTRY OF JESUS IN GALILEE, JERUSALEM AND SAMARIA  
(John 2: 1—4: 42)

iii. *Nicodemus and the New Birth* (2: 23—3: 21)

Ch. 3, v. 16—*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have Eternal Life.*—The dialogue with Nicodemus has come to an end. We are not told its immediate sequel, but from the part that Nicodemus plays later in the Evangelist's narrative we may gather that he had no reason to regret this nocturnal interview with Jesus. It is not the Evangelist's purpose to enlighten our natural curiosity about Nicodemus, but to set forth in terms of universal applicability the lesson that Nicodemus was taught. The Revised Standard Version, I believe, is right in closing the quotation of Jesus' words at the end of v. 15 (although its marginal note indicates that some would continue the quotation to the end of v. 21). Thus far Jesus has been speaking to Nicodemus; now the inspired Evangelist comments on His words, in the paragraph which comprises verses 16—21. Whether the words of this paragraph proceeded from the lips of Jesus or not, they sum up His message and carry the full weight of His authority.

But who is sufficient to expound the words of v. 16, expressing as they do the very heart of the gospel? The love of God is limitless; it embraces all mankind (for such is surely the sense

\* It is a great pleasure to cull the following from *The Christian* recently and we would join in congratulating Prof. Bruce on his new appointment:

'There will be widespread satisfaction among Evangelicals of all denominations at the news that the Council of Sheffield University has appointed Mr F. F. Bruce, Senior Lecturer in charge of the Department of Biblical History and Literature, to the Chair of Biblical History and Literature in the University. Professor Bruce took up this appointment in October. In recent years he has won a place of increasing esteem in Biblical scholarship and as author of numerous volumes, including *The Books of the Acts* in the New London Commentary, his work has become widely appreciated.'

of 'the world' in this verse and the following). No sacrifice was too great to display its measureless intensity; the best that God could give He gave—His only Son, His well-beloved. Nor was it for one nation or group alone that He was given, but for the whole world, that all, without distinction or exception, who repose their faith upon Him, might be rescued from destruction and blessed with the life that is life indeed. The whole work of salvation has its source in the love of God. John wishes to make the essence of the saving message unmistakably clear, in language which men of all races, cultures and times can grasp; and so effectively has He done so that probably far more have found the way of faith in Christ from these words than from any other passage of Scripture.

v. 17—*For God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him.*—John is about to point out that the effect of the advent of the Son of God in the world is division and judgment. But judgment was not the prime purpose for which He came; He came to bring salvation to all. If some refuse His salvation, they inevitably incur judgment; but the responsibility for this cannot be laid at the door of Him who came to be 'the Saviour of the world' (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14). He came in order that men might not perish in unbelief and sin, but how can those who reject His gift of life do other than perish? There is a true universalism here, which may be contrasted with the false universalism espoused by many. It is nowhere suggested in Scripture that God will ultimately save all, whether they will or not; but the implication of this passage is that only those who persistently refuse the salvation brought by Christ will be deprived of it.

v. 18—*He that believeth on Him is not judged.*—The judgment which the Evangelist has in mind is that adverse judgment, that condemnation, which is inherent in the act of turning away from Christ. For those who put their trust in Him there is no such judgment. Justification by faith is as plainly set forth in John's language as in Paul's.

*he that believeth not hath been judged already, because he hath not believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God.*—In a

gallery where masterpieces of art are displayed, it is not the masterpieces but the visitors that are on trial. The works which they view are not there to abide their question, but they reveal their own artistic taste, or their lack of it, by their reactions to what they see. If this is true in the aesthetic realm, it is more solemnly true in the spiritual. The man who depreciates Christ, or thinks Him unworthy of his allegiance, is actually passing judgment on himself, not on Christ. He does not need to wait until the day of judgment; judgment has been passed on him already. There will indeed be a final day of judgment (John 5:26-29); but that day can but confirm the judgment that has been passed already. Those who believe on the name of the Son of God become the children of God, as we have already learned (John 1:12); for those who will not believe there is no alternative but self-incurred judgment.

v. 19—*And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil.*—John now states the essence of this judgment in terms of light and darkness. Christ was the true light shining in the darkness, the light which came into the world for every man. But what if some will not come to the light? What if they actually prefer the darkness? Such an attitude is the sin of all sins—that sin against the Holy Spirit which by its very nature is irremediable, unless it is swiftly repented of. So the coming of the light necessarily resulted in the separation of those who welcomed it from those who shunned it, lest it should expose and put to flight their wicked works.

v. 20—*For every one that doeth ill hateth the light, and cometh not to the light, lest his works should be reprov'd.*—This is a truism in ordinary life; in a well-ordered polity those who practise evil practise it secretly, for they do not wish to be found out and brought to book. So it is too in spiritual affairs.

v. 21—*But he that doeth the truth cometh to the light, that his works may be made manifest, that they have been wrought in God.*—John delights to use contrasting terms—good and evil, love and hatred, life and death, salvation and judgment, light and darkness, truth and falsehood. And of these contrasting pairs,

the positive terms are practically interchangeable—good, love, life, salvation, light and truth. So here, where we might have expected 'he that doeth good' as the correlative of 'every one that doeth ill' in v. 20, we have 'he that doeth the truth'. In the Old Testament 'to do truth' or 'to deal truly' means in effect 'to act honourably' (cf. Gen. 32:10; 47:29; Neh. 9:33). Those whose lives and actions are of this sort have no reason to avoid the light. On the contrary, the light in its highest sense will be their reward. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (Matt. 5:8). Their works are 'wrought in God', says the Evangelist—'in union with Him, and therefore by His power' (Westcott).

John makes no explicit mention here of those who have never had the opportunity of believing in Christ, on whom the light in its fulness has never shone. But his words probably unfold the principle of their judgment too. If men are judged by their response to the light, they are judged by their response to such light as is available to them. All true light is in some sort an effulgence from Him who is the light of the world, even if it be not the full light of His incarnate manifestation. Those who accept the partial light that is available to them will accept the perfect light when it shines on them. Those who refuse the light, in whatever fashion it shines on them, pronounce their own sentence.

It has been suggested by some exegetes (e.g. by G.H.C. Macgregor in his volume on this Gospel in the Moffatt Commentary series) that verses 14 to 21 would find an apter setting if they were moved from their present context to a place in chapter 12. The suggestion is that this whole section should 'be transposed to follow 12:32, 3:14-15 taking the place of 12:33 (which is obviously a gloss), and 3:16-21 being inserted between 12:34 and 12:35-36. By this rearrangement the sequence of chapter 12 is also greatly improved, while 3:14-21, which in its present context has always been felt to end very abruptly and unsympathetically, finds the most appropriate possible climax in 12:35-36'. The whole theory of transpositions in this Gospel rests on very unsure foundations. We cannot be sure that the evangelist would have had the same ideas as we have on logical

sequence and natural transitions. And the way in which the dominant themes of the Gospel constantly recur makes it inevitable that passages in one part will have a close affinity with passages in another part, without demanding a rearrangement of the material so as to bring such related passages together.

(To be continued)

## NEW TESTAMENT WORD STUDIES

W. WILCOX

(SPHRAGIS ; SPHRAGIZO = 'a seal' ; 'to seal'.)

The Apostle Paul on three occasions speaks of the believer as being 'sealed' by the Holy Spirit, using a term frequently employed to indicate the attestation of a fact or the claim to property. Moule commenting on Eph. 1:13 says, 'the idea of the phrase is a double one, attestation of reality (cp. John 3:22; Rom. 4:11; 1 Cor. 9:2) and claim of property (cp. Rom. 15:28). "The Spirit" was at once the proof of the presence of Divine faith in the recipient, and the mark of Divine ownership over him'. Westcott notes that '*sphragis* is used of a visible attestation of the reality of a spiritual fact (1 Cor. 9:2; Rom. 4:11; 2 Tim. 2:19). The "seal" openly marked the servants of God as belonging to Him (2 Cor. 1:22) and assured them of His protection'. 'Here, Eph. 1:13, and in 4:30,' says Salmond, 'the idea seems to be either that of authenticating or certifying them to be of God's heritage, or that of marking them as such'.

Certain interesting features are found in each of the passages where this expression is used of the believer being sealed by the Spirit, which we proceed to examine.

1. *Eph.* 1:13 'In Whom having also believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise'. Note three main points.

(a) The *Sphere*—'in Whom'—every blessing is acknowledged as coming to the believer in that Sphere, in which Christ is seen to be 'the all'—both centre and circumference. 'In Him',