

"Life"—in the First Epistle of St. John.

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IN the Gospel of St. John the author sums up the purpose of his writing as follows: "Many other signs, therefore, did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have Life in His Name" (xx. 30, 31).

An examination of the Gospel shows that St. John carefully chose seven "signs" or miracles performed by Christ, each of which had its part in ultimately securing from the disciples belief in Christ as the Son of God. The climax was reached in the Upper Room, as related in chapter xx., when there fell from the lips of St. Thomas the full and explicit confession of belief in Christ as "Lord" and "God"—the purpose of the "signs" found its realization in the belief here mentioned.

The work of St. John, however, seemed in a way incomplete. It is quite true that the purpose of the Gospel was completed in the confession of St. Thomas; it is also clear that such confession of "belief" in Christ would necessarily mean "life in His Name," for the whole idea of such belief is not simply a new mental outlook, but a completely changed source of life. But the Christian looks further to see what this "life" means. He asks what are its characteristics? How does it manifest itself here in this world? There was need, therefore, for a practical exposition of the working of the "life" set forth in the Gospel, and this need is met in the Epistle of St. John, which proceeds to unfold the meaning of "life" in the three essential aspects of Fellowship with God as the author of "life," Fellowship with man as the working of "life," and non-Fellowship with the world as the safeguard of "life."

The Epistle opens with a summary of the truth proclaimed

in the Gospel—*i.e.*, That the Father had revealed Himself to men in Jesus Christ (i. 1-2); that this revelation from the living God was a revelation of Eternal Life (i. 2); and that this Eternal Life was based on fellowship with the Father, through fellowship with Christ. St. John then declares that the purport of his Epistle is to tell of this fellowship in the life proceeding from the Father, so that others may have their share in it (i. 3); and that Christians themselves may enter into the full realization of what "Life in Christ" should mean (i. 4, and v. 13).

The starting-point, therefore, of St. John is a description of the meaning and characteristics of Fellowship with God (i. 5 to ii. 2).

In the first place, St. John makes the general statement that "God is light" (i. 5)—a truth which carries with it the corollary that those who have Fellowship with God will receive an illumination which will manifest itself upon every aspect of life. That this is so St. John immediately makes plain, for he goes on at once to declare that those who live in Fellowship with God, and understand in consequence that God is the Light of men, will necessarily betray certain characteristics, *i.e.*—

1. They will walk in the light of God (i. 6), they will shape their lives according to the revelation granted to them. Because they have become "new men in the old sphere" they will "do the truth" (i. 6), walking as children of light.

2. In consequence of the fact that they have the Light of God in themselves, and are endeavouring to walk according to the teaching of that Light, they will have Fellowship also with those who have the Light of God (i. 7). St. John thus follows the natural order of all Christian experience—*viz.*, God first, self next, the Christian community afterwards. There was no room for an isolated Christianity but an emphasis upon the corporate life in the Fellowship with God (*cf.* Acts ii. 42).

3. With this corporate life, moreover, there will be the realization of the position of Christ with reference to sins. Although men may have entered into Fellowship with God through Christ, yet the taint of sin still clings to them even as they try

to walk in the light of God's revelation. From such sin there is a continual cleansing by Christ (i. 7): "The blood of Jesus His Son IS CLEANSING us from all sin."

4. Moreover, the fact that men are walking in the Light of Fellowship with God opens their eyes to the real meaning of sin (i. 8). It means that Fellowship with God raises new moral values, gives a new perspective to life and judges every aspect of life from God's standpoint.

5. As a consequence it gives a new attitude towards sin, (i. 9), and places God Himself in a new attitude with reference to sin, because it is only on confession of sin that God is faithful and righteous that He may forgive us our sins, and in order that He may cleanse us from all unrighteousness (i. 9). Fellowship with God, therefore, implies regeneration, and regeneration carries with it a new realization of sin, in the confession of and cleansing from which there is the upward march towards sanctification.

This description of Fellowship with God closes with the statement that—

1. If we say we have not sinned, we reveal the fact that we do not know the meaning of Fellowship of God (i. 10). The light from the Logos has not penetrated the soul of the man who thinks his life unblemished in the sight of God.

2. Yet Fellowship with God is to keep from sin (ii. 1). The sanctifying influence of the Presence of the Living God must work towards the eradication of sin in those who enjoy this Fellowship.

3. Since, however, even those who know the meaning of Fellowship with God still sometimes sin, and this sinning hinders true fellowship, there is a remedy provided, an Advocate with the Father (*πρὸς τὸν πατέρα*) in the Person of Jesus Christ the Righteous (ii. 2). He it is, therefore, who by His revelation of eternal life (i. 2) brings men into Fellowship with God (i. 3), and also by His propitiation gives them the means of continuing in the Fellowship when sin would tend to destroy such harmony (ii. 2).

Note *λασμός* keeps in view God's reconciliation with Himself. If the sins of the whole world are not therefore forgiven (ii. 2), the fault is not on the part of God, but on the part of man who fails to realize the position of Christ with respect to sin, and consequently does not act in such a way that God may turn to him in mercy (*cf.* i. 9): "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous *in order that* He may forgive us our sins, and *in order that* He may cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The general statement of St. John with reference to Fellowship with God stops at ii. 2, but it is immediately followed by a consideration of the Christian's *Fellowship with man*.

The starting-point in the Christian's realization of "life" is, as St. John has shown, contact with God or Fellowship with God through Christ, but this "life" must reveal itself in the Christian's relations with his fellow-men. St. John therefore goes on to show that if Fellowship with God means the inward illumination of the Christian, the outward manifestation of this "walking in the light" must reveal itself in the Christian's attitude towards his fellows. This fact is brought out in ii. 3, "Hereby know we that we know Him *if we keep His Commandments.*" If these latter words refer to the Decalogue, this gives us six Commandments towards our fellows in addition to the four Commandments towards God, but if, as is more probable, the words "His Commandments" refer to the Commandments of Christ, then this reveals a similar duty, which is summed up in ii. 6, "ought himself also to walk even as He walked." The general attitude, therefore, of the Christian towards his fellows is summed up in this expression. Nobody can tell what "life" is, but "to walk" is the mark or expression of life, and "to walk even as He walked," marks the highest expression of life. Hence as the life of Christ is the model upon which the Christian must base his actions in relation to his fellow-men, it follows that the degree of success which the Christian will attain in the latter will be commensurate with his own position in reference to his

Fellowship with God in Christ. St. John therefore seems to mark three gradations in the Christian's Fellowship with God in so far as they reflect the attitude of the Christian towards his fellows. There is the primary position of “knowing Him” (ii. 3), and because of the “knowing” “keeping His Commandments” (ii. 3); this is succeeded by the “being in Him” and “becoming perfected in Him” (ii. 5), which reveals itself in the “keeping of His word” (ii. 5); this, again, is succeeded by “abiding in Him” (ii. 6), which manifests itself in “walking even as He walked” (ii. 6).

The gradation of which St. John speaks has had its counterpart in the general knowledge of the world with reference to Fellowship with God. God had not left Himself without witness as to the possibility of Fellowship with Himself, and this is implied in “the old Commandment” (ii. 7). This “old Commandment” is, however, a “new Commandment” for Christians, because it is the word of Christ which they heard, and this word of Christ brought reality into the meaning of Fellowship with God, and thus made the old Commandment new (ii. 7, 8). The effect of the new Commandment of Christ is as light upon darkness, dispelling the shadows in which the soul of man had lived (ii. 8). Hence the man, who is in the light or in Fellowship with God in Christ, will show this fact in his relationships with his fellow-men by a simple and definite way—*i.e.*, he will love his brother (ii. 10) and will put no cause of stumbling in his way (ii. 10). On the other hand, by hating his brother he shows that he is still in darkness, that his life is shaped in ignorance of God, and that the cataract of blindness has shut out the light of the Fellowship with God (ii. 11). There is therefore no spiritual perception in the man who in his dealings with his fellows forgets the law of love and the working of love, and it is consequently in the Christian's everyday actions that one can gauge how far he has entered into the primary fact of Christian experience—*i.e.*, Fellowship with God in Christ. St. John parenthetically marks off three stages in the spiritual perception of those to whom he was writing. One

class of readers he describes as "little children," another as "young men," and a third as "fathers." These are evidently "spiritual ages," determined according to the position of the Christian in reference to Fellowship with God. The "little children" are those whose "sins are forgiven for Christ's sake" (ii. 12), and who know the Father thereby (ii. 13). This is the initial experience which is followed by the experience of those described as "young men" (ii. 13). These latter "have overcome the evil one" (ii. 13), they are struggling by the help of God against the temptations which beset the physically and spiritually young, they have become strong through trial, and if it cannot yet be said that they "abide in God" (ii. 6), yet, at least, the word of God abideth in them (ii. 14). The consummating experience is that of the "fathers" (ii. 13, 14). Of them it is said that they "know Him which is from the beginning," they know by personal experience the meaning of fellowship with God; they have followed on to know in their inmost self the meaning of possessing the life which comes from God.

Now if these three spiritual ages reveal themselves in the Christian's Fellowship with his fellows, as the parenthetical diversion seems to imply, there is, at all events, only one position for the Christian in connection with the third point to which St. John now directs attention, and that is *non-Fellowship with the world*.

In ii. 15 St. John declares, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world," and concludes with the statement that he who loves the world reveals the fact that the love of the Father, and consequently the life from the Father, is not in him. In the two next verses St. John particularizes what he means by "the world" and the "things that are in the world," and describes them as "the lust of the flesh," "the lust of the eyes," and "the vainglory of life." With such things the Christian will have no fellowship because they are not "of the Father" and because "the world" and "the lust" of it passes away; whilst, on the other hand, he "that doeth the will

of God” from “love of the Father” abideth for ever. Fellowship with God and Fellowship with “the world,” therefore, are mutually exclusive; a life directed and controlled by the love of God is incompatible with a life subservient to mere fleeting things. The Christian must make his choice, in consequence, between the permanency of life in Fellowship with God and the mere transitory allurements of that which is in contrast to “the will of God.”

The ultimate expression of the transitory nature of “the world” and of the cause which produces the antithesis between “eternal life” from the Father and the fleeting things of “the world,” is the rise of anti-Christ, who deny the Father and Christ (ii. 18-24).

The anti-Christ, to which reference is made, are not merely opponents of Christ, but are rather those who profess to take the place of Christ; and who, in consequence, would substitute their own ephemeral selves for the eternal Son of God. The safeguard of the Christian against such a danger is the “anointing,” or separation from the profane, which comes to the Christian from the Holy Spirit through Fellowship with God in Christ (ii. 20). This anointing enables the Christian to estimate the anti-Christ at their true value, for they know in themselves the truth about Fellowship with God (ii. 21). They know, in consequence, the lie in the anti-Christ’s denial of Christ (ii. 22). They know that such denial betokens the lack of Fellowship with God (ii. 23).

For his own safeguard, therefore, the Christian will let that abide in him which he heard from the beginning, and will so abide in the Fellowship of God in Christ (ii. 24). The continuous condition for the Christian is a receptive attitude towards the revelation and words of Christ; for if he allows the words of Christ to abide in him (ii. 24), he himself will abide in Christ (ii. 24); and he will thus maintain his attitude of non-fellowship with the world owing to the fact that he will estimate the “passing show” (ii. 17) at its proper value because of his own possession of eternal life in Christ (ii. 25).

St. John seems to have reached here a definite point in his Epistle, for his statement in ii. 25 with reference to eternal life seems to round off the whole of what he had written, and to revert to the point from which he started. The whole of the section has been taken up with explaining the meaning of the Christian's Fellowship with God, his Fellowship with men, and his non-Fellowship with the world. The concluding words of the chapter sum up the teaching which will guard the Christian from all the misleading ideas of those who would lead them astray (ii. 26). St. John puts it in the form of a reiteration and exhortation—*i.e.*, "You have received an 'anointing' from Christ. Your 'anointing' teacheth you concerning truth and falsehood. In proportion as you act according to the dictates of the anointing, you abide in Him" (ii. 27). "Therefore," he concludes, "abide in Him"—*i.e.*, have no fellowship with the world; then, at His manifestation, you will not be ashamed, but bold (ii. 28); for everyone who in his contact with the world and men does the acts of a righteous man, reveals the fact that he is begotten of Christ, and hence is in Fellowship with God (ii. 29).

St. John now introduces a new section. Starting from the preceding point of the position of Christians as "children abiding in Him" (ii. 28)—which is practically a reiteration of the opening words of the Epistle—he goes on to deal with the aforementioned three relationships of man in his spiritual life from the standpoint of Love.

In dealing first of all with the aspect of the Christian's Fellowship with God, St. John declares that—

1. The love of the Father is shown in the fact of Christians being called "children of God";
2. That this is not a "natural" relationship, for the world does not know Christians as "children of God" because it does not know God;
3. And that though Christians are children of God now, the full realization of it will come when He shall be manifested, and then we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is (iii. 1, 2).

The statements in these verses seem to show that St. John, in turning to take up again the three relationships of man in his spiritual life, was desirous to emphasize a point upon which he had touched incidentally in ii. 12-14—*i.e.*, the progressive nature of the Christian's Fellowship with God. This fact is brought out first of all in St. John's use of the word “child” (iii. 1, 2; *cf.* ii. 12-14). To St. John “child” always connotes the fact of immaturity. He looks upon Christ as the “Son” of God and the Christian as the “child” of God, and looks forward to the time when the Christian will be like Christ (iii. 2). The filial relationship, therefore, of the Christian as a “child” of God is the germ which should fructify into “being like Christ,” and is both itself the hope of the Christian and a means for bringing about the hope (iii. 3).

The upward march, therefore, towards the perfection of the Christian hope is marked by certain characteristics—*i.e.*, the Christian will exhibit purity in the expression of life, according to the example set by Christ (iii. 3). He will further avoid any deliberate act of sin because doing or not doing sin is the criterion of knowing or not knowing Christ. Hence, since Christ was manifested to take away sins (iii. 5), he who sins hath not entered into fellowship with Him (iii. 6), but, on the contrary, is of the devil (iii. 8). There is apparently a contradiction here by St. John of what he had previously stated. In iii. 1 he speaks of Christians as the “children of God,” and also declares (ii. 1, 2) that when the Christian sins there is the possibility of forgiveness, and that the confession of sin proves the existence of the truth in us (i. 8, 9). Here, however (iii. 9, 10), St. John declares that he who is begotten of God sinneth not, and that he who sins is not begotten of God. The contradiction is removed if we bear in mind St. John's use of the word “child,” inferring immaturity, and also his reference to the three spiritual ages of the Christian as mentioned above. The Christian, in virtue of the love of God (iii. 1), is the child of God, and this without any act on the Christian's part beyond the “seeing” Christ (iii. 6). This position given by God is

one, however, to which the Christian must also rise by his life. The Christian is given the place of a child in Fellowship with God, but his life must grow through the stage of young manhood into the experience of the father who "knows" (iii. 6). So, while the Christian is always the child of God *in esse* (*cf.* "seed," iii. 9), yet he cannot be recognized as the child of God when he is not doing the works of God. The gift of the love of God is always there (iii. 1), but the moral habit is not always there, and this defect by implication denies in the sinner the existence of the former. The continuous "abiding" (iii. 6) of the Christian in Christ alone secures continuous absence of sin, and every sin, therefore, demonstrates incomplete Fellowship with God (iii. 9, 10).

The section of the Epistle just examined shows that St. John has been facing the position of the Christian in his Fellowship with God on the basis of the Love given by God to man in the revelation of the Fatherhood of God. The next verses (iii. 10-12) show succinctly that the attribute of Love must be the characteristic of the Christian in his relationship to his fellows. It is scarcely feasible to narrow down the statements of St. John to the fact that the love here mentioned must only be for one's fellow-Christians. It is rather the general statement of what will be the prevailing frame of mind of one in Fellowship with God. For such an one the only possible condition is that of love for one's brother, whilst carefully abstaining from anything which would savour of encouragement of evil. This point is developed by St. John in dealing with the third relationship of the Christian—*i.e.*, his non-Fellowship with the world. The Christian, says St. John, is a partaker of life, and the mark of the possession of life is "love of the brethren" (iii. 14). The world, on the other hand, "hateth," and this hatred is not merely a sign of the absence of "life," but is also a mark of "death" (iii. 13, 15). Hence St. John concludes with the definite statement that the Christian must love as Christ loved (iii. 16), and that this love, therefore, must be of a practical nature (iii. 17, 18), because this ultimately sums

up the expression of the love of God abiding in him. When the Christian is thus living out the life of love, he will find that it will give him an assurance in his inner self of Fellowship with God (iii. 19-21), and he will realize that it puts him in a position of asking for things which God will give (iii. 22). For when the Christian fulfils the command to believe in Christ and love one another, he shows to others that he is abiding in Christ, he realizes for himself the indwelling of the Spirit of God (iii. 23, 24), and thus enters into the full meaning of Fellowship or Communion with God.

The argument of St. John with reference to the three relationships of the Christian seems now to proceed in reverse order. Starting from the fact of the indwelling Spirit of God, mentioned in iii. 23, 24, he declares that this indwelling Spirit secures for the Christian non-Fellowship with the world (iv. 1-6).

Thus, true spirits are of God, and confess that Christ came in the flesh (iv. 1, 2); but spirits not of God, or the spirit of anti-Christ in the world, deny that Christ came in the flesh (iv. 2, 3). Christians, however, have overcome those who deny the divinity of Christ because of the greater power of God (iv. 4); whilst the line of cleavage between those who deny and those who accept the divinity of Christ marks also the distinction between those who know God and those who do not, and sums up also the difference between "the world" and the "Christian life," all of which is discerned by the indwelling Spirit of God.

If the indwelling Spirit of God determines the non-Fellowship of the Christian with the world, St. John goes on to declare that the indwelling love of God secures Fellowship with man, and this Fellowship, on the basis of love, comes from the love of God. Hence the love of the Christian for his fellows is simply the reflection of the Divine Love in himself (iv. 7), and gives evidence of "knowing" God (iv. 8). This is so because the manifestation of God's love was shown in sending Christ to bring new "life" to men (iv. 9), a "life" which was secured by the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ (iv. 10), who in that

propitiation showed the love of God, and thus drew man to know God and to secure the life which comes from the knowledge of God (*cf.* St. John xvii. 3). It is on the ground, therefore, of God's love to man that the Christian ought to love his fellows (iv. 11); and the existence of this characteristic will witness to the primary fact of Christian experience—*i.e.*, Fellowship with God. St. John therefore proceeds to show that the existence of love evidences man's Fellowship with God, and gives an index, moreover, of how far he has advanced in that Fellowship. He first of all declares that no man has ever seen God, but that if we love one another it is a mark of God abiding in us and of the perfecting of His love in us (iv. 12). To this fact God's Spirit in us bears witness (iv. 13), for it is simply the attesting from God of our confession of what we have learned from God—*viz.*, the fact of Christ as Saviour of men (iv. 14); the fact of Saviour attesting to the Divine Sonship of Christ (iv. 15); the fact of Saviour and Divine Sonship of Christ attesting to the love of God towards us (iv. 16). In all this, therefore, the Christian learns that God is Love, and that his own Fellowship with God is measured by the existence of love in himself (iv. 16).

"The infusion of Divine love in the heart of man establishes the principle of this Fellowship. The development of this principle or germ in continued brotherly love brings this germinal Fellowship with God to its perfection, and this perfected Fellowship with Him is again the perfecting of love. Communion with God and love are reciprocal ideas. They require each other, and are each the other's condition; and the growth of the one carries with it ever the growth of the other" (Kaup). It is in the perfecting of Love that Fellowship with God is consummated, and in that consummation is there a guarantee of fearlessness in the day of judgment (iv. 17). Moreover, our approximation to perfect love in Fellowship with God evidences the living out in the world of the God-like or Christ-like nature (iv. 17), and evidences the perfect harmony existing between the "perfected" Christian and God (iv. 18),

because "love" and "fear" are mutually exclusive. The section closes with a statement of basic facts deduced from the foregoing arguments—*i.e.*, the Christian loves because God first loved him (iv. 18). To love God and to hate one's brother is an impossibility (iv. 19), for he who loves God must also love his brother (iv. 21), because such love is evidence of unity with God.

St. John now proceeds to draw his thesis to a conclusion, and sums up all that has gone before in clear statements of fact. He first of all declares what all his previous writing had been demonstrating: (1) That he who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God—he enters into Fellowship with God (v. 1); (2) that he who loves or believes in Him who begat, loves all those begotten of Him—he enters into Fellowship with man (v. 2, 3); (3) that he who is begotten of God (v. 4), or believes in Christ as the Son of God (v. 5), overcomes the world (v. 4), with which he will have no Fellowship.

Of these three relationships of the life of him who has learned to know the meaning of "eternal life," the central fact is the Person of Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is attested in three ways—*i.e.*:

1. By external historical witness—*i.e.*, by "water" and by "blood" (v. 6), which are attested by the witness of men "who knew Him" (v. 9).

2. By the witness of the Spirit (v. 7), which is the witness of God (v. 9).

3. By inward experience (v. 10)—*i.e.*, he that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself to the fact of Jesus Christ as the author and giver of eternal life (v. 10-12).

From this inward experience there result as Christian certainties the facts with which the Epistle has been dealing—*i.e.*:

1. Those who believe in Christ *know* that they have eternal life (v. 13).

Because of this certainty they also know—

(a) That God heareth their petitions (v. 14, 15); and

(b) That they receive their petitions (v. 15) which are according to His will (v. 14).

This latter condition limits the petitions addressed to God, and will be felt by those in Fellowship with God. They will realize that God will give life to those sinning not unto death when they pray for such, but for sin unto death they cannot make request (v. 16, 17).

2. Also they *know* that those who are begotten of God—or those who know their possession of eternal life through belief in Christ—do not sin, but are kept by the power of Christ, and in consequence the Evil One has no point of contact with them (v. 18). They know the circumscribed area of the kingdom of the Evil One, and because they know they are "of God" they refuse to cross the boundary line into the kingdom of the Evil One (v. 18, 19).

3. Further, their knowledge of the possession of eternal life gives them the assurance of the Divinity of Christ. They *know* that in the Person of Christ the Son of God is come into the world; that His coming has brought an enlightenment which itself makes more sure their knowledge of Him, and brings them into living union with God in Christ (v. 20).

All these certainties attest the fact of the true God whom Christ reveals and the fact of eternal life which knowledge of Him brings. "Therefore," says St. John in conclusion, "my little children"—infants in the spiritual life along which he had travelled to maturity—"guard yourselves from the 'idols' of the 'world,' which will prevent you from entering into the full knowledge of eternal life which is in Christ" (v. 21).

