

STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN.

III.

THE OLD AND NEW COMMANDMENT.

Beloved, it is no new commandment that I write to you,  
 But an old commandment which you had from the beginning ;  
 The old commandment is the word which you heard.  
 Again, it is a new commandment, that I write to you :  
 Which thing is true in Him,—and in you ;  
 Because the darkness is passing, and the true light now shines.  
 He that says he is in the light and hates his brother, is in the dark-  
 ness even till now ;  
 He that loves his brother, abides in the light,  
 And no occasion of stumbling exists in him ;  
 But he that hates his brother, is in the darkness,  
 And he walks in the darkness, and knows not where he is going ;  
 Because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

—1 John ii. 7-11.

THE keeping of God's commands, it has been shown in the last paragraph, is the test of a real knowledge of Him ; this criterion distinguishes the true from the false *γνωστικός* (v. 3, 4). In "the word" of God His commandments have their recognized expression, and in "the love of God" their sovereign principle and means of fulfilment (v. 5). The example of Jesus Christ is the pattern of obedience to them, which we Christians are bound to copy (v. 6). St. John is stating what should be perfectly familiar to his disciples ; he almost apologizes for the reiteration of these elementary matters, which the sophistries of current Gnosticism, and the discrepancy of faith and practice that it exhibited, had rendered necessary. "In this insistence upon a practical obedience to God as the witness of your knowledge of Him, and on the meeting of all duty in love, I am not setting before you anything new ; I am telling the old story, and repeating the old command from the lips of Jesus. You heard it when the Gospel first reached you long ago ; it has been sounding in your hearts ever since."

The commandment that the Apostle intends can be none other than Christ's law of love for His disciples—that which our Lord singled out from all the Divine precepts and made specifically His own by saying, "This is My commandment, viz., that you love one another, as I loved you" (John xv. 12); this commandment supplies the touchstone of all the rest. It is *the* commandment of our Epistle, recurring six times in its five chapters, and is dwelt upon at length in verses 9–11 just below. To the duty of *love* the writer challenges his "beloved" (cf. iv. 7, 11)! so addressing the readers for the first time in his letter. Some excellent interpreters find the *ἐντολή* of verses 7, 8, in the command to follow Jesus, which is gathered from verse 6. They argue that the immediately foregoing rather than the following context should supply the basis of this sentence; if it were merely a question of contextual sequence, their preference would be justified. But the point of St. John's appeal lies in the fact that the commandment he means is a trite and well-known rule, the watchword and motto, the ever-sounding order of the day, for those to whom he writes; it is a precept distinct and conspicuous, which must occur of itself to the readers and needs no previous definition or introduction. There was one, and only one, law of the Christian life, as John's disciples understood it, of which this could be said; and it was, not the general obligation to copy the pattern of Jesus, but the specific rule coming from His lips and impressed on His people by His whole life and death, that those who believe in Him *should love one another*. The *ὀφείλει καθὼς ἐκεῖνος περιπατήσεν καὶ αὐτὸς περιπατεῖν* of the last verse does not constitute, but it suggests and leads up to the *ἐντολή παλαιὰ καὶ καινὴ* of verses 7 and 8, which is virtually enunciated and largely enforced in verses 9–11.

Moreover, the command *ἀγαπατε ἀλλήλους* was characteristic of St. John along with his Master, "no new com-

mandment" to those reared upon his teaching. It was the burden of his ministry, and gained him the title of "the Apostle of Love." The story goes that "in age and feebleness extreme," when no longer equal to any other public teaching, he would have himself carried in his chair by the young men into the assembly, and while all listened reverently for the few words he might be able to utter, the old father in God would look round on them and say, "Little children, love one another!" When this had occurred repeatedly, at last some one asked him, "Why, father, do you always say this to us, and nothing more?" "Because," he replied, "it is the commandment of the Lord; and because when this is done, all is done." The great commandment of Christ and of the Gospel—old and not new, old and yet new—the Alpha and Omega of practical religion, could be nothing else for the Apostle John than the Christian law of love.

It may be convenient to reverse the order of St. John's exposition in this passage, and to fix our attention first on the contrasted positions of the breaker and the keeper of Christ's commandment outlined in verses 9–11, and then on the contrasted aspects of the law itself—its antiquity and its novelty—indicated in verses 7 and 8. By this means we may throw into greater relief the salient features of the paragraph.

I. *The man that breaks the Christian rule* is "he who . . . hates his brother" (ὁ μισῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ, vv. 9, 11), as *the man that keeps the Christian rule* is "he who loves his brother" (ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ, v. 10). Of the former it is said that he "is in the darkness" even while he says that "he is in the light," so that "he walks in the darkness," and consequently "knows not where he is going" (vv. 9, 11): the way and the end of life, the path he is taking and the goal he is making for, are both hidden from him, and while he misses his own way, he hinders

others and sets offences in the road for them (*σκάνδαλον . . . ἐστὶν ἐν αὐτῷ*, v. 8). Of the latter, of him who obeys and copies Christ in serving God and man by love, the counter-assertions are made, explicitly or implicitly, at each point: "he dwells in the light," and nothing in him makes others stumble (v. 10); he walks on a lighted pathway, to a visible and assured goal (v. 11).

St. John deals in these plain and broad antitheses—light and darkness, love and hate, righteousness and lawlessness, eternal life and death. He knows nothing of the half-light, the nuances and intermediate shades, in which modern thought with its strained subjectivity, its sensitiveness to the complex conditions of life, its analytic subtlety and critical irresolution, habitually works. Everything with him is simple, severe, and grand in construction. There is the classical purity of line and directness of movement in his mental conceptions, while there burns under the calm surface of his speech a lambent fire too intense for passion, and a flood swells too deep for any tumidity or turbulence of phrase. His *ἀγαπῶν* and *μισῶν* are the oppugnant types of humanity—the child of God and of the devil respectively (iii. 8–11), the embodiments of Heaven and Hell upon this earth, the two fundamental parties of humanity, the elementary factors to which the Apostle would reduce all the antagonisms that exist in the soul and in society.

But the character defined in verse 9 is no abstract type, no mere impersonation of the bad element in humanity. St. John has an actual personality in view—the kind of man with whom he was confronted in the schismatics of the day, and whom his discerning readers would at once identify by the definition *ὁ λέγων ἐν τῇ φωτὶ εἶναι καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ μισῶν*. This is just the Gnostic boaster of verse 4 over again: *ὁ λέγων ὅτι Ἐγνωκα αὐτόν* (sc. τὸν Θεόν), *καὶ τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ μὴ τηρῶν*. The first part of that previous description is here generalized (by way of recalling

the fundamental announcement of i. 5), while the second part of it is specialized: to say, "I have known God," is to say, "I am in the light"; to hate one's brother is, in principle, to break all the commandments of God. The bitter prating religionist, who would serve God with a busy intellect and unquiet tongue out of a cold and proud heart, is ignorant of his own sin, and in his vaunted knowledge is the most deceived of men (i. 8, 9). This brood of "vain talkers and deceivers" were swarming and buzzing about the Churches of Asia Minor, swollen with the pride of their religious culture and full of scorn and provocation toward Christian brethren, toward those who followed the ways of a plain old-fashioned faith, and who could not admit their pretensions or "go forward" (2 John 9) into paths that led away from the Apostolic witness concerning Christ. This contempt and ill-will toward fellow-believers of itself proved them to be "in the darkness," instead of their living in the higher and purer light of God that they claimed to have reached. God, who "is light," in being so "is love" (i. 5, iv. 8). To St. John's mind, there is a flat contradiction between walking in the light, or knowing God, and hating a brother; the two conceptions are logically exclusive, for hatred is of the substance of spiritual darkness; of itself it "blinds the eyes" of those walking in it. Not from above, but from beneath, comes the message that the new teachers bear, since they do not "walk in love" and set at naught "the old commandment"; not out of a clearer light, but out of a profound and miserable darkness do those voices speak that are charged with so much arrogance and anger.

The verb *μισέω* is broader and more elastic than our word "hate"; it covers, in St. John's vocabulary, the whole region of personal feeling opposed to *ἀγαπάω*. Neutrality, a poise of mere indifference to one's fellows, is impossible, as the Apostle conceives things; one likes or dislikes, one

is moved to sympathy or antagonism, toward every personality one touches. And to be in contact with a Christian brother, a true child of God, and yet to be moved by distaste or scorn toward him, is to show the absence in oneself of a Christian heart; not to love "the brother whom one has seen" is practically, on the part of the professor of Divine knowledge, to fail in love to God, "whom he has not seen" (iv. 20 f.), but whose spirit dwells in that rejected Christian man. The term "brother" must be quite strictly understood, if St. John's contention is to be maintained. Neither here, nor anywhere else in the New Testament, does *ὁ ἀδελφός* signify "the brother-man," though the doctrine of human brotherhood has its surest roots in the New Testament; nor is it synonymous with *ὁ πλησίον* of our Lord's story of the Good Samaritan in Luke x. The affinity of character linking the Christian brother to God who is his Father (iii. 1, 2, 9, 24, iv. 13, 20, v. 2, etc.) is the underlying assumption which makes this further test of a spurious Christian knowledge (cf. v. 4) so just and so effective in its bearing. The phrase *ἕως ἄρτι* (*till this moment, usque adhuc*, Vulg.: cf. John ii. 10, v. 17, xvi. 24; also Matt. xi. 12, 1 Cor. iv. 13, xv. 6) at the close of the verse describes, with a touch of surprise and reproach, the state of darkness in which these ill-conditioned Gnostics are found, as continuing unbroken—while "the true light" has been shining around them (v. 8), and while they congratulate themselves on walking in it more truly than others—till this very hour!<sup>1</sup> Throughout they have remained in the darkness of their sin, and are so at this moment; never yet has their heart been touched by the love of God or man; their soul's windows are shuttered and barred against the dawn of the Christian day. Of this sort were the "false prophets," whom St. John will shortly

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. iv. 11, 13, where *ἕως ἄρτι* at the end of the sentence repeats *ἄχρι τῆς ἄρτι ὥρας* at the beginning.

denounce (in *v.* 18 ff.), who "went out from us because they *were not of us*"; the root of the matter was never in them.

The three clauses of verse 11 indicate, beside *the state* of the acrimonious professor of Christianity, *the course* and *the issue* of his life: he "is in the darkness, and he walks in the darkness, and he knows not whither he goes." If he "*walks* in the darkness," it is because he "*is* in the darkness": his conduct matches his character; he cannot act otherwise than he is, or walk in any other element or region than that where his habitation lies. His acts of hostility and words of contempt, his expressions of repugnance toward worthy Christian brethren, only reveal the gloom of his spirit, the alienation from God and goodness in which he dwells. And with all his cleverness and intellectual insight, he sees nothing of the doom that lies before him; such lack of foresight is the natural effect of living "in the darkness" of sin against God; he has no idea where his self-conceit, and the animosity that he indulges toward men better than himself, are leading him. He thinks that he is nearing perfection, that he is on the highway to heaven. By his ambitious speculations and refined notions, and his communion with rare and exalted minds, he affects to rise far above the common herd of men to the infinite source of light and being. How tragic the self-delusion! his bent is in the very opposite direction; while he seems to mount, he is sinking; his sails are filled with the breeze of heaven, but some malignant hand upon the rudder steers his ship of life to the shores of perdition. Amid Christian enlightenment, possessing the name and knowledge of a Christian believer and rich in privilege, one thing he lacks—a loving and simple Christian heart; for want of the one thing needful, the best that he possesses is turned to its meanest and worst.

The Apostle writes in chap. iii. 15, "Every one who hates his brother is a murderer"; and Jesus had declared, "He who says to his brother, 'Thou fool'! is liable to the measure of hell fire"! (Matt. v. 22).<sup>1</sup> The man supposed by St. John forgets such words as these, or misses altogether their bearing on himself; he does not in the least perceive whither his evil heart tends, what are the crimes of which he is capable, and with what ruin for himself and mischief for others the seeds of malice that lodge in his soul are pregnant. No man is in greater spiritual peril than the self-complacent cynic, the Pharisaic intellectualist and contemner of his kind; and no man, commonly, is less sensible of his peril and more incapable of reproof.

"Because the darkness has blinded his eyes:"<sup>2</sup> the fumes of pride and anger, the dust of party conflicts, the mists of speculation and opinionativeness obfuscate the conscience, and shut out from minds otherwise strong and clear the primary truths of religion and the plainest distinctions of right and wrong. St. John ominously repeats in these terms of warning words spoken by Jesus in His last appeal to the Jewish people (John xii. 35): "Walk as you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you; and he that walks in the darkness, *knows not whither he goes.*" Little did the Israelite nation dream of the sequel to their rejection of Jesus Christ, the world's true light, of the downfall to which their infatuate pride and their "odium humani generis" were hurrying them. St. John and his con-

<sup>1</sup> The verb *ὑπάγω*, "to go away," implies, as Westcott intimates, future destination (destiny), since it signifies leaving the present scene. It is the term used by Jesus of His departure to the Father (*οἶδα πότεν ἔλθω καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγω*, John viii. 14), and by the Evangelist speaking of His departure; cf. John viii. 21 f., xiii. 3, 33, xiv. 28, xvi. 5, 10, 17.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. iv. 4 affords a striking parallel to the language of St. John here: *ὁ θεὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου ἐτύφλωσεν τὰ νοήματα τῶν ἀπιστῶν κ.τ.λ.* (cf. also John xii. 40 f.). There the blinding is that of an unbelief which forbids from the outset the reception of the Christian light; here of a misbelief, which perverts that light when it has been intellectually received, and turns it into the contrary element.

temporary readers were witnesses to the result which stands as history's severest admonition against religious pride and inhumanity.

There lies in verse 10 another tacit accusation against the unloving Christian professor. While he hastens to shame and ruin himself, he strews hindrances in the path of others: it is by way of contrast that St. John writes of the lover of his brethren, *σκάνδαλον οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν αὐτῷ*—"not in him," but in the other, "there is offence." Every schism and separation is a scandal against the Church. Every ill-tempered or contemptuous, every passionate, irritable, churlish, ungenerous man who bears the name of Christ, blocks the path of life for those who would enter. The spiteful story, or mean insinuation, or cruel sarcasm, the hasty and unjust reproach, the act of pride or resentment, the look of cold indifference or aversion, is another stone of stumbling thrown into the much hindered way of God's work in the salvation of human souls. Pointing to such examples, the unbeliever finds excuse to say, "If this is your Christian, I prefer men of the world. If conversion produces characters like that,—better remain unconverted"! Such offences, Jesus once said, "must needs come; but woe to him through whom they come"! To remove them, and to combat their ruinous influence, is amongst the Church's constant tasks; she has none sadder nor more difficult.

All that has been said of the *μισῶν τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ* holds in the opposite sense of the *ἀγαπῶν*. Not only "is he in the light," he "abides" in it (*ἐν τῷ φωτὶ μένει*, v. 10), making his resort and domicile there, and growing into familiar and congenial relations with it. His eyes are open; his path is safe; his goal is visible and assured. The light that "now shines" about him pervades his soul and assimilates his nature to itself; it fills the universe for him, illuminating the world, life and

death, things present and to come, with a meaning and a glory that the manifestation of God in Christ alone can give to our existence. Safe himself, by the daily services of love, by copying the sacrifice of Christ, he makes the way of life safer and easier for others; he walks it not alone, but bringing many with him. He keeps step and time in his life's march with the great brotherhood of those who in the love of Christ and the Father have evermore "one heart and one way."

II. Now we return to verses 7 and 8, to the double aspect of the law itself, whose operation we have viewed in the contrasted types of character that are produced under it. The commandment of love is *not new, but old*; again, it is *new while it is old*.

1. "Beloved, no new command am I writing to you, but an old commandment" (v. 7): *how old?* The rule of Christian love is at least as old to the readers as their first hearing of the gospel: "the old commandment," the Apostle adds, "is the word which you heard." It is part of "the message which we [Apostles] have heard from Him and report unto you" (i. 5). The essence of the Gospel was breathed into this law of Christ, so that it forms essentially "the word" which the readers many years back had listened to from the lips of John and others of their first Christian teachers. St. John is now an aged man, and has been at Ephesus probably for nearly a generation; the Church in this province had already a history, before his settlement there. Many of those who read his letters had been brought up within the fold of Christ and under the Apostle's pastorate; the image of Christ and the thought of the Christian brotherhood blended with their earliest recollections. Christianity and its law of love were no untried novelty, no fresh invention, like the Gnostic rules and speculations that were growing rife in Asia Minor; they were traditional and of long standing in that region by the

end of the first century, and in the circle where this venerable and late-surviving Apostle of Jesus Christ still moved. He has nothing to reveal to his readers or to impose upon them other than that they had known and held from the beginning. Naturally, as it is with old men, John's thoughts turn to the past; standing upon this sure foundation of God, on the ground of the Church's settled faith and practice, he confronts all innovators, and lays his stern arrest on men who, as he puts it in his short letter to the Lady Elect, "go forward and abide not in the teaching of Christ" (2 John 9).

To ourselves the same precept comes as the "old commandment," which we "had from the beginning," the word which we "heard" as the first accents of the gospel fell upon our ears, at a mother's knee or from a father's reverend lips. With the command, "Little children, love one another," the grace and truth that came by Jesus Christ challenged our opening hearts in life's morning hour. But to us the "old command" has an antiquity vastly extended and enhanced. For the older of the Apostle's readers, the commencement of the Gospel and the commencement of their own Christian experience were almost conterminous. They "had" it "from the beginning," and "heard" it so soon as its sound went abroad. In our case a wide interval exists between the two. Christianity has behind it now the tradition, not of two, but of sixty generations; its origin carries us back to a remote beginning. "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" is the chain which runs through the nineteen centuries and binds the modern to the ancient world, linking the peoples and the ages into brotherhood. In the corporate life of Christendom—flawed and imperfect, yet real and deeply working—there lies the surest bond of humanity, and this commandment is its central cord. The love of Christ is the focus of history. The long train of blessing that has followed from

obedience to its rule, the peace and progress and moral well-being, the spiritual treasures of a Christianly ordered home and commonwealth, ever accumulating as they descend, are a witness to us—greater witness no historical system or institution can produce—that the law of Christ is the best guarantee of human happiness, is the ultimate and one possible basis of communion for the family of God on earth. “Other foundation can no man lay.” This principle of brotherly love may be traced working age after age in the ascent of man, through the growth of knowledge and the spread of freedom and the widening of human intercourse; it has called out and arrayed against it, for reproof and overthrow, the powers of darkness—pride, sensuality, cunning, the treachery and cruelty and immeasurable selfishness of the evil heart of unbelief. In the diffusion of Christ’s Spirit, in the proclamation and the practice of His simple law, supported by His grand example, the light “shines” more and more widely “in the darkness,” and the darkness everywhere reacts and repels it, but “overcomes it not.”

But if the commandment is so old as this, if it comes from the first fountain of the Gospel, and is part and parcel of the life of Christ amongst men, it must be older still. Christianity was not an invention, but a revelation. Nothing that is of its essence was really new and unprepared. Its roots are all in the Old Testament; its principles were hidden in God who created all things. The Only-begotten came forth from the bosom of the Father, bringing on His lips from that source this law for God’s children. He came to show what God eternally is, and what in His eternal purpose men are bound themselves to be. “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were framed,” God was wisdom, and God was *love*. This commandment is grounded in His changeless being. God surely could not create, could not conceive of, such

creatures as ourselves otherwise than under this law, otherwise than as designed to love Him and each other. Creation and Redemption are parts of one order, are animated by one soul. The commandment is verily, in its ultimate basis and real beginning, old as the creation of the race, old as the love and fatherhood of God. Jesus rested it upon the foundation when He bade His disciples be kind to the evil and unthankful, for He says, "You shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The relation of the child of God to its eternal Father imposes on it this and no lower or meaner ideal.

When the Apostle reminds his readers that they "had" this commandment "from the beginning," his backward gaze did not stop short of the absolute starting-point. St. John sees everything *sub specie æternitatis*; ὁ ἦν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς is the title of his Epistle; it is the "eternal life" manifested in Jesus Christ and communicated through Him to men, of which he thinks and writes from the first sentence to the last (i. 2, v. 20). ἀπ' ἀρχῆς may, to be sure, have a limited reference given by the sentence where it stands, as in verse 24 below, and in iii. 11, 2 John 6, where it qualifies ἡκούσατε,<sup>1</sup> or in John xv. 27, Luke i. 2. But if no such limitation is given, one presumes that St. John is reaching back to the unconditioned "beginning"; and this presumption is strengthened by the recurrence of ἀπ' ἀρχῆς in the same sense a few verses later (vv. 13, 14). It is with a meaning therefore, and by way of distinction, that the Apostle adds to his ἦν εἶχετε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς a second and parallel definition, (ὁ λόγος) ὃν ἡκούσατε. "Which you heard" brings the readers down to the historical and subjective origin of the ἐντολή, which, in respect of its objective and absolute point

<sup>1</sup> To the influence of those parallels doubtless the erroneous ἡκούσατε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς of the Textus Receptus in this place is due. Its effect has been to identify the clauses εἶχετε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς and ἡκούσατε, which really stand in a sort of contrast.

of departure, they "had<sup>1</sup> *from the beginning*" (cf. 2 John 5). Rothe's comment on the sentence goes more deeply into St. John's thought than Westcott's: "'From the beginning' points us back to the first clause of the Epistle — 'You *had* from the beginning' that 'which *was* from the beginning.'" When the Apostle says later, in explaining the newness of the command, that "the darkness is passing by, and the true light now shines," manifestly its oldness is the antiquity of that which existed long before the present age; it was *there*, only the darkness eclipsed it and made it to be as though it were not. Of Christ's great *ἐντολή*, as of Himself (John i. 10-11), it may be said: "It was in the world, and the world knew it not; it came unto its own, and its own people received it not."

2. Verse 8 turns the other side of the shield. "Again, it is (though old) *a new commandment* that I write to you." The old Apostle has still the eyes of youth. New-buddings and unfoldings, the fresh aspects of primitive and well-worn truth, he is quick to recognize. The teaching of his Gospel, so astonishing in its philosophic scope and its adaptation to the Hellenic mind when considered as the work of a Galilean Jewish author, is evidence of this. He knows how not merely to vindicate the old against the new, which is so often impatient and irreverent towards it, but how to translate the old into the new and discern the old in the new under its altered face—and this is, after all, the right way of guarding the old; it is the genuine conservatism. If St. John lives out of the past, he lives in the present and for the future.

To say "I write no new but an old commandment," could never be the Apostle's last word about Christ's

<sup>1</sup> Had the historical sense of *ἠκούσατε* belonged to *εἶχετε*, one would have expected a parallel construction, in the historical aorist, *εἶσχετε*; or the present *εἶχετε* might have been used of a continuous possession, "from the first day until now." The imperfect tense expresses the tentative and growing possession of that which is infinite in its source.

law of love. He had seen, and was seeing still to his latest days, so many new creations born of this Word which "was from the beginning," and such a world of young, eager, growing life was in the Churches that spread before his eyes, stretching east and west and filling the face of the world with new fruit of the Kingdom, that to him change was even more in evidence than identity, and the progress was as manifest as the persistence of the truth. St. John had watched the profoundest spiritual revelation which the world has ever experienced. A new heaven and earth were in the making for mankind; and the law that governed this creation, if old in its origin as the being of God, was new in its operation as the character of Jesus Christ—old as the thought of the Eternal, new as the Cross of Jesus, or as the latest sacrifice of a life laid down for His love's sake. That which is old as one looks up the stream of time and travels backward to the origins, is new at each point as the journey of thought is reversed. The commandment is old as that out of which the present has grown, new as that by which the past is done away and in which the future is germinally hidden; old to the eyes of memory and faith, new to the eyes of prophecy and hope; old as a potential, new as a dynamic energy; old in its eternal foundations, in its Divine, intrinsic nature, new in its gradual, constant, and as yet incomplete developments; old as the ever-shining sun, new as the daybreak and the morning light; old as creation, new as individual birth.

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*(To be continued.)*