

STUDIES IN THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN.

III.

THE OLD AND NEW COMMANDMENT—(continued).

THE antiquity of the law of love St. John left to speak for itself; its novelty he explains in the second clause of verse 8: ὃ ἐστὶν ἀληθὲς ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν, where the neuter relative refers not to the ἐντολή (which would have required a feminine pronoun, as in v. 7), but to the principal sentence as a whole,—"which thing is true," viz. the fact that the old commandment is, notwithstanding, new. And its newness is twofold; in the Head and in the members of the Body of Christ, in the Vine-stock and in the branches—ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν.

"New in Him": for the coming of Jesus, God's Son, in our flesh gave to love a meaning and a compelling force inconceivable before. His personality, character, doctrine, works, culminating in His sacrificial death, revealed the love of God to man, and revealed at the same time a capacity of love and an obligation to love in man, of which the world had no previous conception and that were astounding beyond measure in the given moral conditions and under the circumstances of Christ's advent. "Herein is love," writes St. John, pointing to the Incarnation and the Cross, "herein have we known love, in that He for us laid down His life" (iii. 16, iv. 10)—as though one had never known or heard of love before! so entirely did this demonstration surpass all antecedent notions on the subject and antiquate all earlier examples. In this sacrifice of Jesus Christ the Apostle finds the motive for unbounded devotion to our fellows: "and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." The commandment was put upon another footing, and clothed with a fresh and irresistible power.

In His teaching Jesus recast the ancient law of Israel; He drew out of the mass of inferior and external commands the golden rule, the two-fold duty of love to God and man; while He appealed by all He said upon men's duty to each other to that wider and primeval law of humanity "written in the heart," retracing its effaced characters and re-awakening the affections native to man as the offspring of the Father in heaven. His human life restored to the race its lost ideal, and presented to all eyes "the new man" recreated after the image of God. His death crowned His life's work, and perfected His own filial character. But the death of the cross accomplished something more and other than this; it gave to the law of love an authority new in its kind, a vicarious and redeeming efficacy. "Born under" this "law," Jesus Christ reconciled the world to God, and in so doing generated a force by which sinful men, now released from condemnation, are constrained and empowered to "keep the commandments" of God. Christ's disciples follow their Lord's example by the virtue of His atonement; they "walk in love as Christ also loved them, and gave Himself up for them, an offering and sacrifice to God for an odour of fragrance." It was the cross that sent them forth to breathe Christ's love into the world, and "to lay down their lives for the brethren." "He died for all," writes the other theological Apostle (2 Cor. v. 15), "in order that the living no longer to themselves should live, but to Him who for them died and was raised," and that, as St. Paul abundantly showed by word and life, in living to Christ they should live to and for the brethren on whose behalf He died, even as each member of the body feels and works for every other (see e.g. 1 Cor. viii. 9-13, xii. 12 ff., and xiii.) The cross of Christ reconciles us "in one body" to God (Eph. ii. 16); the fire of Christ's love and passion fuses together natures the most hostile and remote. "The new covenant in His blood" is a covenant of amity and

alliance for all who enter its bonds and share the peace with God which it secures.

This was "true in Christ" for the writer and readers. The peace on earth which the angels' song heralded at the Nativity was an accomplished fact in the multitude of Christian societies now planted through the Roman Empire and spreading from the Mediterranean shores—each of them the centre of forces of goodwill and charity, new-leavening a world where the mass of men were "slaves to manifold lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another" (Tit. iii. 3). The *φιλαδελφία* of the followers of the Crucified, the unbounded love of Christians towards each other, was the most notable thing about the new movement; this was the outstanding characteristic dwelt upon both by its apologists and its critics in the early centuries. "See," they said, "how these Christians love one another!" So true they were in the first age to the intention of their Master, who thus fixed the peculiar mark of His society: "In this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another" (John xiii. 35). The oldest Christian document, the letter of Paul and his fellow-missionaries to the infant Church of Thessalonica, illustrates this feature of the original Christianity; on it the Apostle seizes, and dilates with intense satisfaction: "Concerning brotherly love you have no need that one write unto you; for you of yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia" (1 Thess. iv. 9 f.). In the second Epistle, following at a brief interval, he thanks God, first and foremost, "for that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the love of each one of you all toward one another aboundeth" (2 Thess. i. 3). Were it not well if all Christian teachers put this first amongst the "notes" of the Church, and saw in this sign, rather than in formularies or institutions, the token of apostolical descent?

“ Which is true,” the Apostle dares to say to his disciples, “ in Him *and in you* ” ! The fact that God’s law of love was kept, that a new and powerful bond of affection was formed amongst men and a new gravitation was drawing the scattered elements of life together, was as evident in the case of these Christian men as it was in Christ Himself. It means much that St. John should couple “ Him ” and “ you ” in this sentence and put the two pronouns into the same construction. “ Everyone when he is perfected,” said Jesus, “ shall be as his Master.” How many amongst ourselves, Christ’s present servants, could bear to be put in this juxtaposition? of what Church could it be affirmed without misgiving, concerning the law of love to the brethren, “ Which is true in Him and in you ” ?

In this double truth there is a deep distinction—as between the root and the branches, the full fountain and the dispersed and too often checked and dwindling streams, which need constant replenishment. But in principle, and aim, and issue, the identity holds good for all who are “ in Him.” The law that ruled His being rules theirs. The fires of His passion have thrown a spark into each of their souls, kindling them to something of the same heat and glow. The prayer of Jesus Christ for His discipleship, as it should endure and witness to the world’s end, is so fulfilled, “ that they may all be one ; even as Thou, Father, art in me and I in Thee,” and “ that the love wherewith Thou lovedst me may be in them, and I in them ” (John xvii. 23, 26). Just so far as this affirmation respecting St. John’s little children “ is true ” in us, the true Christianity still propagates itself and bears its genuine fruit amongst men.

The coming of this new love, that had given such bright evidence of its vitality and worth in the Christian society, St. John explains in verse 8*b*; he refers it to “ the message ” which Christ brought from God, and which His

Apostles are announcing everywhere (i. 5). The true life springs from "the true light" (τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινὸν¹ ἥδη φαίνει). In the light of the Gospel, and through the revelation of God that it imparts, the new way of love is disclosed and the life that is alone worthy of man becomes possible to him. St. Paul gives under this figure another turn to the same thought; he affirms the social results of the Gospel to be the outgrowth of its religious conceptions, when he writes, in Eph. v. 9, "The fruit of the light is in all goodness and righteousness and truth." The ethical and theological are inseparable as life and light, as fruit and root. The morals of Paganism were the native product of its idolatry—of "the darkness" which St. John sees "passing away";² Christian morals, the purity and charity of the Apostolic Church, sprang by a like necessity from the ideas of God and of His disposition and relations to men derived from the Christian revelation.

"*Already shineth*," the rendering given by the Revisers to ἥδη φαίνει, is a questionable emendation of the older version. "Already" marks, in English usage, a present antithetical to some future—"so soon as this"; as though

¹ The double "true" of our version represents two, somewhat differing, Greek adjectives, ἀληθές and ἀληθινόν: the former signifies truth of *statement*—i.e. of the statement made by John in verse 8a, which is verified by fact; the latter signifies truth of *conception*, where the reality corresponds to the idea that is expressed. A "true light" (ἀληθινόν) is that which is light indeed and worthy of the name; cf. the use of this adjective, which is characteristic of St. John, in v. 20, John iv. 23, vi. 32, xv. 1, and in 1 Thess. iv. 9. φῶς ἀληθές would be a light that does not deceive, that gives true guidance or conveys a truthful message.

² παράγεται, again in verse 17; more literally, "passes by." Elsewhere the active voice bears this (neuter) sense; so in the Pauline parallel of 1 Cor. vii. 31, παράγει τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου; cf. Ps. cxliii. 4, αἱ ἡμέραι αὐτοῦ ὡσεὶ σικιά παράγουσι; and in the literal sense, John ix. 1, Matt. ix. 9. The verb conveys the thought not of a mere vanishing or cessation, but of a visible movement from the scene, as when clouds are sailing off and the sky clears. Possibly, there is a touch of significance in the use of the passive, which does not occur in this sense outside these two verses. Not of its own motion is "the darkness" passing, but it is *borne away* by the flood of incoming light.

the Apostle meant: "The true light shines even now while the darkness still strives against it; a brighter day is coming, when its light will flood the world, when the darkness will have utterly passed away and the whole sky will be aflame with the glory of God. 'It is beginning to have its course'" (Westcott). This thought, however true, and the prophetic connotation this rendering gives to ἡδῆ (as e.g. in iv. 3, John iv. 35, 2 Thess. ii. 7, 2 Tim. ii. 18, etc.) are out of place in the given connexion. ἡδῆ looks backward as readily as forward; it denotes a present contrasted either with future or past (for the latter, cf. John vii. 14, xi. 17, xix. 28, Rom. i. 10, 2 Tim. iv. 6), and signifies *by this time, now at length*. This may be the rarer sense of the adverb, but it is a perfectly legitimate sense, and is imported here by the contrast of "old and new" dominating this paragraph. A new day is dawning for the world. At last the darkness lifts; the clouds begin to break and scatter; "the true light shines" out in the sky; and in the light its sons can walk with clear vision, to a sure and blissful goal.

Once besides the Apostle John has employed this phrase, describing the advent of the Word with the same retrospective gaze and under the same image of a light long veiled but now piercing through all obstruction, where he writes in the prologue to his Gospel, ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν . . . ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον, "There was the true light [of which the Baptist had borne witness as existing, though unknown, long before his testimony to it] . . . it was coming into the world." *Now at last!* "The mystery hidden from the ages and generations,—hidden away from the ages in God who created all things" (Col. i. 26, Eph. iii. 9), comes to its birth. The hour of the new creation has struck; the word has gone forth, and the Voice has sounded which says, "Behold, I make all things new!"

What the future may disclose, and to what splendour the great day may grow, St. John does not here suggest or

speculate. "The Son of God is come; we have eternal life in Him" (v. 11-13, 20): this conviction fills his mind and brings a perfect satisfaction. He has lived through a day of new creation; he has "seen the kingdom of God come in power." The religious world of his childhood and that of his age—what a gulf lies between them, a contrast between the old and the new within a single lifetime the more astonishing the more he reflects upon it. Enough for him that the darkness is now passing—"the world is passing away, and its lust" (verse 17)—and the true light mounts the sky. He is as one who descries the morn in the east, after a long tempestuous night he has seen the sun climb the horizon, and is sure of day. The old Apostle is well content, and ready to say with Simeon, "Lord, now lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

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