

Rothe's Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

CHAPTER I. 7.

"But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin."

God *is* in the light and we *walk* in the light. In connection with God we cannot speak of a walk, but only of a changeless existence. Our whole being, however, has yet to become light; and in order to this, it is of supreme importance that we walk in God's light, which has come to us in its whole truth in the only-begotten Son of God. According to verse 5 it is the light of truth, of holiness and love.

We have *fellowship* one with another only when we do the truth, that has been revealed to us, when we are sincere Christians. They that have fellowship one with another are the apostle and his readers; and seeing he has already expressly described his fellowship as being at the same time essentially fellowship with God and the Saviour, this latter fellowship is substantially implied in the "fellowship one with another". The sacred name of real Christian fellowship is profaned wherever the fellowship is not at the same time a fellowship of walking in the light. Accordingly there is something suspicious about all Shibboleths of Christian fellowship, whether they be confessions of faith or certain definite religious practices. They cannot give security that the truth of God has become vital truth to the other members of the fellowship. Hence, while Christians are to be stirred up to have fellowship one with another, they must also be warned not to look upon each self-styled fellowship as being on that account real. Where Christians will have fellowship one with another as Christians, they must be sure of one another, that they are children of the light and walk in the light. Herein the grandeur of Christianity appears in a clear light, for no other fellowship has such a principle of union. In this there is also pointed out the way, whereby Christian fellowship may be constituted. In the same measure as we walk in the light we have fellowship one with another, and this fellowship grows in its Christian character. If, therefore, it is true of any fellowship, that in connection with it all depends upon the inner man, this is the case with Christian fellowship. Outward institutions do not bring it about; nay, they often damage it. For this reason the Christian should comfort himself, if he frequently finds a lack of means of communicating externally with his fellow-Christians. The hearts that are sanctified in Christ really meet in Christ; they stand in a real (and not

merely figurative) spiritual relation to one another.

Cleansing through the blood of Christ is closely connected with this by the circumstance that in point of fact, precisely because walking in the light is the condition of all Christian fellowship, cleanness from sin is its indispensable presupposition. Only so far as Christians are clean from sin can they have real fellowship one with another. By this cleansing from sin John understands the cleansing by justification before God. And according also to all experience this is the condition under which alone Christian hearts disclose themselves truly to one another. Only the heart that is free as regards God makes us open and frank also as regards our brother. And it is by means of justification, whereby we enter again into the state of childlike innocence in God's sight, that we also attain to the childlike relation, openness and frankness towards Him. John is led to speak of our cleansing through the blood of Christ by the fact that this fellowship of Christians one with another has their fellowship with God as its basis, and includes it. The latter is absolutely conditioned by the fact that man is clean from sin. With sin, with the creature as sinful, God can only have a repelling contact. This being taken into account, it might be objected to the apostle's assertion of a fellowship of Christians one with another through their fellowship with God, that even the Christian is never actually absolutely clean from sin. Hence it might seem as if there could not be full, perfect fellowship with God and the brethren. The clause we are now considering does away with the objection, that even while walking in the light—which only describes the general, predominant character of the life and behaviour, alongside of which, therefore, there might continue to be deviations in particular instances—*individual* sins still occurred in the life of the Christian, which must necessarily annul the fellowship just thought of—a fellowship which, according to verse 3, is essentially also a fellowship with God and the Redeemer, who can have no fellowship with the sinner.

The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin, i.e., from everything which is sin in us. The atoning power of the death of Jesus—this is what John means to say—extends so far that through it *all* our sins are atoned for, and therefore no longer cut us off from fellowship with God. It makes it possible that, notwithstanding the individual sins that still adhere to us, there is nevertheless between us and God an uncurtailed fellowship, and likewise also between us and one another. The *blood* of Jesus Christ is a designation of the death

of Christ regarded expressly as an *atoning* death, and still more precisely as a sacrificial atoning death. This expression is never used in the New Testament of the death of Christ simply (without its being more precisely described as an atoning, sacrificial death). We need not, however, on this account understand this cleansing exclusively of the atoning cleansing (by taking away the guilt of sin, by bringing about the forgiveness of sin); the thought that from their very nature the atonement and forgiveness of sin at the same time effects the actual cleansing from it (by means of sanctification), is distinctly implied here in the cleansing, as in almost every other passage where the latter is mentioned (Rev. vii. 14; Acts xv. 9). This comes out prominently in verse 9. This atoning cleansing takes place only when we walk in the light, when the predominant bias of our life is towards the light, in virtue of our faith in the Redeemer.

The mystery of the atonement of sin through the sacrificial death of the Redeemer consists in general in this, that through Christ God has brought about the real abolition of the contradiction that exists between the two positions: first, that in virtue of this holiness God cannot form a friendly relation of fellowship with the creature, so long as it is actually sinful; and secondly, that the actual doing away of sin is not possible, except in so far as God first of all forms such a friendly relationship by the forgiveness of sin. Only in this way also can the need of sinful man with respect to God be really satisfied. For it is of supreme importance to him not only that God's grace be bestowed upon him, but also that God's holiness be maintained intact. A grace which should cast a shadow upon the divine holiness would take from man as much as it gave. For to desire from God indulgence of one's sin is impious; we have an idol, if we have not an absolutely *holy* God. God can have no friendly relation with a sinner, for the divine self-consciousness stands related in an absolutely negative way to sin, and, as regards His activity, it is so also with the divine righteousness. Towards sin God can stand only in the relation of wrath. The common notion amounts to this, that God simply does not let sin go unpunished. But He must really do away with it. With the mere punishment of the sinner sin is not made an end of; but the holiness of God must compass the doing away of sin. Accordingly the Church rightly declares that justification is the fundamental presupposition of sanctification. So long as God is angry with us, we must flee from Him. If, therefore, sin is actually to be done away with in the sinner, it is absolutely necessary that first of all there be constituted a friendly relation between God and the sinner; God must forgive the sinner his sins before they are actually done away with in him. This is certainly an antinomy; but we have no difficulty in discerning the reason

for it and the key to its solution, seeing it is given us in the redemption that has come to men. Such a case, viz., is conceivable only if there existed for God an unambiguous security, that through His gracious forgiveness of sin the actual doing away of it in the sinner would be effected. In such a case God, without prejudice to His holiness, would forgive sin; yea, He must do so in virtue of His very holiness and righteousness. For, otherwise, He would neglect the means at His disposal for the actual doing away of sin. To bring about such a case is the function of everything that we call atonement, and of everything that has been attempted in this way among the peoples of antiquity. But it is only in the New Testament, through Christ, that we find atonement really effected. We have the experience that, when God forgives us on the ground of our faith in Christ, the above antinomy has found its solution; God has sealed it to us through His own Spirit. In Christ there has been given to God, so far as we believe in Christ, the sure pledge that His gracious forgiveness of our sin is its actual abolition. It is forgiven in Christ, inasmuch as there dwells in Him the ability actually to do away with sin in humanity. Only so far as He has this ability is He the Redeemer; and seeing that in Christ this ability is actually existent in the human world, there also exists for God the possibility of a forgiveness. From this point of view the Redeemer is the *surety* for humanity in its relation to God. But, when we come to treat of individuals, this security is not yet sufficient. So far as regards the individual the Redeemer possesses this ability only under the condition that the former puts himself into a real, personal, ethical relation with Him. And this takes place essentially through faith in Him; through faith we become partakers of the forgiveness of sins of which we have just spoken. In each individual, who through faith enters into a living fellowship with Christ, the moment of the forgiveness of sin is also the moment in which there begins the actual abolition of sin, which henceforth goes on progressively. Upon the ground of this existence of a Redeemer and of a fellowship with Him God truly forgives sin, and calls forth in man a process of steady, continuous doing away of sin.

If now Christ is really the Redeemer, in what relation to this fact does the *atonement* effected by Him stand? He has become the Redeemer through His own deed; not at all in a natural manner, but in virtue of His own religious and ethical development; He has prepared Himself for being the Redeemer, He has earned this ability for Himself. This is what the atonement made by Him implies and involves. His death is the main element in this development, and that, too, expressly as a sacrificial death. It is, of course, not the only element in His work of atonement; nevertheless, it is the decisive one.