

# Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

BY PROFESSOR RICHARD ROTHE, D.D.

## CHAPTER II. 6, 7.

“He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also to walk even as He walked. Beloved, no new commandment write I unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning : the old commandment is the word which ye [have] heard [from the beginning].”

VER. 6. John has shown in vers. 3-5 how, without the keeping of the commandments of Jesus, fellowship with Him, belonging to Him, is a psychological impossibility. He now adds that for the man, who asserts that he stands in fellowship with Him, this keeping of His commandments is a moral *duty*: “he must do so, he is bound to do so.” To walk as Christ walked is the same as the conscientious keeping of His commandments. From the fact that Christ is in the Christian and the Christian in Christ, from the fellowship of being on the part of the believer with Christ, there follows, by a natural necessity, the fellowship of both also in respect of their way of acting, the sameness of the walk of both.

As regards fellowship with the Saviour, the Apostle definitely distinguishes between an abiding in Him and a merely coming into contact with Him. This is an earnest warning to us, so far as our intercourse with the Saviour still lacks continuity. We may have very vivid impressions of Christ, yea, we may be strongly laid hold of by Him at moments, and yet there may still be no abiding in Him. The individual manifestations of His nearness will attract our attention all the more forcibly, from the very fact of their being individual and isolated. But this may lead to a very dangerous delusion. It is one of the best signs of the reality of our Christian state, when we have little to tell of extraordinary manifestations of our Saviour's nearness, because we are continually in His company. The special festivals in our spiritual life cease, because the working days themselves become festivals. The more we are still conscious of needing to be transported into Christian moods, so much the less is our new Christian nature advanced. The quieter and more uniform it is, so much the more advanced is it. The less it seems to us something special, and the more our life as Christians and as men perfectly coincides; the more we realize that, in order to be men, we must be Christians, and conversely, so much the more surely have we reached the state of abiding in Christ. He who thus abides in Him is really in Him. The sameness of being must have also a sameness of walk as its consequence; and it is an inner impossibility that one that belongs to Christ should be able to walk otherwise than He. When the world lays an uncommon stress

upon this test, it has full right to do so; and in this criterion there is involved a great honour to Christians. Of an idle fellowship with Christ, which should be merely a fellowship of heart and not at the same time also a fellowship in outward deed, the Apostle knows nothing, notwithstanding the fact that he does not know of a fellowship with Christ in action that is not based upon fellowship with Him in heart. We are not to yield to the bias to turn predominantly to the subjective side—this is a thought specially significant in John.

Ver. 7. John still owes his readers information as to the specific commandments of Christ, and as to wherein the uniqueness of the Saviour's walk consisted; and this information he now gives them. He does so, however, in such a way, that he remarks that there is really no need of such instruction, seeing the commandment, of which he speaks, is one that is old and well-known to them for a long time, so that even without any express mention of it they must at once have naturally understood him. Nor does he proceed straightway to mention it, but only describes it in its wonderful uniqueness by laying stress upon the fact that it is at once the absolutely old commandment and the new. This definite commandment, however, of which John has been thinking also in vers. 3-6, is that of *brotherly love*. Expositors in all ages, and even those who have done so reluctantly, have felt compelled to adopt this view. So also in iii. 11, and in 2 John 5. In the passage before us, we cannot but see also an express allusion to John xiii. 34, and xv. 12; but that which is decisive for the interpretation we have adopted is the circumstance, that in vers. 9-11 brotherly love is set forth as that which is characteristic of the Christian walk in the light.

The expression “*which ye had from the beginning*” refers to the time previous to the conversion of the readers to Christianity, when they already had the commandment of brotherly love, and that, too, not merely those of them who had formerly been Jews, in the Old Testament law (Lev. xix. 18), but also those of them who had formerly been Gentiles, in the law of nature. It does not refer to the time since their conversion; for when the commandment of brotherly love is described in ver. 8 as a new commandment in consequence of the appearing of the Saviour, it can be called an old one here (in ver. 7) only as being a command-

ment which, prior to and apart from His appearing, was already extant for men. On the other hand (as in ver. 24), the word, *which they have heard from the beginning*, is certainly that which they have heard as the commandment of Christ from the beginning of their acquaintance with the gospel. John looks upon this commandment of brotherly love as the real principal content of the whole gospel message—so far, at least, as it is a practical message. This natural law of brotherly love, he says, is that which ye have heard as the commandment of Christ since the beginning of your acquaintance with the gospel; this and nothing else. Ye know, therefore, of yourselves what I mean, when I speak of the “commandment of Christ.”

According to this, the commandment of brotherly love has been given to men at large from the beginning of the human race, and in a certain measure they have also been conscious of it. It is an essential feature of the characteristic Christian frame of mind, that the Christian is conscious of the will of his Saviour as a will that does not at all impose new demands that were not already of themselves involved in the nature of the human race. They are rather purely and universally human demands, which the Saviour addresses to us; but they are none the less on that account

demands which He first actually makes. He first brings them into man's full, clear consciousness, and puts them in such a way that man becomes aware of their inevitable obligatoriness for him. Thus the Saviour first, so far as we are concerned, draws forth the half-buried primal, divine commandment into the full daylight of our consciousness. What we as men really are becomes manifest to us, first of all, in and through Him. The Christian is only man; but he is man as only the Christian knows him. The Christian must, therefore, with the most unconditional consent of his inmost nature, decide with respect to the Lord, that He only demands that which a man worthy of himself must absolutely demand of himself. Upon this, also, rests to some extent the Christian's assurance of the coming, perfect universality of faith in Christ. Because the Saviour brings nothing else than what belongs essentially to man as such, He must be able to find acceptance with all men; and because no other than He can perfectly communicate what belongs to the true nature of man, all must ultimately come to Him, in order to obtain it from Him. The Christian, however, should be all the more heedful that nothing is mixed up with Christianity, that is not in itself necessarily human, and that Christianity is not robbed of this its truly divine universalism by ordinances of man.

### The Dispensation of the Spirit.

BY THE REV. JOHN PORTEOUS, M.A., B.D.

IF there were saints of the Old Testament, they must have been sanctified, and that by the Spirit. Wherein, then, consists the pre-eminence of the New Testament Dispensation as regards the outpouring of the Spirit? (Matt. iii. 11; John vii. 39, xvi. 7).

The answer is: On the basis of the new Dispensation there is vastly wider scope for the action of the Spirit than there could be on the basis of the old.

1. The tacit assumption of the Law was that a man might sanctify himself. Experience was to show the fallacy of this. The Holy Spirit was not promised, though He would not be withheld from those who realized their helplessness and sought Divine aid (Ps. li. 11; cxliii. 10). On the other hand, the gospel, starting with the proclamation of human helplessness, had, as its very design, the outpouring of the Spirit. Thus the operations of the Spirit under the New Testament greatly exceed anything known before. Ours is the missionary epoch.

2. The Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John xiv. 17). In His action on the soul, He keeps pace with the

revelation of truth (so cf. 1 Pet. i. 23, and John iii. 5). His work is to take of the things of Christ and show them unto us (John xvi. 13-15). In so far, then, as the revelation of truth is narrowed (as, e.g., under the Old Testament), the action of the Spirit is narrowed. The less distinctly and completely the things of Christ are within human cognition (as, e.g., before Christ came), the less full can be the work of the Spirit. There is a Christian “full assurance,” “peace,” “joy,” “hope,” “love,” “fellowship,” “character,” which can be produced only on the basis of Christian facts and principles. The production of these constitutes the special outpouring of the Spirit in Christian times.

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