

## Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

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### CHAPTER V. 19-21.

'We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in evil. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true being, and we are in Him who is true being, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. My little children, guard yourselves from idols.'

IN ver. 18 John ends the discussion begun in ver. 14. That discussion also was meant to establish the general thought which engages his attention throughout the whole of this section—the thought, namely, that through faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, the Christian is in real possession of eternal life. He now returns again to this general thought, and utters it once more, in vers. 19 and 20, in all its strength, and with the fullest conviction. For in both verses the chief emphasis falls upon 'we know.' Between vers. 18 and 19 there is no direct connexion; but vers. 19 and 20, as is evident from the 'and,' must be taken together.

'We know that we are of God'—the direct expression of the Christian's consciousness of his real being. Through faith in the Redeemer, this his real being is in the element of the divine being, in eternal life (iv. 6). This consciousness attains its full clearness in the Christian through his consciousness of the contrast between this his being and the being of the world, *i.e.* of the natural human life as it still stands out of relation to the Redeemer, and is consequently, without exception, a life in sin, a being in the element of the evil one. Starting with his consciousness of God, which he possesses in virtue of the fact that his real being derives from God and is in the being of God, he becomes conscious of the world as such, as the sphere of that which is opposed to God, as the sphere of the evil one, and also at the same time of his own being as a being that has been delivered from this sphere (the world), and that no longer belongs to it. It is because the clearness and certainty of the Christian's consciousness of the fact that his proper being derives from God and is in God, and consequently in eternal life, attain completeness in his consciousness of the utter godlessness and sinfulness of the world and of his own absolute contrast with the latter, that John, after saying that we know that we are of God, adds, 'and

*that the whole world lieth in evil,' i.e.* the world in its entireness, so that no one and no thing, that belongs to the world, is excepted. 'To lie in evil' is a metaphorical expression, signifying that evil is the *element*, in which the world has its being (Ex. xxxii. 22). John's readers were familiar with the phrase, and consequently the expression, 'the evil one,' just used by him (ver. 18) would not cause them any difficulty in understanding what was meant by 'in evil' (neuter). He does not mean 'the whole world lies in the power of the devil,' an interpretation not at all demanded by the language which he uses.

Ver. 20. In the two clauses of ver. 19, John has set forth two different elements as forming the content of the Christian consciousness, which might seem necessarily to exclude one another. To know at once that one is of God, and also that the whole world lieth in evil, seems an impossibility. If the whole world lieth in evil, how does it come about that Christians are of God? In the verse we are now considering, the apostle answers this natural question, and in doing so once more very emphatically asserts that *in fellowship with the Redeemer, and through this fellowship*, we possess eternal life. Notwithstanding the fact that the whole world lieth in evil, we Christians know ourselves as deriving from God, and we also know why it is that we do so. For we know that the Son of God is come, and has given us, who have received Him, the ability to know God, who is true being; and we know also that, in virtue of our fellowship with this Son of God, we are in God; for He, the Redeemer, is the true God, and eternal life.

The emphatic words here are 'Son of God' and 'us.' For only the Son of God can communicate the true knowledge of God; and they that believe in Him that has come, and who are thereby separated from the world (John xvii. 14), are contrasted with the 'whole world' in ver. 19.

'Understanding' is not insight or knowledge, but the faculty of knowledge. In the appearing of the Redeemer, and in living fellowship with Him, we have the conditions of a real, pure knowledge of God, and the power whereby such knowledge is attained (2 Cor. iv. 6); it was the Redeemer's aim that, in virtue of this 'understanding,' we should learn to know God. 'He who is true being' is certainly God. 'In His Son Jesus Christ' states the more specific condition of our having our being in the true being. 'So far (inasmuch) as we are in, have fellowship with, His Son Jesus Christ;' which is virtually the same as 'through His Son Jesus Christ' (the same thought as in John xvii. 3). But that, in virtue of our being in the Son, we should really be in Him that is true, in true being—this is, of course, possible only so far as the Son Himself is essentially this true being. Accordingly, John immediately adds this thought in the words, 'this is the true God, and eternal life,' which are in effect a justification of what he has just stated. The only natural reference of 'this' is not to God, but to the immediately preceding subject—'His Son Jesus Christ.' We have already shown how exactly this thought suits the immediate context. It also fits in admirably with the whole passage from ver. 11 onwards. Moreover, this thought is very characteristic of John. The basis of the whole religious consciousness of John is—(1) that the being of the Redeemer is a real divine being, and that to us *in concreto* there is no other being of God than that in the Redeemer, no other God than the God in the Redeemer (ii. 23, v. 12; John i. 18, xiv. 7-10, xvii. 3); and (2) that His being is true, imperishable being, eternal life itself, and that consequently fellowship with Him is also at the same time a real possession of eternal life (i. 1 f.; John i. 4, etc.). Accordingly, 'eternal life' is a very appropriate predicate of the Redeemer: His being is, according to its quality, eternal life, and that not merely in the sense that He is the source and ground of eternal life.

John has given expression to two very different sides of the Christian consciousness. On the one hand, the Christian does not merely believe, but he knows with an immediate certainty which rests on experience, that he is of God. This certainty grows in strength in proportion as he makes progress in fellowship with God. As to this certainty, the Christian is not perplexed by all the doubts of

the world, or by the accusation of fanaticism. Of course, only he that has a clear idea of God Himself can know whether he is really of God or not. But the Christian has in Christ a clear idea of God, and therefore he knows with respect to himself that he is of God. He does not, on this account, overlook the fact that there is in himself a very great deal that is ungodly; he rather now first recognises it, in its ungodliness; and the more certain he is that he is of God, so much the more does he humble himself. But that the inmost kernel of his person is of God; that it is begotten again of the Spirit of God, and is therefore of divine quality and in fellowship with God—he is not led to doubt this by the various experiences which he has daily of the imperfection and weakness of his new life. This consciousness must give to the whole life of the Christian a mood and tendency which the life of the natural man cannot have. For it is certainly not the natural conviction of men that they are of God, *i.e.* that they are not merely creatures of God, but such creatures of God that their real life is of the same kind as His, and that He therefore dwells in them and they in Him. The natural man can speak only of the weakness of human nature:—we must not soar beyond ourselves, but must ever bear in mind that we are physical beings. And, therefore, just as the soaring up of man to God, into the heavenly supersensible world, must seem foolishness to the natural man, so the neglect of such soaring up to God must seem foolishness to the Christian. His whole life tends upwards. But no doubt the Christian reminds himself of this too seldom; he forgets too readily that he is of God. Hence there comes about in the life of so many pious Christians a constant vacillation between the bold assurance of their fellowship with God and their despondency in the battle with the earthly conditions of their existence.

Immediately after speaking of this consciousness, John asserts the other consciousness, namely, that the whole world lies in evil. So certainly as the Christian is convinced with respect to himself that he is of God, so certain is he also that the world is of ungodly nature and character. The whole domain of the natural human life without exception, and that not merely where evil has attained its highest development, but even where the natural life is the most specious, he looks upon as belonging to evil. But he also knows how to

draw distinctions. In natural existence he sees 'world' only so far as that existence is not yet laid hold of by the new divine spirit in Christ; and he is therefore far from seeing in our Christian world nothing but 'world.' He does not look upon the Christian world as lying in the lump in evil; but so far as within Christendom the natural human life continues in its mere naturalness, and is not yet really cleansed and sanctified by the Spirit of Christ, it lies in evil, however splendid it may be. The Christian is as careful not to regard that which is no longer world as lying in evil, as he is not to regard that which is not yet laid hold of by Christ as no longer world and no longer lying in evil. The more this his Christian consciousness becomes clear and strong, he is all the more continually discovering, on the one hand, that which is still of the world and lying in evil; and also, on the other hand, that which already belongs to the kingdom of God. This consciousness, that the world lies in evil, is possessed only by the Christian. However much the natural man may be filled with distrust of the world, and however meanly he may in truth think of it; he will nevertheless not believe that it really lies in evil, and regards it as fanatical injustice, if any one so looks upon it. He does not have a right criterion whereby to judge the world. It is only in the light of the consciousness of God and of man's relation to Him, which has dawned upon the Christian, that it can be recognised that the natural state of the world is one that is really evil and positively opposed to God.

No doubt this assurance may become to the Christian a temptation to proud uncharitableness. Regarding himself as one that is of God, and the world as lying in evil, he may be led, in spiritual pride, to look down upon the world. But this is possible only if there is some delusion or other mixed up with his consciousness. For if he is really of God, if he really feels, thinks, and wills as God does, he cannot be filled with contempt and pride, as he beholds the world that lies in evil; he must be filled, like God Himself, with compassionate love, and with an eager desire to work at the redemption of the world from evil. He is of God, not through himself, but through God; and if therefore, in contrast to the evil world, there seems to him to be aught great in connexion with himself, it can only be the divine grace that has delivered him from the world and has begotten

him of God. The consideration that the world lies in evil can only humble him, and at the same time make him circumspect in all his dealings with it. He is on his guard, that he be not again in any way entangled in this world that lies in evil.

John also explains how it is that the Christian has attained to this knowledge as to himself and the world. He does not have it of himself, but has received it from the Son of God. He looks on himself and the world, as it were, with the eyes of the Son of God, not with his own eyes. He looks on himself and the things about him in the same way as Jesus Christ Himself looks on them. This is the great maxim of the Christian, to place himself altogether upon the point of view of the Redeemer, in order to look on everything as He regards it. Even in regard to the minutest detail, he tries to find out how, in any given case, the Redeemer would have judged the matter. The Christian is well aware that his view of the world was not naturally current in the world; that the world could never of itself have attained such a view; but that it was Christ that first brought it into the world. But he knows also at the same time that for the right estimate of all divine and human things there is no clearer eye than that of the Redeemer, and that he is walking securely, when in all matters he is absolutely dependent on Him. He recognises in the Redeemer the Son of God Himself, and knows that the way in which the Redeemer looks on things is the same as the way of God.

Through the Redeemer there has come to us a new 'understanding,' a new faculty of perception. It is not meant that this new faculty is one wholly foreign to human nature; it belongs indeed to human nature in its purity; but sin had deprived man of it. The Redeemer has given the world this new 'understanding,' firstly, through His word, by exhibiting to the world and bringing under its notice His own view of it in His word; and, secondly, through the new spirit, which He has given us, *i.e.* by bestowing on us through faith a new spiritual life, and that too His own. In virtue of this new understanding, we now know Him that is true. The new Christian understanding penetrates with its glance to Him that is true, to Him whose being is alone absolutely true being, in comparison with whom all else is in a certain degree mere appearance, and for that very reason transitory.

The sole ground of all other being is God. It is not possible to the natural being of man to have absolute certainty and knowledge of God. Up to the time of Christ there was in the world no absolute certainty and no really adequate knowledge of God. It was, and still is, one of the main functions of the Redeemer to give the world such a knowledge of God as should colour its consciousness of everything else. As regards the world, this aim of the Redeemer is still far from being fully attained. As regards the individual also, it is the distinct aim of the Redeemer to bring him into such a condition that God should be to him of all things the most certain, and to give him a grand conception of God, in which there is no longer anything contradictory. It is no doubt only very gradually that the Christian reaches this goal; but he must never lose sight of it. It has really become day with him only in proportion as the pure thought of God stands like a bright sun in the zenith at noon. It is in virtue of this new sense for God, and just because God is He that is true, that the Christian now first knows all the other objects of his knowledge in a really right way. This new understanding, however, does not merely lead to the knowledge of God; it brings us at the same time to this God Himself, introduces us to the true life, which He alone is in the highest sense. By means of this same new understanding or sense, the Christian is also in Him that is true—namely, in His Son Jesus Christ, who is the true God, and eternal life.

The apostle states this truth regarding Christ in the most natural form, in the form in which it originates in the Christian consciousness. The Christian knows that in his fellowship with Christ he at the same time possesses eternal life and the fellowship of God Himself. He *must*, therefore, assert this also regarding Christ, that in Him Himself is eternal life and the true God. This thought no doubt makes us grow giddy when we attempt to work it out; we are unable fully to comprehend what kind of a personality that must be in which there dwells a truly eternal life, and that too not merely for itself alone, but for all others; an eternal life, which is absolutely inexhaustible, in spite of its unceasing communication of itself to others. And yet the experience of over eighteen centuries compels the Christian so to judge of Christ's personality. For all, who have ever sought eternal life from Christ, He has had it in sufficient fulness. For all, who through His unity with God

have sought fellowship with God for themselves, He has caused this His own unity with God to be a source of fellowship with God; and the longer this His self-communication is continued, it streams forth all the more richly; in all the more wonderful forms and modifications do we meet the eternal divine life, that flows forth from Him. If to any one this is no fact, neither an objective, historical fact, nor a fact in His own subjective experience, we shall in vain preach to him faith in the divinity of the Redeemer. He, on the other hand, to whom it is a fact, will not let himself be robbed of that faith by all the difficulties which our thinking stumbles upon in the attempt to explain it.

Ver. 21. The thought uttered at the close of ver. 20 (that the Redeemer is the true God, and eternal life) leads the author directly to a thought which forms an emphatic close of the Epistle. The idea of the true God reminds him of God's antithesis (*vid.* 1 Thess. i. 9), the *idols*. It, therefore, occurs to him very naturally that any turning away from Christ to another, whosoever and whatsoever it may be, is idolatry. He expresses this thought in the form of an earnest warning addressed to his readers. He could not have more appropriately concluded the foregoing (since ver. 5) commendation of faith in the Redeemer. Perhaps John is thinking here of the specific contrast between the Redeemer as the true God and the idols, which lies in the fact that, as compared with the *images* of the false gods, the Redeemer, as being the true *image* of the invisible God (John xiv. 9), is the true object of our worship. The idolatry, against which John warns here, is no doubt to be understood in a wider sense (as in Eph. v. 5; Col. iii. 5)—namely, of everything that is incompatible with faith in the Redeemer and does damage to this faith; but there is no need, on that account, to exclude the thought of a relapse into heathenism, into idolatry strictly so-called. Considering the manifold domestic and social temptations to which they were exposed (*cf.* 1 Cor. viii and x.), there was really the danger of such a relapse on the part of the weaker Christians, as is evident also from the express warnings given in 1 Cor. x. 7, 14 against it. And this danger steadily increased, when, in addition to the temptations of which we have spoken, Christians were subjected to political persecution, and were apt to be led astray by those who sought to unite all religions in an absolute, universal Gnosis. The

interpretation of the idols as referring to Gnostic heresies, or to the use of flesh sacrificed to idols, is altogether untenable.

These words contain the grandest doxology in praise and honour of Christ that John could utter. Everything that signifies apostasy from Christ comes under the category of idolatry. Christ is the sacred image, the means of revealing God given by God Himself, through the religious recognition and adoration of whom true piety, a religion uniting us with the true God, is alone possible. That adoration of the Redeemer, therefore, which is often regarded as an encroachment upon the adoration due to God alone, John rather sets forth as the only worship well-pleasing to God:

Jesus Christ alone reveals God truly, and that too for all men. And He does so in spite of His being in the form of a servant. He that sees Him, sees the Father; he that fails to see the Father in Him does not know the Father at all. This appearance in the centre of our human history is literally the pole-star, by keeping which in view we alone can find our way. To fix the gaze of our inner man ever more steadily on Him, and at the same time to apprehend the features of His appearance more and more clearly and precisely, is the great art upon which the practical wisdom of the Christian depends, and at the same time the source of that which deserves to be called true Christian simplicity.

## Contributions and Comments.

### 'Deine Rechte sind mein Lied.'<sup>1</sup>

MAY I be allowed to introduce to the readers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES Dr. Kögel's new work on the Psalter? It is a German work of a similar character to Dr. Ker's *The Psalms in History and Biography*. Few men are more competent for the task of illustrating the Psalms in this special manner than Dr. Kögel of Berlin, who, till nervous exhaustion due to overwork and anxiety laid him aside, ranked among the most eminent of the preachers of Germany. It will not be a surprise to those who know that he has been for many years the faithful Principal Chaplain of the Royal Family of Prussia to find in the book an unusual number of testimonies to the value of the Psalms from kings, princes, and others of high rank. Not, however, that others are by any means excluded, for reformers, theologians, preachers, poets, musicians, statesmen, warriors, men and women of all stations, blend their voices in praise of the wonderful depths and heights of this Prayer-Book of Humanity. Christian teachers will find the work a storehouse of illustrations largely drawn from remoter services. The book is very clearly printed and admirably indexed.

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<sup>1</sup> *Deine Rechte sind mein Lied*. Geschichten und Ansprache zu den Psalmen gesammelt von D. Theol. Rudolf Kögel. Oberhofprediger und Ephorus des Königl. Domkandidatenstifts. Bremen: C. Ed. Müller, 1895, 80.

### The Sign of Jonah.

IN selecting Jonah, you have taken not a bad instance for illustrating the distrust of the conclusions of the present-day Higher Criticism, which is widely diffused among devout and intelligent students of the word of God. You tell us (p. 483): 'So the editor of *The Biblical World* sent a letter to a number of American scholars about it. Did they understand our Lord to say that Jonah was really three days and three nights in the belly of the whale?' I have often heard that the opinion of counsel given on a legal point must always be taken in connexion with the terms of the memorial submitted to them. In this case of Jonah the answers do not set our minds at rest; but besides, the question does not nearly cover the subject which interests us.

I. As to the questions and the answers.

1. There is here an example of the way in which the text of Scripture is often handled. Matt. xii. 40 is pronounced by eminent critics to be an interpolation on purely subjective grounds, which have no weight for us.

2. It is alleged to be a matter of no importance to our Lord's teaching whether the narrative was 'fact or fable.' 'The reference is only by way of *illustration*. The validity of the illustration remains, when the story is found to be an allegory.' 'Our Lord was entitled to follow the custom of the great writers and orators of all peoples and all