

Studies in the Gospel of St. John.

I. THE PURPOSE AND PLAN.

IT is often said, and it can scarcely be said too often, that many people know about the Fourth Gospel who are not as familiar as they ought to be with the Gospel itself. There is a world of difference between knowledge of what men have said concerning this Gospel and acquaintance with its actual contents. The object of these outline studies is to call attention to the Gospel as it is, to examine its contents, and thereby to see something of its meaning and message. Taking it just as it stands, an attempt will be made to discover what its author believed, and how he regarded his Master, who is admittedly the theme of the writing. There is nothing to compare with a personal impression resulting from a personal study of the actual document.

The purpose of the writer is given at the end (xx. 30, 31), as though to suggest a reading through first, to get the proper impression, but whether we look at the purpose in the light of the Gospel or the Gospel in the light of the purpose, we shall see that the entire writing possesses a unity based on a definite object, and every section appears to be selected with direct reference to its specific purpose. Jesus Christ is central, and each incident, even when He Himself does not appear, is associated with Him. It is an argument in the form of a narrative, an argument for Christ arising directly out of the account given of His life and work. A new revelation is shown to have been given to the world, and in the revelation a new power is offered every human life.

The existence of a purpose does not detract in the least from the reality of the record. Even a novel written with a purpose is valuable, whether the purpose is actually stated or not, for as some one has said: "A novel without a purpose is like a life without a career. In order to be a story it must have something to say." The same is true of history, for it is obviously impossible for genuine history to be uncoloured. Mere annals are of no further value than as a record of facts, and it is the historian's imagination in reconstructing the life and purpose of the period that makes his work so valuable. "It is imagination that must take data and rebuild the past." It is the

same with a religious work, as we see from the Old Testament history, which was written with a special purpose by prophetic men, though their object never affects the historical character of what they record. In like manner the purpose of the Fourth Gospel is in no sense derogatory to the facts which form the substance of the writing. Indeed, not one of the Books of the Bible can be properly understood unless we endeavour to arrive at a clear idea of what the author meant, and it is this definiteness and distinctiveness of purpose that give the Gospels in particular their real value.

Four Gospels and one Christ. Four records and one aim. Four pictures and one Person. Four methods of recording impressions of that Person. St. Matthew may be said to demonstrate; St. Mark to depict; St. Luke to declare; St. John to describe. St. Matthew is concerned with the coming of a promised Saviour; St. Mark with the life of a powerful Saviour; St. Luke with the grace of a perfect Saviour; St. John with the possession of a personal Saviour. Each Gospel has been given a keynote from the Old Testament: St. Matthew, "Behold, Thy King" (Zech. ix. 9); St. Mark, "Behold, my Servant" (Isa. xlii. 1); St. Luke, "Behold, the Man" (Zech. vi. 12); St. John, "Behold, your God" (Isa. xl. 9). It is therefore important that, whatever may be the relations between these four records, each should be studied alone, first of all, to obtain the definite impression intended by the writer.

I. THE PURPOSE.

Unlike St. Matthew and St. Mark, St. Luke and St. John both give the reason why they wrote their Gospels (St. Luke i. 1-4), and St. John's definite statement bears so closely on the composition and contents of the whole of his Gospel that it must be considered with all possible minuteness. "But these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in His name" (xx. 31). This shows that the writer had a definite purpose: "These are written that"—and that the purpose is twofold: (1) to lead to personal belief in the historical "Jesus" as "the Christ" or Messiah (for the Jews) and as the "Son of God" (for the Gentiles); (2) to lead, by believing, to the possession of life in His name.

There are seven terms in this verse which are characteristic of the entire Gospel. They can be tested by a good concordance, or

else by reading the Gospel through and marking the references.

1. "Believe": Ninety-eight times in St. John as compared with St. Matthew eleven times, St. Mark fifteen, and St. Luke nine. This keynote of faith is struck in the earliest chapter and is found everywhere until it culminates in the message to the Apostle Thomas (xx. 29).

2. "Jesus": The historic name, and nowhere are the true humanity and historic character of our Lord more clearly set forth than in St. John's Gospel.

3. "The Christ": This term, signifying the Jewish Messiah, is a special point, more particularly in relation to the Jews, in the first great section i. to xii.

4. "The Son of God": Another title of Christ found in the first chapter and illustrated all through. There is perhaps no title which is found more frequently than "the Son" with its correlative "the Father."

5. "Have": This word is peculiarly characteristic of St. John and always implies *conscious* possession of spiritual things, having and holding, obtaining and retaining.

6. "Life": The Greek word ($\zeta\omega\eta$) always refers to the inward and spiritual reality as distinct from the outward and visible expression ($\beta\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma$). This distinction (and contrast) may be seen in our words "zoology" and "biology." The word "life" occurs in St. John thirty-six times as compared with St. Matthew seven, St. Mark four, and St. Luke six.

7. "His name": A phrase wholly characteristic of St. John (i. 12; ii. 23; iii. 18) and occurring no less than eleven times in chapters xiv. to xvii. The "name" always means the revealed character and "in His name" means in union with what we know of Him.

The whole Gospel is built up on the truths associated with these seven terms, and when we thus study carefully the purpose of St. John, we find the two ideas of Fact (v. 30) and Faith (v. 31); the revelation and the record; the work and the writing. Our Lord's life is intended to be the basis and inspiration of our faith. Every fact in Him is to be a factor and a force in us. We must therefore study the Gospel along the lines of this purpose as expressed in these ideas, and the more closely we do so, the more we shall see that everything from beginning to end is deliberately and definitely included in the special object here so clearly set forth.

II. THE PLAN.

This purpose (xx. 31) is built up and realized by means of a definite plan. Everything in the Gospel subserves the purpose and careful study shows that nothing is superfluous. What is this plan? Can we discover it? It is the presentation of Jesus Christ in those aspects of His revelation which drew forth faith in Him. This is not done by argument or by philosophy or even by theology; it is set forth as the manifestation of a LIFE. Thus we have a definite, though comprehensive picture of Christ Himself as a personal, practical Gospel for man. While the materials used are all historical, such a selection of facts is made as to adapt them strictly to show the way in which Jesus revealed Himself to men and also the way in which He was received by them.

Yet side by side with this manifestation of Christ to faith, there is the obvious and sorrowful fact that all did not receive Him, and so the Gospel reveals a growing unbelief which culminates in Christ's rejection and crucifixion. This unbelief is shown to be due to the deep-seated sinfulness of man and his consequent alienation from God.

These two aspects of Faith and Unbelief are strikingly shown by the recurrence of one phrase, "His own," in two places (i. 11; xiii. 1). We are told first of those who were "His own" people who did not, because they would not receive Him (i. 11). Then we are shown the other class, "His own" who did receive Him (xiii. 1).

Thus three elements may be said to run through the Gospel: Revelation, Reception, Rejection. They are found in the prologue, and in one way or another they are the substance of every chapter from first to last.

III. THE PLAN OUTLINED.

With the purpose of the Gospel (xx. 31) clearly in mind and the plan realized, it is now necessary to consider the way in which the plan is developed and the purpose at every point shown. The chief main division has already been given, consisting of two parts: (1) i. to xii., "His own"; (2) xiii. to xxi., "His own." Then we find that the Gospel is further divided into seven great sections.

I. The Prologue (i. 1-18).

(a) The Revelation (i. 1-4).

(b) The Rejection (i. 5-11).

(c) The Reception (i. 12-18).

2. The Revelation of the Messiah (i. 19 to vi. 71). The beginnings of faith and unbelief. At each stage a selection of scenes is given in which Jesus manifested Himself, and in the discussions on which the true meaning and twofold consequence of His revelation were brought out, sometimes resulting in faith and at others in unbelief.

(a) Faith begins in the disciples (i. 19 to ii. 12). This is due to the threefold testimony of John the Baptist, the first disciples, and the first miracle.

(b) The first public manifestation (ii. 13 to iv. 54). This includes Judæa, Samaria and Galilee, the three main sections of the land.

(c) The crisis of the manifestation (v. 1 to vi. 71). This is seen first in Jerusalem (v.) and then in Galilee (vi.).

Every part illustrates the growth of faith and unbelief, and the seven points of xx. 31 are all illustrated and developed in this section.

N.B.—Some writers prefer to end this section with chapter iv., but as chapters vii. to xii. form a unity of place, time and circumstances, it is better to regard the latter section as the beginnings of the end, rather than the end of the beginning.

3. The Great Conflict (vii. to xii.). The development of unbelief into active hostility and the growth of faith in the true followers.

(a) The commencement of the conflict (vii., viii.). This is seen in three stages: before, during, and after the feast.

(b) The course of the conflict (ix., x.). This includes the Sign and its consequence (ix.), the Shepherd and His claim, and the Son and His consciousness (x.).

(c) The culmination of the conflict (xi., xii.). This is shown in the great miracle (xi.) with the differing results (xi. 47 to xii. 19), followed by the closing scenes (xii. 20-36).

Then comes a concluding comment on the public ministry (xii. 37-50), giving first the evangelist's and then the Master's judgment. There was no need of further testimony, for Christ's public work was over. So this epilogue is given, showing that Isaiah's explanation was true and that the manifestations of Christ were quite sufficient. The outcome was seen in the two sides of light and darkness. In all this it is important to continue noting with great care how the purpose of xx. 31 is developed in detail in this section.

4. The Development of Faith (xiii. to xvii.). We are now to

give special attention to our Lord's manifestation to His disciples with reference to their faith.

(a) The education of faith (xiii.).

(b) The instruction of faith (xiv. to xvi.).

(c) The encouragement of faith (xvii.).

5. The Culmination of Unbelief (xviii., xix.). The Betrayal, Trial and Crucifixion.

6. The Culmination of Faith (xx.). The Resurrection.

7. The Epilogue (xxi.).

(Personal Conclusion, vers. 24, 25.)

The prologue and epilogue should be compared and contrasted the former dealing with Christ before His Incarnation and the latter with Him after His Resurrection; the former treating of His First Coming and the latter of His Second.

Thus on the foundation of the manifestation of Jesus Christ are built the two great facts and factors of faith and unbelief. In some respects the prologue contains the whole Gospel:

(a) i. 1-4 = i. 19 to vi. 71.

(b) i. 5-11 = vii. to xii.

(c) i. 12-18 = xiii. to xxi.

As we review the Gospel, we can see how the record is gradually and significantly concentrated. In the first twelve chapters (the first part), dealing with the public ministry of Christ, His work is connected with all three provinces of Palestine and covers practically three years. In the last nine chapters (the second part), our Lord's ministry is confined to one city and covers only a few days. Then too, we observe how the three outstanding lines of thought are shown by characteristic words and expressions from beginning to end (1) Christ's revelation is noticeable all through and is indicated by such words as "glory," "manifested," "sign," "works," "light," "word." An important part of this revelation is the relation of the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father. The phrase, "He that sent Me," occurs over forty times, and our Lord often repeats the significant assertion, "I am," with its obvious claim and meaning. (2) Then we also observe the twofold result of this revelation, sometimes in unbelief and at other times in faith. There are three statements in which it is seen that the manifestation of Christ makes a very distinct separation between those who accept and those who reject Him. The word "division" indicates this (vii. 43; ix. 16;

x. 19). On the one side is the solemn result of unbelief and rejection as indicated by such words and phrases as "world," "blind" and "ye will not come to Me." This process of unbelief is seen almost everywhere in the public ministry recorded in the first part. Then the element of reception is equally clear and is indicated by such words and phrases as "sheep," "His own," and by the attitude of faith that marks the true disciple. While unbelief is a wilful rejection of truth, faith is based on and is a response to what is declared as true. One of the most striking words in the Gospel is "witness," which occurs almost fifty times, and the direct response to this is seen in the word "believe" which, as we have seen, occurs nearly one hundred times. All through the Gospel the testimony of various witnesses is given, and the outcome is either belief or unbelief, according to whether the testimony is received or rejected. (3) The issues of this faith and unbelief are also clearly seen in the Gospel in "eternal life" on the one hand and "judgment" on the other. It is interesting and perhaps significant that the idea of death is practically non-existent, but, instead, we find emphasis on the solemn thought of judgment as an act or attitude that commences here and culminates in the life to come.

The more thoroughly the details are studied, the clearer it will be seen that every part in some way subserves the purpose and is part of the plan of the Gospel.

IV. A SPECIAL FEATURE.

It has frequently been pointed out that there is one element in the plan which runs through every part of the Gospel. This is the personal factor which is often clear, sometimes only hinted at, but is always real. It is as though the selection of material was due to the personal experience of the Apostle himself, and the Gospel, as it stands, is a progressive record based on his own life. It is, as some one has well said, the story of "how I came to believe and how you also may believe." If this be true, John's Gospel is intended to elicit experiment in others and thus lead in turn to further experience. This personal element is certainly seen in the minute details of chapter i. and the personal touches of such passages as xiii. 23-26; xviii. 25-27; xix. 25-27, 31-37; xx. 5, 8; xxi. 7, 22.

It has also been noted that only three times in the Gospel have we any direct hint or suggestion of the writer himself, but when the

three passages are put together, they seem to indicate three stages of his progressive experience: (a) i. 38, the desire of the young believer, "Where dwellest Thou?" (b) xiii. 23, the inquiry of the growing believer, "Lord, who is it?" (c) xxi. 7, the insight of the mature believer, "It is the Lord." This seems to correspond with John's own division of Christians into children, young men, and fathers (1 John ii. 12-14).

And so, when we review the Gospel and pay special attention to its purpose, plan and progress, we see how every part helps to carry out the writer's intention of recording the Divine manifestations of Jesus Christ and the twofold result in some being hostile and others loyal to Him. His claim to reveal the Father and His call to men, "Follow Me," lead either to rejection, which culminated in the crucifixion, or to reception, which culminated in the adoring cry, "My Lord and My God" (xx. 28).

In the light of all that has now been said, it is not surprising to read that Dr. H. Clay Trumbull on one occasion, being met by an exceptionally intelligent student who had imbibed Agnostic views, advised him to study the Gospel according to St. John for the purpose of examining with all possible fairness the strongest presentation of Christian truth. The man read it through from beginning to end, taking it simply as a book without examination of outside evidence of its genuineness. When he read it through, he said: "The One of whom this book tells us is either the Saviour of the world or He ought to be," and it is interesting to know that, because of what the Gospel told the Agnostic of Jesus Christ, he was ready to heed the call of our Lord so frequently uttered throughout the Gospel. It is not surprising to know that this testimony has been endorsed by other leading Christian workers who are convinced that any man who is determined to know and do the truth cannot study this Gospel without becoming a Christian.

It is a familiar story, but one well worth repeating, how the venerable Bede had for his last labours the translation of this story of St. John. We are told that he wrote while age crept upon him, and as he drew near the end of his work, his strength failed him. His disciples urged him on and cried, "Master, Master, there is but one chapter more." He wrote on until his strength was gone, and his disciples said, "There is but one verse more." Summoning his failing strength, he translated the remaining verse and then said,

“It is finished.” They answered, “It is finished,” and then as he lay where he could fix his eyes on the place where he used to pray he passed away to be with that Saviour Whom he loved, served and glorified.

It is no wonder that in all ages this has been regarded as the most remarkable of our four Gospels. Testimony after testimony to this could be quoted from leading minds through the centuries from Clement of Alexandria to the present day. Luther’s words are often quoted: “This is the unique, tender, genuine, chief Gospel. . . . Should a tyrant succeed in destroying the Holy Scriptures and only a single copy of the Epistle to the Romans and the Gospel according to St. John escape him, Christianity would be saved.” And coming down to our own time, the late Bishop Ellicott well said: “If the heart studies the Christ as portrayed in this writing it will need no other proof of His Divinity.”

W. H. GRIFFITH THOMAS.

(To be continued.)

