

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

CHAPTER I. 5-6.

"And this is the message which we have heard from him, and announce unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in the darkness, we lie, and do not the truth."—I JOHN i. 5, 6.

VER. 5.—John has just spoken of a proclamation he has already made in his Gospel. What he does in our Epistle is to translate this historical proclamation for his readers into practice. The *practical* contents of that proclamation he first of all sums up in an altogether general formula, which he places at the head of the whole discussion. "And the contents"—so he proceeds—"of the message which I have received from Christ (and which I only repeat after Him) is, put briefly, this." The new concept, however, in which John sums up the contents of the evangelical proclamation, is calculated to set forth this Gospel as a source of exceeding joy. The name of Him, from whom he has heard the message, he does not mention; he says only "from Him," for he is wont to call Christ merely "He". To him this Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, in whom he has everything—both God and the kind of world, which God wants. The historical theanthropic person of Christ is the real compass for the consciousness of the Christian. This message is described as having been received from Christ, because John desires to assure the reader of its absolute certainty. And in point of fact the great truth, which he states, seems credible upon no other testimony than that of the only begotten of the Father: *God is Light*. The word "light," without the article, ascribes to God in an altogether abstract manner the property of being light, without stating what kind of light, or in how far this predicate belongs to God exclusively or to other subjects also.

John seeks to make the joy of his readers full, by the exclamation: "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all!" Light and joy are closely connected with each other. Where light is, there also is joy; only in the light, where the consciousness looks back into its inmost ground, is joy real. The light of the sun brings with the day joy, the stirring of life over the whole sensible world. Wherever in the human soul that inner clearness has actually arisen, in which man recognises himself in his whole reality, and no longer deceives himself in respect of anything whatever, there joy has entered into him; that which oppresses him has been taken away. So John knows nothing higher and nothing more joyous to utter regarding God, as he has beheld Him in Christ, than that in Him everything is light. At the first glance we see that this expression is meant to form a direct antithesis to the notion of God

within the whole heathen world. To the consciousness of the heathen God is a dark, gloomy God, partly because He is a concealed, and partly because He is an unfriendly, more or less unloving being. To the consciousness even of the Old Testament saint, God still dwells in the darkness, and comes forth from His concealment only in isolated manifestations, in order with the light of His revelation to illumine only a narrow circle within the compass of the human race. Further, in the Old Testament God is dark and gloomy, so far as the fire of His holiness does not yet shine as the pure light of grace, and His holy wrath does not yet stand in full harmony with His merciful love. To the Christian, on the other hand, God is light, that has plainly emerged from its eternal darkness, and has become visible in a human existence, and He has manifested Himself to him, not only in word, but also in an irrevocable deed, as a God of most holy love.

We must now inquire into the more precise meaning of "light," as it is here predicated of God, and its opposite "darkness". That which we know empirically as "light" is certainly not to be understood here. But we are not simply on that account justified in saying that it stands here, not in a physical, but in an ethical sense. No doubt, "light" and "darkness" occur in Scripture in an ethical sense (Rom. xiii. 12, Eph. v. 8 f., 1 Thess. v. 4); and John certainly is thinking here of the absolute holiness of God, in opposition to all sin and all error (Jas. i. 17). John, however, is not writing of the holiness of God *generally*, in opposition to sin and error in general, but he is speaking of it under a more specific, peculiar category. The speculative idea of light is that of spirit, under the category of nature (in opposition to the idea of spirit considered as personality), to which nature, as material, or matter under the category of nature, which has darkness and gravity as its essential predicates, forms the antithesis. Light is spirit under a *non*-personal category. Certainly, "light" is an expression for the holiness of God; it expresses it, however, as it is defined in virtue of its absolute immateriality, as it is His absolute *purity*, *i.e.*, His quality of being absolutely untouched by material or physical defilement, and—which is directly involved in one's being conditioned by matter (just as darkness and gravity go together)—by material or sensuous narrowing (selfishness, egotism). The latter becomes doubly probable, when we think of chap. iv. 8 ("God is love"), and of the great stress which is laid upon love throughout the whole Epistle. Love, as being that which absolutely communicates itself, is also that which is absolutely transparent

and illuminating. As the light of pure love, God is turned towards His creatures as absolute goodness, hence the Christian God stands in contrast with the heathen gods, in whom there is also to a certain extent a lack of love and envy and jealousy of the creature. It is not, therefore, sin and error in general that form the opposite of light, but sin and error so far as they originate in the sensuous nature, the flesh; and it is from this source that John distinctly derives them (chap. iii. 3, John's Gospel i. 13, iii. 6). "God is light" is thus substantially the same as the word of the Saviour in John iv. 24—"God is spirit"—only that the former expresses the same thought with an express negative reference. For this reason John can say of this proclamation in a literally true sense: We have heard it from Him. And in point of fact this is exclusively characteristic of the divine idea in Christ, that it posits in God pure and perfect holiness—holiness which does not intrench upon the perfection of His grace.

Seeing that John thus describes God as light, and, indeed, as pure light, the contents of his proclamation become for his readers an operative principle of ethico-religious and practical judgment of the utmost keenness. For the inevitable consequence of such insight is the unreserved drawing back from everything that is darkness in the human world, and, therefore, from everything that is *sin*. It is so, however, with the express secondary reference, that this sin belongs to that which forms the antithesis of God as light, as spirit, *i.e.*, to matter, to physical—and therewith at the same time selfish—existence. With this statement the way is paved for the earnestness of the following exhortation. Even for a Christian it is not so easy to think of God as pure light; at least in practice he still assumes a remnant of darkness in God. He still believes himself able somehow to hide himself from the divine truth, from the light, which sees everything, and at liberty to count somehow, at least for himself, upon some sympathy in God with sin, upon an unholy forbearance with it. As regards others, he knows full well that God overlooks nothing. The saddest thing is that this presumption of a kind of ignorance or forbearance on the part of God in respect of his sin clothes itself in his soul even as hope, if it can appear to him as desirable that God is not pure light of truth and holiness. It is not possible that under these circumstances we should love God more than our own sinful self; for otherwise it would inevitably be a thought exceedingly grievous to us, that in His light there should remain one spot. The consequence of this error of ours is, that the light of His love is also obscured to us, and we enjoy only a half love of God, and cannot fully refresh ourselves in the believing enjoyment of His unlimited love.

Ver. 6.—From what he has just said, John now

draws the inevitable conclusion, that the absolute condition of man's fellowship with God is *walking in the light*, and that, on the other hand, walking in darkness along with fellowship with God is simply impossible. He earnestly opposes all so-called lip Christianity, the indecision in which confession and walk stand in contradiction. Such indecision was actually found in the circle of his readers. He presupposes the case, that one could *speak* of having fellowship with God, without its being true; yea, that in respect of this matter one might even impose upon one's self. Certainly the thought of a fellowship with God is a thought that man cannot acquire by himself. He can only abstract it from an actual relationship of fellowship with God; and hence this thought in its proper truth did not even enter into the heart of man before the revelation of God. The pre-testament world could not possibly fall into that hypocritical self-deception of having fellowship with God. The mystery that there was such a fellowship had not yet become known to it. But now that God has completely united Himself with us in Christ, and has given to each individual the promise of entering into fellowship with them, if they attach themselves to Christ in faith, the thought of a fellowship with God has become common property in the world; yea, unhappily, it has become wellnigh trivial. The adoring wonder of the human mind, when it heard for the first time of so great a good, is almost lost to us, so that we wish we could hear it for the first time. And now that all know it, it is very natural to each one to make his mind easy on the subject by considering that this fellowship is at least not altogether foreign to him. Each one feels how unworthy he must be, if, after the opening up of this fellowship, he should have no share in it. If man, however, does not watch over himself sincerely, he deceives himself fatally. In the Christian world, the light, which God is, lighteth all, at least externally; it lighteth even those within whose hearts it is not yet shining. Each one tastes, externally at least, something of the kindness of God; and hence he can easily persuade himself that that is his own possession, which in point of fact is only a passing enjoyment of what is communicated by others in their love and friendliness. Accordingly, John reminds his readers of the impossibility of a walk in darkness, and at the same time of a fellowship with God. The *darkness*, in opposition to the light, is not simply sin in general, but more particularly sin as it proceeds from the physical principle; sin, therefore, as it is iniquity (2 Cor. vi. 14), and also at the same time egoistic, selfish (ch. ii. 8-11).

A man's *walk* is the predominant tendency of his life, not merely inwardly, as disposition, but also outwardly, as activity. He whose heart and life do not have as their proper element the light of truth, of holiness, and love, cannot have fellowship with God,

the pure Light: in such a one God finds no point of contact for fellowship with him. *He lies, and does not the truth.* In the condition of such a one there is not merely a defect, but a positive perverseness; it is a condition of lying, not merely of untruth, but of more or less intentional untruth. In point of fact the antithesis between God as the pure Light and walking in the darkness is so glaring that a man cannot remain altogether unconscious of it. Only complete blindness and callousness can *bonâ fide* believe themselves standing in fellowship with God. These, however, are never the commencement, but the extreme measure of religious error. If the Christian, who knows of God as the pure Light, and that too from personal experience, by having felt His correcting and chastening power—if such a Christian can imagine that, though walking in the darkness, he nevertheless stands in fellowship with God, he can only have persuaded himself of this in an artificial way, by an intentional repressing of the sting in his conscience, by lies. It ought to be carefully impressed upon our mind that we are entangled in a lie when we find ourselves desirous to square our fellowship with darkness with the fellowship of God. In such a case we should be upon the straight road to the blinding and deluding of ourselves religiously.

To do the truth is to realise, to carry out in practice, the truth which one possesses in theory, to bring one's conduct into harmony with truth, *i.e.*, with what one recognises as just and right, and thus to do what is right in accordance with one's best knowledge and ability. It is perfect honesty and uprightness of heart. For truth is an impulse in man, which is satisfied only by being completely translated into deed and life, into man's own nature. John regards this as the real, proper aim of man's life. It cannot take place in him who indeed knows of the light, but walks in the darkness. Herein lies the discord in the spiritual being of a man. To have the truth, and not to have it as a power transforming the life, is not only a contradictory, but a torturing condition, a continuous repression of the impulse inhering in truth to give being and existence to itself.

At the Literary Table.

WE have already touched on Westcott's *Hebrews* (Macmillan, 14s.) both in the Expository Notes and in the International Lessons. To give a full review is unsatisfactory till we have had time to *use* the book. Those who know Westcott's *John*, especially the *Epistles*, will know what to expect here. Emphatically a student's book, it is brimful of the most conscientious hard work from one who is now perhaps both our greatest scholar and greatest commentator. But it *needs* hard work to get the use of it. No ready-made "Homiletical Helps" need be looked for here. The preacher who is in a hurry need not turn to

these pages. Nor do we find confident judgments upon disputed questions. The evidence is completely mastered, and no conclusion is expressed except what it warrants. If it warrants none, then none is given. Thus, on the authorship of the Epistle—"We are left with a negative conclusion. The Epistle cannot be the work of St. Paul, and still less the work of Clement. It may have been written by St. Luke. It may have been written by Barnabas, if the 'Epistle of Barnabas' is apocryphal. The scanty evidence which is accessible to us supports no more definite judgment."

We shall have more to say about Westcott's *Hebrews*.

Dr. George Matheson's *Sacred Songs* (Blackwood, 4s.) will introduce him in a new and attractive light to some of his friends, while from those who already know him in this light it will receive a hearty welcome. The friends who are already acquainted with his poetic gifts are more numerous than might be supposed, considering how little he has hitherto published. We, at least, were pleasantly surprised to meet with a letter in a recent *Family Churchman*, which hailed from the Isle of Wight, and showed both knowledge and appreciation.

The best criticism of the book we can offer is to quote a song out of it, and this we have done on another page. It is the best criticism, because, while there is abundant variety in subject and in treatment, in metre and in melody, a uniformity of general poetical excellence is surprisingly maintained throughout. One thing has struck us very forcibly, the wealth of fresh biblical exposition that is packed into the little book. Every poem has a text at the head of it, and often the poem is a living exposition of that text. But even where the text is more of a motto, unexpected flashes of light are continually being thrown upon parts of the written word. Original interpretations abound, and, though not always obvious at first glance, generally commend themselves in the end.

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES recently contained a sermon by Dr. Matheson on the words, "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you" (Matt. vii. 7). The sermon was an entirely original and very striking exposition of that text. The same words stand at the head of one of the songs in this volume; and we shall quote the first half of it as an illustration of what we have said.

The second half of Mr. Spurgeon's *Salt-Cellars* is now published. We took a few pinches out of the first part to season our first number, and hope to do the same by this part also in an early issue.

St. Matthew's Gospel, with Explanatory Vocabulary and Five Original Illustrations, is published in Aberdeen. The text is divided into sections, each with an appropriate heading, without chapters or verses. The Vocabulary forms a kind of Commentary, for it explains phrases and sentences

as well as words. It is well printed, and might serve as a school reading-book; but we should prefer it without the illustrations.

Many of our readers have probably never heard of the *Guide*. It is a penny monthly, published by Elliot Stock, and intended as a Help to Personal Progress. A help it will become to anyone who reads it, especially to young men, whose needs are kept well in view. In the volume for 1889 will be found "Parables for Young Men," by the Rev. A. F. Forrest; a series of papers on "How to Prepare for the Professions," by Sir Arthur Helps and others; "The Saviours of Society," being sketches of well-known philanthropists; Essays by Mr. Henry Dunn on the "Study of the Scriptures". And then it is particularly rich in point and illustration (to use our own title), gathered from every quarter with great skill.

"Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those, that lawless and uncertain thoughts
Imagine howling! 'tis too horrible!
The meanest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death."

And hence the intense interest that books have like Dr. Hamilton's *Beyond the Stars*. We are not in the least surprised to hear that the first edition was spent in a few months. We have always a feeling about books on Heaven that they do not sufficiently follow the reserve of Christ Himself. Dr. Shedd, in an admirable sermon on this subject, to be found in *Sermons to the Spiritual Man*, says truly that "we feel Christ knew much more" of the heavenly state "than He has disclosed; if He had chosen to do so, He could have made yet more specific revelations concerning the solemn world beyond the tomb". We wish that that were always remembered. But the President of Queen's College is not to be classed with those who pander to an uneasy curiosity. *Beyond the Stars* is as safe a guide and as scriptural as we have read. If such books must have a large circulation, it is a satisfaction to know that this one deserves it. First, there is a "Settling of Localities"; then the Contents of Heaven—God, Cherubim, Angels, Saints, Children; then the question, Do they know one another in Heaven? is answered; and the last, and not least, subject is, "How to get there!" We read the dedication, "IN ALICLÆ carissimæ memoriam dulcem," and, we think, we see where the Doctor got his inspiration.

The *Cambridge Bible for Schools* is gradually compassing the whole land. The latest conquest is PHILIPPIANS, by

Principal Moule. We have read the book through from beginning to end, which surely says something both for it and us. Principal Moule has rare qualifications for the exposition of St. Paul's epistles, a combination of such qualities as scholarship, spiritual sympathy, power of expression. He has already expounded Romans and Ephesians in this series, and shown that he could remedy the defect of some of his writings—diffuseness. The rock ahead, in the present instance, was, of course, Bishop Lightfoot. How to prevent one's originality being crushed by his towering influence, and yet say something that is worth saying,—that is the question which a commentator has to answer, whose work lies on any of the epistles Lightfoot has handled. Principal Moule has answered it here.

Lightfoot thinks that St. Paul's reference in Phil. ii. 17, "If I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith," is more likely to the Pagan ritual of libation, in an epistle to a Church of Gentile converts. But Dr. Moule holds that the Apostle must have familiarised all his converts with Jewish symbolism; and that *his own mind* was at any rate deeply impregnated with it. That is an example of his independence taken at random. We are glad to see that, more than ever, he is avoiding the *etymological* snare. On Phil. iii. 11, "the resurrection from the dead," he says: The noun rendered "resurrection" is the rare word *anastasis*, *i.e.*, the common word (anastasis) for resurrection strengthened by the preposition meaning "from". This must not, however, be pressed far; later Greek has a tendency towards compounding words without necessarily strengthening their meaning. It is the *setting* of the word here which makes an emphasis in it likely.

Alongside the original *Cambridge Bible for Schools* we have now several volumes of a *Greek Testament*. They are written by the same authors. The latest is Archdeacon Farrar's HEBREWS. It is a careful exposition of the Epistle, containing fewer surprises of interpretation than we usually find in Farrar. This is not a simple reproduction of the English edition, with the Greek in place of the English; both Introduction and Notes contain additions and corrections. Everyone who knows Greek will prefer this to the other.

Dr. Norman Walker's *The Church Standing of the Children* is the work of a man who is evidently familiar with every coign and cranny of the Infant Baptism Controversy. Evidently also the Church standing of the children is a matter of strong conviction with him. But this little book contains nothing irritating either in the way of controversy or petty detail. It is on the broad principles which underlie the question that Dr. Walker relies. He throws the burden of the proof that infants ought not to be baptized upon those who hold that belief. He insists upon a comprehensive view of Scripture teaching. He very skillfully confronts one dilemma with another. No Church or individual who holds the doctrine to be an important one

should miss this manual. For distribution, it is the very thing. Admirable in spirit and accurate in knowledge, it presents the question in a manner that is both interesting and informing.

In the early days of the *Expositor* it was always to the articles signed S. Cox that we, at least, who were students, and eager for living instruction in the oracles of God, first turned. There were other attractive names, but they were not *always* attractive—not certain to be so clear in exposition, so happy in expression. And we have not lost our first love. It may be true that Dr. Cox has taught many others the cunning which in those days was almost all his own. It may be that now there is not often the delight of those early surprises. But Dr. Cox has never lost the freshness of a living, real, thoroughly sympathetic expositor. And we have enjoyed greatly the latest from his pen.

He calls it *The House and its Builder*; for it is a book for the doubting, for those who are not sure whether the house built itself or was built by somebody. The origin of doubt he finds, and is right in finding, in the origin of evil. For most, and for the best, that is the real difficulty. Dr. Cox offers a "working hypothesis," wherein we find that the fall of man involved the fall of the lower creatures. There follows, accordingly, an exposition, in five chapters, of Rom. viii. 18-27; and that is the richest part of the book—the real strength of it. A sermon to young people—who also are reckoned to have their doubts—is followed by one on the uses of adversity, or, as he calls it, "the Lessons of the Rod". A farewell discourse—farewell to his own congregation of auditors, we hope not to the larger congregation of readers—closes the book. Its texts are: Heb. iii. 4, Rom. viii. 18-27, James ii. 13, Luke xii. 29, Micah vi. 9, 2 Cor. xiii. 11.

Books Noticed.

THE MONTH'S EXPOSITIONS AND SERMONS.

NOTE.—None but valuable sermons and expositions are noticed. Of Monthly Magazines the January issue is referred to. Of Weekly Periodicals the number is given.

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v. 24, F 1820, M'Laren.
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2 Sam. i. 24, 25, SH, Bradley.
iii. 39, PMM.
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xxii. 1-38, GW, Dods, xxii. 19-23, E, D'Arcy.
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xv. 11, PMM.
xv. 12, 13, F 1819, M'Laren.
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