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THE LAST DISCOURSE, ST. JOHN XIV.-XVII.:
A CRITICAL STUDY.

IN looking at a scene from a distance, the various objects which meet the gaze, though not equally remote from the spectator, lose much of their perspective, and appear to group themselves together. A similar effect would, doubtless, have been produced on the mental vision of St. John, after the lapse of half a century or more, by the scenes which he recalled. His consciousness as to the intervals of time which separated different conversations of our Lord would become obscured. And the tendency of such a writer would be, unconsciously, to incorporate into some one discourse, sayings of Christ, which were in reality uttered on different occasions.

But a literary result like this might also have been in part the designed purpose of the author of the fourth Gospel. Writing, as he did, from the sub-Apostolic period, the philosophic and theological controversies of that time were bound to demand attention. His thoughts would be naturally directed towards the exposition of those Christian doctrines with which these controversies were connected. And, consequently, it would be essential to the writer's aim to reproduce the teaching of Christ in the clearest and most comprehensive manner, not merely in letter, but in spirit. Needless to say, this end could not have been attained by a method of strict historical accuracy, in which brief and isolated sayings of our Lord were given in their actual order of utterance. For had these been left scattered here and there throughout the pages of the fourth Gospel, they would have lacked the force and conclusiveness of more extended and consecutive reasoning. It may, therefore, be reasonably inferred that the very design of this Gospel would necessitate, at times, an eclectic association of the Master's words.

In accordance with this hypothesis, the writer desires to present the following theory regarding St. John xiv.-xvii.: that while these chapters contain words spoken by our Lord to the disciples on the night of the betrayal, yet with them the Apostle has interwoven another discourse, which was not uttered on that occasion, but which bears evident marks of being Christ's teaching after His resurrection, when He was "appearing unto them by the space of forty days, and speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God."

Within the scope of a short paper, it would be impossible to enter fully into a critical examination of the various passages so as to shew which, in the writer's opinion, synchronize with the night of the Passover and which with the later date. But in order to give a clearer idea of the theory indicated above, it is contended here that chapters xiv. 1-29, xv., xvi. 1-15, and xvii. are mainly, if not altogether, composed of sayings which belong to the post-resurrection period, and the other portions of chapters xiv. and xvi., of words which were spoken on the eve of the crucifixion.¹

In support of this contention, it is necessary in the first place to contrast the accounts of this night as given by the Synoptists and St. John.

In examining the earlier writers, it is evident that their records of this time agree in essential particulars. In each of their Gospels there is a remarkable attention to details. They seem to have been impressed with the necessity of giving a very minute report of what occurred on that night, which was only natural at such a crisis in the life of their Master.

In St. Matthew's Gospel, the first incident recorded at the beginning of the supper is our Lord's prediction, "One of you shall betray me."² Then followed the

¹ This is not meant to be a final and exhaustive analysis of the passages in question. In chapter xvi. 16-28, St. John may, perhaps, have blended together the teaching of both periods, so that such expressions as "I shall see you again" may have a twofold reference—to the appearances of the risen Saviour and to His coming in spirit after His ascension.

² St. Matthew xxvi. 21.

institution of the Lord's Supper, after which, when they had sung the Hallel, they proceeded to the Mount of Olives. Here our Lord warned the disciples, "All ye shall be offended in me this night." In reply, St. Peter protested, "If all men shall be offended in thee, I will never be offended"; to which Christ rejoined, "Verily I say unto thee, that this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice." They then passed on to the Garden of Gethsemane, the scene of our Lord's agony.

St. Mark's report of the events of that night and of Christ's sayings is almost identical with that of the first Gospel. St. Luke's narrative, however, is somewhat different, though in his description of our Lord's passion in the garden he is in close agreement with the other synoptists. According to him, the supper began with an expression of satisfaction on the part of Christ at eating the Passover with His disciples.¹ He alone records the strife which arose amongst them as to which should be accounted greatest, though there is evidently a veiled suggestion of this rivalry in St. John xiii. 14, 15, 16. And further, the following sayings of Christ are peculiar to the third Gospel, "Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations; and I appoint unto you a kingdom even as my Father hath appointed unto me"²; "When I sent you without purse, and wallet, and shoes, lacked ye anything?"³; "For I say unto you, that this which is written must be fulfilled in me. And he was reckoned among the transgressors."⁴ But notwithstanding these minor differences, it will doubtless be admitted that the main features of the three narratives are in harmony with each other, and that the additional sayings attributed to Christ by St. Luke are in keeping with the spirit of sadness and foreboding which pervaded that fateful night as described by St. Matthew and St. Mark.

The question, then, naturally arises, why the Synoptic Gospels, agreeing as they do in the essential circum-

¹ St. Luke xxii. 15.

² v. 28 ff.

³ v. 35 f.

⁴ v. 37.

stances of that night, contain not even the slightest allusion to the "last discourse," which, according to the fourth Gospel, was *apparently* spoken on the night of the Passover. Undoubtedly, the omission of any reference on their part to this lengthened address of Christ is strange, since the subject-matter of the "discourse" is of such vast importance. It marks a tremendous advance in revelation—in Christ's revelation of Himself and of the Trinity in which He is included. He explains to His followers the purpose of His ascension. He declares to them the personality and mission of the Comforter. He shews them, in the parable of the vine and the branches, the union that exists between Him and His Church. And, finally, in the prayer of intercession¹ His High Priestly Office is exemplified.

No doubt, the importance of an argument from silence may easily be exaggerated. But there are times when such an argument has weight—here, for instance, as it is contended, in the closing scenes of our Lord's life. And for this reason. Until the night of the Passover, with the exception of some few circumstances which the Synoptists record in common with St. John, their narratives move in a different plane from that of the writer of the fourth Gospel. Just as parallel lines do not meet, so it is with them and St. John in the earlier incidents of Christ's life which they narrate. But on the eve of the crucifixion, these lines of narrative converge, and though they do not meet in complete coincidence, they certainly cross each other. At this period St. John makes mention of the following facts, which are common to all the evangelists:—Our Lord's prediction that one of His disciples should betray him ; St. Peter's profession of fidelity ; the reply of Christ, which foretold the threefold denial of Him by the apostle ; our Lord's warning that He would be deserted by all His followers, and finally, a whole series of later events, when He stood before the High Priests

¹ Chapter xvii.

and Pilate. The harmony of the four Gospels here is unprecedented. And it is this unwonted unanimity of the writers which increases our surprise at the omission of any reference by the Synoptists to this particular discourse. At the very time when the four evangelists combine in reporting several sayings of Christ, His most important utterance on the night in question is utterly ignored by the three earlier writers. No thoroughly satisfactory reason has ever been given for this neglect. But it is contended here that the *silence* of the Synoptists affords a presumption, at least, that this discourse was *not* spoken by our Lord on the eve of His death.

But the internal evidence goes further. Admitting for a moment that St. John xiv. may contain a speech of our Lord which was delivered at the supper table, an important question arises as to the position of chapters xv., xvi. 1-15, and xvii. The fourteenth chapter concludes with the command, "Arise, let us go hence." It was evidently the signal for the party to break up. Unless the command to depart was absolutely without meaning, they must have passed out into the street, and consequently the words contained in the three succeeding chapters could not have been spoken in the room. In his commentary on the Gospel of St. John, the late Canon Sadler has said:—

"It is impossible to say with anything like certainty where the words of the Lord, as contained in chapters xv., xvi., and xvii., were uttered. . . The part of the discourse which follows, could not, we think, have been spoken as they walked through the public roads to the place where they crossed the brook. The words seem too solemn, and to demand too much attention, to have been uttered as they passed through places of public resort."

At this point Canon Sadler has practically left the question. His contention, however, is borne out by the silence of the Synoptic Gospels as to anything having been said by Christ on the way to the Mount of Olives. St. Matthew and St. Mark simply record the

fact in identical terms, "when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives." It would seem, therefore, that after the command, "Arise, let us go hence,"¹ the proper and immediate sequence of the text should be, "When Jesus had spoken these words, he went forth with his disciples over the brook Kidron,"² and that chapters xv., xvi., and xvii. are unaccountably out of place.

Again, from a psychological point of view it seems improbable that the greater part of this discourse (including once more chapter xiv. 1-29) could have been spoken on the night of the Passover. The disciples at that moment were passing through the great moral crisis of their lives. One of their number had already fallen, and it is evident from the combined narratives of the four Gospels, that, to some extent at least, the others were shaken. At the close of chapter xiii., our Lord is said by St. John to have warned St. Peter, "The cock shall not crow till thou hast denied me thrice." And then there follows immediately, in the next chapter, His words, "Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions . . . I go to prepare a place for you." It seems scarcely possible that He could have employed such expressions of hope and approval, in regard to the disciples, at a time like this. Assuredly the occasion called rather for words of solemn warning, such as really were given by Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation."³

Again, St. John records⁴ that after quoting from the 41st Psalm, "He that eateth my bread, lifted up his heel against me," "Jesus was troubled in spirit" (ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐταράχθη τῷ πνεύματι). Much has been written on this subject, and yet we still await an interpretation of the "agony," which will bring more fully to light its spiritual and psychological aspects. We are, doubt-

¹ St. John xiv. 31.

² xviii. 1.

³ St. Mark xiv. 38.

⁴ xiii. 21.

less, capable of seeing further than is imagined into the "unknown sorrows" of the passion. The intense sympathy of Christ, arising out of His all-surpassing love for men, demands further elucidation—the sympathy of one so identified with humanity that His agony would seem to be mainly due to an intense personal consciousness of human guilt—a consciousness which even a *repentant* world could never experience in a like degree. Perhaps, too, the finite nature of our Lord's manhood, due to the voluntary resignation for a time of certain divine powers, rendering Him mentally and physically incapable of bearing a strain and burden beyond human strength, requires fuller recognition. But many of the causes, which lead up to that terrible climax of human anguish, are evident. The life-long tension of a tremendous responsibility, the sense of temporary failure, inasmuch as men, in rejecting Him, had so far been made worse, not better, by His mission, the apostasy of the nation after His public reception in Jerusalem, the terrible experience of divine love stemmed as it begins to flow, forced back upon the Giver by a tide of opposing hatred, the betrayal by His own familiar friend, the desertion by those whom He trusted most, all combine to break the heart of Christ.

There is nothing more deplorable in life than the collapse of some strong and courageous nature from causes such as these. And it is indeed a terrible scene which the evangelists depict in the Garden of Gethsemane:—

"He began to be sore amazed, and He cried aloud to the three disciples, 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.' He clung to the relief and support, which the mere presence of those we love affords us in times of great distress. But He could not remain with them. St. Matthew says, 'He went a little further.' St. Luke uses a word which implies that He was restless—that He tore Himself away from them—(καὶ αὐτὸς ἀπεσπάρσθη ἀπ' αὐτῶν). Then followed a succession of prayers, which were uttered in what we may perhaps venture to call successive spasms of spiritual anguish and effort. He was like a great tree bending and almost broken by the storm."¹

¹ R. W. Dale, *The Atonement*, 1894, Lect. ii., p. 57.

And out of this unutterable woe He cried, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."

It has been necessary to dwell on this subject at some length, so as to show how incongruous most of our Lord's utterances in the "last discourse" are with the anguish of His mind on the eve of the crucifixion. Even before He left the supper room His passion had begun, and with it the collapse of nervous power under intolerable trial. It is a fact of ordinary experience that in such moments no ray of hope or comfort is able to penetrate the cloud which enwraps the soul. Let the dawn be ever so near, its nearness is not felt. And it is not then,

"When falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world's altar stairs
That slope through darkness up to God,"

that the sufferer can express himself in the language of hopefulness and victory. Is it possible that in such an hour our Lord could utter words of the calmest peacefulness, and most confident assurance, that He ever spoke in this world, or that He could practically ask His followers to rejoice with Him, because He was going to the Father?

But, further, it is necessary to consider the positive and internal evidence which supports the theory in question. If it could be proved that the Synoptic Gospels are absolutely silent as to our Lord having taught, during the forty days preceding His ascension, truths similar to those contained in the "last discourse," then the contention that this discourse is mainly post-resurrection would be decidedly weakened. The conclusion would, doubtless, still remain possible, notwithstanding the difficulties already mentioned, that St. John was supplying almost unaccountable omissions on the part of the other Evangelists, regarding an address of Christ to His disciples before His death. But in the closing verses of St. Matthew's Gospel, the command of the risen Saviour to teach and baptize all

nations, with its statement of the Trinity and the promise of His spiritual presence, embraces doctrines which form some of the leading ideas of the "last discourse."¹ In the third Gospel, the resemblance of our Lord's post-resurrection words to the subject-matter of the "last discourse" is still more striking. Here the *risen* Christ is represented as saying, "Ye are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I send forth the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city, until ye be clothed with power from on high."² Or again, in the Acts of the Apostles, "He charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, said he, ye heard from me. . . Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. . . . Ye shall receive power when the Holy Ghost is come upon you, and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria."³ In these passages there is a remarkable identity of thought with the words of our Lord in St. John xv. 26, 27, "When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth which proceedeth from the Father, He shall bear witness of me: and ye also bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning." Again, St. Luke records that our Lord during the "forty days" spoke to the disciples of "things concerning the kingdom of God."⁴ And this general statement is in complete accordance with St. John xv., where, in the parable of the vine, we find "the Church described for the first time as a living body or organization having a common life in Christ."⁵

It is hoped that the argument adopted here may not be mistaken. The writer does not suggest for a moment that the same teaching could not have been given by our Lord on two different occasions. But it is con-

¹ For obvious reasons St. Mark's Gospel is not appealed to here. But it is interesting to compare St. Mark xvi. 17 f. with St. John xiv. 12 f.

² St. Luke xxiv. 48 f.

³ Acts i. 4, 5, 8.

⁴ Acts i. 3.

⁵ M. F. Sadler, *Gospel according to St. John*, 1891, p. 367.

tended that some of the most important principles of Christ's teaching in the "last discourse" are said by two of the Synoptists—St. Luke in particular—to have been the subjects in which He specially instructed His followers, after He had risen from the grave.

Nor does it require any abstruse argument to show that the teaching of St. John xiv. 1-29, xv., xvi. 1-15, and xvii. finds its most fitting place in the post-resurrection period. The evident meaning of the passages in these chapters implies that He, the Speaker, is on the point of ascending to heaven. "Let not your heart be troubled. . . In my Father's house are many mansions. . . I go to prepare a place for you."¹ Such words could scarcely be the utterance of one who was staring death in the face, but rather of one who has already triumphed and who is pointing upwards to the home which He has gained. "I will not leave you desolate. I come to you." "I will pray the Father and He shall give you another Comforter."² Such teaching before the resurrection would be unintelligible in the extreme to men who at that time were unable to realize the nature of the ascension or its connexion with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Again, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends: ye are my friends, if ye do the things which I command you."³ The meaning seems to be that to die for a friend is the test and consummation of friendship, and consequently, that He, having fulfilled that test, is able henceforth to call them friends. "No longer (*οὐκέτι*) do I call you servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard from my Father I have made known unto you." If these words were spoken before our Lord's death, they would be falsified by the fact that the disciples were then in a state of mental and spiritual ignorance. And only after they had received the instruction of the "forty days" in the "things concerning the kingdom of God," would that emphatic assertion

¹ xiv. 1 f.² xiv. 16, 18.³ xv. 13 ff.

be substantiated, πάντα ἃ ἤκουσα παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς μου ᾔνωρῶσα ὑμῖν. Nor is it an easy matter to comprehend how the intercessory prayer can be a pre-resurrection utterance of Christ. "I glorified thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which thou hast given me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was."¹ If the Cross had yet to be endured, His work was not completed; and as if in proof of this, He proclaimed the consummation of His mission in His dying words, "It is finished."²

An attempt is usually made to surmount these difficulties by the supposition that our Lord in these passages of St. John's Gospel, has spoken in anticipation; that He was looking forward from the future, but inevitable, standpoint of the resurrection. But is this a reasonable solution of the problem? To the writer, such a contention seems to be hopelessly unreal and to involve a kind of fatalism, not only concerning Christ Himself, but as regards His followers as well, which is foreign to His usual method of instruction.

A short recapitulation of the foregoing argument may prove useful here. It may be resumed under the following heads: (1) that the Synoptists are silent as to this discourse having been given on the night of the last supper; (2) that St. John uses words which imply that the supper party broke up at the end of a conversation recorded in the closing verses of chapter xiv., and that consequently we are not told where the words in chapters xv., xvi., and xvii. were spoken; (3) that the expressions of hope and approval contained in these chapters are not likely to have been spoken to the disciples on the verge of their defection, and that the anguish of our Lord's mind, on the eve of His death, is irreconcilable with the words of peace and satisfaction which meet us in the "last discourse"; (4) that St. Matthew and St. Luke allocate some important principles and doctrines of our Lord's teaching in this

¹ xvii. 4, 5.

² xix. 30.

discourse to the post-resurrection period; (5) that almost every saying attributed to Christ by the writer of the fourth Gospel in chapters xiv.-xvii., with the exception of the passages already mentioned, suggests that He has risen and is about to ascend. "I am no more in the world, and these are in the world, and I come to thee. . . . While I was with them I kept them in thy name which thou hast given me, and I guarded them, and not one of them perished but the son of perdition. . . . But now I come to thee: and these things I speak in the world, that they may have *my joy* fulfilled in themselves."¹ These are the main facts on which our contention is based.

In conclusion, the writer would contend that if the truth of this theory be granted the "last discourse" will supply one of the most extraordinary gaps in the Gospel narratives, namely, their silence as to the important truths which were comprised in our Lord's teaching during the interval between His Resurrection and Ascension.²

R. T. BYRN.

¹ St. John xvii. 11 ff.

² It is interesting to note the fact, that the Gospels for the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays after Easter and the Sunday after Ascension, are taken from St. John xv., xvi., both in the English Prayer Book and in the earlier service books, as if the Church had recognized, in a sub-conscious way, that the words of our Lord in these chapters are derived from His teaching when "He showed himself alive after his passion. . . . speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God." It was not till after the Reformation that the same chapters found place among the lessons of Holy Week.