

St. John in Modern Christian Thought.

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It is a pleasure to see that St. John's writings are coming to a fuller recognition than they have ever yet received. Since the Reformation, St. Paul has almost dominated the thought and life of the Christian Church. "Since the Reformation," for it was by no means the case before. The Reformation may be said to have discovered or rediscovered St. Paul. During the Middle Ages he was little known, and less understood. Luther and Calvin rediscovered his leading doctrines, which have kept their supreme significance ever since. Bishop Lightfoot calls attention to the comparative neglect of St. Paul in earlier times (*Sermons in St. Paul's*, p. 220). St. Paul's Cathedral in London is almost the only great church in Christendom dedicated to the apostle of the Gentiles, the other one being St. Paul's without the Walls at Rome. St. Peter and the Virgin Mary almost monopolise the places of honour. York and Westminster belong to St. Peter. It is, therefore, remarkable that in the sixth century Ethelbert founded the first St. Paul's in London; perhaps the tradition of St. Paul's visit to England had something to do with this. St. John's day has still to come. Our age is discovering him. His characteristic thoughts have never yet penetrated theology and church life as St. Paul's have done. Dr. Milligan says, "All the different branches of the Christian Church are anxiously longing for a deeper and more living theology than that left them by the Reformation, that the thought of St. John, and the manner in which the Lord Jesus Christ—the sum and substance of Christianity—is presented by him," should be more thoroughly assimilated by the Church. Much preparatory work is necessary before St. John's teaching can be understood as a whole, and in relation to the rest of Scripture.

This preparatory work is going on. Bishop Westcott's masterly commentaries on St. John, a fitting pendant to Bishop Lightfoot and Ellicott on St. Paul, are by no means the sole occupants of this new field, though they are among the most eminent. His two volumes represent the work of "over more than thirty years"; and it has evidently been loving work. A fellow-expositor says truly of the bishop, "His are books which can scarcely be opened anywhere in vain." His

Introduction to the Gospel exhausts the subject. Dr. Haupt's *Exposition of the First Epistle* (T. & T. Clark) is an admirable guide to any one familiar with the original text. Bishop Westcott says of him, "No one has shown more impressively the true spirit of an interpreter of the New Testament." His instinct for tracing the connection of thought is marvellous. Godet's *Commentary on the Gospel* (3 vols., T. & T. Clark) is, perhaps, the best of his excellent works. St. John, beyond most writers, needs a sympathetic interpreter, and Godet is full of St. John's spirit. The English student could not have a better guide than the Commentary on the Gospel by Drs. Milligan and Moulton in Schaff's *Popular Commentary*. Both introduction and notes say just what ought to be said, and no more. The marks of careful study are everywhere evident. Alas, the work is not published separately. The Exposition of St. John's Epistles in the same work by Dr. Pope is, it need scarcely be said, equally fine. The two volumes in the Cambridge Bible on the Gospel and Epistles by Dr. Plummer are as good as so compendious a work can be. Quite recently a new exposition of excellent quality by Dr. Watson of Largs (Maclehose) has appeared. The author of this modest volume, without troubling himself or his readers with references to other opinions and books, presents his own interpretation in wonderfully simple and lucid language. The first volume of an Exposition of the Gospel by Dr. Dods has just appeared in the *Expositor's Bible* series. The Exposition of the Epistles by Dr. Alexander in the *Expositor's Bible* is, of course, a good specimen of the bishop's well-known gifts. The Exposition of the Gospel in the *Pulpit Commentary* by Dr. Reynolds is very full and able. This list is enough to show the new turn which the study of Scripture is taking, a turn in which we can only rejoice. If St. John can be made as much the common property of the Church as St. Paul, the result can only be good.

There is no reason to think that the effect of the present direction of thought will be to displace St. Paul. This could only be the case if the teaching of the two apostles were mutually antagonistic, but it is not so. Their teaching is

mutually complementary. The difference in regard to the truth common to both is simply one of expression and proportion. Thus the doctrine of Christ's propitiation so prominent in St. Paul (Rom. iii. 25) is not absent from St. John (1 John ii. 2, iv. 10). The doctrine of sin is not less prominent in St. John than in St. Paul. Compare the teaching of Rom. iii. with 1 John i. 7-9, ii. 1, 2, iii. 4-9, etc. Faith, again, which plays so great a part in St. Paul, is scarcely less honoured in John's Gospel and Epistles (*see* 1 John v. 1, 5, 10, 13).

It is especially in the characteristic teaching of St. John that the differences are seen. Here, again, there are no absolute differences. It is a question of measure and completeness. St. Paul's teaching moves largely in great antitheses—Law and Grace, Faith and Works, Sin and Righteousness, Flesh and Spirit. St. John has antitheses, but different ones—Life and Death, the World and the Father, Christ and Antichrist. It may be said that Paul is theological and John ethical. Yet this must be taken with limitations. Assuredly, Paul's teaching, both about God and man, is ethical enough, as St. John is theological. Was not the latter known in early days as "the theologian"? Still the distinction is a true one. In St. Paul the theology and ethics are kept apart very much, in St. John they interpenetrate. How vividly John's two images,—God is light, God is love,—beautifully expounded by Haupt (pp. 25-34, p. 258), bring out God's moral character! His teaching about the supremacy of love is scarcely more complete than St. Paul's (1 Cor. xiii.; Rom. xiii. 10), but it is more striking, because isolated.

St. John is often described as bringing out the "mystical" side of religion. There is considerable confusion in the use of the term. I believe that the only right use of it is to designate the teaching which exaggerates the inwardness and spirituality of religion. Undoubtedly the essence of true religion according to Scripture lies in its inwardness, in union and fellowship with God. To call this mysticism is misleading. The name belongs properly to those who carry this single idea to excess, and ignore everything else. It is quite true that the inward, spiritual nature of Christianity is set in strong relief in St. John. This explains why his writings have always had such charm for those to whom religion is an inward life, made up

of penitence and faith, of joy and love and hope. Again, we must notice that this aspect of Christianity is found in St. Paul, only it is less prominent. There is nothing in St. John more emphatic than Gal. ii. 20: "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." Again, "To me to live is Christ." "If any man be in Christ." "Ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God." But, of course, it is in St. John that this truth is most conspicuous. Christ's own teaching in St. John's Gospel in the Parable of the Vine and branches, and elsewhere, is as explicit as words can be. In the epistle, everything turns on the believer abiding in God, and God abiding in the believer (iii. 24, iv. 13).

A noteworthy difference of phraseology occurs in the designation of believers. St. John always speaks of them as "children" of God, never as sons, reserving "Son" for Christ exclusively. The Revised Version brings out this point well. St. Paul applies both terms to believers, while of course calling Christ "Son." Was it, in part at least, reverence which prevented St. John including Christ and believers under one designation, reverence born of special intimacy with the Lord? Far be it from us to imagine any want of reverence indicated by the Pauline use; and yet we can conceive the possibility of such a reserve in one of John's character. The difference of meaning is not insignificant. "Son" conveys the idea of right, privilege, dignity, which was evidently present to St. Paul's thought. "Child" suggests simply the thought of a common nature. The believer is partaker of the Divine nature. The idea of affection is secondary. St. John expresses the idea of "Son" in another way: "To them gave he the right to become children of God" (chap. i. 12). The meaning of "child" is also involved in another Johannine phrase, "born of God" (chap. i. 13). "Whosoever is born of God" (1 John iii. 9, v. 1, 4, 18). Let us hear Dr. Haupt. "St. Paul regards us as children of God adoptive, while St. John regards us as children in nature and reality. The former stands hard by or is closely related to the Pauline emphasis on the Christ *for* us; the latter is more in harmony with the Johannæan emphasis upon the Christ *in* us. According to St. Paul, we receive for Christ's *sake* the *rights* of children; according to St. John, we receive *through* Christ the children's *nature*. It is most evident that the two views are substantially one and true; but they depend on the respective

general systems of the two apostles" (p. 156). See also suggestive remarks on "children" and "sons" on p. 166.

The designation of Christ as the "Word" is peculiar to St. John. St. Paul's phrase "Image" (Col. i. 15) comes nearest to it. The standing designation in both apostles is, of course, "the Son."

Another Johannine phrase is life, eternal life. It is found in Christ's teaching in the other Gospels as well as in Paul, but it is frequent in John. It occurs nearly forty times in the Gospel, and it is proportionately frequent in the First Epistle. The keynote is struck in the Gospel in chap. i. 4, "In Him was life," and the note is prolonged to the final "that, believing, ye might have life" (xx. 31). In the epistle the first verses speak of "the Word of life, that eternal life," and almost the last one says, "This is the true God and eternal life." What room there is for discovery here! Dr. Haupt might very profitably be consulted on the leading passages where the phrase occurs.

Another point needing more exposition than it has yet received, is the use of the term variously rendered "Advocate" and "Comforter" in the Authorised Version. In St. John's Gospel the Spirit is called "Comforter" or Advocate (xiv. 16, 26, xvi. 7); in the epistle the title is given to Christ Himself (ii. 1). Still Christ calls the Spirit "another" Comforter, implying that the name belongs also to Himself. St. Paul's teaching in Rom. viii. 26, 27, bears closely on this question.

It is in St. John that the standard of Christian holiness is put very high, we were about saying the highest. The antithesis between the Christian circle and the world is drawn very sharply. "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John ii. 15). Such a saying is not to be evaded. The same may be said of "Who-soever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (iii. 9). We are glad to say that modern exposition does not seek to

explain away these strong sayings; but clearly it scarcely knows yet what to make of them. The Churches which insist on a high standard of Christian living have much to expect from future study of St. John.

A special excellence in Dr. Haupt is that he constantly uses the Gospel to explain and illustrate the epistle. The coincidence between the opening verses of the two books lies on the surface; but such coincidences run through the whole of the books. Thus on i. 8 we read, "The expression 'to have sin' requires consideration. It is specifically Johannæan; cf. John ix. 5, xv. 22, 24, xix. 11." The new and old commandment (chap. ii. 7, 8) is admirably illustrated from the Gospel, chap. xiii. 1 John iii. 5 is explained by John i. 29. Indeed there are few difficult passages in the epistle which are not more or less fully explained by references to the Gospel.

A special attraction in St. John's Gospel is that it is so full of Christ's own teaching. There are whole chapters with little else (see chaps. iii., vi., x., xiv.-xvii.). Not even an apostle comes between us and the speech of the living, eternal Word. No doubt the other Gospels have much of Christ's personal teaching (see Matt. chaps. v.-vii., xiii., xxiv., xxv.; Luke xv., xvi.). Still the difference is obvious. We also mark a great difference of style and subject between Christ's teaching in the Synoptists and in St. John. Perhaps the first difference is due to the second. In the Fourth Gospel are we not listening to many of the "heavenly things" spoken of in chap. iii. 12?

There can be little doubt that the study of St. John will tend to promote Christian charity. 1 Cor. xiii. paints the ideal Church of the future. How different from the actual Church of the past and present! St. John will do much to convert St. Paul's ideal into fact.

I have only noted a few of the more obvious points presented by St. John's writings for study in the future. More recondite discoveries will reward future investigators.