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Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John.

BY PROFESSOR RICHARD ROTHE, D.D.

CHAPTER II. 8.

“Again, a new commandment write I unto you, which thing is true in Him and in you; because the darkness is passing away, and the true light already shineth.”

THE commandment is not merely old; it is likewise at the same time substantially *new* (in Christ). From this point of view, also, John now characterises it. The new commandment is the same as was called the old one in ver. 7; here, however, it is looked at from another side, upon which it appears as a new one. The clause, “which thing is true in Him and in you,” refers to the assertion that the commandment of brotherly love is a *new* one. This assertion is *true* in Christ and in the readers—*i.e.* in their consciousness. Both parties, Christ Himself and the reader, have the definite consciousness that it is so. As regards Christ we are assured of this by John xiii. 34, where He gives His commandment of brotherly love expressly as a new one. The Christian also, who receives it from Christ, is conscious that this commandment has become a substantially new one to him, because the two notions, that of brother and that of loving, have become essentially new to us in Christ. In what literal and transcendently high sense we have to call one another brethren, has first become plain to us through the vision of the first-born of many human brethren; and what it is to love a man, we have also first experienced through the vision of the love of Christ, compared with which all other human love must seem impure and languid, yea, unworthy of the name of love. Thus John reminds us that we must not suffer ourselves to be tempted by the assurance of the original antiquity of the ethical demands, which are made upon us in Christ, to take them in a lax sense, and to look upon them as being likely to be easily met. It is true, we are to put upon ourselves only such demands as are in themselves human; but we are to appreciate these, not as they present themselves to the consciousness of the natural man, but as they present themselves to the holy eye of Christ Himself and to the eye of the Christian as enlightened by Him. Accordingly, the statement made above as to the sameness of what is Christian and what is truly human can never tempt us to moral laxity.

“*Because the darkness is passing away, and the true light already shineth.*” This clause may equally well establish the newness of the commandment of brotherly love as make good the assertion that the commandment as Christian is lodged in the consciousness of Christ and the readers as a new one.

In point of fact, it establishes the former; for if the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining, the primal commandment of love to one's neighbours must naturally also appear in this new illumination as an altogether new one—*i.e.* as one filled with an altogether new and higher content. The *darkness* is the æon of darkness, the whole pre-Christian age and the non-Christian condition of the world, in which, from its very nature, nothing could appear in its true and full light; in which, therefore, nothing, and not even the commandment of love to one's neighbours, could be truly and wholly apprehended. Contrasted with this, the *true light* is Christ Himself (John i. 8, f.), His appearing, which casts upon all things the full and true light in which they are seen, known, and apprehended justly and completely; and this applies especially to the commandment of brotherly love. The clause we are considering describes the character of the whole period in which the Apostle and his readers live. This revolution in the condition of human things brought about in Christ, Paul describes in almost the same words in Romans xiii. 12. It is a fundamental principle with John that the Christian age as day is to night, and that everything has now come out of the false light into the true. To give utterance to this conviction in John's time required great faith; and it also requires great faith to do so in ours. The darkness is still far from having passed away in the literal sense, and still less had it done so when John wrote. But, he says, it is in the act of passing away; and this is all that the Christian also may say. Whoever should dream that through the light that has risen in Christendom in Christ the darkness has already actually passed away, would very much deceive himself. But, on the other hand, if one should be unwilling to recognise with confidence that the life of Christians is a continuous pushing back of the darkness by the light, he would lose in an equally dangerous way all specifically Christian joyousness and all Christian courage. As to what leads John to this utterance: the darkness is passing away, it cannot be anything else than the deep impression which he has received of Christ as the true light. The human appearance, which was called Jesus, made upon John the impression that through it the

previous gross darkness was broken through, and its might once for all in principle absolutely vanquished. The Christians of those days could feel this better than we now. The Christian, however, is not to allow his conviction that the darkness is passing away to be disturbed by the many experiences

he has of the still remaining power of darkness. Nor does he look for the rising of a new light, but for the ever more and more complete piercing of the light that has appeared in Christ through the darkness. Beyond this, there is no new, more specific, revelation of God.

Expository Papers.

Genesis ii. 9: Two Trees in Eden.

(1) *The two trees are amalgamated*, and their qualities confused in heathen myth. The Babylonian cedar of life had the name Ea, god of wisdom in its core, and conferred magic arts, good and evil, on the initiated who tasted its fruit (Sayce, Hibbert Lect. cf. "Hindû Soma").

Confusing the trees, paganism confuses good and evil: the Tempter of Eden became the god of the Gentiles; and the gifts of life were sought from the forbidden tree.

(2) *Two Trees.* In Genesis the two are *distinct*. Adam was permitted to eat of the first till he touched the second. The first was the one thing needful, and contained every good fruit in itself, both wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption (cf. Prov. iii. 18, xi. 30; Sirach xix. 19; Rev. xxii. 2). The second, Sin's fallacious *plus*, was God's *minus*. In a double sense, Satan is the spirit that denies. Disobedience, self-worship, sensualism, atheism lead only to shame and death (James iii. 15). Knowledge itself, when procured at the cost of innocence and reverence, becomes false, worthless, vile, accursed (*Paradise Lost*, Book ix., line 921 *et seq.*).

(3) *Christ is our tree* (John xv. 1), both of life (John vi. 53) and of knowledge (Col. iii. 10). From a seed from the tree of life in Eden sprang the wood of the vera crux (old legend); by the divine obedience unto death the sons of Adam are redeemed (Rom. v. 12-19), the serpent bruised (Matt. iv. 10), and slain (Heb. ii. 14, 15), and the tree of knowledge healed of its poison (1. Tim. i. 5-7; Gal. v. 19-24). Swedenborg has a beautiful thought: "The tree of life is love, and the faith which springs from love." If this be so, to offend the Love Incarnate, to reject *that Way, that Truth, that Life*, must be to eat most morbidly of the tree of death.

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Note on Ephesians iii. 18.

The Apostle is often supposed to be referring in this verse, as in the next, to the love of Christ; but

the terms used show that he has in his mind the spiritual structure spoken of in chap. ii. 21, 22. Before him is the vision of the Jewish temple on the day of its consecration, when the ark was brought into its place under the wings of the cherubim. Then the glory of the Lord filled the place. Paul desires that the spiritual temple at Ephesus may be so filled with the heavenly light and power and purity as to make manifest His glory, who by His Spirit dwells in their midst. He desires that the magnificent temple of Diana may seem as a thing of nought in comparison with the spiritual glory of the Christian temple. In order to this, the Ephesian Christians need some adequate ideas of the greatness of the divine purpose. Noble conceptions lie at the root of noble living. Many a man's religious life is poor and mean because his religious ideals are so. On the other hand, the soul that has nothing noble in it cannot grasp a noble conception. The Apostle prays, therefore, that in their innermost nature they may be strengthened with might through the Spirit to understand the purpose of God, who is raising this temple for His dwelling-place and the resurrection of His glory. He offers up the prayer to Him who gives according to His own nature, as One who is never impoverished by the largest generosity, that they may be strong in faith, desire, understanding hope, that thus, grasping the majesty of God's purposes and designs, they may be built up a spiritual temple, vast and beautiful, filled in every part with the glory of God. This, as will be seen, is closely related to, but different from, the desire that they might know the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ. There is here no vain repetition, but a prayer in beautiful harmony with the epistle of which the words, "I speak concerning Christ and the Church," might be taken as the key-note, and in which the Church is spoken of as "Christ's body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all," and by which not only may the glory of God be revealed to men, but His manifold wisdom be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.

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