

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

CHAPTER I. 1-4.

THE first four verses form a kind of preface to the Epistle. They point to the contents of the communication the writer has to make, and state its purpose. In the Epistle itself, however, we do not again meet with the contents of this communication as indicated here. On the other hand, they are presented to us clearly and distinctly in John's Gospel. The apostle refers back to the latter (as in ii. 13 f.). Both writings, the Gospel and the Epistle, originally belong together. The purpose of the preface is to bring home to the readers the motive and aim of the writer; and it does so by referring to the general attitude, which he assumes towards them as an apostle, and, that too, not merely externally, but also in heart and mind. By exhibiting to his readers his own frame of mind, he endeavours to beget within them the mood in which he writes to them. We feel from the language used by him that he has difficulty in expressing himself, and that he has the most vivid consciousness of the transcendent dignity of his theme. Hence the lofty flight which he takes; hence also a certain abstractness in the thought; but notwithstanding this his language is of a kind intelligible to all. He steepers his thoughts in warm feeling, whereby they become charming intuitions to his readers.

Verses 1-3 form one somewhat involved sentence. The principal clause (v. 1) is interrupted by a parenthesis (v. 2), and is again resumed with the beginning of v. 3. The whole of v. 2 is to be put in parenthesis, as is plainly indicated by the resumption at the beginning of v. 3. The extent of the parenthesis is also indicated by its commencement ("the life was manifested") and its close ("and was manifested unto us"), which correspond to one another.

Ver. 1. *That which was from the beginning—i.e., that existence which was from the beginning—original existence; that which existed eternally, the Self-existent, the eternal, and as such, therefore, only real, true existence, the Absolute. Under this idea that which was manifested in the Redeemer presents itself to John in its transcendent dignity and worth. So far as the essential thought is con-*

cerned, this Self-existent is equivalent to the true and eternal life of which v. 2 speaks. It is not said: that which took place from the beginning of Christianity; and just as little can it be understood of the personal, divine Logos. For there is a parallelism between this passage and John i. 1 only so far as in both passages the author sets out from the consciousness and the thought that the content of his evangelical proclamation is the revelation of the eternal and real supersensible existence, which lies behind all phenomena in time and space as their proper essence. Of the Self-existent, the Absolute, John now says that he has perceived it by the most immediate and most unambiguous sensible experience. The evidence of this immediate perception he sets forth in the strongest manner possible, by the heaping up of the different kinds of it, which he arranges in the form of a climax, and by the expressions which he uses. The "seeing with the eyes" denotes the accuracy and certainty of visual perception; the "beholding" is the intentional, carefully attentive, deliberate seeing; the "touching," finally, admits least of all of any deception as regards the reality of the object, and probably stands in opposition to docetic representations of Christ. He is to declare unto them *concerning the word of life*, for he did not feel himself in a position to be able to declare Christ Himself; he believed himself able to declare only a few particulars regarding Him. He would give only a small drop out of the ocean, not the ocean itself. The *life* is that which was from the beginning; the absolute, the truly real, because eternal existence. Looked at logically, the construction is certainly not precise; for what has already been spoken of is not a "word" itself, but the theme of a word. John is led to give this inaccurate turn to his language by his already having in his mind the expression "declare we unto you," the object of which is always a word. The word of life is the word regarding life, as in Phil. ii. 16.

The thought of a primordial existence, which has its ground in itself, is certainly the most abstract thought which the human mind reaches; but it is also a thought that very naturally suggests itself, a

thought which no one can avoid, who casts an attentive glance within and around himself. For that which falls within our immediate sensible perception proves to one who has in some measure come to reflection to be unreal in itself. The whole of the sensible world taken by itself must seem to the calm understanding, as well as to feeling which sees to the bottom of itself, a something which is transitory, which in itself has no reality, and which does not really deserve the name of existence. This thought, however, that we are surrounded by mere nullity, is intolerable to one who is not altogether irrational; it must beget the longing to find an existence actually given empirically somewhere, which has not come into being, but is from the beginning, in order that we may get a footing upon it. This primordial existence, which is eternally grounded in itself, the apostle has found. He calls out triumphantly to his readers that he knows of an existence, which, being itself exempt from all transitoriness, is the ground of all existence that is merely fugitive and transitory. The idealism of Christianity comes out here in its full strength. The thought that no merely sensible existence is real existence, that what is material is only the manifestation of something else, which lies behind it, is indispensable to Christian piety. From this point of view philosophy, more especially Fichte's, is a good preparation for Christianity. Certainly every human mind seeks, hopes, and has a presentiment of such a real existence; but it can be found only so far as it reveals itself to us, and even enters this sensible world in a sensible manner. And that this has taken place, this is what the apostle knows and declares. It has taken place in Christ. In Christ he has beheld an existence, which incontrovertibly bore witness of itself to him as being an existence that does not belong to *this* world, that does not have its origin and its root in sensible things, but is the eternal existence. The personal manifestation of the Redeemer has produced this impression upon him in an immediate and direct manner, and accordingly he can regard Him only as the manifestation of God Himself. This manifestation of God in the flesh, however, he has at the same time learned to know in its empirical reality; for he was an eye-witness of it; he has heard, seen, beheld, and handled it. These words set forth the com-

plete empirical experience of this in itself eternal and absolutely real existence. No doubt they do so in opposition to the docetism of the writer's own time; but this docetism is continually rising up in the midst of Christendom, as evidenced by the attempts to distinguish between the so-called historical and the so-called ideal Christ. The human, ethical manifestation of Jesus in its full humanity has given the apostle the intuition of the eternal, primordial existence in this Christ.

Ver. 2. What part of the assertion in v. 1 is to be justified here? An assertion had been made by John in respect of his apostolic proclamation to the readers. True, no express mention has yet been made of this proclamation. But the "we declare unto you" of v. 3 was already upon John's lips, and already the reader must necessarily have supplied it in thought, if he would conceive anything whatever in connection with the words of the first verse. Now, there were two things which John had asserted of his apostolic proclamation to his readers. First, that it treated of nothing less than the Absolute, the eternal primordial existence, the true, eternally real life; and secondly, that the author was an eye-witness of what he stated regarding it. At first sight it might seem to the readers as if it were going too far to make both these assertions, and the author has therefore to defend them. This defence he makes here; not, however, by means of a demonstration properly so-called, but only by a repetition of his assertions. He limits himself to the solemn assurance that those statements express his real meaning, and his full, firm conviction; and in the mouth of an apostle this of itself was already a real justification. In respect of the first point he avers that *life* itself, and nothing less, was really manifested, viz., in Christ—just as in death and resurrection it has also stood the test of being a life that did not begin to exist in time, but was eternal; and then, as to the second point, that this life was so really manifested to *himself* that he had seen it immediately, and could bear direct witness of it. He does not, however, state the subject of his apostolic testimony as an eye-witness in a merely general way, but once more expressly declares it in a very emphatic manner to be the real primordial existence and life of which he has already spoken.

Of itself it does not seem to be difficult to em-

brace in Christ these two points with perfect confidence, viz., His absolutely super-sensible and eternal being, and the full humanity and historicity of His manifestation among us. And yet in our days the very opposite appears to be the case. The true divinity and humanity of Christ we must embrace in our mind in a clear manner. Certainly, theology is not capable of performing this service easily, nor has it as yet solved this problem; but the need of its solution is inseparably bound up with piety. The apostle was in the happy position of being able to say that he had heard this primordial life with his ears, seen it with his eyes, and handled it with his hands; for he was an eye-witness of the sensible, human walk of this eternal life. To us there remains, in the first place, only his testimony and that of his fellow-apostles; but this by itself alone cannot afford us the necessary certainty. But we also may still attain a certainty at least similar to that of the apostle; for that life has remained alive for us also. Christ no longer walks among us in the flesh; but even in the present day He is continually appearing to the human world, and reveals Himself to them that love Him. Through faith there is possible a real personal contact with Christ now glorified in the spirit. The experience of this personal contact is an indispensable condition of serving Him in the ministry of the word, and that too an experience that permeates and dominates the whole life. From without, it receives an express confirmation in the testimony this Christ is continually bearing to Himself in the history of the world. Not till one has such an inward experience can one have the joyousness required for the proclamation of the word of life.

Ver. 3. The message, of which the apostle speaks, is manifestly to be understood of an historical proclamation; such a proclamation, however, this letter does not contain, but rather rests upon as its presupposition. We already know that it refers back to John's Gospel. When it is stated to be the object of his message, that his readers also should have fellowship with him, this is not to be understood as if he thought of them as still standing outside of this fellowship. He means to say to them that one, who has had personal experience of Christ as the eternal life, that has come to us men, cannot do otherwise than declare it also to others.

In that which John says of this fellowship, in which his readers are to participate, there is expressed first of all the feeling, that he, who has really seen Christ in faith in the manner indicated, is thereby introduced into a world, by means of which he finds his fellowship with natural human life dissolved. A totally different kind of being commences for the consciousness and life of him who recognises real human existence in this human life, which the name Jesus Christ denotes, and to whom the super-sensuous side of the human being has opened up as the only real one. To such a person the interest in those things, which lay claim to the natural world, retires into the background. Hence the world regards each one that believes in Christ as a fanatic. It is, however, also a test of the healthiness of Christian faith, that the believer does not wish to abide by himself alone in his eternal world, but seeks to draw up to himself those who are still left behind in natural life. He is confident that he can do so, and grounds his confidence not only upon the power of this new life, but also upon the certainty that in each man there is a propensity towards this true life. He feels himself not estranged from those, from among whom he has been raised up to that height; for the same pulse that conditions everything in his life beats also in the hearts of the unbelieving world. Accordingly to those who still stand without he declares what he has experienced in a simple presentation of it, and without obtrusiveness. He will only vividly set forth in its pure form the life that has risen within him; and if he succeeds in unfolding this in its full splendour, he doubts not as to the result. He does not seek to convince violently; but he endeavours to establish a fellowship in this new life with all whom he can reach.

The fellowship that we apostles have is fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, with whom, consequently, he also has fellowship who has it with us; to have fellowship with us is therefore, says John, something great. He here-with indicates why the participation of his readers in the relation of fellowship, in which he and his fellow-apostles stand, is of so great importance to him:—it is an actual fellowship with God, not only with the thought of God; not only in a non-natural, but in the fullest and most literal sense. He does not smooth away the whole paradox of the lofty

promises of Christian piety, but sets it forth in its sublimity, which is so surprising and incredible to the natural man. Of these sublime promises nought is to be abridged; for a noble human heart only they can have the genuine charm. Fellowship with Christ, however, is not absorbed by fellowship with the Father, but continues uninterruptedly for the apostles, because fellowship with the Father is fellowship with God in and through Christ. Nothing is so repugnant to John as such a separation between God in Himself and Christ. He knows nothing of the idea, that to man there could be given an image of God otherwise than in the face of this Son of man Jesus Christ, in whom he beholds only the only-begotten of the Father.

Ver. 4. John now adds for what purpose he writes thus (vv. 1-3) to his readers. *This write we unto you*—according to the apostle's usual way of writing (ii. 26, v. 13), this refers, not to what follows, but to what has preceded. His purpose is to make the joy of his readers full, to render the joyousness of their standing as Christians complete. Their joy is fulfilled by its being brought home to their consciousness, that in their faith in the proclamation of the Gospel they have known the Highest, viz., the Absolute itself, the Eternal Life, yea, that with this Highest they have entered into real fellowship. He who knows that the primordial life has been manifested, and that he can have

fellowship with the same and thereby with the Father—his heart must beat high. We must hold fast to this as a general test of one's Christian standing being real, that it is joyousness. Sorrow, however, is not by any means excluded from the mood of a Christian; but being presupposed in it in its full depth and inwardness, it is at the same time overcome. Still, it is only gradually that this joy of the Christian state becomes a reality, and only in proportion as the object of Christianity actually becomes the matter of joy. And only if with our love we really incorporate ourselves with the primordial life in Christ, can we have true joy, which keeps pace with the diminishing of delight in the world. For this reason it is a *holy* joy and requires no further discipline. Only that requires discipline which is ever disturbing it, viz., the ever reviving delight in the world. It is the joy, which the Saviour calls His own (John xv. 11, xvii. 13), and the fulness of which He promises to His own (John xvi. 20-24); the joy in the Lord, which Paul calls for (Phil. iii. 1, iv. 4), the joy in the Holy Ghost, in which he makes the kingdom of God consist (Rom. xiv. 17), the joy which he represents as the fruit of the faith that is steadily advancing towards its completion (Phil. i. 25). This joy should reach its full measure in his readers. Instead of their present joyless, languid, cold Christianity, he seeks to awaken one that is joyous.

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SHORT NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS.

ST. LUKE'S GOSPEL.

THE Gospel according to Luke will be the subject of lesson throughout the year, so that it will be worth while for the teacher to possess some of the best books on that Gospel. The most suggestive of the larger Commentaries is Godet's. But it costs money and needs scholarship to appreciate it. There are three small and cheap Commentaries. St. Luke, in the *Cambridge Bible for Schools*, is by Farrar, and costs 4s. 6d. Farrar is not at his best in commenting, but this is a good serviceable book, full of simple illustration. Professor Lindsay writes the other two; viz., "Handbooks for Bible Classes": St. Luke, Part I., 2s.; Part II., 1s. 3d.; published by Clark. And "Commentaries for Bible Classes and Senior Sabbath Scholars": St. Luke, two parts, 4d.

each, published by Blackie. The former is much the fuller and the better for teachers; the latter is very cheap, and quite sufficient for the pupils.

Then there are other aids innumerable. A scholarly *Life of Christ* will be found of service. The Religious Tract Society recently published, at 6d., an excellent little *Life of Christ*, by Dr. Conder. It confines itself mainly to the historical and geographical details. Andrews' *Life of Our Lord* has a still more limited range, but is very instructive on all points of chronology and geography. For the pupils, especially in higher classes, Dr. Salmond's *Life of Christ*, in "Bible Class Primers," is by far the most satisfactory. It costs 6d. Larger, and very suitable for teachers, is Scrymgeour's *Lessons on the Life of Jesus*, 2s. 6d. It presents questions on each chapter, and a reference to other sources. Stalker's *Life of Christ* is cheaper, 1s. 6d., and exceedingly fresh and interesting, but it presents picturesque groupings without traversing the whole narrative. Quite recently, in "Men of the Bible" Series, has appeared *Jesus*