

*FELLOWSHIP IN THE LIGHT OF GOD.*

1 JOHN i. 5-10.

RELIGION, as the Apostle John conceived it, consists of two things: true knowledge of God, and fellowship with God, and with each other, in that knowledge. It is to fellowship with God in His Son Jesus Christ that, in the preface (*vv.* 3, 4), the writer summoned his readers. For this communion the facts of the gospel have laid a sure foundation. To establish and perfect His communion with men is the end of all the disclosures which the Father has made of Himself to us from the beginning.

The gospel, therefore, as John delivers it, is, in the first place, and above all things, *a message about God.*

“This is the message which we have heard from Him and announce unto you: God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.”

When the Apostle says that this was the message which he had “heard from Him” (from Christ), it does not appear that the Lord Jesus had at any time uttered these precise words, or put this message, just as it stands, into His Apostle’s lips. St John was not accustomed to rehearse the sayings of Jesus Christ in a formal and mechanical way. But everything that he had heard from his Master, everything that he had seen in Him and learnt of Him, everything that Jesus Christ Himself was, seemed to him to be crying out: “God is light, God is light; and in that light there is fellowship for men.”

To realize the force of this announcement, we should put ourselves in the position of those who first heard Christ’s message from John’s lips, the converted idolaters of the Asian cities. His readers, most of them, were reared in heathenism. They had been taught in their youth to worship Jupiter and Mercurius, Diana of the Ephesians,

Bacchus of the Philadelphians, Aphrodité of the Smyrnæans, and we know not how many besides—gods stained and darkened, in the belief of their worshippers, with the foulest human vices, gods so evil that St Paul justly said concerning them: “The things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God.” They had gods that could cheat and lie, gods licentious and unchaste, gods spiteful and malignant towards men, quarrelsome and abusive towards each other. They had been accustomed to think of the Godhead as a mixed nature, like their own, only on a larger scale,—good and evil, kind and cruel, pure and wanton, made of darkness and of light. Now, to hear of a God who is *all* truth, *all* righteousness and goodness, in whom there is no trickery or wantonness, no smallest spice of malice or delight in evil, “no darkness at all”—a God who can be absolutely loved and trusted and honoured—this was to the heathen of the Apostle’s mission a strange and undreamed of revelation.

Their philosophers had, indeed, conceived of the Divine nature as exalted above human desire and infirmity; but this conception was too speculative and abstract to affect the common mind; there was no power in it to move the heart, to possess the imagination and will. These enlightened men scarcely attempted to overthrow the idols of the populace, and their doctrine offered a feeble and slight resistance to the tide of moral corruption. False religions can be destroyed only by the real. The concrete and actual is displaced by the more actual, never by abstractions. It was faith in a living and true God, in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the supreme fact of the universe, the enthroned Almighty and All-holy Will bent upon blessing and saving men, that struck down the idols, and transformed society and reversed the stream of history; not belief in “the Divine” as the highest category of thought, or as the Substance behind phenomena, or the unknown

Depository of the collective powers of nature. Such ideas, at the best, shed a cold, shadowy light on the path of daily toil and suffering; they prove themselves nerveless and pithless, all too faint to encounter the shock of passion and to master the coarseness and the turbulence of flesh and blood. Not in the name of Pythagoras or Plato did the Greek find salvation.

Now that the providence of God has laid upon the English people so much responsibility for the heathen world, it is worth our while to attempt to realize what heathenism means and is. We must understand the horrible incubus that it lays upon mankind, the frightful mischief and misery of soul that are entailed by vile notions about God. To have untruth, to have cruelty and wrong imputed to the Government of the universe, involved and imbedded in the Divine nature itself, and the fountain-head of being contaminated—what evil can there be so monstrous, so poisonous to society, so pregnant with all other evils, as this one? To own a treacherous friend, a thankless child, this is bitter to the heart, wounding and maddening enough—but to have *a wicked god!* Nothing has ever given such relief to the human mind as the announcement of the simple truth of this verse. To see the sky washed clean of those foul shapes, to have the haunting idols, with their weird and wanton spells and unbounded powers for evil, those veritable demons, banished from the imagination and replaced by the pure image of the God incarnated in Christ, and to know that the Lord of the worlds, seen and unseen, is the Father of men and is absolute rectitude and wisdom and love, this was indeed to pass out of darkness into marvellous light!

Such was the impression that our religion made then, and makes now, upon minds prepared to receive it amongst the heathen. God appeared in a character new and unperceived before, and realistic in the highest degree. Man's

nature was invested with a glory and his destiny lighted up with a splendour of hope that was dazzling and overwhelming in its first effects. The Pagan world had become like a prison vault, gloomy, stifling, filled with shapes of terror. But the door opens, the shutters fall, the sunshine and sweet breath of heaven stream into that death-like chamber, and the prisoner's heart breaks for very joy. Hence the exultant note of the New Testament, the keen and eager sense of salvation that fills its pages. It is the joy of daybreak after fearful night, of health after deadly sickness, of freedom after bondage. Such is the gladness you may send, or yourself carry, to yon Pagan sitting afar off in darkness and the shadow of death. Such is the gladness that comes to ourselves when, at last, behind the shows and forms of religion we gain a sight of what the great, good God really is. Then the dayspring from on high visits us. "For God who said, Light shall shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of His glory."

1. So far our course in the reading of this passage is clear enough. But when we pass from the negative to the positive, from the consideration of that which God *is not* to the consideration of that which He *is* to us, viewed under the symbol of "light," we find ourselves lost in the immensity of the Apostle's thought. This is one of those infinite words of the Bible, which have a meaning always beyond you, however far you pursue them.

The declaration, *God is light*, stands by the side of other similarly brief and epigrammatic sayings: *God is love*, *God is spirit*, and (in the Epistle to the Hebrews) *God is fire*. That "God is love" is the second definition given us in this Epistle (iv. 8). Of the two this is the more comprehensive, as it is the fundamental assertion. Love is one thing; Light is the blending of many things in one. God is love; but love is not everything in God. Light, as we

are now learning better than before, is a subtle and complex element, full of the most delicate, beautiful, and far-reaching mysteries; and in the Divine light there is an infinite sum of perfections, each with its own separate glory and wonderfulness, and all centring in the consummate harmony, the ineffable radiance and splendour of the being of God.

We might say, with Dr. Westcott, that "Physically light embodies the idea of splendour, glory; intellectually, of truth; morally, of holiness." Combining these aspects of the truth, we arrive at the interpretation that God is light as He shines upon us in the splendour of His holiness, His manifested righteousness and love. Light signifies purity, truth, goodness; as darkness signifies foulness, falsehood, malice. There was plenty of these latter in the heathen gods; there is none of them in Ours. He is all love, all rectitude, all goodness and truth, and nothing in the least degree contrary thereto.

And these qualities do not so much belong to God, or distinguish Him and constitute His nature: they are constituted by His nature; they emanate from Him. Their existence in moral beings, and our power to conceive of them and to recognise them, "come down" from Him, "the Father of lights."

Nor does the Apostle's message simply declare that there are these luminous qualities in God, but that they are manifested to us. God is not only shining away yonder in His light unapproachable—in the burning depths of His insufferable glory; He has flung His heavens open, and poured Himself down upon us. This metaphor speaks of the God revealed in Christ, of Immanuel, God with us! "I am *come*," said Jesus, "a light into the world." His coming was "the message." In His incarnation ten thousand voices spoke; as when the rays of dawn strike upon your window, they say, Day is come, the sun is here!

God, whose glory is above the heavens, is shining here amongst us—upon the dulness and poverty of our earthly lot, shooting His radiance, the glances of His love and pity, into the eyes of our heart. “He *gives the light* of the knowledge of His glory, in the face of Jesus Christ.” There is nothing quiescent, nothing grudging or self-confined or exclusive, about light. It is penetrating and diffusive, self-communicating yet self-asserting, streaming through the worlds—the all-piercing, all-informing, all-quickenings and gladdening element of the universe. Such is God manifest to mankind in Jesus Christ.

2. Now it is evident that the knowledge of God in this character, wherever it extends, creates *fellowship*.

Light is a social power. It is the prime condition of communion, knitting together, as by the play of some swift weaver’s shuttle, the vast commonwealth of worlds and setting all creatures of sense and reason at intercourse. With the daylight the forest awakes to song, and the city to speech and traffic. As the household in winter evenings draw round the cheerful lamp and the ruddy fire-light; as the man of genial nature, rich in moral and intellectual light, forms about him a circle of kindred minds won by his influence, and learning to recognise and prize each other, so the Lord Jesus Christ is the social centre of humanity. He is the only possible ground of a race-fellowship amongst us—the King of the world-kingdom, seeing that He is the Divine Firstborn and Elder Brother of the peoples. Christ is the Love and Wisdom of God incarnate, and therefore “the light of the world.”

This connexion of thought is self-evident, when in *v. 6* the Apostle passes, without explanation, from the idea of Light to that of Fellowship :

“If we say that we have fellowship with Him [God], and are walking in the darkness,  
We lie, and do not the truth.

But if we walk in the light, as God is in the light,  
We have fellowship one with another."

For what fellowship can there be in darkness? Is not sin the disruption of all society, human and Divine? When God said, "Let there be light," He said, Let there be fellowship, friendship—a mutual understanding, a commonwealth of thought and joy amongst all creatures. Along the path of light eye runs to meet eye, and heart leaps to kindred heart.

It is a thought full of awe and full of joy for us, that in the light of God we share with God Himself,—“if we walk in the light, as He is in the light.” God is light, and God is *in the light*. He sees and acts in no other light than that of His own being; and in that same light we see and act. God creates around Him a light-sphere, in which all holy souls, men and angels, dwell and “walk” with Him. Each planet subsists and moves in the same light as the sun from whom light proceeds, holding fellowship with the lord of day and with its brother planets in a universe of which the solar effluence is the common element. Even so in the spiritual realm. There is one sun in the sky; there is one God in the universe, one centre of rational and moral life for all creatures, one source of love and truth from everlasting to everlasting, in Him “who filleth all in all and worketh all in all.” The light that pours in ceaseless fiery tide from the heart of the sun, and that gleams on the cottage window and sparkles in the beads of dew and glances on the mountain peak and on the globe of Neptune at the far edge of the planetary world, is one light bringing with it one life and law. The sun is in that light: so is the dancing mote, and the fluttering insect, and the laughing child, and the whirling, rushing globe. God is in the light: so is my believing soul and yours, so the spirits of Abraham and Isaac and all the just made perfect, so the bright squadrons of the angels and the tenants of the farthest outpost stars,

so the vast body of the universal Church. There is one reason, one love, one righteousness for all intelligences—one Name to be hallowed, one Will to be done “as in heaven so on earth,” one Father-hand that holds the stars in their courses and holds thy soul in life. “With Thee,” says the Psalmist to his God, “with Thee is the fountain of life; in Thy light we see light.”

It is this light of God that alone makes possible a true, enduring fellowship amongst men. “If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have [we keep] fellowship with one another”—*i.e.*, with our fellows also walking in the light (comp. ii. 9–11; iii. 10–12, 23, 24; iv. 7–13). It often appears that religious interests divide men, while secular interests and material pursuits unite them. Christ Himself once said that He had come to “bring a sword” and to “set men at variance.” How many blood-stained pages of history confirm this presentiment. But this is a transitional state of things. After all, no community has ever held together, or can subsist in perpetuity, without the religious bond. Fraternity means a common paternity. God is a partner, tacit or acknowledged, to every sound agreement amongst men. The use of the sacrifice and sacrament in compacts and the oath in public declarations, notwithstanding their abuses, witness to this truth. The Eternal God is the rock and refuge of human society. The material and moral laws forming the framework of our house of life are “the everlasting arms underneath” and around us, which nurse and carry us, feed and school us, fence us in with all our quarrels like birds in the nest, while they hold us to the heart of God.

It is therefore through ignorance of God that men and nations fight each other; in the dark we stumble against our fellows and rage at them. In the light of Christ’s true fellowship we gain the larger human views, the warmer heart, that make hatred and strife impossible. Quarrels in

the Church are due to causes often petty and ignoble in the extreme, and are pursued with a peculiar rancour, because those engaged in them are fighting against the God of peace and resisting a secret inward condemnation. It is in such contention that the bitterness of a heart not right with God finds vent, discharging upon others the suppressed indignation due to the evil in itself. All forms of malice, envy, contempt, backbiting, have their root in unbelief; irreverence towards God breeding disregard for men. Just so far as we see and feel what God is, do we grow humble and tender towards our kind.

Under these conditions, as we gather from the last clause of *v. 7*, it comes to pass that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ wins its full and decisive power over our nature: "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin." Through continued fellowship with God and men, the cross of Christ gains an increasing mastery within us. On the one hand, fellowship in the Divine light brings a deepening sense of sin, demanding a renewed confession and a deeper pardon; our old repentance and faith are convicted of shallowness in the clearer knowledge of God. At the same time we find that the atonement is not the means only, but the end of our righteousness in Christ; it supplies the ideal of our service to God and man, while it is the instrument by which we are recovered for that service. The cross of Jesus is the alpha and omega of salvation. We do not pass by it as we enter the way of life; we have to lift it up and bear it with us to the end, identifying ourselves with it more completely at every step. So "the blood of Jesus" is sprinkled on our conscience to rest there; it melts the heart, and melts into the heart. His death-blood, if we may so say, becomes the life-blood of our spirits. It sinks into the soul, wounding and healing, humbling and exalting us, burning its way to the depths of our being, to the dark springs of evil, until it reaches and "slays the dire root and

seed of sin." The sacrifice of Christ is the principle of our sanctification equally with our justification.

Accordingly, in *v. 9*, we find this deliverance from sin opening out into its two elements of forgiveness and moral renewal, both turning upon one condition (the subjective condition, as the atonement is the objective ground of salvation), viz., the acknowledgment—the continued acknowledgment—of personal sin, which is virtually the soul's yielding to the light of God's holy presence: "*If we confess* [go on to confess] our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In this confession penitence and faith meet. With St John we are "cleansed from *all* sin," when with St Paul we are "conformed to the death" of Christ and "know the fellowship of His sufferings." This absolute cleansing, this immaculate perfection of the believer crucified with His Lord, is the crown of a life of walking in the light.

But we observe that the above is not a process carried on in isolation and by the solitary fellowship of the soul with God. "We have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us." There is a world of meaning in that "and." Christian fellowship and Christian perfection are things concomitant. Our social and individual salvation must be wrought out together. The goal is one to be sought for the Church, not the individual; for *us*, not simply for *me*.

3. It is possible, however, to resist the light of the knowledge of God in Christ and to refuse the fellowship which it offers to us. And this resistance takes place in two ways: in the way of *hypocrisy* (*v. 6*), or in the way of *impenitence* (*vv. 8 and 10*). These fatal methods of dealing with religious light are marked out by three parallel sentences, each beginning with the formula, "If we say," as stating things which we may say, but which can never

be. They are alike ways of falsehood. In these various modes "we lie, and do not the truth"; or "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us"; or (worst of all) "we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."

Light is a kindly, but often an acutely painful thing. There are conditions of mind in which every ray of Divine truth is pointed with fire and excites a fierce resentment. The "arrows of the Almighty" burn and rankle in the rebellious spirit. The light searches us out, and shows us up. "If I had not come and spoken unto them," said Jesus of the Jewish Pharisees and priests, "they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin." With Him light came into the world, and men preferred darkness. The preference is their condemnation. St John had seen this preference take a cowardly form in Judas, and a defiant form in the Jewish rulers.

(1) We may oppose the light of God *treacherously*, by hypocrisy, by pretending to accept it while nevertheless we hold fast our sins: "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness"—like the thief who bare the bag and who stole out at night from the supper table of Bethany and the spectacle of Mary's "waste" of love, to say to the priests, "What will ye give me, and I will betray Him unto you?"

The hypocrite is one who has been in the company of Jesus and has seen the light, who knows the truth and knows his own sin, knows at least enough to be aware of his double-dealing. And while practising his sin, he professes fellowship with God! The holy Apostle does not stand on ceremony with this sort of man, or palter with the deceitfulness of the human heart; he gives him the lie direct: "If we say this," he cries out, "*we lie*, and do not the truth." In such words you see the flash of John's swift lightning; you perceive why the Master called him and his brother James *Boanerges*, Scns of Thunder,—the

thunder not of brazen lungs but of a passionate heart. He is the apostle of love, and therefore of wrath,—of “the wrath of the Lamb.”

But the Apostle John will not separate himself even from such an one as this. He had known a traitor amongst the Twelve. He puts his supposition in the first person plural; he speaks as if such a state were possible to any of us,—possible to himself! At the table of the Last Supper he had said with the rest, when the treason was announced, “Lord, is it I?” Which of us can claim to have been always true to the truth of Christ? It is easy to “say” this or that; but how hard to “do the truth,” to put our best convictions into full act and practice! Yet there is an infinite chasm between Judas and John, between the studied deceit of the immoral, canting professor of religion and the self-accusings of the scrupulous believer, whose very loyalty finds flaws in his best service.

He who professes communion with God while he lives in sin, the dishonest man, the unchaste man, the malicious and spiteful man,—what does his profession mean? He virtually declares that God is like himself! He drags the All-holy One down to the level of Pagan deities. He brings to the Christian shrine the worship due to Belial or Mammon. He sees God through the reek of his own burning lusts. Such an one might have fellowship with Jupiter or Mercury, or Diana of the Ephesians; but not with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,—no, not he, no more than the bat or the night-owl holds fellowship with the mid-day sun. It needs clean hands and a pure heart to dwell on God’s holy hill. If we walk in darkness, then it stands to reason that we are in darkness.

(2) There is another, a more open and radical mode of opposition to the accusing light of God,—by flat denial of our sin, by taking the attitude of a bold impenitence. And this denial appears in two distinct forms: as a general

*denial of sin in principle*, or as a particular and matter-of-fact *denial of our individual sins*. Such is the distinction that seems to lie in the carefully chosen expressions of *vv.* 8 and 10: "If we say that we have no sin," and "If we say that we have not sinned."

We must remember, again, that St John had to do with a moribund Pagan world, in which, as in common Hindoo life to-day, the moral sense was deeply decayed and conscience reduced to the lowest terms, wherein the nature of converted men and sincere believers in Christ the sense of sin, that "most awful and imperious creation of Christianity," had to be formed by degrees. Men might and did deny the reality of sin; by all kinds of sophistries and evasions they had learnt to deceive themselves respecting its import and criminality. Not a few persons, we may suppose, had espoused Christianity for various intellectual or sentimental reasons, with very superficial convictions upon this head. Allowing the distinction of moral good and evil, they were slow to confess *sin*; they refused to admit an inherent depravity involving them in corruption and guilt. Their misdoings were mistakes, frailties, venial errors,—anything but "sin." That is an ugly word; and quite needless too,—a bugbear, an invention of the priests! St John hastens to denounce these notions; he puts them down as self-delusion, as the folly of men who extinguish the light that is in them, the ignorance of a shallow reason that wants the inward substance of truth (*v.* 8).

This error has deep roots, and may spring up again, with a strange recrudescence, at an advanced stage of the Christian life. The man of "sinless perfection," who imagines he has nothing left to confess, nothing that needs forgiveness, verily "deceives himself"; rarely does he deceive his neighbour on this point, never his God. "The truth is not in him." His moral convictions, his knowledge of the holiness of God have never yet pierced to the heart

of his iniquity. There is a superficial sanctification, which serves thinly to cover a hard and stubborn crust of impenitence, under which a world of pride and self-will lie hidden. As Rothe says: "In fellowship with Christ our eye becomes ever keener and keener for sin, especially for *our* sin. It is precisely the mature Christian who calls himself a great sinner."

The second form of impenitence stigmatized by the Apostle is the most extreme and shameless: "If we say that we have not sinned"; and its consequence the most shocking: "We make Him a liar."

One may deny sin in general and fence a good deal upon questions of principle and ethical theory, who yet, when the word of God becomes to him a personal message and his memory and conscience are fairly challenged by it, will admit practically that he has sinned and is in the sight of God a culpable and condemned man. David had doubtless argued with himself and deceived his own heart not a little in regard to his great transgression; but the prophet's home-thrust, "Thou art the man," broke down his fence utterly; "and David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD." To contradict a general truth is one thing; to confront the personal fact is quite another.

But when a sinner, with his transgressions staring him in the face and revealed in the terrible light of God's word, declares that he "has not sinned," what can you do for him, what say to him? The Apostle has only one resource with such a man. "God says that you have sinned, that you have broken the law of your being and incurred the penalty of exile from His presence, and brought on yourself moral ruin and misery. You say that you have done nothing of the kind. If you are right, God is wrong. If you are true, then God is false. You make *Him* a liar!" That is St John's final testimony.

Every one who refuses to bow down in penitence before

the revealed Majesty of God in Christ, and to make confession before that white, awful, soul-searching splendour of holiness and love, before the final disclosure of our human guilt and the Divine righteousness made in the spilt blood of Jesus, is doing this. He gives the lie to his Maker and Judge. Impenitence in men who know the gospel, is the most tremendous and daring insolence we can conceive.

GEO. G. FINDLAY.

*PROFESSOR MARSHALL'S ARAMAIC GOSPEL.*

OWING to absence from home in the early part of September, I was unable to notice Prof. Marshall's "Reply" to Mr. Allen and myself in time for last month's EXPOSITOR. I must at the outset express my very sincere regret that the tone of Mr. Allen's criticism should have seemed to Prof. Marshall to be lacking in courtesy. As I shall hope to show in the course of the present paper, Mr. Allen's confidence in the substantial justice of his case was not misplaced; still, I am sure it was as far as possible from his intention to treat Prof. Marshall with disrespect, or to do him an injustice. In an investigation such as that which Prof. Marshall has undertaken it is always an advantage, where a difference of opinion exists, to hear at length the facts and considerations which may be urged on either side; though I must own that the facts adduced by Prof. Marshall in his Reply do not materially modify the judgment I had previously formed. But I must demur, in principle, to the attempt made by Prof. Marshall to fasten upon me the responsibility for "all" that Mr. Allen's papers contain. My prefatory note indicated indeed that I considered Mr. Allen's criticisms to be generally conclusive, and from this position (as will appear) I find no occasion to recede; but I do not think that the terms which I used can in fairness