

Spiritual Growth

1 John 1: 1-4; 1 John 2: 12-29.

Condensed notes of an address by F. B. Hole.

(Extracted from Scripture Truth Vol. 38, 1953-5, page 257.)

It is very evident that the Apostle John wrote this epistle late in the first century, when the other Apostles were gone and antichristian teachers were appearing, doing their utmost to seduce and corrupt the saints, particularly those more recently converted, whom he calls "little children," or "babes."

There are in this epistle two words both translated "little children." The one used in 1 John 2: 12 and 28, is simply "children," embracing all believers, since all are children of God. The other used in 1 John 2: 13 and 18, is really, "babes," the beginners in the Christian life. These are the ones who are told that it is "the last time;" that is, the last epoch, in the last days of which the Antichrist will appear, so that already men of antichristian character were at work.

Because of this the Apostle opens with the words, "That which was from the beginning:" not the beginning of creation, as in Genesis 1 and John 1, but of the revelation that has reached us in the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ. If any entertain doubt as to this, let them turn to John's Gospel and read John 15: 27. The previous verse mentions the coming of the Holy Spirit and the testimony He would render. His testimony being marked by perfection, would any further testimony be needed? Yes, there were men chosen to bear witness of the things they were privileged to hear and see and even handle, as they companied with their Lord from the beginning, in days before the Spirit was given.

We must remember that, unlike man, God never has to experiment, or amend, or improve, in any revelation He makes. It is perfect from the outset, and if men attempt to add to it or subtract from it they do so to their own ruin. These first century "antichrists" were known as "Gnostics," — the "Knowing-ones" — the opposite to the Agnostics of our days, who confess that they do not know and who even aver that nobody can know.

The first century Gnostics doubtless urged that seeing the original apostles were "unlearned and ignorant men," the saints ought now to pass from the cruder ideas that were at first promulgated to the more intellectual and philosophical things they had to say. John was the survivor of the apostolic band and was used to recall the saints to the original revelation. Hence also, again and again he uses the word "know;" using the Greek word which signified not mere intellectual, head knowledge, but inward knowledge, based on experience.

It is true of course that there has been progress in Divine revelation. God made Himself known to Abraham and then through Moses in a further way. But His full revelation was in Christ, completed by His witness through the Spirit after He was glorified, as He promised in John 16: 12, 13.

That which was manifested in Christ was real and objective, capable of being apprehended by three out of the five senses with which man is endowed. This is clearly seen at our Lord's baptism. Then the Father was audible, but that only. The Spirit was visible, but that only. The Son was audible and visible and tangible, which is just what John tells us in his first verse.

And not only that; another wonderful thing follows: the life has been manifested. To the apostles was given the power to see it, so that they could declare to others the eternal life, which, ever with the Father, had now been made known. So truly made known that the Apostle can end the epistle by saying of the Son of God, "He is the true God and eternal life."

The first point before us then is the wonder and perfection of the revelation that has reached us in the Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot improve upon it nor can you add to it. The eternal life which is in the Son of God has been manifested, so that we may come into the communion and blessedness of it, in the knowledge of the Son, who has revealed the Father.

But now there is a second point. Though there is no growth in the revelation, since it is perfect and complete, there is to be a great deal of growth in the apprehension of the revelation.

That is why we have to read those verses in 1 John 2. The forgiveness of sins, spoken of in verse 12, is a blessing shared in common by all the children of God, yet there are measures of growth to be found amongst them, as verse 13 shows — "fathers," "young men," and "babes." The characteristic feature of the first of these is that they are mature in their knowledge of Christ, and of all that has been manifested in Him. The second are characterized by victory over the adversary by the word of God: the third by the simple knowledge of the Father, which is where we all start at the beginning of our Christian lives.

Having stated the characteristic feature of each of the three, the Apostle proceeded to give a message to each, but to the fathers he merely repeated what he had said before. Why was this? Because the very climax of our blessing is found in the knowledge of Christ. A friend who worked among the very poor in one of our great cities, told me of a woman taken from the rationing and scarcity and privations that surrounded her to a North Wales resort, where for the first time she saw the sea. She stood and stared and a tear ran down her face as she said, "Thank God, I have at last seen something of which there is more than enough!" The fathers had reached the ocean revealed in Christ, and they had but to move on more deeply into that boundless and eternal life, since that life consists in the knowledge of Him that is from the beginning, as stated by the Lord's words in John 17: 3.

The young men had not attained to the maturity that marked the fathers, but they had overcome the wicked one in the antichristian errors he had introduced through his servants. This they had done not by the power of their own intellects but by the word of God abiding in them. That does not mean just a mental grasp of the contents of Holy Scripture. It means that what they had apprehended had sunk down into their very being, controlling their thoughts, and expressing itself in their lives.

But even so there was a danger that threatened them; the world system in which they had to live, and more specifically the many attractive things with which the world was filled. It is often in middle life that the pull of the world is most powerfully felt. All too many who were real and devoted in their early days, fail in middle life. Marriage perhaps has not helped them, and then a growing up family around them wants the world and they themselves are dragged in that direction.

What is the world? Here its underlying principles are analysed for us. They are three. First, the lust of the flesh; that is, the desire after that which gratifies man's fallen nature. Second, the lust of the eyes; not merely the desire for outward shows that appeal to the eyes in our heads, but even more the restless desire of the human mind for the acquisition of knowledge, for probing into things undiscovered as yet. Men wish to see the deep secrets of nature, and it is amazing what they have discovered.

Third, there is the pride of life; the lustful desire for self-exaltation, that is natural to every child of Adam. It is the alliance between the pride of life and the lust of the eyes that threatens to wreck the very earth on which we live. Sober men of the world begin to fear this. We know that the whole world system will pass away; but that will be under the judgment of God.

When the Apostle turns to the "little children," or "babes," it is to warn them against those who

would seduce them, turning them aside from that which they had "heard from the beginning," which he tells them is "the truth." The germ of all truth, if I may so put it, lies in the Gospel; so in believing the Gospel they knew the truth in its essence, though they had not yet had time to explore the truth in all its vast extent. As born of God they had the nature that responds to the truth of the Gospel.

And further, they had "the Unction," or "the Anointing;" that is, they possessed the Holy Spirit of God, and thus they had the capacity to know and enjoy the things of God as much as the young men and the fathers had. By that same Unction also they had the power to detect and refuse the error into which the antichrists would lead them. As we now draw near to the end of the age, antichristian teachers abound, and since most of us — both speaker and hearers — are but babes, we do well very earnestly to heed the exhortation of the Apostle.

His main exhortation we find in verse 24, in which the word for "abide" occurs three times, though in our version translated also as "remain," and "continue." That which we have heard from the beginning is to abide in us, and if it does we shall abide in the Son and in the Father, and this abiding conducts us into the power and practical experience of "eternal life," as the next verse indicates.

We all of us have the flesh — the old Adamic life - in us, and it is all too easy for us to be dominated by it. If we are, we live a life much like that of the men of the world and we easily fall as victims of error. Our proper life is "in the Son," in whom we know the Father. If we abide in that life which is the eternal life that has been promised, we shall be preserved from the seducers.

So my closing exhortation must be, Let us live that life which is properly ours - and I am exhorting myself as well as you. If we do, this eternal life will manifest itself in two main characteristics, in righteousness and in love, as the rest of the epistle shows. We could not have anything more wonderful. If the whole world were so ordered that in every relation righteousness prevailed, and in every heart was love, we should have the days of heaven upon earth. That is just what will be brought to pass in the Millennium, in the early days of it at least. And it is just what should prevail in the Christian circle today. If we know that He is righteous — and of course we do — we know those that are born of Him by their practise of it.

Well, may the Anointing, the Holy Spirit of God, teach us these things. He alone — and not any man — can really do this. This does not set aside the teachers mentioned in Ephesians 4, the gifts of the ascended Christ. They are the human instruments or vessels of the Holy Spirit, yet the vital and effectual teaching power is not theirs but His.

Subject to the teaching of the Anointing and abiding in the Son and in the Father, though we may indeed be but babes, we shall grow up in the power and joy of that eternal life which is ours.