

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And many Explanatory Notes.

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JOHN XVI. 8-15.

8 And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.

9 Of sin, because they believe not on me;

10 Of righteousness, because I go to my Father and ye see me no more;

11 Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.

12 I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.

13 Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall bear, *that* shall he speak; and he will show you things to come.

14 He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you.

15 All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you.

WHEN our Lord in this passage speaks of the Holy Spirit “coming,” we must take care that we do not misunderstand His meaning. On the one hand, we must remember that the Holy Ghost was in all believers in the Old Testament days, from the very beginning. No man was ever saved from the power of sin, and made a saint, except by the renewing of the Holy Ghost. Abraham, and Isaac, and Samuel, and David, and the Prophets, were made what they were by the operation of the Holy Ghost. On the other hand, we must never forget that after Christ’s ascension the Holy Ghost was poured down on men with far greater energy as individuals, and with far wider influence on the nations of the world at large, than He has ever poured out before. It is this increased energy and influence that our Lord has in view in the verses before us. He meant that after His own ascension the Holy Ghost would “come” down into the world with such a vastly increased power, that it would seem as if He had “come” for the first time, and had never been in the world before.

The difficulty of rightly explaining the wondrous sayings of our Lord in this place is undeniably very great. It may well be doubted whether the full meaning of His words has ever been entirely grasped by man, and whether there is not something at the bottom which has not been completely unfolded. The common, superficial explanation, that our Lord only meant that the work of the Spirit in saving individual believers is to convince them of their own sins, of Christ’s righteousness, and of the certainty of judgment at last, will hardly satisfy thinking minds. It is a short-cut and superficial way of getting over Scripture difficulties. It contains excellent and sound doctrine, no doubt, but it does not meet the full meaning of our Lord’s words. It is truth, but not the truth of the text. It is not individuals here and there whom He says the Spirit is to convince, but *the world*. Let us see whether we cannot find a fuller and more satisfactory interpretation.

For one thing, our Lord probably meant to show us *what the Holy Ghost would do to the world of unbelieving Jews*. He would convince them “of sin, and righteousness, and judgment.”

He would convince the Jews “of sin.” He would compel them to feel and

acknowledge in their own minds, that in rejecting Jesus of Nazareth they had committed a great sin, and were guilty of gross unbelief.

He would convince the Jews of “righteousness.” He would press home on their consciences that Jesus of Nazareth was not an impostor and a deceiver, as they had said, but a holy, just, and blameless Person, whom God had owned by receiving up into heaven.

He would convince the Jews of “judgment.” He would oblige them to see that Jesus of Nazareth had conquered, overcome, and judged the devil and all his host, and was exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour at the right hand of God.

That the Holy Ghost did actually so convince the Jewish nation after the day of Pentecost, is clearly shown by the Acts of the Apostles. It was He who gave the humble fishermen of Galilee such grace and might in testifying of Christ, that their adversaries were put to silence. It was His reproofing and convincing power which enabled them to “fill Jerusalem with their doctrine.” Not a few of the nation, we know, were savingly convinced, like St. Paul, and “a great company of priests” became obedient to the faith. Myriads more, we have every reason to believe, were mentally convinced, if they had not courage to come out and take up the cross. The whole tone of the Jewish people towards the end of the Acts of the Apostles is unlike what it is at the beginning. A vast reproofing and convincing influence even where not saving, seems to have gone over their minds. Surely this was partly what our Lord had in view in these verses when He said, “The Holy Ghost shall reprove and convince.”

For another thing, our Lord probably meant to foretell *what the Holy Ghost would do for the whole of mankind, both Gentiles as well as Jews.*

He would reprove in every part of the earth the current ideas of men about sin, righteousness, judgment, and convince people of some far higher ideas on these points than they had before acknowledged. He would make men see more clearly the nature of sin, the need of righteousness, the certainty of judgment. In a word, He would insensibly be an Advocate and convincing Pleader for God throughout the whole world, and raise up a standard of morality, purity and knowledge, of which formerly men had no conception.

That the Holy Ghost actually did so in every part of the earth, after the day of Pentecost, is a simple matter of fact. The unlearned and lowly Jews, whom He sent forth and strengthened to preach the Gospel after our Lord’s ascension, “turned the world upside down,” and in two or three centuries altered the habits, tastes, and practices of the whole civilized world. The power of the devil received a decided check. Even infidels dare not deny that the doctrines of Christianity had an enormous effect on men’s ways, lives, and opinions, when they were first preached, and that there were no

special graces or eloquence in the preachers that can account for it. In truth, the world was “reproved and convinced,” in spite of itself; and even those who did not become believers became better men. Surely this also was partly what our Lord had in view when He said to His disciples, “When the Holy Ghost comes, He shall convince the world of sin, and righteousness, and judgment.”

Let us leave the whole passage, deep and difficult as it is, with a thankful remembrance of one comfortable promise which it contains. “The Spirit of truth,” says our Lord to His weak and half-informed followers, “shall guide you into all truth.” That promise was for our sakes, no doubt, as well as for theirs. Whatever we need to know for our present peace and sanctification, the Holy Ghost is ready to teach us. All truth in science, nature, and philosophy of course is not included in this promise. But into all spiritual truth that is really profitable, and that our minds can comprehend and bear, the Holy Spirit is ready and willing to guide us. Then let us never forget, in reading the Bible, to pray for the teaching of the Holy Ghost. We must not wonder if we find the Bible a dark and difficult book, if we do not regularly seek light from Him by whom it was first inspired. In this, as in many other things, “we have not because we ask not.”

NOTES. JOHN XVI. 8-15.

8.—[*And when He is come.*] These words would be rendered more literally, “And He having come.” Here, as in other places, we must remember that the “coming” of the Holy Ghost does not mean His coming for the first time into the world. He was in all the old Testament saints, and no one ever believed or served God without His grace. Wherever there has been a true servant of God, there has been the Holy Ghost. The “coming” here mentioned means His coming down with larger power and influence on all mankind after the ascension of Christ, and especially on the day of Pentecost. From that day began an enormous extension of His influence and operation on human nature: an influence so much wider than it ever was before, that He is said to have “come.”

Lightfoot remarks that “the Holy Spirit had absented Himself the Jewish nation for four hundred years!” Hence the phrase “come” had a special significance.

[*He will reprove...judgment.*] This sentence is perhaps one of the most difficult in the whole of St. John’s Gospel. Men will probably never agree about it entirely till the Lord comes. There is something in it which seems to baffle all interpreters.

The commonest explanation is that which regards the passage as describing the ordinary operations of the Holy Ghost in saving God’s people. It is He who convinces people that they are sinners; convinces them that they must be saved by Christ’s righteousness, and not their own; and convinces them that there is a judgment to come. This interpretation is the one adopted by Alford and many others.—No doubt it contains truth, but it is not at all clear to me that it is the truth of the passage. It is open, in short, to grave objections, and, in common with some commentators, I cannot feel satisfied with it. For popular addresses this view may do pretty well. But, I venture to think, no man who sits down and calmly weighs the meaning of words, can fail to see that it is open to very serious objections.

Inward conviction is certainly not the meaning of the word rendered “reprove.” It is ra-

ther refutation by proofs, convicting by unanswerable argument as an advocate, that is meant.

Believers and God's people are not said to be the subjects of the Spirit's reproofing work. It is the "world" that is to be reproofed; and this very world, in this last sermon, is continually put in contrast with Christ's people.

Add to all this, that the latter part of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh verses can hardly be said to suit and square in with the verse we are considering. If our Lord had simply said, "The Spirit shall convince your hearers of their own sins, of my imputed righteousness, and of a day of judgment," it would have been plain enough. But unfortunately there are several things added which really do not chime in with this mode of interpretation. I repeat, that no intelligent Christian, of course, will think of denying that conviction of sin is a special and saving work of the Holy Ghost on the hearts of believers. But it does not therefore follow that it is the thing taught in this passage. It is truth, but not the truth of the text.

I believe the meaning to be something of this kind,—“After the day of Pentecost the Holy Ghost, the great Advocate of Me and my people, shall come into this world with such mighty power that He shall silence, convince, and stop the mouths of your enemies, and oblige them, however unwillingly, to think of Me and my cause very differently from what they think now. In particular, He shall convince them of their own sin, of my righteousness, and of the victory which I have won over Satan. He shall, in short, be a crushing Advocate whom the world shall not be able to resist or gainsay.”

That this was one effect of the Holy Ghost coming down on the day of Pentecost, appears so frequently in the Acts of the Apostles that it is needless to quote texts. It is clear from the whole narrative of the earlier portion of Acts, that after the day of Pentecost there was a peculiar, restraining, irresistible power accompanying the work of the Apostles, which the unbelieving Jews, in spite of all their numbers and influence, were unable to withstand. Nor was this work of the Holy Ghost confined to the Jews. Wherever the Apostles and their fellow-labourers went, the same convincing power accompanied them, and obliged even the heathen to acknowledge Christianity as a great fact, even when they did not believe. Pliny's famous letter to Trajan about the Christians, is a remarkable illustration of this.

I prefer this interpretation to the one above mentioned, as held by Alford and most commentators, for two simple reasons. One is that it suits the language of the passage, and the other view does not. The other reason is that it harmonizes with the context. Our Lord is encouraging the disciples against the world by the presence of the Comforter. And one special part of the encouragement is, that the Comforter shall do for them the work of an advocate, by silencing, crushing, refuting, and convincing their enemies.

After all, the enormous change which took place in the state of "the world" within a few centuries after Pentecost, is a strong proof to my own mind of the correctness of the view I advocate. About sin, Christ, and judgment, the opinions of men were completely transformed, even though men were unconverted. And who did this? The Holy Ghost. Nothing can account for the change but the miraculous interposition of the Holy Ghost.—I frankly confess that this view of the passage before us is not that of the vast majority of commentators. But in these matters I dare not call any man master, and must say what I think. Those who wish to see the view I maintain more fully argued out and supported, are advised to consult "Poole's Annotations," and Suicer's "Thesaurus" on the Greek word which we translate "reprove." Schleusner also seems to support the view.

Scott remarks here, "It is worthy of notice that an immense proportion of the human race, since the pouring out of the Holy Spirit after our Lord's ascension, have been led to form such sentiments about sin, righteousness, and a future judgment, as the world up to

that time had not the most remote conception of; so that a far higher standard of morals has been fixed throughout numerous nations than was at all thought of before.”

- 9.—[*Of sin...believe not...Me.*] I think this verse means, “The Holy Ghost shall first and foremost convince the world concerning sin, by obliging my enemies to see, though too late, that in not believing Me they made an enormous mistake, and committed a great sin. He shall make them feel at last that in rejecting Me, they rejected One whom they ought to have believed.”
- 10.—[*Of righteousness...no more.*] I think this verse means, “The Holy Ghost, secondly, shall convince the world concerning my righteousness, that I was a righteous Man, and not a deceiver. And this He will do after I have left the world, when the Jews can no longer see Me, and form any opinion of Me. I go to the Father, you know, and you will soon see me no more. But after I am gone the Holy Ghost will oblige my enemies to feel that I was a just and righteous Person, and was unjustly slain.” Even the centurion who saw our Lord crucified, declared, “Certainly this was a righteous man.” (Luke xxiii. 46.)
- 11.—[*Of judgment.. judged*] I think this verse means, “The Holy Ghost, in the last place, shall convince the world concerning the judgment and overthrow of Satan’s usurped power, by setting up a new kingdom everywhere, even my Church, by emptying the heathen temples of their worshippers, and by drying up the power of idolatry, and delivering vast portions of the world from its dominion.”

The “Prince of this world,” of course means the devil. How great His power was over mankind before Christ came into the world, and how great a change Christ’s death and resurrection produced in the general condition of mankind, are things which at this period of time we can hardly realize. The coming of the “kingdom of God,” or “kingdom of heaven,” was a reality 1800 years ago, of which we can now form little idea. The Holy Ghost produced a general conviction that a new order of things had begun, and that the old king and tyrant of the world was dethroned and stripped of much of his power.

Such is the view that I take of this passage. I do not pretend to deny that there are difficulties about it. I only maintain that these difficulties are fewer than those which surround the common idea attached to the passage.

Poole’s “Annotations” perhaps throw more light on the passage than any commentary I have met with. But even he says things which appear to me not warranted by the words of the evangelist.

- 12.—[*I have yet many things...you.*] This clause seems to refer to the higher, fuller, deeper views of Christian truth which our Lord doubtless revealed to His disciples during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension, when He was continually “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.”

The absurdity and unreasonableness of concluding from this text that there are many other truths which Christ after His resurrection revealed to the Apostles, but which are not recorded in Scripture, is well exposed by Ecolampadius and other Protestant commentators.

[*Ye cannot bear them now.*] This word “bear” means literally “carry.” It does not therefore signify things that the disciples could not “apprehend,” but things that their minds were not yet strong enough to endure and digest.

Do we not see here that there are steps and degrees in Christian attainment? A man may be a good man, and yet not able to endure the whole truth. We must teach people as they are able to bear, and be patient.

- 13.—[*Howbeit...He...guide...all truth.*] Here our Lord gives another promise concerning the Holy Ghost. He shall guide disciples into all truth. He will lead and direct them into the full knowledge of all the doctrines of the Gospel, and all the truth they need to know.

It is needless to say that “all truth” here does not mean all scientific truth. It applies specially to spiritual truth.

This great promise does not appear to me to signify “inspiration,” or the imparting of that power to write and teach infallibly which the Apostles possessed. I much prefer the view, that it is a wide promise belonging to the whole Church in every age. It means that special office of “teaching” by which the Spirit illuminates, guides, and informs the understandings of all believers. That the minds of true Christians are taught and enlightened in a manner wonderful to themselves as well as others, is a simple matter of Christian experience. That enlightenment is the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the first step in saving religion. At the same time we must never forget that the disciples received an immense increase of spiritual knowledge after the day of Pentecost, and saw everything in religion far more clearly than they did before.

Alford observes, “No promise of universal knowledge, nor of infallibility, is hereby conveyed; but it is a promise to them and us, that the Holy Spirit shall teach and lead us, not as children under the tutors and governors of legal and imperfect knowledge, but as sons, making known to us all the truth of God. (Gal. iv. 6.)

It is worth notice that in the Greek it is literally, “guide into all THE truth;” as if it specially meant “the truth concerning Me.”

Poole remarks that the Greek word rendered “guide,” is one of great emphasis, signifying not only a guide who will discover truth as the object of the understanding, but one who will bow the will to the doctrines of truth.

[*For...not speak...Himself...hear...speak.*] Here begins a list of things said about the Holy Ghost, which our weak capacities can hardly take in.

The clause before us seems meant to show the close and intimate union existing between the Spirit and the two other Persons in the blessed Trinity. “He shall not speak from Himself, independently of Me and my Father. He shall only speak such things as He shall hear from us.”

The phrases “speak” and “hear” are both accommodations to man’s weakness. The Spirit does not literally “speak” or literally “hear.” It must mean, “His teachings and guidings shall be those of One who is in the closest union with the Father and the Son.”

“Of Himself” does not mean “about Himself,” but “from Himself.”

[*He will show...things to come.*] The second thing said about the Spirit, is that He will show “things to come.” I can only suppose that this points to the prophetic revelation of the future of the Church which the Spirit was to impart to the disciples. He did so when He inspired St. Paul, St. Peter, St. Jude, and St. John to prophecy. The expression probably includes the destruction of Jerusalem, the removal of the Mosaic dispensation, the scattering of the Jews, the calling in of the Gentile Churches, and the whole history of their rise, progress, and final decay.

14.—[*He...glorify Me.*] The third thing said of the Spirit, is that He shall “glorify Christ.” He shall continually teach, and lead, and guide disciples to make much of Christ. Any religious teaching which does not tend to exalt Christ, has a fatal defect about it. It cannot be from the Spirit.

[*He shall receive...mine...show you.*] This is the fourth thing said of the Spirit in this place. He will take of the truth about Christ, and show it or reveal it to disciples. I can attach no other meaning to the phrase “mine.” It is in the singular number,—“that thing which is mine,”—and I cannot see what it can mean but “truth concerning Me.”

Alford remarks, “This verse is decisive against all additions and pretended revelations, subsequent to and beside Christ; it being the work of the Spirit to testify to the things of

Christ, and not to anything new or beyond Him.”

15.—[*All things...Father...mine, etc.*] The object of this deep verse seems to be to show the entire unity between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the revelation of truth made to man. “The Holy Spirit shall show you things concerning Me, and yet things at the same time concerning the Father, because all things that the Father hath are mine.”

Both this verse and the preceding one are strikingly calculated to humble a Bible reader, and make him feel how little he knows, at his very best, of the full meaning of some Scriptures. There are things in them which we must feel we do not comprehend. Beyond the great principle, that it is the special office of the Holy Spirit to glorify Christ, and to show disciples the whole truth concerning Christ, it is very hard to get.

May not the clause, “All things that the Father hath are mine,” be specially put in to prevent our supposing that there can be any real separation between the things of Christ and the things of the Father? It is like “I and my Father are One.” “All mine are Thine, and Thine are mine.”—“Think not,” our Lord seems to say, “when I speak of the Spirit showing you my things, that He will not show you the things of my Father. That would be impossible. There is so close an union between the Father and the Son, that the Spirit cannot show or teach the things of the one without the things of the other. In a word, He proceeds from the Father as well as from the Son.”