

John - Commentaries by Alexander Craven Ord

The Glory of the Person of the Son of God: His Title as the Eternal Life, Introduction (20:31)

The testimony that distinguished brethren in early days is now being given up. The positive and distinct possession of eternal life, as the certain and conscious portion of the believer, was formerly known and held amongst us, and was the subject of public testimony, whilst other Christians were in doubt and uncertainty, and sought to find this certainty in their state or feelings or enjoyment – all of which are unable to give it, not being the sure Word of God.

Not only so, but the distinct presentation of Eternal Life to be received through the Son, as the result of the gift of God's Son (John 3:16), or of believing in the Son of God (John 6:40), or receiving the Word of the Son of God (John 5:24) with the immediate certainty of its possession as the consequence of the reception of the Son of God (John 3:36) has for fifty years marked the testimony which has been given and owned of God. This, moreover, was understood to be the divine object for which the Gospel of John was written. "These things are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name" (John 20:31). Whilst the Epistle was expressly written to believers to establish them in the certainty of what they had received, not as a matter of evidence within themselves, but as a divine testimony: "If we receive the witness of men the witness of God is greater" "These things," says the apostle, "I have written to you that ye may know that ye have eternal life who believe on the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:13).

It were serious enough if only uncertainty were thrown upon all this divine truth, which so long characterized the testimony, and was the means of so much blessing to souls who previously were in doubt as to the possession of eternal life. But far worse than this, is the deprivation of the Son of God of His personal and divine glory as "the Eternal Life," and the dividing His blessed Person in order to distinguish what is Eternal Life in Him and what is not. We had ventured to hope that the irreverences which had resulted from this attempt would, when attention was drawn to them have deterred souls from venturing further on such dangerous ground. Instead of this, the supposed necessity and capability of distinguishing in the person of Christ what is divine and communicable, from what is incommunicable, has led to an alarming development of this system of thought, in which life and deity in the Son of God are divided – Christ, as the Second Man and Eternal Life, is denied the possession of divine attributes – whilst what is essentially human, is virtually introduced into His Godhead. Not only is Mr. Raven supported in this by writers hitherto little known among Brethren, but the positive necessity of this view is now affirmed by leaders among them, so that the mass instead of being warned of the danger, are thereby invited and encouraged to pursue these unholy and soul-withering speculations. The serious responsibility which they have incurred by so doing, in appending their names and declaring that they have "full fellowship" with Mr. Anstey's statements, we leave to God and their own consciences. But rapidly as these views and the false doctrine and expressions connected with them were spreading previously, we can only anticipate, after the impulse thus distinctly, and without any warning, given to them, by men in such a prominent position, that the enemy of souls will take full advantage of the opportunity thus afforded him, of spreading this poisonous leaven in their ranks to a fatal extent. They perhaps will only discover this when irreparable mischief has been done, for false doctrine is always ruinous in its effects upon souls, and numerous teachers, as will be shown in the sequel, are doing their utmost to give currency to these views in some of their worst features.

Such is the total loss of spiritual discernment produced by constant contact with this system of error, that others instead of having uneasiness, or even jealousy for the personal glory of Christ, awakened in their minds, are ready to disseminate the pamphlets containing these sentiments broadcast, in order to discredit those who have opposed them; disregarding the injury they are inflicting in this way on souls, and the triumph that they are thus giving to the enemy, in his worst and darkest designs against the Son of God. To expose these errors from Scripture in their true light, is a duty from which love to the Lord and to souls forbids us to shrink, even though we expose ourselves as before to misapprehension, and even charges of insincerity.

There is a day coming when all will be manifested. In the meantime, the approval of Him who knows the secrets of all hearts, and the deliverance of any of His who have yet "an ear to hear," are consolations which God gives in His grace.

Besides this, the setting forth of the truth of God tends to strengthen faith in those that are weak, and to deliver them from the confusion of thought in which the adversary has sought by specious arguments to involve them. This has necessitated the further stating and bringing forward the truth concerning the Person of Christ, in order to show how that Person is presented and kept before us in Scripture – our sure and safe guide if we follow it, as well as the divine antidote provided against the vain and dangerous speculations of the human mind. At the same time, whilst maintaining the reality of the union of the divine and human natures in the blessed Person of Christ, in opposition to the unhallowed attempts now made to divide them (after the fashion of the Nestorian heresy that troubled the church in the early part of the fifth century), we utterly refuse to define the manner of that union. We do not suppose for a moment that many of these writers are aware of what they are doing; for their evident ignorance of the ground they are traversing, and of the consequences that have followed to those who have ventured on this path before them, in the attempt to "distinguish" (as they call it) "between the human and divine," not merely in active manifestation, but in the Person of Christ Himself, makes the danger all the more serious for themselves and their followers.

It is evident from original letters of Mr. R.'s, now printed, that his views have become more developed and systematized. Indeed, he himself tells us "he was a learner not a teacher, at Witney," and was then "on the road to light." This claim to "more light," on the subject of Eternal Life is advanced in the Sept. No. of the A Voice {to the Faithful, 1891}, in a paper entitled "Divine Light Exposes its Contrary" (pp. 257-266).

Such infatuation should only lead us to take a lower place for ourselves before God, and earnestly cry to Him for our brethren. But this claim is totally inconsistent with the assertion, that this system involved no new truth, but what we had all been accustomed to for so many years. The chief difficulty in reality has been, in the mystic and obscure nature of the system Mr. R. has elaborated, as well as the apparent contra-

dictions it contains, which puzzle and perplex simple souls in a way that we never find in Scripture or in the teaching of the Spirit of God. We can see now that as a system it is fully developed, it is consistent as a whole, and the difficulty of grasping it is greatly diminished, now that we have something more than detached parts or fragments of it to examine; whilst it becomes evident where he is conducting us, and to what extent the truth of God is involved or lost, by adopting these views.

The citations from Mr. Darby, contained in various parts of this pamphlet, will be found of great value, and it seemed well to rescue them on this account from the mass of his writings, in which they are almost unknown or lost. Besides this, the subjects treated in this pamphlet are so little familiar to Brethren, that it appeared almost necessary to give some further evidence as to what has been held, by those who were raised up, to maintain the truth among us, on former occasions.

There does not seem anything that deserves a serious reply in the writings of those who have attacked the doctrine of the Tract entitled *The Manifestation of the Divine Nature.*"

If these attacks originated in value for the truth of God or love for souls, it would be another matter; but where sentences are taken up, only to twist and misrepresent their meaning, it is better to leave that to God, and seek rather to occupy the reader with the truth, adding explanation only of difficulties which have been raised, where it is required.

The Glory of the Person of the Son of God: His Title as the Eternal Life, Chapter 3: The Person of Christ Unfathomable (14:8-9)

This great mystery of the person of Christ is what is specially committed to the Church, which is the pillar and ground of the truth, to uphold and maintain it in the world. She has to be faithful to the sacred trust committed to her, and it is for this object she specially exists. It is this which gives its character to her position in this scene; and this is the mystery of godliness, and is the foundation of all spiritual life and piety (1 Tim. 3:15, 16). "God was manifested in flesh."

This manifestation characterized His whole existence here. As such, He was "seen of angels," and we know from Luke 2 that this commenced at His birth, and was a source of wonder, delight, and praise even then to those exalted beings.

Not only so, but He was "justified in the Spirit." The Spirit verified His title, or glorious claim, as God manifest down here - by the power of the Holy Ghost that accompanied His whole life, path, actions, and testimony in this world - by publicly descending on Him from the opened heaven - and by rendering witness to Him in His resurrection, in which He was "declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness" {Rom. 1:4}. His subsequent descent on the day of Pentecost, with "signs and wonders, and divers miracles and gifts," renders additional testimony to this great fact and mystery.

All this is typically expressed in Lev. 8, where the high priest is anointed without blood, alone and apart from his sons, but along with the tabernacle and all that it contained according to the title Christ has in His own divine Person.

The tabernacle, figure of God's abode in creation, where He revealed Himself in connection with it, becomes thus the scene where the glory of Christ is displayed. After that Aaron, the high priest, was clothed with the garments of glory and beauty which distinguished his position, the tabernacle and all that was within it, with the altar and the laver, were anointed with the fragrant oil. And this was done in conjunction with the person and the position occupied by the high priest, emblematical of the preeminence and dignity of Christ thus prefigured, of which the Holy Ghost's presence and power and action in the universe is the expression.

The Scripture, when announcing the birth of Christ and His manifestation to Israel, puts these words into the lips of the remnant: "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given"; but the very first thing that is revealed respecting this Child is that, His name shall be called "Wonderful," and that He is the "Counselor, the mighty God, the Father of eternity" (Isa. 9:5); that is, that the mystery of His Person is "wonderful," and as such surpassing human ken, even when presented as a Child born and a Son given to Israel, or as the virgin's seed whose name was called "Immanuel," i.e. God with us. This mystery is "wonderful" from the first moment to the last. It is intended to be a mystery, infinitely so; and as such is impenetrable, unfathomable. Hence, he who attempts to touch it, or to reason upon it, necessarily loses the proper glory which belongs to it and gets out of his depth, and in reality destroys what he touches, because it is infinite, and he is only finite; he is limited, and this is illimitable undefinable. As another has well said on these very subjects "The moment you define you limit," reducing the glory of His divine person to the low level or measure of the human mind.

Faith, and faith only, can apprehend, or rightly receive without pretending to fathom, such mysteries as the Trinity or the Person of Christ, or even creation (Heb. 11:3). It receives the wondrous revelation of them, and bows and worships; whilst reason, if it attempts to search into them exceeds its powers, and is necessarily at fault. Faith alone can appreciate, or in any little measure respond to the revelation which God has given of His blessed Person as "wonderful." God has become Man, for He has not taken angelic nature to manifest Himself in, but manhood; as the angels tell us, the expression of divine "good pleasure in men and glory in the highest" (Luke 2:14). □

Whilst the Lord loves to be near us and show Himself to us in the most gracious and condescending way in order to win our confidence and draw us near to Himself - allowing the apostle John to rest on His bosom, the multitudes to throng and press Him, or the woman and others to draw virtue out of Him by a touch - yet how often do we see a sort of mysterious power surrounding or displayed by Him! When exposed apparently to the fury of His enemies, He sometimes hides Himself, or passes through the midst of them untouched (Luke 4; John 8). He appears to the relief of His disciples walking on the sea in the midst of the storm, and saying, "It is I, be not afraid." And in a moment on His entry into the ship it is at the land whither they went (John 6:21). On other occasions, with power over all, He tells them where to find the ass with the colt, to bring it from the hand of the owner for His triumphal entry into Jerusalem; or indicates the upper chamber for the last paschal supper; or directs Peter to the piece of money in the fish's mouth for the tribute.

We have said, indeed, that it is needful always to have before us the divine estimate of this blessed One as that which is presented to us in the Gospels. Into this faith gradually enters as it studies these divine revelations, and becomes more imbued with their spirit and character; for we otherwise fall into the danger of being more or less affected by the atmosphere of unbelief which surrounded Him, and which is so congenial to our fallen nature. None assuredly can "tell" all that God could discern in its perfection in His Son as Man here, though it is evident that this is just what the Gospels reveal; and that whilst we have there a perfect picture of Christ, according to the mind of God, we have also as a sort of background, the unbelief of the human heart.

But again and again we are reminded in the Scriptures that what is infinite and illimitable lies hid in His blessed Person, for there dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; so that all the vain speculations now current among brethren, and among the ritualistic and rationalistic leaders of thought in the Establishment, only involve them in a labyrinth of error. For the subject transcends the powers of the human understanding, which is sure to fail in the attempt to resolve it.

Though He is rejected by man because of His humiliation (in Matt. 11) – for the pride of man is "offended" by the lowly guise and form of manhood which He has assumed – He bows to His Father, who hides these things from the wise and prudent, and reveals them unto babes; and we there learn that so glorious and profound is this mystery of His Person that it is inexplicable to man. But what is most remarkable and shows how, on account of His humiliation, His sacred character is guarded, it is not so affirmed of the Father; for while it is said that no man or creature "knoweth the Son but the Father," it is permitted to us by the indwelling of the Spirit to know the Father. "Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son wills (John 1:18) to reveal Him." There is not in the Father that complex glory which exists in the Person of the Son become man, but pure and simple divine character and nature, which could be revealed and made known by the Son. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him" (cp. John 1:18, 14:8, 9, 16:25, 17:6, 25, 26). Hence the glory of the Son who became man, and in consequence exposed Himself to be scrutinized and treated with indignity by the wretched ingratitude of the heart of man, for whose sake He humbled Himself, is safeguarded by the inscrutability which surrounds it. And so jealous is the Holy Ghost, by whom the Gospels are indited, on this subject, that the same truth is repeated still more emphatically in Luke 10:22: "All things are delivered to Me of My Father; and no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" {Luke 10:22}. The difference of the language here observable is remarkable; it is not only "no man knoweth the Son, but the Father," but no man knoweth (John 1:18) who the Son is but the Father," that is, not only His Person cannot be fathomed, but the manner of His existence is wholly incomprehensible to the human understanding. □

Who, for instance, can form an idea of the effect of the presence, action, and power of the Holy Ghost in that human nature, the Seed of the woman conceived of the Virgin by His power? For though it was "the Seed of the woman," and conceived of her according to the promise, and thus of her nature and substance, the action of the Spirit was such, in the miraculous conception of that holy humanity {Luke 1:35} that the angel says that that Holy Thing born of her could, on this account (as well as in His own higher nature), bear the title of the Son of God. Thus all His human life was in the power of the Holy Ghost, infinitely beyond His marvelous action on saints in earlier days. This explains how, in the sacrificial aspect of His giving up Himself to death, it is said by the apostle Paul in Heb. 9, that He, "through the Eternal Spirit, offered Himself without spot to God"; for the Holy Ghost acts in being Himself, in an infinite way, the power of those motives and feelings, which led Him to devote Himself thus for the glory of God, in His death. So again we read "He was led of the Spirit into the wilderness" to be "tempted of the devil," and "Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee" (Luke 4).

This was signified of old in the type when the fine flour was mingled, as well as anointed with oil. We have pointed out the activity of the Spirit of God from the earliest moment in John the Baptist; how then can we limit His energy, and the effect of His all-pervading presence thus specially marked, in the case of our Lord Himself? Before the scene in the temple, even from His infancy, we read what could not be said of another, He was "filled with wisdom." Now wisdom is not only knowledge, but the power or capacity of adjusting the relations of things, or using knowledge rightly. Where can we find another who could tell us what was addressed to Him at the moment of His birth? "I will declare the decree the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art My Son; this day have I begotten Thee. Ask of Me, and I shall give Thee the heathen for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession" (Psa. 2:7, 8). We have seen (The Manifestation of the Divine Nature) in Psa. 22 how the sense of conscious relationship, confidence, and hope was expressed by the Lord when He was upon His mother's breasts; but this goes even farther, for He declares how He was addressed as Son and heir by the Father, on the day of His birth, and what was then pledged to Him, and on what ground.

Of Him alone, in contrast with all others, it is said, "He whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him" (John 3:34). A prophet might communicate messages which were given to him, but at other times he spake as other ordinary men whilst Jesus spake only and always the words of God, and nothing else, just because He was God, and spake always by the Spirit of God. If He cast out devils, it was by the finger of God, and by the Spirit of God (Matt. 12:28); but He could also whilst on earth confer on others the power of doing the same and working miracles, to impart which is the prerogative of God alone (Luke 9:1; Mark 6:7). What above all marks the import of the passage, that none knows who the Son is but the Father, is the statement in Colossians, twice repeated, that in Him all the fullness (of the Godhead) is pleased to dwell.

□Not only this, but "in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." This statement, true of Him when on earth, is generally supposed to express that He is God incarnate; but far more than this is contained in it. He is corporeally the center of the presence and action of all the divine Persons. He is the Son in His own Person. He manifests perfectly the Father in all His blessed nature; for He can say, "I and My Father are one," and, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." And all the energies and working of the Holy Ghost, in the scene of evil that surrounded Him, proceeded from Himself as their center.

This is expressed in the Revelation, when He is said to be both now and in the future, possessor of the seven Spirits of God (originally seen before the throne, and subsequently sent forth into all the earth), first in the address to the church at Sardis, and afterwards when seen as the Lamb that had been slain, in the midst of the throne, with seven horns and seven eyes, emblematic of the fullness of divine intelligence, and of active power which He wields in all the universe (Rev. 1:4 4:5). □

It is important to observe, that in both the passages which specially speak of the Lord before the assumption of humanity, and subsequently to His becoming man, His divine personality is always maintained. Nor did He take another personality by becoming man. It is one and the same Person that Scripture presents to us throughout. In Heb. 10, "Then said I, Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God"; "A body hast Thou prepared Me." The statement, "In the volume of the book it is written of Me," comprises all that He fulfilled, after that He had taken as well as in taking the body prepared for Him. In what follows we read, "But this man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins, for ever sat down on the right hand of God." In Phil. 2 He who is subsistent in the form and glory of God, empties Himself; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbles Himself. The divine personality is not lost by His becoming man, but is marked or distinguished even then, by these acts ascribed to Him. Hence He carried with Him the infinite sense of what He was, and what He came to do. "Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God." And the result of His intervention never falls below the height of this infinite purpose and presence, as is distinctly shown in His still humbling Himself, and fulfilling what was written in these eternal counsels concerning Him. At no moment of His life from His birth, when He takes the body prepared for Him, to His giving it up on the cross, could this be wanting.

On this passage in Heb. 10 Mr. Darby thus comments

Before He became man, in the place where only divinity is known, and its eternal counsels and thoughts are communicated between the divine Persons, the Word -as He has declared it to us, in time, by the prophetic Spirit - such being the will of God contained in the book of the eternal counsels, He who was able to do it, offered Himself freely to accomplish that will.

That of which we have been speaking is continually manifested in the life of Jesus on earth. God shines through His position in the human body; for He was necessarily God in the act itself of His humiliation, and none but God could have undertaken and been found in it. Yet He was always, and entirely and perfectly obedient and dependent on God. That which revealed itself in His existence on earth was the expression of that which was accomplished in the eternal abode in His own nature. That is to say (and of this Psa. 40 speaks), that which He declares and that which He was here below are the same thing: the one in reality in heaven, the other bodily on earth. That which He was here below was but the expression - the living, real, bodily manifestation of what is contained in those divine communications which have been revealed to us and which were the reality of the position that He assumed (Synopsis on Hebrews, p.335, 336).

. . . He tells us that He took this place willingly according to the eternal counsels respecting His own Person. For the Person is not changed. But He speaks in the Psalm according to the position of obedience which He had taken, saying always I and Me in speaking of what took place before His incarnation" (p. 334, note).

How different all this is from Mr. R. and those writers whose reasonings would reduce us to the conclusion that His infancy was practically unaffected by His divinity or by the unlimited presence of the Holy Ghost; thus lowering Him below what was true of John the Baptist, who was "filled with the Holy Ghost from His mother's womb!

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