

Light in the Johannine Epistles

by A. D. MACRAE

THE FIRST PASSAGE to be considered is 1 John i.5, 'And this is the message which we have heard from him, and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all'. God's nature is light, not merely in an abstract sense but in the intensely practical sense of illumination. God gives man light in which to walk. In verse 7 John says 'If we walk in the light, as he is in the light . . .'. This means letting our lives be ordered by what we know of God who is the true light. And as a vertical relationship between God and the Christian it leads to the horizontal relationship of fellowship with other believers.

I John ii.8 tells us that 'The darkness is past and the true light is now shining'. This is a word of assurance. It is an eschatological word. The final issues have been decided, the last word has been spoken in Christ, and the light he has brought to the world will never be put out by the forces of defeated darkness. Nevertheless some of those who say that they have acknowledged the light have not in reality done so. 'He that says he is in the light and hateth his brother is in darkness until now' (verse 9). Here the implied relationship between light and love is made clear, and a vital clue to John's Christian ethics is supplied. Light and love are almost synonymous at this point. 'He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him' (verse 10). Here is the picture of the man whose life is stayed upon God. He is said, not merely to catch glimpses of the light, not only to see it, not simply to walk in it, but to abide in it. It appears that John is deliberately on the defensive against those who were spoiling the work of the gospel by their snobbish intellectualism. They were manifestly not of the light, but were in darkness.

It is important to grasp John's ethical intention. Canon Brooke has well said, in the Introduction to his Commentary, 'He is a pastor first, an orthodox theologian only afterwards. He cannot separate doctrine from ethics. But it is the life which he cares about. For him the Christian faith is a life of fellowship "with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ". His first object in writing is to help his fellow-Christians to lead this life of fellowship, that his joy and theirs might be fulfilled. And no interpretation of the Epistle is likely to elucidate his meaning satisfactorily if it fails to realise where the writer's interest really lies'.

There appears to have been a real need for ethical instruction in the Church in Asia Minor, and in Ephesus in particular. It cannot be said definitely whether John was here writing for the Ephesian Church alone: possibly this was a circular for the region. At any rate, it appears that certain influences were at work which militated against an ethical Christianity, and led, in fact, to an antinomian position. It seems strange that the Church, in all ages, should have had such difficulty

in steering a course between antinomianism and legalism. This letter seems set against the excesses and carelessness of antinomianism, while Paul's letter to the Galatians is clearly designed to combat the incursion of legalistic religion. Both extremes miss the real freedom Christ brings, the freedom which exists in a love-relationship. Possibly the group John was opposing most strongly was the Nicolaitans, with their antinomian dissoluteness and shocking moral laxity. They denied any moral obligation. Chapters i and ii are a clear indication that there was much to be desired in the behaviour of some within the Church, although the leaders of the heretical group seem to have taken their departure, 'because they were not of us'.

Then there were the Cerinthians, who were also antinomian, but whose major heresy was a wrong Christology. Believing, as they did, with Greek and, later, Marcionite philosophy, in the inherent evil of matter, they denied the reality of the Incarnation, and held a kind of docetic view of Christ. In answer to this, John says, 'Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God'.

There was, obviously, a real need for guidance on Christian behaviour, and John gives it. He does not base his ethics on an extensive theology, as does Paul in the letter to the Romans, but on the simple, though profound, affirmation, 'God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all'. It can be affirmed that, for John, three things may be said about the Christian ethic, as understood in terms of Light, whereby the Christian life is to be thought of in terms of walking in the light.

(a) *The Light of the Christian is derived from God.* God is light, the source of all goodness, purity and truth. There is no suggestion of darkness or evil in Him. Any power to walk in the light must be derived, and derived from that source. If our light is derived from any other source, it is darkness, and not light at all. He is, as we saw earlier, the light which gives meaning to Creation. Much more than He is the life of the individual within Creation. We walk in the light only because of our relationship to the light. If we do not come to Him who is the light, we shall remain in darkness. Our

only hope of living in the light, or to put it otherwise, living so as to please God, is to be in right relationship with Him, to experience the illumination which comes from Him, by the exercise of confession, repentance, and submission. 'The light of the body is the eye', said our Lord, 'if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.' And it is by the eye of faith in Christ, that our lives are opened to the light which emanated from God, and enlightens our lives.

(b) *The Light of the Christian is expressed in Fellowship.* 'If we walk in the light, we have fellowship one with another . . .' fellowship with God, and with other believers. It is, then, by this token, a love ethic; and this is something the Church forgets to its loss. Augustine's dictum is in full accord with John, 'Love God, and do as you like'. Our love for God will always be expressed in love for our brother. If it is not, it is a denial of the fatherhood of God, who is 'the Father of lights'. We see from ii.9, 10 that love and light are almost synonymous in this letter. They are certainly inseparables. Where the one is, the other is also. Where there is light, there is fellowship; where there is fellowship, it is because there is love; where there is no fellowship, there is darkness. And the basis of fellowship, let us remember, is never my brother's intellectual agreement with me, but my relationship, and his, to God, Who is light, the light of us both.

The Gnostic heretics in Asia Minor were intellectual snobs. But one can make many things a basis for snobbery and a breach of fellowship, a different slant on Scripture perhaps, a different interpretation of Baptism perhaps, a different view of worldliness, and so on. Let us, in humility, learn the lesson.

The fellowship, however, will always, if it is real, be pure. The Nicolaitans threw aside the sanctions of christian morality, and in so doing, reduced the love ethic, based on the Divine ἀγάπη to something expressed in human ἔρωσ. But John insists that walking in the light will keep us pure. 'The blood of Jesus Christ', he says, 'keeps purifying us from every assault of sin'.

(c) *The Light of the Christian is influential in the world.* The man who abides in the light, according ii.10, has no σκάνδαλον in him. This means at least that he is not a hindrance to

others. It surely follows that the light which illumines our lives, coming from God to us, and uniting us to all who share its radiance, must also be reflected from us to others. Did not our Lord teach this in His words, 'I am the light of the world. . . ye are the light of the world'. The Christian ethic, then, ought not to speak to us only of edification within, but also of evangelism without. The man who is living in the light which comes from God, will not be able to hide it. It will stream to others from him, inevitably, and bring the illumination of God to other lives.

Let us, in conclusion, hear the words of our Master, who said, 'Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a lamp, and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and give glory to your Father, Who is in Heaven'.