THE

FIRST GENERAL EPISTLE

OF

ST JOHN THE APOSTLE,

UNFOLDED AND APPLIED.

BY

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While introducing to our readers the author of the following Exposition, it may not be out of place to offer a few observations on a subject, respecting which we venture to think that considerable misapprehension exists in the minds of many. We frequently hear and read statements respecting 'the Puritans,' their excellences and their defects, which seem to indicate that many regard them as a class of writers who have little or no resemblance to any others, while they have no material differences amongst themselves; as if they were members of a flock of sheep, all marked with one brand, undistinguishable by any ordinary eye from one another, and altogether unlike the members of any other flock. Now it is no doubt true that modes of speech, and even modes of thought, are to a considerable extent under the influence of circumstances; and consequently there are great features which all the literature of any era has in common, and which distinguish it from that of any other. Such features of course belong to the writers of the Puritan period, producing some measure of mutual resemblance between themselves, and of distinction between all of them and the writers of any other age, as, for example, those of the Reformation, those of the eighteenth century, or those of our own times.

But it may be questioned whether there be any period whose literature is enriched with so much diversity as is that of the age with which we have to do. It was a period of intense earnestness of thought, when men’s minds were brought into contact with great interests, and when questions of unspeakable importance were calling for individual solution. It was a period of transition, when speakers and writers were not drilled into absolute uniformity; a period dismembered to a great extent from that which preceded it, when, therefore, traditional forms of thought and speech had less than their usual influence, and when individual peculiarities were more than usually free to assert themselves.

Some of these causes, perhaps, acted still more powerfully at the Reformation; but another circumstance gave greater variety to the writings of the Puritans than belongs even to those of the Reformers. The English Reformers were substantially at one in all important questions; as were also the Germans, until the Sacramentarian controversy unhappily broke out amongst them. Hence their writings generally, and especially those of them that are of much interest to us, contain comparatively little diversity of doctrinal statement. The variety is doubtless great; as between Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Beza, Farel, Cranmer, Latimer; but it is mainly due to the personal temperaments of the several writers, and to the circumstances in which they were placed. The Puritans, on the other hand,
differed from one another both in respect of important doctrines, and in respect of matters of ecclesiastical polity, which are still fresh in interest; and certainly their writings are distinguished, not only by variety of manner, but also by a greater diversity of matter and sentiment than is to be found in the writings of the leaders of the Reformation.

None of the causes to which we have adverted are in as powerful action now as they were in the puritan period; and consequently we venture to assert that there are greater diversities between the different writers of that period than between those of the nineteenth century, whom yet no one would think of classing together on any principle of classification except that of contemporaneousness. For proof of this, we need go no further than to the series of works which we are now engaged in reproducing. We venture to assert that, amongst the religious writers of our own day, it would be impossible to name any that are more dissimilar to each other than are the several members of the following pairs:—Thomas Adams and Thomas Goodwin; Sibbes and Charnock; Ward and Clarkson; Airay and Stock; King and Rainolds; Bernard and Cartwright; Torshell and Fuller. We may even go so far as to state, that some of these writers are so free from the characteristics which are commonly considered as distinctive of the age in which they lived, that their works would not be thought out of place if by any accident they were classed among the products of our own day. A sermon of Charnock’s, if delivered in one of our congregations, with only a very few expressions altered, would scarcely startle the hearers, or be detected by them as not a modern production; while we are confident that Torshell’s Exercitation upon Malachi, if it had been published as a new work, would have been welcomed by many as a fine specimen of the “modern criticism!” A somewhat similar remark, though not to quite the same extent, is applicable to the present exposition of a portion of the First Epistle of St John; and this it is that has suggested to us, and this is our apology for introducing in this place, a discussion which may be thought by some to be unconnected with the business which we have in hand.

That business is not to compile a full biography of Dr Hardy, but only to give such a brief account of his position and sentiments as may cast light upon the views expressed in the following Commentary, and so put the reader in a position to profit fully by its perusal.

NATHANAEL HARDY was born in the Old Bailey, in the parish of St Martin’s, London, on the 14th of September 1618, and was baptized in the church of that parish. His father, Anthony Hardy, was probably a citizen of good standing; but we are not possessed of any information respecting him. As our main object in this sketch is to indicate the position which Hardy occupied amongst his contemporaries, it may be well to remind our readers of the relation which subsisted between him and a few of the most distinguished of them in respect of the time of his birth. In 1618, then, James I. was in the fifteenth year of his occupancy of the English throne, and his son, afterwards Charles I., was in the eighteenth year of his age; Oliver Cromwell was nineteen years old; Shakespeare had been dead two years, and Milton was ten years old. Hardy was eighteen years younger than Goodwin, ten years younger than Lord Clarendon, five years younger than Jeremy Taylor, and three years younger than Owen and Baxter, who were born in one year. He was three years older than Clarkson, nine years older than Bunyan, and twelve years older than Howe and Barrow.

The time when Hardy came into the world was pretty nearly coincident with the beginning of the storm which was destined to break over England, and to sweep away the old landmarks in Church and State. His life having been spent in the stirring times of James I., of Charles I., of the Commonwealth, and the Restoration, there is a strong temptation lying
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HISTORY, prophecy, and doctrine, are the three channels in which run the streams of sacred writ, from whence ariseth the division of its books into historical, prophetical, and doctrinal. Not but that all the books of Scripture are doctrinal, in which respect the apostle saith, 2 Tim. iii. 16, it is 'profitable for doctrine;' but because some books are chiefly concerned in narrations of things past, others in the predictions of things to come, and some are chiefly, if not only, conversant about dogmatical truths and practical precepts; they are not unfitly thus distinguished. Of this latter sort are the epistolary writings, and therefore in this regard the fittest to be discussed among the people. The prophetical books are most congruous to the schools, but the doctrinal most suitable to the pulpit; those for exercising the learned, these for feeding the vulgar. Upon this account I have made choice of an epistle, and in particular, not without serious and mature deliberation, nor yet, I hope, without the blessed Spirit's instigation, of this First Epistle general of St John to be the subject of my post-meridian discourses.

If any shall be inquisitive to know why, among all the epistles of the holy apostles, I have pitched my thoughts upon this, I shall return this threefold answer, which as a threefold cord, and that, saith Solomon, Eccles. iv. 12, is not easily broken, induced me to this work.

One, though indeed the least, is, that I find not any English expositor upon it, nor yet many among the Latin, except those who have undertaken comments upon all the epistles; whereas, either in Latin or English, or both, I find several excellent interpreters upon each of the rest; and truly, I shall esteem it an high honour conferred upon me by my God, if, through his gracious enablement, by a (though imperfect) elucidation of this epistle, I may cast a mite into the church's treasury.

A second and more persuading reason is, the congruency of it to the age wherein we now live, since there is the same occasion, as to general, if not particular considerations, now given to ministers of handling, which St John had then of writing this epistle.

To clear this, you may be pleased to know, that there were two sorts of men in St John's days, to wit, antichristian heretics and carnal gospellers: those expressly denied the fundamentals of Christian religion; these, whilst they had divine phrases, seraphical expressions flowing from their lips, were sensuous and diabolical in their lives, talking of communion with God, dwelling in God, knowing the truth, and what not, and yet practising envy, malice, hatred, and all uncharitableness in their actions. Against both these this Boanerges (for so he with his brother James are called by Christ), Mark iii. 17, thundereth, and accordingly, as appeareth by the several chapters, his scope is double in this epistle.

1. To warn the orthodox that they were not withdrawn from their Christian profession by the wiles of heretics. This our apostle himself expresseth to be one special end of his writing, 1 John ii. 26, where he saith, 'These things have I written unto you concerning them which seduce you.' Indeed, wherein can the shepherd more express the care of his flock, than in keeping off the wolves? a minister of his charge, than in arming them against heretics? And is there not as great need in this age as ever of such a caution,* wherein such a multitude of deceivers swarm, to the endangering of ignorant and unstable Christians?

2. To persuade in general a practice agreeable to Christian profession, in reference to which he saith, 'These things I write to you, that you sin not,' chap. ii. 1; and in special the practice of that most truly Christian grace, love, which therefore he calleth the message from the beginning, chap. iii. 11. It is observed of precious stones, that each of them hath a several and peculiar excellency; the like is taken notice of in

* Nemo non et lectu dignam et scitum necessarium hanc epistolam judicare possit; maximè hisce temporibus, que hereses et schismata cum magno ecclesie detrito in vixerunt.—Fer. proem. in Epist. Joh.
sacred books; and the splendour of this is, that it is much conversant in describing and prescribing the grace of charity.* For this reason, St Gregory advised those who would be inflamed with this heavenly fire to read St John,† whose words are altogether, as it were, coloured with love. And St Augustine, taking notice of this, affirmed that charity is the chief thing commended by St John in this epistle.‡ And can any admonition be more seasonable to this licentious and malicious generation? That prediction of our Saviour, ‘The love of many shall wax cold,’ Mat. xxiv. 1, 2, was never more verified than in these days. The best of us need this advice, as oleum in flamma, oil to nourish and increase the flame, and the most asflamma ad fomitem, a coal fetched from the altar to kindle or recover this fire in us. Indeed, canting language, affected forms of religious speech, were never needful to us, but the beauty of a Christian and charitable conversation was never less in fashion. And if, as without doubt, that of Solomon be true, ‘A word spoken in due season, how good it is;’ Prov. xv. 22, the discoursing of this epistle, which was written for these ends so nearly concerning us, cannot but be profitable for, and so acceptable to us. But,

Lastly, the chief argument which incited me to this undertaking, is the comprehensive excellency and utility of the matter contained in this epistle. St Jerome,§ speaking of all the catholic epistles, calls them breves pariter et longas, breves verbis, longas sententiae: short, and yet long, short in phrase, but long in sense. This is singularly true of this epistle, which as in situation it is the middle,¶ so for matter the fullest of them all, at once enriched with weight of matter and elegance of words, in which respect Lorinus¶ is bold to say, no other epistle is more divine, than this of him who is by the church called the divine.

The truth is, a world of heavenly matter is contained in this little map, which that it may the better appear, give me leave in few words to delineate it before you.

The globe of divinity parts itself into two hemispheres, to wit, credenda et agenda, the things we are to know and believe, and the things we are to do and perform, both which are here described; and therefore those two words, μαθηματας and ἀποκαλυπτωματα, at the second verse of the first chapter, are by

† Succedendi cor nostrum in igne charitatis quierimus? Johannes verba pensamen cujus omne quod loquitur charitatis igne vaporatur.—Greg. Hom. xiii. in Ezek.
‡ In ipsa epistola satis dulci et satia memorabilis maximè charitatis commendatur.—Aug. Expos. in hanc Epist.
§ Hieron. Epistol. ad Paulinum.
¶ Medium tenet in septem quasi honoratiorem catholici locum.—Lor. in loc.
¶¶ Ausim ipse dicere nullam habe epistola magis theologorum.—Id. ibid.

Justinian considered as referring to those two heads, the ‘bearing witness’ to matters of faith, and the ‘shewing’ or ‘declaring’ to matters of practice.*

Out of this epistle we may gather an abstract of the things to be known, and that concerning God, ourselves, and Christ.

1. Concerning God. We may hence be instructed in his nature, attributes, and person: as to his nature, that he is light, and in him no darkness; his attributes, that he is faithful, just, holy, righteous, pure, invisible, knowing all things, and love itself; the persons, that there are three which bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, the Holy Ghost; and these three are one.

2. Concerning ourselves. We may here learn what we are by nature, namely, ‘lying in wickedness,’ what we are by grace, to wit, ‘born of God;’ and what we shall be in glory, ‘like to him, seeing him as he is.’

3. Concerning Christ. We have him here characterised in his natures, offices, acts, and benefits.

(1.) In respect of his natures, he is as to his deity called ‘true God,’ and yet more distinctly, with reference to his personality, the ‘only begotten Son of God;’ as to his humanity, he is said to be ‘sent into the world,’ and so truly man, that he was ‘seen, heard, and handled’ by the apostles.

(2.) As to his offices, he is here asserted in general to be the Christ, and so anointed to those offices; and in particular, as priest, to ‘take away sin,’ to be the propitiation for our sins, and ‘our advocate with the Father;’ as prophet, by his Spirit to ‘teach us all things;’ and as a king, to ‘destroy the works of the devil.’

(3.) Most of his mediatorial acts are here specified: his incarnation, where he is said to ‘come in the flesh;’ his passion, in that he ‘layeth down his life for us;’ his resurrection, inasmuch as ‘eternal life’ is said to be ‘in him;’ and his ascension and intercession, because he is affirmed to be an ‘advocate with the Father,’ and his coming again in the day of judgment to appear as Judge of the world.

(4.) Lastly, We need not go further than this epistle to meet with those benefits we obtain by him, in that he ‘giveth his Spirit to us,’ whereby, ‘we dwelling in him, and he in us, have fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ,’ and by virtue of this ‘forgiveness of our sins for his name’s sake;’ ‘adoption,’ whereby we are called the ‘sons of God;’ finally, justification by blood, sanctification by water, and eternal life.

2. Nor are only doctrines of faith, but rules of practice, deducible from this epistle.

(1.) Would we know what to avoid? This book teacheth us in general to eschew all sin, both describ-

* Videtur apostolus duobus hisce verbis duo praecipua Christianae religiosae capita indicare voluisse, &c.—Just. in loc. Joh. Epist. 1.