

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
16:8-15

8. And when he has come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: 9. of sin, because they do not believe in 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 still have many things to say to you, but ye cannot bear them now. 13. However, when he, the Spirit of truth, has come, he will guide you into all truth; for he shall not speak of himself, but whatever he hears he will speak; and he will tell you things to come. 14. He shall glorify me, for he shall receive of mine and shall show *it* to you. 15. All things that the Father has are mine. Therefore I said that he shall take of mine and shall show *it* to you.

8.--[*And when he has 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 specially 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 from the Jewish nation for four hundred years!" Hence the phrase "come" had a special significance.

[*He will reprove...of 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 most common 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 rather 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 reproving work. It is the "world" that is to be reproved; 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 9th, 10th, and 11th 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 that really do not chime in with this mode of interpretation. I repeat that no intelligent Christian, of course, will think of denying that the 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 sins, of my righteousness, and of the victory that 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 laborers 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 that 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 work that we translate "reprove." Schleusner also seems to support the view.

Scott remarks here: "It is worthy of notice that from the time of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit after our Lord's ascension, an immense proportion of the human race have been led to form such sentiments about sin, righteousness, and a future judgment (of which the world up to that time had not the most remote conception), that a far higher standard of morals has been fixed throughout numerous nations than was at all thought of before."

9.--[*Of sin, etc.*] 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, etc.*] 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, as 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 23:46).

11.--[*Of judgment, etc.*] 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 that 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 that 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 that appear to me not warranted by the words of the evangelist.

12.--[*I still have...say to you.*] This clause seems to refer to the higher, fuller, deeper views of Christian truth that 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 that Christ revealed to the Apostles after His resurrection, 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.--[*However...guide you into 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. 4:6).

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 of Himself...will speak.*] Here begins a list of things said about the Holy Ghost that 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 words "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 tell you things to come.*] The second thing said about the Spirit is that He will tell "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 shall glorify Me.*] The third thing said of the Spirit is that he shall "glorify Christ." He shall continually teach, lead, and guide disciples to make much of Christ. Any religious teaching that does not tend to exalt Christ has a fatal defect about it. It cannot be from the Spirit.

[*He shall receive...show it to 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 that the Father has, 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 has 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 that we must feel we do not comprehend. Beyond the great principle--that it is the special office of the Holy Spirit to glory 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 has 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 a 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."