

Concordia
Theological
Monthly



JANUARY

•

1952

Notes on John 16:5-16

By J. T. MUELLER

THERE is no doubt that the Gospels arranged by the ancient Church for the Sundays between Easter and Pentecost belong to the most comforting of the entire church year. This is true especially of those that are taken from Christ's farewell address to His disciples delivered shortly before His suffering and death. But the very fact that they are taken from an allocation of our Lord on a special occasion and for a very special purpose renders them also (at least in part) difficult of interpretation and application. His last words were not only to comfort His sorrowing Apostles during the immediate time after His departure from them, but they were to prepare them for their entire Apostolic ministry, which was preceded by the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Ghost, and for the work, benefit, and tribulation of that trying and troubled service. No doubt the words meant much more to the disciples than they mean to us today, upon whom the blessings of the Apostolic ministry have come in so rich a measure and whose lot as disciples of our Savior is much more bearable than was theirs.

Difficulties attach especially to the interpretation and application of the Gospel for Cantate, John 16:5-15, and here, in particular, of verses 7-11. The exegetical difficulties seem to be centered not only in the scope of the revelation, but also in the meaning of the words ἐλέγχειν, κόσμος, and the three terms describing the Spirit's areas of activity: ἁμαρτία, δικαιοσύνη, κρίσις, and lastly, παράκλητος. While the various interpretations of the five verses (7-11) agree in a general way with the analogy of faith, that is, with divine truths definitely stated in other and clearer passages of Scripture, it seems to the writer that even the textual explanations of Luther, Walther, and Stoeckhardt fail to do justice to the focal emphasis which Jesus here had in mind. Although the writer is aware that there are other ways of explaining the pericope, he suggests this exposition of the text as one that seems to him simple, clear, and practical and also in agreement with both the text and the context.

This explanation of the pericope, in its difficult parts, has been re-stated and defended by the Rev. J. C. Hare, rector of Herstmonceux, archdeacon of Lewes, and fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, who expounded the text very ably in his sermons on the *Mission of the Comforter*,¹ preached before the University of Cambridge in 1840 and published later under the given title, and defended it very convincingly in a series of learned "Notes" appended to the discourses.

Archdeacon Hare contends that since Christ's words primarily refer to the Holy Spirit's convicting ministry on Pentecost (and thereafter, of course) unto conversion and salvation and not unto judgment and damnation, the verb ἐλέγχειν (here, as in various other places in Scripture) must be taken in the sense of *to convince*, and that indeed savingly, not damningly. The Spirit's work here described is an *opus gratiae*, not an *opus irae et damnationis*.

The verb ἐλέγχειν, he admits, can of course be translated also with *to reprove*, *to rebuke*, *to reproach*, as not only New Testament and ecclesiastical usage, but also that of secular Greek proves. His detailed proof from the New Testament is most instructive, but it would lead us too far afield to enter upon it in detail. Luther's *strafen*, which he criticizes as failing to give the intended meaning of the verb in this connection, was adopted by Tyndale and so came into the English Bible. Beza, following Calvin, translated the Greek verb with *convincere*. This meaning found its way into the French version of Diodati (*Il convaincra le monde*) and was used also by Catholic theologians in France (cf. Bossuet's *Meditations: Il convaincra le monde*). He charges exegetes of his day, especially Tholuck and Olshausen, that they "mix up the notions of convincing and reproofing." In passing it may be said that very fittingly Archdeacon Hare renders παρακλητος with *defensor causae*.

We believe that Archdeacon Hare is right in here translating the verb ἐλέγχειν with *convince*. Thayer gives as the first meaning of the verb *to convict*, *to refute*, *to confute*, though he quotes the German exegete Schmidt with apparent approval: 'Ἐλέγχειν *bat*

¹ *The Mission of the Comforter with Notes*. By J. C. Hare, M. A. (fourth edition), ed. by E. H. Plumptre, D. D., professor of divinity at King's College, London; vicar of Bickley, prebendary of St. Paul's. London: Macmillan & Co., 1877.

eigentlich nicht die Bedeutung "tadeln, schmaehen, zurechtweisen," welche ihm die Lexika zuschreiben, sondern bedeutet nichts als ueberfuehren, that is, to convict. As a second meaning of the Greek verb Thayer gives to find fault with, to correct.

In more recent times Buechsel in Kittel's lexicon stresses the meaning *zur Busse rufen, zur Busse weisen*, and remarks: *Von einem Strafamt des Heiligen Geistes sollte man nicht reden*. Other authorities, however, favor in this passage the translation *to convict*, or *to convince*, and very few support Luther's translation *strafen*. Moffat employs in his translation of the passage both *convict and convince* (cf. He will convict the world, convincing men of sin," etc. Goodspeed translates: "He will bring conviction to the world about sin," etc.) By the way, while the ancient Spanish Valera Version has *redarguirá* (reprove) the Moderna, now widely used in Spanish countries, has *convencerá* (convince). The RSV reads: "He will convince the world." Weymouth has: "He will bring conviction to the world." The Catholic New Testament translates: "He will convict the world of sin." Whether we translate ἐλέγχειν with *convict* or *convince* is really of secondary importance, since both verbs pretty well agree as to their root meanings. However, *convict*, while agreeing with sin, does not readily agree in its basic sense, *to prove guilty of*, with righteousness and judgment. The verb *convince*, on the other hand, applies properly to all three nouns since its meaning is *to persuade by argument*. In converting sinners the Holy Spirit persuades them through the argument of the divine Word of sin, righteousness, and judgment.

Very important for the proper understanding of Christ's words is also the meaning of *kosmos* in this connection. Those who explain the function of the Holy Ghost, of which Christ here speaks, as a peculiar *Strafamt*, or condemnatory rebuke, regard *kosmos* as signifying the hardened world of sinners, the enemies of the Savior, who reject the Gospel, refuse to believe in Christ as their Redeemer, insist upon their own righteousness as sufficient for salvation, and serve, by their perverse conduct, the devil, whom our Lord has overthrown. Luther expresses this view when he writes: "The world will not hear such preaching that they should all be sinners before God and that their pious works have no value before

Him, but that they rather through this crucified Christ must obtain mercy and salvation. Such unbelief against Christ becomes the sum and substance of all sins that lead a person into damnation, so that there is no help for him.”² In other statements, however, Luther explains the ministry of the Holy Spirit, described in this passage, as the one by which sinners are converted and saved. Luther’s sermonic exposition of John 16 deserves careful study, for while at times it lacks clarity and consistency, it is rich in practical lessons of faith and piety.

Stoeckhardt in his *Biblische Geschichte des Neuen Testaments*, while conceding that by the Spirit’s ministry through the Word some always are won for Christ, emphatically explains the Spirit’s function described in our passage as one of condemnatory judgment directed against the perverse and hardened *kosmos* of Christ’s enemies. He writes (in part): “In this connection Jesus speaks of the world which is inimical to Christ and God, which has heard the Gospel, but has rejected it. . . . It is the duty and calling of Christians in this world to testify of Christ. Through their testimony comes (*ergebt*) the witness of the Holy Ghost. The living Spirit of God, who proceeds from the Father as also from the Son, whom Christ has sent from the Father, attests to the world through the mouth of the Christians that in Christ alone there is salvation. Through this witness there are always some who out of this perverse generation are overcome and saved. True, the majority contradict the Gospel of Christ and resist the Holy Spirit. And just this world of despisers and contradictors (*Veraechter und Widersprecher*) will then be rebuked (*gestraft*) by the Spirit of God. . . . The Holy Spirit rebukes the world, convicting them in their conscience of their grave sin, because they do not believe in Christ. He rebukes them, because through Christ’s going to the Father there has been procured righteousness for sinners which avails before God, for which reason no one can stand before God who rejects Christ. He rebukes them, because through Christ the prince of the world is judged, for which reason this world, which serves the devil and will not depart from him, is doomed to judgment and damnation. The unbelieving world therefore is already judged,

² Cf. St. L. Ed. VIII:654; quoted by Kretzmann, *Pop. Com.* (N.T.) I, 654 ff.

is judged inwardly, is condemned by conscience, no matter how vehemently it may breathe out threatenings and slaughter” (p. 274 f.).

Now, of course, all this is true. The Christian proclamation of the divine Word, in particular that of the Gospel, comes as a divine judgment unto condemnation upon all who repudiate Christ and oppose His Word. Paul asserts this truth when he writes: “For we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ, in them that are saved and in them that perish. To the one we are the savor of death unto death, and to the other the savor of life unto life” (2 Cor. 2:15-16). But this is only the “foreign work” of the Gospel, not at all intended by the merciful God, who in His infinite goodness has His gracious glad tidings preached to all sinners. When the Gospel thus condemns sinners, it performs, as our Confession puts it, an *opus alienum*, and not its *opus proprium*, which is to save.³ And really it is the Holy Spirit’s *opus proprium*, preaching salvation to sinners through the Apostles, which Christ in John 16:7-11, according to both the text and the context, has in mind. That the Holy Spirit also uses the Law in His witnessing ministry through the Apostles and all believers after them appears not only from the fact that the Law is the proper divine message through which comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:19-20), but also from the commission which Christ gave to His disciples to proclaim to the world not only: “He that believeth shall be saved,” but also: “He that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16: 15-16).

The term *kosmos* in our passage, then, does not primarily denote the hardened enemies of Christ, who persistently oppose the Gospel, but more generally, “the inhabitants of the earth,” “men,” “the human race.” While on earth, Christ performed His prophetic ministry in the land of Israel, but the Apostles were to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). It was Christ’s amazing revelation to His timid disciples that they were to bring the Spirit’s witness through their proclamation of the divine Gospel to the whole *kosmos* of the *massa perditā* and so build the spiritual temple of God. The saving witness of the

³ Cf. F. of C., Epitome, V, 9—10; *Trigl.*, p. 803.

Gospel, of course, has attached to it the condemnatory judgment: "He that believeth not shall be damned"; but that is not God's *voluntas antecedens*, not His will of grace, but His *voluntas consequens*, His will of judgment, upon all who reject His gracious invitation. As the *Deus revelatus in Christo* God desires but one thing: the salvation of all sinners (1 Tim. 2:4).

If, then, ἐλέγχειν here primarily means to *convince* savingly and *kosmos* the world of sinners who are to be convinced and won through the Spirit's testimony in Word and Sacrament, then there can be no doubt about the meaning of the words ἁμαρτία, δικαιοσύνη, and κτίμα. Both Luther and Stoeckhardt explain the meaning of these significant nouns correctly. Through the Gospel witness of the Apostles and all believers the Holy Spirit convinces those who are saved that unbelief is the one great sin which they must overcome, that Christ by His redemptive work (and this really is meant by the words: "Because I go to My Father") has redeemed the whole world from sin, death, and the devil, having gained for all men a perfect righteousness, and that the victorious Christ now is their Lord, who should be obeyed and worshiped, and not the devil (Eph. 2:2), whom our Lord has vanquished and condemned so that he can no longer pose as the "prince of the world," that is, as the lord whom men must serve. This is the sum and substance of the entire Gospel *kerygma*, proclaimed by the Church for the conversion and salvation of sinners through the witness of the Holy Spirit in and with the Word.

In His farewell address Christ thus extols the Apostles' paramount mission in the world of preaching the Gospel and gathering, through the Spirit's witness, in and by that very *kerygma*, the elect of God. The amazing thing about this revelation is, on the one hand, the marvelous extent of their Apostolic ministry and, on the other, its equally marvelous success by the power of the Holy Ghost, "the Lord working with them and confirming the Word with signs following" (Mark 16:20).

If this exposition is correct, then the inadequacy of rendering παράκλητος with "Comforter" becomes apparent. The Holy Spirit is, of course, the Comforter of His saints, just as He was the Comforter of the Apostles even while Christ was speaking to them His consoling words. The root meaning of παράκλητος, however,

is not comforter, but the term properly denotes "one called to one's side or to one's aid." A παράκλητος is someone "who pleads another's cause before a judge," "a counsel for defense," "an advocate." Thayer gives, as a second meaning of the word, *intercessor*, while in its widest sense the term denotes a "helper." He well remarks on the last use of the word: "So the Holy Spirit was destined to take the place of Christ with the Apostles (after His ascension to the Father), to lead them to a deeper knowledge of the Gospel truth, and to give them the divine strength needed to enable them to undergo trials and persecutions on behalf of the divine kingdom." As reference for this special use he cites our passage, in particular, John 16:7. The Holy Spirit therefore is the Counselor or Helper of Christian believers, who proclaim the divine Word as did the Apostles after Pentecost. Sent by Christ for this purpose, He savingly witnesses through their Gospel *kerygma* even unto the end of the world (Matt. 28:20). That the *kerygma* of the Church by God's will includes the divine Law is apparent also from Luke 24:47, where we are told that Christ commanded His Apostles to preach both "repentance and remission of sins," that is, Law and Gospel, and these indeed, as our Confession correctly says, "side by side."

Pastors who fully realize that the Holy Spirit witnesses through their proclamation of the divine Word to the salvation of God's elect will receive from this gracious assurance both comfort and strength for their ministry, as also did the Apostles after Pentecost (Acts 4:29). Even when the Christian believer with his message of Christ becomes to men a savor of death unto death, our Lord's gracious Pentecostal promise in the Gospel for Cantate consoles and confirms him in his arduous yet blessed task. This revealing pericope therefore deserves constant and careful study.

St. Louis, Mo.