

CHRISTIAN CERTAINTY

by Ray C. Stedman

Perhaps the most striking thing about the close of First John is the threefold occurrence of the phrase *we know* in the last three verses. Verses 18, 19, and 20 of the fifth chapter all begin with those words, *we know*. That is a phrase that has a bite to it in these days when we are told that we cannot know anything for sure. There is a quiet ring of assurance about it; especially when you discover that the apostle uses a word in the original Greek which refers not to knowledge gained by experience, but to an inward learning process. It is precisely that kind of knowledge to which the Apostle Paul refers in First Corinthians 2 when he speaks of a hidden wisdom from God which is not available to the world in general but which is imparted to those who are taught by the Spirit of God. That is the kind of knowledge John is talking about here.

This knowledge is the secret of Christian poise and the unshakable patience which Christians ought to be manifesting in any situation, a secret hidden reservoir of knowledge. That is one of the great things about Christianity. Christians know secrets that other people do not know. Because they know them, they can act differently in a situation than others. They can react differently to what happens to them. It is this kind of knowledge that John refers to here.

I remember reading that one of the colleagues of England's great Christian prime minister, William Gladstone, once said of him, "I don't mind that Gladstone always seems to have an ace up his sleeve; what makes me angry is his maddening assurance that it was the Almighty who put it there." Is this not often the reaction of many toward Christians? It is because Christians are relying upon a secret hidden wisdom, imparted by the Spirit of God. John says that true Christianity creates three great certainties, and with these three certainties he closes this little letter. The first of these is in Verse 18,

We know that any one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. {1 Jn 5:18 RSV}

"We know that any one born of God does not sin..." There is the certainty of righteousness. This is a dogmatic declaration on the part of the apostle that, if you are a Christian, you will come to a place where you cannot continue in sin. He is not talking about sinlessness. If he were, who of us could possibly measure up? But he is not speaking of that. It is not sinlessness that is in view. The tense here (as we have seen previously in John) is the present continuous tense. What he means is, "We know that any one born of God cannot continue on in sin." He simply cannot. That means that if there is a Christian profession there must be an accompanying change in the life. There is a basic change in the attitude toward wrongdoing. If that change is not there, then the person is only deceiving himself and others about being a Christian. That is what John is declaring. There may be occasional failure in practice, as there is in each of our lives from time to time, but there cannot be a continual, habitual practicing of sin. There must be a deep desire within to be changed which keeps this individual always pushing out against the inhibiting forces and habits of sin. This desire is the proof of the new birth.

Billy Graham was quite right in saying in a recent article, "Conversion is a revolution in the life of the individual." If you are converted, you have changed your whole direction; you have turned around 180° and you are going another direction than you were before. Otherwise, it is not a conversion at all because that is fundamentally what the word *conversion* means, "to change completely." Someone this week described to me a woman whom they watched come right up to the very point of making this change. She was attracted to the Christian truth, was fascinated by what the Bible taught, and wanted to

know more about all these things, but, as this person said to me, "She did not want them to make any change in her life." She came right up to the point of change, but she would not change. Therefore, any profession on her part was not an actual, genuine transaction with God, but was a mere empty profession. Conversion means change.

The apostle tells us why this is true. The reason a Christian cannot go on living in sin, doing what he knows to be wrong, is because "He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him." The Revised Standard Version is quite right in capitalizing this word, "He," "He who was born of God." This does not refer to the Christian himself, although he is called one born of God in the previous phrase. This refers to the Lord Jesus himself. Previously in John we saw that any one born of God cannot sin because "His [God's] seed remains in him," {cf, 1 Jn 3:9 KJV}. The Lord Jesus Christ is dwelling in that person's heart and life, and, thus, he cannot go on in sin. The One who was born of God, the holy Son of God, is dwelling in him, living in him, and keeping him. The love of Christ has an unbreakable hold on that person's life. He may struggle, he may temporarily fall, he may resist the changes that the Spirit of God is attempting to make, but he cannot continually do so. He will be "kept by the power of God" {cf, Jude 1:24, 1nbsp;Pet 1:5}, as the Apostle Jude puts it. The One who is dwelling in him will bring him into circumstances and pressures that will make him realize what he is doing, and the mess he is making, and make him hunger to go on and be free. Otherwise he is not a Christian.

And the result is, as John says, the evil one can never repossess him. The evil one, of course, is the devil. John says that the stronger One has now come and the bonds of the strong man have been broken and he can never repossess the Christian. That is an encouraging word, is it not? The enemy can frighten us, as he often does. He can harass us, he can threaten us, he can make us believe that we are in his power and that we have to do certain things that are wrong. He can create desires and passions within us that are so strong that we think we must yield to them. But that is a lie, because he is a liar. We do not have to yield to them. He can lure us, he can deceive us, as we have seen, he can even temporarily derail us, and make us fall, but the great declaration of this Scripture is, the devil can never make you sin! Once you know Jesus Christ, the devil can never again make you sin. There is never any excuse for giving in because it is all bluster on his part, all a bluff. He is trying to make you believe that you must sin, but you do not have to.

This is what John tells us, and thus he makes the point that indifferent disobedience to Christ, a Christian going blithely on living the same way he lived before he claimed to become a Christian, is a sign the person has never been born again. You cannot be born again without there coming a change, and a desire for obedience is born in the heart. Is that not clear? I heard Rev. Ben Haden at Mt. Hermon put it very precisely. "Obedience," he said, "is the name of the game." That is exactly right. You cannot be a Christian without being obedient to the Lord. "If you love me," Jesus said, "you will keep my commandments," {cf, John 14:15}. Obedience is the name of the game.

The Apostle Paul also put it very plainly. He said, "God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity,'" {2 Tim 2:19 RSV}. We often quote only the first part of it saying, "The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,'" We say, "Well, I know he's not behaving like a Christian and hasn't for years. There's not a change ever since he said he came to know Christ, but 'The Lord knows those who are his.'" No, that is only part of it. "And, let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." That is the visible mark -- anything less than that is phoney.

You young people do not want someone to tell you about the Christian life, and make it sound as if it demands nothing of you, makes no change in you, and produces no real difference in your experience.

You want to hear the truth. And the truth is that if you are not changed, if you are not living obediently, if you do not have a desire to depart from the things that are wrong, you have never been born again. Now look at the certainty of relationship in Verse 19.

We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. {1 Jn 5:19 RSV}

There is the certainty of relationship that any Christian can declare. "We know that we are of God." "Well," someone says, "what smug presumption. Imagine! That's the trouble with you Christians. You think you're so much better than everybody else. You think you're so superior!" No, not superior; just separated! Not better; just blessed -- with a blessing that is open to anyone who wants to receive it. This is what makes Christians talk this way. "We know," John says, "that we are of God;" that a fundamental separation has occurred between us and the world system to which we once belonged; that we now are "of God," we are walking in his direction, we are going on with him. The world, on the other hand, "lies in the power of the evil one." The whole world is going a different direction.

You can see how this touches at every point our relation to the busy, complex world in which we live. We live in this world. We were born in it, we grew up in it. But now that we have become Christians, we no longer can be like it. A fundamental separation has occurred. We are no longer in the same relationship. We now see that the world lies in the power of the evil one.

How many Scriptures declare this! Remember in Ephesians 2 Paul says, "You all once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air. You were once darkness in mind and alienated from God," {cf, Eph 2:2}. This is the truth about the world. It is satanically controlled. Jesus called Satan, "The ruler of this world."

Now, you will recognize that this is what is called in Scripture, "the offense of the cross," {Gal 5:11 KJV}. The world does not like to be told this. As long as you leave this truth out of the Christian proclamation, the world will welcome it and say, "it is wonderful." Worldlings love to hear the great and glorious declarations of the Christian gospel concerning God's love for man and his desire to make him into his image. Men love this. There is no offense to that aspect of the gospel. When they hear that God loves this world, came into it, and gave himself in order that he might take human nature and mold it, fulfill it, bring it to perfection, and the experience of the full possibilities of its powers, they love that. But what they do not want to hear is the additional word that, apart from coming to know Jesus Christ, they are all in the grip of and under the control of certain unseen powers of darkness. If you leave this unsaid you will be popular. But if you tell the truth -- that every individual is confronted with only two choices -- either he is of God, or he is of the devil, either he is led by the Spirit of God, or he is in the control of the devil, bound by satanic forces, and following satanic philosophies. When you say that, you will discover that faces begin to grow cold and hard around you, and there is resistance to the gospel. People say, "I was attracted to it at first, but, the more I look into it, the less I like it. I think I'll go my own way." And they refuse to believe that what they fondly imagine is their "own" way is only the way of the devil.

Yet, who can really doubt this statement when they look around them? The marks of the evil one are everywhere. If we believe what Jesus said about him, that he is a murderer and a liar, do you not see the signs of murder and lying everywhere? Think of the violence, the terrifying tension that have been gripping our cities these past weeks, and that seethe constantly below the surface. Our cities are nothing but seething pools of human misery, ready to erupt in a moment into riot, violence, and death in the streets. Think of the hate, the horror, and the bitterness that is rampant in human life today: in family circles, breaking up families and separating between husbands and wives, mothers and fathers and children. Think of the brutal wars and the even more brutal weapons of nuclear death that are hiding in the closets of the world today; all the product of man's cleverness and evil ingenuity. You can see the

mark of the murderer everywhere: in the Near East, in the Far East, and in Viet Nam; in the awful burning and mutilating of the bodies of fine young men, children and women. Who does not gag at this terrible destruction of human life? It is all the work of a murderer, Jesus said. See how he holds the world in his grasp? The history of the human race is one unending story of brutality, violence, murder, war and death.

That murderous passion is manifest in other ways as well. Think of the smog that chokes our cities, the filth that pollutes the waters, and the waste that destroys the beauty of the countryside so that slowly but surely, this world is being turned into one vast garbage pile, threatening human existence. The leaders of our nations are now wondering what to do about this, and how to arrest this inevitable decay. Think of the deceit that is everywhere in public life -- the lying, the cheating, the twisting and distorting of truth, in homes and classrooms, in the Congress and our courts, and the highest offices of the land. We are faced with the spectacle of men who have been elected to office and trusted to perform their public duties honestly, who openly, flagrantly, blatantly misuse funds and mistreat their powers, and then defend themselves in so doing.

Think of the deceit that is prevalent in the thinking of people even in the every-day activities of life. A teenage boy and girl are in the back seat of a car. They have been led to believe that if they love each other, anything they do is all right. Anything is acceptable in the moral realm if they only really love each other. In the passion of the moment they feel as all couples do in these circumstances -- no one ever loved like they love, no one is so misunderstood by others as they are, no one ever needed each other more than they do. In the deceitfulness of that feeling, that passion, so completely subjective, they go on to give themselves to one another. Soon the inevitable results begin to appear in their lives. They begin to reap results in the hurt and damage they have thoughtlessly done to the lives of others. They must face the terrible injury they have done to others whom they profess to love, all because of their selfish overruling of the laws of God. And they reap results in their own personalities. As the Apostle Paul put it, they "receive in their own personalities the due penalty of their error," {cf, Rom 1:27 RSV}.

Why does this happen? It is the work of the liar, the deceiver, the one who makes things look beautiful and good when they are really sordid and vapid. Life is full of this, is it not? Is not this statement of John's, seen in the light of the Scriptures, the truest statement about human life you have ever read? "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one," and that power cannot be broken by merely telling people the pickle they are in. A number of decades ago there lived a prominent Christian lawyer named Philip Mauro. He wrote a book called, *Man's Day*, in which he carefully described, from the point of view of the Scriptures, the civilization of this modern day. Among other things, he said these words:

"Among the strong delusions of these times there is none stronger than that Man's Day is a day of glorious achievement, successive triumphs, and continuous progress and that by the forces operating in it mankind is eventually to be brought to the condition of universal blessedness and contentment."

Notice, he calls this all a delusion. Then he went on to say,

"The writer knows full well that those who are under the influence of this delusion cannot be freed from it by arguments, however cogent; or by statistics showing the appalling increase of crime, accidents, suicides, and insanity; or by the open and flagrant manifestations of corruption, lawlessness, and profligacy. To all these appeals they resolutely close their ears and eyes, not willing to recognize the real drift and certain end of what is called civilization."

Well, then, what can bring them out of it, since you cannot argue them out of it? Christian friends, do you not see that the only answer is the Christian message, the proclamation that a Stronger One has come who binds the Strong Man and sets his goods free? There is nothing else. There cannot be anything else. How this highlights the revolutionary character of the Christian message. Here is a

message which can actually set men free from the delusions of a world which lies helpless and hopeless, lulled to sleep, deceived by the wicked one, the evil one. But, by God's grace, we Christians can say, "We are of God." It is not superiority that says that, it is gratitude. Do you ever stop to give grateful thanks that God has taken you out of the power of Satan and brought you under the power of God? That is the position we are in. How grateful we should be for it. Now, look at the last certainty here, the certainty of reality:

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. {1 Jn 5:20-21 RSV}

Notice how many times the word, *true* occurs: "to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true... This is the true God and eternal life." The word *true* is actually "reality." Here is reality. Here is the great rock upon which everything rests. Our faith does not rest upon men's guesses, not upon those erudite explorations of human knowledge called philosophy; not on clever ideas, or on untested theories. It rests solidly upon the great events of God's actions in history. It rests on facts.

There is an historical process here. "The Son of God came," John says, we saw him, we felt him, we lived with him. We can testify in every possible way that the Son of God came in the historical process of time. Further, the practical result of that is, "he gave us a new understanding." We began to see life as it really is. He stripped it of its veils, took away its illusions, dispelled the mists and vagueness which cause men to grope through life like blind men. He clarified life, he gave us an understanding, he told us what was true. The glorious privilege that follows is, "we are in him who is true." We not only know him, we live in him. We are part of his life. We share his thinking, we have the mind of Christ.

What tremendous privileges! I wonder if it ever remotely dawns on any of us who are Christians, just what it means to be a Christian. How far we have come, how much we have, how tremendous are these great, unshakable, fundamental, foundational truths on which we rest our faith. The glory of Christ's love and his comfort, the warmth of his presence and his peace in our hearts. "This," John says, "is the true God." We are in his Son Jesus Christ; therefore, we are in him." This is the true God and, therefore, eternal life -- abundant and continual life.

No wonder he closes with this final warning. "Little children, guard yourselves from idols." Do not go off to something else. Do not give your attention, your interest, your time, or your energy, and your money; it is what you live for, what you get excited about, what enthuses you. That is your god. Now what is it with you? Is it Jesus Christ, or is it something else?

This last spring, as you know, my family and I were privileged to be in various parts of the ancient world where we visited many temples, temples dedicated to idols. Though these temples had fallen into ruins, in every place a certain god had been enthroned in the temple and worshipped there. Apollo, Venus, Bacchus, Zeus -- you have seen these temples. It suddenly struck me, after returning home, that though these temples have been abandoned, yet the worship of the god has not ceased. We still have the same gods. We have changed the names, but the gods, the idols, are exactly the same.

There is the worship of Narcissus, the god who fell in love with himself. Is this not perhaps the supreme god of mankind, the worship of self, the worship of man, the exaltation of man? The idea that we constantly hear set forth is that man is so tremendous, so smart, so brilliant, so clever; he can do so many things. Yet we deny the continual evidence of our senses that the world is crumbling to pieces around us. Is it not amazing, how we worship man? The manifestations of it find expression in such devilish things as Nazism and Bolshevism, the worship of race or country. I am appalled at the number of Christians who worship the United States, who identify Americanism with the gospel of Jesus Christ,

and worship it. We have the worship of Bacchus, the god of pleasure, the god of wine, women and song; the worship of Venus, the goddess of love, enthroned in Hollywood and all that Hollywood stands for; Apollo, the god of physical beauty; Minerva, the goddess of science. Everywhere we have enthroned science.

Now, John writes and says, these things will destroy you, they will rob you of what God has for you. "Little children, watch that you do not drift off into the worship that the world around you is constantly engaged in. Do not let these things become important in your life, for God has set you free that you might live as God intended man to live." No wonder his word comes, "Little children, guard yourselves from idols." What makes you enthusiastic? To what do you give your money? What are you saving up for now? What is it that you regard as supremely important? It is with this question that John closes this book, and we close our studies now.

We come to the celebration of the Lord's table, which is a reminder, designed by God himself, that calls us to an understanding again of the great fundamental truths of the Christian faith. There has been a fundamental separation between us and the world. If we partake of these elements of bread and wine together, we are saying that we died with Christ and are risen with him. We can no longer go on with the world and its ways. There must be a change. We can mix with them, and love worldly people. We must be friends with them, and not separate ourselves from them. That is wrong, terribly wrong. But we cannot think like they do. We cannot evaluate things as they do any longer. We cannot follow the same urges, or seek the same goals. We cannot accept the same standards. There is a difference: "we are of God." We have been separated from the power of darkness.

Prayer:

Our Father, as we have been reviewing these mighty things that are true of our faith, we have felt something of the greatness of the gospel, this great good news that has come into human history, that Christ has come to set us free, to be no longer slaves of a vicious, dark, and murderous power, but free to obey a living, loving Lord who brings us ever into blessing, fruitfulness, joy, peace and glory. In this moment, Lord, if any here have seen themselves by the eye of the Spirit as still in the grip of this satanic darkness, we pray that right now, in the simple way that you have provided, by inviting the Lord Jesus to come into their life and by committing their lives and their will to him to be obedient to him as Lord, they may pass from death unto life, as we have. We ask that you will achieve this in the lives of many, even as we are praying now. Then bring us to this table to worship thee in Spirit and in truth. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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