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The Works of
JOHN OWEN
EDITED BY
William H. Goold
VOLUME IV

The Banner of Truth Trust
78b Chiltern Street, London, W.1.
unto the diversity of respect with

(2.) It admits of a course more expedite unto the same end, it is what I understand not nor do desire to participate in.

CHAPTER III.

Other testimonies pleaded in confirmation of the same truth—John xvi. 13 opened—How far all true believers are infallibly led into all truth declared, and the manner how they are so—1 John ii. 20, 27, explained—What assurance of the truth they have who are taught of God—Eph. iv. 14; Job xxxvi. 23, John vi. 45—Practical truths inferred from the assertion proved.

There are yet other testimonies which may be pleaded unto the same purpose; for unto this end is the Holy Ghost promised unto all believers: John xvi. 13, “When the Spirit of truth is come, he shall guide you into all truth.”

The Holy Spirit is called “The Spirit of truth” principally on the same account as God absolutely is called “The God of truth;” he is so essentially. He is the first, absolute, divine, eternal verity. So he is originally called “The Holy Spirit” on the account of his essential holiness. But it is not on that account solely that he is here called “The Spirit of truth.” He is so as he is the remeade of all divine, supernatural truth unto the church, as he is also called “The Holy Spirit,” as he is author of all holiness in others; therefore is he here promised unto the church, as it is his work to lead us into all truth.

And two things are considerable in this promise:—1. What is intended by all truth; 2. How the Holy Spirit guides or leads us into it:

1. With respect unto the object,—(1.) It is not all truth absolutely that is intended. There is truth in things natural and civil, and stories of things that are past; nothing of this nature is comprised in this promise. We see believers of all sorts as ignorant of, as unacquainted with, many of these things as any other sort of men whatever; yet doth not one word of the promise of Christ fall unto the ground. Wherefore, all that truth, or all truth of that nature, whereof our Saviour there speaketh is alone intended. The mysteries of the gospel, of the kingdom of heaven, the counsel of God about the salvation of the church by Christ, and concerning their faith and obedience, are the truth which he is promised to guide us into. This the apostle calleth “All the counsel of God;” Acts xx. 27,—namely, which respects all the ends of our faith and obedience, verse 21.

(2.) It admits of a limitation with respect unto the diversity of subjects, or the persons unto whom this truth is to be communicated. They are not all of them, as to the degree of light and knowledge, equally to be led into all truth. Every one unto whom he is thus promised shall be so far led into the knowledge of it as is necessary unto his own estate and condition, his duty and his work; for “unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ,” Eph. iv. 7. It is Christ alone who, in the free gift of all grace, assigns the measures wherein every one shall be made partaker of it. In his sovereign will he hath allotted the measures of grace, light, and knowledge unto all the members of the church; and there is no less difference in these measures than in the knowledge of the most glorious apostle and that of the meanest believer in the world. The duty, work, and obedience of every one, is the rule of the measure of his receiving these gifts of Christ. None shall want any thing that is necessary unto him; none shall receive any thing that he is not to use and improve in a way of duty.

2. Our second inquiry is, how the Spirit doth thus lead us into all truth. The external revelation of truth is herein supposed. This he is promised to instruct us in the knowledge of in a spiritual manner; whereby I understand no more but so as it is required of us in a way of duty. To clear the truth hereof some things must be observed; as—

(1) The promises concerning the mission of the Holy Spirit in these chapters of the Gospel [by John], xiv. xv. xvi., are not to be confined unto the apostles, nor unto the first age or ages of the church. To do so is expressly contradictory unto the discourse and whole design of our Lord Jesus Christ unto that purpose; for he promised him in opposition unto his own temporary abode in the world, namely, that this of the Spirit should be for ever, chap. xiv 16,—that is, αυς γις αυχέρρης τοι αίανε, Matt. xxviii. 20, unto the consummation of the whole state of the church here below. And to suppose the contrary is to overthrow the foundation of all truth and comfort in the church: for their preservation in this, and the administration of the other unto them, depend on the accomplishment of this promise alone; and so also do all the benefits of the intercession of Christ, which are no otherwise communicated unto us but by the Holy Spirit, as given in pursuance of this promise; for what herein he prayed for his apostles, he prayed for all them that should believe in him through their word unto the end of the world, John xvii. 20.

(2) It is granted that sundry things in the promises of the Holy Ghost were peculiar unto the apostles, and had their accomplishment on the day of Pentecost, when he descended on them in that glorious, visible manner, Acts ii. 1–4; for as they were commanded by our Saviour to wait for this his coming before they engaged in the
discharge of that office whereunto he had called them, Acts i. 4, so
now they were fully empowred and enabled unto all that belonged
thereunto. But their peculiar interest in these promises respects
only things that were peculiar unto their office; such that men
tioned in this place is not.

(3.) It is not an external guidance into the truth by the objective
revelation of it that is intended, for such revelations are not granted
unto all believers unto whom this promise is made, nor are they to
look for them; and the revelation of truth, in the ministerial pro-
posal of it, is common unto all the world unto whom the word is
preached, and is not the subject of an especial promise.

(4.) Wherefore, it is the internal teaching of the Holy Ghost, giving
an understanding of the mind of God, of all sacred truths as revealed,
that is intended: for—[1.] It is the same with that other promise,
"They shall be all taught of God;" for we are thus taught of God
by the Spirit's leading us into all truth, and no otherwise. [2.] This
the word enforceeth. "The Spirit of truth tóygyon wai, shall lead
and guide you in the right way to the knowledge of the truth." So
when Philip asked the eunuch whether he understood the things
which he read out of the prophet Isaiah, he replied, "How can I,
λεγω μη τι διδασκω, unless one lead me" to the sense of it?—
that is, "by his interpretation give me an understanding of it." Acts
viii. 31. Thus the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth, by giving us that
understanding of it which of ourselves we are not able to attain.
And other interpretations of the words will not admit. It is, therefore,
his work to give us a useful, saving understanding of all sacred truth,
or the mind of God as revealed in the Scripture. All spiritual, divine,
supernatural truth is revealed in the Scripture. Herein all are
agreed. The knowledge, the right understanding, of this truth as
so revealed, is the duty of all, according unto the means which they
enjoy and the duties that are required of them. Neither can this
be denied. Unto this end, that they may do so, the Holy Spirit is
here promised unto them that do believe. His divine aid and assistance
is, therefore, necessary hereunto. And this we are to pray for,
as it is promised. Wherefore, of ourselves, without his especial
assistance and guidance, we cannot attain a due knowledge of and
understanding in the truth revealed in the Scripture. As unto the
especial nature of this assistance, it shall be spoken unto afterward.

This is again affirmed concerning all believers, 1 John ii. 20, 27,
"Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.
The anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and
ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing
teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it
bath taught you, ye shall abide in it."
unto God." It is, therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit that is here described. He alone, and his gifts, graces, and privileges that ensue thereon, are so expressed, here or anywhere else in the whole Scripture.

2. Two things are to be observed in what is here ascribed unto this union:—(1.) What is the effect of his work in believers; (2.) What is the nature of it, or how he produces that effect.

(1.) For the first, there is a double expression of it:—[1.] That they "know all things;" [2.] That they "need not that any should teach them;"—both which expressions admit of, yea require, their limitations.

[1.] The "all things" intended come under a double restriction,—the first taken from the nature of the things themselves, the other from the scope and circumstances of the place; or, the one from the general end, the other from the special design proposed.

1st. The general end proposed is, our abiding in Christ: "Ye shall abide in him;" which the apostle expresseth, 1 John ii. 24, by "continuing in the Son, and in the Father." Wherefore, the all things here mentioned are all things necessary unto our ingraining into and continuance in Christ. Such are all the fundamental, yea, important truths of the gospel. Whatever is needful unto our communion with Christ and our obedience to him, this all true believers are taught. However they may mistake in things of lesser moment, and be ignorant in the doctrine of some truths, or have but mean degrees of knowledge in any thing yet shall they all know the mind and will of God as revealed in the Scripture, in all those things and truths which are necessary that they may believe unto righteousness and make confession unto salvation.

2dly. The especial end under consideration is, preservation and deliverance from the antichrist and seducers of those days, with the errors, lies, and false doctrines which they divulged concerning Christ and the gospel. The only way and means whereby we may be so preserved from the poisons and infections of such pernicious opinions and ways is, the assured knowledge of the truths of the gospel as they are revealed in the Scripture. All those truths which were any way needful to secure their faith and preserve them from mortal seductions, they were taught and did know. And where any man knows the truths which are required unto his implantation into Christ, and his continuance with him in faith and obedience, as also all those which may preserve him from the danger of seduction into pernicious errors, however he may fail and be mistaken in some things of less importance, yet is he secured as unto his present acceptable obedience and future blessedness. And to speak of it by the way, this giveth us the rule of our especial communion and

love. Where any are taught these things, where they have the knowledge and make confession of that truth, or those articles of faith, whereby they may "abide in Christ," and are preserved from pernicious seductions, although they may differ from us and the truth in some things of less moment, we are obliged not only to forbearance of them, but communion with them; for who shall refuse them whom Christ hath received? or doth Christ refuse any to whom he gives his Spirit, who have the union from the Holy One? This, and no other, is the rule of our evangelical love and communion among ourselves. Whatever we require of any as a necessary condition of our Christian society, in point of doctrine, is an unwarantable imposition on their consciences or practices on both.

[2.] It is said that they so know these things as that they "need not that any should teach them;" which also requireth a limitation or exposition; for,—

1st. It is only the things as before declared that respect is had unto. Now, besides these, there are many other things which believers stand in need to be taught continually, and whose knowledge belongs unto their edification. Many things are very useful unto us that are not absolutely necessary. In natural things, and such as belong unto this present life, men would be very unwilling to be without or part with sundry things, without which yet life might be preserved; because they value them, as of use unto themselves, so enabling them to be useful unto others. And they who understand the nature, use, and benefit, of evangelical truths will not be contented that their knowledge in them should be confined only unto those which are of absolute necessity unto the being of spiritual life; yea, they cannot be well supposed to know these truths themselves who pretend such a satisfaction in them as to look no farther; for all who are sincere in faith and knowledge do aim at that "perfect man in Christ," which all the ordinances of God are designed to bring us unto, Col. i. 28. Wherefore, notwithstanding the knowledge of these things, there is still use and need of farther ministerial teaching in the church.

2dly. It is spoken of the things themselves absolutely, and not with respect unto the degrees of the knowledge of them. They did so know them as that there was no need that any man should teach them unto them, as unto their initial knowledge and substance of the things themselves; and so it may be said of all believers. But yet there are degrees of knowledge with respect unto those very things, which they may and ought to be carried on unto, as the apostle speaketh, Heb. vi. 1; and therefore doth the holy apostle himself who writes these things further instruct them in them. And herein consists the principal part of the ministry of the church, even to carry
on believers unto perfection in those things wherein, for the substance of them, they have been already instructed.

32. Ye. That which is principally intended is, that they need not that any should teach them, as that they should depend on the light and authority of their instruction. Others may be helpers of their joy, but none can be lords of their faith. "Ye need no such teaching, because of the teaching which ye have received."

(2) For the general nature of the work here ascribed unto this teaching—that is, the Holy Spirit—it is teaching: "The teaching teacheth you." There are but two ways whereby the Spirit teacheth us, nor can any other be conceived. The one is by objective, the other by subjective revelations; for he teacheth us as a Spirit of wisdom and revelation. The first way of his teaching is by immediate inspiration, communicating new sacred truths from God immediately unto the minds of men. So he taught the prophets and apostles, and all the penmen of the Scripture. By him the word of the Lord came unto them; and they spake as they were acted by him, 1 Pet. i. 11, 12; 2 Pet. i. 21. This is not the way of teaching here intended, for the end of this teaching of the Holy Ghost is only to make men teachers of others, which is not here intended; nor doth the apostle discourse unto any such purpose, as though God would grant new revelations unto men to preserve them from errors and seductions, which he hath made sufficient provision for in the word, Isa. viii. 20; 2 Pet. i. 19. By this word were they to try all doctrines and pretended revelations, yea, those which were so really before they received them, 1 John v. 1. Besides, what is here affirmed is ascribed unto all sorts of believers, under the distribution which they are cast into by the apostle,—namely, of "old men," "young men," and "babes," which had not all of them received the Spirit of immediate revelation.

His other way of teaching is that which we have insisted on,—namely, his enabling us to discern, know, and understand the mind and will of God as revealed in the Scripture, or as declared in any divine revelation. This alone is or can be here intended. Wherefore, this is the design of the apostle in these words: All divine truths necessary to be known and to be believed, that we may live unto God in faith and obedience, or come unto and abide in Christ, as also be preserved from seductions, are contained in the Scripture, as proposed unto us in divine revelations. These of ourselves we cannot understand unto the ends mentioned; for if we could, there would be no need that we should be taught them by the Holy Spirit: but this is so; he teacheth us all these things enabling us to discern, comprehend, and acknowledge them. And this is the whole of what we plead for.

For a close of our considerations on these words of the apostle, I shall only observe what assurance a man that is thus taught the truth may have that it is the truth which he is taught, and that he is not deceived in his apprehension of it; for hereon depends the use of this instruction, especially in times of trial,—indeed, at all times and on all occasions. It is not enough that we know the truth, but we must be assured that so we do; see Eph. iv. 14; Col. ii. 2. And there was never a greater artifice in the world than that whereby the Roman church hath imposed an impregnable, obstinate credibility on all that adhere thereto; for it doth first fix this in their minds that itself cannot err, and therefore whatever is by her authority proposed unto them is infallibly true. Hence it comes to pass that they will abide obstinate against all convictions and the highest evidence of truth in all particular instances, whilst this principle is firmly fixed in their minds, that the church which proposeth these things unto them cannot err nor be mistaken; yea, whilst this persuasion abides with them, they may be, and indeed accordingly are, obliged to believe contradictions, things most irrational and absurd, inconsistent with Christian piety and the peace of human society. However, they say well in this, that it is necessary that a man should have good assurance of the truth which he doth possess, or of his own understanding of it and conception about it. This the apostle calleth "The riches of the full assurance of understanding," Col. ii. 2, whereas we shall speak afterward.

Wherefore, whereas the assurance of mind in other teachings depends much on the authority of them by whom they are taught, on a supposition that believers are taught the mind of God in the Scripture by the Holy Spirit, or are by him enabled to discern and know it, the inquiry is, how or by what means they have an assurance that they have a right understanding of the things which they are so taught, so as to abide in them and the profession of them against all opposition whatever, and so as to venture the eternal condition of their souls on that assurance they have of the truth; which every one must do whether he will or no. And this in the text is referred unto the author of this teaching: "The anointing is truth, and is no lie," it is true, and infallibly so. There is no fear of, no possibility for, any man being deceived in what he is taught by this anointing. And an assurance hereof ariseth in our minds partly from the manner of his teachings, and partly from the evidence of the things themselves that we are taught. The manner and way of his teaching us in and by the Scripture evidenceth unto us that what we are taught "is truth, and is no lie." He giveth a secret witness unto what he teacheth in his teachings; for it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth," 1 John v. 6. And with respect unto
the evidence which is so given us of the truth, it is said that the "unction" whereby we are taught "is truth, and is no lie;" that is, it is impossible any one should be deceived who is so taught. This will more fully appear when we have declared the whole of his work herein; something only may now be spoken, on occasion of this testimony.

There is a peculiar power accompanying the teaching of God by his Spirit: "Behold, God exalteth his power; who teacheth like him?" Job xxxvi. 22. So our Saviour expoundeth that promise, "They shall be all taught of God." Every man therefore that hath heard, saith he, "and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me," John vi. 45. There is such an efficacy accompanying God's teaching, that whatsoever is so taught doth certainly believe the things that he is taught, as having the evidence of the truth of them in himself.

When the Holy Ghost gave new revelations of old unto the prophets and penmen of the Scripture by immediate inspiration, he did therein and therewith communicate unto them an infallible evidence that they were from God; and when he doth illuminate our minds in the knowledge of what is revealed, he doth therein himself bear witness unto, and assure us of, the truth which we do understand. Hereby do we come to that which the apostle calleth "The full assurance of understanding, in the acknowledgment of the mystery of God." He not only enables our minds to apprehend the truth, but he shews into our hearts, the seat of spiritual experience, to "give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." And the assurance which believers have thereby is above that which any other evidence or demonstration whatever can give; and the meanest believer hath from this teaching a greater rest, satisfaction, and assurance in the knowledge of the mind of God, than any that can be attained by the most raised notions or profound disputations; for "he that believeth hath the witness in himself," I John v. 10. And why should others think it strange that there should be such evidence of truth in the teaching of the Spirit, by the illumination of our minds in the knowledge of the Scripture, as to give us an assurance of the highest nature, seeing there is "none that teacheth like him?"

Want hereof is that which makes men to fluctuate in their conceptions of spiritual things, and so ready on every occasion to part with what they have received. The church of Rome hath, as we observed, rather craftily than wisely, provided against any inconvenience herein. The doctrines which it teacheth are many of them false, and so the things contained in them can give no evidence unto themselves in the minds of men; for there is nothing but imagination in error,—there is nothing of substance in it. And their way of teaching is not accompanied with any especial advantage; yet, it is the most vain that ever was in the world. They would have men suppose that they may advance at once in the true belief of a hundred things whereas they have no evidence, merely resting on the infallibility of the church, by which, they say, they are proposed. Wherefore, they teach men that although they receive no evidencing light in this way of their instruction, nor have any experience of the power or efficacy of truth in what they are taught, yet they may rest assuredly in the infallibility of the church. Hence the assurance they have of any thing they suppose truth is not an act of the mind in the embracing of the truth from any evidence that it gives of itself, but a presumption in general that the church is infallible by which these things are proposed unto them. The design is, to prevail with man to suppose that they believe all things, when, indeed, they believe nothing,—that they understand the mind and will of God, when, indeed, they understand nothing at all of them; for a man believes nothing but what is accompanied with an evidence whereon it ought to be believed. But this they pretend not unto, at least not such that should give them that assurance of the truth of it which is requisite; and therefore are all men by them referred for that unto the infallibility of the church. Persons weak, ignorant, credulous, or supposititious, either for interest or by the craft of seducers, may be prevailed on to make their resort unto this relief. Those who will not forego the rational conduct of their own souls, and leave themselves unto the guidance of others, knowing that it is they alone who must give an account of themselves to God, will not easily be induced thereunto.

Others will receive all into their own rational conceptions of things, without any respect unto a superior infallible teacher; and the minds of many, influenced by this notion, that they have themselves alone to trust unto, are come unto the utmost uncertainty and instability in all things of religion. Nor can it otherwise be; for as the mind of man is in itself indifferent and undetermined unto any thing, so true or false (unless it be in its first notions of the common principles of reason) beyond the evidence that is proposed unto it; so also is it various, unstable, and apt to fluctuate from one thing to another. And there are but two ways whereby it may be naturally ascertained and determined in its conceptions and assent. The first is by the use of the external senses, which will not deceive it. However, it cannot but receive, believe, and comply with what it comprehends by its senses, as what it sees, hears, and feels. The other is by reason, whereby it deduces certain conclusions from propositions of necessary truth,—that is, by demonstration. But by neither of these ways can the mind be brought unto a stability and
assurance in or about things spiritual or supernatural; for they are neither the objects of natural sense nor capable of a scientific demonstration. Therefore, a man can have nothing but a probability or conjectural knowledge concerning them, unless he have some certain, infallible teaching wherein he can acquiesce. And such is that of this "unction," which "is truth, and is no lie." In and by his teaching of us,—namely, the mind of God as revealed in the Scripture,—there is such evidence of truth communicated unto our minds and hearts as giveth us an immovable assurance of them, or the "full assurance of understanding;" for God therein "shines in our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ."

Again, there is an evidence in the things themselves, unto spiritual sense and judgment, Phil. i. 9; Heb. v. 14. This is that which gives the mind the highest assurance of the truth of what it doth believe that it is capable of in this world; for when it finds in itself the power and efficacy of the truth wherein it is instructed, that it worketh, effecteth, and implanteth the things themselves upon it, giving and ascertaining unto it all the benefits and comforts which they promise or express, and is thereby united unto the soul, or hath a real, permanent, efficacious subsistence in it,—then, I say, hath the mind the utmost assurance in the truth of it which it doth or can desire in the things of this nature. But this belongs not unto our present design.

The testimonies pleaded are sufficient for the confirmation of our first general assertion,—namely, That it is the Holy Spirit who teacheth us to understand aright the mind and will of God in the Scripture; without whose aid and assistance we can never do so usefully nor profitably unto our own souls. Sundry others that speak unto the same purpose will be afterward on various occasions insisted on.

I might add unto these testimonies the faith and profession of the church in all ages,—they all believed and professed that the Scriptures could not be understood and interpreted without his assistance and inspiration by whom they were indited,—but it is not necessary so to do; for those who profess to trust unto their own reason and understanding only, cannot be so ignorant as not to know that they have no countenance given unto their persuasion in antiquity, unless it were by the Pelagians. But whereas there is no profitable handling of sacred truths on any pretence but with an eye unto the guidance of Christian practice,—and when that is manifest, it gives a great confirmation in our minds unto the truth itself,—I shall, before I proceed unto the consideration of the especial ways of the teaching of the Holy Spirit in this matter, and the especial duties required of us in compliance with them, that they