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AUTHORITY OF AN OATH:

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BY

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AUTHORITY OF AN OATH.

Reverend Brethren, and Brethren of the Laity,

It is my intention, at the present time, to address you on a subject equally solemn and important, more especially as none of us can feel otherwise than anxious on the grave aspect it offers to our notice. You will readily see that I am referring to the controversy recently raised on what amongst Christian people ought to be no controversy at all. It is, in effect, whether what we may designate as a compact between God and man shall be maintained or not: it is whether we should consider God as not watchful of human action, as indifferent to human faith and conduct, and as, in truth, leaving Him in all things regardless of right or wrong. This is the situation in which the world must be placed if the original engagement between God and man be not holden full and sacred, and if it be left to the wish or the want of the hour to determine rule of conduct or decision of act. It will be well to look back to that the earliest age of the world, in which God founded and established the great principle on which its works and duties were to be carried on. He left nothing to chance, nothing to caprice; but determined, as all lay before Him in one great sheet, what was fitting and would be advantageous to every circumstance and event. I mean to say, He established the world on a settled principle, seeing that all He had made was good, that is, suited to His own purpose, and that it should remain so established for ever. That was the obligation under which He bound both it and Himself; that which we call the material world, the firmament, the air, the earth, the waters, had a direction

given to them which they were compelled to obey. Their obedience, or their regular conduct, was a rule binding on their part as it were, while on His there was an equal engagement that their safe being and progress should be secured. I am compelled to use this view of the case almost supposing that the unconscious world, as we may call it, felt bound to the acting of its own part. God had pronounced its duties in such language as this:—"Let there be light—the greater light to rule the day,—the lesser light to rule the night,"—and so in all other parts of this unconscious creation. Now, this is what I would apply to man himself in its force and meaning. He was made a reasonable, and, on conditions, a living and immortal being; life being given to his external substance as formed of the dust of the ground, and his immortal part being of the breath of God Himself, immortality was granted to either on the great conditions of faith and obedience.

The government of the world, command over all living creatures, and an undying state to body and soul, were thus given. He was told, when placed in the Garden of Eden, that his continuance there would depend, as I have said, on his faith and obedience: that if he offended in one declared point he should die, fully implying that if he did not disobey that interdiction he should live, thus establishing a solemn compact between the Creator and the created, which either was bound, as by oath, to hold sacred and pure. This was man's position, and thus he stood, his heart, his conscience, his body and soul, being all open to God's eye, and all inviolably as was intended to be fit for its observance. So stood God and His creature man. We must now look at man in far different circumstances. The compact between his Creator and himself had passed away, the terms of it were broken, and the benefits forfeited in all wherewith man was concerned: he was cast to the ground dependent on the mercy of an offended God: he had incurred the sentence of death, and the fullness of it was deservedly his due. God

was merciful, all powerful in mercy while stern ; His offended honour demanded the sentence disobedience had earned, and it was accordingly inflicted.

The covenanted life had passed away, and man stood forth a creature devoted to death. We must here look to the important fact that man consisted of two parts—in body he was earthly, in soul he was of the breath of God. The sentence of death operated in due time on the former, and it did return to its original dust ; the latter vanishing as it were into an unseen state, awaiting that just dealing which will one day be shewn in its reunion with the revived body. So had God ordained, and so had His mercy determined on the means by which that and His justice should meet together. We find God thus addressing Himself to the serpent, the author of the great ill. He said, “ And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed ; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” In this, as we have well learnt, redemption is fore-shewn as planned for the restoration of man to the Divine favour : redemption in which the great party was to be His own Son, incarnate, the second Person in the ever-blessed Trinity, as subsequent revelation, or Divine communications have well indicated ; and all this was confirmed, as is testified by S. Paul, in that he says in speaking of the Priesthood of Christ, “ The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedek. By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament—For the law maketh men High Priests which have infirmity, but the word of the oath which was since the law maketh the Son, who is consecrated for evermore.” We have it here in clearest testimony that God did bind Himself by oath to the fulfilment of His promise in the redemption of man. He sware ; and how did He swear ? by Himself, because there was no one greater than Himself. It is to be borne in mind that Melchisedek was Priest of the Most High God, King of Salem, which is, King of Peace. Now, the

promised redemption was peace—our blessed Lord is called, and justly called, the Prince of Peace, in that through Him peace was re-established between God and man, and it is the construction, and to us it is an acknowledgedly true construction, that Melchisedek was a Priest under the Covenant of Grace vouchsafed by God in consequence of the fall of our first parents; that is, he was a true worshipper, a Priest in true worship, testifying, and looking forward to the re-establishment of peace between God and His fallen creatures in the redemption by Christ. In all this solemn and awful circumstance God appears to the world binding Himself by oath, and making it an evidence not only between Himself and man, but between man and man when deemed essential to the ratification of a covenant or in testimony of truth. Who can look back on all this, a mighty power, great worth, and what ought to be reliable responsibility in that to which it testifies, or to which it engages, without confession of the sacred obligation to be drawn from it? The Holy Scriptures abound with references which are binding by oath in the various relations of life, and it must be taken as undoubted that their great exemplar, their most authorizing reason, and gratifying usage must be sought in this condescension of God to the wants and the advantage of those beings, who, as created by Him appeared rightly to call on His assistance and justification in what might be deemed necessary to their peace and safety, and other requirements of life. It will be well that we look with attention to some of the many instances with which the Holy Scriptures abound. By so doing, we shall not only feel strengthened in our reliance on this as a beneficial means of dealing one with another, but also as a justification of the usage itself, and an answer to those who would decry it either as useless, or unauthorized, or as a wrongful doing. It is by such practice that we may in all circumstances and in all difficulties of life, place ourselves on sure ground, both as concerning our own security and our own

position, as of discovering wherein the will of God shall lie, and so best draw to ourselves that approval by Him in which are our true security and peace.

When the Patriarch Abraham gave the important and sacred commission to his servant with respect to obtaining a wife for his son Isaac, we find him addressing him in these terms—"And I will make thee swear by the Lord, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell." In the promulgation of the law, Moses, referring to Gen. xxvi, 3, thus addresses the people—"But, because the Lord loved you, and because He would keep the oath which He had sworn unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand." Again, in his exhortation to obedience, he says "That thou shouldest enter into covenant with the Lord thy God, and into His oath, which the Lord thy God maketh with thee this day, that He may establish thee to-day for a people unto Himself, and that He may be unto thee a God, as He hath said unto thee, and as He hath sworn unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." We find a reiteration of God making a covenant with oath in the words of David in the First Book of the Chronicles, where he says, "Be ye mindful always of His covenant; the word which He commanded to a thousand generations; even of the covenant which He made with Abraham, and of His oath unto Isaac." And in the Second Book of the Chronicles, where Asa is moved by Azariah to make a solemn covenant with God, it is stated, "And all Judah rejoiced at the oath; for they had sworn with all their heart, and sought Him with their whole desire." In the fifth chapter of the Book of Nehemiah we find these words—"Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them that they should do according to this promise." Turning now to the New Testament, in the Gospel of S. Luke, in the prophecy of Zechariah, we read, "To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant; the oath which

He swore to our father Abraham." Again, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, it is written, "For when God made promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself, saying, &c,"—and again, "Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath." Who can now fail after strong references like these, and many more might be adduced, to see at once the value and obligation of that adjuration which we term our oath? It comes to us from the highest authority, even from God Himself; often, indeed, applied by Himself, if we may so speak, in His dealings with man. In all His communications on the world we inhabit, it is sanctioned; likewise by His own Blessed Son, and that Gospel which says that our oath is the ending of strife. Here, however, I would remark, that in the time of our Lord much scandal was caused, and much evil encouraged by the abuse of this solemn means of leading to the settlement of questions, to which in the manner then commonly used, it had been so unfairly applied. Our Lord says, "Swear not at all," &c. A very erroneous construction has been put on these words. He was discoursing on the abuse of the appeal to Divine authority, not giving a judgment on the subject of oaths. God's name was appealed to in most of the ordinary questions of life, and so appealed to as to be offensive in the eyes of both God and man. It is to that, and that only, that our Lord's words apply themselves: He says, "Swear not at all," that is, as men then made it their practice in their most ordinary communications, but, He made no change in that law of God, and God's own sanction of it in His own expression of its obligation, by any word deprecating that proper and legitimate use, which, through the authorities I have quoted, mark its sacredness and worth. Now let us just consider in what respect we ourselves stand to this great obligation, this divine creation of an infrangible bond. Our laws stand upon it as their foundation, and as a defence against all injury and wrong. Our rights and liberties as a people and a nation

under constituted government, have the guarantee, the solemn, the awfully declared protection of that oath called the Coronation Oath to protect the rights, properties, and liberties of all estates of men within this land. By it the Sovereign is bound to maintain the sacred character, the rightfully inviolable condition of our Holy Church; the lives, and properties, and liberties of all within that Sovereign's dominions. It is, indeed, an awful obligation, but not to be disputed: that is the condition, the firm, the immediate condition on which the sovereignty is assumed. We do not mean to say that the Coronation Oath is the oath taken at the commencement of a reign, for the coronation itself is usually deferred till a somewhat distant time, but this oath stands in prospect, and with a full understanding to all parties concerned that it will be formally and duly taken. Besides which, and immediately as can be on accession, the Sovereign does enter into an obligation as binding and as solemn in its material, manner, and bearing, as the Coronation Oath itself shall command. So do our people stand under the broad and strong panoply of one of the most sacred obligations, most binding in its effects, and most enlarged in its character which man can conceive. We deem ourselves safe from all inroads on our privileges as Christian men, as Christian churchmen, and as free inhabitants of one common country. Surely this of itself would be enough to stamp the word oath with that soundness which is a divine institution of such strong practical bearing, and such an obligation on the Sovereign to do right, as ought not to fail of the fullest effect which God has ordained by its means.

Next look to our Constitution as it stands under the Sovereign authority, which, in truth, represents all authorities under it, seeing that from it, under God, all authorities do emanate. Who is admitted to any situation of trust, I mean of public trust, without the security of an oath, be that trust, whether as concerns Church or State? We trust no man with authority without placing him under this

obligation, and we act rightly. We take the bond of his conscience, nor care we to go further ; he binds himself both to God and man to act rightly, according to the intention of the appointment with which he is vested. Again, look to our judicial proceedings—specially, I mean, because they may in truth be set under that portion of our subject we have just looked to. Our Judges, be they ecclesiastical or civil, can perform no function of their office without the obligation of an oath ; they can permit no proceeding in their respective courts, they can sanction no pleading for either indulgence or constraint without its previous guard of honest purpose in the applicants. So our Juries are bound by oath within the ear and under the sacred influence of a Judge, solemnly occupying his seat as in the sight of God. Their consciences are bound by that equal charge of truthful obligation in which he so solemnly sits before them ; witnesses there indeed on questions relating to rights between man and man can deliver testimony but on oath, and so present themselves as under the eye of Almighty God Himself. Then look, and here it is with great diffidence I speak, because I cannot but be aware from the circumstances of the times, that what I urge may meet with dispute, look then I say to our Legislative Assemblies. They sit in their respective places to advise the Sovereign, to serve and to defend the people ; themselves the authors of those laws and obligations by which the Sovereign is bound. We admit them to their high functions under this sacred security--we call upon them also to give the security of their conscience that they will do right, fearing not—we trust no one who refuses this security ; we have no hold on *his* conscience, and therefore we can have no faith in anything he can otherwise promise. Who indeed can trust him who says he knows not God, or who says he has no fear of God, or indeed who will not say that he looks up to God in all he does, or says, or thinks without due regard to His will and pleasure, or that God does not watch over his path and his ways ? Would we trust

the man in the ordinary concerns of life who will not engage himself to be bound by the terms of mutual obligation; would we trust the man in any transaction whatever whom we know to be reckless as to an honest performance of his own engagement? I think not—so, we cannot trust him to be our legislator, our guide, and to a great extent our master who will not rightly bind himself to perform his duty by us, under the obligation, and in consequence subject to the all-seeing eye of a Superior Being. We cannot enter into any consideration of the awful subject which I have now set before you, without casting ourselves in deep and solemn thought on its bearing upon ourselves; upon ourselves, my Reverend Brethren, as Ministers of that Church which God established under the solemnity of an oath, when, as the Scripture says, “He could swear by no greater than Himself,” He swore by himself that Christ was and should be a Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedek. Thus was the Christian Priesthood established; it took its effect from thence, and was in His view through all succeeding time a Priesthood after that order which is called the order of Melchisedek, and is thus confirmed to us as the only true and holy faith by which man’s salvation should be secured. We, in our character, as Ministers of Christ, are included in this solemn compact. Our Church is established for ever. It was thus appointed for the service of all mankind; all are called to it, and all will be judged by it. I do not say that God designed in any part of His plan, to make it a recognized Christian Church throughout the world. Such was not His purpose. The visible settlement of it was to be progressive, and we doubt not that in His own good time it will be of universal acknowledgment. Still, we know that Christ was born and lived and died in redemption of all men. His merits were confined to none, and in the eye of God we cannot doubt that by means unknown to us, and incomprehensible, it has an effect upon all. Long was the interval between the promise of redemption and the actual appear-

ance and visible merits of the Redeemer, and we may not say that the grace of redemption was not operating through that period. God's oath was with it, and that oath secured its continuance. We may not doubt that the faith spoken of as the order of Melchisedek was a true faith; the only true faith possibly then known or recognized in the world, and hence it is, I argue, that our Church stands in Christ on God's oath, and that it is under the operation of that oath we now do actually minister in that branch of it which we believe to be true and acceptable, and within the survey of the Heavenly King.

This will at once set forth to you the awful situation in which we stand, that we are bound, under this oath of God, and may not by any failure in word or deed shew other than a due regard of it. Does not this pointedly tell us what is our obligation, and how we are to testify or have testified our conviction of it. Look back to the time and occasion when each one of us severally presented ourselves for admission into this Priesthood, that we did so present ourselves under that appointment of it which was declared by God Himself, that we are servants under that His oath, and that we became, under the operation of it, and by the operation of that influence which God's oath then poured down upon those who rightly and truly presented themselves before Him for acceptance, as His accredited servants. We bound ourselves by oath, hence it is that we must feel it a duty resting upon us to acknowledge that so solemn a form of obligation originating with God Himself is fit and indeed necessary in all the obligations which fall on the Christian man. We are bound by our special duties, and woe be to us if we break our faith. Woe be to us, if, in defiance of God's declared righteousness we in any wise lose sight of the obligation which by His wisdom, justice, and mercy has been laid upon us. Thus it is with all men—the duties of the present life having been appointed by God, and the Christian dispensation having been of His direct ordering, and provision, are

Christian duties. Through the mediation of the Redeemer, man has become, so to speak, again sanctified in the eye of his Creator ; so it is, I say, his duties are Christian duties, and are to be regarded in a Christian spirit. This is what we are bound to teach and insist on—in all they do and purpose men must shew their faith in God, and manifest their obedience to His Word. He has, through all generations to the present time, spread the sanctity of His own oath upon us. We are to receive it according to that ordering which we find throughout the sacred Scriptures, and with which we have so good reason to believe Himself to be well pleased.

These are the grounds which I have briefly and it may be imperfectly placed before you, and on and by reason of which I must implore you to uphold the sanctity of that procedure by which God both proved Himself to be known and true, and by which also He would have His reasonable creatures to shew their integrity also. I need not enlarge further, and will therefore content myself with simply praying you to give an attention at least to the great subject I have ventured to discuss ; to urge you by all that is good and sacred not to separate yourselves from that method or demonstration of truth by which God declared He Himself would be known to be true, and which He has given you as a rule by which to direct yourselves. I have thus, my Brethren, Ecclesiastical and Lay, set before you the origin and authority of that solemn, and what ought to be most effectual obligation which can assist to the obedience and best administer to the welfare of ourselves in all the duties, observances, and circumstances of life. It comes to us from the great God Himself, and is substantially connected with our true welfare both here and hereafter ; it binds us one to another in all that can concern mutual service, it binds subjects to lawful authority, acting as in the fear of God and dependent on His mercy and protection. It engages us all to our mutual duties, forming where rightly observed, a powerful link to the general welfare. But here, my Reverend Brethren, I

must more especially call upon you to give your deepest regard to the high duty which so lies upon you; you stand before your God and your people under this most solemn covenant; you are bound to Him, the Author of this oath, the most solemn covenant in which man can be called on to engage himself. Look back to your call to the Ministry, to the circumstances in which it was made, the appeal which you have answered in your veriest conscience, to promote the welfare of your people by leading and preserving them in the rightful service of their God and their Redeemer. You admit all this as concerning ourselves, and so in the strongest manner that can be imagined, confessing this solemn form and procedure to be a covenant binding for ever. God is with it, sees it, and has it in perpetual memory before Him. This same covenant is in its force and its power bounden upon all men, and cannot be lightly regarded without sin. God will not be mocked by either its non-observance, or by the contempt with which the insanity of evil men would deal with it. To suppose such a state of things may seem to some a hard charge, but we cannot help knowing, we can no longer hide from us the truth that there is a powerful and evil endeavour abroad to weaken moral and religious obligations. Let me ask you what, if that endeavour were to succeed, would be our condition? what the security in any relation of life? Where would be the trust either of us in our governors, or of our governors in us; both revelation and experience have taught us that man must be bound by what he feels to be binding in his inmost soul, and surely that would be enough, or ought to be enough with reasonable creatures to receive and direct.

Yet let us go further; we are living within the notice of that high and all powerful Being who governs all things; who has His purpose in all, and will not suffer Himself to be thwarted in any design. Awful is the obligation thus created—you are bound by all effectual means, on all occasions, and without any hesitation or drawing back, to

discountenance and overthrow whatever would lead you from that high sense of duty which I have said so lies upon you. In few words, trust not the man, trust not any body of men, who refuse to present their conscience as under the eye of Omniscience, but cast from you all consideration, and, let me add, all fear of such as would lead you from your duty to God, your proper regard for the welfare of each other, and that salvation of your immortal souls which God has so plainly, so wisely, and so kindly made the great principle on which our present relations may be so established as to lead to all that is holy, just, and good, and again I say, so to prepare yourselves by a true and unswerving obedience in this life for acceptance and blessedness in that which is to come.









