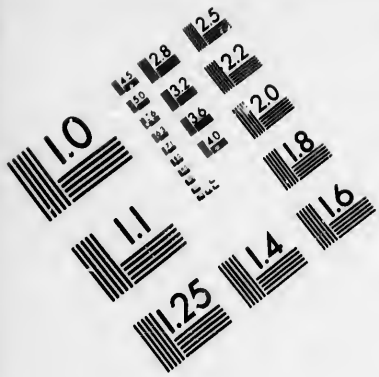

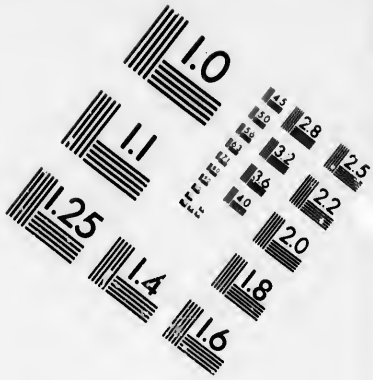

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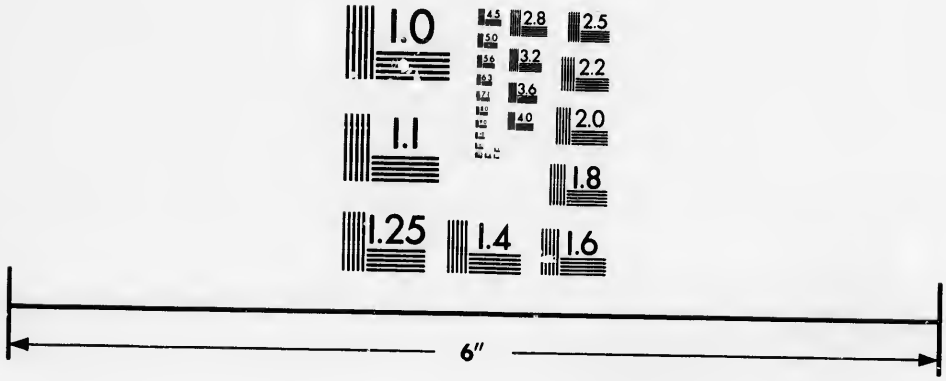

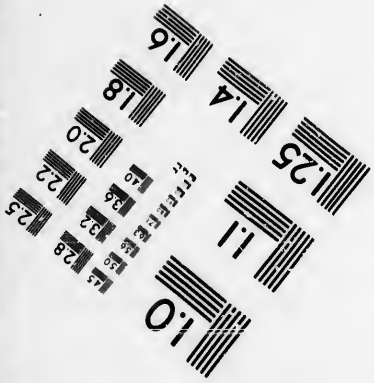

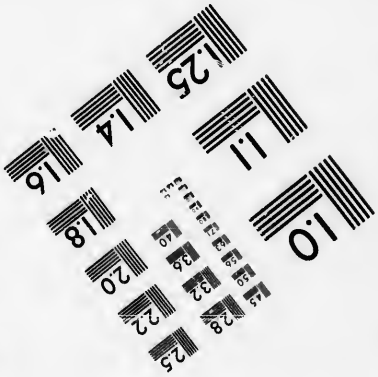

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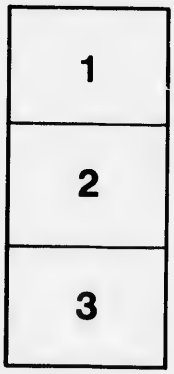

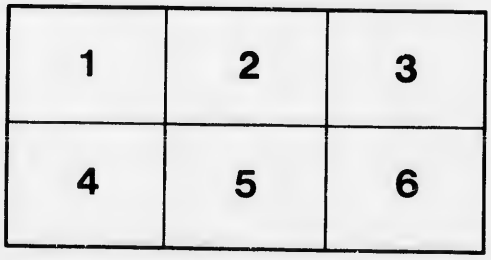

THE

NATURE

AND

NECESSITY

OF

WORKING OUT OUR OWN SALVATION.

A

SERMON.

By JOHN MASON.

Montreal:
Printed by NAHUM MOWER.
1812.

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St. Armand, L. Canada, January 30, 1812.

MR. MOWER,

I HAVE sent you a Sermon in manuscript which I received from a friend a few days before I sailed from England. I conclude that the Author of it is the same person as he who wrote that excellent little book on SELF-KNOWLEDGE. *Its own intrinsic merit, however, is its best recommendation: and the clear and satisfactory manner in which the Author treats most interesting and important subjects must make the perusal of it, I think, pleasing and profitable to every reader. I therefore request you to print and to publish it.*

I am, Sir,

Your Humble Servant,

CHARLES STEWART, *Minister of St. Armand.*

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THE NATURE AND NECESSITY OF WORKING OUT OUR OWN SALVATION.

A SERMON.

PHILLIPIANS, ii. 12, 13.

Work out your own Salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will, and to do, of his good pleasure.

IN these words we have,

I. A duty commanded, and

II. A motive to it subjoined.

I propose distinctly to consider both, and then to conclude with a suitable application.

1st. The duty commanded is, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; wherein we have the matter of the duty,

2dly. The manner in which it is to be performed.

The duty of working out our own salvation implies.

1st. That we should diligently attend to the means of our salvation, and make the best use of all those advantages we have to attain it. Salvation, which consists in a total deliverance from all evil, and the everlasting enjoyment of all good, should surely be the chief concern of an immortal soul! The very word implies that we are liable to misery,

and capable of being delivered from it. Should not then our first inquiry be, "What must I do to be saved?" Now the grand design of the gospel was to set us right in this important inquiry, and shew us the way to salvation by Jesus Christ the author and purchaser of it. But though it was purchased by him, it must be wrought out by us. God hath appointed certain means proper to prepare us for it, and requires of us a diligent use of those means. He has given us many valuable advantages for obtaining it, and expects that we should improve them. For instance, the noble powers of our mind, our reason, understanding, memory and judgement; the pious instructions we received in our youth, the principles of truth and wisdom we then imbibed: the invaluable blessings of a divine revelation, and the helps we have to understand it; the ordinances of public and private worship; the various admonitions and calls of providence; pious friendships, and opportunities of religious converse; and above all, the gracious influence of God's Holy Spirit; these are great helps, and unspeakable advantages for obtaining salvation and happiness, and by a careful improvement of all these we are to seek for, and work out that salvation.

II. The command further implies that we diligently cultivate those good dispositions and habits which are absolutely necessary to qualify us for it; especially those two great duties of piety, repentance, and the love of God. In this sense the precept is the same with those which so frequently occur in the Old Testament; wash ye, make ye clean, amend your ways and your doings; turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die; break off your sins by righteousness; make ye a new heart and a new spirit: with which agree the like

exhortations in the New Teſtament; give diligence to make yours calling and election ſure; ſtrive to enter in at the ſtraight gate; let us labour to enter into that reſt.

The plain caſe is this; the ſoul of man, depraved by ſin, muſt be greatly changed before it can enjoy God; it ~~may~~ must become holy before it can be happy; for it is holineſs alone that qualifies it for happineſs; to this therefore God frequently and earneſtly calls us in his word: and though the work at laſt be his own (as I ſhall hereafter ſhow) yet much may be done, and muſt be done on our part; and therefore he hath graciouſly afforded us theſe common helps and advantages before mentioned, which he requires us carefully to improve in order to obtain thoſe holy diſpoſitions ſo neceſſary to our happineſs. And this is what the text calls, working out our ſalvation.

Another thing implied in this duty is, that we carefully watch againſt and avoid all thoſe ſins, both of omiſſion and commiſſion, which if they prevail will undoubtedly diſqualify us for, and exclude us from ſalvation.

This then is the general import of the duty commanded in the text. I am now to conſider,

2dly. The manner in which it is to be performed, namely, with fear and trembling. That is, with an humble cautious fear, leſt we ſhould fall ſhort of that ſalvation we ſeek to ſecure. The author of the Hebrews gives us the ſame advice, Chapter 4. 1. Let us therefore fear leſt a promiſe being left us of entering into his reſt, any of us ſhould ſeem to come ſhort of it. Happy is the man (ſaith Solomon) that feareth always; and this cautious fear is founded on a juſt ſenſe of our ignorance, folly and weakneſs.

A ſenſe of our ignorance ſhould make us fear leſt we might miſs the right way to ſalvation. There are ſo many wrong paths in this wilderneſs, and but one right, and that a narrow one; we find ſo much difficulty to diſcern the right way, and when diſcerned to enter upon it, and when entered upon to perſevere in it, that it is no wonder we often walk with trembling feet and doubtful heart. When we ſee ſo many confident in a wrong way, and ſo many draw back from the right, have we not cauſe to fear?

Again, a conſciouſneſs of our folly will make us fear leſt when we are entered on the right way to ſalvation we ſhould afterwards deſert it. That we have in many former inſtances acted very fooliſhly, we too well know; and he have the ſame bad and back-ſliding heart ſtill. We have too much reaſon to ſay of ourſelves, what God ſaid formerly of his people Iſrael, "a deceived heart hath turned us aſide." Every way of man is right in his own eyes, and therefore many go down into the grave with a lie in their right hand. Through the influence of example, the force of habit, the power of cuſtom, and the prejudice of ſenſe, there is not a more common thing in the world, than ſelf-deception, and that in affairs of great importance, and ſcarcely any thing more dangerous or attended with more fatal effects. Very juſtly then hath Solomon made this cautious fear a mark of wiſdom, a wiſe man feareth, and departeth from evil.* And in fine, a ſenſe of our weakneſs will make us fear leſt we be overcome by the enemies of our ſalvation. The luſts of the heart, the ſubtilties of Satan, and the ſolicitations of ſenſe, create in us many conflicts; and to divert us from, or diſcourage us in our beſt purſuits, they often excite an oppo-

* Proverbs 14. 16.

ſition to which we are unequal; ſo that we are never more ſafe, or ſucceſsful in our ſpiritual warfare, than when moſt diffident of our own ſtrength and wiſdom we are moſt dependent on divine grace and direction; when conſcious of our own weakneſs we chuſe rather to decline the attack than meet it, and when the remembrance of paſt defects makes us cautious, humble, and vigilant.

So much for the duty commanded, work out your own ſalvation, &c. I now proceed,

II. To conſider the motives ſubjoined; for it is God that worketh in you, &c.

And here I ſhall firſt briefly open to you the meaning of the words ſeparately conſidered; ſecondly, take them in their connection with the preceeding; and ſhew you how properly they are urged as a motive to the duty before commanded.

I. By theſe words then, ſome mean no more than a divine concurrence, or God's co-operating grace, which concurs with our ſincere endeavours after holineſs. But the original word plainly implies ſomething more; for it properly ſignifies, not only to work WITH US but to work IN US; and this of his good pleaſure; or through his mere good will towards us, there being nothing on our part to move him thereto. And this energy is exerted not only on our endeavours, but on our hearts; for he works in us not only TO DO, but to WILL. I ſhall endeavour to explain to you both theſe expreſſions briefly.

I. How are we to conceive of God's working in us to do? I anſwer, it is the Grace of God that fixes and conforms the good purpoſes of the heart, which would be otherwiſe faint and fluctuating. It alſo ſtrengthens the natural and

moral powers of the mind to put those good purposes into execution.

The providence of God often diminishes the difficulties that lie in the way of our duty, by which we might sometimes be discouraged from attempting it. Nay, it sometimes entirely removes those difficulties, which makes the work advance with unexpected ease and expedition—and all this is called the divine concurrence, or God's working in us to do. But secondly, God is said to work in us not only TO DO but TO WILL.

Now how are we to conceive of this Divine Energy on the mind in a manner that is at once honorable to the Grace of God, and suitable to the freedom of a rational nature? For whenever we go about to explain the manner of divine operations on the heart, we must ever keep these two points in view, in order to guard us against two very common extremes in this affair. Now previous to the discussion of this point, let these two things be carefully attended to.

I. Whatever influence the grace of God has upon the mind of man, it is not the effect of a physical but a moral operation, or in other and plainer words, God does not work upon our hearts in a forceable and mechanical, but in a rational and persuasive way. He always deals with his creatures in a manner suitable to the nature he gives them; with inanimate creatures by impulse, with animal creatures by instinck, and with intelligent creatures by reason. And to move rational and intelligent beings by force and violence would be a method no less absurd and incongruous than to influence inanimate and irrational beings, by persuasion and argument. So that it is very unworthy of the wisdom

of God to ſuppoſe that his operations on reaſonable minds are coercive or compulſory.

II. Theſe operations whatever they are, muſt be ſuppoſed to be refiſtable; as all ſpiritual and moral operations in their own nature are. If they be abſolutely irreſiſtable, they muſt be mere mechanical compulſion, from which I have firſt ſhewn they are eſſentially different. Beſides this ſuppoſition entirely deſtroys the liberty of the human mind, and is attended with fatal conſequences. For if we only act, as we are acted upon, and when we are acted upon have no power to reſiſt the impulſe, what do we different from mere machines? This ſaps the foundation of all moral goodneſs, and of all future rewards and puniſhments. And how could the Apoſtle upon this ſuppoſition exhort us to work out our own ſalvation? The very motive by which he inforces this precept would be a contradiction to it. And what occaſion were there for fear and trembling, if we had not a power to reſiſt the operation of that grace upon us? And it is worth obſerving that the ſame word with that in our text is uſed in Epheſians, II. 2, where Satan is ſaid to work in the children of diſobedience; and no one I believe will ſay that his temptations are irreſiſtable. But how then does God work in us to will?—I anſwer in one word; he effectually perſuades the will. And this he may be ſuppoſed to do, by enlightening the underſtanding; and ſetting the things of religion before the mind in their proper point of view; by removing thoſe clouds and miſts of error and prejudice which overſpread the mind, and prevented it from ſeeing thoſe things in the ſame light before: and in conſequence of this, by engaging our attention to their great neceſſity and importance; which may further be effected by

bringing the mind into a ſerious and thoughtful frame, and by weakening thoſe carnal affections, and with drawing the objects of them, which are ſo apt to give it a contrary diſpoſition. And the conſequence hereof, by the continuance of the ſame gracious aſſiſtance, will be ſincere purpoſes of repentance, and earneſt deſires after holineſs. The ſoul having thus a different view of things, and forming a different judgement concerning them, is affected towards them in quite another manner from what it was before. The eyes of the underſtanding being opened, it not only diſcerns, but prefers the things that are excellent. It wiſhes and wants to be more holy, more like God, more like what it ſhould be, and more like what it will be in heaven.

In conſequence of all this it enters upon different purſuits, and puts thoſe good purpoſes into execution; while by the concurrence of divine grace and providence, its internal difficulties and external diſcouragements are gradually removed, at once to make its courſe clear, and its progreſs eaſy.

And thus may the grace of God be conceived to work upon the will, not only by moral but divine influence, by giving an efficacy to what is called MORAL SUASION; and that in a way co-natural with the rational powers of the ſoul, ſuitable to its native freedom, and without offering the leaſt violence to its liberty as a moral agent. And thus to con~~vince~~ceive of it, ſets the mind at eaſe, reconciles the different repreſentations of this matter in Scripture, honours the grace of God, preſerves the liberty of the human mind, and, I think, keeps clear of all extremes. And now,

2dly. I need not take up much of your time in ſhowing how proper and powerful a motive this is to enforce the duty here commanded. For is God always ready by his

grace, not only to assist us in duty, but to dispose the mind to it, to excite good inclination, serious thoughts, and holy desires in the heart, and to strengthen us to carry them into practice? Is his spirit at work upon our minds, to remove our darkness, correct our prejudices, subdue our lusts, and persuade our wills, by shewing us the things of God in a light of evidence and importance; and is he willing to continue that grace (if we do not obstinately refuse it) till the will is finally gained and our salvation secured by our being made fit to enjoy it? What mighty encouragement then have we here to work out our own salvation, to be diligent, constant, and indefatigable in the improvement of all those means and helps which we enjoy for the attaining it.

But after all, may this grace of God be rejected, these divine operations resisted, may the Holy Ghost be quenched and grieved, and provoked by our obstinacy to withdraw from us; and the most hopeful beginnings prove abortive by our after slothfulness, security and sin. What need have we then to work out our salvation with fear and trembling! And how properly and strongly does the motive, thus explained, enforce the duty before recommended?

By way of application of this subject I propose,

1st. To lay before you the extremes into which some are apt to run with regard to this doctrine,

2dly. The source and origin of these extremes,

3dly. To point out to you what I take to be the truth, as equally distant from those extremes, and lastly, conclude with a few practical reflections upon the whole.

1st. I am to lay before you the extremes into which some are apt to run with regard to this doctrine; and from which

one would be ready to think this ſingle text ſhould have been a ſufficient guard.

Some are led enormouſly to magnify the ability and freedom of the human mind, and to imagine that it has animate power of its own to make thoſe improvements in piety and virtue which are neceſſary to fit it for future happineſs, without the ſupernatural and ſpecial aſſiſtance of divine grace; or that every man has a power of his own (originally given him by his maker) to change his own heart, and to rectify all his mental diſorders, ſo as properly and ſtrictly ſpeaking, to work out his own ſalvation.

This ſentiment came originally from the ſtoics,* and was thence adopted by ſome ancient chriſtians, who in the fifth century were diſtinguiſhed by the name of Pelagians. But that is a very wrong notion, very diſhonorable to divine grace, ſuperſedes the neceſſity of all ſpecial divine concurrence, ſuppoſes the human mind to have the ſame power and ſelf command ſince the fall as it had before, apparently contradicts, not only ſome of the plaineſt declarations in ſcripture, but the general deſign and ſcheme of the goſpel revelation, and leads directly to preſumption, pride and popery; for the papiſts in their improvements on this error, in their doctrine of merit and ſupererogation have carried it to as great a height of abſurdity as it can be ſuppoſed capable of being advanced. But to avoid this extreme ſome have ran into the direct contrary; and have imagined,

2dly. That mankind by the fall have loſt all the native power and freedom of their minds in ſpiritual things; that their reaſonable faculties with regard to religion are totally

* Thus saith Seneca. That I am, I owe to God. That I am wise, I owe to myself.

perverted; that a ſinner is entirely paſſive in the work of converſion, can only act as he is acted upon, that the ſpirit of God muſt do all for him; and in a word, that one who is dead in treſſpaſſes and ſins, has no more power to do any thing towards the recovery of a ſpiritual life, than a dead body has towards its recovery to a natural life.

This notion came originally from an ancient ſect of chriſtians which prevailed in the fourth century, known by the name of Manichees; from whom it was adopted by St. Auſtin, who in the warmth of his zeal againſt the Pelagian errors (for nothing is more common than in flying from one extreme to run into another) carried it to a length not to be juſtified by ſcripture or reaſon; and from him, whoſe piety and eminence gave it a ſanction it never had before, it has been tranſmitted down in the church, and is retained by many chriſtians ſtill.

But now that this is for certain as great a miſtake as the other plainly appears from hence. That it cuts the ſinews of all human endeavours, ſaps the very foundation of all practical religion, contradicting all the remonſtrances and expoſtulations and precepts directed in the word of God to ſinners; under a ſhew of exalting divine grace highly diſhonours the divine wiſdom; makes men mere machines; and opens a wide door to licentiouſneſs of life. And as thoſe who imagine they have a power to perform good works of themſelves, do enormouſly magnify the value of them, ſo theſe who conceive they have no power at all to perform them, do as much depreciate and deſpiſe them; will not allow them neceſſary as conditions of ſalvation, but only deſirable as evidences of juſtification; and look upon them, when performed before converſion, but as ſplendid ſins

Theſe now are the extremes on both ſides. The one does not conſider man as a fallen creature, nor the other as a rational creature; the one fruſtrates the efficacy of divine operation, the other deſtroys the freedom of human agency; the one diſhonours the grace of God, the other his wiſdom; the one leads to preſumption, the other to ſloth; in a word, they who maintain the one, read the former part of the text ſeparately from the latter; and they who plead for the other, keep to the latter part of it independently of the former: but both extremes are equally contrary to ſcripture, injurious to practical piety, and at the ſame diſtance from the truth, which ſeems to lie between them. But before I proceed to ſhew you what that is, it may not be amiſs,

2dly. To examine briefly into the ſource and origin of theſe extremes, or what is the cauſe that men who enjoy the ſame lights and advantages, are under the ſame guidance of reaſon and revelation for attaining the truth, ſhould nevertheleſs be ſo frequently betrayed into thoſe extremes, which are equally diſtant from it.

This can then be reſolved into no other than the uſual and common cauſes of error in all matters of religion, namely, a narrow and contracted mind, which does not take a ſufficient ſcope and compaſs in its contemplations, but confines them to a few particulars, which it views only in one light.

An idle and indolent turn of mind, which contents itſelf with a general and ſuperficial view of things, without examining into their connection, tendency, or effects.

A partial ſtudy of ſcripture; that is, not attending to the proper connection of one part with another, nor adjuſting our regards to doctrines by the importance with which we

see them there recommended; but confounding the literal and figurative construction of the sacred phrase, by being more intent to find out that sense which a particular party has established, than that which the inspired writer intended.

The bias of education and force of custom; which warps and blinds the best and clearest understandings to a degree which we should never think credible if we did not see it fact.

Lastly, a determination to read, hear, and converse, only on one side; and whilst a man continues to do so, he does not know but that the truth, or at least a great part of the truth, may lie on the other.

These are the usual sources of religious mistakes, and the obvious causes why christians who have all the same rule to go by, are nevertheless so often betrayed into opposite extremes.

3dly. I am now to lay before you what seems to be the truth in this case, as equally remote from the two extremes before mentioned. This is contained in the five following short propositions.

Proposition 1st. That since the fall, human reason is much obscured but not totally defaced, and our mental powers are much weakened, but not wholly destroyed. If the truth of this proposition be allowed (and I believe it will not be readily disputed) it goes to the foundation of those errors which lie in the forementioned extremes; one of which considers the powers of the human mind in its present state as perfect, the other as totally perverted.

Prop. 2d. That in compassion to our present darkness and inability, God has graciously offered us divine illumination and strength. This is plain from scripture, wherein these

promiſes of ſpiritual light and aſſiſtance are frequently made to us: and from the many prayers which David, Paul, and other ſaints mentioned in ſcripture, have put up to God, that he would pleaſe to guide, and enlighten, ſtrengthen, and direct them. This the text calls a divine energy, or God's working in us to will and to do. And in what manner we may conceive of it conſiſtently with the liberty of man as a free and moral agent, I have endeavored to ſhew you.

Prop. 3d. That this divine light and grace is freely communicated to thoſe who ſincerely ſeek and endeavor after it. The truth of this propoſition is confirmed by a great variety of plain ſcriptures; ſuch as, ſeek and ye ſhall find; God giveth wiſdom to them that aſk it; and his holy ſpirit to them that ſeek it of him, and that more freely than earthly parents give good gifts to their children.

Prop. 4th. That theſe divine communications may be forfeited and withdrawn from man, by reaſon of their abuſe of, and neglect to improve them. This is equally plain from many ſcripture declarations and examples; as, that God's ſpirit ſhall not always ſtrive with man; and when he is pleaſed to take away his holy ſpirit from them (a judgement which David ſo importunately deprecated) he is then ſaid to give them up to a reprobate mind; and to hearden their hearts; that is, by withdrawing from them that grace they had ſo often rejected and abuſed.

But laſtly. If we continue watchful and diligent, ſuppliant and dependent, that light and grace will be continued and continually increaſed till our ſalvation is complete.

Theſe conſiderations now ſet the precept of the text in a light of great importance; and ſhould equally induce us to work out our own ſalvation, and to depend upon the grace

of God, who through his good will towards us is always ready to work in us both to will and to do.

And that this is a juſt and right way of thinking in this matter, and the ſentiments to which we ſhould always adhere as the truth, appears very probable from hence, that it is equally diſtant from the two forementioned extremes, has all that is valuable in both; preſerves the freedom of the human mind, as much as the one, and magnifies the grace of God as much as the other; reconciles thoſe ſcriptures which ſeem to be contradictory; is moſt honorable to all the divine perfections; moſt ſuited to the general deſign and ſcheme of the chriſtian religion; aſcribes the ſalvation of man to divine grace, and their condemnation to themſelves; is beſt adapted to the ſtate of man as depraved; and to his nature as a a rational being; embarraſſed with the feweſt difficulties; and in a word, ſets both parts of my text, not only in the ſtrongeſt light of importance, but in the faireſt point of view.

Laſtly, I ſhall now conclude with a few practical reflections on the whole. And,

1ſt. Let us be very thankful if the providence of God has ſo ordered the circumſtances of our education, that we are not under the ſame temptations that many others are to run into either of theſe dangerous extremes before mentioned—Dangerous I call them, not only for their tendency, but the bad influence they often have on the heart and life—Not but that many good men are to be found on both ſides, who, governed by a ſpirit of genuine piety, live in a very happy inconſiſtency with their own principles; thoſe on the one ſide, who too much magnify the powers of the human mind, praying as earneſtly for divine light and help as if they

felt their need of it, and those, on the other, who too much depreciate those powers, using and employing them with as much care and diligence as if they knew their salvation depended thereupon.

However, though the grace of God may sometimes lead a man to live down his own bad principles, it is nevertheless a great mercy not to lie under the influence of them.

2dly. What we have said should not only teach us moderation in our sentiments of doctrine, but charity in our opinions of persons—Do others differ from us in their sentiments of the subject which has now been discussed, let us remember that by a different tincture in their education, they see through a different medium and with different eyes, and to that it may be in part owing that we do not form the same judgement of objects so differently discerned. Had we been taught as they were, it is probable we should think as they do; and with the same opportunities and method of instruction which we have enjoyed, it is likely their sentiments would have resembled ours. We scarce know how to make allowance enough for the bias of education with regard to the principles which persons imbibe. However, let us take care that we do not induce others to run into one extreme in their way of thinking, by going into another in our own, than which nothing is more common in the course of a warm debate: nor should we be ready to charge upon others all the bad consequences of their notions, which they are not sensible of and perhaps heartily disavow.

Lastly, What remains but that we firmly resolve, by the grace of God, to practice this important scripture precept which has now been so particularly recommended, and be sure to take both parts together. Let us work in a way of

dependence, and depend in a way of duty; take as much care of our ſouls as if we had no divine help to truſt, and truſt the divine grace as much as if we could abſolutely do nothing for ourſelves. We muſt work and labour, and watch and ſtrive, but after all remember that by grace we are ſaved; and ſay, not unto us, O Lord! not unto us, but unto thy name be the Glory: this becomes us as reaſonable creatures, this becomes us as fallen creatures. Let not our weakneſs diſcourage our endeavours, but excite our prayers. And let not our prayers excuſe, but animate and invigorate our endeavours: for though we are weak in ourſelves, we are ſtrong in the grace which is in Chriſt Jeſus. Now, unto God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghoſt, Trinity in Unity, be aſcribed all honor and glory, thankſgiving and praiſe, love and obedience, now and for evermore. Amen.