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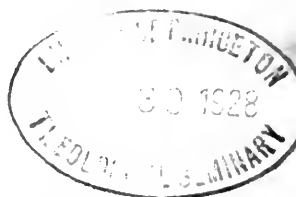


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DISSERTATIONS

On SUBJECTS relating to



The GENIUS and the EVIDENCES

O F

CHRISTIANITY.

By ALEXANDER GERARD, D. D.

Professor of DIVINITY in the MARISCHAL College of  
ABERDEEN.

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E D I N B U R G H :

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M, DCC, LXVI.





To the RIGHT HONOURABLE  
JOHN EARL OF GLASGOW;  
HIS MAJESTY'S  
HIGH COMMISSIONER  
TO THE  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY of the CHURCH  
OF SCOTLAND.

MY LORD,

**A** SERMON on the subject of the first of the following Dissertations, was preached before your Lordship, at the Opening of the last General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. In the compass of a *Sermon*, the Argument could not be fully treated: but your Candour led

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you

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you to approve ; and, in a very obliging manner, you desired the Publication of it. With that freedom which your affability had invited me to use in all my intercourse with you, I declined publishing the Sermon, and expressed my inclination rather to offer to the Public a larger Dissertation on The Manner in which Christ and his Apostles proposed the evidences of their Mission ; and to subjoin to it another Dissertation on a related subject. You was pleased both to accept my Apology, and to allow me the honour of prefixing your name to the whole work.

Your Lordship's great Talents and amiable Virtues afford matter for praise remote from the suspicion of adulation. But the just praise of them

## DEDICATION. v

them would be offensive to that Greatness of Soul, which has always despised an ostentatious display of them, and to that Modesty which has added grace to them, by endeavouring to conceal them. Your Delicacy would not bear so much as an acknowledgment of your Favours to me, in terms suitable to the sense which I have of them; for you never would allow me, even in private, to mention them as obligations.

BUT if the Dissertations which I now present to your Lordship, shall in some measure answer the purpose for which they are sincerely intended; if they shall point out any Evidence for Christianity, which has not been hitherto sufficiently regarded; if they shall excite the attention, and  
convince

convince the judgment of any who may have acquired an habit of inattention to the more common proofs of the divinity of this Religion; or if they shall add any vigour and activity to the Faith of those who are already Christians: This will be truly agreeable to your Lordship; and by this you will obtain the end to which your indulgence to the Author, led you to hope that this publication might contribute. With the highest Respect and Esteem, I am,

MY LORD,

*Your Lordship's*

*much obliged,*

*most humble, and*

*most obedient Servant,*

May 1. 1766.

ALEX. GERARD.

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## INTRODUCTION.

THE Evidences of the Christian religion, may very properly be distinguished into two kinds, the *direct* and the *collateral*. It is on the former of these that Christian writers have bestowed the greatest part of their attention. They are commonly reduced to two heads, *internal* and *external* evidences. Both have been fully illustrated, and frequently urged. The external evidences of Christianity are, Miracles, and Prophecy: these are the directest proofs of its divinity. Its internal evidence, however, has likewise considerable force; much greater force, it might easily be shown, than some Christian writers have allowed it. This evidence

vidence arises from its excellence. But when its excellence is urged as a *direct* proof of its truth and divinity, it will be proper to consider that excellence in reference to the main and principal end of Christianity. The want of attention to this, has often led Christians into gross perversions of the doctrines of their religion; and has given occasion to many of the objections of Infidels against it, which would be shown at once to be frivolous and impertinent, by only ascertaining the *kind* of excellence which it is reasonable to demand in Christianity. We talk at random concerning the excellence or the defects of any system, till we have first discovered the precise end and design of that system: excellence always consists in the fitness of a thing for answering some determinate end of real importance. It is sufficient for rendering any institution excellent in its kind, that



that it be adapted to the end which it in fact proposes, tho' there may be many other ends, very valuable in themselves, which it has no tendency to promote. The end which Christianity professedly aims at, is the spiritual improvement of mankind, the present virtue and comfort, and the future perfection and happiness, of all who yield themselves up to its power. It keeps this end continually in view; it represents all its doctrines and all its precepts as means of promoting this end; it is careful to set them in that attitude in which they may most directly and powerfully contribute to it. Christians have not always considered the gospel in this light; they have not searched it with a design only to find food by which their souls may be nourished unto eternal life; but they have sought for what may gratify their curiosity, give an occasion for displaying their ingenuity

nulty, or countenance refinements into which they had previously run: and, while they were intent on drawing from the gospel imaginary benefits which it was never designed to afford, they have too often lost sight of the real and important advantages of which it is naturally productive. A misapprehension of the proper and ultimate end of Christianity, and a desire, consequent on that misapprehension, of applying it to purposes remote from its intention, is the source to which we may trace up most of the subtle and intricate discussions imposed on the world, in all ages, as the doctrines of Christ, and most of the frivolous and abstruse controversies, which have been agitated as questions very essential to religion. When Christians have thus overlooked the design of that religion which they profess to believe, it is no wonder that Infidels have mistaken it

too. Their mistake concerning it, is the only foundation of many of their objections. When they hear it asserted, that Christianity is excellent, they suppose that it ought to contribute something to every end that is valuable in any sense, however foreign to its professed design: and if they can think of any purpose which they are pleased to reckon desirable, but to which Christianity contributes not, they take it for granted, that this is contrary to excellence, that it is a defect, and an objection against a divine original. But as the professed end of Christianity is indisputably most important, and what ought to be the ultimate end of all religion, so it is solely by examining its fitness for promoting this end, that we ought to determine, whether it is excellent or not. If it contains powerful means of virtue, if it affords solid grounds of joy, suited

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to the condition of human creatures, it is excellent; it not only is such a religion as may have been revealed by God, and ought to be received on a positive proof that it was revealed by him; but its very structure indicates that it actually is divine, in a manner similar to that in which the benign and wise contrivance of the world, proves it to be the work of God. Admit, that it throws no new light upon any of the sciences, that it corrects not the errors of the vulgar concerning the constitution of nature, that it gives no decision in many questions which speculative men have raised concerning religion and morality, that it affords not the means of gratifying idle curiosity with respect to all the circumstances, and motives, and uses of the very dispensation which itself brings to light, that it is in no degree subservient to many purposes very desirable

to

to mankind : A thousand objections of this sort, are of no weight : they are wholly beside the purpose ; they amount only to this, that Christianity promotes not ends which it never had in view : it is sufficient, that it is exactly adapted to its own end : it is from the importance of this, and from its fitness for promoting it, that the proper excellence of Christianity arises. Whatever does not either belong to its excellence considered in this light, or fall under the heads of miracles wrought on purpose to attest it, or of prophecies fulfilled ; and yet affords a proof, or any real presumption, of its truth and divinity, is a *collateral* evidence for it. The use of such arguments is, either to rouse the inattentive and the prejudiced to a careful and impartial examination of the more direct evidences of the gospel, or to strengthen the conviction which these evidences have already

ready

ready produced. To keep it steddily in view, that this is their proper use, is necessary for prosecuting arguments of this kind to the greatest advantage.

IT is a common complaint, especially concerning subjects which have been very frequently treated, that they are exhausted. If the complaint were just, it would long ago have been in vain to expect that any thing new should be advanced with regard to the evidences of the Christian religion; for it will be difficult to name a subject which has been oftener canvassed. But the complaint is generally no more than an excuse for want of genius. It may perhaps be affirmed with truth, that no subject is so trite, as not to afford real genius matter for new discoveries. There never yet arose a defender of Christianity, possessed of genius, who did not throw additional light up-

on its evidences. Some of the latest writers have confirmed even its direct and principal evidences, by arguments which were not formerly urged, and have set their force in the clearest light, by happy illustrations which had not occurred to their predecessors. The collateral evidences of the gospel, open a field much more untrodden; and several late writers have shown, that it gives ample scope for the exercise of invention: they have discovered many presumptions of the truth of our religion, which had wholly escaped the observation of preceding writers; and they have prosecuted others with great accuracy, which before had been but occasionally hinted, and evinced that they have much greater force than they could have been expected to have. I may add, that authors of penetration, have suggested topics which may be improved into conclusive and striking

arguments for the truth of Christianity, even when they have been examining subjects, and pursuing designs, very different and seemingly unconnected: *The spirit of Laws*, is a treatise which affords many instances of this. All the collateral evidences of the truth of Christianity are in one sense *internal* evidences: they all arise from some particulars in the nature of this religion, from some circumstances which have attended its reception, or sprung from it, or from some remarkable facts connected with it, and related in the gospel history. But even those of them, which have been already profecuted, are far from being all of precisely the same species.—Some of them are in the strictest sense internal. That excellence of Christianity, which constitutes its internal evidence, may be sufficiently ascertained by an examination of the doctrines and precepts of this religion:

an



an examination of its nature is indeed the direct and proper method of bringing its excellence to the trial; and if, on this trial, it be approved, the direct argument thence resulting for its divinity, is completed. If there be any topic from which a proof of its excellence can be deduced, additional to, and independent on, what arises from the examination of its nature, that topic may justly be considered as affording a separate and collateral proof of its truth. Of this kind is an argument which was very early urged in favour of the gospel; the argument deduced from its great efficacy, at its first appearance, in banishing polytheism, idolatry, superstition, and the arts of magic, and in reforming the tempers and manners of those who embraced it. This efficacy gives us new assurance of the excellence of Christianity, by showing us correspondent effects actually re-

fulting from it ; by this it ftrenghens  
 our belief of its divine original: it like-  
 wife begets a general prefumption,  
 that there muft have been very fatis-  
 fying evidence of its truth, elfe men  
 never would have made fo great facri-  
 fices to it.—Again, tho' the virtue and  
 the fpiritual good of man, be the only  
 main and ultimate end of Chriftianity,  
 yet it may at the fame time be fit for  
 promoting many other good ends fub-  
 ordinate to this; or confiftent with it.  
 A fitnefs for promoting any fuch end  
 is a new inftance of the excellence of  
 Chriftianity, diftinct indeed from its  
 proper and effential excellence, but  
 which ftrenghens the argument for  
 its divinity, arifing from this, and  
 ftrenghens it by operating fimilarly  
 on the mind; it begets an additional  
 degree of conviction, by giving an ad-  
 ditional perception of excellence. It  
 has been obferved, for inftance, tho'  
 for

for the most part only incidentally, that the spirit of Christianity naturally softens the rigour of despotism, introduces moderation into government, banishes many inconvenient civil laws once generally prevalent, gives rise to others of a very happy tendency, refines the laws of war, humanizes the manners, and improves the customs of nations \*. All these, and others which might be mentioned, are purposes, distinct from the principal and ultimate end of Christianity, but consistent with it, and in some respects subordinate to it; and the subserviency of that religion to each of these purposes, is a particular instance of its excellence, and consequently an additional indication of its truth. When the subserviency of Christianity to any such end, is thus professedly considered as a *subordinate* excellence, the inconveniencies are avoided, which would arise from an indistinct

\* L'esprit des loix. Liv. 24. chap. 3, 4, 6, 19.

distinct conception of its ultimate end, and proper excellence. We shall not naturally be led into a distorted view of its doctrines, by having in our eye what we regard only as a subordinate end of it. Infidels have no right to demand, that it be proved to their satisfaction, that Christianity possesses every subordinate excellence which some think they see good reason to ascribe to it : whatever objections they can raise against such instances of its excellence, are objections, not against Christianity, but against one particular topic which, to those who perceive its force, will serve as a confirmation of that religion, but which, if it should be deemed fallacious, cannot reasonably infuse the smallest suspicion of falsehood, since it leaves all the principal evidences in their full force.—Another class of collateral arguments for the truth of the Christian religion, arises from particulars

lars in its nature, or from effects produced by it, or from facts in the gospel history, which cannot be at all accounted for, but on the supposition of a divine original, or which are, at least, most naturally explicable on that supposition. Such arguments produce conviction, in a manner totally different from those already mentioned; not by simply exciting a perception of excellence, but by making us feel, that we must offer violence to the natural principles of our understanding, and be involved in absurdities, if we will deny the divinity of Christianity. In numberless instances, both in common life, and in the sciences, our conclusions rest on a foundation entirely similar to this. Whatever circumstance is unaccountable without supposing the truth of Christianity, affords a real presumption for it, the strength of which will depend on the nature of that circumstance,

cumstance, and the degree of its unaccountableness. On this single principle, the character of Judas Iscariot has been, not without success, applied to confirm the truth of the gospel. But most of the arguments reducible to this class, are more complicated in their nature: the circumstances from which they arise have other qualities, besides their unaccountableness, that indicate the truth of the Christian religion, and the conviction produced by them is partly owing to the principles of belief on which these other qualities naturally operate. Hence arises a considerable variety in the presumptive arguments for Christianity; of which it may be worth while to take some further notice. Some of them, in respect of the circumstances from which they arise, and of the manner in which they affect the understanding, are allied chiefly to the internal evidences of Christianity;

anity ; others to the external.—The circumstances from which some presumptive arguments for our religion arise, are such in their nature, as, while they are inexplicable, without supposing its divinity, excite at the same time a perception of excellence. Thus, the character of Jesus is raised far above a mere human character ; and yet it is uniformly supported: it is a character perfectly extraordinary and singular ; and therefore, if it had not been real, the Evangelists cannot be supposed capable of delineating it \*. In our Saviour's last discourses to his disciples, and his prayer for them, recorded in the gospel †, the mixture of dignity and tenderness which he displays, the plain account which he gives of the dangers and difficulties to be expected by his followers, and the nature of the sup-  
ports

\* Duchal's presumptive arguments for the truth of the Christian religion, Sermon I.

† John xiv. xv. xvi. xvii.

ports and consolations which he promises them; afford striking presumptions, that, if Jesus spake them, he could be no impostor; and that, if he had not really spoken them, the Evangelist never could have feigned them, or ascribed them to him \*. The characters of some of the apostles of Christ †; the controversies among Christians in the apostolic age ‡; the practice of Christ and his apostles, in uniformly referring their claim to the impartial inquiries of men, and renouncing every other method of recommending it ||; have been shown to contain strong presumptions of the truth of Christianity. These all belong to the class of arguments now under consideration. They affect two different principles of belief at once: they lead us to conclude that Christianity is divine, by showing us that, if it is not, certain particulars in it

\* Duchal, Sermon. iv. † Sermon. viii. ‡ Sermon. ix.  
 || Sermon. x.



it must be unaccountable : and they exhibit an instance of excellence, which disposes us to infer the truth of the religion possessed of it : these qualities make separate impressions on the understanding ; the conviction produced, is the joint effect of both, and is stronger than what would have been produced by either of them alone. In arguments of this sort, these qualities are combined in very different proportions ; sometimes one, sometimes the other is predominant ; and sometimes it is difficult to determine, to which of them the conviction is principally owing.—Other arguments have an affinity to the external evidences of Christianity ; they add credibility to them, they predispose the mind to admit them, or they heighten its acquiescence in their sufficiency ; and they produce these effects in different degrees, and in different ways.—Some of the

the circumstances and facts relating to Christianity, which are unaccountable without supposing it divine, and therefore afford presumptions for it, contain a mixture of something miraculous, which by being such, implies the divinity of this religion, and which carries along with it satisfying evidence of its own reality. Thus, it has been shown by a late writer \*, that the claims of John the Baptist and of Jesus mutually support each other, and that both the circumstances attending the births of these persons, many of which were miraculous, and their whole conduct towards one another in their public life, afford a full proof that Jesus was the Messiah, and John his forerunner. The argument concludes chiefly by showing those circumstances and that conduct to be inexplicable except on the supposition of the divine mission of these

\* Bell's inquiry into the divine missions of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.

these persons: but this is not the whole of its force; there is in it a mixture of miracle, which makes a separate impression on the mind, similar to what is made by the miracles wrought by Christ: we may add, that this argument does, in several ways, indirectly contribute both to the credibility of the Christian miracles, and to the illustration of ancient predictions. The same observations are applicable to the miraculous conversion, and the subsequent conduct of the apostle Paul; the force of which for proving the truth of Christianity, has been displayed with great strength of reasoning, by two very ingenious modern authors\*.—There are arguments which corroborate the truth of Christianity, by adding weight to its external evidences, in a manner still more direct. They arise from circumstances

\* Observations on the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul, in a letter to Gilbert West, Esq;—Duchal, Sermon. v. vi.

stances not absolutely necessary for rendering these evidences complete, and therefore they may be justly considered as separate and independent evidences, of the collateral kind. If the ancient prophets had predicted the time of the appearance of the Messiah, the place of his birth, and many circumstances of his life and death, and these had all belonged to Jesus, this would have been sufficient to prove him the person intended by them, tho' there had been nothing uncommon in any of these circumstances considered by themselves; for it is not to be expected that a great number even of the most ordinary circumstances, combined at random by a pretender to prophecy, should ever meet in any one person. But when we consider that many of the particulars predicted concerning the Messiah, and accomplished in Jesus, are perfectly extraordinary in their own nature

nature, and seemingly incompatible with one another, this affords evidence of the truth of our religion, additional to what arises merely from the accomplishment of *any* prophecy. A similar confirmation of Christianity has been deduced from some circumstances in the character of the Man of sin, foretold by Paul, so singular, that mere imagination scarce could have suggested them, and that, if it had, they never could have taken place\*. These instances have an immediate relation to the proof of Christianity from prophecy; others are related to the proof from miracles. Such are the argument from the quick and extensive propagation of the gospel, which has been often urged; and which corroborates the evidence from miracles, in the very same way as the efficacy of the gospel corroborates its internal evidence; and the argument

\* Duchal, Sermon vii.

ment from the concessions of ancient Infidels, which has been proposed oftener than once, and is briefly stated in one of the following Dissertations\*. The argument for Christianity, from the continuance, and the present state, of the nation of the Jews†, is almost equally related to the proof from miracles, and to that from prophecy.—The classes of arguments, which have been mentioned, are plainly distinct; their force arises from different principles. Some collateral arguments for Christianity, are however of a mixt or complicated nature; they belong not wholly to one class, but operate by several principles at once. As all the gradations of nature are delicate and almost imperceptible, there may be arguments which we can, with almost equal propriety,

\* Dissert. ii. Sect. 2.

† Lardner's Discourses on, The Circumstances of the Jewish People, an Argument for the Truth of the Christian Religion.

priety, reduce to one class or another. —But there are arguments also which have an equal relation to the internal and the external evidences of Christianity, and add weight equally to both. The arguments pursued in both the following Dissertations, are of this kind. But they corroborate those evidences in different ways. The manner in which Christ and his apostles proposed the evidences of their mission, adds force to the matter of all these evidences, just as a proper way of proposing any proof increases its effect: attention to this manner brings into our view an excellence in Christianity, which naturally disposes us to the reception of it: it moreover presents a circumstance which would be unaccountable, if Christianity were an imposture. There are perhaps other collateral arguments which corroborate all the direct proofs of the gospel, in a similar

c manner,

manner, by contributing indirectly to make them insinuate a stronger conviction into the mind. The argument of the second Dissertation corroborates all the evidences of our religion, in a much more direct manner: They have been scrutinized by Infidels; they have withstood all the opposition of argument; they have gained by it: hence is deduced a positive proof that these evidences are solid, additional to that conviction of their force, which arises from mere attention to them; the faith produced by their natural strength, is deepened by a reflex act of the mind approving that faith, and pronouncing it just and rational.—These reflections, on the varieties of which presumptive or collateral arguments for Christianity are susceptible, and on the principles from which they derive their force, will contribute to our forming a just judgment of particular arguments, in the same



same way as a logical theory of evidence contributes to our distinguishing solid reasoning from sophistry, or as critical observations tend to guide and improve the taste.

The direct evidences of the Christian Religion are, no doubt, the most important: but no real evidence for it ought to be neglected. Every new probability, when it is set in a proper light, and viewed in connexion with the other proofs, adds brightness to the evidence upon the whole. Nothing can contribute more than a multitude of evidences, arising from various and dissimilar views of Christianity, to settle us in that full assurance of faith, which will operate most certainly on the heart, and to prevent our being thrown into doubts, by every minute objection which we cannot immediately answer to our entire satisfaction. Besides, the direct and principal evidences of Christianity,

Christianity, have been long the subject of controversy between Infidels and Christians; arguments have been multiplied and repeated on both sides: some have learned to take it for granted, without examination, that these evidences are weak, or at least disputable; and therefore they never think of attending to them. If such can at all be roused to an impartial inquiry into the truth of Christianity, it will most probably be, by their being led to perceive, that it has other evidences than they imagined, evidences additional to all those which Infidels have so strenuously laboured to confute. When such evidences are suggested, novelty may induce some to attend to them; if they find that they afford considerable presumptions of the truth of the gospel, they will naturally begin to suspect, that its direct evidences may possibly have greater strength, than they have  
been

been disposed to allow them; in consequence of this suspicion, they may be brought to give them a fair examination, and to yield to their force. This effect, I am persuaded, has been in a very considerable degree produced by some of the works, which have furnished me with examples of the principles just now laid down. These works serve both to encourage others to similar attempts, and to point out the manner in which such attempts ought to be conducted. For such attempts, the Author of the following Dissertations, had some advantages from his situation. The duty of his profession led him to employ all that attention on the evidences of Christianity, which was necessary for giving the justest representation of them that he could, in the course of his Theological Lectures. In consequence of this attention, several circumstances occurred, which appeared to him of considerable

siderable importance in establishing and confirming the truth of Christianity, but which had been hitherto overlooked, or at most but slightly touched upon; some which might throw new light on the principal evidences and the general defence of it; some which afforded separate arguments for its truth; and some which served to illustrate its true genius and spirit. Of these, however, the subjects alone which are considered in this volume, have hitherto been reduced into such form, as that they could be offered to the public: and between them there is a natural connexion. In the first Dissertation, the argument is drawn from the manner in which the evidences of the gospel were proposed at first: in the second, from the manner in which they have since been both opposed and vindicated. The former is a proper introduction to the latter; for the ways  
in

in which new light could be thrown upon the evidences of the gospel, necessarily depend, in some measure, on the manner in which these evidences were proposed at first; and as their being proposed at first in such a manner as to remain capable of further confirmation by any means, might be suspected by some to imply, that they were left imperfect by the divine Author, and the inspired publishers of the Christian Faith, it is after a full proof of the propriety of the manner in which they exhibited the evidences of their mission, that the light and confirmation afterwards derived from opposition, can be pointed out with greatest advantage: the latter is a proper sequel to the former, and arises naturally out of it; after having observed how Christ and his apostles proposed the evidences of their mission, and how they defended it, when it was called in question,

tion, and after having perceived the advantages accruing to Christianity from the whole of their manner, it is natural to examine how Christianity has been defended since, and what conclusions can be deduced from the effect which opposition has had upon it. At the same time, each Dissertation contains an entire and separate argument for the truth of Christianity. A few of the objections also, which Infidels have proposed, are examined, as they came incidentally in the way; and they are examined with this advantage, that the principles, from which the solutions flow, are previously established, and particularly illustrated; an advantage which can scarce be obtained, at least in so great a degree, in any treatise written with a professed intention to answer a number of different objections.

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# DISSERTATION I.

The EVIDENCES of CHRISTIANITY

PROPOSED AT FIRST

In the PROPEREST MANNER.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Though I bear record of myself, yet my record is true.* John viii. 14.

Οἱ κατ' ἡμᾶς προφήται, Ἰησοῦς τε, καὶ οἱ ἀπόστολοι αὐτοῦ,  
ἐνείδον ΤΡ'ΟΠΩ ἀπαγγελίας, οὐ τὰ ἀληθῆ μόνον πε-  
ριεύουσης, ἀλλὰ καὶ δυναμένης ἐπαγαγέσθαι τοὺς πολλούς.  
Origen. contra Cels. lib. 6.

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## DISSERTATION I.

The EVIDENCES of CHRISTIANITY proposed at first in the properest manner.

### SECTION I.

#### *The Design.*

**T**HERE is scarce any criterion of Truth, less ambiguous than this, That it gains evidence by being placed in a variety of lights. There is generally one situation in which error admits a specious disguise; and, by being artfully shown only in that situation, it often imposes on the understanding: but set it in another point of view, it is immediately detected,

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and men wonder how they came to be deceived. There have been impostures in religion, which, if you consider them only on one side, seem capable of a very plausible defence; but none of them can bear to be accurately inspected on all sides. The Christian religion proves itself to be no imposture, by its shining forth with new evidence in every light in which it can be placed: there is scarce any circumstance attending it, which is not found on trial to give testimony to its truth.

The nature of the principal evidences of Christianity, has been often explained; their strength has been fully illustrated and vindicated: The *manner* in which they were proposed by Christ and his apostles has not been so carefully attended to. Infidels have insinuated, that this manner is in some respects exceptionable: it is however  
truly

truly such as adds weight to the evidences themselves. It contains several separate presumptions of the truth of Christianity ; and therefore merits a particular examination.

Both Christ and his apostles proposed the evidences of their mission, in two very different situations : they proposed them to those who had not yet expressed prejudice against the gospel, or against the proofs of its divinity which were offered : and they proposed them to those who were already engaged in opposition, and had actually moved objections. In these opposite situations, they proposed them in different manners, which it will be necessary to examine separately. Each was proper in the circumstances in which it was used. Each has peculiar advantages, by means of which it affords collateral evidence of the truth of the gospel. When we con-

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#### 4    D I S S E R T A T I O N    I.

sider both together, we shall perceive, that the evidence of our religion was proposed in a manner which is absolutely complete, and which bears the strongest marks of a divine original.

S E C-

## S E C T I O N II.

*The manner in which the Evidences of Christianity were originally proposed.*

WE shall begin with examining the manner in which Christ and his apostles proposed the evidences of the gospel to those who had not yet opposed it, or expressed prejudice against it. This we may call their original manner. The New Testament affords us the means of ascertaining it with precision. In addressing those who did not raise objections against the gospel, it was their uniform method, to satisfy themselves with barely exhibiting its evidences. They laboured not to prove by argumentation, that these evidences were sufficient; they were not at pains

## 6 DISSERTATION I.

pains either to prevent or to remove every objection which might be started; they explained not minutely the particular manner in which each evidence supports their mission.

THE excellence of Christianity, is alone a considerable evidence of its divinity. Our Saviour *exhibited* this evidence in its full strength; but he never *urged* it, except when he was led to urge it, by opposition. He delivered doctrines which were really excellent, and bore clear marks of truth and divinity: but he did not studiously point out their several perfections; he did not multiply assertions, either that they were excellent, or that their excellence proved their divinity. He left his hearers to *feel* the excellence of his religion, and from their feeling of its energy, to conclude for themselves, that it was  
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of heavenly original. It was not by means of his encomiums, but by means of their own perceptions, that great numbers discovered the features of divinity in his discourses.

He exhibited the proof of his mission arising from miracles, with equal simplicity. He made no commentary on the very first miracle, which he wrought in Cana; he left it to *manifest forth his glory*\* merely by its natural force. When he entered more professedly upon his ministry in Galilee, his manner was entirely similar: *he taught in their synagogues, and preached the gospel of the kingdom, and cast out devils, and healed all manner of sickness, and all manner of diseases among the people*†. He published his doctrine, he performed miracles sufficient for proving that it was from God: but we are not informed that he employed arguments for

\* John ii. 11.

† Matth. iv. 23. Mark i. 39.

for evincing that his miracles were proper and conclusive evidences. Through his whole public life, *he received them that followed him, and spake unto them of the kingdom of God; and, to induce them to believe him, healed them that had need of healing* \*. He did miraculous works of the most various and the most stupendous kinds: he satisfied himself with having done them; he entered into no laboured detail of the circumstances which showed their reality, into no nice reflections on the strength of these circumstances, into no subtile explications of the connexion between miracles and doctrines: he left his miracles to speak for him in their own language, and to support both their reality and their force by their own internal characters of truth and divine power. Read the New Testament, and you will find that this  
account

\* Luke ix. 11. Mark ix. 35.



account suits far the greatest part of the miracles which are recorded. He cast out an unclean spirit in the synagogue of Capernaum \* ; he cast out a legion of devils, and permitted them to enter into a herd of swine † ; he loosed the tongues of persons dumb by reason of the possession of evil spirits ‡ ; he cast out a devil from the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, without going near to the place where she was || ; he cured a lunatic whose distemper was inveterate, obstinate, and extreme \*\* ; he restored sight to many blind persons †† ; he restored vigour to a lame man, at the pool of Bethesda ‡‡ ; he re-  
 moved

\* Mark i. 23,—26.

† Matth. viii. 28,—32. Mark v. 1,—16. Luke viii. 26,—36.

‡ Matth. ix. 32. Mark vii. 32,—35. Luke iv. 33,—35.

|| Matth. xv. 22,—28. Mark vii. 25,—30.

\*\* Matth. xvii. 14,—21. Mark ix. 17,—27.

†† Matth. ix. 27,—30. chap. xx. 30,—34. Mark x. 46,—52. Luke xviii. 35,—43.

‡‡ John v. 1,—9.

moved the palsy from a centurion's servant, by a word spoken at a distance \* ; a fever left Peter's mother-in-law, on his only touching her hand † ; a woman was cured of an issue of blood, by touching the hem of his garment ‡ ; at different places and on different occasions, in the several periods of his ministry, multitudes afflicted with almost all possible sorts of diseases were brought to him, or came in his way, and he cured them all || ; he raised the widow of Nain's son, and the daughter of Jairus, from the dead \*\* ; at one time, he fed above five thousand, with five loaves and two fishes ;

\* Matth. viii. 5,—13. Luke vii. 1,—9.

† Matth. viii. 14, 15. Mark i. 30, 31. Luke iv. 38, 39.

‡ Matth. ix. 20,—22. Mark v. 25,—34. Luke viii. 43,—48.

|| Matth. xiv. 34,—36. chap. xv. 29,—31. chap. xix. 2. Mark i. 32,—34. 39. chap. vi. 56. Luke iv. 40.

\*\* Luke vii. 11,—15. chap. viii. 41,—56. Matth. ix. 18,—25. Mark v. 22,—42. John iv. 46,—51.

fishes \* ; and at another time, four thousand, with seven loaves and a few little fishes † ; at one time, he rebuked the sea, and turned the storm into a calm ‡ , at another, he walked upon the waters when they were tossed with waves, and afterwards composed the winds || ; once he directed Simon and his companions to a draught of fishes, miraculous on account both of their number, and of their being found when they had toiled all night without catching any thing \*\* ; and again he directed the same Simon to catch a single fish, which equally showed his miraculous power, because it brought the precise sum of the tribute demanded from him.

\* Matth. xiv. 15,—21. Mark vi. 34,—44. Luke ix. 12,—17. John vi. 5,—14.

† Matth. xv. 32,—38. Mark viii. 1,—9.

‡ Matth. viii. 25,—27. Mark iv. 37,—41. Luke viii. 23,—25.

|| Matth. xiv. 24,—32. Mark vi. 45,—51. John vi. 18,—20.

\*\* Luke v. 1,—11.

him\*. In all these instances, and in many others, he wrought miracles without making any reflections on their credibility or on their force. Indeed, miracles can prove nothing till their own reality be established. But how is the reality of a miracle established most effectually? Doubtless by its being wrought in such circumstances as render men attentive to it, and force them to perceive it by their own senses. Without this, the most peremptory assertions that it was wrought, will not satisfy those who must have seen it if it had been wrought; and if it was attended with such circumstances as we have supposed, assertions of its reality are superfluous. It was by the manner of his working them, that our Saviour rendered the reality of his miracles obvious and undeniable; they were in themselves appeals to the senses of  
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\* Matth. xvii. 27.

men; and when he found it necessary to take any notice of their certainty, he generally did no more but put them upon judging by their own senses: when he had cleansed a leper, by *putting forth his hand, and touching him, saying, I will, be thou clean*; he did not expatiate on the undeniable certainty of the miracle: he needed not: but, that men might of themselves judge concerning its certainty, he simply said, *show thyself unto the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded for a TESTIMONY unto them* \*. Miracles are proofs of a doctrine, only when they are performed with a professed intention to answer this purpose. It was therefore necessary for our Saviour to declare, that his miracles were intended to be evidences of his divine mission, in order to establish a connexion between them and his doctrine. But  
it

\* Matt. viii. 2,—4. Mark i. 40,—44. Luke v. 12,—14.

it was by no means necessary, that he should make this declaration at the time of working every miracle. As he laid claim to a divine mission, and constantly delivered his doctrines in the name of God, a general declaration of the intention of his miracles, with an appeal to them on some particular occasions, was sufficient for rendering them vouchers of his mission; and, from the evangelical history, he appears to have done no more. It is not improbable that he appealed to his miracles in some instances where it is not taken notice of by the evangelists: but his appeals to them in almost all the instances which are recorded, were occasioned by opposition and objections; and this gives us abundant reason for concluding that he was at least very sparing in enlarging even on their general intention. He insists, that, when he had wrought his miracles, he had given

ven

ven sufficient evidence of his doctrine, and done all that was incumbent on him for the conviction of mankind. He represents it as enough to render Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum inexcusable, that *mighty works had been DONE in them* \*. They had seen his miracles: this alone, he tells them, ought to have convinced them of his mission.

Our Saviour proved himself to be a divine teacher, by miracles of knowledge, as well as by miracles of power. He shewed himself to be a prophet: he foretold future events with great exactness; and he gave proof that he was perfectly acquainted with things as remote from a discovery by mere human sagacity, as futurity itself. He told Nathanael, for instance, his inward disposition and his secret behaviour †. He shewed the Samaritan wo-

man

\* Matth. xi. 20, — 24. Luke x. 13, — 15.

† John i. 47, 48.

man whom he met at Jacob's well, that he knew all the events of her life, though he had never seen her before\*. He frequently foretold his own sufferings in the most circumstantial manner †. His predictions of the calamities which were hastening on the Jews, were not less frequent, nor less precise ‡. He showed, in like manner, that he had full foreknowledge of what would be the state of his disciples and of his religion after his departure from the earth ||. But, conscious that these instances of supernatural knowledge ought to gain credit to all his doctrines, he was at no pains to display their force. I can recollect but two occasions on which we are informed of

\* John iv. 16,—18.

† Matth. xvi. 21. chap. xvii. 22, 23. chap. xx. 17, — 19. Mark viii. 31. chap. ix. 31. chap. x. 32,—34.

‡ Matth. xxiii. 38. chap. xxiv. Mark xiii. Luke xix. 41,—45.

|| Matth. x. 16,—22. chap. xvi. 18. chap. xx. 23. chap. xxiv. 5, 9, 14, 2. Luke xxi. 12,—15.



of his having observed, that his predictions were evidences of his mission: when he had pointed out Judas as the person who would betray him, he added, *Now I tell you before it come, that when it is come to pass, ye may believe that I am he* \*. He concluded one of the predictions of his own death, with a similar intimation of the intention of it, expressed in almost the same words †.

Jesus often proves his mission from the predictions of the Old Testament. He claimed to be not a prophet only, but the Messiah. The characters of the Messiah were very particularly determined by ancient predictions: and these characters were so numerous, and in some instances so seemingly incompatible, that they could not possibly meet in one person by accident: if Jesus had actually united them all in himself, this would have shown him to be

\* John xiii. 19.

† Chap. xiv. 29.

be the Messiah, tho' he had never almost appealed to any of them. And so far is he from ostentatiously displaying the testimonies of the prophets, that often he refers to them only in general, without pointing out particular passages; that, when he mentions a particular prediction, he generally barely repeats it, and applies it to himself; that he seldom uses any reasoning, never any subtle reasoning, to justify the application\*. He always urges the proof from prophecy with the like simplicity, as that from miracles. We have one very remarkable instance of the manner in which he exhibited both these proofs. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask, *Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?* he did not declaim concerning the evidences

\* The following passages may serve as instances: Matth. xvii. 10.—13. chap. xxi. 42, 44. Mark ix. 11, —13. chap. xii. 10. Luke iv. 17,—21. John v. 39. chap. xiii. 18. Matth. xxvi. 54.

dences of his mission; he argued not at all: *In that same hour, say the historians, he cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight: And he said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard, how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached; and blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me\**.

He wrought miracles in the presence of the messengers; he said what sufficiently implied that he wrought them with an intention to prove his mission; and he left them to determine by these, whether or not he really had a divine mission. He designed that John and his disciples should discover him to be not merely a prophet, but the Messiah: for this reason, the particular miracles which he chose to work at that time,

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were

\* Luke vii. 19—23. Matth. xi. 2,—6.

were some of those by which the prophetic spirit had of old characterised the Messiah; and, for this reason too, he alluded in what he said, to the words of Isaiah's predictions; *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing\**. *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound†*. By alluding to these predictions he applied them to prove that he was the Messiah; but applied them in the simplest manner, without entering on a nice explanation of their accomplishment.

Thus, whatever be the particular evidence of his mission, which our Saviour gives at any time to those who had

\* Isa. xxxv. 5, 6.

† Chap. lxi. 1.

had not yet raised objections against him, he exhibits that evidence; but he does not show any eagerness to reason upon it, to analyse it into its principles, to estimate its force, or to prevent all the cavils which might be raised against it.

HE directed his disciples to use the very same method. When he sent forth the twelve apostles, he commanded them to deliver their doctrine, and simply to work miracles in confirmation of it: his instructions to them were, *Preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand, and heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils\**. When the seventy disciples were sent out, he gave them similar instructions †. The *working* of miracles was all the evidence which he directed them to produce. Instead of teaching them arguments

by

\* Matth. x. 7, 8. Luke ix. 1, 2.

† Luke x. 9.

by which they might prove that this evidence was sufficient, he commands them, if the miracles themselves did not convince those who saw them wrought, to be satisfied that they had done their part notwithstanding, and to pronounce the unbelievers inexcusable: *Whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when you depart out of that house, or city, shake off the dust of your feet; verily I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment than for that city* \*. They executed the commission with all the simplicity of manner that had been prescribed: *They departed and went thro' the towns, preaching the gospel, and healing every where* †. On all other occasions, as well as on that, it was in this manner that the disciples of Jesus originally proposed the evidences of his religion.

The

\* Matth. x. 14, 15. Luke ix. 5. chap. x. 10,—12.

† Chap. ix. 6.

The evangelists might have found many occasions, in giving the history of our Saviour's life, to enter into discussions concerning the nature and the strength of the proofs of his mission: But they write in the same spirit of simplicity, in which their master spake. They record his discourses as they really were; they do not in their own persons give us descriptions of the manner of his teaching, or panegyrics on it; they do not boast of the excellence of his documents, or labour to display it, or set themselves to draw conclusions from it. When they at all touch upon it, it is only by relating the influence which his doctrine actually had upon his hearers, or the acknowledgments which it extorted from them. They tell it as a matter of fact, which fell naturally within their province as historians, that, when he taught in the synagogue of Capernaum, *they were astonished*

astonished at his doctrine, for his word was with power, and he taught them as one that had authority\*. It is in the same manner they introduce the same remark, after his sermon on the mount †. When one of them says, *Never man spake like this man* ‡, he simply records the answer which the officers made to the chief priests and pharisees. Concerning the miracles of Jesus, the evangelists, for the most part, as appears from what hath been already said, merely inform us that he wrought them, and mention the situation in which they were wrought, and the circumstances which attended them: tho' these circumstances rendered them not only credible, but even undeniable, they scarce ever make this remark. They do not even enumerate all his miracles §. They sometimes tell us, that he declared his design

\* Luke iv. 32. Mark i. 22.

† Matth. vii. 28.

‡ John vii. 46.

§ John xx. 30.



design in working them to be, that they might prove his mission: but they add no reflections of their own \*. In the same simple historical manner, they at other times relate the effects which Christ's miracles produced, and the opinions which they led men to form: they tell us, for instance, that they excited wonder in those who saw them, and forced from them various expressions of their astonishment †; that they spread the fame of Jesus, and made multitudes to flock to him ‡; that many followed him, and became his frequent hearers ||; that they ascribed his miracles to a divine power \*\*; that

\* John. v. 17. ver 36. chap. viii. 18. chap. ix. 3. chap. x. 25, 37, 38. chap. xi. 4, 15, 41, 42. chap. xiv. 10, 11. chap. xx. 31.

† Matth. ix. 33. Mark i. 27. chap. v. 20. chap. vii. 37. Luke iv. 22. chap. v. 26.

‡ Matth. iv. 24. chap. ix. 26, 31. Mark i. 28. chap. iii. 7, 8.

|| Mark x. 52. Luke v. 4.—11. ver. 28. John vi. 2.

\*\* Luke ix. 43.

that they glorified the true God on account of them \* ; that from them many concluded that he was a prophet † ; that on account of them many believed him to be the Messiah ‡ ; that some who doubted whether he was the Messiah, yet said, *When Christ cometh, will he do more miracles than these which this man hath done* || ? They sometimes relate particular instances of his knowlege of the hearts of men, and of future events : but, satisfied that these were the plainest indications of a divine commission, they seem to have reckoned it superfluous to draw any inference from them \*\*. In proving that he was the Messiah, from the prophecies of the Old Testament,

\* Matth. xv. 31. Luke v. 26. chap. vii. 16.

† Mark vi. 14, 15. John vii. 40.

‡ Matth. xii. 23. chap. xvi. 16. chap. xxvii. 54. Mark viii. 29. John ii. 23. chap. vi. 14, 69. chap. vii. 41. chap. ix. 30, — 38. chap. xi. 45. chap. xii. 11, 19.

|| John vii. 31.

\*\* John ii. 24, 25. chap. vi. 64, 70.

ment, they simply mention the events of his life, or events belonging to the gospel-dispensation, and quote the predictions which were applicable to them\*. When they relate applications of the prophecies made by others, to Christ, or to persons connected with him, it is in the same simple manner †.

After Christ's ascension into heaven, his apostles began, in execution of the commission which they had received from him, to preach the gospel everywhere. Before this time, the Jews had raised many cavils and objections against its evidences: and the crucifixion of its author had produced a new prejudice against it, and thrown a dark shade

\* Matth. i. 22, 23. chap. iii. 3. chap. iv. 13,—16. chap. viii. 17. chap. x. 34,—36. chap. xii. 16,—21. chap. xiii. 14. chap. xxi. 4, 5. chap. xxvi. 31, 56. chap. xxvii. 9. Mark i. 2, 3. chap. xiv. 27. chap. xv. 28. Luke iii. 4. chap. xxii. 37. John i. 23. chap. vii. 39. chap. xii. 14, 15, 37, 41. chap. xvi. 32. chap. xix. 28, 36, 37.

† Matth. ii. 5, 6. Luke i. 31,—79. chap. ii. 34. John i. 45. chap. vii. 4 .

shade over all its proofs. On this account, the apostles were obliged very frequently, to prove the truth of Christianity by more formal arguments than had been generally used by their Master. Yet they appear to have had recourse to that method, only when it was absolutely necessary. They were contented with simply exhibiting its evidences, unattended with any parade of argument, whenever the occasion could at all bear it, whenever some very immediate and particular opposition did not require their doing otherwise. They alledge the miracles which Jesus wrought; they insist particularly on his resurrection from the dead; they relate occasionally the circumstances which attended them, and which needed only to be related, in order to put their reality out of doubt: they do not philosophise on the moment of these circumstances, or on the force of the  
miracles

miracles themselves: they speak of them as of what they knew to be true, and as of what they doubted not but sincere inquirers would likewise find to be true; and they seem to reckon this enough \*. The apostles performed many miracles themselves; they healed diseases, cast out devils, raised the dead, exercised the several gifts which the effusion of the Holy Ghost had conferred upon them: They gave their miracles a connexion with the gospel, by working them with a professed design to confirm the doctrine which they preached, and by declaring, as often as it was necessary, that they wrought them in the name of Jesus Christ. They were satisfied with this; they did not call in the aid of subtile arguments, to enable their miracles to work conviction. In relating their miracles, and  
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\* Acts ii. 22. chap. v. 30,—32. chap. x. 36,—42. chap. xiii. 30, 31. chap. xvii. 31. I Cor. xv. 4,—8.

the effects produced on men, both by miracles, and by the other evidences which they exhibited, the same historical simplicity is constantly preserved, which, we have already seen, takes place remarkably in the histories of the miracles of Jesus \*. The apostles often appeal to the prophecies of the Old Testament ; and often they do no more but appeal to them †.

Such is the manner in which Christ and his apostles *originally* proposed the evidences of the gospel. They barely exhibited proper evidences ; they did not indulge themselves either in nice reasonings, or in rhetorical declamations, on their credibility, or their force ; they left them to speak for themselves, and to produce conviction  
in

\* Mark xvi. 20. Acts ii. 37, 41, 42, 43. chap. iii. 4, &c. chap. iv. 4, 21, 33. chap. v. 1, &c. ver. 12,—16. chap. vi. 7, 8, 10. chap. viii. 6, &c. chap. ix. 34, 40. chap. xiii. 9, &c. chap. xiv. 3, 8, &c. chap. xvi. 18. chap. xix. 11, 20. chap. 20. 10. chap. xxviii. 5, &c.

† Acts ii. 14, &c. chap. iii. 18, 22,—24. chap. i v 25, &c. chap. x. 43.

in the minds of men, by their own operation upon the natural principles of belief. We cannot affirm, that they would never have proposed the evidences of the gospel in another manner, if no objections had been raised: but we may affirm, because it is clear from the New Testament, that in fact they never did deviate from the manner which has been explained, except when some particular objection or immediate opposition rendered it necessary. It seems to be the only manner which they ever used of choice.

WE may add, that they propose, even in this manner, only the principal and most direct evidences of Christianity. There are many presumptions of its truth, many collateral evidences of its divinity, which they do not urge in any manner. They only give a handle for men's observing them: they furnish

nish the materials out of which an argument may be wrought up ; they mention circumstances from which an attentive person may deduce it : but it is generally incidentally that they mention them, with a view to some other end than confirming the gospel, and without drawing an argument from them, for its truth. Thus, the character of our Saviour, the characters of some of his apostles, the quick and extensive progress of the gospel, and many other topics, have been successfully improved into arguments for the divinity of our religion. The New Testament contains what may naturally suggest these arguments ; but they are scarce ever professedly urged in it. The inspired writers are so far, for instance, from insisting on all the arguments for a divine mission, which may be deduced from our Saviour's character, or those of his apostles, that they  
never



never draw their characters, but leave us to collect what they were upon the whole, from scattered hints, and from some of their particular actions. The progress of the gospel is frequently mentioned : sometimes it is predicted ; sometimes it is related in a historical way ; sometimes persons are exhorted to thankfulness, because the knowledge of it had been extended to them : but it is seldom, if ever, applied to the proof of the divine original of Christianity.

## SECTION III.

*The propriety of the manner in which the  
EVIDENCES of CHRISTIANITY were  
originally proposed.*

“ **B**UT may not this simple, unar-  
 “ gumentative manner of propo-  
 “ sing the evidences of the gospel, be  
 “ urged as an objection against it? Is  
 “ it not dishonouring Christianity, to  
 “ assert that it is not founded on argu-  
 “ ment? And does not this manner of  
 “ proposing its evidences, give too  
 “ great countenance to that assertion?”  
 The assertion, that Christianity is not  
 founded on argument, will be disho-  
 nourable to our religion, or not, ac-  
 cording to the sense in which it is un-  
 derstood.

derstood. It is a very old objection\*: when ancient infidels urged it, they meant, that Christ and his apostles did not, like the Greek philosophers, prove each particular doctrine by a distinct train of argument deduced from first principles, but proved them all from the authority of the revelation in which they are taught. This is true: but it is no objection, provided the authority of that revelation be fully established: on the contrary, it is one of the excellencies of the gospel; it promotes its utility, it renders it fit for the bulk of mankind. Modern infidels turn the objection into another form: they assert, and endeavour to prove, that our Saviour and his apostles neither “made  
 “ nor intended any appeal to the un-  
 “ derstanding †.” This would be a  
 C 2 real

\* 1 Cor. i. 22. Origen contra Cels. lib. 1. Theodoret. ad Græc. Orat. 1.

† Christianity not founded on argument, page 35.

real and strong objection, if it had any foundation in truth. But every person who has read the New Testament, knows, that it contains many passages in which men are commanded to exercise their reason in judging of Christianity, commended for exercising it, or blamed for neglecting to exercise it: and when he knows this, needs he to inquire, what arguments are brought to prove the objection? Whatever they are, they must be mere sophisms. When we are certain, by seeing positive instances of it, that persons do actually address the understanding, an attempt to prove by subtile ratiocinations, that they do not, is as ridiculous as it would be to undertake to prove that the sun shines not, when we see him shining. Indeed a person may address the understanding, and yet address it improperly. It is addressed improperly, if no real evidence be offered: if  
you

you endeavour to convince me, and yet propose no solid or conclusive arguments, you either insult me, or betray your own weakness. It might be said, that Christianity is not founded on, or, to speak more properly, supported by argument, if the evidences which its author professes to bring, were not rational and just\*. But in order to prove that they are not, it must be evinced, that Christianity is not recommended by the excellence of its doctrines, by miracles, and by prophecies, or that all these have no degree of fitness for convincing the understanding, of its truth and divinity. This will be, at least, a laborious task: the assertion, in this sense of it, has no tendency to shorten the work of infidels; it is not one expeditious and decisive argument

\* It is in this sense that Mr Hume says, "Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on Reason." *Essay on Miracles*.

argument against Christianity ; but it is the very conclusion which they must ultimately prove. All the objections of the most various kinds, which infidels have ever moved, are but so many attempts to prove it : all the defences of Christianity, which have ever been made, are intended to confute it. It can receive no shadow of countenance from any thing which we have said : we have been speaking only of the *manner* in which the evidences of the gospel were originally proposed, not at all of the *nature* or strength of the evidences themselves. The present question is not, whether the evidences of the gospel be such in themselves, that, when properly proposed, they will prove it to be a divine revelation ; but it is, whether, supposing them real and sufficient evidences, that which we have described, was a proper manner of proposing them ? These questions are totally

rally distinct. The manner in which they were actually proposed, may totally exclude the display of curious and subtle argument; and yet the evidences themselves may be truly rational, such that the utmost efforts of argument cannot invalidate them, and even capable of being supported by the nicest reasonings. Suppose excellence of doctrine, the working of miracles, the testimony of the spirit of prophecy, to be evidences of a divine mission; and from the whole account which we have given of our Saviour's manner, it is not more obvious, that he declined amusing men with intricate reasonings, than it is, that he presented real and strong evidence to them on every occasion.

EVIDENCE ought, no doubt, to be proposed in a proper manner: arguments of real strength may be stated in so imperfect a manner, that they shall  
produce

produce no conviction. If it could be proved, that this was the case of Christianity, it would give some reason for saying, that it was not supported by argument. It may be thought, that this receives some colour from the representation which has been given of the manner of our Saviour and his apostles: but it is only in appearance. Remote as this manner is from an ostentation of reasoning, it may notwithstanding be the properest that could have been employed. It has often happened, that infidels have deduced objections from topics which are so far from yielding them support, that they answer just the contrary purpose, when they are attentively examined, and pursued through their genuine consequences. It happens in the present case: the manner in which the evidences of the gospel were originally proposed, is no sort of presumption *against* the divine mission



mission of Jesus ; it is, on the contrary, a presumption *for* it, a collateral proof of it.

No presumption against Christianity, can arise from that manner, because it is sufficient for producing belief. Suppose the evidences of the gospel in themselves proper and conclusive ; it admits the clearest proof, that, in order to convince those who attended to them without prejudice, or whose prejudice had not yet engaged their ingenuity to contrive objections against them, no more was necessary, but merely to exhibit them. This appears in some degree from matter of fact : that they were barely exhibited to persons in this state, has been already shown ; that multitudes were convinced, and embraced the gospel, is undeniable. “ Perhaps these believed  
“ without evidence.” We allow that  
men

men often do believe without reason, and therefore we enlarge not on this topic. But, that the manner in question was sufficient for conviction, may be proved from the constitution of the human mind, and the nature of evidence. If the evidences of the gospel be in themselves solid, it was by no means necessary for the founder of it, by a nice analysis of them, or by an abstract explication of their principles and force, studiously to point out their solidity. Natural evidence is, by the original constitution of the human soul, adapted to the understanding; there are principles of belief essential to man, on which it instantly lays hold, and by means of which, without the need of deep reflection, of laborious illustrations, or of intricate reasonings, it will produce conviction in all who are not perverted by the sophistry of false science, or vitiated by unnatural refinement.

finement. Evidence is different from reasoning: evidence perceived is the immediate cause of belief; reasoning is but one mean of bringing men to perceive the evidence; and it is a mean which is far from being necessary in every case. The strongest conviction possible is produced by simple intuition, which leaves no room for reasoning. There are some propositions, mathematical truths, for instance, the evidence of which can be perceived only by a chain of reasoning, consisting of several steps, and deducing the conclusion gradually from first principles. But the evidence of natural and moral truths, and in general of all matters of fact, is of a totally different sort: it requires not a long process of reasoning, in order to its being perceived: a fact is exhibited, and from that, a conclusion concerning another fact, is directly inferred;

ferred ; the natural constitution of the mind determines it to make the inference, and to adopt it, without any comparison of ideas, or the intervention of any middle terms. We can give no reason for it, but that our constitution determines us to it, and renders it impossible for us to do otherwise. In subjects of this kind, therefore, there is much less need of reasoning, and much less scope for it, than in some others. Often the evidence is perceived without any reasoning at all ; and when it is, it would be superfluous to employ reasoning. Fire will burn a human creature who approaches too near it, is a natural truth ; we do not prove it by any process of reasoning concerning the qualities of fire, and those of human bodies ; our experience of the effects of fire in past instances, is the natural evidence of this truth ; and we perceive

ceive that evidence in an instant, and are convinced by it without argument. Now the evidences of the gospel are of this kind; they are facts, the perception of which leads the mind naturally to infer the truth of the gospel. The facts may be perceived without reasoning; the conclusion is likewise deduced without reasoning. They who see an inveterate distemper cured, or a dead person raised, by a single word of a man claiming a divine mission, will need no arguments to convince them, that he has wrought miracles; and being convinced of this, if their natural principles of belief be not obstructed, or perverted, they will readily conclude, *We know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles which thou dost, except God be with him*\*. Though, then, the gospel, in the original publication of it, was not supported by *reasoning*, it by no means follows,

\* John iii. 2.

follows, that it was not supported by *evidence*. The nature of its evidences is such as fits them for being perceived, and producing conviction, without reasoning upon them.

But though the evidence of matters of fact does not necessarily *require* reasoning, yet it often *admits* reasoning. Reasoning may be used in some cases, for ascertaining the real circumstances of the fact from which we draw our inference, that it may give the mind an impulse to draw it. When there are opposite probabilities, reasoning may be used for determining which of them ought to preponderate. When objections are raised against the justness of a particular inference, it may be vindicated by reasoning. Reasoning may be employed for investigating the general principles of belief in matters of fact, for giving an account how we come to yield to these principles,  
for

for explaining the theory of evidence, and for showing that our conclusion, in a particular instance, is agreeable to that theory, and supported by it. But it is by no means necessary that a person enter into all these reasonings, in order to his obtaining conviction in any case. If evidence be presented suitable to the case, it will beget conviction, tho' we attend not to any of these sorts of reasoning, tho' we have never reflected how we come to be convinced, tho' we be not aware of all the objections which may be raised against the sufficiency of the evidence, tho' we be not able to answer them all particularly, if they were proposed to us. It is enough that the evidence be in its nature fit for operating on the human understanding: then conviction will arise spontaneously on the exhibition of it. This holds with respect to all subjects. Metaphysical acuteness

acuteness hath raised several objections against the certainty of mathematical evidence. Is it not, nevertheless, sufficient for convincing a man, that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, to make him acquainted with the ordinary demonstration of that proposition? Is not the conviction produced in this way, perfectly rational? Will any person pretend, that it is moreover necessary, to inform him of all the metaphysical difficulties, and to obviate them, before he can reasonably yield to the force of the demonstration? Every man is fully satisfied, that bread will nourish him, that arsenic will poison him, by simply reflecting that these substances have uniformly produced these effects, in all former trials. Would you think it necessary for promoting his conviction in this case, or for rendering it rational, first to inform him of all the doubts which

which



which may be raised concerning the certainty, that the future course of nature will be similar to the past, or that bodies having the same sensible qualities, have also the same powers and virtues; and then to remove these doubts, and to prove that they ought not to obstruct his belief? Or would the drawing out of the argument from experience, in this philosophical form, render the belief of an ordinary man, either firmer or more rational than it was before? To perceive evidence, is one thing; to account for evidence, is quite a different thing: the former only is necessary for conviction. In like manner, to propose evidence proper in a particular case, is totally different from laying down a theory of evidence, or from giving an abstract proof of the sufficiency of it, or an explication of the manner in which it works conviction: the former is all that is fit, or necessary,

fary, in addressing the bulk of mankind on any subject. Our Saviour and his apostles addressed mankind in that very manner. They wrought miracles, for instance, and cited prophecies, in proof of their mission. If these be at all evidences of a divine mission, they are such evidences, that the simple exhibition of them is sufficient for producing conviction. It must be remembered, that these evidences do not appear to us in the very same light, as they did to those to whom the gospel was originally proposed. In order to judge what was sufficient for them, we must carefully distinguish their situation from our own; we must suppose ourselves placed in their circumstances. Whoever attends to the controversy concerning the truth of Christianity, will perceive that circumstances peculiar to us, have occasioned far the greatest part of the reasoning used on either side.

sider. On this account, though a variety of arguments may be necessary for convincing us of the truth of Christianity, it by no means follows, that the same arguments were necessary for their conviction, to whom our Saviour and his apostles spoke. With respect to them, there was scarce even scope for reasoning. Almost all the reasonings, for instance, which have been introduced concerning the proof from prophecy, are employed in showing, that the prophecies of the Old Testament were intended of the Messiah. Ought our Saviour to have entered into these reasonings, in preaching to the Jews? To us, they may be necessary: but to them, they would have been superfluous: they were persuaded already that these prophecies related to the Messiah; if they were really fulfilled in Jesus, the fulfilment would be perceived whenever they were atten-

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tively compared with the correspondent events ; a simple appeal to the predictions, was sufficient for exciting their attention. Our reasonings concerning miracles likewise, are employed chiefly in proving, that the works ascribed to Christ and his apostles, were really done by them: in the first publication of the gospel, there was no room for these reasonings ; if the works were at all done, they saw them with their eyes. No person who is fully persuaded, that the extraordinary facts recorded in the gospel, really happened, will hesitate to pronounce them miraculous ; but the sight of them could not fail to strike the mind more vigorously, than any conception of them which we can form by the force of imagination ; and, by reason of the superior strength and vivacity of their impression, they who saw them, would pronounce them miraculous, more quickly and confidently

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ly than we do. Besides, the scruples which have been moved on this head, arise from suppositions, that we may be ignorant of some circumstances of these facts, necessary for determining their real nature: having only a relation of them, we may find room for doubts, and disputes, and reasonings; but they could find none; they were eye-witnesses of the facts with all their real circumstances; if these did render them plainly miraculous, they needed no arguments to prove that they did, they must perceive it by their own senses; if these circumstances did leave the miracle equivocal, no arguments could prove that they did not. We may add, that they to whom our Saviour and his apostles proposed the evidences of their mission without reasoning, allowed miracles to be a proof of a divine mission; these teachers had not this conviction to produce by argumentation;

tion ; they found their hearers already in possession of it, and had nothing to do but to lay hold of it by working miracles. If then it be supposed, that the gospel really had the evidences alledged, and that these evidences are in their nature proper proofs of a revelation, it is certain, that the bare exhibition of them was originally sufficient: there was no need of refined reasonings, or subtle deductions: the manner of proposing them is liable to no exception. If there be any defect, it must ly either in this, that the gospel was not really attended with the evidences alledged; or in this, that these evidences, supposing them real, are not proper or sufficient proofs of a revelation: let either of these be evinced, if it can be; but still the arguments urged, will strike only at the *matter* of the evidence, not at the *manner* in which it was proposed.

It

It is almost only inattention to the nature of that evidence by which the gospel is supported, that bestows any plausibility on the assertion, that the first publication of the gospel was in a manner unfit for producing a rational conviction of its truth, or on the topics which are urged in proof of that assertion. It has been urged, for instance, that a ready assent to the gospel was demanded; that no time was allowed for doubt or deliberation; and that therefore a *rational* assent neither was expected, nor was possible\*. There is here a gross misrepresentation of the matter of fact: but, tho' there were none, the argument would avail little: the evidence offered for the gospel, was not intricate reasoning in proof of each of its doctrines separately, which would have required long time for examination:

\* Christianity not founded on argument, page 38, &c.

examination : miracles were wrought, and led them to conclude, at one step, the divine mission of those who wrought them, and consequently the truth of all the doctrines which they delivered in the name of God. It has been observed with the same view, that a ready acquiescence was greatly approved, but could not admit deliberate examination \*. But supposing the evidence offered, such in its own nature as to require no long examination, as to be fit to work immediate conviction in those to whom it was exhibited, was it not really commendable to attend to it without prejudice, and to yield to it readily? It might be perceived in an instant: and a captious caviller, who will raise thousands of difficulties in the plainest case, is not a very approveable character. We are apt to regard nicety in admitting evidence, and scrupulosity in canvassing every possible difficulty

\* Ibid. page 37.



culty attending it, as a mark of superior understanding, and to represent an assent yielded without this, as on that account irrational. But this decision is not altogether just. What renders our assent rational in any case, is its being yielded to real and proper evidence, not our being acquainted with the foundations of that evidence, or with all the objections that may be raised against it. Assent is irrational only when it is yielded to improper evidence, not when it is yielded readily and at once to such as is proper. Its being yielded readily, is a sign of a sound understanding: its being withheld till the evidence has been enforced by a multitude of arguments, and cleared from a multitude of cavils, is truly a symptom of a diseased understanding. It is when the stomach digests wholesome food easily, by its own force, that it is sound and strong: it is distempered,

ed, when it cannot digest it without artificial preparations and assistances. We dread the imputation of credulity: but incredulity is as truly an intellectual weakness. To be imposed upon by insufficient evidence, shows a defect in understanding; but to reject sufficient evidence, or to yield to it with difficulty, shows a defect equally great and real, tho' not so universally acknowledged. No doubt, a talent for raising difficulties and objections, and contriving ingenious solutions of them, shows acuteness: but it is a species of acuteness which, if it be indulged, destroys true strength of understanding; for this consists in the ability to distinguish sufficient from insufficient evidence, quickly, and without any more arguments than the nature of the case renders absolutely necessary. If we could perceive evidence on all subjects by simple intuition, without any arguments,

ments, our understanding would be much more perfect than it is: it is its imperfection, that renders reasoning at all necessary for our perceiving evidence, or being convinced by it. When natural evidence is presented, it is always an imbecillity of understanding, that renders subtle reasoning necessary for its operating on the mind: the greater real strength of understanding a person possesses, the less reasoning will be necessary for bringing him to assent. When men are backward to assent to suitable evidence, it proceeds from a perversion, mistaken indeed for an improvement, of understanding, acquired by application to false knowledge, and fostered by intellectual vanity. The generality of mankind are not naturally subject to this perversion; it would be superfluous labour to multiply reasonings, after evidence has been exhibited to them. Our Saviour exhibited

exhibited evidence sufficient to extort their assent, if their natural principles of belief were not perverted: more was needless: laboured arguments concerning that evidence, might have been necessary medicines for the distempered understanding; but it was Christ's intention, in the cases now under consideration, to give food to the sound. Thus, the manner in which the evidences of the gospel were originally proposed, was altogether sufficient for the conviction of those in addressing whom it was used: it therefore affords no presumption against the truth of Christianity.

It even affords strong presumptions for it. A presumption of its truth arises even from what has been already said. If the evidence of the gospel was such, that the bare exhibition of it, without arguments, was sufficient for  
conviction,

conviction, this alone may lead us to favourable sentiments of the gospel; for this could proceed only from the *strength* of its evidence. The strongest evidence, in every kind, is that which operates most immediately on the understanding: it is when evidence is weak or doubtful, that much reasoning is necessary for making its force to be perceived. A full proof from experience not only produces assurance, but also produces it in an instant: probability produces only opinion, and produces not even that without some deliberation and reasoning; and the weaker the probability is, the longer and more intricate is the reasoning by which it may be determined, whether it ought to produce assent, or not. Had the evidence of the gospel been weak, it could not have produced conviction, without the need of reasoning: it was only its being strong and clear, that rendered

rendered the simple exhibition of it sufficient. The strength of that evidence is perceived by the direct view of it: but the circumstance now considered, presents a new indication of its strength, which is discerned by reflection, and adds assurance to the direct perception of it, and consequently to the belief of the gospel. This presumption rests indeed on the supposition, that the evidence of the gospel, is in its nature sufficient for begetting conviction: to all, however, who admit this supposition, it will be an additional argument for the truth of the gospel; it will have real force with every Christian who attends to it, and will serve to confirm his faith. But it may be thought, that it can have no weight with infidels. It cannot, we acknowledge, have the same weight with them as with Christians: but even with them, it ought to have some weight. They  
will

will not allow, that the evidences of the gospel are in their nature sufficient grounds of belief: but they cannot deny, that they did actually prevail on many to believe; and it is certain that they were originally merely exhibited; the exhibition of them, therefore, was in fact sufficient for working conviction in many. This is an undeniable presumption, that its evidence was very strong. Let all reasonable allowances be made for the credulity of mankind, let it be owned, that they have often believed without sufficient evidence, yea without any real evidence at all: yet this never happens, but it may be accounted for; slender evidence is studiously fet off by specious reasonings, men are artificially diverted from attending to the want of evidence, some method is used for giving the appearance of evidence where there is none, or for giving an appearance of greater evidence

evidence than there really is. But in the original proposal of the gospel, there was nothing of this kind. All that was done was, simply to present the evidences of the gospel, naked and unadorned. Is it possible that this method could have succeeded, if there had been no real evidence? Must not the defect have been quickly perceived, when no means at all were employed to conceal it? If the evidence had not been very strong, could it in this way have been effectual? Is there any thing that can account for the original reception of Christianity, except the strength and fulness of its evidence? There are very certain truths, which have failed of obtaining belief, because their evidence has been only proposed, not fully urged, or particularly illustrated: but there never was a falsehood successfully inculcated by a bare exhibition of pretended evidence, without any art or  
pains



pains employed for colouring the defect, and imposing on the understanding. Since a simple exhibition, therefore, of the evidences of the gospel, did confessedly bring multitudes to the belief of it, this is undoubtedly a strong presumption of its truth.

Further, the method in which our Saviour and his apostles proposed the evidences of the gospel, was not only *sufficient* for bringing men to believe the gospel: it was the *fittest* for this purpose. The more simply evidence can be, in any case, proposed, consistently with clearness, the more readily it will produce conviction: nice reasonings, if they be not absolutely necessary, only burden the evidence, and perplex the understanding. With respect to mathematical truths, the evidence of which can be rendered perceptible only by a chain of reasoning, the more minutely the demonstration is pursued,

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the fewer the steps omitted, the evidence generally strikes the more easily, and is the more irresistible. But even here, there are certain limits: a demonstration may be drawn out so minutely as to weaken the conviction; the steps may be rendered so many, that the difficulty of retaining them, overbalances the effect of the clearness with which the connexion of ideas is perceived in each separate step. It is certainly in learning those mathematical truths which require the longest series of steps in a demonstration of them, that the generality find the greatest difficulty. Thus, even in subjects which belong to its proper province, reasoning may be carried to a degree of precision which obstructs its end, and obscures the evidence. This will happen still more readily in matters of fact, which we are naturally formed for inferring, without a long chain

chain of reasoning, from the simple view of what affords evidence for them. In delivering a science, and that too to studious persons, it is justly reckoned a method improper for producing conviction, to observe every difficulty or objection, and to confute it particularly, as you go along. Few will dispute the propriety of the censure which Bacon passes on the scholastics, for pursuing this very method. "The manner amongst them was this, says he; upon every particular position or assertion, to frame objections, and to those objections solutions; which solutions were for the most part not confutations, but distinctions: whereas indeed the strength of all sciences is, as the strength of the old man's faggot, in the band. For the harmony of a science supporting each part the other, is and ought to be the true and brief confutation and suppression of all the

finaller fort of objections. But, on the other side, if you take out every axiom, as the sticks of the faggot, one by one, you may quarrel with them, and bend them, and break them at your pleasure: so that, as was said of Seneca, *Verborum minutiis rerum frangit pondera*; so a man may truly say of the schoolmen, *Questionum minutiis scientiarum frangunt soliditatem*. For were it not better for a man in a fair room, to set up one great light, or branching candlestick of lights, than to go about with a small watch-candle into every corner? And such is their method, that rests not so much upon evidence of truth proved by arguments, authorities, similitudes, examples, as upon particular confutations and solutions of every scruple, cavillation, and objection; breeding for the most part one question, as fast as it solveth another; even as in the former resemblance, when you carry  
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the light into one corner, you darken the rest \*.” It is the very method recommended by this great philosopher, that Jesus took in proposing the evidences of his religion: The representation here given of the contrary method, is, with little variation, applicable to that which infidels affect to think it reasonable, that he should have taken. This method would be improper even in delivering a science; but it would have been much more improper in laying down the evidences of the Christian religion. This religion, it must be remembered, was intended, not for the entertainment of the speculative, but for the use of the whole of mankind: the properest manner, therefore, of proposing its evidences, was that which was fittest for the conviction of the bulk of mankind; and what was fittest for this purpose, there  
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\* Advancement of learning, Book 1.

is little difficulty in determining. Propose to an ordinary man, evidence really suited to the nature of the subject, and to the principles of human understanding; he assents without hesitation. Inform him of all the exceptions to which that evidence is liable; prove that these exceptions are not sufficient to destroy its force; ascertain its precise degree of strength; point out its foundation in human nature; explain the manner in which it produces belief: he cannot understand you, he is bewildered; if he continues to be convinced, it is owing to your first simple representation of the evidence, not to your subsequent refinements; these tend rather to make him lose sight of the point which ought to be believed. All men are formed capable of being convinced by real evidence; but all men are not capable of reflecting on the manner in which their conviction

viction is wrought, or of understanding the theory of evidence: to attempt to teach them this, in order to their conviction in a particular instance, is not only unnecessary, but improper also; with respect to the generality of mankind, it in no degree promotes the end, it answers no purpose at all. In any ordinary case, every sensible man would chuse the former method, as the only proper one. If you want to convince a person of the probability of any future event, you will naturally mention the similar past events from which it derives its probability. You will not surely think it necessary or proper, to explain the foundation of our believing that the future will resemble the past, to prove the stability of the laws of nature, or to enlarge on the other topics which are very properly discussed in philosophical speculations concerning the nature of our reasonings

sonings from experience. The absurdity of taking this method, would be perceived at one glance. If by the former method you fail of convincing a plain man, you shall in vain hope to accomplish it by having recourse to the latter. That is indeed the method which is always employed by ordinary men, and which succeeds best with them: nay, it is constantly employed even by the most subtle logicians, not only in ordinary life, but in all cases of science where their logical principles are not directly in their view; and it is a method so perfectly adapted to the human understanding, that it often produces ready and unreserved assent in those whose logical principles would, by being recollected, tend to suggest objections and create doubts. Reasoning of a simpler kind than what we have described, is sometimes employed in proving matters of fact. When the  
evidence



evidence is only probable in a slight degree, there must be an induction of many circumstances, and many exceptions must be removed, before it can at all appear: but so unfit are reasonings of any considerable length or intricacy, for convincing the generality, that they can scarce enter into subjects of this kind. When multitudes of probabilities must be accurately balanced against their contraries, it is almost impossible to bring the generality to conceive any evidence, or to form any opinion in the case. Reasoning of all the kinds which have been mentioned, has in course of time been unavoidably introduced into the defence of Christianity: When unbelievers attempted to show that Christianity is improbable, it then became necessary to collect and estimate, both the circumstances from which its proof arises, and those which are supposed to be contradictory;

contradictory; when they deduced objections from abstract theories of evidence, it became necessary to answer them, by arguments arising likewise from a just theory of evidence. But in originally proving the truth of the gospel, this would have been absolutely unfit, because by no means adapted to the conviction of the generality of mankind. Jesus chose the properest, nay the only proper method. He simply proposed the evidences of the gospel as they were; he reasoned not concerning their force; he did not search out every difficulty which a captious spirit might lead men to apprehend in them, and give a particular answer to it. The method which he used, is the fittest method for leading mankind to believe the gospel; the contrary method would have been absolutely improper. In this manner proposed, the evidence of the gospel would most effectually

fectually produce belief, if it was real and suited to human nature: if it was not fit to produce belief when thus proposed, no reasoning could enable it to produce it in the bulk of mankind. Lay before an ordinary man, the evidences of the gospel, in a plain manner; if he be not convinced by this, it will be to little purpose, to endeavour to convince him by a subtle discussion of their force. To be convinced by the former, requires only his being a man; to gain conviction by the latter, requires that he should have moreover become a philosopher. The latter manner may give greater entertainment to the curious; but the former is the best and shortest way to conviction. It hath been said, with a design to depreciate the gospel, that “the apostles  
 “knew nothing of reasoning, and  
 “would have been easily entangled in  
 “a syllogism\*.” Be it so. But is not  
 this

\* Christianity not founded on argument, p. 37.

this true of the generality of mankind, as well as of the apostles? Intricate reasoning would, therefore, have been improper in proving a religion intended for the generality. Our Saviour's manner was such as enabled unlearned apostles, to address the unlearned in a way the fittest possible for producing conviction. If the evidences of the gospel are sufficient for conciliating belief, attention to the manner of proposing them, will naturally strengthen that belief, for it is the best manner that could have been chosen. God has adapted the evidence of the gospel to the powers of the generality: Christ has proposed it in a manner suited to its nature, and to their apprehensions: by this the gospel is declared, not obscurely, to be the offspring of the same wisdom which fixed the human constitution.

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It is not the only recommendation of our Saviour's manner, that it is the properest for producing conviction, and thus making evidence to answer its end. This manner is, likewise, most suitable to the character of Jesus as a divine teacher. It forms a striking contrast to the manner of impostors: it sets Jesus in direct opposition to those who have attempted to deceive mankind into the belief of false religions. Impostors studiously magnify very slender evidence: they can produce no stronger; and therefore they labour to persuade men, by every art, that what they have produced, is considerable. We would naturally expect, that a teacher really sent from God, should on the contrary give evidence of his mission, fit in its own nature for producing belief; and that, conscious of its inherent strength, he should propose it without show. In Mahomet

we find the former manner, in Christ, the latter, in perfection. Mahomet was able to produce but very lame credentials; and he endeavoured to give them weight by confident assertions. He rested his credit almost entirely on the excellence of the Alcoran; he left not men to judge of this for themselves: to procure an acknowledgment of its excellence, he made the most pompous encomiums on its perfection. He ventured not to work open miracles in confirmation of his mission: to supply this defect, he boasted of many secret miracles wrought for him, of which there were no witnesses, which therefore could be no evidence at all of his pretensions, but needed evidence in order to gain credit to themselves: and having, in a single instance, done what he imagined might be magnified into a miracle, he repeatedly gloried in this, and used all his art to exaggerate

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rate it. He laid claim, in the most ostentatious manner, to the testimonies of former prophets, not one of which however he was able to produce\*. Is not this very manner of supporting his claim, a mark of imposture, far from being equivocal? Can we avoid applying on this occasion, what Jesus said to the Jews: *If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true*†? He who, like Mahomet, requires men to believe his mission from God, wholly on his own testimony, without giving them evidence of it, is plainly an impostor. How naturally mankind run into this judgment, we may perceive by recollecting the slight occasion on which the pharisees said to Christ, *Thou bearest record of thy self; thy*  
*record*

\* The imperfection of the evidence of Mahomet's mission, might afford room for many remarks; but at present we speak only of the *manner* in which he urged that evidence.

† John v. 31. chap. vii. 18.

*record is not true*\*. It was a just sentiment applied improperly; their being so forward to adopt it, when sufficient occasion was not given, proves that it would have been very natural, if there had been an occasion. In every respect the manner of Jesus, already described, is perfectly the reverse of Mahomet's. He gave real and strong evidences of his mission; and he was not studious to set them off: he spoke no more of them than was absolutely necessary for showing, that he intended they should answer this very purpose of proving his mission: he claimed only what he fully proved to belong to him: he avowed his real character, only so far as was necessary for the instruction of his hearers: he often even declined asserting that he was the Christ, and wanted that they should collect it from what they saw and heard. Do we not  
here

\* John viii. 13.



here perceive the true features of a divine mission? When a man discovers too great anxiety to gain credit, he is naturally suspected of an intention to deceive: one who is conscious of the goodness of his cause, and designs not to bias the judgment, does not assert on every occasion the strength of his arguments; he proposes them, and leaves them to show their own strength. Simplicity of manner is always an evidence of truth; and Jesus possessed it in the highest degree.

Christ's manner of proving his mission, shows that he was conscious of his title to the character which he claimed, and secure of the sufficiency of the evidence which he gave. A person who knows that he intends to deceive, is naturally suspicious, careful to set off his arguments by every artifice, ready to foresee objections, and constantly solicitous to guard against them. This

is discernible in almost every chapter of the Alcoran. This would have been the practice of Jesus, if he had been an impostor: and there can be little doubt, that the same abilities which were adequate to the invention of such a system as the Christian, would have been sufficient for acting this part with great plausibility. But the practice both of Jesus, and of his apostles, is perfectly the reverse: *he* shows no artifice, no forwardness to obviate every difficulty; and *they* relate things as they knew them to be, without any concern about the consequences, without any anxiety to conceal such circumstances, or to avoid such representations, as seemed even to give a handle for objections. This conduct bears the strongest marks of that honest confidence which springs only from a consciousness of integrity, and is not consistent with an intention to deceive. It  
proves

proves these persons to be what they said they were.

Simplicity of manner is an indication, likewise, of genuine dignity. The Son of God appearing in this world, could not but disdain a laboured and pompous display of the evidences of his mission. This suits only a person who is prompted by ambition to *pretend*, that he is a divine messenger. “ There is no majesty at all, says  
 “ a great writer \*, in the laws of the  
 “ lower empire; princes are made to  
 “ speak like rhetoricians. When the  
 “ style of laws is tumid, they are look-  
 “ ed upon only as a work of parade  
 “ and ostentation.” The observation is judicious; and it is as applicable to parade of every kind, as to the parade of style. If parade and ostentation be unsuitable to the majesty of princes, and of human laws, it is much more

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unsuitable

\* Montesquieu, l'Esprit des Loix, Liv. 29. chap. 16.

unfuitable to a divine messenger, and a divine law. Mahomet affected dignity; but it was of a false kind: he refused what was absolutely incumbent upon him, he deigned not to give evidence of his mission: but, at the same time, he made an ostentation of evidence, which showed a littleness of mind, inconsistent with the character which he assumed: his dignity ought to have appeared in disdaining this; being misplaced as it was, it proclaimed itself to be only pride, put on purposely to hide the want of evidence. Jesus, on the contrary, supported the high character which he claimed, with natural and genuine dignity: he readily gave evidence; he disdained only to be ostentatious of it. *Truly this was the son of God\**! The simplicity of his manner is one internal evidence, that the dignity which he claimed, did belong

\* Matth. xxvii. 54.

long to him: it was an obvious expression of it.

THUS we have endeavoured to ascertain the manner in which the evidences of the gospel were originally proposed: that manner appeared, on a superficial view, to be exceptionable; it was therefore fit to enquire into its propriety. It has been found, on examination, to be absolutely unexceptionable, and consequently to yield no presumption against the truth of Christianity. It has moreover been found to contain, in several ways, real presumptions for the truth of Christianity. Suppose this religion true, and its evidences sufficient; then the manner in which these evidences were proposed, is in every respect the best and fittest possible: but suppose the contrary, and it must appear surprising that ever that manner should have been adopted,  
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and absolutely impossible that ever it could have succeeded. The truth of Christianity is the only hypothesis on which the original manner of proposing its evidences, can be accounted for : this manner, therefore, is by itself one separate and entire argument for the truth of that religion.

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## SECTION IV.

*The manner in which the EVIDENCES of CHRISTIANITY were proposed by Christ and his apostles, in consequence of objections raised against them.*

**A**S it is only in *appearance* that the manner of proposing the evidences of the gospel, is liable to exception; so it is only the manner in which they were *originally* proposed, that is exceptionable so much as in appearance. The vices and the prejudices of the Jews led them to form objections against these evidences, very early in our Saviour's ministry, and very frequently through the course of it. In addressing the persons who formed these objections, or listened to them,  
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our Saviour departed from his ordinary method of simply exhibiting evidence: he illustrated the evidence which he had given, he urged it, he returned direct answers to their cavils. On similar occasions, his apostles had recourse to a similar method. The objections raised were either intended to invalidate the truth of his mission in general, or urged directly against some one evidence of it. But we shall perhaps obtain the distinctest view of the manner which Christ and his apostles adopted, in consequence of opposition, by considering those objections together, which gave occasion to their enforcing the same proof of Christianity, or to their urging its truth and divine original in the same way.

THOUGH Jesus was very sparing in asserting his mission, and claiming the high character which belonged to him,  
when



when men showed no disposition to resist the evidence by which he supported it; yet, on occasion of opposition, he often avowed it in very peremptory and explicit terms; he affirmed that he was sent by God, called God his Father, and himself the Son of God, asserted the necessity of believing him, and warned men of the danger of rejecting him. When Nicodemus showed himself dissatisfied with his doctrine, he asserted his authority with the greatest boldness: *Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness: And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven\**: and he gave the plainest warning of the danger of not receiving his religion; *He that believeth not, is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name*

\* John iii. 11, 13.

*name of the only begotten Son of God*\*. When the Jews took exceptions against the miracle which he had performed in healing the infirm man, at the pool of Bethesda, he readily avowed his high character, calling God his Father, and saying, *What things soever the Father doth, these also doth the Son likewise, for the Father loveth the Son, and showeth him all things that himself doth* † : he told them expressly that the Father had sent him ‡ ; and intimated, that it was criminal not to believe him ||. When their prejudices led them to misunderstand what he meant by the *meat which endureth unto everlasting life* ; he immediately affirmed, that *God had sent him*, and that it was the will of God, that they should believe on him:\*\* And  
when,

\* John iii. 18.

† Chap. v. 17, 19, 20.

‡ Ver. 36, 37, 43.

|| Ver. 38, 45, 46.

\*\* Chap. vi. 29.

when, despising all the evidences which he had already given of his mission, they asked a sign, and heaped one exception on another, he repeatedly asserted, that he came down from heaven, and was sent by God\* ; and found fault with them for not believing him †. The Pharisees accused him of vain-glorious boasting, sufficient to prove him an impostor, for having said, *I am the light of the world*: He persisted in his claim ; he expressly affirmed that he was *not of this world*, that he was *from above*, that he *proceeded forth*, and *came from God*, and was *sent by him* ‡ ; and assured them that they were unreasonable in rejecting him, and exposed themselves to punishment by it ||. Many other instances might be produced of his being led by the  
opposition

\* John vi. 33, 39, 40, 44, 47.

† Ver. 36, 64.

‡ Chap. viii. 16, 18, 23, 26, 29, 42.

|| Ver. 24, 45, 46.

opposition of the Jews, to assert his mission, in the most express terms, and in every proper manner. I shall only add, that their prejudices, mistakes, and objections, led him on several occasions, either directly to acknowledge and assert, or sufficiently to indicate that he was the Christ or Messiah. The different opinions which, by the account of the apostles, men entertained concerning him, gave occasion to Peter's confession of this, and to Jesus's explicit approbation of it\*. Some of the Jews gave this reason, why they did not believe him to be the Messiah; *We know this man, whence he is; but when Christ cometh, no man knoweth whence he is.* His answer plainly implies that he claimed the character: *Then cried Jesus in the temple as he taught, saying, Ye both know me, and ye know whence I am: and I am*  
*not*

\* Matth. xvi. 13,—17. Mark viii. 28,—30. Luke ix. 19,—21.

*not come of myself, but he that sent me is true, whom ye know not : but I know him, for I am from him, and he hath sent me\**.

At the feast of the dedication, when the Jews traduced him as a possessed person and a lunatic, and showed that they did not yet own his pretensions, by saying, *How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly ;* he not only allowed that he was the Christ, but intimated likewise, that he had given sufficient proof of it, and that their unbelief proceeded not from want of evidence ; *Jesus answered them, I told you, and ye believed not : the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me : but ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep †.*

THE internal evidence of Christianity, arises from its excellence: Jesus always

\* John vii. 27,—29.

† Chap. x. 24,—26.

ways exhibited this evidence; all that he taught, had striking characters of perfection. But, notwithstanding the absolute purity of his doctrine, the Jews frequently found fault with it: and their cavils, sometimes with respect to this, and sometimes too with respect to other topics, led him to illustrate, to vindicate, and to urge, the excellence of the gospel. Even when he answered them in the simplest manner, they gave him occasion to enlarge more fully and clearly on particular points, than he had done before; to rectify mistakes; by the confutation of them to instil juster principles; and thus to give a more ample exhibition of internal evidence, to render the excellence of his religion more conspicuous. Sometimes their objections proceeded merely from their mistaking his meaning. He took occasion from them to deliver his sentiments  
more

more plainly; and thus taught doctrine, the excellence of which was more obvious, and therefore fitter for leading them to conclude of themselves, that it was divine. When he asserted, that he was the *bread of life*, and told them, that he would give them his *flesh for meat*, and that they must *eat his flesh and drink his blood*\*, they foolishly understood his words in a literal sense, and in this misapprehension were greatly offended at his doctrine †. The metaphor was perfectly familiar to them; therefore he thought it not necessary to relinquish it: but he abundantly illustrated his meaning, tho' he continued to use the same figurative terms ‡; he told them plainly, that by eating and drinking he intended believing on him ||; he informed them that his discourse

\* John vi. 35, 48, 50, 51, 53,—58.

† Ver. 41, 52, 60.

‡ Ver. 49,—58.

|| Ver. 35, 40, 47, 64.

course was figurative throughout\* ; and he gave them a key to it, by foretelling his ascension into heaven †, which might have naturally led them to conceive his meaning, which insinuated at once the real nature of his kingdom, and which would be an illustrious evidence of his having come from heaven, and that both in itself, and by being the accomplishment of his predictions. On one occasion, when he was speaking of his death, and his subsequent exaltation, they imagined that he intended to kill himself. He corrected their mistake, and said all that was necessary for their comprehending his true meaning; he pointed out the source of their mistake, he intimated that he came from heaven, that he was sent by God, and even that he was the Messiah, whom it was dangerous to reject; he informed

them

\* John vi. 63.

† Ver. 62.



them pretty plainly of his crucifixion, than which nothing could have a stronger tendency to rectify their wrong opinion of a temporal Messiah; and all this in such a way, that *many believed on him* \*.

The Jews were inveterately tainted with the expectation of a temporal Messiah. This was often the immediate source, or the remote cause of their mistakes of his meaning; what he said, was in its obvious sense contradictory to this expectation: In correcting their mistakes, therefore, in the instances already remarked, he generally gave some hints of the real character and office of the Messiah. Often likewise, when they understood his meaning, the same prejudice hindered them from perceiving the excellence of his doctrine, or even led them to raise objections against it, as inconsistent with

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\* John viii. 21, — 30.

what they took it for granted, was the truth. In both cafes, Chrift took an opportunity from their exceptions, to infinuate, in different ways, juft sentiments of the fpiritual nature, and the feveral real circumftances of his kingdom. I fhall give a few inftances more. He faid in the very beginning of his miniftry, *Except a man be born again, he cannot fee the kingdom of God*\*. Nicodemus would have readily underftood the expreffion, if it had been ufed of a heathen converted to Judaifm. But he imagined that it was the office of the Mefſiah, to bring all the world to embrace the religion of Moſes, not to call the Jews themſelves to embrace a new religion; and he was ſo much biaſſed by the imagination, that he could not at all comprehend the ſenſe of the maxim, but answered, *How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the ſecond*

\* John iii. 3.

*cond time into his mother's womb, and be born*\*? Our Saviour, in return, not only explained the doctrine which had given rise to the question, by telling him very plainly, that he meant a spiritual, not a natural birth, and that the latter, tho' it were possible, could have no fitness for answering the end of which he spoke†; but also informed him, that he had in view conversion to a religion different from Judaism, and explained the nature and design of the whole gospel, in such a way that its conformity to the Old Testament, and its intrinsic excellence, appeared very strikingly, and produced full conviction in Nicodemus‡. His own disciples were, for a long time, deeply tinctured with the same prejudices as the rest of the Jews, and were led by them to take exceptions on particular occasions. When he first began to inform them of his approaching sufferings

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\* John iii. 4.    † Ver. 5, 6.    ‡ Ver. 7, —21.

and death, they were, in respect of these, perfect unbelievers; and Peter was so much offended, that he blamed his master in a very indecent manner. On this occasion, Christ not only rebuked Peter, but taught them all, that the nature of his undertaking was very different from what they imagined it to be, and that the situation of his disciples would be quite unlike to what they expected; and strongly inculcated the duties which that situation would require\*. By reason of the same mistaken notion of a temporal kingdom, preferment was asked of Jesus, for the two sons of Zebedee. On this occasion too, he intimated the true nature of his kingdom; and likewise delivered the most excellent instructions, dissuading them from pride in all its forms, and teaching them that true

\* Matth. xvi. 21,—28. Mark viii. 31,—38. Luke ix. 22,—27.

true greatness consists only in genuine goodness, usefulness, and humility\*. The excellence of some of his documents, on these and other occasions, will be easily perceived: but it is not perhaps unnecessary to remark, that, whenever he rectified their false notions of the Messiah, and declared the true nature of his kingdom, he by this added great force to the argument for the truth of Christianity, drawn from its excellence. Had the kingdom of the Messiah been such as the Jews conceived it to be, it would have contained no internal characters of divinity: it was a scheme scarce worthy of God. But the real scheme for the redemption of the world, to execute which the Messiah came, and to explain and publish which was the design of his gospel, was every way worthy of God, and bears

\* Matth. xx. 20,—28. Mark x. 35,—45. Luke xxii. 24,—27.

bears in its essential features, the strongest marks of divine contrivance. His apostles, as well as himself, had frequent occasions, by reason of the opposition which it met with, to enlarge upon this topic, and by doing so, to display the excellence of the gospel.

The excellence of doctrine is founded upon truth. No evidence can prove a doctrine to be from God, which plainly contradicts what we already know to be true. It was necessary, therefore, that our Saviour's doctrine should be consistent both with former revelations, and with the genuine dictates of reason. During our Saviour's own life, the real nature of the gospel was not so perfectly understood by the Jews, as to beget an opinion of its inconsistency, except perhaps in some minute particulars, with the law of Moses. They began, however, very soon

soon after his ascension, to suspect that the gospel was designed to overthrow the law: their accusation against Stephen, was, *We have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us\**. But when the Gentiles were admitted into the Christian church, without being subjected to the Jewish ceremonial, it was clearly perceived that the religion of Jesus was different from that of Moses. This was a capital objection of the unbelieving Jews: a considerable part of the apostolical writings has a reference to it. The apostles show, that, tho' Christianity be indeed different from Judaism, and does abrogate it, yet it is not inconsistent with it, in any sense that can affect the truth of either. The law was not intended to be perpetual; intimations were all along given, that it would be  
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\* Acts vi. 14.

in due time succeeded by the gospel. These are strictly connected as parts of the same great scheme: the law was the preparatory, the gospel, the ultimate dispensation; that was the shadow, this the substance; that was the type, this the antitype. By enlarging on these and similar topics, the apostles give, not only a full view of the nature of Christianity, but also juster conceptions of the nature of the law than the Jews had formerly; and they display the excellence of both. Sometimes the Jews found fault with our Saviour's doctrine, as inconsistent with the dictates of reason. A remarkable instance of this sort is recorded by the evangelists. When a paralytic man was brought to Christ at Capernaum, and let down by the roof of the house, he said to him, *Thy sins are forgiven thee.* The Scribes and Pharisees censured this expression as blasphemous, as implying



plying an invasion of the prerogative of God. Christ's answer is a satisfying vindication of his doctrine. He showed that the doctrine was true, because the very miracle which he had wrought, was a plain proof and exemplification of it\*. And when its truth was once established, the more extraordinary it was, the more strikingly it displayed the dignity of his character, the greatness of his undertaking, and the excellence of his gospel.

When the gospel came to be preached by the apostles to the Gentiles, they raised objections against it, which, though they were different in themselves, proceeded from causes similar to those which influenced the Jews in the instances just now mentioned. They had a high conceit of the anti-  
quity

\* Matth. ix. 2,—6. Mark ii. 3,—12. Luke v. 18,—25.

quity and extent of their own religion: it contained nothing which could directly lead them to expect, that an alteration would be made in it by a divine revelation: they therefore objected against Christianity, that it was an innovation, a *new doctrine, bringing strange things to their ears* \*. In answering this objection, the apostles delivered doctrine which had real excellence: they pointed out the falshood and absurdity of Paganism; they showed that, on account of this, it ought certainly to be abandoned, and that therefore it ought not to obstruct their receiving another religion, especially a religion so far superior as the Christian †.

When the Jews could find no fault with what our Saviour had already said, they often put questions to him, on purpose

\* Acts xvii. 19, 20.

Ver. 22, — 31.

purpose to lead him to utter such sentiments as were censurable, and might thus give them an opportunity of raising objections against his doctrine. On all these occasions he baffled their malice, by delivering doctrines so excellent as reflected new lustre on the truth of his religion. A lawyer came to him with an insidious intention to discover, whether he would teach any thing inconsistent with the law of Moses, and said, *What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* Jesus not only gave an answer with which he could find no fault, but explained the extent of our duty to others, so justly, and in a manner so wonderfully fit for touching the heart, as signally displayed his divine wisdom \*. The Pharisees asked him, with the like malicious intention, concerning the lawfulness of divorce. He proved the unlawfulness of this abuse, which

\* Luke x. 25,—37.

which, by reason of the love of pleasure, had become very general among them, in the most convincing manner ; from the original institution of marriage, acknowledged by themselves, and related in their own scriptures ; by assigning the true reason why Moses had given any permission to this practice in the law ; and by informing them that his gospel enjoined the strictest morality on this head \*. After he had entered publicly into Jerusalem, all his enemies, in concert, assaulted him with subtile questions. The Pharisees and the Herodians together, began with asking him, *Is it lawful to give tribute unto Cefar, or not?* secure that he would either expose himself to the resentment of the Roman Governor, by forbidding it, or appear to the people to renounce the character of the Messiah, by allowing it. But he showed his divine wisdom,

\* Matth. xix. 3,—9. Mark x. 2,—12.

wisdom, by giving such an answer as not only disappointed their designs, but also fixed the real bounds between their duty to God, and their duty to the Emperor, which did not at all interfere, except in their imagination, and reproved each of them for the extreme into which they were apt to run, and by which they both transgressed one of these duties, under colour of fulfilling the other: *and they could not take hold of his words before the people; and they marvelled at his answer, and held their peace\**. Next the Sadducees attacked him, by proposing an argument against a future state, which they thought was founded in the law, and which they reckoned unanswerable. Far from being perplexed by their subtlety, he showed at once that it had not the least degree of force, but proceeded altogether from

\* Matth. xxii. 15,—22. Mark xii. 13,—17. Luke xx. 20,—26.

from a mistake ; he gave a just conception of the nature of a future state, an important doctrine, concerning which men had always formerly run into absurdities ; and he showed that a future state was directly implied in the scriptures which the Sadducees themselves received ; *and when the multitude heard this, they were astonished at his doctrine\**. To make a farther trial, a Pharisee asked him, *Which is the first and great commandment ?* By his answer, he set aside all the superstitious determinations of the Scribes in favour of one ceremonial precept, or another ; he represented real piety and virtue as the substance of religion ; he took occasion, tho' the question did not render it absolutely necessary, to inculcate the love of our neighbour, as preferable to all duties, except love to God ; he thus  
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\* Matth. xxii. 23, — 33. Mark xii. 18, — 27. Luke xx. 27, — 38.

gave a noble summary of morality, which extorted the approbation of the Scribe who had proposed the question \*. In a word, whenever any persons endeavoured to entangle him, he showed such divine wisdom, that they found all their attempts to be in vain, and he delivered instructions so proper and useful, as heightened the excellence of his gospel.

The internal evidence of Christianity, arises not only from the excellence of its doctrine, but also from the perfection of Christ's character. The Jews often took exceptions, however, against his character, by blaming his behaviour, or the behaviour in which he allowed his disciples. They wanted to show, that no evidence could prove his claim, that it was unnecessary to examine or confute the evidences which he pretended to give, or so much as

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\* Matth. xxii. 35,—40. Mark xii. 28,—33.

to attend to them ; for his transgressing the law of God, rendered it plain that he was not sent from God, whatever plausible appearances of a mission he might exhibit. They were solicitous that men should argue thus : This man doth what God forbids ; therefore he cannot know the will of God, or be commissioned to reveal it : suppose his doctrine good, yet it cannot prove him to be from God, for his practice is bad ; if his doctrine be good, it is only in some respects, it is not uniformly good, for he himself doth, and he teacheth his disciples to do, some things that are wrong ; whatever signs he shows, they cannot evince that he is sent by God to discover his will, there must be some fallacy, for he is a sinner. The argument, it must be owned, would have had considerable force, if there had been only any just foundation for it ; a divine teacher of religion



gion must be supposed exempt from all errors in matters of religion. His answers to objections of this sort, were always at least a full vindication of the actions blamed, they therefore removed the objections, and left the internal evidence of the gospel unimpaired by them; they proved the innocence and sinless integrity of his life, which is an internal evidence of Christianity. The fault which they most frequently found with him, was, the transgression of the law of the Sabbath, according to their superstitious notions of it. *As he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath day, they watched him. And there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy: and Jesus said, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day? And they held their peace; and he took him, and healed him, and let him go; and answered them, saying, which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and*

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*will not straightway pull him out on the Sabbath day? The vindication was so complete, that they could not answer him again to these things\*.* But generally his vindication of the action blamed, was attended with such illustrations and sentiments as had great excellence, and were therefore new instances of internal evidence. When *he went thro' the corn fields on the Sabbath day, and his disciples were an hungred, and plucked the ears of corn, and did eat, rubbing them in their hands;* the Pharisees blamed him for permitting his disciples to do what was not lawful. He abundantly justified them, by the example of David, and by the practice of the priests, which the law itself authorized. He likewise inculcated in general the superior excellence of moral duties; he assured them, that God requires us, not to neglect works of mercy, tho' the performance

\* Luke xiv. 1,—6.

formance of them should interfere with the most sacred ceremonial institutions, but expressly declares, *I will have mercy, and not sacrifice.* He informed them, particularly, that the Sabbath was appointed for the advantage of man, and that therefore to hurt men by means of the observance of it, is directly to counteract its end\*. A doctrine so repugnant to all superstition, and which condemns it on principles so truly reasonable, and so universally applicable, is a conspicuous instance of the excellence of the Christian religion. This alone renders it wholly unreasonable to draw objections against this religion, from the positive duties which it enjoins, to charge it with any tendency to promote superstition, or once to compare it with those religions which have multiplied and extolled ce-

H 2 remonies.

\* Matth. xii. 1,——8. Mark ii. 23,——28. Luke vi. 1,——5.

remonies. On another Sabbath, when Christ had healed a man, in the synagogue, whose right hand was withered, and when the Pharisees charged him with a profanation of the Sabbath; he vindicated himself by showing that the occasion was far more urgent than many others which confessedly justified labour on the Sabbath; and he interwove with his vindication a striking and noble recommendation of beneficence\*. The ruler of the synagogue, on another Sabbath, expressed great indignation, because Christ had cured a woman who had been bowed down eighteen years: he repeated the same satisfying defence, and insinuated the same important recommendation †. It was on the Sabbath too that our Saviour cured a man, who had been lame thirty eight

\* Matth. xii. 9, — 13, Mark iii. 1, — 5. Luke vi. 6, — 10.

† Chap. xiii. 10, — 17.

eight years, at the pool of Bethesda. This miracle was performed in the most public manner, within the walls of Jerusalem itself, at the time of the passover, and it was attended with this particular circumstance, that he commanded the man whom he had healed, to carry his bed. The Jews expressed the greatest rage against Jesus, and were even intent on putting him to death, for authorizing such a profanation of the Sabbath. But he refuted their superstitious notion by the example of God himself, who, tho' the observance of the Sabbath was founded on his having rested from the works of creation on the seventh day, yet carried forward the works of his providence on that day, as well as on every other, for the benefit of mankind: *My Father worketh hitherto, and I work\**. As the circumstances attending this miracle, rendered

\* John v. 1, — 17.

rendered it very remarkable, the Jews recurred to their censures of it a considerable time after it was performed. On that occasion, he gave such a vindication of it from their own law, as not only was unanswerable, but also cast great light on the general nature of the Jewish ceremonial, and implied the superiority of humanity and good works to all ritual observances\*. On another Sabbath, Jesus cured a man who had been blind from his birth, by making a little clay with his spittle, putting it on the blind man's eyes, and commanding him to wash in the pool of Siloam†. From this miracle, the Pharisees argued expressly, *This man is not of God, because he keepeth not the Sabbath day*‡. Their objections gave him occasion to deliver a great variety of instructions,

\* John vii. 21, — 24.

† Chap. ix. 1, — 6.

‡ Ver. 16.

structions, which we need but read, in order to perceive that they bear plain marks of truth and excellence\*. The Jews accused Jesus of other crimes, besides the breach of the Sabbath; and that with the same view, to invalidate all the proofs of his mission together. They found fault with him, for instance, for keeping company with publicans and sinners. In showing that he was not blameable for this, he insinuated the true end of his coming, and nature of his office, inculcated the important maxim, *I will have mercy, and not sacrifice*, and asserted the superiority of moral virtue, particularly of benevolence, to ceremonial duties; and thus gave instructions which were both necessary and excellent †. They blamed him because he and his disciples did

\* John ix. 39, — x. 42.

† Matth. ix. 11, — 13. Mark ii. 16, 17. Luke v. 30, — 32.

did eat with unwashed hands, and by this transgressed the traditions of the elders. He not only evinced, in answer to them, that his conduct was faultless, because real impurity arises from the mind, not from the body; he also struck at the root of their superstitions, by proving that their traditions had no authority, nor could be a proper rule of action, since they not only multiplied insignificant precepts of human invention, but also gave countenance to the most unnatural vices, nay taught men how to perpetrate them under an appearance of piety, and therefore, instead of being a fence to the divine law, truly subverted it\*. In every instance, he in this manner proved his innocence; and in most instances he moreover delivered such sentiments, as made the excellence, and consequently the truth of his religion

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\* Matth. xv. 1, — 11. Mark vii. 1, — 16.



to shine forth with the brightest lustre. Their censures proceeded for the most part from superstition ; and his confutations of them were powerful antidotes against this abject spirit.

Thus, the objections of unbelievers led our Saviour and his apostles, to exhibit in the greatest perfection, that excellence which is an internal character of divinity. It led them further ; it led them to assert that the gospel is excellent, and to set its excellence in various lights. Thus, the doubts of Nicodemus, of which we took notice already, led Jesus to intimate the excellence of the gospel, by representing it as directly subservient to the eternal happiness of mankind, by affirming, that it was the design of his coming *that the world through him might be saved, and that whosoever believeth on him shall not perish, but have everlasting life\**. The  
cavils

\* John iii. 15.—18.

cavils of the Jews against his miraculous cure of the lame man, gave occasion to a similar assertion; *He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life\**. Their exceptions on another occasion, led him to expatiate on the same topic: *Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him: as the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father, so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me†.*

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\* John v. 24.

† Chap. vi. 35, 40, 47, 48, 50, 51, 54, 56, 57, 58.

When he was in the temple, some Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, asking his judgment in the case, and prepared to take advantage against him, whatever his determination were. But, having disconcerted their malice by his wisdom, and confounded them, he took occasion to assert the excellence of his office and doctrine: *I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life* \*. When the people, understanding one of his predictions of his own death, objected that this was inconsistent with the character of the Messiah, described in the Old Testament, Jesus claimed his proper dignity, and expressed the excellence of his gospel, under the same figure of light: *Yet a little while is the light with you: walk while you have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness, knoweth not whither he goeth:*  
*while*

\* John viii. 3;—12.

*while ye have the light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light\**. In the days of the apostles, both Jews and Greeks continued to oppose the gospel; *the Jews required a sign, and the Greeks sought after wisdom †*. The latter were greatly attached to the subtilties of their philosophy, and the pomp of their rhetoric; and they despised the gospel, because it contained no abstruse investigations or curious reasonings, because it inculcated only practical doctrines, which rested wholly on the authority of a revelation, and because it delivered them without studied eloquence. The apostle Paul owns the facts from which their objection is deduced; he acknowledges, that, if their notion of wisdom were just, the gospel would be *foolishness*; and that he preached it *not with wisdom of words, nor with excellence*

*of*

\* John xii. 32, — 35.

† 1 Cor. i. 22.

*of speech or of wisdom*\*. But he shows that the gospel had nevertheless real excellence; not of the kind which they desired, but of a far superior kind; that it effectually led men to the knowledge of the true God, tho' their boasted wisdom never could: *It pleased God, says he, by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe: We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews, a stumbling block; and unto the Greeks, foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God; because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men: Christ Jesus is of God made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: We speak wisdom among them that are perfect* †. In this representation of the excellence of Christianity, the apostle has an eye not on-

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\* 1 Cor. i. 17, 21, 25, 27. Chap. ii. 1.

† Chap. i. 21, 23, 24, 25, 30. Chap. ii. 6.

ly to the objection of the Greeks, but also to that of the Jews: and with a still directer view to them, he declares the gospel to be a clear discovery of what it was the principal excellence of the law to have pointed out obscurely: *We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the world unto our glory; which none of the princes of this world knew; for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory: but God hath revealed it unto us by his spirit\**. Thus, the apostle both asserts and proves that the gospel is excellent. The opposition of those, whom attachment to Judaism rendered *enemies of the cross of Christ*†, led the same apostle, on another occasion, to a strenuous assertion of the excellence of the gospel, and of its superiority to the law: *What things were gain to me, those*

\* 1. Cor. ii. 7, 8, 10.

† Phil. iii. 18.

*those I counted loss for Christ : yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord ; and I do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him\*.*

Our Saviour and his apostles were led by the objections of unbelievers to assert, not only that the gospel is excellent, but also that its excellence is a real evidence of its divinity. This is at least *implied* in some of the declarations, of which we have taken notice already : on some of the occasions too, which led to these declarations, this was urged pretty explicitly. Thus, in consequence of the objections which the Jews moved against Christ, for having called himself *the light of the world*, and of the exceptions which they took at some parts of his succeeding discourse, he urged the perfect purity of his doctrine and innocence of his life,

very

\* Phil. iii. 7, 8, 9.

very exprefsly, as an evidence of his miffion: *Because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not: which of you convinceth me of fin? And if I fay the truth, why do ye not believe me? He that is of God, beareth God's words\**. We have already mentioned the cenfures which the Jews paffed upon Jefus for having healed a lame man on the Sabbath: on occafion of them, he urged the excellence of his own character and conduct, as an argument for his miffion, in the parabolical difcourfe concerning the good fhepherd †. There is a remarkable inftance which has not yet been taken notice of. The Jews were greatly prejudiced againft Jefus on account of the meannefs of his birth and education; and they urged this as a reafon againft believing on him. *When he was come into his own country, he taught them in their fynagogue, and many hearing him were aftonifhed, and faid,*  
*Whence*

\* John viii. 45, 46, 47.

† Chap. x. 1, — 18.





confessed; that he could not have it in a natural way, was plain from the circumstances of which they took notice; the obvious conclusion was, the very contrary of what their prejudice suggested, that therefore he must have received it in a supernatural way. But Jesus did not urge this conclusion at that time. When a similar objection, however, was repeated, and urged very publicly in the temple, in a great concourse of people, at the passover of the year before he suffered, he drew this very conclusion, and urged the excellence of his doctrine as a strong proof of his divine mission. *The Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned. Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me: if any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself: he that speaketh of himself, seeketh his own glory; but*

but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him\*. He thus informed them, that the superior knowledge, which they saw that he possessed, and which appeared in his doctrine, and which they were certain he had had no opportunity of either learning from masters, or acquiring by his own study, ought to lead them to conclude that he had received it immediately from God, and to own that he was, as he asserted, a divine messenger. The excellence of his doctrine, he told them, directed them so plainly to this conclusion, that nothing but an impartial desire to find the truth and comply with it, was necessary for their arriving at it; for his doctrine was not calculated for promoting any of those ends which an impostor could be supposed to have in view, but was totally subservient to the ho-

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nour of God, and therefore bore plain marks of coming from him. We shewed formerly, how the apostle Paul asserts and evinces the excellence of the gospel, in opposition to the cavils both of Jews and Greeks: and we may now observe, that he at the same time urges its excellence as a proof of its divinity. This is indeed implied all along in his manner of expression. When he speaks of the gospel in the terms of their objections, he still intimates that it was of such a nature as showed it to be from God: *IT PLEASSED GOD by the foolishness preaching to save them that believe:\** if it wanted that sort of wisdom and power which they demanded, and might, on this account, be called in some sense foolishness and weakness; yet it was *the foolishness OF GOD, wiser than men, and the weakness OF GOD, stronger than men†.* He intimates that it appeared plainly  
to

\* 1 Cor. i. 21.

† Ver. 25.

to be of divine original, because, notwithstanding the seeming weakness of the means which it employed, it proved itself so truly excellent as to have accomplished a reformation in the world, with which all the effects produced by human wisdom, and by the most likely means, could not bear to be compared\*. As it thus appeared from matter of fact, that it was of wise contrivance, and of great efficacy, so on this account he without hesitation ascribes it to God, calling it *the power OF GOD, and the wisdom OF GOD* †, and asserting it to be *OF GOD, that Christ Jesus is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption* ‡. Under this head, we might take notice of many of the reasonings which the apostle uses, for proving to the Hebrews, that the gospel is more excellent

\* 1 Cor. i. 21, 27, 28.

† Ver. 18, 24. chap. ii. 4, 5, 7.

‡ Chap. i. 30.

lent than the law, and therefore at least as plainly from God: but we have already enlarged sufficiently.

As the objections which were raised by unbelievers, gave Christ and his apostles sometimes occasions of illustrating and arguing from the internal marks of divinity, which Christianity contains; so, at other times, they led them to appeal to the miracles which were wrought in proof of it, and to reason from them in support of it. We may begin with observing, that the objections which were raised, led Christ on many occasions to assert that his miracles were wrought with an express design of proving his mission, to urge them as proofs of it, and thus to establish a connexion between them and his doctrine. On occasion, for instance, of those exceptions which took their rise from the cure of the infirm man at  
the

the pool of Bethesda, he appealed directly to his miracles: *The works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me\**. Their charging him with boasting like an impostor, occasioned his making a similar appeal: *the Father that sent me, beareth witness of me †*. Some of the Jews said, at another time, *He hath a devil, and is mad; why bear ye him?* and others insinuated that he had not yet put it out of doubt, that he was the Christ: in confutation of both, he said; *The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me ‡*. When the Jews charged him with blasphemy, for having said, *I and my Father are one*, and were preparing to stone him on that account, he insisted that his miracles were sufficient evidences of his mission from God, and consequently

\* John v. 36.

† Chap. viii. 18.

‡ Chap. x. 20,—25.

consequently of the truth of all his doctrines: *If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not: but if I do, tho' ye believe not me, believe the works; that ye may know and believe that the Father is in me, and I in him\**. It was the strong propensity of his own disciples, as well as of others, to incredulity, which moved him to declare beforehand the design of his miraculously raising Lazarus from the dead: *Lazarus is dead; and I am glad for your sakes, that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him†*. It was, he tells us, because of the unbelief of the people who were present, and on purpose to conquer it, that he declared in the most striking manner, by a direct address to God, before he commanded Lazarus to arise, that his miracles were wrought by the power of God, and proved his mission from him: *Jesus lift*

\* John x. 39,—38.

† Chap. xi. 15.



*up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me ; and I knew that thou hearest me always : but because of the people which stand by, I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me\**. It is not necessary to take notice particularly of the instances in which the apostles, in consequence of opposition, urged the miracles wrought by Jesus, as proofs of his mission ; or insisted on the circumstances which rendered them undeniable, their public nature, for instance, and their own knowledge of them : for as they preached in the name of Jesus, not in their own name, this was unavoidable, tho' no objections had been moved against them. As the apostles wrought miracles themselves, so it was observed before, that they generally wrought them in the same simple manner as their master : but the unbelief of those who saw them, and the opposition and cavils which it produced,

\* John xi. 41, 42.

produced, led them sometimes to urge them as proofs of the religion of Jesus, which they published. When the people who had seen two apostles heal a lame man, only wondered, instead of believing, Peter made an explicit declaration of the intention and force of the miracle: *Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? or why look ye so earnestly on us, as tho' by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk? The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our Fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus, whom ye delivered up,—whom God hath raised from the dead, whereof we are witnesses: And his name through faith in his name, hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know; yea the faith which is by him, hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all\**. When the rulers called them to give an account of this miracle, Peter made a similar declaration:

\* Acts iii. 12,—16.

tion: *Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel, if we this day be examined of the good deed done to the impotent man, by what means he is made whole; be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole; neither is there salvation in any other\**. When the Jews not only raised objections against Paul's doctrine, but also turned them into accusations of him before the Roman Governor, with a design to take away his life, he largely urged his own miraculous conversion as an evidence of the truth of Christianity, first before the chief captain †, and again before Festus and Agrippa ‡. The objections of the Jews and Greeks at Corinth, which we have

\* Acts iv. 8, — 12.

† Chap. xxii. 3, — 21.

‡ Chap. xxvi. 12, — 20.

have formerly mentioned, led the same apostle to assert that his *speech, and his preaching was in demonstration of the spirit, and of power, that their faith should stand in the power of God\**: and the opposition made to himself in particular, led him to an explicit appeal to the miracles which he had wrought, in confirmation of his apostleship: *Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds†.*

Men were eye-witnesses of the miracles which Christ performed; they could not therefore call their reality in question; but they objected against their force; and thus gave him occasion, by answering their objections, to state the evidence for the truth of Christianity, which miracles contain. They oftener than once asserted, that his miracles were performed by magic, not  
by

\* 1 Cor. ii. 4, 5.

† 2 Cor. xii. 12

by the power of God, and therefore were no proofs of a divine mission. When he had *healed one possessed with a devil, blind and dumb, all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David? But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, He doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils. And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself, is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself, shall not stand: and if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand? And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast them out? therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. Or else, how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? And then he will spoil his house. He that is not with me, is against me; and he that gathereth*

*gathereth not with me, scattereth abroad*\*. The reasoning is strong and unanswerable, and demonstrates that their assertion was even absurd. If the devil had enabled a person to work miracles, they would not have been such miracles as Jesus wrought, for many of these consisted in dispossessing devils; nor would they have been wrought in confirmation of such doctrine as Jesus taught, for it was most opposite to all that an evil spirit would wish to be propagated in the world. Christ's miracles could not be performed by the assistance of the devil, for if they were, the devil must have been intent on the destruction of his own power, and the subversion of his own interests. The assertion was therefore absurd in itself, but it was peculiarly absurd in the mouth of Jews: they affirmed that many

\* Matth. xii. 22, — 30. Mark iii. 22, — 27. Luke xi. 17, — 23.

ny of their own nation had performed miracles by the power of God, and, on the testimony of these miracles, acknowledged these to be divine messengers: it was the grossest inconsistency after this to ascribe Christ's miracles to the devil; for his doctrine was as holy as theirs, and his miracles were much greater and more numerous, and consequently more undeniably derived from omnipotence. They ought without hesitation to ascribe them to the Almighty, and to regard them as a full proof that Jesus was, what he claimed to be, the Messiah. They plainly proceeded from power superior to that of Beelzebub, and able to vanquish him; for they tended directly to overthrow his dominion. If it be a just maxim, that he is to be regarded as an enemy who with-holds assistance, much more ought Christ to be considered as an enemy to the devil, when he was doing every

every thing to ruin his kingdom, both by his miracles themselves, and by the doctrine for which he wrought them; the accomplice of the devil he could not possibly be.

One of the apostles was obliged, not properly to prove the force, but to point out the real intention of a miracle which he had wrought, by a mistake of the spectators which was very gross, but into which Pagans might naturally run. The occasion was of a very peculiar nature; the illustration of the miracle was exactly suited to it. *There sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother's womb, who never had walked. To him Paul said, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked. When the people saw what Paul had done, they lift up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The Gods are come down to us in the likeness of men: And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul,*



*Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker. Then the priest of Jupiter which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people. They acknowledged the miracle; they were sensible that it showed a divine power residing in the persons by whom it was performed: but they had been inattentive to the doctrine which they preached; instead of considering the miracle justly as a proof of that doctrine, they hastily explained it according to their own preconceived opinions. Certain that the miracle implied divine power, and accustomed to think only of the pagan deities, they immediately concluded that Paul and Barnabas were two of these. The apostles perceived their mistake, and set themselves to rectify it. They had no need to insist on the reality or the force of the miracle; these were acknowledged: the*

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particular point designed to be proved by it, was what had been mistaken; they therefore explicitly determined this: they assured the people that they were no divinities, that the miracle proceeded not from any of the heathen gods, who indeed had no existence: they declared that its sole intention was to attest the doctrine which they preached, that it proved its truth and divinity, and therefore ought to lead them to embrace it, renouncing their former idolatry and superstition: *They rent their cloaths, and ran in among the people, crying out, and saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you, that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God\**.

### Miracles

\* Acts xiv. 8,—18. Rousseau (Letters from the Mountains) boasts much of his own modesty in being contented with the character of a *Conjurer*, when, by an ingenious manner of giving responses, invented and practised by him, he  
could

Miracles prove immediately the divine mission of the person who works them; and that mission once proved, gives authority to all the doctrines which he teaches in the name of God. But the Christian miracles have moreover a direct and natural connexion with the particular doctrines of Christianity, as they are exemplifications of them: and the objections which were raised by the Jews, led Christ on several occasions to point out this very connexion.

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nexion.

could not have failed to obtain that of a *Prophet*, if he had only laid claim to it. That he could not have failed of obtaining the latter character, is very far from being certain; we have only his word for it; he does not say that any one person showed a propensity to confer the title on him: his confidence that he could not have failed of success in arrogating it, is no mark of extraordinary modesty. The modesty of Paul and Barnabas is both much greater, and much more indisputable: if they had pleased, they might have been worshipped as Gods; they had no need to ask it, they had need only to hold their peace: divine honours were urged upon them by the whole city of Lystra; they eagerly exerted themselves to prevent it: and they never made a boast, either of the modesty or of the honesty of their conduct.

nexion. One of the great doctrines of the gospel is, That there is forgiveness of sin through Christ, and that he is empowered by God to dispense this forgiveness to men. Christ proves this doctrine, by actually forgiving sin. Diseases are the consequences of sin, and part of the punishment of it; they are among those effects of it, which lie most open to the observation of men at present, and the removal of which they can most readily perceive. Many of Christ's miracles consisted in healing various diseases, and were thus the most natural specimens which he could give of his power to forgive sin. One of them is represented in this very light by himself. He said to a man sick of the palsy, *Thy sins be forgiven thee.* This expression implied, that the miraculous cure was an instance of his forgiving sin, and intended to be an exemplification of his power to forgive it.

*And*

*And certain of the Scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth; who can forgive sins but God alone? This misconstruction led him to state the connexion between the miracle and the doctrine, explicitly and professedly: Whether is it easier to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee? or to say, Arise and walk? But THAT YE MAY KNOW THAT THE SON OF MAN HATH POWER ON EARTH TO FORGIVE SINS, Arise (said he to the sick of the palsy) take up thy bed, and go unto thine house\**. He thus affirmed, that his healing diseases was intended to prove this truth, That the Son of man is empowered to forgive sin: and it was the directest proof possible; it made men to see with their eyes, that he did forgive it †.

The

\* Matth ix. 2, — 7. Mark ii. 3, — 11. Luke v. 18, — 25.

† Isaiah prophesies concerning the Messiah; *Surely he hath born our griefs, and carried our sorrows*; chap. liii. 4.

The

The resurrection of the dead, is a fundamental doctrine in Christianity. Our Saviour gave men the same direct evidence of this doctrine by several of his

The prediction is generally understood of his obtaining the forgiveness of sin by his death: and it is alluded to in this sense by one of the apostles, 1 Peter ii. 24. *Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree*; that in this expression he has an eye to that prediction, is universally agreed. But Matthew affirms, that this prophecy was accomplished in Christ's curing the diseases of men by miracle, chap. viii. 16, 17. *He cast out the spirits with his word, and healed all that were sick; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses.* This has the appearance of being an improper application of the prophecy; at least of being inconsistent with Peter's interpretation of it. What has been said concerning the intention of this species of miracles, removes the seeming contradiction. They were not merely cures of bodily distresses: they were also proofs that Christ was empowered to forgive sins; they were declared specimens of that power to forgive the sins of the world, which Isaiah directly foretold; take in their intention, and in respect of it they were the real accomplishment of his prediction. By these miracles Christ showed that he was the person who was to obtain forgiveness of sin by his death, and consequently showed that he was the very person of whom Isaiah spoke. Thus this passage is an instance in which the evangelist sets the miracles of healing, in the very same light in which we have seen that Christ sets them.

his miracles; he raised the dead: and, that they were intended to prove this doctrine, and to prove it precisely by being exemplifications of it, the objections of the Jews led him to declare, on one occasion, in the most express terms. The Jews concluded that he had not a divine mission, and even persecuted, and sought to kill him, because he was, in their apprehension, guilty of gross impiety, in not only healing an infirm man on the Sabbath day, but also commanding him to carry his bed: they moreover charged him with blasphemy, because in his defence of this miracle he had *said, that God was his Father*. Christ, having first insisted that his miracles were truly performed by the power of God, and ought to satisfy them, both that he was sent by God, and that he had a title to the high character of the Son of God, which he assumed; adds, in order to render that  
proof

proof the stronger, *and the Father will show the Son greater works than these, that ye may marvel; for as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them, even so the Son quickeneth whom he will\**. In the next words he intimates that this sort of miracles, the raising of the dead, had a peculiar use; they not only proved his mission, and consequently the truth of his religion in general, but they were direct evidences of one important doctrine of it, and were intended peculiarly to establish it: the Son quickeneth whom he will, FOR *the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment to the Son†*: but, for the execution of judgment, the resurrection of the dead was previously necessary; and therefore he goes on to inform them, that the Son was also impowered to accomplish this, and that of his  
being

\* John v. 19.—21.

† Ver. 22, —24.



being thus impowered, the raising of dead persons miraculously, was intended to be a special proof: *Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live\**. He had already raised the daughter of Jairus, and the widow of Nain's son, and he was afterwards to raise Lazarus: he has these miracles in his eye; and he intimates a strong connexion between them and the doctrine of a general resurrection; THE HOUR IS COMING, AND NOW IS; you may be assured that the hour will come, for you see it is come already, at least in part; you may believe that there shall be a general resurrection, for, as a pledge of it, many dead are raised at present. The general resurrection will take place; for the Son, who promises it, has power to effect it; and that he has this  
power,

\* John v. 25.

power, he proves undeniably by actually exerting it in the miraculous resurrection of several individuals: *for as the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself* \*. To make them the more attentive to the evidence with which this doctrine was established by his miracles, and to enforce the doctrine itself, he almost immediately subjoins, *The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation* †. On occasion of the doubts and the misapprehension of Martha, when he was about to raise Lazarus, Jesus insinuated the same view of the miracle, tho' not quite so explicitly as in the preceding instance: *Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again.*

\* John v. 26.

† Ver. 28, 29.

gain. *Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, tho' he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die\**. Thus Christ assures us that there shall be a resurrection of the dead; he assures us that he himself has power to raise them, and will raise them: he gives the most natural proof of this, he exercises the very power with which he asserts that he is invested: and can there be better evidence that a person has any talent or ability, than his exerting it? He tells us, that he raises dead persons, on purpose to show that he will raise the dead: to bring us to believe that we shall live in another world, he calls back several of the inhabitants of that world, and men see them, and converse with them.

Concerning

\* John xi. 23,—26.

Concerning several of the kinds of miracles wrought by Christ, it is at least insinuated on one occasion or another, that they were intended to be exemplifications, either of some particular doctrine of his religion, or of some general quality and virtue of it. Diseases may be considered in several lights, besides that of their being the consequences, and the chastisements of sin: they are hurtful to the person who is subject to them, in various ways according to their different natures; and they are natural emblems of the several depravations of the soul: and therefore the miraculous cures of particular distempers, were likewise natural emblems of the power of the gospel to remove the depravations of mind correspondent to them; and in some instances they are represented as such. Thus, Christ asserted, that he would remove the ignorance of men, and  
that

that his gospel is the proper mean of illuminating their understandings : to prove this, he frequently restored sight to those who wanted it. To convince men, that he could, as he affirmed, remove the spiritual blindness of ignorance and error, he cured that bodily blindness which is the most natural image of it: and that the miracles of this kind, were peculiarly designed for convincing men of that, he insinuates plainly enough on one occasion. On a Sabbath day, he *saw a man which was blind from his birth*, and intended to cure him: as the Jews had often found fault with miracles wrought on the Sabbath day, he observed, before he performed the cure, that the short time he would remain on earth, made it necessary for him to take every opportunity which occurred, of confirming his divine mission by miracles: *I must work the works of him that sent me,*  
*while*

*while it is day: the night cometh when no man can work\**. In allusion to the particular nature of the present miracle, he added; *As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world†*. By this he directed them to consider his restoring sight to the blind man, as a direct evidence of his being, in a spiritual sense, the luminary of the world. He had assumed the title in this sense, so often before, that they could scarce overlook it: his principal intention in assuming it on this occasion, was, to represent the miracle as an emblem of it, and a proof that it belonged to him; it is for this reason he inserted the clause, *as long as I am in the world*; which, tho' it does not hinder the expression from being applied to his general character, yet shows that it was most directly intended of those miracles, of giving  
sight

\* John ix. 4.

† Ver. 5.

fight to the blind, which were sensible specimens of that truth. He thus intimates, that the fitness of his doctrine to enlighten the soul with knowledge, and his restoring the bodily eye to the perception of light, were closely connected, that the former was the thing signified and confirmed, the latter the emblem and the proof, that the former was in a manner the figurative meaning, the spiritual import of the latter, or rather the consequence naturally deducible from it. This view of the same miracle, is likewise naturally suggested by what Christ said to the blind man himself, when he met him at the feast of Dedication, after the Jews had gone so far as to excommunicate him: *I am come into the world, that they which see not, might see, and that they which see might be made blind\**; he plainly speaks in allusion to the miracle.

Many

\* John ix. 39.

Many of the miracles of Christ consisted in casting out devils: these miracles were in like manner proofs by example of what he taught concerning his having come to overthrow the kingdom, and destroy the works of the devil, and of the victory over sin, which he promised his true disciples. That they were designed for this purpose, is hinted in his reply to the seventy, when they seemed to be surpris'd at the greatness of the power which had accompanied them: *And the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name. And he said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven: behold I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy* \*. He has both the spiritual conquest over Satan, and the miraculous power of dispossessing evil spirits, which was a pledge of it, in his eye.

We

\* Luke x. 17,—19.



We are taught by the Christian religion, that Jesus is the author of eternal salvation, and that the gospel is the great mean of nourishing the soul to eternal life: and to prove that he can give spiritual and eternal life, he showed that he could miraculously support the present life; he oftener than once fed several thousands with a very few loaves and fishes: and on one of these occasions he plainly insinuated that he wanted the miracle to be considered in that very light. The multitude, struck with the greatness of it, followed him to Capernaum. Jesus knew that they were not convinced by it of his real character; but either desired merely to be fed again in the same manner, or at most considered it only as a prelude to the temporal advantages which they expected from the Messiah: *Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did*

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eat

*eat of the loaves, and were filled.* To lead them therefore to better conceptions, to make them perceive the real language of the miracle, to intimate that it was not perishing food which he came to give, but the food of the soul, eternal life and the means of it, he said, *Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you; and he added, for him hath God the Father sealed\**, that is, God has by this very miracle given a security that he has authorised the Son to bless mankind with this. It is remarkable, that, when the Jews understood not the figurative expression which he used, and proceeded to raise difficulties occasioned by their misunderstanding it, he nevertheless persisted in the use of it, through his whole discourse. It was not without design; it was on purpose to

\* John vi. 5, — 14, 24, — 27.

to urge the connexion between the doctrine couched under that figure, and the miracle which he had wrought. By dropping the metaphor, he might have explained the doctrine perhaps more clearly; but then he would not have kept in view so perfectly the confirmation which it derived from the miracle. This advantage is gained by continuing the metaphor, and at the same time he renders his meaning so plain, that nothing but prejudice could lead them to mistake it\*.

This kind of connexion between particular miracles and particular doc-

L 2 trines,

\* Christ insinuates the same account of the force and import of another miracle, which we have not however mentioned, because it was not set in this light, in consequence of opposition or objections; I mean, the miraculous draught of fishes, Luke v. 4, — 10. When Peter was astonished, Christ said to him, *Fear not, from henceforth thou shalt catch men*; thus intimating, that the miracle was contrived on purpose to be a pledge to him and the other disciples, of the success which they should have in converting men to his religion, and to encourage them by the prospect of this, in their attendance upon Jesus.

trines, is so natural, that it might have been discovered, tho' Christ had never pointed it out. But his having pointed it out, is of great advantage. It shows most of the cavils of infidels, against the force of miracles for proving the truth of doctrines, to be frivolous and wholly beside the purpose. It enables believers to rest in the connexion between the Christian miracles and the Christian doctrines, with perfect confidence. It leads us to discern the force of such miracles as are not in this manner illustrated by Christ himself: it leads us, for instance, to consider his cures of lameness, palsies, and other bodily infirmities, as specimens of the power which he affirmed that he had to remove the impotence of soul produced by vice; his cures of leprosy, and other loathsome diseases, as specimens of his power to cleanse the soul from the pollution of sin; and the few  
hurtful

hurtful miracles which he wrought, as samples of his power to destroy the impenitent, as well as to save the penitent.—Thus the opposition that was made to Christ, led him to appeal to his miracles, to prove by argument that they evinced his divine mission, and to show that they were at the same time immediate evidences of some of the principal doctrines of his gospel, as being actual exertions of the very powers which these doctrines ascribed to him, or of the most similar powers that could be rendered objects of sense.

THERE is one evidence of Christ's mission, which, we observed formerly, he scarce ever professedly urged or appealed to, as an evidence, tho' he often exhibited it; his knowledge of men's hearts and of future events. It may be remarked, that the prejudices and objections of men, were generally  
the

the occasions of his exhibiting it. It was on occasion of Nathanael's exceptions against Philip's account of Jesus, that he showed himself to be acquainted with his inward character, and most secret actions: *Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph; and Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see. Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile. Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig-tree, I saw thee\** The Samaritan woman's expressing a diffidence of his pretensions, and mistaking his meaning †, gave occasion to his displaying

\* John i. 45, — 48.

† Chap. iv. 12, 15.

playing supernatural knowledge, by showing himself to be acquainted with her whole past life \*. It was the propensity of the Pharisees to charge him with blasphemy, for pretending to forgive the sins of the paralytic man, that gave him an occasion of showing by his vindication, that he *perceived their thoughts* †. The insidious and malicious disposition of the Pharisees in the synagogue, when he was about to heal the man with the withered hand ‡; Simon's misconstruction of his indulgence to the woman who had been a sinner ||; the Pharisees ascribing his miracles to Beelzebub \*\*; and their endeavouring to ensnare him by a question about paying tribute ††; were all

\* John iv. 17, 18.

† Matth. ix. 4. Mar. ii. 8. Luke v. 22.

‡ Luke vi. 8.

|| Chap. vii. 39, — 50.

\*\* Matth. xii. 25. Luke xi. 17.

†† Matth. xxii. 18. Mar. xii. 15. Luke xx. 23.

all occasions of his exhibiting specimens of his knowledge of the human heart, sufficient to prove that he came from God.

Many of Christ's *predictions* also were occasioned by opposition and objections. The relation which the disciples gave him of several mistaken notions of his character, entertained by the Jews, occasioned, at least partly, his explicit prediction of his own death and resurrection\*. Peter's finding fault with this prediction, led him to foretell his subsequent glory†. The obstinate unbelief of his disciples in the article of his sufferings, occasioned his predicting them frequently afterwards. When the Pharisees denied his being the Messiah, so explicitly, as to desire him to rebuke those who in acknowledgment of it cried out, *Blessed be the king*

\* Matth. xvi. 14,—21. Mark viii. 31.

† Matth. xvi. 27, 28. Mark viii. 38.



*king that cometh in the name of the Lord*, he very plainly, and in the most pathetic manner foretold the destruction of Jerusalem\*. The continued and irreclaimable infidelity of the Jews, led him to repeat the prediction some days after †. When the Jews persisted in infidelity, and formed multitudes of objections against Christianity, the apostle Paul not only plainly declared their rejection, but also foretold that it will have a period, and that their restoration will be very beneficial to the whole Christian world ‡.

It was from the prophecies of the Old Testament that Jesus could be proved to be the Messiah. It was therefore necessary that he should make some sort of appeal to them, even  
when

\* Luke xix. 38, — 44.

† Matth. xxiii. 34, — 38.

‡ Rom. xi. 11, — 32.

when there was no opposition: but he was led by opposition to urge this argument more expressly and fully. His appeals to particular predictions as fulfilled in events relating to the gospel dispensation, were frequently occasioned by opposition made to him. On one occasion he expressly asserted that John the Baptist was the very person whom Malachi predicted, under the character of the forerunner of the Messiah: *But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea I say unto you, and more than a prophet: for this is he of whom it is written, Behold I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee\**: And that this assertion was occasioned by the perverse infidelity of the Jews, both under John's ministry, and under his own, we learn from the conclusion of his discourse †. They had  
had

\* Matth. xi. 9, 10. Luke vii. 26, 27.

† Matth. xi. 16, — 19. Luke vii. 29, — 35.

had derived the idea of the Messiah whom they expected, from a partial view of the prophecies concerning him, especially from a literal interpretation of the several figurative expressions in which his kingdom is described. On this account, they wholly overlooked some predictions relating to the times of the Messiah, and many essential and important circumstances of such predictions as they applied to these times: they were not compatible with the idea of the Messiah which they had hastily formed, and they did not suspect that idea to be faulty. Jesus therefore took frequent occasions from their opposition, of pointing out predictions and circumstances of this kind. The prophets had plainly enough foretold, that the body of the Jewish nation would reject the Messiah; but the Jews attended not to this: our Saviour, therefore, often turns their attention

to

to it, particularly when they showed the violence of their prejudices. *Seeing, they saw not, and hearing, they heard not, neither did they understand*: This led him to apply to them a prediction of *Isaiah*: *In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing, ye shall see, and shall not perceive: for this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them\**. After his public entrance into *Jerusalem*, the chief priests and the elders not only called his authority in question, but were intent on taking away his life: this led him, after having foretold their approaching ruin, by two parables, to put them in mind of a prediction of *David*

\* *Matth.* xiii. 13, — 15.

David, and to apply it closely to themselves: *Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof: and whosoever shall fall on this stone, shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder\**. The irreconcilable hatred of the Jews led him to point out to his disciples another clear and express prediction to the same purpose: *Now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father: but this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled, that is written in their law. They hated me without a cause†*. The various questions which were put to Christ in the temple, tho' not immediately relative

\* Matth. xx. 42, — 44. Mark xii. 10, 11.

† John xv. 24, 25.

lative to prophecy, led him to prove from a passage which they understood of the Messiah, but a remarkable circumstance of which they overlooked, that he could not be merely a temporal prince, as they expected, but something totally different, and far superior : *While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, What think ye of Christ? whose Son is he? They say unto him, The Son of David. He saith unto them, How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool? If David then call him Lord, how is he his Son\** ? He cites this prophecy, and he reasons from it : the argument is obvious : had the Messiah been merely a temporal prince, governing the Jews who were contemporary with him, he could not have been  
the

\* Matth. xxii. 41,——46. Mark xii. 35,——37. Luke xx. 41,——44.

the Lord of David, who was dead many ages before, and who was the founder of the kingdom to which he only succeeded; it followed necessarily from this prediction, that his character was totally different from what they imagined it to be.

The Jews having formed a wrong notion of the Messiah, they found several things in Jesus different from, or inconsistent with that notion, and consequently unsuitable to the prophecies in their apprehension of them; and thence concluded that he was not the Messiah. This led him to show, that the circumstances of which they formed this judgment were really foretold of the Messiah, tho' their prejudice hindered them from perceiving them in the prophets, or that at least they were not inconsistent with the predictions of the Old Testament. The Jews took it for granted, that Jesus was the real  
 son

son of Joseph, and they reckoned this inconsistent with some ancient prophecies concerning the Messiah; probably with this prediction, *Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son\**; or with this, *Who shall declare his generation†?* therefore they thought that Jesus could not be the Messiah: they said, *Howbeit we know this man whence he is, we know who is his father; but when Christ cometh, no man knoweth whence he is. Then cried Jesus in the temple as he taught, saying, And do ye know me? (for thus his reply should be translated) And do ye know whence I am? And I am not come of myself, but he that sent me is true, whom ye know not: but I know him, for I am from him, and he hath sent me‡.* Thus he very plainly denied that they knew whence he was, or who was his father, and intimated that

\* Isaiah vii. 14.

† Chap. liii. 8.

‡ John vii. 27, — 29.



that he was the Son of God, as well as his messenger, and thus informed them that he wanted not the character of the Messiah, which they had in their eye. Sufferings and death were what their prejudice would not allow them to conceive to belong to the Messiah; he therefore several times told his disciples that they were predicted by the ancient prophets\*; and, when the time of them approached, and the disciples were, by means of their prejudices, quite disconsolate, he pointed out a particular prediction of them: *For I say unto you, that this that is written, must yet be accomplished in me, And he was reckoned among the transgressors* †.

The prejudices of the Jews led them also to miss in Jesus, some of the characters which they imagined were predicted concerning the Messiah; and

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thus

\* John iii. 14. Mark ix. 12. Luke xviii. 31.

† Luke xxii. 37.

thus gave him occasion to show, either that these characters did belong to him, or that they were not predicted characters of the Messiah. They collected from a plain prophecy, that the coming of the Messiah ought to be preceded by that of Elias; and because Elias had not come in the manner they expected, they thought that Jesus could not be the Messiah. This very difficulty was proposed to our Saviour, and removed by him. *His disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the Scribes, that Elias must first come? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things: but I say unto you, that Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed: likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist* \*. There is a very remarkable instance

\* Matth. xvii. 10,—13. Mark ix. 11,—13.

instance which, it will appear probable on examination, falls under this head. The Jews asked a *sign* from Jesus at several different times. At the first passover after he began his public ministry, when he had driven the sellers of cattle, and the changers of money out of the temple, *the Jews said unto him, What sign showest thou unto us, seeing that thou dost these things? Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.—But he spake of the temple of his body\**. After he had performed a miraculous cure, so remarkable that *all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David?* and after he had proved by the most convincing reasoning, that his miracles were wrought by the power of God, and therefore were evidences that *the kingdom of God was come unto them; certain of the Scribes and Pharisees answered,*

M 2 saying,

\* John ii. 18, 19, 21.

saying, *Master, we would see a sign from heaven from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth\**. Soon after our Saviour had for the second time fed a great multitude by a miracle, the Pharisees afraid, it would seem, lest all men should follow him, and eager to discredit him, by demanding what he had oftener than once declined giving, and what they therefore thought themselves certain that he could not give, came with the Sadducees, and tempting, desired him that he would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said unto them, *When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather, for the sky is red; and in the morning,*

\* Matth. xii. 38, — 40. Luke xi. 16, 29, 30.

*morning, It will be foul weather to day, for the sky is red and lowering: O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times? A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas\**. In the first instance, the demand was made immediately after an action which implied his assuming very great and extraordinary authority; and before this time he had been declared to be the Son of God by the miraculous testimony at his baptism, he had been pointed out for the Messiah by John, who was owned to be a prophet, he had himself wrought some miracles, and he had just done what may not improperly be considered as partaking of the nature of a miracle. In the other two instances, the demand was almost immediately occasioned by very stupendous miracles, which

\* Matth. xvi. 1, — 4. Mark viii. 11, 12.

which he had performed. These circumstances, as well as the manner in which the demand itself is expressed, naturally lead us to think, that it was not a great miracle in general, but some one determinate sign, which they had in their eye, and which was peculiarly reckoned *the sign of the Son of man*. It is sometimes called *a sign from heaven*, and we can scarce doubt, that they meant the very same sign in all their different demands: this having been once refused, they repeatedly asked it with an air of triumph, as if they expected that it would be refused, and thought that no evidence without it, could prove Jesus to be the Messiah. It is remarkable too, that Jesus constantly refused the sign which they asked; and that his answer is always to the same purpose, tho' expressed in different ways, and never fails to include an intimation of his own resurrection from

from the dead. This last circumstance is the more remarkable, because he scarce ever intimated his resurrection in speaking to the promiscuous multitude, except when a sign was asked. In order to account for these circumstances, and to understand the real import, as well as the propriety, of Christ's answers to their repeated demand, let us endeavour to ascertain, what was most probably the real nature of the sign which they expected. Daniel had said concerning the Messiah, *I saw in the night-visions, and behold one like the Son of man, came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him : and there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages should serve him\**. The Jews mistook the sense of this prediction ; they seem to have concluded from it, that

\* Daniel vii. 13, 14.

that the Messiah would come down from heaven in visible glory, in the character of a temporal prince, put himself at their head, and lead them forth to conquer all their enemies, and to erect an universal empire: and whenever they asked a sign from Jesus, their meaning was, that he should appear in this very manner. Indeed they had come to reckon such an appearance so proper and determinate a mark of the Messiah, that it was a common periphrasis for his name. This is plain from what happened at our Saviour's trial: *The high priest said, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us, whether thou be the Christ the Son of God.* Jesus answers in terms equivalent to those of Daniel's prediction, *Thou hast said: nevertheless, I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven\**.

This

\* Matth. xxvi. 63, 64. Mark xiv. 61, 62.



This was intended to be a *direct* answer to the question, and it was understood to be such. If this was their meaning, we may perceive how naturally they made the demand immediately after he had assumed extraordinary authority, or wrought great miracles: they were astonished by these, they could scarce help suspecting that Jesus was more than an ordinary person, though they were very unwilling to suppose it: yet still they missed in him, what they reckoned an essential character, nay the precise characteristic of the promised Messiah, his coming down from heaven in the manner defined by their interpretation of Daniel's prediction: they therefore asked him to put his claim out of doubt, by exhibiting this sign. They might have been led to make this demand, not only by their unbelief, but also by some degrees of suspicion, that Jesus would perhaps  
give

give this proof of his being the Messiah afterwards, though the time for it was not yet come: the latter of these causes had, it may be, some influence upon them when they made the demand at first; but in the succeeding instances they were actuated solely by the other. Our Saviour's refusing a sign when it was demanded, has been a great subject of objections, and has particularly been alledged as a proof, that he was unwilling to give all the evidence of his mission, which he might have given, or to satisfy the understandings of men.

“ *The Pharisees, it is said, tempting him,*  
 “ *asked a sign; that is, some testimonial*  
 “ *of the truth of his declared mission:*  
 “ *And what did this request produce?*  
 “ *Why, he sighed deeply at their per-*  
 “ *verseness, who were so hard to be*  
 “ *convinced, and stiled them a foolish*  
 “ *and adulterous generation for their pre-*  
 “ *sumption. Now this desiring a ra-*  
 “ *tional*

“ tional evidence for their discipleship,  
 “ the *seeking after a sign*, as the scripture  
 “ terms it, had, if he had indeed appeal-  
 “ ed to their understandings, been so far  
 “ from any thing criminal or blame-  
 “ worthy, that it had been in all rea-  
 “ son their indispensable duty ; where-  
 “ as it was, it seems, in Faith, an un-  
 “ warrantable, presumptuous, and  
 “ wanton curiosity \*.—The coming  
 “ desirous to canvass the evidence,  
 “ though from no other principle per-  
 “ haps, originally, than that of grati-  
 “ fying a light curiosity, were, one  
 “ would imagine, a turn of mind to  
 “ be favourably entertained, and care-  
 “ fully cherished in a novice, by any  
 “ who was sollicitous to gain profelytes  
 “ by such means, and conscious of ha-  
 “ ving any thing of the kind to pro-  
 “ duce to him. But, on the contrary,  
 “ we find our Master ever disclaiming,  
 “ with

\* Christianity not founded on argument, p. 38.

“ with the severest resentment, all fol-  
 “ lowers of that complexion ; and no  
 “ temper check’d and discourag’d with  
 “ so constant an aversion, as this of,  
 “ as it is opprobriously termed, *seeking*  
 “ *a sign*\*.” This objection almost re-  
 futes itself, though we take not in the  
 peculiar nature of the sign which they  
 demanded : The assertions, that they  
 asked only *some* testimonial of his decla-  
 red mission, that they desired a *rational*  
 evidence for their discipleship, that they  
 came desirous to canvass the evidence,  
 that this was the disposition which Je-  
 sus held criminal, are all so directly  
 contradictory to the real circumstances  
 in which the demand was made, that  
 they can scarce be imputed to other  
 principles than want of candour, and  
 an intention to mislead : From these  
 circumstances it is plain, that far from  
 being possessed of this laudable temper,  
 they

\* Christianity not founded on argument, p. 49.

they were not impelled to make the demand even by a principle so little blameable as *light curiosity*, but were actuated by perverseness and prejudice, which had already made them withstand the clearest evidence, and the greatest miracles, and which it was in vain to expect to conquer by working more miracles: It was therefore as reasonable to refuse to work more, as it is, not to persist in reasoning with a man who shows that he reasons only for the sake of contention, without any concern to discover truth. But when we recollect what was the sign which they desired, the objection is even absurd. It was a sign which they were led to expect, only by their false notions of a temporal Messiah; it was absolutely inconsistent with the truth of the Messiah's character; to have given it, would have been to become just such a deliverer as the Jews expected; it was therefore

therefore impossible that it could be given. Instead of giving it, it was proper to affirm expressly, as Jesus did affirm, that it never would be given, and that it did not belong to the Messiah justly conceived. Whenever a sign was asked, he appealed for the certainty of his mission, to his own resurrection from the dead. So far was he from refusing *any rational* evidence of his mission, that even their perverseness hindered him not from voluntarily pointing out the *strongest*. His resurrection was in itself the most stupendous miracle; and its force was increased by its being in this manner appealed to, for it thus became the accomplishment of prophecies uttered by him. But there is a farther propriety in his foretelling it, when they required a sign: it was a plain insinuation, that their opinion of the manner of the Messiah's appearance was wrong, that he was not such a prince

prince as they expected; for by it he informed them expressly, that he must be put to death, before he entered on his kingdom. His answer was therefore fit for leading them to a juster interpretation of Daniel's prophecy, and for preventing their rejecting the Messiah, because he wanted a character which was never predicted of him. There is another occasion on which the Jews demanded a sign. We have not yet taken notice of it, because it may now be examined with greater advantage by itself. The day after he had first miraculously fed a great multitude, while he was teaching them in expressions borrowed from that miracle, and urging them to believe on him, *they said unto him, What sign showest thou then, that we may see and believe thee? what dost thou work\*?* They thus intimated, that it would be soon enough to receive him as the Messiah, when he assumed the kingdom.

\* John vi. 30.

kingdom, in the manner which, they imagined, was fixed by Daniel's prediction, that without this, no miracles of another sort could prove his claim; and they particularly insinuated that his having given one meal to a multitude by miracle, was nothing extraordinary, but far inferior to Moses's having fed many more, for a longer time, with manna from heaven\*. His discourse on this occasion, is much larger and more complex than any of the answers which he gave to the same demand at other times. There are many reasons for this; they expressed their contempt of the miracle of the loaves, as well as asked a sign; he spake figuratively, in allusion to that miracle, on purpose to inculcate its fitness for proving that he was empowered to bestow eternal life; several particular difficulties were moved in the course of his sermon; so that his answer to  
the

\* John vi. 31.



the demand of a sign, is interspersed with a variety of other subjects. Many things, however, which he said, tend directly to show them that they were mistaken in the nature of the sign which they expected, and to lead them into right apprehensions of the manner and design of the Messiah's coming. Thus, tho' he came not down in the manner which, they imagined, Daniel had foretold, he assures them several times, that he actually came from heaven \*: particularly, when they insinuated that this could not possibly be, because he was descended of earthly parents, he affirms very expressly that, this notwithstanding, he did come down from heaven, and intimates that, by the ancient prophets, the Messiah ought not to come from heaven in such a way as they expected, which would have made the Jews flock to him eagerly, without the need of any extra-

N ordinary

\* John vi. 32, 33, 35, 38, 58.

ordinary means: *The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven: and they said, Is not this Jesus the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven? Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Murmur not among yourselves: no man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him; so far am I from coming with visible pomp, and conspicuous majesty, and striking signs: and I will raise him up at the last day: This is in a manner foretold, for, It is written in the prophets, and they shall be all taught of God\*. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me: not that any man hath seen the Father, save he WHICH IS OF GOD, he hath seen the Father.—I am that bread of life: your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead; this is the bread which COMETH*

DOWN

\* There is some difficulty in perceiving the propriety of the answer which Jesus here makes. The objection of the Jews

was,

DOWN FROM HEAVEN, *that a man may eat thereof and not die ; I am the living bread, which* CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN\* : he uses such expressions as may at the same time imply, that they ex-

N 2 aggerated

was, How can he say, that he came down from heaven, when he was born of earthly parents whom we know ? His answer is, *No man can come unto me, except the Father which hath sent me, draw him :— it is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God*: How is their objection obviated by this reply ? It is somewhat indirect ; the violence of their prejudices made it necessary that it should be so ; but it tended to warn them that they were prejudiced, without exasperating them:

1. When we consider the answer in the most general view, the assertion that divine teaching was necessary for their receiving him as the Messiah, and the quotation of a passage from the Old Testament, in which this teaching had been foretold, implies a plain insinuation, that it would not be altogether so easy to distinguish the Messiah, as they imagined, and that, since they ought to expect some difficulty, they should not be positive that he did not come down from heaven, merely because they knew not exactly in what manner he did.

2. It had a still more immediate relation to their objection. They expected that the Messiah should descend from heaven in the visible and glorious manner which we have already described, and this was the sign which they demanded. But this sign was so accurately determined and so minutely described by their doctors, that, if it had truly belonged to the Messiah, they must have known him instantly, there could have been no room for  
doubt:

\* John vi. 41, — 51.

aggerated the miracle of the manna, most extravagantly. In order to lead them to rectify their mistake, he further informs them plainly, that the salvation and life which he would bestow

was

doubt, and consequently no need of divine teaching. By asserting, therefore, the necessity of this, he intimated that they were mistaken concerning the nature of the sign, that is, concerning the manner of the Messiah's descent from heaven; that no such decisive mark as they expected, would attend him; and that, on this account, they could not conclude from what they knew of his nativity, that he was not truly the Messiah. 3. To be *drawn by the Father*, is commonly understood of men's being enlightened and convinced by the immediate influence of the divine Spirit; but it likewise naturally implies, their being taught by the ancient revelations which God had given. According to this sense of the expression, the import of Christ's answer is: Ye cannot perceive me to be the Messiah, or to have come down from heaven, except ye understand the intimations of his character which God has already given by the prophets, except ye apprehend the true meaning of the predictions concerning him; ye mistake their meaning in the particular to which your present objection refers, as well as in many others, ye ought therefore to study them more carefully; if ye do, ye shall attain the knowledge of the real characters of the Messiah; for it is predicted, that in his time God will teach all who are disposed to learn, and then ye shall easily get over the difficulties which now perplex you, for every man that hath in this manner heard and learned of the Father, will discern me to be the Messiah, and come unto me.

was very different from the temporal deliverance and prosperity which they expected under the Messiah; whence they might easily collect that the *manner* of the Messiah's appearance would likewise differ from their notion, which suited only a temporal king: he constantly represents what he promises, as salvation and life which would be given, only at the last day, in consequence of their being raised again from their graves, and therefore obviously as wholly spiritual and eternal; he seems even anxiously to keep this in view\*. Nay, he tells them expressly, that, far from being such a triumphant Messiah as they looked for, he was to die; and that, from his death, the blessings which he promised would result: *the meat that I will give, is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world*†. He assures them, likewise, that he would ascend

\* John vi. 39, 40, 44, 47, 50, 51, 54, 58.

† Ver. 51.

ascend again into heaven; *what and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?*\* This is equivalent to the mention of his resurrection, on similar occasions; it is an intimation, that he would be proved to be the Messiah by an appearance as remarkable as the sign which they demanded; and it is an intimation of the true nature of his kingdom, and of the manner of his entering on it. Finally, to this intimation he subjoins the following caution, *It is the spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life* †. This certainly implies a warning, that his present discourse was designedly figurative, and therefore ought not to be grossly interpreted: but it may likewise imply a hint, that their mistakes about the Messiah, and particularly their expectation of what they called a sign from heaven, proceeded from their

\* John vi. 62.      † Ver. 63.

their understanding the figurative expressions of the ancient prophecies, in too strict and literal a sense; and, that his account of himself and his kingdom, was really agreeable to the spirit and the true meaning of them. Thus the substance of his discourse, on this occasion, is the same with that of his answers to the demand of a sign at all other times, tho' the form be different; and it has the direcest tendency to show them that they were mistaken, to warn them against suspending their faith on a sign, the expectation of which had no foundation, except in their own imaginations, and against rejecting him, in opposition to the strongest evidence, merely because this fancied sign attended him not.—As the expectation of a temporal Messiah, and that interpretation of the prophecies, from which it had been deduced, were deeply imbibed by the Jews, so even the apostles retained

retained them, till they were fully illuminated by the effusion of the Holy Ghost, after Christ's ascension. They believed him to be the Messiah, but they never doubted that he would some time or other assume the character which they supposed to belong to the Messiah; and that, at that time, whenever it should happen, the sign from heaven would be given. In this temper, and with the same notions which the Jews had in all their demands, it was that, after his lamentation over Jerusalem, they asked him privately, *When shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming?* \* In answer to these questions, Jesus foretels very particularly the calamities and ruin which were coming upon Jerusalem; after an account of many of them, he describes the total subversion of the Jewish polity, which would be the issue of them, in terms highly figurative, but very familiar in  
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\* Matth. xxiv. 3.



the prophetic stile ; *Immediately after the tribulation of those days, shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken*\*. He adds, *And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven ; and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory* †. Here we find that the sign which was asked so often, was indeed what we have supposed it to be, and that the expectation of it was derived from that very prophecy of Daniel, which we have pointed out: the two clauses of the verse are equivalent, and the last of them is expressed in Daniel's very words ; *then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven*, and thus they shall see the accomplishment of what Daniel really intended by the figurative

\* Matth. xxiv. 29.

† Ver. 30.

gurative expressions which he uses, *they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven, with the dominion or power and the glory* which was given him by the Ancient of days. By the manner in which he alludes to the prediction on this occasion, he expressly contradicts their interpretation of it, as being inconsistent with Daniel's real meaning. For, first, he gives such intimations of the time when this sign would be exhibited, as plainly showed that they were totally mistaken in expecting it at his entering on his kingdom: and, secondly, he lets them know that they likewise mistook its nature. They expected that the Son of man would descend visibly from heaven, to take upon him the government of the Jews, and to lead them out to victory over all their enemies, and that he would come cloathed with such majesty and splendour as should make all know him  
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for the Messiah, and follow him: But he informs them that they ought to expect something almost totally the reverse of this, the Son of man, not descending visibly, but interposing powerfully and irresistibly, not for raising the Jews to universal empire, but for executing dreadful judgment and destruction on them. They could scarce fail to perceive that *coming in the clouds of heaven* implied executing judgment, for the expression is used several times in their own scriptures, and always means no more than this\*; they notwithstanding strained it to a literal sense, to the meaning of a visible appearance, in Daniel's prediction, and, tho' they understood it to imply the execution of judgment, yet it was only upon their enemies, not upon themselves. But Jesus informed them that

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\* 2 Sam. xxii. 10, — 15. Psal. xviii. 9, — 14. xcvi. 2. Isa. xix. 1. Jer. iv. 13, — 18.

it did not here, any more than in other passages, denote a visible appearance, that it meant simply the execution of judgment, and that the Jews themselves were the objects of that judgment. “ A sign, says Jesus, has frequently been asked of me; I will now tell you, what sign ought to have been expected: if the Jews had known what it is, they would not have been so solicitous for it; it is very different from what they suppose it to be: the whole Jewish nation shall be utterly dissolved by the severe vengeance of God; this is *the sign of the Son of man* which shall appear in heaven, for this is all that Daniel means by *the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven*, in the passage on which they found their expectation of a sign.” On this occasion, then, Jesus not only assured them that the sign which they looked for, would not  
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be given, but also pointed out where their mistake lay, and explained the true meaning of the prophecy on which they founded it.

Thus Jesus, in consequence of the opposition made to him, occasionally illustrated the proof of his mission from prophecy, frequently during his life. But after his resurrection, he fully explained all the ancient prophecies concerning his sufferings and death, and his religion, oftener than once to his disciples. The same day that he rose from the dead, he came up to Cleophas and another disciple, going from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They had hitherto believed him to be the Messiah: but now their faith was almost totally subverted, because he had been crucified, and they had not yet been satisfied concerning the truth of his resurrection; *the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him;*

him: but we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, to day is the third day since these things were done. Having heard their doubts, and the grounds of them, he said, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and in this manner to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses, and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures, the things concerning himself\*. In order to confirm the faith of the apostles and other disciples, and to inform their understandings, he pointed out the application of the ancient prophecies to himself, likewise on another occasion: *These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding that they might understand*

\* Luke xxiv. 13,—27.

*understand the scriptures, and said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name, among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem: and ye are witnesses of these things* \*.

This served not only for the conviction of the disciples themselves; it answered another purpose. Being thus instructed by Christ himself, in the true meaning of the prophecies, their knowledge of which was perfected by the effusion of the holy Spirit at Pentecost, they were qualified for supporting Christianity by appeals to them, and reasonings from them, and all their applications of them bear the authority of Christ himself. The opposition which had been made to the gospel, before they began to preach, prevented its being ever improper for them to explain, and reason from, the prophecies which they quoted; it made it even  
 necessary:

\* Luke xxiv. 44,—48.

necessary: but they were very often called to it by immediate objections and marks of prejudice. On the day of Pentecost, Peter spoke to an assembly of those who had opposed Christ so inveterately as even to be accessary to his death, who had already *taken him, and by wicked hands crucified and slain him\**; and he spoke in an assembly in which some, on seeing the miraculous gifts bestowed on the apostles, *said mocking, These men are full of new wine†*. After having simply quoted, with a particular view to these latter, a prophecy of Joel, of which what they misrepresented as drunkenness was so obvious a completion, that it needed no commentary‡; he was naturally led by his knowledge of the disposition which the generality of his audience had fully shown, to quote two prophecies of David, and to prove by the justest reasoning,

\* Acts ii. 23. † Ver. 13. ‡ Ver. 14,—21.



soning, that they were never properly fulfilled in David himself, that they related to the Messiah, and that they were literally and exactly fulfilled in Jesus, and therefore demonstrated that he was the Messiah there predicted : *David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved; therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad: moreover also, my flesh shall rest in hope, because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine holy one to see corruption: thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance. Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day: therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne;*

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*he seeing this before, spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption: this Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear: for David is not ascended into the heavens; but he saith himself, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thy foes thy footstool. Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ\*.* As the Jews only expressed their surprise at the cure of the lame man, by Peter and John, but were not convinced by it; and as they had already *denied the holy one and the just, and killed the prince of life †*; Peter, after having pointed out the intention and the force of the miracle,

\* Acts ii. 25, — 36.

† Chap. iii. 10, 13, 14, 15.

racle, naturally took occasion to observe that many prophecies had been emitted, in all the preceeding ages, concerning the Messiah, some of which he quotes particularly, and that they were all exactly fulfilled in Jesus; and thence concluded that the Jews, who were *the children of the prophets, and of the covenant*, ought readily to acknowledge him as the promised Saviour\*. When he was questioned by the council, concerning the same miracle, he applied another particular prophecy to Christ's being crucified by them, and exalted by God †: and their threatenings gave occasion to the company of Christians, when Peter and John returned to them, to take notice of the accuracy with which another prediction was accomplished in Jesus: *Thou by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things?*

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\* Acts iii. 21,--26.

† Chap. iv. 11.

*The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ: For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done\*.*

When Philip came up to the Ethiopian Eunuch, he found him reading this place of scripture; He was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: in his humiliation his judgment was taken away; and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth: and not understanding it, he asked Philip, Of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? We are not informed of the particulars of Philip's answer, but we are told that he began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus †.

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\* Acts iv. 24,——28.

† Chap. viii. 32,——35.

The objections of the Jews who believed the gospel indeed, but understood its nature very imperfectly, inflamed no doubt by the clamours of the unbelieving Jews, against granting the gentile Christians immunity from the observance of the ceremonial law, led James to recollect and to urge a prediction which indicated this very thing: *To this agree the words of the prophets, as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up; that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world\**. It is with a direct view to remove the mistakes of the unbelieving Jews, who inflexibly opposed the gospel, in relation to the same subject, that the apostle Paul proves from several

\* Acts xv. 15,——18.

ral passages of the prophets, that the Gentiles ought to be admitted into the Messiah's kingdom, without any other condition but believing in Christ. This, he observes, is plainly implied in what Isaiah says, speaking of the Messiah, *Whosoever believeth on him, shall not be ashamed*; for the expression, he argues, is unlimited, *whosoever*, so that here there is no difference made between the Jew and the Greek, and nothing is required but *believing*\*. He further confirms this, by quoting a similar intimation of Joel, *WHOSOEVER shall call upon the name of the Lord, shall be saved*†. He afterwards proves that their cavils against preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles, were perfectly unreasonable, since they might have known that it would be so, because it was all along foretold: *Did not Israel know* that the Gentiles would be called? If they did not, it  
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\* Rom. x. 11, 12.

† Ver. 13.

was their own fault, for *first*, *Moses saith, I will provoke you to jealousy by them that are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you. But Esaias is very plain in foretelling both the calling of the Gentiles, and the rejection of the Jews themselves; and saith, I was found of them that sought me not, I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me: but to Israel he saith, All day long have I stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people\**. At Thessalonica, *the Jews who believed not, were so violent in their opposition to Paul, that they at last raised a tumult against him †: There Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three Sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alledging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus whom I preach unto you is the Christ ‡.* Apollos used the same method in similar circumstances:

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\* Rom. x. 19,—21. † Acts xvii. 5. ‡ Ver. 2, 3.

he not only helped them much which had believed through grace; but also mightily convinced the Jews who opposed the gospel, and that publicly, showing by the scriptures, that Jesus was Christ \*. Before Agrippa, Paul affirmed that, in preaching the gospel, he said none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come; that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people, and to the Gentiles †. When Paul was a prisoner at Rome, the Jews said to him, *As concerning this sect, we know that every where it is spoken against ‡.* In order to remove the prejudice which they thus expressed, and to answer their objections, he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening ||: and

\* Acts xviii. 27, 28.

† Chap. xxvi. 22, 23.

‡ Chap. xxviii. 22.

|| Ver. 23.



and when, notwithstanding all his pains, *some believed not*, he showed that this very obstinacy was foretold by Ifaiah\*.

THUS we have largely explained the manner in which Christ and his apostles illustrated and urged the several particular evidences of the truth of Christianity. The smallest degree of attention to what has been said, will enable us to perceive, that, on several occasions, the objections of those who believed not, led them to collect several of these evidences together, and to enforce them at once. It will not be necessary to review the instances which have been already produced, in order to prove this. It will be sufficient to recollect, that we have frequently had occasion to introduce passages of scripture in considering one of the evidences of the gospel, which had been formerly examined

\* Acts xxviii. 25,—27.

mined in part, when we were considering other evidences of it. Sometimes in answering an objection which had been raised, Christ or his apostles insisted on several distinct proofs of their mission. Sometimes when an objection was made, they answered it by displaying one evidence of the gospel; an exception was taken against their answer; this led them to urge another evidence of it; and thus they were brought to touch on several or all of its principal proofs. We shall take notice only of a few instances, which are full to the purpose, and have not been formerly pointed out. We shall not repeat any of the illustrations of the truth of Christ's mission, to which it has been already shown that the cavils of the Pharisees against the miracle wrought at the pool of Bethesda, gave rise: but we may observe, that it moreover led Jesus to give a summary of all the principal

cial proofs of his mission. Having claimed very high dignity, he thought proper to produce at once the several vouchers for it. He desires them not to take it on his own word; *If I alone, says he, bear witness of myself, my witness, you will say, is not true.* Be it so; you say right; had you only my own assertion for my mission and dignity, it would not be sufficient to render it credible. But this is not my case; I want not abundance of the most unexceptionable evidence: *there is another that beareth witness of me, and I know that he is really a prophet of God, and that therefore the witness which he witnesseth of me, is true,* and ought to obtain credit. Ye certainly ought to be determined by it; he is a witness called by yourselves: ye acknowledged him to be a prophet, ye even were not certain that he was not the Christ; ye sent unto John, and what was his answer

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to you? *He bare witness unto the truth*; he confessed that he was not the Christ, and he declared expressly that I am the Christ. This testimony from a prophet, might alone prove my claim; *but I receive not testimony from man*, I am under no necessity of resting my cause on this declaration alone, *but* I would not omit it, because it ought in all reason to have great weight with you, for it will be gross inconsistency in you to reject it; and therefore *these things I say, that ye may believe and thus be saved*. Ye ought seriously to ponder the force of this proof: it is very considerable, for *he was a burning and a shining light*; and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light: ye had once a high opinion of him, and he fully deserved it. *But* decisive as his testimony is, it is not my principal voucher; *I have greater witness than that of John*: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works  
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*that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me: my miracles are the testimony of God himself; they are very numerous, and, in every one of them, this testimony is repeated. And the Father himself which hath sent me, hath born witness of me, in even a more direct and definite manner, if possible, than by miracles: have ye never at any time heard his voice, or seen his shape, a visible symbol of his presence? Did ye not see the Spirit of God descend like a dove, and light upon me at my baptism? And did ye not hear a voice from heaven declare, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased? Yet ye have not his word abiding in you; remarkable as this voice and declaration was, it has made no lasting impression on you, for whom he hath sent, and declared so plainly and strikingly that he hath sent, him ye believe not. I can produce more evidence still; search the scriptures, for in them ye think ye have*

*have eternal life, they are the foundation of all your hopes, their authority should be sacred with you; and they are they which testify of me, they contain many express predictions of the Messiah, all which, if you will but attend, you may perceive to be accurately fulfilled in me. Yet ye will not come to me, that ye might have life. I know that ye are prejudiced against me, because I pursue not that secular glory, which your own pride and ambition have induced you to believe to be the objects of the Messiah's mission; I receive not honour from men. I avow it. But is this any real presumption against my being the Messiah? By your persisting so obstinately in thinking that it is, I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you; it is principally your wickedness that has dictated your idea of the Messiah, and makes you to hold it so pertinaciously. The event will prove it; I am come in my Father's name,*

*name*, with the strongest evidences of a commission from him, *and ye receive me not*, merely because my appearance and professed design agrees not with your prejudices: *if another shall come in his own name*, without so much as a shadow of evidence of a divine mission, and shall only make pretensions which fall in with your depraved notions, *him ye will receive*. *How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour which cometh from God only?* While you continue intent upon the applause of men, it is impossible that you can receive me as the Messiah, for this would disgrace all the pretences to deep knowledge of the scriptures, on which you have built your reputation; it would be an acknowledgment of the grossness of your ignorance and mistakes; and before you can make it, you must learn to value the approbation of God above all things. This  
however

however you cannot obtain without it; your rejecting the evidences which I produce, will be sufficient to condemn you in his sight: but *do not think that I alone will accuse you to the Father, if you persist in unbelief; there is another that accuseth you, even Moses in whom ye trust; for had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me; for he wrote of me: but if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words* \*. Thus, in a train of the closest and justest reasoning, he gives a concise and simple, but clear and nervous representation of all the principal evidences of his religion.—There are several passages in which the apostles, either on occasion of immediate objections, or at least in consequence of the general opposition which Christianity met with, urge at once, the miracles of Christ, his resurrection, the miraculous gifts which he bestowed upon his disciples, and the testimony of the ancient prophets,

\* John v. 31,—47.



prophets, as containing a full proof of the truth of his religion \*. I shall take notice only of two instances. When Peter was called to Cornelius, he in a very simple manner, without reasoning, as there was no immediate opposition; but with natural energy, takes notice, that the testimony of John †; the greatness, the number, the beneficial tendency, and the public nature of the miracles which Jesus wrought ‡; his resurrection from the dead, of which there was the clearest evidence ||; and the predictions of the ancient prophets \*\*; all concurred in proving that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. In the synagogue at Antioch, where there were many so ill disposed, that they soon came to *speake against those things which were said, contradicting and blaspheming* ††, Paul urged the witness of John, who

P . *preached*

\* Acts ii. 22,—36. chap. iii. 13,—26.

† Chap. x. 37. ‡ Ver. 38, 39. || Ver. 40, 41.

\*\* Ver. 43. †† Chap. xiii. 45.

*preached before his coming*, and declared in exprefs terms that he was the Mefiah \*; his refurrection from the dead †; and the prophecies of the Old Testament, concerning his family ‡, his death ||, and his refurrection \*\*, which were all fulfilled in Jefus ††, and fome of which he quotes particularly and reasons from ‡‡; as concurring and indisputable proofs of the truth of his miffion and his religion.

WE have now feen, in what manner Chrift and his apoftles fupported the truth of Chriftianity in confequence of oppofition made to them, and objections raifed againft them. In this fituation, they did not fatisfy themfelves with fimply exhibiting the evidences of their miffion. Chrift himfelf afferted  
both

\* Acts xi. 24, 25. † Ver. 30,—33. ‡ Ver. 22, 23.

|| Ver. 27,—29.      \*\* Ver. 32,—37.

†† Ver. 27, 29, 32, 33.      ‡‡ Ver. 35,—37.

both his mission and his dignity, in the most unreserved manner : He not only gave a more ample exhibition of excellent doctrine, but he likewise affirmed, both that his religion is excellent, and that its excellence proves it to be divine : He urged his miracles as illustrious vouchers of his being sent from God, he vindicated them from the exceptions that were taken against their force, and he appealed to them as direct proofs of his particular doctrines, as facts which showed an actual exertion of the very powers which these doctrines ascribed to him : He took occasion to strengthen the evidence of his being a divine teacher, by giving many plain instances of supernatural knowledge : He showed that the ancient prophecies were accomplished in himself ; he pointed out some whole predictions, and some important circumstances in other predictions, which

they overlooked, and by overlooking which they were led into mistakes, and hindered from perceiving that he was the Messiah; by these means he accounted for such circumstances relating to himself, as gave them offence, and showed that, tho' they suited not the idea which they had formed of the Messiah, yet they were plainly foretold by the prophets, from whom they ought to have derived their idea of him; he evinced that no essential character of the Messiah was wanting in him, and that it was, in some instances, their inattention to him, and in others their ignorance of the true sense of the prophecies, that led them to imagine it: Finally, he collected the several evidences of his mission, joined them into one proof, and enforced this proof upon his hearers. The apostles exactly copied the example of their master, when they found proper opportunities.

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## SECTION V.

*The advantages of their having used this manner in consequence of opposition.*

SEVERAL advantages redound to Christianity, from Jesus and his apostles having sometimes departed from their original manner of proposing the evidences of the gospel, and adopted the more argumentative manner which has been now explained ; and these advantages are the greater, because it was only on occasion of opposition that they made this alteration.

THIS manner contributes in various respects to facilitate the defence of Christianity : it removes several difficulties which would have otherwise attended this ;

this; it cuts off all colour for several objections which might have otherwise been in a considerable degree plausible; it gives great advantages for answering them, if they should be notwithstanding moved. It was in some measure necessary for these purposes, that, in the publication of the gospel, the evidences of Christianity should be not only exhibited, but likewise appealed to, illustrated, vindicated, and enforced by reasoning. Jesus and his apostles often did all this, on occasion of the opposition which was made to them. It would be rashness to pretend to decide, in what precise degree a true revelation must stand clear of difficulties: but it is certainly a presumption in favour of Christianity, that it does stand clear of many difficulties to which a different manner of publication would have left it exposed.

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It was very necessary that Christ should put it beyond doubt, that he delivered his doctrine as a divine revelation, every part of which stood on the authority of God. If he had not delivered it in this manner, he could have been considered only as a wise man who published his own sentiments, and taught what appeared to him to be true and useful: it might have been admitted that he gave many excellent instructions, but still there would have been no obligation upon men to receive all that he taught: his religion would have been like the systems of the philosophers, in which we are at liberty to reject whatever we dislike: every separate principle of Christianity must have been adopted only so far as it could be proved true by a direct and peculiar train of reasoning. It was even necessary that Christ should be very explicit in claiming a divine mission,

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else it might have been pretended by some, that he designed his religion to be considered merely as a human system, and it might have cost some pains to render it absolutely undeniable that he did not. As explicit as he has been, some have been so absolutely inattentive to the import of his claim, as to profess themselves Christians, and even to complain loudly that gross injustice was done them by refusing them the name, while notwithstanding they avowedly reject many things which they acknowledge to be expressly contained in the New Testament itself\*. Indeed most infidels have shown a strong propensity to examine the articles of the  
Christian

\* Very many infidels might be named, who have run into this inconsistency. By J. J. Rousseau it has been carried to the highest pitch of extravagance. See particularly his letter to the Archbishop of Paris, and his letters from the mountains. They are not yet ashamed of this absurdity; the author of an artful, but impotent, attempt against the gospel, intitled, *The morality of the New Testament, &c.* still more lately published, blushes not to assume the name of *An impartial Christian*.



Christian faith, in a manner that supposes them not to stand on the authority of a divine revelation, and to reject them, not because they can be proved to be false, but because reason could not, by its own light alone, prove them to be true. But all who are not either very unthinking, or very much prejudiced, may easily perceive that this proceeds from a perfect misapprehension of the nature of the gospel. For Christ was led, by the opposition which he met with, to assert expressly and repeatedly, that he was a teacher sent from God, and to appeal for proof of it, to the evidences which he had produced. He thus delivered all his doctrines in the name of God; he claimed that all of them, without exception, should be received and believed; he left not every article to derive its credibility from a separate and peculiar proof; he

gave

gave one common proof for them all, the authority of a divine revelation. It is on this footing that his religion must be tried: all the parts of it demand our belief, as being truths revealed by God; the rejection of any one article clearly taught in the gospel, can be justified only by proving, that the gospel is not a divine revelation, at least that we have not sufficient evidence of its being such. In examining, whether it be a revelation or not, its particular doctrines must doubtless be considered: but they ought to be considered only in one light: you must prove them to be positively false and absurd, else you can draw no argument from them, against the truth of Christianity. If it be but *possible* that, considered in themselves, they *may be* true, they leave the direct evidences of Christ's mission, in their full force; and whenever this mission is proved, it follows of course, that all  
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the doctrines contained in the gospel *are* true. All objections against these doctrines, which do not infer their absolute absurdity, are beside the purpose. You say that reason gives no evidence of their truth; that, when you consider them simply in themselves, you can perceive no probability attending them: Be it so; it is not necessary that it should be otherwise; it is affirmed only that they are revealed; and objections of this kind cannot prove that they are not, tho' they might justify your not embracing them, if they were proposed merely as human opinions. You think that there are principles of reason, from which it may be inferred that they are improbable: but before you reject them on this account, you ought to be satisfied, that there is greater certainty both of the truth of those principles, and of the legitimacy of the consequences deduced

duced from them, than of the truth of the revelation which contains the doctrines objected against. You cannot see that a revelation for discovering them was necessary, nor perceive what good end the discovery of them has answered: but this is not what you are called to judge of: the proper question is, Have they been in fact revealed? Has Christ, who taught them, proved a mission from God? The simple state to which Christ has reduced the question concerning the truth of his religion, by claiming a divine mission so explicitly, is, Whether there be sufficient evidence that he actually had that mission? If there be, all his doctrines must be received at once. He had so frequent occasions of insisting on his having been sent by God, that it scarce can be honestly overlooked: and attention to it, would confine the controversy with Infidels within very  
 narrow

narrow limits; it would enable them to perceive, that many of their most specious and popular reasonings, their arguments, for instance, against the necessity of revelation, and most of their objections against particular Christian doctrines, are nothing to the purpose; it would show them that, in order to overturn Christianity, they must evince, either that it has not the evidences which it pretends to have, or that, supposing it to have them, they are not sufficient to prove its divinity; and that they must evince this, not by nice speculations on general topics, or by studied deductions from distant principles, but by a direct and close examination, and confutation of these evidences themselves. Attention to this, would indeed shorten all theological controversies; it would cut off many species of argumentation which all parties have employed in defence of  
their

their peculiar tenets : for when Christ's mission is once acknowledged, the only question that can properly arise concerning any religious doctrine, is, Whether it be taught in scripture, or not? To acknowledge that any doctrine is taught in the gospel, and yet to disbelieve that doctrine, is truly to deny the gospel to be a divine revelation.

Miracles considered simply in themselves, are only exertions of a supernatural power, and prove nothing but that the person who works them, is possessed of that power. It is when he delivers some doctrine, when he asserts that God revealed it to him, and sent him to teach it, and gave him the power of working these miracles on purpose to confirm it, that they become proofs of the truth of that doctrine. Without this, a person might perform miracles, or works exactly resembling  
miracles

miracles in their whole outward appearance, and yet have no omission from God to make any revelation\*. It was very necessary, therefore, that the intention of the Christian miracles should be plainly declared. Infidels have been forward in all ages, to represent them as mere exertions of power or skill, which do not infer the truth of the Christian religion. With this view chiefly, Celsus collected the fabulous miracles of Aristeas, Abaris, Hermotimus, Cleomedes, and remarked that they were not, on account of these, considered by any as gods or divine persons †: and with the same view

\* See Campbell's Dissertation on Miracles, Part 2. Sect. 3. A just conception of the nature of that connexion which subsists between miracles and doctrines, seems to throw some light on a question which has been lately agitated with great warmth; the question concerning the continuance of miraculous powers in the Christian church. That these did continue, and were exercised by Christians, for a considerable time

† Origen. cont. Celsum. lib. 3.

view, Hierocles compared Christ to Apollonius Tyanæus, and extolled the judgment of the Pagans, who, tho' they believed the marvellous exploits of the latter, did not therefore reckon him a God\*. If Christ had never professed that

time after the age of the apostles, there are numerous testimonies of the primitive writers. The testimonies have many circumstances of credibility. On the other hand, some circumstances have been taken notice of, which seem to lessen their weight. One is, that errors and corruptions had crept into the church, in the period during which miraculous powers are said to have remained, that they were patronized by those who exercised such powers, that therefore they must be admitted for truths, if the reality of these powers be acknowledged. But this consequence by no means follows. Miracles prove the truth, not of all the opinions of the person who works them, but of those doctrines which he professes to have received by revelation, and in attestation of which he declares them to have been wrought. The miracles performed by the prophets and apostles, did not prove them to be infallible in all things, but only in the particular doctrines which they delivered as from God, and for proof of which they appealed to their miracles. In like manner, suppose succeeding Christians to have exercised the miraculous powers ascribed to them; these miracles can be proofs only of the doctrines for the confirmation of which they declare that they exercised them,

\* Euseb. cont. Hieroclem.



that he wrought his miracles with a design to confirm his doctrine, they would indeed have had no connexion with its truth: if he had not asserted this very frequently and explicitly, Infidels might have dissembled that con-

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them, not of any of their other particular opinions, which they supported, not by an appeal to miracles, but by evidences totally distinct. In order, therefore, to determine what it is that their miracles prove, we must examine what is the purpose for which they say that they were intended. Now, with respect to almost all the miracles which are said to have been wrought for the three first centuries, we may observe, that they are mentioned chiefly in the Apologies for Christianity, that they are expressly declared to have been wrought only for the confirmation of Christianity as contained in the New Testament, that they are constantly represented in this precise point of view, as standing monuments of the truth of the gospel. The truth of the gospel, therefore, is all that will follow from the supposition of their reality. The fathers held many errors; their miracles oblige us not, to admit any of these; for they are not pretended to have been wrought in proof of any of them: they sometimes deduce these opinions from scripture, in the exercise of their own reason, and sometimes inform us, that they learned from tradition that some of the apostles had taught them; and we are at liberty to try them, by scrutinizing these evidences: they may be false, and yet all the alledged miracles real. Some things have indeed  
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nexion with some degree of plausibility. But the opposition which he met with, gave him so many occasions of asserting it, and insinuating upon it, that it cannot possibly be overlooked by any man of candour, and needs no other

been affirmed, which seem to imply that some of the primitive writers urge miracles in support of their own private opinions. Let us examine a few of the principal of these. It has been said, that Justin asserts that he himself had a miraculous gift of expounding the scriptures, and that we cannot give credit to him without adopting all his expositions. But he really claims no such gift. When he says, *γραφὰς ὑμῖν ἀνισορῆν μέλλω, ὅν κατασκευῆν λόγων ἐν μόνῃ τέχνῃ ἐπιδείκνυσθαι σπέυδω. οὐδὲ γὰρ δύναμις ἐμοὶ τοιαύτη τις ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ ΧΑΡΙΣ ΠΑΡΑ ἘΘΕΟΥ μόνῃ εἰς τὸ συνιέναι τὰς γραφὰς αὐτοῦ ἐδίδθη μοι.* (Dial. cum Tryph. page 280.) his words imply, not any claim to inspiration, or to a supernatural knowledge of the scriptures, but only a thankful acknowledgment of that general knowledge of the doctrines taught in them, which Christians may acquire by ordinary means, and which may be justly ascribed to the grace or kindness of God. He says again, (ibid. page 326,) *ἀπεκάλυψεν ὁ υἱὸς ἩΜΙΝ πάντα ὅσα καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γραφῶν διὰ τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ νενοήκαμεν.* That he means not any peculiar revelation made to himself, we would naturally conclude from the bare inspection of these words; and that he truly means only the Christian revelation

ther proof, but an appeal to the plain expressions of the gospel history. When therefore a late writer \* has asserted that Christ's miracles were never intended by him for evidences of his mission, we can only wonder at his

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tion in general, is put beyond all doubt by the sentence immediately preceding, from which this is a professed deduction: *ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ δὲ γέγραπται εἰπών. Πάντα μοι παραδέδοται ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς. Καὶ οὐδεὶς γινώσκει τὸν πατέρα, εἰ μὴ υἱὸς. οὐδὲ τὸν υἱόν, εἰ μὴ ὁ πατήρ, καὶ ὁὖτος ἂν ὁ υἱὸς ἀποκαλύψῃ. ἀπεκάλυψεν ὁὖν, &c.* He says in another place, (ibid. page 346.) *ὕμειθε ἂν ἡμᾶς ποτὲ, ὦ ἄνδρες, μενοικέειαι δυναθῆναι ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς ταῦτα, εἰ μὴ θελήματι τοῦ θελήσαντος αὐτὰ ἐλάβομεν χάριν τῶ νοῦσαι;* This also plainly relates, not to any supernatural gift bestowed upon himself, but to the light which the New Testament revelation had thrown on the ancient prophecies: for he had just before quoted some predictions, most of which are applied to Christ in the New Testament; he had asserted that Gentiles had now more perfect knowledge of the scriptures than the Jews themselves, and he had asserted that they owed this to the calling of the New and everlasting Testament. The question followed naturally, Could we Gentiles understand all these things in the scriptures, if we had not received grace

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\* Christianity not founded on argument, p. 46, &c.

boldness: he pretends to prove it by arguments; but we may be certain that they cannot possibly be conclusive: It is a plain fact, that Christ did, in many instances, urge his miracles as proofs of his mission and doctrine: no reasonings

to do it? To show that the grace which he intends, is God's kindness in calling the Gentiles, while he rejected the Jews, he proceeds immediately to quote predictions of these events. Several passages are likewise produced for proving, that Cyprian endeavours to establish some particular opinions or practices, by pretending that he was directed to them by visions and supernatural admonitions. Of these there is one which does imply such a pretence: but this is a claim to such inspiration as would need miracles for proof of it, more properly than an appeal to any miracle as an evidence of truth; it is not therefore to the purpose: besides, in this case, a man of a warm temper might more easily deceive himself, or a designing man might more securely make a false pretence, than in open miracles which are the objects of men's senses. But indeed most of the passages produced, imply no pretence to inspiration. He says, for instance, that God had commanded that a mixture of wine and water should be used in the Lord's supper: he means, commanded in scripture; for it is from passages of scripture that he attempts to prove it. He says concerning his flight from persecution, that the Lord commanded him to retire; he adds not, *in a vision*; and there is  
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reasonings from any topic can prove, then, that he did not; to propose arguments in this case, is an insult upon reason.

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a written direction of our Saviour, Matth. x. 23. sufficient to warrant his expression. He speaks of two persons who were set apart for presbyters, *divina dignatione*; they were eminent for goodness, they had shown great steadiness in persecution, one of them recovered after having been half burnt by his persecutors; Cyprian regarded these things as declarations of providence in their favour; all that he says of them, shows that he meant no more. It is plain then that the declared intention of the miracles said to have been wrought in the primitive church was, not the establishment of particular opinions or practices, but simply the confirmation of Christianity. Suppose them real, the truth of the gospel is all that follows. When miracles were urged in proof of particular tenets, we may take it for granted that they were merely pretended; when they came to be thus urged very commonly, real miracles had then either ceased in the church, or become very rare. When the scriptures were completed, God had given men the whole rule of faith which he intended; he left them to collect their religion from them, in the use of their own faculties; he empowered none any longer to work miracles for establishing new doctrines; all pretences to such were mere imposture. For the propagation of Christianity among unbelievers, miracles might notwithstanding continue necessary; how long they did continue to be wrought for this purpose, must be determined by historical evidence.

That Jesus was a divine teacher, might have been proved by other arguments; that he was the promised Messiah, could be proved only from the prophecies of the Old Testament. The agreement of these to him and his religion, is so accurate, and extends to so many particulars, that it might have convinced an attentive inquirer, that he was indeed the Messiah, tho' he had never affirmed it, or made an appeal to prophecy. But his neglecting this altogether, would have been in some measure unaccountable; it would have rendered this proof of his mission somewhat feeble, and considerably intricate; there might have been a show of reason for asserting, that he only claimed to be an ordinary divine teacher, but assumed not the high character of the Christ. But he did in fact, on occasion of the objections which were made, appeal very frequently to  
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the ancient prophets, apply their oracles to himself, reason from them, show that they were accomplished in himself, and affirm that he was the very person intended by them. It cannot, therefore, be even pretended, that he ought to be regarded only as a common prophet: if he be at all a divine teacher, he must be the Messiah; the proof that this character belongs to him, stands in full strength, and is as short and clear as it possibly could be.

Thus if our Saviour and his apostles had never employed that manner which they did employ on occasion of opposition, it might have given a handle for some plausible objections against the gospel: it is a great advantage that there remains no colour for these; it renders the truth of Christianity more immediately evident, and the defence of it easier. Infidels are forward to lay hold of every difficulty attending revelation,

tion, and to turn it into an argument against its truth. A true revelation, they argue, if there ever was one, is of so great and general importance, that it would not be consistent with the goodness and perfection of God, to leave it exposed to difficulties, which may be insuperable to some men, and occasion their rejecting it. The argument is perfectly fallacious; it runs counter to the whole analogy of nature. It is however in some degree specious: and its being so, shows that the principles of human nature dispose us to regard a freedom from difficulties, as one reason for thinking favourably of any scheme of religion. When, therefore, Christianity stands clear of so considerable difficulties, by the manner of its publication, it is reasonable to consider this as some indication of its truth. It is, at least to a certain degree, what men would wish  
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a true revelation to be, and what Infidels judge it reasonable to expect that it should be. This is an indication of its truth, the stronger because the difficulties effectually prevented, are such as would have unavoidably arisen from the sole use of that method which was originally and most ordinarily employed, and because they are prevented in a consistence with the advantages resulting from that original manner.

FURTHER, as the manner in which Christ and his apostles supported their mission, when they met with opposition, prevents some objections, so it removes others. In consequence of it, we have their own representation of the nature and force of the evidences produced by them, and their own answers to several of the objections which have been moved against the truth of Christianity. This cannot fail to be highly

ly agreeable to the curious and inquisitive. It is not only agreeable. By means of it, considerable progress is made in the defence of Christianity. Its evidences cannot fairly be rejected, till the representations of their force, given by Christ and the apostles, be first invalidated; the same objections cannot fairly be repeated, till the answers which they have already given to them, be first refuted. This has, however, been scarce at all attempted by Infidels. There can be no stronger evidence of want of candour. Indeed, since there have been so many defences of Christianity, it would not be altogether unreasonable to expect, that Infidels should not revive any objection, without showing all the answers already given, to be insufficient: But it is peculiarly inexcusable, to overlook those answers to objections, which the New Testament contains. They cannot be  
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ignorant of these, if they only read the New Testament; it is in it that Christianity is taught, and therefore to oppose Christianity without reading it, is alike absurd and disingenuous. To know these answers, and yet to take no notice of them, is as little consistent with the love of truth. Had Infidels pursued the track which this principle naturally points out, it would have probably prevented some of their objections; for Christ and his apostles gave answers to the objections which were proposed to them; and in every instance, it may be safely left to any person who will examine them, to determine on which side the strength of argument lies. But if they thought not these answers sufficient, it was plainly incumbent on them to have confuted them, before they could be at liberty to urge the same objections. If they have declined this labour, it should in rea-  
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son prejudice their cause ; it cannot promote it. It exposes their impartiality to just suspicion ; it intimates a consciousness of their inability to reply ; it is an acknowledgment of the solidity of the answers: at any rate, it renders their opposition faulty in its very foundation. They have left a strong enemy behind, in possession of a fortress which they found impregnable, and, on that account, all their advances are insecure, and their successes but apparent. Till the original answers be fairly confuted, the repetition of the objections is mere trifling. But when they are repeated, so long as the New Testament remains, Christians have the ready means, both of removing them, and of showing the impropriety of their being urged. They have not this advantage only. The answers recorded in the New Testament are so natural, that they would have no doubt occurred, whenever the  
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objections had been raised; and they are so full, that they could scarce have failed to satisfy the reason of men, by whomsoever they had been given: But being given by Jesus and his apostles, Christians, who are already convinced of their mission by distinct and independent arguments, must rest in them with peculiar assurance, and be, by means of them, greatly confirmed in their faith. Their utility extends beyond the confutation of the particular objections which gave rise to them; they are models to Christians for answering many others; and they proceed upon principles of so general influence, that they are even immediately applicable to many objections which had not then been professedly urged. In every defence of Christianity, we may find numerous instances, in which the reasonings of the New Testament have been made, in this very manner,

to contribute greatly to the illustration of the truth of our religion. In a word, in consequence of Jesus having been led to support and enforce the evidences of his mission by reasoning, we have an opportunity of seeing him rise superior to all opposition, of seeing the victory of argument over sophistry and cavil, of observing, in the gospel, the genuine triumphs of divine truth.

THE manner of proposing the evidences of Christianity, which Christ and his apostles adopted on occasion of opposition, not only contributes to facilitate the defence of our religion; it was necessary for doing full justice to its evidence. There are two ways in which the strength of evidence may be made to appear. It shows its strength directly, when it produces ready and firm belief. But it cannot always show its strength in this manner; prejudice

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or some other cause may prevent the strongest evidence from producing its effects on some men, and may suggest objections against it. It is proved to be, notwithstanding, strong, when it is shown by reasoning, that it ought to have produced belief. This is the only way in which its power can be made known to those, who do not feel it by its operation on their understandings. Strong evidence requires not a great deal of reasoning, to enable it to gain the assent of a sound understanding; but evidence must be spurious, if it admit not a vindication by reasoning, from all the objections that can be raised against it. The evidences of Christianity were called in question; objections were formed against them; attempts were made to elude their force, by cavilling at some of the circumstances which attended them. Jesus confuted the objections, by argument; he exposed

posed the weakness of the cavils; he showed that they affected not his credit, and that, in spite of them, the evidences which he had given, remained conclusive and sufficient. By these means he made it plain, that the faith which the simple exhibition of them had produced, was not the offspring of credulity, that it was perfectly legitimate, and that the unbelief of others proceeded altogether from themselves, not from any defect of evidence. It is often impossible to convince a person, who may yet be proved to be undeniably in the wrong: the reasonings of Christ and his apostles show that this was the case with those who opposed them.

REASONINGS in support of the evidences of the gospel, were in some respect necessary, likewise, for procuring it a reception. The exhibition of these evidences



evidences was sufficient for the conviction of the honest and attentive ; it was the properest for their conviction. But the mere exhibition of evidence is not, in any case, sufficient for the conviction of all. Some are inattentive ; some are prejudiced ; some love exceedingly to be amused with reasoning, and set a high value upon it ; we find some men even so much addicted to doubt and disputation, that they will scarce be convinced by the strongest evidence, except it be enforced by reasoning. By an argumentative display or vindication of evidence, many may be convinced, who would not have believed without it. Medicine is as necessary to the diseased, as food is to the sound. The incredulous labour under an intellectual distemper which can be removed only by explaining the force of the evidence, and answering their objections. If Christ and his apostles

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had not sometimes taken this way, it would have been regarded by many as a very strong prejudice against their mission. The objection would not have been subversive of Christianity, provided they had exhibited real and natural evidence; for we are not qualified for determining, what precise *degree* of proof, it is fit that God should give in matters of religion. But the objection would have had some force; it would have seemed to imply a neglect of *the sick who need a physician*. When men think that they have reasons against believing on any subject, after the natural evidence has been presented to them, the only possible way of overcoming their unbelief, is, to prove that their reasons are not good. When heedlessness, prejudice, or a captious spirit, hinder men from perceiving the force of clear evidence, the natural means of enabling them to perceive it, are

are, to excite their attention, to direct them to consider it in the proper point of view, and to solve their difficulties. Had not Christ and his apostles used these means, when the opposition of argument naturally demanded it, there would have been some cause to say, that they did not all they might have done for the conviction of those who were unhappily prejudiced against them. But, be the objection ever so strong, be it insurmountable, if you please; Christianity has no concern with it. The opposition raised by unbelievers, gave the founder and the first publishers of this religion, many opportunities, the properest that could be, for confirming the truth of their mission by reasoning; and they used these opportunities for that very purpose. It is not more plain, that they made no ostentation of argument when it was not necessary, than it is, that they never neglected to use it

when it was necessary: they thus did all that could possibly be done for the conviction of men; if any notwithstanding remained in unbelief, it was wholly owing to themselves\*. The New Testament contains so many instances of their having actually reasoned in defence of their mission, as must satisfy every person who only reads it, that

\* There were, perhaps, some objections proposed to Jesus, which he did not think it necessary to confute. Thus, when some of the people were disposed to own him for the Messiah, and said, *Of a truth this is the prophet, this is the Christ*; others raised an objection, which would have been insurmountable, if it had not arisen from a mistake of fact; they said, *Shall Christ come out of Galilee? Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem where David was?* John vii. 40,——42. We are not informed, that Jesus made any answer. It is not, however, certain that he made none; the evangelists record not all that he said. But if he made none, it cannot be thence concluded, that he declined giving all reasonable satisfaction to his opposers. An answer was not necessary. They might easily learn, that he was really born at Bethlehem, and of the family of David: it was generally known; it had been rendered notorious by the national inrolment, by the inquiries of the Magi, and by Herod's slaughter of the infants: none of the Jews  
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that all the advantages which any system can derive from its being supported by reasoning, actually belong to Christianity. That Jesus showed an incapacity for reasoning; that he owed his success to his having addressed only the weak and credulous; that he satisfied himself with imposing upon these; that, whenever he met with men of penetration, who discovered the imposture, and were willing to expose it, he was glad to be silent, and to make no attempt to convert them; that he knew he could not satisfy them, and was afraid lest, by contending with them, he

needed to remain ignorant of it, if they had a desire to know the truth. His informing them of the place of his birth, would have served no other purpose, but to answer this cavil; it would have given no new light or force to the evidence of his mission. It is enough that he readily answered objections, when it was truly useful, especially when it gave an opportunity of insinuating fresh evidence; it was in no way necessary that he should enter into a minute examination of every frivolous objection; he was too secure of his mission, to dread any ill consequence from declining this.

he should only render the weakness of his cause the more notorious; these are assertions in which infidels would have triumphed. But if they will venture on them, they must have boldness enough to fly in the face of clear matter of fact; the frequent opposition with which he met, and the manner in which he always supported his mission when he met with it, afford a direct proof of the contrary. Evidence of the truth of the gospel, was given in abundance; it was enforced and vindicated by reasoning, whenever there was occasion. Is not some credit due to the teacher who declines no proper means of convincing? Is it no presumption in favour of our religion, that, in its first publication, every thing was done, that could in any case possibly be done, for the conviction of mankind?

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ſo great pains to ſupport the evidences of his miſſion, inconfiſtent with the account formerly given, of the manner in which he originally propoſed them, and ſubverſive of the concluſions deduced from it? It has been ſhown, that his ordinary reſerve, his not being forward to multiply aſſertions of the reality of his miſſion, his not boaſting of his dignity, his not ſtudiouſly displaying the greatneſs of the evidence which he had produced, afford in many ways ſtrong preſumptions of the truth of his religion. That this is in general his manner, is undeniable. Yet there are ſeveral inſtances recorded by the evangelists, which bear another face. There are inſtances in which he moſt expreſſly aſſerts his miſſion; in which he claims very high dignity; in which he purpoſely enumerates the evidences of his religion; or diſplays the ſtrength of ſome particular evidence of it; in  
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which he pronounces men inexcusable for not being convinced of it, and threatens them with perdition on account of their unbelief. But when these instances are examined, it appears that they all, without exception, were occasioned, at least by a very violent general opposition to Christ, and for the most part too by particular objections against him. This gives a full and satisfactory account of them. In this situation they are wholly unexceptionable; no just presumption against the gospel can arise from them. Nay, in this situation, to explain, to urge, and to vindicate the proofs of his mission, had as great propriety as the simpler method of barely exhibiting them, had in the circumstances in which he adhered to it: it was even expressive of the very same characters; it gives new assurance of the reality of his mission.

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By doing no more at first, but presenting the evidences of his mission, he showed, in a striking manner, his sense of the truth of his claim, and of the authenticity of his credentials. But did that sense require, that he should not enforce these evidences, when men actually resisted them, and called their solidity in question? On the contrary, it required that he should. This was even absolutely necessary for showing that he was sincere in claiming a divine mission, and secure of his title to it. If he had neglected it, it would have naturally been construed into an acknowledgment that his mission was false, and that the evidences of it, which he pretended to give, were indefensible; it would have undeniably implied the want of just concern for the success of his undertaking, and an indifference unsuitable to its importance, and repugnant to the character of a divine teacher.

teacher. When a man's title to any thing is called in question, not to assert it, is in fact to relinquish it. After all the evidence which Christ had exhibited, his mission was called in question; not to affirm it, would have been to renounce it. He himself thought so. On one occasion, the Jews found fault with him for asserting his real character; they affirmed it not only to be vain-glorious, but also to be an indication of imposture: in his answer, he intimates that not to have born testimony to himself, in the circumstances in which he bare it, would have implied a consciousness that he came not with the authority of God, nor had a title to the dignity which he assumed, that he knew not whence he came, and whither he went: *tho' I bear record of myself, says he, yet my record is true: for I know whence I came, and whither I go\**. Can any impartial man consider, that  
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\* John viii. 14.

he bare record to himself only in consequence of opposition, and attend to the manner in which he bare it, and not admit the defence? Spontaneous anxiety to foresee and prevent every possible difficulty, is a sign of that suspiciousness which commonly attends deceit: but a readiness to listen to objections and to obviate them, when they are actually proposed, is an indication of a very opposite temper. We can desire no stronger evidence, that a man is convinced himself, and willing to refer his claim to the reason of mankind. Jesus gave the most unquestionable evidence of this, and on account of his having given it, his religion deserves the greatest credit.

In being contented at first with only presenting evidence in great abundance, he signally displayed that genuine dignity, that true greatness of soul, which despises parade and ostentation,

tation. But it was in no way inconsistent with the perfection of this temper, to illustrate that evidence when it had been misunderstood, and to inculcate it by reasoning, on those who, of themselves, perceived not its force. He had exhibited the strongest evidences of a divine mission; yet men had not attended and yielded to them: in this situation, to remind them that he had exhibited them, to appeal to them as designed and valid proofs of his mission, to point out where their force lay, and to insist that men ought on account of them to receive him in the character to which he laid claim, was neither meanness nor ostentation. It was the very opposite; to have declined it, would have shown an ill-placed affectation of the same false dignity, which might lead an impostor superciliously to refuse to give any evidence at first. It would have been an expression  
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sion of that pride and haughtiness which mimics majesty, but really implies a great degree of meanness. Condescension is an essential ingredient in natural majesty; it mixes with all the exertions of it; it is so obviously predominant in them, that pride never fails to put on the appearance of it on some occasions; but it cannot practise it so gracefully as to hide the design. When Jesus met with opposition, his readiness to satisfy every scruple, evidenced the most unaffected condescension; it was a plain expression of that benevolence which constitutes the divinest character.

Thus, the manner in which Jesus inculcated the evidences of his religion, upon those who withstood the exhibition of them, weakens none of the presumptions for Christianity, arising from his original manner; the opposition which was made to him, accounts

counts for every thing in the gospel, that could be suspected to have this tendency. It even contains new presumptions in favour of our religion. It is expressive of the same dignity, conscious sincerity, and honest confidence, which shone so conspicuous in his original manner; it shows the very same character, only set in a different light, or thrown into a new attitude. The opposition of his contemporaries, gave him an opportunity of displaying this character in various ways; in the most contrary situations, he maintained it uniform and consistent: this adds to its lustre; this heightens our assurance that it truly belonged to him; this strengthens every indication of the truth of Christianity, which can result from its author having really possessed this character.

By the manner in which Christ justified the evidences of his mission, and inculcated

inculcated them on those who opposed him, no less than by the manner in which he originally presented them, he is a perfect contrast to impostors. Mahomet runs spontaneously into vaunting; he abounds in it, when no natural occasion is given for the least approach to it; he seeks out occasions for it: it proves itself to be the genuine offspring of presumption, ambition, or some other principle equally unhallowed. Without giving any evidence, he is continually talking in the most magnificent terms of the certainty of his mission. When he is charged with having produced no evidence, he neither produces any, nor proves that he had already produced what was sufficient; sometimes he denies that it was necessary to produce any, sometimes he exaggerates the few shadows of evidence, which he had luckily found means of giving, and always he multiplies assertions

tions of his mission, and boldly denounces judgment against all who ask a proof of it. When objections were raised, which would have required a particular confutation, if he had had it in his power, he deigns not to enter on it; he satisfies himself with the repetition of his confident assertions, his arrogant boasts, and his presumptuous comminations. It is not by argument that he enforces or justifies his claim; that would have required evidence as a foundation on which it might have been reared: but it is by declamation; this, being destitute of a foundation, is indeed wholly unsubstantial, but it tends to conceal the want of evidence, and upon the inconsiderate it counterfeits the effects of evidence; of all that he had in his power, it was the method best suited to his purpose. Jesus was of a very different spirit. He never uses expressions which can be even mis-

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construed into boasting, except when he is constrained to it by the most natural and pressing occasions. Even then, his assertions of his mission and his real character, cannot be justly termed ostentatious; whatever he *claims*, he likewise *proves* to belong to him: he claims it only in consequence of proof; it is always to evidence undeniably produced, that he appeals; and on it he rests his cause; *which of you, says he, convinceth me of sin\**? *If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not †*: *If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin ‡*. He never exaggerates the evidences which he had given; he inculcates the sufficiency of them much seldomer than he presents evidence without being at any pains to set it off. Yet he never declines answering such objections as require an answer: he does not rest satisfied

\* John viii. 46. † Chap. x. 37. ‡ Chap. xv. 24.

tisfied with affirmations that they are frivolous; he actually removes them by just and striking arguments from evidence which he had before exhibited; he generally too exhibits further evidence; and, when he has done both, he leaves men to feel it, he is not solicitous to affirm that he has. The evidences which Christ produced were strong, they were suitable to the sentiments of those to whom they were proposed, they were similar to those evidences on which they gave credit to their own religion, but far superior in degree: these circumstances showed, that their resisting them proceeded from vicious temper, or prejudice wilfully indulged; the absolute futility of their exceptions confirmed it. Was it improper, to warn them of the danger to which this exposed them? The warning was given in severe threatenings: but it could not be fairly given  
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in another way; and therefore in this situation, severe threatenings had entire propriety. Are these similar to the denunciations of impostors? In no other particular doth it seem that Christ resembles them so much as in his threatenings: but even in these, it only *seems*; there is a wide and essential difference. Mahomet threatens men, if they will not believe without any evidence, he employs this engine to terrify men from asking a proof of his mission; this is mere arrogance and effrontery: Christ threatens only those who obstinately and wickedly resisted the strongest evidence; this was no more than what a real concern for their happiness rendered necessary.

THIS whole argument will acquire still greater force, if we consider the nature of Christ's answers to the objections proposed to him, and of his reasonings concerning the truth of his religion.

ligion. His arguments were always suitable to the divinity of his character. They were not calculated for merely confounding and silencing men; they had a direct tendency to remove their mistakes; they both enlightened and satisfied the understanding. They are not in any degree intended to make a show of ingenuity; they always lead to conviction by the shortest road, without so much as the appearance of any other view. The argument is never deduced from abstruse or distant principles, it is never carried on by subtle and intricate reasoning: it is always concise, clear, and cogent; it is deduced from obvious principles, and such as will be most readily admitted; it is, in all its parts, level to common capacities, and proper for begetting immediate conviction; it is by a happy, but artless, address, set in such a point of view, that, while it convinces, it both engages

engages the attention, and touches the heart. In the reasonings by which the truth of Christianity is supported in the New Testament, there is nothing mean, nothing artificial, nothing in any respect weak or suspicious. They are at once such as tend naturally to the illustration of real and strong evidence; such as are best fitted for overcoming the prejudices of men, and working conviction in them; and such as are worthy of a divine teacher. But are all the reasonings in the New Testament, of this sort? Are there not some, especially in Paul's writings, which appear to be in a considerable degree subtle and intricate? I will not affirm, that there are none to which this character may be applied. But a great part of the intricacy of such reasonings as seem most to deserve the character, is only apparent, arising from our ignorance of some things proper

proper for throwing light upon them, from our affixing mere modern ideas to some of the expressions employed, or from other causes which had no influence upon those to whom the apostles wrote. Besides, they are comparatively very few; and these few are employed, not in proving the truth of Christianity, but for other purposes: still therefore the description which has been given, holds *generally* of the scripture reasonings, and *universally* of those by which the truth of the gospel is supported. But if, among the many concise and simple arguments for the truth of Christianity, which are contained in the New Testament, one or two intricate and subtle reasonings should be found, they would not be sufficient to invalidate what we have said; they would rather serve to show, that our religion is capable of a defence  
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in every stile and manner which has any degree of propriety.

THUS the manner which Christ and his apostles adopted on occasion of opposition and objections, in all the lights in which we can consider it, not only gives great advantage for the vindication of Christianity, but also carries on and compleats a separate and collateral proof of the truth of this religion; a proof of it arising from this, that its evidences were proposed, tho' differently in different situations, yet always with entire propriety. In Christ's manner of supporting his mission, the genuine marks of a divine teacher shone forth, but naturally varied just as the case required. Cunning will sometimes enable a man who only affects a character, to escape detection in one situation, in which he has carefully practised his part: but  
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if a person sustain a character with equal propriety in opposite situations, especially in sudden changes of circumstances, there can be no surer proof that it is his natural character.

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## SECTION VI.

*The perfection of the manner in which the  
EVIDENCES of CHRISTIANITY were  
proposed.*

**O**RIGINALLY Christ supported his mission in the simplest manner, by merely presenting the evidences of it: opposition gave him a natural occasion of superadding the argumentative manner. By the union of these, the proof of Christianity was proposed in a manner altogether entire and perfect. In order to evince this, little more will be necessary, but to bring into one view the substance of what has been already said. Each of these manners has some disadvantages: in the gospel, one corrects the inconveniences, and supplies

supplies the defects, which would have attended the other, if it had been used alone. Each of them too has peculiar advantages : the gospel has secured those of the one kind, without forfeiting any of the opposite. Had Christ confined himself to either of these manners, it might have been proved notwithstanding, that Christianity is true. This arises from the singularity of its evidence, and is indeed a very striking indication of it: but he used both, and he used each in its proper place; this makes the divinity of his religion more indisputable. The manner in which the evidences of our religion were proposed, may be considered either in reference to those whose conviction was intended, or in relation to the character which the employing of it, shows Jesus to have been possessed of. In both respects, it is proper and perfect.

JESUS

JESUS began with simply exhibiting the evidence of his mission. This was sufficient for convincing the attentive and the unprejudiced, provided the evidence was in its nature solid: it was in addressing those who had not yet shown themselves destitute of these characters, that he contented himself with this. He saved them the labour of attending to exceptions which had no weight with them, and solutions for which they had no need; he led them to faith by the direct road. But all were not of that disposition; many neglected the evidence which he gave, or called its force in question: whenever they did, the evidence was pointed out, and shown to be conclusive. Objections were formed against the evidence: immediately they were answered, and that in such a manner, that men would never have repeated them, if they had, as was certainly incumbent on them, first  
refuted

refuted the answers already made. The exhibition of the evidence of the gospel, without any illustration, convinced many of its truth; by this, that evidence proved itself to be very strong, and strictly natural. Had it been always illustrated when it was exhibited, there would have been no opportunity given for its showing in this way, how strong it really was; it would have been taken for granted, that its weakness or obscurity absolutely required all this illustration, in order to make it to be perceived. But many causes may hinder the strongest evidence from producing belief in individuals; they did hinder the evidence of the gospel from bringing all to whom it was exhibited, to believe: in this case, it was shown by just reasoning, that the evidence was notwithstanding strong, and that its not prevailing universally, was owing only to the indisposition of men's minds.

minds. A simple exhibition of it, succeeded in convincing many; here its strength was exerted, and, by the exertion, displayed: on occasion of the incredulity of others, its strength was examined, and, by the examination, justified. If its strength had not been real, it could in neither way have appeared so conspicuous. The generality of mankind are not capable of entering into long trains of argument; they are perplexed by a series of reasons, objections, and answers; they are rendered incapable of determining any thing. In order to obtain a rational conviction of the truth of Christianity, they need not attempt what they are unequal to; plain evidence is presented to them; there is no need of intricate reasoning to enable them to perceive it: they are desired only to attend to it; if they do, they will sustain no loss by not entering into the labyrinths of controversy;

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if they be but honest, it will by its own power force their assent. But some are prone to argumentation, ready to start difficulties, fond of canvassing them, and disposed to suspend their assent, till they be cleared. Christ often met with such persons; he listened to every difficulty which they proposed, he gave a patient hearing even to the merest cavils; he offered solutions of them all; the solution had always solidity enough to silence the acutest, and to convince the impartial that all ought to have been satisfied: at the same time, the argument exceeded not the comprehension of the most ordinary man; it never failed to have a surprizing, and almost singular degree of conciseness and perspicuity. If Christ had found no opportunity for this, his revelation would have given Christians no direct assistance in answering objections which might have been afterwards raised against

gainst it. The defect would not have been of very fatal consequence: if the evidence was real, it is enough that it was addressed to reasonable creatures; they had already, by the constitution of their nature, faculties proper for distinguishing real evidence from spurious, and for detecting the fallacy of such cavils as prejudice or scepticism may oppose to the former. But even so immaterial a defect adheres not to the Christian revelation. Jesus had opportunities, of preventing objections which might have had a specious appearance, if room had been left for them; of answering others, and, in answering them, of producing principles so extensively applicable, that we have not only examples which we may imitate, but also materials which we may successfully employ, in the defence of our religion. There are very different characters among men; but Christ proved

proved his mission in a way suited to them all: the manner in which he originally proved it, is the fittest possible for the conviction of the attentive, the candid, and men of ordinary capacity; but he proposed it likewise in a way fit to satisfy the speculative, the inquisitive, the captious, and the prejudiced. His manner is nicely adapted to universal conviction; the objections must be very strong, which can show that there was no real evidence given, where a manner so suitable to very bright evidence was preserved, and pursued through all its natural variations; there is scarce a possibility that there should be such objections. That the evidences of the gospel were given in a way so fit, in all respects, for producing faith, is a very strong presumption, that they are sufficient, that Christianity is true, and that infidelity is  
not



not excusable in persons of any turn of understanding.

IT is not the only excellence of the manner in which Christ proved his mission, that it is equally adapted to the conviction of the most opposite sorts of men : it is moreover a natural expression of that character which he assumed. He spontaneously and readily exhibited evidence in the greatest abundance. To have done otherwise, would have been a strong presumption that he could produce none ; it would have left his claim without any real foundation ; it would have betrayed, either a consciousness of imposture, or such an indifference to success, as is not consistent with a real mission for any important purpose. By readily giving evidence, he shows, that he was conscious of the truth of his mission, and of his power to support it ; and that he desi-

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red to support it only by the most legitimate means, that he sought to bring men to believe, only by a copious and undisguised address to the natural principles of belief; he shows, that, with the condescension essential to true greatness, he was willing to do every thing really necessary for promoting the end of his coming. He never of his own accord laboured to set off the evidence which he had given. This showed his sense of the strength of that evidence; it showed that he understood well in what way the bulk of mankind ought to be addressed; it showed that he was free from the artifice by which persons of a subtilizing and disputatious turn, often confound plain men, and hide the want of evidence from others; it showed that he was remote both from the meanness of ostentation, and from the suspiciousness attendant upon falsehood and cunning. But whenever the  
evidence

evidence of his mission was called in question, he readily defended it, illustrated it, and frequently too made an addition to it. This was a new and well-placed expression of conscious sincerity : it was in this situation that reasoning and disputing became consistent with dignity of character ; here indeed, true dignity required it ; and in the manner of all his reasonings, dignity was uniformly preserved. Impostors act a part in all respects the reverse of this. In exhibiting evidence, they are very sparing ; by this alone they forfeit all right to credit, and betray their falsehood ; to require that we should believe, and yet not to give evidence, is to mock us, and insult our understandings. They attempt to justify their sparingness, by pretending that they disdain to gratify the perverse and incredulous : this is a mere affectation of dignity intended to conceal

their inability to satisfy a rational enquirer ; it can proceed from no better source, for dignity is so ill put on, that haughtiness is mistaken for it. In asserting that they ought to be believed, in magnifying any appearances of evidence which they think they have given, they are liberal, they are immoderate. It is in despising this, that true dignity would have expressed itself: this is the greatest meanness ; it is the silliest vanity, it is the most disingenuous artifice. They support their cause, not by reasoning, but by declamation ; they employ it most when they are not among those who oppose them : when they are pressed with objections, they sometimes divert men's attention from the real question as well as they can, and sometimes their haughtiness returns, and assuming the name of majesty becoming a divine messenger, forbids them to condescend to answer.

Jefus

Jefus has not a fingle feature which is not the oppofite of theirs : is it poffible that he fhould neverthelefs be one of them ? Every part of his manner gives fome evidence of the divinity of his miffion, as every point of the fun emits a ray of light : when we take in his whole manner at one view, the indications of divinity refulting from it, act on the underftanding with an irrefiftible force, like rays collected into a focus, againft the heat of which no combuftible materials can be proof.

WE may add to all that has been faid, that Chrifft's manner, not only is the fitteft for the conviction of men, and the moft expreffive of the character of a divine teacher, but alfo shows the greateft ftrength of underftanding, and the higheft powers of reafon. Intellectual vigour appears in the original exhibition of the evidences of the gofpel;  
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for only solid evidence is exhibited. A person of weak understanding betrays his weakness, not only when he attempts to pursue an argument through all its steps, but also by never failing to build on some unsubstantial principle, or to employ a wrong kind, or an imperfect degree of evidence. By presenting only such evidence as is solid, by appealing only to principles from which conclusive arguments are deducible, strength of understanding is displayed, as really as by pursuing the argument minutely through the most regular train of reasoning. Indeed not to be able to urge an argument closely and particularly, when this is proper, would show an imperfection of understanding. But it is likewise an imperfection, not to be able to render an argument convincing, by placing it at once in a striking point of view, without minutely urging it. In the few instances in  
which

which it was proper or necessary for Christ to enter into reasonings of any length, he gives sufficient evidence that he laboured not under the former imperfection : all his reasonings are proofs that he was free from the latter, that he possessed the opposite talent in great perfection ; none of them are intricate, very few are particular or minute, they are generally immediate deductions from just principles ; yet all of them are satisfying. This manner is acknowledged to be a mark of superior penetration. There are many of Newton's demonstrations, a single step of which it would require several propositions to evince minutely : this never was supposed to imply any intellectual defect ; it shows plainly an uncommon reach of thought. In prosecuting an argument particularly, imagination receives many assistances ; attention to the intermediate ideas, both facilitates the  
discovery

discovery of just principles, and leads to a gradual discernment of the influence which they have upon the conclusion. A weak understanding needs these assistances. It is vigour of mind that enables a man to conceive and express the whole force of the argument, without having recourse to them. In every argument for the truth of Christianity, urged either by Jesus or by his apostles, that vigour of mind appears remarkably. It may be added, that they have satisfied themselves with exhibiting evidence, whenever no more was necessary, and have always enforced it when that was proper; and all this, throughout an address to mankind continued for years. This is a pitch of excellence which persons ordinarily attain, only when great natural penetration is united with the happiest opportunities of intellectual improvement. But when we consider  
how



how few opportunities either Christ or his apostles had of attaining it by natural means, their having possessed it in so eminent a degree, and exerted it with so uniform propriety, in very different, and even contrary situations, can scarce fail to lead us to conclude, that they owed it to supernatural causes, and that they were, as they affirmed themselves to be, persons commissioned and inspired by God. In this way, a new presumption of the truth of Christianity, arises from the manner in which its evidences were proposed.

THUS, in every light in which this manner can be considered, it is absolutely faultless: there is nothing wanting, nothing superfluous, nothing misplaced. It is throughout an application of evidence, the completest, the best adapted to the human understanding, and the most expressive of a di-  
vine

vine original, that can be even imagined. The presumptions of the truth of Christianity, which arise from this topic, are very strong; they imply very plainly that the evidence which was thus proposed, must have been natural and found: they have therefore the directest tendency to excite all who have any candour, to the diligent examination of it; and the view of them must add great strength to the faith of those who already believe the gospel.

In the most finished works of art, there are some defects; even in the works of nature, many particulars appear exceptionable to a hasty and superficial observer. Divine contrivance is so deep, and so far surpasses the skill of men, that it is reasonable to expect in every thing which comes from God, some circumstances unaccountable and seemingly exceptionable. When further acquaintance teacheth us, that  
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what we imagined a defect, is really an excellence, that what we reckoned a blemish, is a beauty, that what we thought pernicious, is highly useful; the discovery fills us with the most agreeable surprize, strikes us with the liveliest admiration of the divine wisdom, and works the firmest conviction that God is indeed the author of the work. Those circumstances in the manner of the first publication of Christianity, which proclaim its truth, are, in some instances, such as we would be apt to find fault with, on a superficial view: the perception of their real force, will have the greater effect on this very account; the surprize which it excites, mixing with our assent, will render it the firmer and the more vigorous.

There is no subject on which difficulties may not be raised, in some of the lights in which it is possible to place it. Difficulties have been raised with respect

spect to the truth of the gospel. There are some men who have a natural propensity to fix their attention upon difficulties; and there are moments in which most men are apt to conceive difficulties strongly, to be much affected with them, and inclined on account of them to doubt of what is supported by the directest proof. It is sufficient for recovering men from this situation, to reflect on the weakness of human understanding, which prevents our attaining a perfect comprehension of any subject, and puts it out of our power to give a positive account of every difficulty. To perceive, that those difficulties which occur in the defence of Christianity, supposing them real, do not infer its falsity; or, that the difficulties which seem to press it, are not real, but capable of a direct solution; contributes still more to banish uncertainty concerning its divinity.

ty. But nothing has a more powerful tendency to compose the mind, to place it in complete serenity and assurance, to give entire peace in believing, than to observe, how many circumstances of the most various kinds, concur in proclaiming the truth of the gospel. When a person discerns, that its principal evidences, natural and strong in themselves, are supported and confirmed by collateral arguments, innumerable, and derived from very dissimilar sources, he cannot entertain any suspicion that it is not true and divine; he cannot reckon it possible that, if it were false, there could have been a concurrence of so many indications of truth. None of these arguments contributes more largely to the production of this effect, than that which arises from the manner in which the evidences of Christianity were proposed. It adds greatly to the splendor of that  
blaze

blaze of evidence which overpowers the soul when one conceives all the proofs of the gospel together, which suffers him not to doubt that it is from God, which makes all small difficulties and trivial objections to be forgotten as unworthy of regard; just as bright sunshine causes those clouds to disappear, which before were clearly visible, and covers the whole face of the heavens with uniform and unbroken radiance.

DISSER-

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# DISSERTATION II.

## CHRISTIANITY CONFIRMED

B Y

### THE OPPOSITION OF INFIDELS.

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*If this counsel, or this work be of men, it will come to nought ;  
but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it. Acts v. 38, 39.*

*Opinionum commenta delet dies : naturæ judicia confirmat. Cicer.  
de Nat. Deor. lib. 2.*

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## DISSERTATION II.

CHRISTIANITY *confirmed by the Opposition of* INFIDELS.

## SECTION I.

*The Subject proposed.*

**I**T is by such friction as seems at first sight likely to break it, that the diamond is polished and receives its lustre. In like manner, it is by being fretted, as it were, with every difficulty and objection, that truth is made to show the full brightness of its evidence. The trial distinguishes the true gem from the supposed one, which in the  
U lump

lump promised, perhaps, as fair as it: And plausible falsehoods are often as well received as real truths, till both have been subjected to an exact and severe examination; but the opposition of argument overturns the former, and renders the certainty of the latter more undeniable.

No species of truth has been subjected to a stricter scrutiny, or tried by ruder opposition, than the evidences of our holy religion. As soon as this heavenly gem was presented to the world, both Jews and Heathens fell upon it with so great violence, that, if it had had the smallest flaw, it must have been shattered into pieces. It has been in the possession of the world for many centuries; and numberless attempts have been successively made, to prove that it is a worthless counterfeit: but all these attempts have only  
contributed

contributed to evince with stronger evidence, that it is genuine.

THAT persecution promoted, instead of obstructing, the progress of Christianity, has been very commonly remarked. Sometimes too, it has been asserted in general, that the opposition of unbelievers in the way of argument, has confirmed the divinity of the Christian religion, and thrown new light upon its evidences. It is worth while to undertake a professed examination of this assertion. If it shall appear to be true, it will afford a strong presumption of the truth of Christianity: it will show, that Christianity gains, not only by being viewed in various lights, but also by being narrowly inspected in every light. That the assertion is true, will be best proved by inquiring, in what particular ways the opposition of infidels has contributed to the illu-

stration and confirmation of the evidences of the gospel.

Of the advantages which Christianity has derived from opposition, some are peculiarly owing to the opposition of infidels in early ages; others arise from opposition in general. We shall begin with the consideration of the former.

## SECTION II.

*The advantages which CHRISTIANITY  
has derived from the opposition of early  
INFIDELS.*

**I**N the preceeding dissertation, we have fully explained the manner in which the evidences of the gospel were at first proposed, and pointed out the excellence of that manner. But this excellence could not possibly have been attained, if Christ and his apostles had not met with opposition. All the indications of truth, which it implies, may therefore be justly ascribed, in a great measure, to the opposition of Infidels. If none had raised objections against the divine mission of Jesus, he and his apostles must have  
either

either confined themselves to their original manner of simply exhibiting evidence, or they must have *spontaneously* illustrated and vindicated the evidence. If they had chosen the former, their manner would have indeed contained several presumptions of the truth of Christianity; but it would have been in some respects lame and imperfect, and all the advantages arising from their *reasonings*, would have been lost. If they had preferred the latter, this would have destroyed all those proofs of their mission, which result from the simplicity of their original manner. It would have likewise rendered their reasonings of less weight than they now are. Opposition gives the most natural occasion of pointing out the force of the evidence produced, and it gives almost the only natural occasion of answering the objections to which that evidence is liable. It enables a person  
to

to introduce illustrations and defences without any appearance of design or artifice. It put it in the power of our Saviour to support and vindicate his claim by argument, as often as any good purpose required; and, by giving as many opportunities for this as were necessary, it left him at liberty, in *all* his ordinary addresses to men, to pursue that original manner which is so full of divinity. It made way for a delicate union of opposite manners in opposite situations, which bestows on his whole manner a degree of perfection, and consequently bestows on his religion a brightness of evidence, unattainable by any other means. Thus the assaults of ancient infidels contributed greatly to the confirmation of Christianity, merely by the influence which they had on the manner of its author in proposing the proofs of it. But this, tho' very considerable, is not  
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the only advantage resulting from them. This advantage is peculiar to the opposition of the contemporaries of Jesus: but the same prejudices and vices which produced that opposition, moved succeeding unbelievers in the early ages, to contrive new objections against the gospel, or to repeat the former ones. These too have been the occasions of throwing new light upon the evidences of our religion, and of rendering their strength more conspicuous.

MODERN Infidels have often endeavoured to gain advantage to their cause from the unbelief of so many in ancient times. “ The contemporaries of Christ  
 “ and his apostles, say they, and those  
 “ who lived in the next age, had great  
 “ advantages for examination, and  
 “ could not fail to perceive the evi-  
 “ dence of the Christian religion, so  
 “ far



“ far as it was real: if they neverthe-  
“ less believed not, no wonder that  
“ unbelievers should be multiplied in  
“ later ages, when the distance of time  
“ must have burdened the evidence  
“ with many difficulties additional to  
“ those which had force enough to pro-  
“ duce infidelity at first. Nay, the  
“ infidelity of multitudes in the earli-  
“ est ages, is itself a strong reason for  
“ our rejecting the gospel; for if its e-  
“ vidence had been so great as is pre-  
“ tended, they who had that evidence  
“ set before them in its full force, could  
“ not have been so unreasonable as to  
“ persist in infidelity. If they had not  
“ found good cause for unbelief, if  
“ there had not been some flaw in the  
“ grounds of Christianity, which their  
“ favourable situation gave them the  
“ means of detecting, they must  
“ have all become Christians.” If  
this reasoning be specious, it is no  
more.

more. It can have no degree of real force, except it be supposed that all in those ages, who resisted the gospel, were influenced purely by the love of truth. But this cannot be supposed. Every person knows, that opposition to a new doctrine arises frequently from very different, and even opposite causes. Attachment to opinions which have been instilled by education, and confirmed by habit, often produces prejudice so inveterate as to hinder men from so much as examining opinions contradictory to them, or bestowing the least attention on any thing that is urged in support of these opinions. Actuated by it, men obstinately reject undoubted truths, and can perceive no force at all in the strongest arguments. This is notorious from universal experience : what then can be more unreasonable than to take it for granted, that the unbelief of early infidels proceeded only

only from their discovering a real fallacy in the evidences of the gospel? But we need not rest the matter on a general principle: their opposition itself is such as shows that it did actually proceed from other causes, and that it cannot possibly afford the slenderest presumption against the truth of Christianity.

We are informed of many of the occasions on which both Jews and Gentiles took exception; and these show that they were under the power of the grossest prejudices. How often, for instance, did the Jews oppose Jesus upon no other pretence but this, that it was the Sabbath-day when he healed the diseases of men? This will be acknowledged to be the most abject superstition. At Thyatira, *the multitude rose up together against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates interposed their authority to silence them: from what principle did this*

this

this general opposition arise? From strong affection to the idolatry and superstition of Paganism: the accusation which occasioned it, was, *These men teach customs which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans* \*. At Ephesus a violent uproar was raised against Paul: for what reason? *He hath persuaded much people, that they be no gods, which are made with hands, so that there is danger that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth* †. With modern Infidels, superstition is the object of the most inveterate hatred; in cases where it is neither so gross nor so indisputable as in these, they affirm that it necessarily blindeth reason. Can they then take ancient Infidels for their models? Can they pretend, that the judgment of men so deeply immersed in superstition, affords the slenderest presumption

\* Acts xvi. 19,—22. † Chap. xix. 26, 27.

tion in favour of the cause which they espoused?

Further, from the *nature* of the objections which ancient unbelievers urged, it appears, what were the very reasons for which they rejected Christianity. If you hold their opposition to be of any authority, you must maintain, that the declared reasons of it are solid and sufficient. If you own that their objections were insufficient, you must likewise own that they acted an unreasonable part in allowing these objections to prevent their becoming Christians; for tho' the conclusion should happen to be true, yet if it be embraced on false or absurd principles, this shows as great an intellectual weakness, as would appear in adopting a false conclusion: and if you allow that their infidelity was unreasonable, you cannot consistently draw any conclusion from it, against the gospel. Take the objections

objections therefore which they moved; weigh them fairly; can you say that they alone could justify the rejection of the Christian religion? A modern Infidel can scarce affirm it; for they proceed on principles directly repugnant to his most favourite maxims. Far from giving countenance, for instance, to the objections of the Deist against revelation in general, they are founded on the contrary supposition. All ancient Infidels allowed, both that a revelation is possible, and that revelations had been often given; they either believed the Mosaic revelation on evidences which had been exhibited thousands of years before, and transmitted through a long succession of ages, or they gave credit to the fables, the oracles, and the presages of Paganism; and it was on principles arising from this belief, that they reasoned against Christianity. Will any Deist adopt  
their

their reasonings, or affirm that the smallest deference is due to the judgment which, on these principles, they were pleased to form? Can it be honestly affirmed, that to receive either Paganism or Judaism, and yet reject Christianity, is not partial, perverse, and inconsistent?—The Jewish scriptures contained many prophetic descriptions of the Messiah; yet the Jews would not acknowledge Jesus to be the Messiah. If modern Infidels will avail themselves of their authority, it must be by maintaining that the Jews could not but understand their own scriptures best, and by concluding that they perceived that the prophecies were not fulfilled in Jesus. A very little attention to the grounds of their opposition will make it evident that there is no room for supposing this. They applied the very same predictions to the Messiah, which Christians understand of him;

him; the proofs that they did so, are numerous and irrefragable: they understood the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, for instance, to refer to the Messiah; one of their objections recorded in the gospel \*, is most probably founded on a part of that chapter †: yet they reckoned it incredible, that the Messiah should suffer and die before he entered into his kingdom. It is in a passage of Daniel that the Redeemer of the world is foretold under the name, MESSIAH, which the Jews used very frequently; there it is expressly said, that he *shall be cut off* ‡: yet they expected not that he should be put to death. To believe these to be inspired predictions of the Messiah, and yet to reckon a mean condition, sufferings, and death, inconsistent with the character of the Messiah, is a degree of absurdity hardly credible. It makes it plain that they were warped by prejudices, which rendered

\* John vii. 27. † Isaiah liii. 8. ‡ Daniel ix. 26.



dered them totally blind to the obvious meaning of their own prophecies. Their judgment is so grossly perverse, that it can possess no authority, nor merit the least regard.—The sentiments of ancient Infidels concerning the Christian miracles, can serve as little to bring them into discredit, or to lessen their force, at least in the opinion of modern Deists. Can we conclude, that, if so many miracles had been wrought in confirmation of Christianity as are said to have been wrought, none of those who saw them, could have resisted their force? Can it be insinuated, that the opposition of early Infidels gives any reason to suspect that the Christian miracles were fictions? Nothing can be more remote from the truth: they who rejected Christianity, owned notwithstanding the reality of all the miraculous facts to which it appealed. On occasion of the resurrection

of Lazarus. the Jewish rulers assembled in council, gave a remarkable testimony to the miracles of Christ: *Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him: but some of them went their ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done. Then gathered the chief Priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? For THIS MAN DOTH MANY MIRACLES; if we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him\**. In the same public and authentic manner, and after the minutest examination of it, they afterwards gave testimony to a great miracle wrought by Peter and John: *Beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it: but, when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, What shall we do to these men? For that indeed a notable miracle hath been done by them is manifest to all them that dwell*

\* John xi. 45,—48.

*dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it\**. Not only on the authority of the New Testament and of the writings of Christians, but also by the confession of Jews and Pagans, even in their professed attacks upon Christianity, it is indisputable, that for several ages the reality of the gospel miracles was not denied, but in the most explicit manner acknowledged, by all sorts of unbelievers. You must either allow, therefore, that it was perfectly reasonable to believe, that all the miracles recorded in the gospel, were really wrought in the manner there described, and yet that the gospel is absolutely false; or you must grant, that the judgment of these men was altogether wrong and inconsistent, and consequently unfit for supporting any conclusion against Christianity. But no modern Infidel will chuse to avail himself of the authority of ancient unbelievers, on the condi-

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\* Acts iv. 14,—16.

tion of approving and adopting their judgment. It would suit the genius of modern infidelity much better, to receive the Christian doctrine without the miracles, than to believe the miracles and yet reject the doctrine.

From the opposition of ancient Infidels, no presumption of the falsehood of Christianity can be collected, except so far as the reasons of their opposition are reckoned solid: but these are such as no modern Infidel will affirm to be solid; they are palpably weak and inconsistent. Will this be ascribed to want of abilities in the adversaries of our religion, or to the influence of the prejudices which they laboured under? If these causes can account for the *futility* of their arguments, yet they lessen the *authority* of their opposition in the same proportion. They lead us to consider them as weak and prejudiced men, who obstinately withstood the gospel, and  
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and yet could produce only inconclusive or inconsistent objections against it, and whose judgment therefore can merit no regard. But since their reasonings are confessedly insufficient, they even afford a presumption for the truth of Christianity. There can be no doubt that these men gave the best reasons which they could find, for their unbelief; if there had been better reasons, it is highly probable that they would have discovered them. They had all possible advantages for examining the evidences of Christianity, and perceiving their defects; if their exceptions be notwithstanding frivolous, the reason must be, that there were none of greater consequence. This is a general presumption, that the evidences of Christianity are not liable to just objections, and that therefore its truth is fully established; and, by affording this presumption, the opposition of  
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early Infidels has contributed to the confirmation of Christianity.

THEIR opposition has not only in this manner afforded a general presumption in favour of Christianity; it has likewise given additional strength to many of its direct and principal evidences. The proof of the truth of Christianity from prophecy, derives no inconsiderable accession of force and clearness from this consideration, that the prophecies to which Jesus and his apostles appealed, and which Christians urge, were understood of the Messiah, by the ancient Jews; it derives the greater accession, because they notwithstanding rejected Jesus. They rejected him, only because they pretended that he answered not to the prophetic descriptions of the Messiah: they never pretended that he or his apostles applied to him any predictions which  
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did not truly relate to the Messiah. The predictions themselves are still extant; we have the same opportunities of determining, what is the character delineated in them, that the Jews had. Let them be examined as they stand: do they naturally indicate such a person as Jesus was, or such a person as the Jews expected? a person who should have arisen about the time when Jesus lived, or a person who has not yet arisen? This is a question which can be determined only by an attentive examination of the several particular predictions, and in which authority has no weight. The Jews had formed an idea of the Messiah inconsistent with the prophecies which they themselves applied to him; they were led by it to reject Jesus; they were reduced to the greatest difficulties in defending their infidelity; these could have been removed by their denying that several predictions

predictions related to the Messiah. Would they not have denied it, if they had found it in their power? But they persisted in acknowledging it, tho' the acknowledgment rendered their infidelity absurd and inexcusable. Can there be a stronger proof, that it was extorted from them by evidence which they could not resist? Their judgment concerning the general intention of the prophecies, would not have merited so great regard in any other situation. The modern Jews apply to other persons, many predictions which their fathers had universally applied to the Messiah; and their opinion is urged as an objection against the proof of Christianity from prophecy. But it can have no authority: it is contrary to the uniform judgment of their ancestors, who were as obstinate in their unbelief, and as anxious to defend it, as they can be; they have been led to adopt it;  
only



only by a determined spirit of opposition to the gospel, after they found it impossible to vindicate their infidelity on any other principles; and, after having made the attempt, they were never able to discover any proper accomplishment of these predictions. Their conduct implies an acknowledgment, that if the predictions to which Christians appeal, be truly predictions of the Messiah, the argument for Christianity from prophecy, is clear, conclusive, and indisputable.

That the miracles recorded in the gospel, were really wrought, is proved by evidence stronger and of more various kinds, than perhaps any other ancient facts. Part of that evidence must have been wanting, if none in that age had resisted the gospel. The testimony of an enemy is one of the most convincing proofs: the reality of the Christian miracles is not only allowed, but in many instances explicitly

ly asserted, by the ancient enemies of Christianity, both Jews and Heathens: nothing can add greater strength to the argument from miracles, so far as that argument depends on the *reality* of the miracles. Even when Infidels were most eager to depreciate the power by which the miracles of Christ were wrought, they could not deny that they were wrought. To what could their acknowledgment of the facts be owing, but to their firm belief of them? and from what could their belief of them proceed, but from their certain knowledge of their truth? Their violent opposition shows that they wanted not inclination to dispute them; their owning them notwithstanding, proves that it was not in their power. Yet it is when a forgery is recent, that men have the best opportunities of detecting it: they who had the best opportunities of examining the Christian miracles, were

were forced by the notoriety of their evidence, to own that the relations of them were no forgeries, but authentic histories: to what purpose is it then for modern unbelievers to deny their truth? The evidence of their truth was completed many ages ago; it extorted the acknowledgment of enemies; their acknowledgment renders the miracles of Christ as undeniable as any fact can be, and consequently renders the truth of his religion, so far as it is supported by these miracles, as certain as it was possible to render it.

The quick and extensive propagation of Christianity, is a striking argument of its truth and divinity; and it acquires a great accession of strength from the early and continued opposition of Infidels. That Christianity made so great and rapid progress in spite of the cruelest persecutions, adds great weight to this argument; its having  
spread

spread in spite of the keenest opposition in the way of reasoning, adds no less weight to it. It shows that the success of the gospel was not owing to credulity. It cannot be pretended, that it was embraced merely because its evidences were not examined: the acuteness of the philosopher, and the art of the orator, were employed to confute them: but their solidity baffled all the efforts of both: the gospel rose superior to all exceptions, it prevailed every where by the force of its conspicuous truth. As it could not be crushed by violence, so neither could it be overturned by argument.

THE advantages which Christianity derives from the opposition of ancient Infidels, extend still farther; their attacks do not merely confirm some of its principal evidences: the manner in which they were carried on, has  
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been improved into a distinct argument for the truth of Christianity. Its truth may be directly inferred from the testimonies and concessions of its ancient adversaries. I intend not to enumerate these, or to urge the proof arising from them, minutely or at large; for this has been done already \* : but to give a short representation of the force of the argument, will be necessary for our present purpose. That the Jews believed the time of the Messiah's appearance to be at hand when Jesus arose; that he lived in the period in which the writers of the New Testament place him; that he was put to death at Jerusalem; that his followers constantly affirmed that he had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven,

\* See *The truth of the History of the Gospel, made out by heathen Evidence*. Edinburgh, 1741 : And SHARPE'S *Argument in Defence of Christianity, taken from the concessions of the most ancient adversaries, Jews and Pagans, Philosophers and Historians*.

ven, and produced several evidences of it; that he claimed a divine mission, and the character of the Messiah, and delivered his doctrine in the name of God; that he taught those doctrines which the New Testament ascribes to him; that he and his apostles performed many wonderful works in support of these doctrines, and communicated to others the power of performing similar works; that his disciples, after his death, published his religion thro' a great part of the world, resolutely encountering the greatest hardships and the cruelest persecutions; that, notwithstanding this, the gospel, unsupported by any worldly power, obtained a reception from multitudes: these are the principal facts of the gospel history, and these are put beyond doubt, by the confession of the enemies of the gospel. Ancient Infidels give the most express testimony to the  
truth

truth of many of them: they admit them, and reason from them in defending their infidelity. They often acknowledge the facts which relate to the birth, the life, and the death of Jesus, and thence draw arguments against his religion. They ascribe his miracles to his skill in magic; but, by endeavouring to account for them in this manner, they plainly acknowledge that they were really performed by him. They either directly quote, or professedly hint at, many doctrines, sentiments, and expressions contained in the New Testament; they endeavour to turn them to the disadvantage of Christianity: but by this they render it undeniable, that the New Testament contains the very religion which Christ and his apostles taught. They sometimes pervert facts, they torture them into a shape unfavourable to the gospel: by this they show, that they could

could do no more, that it was not in their power to deny them. Sometimes, when they cannot, by any plausible misrepresentation, wrest them to the disadvantage of Christianity, they intimate suspicions of their truth, or they affect to deny them: but they deny them in such a way as indeed confirms them. Instead of detecting their falsehood by legitimate means, they show that they could produce no evidence against them. They give us their reasons for denying them: but these are such as cannot invalidate direct testimony for any matter of fact; they are sometimes built on false principles, at other times deduced by manifest sophistry, always precarious conclusions from general topics. To the affirmations of eye-witnesses, contradicted by no other witnesses, corroborated by a long train of connected events, they oppose abstract reasonings and arbitrary



ry conjectures. Such attempts to disprove any matter of fact, made by those who must have had in their power, the *proper* means of confuting it, if any such there were, establish the reality of the fact even more strongly than admitting it in silence. The enemies of the gospel would not have combated its facts with objections of this kind, if they could have found any of another kind. Such efforts demonstrate their inclination to overturn these facts; yet they are employed only against some of them: the facts, therefore, which they do not once attempt to deny, must be accounted so indisputable, that, against them, all their ingenuity could not invent any exception. There are some facts, perhaps, related in the gospel history, of which they take no notice: but even these are confirmed by the testimony which they give to other facts, for they are connected with  
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them, and in a manner implied in them. It is only in matters of fact, that either the acknowledgment or the denial of contemporary persons is of importance; and in these, all ancient Infidels bear witness to the gospel. Their conclusions from the facts; and their conjectures concerning the causes of them, are unfavourable to the gospel: but they have no authority, they are only matters of judgment or opinion, which may be freely canvassed and rejected; and they give weight to their testimony for facts, they render it a testimony in opposition to their prejudices and their principles; such a testimony, nothing but the force of notorious and incontestible truth could have extorted from them. The concessions, then, of ancient Infidels show that the history of the New Testament is true. The New Testament is no forgery of later ages; it is the original history

history of Christ and his apostles ; it was extant from the beginning of Christianity : it contains the very facts which the earliest Infidels mention, the very doctrines which they ascribe to Christians, the very expressions which they quote, or to which they allude. That it is the genuine record of the religion which Jesus taught, all those unbelievers who had opportunities of judging concerning that point, amply and explicitly bear witness. The facts related in it, are such as really happened : as long as they were recent, they were so notoriously true, that even those persons who would not admit their most obvious consequences, seldom attempted to deny any of the facts themselves, and only exposed their own prejudice in the few instances in which they attempted it. Having been once so notorious, they must remain for ever indisputably certain: all mo-

dern objections against them must be frivolous : distance of time may render the absurdity of calling them in question, less palpable and striking than at first, but the absurdity itself it cannot lessen. On the authority of ancient Infidels, the facts of the gospel history ought to be held absolutely incontestible : but, if they be true, Christianity must be likewise true. Ancient Infidels perceived not this consequence ; it is surprising how they could overlook what is so obvious : there were, however, principles deeply imbibed by them, which may account for their blindness ; but it is not necessary for our present purpose to point out these. Modern Infidels too urge some objections which seem to go on the supposition, that this consequence is disputable ; but that they really are not insensible of its force, is plain from the pains they take, and the various topics they

they employ for overturning the gospel history. In truth, no man who firmly believes the whole gospel history, can find any difficulty in concluding, that the Christian religion came from God. If the history be true, the whole of this religion must be equally true: the principal doctrines of Christianity, are implied in the history itself: they are but parts of it: the whole system of Christianity, claims a reception on the authority of the teacher; the evidence of his authority, arises from the very facts recorded in the history, which, if they indeed happened, render it certain that he came from God.

THUS, if there had not been Infidels in early ages, we should have wanted some part of the evidence which we now have, for the truth of Christianity. At any rate, there would have doubtless been sufficient evidence: but this  
addition

addition is very considerable. It is when an imposture has been suffered to go on for ages, before it is inquired into, that it becomes difficult to detect it. In this case, the real circumstances which attended its rise and progress, are forgotten; all means of bringing a direct proof of deceit, are sometimes necessarily lost by length of time: men may still find reason to reject it, but it is only because its nature renders it suspicious, because it contains internal marks of falsehood. But there never was an imposture which escaped detection, when it was examined at its very rise: if it was carried on with so great secrecy and art, as to elude a full confutation, yet there have always occurred some positive presumptions of falsehood. Christianity was examined in its earliest infancy, it grew up under the watchful eye of opposition; all the steps of its progress were observed with  
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the strictest attention, by its most inveterate enemies : the assaults of ancient unbelievers are everlasting monuments of all this. Nevertheless, it was not confuted; there were not even produced any direct presumptions of its being an imposture; nay all attempts to detect it, issued in affording, in many ways, new evidence of its truth. If it had been an imposture, could its fate have been so signally the reverse of the fates of all the impostures which ever the world knew? The whole question concerning the truth of Christianity, may almost be fairly reduced to this single point: Did ancient Infidels give full proof that it was an imposture, by detecting the methods of deceit and artifice, by which it was carried on, and rendered successful? If they did not, Christianity could be no imposture. That all their attempts failed, that they contributed, in contradiction to their intention, to the confirmation

confirmation of Christianity, is a positive proof of its truth. If you would, after this, convict it of imposture by internal characters, they must be such as render its truth absolutely impossible, they must be instances either of plain absurdity or of immorality: any thing short of this, cannot overbalance the evidence of truth arising hence, that no imposture was detected by the most laborious and invidious scrutiny, on the first appearance of Christianity; it is only precarious reasoning, plausible speculation, and indirect presumption, opposed to direct proof and indubitable facts. So great is the advantage which Christianity derives from the opposition of its ancient adversaries, that this opposition at once affords a strong argument for the divinity of Christianity, and renders all internal objections against it, of little force, except they amount to a strict demonstration of its falsity.



## SECTION III.

*The advantages which CHRISTIANITY  
has derived from opposition in general.*

THE advantages of which we have hitherto taken notice, are peculiar to the opposition of *ancient* Infidels. But, from opposition, Christianity has derived advantages of a more general nature. The attacks which have been made upon it by Infidels in every age, have contributed to render its truth the more conspicuous.

INFIDELS have always urged their objections in a way which strongly implies the goodness of the cause opposed by them, and which heightens the effect

fect produced on the mind, by the direct evidences of the truth of the gospel. It is universally allowed, that dishonest methods of defence are prejudicial to any cause: they infuse a suspicion that it is a bad cause; and when they are adopted by all without exception, who patronize that cause, the suspicion is rarely groundless. Such conduct proceeds from the impossibility of defending the cause by better means. If, then, dishonest arts have been employed by the whole tribe of infidel writers, this will yield a general presumption, that infidelity is indefensible, and consequently that Christianity is true; a presumption which will operate powerfully on the principles of human nature. But that this has been the conduct of Infidels, is evident from their writings. Partial and unfair quotations from the scriptures; gross misrepresentations of the nature

nature of Christianity ; exaggerations of whatever can be wrested to the disadvantage of it ; overlooking or explaining away what tends to support it ; confident assertions or arbitrary suppositions of what it is incumbent on them to prove ; demands that Christians should produce evidence which the nature of the thing admits not, or prove what ought to be taken for granted till it be disproved : these and many such as these, are arts of controversy made use of by all infidel writers\*. They have been occasionally pointed

\* They who have perused the writings of Infidels, will be sensible of the truth of what I here affirm. To others it cannot fail to appear astonishing ; but lest these should reckon it incredible, I shall hint at a very few instances of the several sorts of arts, which have been enumerated. I have been at no pains to select the most flagrant instances ; I mention just such as happen first to occur to my memory. Of quotations partially made, or grossly misapplied, *Christianity not founded on argument*, tho' a book of no large size, and written by a man far from being destitute of acuteness or ingenuity, will afford perhaps a hundred instances. By almost every Infidel,  
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pointed out by the defenders of Christianity, and fully ascertained. Many species of such artifices might be enumerated, and many instances collected under each head. But we decline entering

the gospel is represented as encouraging superstition, persecution, and tyranny over men's consciences; things most abhorrent from its genuine spirit. Occasion has been taken for this misrepresentation, from the vices of professed Christians, committed in absolute contradiction to the genius of the New Testament; and to give it countenance, these vices have been magnified on the one hand, and on the other hand the horrors of Pagan idolatry and superstition, and the severities of the heathens against the first Christians, have been palliated. The Alcoran has been extolled, in contradiction to truth, that it might seem a rival to the Bible. In order to see, how ready they are to suppose or to assert, whatever suits their purpose, you need but read the suppositions which Mr Hume makes with regard to Alexander of Pontus, the miraculous cure ascribed to Vespasian, or the testimony of Cardinal de Retz, without any authority from the writers whom he quotes, sometimes even in opposition to their authority. In order to discredit the apostles, how often have Infidels reckoned it sufficient, that the apostles might have been impostors, or enthusiasts, or something produced by a strange mixture of these characters? But they offer no proof; they even attempt not to reconcile the imputation with the history of the apostles; they require of Christians to prove the negative, that the apostles were not impostors nor enthusiasts.

tering on the detail. Merely to mention the various arts of sophistry employed, would not produce conviction of the justice of the charge ; and to collect multitudes of particulars in support of it, would be tedious and unpleasant. We shall, therefore, enlarge only on a few observations so obvious from the whole tenor of the infidel writings, that there will be no need to quote examples for supporting them.

It would be curious to trace the objections against Christianity, from the earliest ages to the present time. This connected view of the successive efforts of unbelievers, might suggest many reflections which would confirm our faith. No person who has at all considered the opposition of Infidels in this point of view, can have failed to remark, that they have, one after another, repeated the same objections very often, varied perhaps in form, but without  
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being at any pains to confute the answers which Christians have returned to them. That there is no degree of force or plausibility at all in these answers, the most confirmed Infidel, if he be not destitute of candour, will not be hardy enough to affirm. If they destroy not the objections altogether, they certainly in many instances weaken them very considerably. Yet, without taking any notice of them, the objections are repeatedly urged. The defenders of Christianity have acted an opposite part: they take notice of every new objection that is raised against the gospel; they at least endeavour to show by a particular examination of it, that it is not sufficient to overturn the gospel; they thus provide mankind with the means of judging fairly between them and their adversaries. This difference of manner will be obvious to every person who has the least acquaintance

quaintance with the controverfy ; and a thorough scrutiny will render it still more striking. Did fuch a difference appear between two difputants in any one instance, it would induce every confiderate fpectator, previous to a minute examination of the feveral arguments produced, to believe that he who uſes the latter method, is the abler, as well as the fairer advocate. But, in the queſtion concerning the truth of Chriſtianity, this difference takes place univerſally : the former manner characteriſeth the defenders of infidelity, almoſt without exception \* ;  
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\* This is ſo notoriously and confeſſedly the manner of Infidels, that it is almoſt ſuperfluous to appeal to any particular inſtances. Let the reader peruſe any of the lateſt works of Infidels, and try how many objections againſt Chriſtianity he can find in them, which had not been often moved, and often answered before. Let him examine, for example, how many of thoſe arguments, for the perfection or ſufficiency of natural religion, and againſt the neceſſity and uſefulneſs of revelation, which, without any notice taken of any replies to them, are  
urged

the latter manner is preserved by Christian apologists, at least by all of them whom sensible and rational Christians esteem. The natural conclusion is, that this characteristical difference arises from a difference between the causes which they maintain: and certainly we will not be disposed to think most favourably of that cause which leads its votaries to a method of defence, strongly marked with negligence at least, if not with dissingenuity. An uniform care to avoid entering into a confutation of the reasonings for Christianity, seems to imply a confession that they cannot be confuted.

Again, every person who peruses the writings of Infidels, must perceive that

urged with so great confidence and ostentation in *The philosophical works of Lord Bolingbroke*, or enforced with so great eloquence in the celebrated *Creed of the Savoyard Curate*, had not been formerly moved by Lord Herbert and Dr Tindal, and confuted, or at least much invalidated, by almost every author who wrote against them.



that not only different persons, but even the same persons, employ *inconsistent* principles in reasoning against Christianity. Men vary so much in their apprehensions of things, that different persons, arguing on almost any subject, adopt incompatible principles. Christians have sometimes given advantage to Infidels, by the fallshood of the principles on which some of them have built their reasonings, as well as by the weakness of the reasonings themselves. Were no more chargeable on Infidels, than that they are in their arguments inconsistent with one another, a conclusion to the disadvantage of their cause, could not with justice be inferred. One remark, however, may be made even on this view of the case. The mistaken principles of one Christian writer have been detected and exposed by other Christian writers, without reserve. But Infidels, indissolubly leagued

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together by the single tie of unbelief, studiously avoid confuting one another: this conduct shows a determined resolution to support a beloved cause by all possible means; and the cause which inspires all its votaries with such a resolution, is not likely to be the cause of truth. But what chiefly deserves attention is, that there is scarce any Infidel writer who, in reasoning against Christianity, does not without scruple admit principles contradictory to one another. Were this conduct peculiar to a few, it would only show that certain individuals were weak enough not to discern the contradiction, or disingenuous enough not to own it. But it is so general, that one Infidel author of a few pages, cannot perhaps be named, who is innocent of the charge\*.

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\* Instead of multiplying instances from a variety of authors, I shall mention one or two, in Mr *Hume's essay on miracles*. P. 202, " It appears that no testimony for any kind of miracle can

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A good cause needs not to be supported by such means; it does not naturally put men on the use of them. This is not the kind of attachment which truth inspires; it is the bigotry which error usually begets. Truth leads

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“ ever possibly amount to a probability, much less to a proof.”  
 “ (See also p. 180, 194, 196.) P. 205, “ I own, there may possibly  
 “ be miracles, or violations of the usual course of nature, of  
 “ such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony.”  
 The contradiction here is direct. I might add the contrariety which there is between his assertion, page 183, that no miracle was ever attested by a sufficient number of men, such by their character and circumstances as to merit credit; and the account which he gives, page 195, &c. of the manner in which the miracles wrought at the tomb of the Abbé Paris, are attested. These instances are the more to the purpose, for two reasons; because the essay consists but of a few pages, and because Mr Hume is unquestionably superior in penetration to almost all the writers who have appeared on the side of infidelity. But if the reader desires more instances, he needs but compare the opposite views in which most Infidel writers represent human reason, according to the different purposes at which they aim: when they combat the necessity of revelation, reason can do every thing, even for the bulk of mankind: but when the evidence of revelation is to be judged of, or a true revelation distinguished from an imposture, reason can do nothing.

forward its votaries in a plain road ; it is error that involves men in a labyrinth, and bewilders them in crooked paths. The principles of the best defenders of Christianity, are consistent with themselves ; among all the principles from which its truth is deduced in the New Testament, the avowed standard of our religion, there subsists the most perfect harmony.—What has been said, may serve as a specimen of the ways in which the evidence of Christianity has been corroborated by the methods in which Infidels have managed their attacks upon it.

BUT the opposition of Infidels has contributed, still more directly, to add light and force to the evidences of Christianity, by the conduct which it has led Christians to pursue. It gives Christians a natural occasion to explain the real strength of the evidences of their religion,

religion, to point out the several circumstances from which that strength arises, to show in what particular manner each circumstance promotes it, and to detect the fallacies of all the reasonings which are employed against the gospel. The New Testament informs us of a very early instance in which opposition produced this effect. It led an illiterate person, by the mere force of his own understanding, without inspiration, to a solid confutation of an objection against a particular proof of our Saviour's mission, and to a convincing explication of the force of that proof. When the council had examined a blind man to whom our Saviour had restored sight, concerning all the circumstances of the cure, they declared that Jesus must be an impostor; because, in performing it, he had broken the law of the Sabbath; *This man is not of God, because he keepeth not the Sabbath-day.*

day\*. They asked the blind man his opinion concerning Jesus: he insisted, that, notwithstanding their exception, the miracle proved him to be a prophet†. When they still urged that he was certainly an impostor, *the man answered and said unto them, Why, herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes: Now we know that God heareth not sinners, but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doth his will, him he heareth: Since the world began, was it not heard, that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind: If this man were not of God, he could do nothing‡.* The force of this reasoning was so irresistable, that it utterly silenced the rulers. They confessed its force, and showed that they were unable to answer it, by betaking themselves to reproach and violence, the ordinary consequence of want of argument.

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\* John ix. 16. † Ver. 17. ‡ Ver. 30,—33.

The various objections which have been raised against the evidences of Christianity, have always produced similar effects. By the publication of them, every exception that can, with any show of reason, be taken against these evidences, is gradually brought forth ; every doubt concerning them, is proposed ; every difficulty attending any of them, is stated : An opportunity is thus given of removing every thing which seems to weaken their force, or can hinder the mind from yielding its assent to them. Christians have never declined embracing this opportunity : they have readily taken notice of the arguments of Infidels, and examined them ; they have pointed out the false principles from which they are deduced, and the sophistical reasonings by which they are carried on ; they have evinced, that, notwithstanding them, the evidence of Christianity

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anity remains entire. The natural tendency of all this is, that every thing of importance to the proof of Christianity shall be accurately canvassed; every possible objection moved, and either directly answered, or obviated so far as the weakness of the human faculties permits, and so far as similar objections on other subjects can be obviated: and this has been, in a great measure, the actual effect. In what precise degree this effect has already taken place, they are best qualified to judge, who have deliberately considered all that has been said for and against Christianity, and impartially compared the reasonings on one side with those on the other. If a person has attended only to objections against the truth of Christianity, but has been at no pains to learn what answers have been returned to them, or has not weighed the answers with the same candour as the

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the objections; and should nevertheless determine, that all the arguments of Infidels have not been solidly confuted, that the several evidences of Christianity have not been fully vindicated, after allowing every difficulty and objection its real weight, and that these evidences together do not constitute a proof of the truth of Christianity, perfectly suited to the nature of the subject, the highest that the case can possibly admit, fully satisfying to the understanding, and superior, by many circumstances of advantage, to the proofs of numberless conclusions which are adopted with unreserved assurance; such a person is undeniably an incompetent judge; for he is ignorant of many things necessary for deciding the question with understanding. Whether any *Infidels* have gone through all the examination requisite for their giving a just decision,

sion, it must be left to their consciences to judge: their writings bear many marks of their having neglected it, of some of which we have already taken notice. It is certain that many Christians have made a full examination; their writings show that they have; and yet they have continued Christians. This is some presumption, that the evidences of Christianity are already brought wholly or nearly to the state into which opposition to *truth* tends to bring its evidence; every material objection urged, and fully answered. If any person doubts of this, let him examine without prejudice. Whether, on a full examination, every person will perceive this to be the state of the controversy, and find reason to become a Christian, I will not take it upon me to pronounce: men are influenced in their judgments by so various principles, that it is impossible  
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to say, what will be the issue of their application to any subject. But we may assert, that there is no contradictory instance: those Infidels who have boasted most confidently of fair examination and deep investigation, have notwithstanding betrayed either gross ignorance or wilful inattention, with respect to many things most essential to the evidence of Christianity, and to the vindication of it from objections. But it is by the general principles of reasoning, that a comparison ought to be stated between the attacks upon Christianity, and the defences of it: and, judging by these, nothing can be clearer than that the evidences of Christianity have not, in the course of a long and eager controversy, been confuted; that, on the contrary, all the exceptions against them have been obviated by just argument, and that consequently the force of these evidences

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ces has been farther ascertained and justified, than it was at first, and new light thrown upon the truth of our religion. No argument employed by Christ or his apostles, in support of their mission, has been overthrown by Infidels. Many of their objections have been proved to be frivolous, all of them to be inconclusive. Arguments have been advanced for Christianity, which Infidels have not so much as attempted to answer, and which must therefore be held solid and legitimate. In consequence of the exceptions of unbelievers, many arguments have been shown to advantage, have received new illustrations, and have been prosecuted with greater precision and depth. Nowhere can there be found greater confusion of thought or weaker reasoning, than in the writings of Infidels; nowhere more accurate and unexceptionable argumentation, than in the answers

fwers of Christians. For the truth of all this, we appeal to the works of both. If it be an advantage to Christianity, to have its evidence clearly explained, fully illustrated, carefully vindicated, and traced up to the general principles of human nature, there can be no doubt that it has derived advantage from the opposition of unbelievers.

THEIR opposition has not only produced a full defence of the evidences of Christianity, but likewise occasioned their being set in a great variety of lights. Men differ so much in the turn of their understandings, that truth must be placed in many different attitudes, in order to its being either conceived or embraced by all. An argument, by being turned into a particular form, will often instantly strike a person on whom it had no influence when

when it was profecuted under a different form. When a man propofes an argument, in which he has no fufpicion of obfcurity or uncertainty, and againft which he has no particular exceptions in view, he fatisfies himfelf with expreffing it in the manner which appears moft natural to himfelf, or which happens firft to occur. But when he finds that its force is not perceived, efpecially when particular exceptions are taken againft it, he endeavours to fet it in different lights, and to turn it into every poffible fhape, that, in fome one of them, its force and the futility of the exceptions againft it, may come to be acknowledged. If another perfon adopts the argument, he may be able to give it a turn which the former never thought of, and which may render it peculiarly fit for convincing fome who would have otherwife withftood it. At firft, the evidences

dences of the gospel were proposed in a very simple manner : but the objections raised against them, led Christians to turn them into various shapes. Every new objection, and even every old objection urged in a different manner, gave occasion to some new illustration of the proof of Christianity affected by it. In how many striking lights, for instance, is Origen alone led by the several objections of Celsus, to exhibit the argument for Christianity, deduced from its quick and extensive propagation? The reality of the Christian miracles was originally asserted by a naked rehearsal of the miracles themselves, and of the circumstances in which they were wrought : but, when objections against this evidence were multiplied, they led men to many new methods of representing it. In consequence of one objection, the weight of the several real circumstances attending

attending these miracles, was estimated, and shown to be sufficient to exclude all suspicion of deceit. Another objection led men to examine the precise force of that testimony by which we are assured that these miracles were wrought. Other objections have been the occasions of pointing out the difference between the Christian miracles and those false wonders, by comparison with which, attempts have been made to depreciate them; of ascertaining the nature and degree of that assent which is due to testimony; of attending to all the principles and propensities of the human mind, which can be supposed in any way to affect our belief of extraordinary or miraculous facts. The objections which have been successively raised against the connexion between miracles and doctrines, and the several hypotheses which have been contrived for accounting for the  
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wonderful works ascribed to Christ and his apostles, without allowing them to be proofs of a divine mission, have given occasion to represent that connexion in almost as great a variety of lights, in some one or other of which it can scarce fail to appear undeniable to every person who takes the pains to understand it, and gives scope to his natural principles of belief. The excellence of the Christian religion has been called in question; objections of all possible kinds, have been formed against its doctrines and its laws: the consequence has been, a display of its excellence in every possible point of view. It has been shown that it contains no tenet which reason can evince to be false, no precept which conscience can disapprove. It has been shown that it republishes a system of natural religion, perfectly conformable to the soundest deductions of reason, and teaches it

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with singular purity, perspicuity, and authority; that its peculiar doctrines not only are consistent with all that reason teaches us, but form a well connected scheme of principles; agreeable to the analogy of nature; for confirmation of which, after they are revealed, we can discover many arguments; which account for facts, and clear up difficulties in the actual state of things, otherwise inexplicable; which convert many dubious conjectures of reason into certainty; which fall in with, and support the wavering expectations of nature; which suit the hopes and the fears of mankind; which extend our prospect and brighten our views where the light of nature fails us; which discover to us a scheme of things, the exact counterpart of that with which reason and experience bring us acquainted, and, together with it, making up one plan of providence. It  
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has been evinced, that all its doctrines are useful and important in the highest degree, calculated for the noblest end, for promoting the present improvement and joy, and the eternal perfection and felicity of mankind, directly subservient to this end, affording motives to virtue, the strongest in themselves, the best adapted both to our constitution and to our state, and of the most various kinds, fit to lay hold on every principle of action, and to influence the most opposite tempers. It has been proved, that its moral precepts are absolutely proper, pure, and complete, and its positive precepts immediately conducive to real goodness; that its laws ascertain our duty with the greatest precision, and impress a sense of its obligation with the greatest force, while its doctrines give us the most powerful inducements to fulfil it, and provide us with the most natural means of ful-

filling it. Christianity has been compared with other religions, and with the noblest discoveries of the best philosophers, and demonstrated to be vastly superior to them all. In a word, it has been shown to have all the excellence which can be derived from subservience to the most important end, and to have every sort of excellence consistent with its being immediately subservient to that end, every sort of excellence which can satisfy the understanding, strike the imagination, or engage the heart. It is sufficient, and all which can be reasonably desired, that real evidence be displayed in one proper light; but when it is set in various lights, it becomes much fitter for convincing all, and for heightening the assurance of each. That the evidence of Christianity has been proposed in this advantageous manner, the opposition of Infidels has been the principal

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cipal occasion: it has led many different persons to state that evidence, every one in the way which was most suitable to his own turn of thinking; and different representations of it have been naturally suggested by the variety of objections urged against it.

THERE is a very great difference of abilities among mankind; and they who have the least share, are very apt to make a false estimate of their own powers. On this account, as well as on many others, when any question is long agitated, many weak arguments will unavoidably be employed. Some Christians have, no doubt, made frivolous observations, and used inconclusive arguments, in explaining and supporting the evidences of their religion, and refuting the objections of unbelievers. They have appealed to evidence which could yield no proof of truth

truth or divinity; and they have represented real and just evidence in an improper manner. Were there no opposition, this might not be taken notice of. It seems unnecessary to expose the weakness of others, when the detection of it can serve no good purpose: the benevolent only pity it, and the more rigid satisfy themselves with despising it. But the spirit of infidelity fails not to lay hold of every thing of this sort. However sparing unbelievers are, in undertaking a regular confutation of solid answers made to their objections, their writings show, that they are not backward to make all the advantage possible of the *mistakes* of Christians. When Infidels are awake to observe these, Christians come likewise to have a strong motive to expose and rectify the false reasonings of one another; it is conducive to a valuable end; it is necessary for preventing their being  
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unfairly turned against Christianity itself; and consequently it is perfectly consistent with the meekest benevolence. By these means, the opposition of Infidels has a very powerful tendency to banish inconclusive reasonings from the defence of Christianity.

It has been often asserted, that most of the ancient Christian writers use several weak arguments in their apologies. Infidels triumph in the observation, and represent these instances of false reasoning as even subversive of the gospel. That there are such instances, believers readily acknowledge; and, on account of them, some entertain a much lower opinion of these ancients, than can be fairly justified from their writings. Suppose that many of their sentiments and reasonings are so weak, that a modern of very moderate abilities would avoid them; yet  
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an excuse may be pleaded for this: it is common to them with almost all the philosophers of antiquity. There is not perhaps any difference between ancient and modern writers, more characteristical than this; the moderns, when possessed of any considerable degree of excellence, preserve an uniformity and equality, in matter, sentiment, and reasoning, which is wanting in the ancients. In these latter, there is a surprizing mixture of the finest sentiments with the meanest or the falsest, of the justest reasonings with the silliest cavils. In the writings of Plato, of Cicero, of almost any one of the most admired philosophers, innumerable instances may be pointed out. If few moderns rise to their excellence in some parts of their works, it is certain however that defects and absurdities, so gross as may be found in other parts, are not chargeable on any modern



dern author, who has, in the judgment of the world, even reached mediocrity. Whatever defects are observable in the Christian fathers, I know few of their apologies for their religion, in which the just reasonings do not bear as great a proportion to the puerile cavils, as in almost any work of the same length, of any the most celebrated ancient. It may be added, that very many of their false sentiments and inconclusive reasonings, were derived from the prevailing opinions of the times, were common to them with the most eminent of their contemporaries, and belong to subjects which are foreign to Christianity, and on which it was not its business to give them light. This is in reason sufficient for their vindication: and what has happened to their puerilities and cavils, exemplifies the topic on which we are now insisting. Christians have concurred with

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Infidels in detecting them; they are generally exploded. They would perhaps have been abandoned, tho' Infidels had given no occasion: but they would not probably have been so expressly disclaimed, or so professedly confuted. It often happens, that very exceptionable positions are not so quickly banished as they ought to be; there will always be some persons injudicious enough to adopt the weakest things that have been advanced by others: but this happens on all subjects, and can on no subject be justly ascribed to any other cause, but the folly of these individuals. It is no wonder that it sometimes happens likewise with respect to the evidences of Christianity. But the opposition of Infidels has a very strong tendency to make all sensible Christians extremely cautious in chusing their weapons, wary in examining the propriety of every principle on  
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which they build, attentive to the soundness and strength of every argument which they urge, scrupulous about the truth of every deduction which they make; in a word, careful that the defences which they offer for their religion, be in all respects beyond reasonable exception. A siege not only proves the strength of some parts of a fortification, but also discovers the weak parts, and shows what eminences command, or give advantage against any part of it; and thus suggests the necessity and the means of improving what is insufficient, and removing what is dangerous, so that the whole may become stronger than before. In like manner, while the attacks of Infidels give fuller conviction of the solidity of the proof of Christianity in general, and of the force of many of the particular arguments used in support of it, they at the same time expose the frivolous arguments which  
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the weakness of individuals has introduced, lead to the substitution of better in their place, and to the removal of all the rubbish by which the defence of Christianity was obstructed. False principles, which have been injudiciously adopted, are laid aside; lame reasonings from true principles, are abandoned. When the opposition of Infidels is continued for a considerable time in enlightened ages, the natural result is, a display of the several evidences of Christianity, and a vindication of it from all objections, more pure and unmix'd, more consistent, and more uniformly solid, than could have otherwise been expected. By the weakness of human nature, and the partial and discordant views of men, this effect will be hindered from taking place all at once. An entire defence of Christianity against all kinds of objections, and in respect of all its evidences, equally

qually unexceptionable in every part, is a work too large and multifarious for the abilities of most men. But there are separate defences of its several different evidences, each of which is absolutely unexceptionable, and all of which put together may form a complete and faultless apology for our religion. Nay, there are general defences of it, considered in every point of view, as uniformly solid as any work on any subject of the same compass and variety. When we look back, and observe how great progress has been made in this argument within a short period past, a much purer and completer defence of the truth of our religion, than yet exists, will not appear too much to be expected from the continuance of the efforts of unbelievers, in an age affording all advantages for every branch of learning, and encouraging freedom of inquiry. But even  
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before the tendency of opposition to make all weak reasonings be universally abandoned, have time to take entire effect, the censures of them which it produces, give men of abilities the means of selecting for themselves such proofs as are valid, without a mixture of any others. A man who has not genius enough to invent the strongest arguments on a subject, yet has often judgment enough to prefer them to the weaker, when both are set before him. It is a great advantage to have a large collection of arguments, and of exceptions against them, in our view at once : the comparison assists our choice, and enables us to reject many things with which we would have been satisfied, if we had not seen all.

THE rejection of which we have been treating, is not confined to things absolutely weak and frivolous ; it extends

tends to all such principles and arguments, however plausible or ingenious, as are in any the least degree exceptionable. A man is not always aware of every difficulty affecting either the principles on which he founds his arguments, or his reasonings from these principles: And different men examining a subject without any knowledge of each others sentiments, seldom fail to view it in different lights. From these causes it proceeds, that Christians, even of the greatest abilities, have explained the several evidences of their religion, on different principles, and in different ways. The opposition of Infidels gives occasion to a communication of sentiments among Christians. One enjoys the labours of his predecessors: he can observe to what difficulties any of their principles have been liable, and guard against them; what fallacies have been chargeable on any  
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of their reasonings; and either, by setting the argument in a more striking light, show them to be imaginary; or, if they be real, correct them. Infidels will canvass the *defects* at least, of all the different hypotheses adopted. In consequence of their eagerness to take all advantages, Christians likewise will be ready to observe them. The blemishes of each will be gradually discovered, and at length acknowledged; and the argument will be stated in such a way as to stand clear of them all. This may be exemplified in the two principal evidences of our religion. Tho' all Christians agree that the wonderful works ascribed to our Saviour, are properly miracles, yet they have given different definitions of a miracle. Some have adopted definitions, which, once admitted, render the argument from miracles very short and obvious: others have preferred such definitions as indeed



deed leave the deduction from them somewhat more intricate, but will be more readily admitted. The argument from miracles, so far as Christianity is concerned, may perhaps be rendered conclusive on any definition of a miracle, that has the smallest degree of propriety. It would be an advantage, however, that some one unexceptionable definition were universally received. The opposition of Infidels leads to a scrupulous examination of every one that is offered, and has thus a strong tendency to suggest a definition in all respects blameless, and to obtain it so universal a reception, that only men of a very peculiar cast of mind shall refuse to adopt it. The writings of Christians show, indeed, that they are already brought to agree very generally in every material part of the description of a miracle, that they differ only in some circumstances

of small importance. They have so far given up all extremes, that, taking that in which they agree for the notion of a miracle, there is no difficulty in proving, either that our Saviour's works were truly miracles, or that such miracles as his, prove a divine mission. In like manner, Christians have differed very considerably in their explications of the prophecies of the Old Testament, and in the principles on which they show the application of many of them to Jesus. Some, conceiving nothing peculiar to the prophetic stile, have thought it necessary to maintain, that the several prophecies were intended of him in their sole literal sense; and, in their eagerness to maintain this, they have stretched particulars, and introduced arbitrary suppositions, and rules of interpretation scarce defensible. Others, ascribing peculiar qualities to the stile of prophecy, have allowed

lowed that some of the prophecies relating to the age of the Messiah, predict it in an indirect and allegorical manner, prefiguring it by other analogous events, speaking of it along with these, or representing it by various types; but they too have sometimes been unable to build their doctrine on such principles as might give it entire solidity and firmness. The former have been led to suppose corruptions without evidence, and instances of incoherence without necessity: the latter have considered predictions as applicable, in some degree, to other events, which were intended of the Messiah alone. Infidels have not failed to triumph in the diversity of such opinions, and to accumulate against each of them, all the difficulties to which it was liable. Christians too have, without reserve, examined both hypotheses, and endeavoured to find out the truth. In the

course of the examination, the difficulty has been in a great measure removed. It has appeared that, when men seemed to espouse the most opposite principles, they often differed only in words; and that, so far as their difference was real, it proceeded chiefly from their explaining principles just in themselves, in an improper manner, or from their extending them too far. It has been fairly proved, not only that Christians apply the ancient prophecies to the same events, and in the same way as the Jews applied them before their fulfilment; but also, that this application is perfectly agreeable to the natural genius of prophetic writing; that it is reducible to as fix'd general rules as any species of criticism whatever; that these rules arise from principles founded in the nature and design of the Mosaic dispensation, in the unquestionable manners and usages of the times

times when the prophecies were pronounced, nay in the very nature of language, and justified both by the history and by the philosophy of its rise, progress, and gradual improvements. In a word, it has been shown, that the interpretation of prophecy is, as much as any thing else, reducible to a regular and consistent system, built on the most rational and solid principles; and that the difficulties with which it seemed to be pressed, arose only from men having conceived that system imperfectly, and are therefore chargeable only on the weakness of individuals, but do not in the least diminish the real force of this evidence of our religion.

WHEN objections are raised against Christianity, which seem to be deduced from deep and solid principles, and to be pursued by close reasoning, which  
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are therefore very plausible, and make a great show of strength ; the weak are alarmed, as if the truth were in danger of being overthrown. The fear is vain : these are only the violent rubs which the natural solidity of the diamond renders necessary for giving it its proper lustre : a much slighter touch would give a softer stone the highest polish of which it is susceptible, or would perhaps even break it into pieces ; but were the diamond tried with weaker friction, it would never display all its brightness, nor would it be ever known how solid and how strong it is. When only trivial objections are moved against a truth, they scarce seem to require any answer at all ; at any rate, the answer is obvious, a small degree of attention is sufficient for removing them, and they excite not to a thorough examination of the subject ; when they are confuted, the confuta-  
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tion contributes very little to show the strength of the argument against which they were directed. On the contrary, strong objections cannot be removed without a careful examination of the subject, without strict attention to the principles from which they are deduced, and accurate knowledge of the sciences to which these principles belong: and the view of strong objections leads the mind to give the necessary application. But intense application of mind bestows uncommon vigour on the exercise of all the faculties, and enables a man to discover truths, which otherwise he would never have so much as conjectured. When, therefore, intense application of mind, and the invigorated exercise of understanding thence resulting, are employed about the evidences of Christianity, they naturally produce a display of the full force of these evidences, and an investigation

stigation of the profoundest sources of them. The stronger the objections are, the more strongly they prompt men to the exertion of their powers; and, as soon as they are answered, the more conspicuous the solidity of the evidences of Christianity becomes, since even by so formidable objections they are not overcome. It requires abilities to answer a strong objection: but to those who have the necessary abilities, a strong objection points out the road which leads to a proper answer. The cavils of dulness serve no other purpose but to perplex a subject, and involve it in confusion: but even the errors of true genius give hints of farther discoveries, by prosecuting which they may be corrected. This observation might be confirmed by many instances on all kinds of subjects: I shall give only one on a subject nearly allied to the present theme; the theory of evidence.

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The first attempts of philosophers amounted to little more than the taking notice of some of the characters of those arguments which in fact produce belief, and of some of the rules by which such arguments may be constructed. By degrees, a greater variety of conclusive forms of syllogisms were pointed out, and the rules for distinguishing these from mere sophisms, were rendered more precise and determinate. At length, genius, disdaining to be confined to the mere mechanism of reasoning, set about investigating the general principles, and the different kinds of evidence. The difficulty of the subject, joined to an excessive desire of simplicity, rendered the first attempts imperfect. From their imperfections, succeeding philosophers were led into conclusions which subvert all belief and introduce scepticism. But these conclusions being deduced  
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with great ingenuity, their very errors point out in some measure where the fallacy lies, and suggest the means by which a juster theory may be established. Whatever discoveries there have been on this head, are in a considerable degree owing to the preparation made for them, by the acuteness of those who have fallen into capital mistakes, and have been hit upon by only carrying to a greater length, and pursuing with greater caution, the very method of investigation of which they had set an example. In like manner, every objection truly ingenious, urged against any of the evidences of Christianity, has always started hints, the prosecution of which leads not only to a satisfying answer to that particular objection, but also to a clearer view of the principles from which the strength of those evidences arises. Thus strong objections tend to produce proportionably

ably strong defences of Christianity, both by exciting to an intenser application, and a more vigorous exertion of understanding, and by opening a way for deeper discoveries concerning the nature and force of the evidences of that religion. In ascribing this tendency to strong objections, we speak the language of experience. Every age, since the publication of the gospel, has witnessed the truth of it; every new assault of infidelity has given occasion to new and stronger defences of Christianity. Most of the objections, for example, that have been raised against the credibility of the Christian miracles, have only pointed out some separate circumstances which seemed to weaken or to destroy part of the positive proof of their reality. It has indeed been always pretended, that every the most frivolous objection subverted their credibility altogether: but this is mere assertion,

assertion, in no way justified by the real strength of the objections. Most of the answers returned, only showed that the objections had not the weight ascribed to them, that there was sufficient evidence, notwithstanding them, of the reality of the Christian miracles: and such answers were all that the objections required, and all that they naturally led to. If, on occasion of them, any of the general principles on which the evidence of these miracles depends, were pointed out, this was not so much the result of the objections urged, as the effect of uncommon penetration in particular men. But some objections of greater depth have been raised against miracles, and proposed with more than ordinary acuteness; their incredibility has been deduced from an ingenious theory of evidence, and from this has seemed to derive a considerable degree of solidity\*. This view  
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\* Hume's Essay on Miracles.

of the matter has led naturally to an investigation of the foundation of that evidence which belongs to matters of fact; it has led to an examination, whether the evidence of testimony arises solely from our experience of the veracity of mankind, or whether testimony is, independent of experience, a natural cause of belief? it has led to a proof that, since the latter is the case, the credibility of the Christian miracles arises from original and unalterable qualities of human nature. It is thus not only shown that we must give credit to these miracles, but explained also to the satisfaction of the most inquisitive, whence it arises that we must\*. To place the evidences of Christianity in this light, to trace them up to their source, to deduce their force from ultimate qualities in the human mind, cuts off at once multitudes of particular

\* See Campbell's Dissertation on Miracles, Part I.

lar objections against them: it has as great advantages above any other kind of vindication of them, as a direct demonstration in mathematics has above an indirect one.

It is ordinary for Infidels, to ascribe their objections against Christianity to philosophy, and to represent them as the effects of deep researches into the sciences. There is some colour for the pretence; but it is such as, when thoroughly examined, will contribute little to its credit. In the first stage of philosophy, when it contains only the natural history of things, with a few general conclusions obviously arising from facts, it falls in with the common sense of mankind, and it will lead philosophers to judge of the evidences of religion, in the same way with an ordinary man of good sense. When men endeavour to raise philosophy from this state of imperfection, and to investigate  
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more general principles, they will be able to accomplish it only in part, and their conclusions may contain something favourable to irreligion, scepticism, and infidelity. But when men push their inquiries still farther, render their conclusions more accurate, and their theory more perfect, philosophy loses every thing of a pernicious tendency ; it appears to be altogether friendly to religion, and by the depth and the unexceptionable justness of its principles, it renders its evidence the brighter, and supports it the more powerfully. Some steps of this progress, as many as are necessary for showing it to be natural, may be observed in every part of philosophy : and in those parts of it, which have already arrived at a considerable degree of perfection, natural philosophy for instance, this whole progress has been exemplified. To every person who  
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examines them, it will appear that those objections of ancient Infidels, and even of unbelievers of the last age, which seemed to have the deepest foundation in philosophy, were built only on some false or imperfect system of philosophy, which has been exploded in consequence of new discoveries in the sciences. The present race of Infidels boast much of their *philosophic spirit*, and to it ascribe all their opposition to the gospel: but if their objections truly arise from philosophy in the state in which it now is, it is only because it is hitherto in an imperfect state; a very few improvements in the sciences will show, that unbelievers either possess the philosophic spirit only in a superficial degree, or are perverted by false and crude theories; and that, in order to their perceiving the truth of Christianity, they need no more but to correct their errors in the sciences, and



and penetrate deeper into the principles of true philosophy.

THE opposition of Infidels not only produces a full display of the leading evidences of the gospel, and a thorough investigation of the principles from which they derive their force; but also leads Christians to discover additional presumptions and collateral proofs of the truth of their religion. Our Saviour and his apostles professedly urged only the most direct evidences of the gospel. There are many particulars in its structure, and many circumstances attending it, which truly indicate its divinity, but which are not applied to the confirmation of it, in the New Testament. It only supplies the materials from which such arguments may be collected by reflection; it only suggests the topics from which such presumptions may be deduced. The op-

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position of Infidels has contributed greatly to make Christians attentive to every thing of this kind, and has led them to prosecute many collateral proofs of Christianity, with great distinctness and energy. It forces Christians to study every part of their religion carefully, that they may defend it against the objections of its enemies: and when they survey it on every side, and view it in every light, they discover many strong indications of its divinity, which undeniably belong indeed to Christianity, but might for ever have escaped their notice, if they had not been roused by opposition, to extraordinary accuracy in examining it. Besides, there are many things which have at first sight the appearance of objections against Christianity, but which, when they are thoroughly examined, turn out very strong presumptions of its truth. Infidels, taking these in the  
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most obvious point of view, have often urged them as formidable objections : this has excited Christians to search deeper into them, and, by pursuing them through their remoter consequences, to show that they are real confirmations of the gospel. Further, when one presumptive argument for Christianity, is discovered, the prosecution of it often naturally suggests others ; as one improvement in any science generally opens a way for new improvements. Should the opposition of Infidels cease for ever, the additions which they have long ago been the occasions of making to the proofs of Christianity, will gradually lead forward to the view of many other confirmations of its truth. Very early apologies for the Christian religion, afford instances of collateral arguments for its truth, suggested by such means. Later writers have pointed out several evidences

of the same sort, which arise from circumstances essential to the Christian religion, or implied in the scripture history, and which greatly corroborate the direct and principal evidences of the gospel. These had not appeared at all, or had appeared but faintly to the ancient apologists, on the slighter attention which the feeble efforts of the old unbelievers awakened in them: but the repeated and invigorated attacks of modern Infidels have excited attention sufficient for the discovery of them, and have even in many instances suggested them\*. There are, no doubt, many circumstances of this sort, which have not even yet been professedly urged; the longer and the more minutely

\* To give a few instances; of this kind are the arguments prosecuted in *Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St Paul*, in *Duchal's Sermons on Presumptive arguments for the truth of the Christian Religion*, in *Bell's Enquiry into the divine missions of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ*. Several arguments of the same kind are incidentally introduced into *Warburton's Divine Legation of Moses*.

minutely Christianity is canvassed, the more indications of divinity, it will be found to contain. But, as the matter stands already, there is not one of its principal evidences which has not been shown to be supported and confirmed by collateral presumptions. This is of very considerable moment. The evidence of Christianity is of the probable kind; and in every probable argument, the strength of the evidence depends not only on the strength of each separate probability, but also on the number of probabilities. Any new presumption makes an addition to the evidence, often a greater addition than in proportion to its own force, by falling in with the others, and completing a connected train of circumstances. Nay, there are instances in which the want of a single circumstance, seemingly of no great importance by itself, would destroy the whole evidence, by  
breaking

breaking one link in the chain. But presumptions, each of which alone is very weak, may, by being numerous and by tallying exactly with one another, compose a proof whose force is irresistible, and which begets the highest possible degree of conviction, the firmest and the most indubitable assurance. Let the several direct evidences of the truth of Christianity, together with all the additional presumptions by which it has been shown that each of them is corroborated, be attentively considered in their natural order and dependence; and then let impartiality pronounce, whether the proof of Christianity is not indubitable and irresistible.

It deserves to be mentioned, that the opposition of Infidels produces an effect which makes some real addition to the original evidence of Christianity:

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it gives Christians an opportunity of bearing testimony to their religion. The profession of Christianity, when it meets with no opposition either by force or by argument, can scarce be regarded as bearing testimony to it. It may be only an indolent acquiescence in the principles which education has instilled, an unthinking assent to the established faith, or an implicit compliance with the fashion of the times. But to adhere to Christianity in the face of persecution, to persist in the belief, or undertake the defence of it, when attempts are made to subvert it by reasoning, is an authentic testimony of our firm persuasion of its divinity. Mere authority of fallible men, is far from being a sufficient ground for our believing any doctrine: yet experience shows that it has some force, and reason allows that it ought to have some force. All men, even they who most expressly

expressly disclaim regard to authority, are ready to value themselves on great names who have held the same opinions with themselves. They are conscious that the authority of such names adds some credit to their own tenets; and therefore they eagerly seize every handle for representing men of eminence, as of their party. Infidels themselves are not averse from this: they never miss an opportunity of filling their works with quotations from such Christian writers as have advanced any sentiments or principles which they think may be turned to the advantage of their cause; they boast of the concurrence of these in their opinions: on very slender pretences, they have often laid claim to persons who were by no means unbelievers. In every case, when we have communicated our opinions to others, and found them approved by them, we thence acquire additional  
assurance



assurance of their truth. There must be a real foundation in human nature for a deference to authority, which is so strictly universal. Regard to authority may very readily become excessive, it often does : but when it is not excessive, when it is moderate and duly regulated, it is a natural and reasonable foundation for some degree of assent. When a person of abilities, one especially who is remarkable for just reasoning, has examined an opinion carefully, and after examination holds it, this gives a presumption that he found it fully proved ; we immediately conclude that, if there had been any defect in its evidence, his acuteness would have very probably enabled him to discover it. This alone is far from being a full proof of the truth of an opinion : but it affords a real, frequently a strong, probability for its truth. It may be set aside or overbalanced in  
many

many different ways: but it is a real presumption which, till it be actually destroyed, ought to have some degree of weight with every man. When it is joined to other evidences, it always makes some addition to their force. Suppose a man to have fairly examined the evidences of Christianity, according to the best of his abilities, and in consequence of that examination to believe it; when he finds that great numbers of persons, many of them men of the highest abilities, have likewise believed it, and given testimony to it, this will produce, at least, greater confidence in his own judgment, and make him less suspicious that he may possibly be mistaken; it will by these means contribute to strengthen his faith.

THE brightness with which the evidence of the Christian religion shines, will always bear a proportion to the  
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purity in which that religion is preserved. It may be so much corrupted, that the compounded, adulterated form which assumes the name of Christianity, cannot be defended. Christians have in many instances loaded their religion with absurdities to which reason cannot be reconciled, and which, by being confounded with the gospel, obscure its evidence. Corruptions of Christianity stain its evidence, as it were, with a dim varnish, which is of the more dangerous consequence, because it is not suspected to be a varnish, but mistaken for the genuine colour, and even reckoned by some the most beautiful part of the Christian system. The opposition of Infidels has a tendency to prevent the corruption of Christianity, and to lead Christians to reject by degrees all such adulterations as have already been admitted. It was after Christianity had been pretty much established,

established, it was when the professors of it were little exposed to the observation of Pagans, or to opposition from them, that the corruptions of Popery invaded the church: it was in ages of darkness and ignorance, when every thing passed without examination, when the greatest absurdities met with no opposition, that these corruptions grew to a height. Opposition from Infidels would have naturally checked their progress, or even prevented their appearance altogether. Had Christians continued, for instance, as they were at first, to be intermixed with Pagans, had they continued to have frequent occasions of representing to them the absurdity of making images of their gods, or of worshipping those who had once, by their own confession, been mortal men; this must have preserved so constant a sense of the truth in their minds, as could not have failed to restrain

ſtrain them from ever thinking of introducing the worſhip of images and of faints ; or, if they could have been ſo inconſiſtent as to attempt it, the Pagans would have retorted their own arguments upon them, and made them to perceive very quickly the abſurdity of the attempt. Every perſon who is at all acquainted with the ſubject, knows that Infidels have derived their moſt plauſible objections againſt the excellence and utility of the goſpel, from the corruptions with which Chriſtianity is blended in the Popiſh religion, and from the remains of the tenets and ſpirit thence ariſing, which ſtill adhere to many Proteſtants. Theſe have given them an occaſion to repreſent the goſpel, as a diſputatious ſyſtem of dry, ſpeculative, intricate, abſtruſe opinions ; as promoting a ſpirit of ſuperſtition as irrational and abject as any that was ever cheriſhed by any

ſpecies

species of Paganism ; as giving countenance to priest-craft and usurpation over the consciences of men : in a word, have given them an occasion to affirm, that the gospel has been productive of no advantages to mankind, that, on the contrary, it has been on the whole pernicious. Taking it for granted, that every thing belongs to Christianity, which has been at any time maintained by any number of Christians, Infidels have represented its internal evidence as nothing, nay have represented it as containing many things which it requires great pains to justify, and which it would need very strong arguments for proving to have been revealed by God. By means of this, and likewise by pretending evidences for the superadditions to Christianity, similar to those which were exhibited for Christianity itself, the corrupters of the gospel have given unbelievers a pre-  
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tence for making large deductions from the force even of its external evidences. When Infidels lay hold of these advantages in their opposition to the gospel, this has a strong tendency to push Christians forward in reforming their religion from all corruptions. When we find plausible or strong objections raised against what has been at any time reckoned a part of Christianity, when we can scarce give a rational and satisfying defence of it, it is natural to examine carefully, whether this be truly a part of the original gospel, or only an addition to it. Many of those articles against which Infidels have erected their strongest batteries, and which they have attacked with the fairest prospect of success, have appeared, on examination, to be of the latter kind, and have been very generally abandoned. By many causes, the complete reformation of our religion from all corruptions,

tions, may be retarded for a considerable time: but nothing can counteract the influence of those causes more strongly, than continued opposition from unbelievers. This has a tendency to unite all true Christians in the desire of putting their religion in the best state of defence against the common enemy, to make them concur in giving up all opinions and practices which do not undeniably belong to the gospel. By these means, Christianity will be gradually brought back to its original purity and simplicity: in some periods, the advances may be slow; in some, they may be interrupted; but as long as Infidels are eager to turn the private sentiments of individuals, and the overstrained tenets of parties, to the discredit of the gospel, there will be some tendency to return by degrees to the unadulterated religion of Jesus. Pure notions of Christianity, once introduced,



ced, will naturally diffuse themselves. They will by degrees recommend themselves so generally, that all Christians must in time imbibe somewhat of the spirit which they raise. Even Popery has become considerably different from what it once was, and it would have been still more reformed, if artificial and political restraints had not opposed the tendency of examination and inquiry. Since Christianity began to be depraved by adventitious mixtures, there never was an age in which there has appeared so generally, as in the present, a disposition to embrace whatever fair inquiry discovered to be the real doctrine of scripture, without any regard to the authority of men, or to the established distinctions of sects: and nowhere has this liberal spirit prevailed so much as in those countries in which infidelity has been suffered, for the longest space of time, to propose

all its objections freely, and without the fear of persecution or legal penalties. But the effect of its opposition has hitherto taken place only in part. The heart of a good man triumphs in conceiving the period when it shall have fully taken place; in anticipating the time when Christianity shall become in the writings and in the apprehensions of Christians, as it truly is in the New Testament, not a system of nice speculations and contentious subtleties, but a series of plain principles, evidently founded in scripture, unmixed with the arbitrary explications, and precarious conclusions of fallible men, all naturally touching the heart, commanding congruous affections, and, by their joint force, directly inculcating piety and virtue, and promoting the reformation and happiness of mankind. Let the Christian religion be universally and steadily kept in this point of view by

Christians:

Christians : then it will appear that the most formidable objections of Infidels have been directed, not against this religion itself, but against something totally different, tho' unhappily confounded with it ; then the excellence of Christianity will shine conspicuous and indisputable ; then all its evidences will operate on the understanding with their full force ; then its truth will be strikingly perceived, like the beauty of a fine picture placed in a proper light : Then too Christianity will have its native influence on the temper and practice of mankind ; it will be a vital principle of real goodness. Virtue and joy, its amiable children, will stand up, and declare with a voice of irresistible persuasion, that it is of heavenly extraction, that it is truly the offspring of the Most High. Every man who is actuated by the gospel, will feel its truth from his own experience

rience of its efficacy, and will have *the witness in himself*\*, that it is *the word of God, the incorruptible seed* † of holiness and felicity. All men will see with their eyes such marks of its power, as cannot suffer them to doubt of its truth and divinity. How glorious a testimony would this state of things give to our religion! What splendor would it confer upon its evidences! The gospel maintained in its purity, and vigorously conceived, tends to produce this state of things: And the vigilance and opposition of Infidels is one very powerful mean of exciting Christians to maintain the gospel in its purity.

SUCH are the advantages arising to Christianity from those objections by which Infidels intended to subvert it. The force of its evidences has been pointed out and ascertained; every exception against them has been examined

\* 1 John v. 10. † 1 Pet. 1. 23.

mined, and shown to be groundless; the proofs of its divinity have been fully illustrated, and set in a variety of striking lights; trivial or questionable arguments have been by degrees abandoned; seemingly jarring arguments have been explained with greater precision, and by such explication reconciled; the strongest objections have only produced a deeper and more satisfying investigation of the principles from which the evidences of Christianity derive their force; the defence of this religion has been rendered in a great measure pure, consistent, and uniformly solid; many collateral proofs of it have been attended to and prosecuted; Christians have been led to the most explicit declarations of their belief of it; and they have been excited to avoid or to remove those corruptions which would eclipse the splendor of its evidence. In all these ways, the trial to  
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which Infidels have put the truth of Christianity, has been the occasion of its receiving new light and confirmation. The observations which have been made, are the result of a review of the controversy between Christians and Infidels; it is only by attention to the progress and the actual state of this controversy, that they ought to be examined; and by such attention they will be fully justified.

THERE is, however, an objection which seems to arise from matter of fact. The continuance and the growth of infidelity proves, it may be thought, either that the evidence of Christianity is not brought, by the opposition of Infidels, into the state which we have supposed, or that its being brought into that state, is not an advantage upon the whole. But it really proves neither. It is not my design to examine  
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mine all the causes of the rise or of the growth of infidelity: but it will not be pretended that *all* Infidels become such, on a deliberate inquiry into all the reasonings for and against Christianity. Infidels themselves disclaim this as a drudgery, too mean for their great abilities: they boast of having discovered a shorter way to truth; and the writings of most of them demonstrate, that they have spared themselves the pains of bestowing any attention on the defences of Christianity. From their opinion, then, no conclusion can be drawn concerning the state in which the controversy really stands. What that state is, they cannot possibly know, who have never inquired into it. Tho' every argument for Christianity were rendered irresistible, and every objection against it fully confuted, these can thence derive no advantage. The clearest illustration of the evidences of this religion,

religion, cannot prevent infidelity from spreading among those who are not determined by evidence, but led by fashion, or an affected superiority to vulgar belief, or who take up with any specious argument upon one side. That the infidelity of some should lead others into infidelity, is by no means surprising: that it should, and yet the efforts of infidelity have as great a tendency as we have ascribed to them, to add strength to the evidences of the gospel, is far from being marvellous. Almost every thing produces mixt effects. That will seduce the thoughtless, the prejudiced, and the vicious, which contributes powerfully to the confirmation of the honest and considerate. The first and most obvious effects may often be of the pernicious kind; and yet, if time be allowed, the consequences may be on the whole highly beneficial. An age or two  
appears



appears very considerable to us, but it is not considerable in the eye of God: for many ages he permitted rudeness and idolatry to prevail among all the nations; and, in many nations, it still continues to prevail. Need we wonder, then, that he has permitted infidelity to grow so long as it has yet grown, or that he should even suffer it to subsist much longer and to spread much wider? or can we thence conclude, that it will be in the end triumphant? All the dispensations of providence are progressive; they are often unfolded by very slow degrees; from their appearance for an age or two, we cannot determine what will be the final issue. All the opposition of Infidels to Christianity, has been unsuccessful; their objections have been answered; every new attempt has only afforded a new proof of their weakness: they are obstinate enough to repeat their attempts

tempts with hopes of better success, and they who take not the pains to learn how often and how shamefully they have been baffled, reckon their obstinacy the effect of victory, and are seduced to their party: but the natural consequence is, that infidelity should cease at last, and the truth of Christianity be acknowledged by all. An enemy may besiege a fortress that is in truth impregnable, tho' he has formerly met with a repulse; he may for a long time entertain the hope of making an impression on some quarter or another: much more may *they* renew the siege, who have not been informed of the defeats of other assailants: but certainly the direct tendency of frequent repulses is, to convince all of the folly of the enterprise, and to make the strength of the place to be confessed; if in every assault it be found impregnable, this will at last be the actual effect.

fect. It is in many cases impossible to convince a man, tho' you render it plain that he ought to have been convinced. The best defence of Christianity will not infallibly produce belief in every man; it is enough that it be defended in such a way as to show, that they are unreasonable who disbelieve it. This can be shown only by an estimate of the real merit of the defence, not by the degree of success which it happens to have in fact. In a word, the truth of the observations which we have made, depends wholly on the intrinsic nature of the objections against Christianity, and of the defences of it: it is by a fair comparison of these, that they must be judged of; if by that comparison they be supported, the unbelief of multitudes can no more invalidate them, than it can render the stronger argument the weaker, or alter the nature of things; it can only show that

that these multitudes either form their opinions without examination, or have not skill to discern the superior evidence, or are led by vice or prejudice to stifle the conviction of their minds.

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## SECTION IV.

*The advantages which CHRISTIANITY has derived from OPPOSITION, afford a separate argument for its truth.*

**I**T has now been shown, that all the reasonings of Infidels, have been so far from overturning the Christian religion, that they have contributed to throw new light on its evidences, to make the solidity and strength of each of them to be more clearly perceived, and to lead to the discovery of many collateral arguments for the divine original of the gospel. Tho' no general conclusion could be drawn from the induction of particulars, which we have attempted, the attempt would have nevertheless

nevertheless been worth our labour. Every step of it sets the evidences of the gospel in some point of view which gives satisfaction to the understanding, additional to what it receives from the mere proposal of the evidences themselves. If attention to these evidences has produced belief, observation of any one of the effects of opposition, will naturally convince us that we had reason to believe, and will by this reflection confirm our faith. But the detail which we have made, answers a farther purpose. The several advantages enumerated, may be collected into one point; they form premisses from which the truth of Christianity may be directly inferred. This fact, that the opposition of Infidels, instead of overturning Christianity, has greatly confirmed it, and, in the several ways taken notice of, been the occasion of illustrating its evidences, affords a new presumption,  
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a separate and strong proof of its divinity.

INFIDELS have sometimes drawn the opposite conclusion, from the multitude of objections which have been raised against the truth of Christianity, and from the labour of argument which has been employed in vindicating it from these objections: they have intimated, that, if its evidences had been entirely clear and solid, they would not have afforded scope for this. Their conclusion supposes, that certain and evident truths will never be called in question. But no supposition can be falser. The most evident truths are those against which sceptics are generally most eager to direct their cavils. They think, perhaps, that the less a principle is liable to objections, the greater ingenuity it shows to find out objections against it. But whatever be  
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the motive, experience proves the fact. The principles of common sense, for instance, are absolutely undeniable; they extort the assent of every person; they have so deep a foundation in the original constitution of our nature, that no man could ever seriously doubt of them. But this has not preserved them from opposition: some have invented very subtle arguments for proving that we ought to doubt of them; and these cannot be confuted without great ingenuity, and copious reasonings. Objections have been urged against the demonstrations, and even against the axioms of geometry; it requires considerable attention and pains to answer them: but, since they may be fully answered, they cannot justly lead us to call in question the force either of demonstrative or of intuitive evidence: they may confound a person who does not readily perceive the fallacy of them;



them; but if a self-evident truth or a strict demonstration be proposed to him, they cannot prevent his being convinced. There is no subject on which doubts and difficulties may not be started by ingenious and disputatious men: and therefore, from the number of their objections, and the length of the controversy to which they give occasion, we cannot in any case conclude, that the original evidence is weak, or even that it is not obvious and striking. Were we to presume that every principle is dubious, against which specious objections may be contrived, we should be quickly led into universal scepticism. The two ways in which the ingenuity of speculative men has been most commonly employed, are dogmatical assertions of doubtful opinions, and subtle cavils against certain truths. It is therefore absolutely unreasonable to conceive any suspi-

cion unfavourable to the truth of Christianity, merely on account of the multiplied reasonings of captious men against its evidences, and the various and large defences of it, to which these have given occasion. No degree of strength or clearness can prevent objections from being framed; when they are framed, solutions become necessary: they are necessary only for removing the cavils of unbelievers, not for enabling the unprejudiced to perceive the force of the original evidences. That many objections have been urged, and that the answers have increased in proportion, and been sometimes conducted with great subtlety, is no presumption of the falsity of Christianity: if the objections have been shown to be inconclusive, if the answers have evinced the solidity and strength of the evidences of the gospel, this is sufficient for putting the truth of  
Christianity

Christianity beyond all reasonable doubt.

IN the beginning of Christianity, Gamaliel, uncertain whether it came from God or not, referred the determination to this very trial. When the Jewish council wanted to put the apostles to death, he said, *Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought; but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it\**. The judgment was solid; it was founded on the nature of truth: Christianity has undergone the trial, and shown itself to be divine. We may now determine with the greatest confidence; *This counsel and this work has not come to nought*, tho' the most eager endeavours to bring it to nought, have been repeatedly employed; therefore it is not *of men*: men have not been able by the utmost efforts of argument

\* Acts v. 38, 39.

to *overthrow it*, all their efforts have, on the contrary, confirmed it; therefore it is *of God*. The force of this proof of the divinity of our religion, will appear from the following observations.

The evidences of Christianity cannot properly be rendered stronger in themselves, by means of the opposition of Infidels, than they originally were. They were from the first possessed of all the strength which the most thorough examination discovers in them; it is their having been possessed of it, that renders them capable of bearing a thorough examination. Examination does not create any part of their strength, but it greatly displays it. Evidence can answer no purpose except it be perceived; it cannot operate with its full force, except its force be perfectly understood: the opposition of Infidels gives a clearer conception and firmer assurance of the sufficiency of the evidence which Christianity had from the beginning,

beginning, than could have been otherwise obtained. Thus, tho' gold be as truly gold before it is tried as afterwards, yet when it has undergone every sort of trial, and in each of them displayed the characteristics of that metal, its purity becomes more evident and certain than it was. If a fortification be found impregnable on a siege, it truly was impregnable before; but it is its having sustained the siege, that discovers its having been such.

Indeed there cannot be an higher or a more undeniable proof of the truth of any principle or system, than this, that it has not been disproved by severe and repeated examinations. In many cases, the evidence may be so full, and the proof so clear and decisive, that the very first time sufficient attention is bestowed, there remains no rational ground of doubt. If the first examination, however, should leave a suspicion of any fallacy, what  
method

method could we naturally take for determining, whether the suspicion be just or groundless, but to examine the proof anew? If, after reiterated examinations, it still appeared to be unexceptionable, our assurance of the truth of the conclusion would necessarily become much firmer. Tho' its essential evidence continues the same, yet the effect of that evidence on our understanding, is heightened by every examination. If we moreover set ourselves to find out all the difficulties which attend the evidence, and all the exceptions which can be taken against it, if we learned from those who reject it, all the grounds of their unbelief; and if, after all this, we still found the evidence satisfying and conclusive, and could discern no real fallacy in any part of it, this would raise our assurance to a height which nothing can exceed. There are many cases

cases in which we have not all the opportunities; and many more in which we take not all the pains, necessary for obtaining this high degree of assurance concerning the truth of our principles. This is the reason why men of hasty judgments, hold so many doubtful or false opinions, and why we have nothing but opinion on subjects where we might have certainty. But the evidences of Christianity have stood the test of a severer examination than ever was bestowed on any other subject. Every difficulty has been represented in the strongest colouring, every objection urged, all the evidences canvassed if possibly there could be found a fallacy in any part of them; their strength has been tried by one after another, and tried in every possible way: but after all, the evidences of our religion appear to be found, and satisfying, as high as the nature of the  
subject

subject can admit, as high as could be expected on supposition of its truth. When they are simply proposed, they are convincing to the unprejudiced mind: when all that can be advanced against them, and all that can be urged in support of them, are fairly balanced, still they are convincing. This gives new assurance of their strength; no person who enquires, and finds on enquiry that this is the case, can entertain a doubt of it. There can be no more certain mark for distinguishing between truth and falsehood than this, that the former withstands all the assaults of reasoning, but the latter, tho' it may maintain itself by specious pleas for a while, yet never fails to be plainly detected and confuted, if the scrutiny be long continued. By this mark, the gospel is proved to be truth. If it were not truth, is it possible, that all the efforts of early unbelievers,

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lievers, instead of detecting any imposture, should have produced only frivolous objections, added strength to its several evidences, and laid a foundation for new proofs of its divinity? Is it possible that Infidels, in every age, should have been driven to all the methods of chicane and sophistry in managing their opposition to the gospel? Is it possible that they should have been able to discover only such arguments against it, as are for the most part weak or unfair, as without exception lose their plausibility, in proportion to the attention with which they are examined, and have been fully answered?

If it could be asserted, merely that Christianity has stood the trial without being confuted, this would be sufficient to infer its truth: but by the trial, its evidence has been illustrated, and has received an accession of strength; this renders its truth still more undeniable.

able. There may be *false* principles which we cannot absolutely confute; we may want the means of proving that they are certainly false: but there cannot be a false principle of whose fallshood, examination frequently repeated and eagerly prosecuted, will not infuse a reasonable or probable suspicion. Examination generally produces several subordinate effects before it issues in a full confutation: it first discovers that some part of the proof has not all the strength which it was supposed to have, and thus leads us to maintain the opinion with a lower degree of assurance than before: when the examination is carried farther, it shows some argument on which we laid considerable stress, to be fallacious and unsound, and, by means of this, it renders us suspicious of the solidity of the other evidences, and dubious in our judgment of the whole: and even when a continued examination

amination cannot afford positive proofs that a principle is false, it shows at least that there is no sufficient reason to believe it true. This is matter of experience: you cannot name any false opinion which did not lose by being examined, and lose in proportion to the accuracy with which it was examined. But Christianity has, on the contrary, gained by examination. Can there possibly be a more satisfying proof that it is altogether true? Seeming evidence looks specious only in one lucky attitude; if the evidence of the truth of Christianity were not real, could it have born to be set in so great a variety of lights as it has been set in? Every one of its evidences has been examined separately: but none of those evidences to which Christ or his apostles ever appealed, has been shown to be either wanting, or inconclusive. On the contrary, additional evidences have  
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been perceived, and the force of all of them has been set in so clear a light as to show that, if they who disbelieve the gospel, would act consistently, they must run into universal scepticism, and renounce principles of belief, to which it is necessary that they yield implicitly every hour in common life, else speedy ruin is the consequence ; but which indeed the kind author of our nature has rooted so deeply in our constitution, that in common life the most determined sceptic cannot resist their force for a single moment ; and which, by consequence, it is the plainest folly and the grossest absurdity to attempt to resist in matters of religion. Had the evidences of Christianity been either fictitious or improper, it must have been impossible to point out so deep a foundation for them in human nature.

In Christianity, as in every system, whether of nature or of art, there are some parts which, to a superficial observer, appear more exceptionable than the rest. If this religion be false, it is reasonable to expect, that on examination, those parts would be found still more exceptionable, and that by attention to them we should be led most readily to a detection of the cheat. If the reverse has happened, if it has appeared on a full examination, that those parts of Christianity, and those circumstances in its evidence, which are most exceptionable to a superficial observer, turn out, when they are sufficiently understood, signal indications of excellence, truth, and divinity, there can be no stronger confirmation of that religion. A defect in any hypothesis, or in any machine, which is so obvious as to strike at first sight, if it be real, is perceived more clearly by the attentive

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tive inquirer, but, if it be only apparent, recommends the skill of the inventor. The same conclusion ought to be adopted with respect to Christianity: the defects which seemed to belong to it, have been scrupulously canvassed, and found to be only imaginary. They are therefore like those delicate strokes in works of art, which displease the uncultivated taste, but gain the highest and the most permanent approbation from those who have improved their taste; or they are like those parts of nature, which the ignorant reckon deformed or useless, but which the researches of the curious discover to be both beautiful and beneficial; these show the highest skill; those in like manner evidence the most unquestionable truth. For instance, the mean condition of Jesus while he lived on the earth, is a circumstance which Infidels have always eagerly laid hold up-

on, and endeavoured to turn to the discredit of the gospel: but it has been proved that this circumstance not only is incapable of being fairly turned to the discredit of the gospel, but also in numberless ways promotes the design of the gospel, and renders its truth unquestionable, and that far more effectually than could have been accomplished by his appearing in a more exalted sphere. When Infidels have censured any of the evidences of the gospel, and pointed out the objections to which they judged them liable, they have sometimes condescended likewise to inform us, by what means these evidences might, in their apprehension, have been rendered convincing, and suitable to a revelation truly divine: but it has always appeared that the evidences proposed by them, would have been less satisfying, and exposed to much juster objections, than the most exceptionable

exceptionable of those by which our religion is actually supported. Christianity in some of its features bears some resemblance to false religions: Infidels are eager to observe these features, they triumph in pointing them out, they think that these will suggest an easy proof of *its* being likewise false. But by no track are we led to a clearer discovery or a firmer conviction of the truth of Christianity. The resemblance is precisely such as might naturally be expected to take place between a true religion and false religions. Suppose a religion really revealed by God, we may be certain that it would be adapted to human nature: and suppose a revelation of a new religion to be pretended, we may be certain that the impostor would both do his utmost to adapt it to human nature, and copy after such revelations as had proved successful. There is no greater similitude



tude between Christianity and any false religion, than is easily accounted for by this obvious reflection. The resemblance, however great it may seem in some particulars at first sight, grows always fainter and fainter, the more closely it is traced; and on an exact comparison, Christianity is found to be in its whole spirit and evidences the very opposite of every false religion. Thus two faces may be mistaken for each other when they are seen separately and little attended to, between which scarce any resemblance can be perceived when they are deliberately viewed together. In a word, Christianity has been so much confirmed by examination, that even whatever seemed to be exceptionable in it, has been converted into a new presumption of its truth.—No subject has undergone so free or so frequent examination, as Christianity; and no subject ever gained so much

by examination. Every book that ever was written against this religion, has, in the course of the controversy to which it gave rise, occasioned some improvement in the defence of Christianity. Every objection that has been started, has produced answers which showed the strength of some of the evidences of the gospel, in a new and striking point of view. And since Christianity, far from being confuted, has been so much confirmed by an opposition of argument so often renewed, so long continued, and so eagerly prosecuted, the inference is short and clear. This is peculiar to truth; it leaves no room for the least suspicion of falsehood.

If Christianity were a false religion notwithstanding all the trials which it has undergone, and the manner in which it has sustained them, it would be absolutely singular and without a parallel

parallel on earth. Many false tenets and false religions have subsisted for a long time; it is acknowledged: yet if Christianity were false, it would still be without a parallel. For has any of these falsehoods been examined and canvassed in the same manner as Christianity has, and been retained notwithstanding? None of them has. In numberless ways, false opinions may gain ground; and when they have been once adopted, they may be for ages transmitted from some to others, without being at all suspected or examined: but an opinion's subsisting ever so long while it is not examined, affords no sort of presumption of its truth. The Ptolemaic system of the world was long the received hypothesis: but its reception was no proof of its truth. During all that time, it was taken for granted without examination: most men wanted the means of bringing it to a pro-

per trial ; if a few had them, and used them, they disbelieved it ; and as soon as it was generally examined, it was generally exploded. It did not require repeated examinations to confute it ; it fell at once, upon the first scrutiny of unprejudiced reason. Many false hypotheses have reigned in every science, through long periods of time. Attend to such of them as are now abandoned : you will find that they were established on false *principles* which, during their reign, were never called in question. Their prevalence, therefore, truly proceeded from men's having never examined these principles : as soon as these were examined, it appeared that they had been all along taken for granted without evidence ; that, therefore, however well the several parts of the superstructure hung together, the whole hypothesis was nevertheless a mere baseless fabric. The same has  
happened

happened in religion, as in science. The Pagan religion was of very long duration: but every one knows that many causes prevented its being thoroughly examined; that, as imperfectly as it was examined, it did not stand unconfuted all the time it continued to subsist; and that, when it came to be fully canvassed, no rational defence was offered for it. Mahometanism has subsisted for several ages: but it is because its evidence has never been examined by those who profess it. By all who have examined it, it has been pronounced destitute of evidence: many have embraced it from other motives; but it does not appear that any ever turned to it in consequence of a deliberate inquiry into its truth. The fate of Popery is no exception against this argument. It rose in dark times, and therefore without examination. It acquired its present form by a gradual  
corruption

corruption of Christianity ; each step prepared the way for another ; and therefore it advanced imperceptibly and without suspicion. It forbids free inquiry, and therefore has never been examined by those who hold it. At least, if any of them have examined it to a certain degree, they have nevertheless stopped short before they searched it thoroughly: they still took for granted certain first principles on which it is founded, the authority, for instance, of Popes, Councils, Fathers, and Doctors ; principles which ought not to have been taken upon trust, but proved very clearly, for which however no solid proof has been produced. Popery has been examined by those who believed it not : and whether they have not attacked it in a fairer way than that in which Infidels have opposed the gospel ; whether they have not readily taken notice of all the pleas of its patrons,

trons,

trons, and undertaken to confute them; or whether their objections againſt it, have been answered ſo fully, ſo freely, upon ſo unexceptionable principles, or by ſo ſtrong reasonings, as the objections of Infidels againſt Chriſtianity, we may appeal to every impartial perſon who takes the trouble to examine both the controverſies. At any rate, it will not be pretended, that Popery has gained by examination, or been confirmed by the oppoſition of Proteſtants: on the contrary, its votaries have been induced to alter their ſyſtem, to refine upon their principles, to renounce or explain away tenets expreſſly taught in books to which they ſtill in words aſcribe the higheſt authority, and which they even profeſs to believe infallible. “ But has not the ſame hap-  
 “ pened to the Chriſtian religion?  
 “ Have not doctrines which were once  
 “ reckoned a part of this religion,  
 “ been

“ been abandoned in consequence of the  
 “ inquiries occasioned by infidelity?”  
 That this has happened, we readily ac-  
 knowledge; but this is not the same  
 that has happened to Popery; nay,  
 tho’ on a superficial view, it seemeth  
 somewhat like, it is in reality directly  
 contrary. Christians have never given  
 up as indefensible, any doctrine plain-  
 ly taught in scripture; Papists have gi-  
 ven up doctrines most indisputably in-  
 culcated by Popes, Councils, and Doc-  
 tors. Christians have renounced on-  
 ly errors which had insinuated them-  
 selves into their religion; but really  
 made no part of it; if they be likewise  
 errors which inquiry has forced Papists  
 to renounce, yet they are such errors  
 as compose the very substance of Pope-  
 ry, so far as it differs from the religion  
 of other Christians. The scripture is  
 the avowed standard of Christianity,  
 by which whatever is asserted to be-  
 long



long to it, may be tried; the opposition of Infidels has only excited Christians to study the scripture with greater care, and to render their opinions more conformable to it: Popery owns some standards additional to the scriptures; the opposition of Protestants has reduced its professors to the necessity of deviating from these additional standards. In a word, that Christianity has been examined, there are the most unquestionable documents, the writings of unbelievers: it has not fallen before one or a few attacks: objections of all kinds have been raised against it: the first principles on which its evidences rest, as well as the reasonings by which they are supported, have been tried, and found to be the very principles of belief natural to the human understanding, to which men necessarily yield in innumerable cases: many have inquired into its grounds  
with

with the greatest freedom, and after all embraced it as divine with higher assurance than before: by opposition, none of its proofs has been invalidated, all of them have been illustrated and strengthened. There is therefore an essential difference between Christianity, and all the false doctrines which ever obtained a durable reception. If that be false, it is the only falsehood that ever sustained so accurate an examination. Its having sustained this examination, its having even derived advantage from it, sets it in direct opposition to falsehood and imposture, and proves that it is, what it claims to be, true and divine.

THE argument for the truth of Christianity, which we have endeavoured to illustrate, depends on two propositions; the first, That Christianity, far from being overthrown by the opposition

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tion of argument, has been confirmed by it; the other, That not to be overthrown, much more to be confirmed, by the opposition of argument, and by free inquiry, is a certain and unequivocal characteristic of truth. The latter proposition is both obvious and undeniable. Were the evidence of the former equally clear and immediate, or capable of being rendered as absolutely incontrovertible, the argument could not fail to be perfectly satisfying to every man; the conclusion, That Christianity is true, would strike the mind with a degree of force nowise inferior to that of the strictest demonstration. But the former proposition relates to a matter of fact, which, in its very nature, admits only such evidence as must appear different to different men, and can never be rendered wholly unexceptionable to every individual. The fact must be ascertained by a comparison

parifon of the writings of Infidels, with thofe of Chriftians, and will be admitted or denied, and that with greater or lefs affurance, according to the judgment which any perfon forms on the comparifon. The fact is not fufceptible of any other fort of evidence; and by this fort it has been proved, in the preceeding fections, as clearly as could be expected on fuppoifion of its truth. But fince the only poffible evidence is of this kind, it muft be owned, that the argument will appear inconclufive to fome, and will be thought by others to fall fhort of demonftration. This does not render the argument void either of force, or of utility; but it renders it proper to examine what precise degree of force ought to be aferibed to it.

That Chriftianity has not been confuted, but eftablifhed, by the oppofition of its adverfaries, Infidels will not  
 acknowledge;

acknowledge; they cannot consistently acknowledge it, and yet continue Infidels. On Infidels therefore, it may be thought, the argument can make no impression. Indeed, while they deny the fact on which the argument is founded, it cannot immediately and directly tend to their conviction: yet it ought to have some sort of influence even upon them, by means of which it may contribute indirectly to their conviction. The impossibility of an Infidel's allowing the fact from which the present argument is deduced, and yet continuing an Infidel, shows, that, on supposition of the truth of the fact, the argument is perfectly decisive. If, on that supposition, it be decisive, it must be incumbent on Infidels, to examine carefully and impartially, whether the fact be true or not. This is the method of obtaining satisfaction, to which both curiosity and candour prompt men in  
other

other controverted subjects, tho' in many of these they are not so deeply interested as in religion. If Infidels decline this examination, they can have no right to deny the fact; it may be true for any thing they know: they have been at no pains to inquire about it; and therefore their denial of it, can merit no regard, and ought not to be allowed by any man to infuse into his mind the faintest suspicion of its truth. If they decline the examination, they cannot approve themselves in their unbelief; they must be conscious of wilful negligence. They have no just claim to the favourable sentiments of Christians: these are due only to those who have used all the means of discovering the truth, which impartiality requires, and which God has put in their power, and after all are so unhappy as not to find sufficient reason for believing the gospel; they are not at  
all

all due to them who eagerly adopt a conclusion against the gospel, without ever taking into consideration, the principles on which its truth or its falsehood depends. However impossible it may be in fact to convince these persons, either that Christianity is true, or that it has gained by opposition; it is notwithstanding plain, that, even supposing these propositions false, they cannot *reasonably* believe them false. Before they can reasonably commence Infidels, they must consider, What the evidences of the gospel truly are? Whether they have real solidity and force? Whether they have been overturned by the objections which have been raised against them? Whether, on the contrary, these objections have not been fully answered, and even turned, in many instances, into arguments for corroborating the evidences of the gospel? —On what principles can it be denied, that

that it is incumbent on every person to go through this whole inquiry, before he can reasonably reject the gospel? A religion is proposed to men, as revealed by God: if it be really revealed by him, without question it merits the greatest regard. It builds its claim to a divine original, on certain evidences to which it explicitly appeals: these ought certainly to be canvassed with the strictest impartiality, before they be declared insufficient. If they do not satisfy you, you ought to know why they do not, and wherein they fail. If you publish to the world, that you are not satisfied with them, you ought also to publish your reasons, and to point out the defects which you have observed in them. Many have done so; answers have been offered to their objections; of most of these answers, no confutation has been so much as attempted; they must therefore in all fairness



fairness be reckoned solid. Since the controversy is already brought to this state, the natural and the only way of attacking Christianity, is to confute the answers which have been returned to the objections raised against it. In consequence of this, Infidels ought to pursue a method perfectly the reverse of that which they have hitherto pursued; they ought to set themselves to examine and to overturn the defences of Christianity; this, the love of truth absolutely requires of them. It is among the young, the thoughtless, and the dissipated, that infidelity has chiefly prevailed: but from the observations just now made, it is plain that among them infidelity never can prevail on principles of reason: Suppose that there were good reason for infidelity, yet, as matters now stand, an attentive and careful inquiry is necessary, before that good reason can be discovered; and

to such an inquiry these persons have not submitted. In the present state of things, the very greatest abilities, without this inquiry, are not sufficient for enabling a man to perceive, that Christianity has no just foundation: after so many objections have been moved against it, and after it has been so often and in such various ways vindicated from them, a rational determination that it is not true, necessarily depends on the knowledge of many points which cannot be learned by the greatest abilities in an instant, or without a deliberate and extensive investigation. Whatever be the objection which startles you, tho' you can see no way of removing it, yet an answer has been perhaps made to it by others, with which you would be fully satisfied: it is necessary at least that you should inquire, whether there has not, before you can reasonably hold your objection

to

to be unanswerable. Thus all men are obliged, before they can reasonably disbelieve the gospel, to go through an inquiry which will put it in their power to decide with understanding, concerning the fact on which our present argument depends. If they decline the inquiry, they may deny the force of the argument; but they act a rash and unreasonable part in denying it. If they make the inquiry, and find the fact to be as we have represented it, the argument will strike into their minds a conviction of the truth of Christianity, with the irresistible force of demonstration. If, after a careful and impartial inquiry, any person should be of opinion, that Christianity has been overthrown by the objections of Infidels, and clearly proved to be false, he must doubtless be left to follow his own judgment. But it may nevertheless be very plain, that he is

in an error. On every other subject, as well as on this, it is impossible to force conviction on those who are disposed to deny; the understanding of each individual must ultimately determine for him in every case: yet it does not follow, that there is no difference between truth and error, or that there is not any truth which can be said to be fully proved, because there is almost no truth which will not be denied by some. In like manner, tho' there may be persons who will perceive no force in the present argument, it by no means follows that it is not in itself a just and a strong argument for the truth of our religion.

THE argument which I have now urged, cannot naturally be that which will *first* convince a man of the truth of Christianity. On the contrary, it supposes that a person has already examined the several more direct evidences

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ces of this religion, perceived their force, and found them sufficiently vindicated from all exceptions. Till he has done so, he cannot feel the force of this argument. Its proper design is, to *strengthen* the faith which has been already produced by more direct proofs. This purpose, it will very powerfully promote. When a person attends to the several evidences of the gospel, he is convinced by them; conscious that they are in fact convincing, he has not naturally any propensity to suppose, that they may notwithstanding be liable to objections which can invalidate them, or, on account of the possibility of such objections, to hesitate in yielding his assent: But when he has examined the objections which have been moved against these evidences, when he finds that they do not invalidate the evidences, that they leave them in their full force, that they even display

display the strength of the proof, that they have issued in the confirmation of the gospel, his assent necessarily becomes more assured. Now he does not merely *suppose* that there are no valid objections against the evidences of the gospel; he has *positive proof* that there are none. When we attend to the evidences of any truth, they operate *directly* on the understanding, as the natural causes of belief; they do convince, and this is a sufficient foundation for our assent: but when we examine the objections against them, and the defences of them, the mind exerts a *reflex* act, by which it perceives that they ought to convince us; this cannot fail to make us acquiesce in their sufficiency with the most entire and explicit complacence.

“ BUT suppose this argument to  
 “ have all the force which has been a-  
 “ scribed

“ scribed to it, yet is Christianity,” it  
 will perhaps be said, “ really the bet-  
 “ ter on the whole, for that examina-  
 “ tion to which the opposition of In-  
 “ fidels has given occasion, and on  
 “ the result of which the argument is  
 “ founded? Does its evidence become  
 “ clearer, is it not, on the contrary,  
 “ rendered intricate, and involved in  
 “ confusion, by so great a multitude  
 “ of arguments, objections, and re-  
 “ plies? Can the *generality* at least de-  
 “ rive any advantage from them, for  
 “ are not they incapable of going thro’  
 “ so long and complicated trains of  
 “ reasoning; and yet, if it be true  
 “ that an Infidel cannot reasonably  
 “ *disbelieve* till he has gone through  
 “ them, must it not be equally true,  
 “ that, in the present state of things,  
 “ without going through them, no  
 “ Christian can reasonably *believe*?  
 “ And must not the assent even of  
 “ speculative

“ speculative men, who can trace the  
 “ whole progress of the controversy,  
 “ and comprehend and balance the  
 “ arguments on both sides, be never-  
 “ theless weakened by their passing  
 “ through so many steps before they  
 “ come to the conclusion? Is not all  
 “ the seeming light and confirmation,  
 “ therefore, which Christianity has  
 “ derived from opposition, rather de-  
 “ trimental than beneficial to it? And,  
 “ if it be, how can any presumption  
 “ of its truth be thence deduced?”

It is readily allowed, that the gene-  
 rality of mankind are not capable of  
 taking in a minute detail of objections  
 and answers, or of accomplishing a  
 critical or speculative discussion of evi-  
 dence. But it is not necessary that  
 they should. The evidences of the  
 gospel proposed, as they were original-  
 ly, in the simplest manner, will satis-  
 fy those whose understanding is not  
 debauched



debauched by the false refinements of science, or warped by prejudice or vicious passions, who retain the *natural* propensity to yield to the principles of belief implanted in the human constitution, and who have not acquired a disposition to elude evidence, or to perplex themselves by studiously searching for difficulties. A perception of the evidences in that manner proposed, is sufficient to render their *belief* reasonable, tho' *unbelief*, as was lately proved, cannot be reasonable in any man who is not acquainted both with the objections against Christianity, and with the answers which have been returned to them. The reason of this difference will be obvious on a little attention, and indeed arises naturally from some of the principles which were formerly established and fully illustrated\*. The gospel offers *positive evidence* of its truth; in the person who yields to it on a  
simple

\* Dissert. 1. Sect. 3. p. 56, &c.

simple propofal, this evidence produces its proper effect by operating on the natural principles of the understanding; and, if the evidence be really folid, this of itfelf renders his affent rational and fuitable to the conftitution of the human mind, tho' an hundred objections againft that evidence may poffibly be ftarted by the fceptical, which he could neither underftand nor anfwer. But, when a perfon refifts the pofitive evidence which is produced, and moves objections, the cafe is very different: it is incumbent on him to point out fome real failure in it; if it has been already charged with the fame failure and vindicated from it, he muft examine whether the vindication be fufficient, and, if not, he muft be able to fhew where the defect lies; otherwife he counteracts the principles of the human conftitution, which naturally lead us to yield to evidence, when it has

force

force enough to produce assent, and we perceive no fallacy in it. This difference between their situation, who yield to positive evidence, and their's who resist it, takes place in every case. A proposition in Euclid's elements is demonstrated; if a person comprehend the demonstration, he necessarily gives credit to it; and he is perfectly rational in giving credit to it, tho' he be not acquainted with any of the objections which some Metaphysicians have raised against the exactness of mathematical reasoning, nor with the solutions of them. But if a person, on the contrary, after comprehending the demonstration, refuses to admit the proposition, he certainly acts unreasonably, except he can clearly perceive the defect of the demonstration, and the insufficiency of what has been urged for vindicating it from the imputation of that defect. Universally, a more extensive

tensive inquiry is incumbent upon him who resists the positive evidence offered in a case, and thus holds himself capable of scrutinizing it, than upon him who, owning its force, readily yields it the assent which it demands: the former must always be able to give the reasons of his unbelief; of the belief of the latter, it is a sufficient reason, that the constitution of his nature leads him to be convinced, tho' he cannot explain the grounds of his conviction in a philosophical manner. None will assert that an ordinary man acts an unreasonable part, in readily believing, that food will continue to nourish, sleep to refresh, and the sun to rise and set at stated hours: but all would laugh at the unreasonableness of a sceptical philosopher, who should deny these propositions, and yet refuse to explain wherein he thought that their evidence failed, or to listen to a vindication of it.

it. To render a person reasonable in believing any proposition for which positive proof is offered, it is not necessary that he be acquainted with *all* the evidences of it; he may perceive evidence enough to satisfy him, tho' he perceive not all: but he cannot be reasonable in rejecting it, unless he has attended to the whole of the proof that is offered; tho' one part of it does not satisfy him, another may. To pretend that a Christian is not reasonable in believing, unless he has discussed all the objections of Infidels, is to beg the question, to take it for granted that the evidences of the gospel are not real; for, on supposition that they are, it is entirely rational to yield readily to their force. But, tho' Christianity should happen to be false, and its evidences fallacious, the Infidel must be unreasonable in rejecting it, without a full examination of the answers which have  
been

been returned to objections ; for positive evidence can never fairly be set aside without being positively confuted. Infidels make high pretensions to a spirit of inquiry ; but they must push their inquiries farther than they generally do, before their infidelity can be in any degree reasonable. They are eager to charge Christians with credulity ; but the charge would not be just, tho' Christians had not examined the arguments of Infidels so minutely as many of them have. To give a quick assent to evidence real and natural in itself, never can be blameable credulity ; to refuse it, or to give it with difficulty, is always faulty scepticism. Thus the opposition of Infidels, and the manifold defences of Christianity occasioned by it, are of no *detriment* even to the generality ; they do not render it more difficult or laborious to become a rational believer, than it was before. Nay  
 even

even to the generality, considerable *advantages* are derived from them.

In the first place, by means of them, they are excited to attend to the grounds and evidences of their religion, and are naturally led, tho' not to enter into all the intricacies of argument concerning them, yet to examine them, at least, so far as to acquire a distinct conception of their nature and force, as they are proposed in the New Testament: and, if these evidences proposed in this manner, be sufficient for begetting conviction, the generality, being thus led to attend to them, will come to be possessed of a truly rational faith in the gospel. Had no opposition been made by Infidels, Christians would run a risk of becoming inattentive to the evidences of the gospel, and negligent in their endeavours to understand them: that opposition is a continual antidote against this. In the beginning of Christianity

flianity, many things contributed to prevent this: the evidences of the gospel, from their very nature, excited attention in that age; in the first exhibition, many of them were presented to the very senses of men; they could not be overlooked; every person who yielded assent to them, was unavoidably conscious of the reasons on which his assent was founded; and consequently his faith was necessarily rational: besides, the prejudices arising from their education in other religions, and the dangers to which they were exposed by becoming Christians, could not fail to render them scrupulous in examining the evidence proposed to them, and careful to be fully satisfied of its sufficiency, before they admitted it, or professed their faith in consequence of it. But the circumstances of the world are now so much altered, that men may be sometimes led to profess Christianity,



ftianity, and even to embrace it, without any examination of its evidences, without fo much as a tolerable apprehenfion of them, as they ly in the Bible. It is unnecessary to fpend words in pointing out the feebleness, the inefficacy, the difadvantages of various kinds, which must attend a faith fo slenderly, fo imperfectly fupported: they are extremely obvious. Now the continual opposition of Infidels has a natural and strong tendency to hinder men from thus taking their religion altogether upon trust: and, except the existence of other religions, it is perhaps the only *external* cause by which Christians are prompted to examine the foundations of their religion. It leads those who have been educated in Christianity, to reflect, whether this religion may not nevertheless be false: If they have either seriousness or curiosity, this reflection will make them solli-

citous to examine, whether it is or not ; and all who have ordinary abilities and honesty of heart, may determine this point without any very difficult or intricate inquiry: and when, in consequence of attentive inquiry, they determine that it is a true and divine religion, when they believe it with the substance of its evidence full in their view, their faith is truly rational, it has strength and firmness, by means of which it may produce a concern to comply with the gospel, and constancy in adhering to it. There will always, no doubt, be some Christians who have not attended to the evidences of the gospel, nor can give any reason for their embracing it: but where its truth is openly attacked by Infidels, this will be the case much less generally than it would otherwise have been. There may be sensible Christians at present, who could not perhaps give a direct  
answer

answer to every objection urged by Infidels; but there are very few of them who are not believers in consequence of attention to the evidences of the gospel, and real conviction of their sufficiency. At whatever period opposition from Infidels shall cease, the remembrance of it will continue to produce this effect in some measure, to excite Christians to obtain a rational faith; and at the same time, its having been defeated, will be a strong argument of the truth of Christianity, and will contribute to render their faith firm, in like manner as the original propagation of the gospel is one ground of belief to us.

Again, the opposition of Infidels is of real advantage even to the generality, by leading to such a manner of proposing the evidences of the gospel, as will most effectually produce conviction in them. In order to convince

any person, the evidences of the gospel must be properly proposed. If in the proposal they were loaded with unessential or precarious circumstances, a man's natural sagacity might suggest difficulties, and occasion doubts, and thus weaken his belief. But an acquaintance with the several objections of Infidels, will naturally lead one to propose them in a precise and guarded manner, and to represent every evidence in that just and striking point of view, in which it will most quickly and certainly lay hold of the understanding. The supernatural knowledge of Christ and his apostles, enabled them, previous to all opposition, to propose the evidences of their mission in an exact and convincing manner, even when they proposed them most simply: but no uninspired person could even collect and put together the several evidences to which they occasionally appealed,

pealed, so as to preserve them in their greatest force, without a distinct comprehension of their nature, of the circumstances on which their strength depends, and of the objections to which they are most liable; and this can be acquired only by an extensive acquaintance with the opposition which Infidels have actually made.—Thus even the *generality* derive real advantage for their establishment in Christianity, from the opposition of Infidels, and from the manner of exhibiting the evidences of the gospel, to which it naturally leads. But to some men the advantage thence resulting, is much greater and more essential.

Some are naturally captious; they have a propensity to raise objections on every subject; they have a turn of understanding, which makes them apter to doubt than to believe; they have a greater capacity for raising difficulties,  
 than

than for removing them. This is an intellectual distemper; but it is no uncommon one; and to the opposition of Infidels it is owing, that medicine proper for this distemper, is continually in readiness. In consequence of that opposition, answers have been made to multitudes of objections against the gospel: when, therefore, any of these objections occur to a person, he can easily discover what has been advanced for the solution of it; and if that prove satisfying to him, he is delivered from his doubts. If it prove not satisfying, he can point out the fallacy which he observes in the solution; and this conduct will either give occasion to a better solution, or make the objection to be acknowledged in the end solid and unanswerable. An instance in which the latter effect has taken place, has not hitherto occurred; the former therefore may most naturally be expected.

Every

Every objection proposed, has been so often and so fully answered, that the most exceptious person, if he has only candour, cannot entertain a doubt concerning the truth of Christianity, except he has either discovered an objection that is new, or examined the answers to old objections and found them insufficient. But indeed, if no objection were published but what is new, or if no objection were repeated till the answers already given were first confuted, far the greater part of the volumes of Infidels had never seen the light.

There are some men whose abilities and improvements enable them to take in a distinct conception of the evidences of the gospel, to comprehend the whole series of proofs, exceptions and answers. To such men, that particular display of those evidences, which the efforts of infidelity have occasioned, renders

renders them more satisfying, and capable of impressing a deeper faith, than if they had been more simply proposed. Their assent will not be altogether so quick or ready, but it will in the issue be much more assured. No suspicion of fallacy remains to disturb their full acquiescence in the conclusion, or to diminish the firmness of their faith. Whatever could breed suspicion, has been already examined, and explicitly renounced. “ But would it not have  
 “ been still better, if no objections had  
 “ been raised, and if consequently no  
 “ answers had been necessary?” While men continue men, that is impossible. There is no subject on which speculative men can employ their attention or indulge their ingenuity, but difficulties will occur upon it, and objections will be raised. If a subject be capable of being perfectly freed from the hazard of disputation, yet this can hap-  
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pen only after all possible objections have been actually proposed and answered. There is thus a certain course of trial which truth must go through, before it be so fully ascertained as to gain an universal reception without further question; and when it comes near to the end of this course, it is in a more advantageous situation, than it could be in, when it had its progress yet to begin. When the vindication of it is completed, this restores not the truth merely to its original situation; it moreover renders it less liable to be again denied: many of the arts by which scepticism might attack it, are already detected, and many of its cavils exposed; so that fewer arts remain, by which they who are acquainted with the controversy, can be again debauched from the acknowledgment of it.

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Tho' the light and confirmation which the evidences of Christianity have received from the opposition of Infidels, had not been in these ways of actual advantage to that religion; yet still its having received them, would afford the strong presumption of its truth, which I have endeavoured to state. For this presumption arises from the essential difference between truth and falsehood, and therefore cannot be destroyed by any accidental consequences to which the weakness or the perverseness of men may give occasion. That is undoubtedly false, however specious, which a fair examination overthrows: that is certainly true, which, by the most rigid examination of its evidences, is not confuted, but confirmed. This will always remain an infallible criterion, to whatever bad purposes men may happen to abuse the examination from which it arises. But  
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when the opposition of Infidels has not only contributed to the illustration of the evidences of the gospel, considered abstractly, but also, as has been just now shown, actually puts men of all different characters, provided they will only seriously inquire, into a better situation for obtaining faith in the gospel, or for rendering their faith firm, than they could have been in, without it; this makes the argument in favour of Christianity, to appear to still greater advantage. It makes it indisputable, that the confirmation which its evidences have received, is real: it shows it to be not only real, but important: it gives the mind a propensity to believe the gospel, which will enable both this presumption and every other evidence of its truth, to operate more strongly on it, to lay faster hold of it, and to produce fuller and more steady belief.

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To confirm us in the belief of Christianity, is the purpose to which the argument of this dissertation, is most directly subservient. But it likewise naturally suggests a very strong reason for moderation and forbearance towards those who disbelieve the gospel, and freely propose their objections against it. Christianity is so evidently true, and so highly conducive to the most important interests of mankind, that we can scarce fail to regard those with pity, who are so unhappy as to reject it. At the same time, their opposition to evidence which we reckon so clear and convincing, and the many mischievous consequences which spring immediately from the propagation of infidelity, are very apt to raise indignation in those who are warmly concerned for truth and goodness. If this sentiment be kept from exceeding due bounds, and from exerting itself  
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in an improper manner, if it prompts us only to use our utmost endeavours to convince the unbelieving by argument, and to fortify others against the infection of their principles, it is natural and worthy. But it too frequently degenerates into anger, and prompts to illegitimate methods of curbing infidelity; it has led Christians to attack unbelievers by force, and violence, and penal laws. There are many arguments against this. It is unlawful in itself, and therefore absolutely to be avoided: however pernicious the immediate consequences of propagating infidelity are, it must always be wrong to endeavour to prevent them by means that are unlawful. Besides, this method of opposing infidelity will always prove ineffectual; force may make men dissemble their unbelief, or render them more cautious in avowing it; but it will never move them to abandon

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don it, and it will make them more eager to infil it into others whenever they can with safety, and more artful in the manner of intilling it: it would therefore be foolish, tho' it were not unlawful, to have recourse to violence. This would be not only ineffectual for repressing infidelity, but even really detrimental to Christianity. Zeal for this religion, is the pretended motive to the use of violence against unbelievers; but true and reasonable zeal for it, would be the most powerful restraint from this conduct, because it hurts it in many ways. It seems to betray a diffidence of the truth of Christianity. It gives an appearance of boldness and intrepidity to the opposition of Infidels, which makes the unthinking more prone to listen to them, and more susceptible of a deep impression from their arguments. It gives them a handle for pretending, after  
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they have published all the objections which they can, that they have stronger in reserve, but that it is not safe for them to produce them: they have not failed to avail themselves of this pretence, tho' they have often conducted their opposition in a way that ought to take all credit from it; the greatest strength of argument could neither have so well deserved, nor so directly provoked, the use of violence, as the disingenuous arts which they have, in many instances, fearlessly employed in setting off very frivolous cavils, and the indecent scurrility which they have indulged, when there was no shadow of argument mixt with their abuse. But attempts to restrain infidelity by force, hurt Christianity in a way still more direct and essential, which I have principally in my eye. Suppose they should be effectual for hindering Infidels from at all proposing their objections:

tions : this is the very utmost that could be expected from them : but would this really be of advantage to Christianity ? If the preceeding reasonings be just, it would not ; it would on the contrary be prejudicial to it. It would prevent the evidence of this religion from ever shining with that brightness which it has acquired by having stood the severest trial of reason, and which it could not possibly have acquired by any other means. Infidels, tho' they intend far otherwise, are truly instruments in the hand of divine providence, for the confirmation of Christianity. If it be true, as we believe it is, all the attacks which can be made upon it, will infallibly issue in rendering its truth the more unquestionable. No doubt they may produce very bad effects in the mean time : but these we have no authority from God, to prevent by methods of violence, and by  
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such methods they cannot be in fact prevented. By betaking ourselves to them, we thereby obstruct the good purposes to which infidelity will be overruled, without redressing the temporary evils which immediately result from it; we destroy the wheat, without being able to root out the tares. That the accession of evidence which Christianity acquires by standing the test of inquiry, may appear with the greatest advantage, it is necessary that the objections against it be proposed with as great security, as the arguments for it: without this, the trial which it sustains, is not absolutely fair; and, till the opposite reasons be carefully balanced, there is room left for a suspicion, that it has sustained the trial, not by the force of its truth alone, but partly also by the protection of human power. It is not every degree of restraint that will justify this suspicion;

but it is pity that, by any degree of restraint, a pretence was ever given for it. Let never Infidels be discouraged from reasoning freely against the evidences of Christianity, as well as on other subjects; their strongest reasonings against it, will do it the greatest service; they will be like heroes, whose bravery renders the victory more difficult, but whose captivity adds greatly to the splendour of the triumph. If they even betake themselves to cavils and misrepresentations, let these be only pointed out with calmness; they will, in the end, not only disgrace their authors, but also hurt the cause which they were intended to serve. Infidelity allowed to do its utmost, tends ultimately to destroy itself, by making the truth of Christianity to appear the more evident and unquestionable. If then we really believe our religion to be of divine original, and be not under the  
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power of a contracted and undiscerning spirit; concern for its success, will concur with many other principles, in leading us to wish most earnestly, that infidelity may never be opposed by any other weapons, but that of just reasoning. Gold is *refined* in the furnace; it is only the worthless dross that is *consumed*; let Christians never act as if they suspected their religion to be dross. Let penal laws be invariably appropriated to *crimes*, concerning which fallible men can judge with precision, which are the natural objects of human cognizance, which may be effectually restrained by punishment, and which are so immediately destructive to society, as to render punishment necessary for its preservation. Let never the interests of truth be obstructed, by ill-judged or unlawful attempts to promote them.

T H E E N D.





