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Smith, Theyre Townsend.
Man's responsibility in
reference to his religious



HULSEAN LECTURES

FOR THE YEAR 1839.

MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY

IN REFERENCE TO

HIS RELIGIOUS BELIEF,

EXPLAINED AND APPLIED.

BY THE

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TO

WILLIAM HODGSON, D.D.

MASTER OF ST. PETER'S COLLEGE, AND LATE VICE-CHANCELLOR,

AND

CHRISTOPHER WORDSWORTH, D.D.

MASTER OF TRINITY COLLEGE,

TRUSTEES OF THE LECTURE FOUNDED BY

THE REV. JOHN HULSE,

THE FOLLOWING DISCOURSES,

PREACHED BY THEIR APPOINTMENT,

ARE MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED,

BY

THE AUTHOR.

SUBSTANCE OF CERTAIN CLAUSES RELATING TO THE
HULSEAN LECTURESHIP,

In the Will of the Rev. J. HULSE, M.A., the Founder of that and
other offices in the University of Cambridge.

[Dated July 21, 1777.]

HE founds a Lectureship in the University of Cambridge.

The Lecturer is to be a "Clergyman in the University of Cambridge, of the degree of Master of Arts, and under the age of forty years." He is to be *elected annually* "on Christmas-day, or within seven days after, by the Vice-Chancellor for the time being, and by the Master of Trinity College, and the Master of St. John's College, or any two of them." In case the Master of Trinity, or the Master of St. John's, be the Vice-Chancellor, the Greek Professor is to be the third Trustee.¹

The duty of the said Lecturer, as stated in the Will, is "to preach" so many as "*twenty* sermons in the whole year," as well as to print them in the same period; and it having been found, in consequence, that few were willing to undertake the office, application was made to the Court of Chancery, with a view the better to carry into effect the intention of its Founder. The result was, that by an Order of that Court (dated 21st December, 1830), the number of the Sermons was reduced to eight, and the time allowed for printing them extended to the term of one year from the delivery of the last of them.

¹ One of the Trustees, to whom the author was indebted for his appointment to the office, was the late Dr. Wood, Dean of Ely, and Master of St. John's College.

The subject of the Lectures is to be, “the Evidence for Revealed Religion; the Truth and Excellence of Christianity; Prophecies and Miracles; direct or collateral Proofs of the Christian Religion, especially the collateral arguments; the more difficult texts or obscure parts of the Holy Scriptures;” or any one or more of these topics, at the discretion of the Preacher. The subject of the Lectures is *not* to be “any particular sects or controversies amongst Christians themselves; except some new and dangerous error, either of superstition or enthusiasm, as of Popery or Methodism, or the like, either in opinion or practice, shall prevail.” “And in all the said twenty sermons,” now *eight*, it is stated that “such practical observations shall be made, and such useful conclusions added, as may instruct and edify mankind.”

P R E F A C E .

FEW, if any, who acknowledge man to be accountable to the Creator, would, generally or absolutely, deny him to be so in reference to his belief or opinions; they would at least allow and maintain, that it is often our *duty* to examine a question closely and impartially before we adopt a conclusion respecting it; and what is this but to allow and maintain a responsibility in forming our opinions? But we find persons who would not be suspected of disowning their accountability in regard to their conduct, affirming, in the most positive manner, a position which unquestionably *implies* the negation of all responsibility in reference to their opinions—the position that belief or opinion is wholly independent of the will; for there can be no responsibility, there can be no merit or demerit in operations of the mind in which the will is in no degree implicated, and perfectly quiescent. A man cannot be respon-

sible in reference to his belief, *in any sense or degree* whatsoever, if his belief be absolutely independent of his own volition, whether his belief be the work of a moment, or a process of years. But besides the assertion of this position, the doctrine in question, though expressed in the most general manner, thus—*man is responsible for his belief*, is pronounced irrational and absurd by persons who would not be supposed to deny the proposition, that *man is responsible for his actions*, or criticise the terms in which it is commonly expressed. And, moreover, it is a fact of serious importance, unless the doctrine *be* irrational and absurd, that authors sometimes handle the subject of human opinions in general, trace their formation, and account for their diversity, in a *spirit and manner* calculated to bring into contempt and odium the very idea of imputing guilt to a man on account of his opinions, and to obliterate from the minds of their readers all sense of a *personal* responsibility on this head.¹

¹ See, for example, “Essays on the Formation and Publication of Opinions,” an anonymous work, but worthy of notice on this subject, both on account of the ability with which it is written, and its extensive circulation, having passed through several editions. The author of the following pages had not seen it when he composed the discourse on the influence of the affections on the judgment; on reading it he was induced to add the paragraph at page 36. The object of the work alluded to is to establish the independence of belief on the will; and its whole tendency is peculiarly hostile to the doctrine maintained in these pages. Without attempting here

It appears, then, that there are some who indistinctly comprehend what is meant, when it is said that man is responsible in regard to his belief, and it is evident that there are many who conceive the proposition, however it be explained, to be open to strong objections, and to merit their determined opposition. Now it is worthy of remark, that to particularize objections to the reasoning of its author, it is but justice to the subject of which he treats to remark, that notwithstanding he would annihilate the conclusion, that belief is or can be dependent on the will, and would break up entirely the association of blame or praise with the opinions of mankind, he admits the facts from which that conclusion is principally deduced, and which are commonly alleged to prove it. In the first place he observes,—“Belief may, in some instances, be partially controlled by our voluntary actions” (p. 34), and that “a man has, in some degree, *the power of making his opinions follow in the track of his own inclinations,*” (p. 35). Again he observes, “No maxim is more current in the world, than that a man’s opinions are influenced by his interests and passions.” (p. 47). He accords to this maxim in a qualified measure—he admits the power of a man’s *interests and passions* on his opinions, though he *utterly* condemns the application of rewards and punishments with a view to influence the formation of opinions; remarking that, “the way to alter belief is not to address *motives to the will*, but arguments to the intellect,” (p. 67). But more—he points out and describes, in various parts of his work, the effect of the feelings and passions on the reason, by awakening peculiar trains of ideas, &c. In a word, he admits the substantive facts on which the opinion of a dependence on the will is grounded: they afford him occasion for acute remark and happy illustration: the reader will judge whether they have received their due place in his *argument*, and are reconcilable with the tenor and scope of his work; or whether such facts are more properly estimated, in a *moral* point of view, in the following discourses.

though this doctrine may be properly called a doctrine of Scripture, it is assumed in the Scripture to be a deduction of human reason, or capable of proof on its own merits. Christianity does not require us to account ourselves responsible in regard to our belief in virtue of the evidence afforded us of its own divine authority. It assumes and appeals to that responsibility as the ground on which it *claims attention* to that evidence. It judges us responsible in dealing with the proofs of its divine origin, and capable of perceiving ourselves to be so, before those proofs have been examined, while they are only proposed, or pending the question whether Christianity be a divine revelation or not. If this responsibility then were difficult of comprehension, and incapable of proof, there would be an objection to the credibility of the Christian religion, which, as it appears, would be wholly insurmountable; the *offered evidences* of its truth would not be entitled to examination. This is not the less true, because many have investigated, and continue to investigate, the evidences of Christianity without *questioning* their duty to do so; as that such an investigation itself is not the less reasonable, because multitudes have received the approbation of their conscience in the belief of Christianity without it. If God had not constituted us capable of discerning our accountableness in relation to our belief, it is incredible that he would have

delegated individuals to address the *sense of duty* in offering evidence of truth, or in inculcating a particular religion on the *belief* of mankind.

The design of the following discourses is to vindicate the assumption of Christianity that we are accountable in regard to our belief: to show that this is as *clearly*, though not so *readily*, a conclusion of our reason as that we are accountable in regard to our conduct; and that those familiar but essential facts of human experience, which have led mankind in general, in a greater or less degree, to judge themselves and others worthy of reproach or commendation in forming their opinions, must, if closely investigated and pursued to their consequences, place this assumption of Christianity beyond dispute.

Bishop Butler, in replying to an objection to Christianity derived from “a supposed deficiency in the proof of a revelation,” observes—“The evidence of religion not appearing obvious, may constitute one particular part of some men’s trial in the religious sense; as it gives scope for a virtuous exercise, or vicious neglect, of their understanding, in examining or not examining into that evidence. There seems no possible reason to be given, why we may not be in a state of moral probation, with regard to the exercise of our understanding upon the subject of religion, as we are with regard to our be-

behaviour in common affairs.”¹ “Nor does there appear,” he again observes, “any absurdity in supposing that the speculative difficulties in which the evidence of religion is involved, may make even the principal part of some person’s trial.”—These important propositions are expressed in terms, and supported by arguments, characteristic of an author remarkably cautious as well as pre-eminently profound. But “the constitution and course of nature,” which he has contributed so much to lay open and illustrate as the constitution and course of accountable beings, will conduct us to the conclusion, that, speaking generally, speaking consistently with the various conditions in which individuals and multitudes are placed, we are *as certainly* “in a state of moral probation in the exercise of our understanding on the subject of religion,” as we are in fulfilling or neglecting any duties to the Creator whatsoever.²

¹ Analogy, P. ii. c. 6.

² The guarded accuracy of Bishop Butler may be remarked in his allusion to an affirmation of Grotius on this subject, though a notice of it here may perhaps unduly anticipate the subject. Referring to the saying of Christ, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear,” he observes, “Grotius saw so strongly the thing intended in these and other passages of Scripture of the like sense, as to say, that the proof given us of Christianity was less than it might have been for this very purpose.” The Bishop quotes this affirmation of Grotius as accordant to the *spirit* of his own argument, but he only quotes it: had he adopted it, he would, in effect, have as-

And here let it be observed, that it is perfectly consistent to affirm this doctrine of Scripture the truth of Christianity, a *petitio principii* not uncommon in reasoning on this subject. To affirm that God *has* made the evidence of Christianity less than it might have been for the purpose of trying us, is, in other words, to affirm that religion to be of divine authority—to affirm that the evidence of its truth is sufficient; whereas the Bishop is arguing with the sceptic; one who, so far from admitting the existing evidence to be sufficient, maintains that the absence of stronger evidence is an objection to Christianity. His reply to the objection is, that inasmuch as such a trial is *probable*, our condition being probationary, the part of reason is not to object that the evidence of Christianity might have been stronger, but to examine impartially the evidence which is actually afforded. The following are the words of Grotius, and, taken with the exception just stated, may well deserve to be cited:—“*Voluit autem Deus id, quod credi a nobis vellet, sic ut illud ipsum credere tamquam obedientiam a nobis acceptaret, non ita evidenter patere, ut quæ sensu aut demonstratione percipiuntur; sed quantum satis esset ad fidem faciendam, remque persuadendam homini non pertinaci: ut ita sermo Evangelii tamquam lapis esset Lydius, ad quem ingenia sanabilia explorarentur. Nam cum ea, quæ diximus, argumenta tam multos probos, eosdem que sapientes in assensum traxerint; hoc ipso liquet, apud cæteros, incredulitatis causam non in probationis penuria esse positam, sed in eo, quod nolint verum videri id quod affectibus suis adversatur; quod, scilicet, durum illis sit honores et alia commoda parvi ducere, quod faciendum sit, si ea recipiant, quæ de Christo narrantur, ac propterea etiam Christi preceptis obtemperandum putent.*”—(*De Ver. Rel. Christ. Lib. ii. § xix.*) In justice to Grotius, it may be added, that having adduced the specific evidence of Christianity, he might have judged himself warranted to assert not merely the probability, but the fact, of God's dealing with us, in respect to that religion, as described. Still it is not the fact, but the *probability*, that really applies to and may weigh with the sceptic.

ture to be a conclusion of reason, though it may be perfectly true that, had not the Scriptures been placed in our hands, we should not so readily have discerned and ascertained it to be such; or even that, in that case, our responsibility in regard to our belief might never have been pressed on our reflections. Notwithstanding this, it is one thing to establish by our own reason a proposition, inculcated in the Scriptures, with the *aid* of the Scriptures, and another to believe it in virtue of the divine authority of the Scriptures, or to receive it as true because the Scriptures declare it to be so. The Scriptures may have suggested views, may have supplied arguments in support of a proposition, but it may yet be competent to our reason to discern the correctness of those views, the value of those arguments: the Scriptures may have furnished and stimulated our reasoning faculties on a particular question, but those faculties may yet operate after their own nature, and proceed to their own conclusions. There is no need to be here drawn into an attempt to define the office of human reason in reference to the evidence of an alleged revelation: it is sufficient to intimate that in supposing a proposition to be less a deduction of reason because it is affirmed in the Scriptures, we should be carried to most egregious consequences. We should be debarred from asserting even the existence of God to be

a deduction of reason, or to be capable of proof irrespective of the Scriptures; for it can admit of no question, that wherever Christianity is taught and professed, this “immense conclusion” is, in the first instance, directly or indirectly, suggested to the human mind from the Scriptures: at least, it is received in implicit reliance on the assertion of others, long before an acquaintance with the evidence on which it rests. Even this instance exhibits the *reality* of a distinction of incalculable importance in appreciating the evidence of Christianity; more especially if our responsibility in the use of that evidence be founded in reason.

But the author has very imperfectly executed his purpose, if he have merely repeated or enlarged the proof of an accountableness attaching to mankind in respect to their belief or opinions. He has endeavoured to attract attention to the *extent* of that accountableness, and to the close connexion which there is between a full acknowledgment of it and the religious and moral welfare of mankind. He has written under an impression—so much he differs from some others in his views on this subject—that our responsibility in this respect properly grows in our apprehensions as we improve our knowledge of man as an accountable being; and that if the moral principles be sustained and cultivated, it must take a firmer hold upon the convictions of man-

kind, and fill a larger space in their thoughts, in proportion to the progress of general knowledge, and the activity of the intellectual faculties. But especially with regard to Christianity, he judged this to be a subject which, while very far from being barren of direct arguments in its support, would exhibit views of human nature, and of our relations to the Deity, essentially calculated to induce and strengthen the belief of a pure and beneficent religion, and might, even more than detailed and conclusive proofs of its divine origin, promote the special object for which the office that he holds was established by its devout and, in the highest sense, philanthropic founder.

A very able advocate of our religion has recently remarked, “ The great subject of the evidences of Revelation might well seem to be almost exhausted. The truth of Scripture has been established by historical testimony ; by its contents ; by its prophecies ; by its miracles ; by its analogy with the constitution and course of nature ; and by its perfect adaptation to the character of God and the necessity of man. One line of argument seemed yet open That line of argument he has himself pursued, and rendered the evidence of Christianity still more abundant and complete.¹ Yet very much

¹ Rationalism and Revelation. Hulsean Lectures, 1837, Rev. R. Parkinson, B.D. : Preface. The design of the author

more than the evidence of Christianity is necessary to promote the belief of its truth; that is, at a period when such evidence is properly called for, or actually required. Whatever the force and variety of the proofs which the advocates of Christianity have brought to its support, the part which individuals must themselves perform in establishing or maintaining their religious convictions may not have been treated so specifically, or so directly kept in view, as the nature of their subject demanded.—Not that this has been generally overlooked—far from it—or even that it has not been particularly discussed by several authors besides the distinguished prelate who has just been cited. In our own time, indeed, and but a very few years since, “Man’s Accountability for his Belief,” was expressly asserted, and powerfully enforced, by a divine to whom the Christian community in general, whatever be the difference of opinion on particular topics, far from unimportant, will own itself a debtor, not only for the work here alluded to, but for others, more especially for a series of discourses on the Divinity of Christ.¹ But, speaking generally,

is to prove that the “undeniable and specific defects of rationalism, or natural religion, are met and remedied by the specific doctrines of revelation.”

¹ In alluding to Dr. Wardlaw’s work on the present subject, the occasion suggests itself on which it was written. The reported words of Lord Brougham have since been satisfactorily explained; but lest the author should be suspected of

this accountableness has either been taken for granted, or insisted on in very general terms; as if it could require no proof against objectors, or, though commonly admitted, it might not demand some reflection adequately to perceive and comprehend it. Probably, some have been deterred from alleging it with any earnestness in connexion with the proofs of a *particular religion*, lest they might incur the imputation, as from some they probably would, that they were seeking, not so much to lay open the evidence of Christianity, as to silence objections against it, and were rather willing to overawe the judgment than to enlighten and convince it. Nevertheless, the mere exhibition of evidence, whether on religion or any other subject, cannot, in itself, infer the duty of giving it our attention; nor, in numerous instances, as all must know, will its strength and conclusiveness ensure its efficacy, or render it convincing. And certainly there appears but little ground for a general presumption, that the mere allegation of proof would conduct individuals, and far less recall them, to the belief of such a religion as the Christian:—supposing that proof, however intelligible and

intending the remotest allusion to them in the following pages, he may here state that, for his own part, he never understood them in the sense attached to them by Dr. Wardlaw, and by not a few besides: regretting, however, in common with many others, that a great name was thought to be opposed to a great truth.

decisive, to be of a nature consistent with the *professed design* of its institution.

The responsibility assumed in Christianity, in reference to our belief, applies to our religious opinions generally; and, in justice to Protestantism, the author has opposed it to the assumption of infallibility by the Church of Rome. Objections to that assumption in particular, and objections to it derived from the Scriptures, are especially worthy of attention at this period. In the controversy now proceeding in our own Church on the authority of tradition, an impression is conveyed, in a manner which it were not very difficult to explain, that the Church of Rome founds her claim to universal acquiescence and submission on that authority—that is, on the conformity of her doctrines and usages with those of the Christian community in the earliest ages. Her pretension to infallibility is cast in the background, and the Protestant, to say the least, is left to infer, that unless he can meet the Roman Catholic on the ground of antiquity, he has but little to offer against him; from which it would follow that the bulk of this people, unversed as they are in the writings of the Fathers, and deriving their knowledge of Christianity expressly from the Scriptures, are Protestants in scarcely more than the name. That no such inference may be drawn from the controversy alluded to, from any mode in which it is conducted, or from

any aspect under which it is viewed, it should be called to our remembrance, and it cannot be denied, that the capital, distinguishing article in the creed of the Church of Rome is her own infallibility; that she has not foregone that pretension, let her confidence be what it may that she can vanquish any particular form of Protestantism without it; but that she appeals to it, whensoever she deems fit to do so, and, specifically, when she delivers the judgment of antiquity on the sense of Scripture, and affirms it to be concurrent with her own.—Now, if the belief of her infallibility in expounding the Scriptures be mainly upheld by a *presumption*, or an *à priori* argument, irreconcilable with a clear implication and a manifest purpose of the Scriptures themselves, then the whole Protestant community are supplied with a sufficient and unanswerable reason for their name and profession—for protesting against the authority asserted by the Church of Rome. They have a ready and conclusive argument against it—a weapon fitted to every hand, and sufficient to the strongest.

In contending, however, against that presumption by which the claim of infallibility is principally supported—a presumption which it is here unnecessary to anticipate—the author admits and argues, that *if* that presumption be fully disproved by the Scriptures, the Protestant is not more at liberty than the Roman Catholic to adopt

it, and to raise upon it any position in theology, whether relating to the explanation of Scripture or any other topic; but that both are alike required to surrender it to the equity of reason. The subject of the following discourses will yield no principle commensurate with the design of the Church of Rome, to harmonize the religious opinions of all professed Christians, but, if well considered, it may supply an element of peace and unity to our own Church, whose members are differing expressly, not as to the doctrines of Christianity themselves, but as to the authority on which they are bound to receive them as such.

In works the *tendency* of which, if not their declared purpose, is to fix a stigma of unreasonableness and injustice on the belief that a person is, in the smallest degree, less worthy of esteem, less entitled to regard for his moral and, in most instances, his religious character, on account of his opinions,—in such works very much has been written, very much powerfully eloquent and indisputably true, on the injustice as well as the impolicy of *punishing* our fellow creatures on account of their opinions, and seeking the promotion of truth by force instead of argument. The author could not with propriety have omitted this important topic; but he will here only suggest, that unless a belief of the

doctrine which he has maintained be, as some appear to suppose, inseparable from a spirit of persecution, the nature and history of the latter may bring into view something more respecting Christianity, than the intemperate and shortsighted zeal of its professors in former and unenlightened ages.

To conclude these preparatory observations—the responsibility maintained in these discourses is deducible, as has been already intimated, from facts which it requires no intimate study of the operations of the mind to ascertain and discriminate—were it otherwise, indeed, that responsibility would ill deserve to be entitled a conclusion of reason—facts which it consequently requires no unaccustomed precision, or, rather, restriction in the use of language, in order to identify and keep in view. The author, therefore, has not judged it necessary to set out with defining the words belief, opinion, &c. &c., which cannot be required merely because the custom of language has rendered such words capable of conveying more than one signification. But with reference to such a subject as the present, it were better far to sacrifice some degree of precision, if this were necessary, and to tempt the criticism of opponents, than to invest with an air of *science* or exclusiveness, that observation of human nature, which all mankind are more or less competent to

make, and deeply concerned to apply to the culture of their religious principles.¹

¹ The following passages, from a number of most useful observations of the Bishop of Llandaff, on the practice of definition, are applicable to the present subject, as well as to the conduct of controversy in general:—"It has been sometimes proposed as a wise rule, always to define with precision in *limine* the principal terms of the argument, and in the course of the treatise invariably to use these words in the same meaning. But this suggestion proceeds from an imperfect notion of the nature of language, and a crude idea of the doctrine of *definition*. In the first place, it would be impossible to find words enough to express our thoughts, if we did not make each of them serve a variety of uses, more or less differing from each other,—a variety which, in general, causes no confusion or mistake, because the sense in which they are employed is made manifest by the context, or by that interchange of thought which has already taken place between the parties who employ them. In the next place, this rigid confinement of words to one sense would be perfectly useless, if it were possible. It is only requisite, when after a little discussion we find, or we suspect, that in the same process of reasoning, a word is used in different senses, and that the difference, however slight, really *affects the argument*. In all such cases, *definition*, as it is called, or a discrimination of the two senses, is the proper remedy; and in general, among candid reasoners, it terminates the dispute to their mutual satisfaction. In all other cases such nice discriminations are frivolous and pedantic."¹

The author of "Essays on the Formation and Publication of Opinions," objects to Locke's use of the term opinion, "as synonymous with belief and assent," and remarks that that term, "in its ordinary sense, denotes not the state of the mind, but the subject of belief, the thing or the proposition believed. Thus we say to receive, to hold, and to renounce an opinion," (p. 7.) But it may be replied for Locke, that the

¹ Appendix to Sermon, "Who are the persons authorized to preach the Gospel?"—P. 27.

term is used in both senses : "In my opinion" is a common phrase, as well as "I hold the opinion." Again he observes, "It is surprising that words of so much importance should be employed with so little precision. Belief is often indiscriminately used to express a state or affection of the understanding, a proposition believed, a doctrine, and a collection of doctrines." But surely this is not an instance of want of precision, but rather an instance in which, to repeat the words above cited, "one term serves a variety of uses," and "the sense in which they are employed is made manifest by the context." The truth is, that here as elsewhere, the ordinary lettered usage of words is law and sanction for language in authorship : though, doubtless, an author may, and sometimes must, define a word to apprise his reader of the specific sense in which *he* intends to use it.

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LECTURE I.

THE DOCTRINE STATED AND EXPLAINED.

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JOHN III. 18, 19.—He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil 1

LECTURE II.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE AFFECTIONS ON THE JUDGMENT.

JOHN III. 18, 19.—He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil 29

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LECTURE I.

THE DOCTRINE STATED AND EXPLAINED.

John iii. 18, 19.

HE THAT BELIEVETH ON HIM IS NOT CONDEMNED: BUT HE THAT BELIEVETH NOT IS CONDEMNED ALREADY, BECAUSE HE HATH NOT BELIEVED IN THE NAME OF THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD. AND THIS IS THE CONDEMNATION, THAT LIGHT IS COME INTO THE WORLD, AND MEN LOVED DARKNESS RATHER THAN LIGHT, BECAUSE THEIR DEEDS WERE EVIL.

THE Scripture states, and it is evident on the face of the narrative, that the unbelief with which the Jewish rulers and people looked upon Jesus, heard his discourses, and witnessed his miracles, was not unreal or affected; but that they were actually unconvinced, that they did not *know*, that he was the Messiah. Thus one of the writers in the New Testament, after charging the multitude with having killed “the Prince of life,”¹ added, “I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers;” and another

¹ Acts iii. 15.

conveys the same judgment on their conduct; for, referring to "the wisdom of God" which had been revealed to himself and other apostles of Christ, he writes, "which none of the princes of this world knew; for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory."¹ Whatever startling doubts, then, or compunctious misgiving, might have visited the Jews, in the course of their proceedings against Christ, we are given to understand by their accusers, that they did not actually believe that he was the foretold and expected Messiah. Nevertheless, Christ himself, in the words just cited, as well as elsewhere, accused them of heinous sin in rejecting him, and predicted in consequence the approaching destruction of their city. The example must forcibly remind us, that it is a prevailing assumption, an essential doctrine of Christianity, that mankind are subject to trial, or in a state of probation, in regard to their belief or opinions, as well as their actions; that they are liable to contract guilt before God, and to incur his signal displeasure, through an evasion or misuse of that evidence by which His will is ascertained, as well as through a wilful violation, or careless observance, of his known commandment; that impiety and vice may be as certainly at work in the exercise

¹ 1 Cor. ii. 8.

of the understanding, as in the instigation of our conduct or course of life. It is this important postulatam of the Christian system which we propose to maintain, and would commend to an attentive consideration, in the present and succeeding discourses: persuaded, as we are, that unless it be acknowledged and weighed, there can be no security for the attainment of such a knowledge of the Supreme Being as man is capacitated, and it is his proper concernment, to acquire; and no ground, in consequence, to presume, on the part of any individual, a correct judgment as to whether the Scriptures be of divine authority or not, or even as to what are the doctrines which they were intended to convey. Indeed, it may be generally affirmed, as we apprehend, that a full recognition of this principle is properly involved in the reality of our accountableness to the Creator; that it enters essentially into the promotion of all rectitude towards God and man; and is vital to the temporal as well as spiritual welfare of mankind.

We are perfectly aware that this particular responsibility would be presumed and urged, as it has been, in enforcing a false religion upon the reception of the world; but, nevertheless, we are concerned to maintain, that it would be perfectly reasonable to insist upon it in inculcating the *truth* relating to the Deity; and, farther, to point out, as deserving of particular attention, that

Christianity, whether true or false, is most ostensibly designed, as it is remarkably adapted, to bring that responsibility into view—to place it distinctly and prominently before us—to induce us, in dealing with its own peculiar title to our faith, to consult especially our sense of *duty*, and to seek the satisfaction of our conscience. Such is our leading purpose in entering upon the discussion of this doctrine; which, however, will be found replete with matter for consideration in other and numerous points of view. It bears directly upon the question of *private judgment*, or the duty of a personal inquiry, on the subject of religion. Moreover, a doctrine which associates with the adoption of particular opinions—opinions adverse to our own—a personal demerit, and an opposition to the great interests of mankind, plainly threatens an anti-social tendency, and has been notoriously perverted to a spirit of intolerance and persecution. It is of no little moment, then, to the pretensions of Christianity, that it evinces a singular foresight of a misguided zeal in the propagation of religious tenets; and, had the principles which it inculcates been rightly understood, would have raised an effectual barrier against it. But without anticipating, more particularly, the topics which it may be practicable to embrace in the prosecution of this subject, we shall only express an earnest hope, that in bringing it forward, and

endeavouring to illustrate it to a greater extent than is usual, we may be instrumental, in however small a degree, to promote a belief of the Christian religion; by fixing a more earnest and impartial attention on the facts and arguments on which it claims to be received as a communication from God; and that—so far as its title to universal estimation may stand connected with one of the most important of its doctrines—we may bring the objects which it contemplates more fully into view, and raise some befitting ideas of its excellence.

It must at once be premised, that we do not propose this doctrine to the consideration of any who deny the substantive fact, that man is accountable to the Creator, as an intelligent and voluntary being; approving as right, and disapproving as wrong, the affections of his own mind, and the actions which flow from them. It were surely premature to argue a question touching the extent of our accountableness to the Deity, if it were yet undetermined whether we were accountable to him at all: almost as much so as to inquire into the proofs of his moral government over us, before we had arrived at the belief of his existence. We assume, then, that it is our duty, and, if our duty at all, necessarily our highest duty, to obey the will of the Creator. And, farther, we shall premise that whatever dispositions, or actions resulting from

them, are, *in reality*, morally right, are also conformable to the will of God, and, consequently, incumbent on us in virtue of our duty to obey him. These, it will be perceived, are weighty and comprehensive positions; but they would hardly be questioned, and, indeed, are often maintained and insisted on, by those who dispute, or entirely overlook, our responsibility in relation to our belief, as distinguished from our conduct.

To proceed then.—“He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” That a man should thus be held guilty and punishable before God on account of his disbelief of particular facts or propositions, appears to many to sound harshly, and to wear the semblance of a paradox or arbitrary dogma. The reason is, that the imputation of guilt to the unbeliever is supposed to infer, that belief or disbelief is matter of instant choice or direct volition: as if it were possible that the judgment, with respect to any question under immediate examination, could be otherwise determined than by an apparent preponderance of the evidence; or that, when occupied with any proposition, the mind could, at its will, assemble such arguments relating to it, and so modify its susceptibility of conviction, as to possess itself with a persuasion of its truth or falsehood; as if, in a word, it were *equally* in our own volition to open

or shut the eye of the mind as that of the body ; and not only so, but even to alter the appearance of its objects at pleasure. It were needless to unravel the complication of inconsistency involved in so superficial a construction of the doctrine which it is proposed to explain and vindicate ; though it is easy to perceive, that such is the construction too often put upon this doctrine, even by inquirers into the processes of the human mind, and the grounds of moral obligation ; who thus bring into utter discredit, or weaken in its hold upon the conscience, one of the most important truths that can engage the attention of a moral agent, an accountable being.

That a man may be morally guilty, and obnoxious to punishment from God, on account of his opinions, is a proposition which admits of as rational an explanation, or rather, is grounded on the same presumption, as the prevailing conclusion, that he is subject to the judgment of God on account of his actions : there is precisely the same reason for asserting that he is amenable to a higher tribunal than that of his fellow-creatures, for the one as for the other. Our deeds are pronounced to be evil inasmuch as they are presumed to be committed through an excess or perversion of the passions, or the predominance of a corrupt inclination over the sense of duty, whether to God or man. In like manner, certain opinions are held to be morally evil, and grounds

of divine displeasure, inasmuch as they are presumed to be embraced through the defect of a right disposition, the bias of some vicious propensity, or under the habitual influence of ill-ordered passions. In either instance, the imputation of guilt is directed against the prevailing desire, the ruling affection, of the mind. Unless, then, it can be shown that the affections in general are inert in the process of belief, or the formation of opinions—inert, so far as they can be characterized as morally good or evil—it must follow, that we may be as reasonably obnoxious to blame and punishment in the determinations of our judgment, as in the disposal of our conduct. It is not, we are aware, the opinion itself which is sinful, for the same conclusion may, in many instances, be embraced under the influence of widely different feelings and dispositions—may be arrived at in an upright conduct of the understanding, or reached by a perverted use of our reason, or the strength of unsubordinated passions. But neither is it the outward physical act which is morally evil. The destruction of the life of a fellow-creature does not constitute the guilt of murder; for this may be done by the hand of the executioner, or the fury of a maniac, as well as by the stroke of the assassin. Indeed, the actions of an individual, in a moral acceptance, are properly significant of those desires which are conceived to prompt

him in performing them. In like manner, his opinions, morally estimated, denote those inclinations which are supposed to operate on the understanding in the course of his adopting them—those predispositions which affect the mind in its capacity for knowledge, or susceptibility of conviction; in its search and use of that evidence by which facts are ascertained, and conclusions are established.

Accordingly, it can be no argument of exemption from vulgar prejudice, or mark of philosophical acumen, to reject, as an incongruous connexion of ideas, this fundamental position of the Christian system—that man is morally accountable in reference to his belief; unless it can be proved that a right control of the affections is strictly inoperative in the search of evidence, and the perception of truth: that the man who cultivates a predominating desire to obey the will of God is, on that account, no better qualified to ascertain his relations to the Deity as the subject of his moral government, than the man who is mainly intent upon the indulgence of his appetites and passions, or controlled only by a regard to the laws and opinions of his fellow-creatures: nay, that men who are least subject to these, the most sensual and covetous, the most irascible and malevolent, the foremost in pride and ambition—men whose deeds are preeminently evil, are, equally with the most devout and

virtuous amongst us, prepared to comprehend their obligations to the Author of their being, and to discriminate the just claims of their fellow-creatures; equally prepared to collect the mass, and feel the weight, of such arguments as seem to authenticate the restraining laws of the Creator; to evince his abhorrence of all iniquity; and to verify the strait conditions of eternal life:—in a word, unless it can be shown that, where there are equal external opportunities of knowledge, the opposite opinions prevailing among men upon religion, are nothing more than the necessary consequence of a difference in their reasoning powers, and do but indicate the several degrees of intellectual capacity in the world, with the peculiar bent or conformation of individual minds: just as the various currents of the ocean are determined by the inequalities in its bed, and observe the directions of the eminences concealed under its waves.—Until this can be established, the plea that we are irresponsible for our opinions, inasmuch as we are wholly passive to the impressions made upon the understanding, must seem as hollow and pernicious as the pretext that we cannot be accountable for our actions, seeing that we are subject to the impulse and sway of the passions. The former appears scarcely less inconsistent with our reasonable nature than the latter; and as little worthy to be maintained, or connived at,

by any one concerned for the virtue and well-being of his species.

That the incitement of the passions, and the bent of our ruling inclinations, *do* impress a bias, or take effect, in various ways, on the movements of the understanding, is capable of specific proof, and is, in a measure, universally acknowledged. It will be our aim, on another occasion, to bring under consideration, together with the reality of this influence of the affections on the judgment, its intimate and powerful nature, its almost indefinite extent, and its certain, inevitable bearing on the prevailing conceptions of the Deity, and the religious belief of mankind. At present, we are mainly concerned to give prominency to the *sense* of Scripture on the subject in question, and to insist that its judgment on the unbeliever is a judgment against him for the evil in his desires and inclinations. “This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil:”—a declaration, however, which, if it contain any truth at all, must be capable of extensive application; for other dispositions, besides those which pass for evil in the common acceptation, are really such, and are frequently imputed, whether justly or not, to disbelievers of the Gospel, as accounting for their rejection of its doctrines. Premising, as we have done, the paramount duty of obedience to the

Creator, it is necessarily implied that every inclination must be evil which trenches upon the fulfilment of that duty; every desire, therefore, or principle of conduct, which, in pursuing an inquiry, in adopting an opinion, on religion, supplants the disposition to obey the will of God, or disputes its ascendancy in the mind.

But it may be asked, By what rule but his own opinions can a man shape his conduct as a rational being, or a moral agent? Clearly, by no other. But this, so far from disproving or extenuating our accountableness in the *formation* of opinions, in the highest degree confirms and enhances it, and lays open the magnitude of the subject before us,—the imperious necessity of including it in our view of human probation, if we would promote, in ourselves and others, the power of well-doing, and stay the progress of evil. For suppose an individual to have succumbed to the strength of his passions in the perversion of his judgment, he is so far disabled for the fulfilment of his duty: he is in a condition which may not unfitly be compared to that of a person who has deprived himself of the proper use of his reason by intoxication. Now it may be readily admitted, that a man is not equally answerable for his doings when inebriated as when sober, when his intellect is suspended or impaired, as when he is capable of a moral estimation of his conduct; but, at the same time,

it is perfectly manifest that he has contracted no little guilt by so immoderate an indulgence of his appetite, as to have placed himself in a state of defenceless exposure to the onset of his passions ; of increased liability, or aggravated proneness, to break the laws of God and man. So, it may be granted that the erroneous opinions of an individual infer a diminution in the guilt of his offences, if committed at their dictation, or under their sanction ; but, at the same time, we may detect a most depraved operation of the passions in his embracing and adhering to those opinions. And such, it is observable, was the judgment which a distinguished teacher of Christianity entertained of his own misguided conduct in persecuting the professors of that religion, previously to his own conversion to its principles. He unquestionably held that the Almighty takes cognizance of ignorance and error as pleas of extenuation in the commission of sin ; for he concluded that he himself had obtained mercy because he had acted “ ignorantly in unbelief :”¹ thus separating himself from another and a worse sort of persecutors, who, it is to be feared, have lived in all ages ; men who, in mixing with the blind bigots and persecutors for conscience’ sake of their time, have merely availed themselves of their tenets and fanaticism, to further their own

¹ 1 Tim. i. 13.

aggrandizement, and feed their own insatiate passions. But did he account himself innocent in that ignorance and unbelief to which he attributed his furious hostility against the Christians? Far from it—he bitterly reproached himself as “a blasphemer and a persecutor, and injurious:” in the spirit of the true penitent, continually dwelling on the mercy which God had vouchsafed him. And why? Because he stood convicted of those selfish and malignant passions which, he now perceived, had darkened his understanding, and perverted the dictates of his conscience; the moral causes of that ignorance and unbelief which, notwithstanding, he assigned as a reason why he had obtained the mercy of God;—mercy which, as he averred, had interposed in his behalf in no ordinary manner, but had miraculously brought him to repentance.—To take another example, and assuming the evangelist to have given us a faithful account of the conduct of the Jews towards Christ, we cannot but conclude that they were deeply chargeable with sin, in the allowance of those selfish, inordinate propensities which had filled their minds with prejudices against him, and caused them to regard him as a dangerous impostor and deceiver of the people; but if the evangelists had led us to infer that, on a further inquiry, they had been convinced of his innocence, struck with the excellence of his character, and impressed, in

consequence, with as strong an apprehension of the reality of his divine commission as would have been compatible with their ultimate proceedings against him, their guilt in condemning him must have taken a far darker hue, and have been aggravated as the sin of Judas. Such, it will be remembered, is expressly the judgment of the Scripture on the comparative sinfulness of the parties who were immediately concerned in the crucifixion of Jesus, and the individual who had betrayed him into their hands.¹

Admitting then, to the full, a natural and proper connexion between the opinions and conduct of a man, we may presume the former, in particular instances, to be the offspring of ungoverned passions; rendering him, in consequence, obnoxious to the just punishment of Almighty God. We may conceive his guilt to be enhanced to a great degree; to an extent to which we could with difficulty place a limit. Reverting to the example of intoxication—persons, for the most part, are unwarily betrayed into that excess on particular occasions, or impelled into it by the force of habit; but we may be allowed the supposition, for the sake of our argument, that a person had not only been unmindful of his duty as a rational being, that of retaining a control upon his feelings and propensities; but had been actually instigated to

¹ John xix. 11.

drunkenness by an intentional disregard of moral obligations; by a repugnance to all inward restraint upon his doings; by a desire to riot in the unbridled license of his passions;—how palpably and egregiously aggravated would have been the guilt of such an individual! In like manner, we may suppose a person, in having taken up a persuasion that the Gospel was untrue, to have been actuated by a kindred wish and purpose; to have been mainly worked upon by a desire to escape the conviction of his duty, and discharge the dread of future retribution; and, so far as the authority and sanctions of religion were concerned, to live in the unrestrained gratification of his passions. We may suppose him still and habitually to cherish that persuasion, in no better spirit and for no other end; repelling every question and shunning every thought, that may threaten to disturb it.—In a word, we may imagine the assertion of Jesus Christ regarding the disbelieving Jews to be applicable to such an individual to the full extent of its signification; namely, that, in rejecting the Gospel, he “loved” and still loves “darkness rather than light, because his deeds are evil.” Could we wonder that, whether Christianity be true or not, a sentence of condemnation from the Moral Governor of the world should be passed upon such an individual? Or is the case so unlike the conduct of any human

mind, so wholly an imaginary one, that men may safely dismiss it from their thoughts ?

We repeat, then, that presuming the activity of the affections in the formation of opinions, and the propriety, in consequence, of bringing the latter under a moral designation, it follows that the connexion between the opinions and the conduct is that consideration which, most of all, exhibits the responsibility lying upon every one of us in the procedure of his understanding ; and likewise, in the influence which he exerts on the judgment of others. If it be our duty to weigh the consequences of our actions, then, inasmuch as actions are the consequences of opinions, our duty must inevitably extend to a conscientious adoption and diffusion of the latter. Here indeed is laid open to us an extent of moral agency, which it is at once most fearful and encouraging to contemplate : particularly to the more intelligent portion of mankind ; to men of commanding powers of reasoning and persuasion ; above all, to those who are seeking to extend and perpetuate their own opinions and conjectures ; who leave, or wish to leave, the impress of their own minds on the minds of others, and to repeat the impression on succeeding generations ;—men whose thoughts and speculations may reach the limits of the earth, and work, for good or evil, to the end of time. How great is their liability to pollute themselves with the guilt of other men's

misdeeds! How great their power to share in the glory of their virtues!

We have argued that the moral estimation of opinions stands upon the same presumption as that of actions; accordingly we infer a propriety in the commandment to believe the Gospel; a propriety, we mean, in the fact that belief should be matter of divine *commandment*; for it should be kept in view, that we are not maintaining the sufficient evidence of the truth of the Gospel; but aiming to confute the notion that there is any intrinsic impropriety in that injunction which it has laid upon us to believe its own declarations; and, so far, to vindicate its honour as an appeal to the reasonable mind, or to show its credibility as an alleged revelation from the Deity.

It is often affirmed, and, we allow, with some degree of plausibility, that a commandment to believe the Gospel—to believe a religion to be true, is incongruous and irrational: that the weight and influence of authority, the fear of punishment, and the hope of reward, must operate as a constraint upon the judgment, and be incompatible with the pursuit of truth and the process of conviction: that an intelligent belief is essentially spontaneous, the result of free inquiry and independent reflection. The assertion, however, is well founded only on this supposition—that by freedom of inquiry, or independence of thought, is meant an exemption

from all moral obligation in dealing with the criteria of truth, or the grounds of a rational conviction. Otherwise, the commandment in the Bible to *believe* may be as little open to an imputation of irrationality as any one of its practical precepts. The Scripture, for example, enjoins the communication of our substance to the needy; but in what manner do we understand the injunction? Do we infer its meaning to be that God approves the external act of almsgiving? Certainly not, if we receive its own explanation of the precept; for it expressly declares that though a man “bestow all his goods to feed the poor,” yet if he “have not charity it profiteth him nothing.”¹ Its meaning then, is, that God enjoins us to cultivate that love of our fellow creatures which cannot but dispose us to relieve the indigent; whatever spurious or defective motives may also prompt the bestowment of alms, and usurp the honour of benevolence.

In a similar sense, or with a like implication, it is equally reasonable to understand the commandment of the Gospel to receive as true the doctrines which it purports to unfold—equally reasonable to conclude that, in this commandment, the Gospel demands an active, supreme regard to the will of God; implying, whether correctly or not, that under adequate circumstances, or

¹ 1 Cor. xiii. 1.

with sufficient opportunities of knowledge, the prevalency of such a principle in the minds of men will result in a conviction of its truth.

It may be added, as a further illustration of the sense of Scripture in this important instance, that an injunction to believe certain facts or declarations is just as reasonable, in itself considered, as the obligation which one man imposes on another to retain them in his memory : just as reasonable as the demerit attached to forgetfulness and the punishment often inflicted on account of it. An injunction to remember any number of particulars is, in truth, an injunction to direct that attention to them which will, it is concluded, prevent them from being forgotten, and facilitate their recurrence to the mind ; and accordingly, the punishment which forgetfulness brings upon a person is properly the punishment incurred by a previous neglect of attention. Just so, the injunction in the Gospel to believe its declarations is virtually an injunction to consider and examine them in a spirit of obedience to our Maker ; and the penalty annexed to unbelief is presumed to be justly deserved by a dereliction of that principle.

We have said that unless by a freedom of inquiry be meant an exemption from moral obligation in conducting it, the commandment to believe, in itself considered, is just as reasonable as any practical precept in the Scripture. As

to the constraint, then, of fear and hope upon the proper action of the intellect, these are exclusively inducements to the discharge of that obligation; and whether such inducements, though held to be generally needful to support the sense of duty, should be discarded as misplaced and unnecessary in the formation of opinions on religion—whether, in this particular engagement of the human mind, they must clog and depress its faculties, instead of contributing to their freedom and enlargement, will be better ascertained when we shall have made some specific inquiry into the actual operation of the affections on the views of the understanding, or the sources of conviction in general. It were most unjust, however, to the Christian religion, to infer that, in arraigning the unbeliever, it assumes a man to be liable to punishment, to a forfeiture of divine mercy, through the unavoidable errors of his judgment,—errors into which, however guarded and animated by a love of truth, he is not secure from falling. Whether, indeed, we should hold it to be the *judgment of Scripture*, that a predominating love of the truth is strictly or universally incompatible with a disbelief of its doctrines, may, it is possible, offer some matter for discussion; but, however we may handle or decide upon that question, there is manifestly no warrant in its pages for the inference to which we are adverting. Jesus Christ,

as we have seen, explained and qualified his condemnation of those who rejected him in a manner which entirely precludes such an imputation on the religion which he taught; and what is the language of one of his apostles?—"Who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?"¹

It may appear then superfluous to remark expressly, that the Gospel acknowledges no ground of condemnation in the unbeliever, no disqualification for divine mercy, of a purely physical or external nature: yet even this is a measure of reasonableness in Christianity, of which some appear to be scarcely aware. At least, we often hear it remarked, and even find it carefully penned, that the religion of an individual is determined by the place of his birth or habitation; by the accident of his having been born on a particular side of a mountain or river. Now, is this consideration put forward to remind us that the whole complexion of a human life may be decided by an accident, or an event which we choose to call trivial, as if events could be otherwise important than in virtue of their consequences? No, it is urged, we suspect, for the purpose of insinuating a doubt of that particular religion which is unfolded in the Scriptures, and to reduce it to the level of a pagan superstition.

¹ 1 Pet. iii. 13.

Do the Scriptures then deny, directly or indirectly, that the religious creed of an individual may be determined by his coming into existence on one side of a mountain or river, and not on the other? Or do they criminate and denounce a human being for spending his life in a particular locality,—for submitting to the limitations of space and time, or the uncontrollable influence of circumstances? “If ye were blind,” said Jesus, “ye should have no sin:”¹—“If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin.”² Or are we to infer, that the existence of other religions is a conclusive proof of the fallacy of our own? But, surely, such objections to the Christian religion are rather pretences for disregarding the offered evidences of its truth and authority. They discover little more than a levity of character in those who entertain them; an indifference to religion altogether—to such a knowledge of the Creator, and such a ground of hope and confidence towards him, as may be answerable to the surrounding proofs of his existence, and tokens of his moral government—answerable to the secret judgments of the conscience, and its premonitions of futurity:—not to speak of wants and aspirations which find no corresponding object in the present state, and

¹ John ix. 41.

² *Ib.* xv. 24.

which we seem prompted to refer to an enduring part of our nature.

It is, we repeat, a prevailing concern to obey the will of God, inseparable from a willingness to know it, or inspiring a love of the truth concerning him, which the Gospel virtually requires in its commandment to believe the doctrines which it assumes to make known. It was in consequence of a defect in that essential principle, and because they were governed by passions hostile to its nature, and subversive of its existence, that Jesus denounced the unbelieving Jews, and, by parity of reasoning, all who should resemble them in dealing with the proofs of his divine commission, and the doctrines which he inculcated,—denounced in language which we are not at liberty to withhold or extenuate. It has been remarked as a circumstance of disparagement to Mahomet, in a comparison of that pretender with Jesus Christ, that “he never ceased from describing the future anguish of unbelievers;”¹ and certainly this assertion could with no truth be made of Jesus; for he was pre-eminently the bearer of benedictions and promises to mankind, and it might with more justice be affirmed, that the threatenings which he uttered were extorted from him by a stubborn disingenuousness, an impenetrable obduracy, on

¹ Paley's Evidences, Chap. ix. sec. 3.

the part of his hearers. “He was sent,” as he declared, “into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.”¹ Yet, undeniably, he denounced the unbeliever; he foretold the condemnation of those who persisted in rejecting him, in most explicit and most awful language: “He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”—“He that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”²—“If ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.”³ But the fact which distinguishes Christ from Mahomet in this respect, and places him in irreconcilable opposition to the Arabian impostor, is, that whereas the latter enforced his threatenings of future punishment by the sword,—by the dread of present suffering, of bodily pain and death, Jesus Christ left *his* accusation against the unbeliever, together with the substance of his doctrines and admonitions, to the choice of those who had heard it from his lips, or might be made acquainted with it in all future time—left *his* accusation to their own choice to hearken to or deride it as they willed. He left it to sink into the heart by its own weight; to be answered, like the conscience, in the stillness of the passions, in the hour of

¹ John iii. 17.² Ib. iii. 36.³ Ib. viii. 24.

solitude, on the bed of sickness, in the face of death;—as it befitted one who announced himself as a messenger from the invisible state; as a ruler who seeks the hearts of his subjects; the founder and head of a kingdom whose rewards and punishment are not of this world.

Regarding, then, the doctrine which it was proposed to illustrate in its true sense, its essentially *moral* import, considerations cannot be wanting to commend it to a special inquiry, and, as we apprehend, to invest it with pre-eminent importance. And though it addresses itself more especially to persons who reject Christianity, or are occupied with the question of its divine authority, it must surely be perceived that it suggests important admonition to those who assent to its truth, and receive it as a divine revelation. It holds up to us all a decisive proof, if proof be wanting, that the real value of our faith, its acceptableness in the judgment of God, consists in its tendency to amend the heart and conduct. Why did our Saviour condemn the unbeliever? Because his deeds were evil. “For every one,” he added, “that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.” Why did he commend the believer? Because his belief was a proof of his willingness to act in pursuance of the dictates of truth,—“He that doeth truth”—he who resolves to do that which

the truth prescribes—"cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest that they are wrought in God." It was essentially on a practical ground that our Saviour commended the believer. How forcibly, then, must the subject remind us, that the faith which we place in him, be it ever so accordant to the declarations of the Scripture—our faith in the divinity of his person, the reality of his incarnation, the efficacy of his sacrifice for sin, and his victory over death and the grave for our sake—is no farther estimable than as it fills us with a repugnance to all evil, and animates us in the daily practice of religion and virtue. How entirely do his words support and bear out the strong assertion of St. James, that a merely theoretical assent to the Gospel, in habitual indifference to its practical purpose—faith "alone," or "without works," is as the body without the spirit: that it is as manifestly deprived of all worth and use, as is the inanimate frame when the extinction of life has become evident to the senses; and the more palpably vain and worthless as it exhibits more conspicuously the features of truth, and, in speculation, appears to be faultless; for surely the lifeless body shows a sadder image of mortality when cast in a mould of true proportions, and of perfect beauty;—the ravages of death are but the more visible, its power the more triumphant. May it be our concern, in the help of God, to

realize, in our belief of the Gospel, an active principle of obedience to its precepts, a living energy in our moral nature, enduing us with righteousness,—a righteousness exceeding that of the Scribes and Pharisees,—with a secret devotion, a purity of heart, and charity unfeigned.

LECTURE II.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE AFFECTIONS ON THE JUDGMENT.

John iii. 18.

HE THAT BELIEVETH ON HIM IS NOT CONDEMNED : BUT HE THAT BELIEVETH NOT IS CONDEMNED ALREADY, BECAUSE HE HATH NOT BELIEVED IN THE NAME OF THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD. AND THIS IS THE CONDEMNATION, THAT LIGHT IS COME INTO THE WORLD, AND MEN LOVED DARKNESS RATHER THAN LIGHT, BECAUSE THEIR DEEDS WERE EVIL.

WE are maintaining a most important position, undoubtedly assumed in the Scriptures, namely, that mankind are accountable before God with regard to their belief or opinions as well as their actions ; and have already argued, that, as actions are held to be guilty and deserving of punishment, inasmuch as they are presumed to be manifestations of ill-governed passions, opinions may, with equal propriety, be regarded in a similar point of view ; unless it can be shown that corrupt inclinations are altogether inert or strictly neutral in the formation of opinions. In accordance with this view, we considered the commandment

in the Gospel to believe the truths which it professes to make known to us, as referring, no less than its practical precepts, to a disposition of the mind; and as virtually enjoining us to cherish an earnest desire, to make it our great concernment, to obey the will of God: it being implied in the Scriptures that such a principle of action will so operate on the understanding, in reference to the Christian religion, as to lead to a conviction of its truth. That this is rightly implied, or, in other words, that the evidences of the Christian religion are sufficient to command a rational assent, or convince an impartial mind, it is not the purpose of these discourses to maintain, and doubtless, for the perspicuity of our argument, we must carefully forbear to assume.

We now proceed to bring under consideration the actual influence of the passions or desires¹ on the operations of the understanding in general;

¹ “The passions are truly no separate class, but merely a name for our desires when very vivid or very permanent. It is impossible to state in words at what degree of vividness or permanence we cease to speak of a desire, and term it a passion.”—*Brown. Philosophy of the Human Mind. Lect. lxxv.* There are states of mind, however, to which the terms “passion” and “desire” would not be equally applied. We have spoken of a desire to obey the will of God; here no one would substitute the term “passion.” It were unnecessary to our purpose, as was remarked in the Preface, to employ such words in a more limited sense than custom assigns to them.

and we shall then be prepared to appreciate, in some adequate measure, their probable effect on the religious apprehensions of mankind, and the important nature of the doctrine which we are seeking to establish.

Now there are ways in which our desires in general work a prejudicial effect upon the understanding, or obstruct the attainment of truth, which are perfectly evident, and admitted on all hands. It is too well known, for example, that an individual often refuses to institute an inquiry into a subject, whether proposed to him by another or suggested by his own reflection, or having commenced the inquiry, desists from pursuing it, when he is suspicious that it will issue in the disappointment of his wishes; by obliging him to *act* in a manner repugnant to his present inclination, or detrimental to his apparent interests. That man, indeed, must be little versed in the practice of self-government who has not, on such occasions, been conscious of an inward effort and conflict of his feelings, in applying his attention to an inquiry so circumstanced, and following the footsteps of truth wheresoever they might lead him. Now, in this instance, to shun the inquiry, or to retreat from the pursuit of it, is specifically a determination of the will; in the strictest propriety of speech, an act of volition; and is itself unquestionably criminal, in virtue of the selfish bias, or obliquity of moral principle,

from which it springs. But, farther, presuming the individual who thus suspends his powers of knowledge as voluntarily as he can shut his eyes to the light of the sun, and prevent his perception of visible objects, to be already uninformed or mistaken with reference to the subject of inquiry; his continuance in ignorance, or exposure to additional and, it may be, the most pernicious error, are as certainly the results of his own volition as any mischief to himself and society could be the effect of his vicious conduct, or overt act of immorality. Need it be added that for such ignorance or error, and its weight of evil consequences, he is essentially answerable to God and man? Even this palpable misguidance of the understanding must furnish ample ground for the doctrine of man's responsibility in reference to his religious belief, and an urgent motive to bear it in remembrance; for it can admit of no question that there are examples, and many examples, of a wilful inattention to the subject of religion, and a voluntary slight and superficial consideration of facts and arguments relating to it,—examples of unrighteous dealing with our powers of intellect, and means of knowledge, in relation to the most obligatory, the most morally imperative, of all human inquiries,—the inquiry into the claims which the Supreme Being exhibits in the universe, or, by any special interposition, may have made known, to the devotion and

obedience of his creatures. In the last discourse, we presumed the possibility of a strong case of this nature, and it can hardly be questioned that we were, unhappily, warranted to presume it.

Another instance may be cited, as tending to illustrate the very prominent part which is taken by our own inclinations in the creation of our opinions, and that by strictly voluntary acts. It is a frequent and manifestly favourite observation, with the opponents of established opinions in religion and politics, that persons assume the profession of opinions merely to advance their own interests, in a perfect indifference to their truth or falsehood. The observation, it is to be feared, is a true one: though we should desire it to be made, as all such observations should be, if intended to subserve the universal interests of religion or morality, in the spirit of philosophy; that spirit which is ever seeking to extend and generalize its conclusions. For it is not only from interested motives, commonly so termed, that a man may espouse and advocate opinions relating to questions of the highest moment to individuals and society, in habitual indifference to the grounds on which they rest, and the good or evil consequences of maintaining them: he may do so, in a very great measure, to gratify a love of distinction, to isolate himself in the circle, large or small, intelligent or ignorant, about

him: he may do so from a variety of motives besides the right one. The observation, however, is undoubtedly well founded, that persons assume a profession of opinions with little or no estimation of their truth. But it is equally worthy of remark, that when a person is instigated, by whatever motive, of interest or vanity, to assert a particular class of opinions, he contracts, through the operation of causes sufficiently discernible, a tendency to believe them; and, in process of time, is frequently brought to a persuasion of their truth: a fact that can hardly surprise us, if we may believe that individuals are often led, by the mere iteration of a statement, to give credence to a falsehood which they themselves originally fabricated, or knew to be one. Now the profession of opinions is manifestly a voluntary act, and the ultimate impression of their truth is the not improbable result of it; and this impression, be it observed, may imply the rejection of truth as well as of error, and of truth which we are especially bound and concerned to seek. What if it amount to the rejection of a revelation from God, a resistance to his purpose in vouchsafing it?

Such instances are conclusive as to the reality of a dependence of our opinions on our desires and inclinations, as these incite us to voluntary acts—that is, the reality of a dependence of belief on the will; and familiar as they may seem, we

are compelled to bring them forward in the discussion of this subject; for strange as it must appear, with such examples in our view, we find it roundly asserted that belief is altogether independent of the will, and the contrary opinion held up to contempt and ridicule, nay, disgust and execration. When philosophers and divines have argued a certain dependence of belief on the will, they have signified by the *will* the *affections* in general, conformably with the old and well known division of the mental operations into those of the *understanding* and the *will*. But the proposition for which they have contended is sufficiently true even in the absence of this explanation. The instances alluded to exhibit a dependence of our belief on the affections as they operate in specific voluntary acts, in willing to inquire, or not to inquire, or to inquire no farther; to give time and thought to the consideration of a subject, or not to give it; and in willing to assume a profession of opinions with no conscientious conviction of their truth. Nevertheless, the conclusion that belief is not independent of the will has provoked the following sweeping condemnation from an accomplished but anonymous writer, in a work extensively circulated:—"We may venture to assert that neither the virtue nor the happiness of man will ever be placed on a perfectly firm basis till this fundamental error is extirpated from the human

mind.”¹ Surely this author and those who concur with him, must, in the vehemence of their hostility to a proposition as certainly received in the schools of philosophy as it is habitually assumed and acted upon in the transactions of common life, have been carried into an egregious oversight; as indeed in the rejection of a proposition so circumstanced, there was no little ground to anticipate. They must have failed to perceive that every accession to our knowledge, every discovery of truth, involves an additional act of belief, or, in other words, advances the mind to a new state of believing; and, consequently, that in denying thus absolutely that belief is dependent on the will, they virtually deny, as absolutely, that the attainment of knowledge is dependent on the will. Knowledge, as an attribute of the mind, is inconceivable in the absence of belief; though belief may unquestionably exist without knowledge. I cannot *know* a proposition, though a true one, if I do not believe it, if in my conviction it is a false one: I can know only the meaning of its terms. The same must be said of any collection or series of propositions, of any system of philosophy or religion. Truth, we presume, is the object of a man’s knowledge, or, we confess, we are incapable of distinguishing

¹ Essays on the Formation and Publication of Opinions, &c. p. 89.

his knowledge from his ignorance or error. If the Scriptures declare truth, the man who disbelieves them, is devoid of infinitely important knowledge : though he may be able to state and particularize every doctrine which they inculcate, and every argument alleged to establish their divine authority. He cannot know the facts which the Scriptures assert, he knows only that the Scriptures assert them. Of course, he cannot know that Christ was sent from God to instruct and redeem mankind ; that though put to death, he rose to life again ; and that he is divinely appointed to be the Mediator between God and man, and the final Judge of the world ; he knows only that the Scriptures relate and declare these things. Accordingly, if guilt be imputed to him in not believing the Scriptures, it is imputed to him in neglecting or misusing the means of obtaining that knowledge which they were intended to convey. We repeat then, that whatever be the nature of that dependence of belief on the will which is assumed in the Scriptures, in concurrence with the persuasion of mankind in general, to deny the reality of that dependence is equivalent to asserting that the attainment of knowledge, the discovery of truth, is strictly independent of the will—in no manner traceable to our own volitions.

But there is a more secret and subtle, a more constant and habitual operation of the passions

on the judgment—a constitutional and vital connexion, if we may so speak, between them, which demands our particular attention to the due appreciation of this doctrine of the Scriptures. It is a great and undeniable fact, that the *feeling of desire* exerts a continual and prevailing influence in determining the succession of our thoughts; or in communicating an impulse and direction to our intellectual faculties. For example, we *desire* to complete our recollection of a chain of circumstances, or of a process of reasoning, or of a series of words, and our desire is successful and gratified in proportion to a natural or acquired readiness of the memory. Again, we desire to exercise our judgment on a particular question, to discover the truth concerning it; the consequence is that certain facts and inferences relating to that specific question, in distinction from other and innumerable topics of inquiry, which have previously, and it may be very recently, occupied the mind, assemble and dispose themselves, more or less rapidly and orderly, on the field of our conception. Or we desire not so much to elicit the truth for ourselves as to communicate it to others, to produce a certain conviction in their minds; and we need but advert to the change which this desire is often found to produce in the particular class and disposition of our ideas. Again, the imagination responds to this directing energy of

the mind, displays its creative powers, and “bodies forth” appropriate images to the *desire* of the poet and the orator. In such instances, it is true, we are more or less conscious of an effort, and the state of mind preceding such operations of the intellect, would be called a determination of the *will*; but the main fact to be considered is the connexion which there is between the feeling of desire and the suggestion of corresponding ideas, of kindred facts, and modes of reasoning and illustration. We are universally conscious that the influence of our desire, or if it be so called, the power of our will, is no less real, and scarcely less extensive, over the operations of the mind than over the movements of the body; and, moreover, as in the latter so in the former instance, the more energetic the desire the more powerful and complete its efficacy.¹

We submit that this familiar fact, this prevailing law of our nature, might itself prepare us to expect that the influence of the passions and dispositions would extend to our opinions, and intimately affect the conclusions of the understanding. For let it be considered that every passion which possesses us involves a connexion between the feeling of desire and the presence

¹ The reader may find the influence of the feeling of desire on the train of ideas distinguished and illustrated at length in Dr. Brown’s *Philosophy of the Mind*, (Lect. xxx.)

of a particular belief or persuasion : consequently, the train of ideas is of such a nature as to support that belief: in other words, the faculties are exerted in such a manner as to fix and confirm it. We shall take a familiar instance; premising that, in order to apply it to the illustration of our subject, we must examine it with some particularity. Suppose then a person to be under an excitement of anger, or exasperated to a *desire* of vengeance. His anger has been awakened by a belief that he has suffered injury from the act or intention of some individual. But neither that passion, nor any other, can sustain itself and dominate in the mind, except by prolonging and confirming the persuasion by which it was excited. Our anger, whether it seek retaliation or not, whether it utter aloud its reproaches or murmur them in secret, can nourish and indulge itself only by protracting and aggravating the persuasion by which it was enkindled—namely, that we have suffered injustice. By the impetus of anger, then, or the incitation to revenge, the mind's desire is attached to that identical persuasion: the *will*, it may be truly said, is violently urged to retain and increase it, and, as experience testifies, the faculties are singularly active and powerful in its service. The man therefore, who is excited to resentment by a false or exaggerated conception of injury inflicted upon him, has, in proportion to the

depth of his emotions, contracted the circle of his ideas, and disqualified himself for the right use of his judgment. His condition, with regard to the perception of truth, the estimation of evidence, is materially altered by this access of wrathful emotions : for whereas he was previously only more or less susceptible of an impression of injustice inflicted on him, now his desire, as we have said, is bent to retain and enhance that impression :—that desire which, as we have been reminded, exerts so ample a control over the operations of the mind ; directing the course of its ideas, and urging the velocity of their current.

We need not be solicitous, however, to determine in what particular manner the passions impress a bias on the movements of the understanding. The fact, in the example before us, is above all question, that the emotions of anger react upon the conception of injury which produced them, and have the property of enlarging our ideas of the injustice and criminality of the individual who excited them.¹ The enraged person puts a construction on the conduct of the individual who has provoked

¹ We may here observe that it is in the shape of *desires* that our feelings become motives of action, and are immediately subject to a conscientious regulation. Fear, as well as anger, magnifies the dimensions of its object ; but it is by exciting a desire of self-preservation, by prompting us to a defence of our person, substance, or reputation, that it places us in a condition to act rightly or otherwise.

him, which, in the subsidence of his passion, he commonly abandons, and often retraces with compunctious and humiliating reflections. It is true, there is a counteracting process in the resentments of the morally-regulated mind : in the faithful Christian a growing power is set up against that bias of the passions on the judgment of which we are speaking, and some resistance made to it in most men. But we are looking at the reality of that bias, and if it be brought into question, how is it to be explained, that during the excitement of anger, a person is often altogether inaccessible to palliating views of the conduct of the individual who has offended him ; that the ideas and considerations which throng upon him are unmixedly and uninterruptedly of a nature to criminate and blacken his character ; so that the impartial observer refuses to concur with him, and even sympathizes with the aggressor ? There is often an unity, a totality, in the apprehensions of an incensed mind, which is without a parallel in the ordinary state of the understanding in its construction of human actions : so that if we could conceive a judge to collect the evidence against the accused in a similar manner, there could not be the glimmer of a doubt that he was urged by a vehement desire of convicting him—that desire which, in excessive anger, is the animating, governing power of the intellect. Well may we

observe, with humiliation and dread, the force of this and other passions in degrading our reasonable nature, and blinding the eyes of our understanding to the light of truth!

This familiar instance supplies us with an adequate and decisive exemplification of the influence of the passions on the sources of our belief, and their actual agency in the views of the understanding. The man stung with anger and goaded to revenge, however infatuated and befooled, is no hypocrite. He firmly believes—what, it is probable, no mind in the universe but his own can believe—that he has suffered a grievous, inexpiable wrong, and would deem himself fully justified in the infliction of unmeasured vengeance. If, however, as some appear to imagine, a person cannot be justly held accountable for his belief, and it is certain he can have no other rule of conduct but his own persuasion, it must follow that however injuriously this claimant of right and justice may retaliate on the party who has offended him; betray his confidence, malign his character, or seek his life; we are barred from condemning the act as a crime, but can only deplore it as a calamity. There is no light, that we can see, to distinguish it from an outbreak of idiocy or madness. In truth, if you hold a man responsible for a due restraint of his passions in the choice of his actions, you do, by implication, hold him

responsible for the same restraint of his passions in the conduct of his understanding.

Surely it is no objection to the propriety of this instance, that the erroneous belief is here but temporary, a transient illusion of the understanding. We can hardly imagine that those who deny the responsibility of a man with regard to his belief, would except from their denial that belief which is of *brief duration*. If so, why is not this exception distinctly stated? And why are we left to conjecture the length of time to which a false and injurious persuasion must be limited, in order to establish its title to be accounted a purely intellectual error, or to raise an individual in entertaining it above the imputation of guilt. Really, to our apprehension this would be a strangely arbitrary and ungrounded exception; and not only so, but, in numerous instances, wholly inapplicable. In the case supposed, the illusion of the understanding may be protracted to any length of time. In the neglect of *consideration*—that cardinal duty of a rational creature, the basis and safeguard of our moral freedom, that duty which the Scripture so continually urges upon us—in the neglect of consideration, the memory may take up the impression originally made upon the judgment, and preserve entire the views presented through the magnifying and distorting medium of the passions; reviving from time to time the emotions

which it first enkindled, and sustaining, it may be, a deliberate purpose of revenge through a succession of years, or the whole of life. We must insist, however, that whether the fallacious impression be transient or abiding, it is in reality a *belief*, and it subsists by the force of the passion; and unless we are contented to speak of man's accountableness or probationary state as an ideal abstraction merely, having no substantive existence, we must realize it in particular instances in actual occurrence,—at the instant and crisis when the human being is thinking and acting as an intelligent and voluntary agent.

But dismissing this example, which however admits of a *general* application, it is not for a moment to be conceded, that the passions and affections have merely a temporary though violent action in the reasoning faculties; as if they were extinct or dormant when the rush and tumult of the emotions have subsided. As well might we suppose that the electric principle expended itself in the phenomena of lightning, or that the agency of fire in the globe could be understood and measured by the sensations of heat: as well might we suppose that the operations of all nature were fully known by their obvious and sensible appearances. The dispositions of the heart, the great motives of conduct, are continually working, for good or

evil, in the depths and recesses of the mind ; qualifying our apprehension of things without us and within us, past, present, and future ; exerting their several affinities, if we may thus speak, among the materials of our knowledge ; modifying the processes of thought ; establishing susceptibilities of feeling ;—arranging and consolidating the parts of our character. But we can only allude to operations which, however gradually, are continually and surely, proceeding ; and advancing to momentous and enduring results in the moral world.

We are insisting upon the fact, of which every one who reflects upon the working of his own mind must be solemnly conscious, that it is the tendency of our desires in general to fasten and restrain the attention to their objects ; to crowd into view such ideas as are congenial to their nature ; and thus to carry along with them the suffrage of the judgment. The fact is so indisputable, and so apparently involved in the moral depravation of human beings, that some have argued, that in every guilty indulgence of a passion, the determination of the will is preceded by some erroneous decision of the understanding. We shall not push this position, or endeavour to explain its consistency with the tyranny of habit of which the slave of his passions is often so bitterly conscious ; but, speaking generally and certainly in the earlier stages of depravity, it

admits of no question that, previous to the commission of an unlawful act, the understanding is actively engaged, either in creating some belief of its innocence, or suggesting some means of indemnifying the conscience for the injury to be inflicted upon it in its perpetration,—suggesting the means of atoning for its guilt, or averting its punishment; and thus assuaging that fearful and degrading consciousness of demerit which dashes the pleasures of sin: and which also embitters its recollections, inasmuch as the sinner, in his penitence, cannot but perceive that, in yielding to the impulse of his passions, he has been deluded by vapid excuses for doing wrong, and presumptions of repairing its consequences, which rested on no solid foundation. The manner in which we are betrayed into evil is made evident to every one who is concerned to know himself, and to make any stand for the mastery of his own spirit.

But it must be distinctly observed, as already intimated, that it is the nature of inordinate passions, not merely to raise a temporary illusion in the minds of men which is dissipated by returning reflection, but to warp their judgment in a deliberate estimation of their own actions, under the sway of their master-passions: to commend the misdeeds to which they incite them, and render the deception as permanent as their own dominion. Can we forget—is it not

notorious that the vicious of all classes, in all time, have adopted their respective creeds, and been abetted in their doings by their special articles of belief?—that the tyrant has alleged his plea of necessity, and the invader his right of conquest or discovery; that the ambitious mover of sedition has ever held, in his vindication, the paramount claim of the public; that the persecutor has cited, in all ages, the commandment of Almighty God; that the sensualist has appealed to his appetites for the sanction of his Creator; that the Jesuit has excogitated his demoralizing casuistry;—that all the workers of iniquity, individuals and communities, have sought to justify their doings before the universe, and have expostulated with an accusing and protesting conscience? Can we forget that what their passions have prompted them to invent, their passions have helped them to believe; and that the history of the world and its present experience alike bear unequivocal testimony to the declaration of Jesus of Nazareth—that “men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil?”

It seemed due to that doctrine of the Scripture which we are engaged in maintaining, that we should examine somewhat closely the connexion which there is between the affections and the judgment, because it is on the presumption of such a connexion that that doctrine is essentially founded. But the reality of that connexion,

the truth of that presumption of the Scripture, stands in little need of formal proof, inasmuch as it is clearly anticipated and accorded to in the general conviction of mankind : a conviction most conspicuously manifest in their language and conduct : so conspicuously in their language, for example, that we find the epithets describing actions and dispositions transferred, as a matter of course, to opinions ; as in the current phrases, *profligate* opinions, *uncharitable* judgments, with others equally illustrative of the same conviction. We may add, it is precisely this universal persuasion of the influence of the affections on the understanding, which explains the appeal so often made to the *candour* of an individual in dealing with a question submitted to his judgment. The purport of that appeal is, that he will keep in abeyance his own inclinations as affected by the question, not, however, in stating his opinion, but in forming it. We demand his candour, not in order that he may affirm what he actually believes, but that he may bring his mind into a better condition to believe the truth.

Indeed we are not aware that the effect of the inclinations on the judgment, as a bare, simple fact, has ever been seriously disputed. The evidence of the senses, or the existence of the outer, material world, has been disputed ; the reality of moral distinctions, or the authority of conscience, has been impugned ;—the most

intimate and valued convictions of the human mind have been sought out and dragged to the question ; but what inquisition of philosophy, what scepticism less than universal, could refuse to admit that the affections and passions, in the language of Lord Bacon, “tinge the understanding with their own colouring?” Who is there that would not rather be compelled to subscribe to the conclusion of that great observer, that no inconsiderable portion of the opinions of mankind is little better than a devotion to the various objects of their passions ; or a cleaving to prejudices, sometimes innocent, but, on the whole, greatly more to be censured than commended—a worship, not of truth, but of *Idols* ?

But we are far from allowing that the fact, thus generally acknowledged, can be seen in its true dimensions, or followed to its proper consequences, by any who deny the doctrine raised upon it in the Scriptures—the responsibility of man to the Deity in relation to the belief which he embraces concerning him ; and it will be our purpose in the next discourse, to consider how directly the reasonableness of recognising that responsibility follows from the truth of the presumption on which it is founded. But we presume it must be already manifest from the preceding observations, and the examples cited to support them, that the objections so confidently urged against the position that man is

an accountable being in the procedure of his understanding, or—which perhaps are more frequent—the endeavours made to reduce its application to the smallest possible limits, must have been dictated either by a very partial apprehension of the grounds on which it rests, or by views strictly referrible to some particular *instance* of its application, or to the abuse to which it is subject; and can ill be defended with the actual experience of human nature before us, and the essential interests of religion and morality in our view. So far as we can explain our own derelictions of duty, we find that it is by the suggestion and prevalency of fallacious judgments, illusive views and expectations, that the appetites and passions betray their tendency to excess and perversion, and establish their ascendancy within us:—judgments which, it is true, in our speculative mood, or in the calm, dispassionate exercise of our reason, we may reject and disavow; but which, notwithstanding, exert an influence, more or less powerful, in sustaining our habitual inclinations, and determining the tenor of our conduct. We may judge the fact anomalous, and be perplexed to reconcile it with the constitution of a rational being; but would it not be still more anomalous, or rather inconceivable, that an intelligent and voluntary agent should be estranged from the law of his Creator, and become the instrument of his own undoing,

without a concurrent depravation of his principles of belief, or perversion of his judgment? The account in the book of Genesis, that the first act of transgression was committed under a *disbelief* of the divine declaration, a presumption that the sin would *not* be mortal, is at least conformable to human experience. He who is in the act of disobeying the dictate of his conscience is, we may well conclude, the dupe of a falsehood: an error of some nature has insinuated itself into his understanding, and is doing the work of the serpent within him. And whereas we are wont to infer that a more deliberate approbation of our own principles and conduct must be well founded, yet, if we give some attention to the minds of others, we perceive that they are often most firmly persuaded that their occasional actions, and even their habitual life, are innocent and virtuous, and virtuous too in the judgment of the Christian morality, when, notwithstanding, we ourselves, with other observers of their character, are perfectly convinced that such their persuasion has been formed and established in the dominance of self-love, the sway of unreined passions. That any man with such a knowledge of his own mind, and such an observation of others, should hold himself irresponsible to the Deity, assuming him to be the Moral Governor of his creatures, in the article of *believing*, is, in our judgment, a most precipitate

and dangerous conclusion. We should rather deem it the part of reason, and the concern of a wakeful conscience, to inquire into the *extent* to which we may be liable to such errors as spring up and root themselves in the misgovernment of the affections, and the defect of a ruling principle of obedience to the Creator;—how far we may be accessible to such errors from the absence of that evidence of truth which is irresistible in its nature, and ever present without our seeking,—evidence which, indeed, would supersede inquiry, and banish doubt, irradiating the whole mind with a mid-day lustre; but which, at the same time, would, so far as it actually extended, suspend that operation of the passions on the judgment which must seem to be a condition of our moral agency; and consequently narrow the limits of our probationary state.—But we must dismiss the particular subject of this discourse.

Before we conclude, however, there is *one* fallacy imposed upon the judgment by an undue prevalence of those desires in general which attach us to the objects of the present state, that demands a special observation; for there is ground to apprehend that it must tend to prejudice the attainment of religious knowledge, and, consequently, prevent a due appreciation of the evidences of the Christian religion. If, however, it convey no such apprehension to the sceptic, it will at least suggest a needful admoni-

tion to believers of Christianity—to those who receive as true the testimony in the Scripture regarding “our Saviour Jesus Christ:” that he “hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.”¹ Moreover, it is a fallacy which furnishes a sufficient answer to the objection that hope and fear, relating to a future state, must tend to enfeeble the understanding, and narrow its scope, in forming our opinions on religion. We allude to our desires of present gratification or earthly good, as they affect our apprehensions of a future world. We owe to God all devout affections and uniform obedience, as the objects of his un-failing goodness in the “life that now is;” but such is the character of human piety that it needs support from the hope of happiness, and the dread of suffering, hereafter; so that in growing unmindful of a future state we almost certainly grow forgetful of Him “in whom we live, and move, and have our being.” But are we not conscious that under the *collective* influence of those desires which terminate in this world, pre-occupying, attracting, and engrossing our thoughts, the state of existence which may await us beyond the grave—the great, illimitable future—in the apprehension of most men, the place of final, endless retribution of good or evil, and, to the remainder,

¹ 2 Tim. i. 10.

the vast unknown—is continually receding and disappearing from our thoughts?—continually waning to the dimness of a remote futurity; while the pursuits and transactions, the advantages and pleasures, of this world appear to fill up our whole view—to extend along the entire range of our thoughts and preconceptions? This is not merely the power of the present world over the senses and the imagination. There is an illusion of the judgment: one which requires the “labour,” as every Christian at least will confess, of the inner mind, where the reason and the conscience collect their strength, to repel and dissipate. We *judge* the invisible, eternal world to be indefinitely far off in futurity: we entertain it as a most distant anticipation: we explain our indolence and procrastination in preparing for it, by alleging its remoteness from our present interests and pursuits: and the explanation is given and accepted with a sort of philosophical acquiescence, as though there were little left to add upon the matter. Now whence does this persuasion come? From the pure, impartial, unbiassed reason? Our reason—for so we term our dispassionate intelligence—renounces and despises it. It declares—it must, if prompted or allowed to speak—it declares the utter foolishness, on the part of beings like ourselves, so concerned and active to provide for future wants in this world, and to ensure our welfare

through the whole of our life here, to account that condition of existence remote, which immediately—without an interval of consciousness, will succeed it : seeing that the instant we shall quit this tenement of flesh, we shall enter the world of spirits. To the eyes of our understanding, moreover, in the hour of meditation, the eternal duration of the life to come is an object of so immense a magnitude, as to diminish, and almost destroy, the perception of distance separating us from it. Nay, can we say how soon even the thoughts and anticipations which fill and glow in the heart of youth may be dissipated as a dream, and that state of existence which is to know no end be begun ? Well may we speak of the force of the passions on the judgment of mankind, when they are thus found to reverse its most certain conclusions,—when such is their power to magnify the objects presented to them, that the brief and uncertain period of a human life enlarges to the mind's field of vision, and stretches to the end of the prospect before us ; while eternity, which it would seem, must invest every question relating to it with an incomparable interest, an unspeakable moment, fades into the insignificance and obscurity of distance ; occupying, so to speak, a narrow space, and that indistinctly, at the far boundary of the circle of our ideas. Well may we look to an agency in the understanding

which thus, in our estimate of things, inverts the order of truth and reason; placing those which should be first last, and the last first—the interests and capabilities of a fugitive life for an immortal existence beyond it—the littleness for the greatness of man.

We refer particularly to this erroneous judgment, because it grounds an urgent presumption that the affections attaching us to the present state, which so remarkably diminish in our view the importance of religion, exert a similar influence in obscuring and extenuating the evidences of its truth: begetting habitual indifference to arguments alleged in its proof and confirmation, or inducing a partial, exclusive exercise of the faculties—the attention, the memory, and the judgment, regarding them. Assuredly, if in the cognizance of our duty towards God, the presentiment of a future state of retribution comes in aid of the dictates of the conscience, it must be most important to cherish it—to cherish it when prosecuting an inquiry into his will, and when forming our judgment upon writings which purport to record his dealings, and make known his purposes concerning us. Otherwise, it appears almost certain that we shall be actuated in such an inquiry by some desire, unworthy as insidious, growing out of our relation to this world and our fellow-creatures—some other motive than the only right one. At

least, as believers in the divine authority of the Scriptures, we are taught by experience that it is chiefly under the engrossing influence of present objects, that we meet with suggestions of scepticism, and are subject to doubts and uncertainty in our religious convictions; and that our faith never stands so firmly as when, not insensible to the pursuits and enjoyments of this life, and far less careless of its specific duties, our future destiny has its just share, its right place, in our thoughts and meditation:—when we reflect that “the things which are seen are temporal, and the things which are not seen”—the things to which the Gospel claims our attention—“are eternal.”

LECTURE III.

THE RECOGNITION OF THIS DOCTRINE ESSENTIAL TO THE ACQUIREMENT OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE.

John vii. 16, 17.

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.

IN maintaining the reasonableness of the doctrine conveyed in Christianity, that we are accountable to God in reference to our belief as well as our conduct, we have premised, not merely the fact itself of our accountableness to him, or the supreme duty of obeying him, but also, that whatever is in reality morally right is conformable to the will of God:—we have said *in reality* morally right, because the question as to what extent, or under what limitations, that which mankind believe to be morally right is likely to be so, may be found to be seriously involved in the discussion of that doctrine: indeed, we apprehend, this will be sufficiently evident in

the farther prosecution of the subject. Looking then from these premises, we have seen that the desires and inclinations of mankind take extensive effect on the determinations of the judgment; both as they impel us to voluntary acts, bearing, more or less directly, on the attainment of knowledge, or belief of the truth, and as they exert an immediate influence on the operations of the intellect in general, by their own nature, or in the very *mode of their working* in the mind as principles of conduct. It follows, then, that our responsibility to the Divine Being with regard to the exercise of our understanding, and, consequently, the nature of our belief concerning him, is commended to our rational acknowledgment by the two following inferences, as direct and undeniable as they are fitted, by their importance, to arrest the attention of every considerate mind.—First, unless this responsibility were recognised, there could be no ground for concluding that mankind would acquire such a knowledge of the will of God, and the inducements in existence to fulfil it, as would correspond to their power and opportunities. By *inducements in existence* to fulfil the will of God, we mean his agency and purposes regarding us, which, so far as they were known, would constitute inducements to obey him.—Secondly, the readiness which we evince, the endeavours which we make, to acquire that knowledge,

and so far our belief of a divine revelation—presuming it to be adequately attested as such by evidence offered to our examination—must afford a criterion of our desire to obey the will of God, as a ruling affection of the mind, a governing principle of conduct. On this latter inference, as an *à priori* conclusion, considerable stress has often been laid in maintaining the credibility of the Christian religion; but the *fact*, that Christianity actually offers itself as an instrument of trying the rectitude of our purpose towards God, in the manner of our dealing with the evidences of its truth, appears to merit a larger share of attention than is commonly attracted to it; and is certainly of capital importance in weighing the arguments on which it demands our reception as a divine communication. The inference first stated, however, is no less imperative on our consideration, and will form the subject of the present discourse.

We may frequently observe in the conversation and writings of persons, even of those whose knowledge and discernment in general, or intellectual position amongst us, would entitle their opinions to a respectful attention, an appearance of perfect indifference to a *particularity* of religious belief—to the articles of a creed: accompanied, however, with expressions of devotion and reverence to the Deity, as the Being who has constituted and designed us for *moral excel-*

lence, and the happiness which flows from it: accompanied also with an apparent persuasion that God will judge mankind according to their conduct, or moral character; rewarding them for their good and punishing them for their evil deeds. Now this strain of speaking and writing—so directly calculated, if not designed, to efface all impression of our accountableness to the Author of our rational faculties for the use which we make of them in relation to himself, and to foster an opinion that the abolition of the Christian, as well as every other religious creed, would, on the whole, be rather advantageous than detrimental to practical piety and virtue,—proceeds on these two assumptions; first, that mankind would attain as correct a discernment of moral distinctions, and, consequently, as just an apprehension of the will of God as their circumstances and powers would enable them, in the spontaneous exercise of their reason; and, secondly, that having attained such an apprehension of the will of God, they would, in the equally spontaneous use of their faculties, and to an extent commensurate with their means of knowledge, collect the most needful and effective inducements to fulfil it. For either of these assumptions, we may safely affirm, there is no adequate foundation in our knowledge of human nature, and still less in the recorded experience of the world.

It were of no avail to argue, in defence of assumptions apparently so arbitrary, that particular individuals have associated the purest system of morality with their conceptions of the Supreme Being, in a disavowal or unconsciousness of that responsibility of which we are speaking; or even that they have found inducements, experimentally sufficient, to exemplify it substantially in their lives. Still less would it suffice to appeal to the sentiments and conduct of any number of individuals in a professedly Christian society: individuals who, so far from having been left to deduce the will of God in the unaided, irresponsible exercise of their own understanding, have been put into the possession of a number of precepts anticipating their most impartial and deliberate comprehension of human duties, and their highest conceptions of moral excellence; and who, in virtue of their connexion with that society, would be prompted to a partial, and it might be a considerable, observance of such precepts by motives altogether independent of their conclusions on religion. There are indeed, even in this era of moral enlightenment, sufficient and remarkable indications of the necessity of a controlling principle, of a sense of amenableness to the Highest tribunal, in forming a judgment touching the rectitude of actions, or their conformity to the divine will; and, generally, in adopting opinions relating to the dealings

of God with our species, or the principles of his moral government. But, in justice to the doctrine under discussion, we should, in all consistency, estimate its worth and necessity, as a principle of moral rectitude, in its relation to our nature universally, and as illustrated in the development of the human mind under circumstances different from our own.

In the first place then—reflecting in how various ways, to what a wide extent, the desires and propensities of human beings affect the conclusions of their reason, on what ground, it may be asked, can we venture to conclude that, however they might believe themselves subject to the judgment of God for their actions, and though they might expect at his hands reward or punishment hereafter, they would acquire such a knowledge of his will itself—such a knowledge of that course of conduct, that government of the heart, which he approves, as the constitution of their nature and their powers of reasoning might enable them, in the unbidden exercise of their own understanding, or unless they held themselves accountable to himself for such an application of their faculties? What substantive ground is there for such a supposition?—in theory or possibility, we mean, for in this as in other instances, our accountableness to the Deity may be matter of speculative acquiescence only, of nothing more—what substantive ground have

we, hypothetically, for inferring that mankind would arrive at such a comprehension of their duties as would promote the rectitude of their character, or actual conformity to the divine will. Of course, we lay out of the question those precepts of morality, those prohibitions upon the natural propensities, which mankind submit to and impose upon themselves, in order to ensure the essential advantages of the social state. These, it may be presumed, the bulk of mankind would readily receive, and their rulers and legislators judge it political to publish, as the enactments of the Divinity; but we shall be allowed to suppose a stricter restraint of the appetites, a more searching discipline of the affections in general, as necessary to constitute or complete the rectitude of human beings—as necessary to embody those ideas of virtue and “true holiness” which they are intellectually qualified to form, and as conducive to their happiness in this life as well as in a future state. We shall presume high degrees of personal rectitude or obedience to the will of God, the advantages of which might not be so immediately apparent as to overpower the force of the natural propensities; and it is at this stage of our moral intelligence, that human rectitude stands in need, and can take advantage of, a knowledge of the Divine will, or the motives and sanctions of religion. Where then is the probability that these high degrees of

congruity to the will of God would be perceived and acknowledged, if there were no prevailing conviction of a primary obligation to subordinate the affections to the one concernment of doing his will, in the process itself of deducing his approving or condemnatory judgment on the dispositions and conduct of his creatures? In that inner, but far from narrow, circle of our moral agency, where human laws are powerless, or can claim no jurisdiction, and public opinion is fain to compromise with the importunity and turbulence of the passions, what could keep the intellect awake to moral distinctions, as the medium of acquainting them with God's approval or disapproval of their doings, if the conscience slumbered on its movements, and ceased to assert his claims on the powers of intelligence? They might conclude in general, as we are sure will be concluded in the broad light of reason to the end of time, from their moral constitution,—from their discernment of a right and a wrong in actions, or of merit and demerit in the states of the human mind, and from the distinctive nature of those feelings which spring up to prompt us to the one, and to deter us from the other,—they might conclude that the Author of their being had designed them for happiness in the practice of the *right*; and that he would vindicate such a structure of their minds in the issues of a future state; but would they pursue that great conclusion

to any adequate result in deciding upon the good or evil of their actual doings? Would they derive from the universal sentiment of reverence and adoration to the Supreme Being, and the abundant manifestations of his goodness, a proportionate inducement to apply their faculties to discriminate the moral qualities of particular actions, and to ascertain the full extent of human duties, preparatory to their offering him the tribute of a virtuous, holy life? Would they decipher the moral law of the Creator as well as they were able? And, in general, would they not choose and be content to contemplate him as the Donor of merely natural and sensible good, “giving them rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling their hearts with gladness;”¹ and instead of “presenting their bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God which were their reasonable service,”² indulge their ardour of devotion by heaping the altars which they raised to him with inanimate matter or irrational life—the fruits of the earth, or the beasts of the field? In point of fact, what better tribute was presented to the supreme, presiding Power in the universe by the mass of the Gentile world?

But more—if this responsibility were unrecognised or lost sight of, what could restrain the imagination from creating such ideas of the Divinity as

¹ Acts xiv. 17.

² Rom. xii. 1.

tended to confirm and aggravate the depraved propensities? What could prevent the religious affections themselves from becoming accessory to the vicious excesses of their nature; from supplanting the original obligations to virtue; and supplying incentives to deeds forbidden even by their own laws;—laws which they judged it necessary to enact, but found it difficult to obey? What, in truth, were those imaginary beings whose character and history filled the place of Divine perfection to the Heathen world, but gods who were superhuman in natural attributes only, in power and knowledge, but as deficient in moral energy, and as unequal to the control of their appetites, as their worshippers,—nay, furnishing precedent and apology for every species of crime,—idols moulded in the likeness of our ungoverned nature—cast in the furnace of the human passions?

The instance is far from being an extreme or solitary one. The conceptions of Paganism are of a cognate character in every age. The impugners of the Christian faith—the impugners of morality, so far as it may claim the alliance, and own the support, of a pure and undefiled religion, have industriously collected them; parading them as proofs that the moral judgments of mankind are too dissimilar and contradictory to be regarded as monitions of the will of the Creator; and Christians have been scandalized

at the unsightly assemblage, and perplexed to account for them.—As though—to say nothing of the stark ignorance and unexercised reason of mere barbarians—the determinations of the conscience could be accurately collected, and the will of Him who made us thereby known, from examples in which there is the utmost reason to believe, if indeed it be possible to doubt, that one of its primary dictates has been disregarded; that an essential condition of its proper action, if we may so speak, has been wanting;—we mean that dictate of the conscience which claims a specific and dispassionate exercise of the understanding, in order to discriminate the good and evil in our acts and dispositions which we are capacitated to perceive, and in perceiving to approve and condemn. We claim these corruptions of the moral sentiments in the religions of the Heathen, as directly corroborative of that doctrine of Scripture which we are aiming to establish: as abundantly showing, that unless the conscience sit in judgment on the course of the understanding, when mankind are framing their opinions as to what is right and acceptable to the Deity, those opinions may be little better than expressions of their own inclinations,—nay, that you cannot save morality from utter corruption—you cannot prevent *the deification of vice*, if the intellect be abandoned to the bias of the passions.

Whether Paul of Tarsus was divinely inspired or not, it seems impossible to dispute his account of the source of those Pagan imaginations which “belied” the perfections of the Deity, namely, that the Heathen failed of the knowledge of God—that their capacity of knowing him was useless, and any knowledge which the world had possessed of him lost, because their appetites and passions predominated in the suggestion of their ideas, in the creation of their belief, concerning him: that they dealt with religion as though it had been a matter of personal choice or natural inclination:—“They *did not like*,” he writes, “to retain God in their knowledge.”¹ And whether Christianity be a divine institution or not, it appears to admit of no question, that in opposing itself to a wilful inaction, or perverse use, of the understanding in reference to religion, it has penetrated to the citadel of the passions, and forced the stronghold of wickedness: that in restoring the authority of conscience in the search of truth, it has taken an essential step in accomplishing the end which it professes to contemplate—the recovery of man to the service of his Maker, and the practice of all righteousness.

Christianity, however, obtains but a partial ascendancy amongst us, and, as has been already intimated, even in our own time, and amongst

¹ Or “did not think fit,” (*οὐκ ἔδοκίμασαν*) which, however, conveys the same sense. Rom. i. 28.

this people, proofs, unhappily, are not wanting of the necessity of a moral control, of a governing principle of obedience to the Creator, in proceeding to a judgment on the rectitude of our doings in his sight. We need but cite a single instance as decisive of this necessity; if anything in the compass of human observation can be. We refer to that opinion which the votaries of pleasure are so forward to allege, or so easily beguiled to admit—namely, that it is unreasonable to suppose that God disapproves the indulgence of passions which he has implanted in our nature. Is it possible to doubt, deliberately, that this opinion is itself engendered by the propensities which it is held to justify? Is it in the smallest degree more certain that there are appetites and passions in human nature, than that the intelligence which suggests or concedes to such an opinion is instinct with them? Or, if there be principles of conduct in a rational being which dictate a restraint upon his inclinations, is it not manifest that in the formation of that opinion, those principles are effectually overruled?—an opinion, be it observed, which would actually invest the passions with the authority of reason, and even the sacredness of religion; and thus exhibits no faint resemblance to that perversion of the human understanding, which polluted and still pollutes the temples of idolatry; inflaming its brutal orgies, and working

demoralization in the ostensible servants and worshippers of the Divinity.

We may further advert to the opinion which certain believers of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures are found in every age to embrace, that their faith in the sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for their guilt, exempts them from a personal obligation to holiness ; as another undoubted offspring of the same prolific parent of error ; reminding us, if possible, yet more strongly, that opportunities of knowing the true God might be utterly useless, or rather wholly pernicious, in the denial or forgetfulness of that responsibility which we are concerned to enforce :—that even writings believed to have been dictated by God himself, and preeminently adapted to accomplish the reformation of his creatures, might have the effect of depraving instead of improving their character ; of extinguishing or vitiating instead of reviving their sense of duty ; unless they held themselves bound to a faithful consideration of their import, or answerable to the Almighty in placing a construction upon the language in which his communication had been made to them ;—answerable in the adoption of their religious tenets.

With such examples before us, additional and accumulating proofs of the truth and magnitude of that presumption on which the doctrine under discussion is founded, who can hesitate to admit

that, if accountable to God at all, we are so for the part taken by our affections in the ideas which we entertain, the belief which we embrace, concerning him. Acknowledging it to be our highest duty to act in accordance with the will of God, must we not, in all consistency, own a corresponding obligation to ascertain, as fully and clearly as we are able, what his will *is*? and—which is equally essential—be active to learn, and solicitous to appropriate, the strongest inducements that may be afforded us, through whatever medium, to fulfil it?

The need and efficacy of special *motives* to the fulfilment of known duties, is, it must be readily perceived, a most important topic in connexion with our subject; and one which, though it can be ill comprehended in these limits, demands some particular observation. Individuals, it is manifest, may be equally intelligent of the moral qualities of actions, equally certain that they are agreeable or contrary to the will of God, while, at the same time, there may be so great a disproportion in their motives to the fulfilment of received obligations, as, in their actual conduct and personal character, to destroy all comparison between them. It cannot be denied that there have been individuals amongst the Heathen, who occasionally discerned the purest forms of moral rectitude, and commended a degree of self-

government entirely answerable to the precepts of the Gospel; so equally true is it that the path of righteousness, as described in the teaching of Christ and his apostles, lay open to human reason, and that the bulk of mankind have been careless or unwilling to find it. Moreover, unbelievers in modern times—though, as is often remarked, their writings have tended to a serious relaxation of the moral sentiments, and we might well have cited their opinions on particular questions relating to morals, as the determinations of a judgment more subservient to human inclinations than intent upon the essential distinctions of *right* and *wrong*—unbelievers have, in some instances, adopted into their ethical philosophy principles which, speaking generally, are justly regarded as distinguishing the morality of the Gospel. Christianity does not stand entirely alone in inculcating the utmost forbearance under injury and provocation, even a willingness to benefit individuals who have done us wrong; nor is it strictly singular in extending the application of moral rules to the feelings and imagination. The same insight into moral distinctions has been remarked in writings which make no pretensions to a divine inspiration. But where shall we find a parallelism of arguments for carrying it into practical effect—for applying the discrimination of the understanding to the government of the heart, the formation of character? Do the

reflections of a Seneca, or the ethics of a Volney supply their readers with inducements to a conscientious regulation of their thoughts and affections, equally urgent and constraining as those which are addressed to the believers of the Gospel, the disciples of Jesus Christ ?—There is here a disparity between them which must fill our apprehensions in a moment.

Now, whether Christianity be true or false, or to what extent such knowledge as would operate favourably on the principle of obedience to the Creator, and consequently on the whole moral character, is actually attainable in our particular circumstances, is a question which we have not undertaken to discuss, and are not at liberty to prejudge. We maintain the doctrine of Christianity, that man is accountable in reference to his religious belief, to be a reasonable conclusion, in itself considered, or independently of the particular claims of that or any other religion. Nevertheless, we are manifestly entitled to make the supposition of mankind in general, or of individuals or communities amongst them, that it might be considerably, it might be incalculably, important to their rectitude and well-being, to extend their knowledge of the agency and purposes of the Almighty regarding them. But if, as we have seen, there would be no valid ground for presuming that, in the spontaneous exercise of their

intellect, they would be brought to an apprehension of his will, just and comprehensive in proportion to their power of learning it, still less are we warranted to infer, that they would consider the frame of their own nature, or consult any other sources of knowledge, expressly and impartially, for facts and reasoning which might operate as motives to an active obedience of his laws. This, however, is the conclusion which those must have adopted or are bound to vindicate, who, holding man to be capacitated for the service of God in the practice of every virtue, would notwithstanding leave him to accomplish his high destination in the unbidden exercise of his own understanding. They must take for granted, that inasmuch as mankind are confessedly conscious of a practical infirmity in their sense of duty, or an inaptitude to do what they discern to be right, they must be proportionately concerned to ascertain, or ready to assent to, whatever conclusions may be credibly asserted as inducements to the fulfilment of their acknowledged obligations; standing in no need of any responsibility summoning them to such an application of their faculties:—as though a race of beings prone, more or less, to do evil, were not at the same time, and as the result of such moral imperfection, inclined to *evade* and *dispute*, as well as to forget, those arguments by which the reason opposes itself to the strength of

the passions, and threatens to arrest and overbear them :—as though it were not the peculiarity of our moral distemper, and the worst of its features, that it renders us averse to the use of remedies, and not the less so inasmuch as such remedies appear the more sure and effectual.

One and a primary motive to obey the Creator, and to repent of our transgressions against him, is the persuasion of his goodness ; but if, in the engrossment of created objects, men can be readily beguiled to disobey him, must it cost them no effort of self-denial—must it demand no cherished sense of duty, in order to learn, as well as they are able, the extent to which that goodness has reached in their behalf—the amount—it may be immense—to which it has swollen ? Hope and fear are energetic principles of human conduct ; powerful to coerce the passions, to damp their ardour, to humble their audacity ; powerful to enlist the affections in the cause of rectitude ; but, if it be incident to the mind of man to prefer a present gratification to a future though a greater good, where would be the likelihood that these elements of human nature were doing their needful and auspicious part in the moral world, if men were to account themselves as free to disregard as to examine the evidence of facts, and the validity of arguments, purporting to indicate a final retribution, or to afford conclusive proof of its reality, or to bring

into clearer light the actual bearing of their present conduct on their future destiny ?¹

Even if there were truths in existence, promotive of obedience to the Supreme Being, which are not forced upon the attention and conviction of mankind, but which discover themselves to the observers of his works and providence, we should have ample ground for recognising the responsibility in question. But if so, with what colour of reason can it be disowned or slighted by any who hold in their hands such a collection of writings as the Scriptures ?—documents which profess to bear a preternatural communication from the Deity, and to make disclosures specifically relating to our probationary state and our *capacity for moral excellence* ;—documents which, to say the least, suggest the possibility of an interposition on the part of God in behalf of

¹ In connexion with this topic, (the duty and importance of inquiring into the existing reasons for gratitude and for hope and fear towards God,) Bishop Butler observes, and surely with equal truth and pertinency—“ Suppose a man to be really in doubt whether such a person had not done him the greatest favour ; or, whether his whole temporal interest did not depend upon that person ; no one, who had any sense of gratitude and of prudence, could possibly consider himself in the same situation, with regard to such person, as if he had no such doubt. In truth, it is as just to say, that certainty and doubt are the same, as to say, the situations now mentioned would leave a man as entirely at liberty, in point of gratitude or prudence, as he would be, were he certain he had received no favour from such person, or that he no way depended upon him.”—*Analogy*, part ii. ch. 6.

our species; of facts confirmatory of the general presentiment of a life to come; of conditions in the attainment of future happiness;—in a word, the possibility of truths which, if known, if believed, would furnish motives to fulfil his will, to resolve and persevere in a course of rectitude, incomparably more cogent and availing than any that could have been discovered by human reason, or even have entered into our imagination? We do not, indeed, suppose that the *truth* of Christianity, even as a possibility, enters very much, if at all, into the speculations of persons who repudiate the responsibility for which we are contending. To accord to that religion, on the whole, a measure of credibility—to judge it not improbable that God may thus have signally interfered for the behoof and guidance of mankind, and, notwithstanding, to commend a general indifference to the matter of our religious belief—to the *articles of a creed*, would expose a habit of thinking in relation to the Creator, which none, we shall presume, would undertake to defend. But what we are combating in the theology of such persons is, the position that though man is an accountable being in regard to his conduct, it is unreasonable to conclude him to be such in regard to his belief; and if our argument be a sound one, it is not in the strength of *that* position that they can dissipate the proofs of Christianity,

and extinguish the rational belief of a divine revelation.

It is a rude and superficial theology that expects to secure the practical advantages of religion, while it leaves the attainment of its truths—the source, it must be evident, of its salutary efficacy on the conduct—to the choice or natural willingness of mankind to find them. It is true, indeed, that so far as men are actuated by a sincere desire to obey the divine will, their sense of inability to answer the dictates of their conscience must dispose them to value any superadded, extraordinary incentives to the fulfilment of their various duties,—to arm themselves with the surest weapons which the search of truth may furnish them in a strife with strong temptations. Undoubtedly, “he that will do the will of God” is provided with the most essential qualification to know of any doctrine whether it be of God. But, in this as in other instances, human piety and the satisfaction attending it are realized in the predominance of a sense of *duty* over present inclination. It is necessary that we should clearly perceive that our consciousness of deep infirmity in the religious affections as principles of conduct grounds an especial corresponding *obligation*, if not to search out, yet surely to give heed to, the most commanding and persuasive arguments that may appeal to those affections; that may stimulate our

sluggish piety, or support our faltering virtue; and, consequently, if led, by whatever means, to doubt the divine authority of the religion professed amongst us, to examine with a ready and impartial mind the authenticity of records, the credibility of facts, the truth of declarations, singularly, beyond all comparison, above all utterance, calculated to fill the mind with the love of God, and a wholesome dread of his displeasure; to establish the sense of his dominion over us; to fix our purpose in the service of that Being to whom confessedly our obedience is supremely due. Otherwise, we deliver up the mind to that tendency of our desires of present enjoyment, or merely earthly good, which has been brought under consideration—a tendency to preclude or extenuate that truth which confronts and opposes them; and, for aught we know to the contrary, may deprive ourselves of knowledge infinitely valuable to us as accountable and immortal beings.

We repeat then—and the divines and moralists in this assembly will hear with patience the iteration of a conclusion which, as they well know, is most essential to be borne in mind in the estimate of all such truth as that which we are now contemplating—we repeat, there can be no security for a just apprehension of the will of God, still less of the important consequences dependent on our fulfilling it, corresponding to

our opportunities and powers, if that doctrine which we are concerned to advocate should fall into neglect, or be kept in abeyance. Presuming the religious knowledge of individuals, or their right belief in religion, to depend upon the use of their own understanding—as it will more than heretofore, in the extension of general information, and the growing activity of the intellectual powers—all that bears the name of piety and virtue will be brought into utter jeopardy; inasmuch as such knowledge—inasmuch as a right belief in religion can avail to the reformation and improvement of mankind. What may be accomplished in the advancement of legislative wisdom, or improvements in administrative justice, is a question which may be yet unsolved; what greatly farther amelioration of the human character might be effected by a wiser direction of the public opinion, and a more active accumulation of its force, it were still more interesting to inquire; but so far as the knowledge of true religion can subserve the interests of morality, or the lasting welfare of mankind—so far as right conceptions of the Supreme Being, and well-founded views and expectations of futurity, may be judged to purify, and elevate, and support the soul of man, the light that is in us may be turned into darkness. God may have unfolded his mind in the works which his power has made; he may have signified his will in the

wonderful frame of our nature ; but men may expend a whole life without knowing that mind, that will. He may have specially declared the principles of his government, and the way of acceptance, the means of reconciliation, with his offended justice, in writings which he may have overruled the whole course of the world to preserve, and may yet overrule it to spread among all people ; he may have “ lifted up the light of his countenance,” and spoken in accents of mercy to the guiltiest amongst us ; he may even have given us promises “ exceeding great and precious,” overflowing all human hopes of a happiness hereafter ;—and, notwithstanding, it may in the end be found to our amazement, that, for aught we shall have gathered from such a manifestation of the Deity, he might have wrapped himself in impenetrable darkness, and kept an eternal silence.

And we cannot but add, it appears especially pertinent to assert the reasonableness of this doctrine of Christianity, and indispensably necessary to enforce its application, in forming our judgment on that particular religion. For, surely, when we turn our attention more directly to the practical scope of Christianity, we must confess, that if unruly appetites and misguided passions would operate to obstruct the knowledge of the true God under general circumstances, it were unreasonable, in the highest

degree, to presume that they would be at rest, or demand no express subordination to the religious principle, in applying our attention to the claims of the Gospel, and proceeding to a conclusion respecting them:—a religion which imposes a restraint not on one only of those desires and propensities which are so active in the process of believing, but upon all of them; opposing itself with uncompromising hostility to the sensual, the ambitious, the covetous, the vindictive nature; and moreover enforcing its requirements by sanctions which, it must suffice to observe, the man who would preserve his peace of mind in his disobedience of Christianity, must discharge from his thoughts by disbelief or forgetfulness. There must be—it were idle to dispute it—there must be, in judging of the credibility of this religion, ground for warning lest we fall short in a rectitude of purpose towards the Divine Being; and place for suspicion that those who have discarded it may have rent something more from the mind, than a mere respect for authority, or a prejudice of their education. Assuredly, if *this* be a light that has shone upon us from above, we must mortify our desires, we must deny ourselves, and “walk humbly with our God,” in order to come into it. If the words of Jesus Christ be a voice from heaven, then, in truth, if we “have ears to hear,” we have need to hear. If the pages of Scripture contain anything

essential to our well-being, and which it eternally concerns us to know, we must be willing to learn; if these be the oracles of God we must submit to be taught.—And if prayer to the Intelligent Cause of all things be a fitting act of his rational creatures, if it be reasonable to presume that the Author of our nature is no less accessible to our supplications, and willing to befriend us, in our mental strife and perplexity, than he is to succour these mortal bodies when pressed with thirst and hunger, then, if we feel that we “lack wisdom” in this great concernment, “let us ask of God,” in the hope and confidence that he will “give us liberally and upbraid us not.”

LECTURE IV.

A DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIANITY IN DISTINCTION FROM JUDAISM.

John xx. 29.

JESUS SAITH UNTO HIM, THOMAS, BECAUSE THOU HAST SEEN ME
THOU HAST BELIEVED: BLESSED ARE THEY THAT HAVE NOT
SEEN, AND YET HAVE BELIEVED.

IN the last discourse, we considered *one* important inference, deducible from the connexion which subsists between the condition of the affections in general and the operations of the understanding—namely, the absence of all probability that mankind would make an effectual use of their means of religious knowledge, unless they held themselves morally accountable to the Supreme Being in the use of their reason, or in the formation of their belief, concerning him. Now, with this inference before us, and applying it to the credibility of the Christian religion, it might at first appear probable, that if God had designed to effect an essential reformation in the human character, and had vouchsafed a revelation expressly for that purpose, he would have accom-

panied it with a strictly indubitable evidence of its having proceeded from himself, thus obviating the prejudicial influence of the passions in obstructing the attainment of religious truth; that is, so far as they could operate to raise a doubt of the reality of a divine communication—a doubt that that appeal which the gospel professes to make, on the part of the Creator, to the judgments of our conscience, to our hope and fear, and pre-eminently our gratitude, had been actually addressed to us; rendering us absolutely and unalterably sure, that, in embracing its conditions, we were securing the benefits which it offered us, as well as avoiding the consequences of unrepented sin. But this antecedent probability—which we notice as naturally suggesting itself in the prosecution of our argument, not because the absence of a stronger evidence of the truth of Christianity than actually attends it, has been objected to by its opponents *on this particular ground*—appears to be precluded by a *second* inference which immediately follows from the intimate connexion between the affections and the judgment—from that great fact in the known operations, the natural history, as it may be termed, of the human mind—the inference, that the readiness which individuals evince to acquire the knowledge of God, of his laws, his dispensations, his purposes respecting them, and so far their belief of a particular system of

religion, presuming it to be sufficiently attested to an impartial inquirer as a divine institution, must afford an important criterion of their desire to obey his will, as a ruling affection of the mind, or master-principle of conduct. This consideration, as we have before intimated, has been put forward by most authors who have argued the credibility of the Christian religion, and not the least by the more eminent of its advocates; who have justly reasoned that, assuming mankind to be in a state of probation, (a state in which Christianity unquestionably regards them, while it contemplates their recovery to the original integrity of their nature, and the happiness forfeited by sin,) it was antecedently probable, that a divine revelation should be so framed as to afford some test of our sincerity or upright purpose towards God in the act of our receiving it as such,—in the act of our acknowledging it to be a communication from the same Being who has given us no unintelligible indications of his will in the monitions of the conscience, or the constitution of our reasonable nature. It may, however, be more needful, at least it seems essential to a due estimate of Christianity in this point of view, to apply our attention to the *fact* that this antecedent presumption of probability is *professedly* proceeded upon and carried into effect in the Christian system: that it is an ostensible purpose of the Gospel to subject us to

such a trial of our rectitude towards the Supreme Being. This, it is true, is actually implied in its demanding our belief, or holding us accountable in the reception which we give to its doctrines; but till we had considered how close and extensive that alliance is which undeniably exists between the state of the affections and the operations of the understanding—between our principles of conduct and the complexion of our belief and opinions, we were less prepared to appreciate this particular avowed design of Christianity; and to assign it a due place in our thoughts, in forming our judgment on the evidence of its divine original.

That the Christian religion assumes this special responsibility to lie upon those who have been made acquainted with its doctrines, or placed *in a capacity* for believing them, must be conspicuously apparent when we compare our own circumstances, in regard to the evidence afforded us of a divine revelation, with the recorded condition of the Israelites under the Mosaic institution. We speak of that institution as it appears on the pages of the Old Testament, and under the character in which it is represented in the Christian Scriptures, namely, as initial and preparatory to the Christian economy; and if we seem to assume the divine origin of either, it is for the purpose of exhibiting that distinguishing feature in the religion of the Gospel,

which has been proposed for consideration in the present discourse. Christianity, it must be remembered, asserts its essential alliance with that system of religion whose history and ordinances are recorded in the Jewish Scriptures, and consequently should be viewed in connexion with that system; whether our purpose be to discriminate the doctrines which it teaches, or to appreciate the proofs of its divine authority. Taking then the account in the Old Testament, it must be evident, on the least reflection, that the Israelites were irresistibly convinced of the divine origin and authority of their whole national polity, religious and civil. They were entirely and securely possessed of that conviction, and it was repeatedly brought to their remembrance, and impressed upon their minds, by their own perception of miracles; which were wrought, from time to time, to attest and signalize the special interposition of God, in separating them from surrounding nations; in framing their laws and institutions, and presiding over their destinies as a people. Now, in remarkable distinction from such a condition of the intellect in reference to a divine revelation, our belief of the Christian religion is the result of *investigation*, by individuals on their own account, or on behalf of others; and our persuasion of its truth may be either shaken or confirmed in the course of our examination of the grounds on which it has

heretofore obtained, and still obtains, the faith of its professors; and that persuasion may be entirely overthrown by the active suggestions of our own mind, or the besetting unbelief of others. Of course, those amongst us who are unacquainted with the proofs of Christianity may be turned aside from the belief of its doctrines: ignorance on this head *must be* an occasion of danger to the faith of Christians. But intelligent, inquiring believers of the Gospel are liable to fluctuate in their judgment respecting it. They feel the need, they own the duty, of ascertaining, and bearing in remembrance, the nature and force of that testimony which was borne to the reality of the miracles, asserted to have been wrought in attestation of the divine commission of Christ and his apostles; as well as of discriminating, and keeping in view, such internal characters of truth as they perceive to be impressed on those documents which are held to set forth the religion they promulgated to the world.

To the Jewish people under the Mosaic dispensation, it would have been comparatively useless, or rather wholly unnecessary, to argue the credibility of their religion; to collect and marshal a body of proofs by which they might be supported in their belief of the divine legation of Moses, and the inspiration of the prophets. It were difficult to conceive on what grounds they could have doubted the one or the other;

and we are not aware of any traces in their history that they did; certainly there are none worthy of being mentioned in the comparison under consideration. When they departed from the commandment delivered to them, they acted as children who rebel against a parent in mere perverseness and obduracy, without the smallest doubt of his parental relation or authority; or as subjects who conspire against their monarch at the impulse of cupidity and ambition, without the shadow of a pretext for impugning his title to the sceptre which they are seeking to wrest from his hand. Accordingly, when the inspired prophets endeavoured to reclaim them from the idolatry and wickedness into which they had fallen, to the worship and service of the true God, it was rationally sufficient to appeal to the miraculous redemption which he had accomplished for them, in their deliverance from the yoke of Egypt, and the extraordinary privileges which he had conferred upon them as a people; or to recite the awful judgments with which he had aforesaid visited the transgressors against him. It was necessary only to move them to compunction for ingratitude, which, on reflection, they could not but acknowledge; or to awaken a dread of provoking the Most High to afflict or destroy them. But to effect *our* reformation from vicious practices, or an irreligious life, it is far from being always sufficient to

reflect upon the "goodness of God," which the Gospel announces, in order to lead us to repentance; or to contemplate the "terrors of the Lord," which it arrays against the impenitent transgressor. We are subject to doubts of the reality of such goodness; of the rational foundation of such terrors. We are accessible to a presumption, be it probable or otherwise, that the scheme of our redemption unfolded in the Scriptures is a human invention; and that the character and circumstances of guilt which it imputes to every one of us before God, with the aggravated punishment which it denounces against the "despisers" of that last transcendent display of divine mercy, are no other than figments of superstition, the phantoms of man's imagination. And even when we have sincerely acquiesced in the teaching of the Gospel, and are fulfilling, as we trust, in an availing measure, the gracious conditions which it has laid upon us, we are still within the reach of a sceptical philosophy; chilling our devotion to the Creator and Redeemer of the world, and unsettling our resolutions in his service.

Moreover, in manifest consistency with this difference in our religious condition from that of the Israelites under the former dispensation, it is observable, that when the subjects of the Mosaic economy, and, it may be added, the worshippers of the true God in the ages preceding, were subjected to a trial of their faith, they were required

to believe that God would in reality fulfil the promises which they were in no condition to doubt, but were certainly sure, that he had made to them; and, in that belief, they were expected to overcome the most powerful temptations, of terror or allurements, to disobey the divine commandment. Such was the faith demanded from the piety of an early age, the faith of Abraham, of Moses, and other servants of God,—of that whole army of the faithful, who, in the exulting language of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, “all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”¹ Such is an essential bounden duty of piety in all time. But the faith more especially demanded by Jesus Christ from the Jews was a belief of his divine commission, and the unbelief of which he accused them consisted, not in rejecting or distrusting his words as an already accredited messenger from God, but in disputing the sufficient evidence, resisting the conviction, that he *was* a messenger from God, the true predicted Messiah. And though, in their case, an appeal was made to the evidence of miracles—a fact to which we shall again advert more particularly—yet, clearly, that exercise of faith which the Scripture more especially requires from ourselves is of a similar nature,

¹ Heb. xi. 13.

or has for its object the same proposition—namely, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is itself an actual revelation from the Author of our being.

Now surely the diminished force of that evidence which is offered of the divine authority of the Christian religion, when compared with the resistless, overpowering demonstration of God's interposition in the establishment of the Mosaic economy, as related in the Scriptures, should be considered in connexion with the fact, that the former professedly bringing with it larger discoveries of religious truth than the latter, conferring superior privileges, inspiring loftier hopes and expectations, claims, in consequence, to institute a severer trial of human rectitude; and contemplates a superior discipline, a higher development, of religious and moral principles.—For it is in perfect and, indeed, remarkable consistency with such a distinction between the two dispensations, that Christianity should allow a wider scope for that influence which well ordered passions on the one hand, and unrestrained inclinations on the other, are certainly known to exert on the decisions of the understanding. We say a *wider* scope for that influence, because, as has been already pointed out, every state of probation implies *a certain measure* of that influence, for good or evil, discovering itself in some form of opinion or another. Every trial of upright principle proceeds on an assumed

connexion between the passions and the reason, the desires and the judgment. The Israelites could not have been effectually tempted to wilful, flagrant violations of commandments which they were absolutely certain had been delivered to them by God himself, had they not been beguiled by some opinion, whatever it might be, suggesting a presumption that he would not in reality execute the sentence which he had denounced against the transgressor; but would be prevailed upon to remit it.¹ To such illusions of a

¹ Gibbon's lofty and specious sarcasm on the supernatural interpositions of the Deity recorded in the Jewish Scriptures, is far from being conclusive against their reality. He observes, "The contemporaries of Moses and Joshua had beheld with careless indifference the most amazing miracles," and (as he elsewhere expresses it) with "stubborn incredulity." (Chap. xv.) They might have beheld the miracles, not with indifference or incredulity, but with the feelings ascribed to them in the history in which these miracles are recorded—with the utmost astonishment and deep religious awe; and yet, however the fact must surprise us, they might have disobeyed the commandment which they were intended to enforce. For the sight of the miracles, it should be observed, could only fix the conviction that God *had threatened* the transgressor with punishment: it could do nothing more. But did it necessarily follow that the conviction would bring with it as sure and immovable a persuasion that God *would actually inflict* the punishment which he had threatened,—a persuasion proof against the importunity of their own inclinations, the desire of some excuse for indulging them? Must it have been so unquestionably natural for "the contemporaries of Moses and Joshua" to disengage *their* idea of God from all merely human and earthly associations; and, for any length of time, to avoid conceiving of him as bearing a resemblance to themselves?

distempered judgment, believers of Christianity are similarly liable. They stand in need of the following impressive warning of the Apostle, to deter them from the commission of sins which, notwithstanding, they believe to have been positively forbidden by God, on pain of exclusion from the kingdom of heaven—"Let no man deceive you with vain words, for because of these things the wrath of God cometh upon the children of disobedience;" and again, "Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." In truth, the only security from such illusive presumptions, "the deceitfulness of sin," is to be found in *acting*, at once

Might it not have been necessary to convince this people, by the evidence of their senses and experience, that the Deity "was not a man that he should repent?"—a people of a rude age, unused to abstract contemplation, and wont to presume on their privileges as the chosen people of God? Such conduct, indeed, as theirs, under such circumstances, must, as we have said, surprise us: it is manifestly looked upon with an air of astonishment in the history that records it; at least, the people who were guilty of it are stigmatized as "stiff-necked;" distinguished as such even in the annals of human perverseness and obstinacy. But it should be borne in mind that there is a wide interval between what is extraordinary and what is incredible. It is *extraordinary* that a people prone as the rest of the world to idolatry, should have been distinguished by laws and institutions which prohibited it and sought its extirpation,—extraordinary that they should have been actually preserved from idolatrous practices during no inconsiderable periods of time, and again and again reclaimed when they had fallen into them. But these things are far from being incredible, as explained in the history which relates them.

and habitually, on our present conscientious convictions: for the understanding is inexhaustibly fertile in supplying the passions with pretexts and apologies for their own indulgence; and, moreover, the power of habit, however we explain this ruinous tyranny in the mind of man,—the power of habit is working at this moment, in ways without number, in direct defiance of the clearest deductions of reason, and the most imperative judgments of the conscience. But, added to the ordinary pretexts and subterfuges which man is so quick to invent, and so fond to cling to, in the evasion of his duty, *we* are importuned by a more specious and imposing plea, in behalf of that policy which regards supremely the gratification and aggrandizement of self, and looks no farther than the pleasures and advantages of the present state:—the opinion that the volume received amongst us as prescribing the laws of the Creator, laying open the principles of his moral government, and recording his denunciations and promises, is *itself* insufficiently authenticated as a communication from heaven. And this, we submit, would be perfectly consistent, if regarded as a consequence and proof of our being under a more comprehensive and searching trial of our sincerity towards God—of our steadfastness in the whole pursuit of goodness.

There are other instances besides that which is now under consideration, in which the

Christian economy assumes to have enlarged the bounds, so to speak, of our probationary state, and to address itself more directly to the sense of duty than the dispensation which, as it declares, preceded and foretold it: for example, in its total indifference to rewards and punishments of a strictly temporal nature, as incentives to devotion and virtue. Presuming Christianity to be, as it purports, an improved and perfect system of religion, the discontinuance of such incentives to the fulfilment of our duties could be satisfactorily accounted for on no other ground, than that, however expedient and needful to stimulate the piety of mankind at an early period, as well as to promote the peculiar objects of the Mosaic institution, they were neither requisite nor conducive to that superior strength of moral principle—that more independent love of holiness, which the Gospel was designed to raise and nourish. If their place had not been completely and greatly better supplied, by the offer of a reward different in its nature from the objects of pursuit in this world, as well as reserved to a future state; or even if, notwithstanding the earnest of immortality to the faithful disciples of Christ, they might have brought an important auxiliary to their principles; they would not, we must conclude, have been wholly withdrawn and held of no account in Christianity:—presuming that religion, as we have said, were

what it describes itself to be, one in which the “divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue.”¹

We are not then applying to the illustration of the doctrine which it was our purpose to explain and vindicate, a distinction between the Jewish and Christian systems of religion, which has no proper foundation. Indeed it is a prominent topic in the Apostolical writings, that the subjects of the Law—a term by which the whole Jewish religion is most commonly signified—were in a state of childhood or nonage, and placed under a lower order of divine governance, in comparison with those who have been instructed in the principles of the Gospel. But such a representation of their spiritual condition cannot, it is abundantly evident, be understood to imply that they were favoured with less convincing proofs of the divine origin of their religion. It clearly imports that the Christian dispensation has admitted us, not to a higher degree of certainty in our belief, but to a larger measure of knowledge;—that is, knowledge conveyed to us on *highly probable* evidence; for the utmost or absolute certainty would obliterate that distinction between the two systems of which we are speaking.

¹ 2 Pet. i. 3.

According to the account in the Jewish Scriptures, the Israelites under the Law could have neither wanted nor desired an additional assurance of the *fact*, that God “at sundry times and in divers manners spake” to them “by the prophets;” but it is presumed in the Gospel that he has spoken to us exceedingly *more* by his Son, than he spake to them by the prophets; having specially revealed himself as the Author of a complete redemption from the guilt and power of sin, and the Donor of an immortal life. Christianity professes to have clearly unfolded our peculiar privileges and destination as the creatures of God—in its own words, as the “sons of God,” and the heirs of an imperishable inheritance; and, consequently, demands on our part a more profound and impartial obedience; a devotion in his service which not only prompts us to obey his will when unavoidably known, but inclines us to attend to the proofs and significations of his will itself; a readiness to acknowledge his authority, to recognise his voice, in commandments which—if he have spoken in the Gospel—he hath with *so much mercy* laid upon us. Christianity declares it to be the duty of all mankind, in all ages and circumstances, to “seek” the Author of their being; to collect his mind from his works, and from the nature he has given them; to trace his footsteps in the path of his providence; to comprehend “his ways” to

men. It accuses the Heathen of a general and gross neglect of that duty, and holds it up as a proof of their moral degeneracy; but accounts ourselves—accounts those who have been instructed in its principles, as thereby raised to a condition of intelligence, essentially more favourable than was that of the Heathen to such an employment of their powers in the service of the Creator; as well as to the fulfilment of every other duty that we owe him. Hence it deals so largely with our reason and conscience: urging its demand on our belief by abundant argument, and a great variety of proof; but withholding the evidence of miracles, or rather, we should say, compulsory means of conviction.

We do not forget that *originally* the faith of Christians, as well as of Jews, as related in the Scriptures, was, more or less, the effect of miracles, of an appeal to the senses,—of “mighty signs and wonders by the Spirit of God.” But, not to speak of the reasoning by which, in that age, it was attempted to obviate the impression of miracles as manifestations of the hand of God,—reasoning which served the enmity of the Scribes and Pharisees against Jesus, and was so entirely successful with the Jewish multitude as, notwithstanding their previous astonishment at his miracles, to induce them to account him a mischievous impostor, and to inflame them with the utmost animosity against him,—not to speak

of the reasoning in general which opposed itself to the original promulgation of the Gospel, and which is presumed in the Scripture to have tried the devout purpose of the earliest Christians, and annexed a moral value to their faith ;—not to speak of such reasoning, the performance of miracles was a predicted office of the Messiah, and indispensable, on various grounds, to command the belief of Christianity at the period of its first publication. It must be evident, however, that the true scope of that religion, as an instrument of human trial and discipline, is to be collected, not from the means of its introduction and actual settlement in the world, but from the aspect in which it was designed to present itself to the human understanding from age to age, and obtain a permanent ascendancy in the views and expectations of mankind. Indeed its Founder himself has clearly expressed his demand and commendation of a belief—a belief of his *resurrection*, and consequently of the doctrines which that display of the power of God was intended to establish, which should not be dependent on the evidence of the senses, but should derive its strength and nourishment from a right use of our powers of understanding. What otherwise can be the import of his words to the incredulous disciple ?—“ Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed : blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed.”

But it brooks no question, and we do but endeavour to engage a more earnest attention to the fact, that the Gospel, in requiring our belief, appeals to an essential conformity existing between its own declarations and the conclusions of our reason, the judgments of our conscience. We have already had occasion to notice that conformity, but it may now require a more specific observation.

Consistently with what appeared to be the precise limits of our subject, it was premised at the outset that whatever is right, whatever is morally good in the conduct and dispositions of mankind, is conformable to the will of God. It directly follows, with regard to Christianity—and, in this important view of its character, it were idle to speak of any other alleged revelation from God—that, inasmuch as the precepts and doctrines which it inculcates are undeniably and pre-eminently calculated to promote the moral rectitude of mankind, we have an antecedent presumption of its having proceeded from the Author of our being: a presumption which might indeed, on subsequent inquiry, be overruled and superseded, but a strong presumption *till* overruled, *till* superseded. Such, we apprehend, is that most reasonable, conscientious presumption to which Christ adverted in the declaration, “He that will do the will of God shall know of the doctrine whether it be of

God,”—clearly implying that the will of God, as expounded by himself, was so conformable to the dictates of reason, so immediately discernible as right and good, as to secure for the *whole* “doctrine” which he taught, and the proofs in general of his divine commission, the ready examination of every individual predisposed to the service of the Divine Being.

If there be then an accountableness to God in the conduct of our understanding, in the matter of our belief, relating to him, such a presumption assumes a character of peculiar and supreme importance, investing itself with the authority of the conscience, and bearing *so much* testimony to the demand of the Gospel to be received as a revelation from God, as to dictate a special attention to additional marks of its veracity, to farther arguments of its credibility; and to infer the possibility and likelihood of contracting guilt in rejecting them. But for such a presumption we could perceive no definite ground of obligation to search the foundations of Christianity, which might not as well apply to any other of the religions in the world. The Gospel could not justly challenge our attention because it professes to inspire a devotion towards God, or to supply us with information of a life to come—other systems of religion profess as much—but because it seeks to inspire devotion towards God, and the hope of future happiness, in inseparable connexion

with the pursuit of all attainable holiness and virtue: because the crown of glory which it offers is to be striven for in a contest with every evil passion, and won in the triumph over them: because the love of God which it teaches is a commanding motive to the love of our fellow creatures, the fulfilment of our duties one towards another.—For it is through our perception of a resemblance between certain relations connecting us with our fellow creatures, and those which we sustain towards our Creator and Preserver, and our perception of corresponding duties attaching to those relations, that we are qualified to entertain any sense of moral obligation to Almighty God whatsoever; any sense of the duty, for example, of applying our attention to writings which *seem* to speak his language, to bear his seal. A religion which trenched upon the duties of *morality* were demonstrably an imposition on human credulity—an affront to the enlightened reason.

It must suffice to remark in general the strength of this presumption in support of Christianity, and its force to bind the conscience in dealing with its claims to our reception. We may observe, moreover, that so far as a belief of the Gospel may be regarded as acceptable to God, as properly an offering of piety, the faith of a considerable number of Christians would be found to resolve itself into a full consent to that presumption: preparing the mind, as it does, for

the main scope of its peculiar doctrines, the general strain of its precepts and exhortation. And the faith of the most intelligent of believers, be it built up and fortified as it may with learning and philosophy, must, as a structure of moral strength and excellence, repose on the same foundation. It is remarked by Bishop Horsley, in a discourse on that passage of Scripture which we cited at the beginning, as agreeable to this view of Christianity, that “whatever it may be which gives faith its merit in the sight of God, it is surely to be looked for not in the faith of the learned, but in the common faith of the learned and illiterate believer.”¹ It may be added

¹ In the luminous discourses of this prelate, there are two on these words of Christ. The remark above cited is supported by the following comprehensive passage, which surely deserves to be impressed on the mind of every reader of the Scriptures :—“What then is the great foundation of proof to those who are little read in history, and are ill qualified to decypher prophecy, and compare it with the records of mankind? Plainly this, which the learned and the ignorant may equally comprehend,—the intrinsic excellence of the doctrine, and the purity of the precept ;—a doctrine which conveys to the rudest understanding just and exalted notions of the Divine perfections ; exacts a worship purged of all hypocrisy and superstition—the most adapted to the nature of him who offers—the most worthy, if aught may be worthy, of the Being that accepts it ; prescribes the most rational duties—things intrinsically the best, and the most conducive to private and to public good ; proposes rewards adequate to the vast desires and capacities of the rational soul ; promises mercy to infirmity, without indulgence to vice ; holds out pardon to the penitent offender in that particular way which secures to a frail

here, that though the principle which renders the faith of the learned morally approvable in the judgment of God must be the same as that of the illiterate; yet, in the former, that principle may be subject to a severer trial, may be exposed to attack from additional and peculiar causes, and be crowned in its steadfastness with especial honour. Indeed it is due to this view of the Christian system to remark, that whether that religion be true or false, it is precisely such reasoning as tends to undermine its foundations, or to destroy the belief of its divine authority, which would suggest itself to the more intelligent portion of mankind; provided they were averse to that discipline of our nature to which it would subject them. These, it is certain, could ill sustain themselves in a practical neglect of the Gospel, by those gross conceptions of the Deity, and misapprehensions of Christian doctrines, which so readily mislead the judgment, and lull the consciences, of the ignorant and unthinking; and which so remarkably prevailed in past ages, through a dearth of knowledge and intellectual

imperfect race the blessings of a mild government, and secures to the majesty of the Universal Governor all the useful ends of punishment; and builds this scheme of redemption on a history of man and Providence,—which clears up many perplexing questions concerning this origin of evil, the unequal distribution of happiness and misery, and the disadvantages on the side of virtue in this constitution of things, which seem inexplicable upon any other principle.”

cultivation. Undoubtedly, the spread of infidelity at an enlightened period of the world—were this the fact—would appear to argue a deficiency in the evidence of Christianity; but, at the same time, it admits of no question that, at such a period, those who were unwilling to comply with its practical conditions would be thrown more directly upon the resources of the intellect for their support and vindication; and that spirit of self-indulgence which, in times of ignorance, had screened itself from the rebukes and expostulations of the Gospel by imaginary acts of atonement for sin, as well as by purposes of future amendment, would fain encounter them on strictly sceptical or antichristian ground. This inference is far from being offered in a spirit jealous of research and argumentation, which surely need not suffer from a close restraint on any predisposition adverse to the love of truth: it is above dispute, that if the will and affections be properly subject to a moral regulation in the use of our reason, in reference to the question whether the Christian religion be a divine or merely human institution, they are so especially in an age of information and inquiry; and, pre-eminently, to the most active and excursive minds.

We have sought to make evident the very prominent place which the doctrine of a responsibility, in regard to our religious opinions,

actually occupies in the Christian system; as calculated to press it more strongly on the attention of any who reject that system as incredible, or are indifferent to the evidences of its truth. Moreover, it must follow that our probationary condition, in this essential instance, should be steadily kept in view, and received with its proper consequences, by all who in reality believe the Gospel, and build upon it their hopes of future happiness. Placed, as it is, so conspicuously before them in the Scriptures, they may be sure that it merits a proportionate share of their attention; both as it relates to the government of their own minds, and the general advancement of the Christian religion. Our principal aim, however, has been to urge it on the reflection of individuals who have abandoned, or are inclined to abandon, their belief of Christianity: and, in the next discourse, we shall bring under discussion the *present* import of Christ's accusation against the unbelieving Jews, or its applicability to persons who reject the Gospel in our own time.

In concluding for the present, we find it difficult to forbear one or two observations.—There is in the business of human inquiry, not merely a love of knowledge commonly so termed, but a love of truth, which is properly entitled to a moral approbation, and ranks high among the virtues. Be it observed, then, that it is that

principle which Christianity not only recognises in its commandment to *believe*, but directly appeals to in the *probable*, and therefore *resistible*, nature of the evidence which it offers of its divine origin. For if there be a moral quality in the love of truth, this cannot be the love of that truth which presents itself in the undimmed and perfect lustre of scientific or demonstrative evidence; with regard to which, speaking strictly, there can be no experience of doubt or uncertainty, no balancing of proofs, no suspension of judgment, no degrees of conviction; the belief of which must be unmixed and absolute, if it exist at all. Rather—it cannot be a love of that truth which is perceived to be such by a strength of evidence above our power to resist or evade; for, however we may discriminate between the force of that evidence which accompanies and rewards the pupil of science, strictly so called, and that of testimony or experience, there are innumerable instances in which the distinction is purely speculative, and we are as wholly unable to resist conviction from the latter as the former. We say, then, that when we speak of the love of truth as a virtue, and commend it to habitual regard and cultivation, we cannot mean the love of that truth which, however men may be tempted to shun, no excess of their passions could prevent them from perceiving; which no aversion to the truth on their part could darken or

obscure ; which enters and pervades with equal ease and certainty the purest and the most polluted minds. If there *was* any trial of this principle in the Jews, in reference to the pretensions of Jesus, and any exposure of their wickedness in rejecting him, that trial and that exposure were consequent on the fact, that the evidence of his divine commission did not reach the highest degree of certainty ; that his credentials were open to cavil and disputation ; that circumstances could be cited to his prejudice, not without colour and plausibility ; and reasoning was at hand to bring against the proofs of his Messiahship. The physical possibility, for example, that his miracles might have been the effect of a diabolical agency, lent them a pretext for refusing to accept him as a messenger from God ; and to which, such was their hostility to the substance and spirit of his doctrines, they might continue to cling, notwithstanding the argument and rebuke of Christ, which, had they been accessible to evidence less than demonstrative or irresistible, must have flashed conviction into their minds, and struck them with shame and confusion. The love of truth, we insist, as a moral principle, is the love of that truth, the evidence of which being more or less partial or incomplete, and conflicting with our selfishness and undue propensities, has the property of trying the integrity of the character—that truth

which is conversant with our duties towards God and towards man, and the love of which is so far synonymous with the love of rectitude.

One thing, then, is certain, that those individuals must be ill prepared to appreciate the claims of Christianity, who, instead of seeking to ascertain the truth regarding it by a comparison of adverse probabilities, are mainly engaged in the discovery of objections against it, or in suggesting difficulties in the way of its reception. They have need to reflect that the power of raising objections to propositions relating to our duties, whether to God or man, is, of all things, the last that should satisfy, or actually can satisfy, the love of truth as a moral principle: that the man who leans to that power takes the surest course to enfeeble and destroy the love of truth, and prepares his understanding to become the able and obsequious minister of his appetites and passions. Christianity, they should consider, appeals to the sense of rectitude towards God, when it claims the assent of the understanding; and the question for the unbeliever to determine is, whether, in rejecting it, he can in the secret judgment of his conscience, acquit himself of an imputation of insincerity towards the Supreme object of devotion and obedience. It is sometimes urged upon the sceptic to reflect upon the awful *possibility* that Christianity may be true. It is an awful possibility; but it is so because

Christianity is precisely that appeal to the sense of duty, and on no other ground: God has not placed us under the necessity of providing for our happiness in a future state, and left us, in so doing, to a successfulness of conjecture, or the reach and training of our intellectual powers. But this is not the only awful possibility. I may disbelieve the Gospel, and this system of religion may be, in reality, nothing more than a wonderful formation of the purely inventive and imaginative principles of the human mind—but is the awful alternative at an end? Suppose, then, that in addressing myself to the question of its credibility, and advancing to the determination to reject it, I have been mainly actuated by dispositions and feelings which my conscience cannot approve, or must entirely condemn; by a desire to free myself from certain restraints upon my conduct, and apprehensions of the Supreme Being, and a life to come; or even to be the final judge of my own actions, the sole proprietor of myself;—am I exonerated and secure because the Gospel is untrue? Is this the state of mind with which I am satisfied to appear before the Moral Governor of the universe—to see the end of all things—to await the disclosures of futurity?—One word more, and we conclude.

Christianity teaches the love of God in inseparable connexion with the love of our fellow-creatures. In binding its professors, then, to

a faithful, conscientious use of their reason, in all inquiries involving a determination of their duties one towards another, it supplies a great desideratum of humanity; without which there can be no security for the virtue of individuals, and, consequently, for the social welfare and permanent prosperity of communities. The opinions of men are so powerfully acted upon by their interests and passions; these are so effective in reversing their past conclusions, as well as in preventing the formation of others; so effective, strictly speaking, as stimulants of thought, and instruments of conviction; that, unless the force of moral obligation be realized in the exercise of the judgment, there is no guarantee for a probity of character, whether in a public capacity or private life. If this be wanting, what, we ask, are extensive views and a practised intellect, but readier and surer means of indulging our own inclinations, and advancing our selfish designs? What is intellectual power, as distinguished from physical strength, or a brute force, but a change in the mode of that warfare, in which, at all times, individuals and bodies of men have been more or less engaged against the power of justice, and the common interest of mankind? What is it to be rich in a treasury of knowledge, disciplined in reasoning, and formidable with the weapons of controversy, but to be more amply

provided, and better fitted, for aggressing upon the rights, and trampling on the feelings of our fellow men? We are adverting to a worth and excellence in Christianity which will not fail to be better and more generally understood, if the morals of a people keep pace with the common intelligence: and which such an assembly as the present cannot but well and peculiarly appreciate. You know—you have observed and traced the difference which there is in the operations of the human understanding, when men are intent upon self-indulgence or personal aggrandizement, and when solicitous to fulfil their duty and promote the general good; and you must revere that religion which turns the attention of its disciples, in so conspicuous a manner, to the springs of thought; and seeks to inform and animate the functions of the intellect with the principles of an enlightened conscience.—May all unite to honor and obey it! that when the objects and pursuits of this life shall have ceased to interest us, and the strife of parties with the rage of controversy, be hushed in our hearing—at the last, the trying hour, “our rejoicing” may be “this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world.”¹

¹ 2 Cor. i. 12.

LECTURE V.

THE PRESENT IMPORT OF CHRIST'S ACCUSATION AGAINST THE UNBELIEVER.

Heb. iii. 12.

TAKE HEED, BRETHREN, LEST THERE BE IN ANY OF YOU AN EVIL HEART OF UNBELIEF, IN DEPARTING FROM THE LIVING GOD.

WHEN we reflect that Christianity openly professes to try the character of our dispositions and motives, in laying its commandment upon us to believe the doctrines which it assumes to unfold, and that the absence of a strictly indubitable, or necessarily convincing, evidence of its divine authority, so far from lending any rational inducement to regard this religion with indifference, would be essential and directly instrumental to such a trial of human beings; when we reflect, as was argued in our last discourse, that the non-existence, to ourselves, of a miraculous attestation to the truth of the Gospel, is impressively consistent with a capital distinction set forth in the Scriptures between the Mosaic and the

Christian dispensation; when we bear in mind, moreover, that effective influence which the predominating affections are continually and unobservedly exerting on the movements and habit of the intellect, with the singular fitness of Christianity to afford a test of our governing principles in judging of the proofs of its divine authority;—it surely becomes a matter of most rational concernment—to individuals who either reject as incredible that volume which is commonly received amongst us as the word of God, or are wont to entertain doubts, and moot objections, concerning it—to be well assured that it is not a corrupt bias of human desires and inclinations, which has led them, or appears to be leading them, to a disbelief of the Gospel. For they cannot but acknowledge that, whether the Gospel be itself a divine revelation or otherwise, and however they and other persons may seek to justify their *own* rejection of its doctrines, the *existence* of such a bias in dealing with the evidence of its truth, is highly probable in the nature of things, and, in many instances, capable of proof from observation and experience. We say, it greatly concerns individuals who disbelieve the Gospel, to assure themselves that they have applied their understanding to the question of its credibility with a religiously upright and docile mind; and are accordingly prepared, if this be possible, to

sustain the judgment of that Omniscient Being, who, it is alleged, addresses them in its pages. We speak of an application of the understanding to this question, for we shall not presume that any who admit that accountableness which we have endeavoured to establish, and who admit, moreover, that the evident and incomparable tendency of the Christian religion to correct and purify our moral nature, grounds an obligation to examine the evidence of its divine original, would, notwithstanding, refuse to proceed a step farther towards a reception of its doctrines; and, after having made these admissions, would assert that the arguments adduced to convince us that the Deity has actually interposed to bind the Gospel on our faith and practice—to convince us that prophecy has been fulfilled, and miracles wrought, to accredit it as a revelation from himself, are so palpably erroneous or defective, as to offer no inducement to a considerate estimate of their value; or to put the religious sincerity of intelligent persons to no sensible test, in forming a conclusion respecting them. If, indeed, there be any who can thus characterize processes of reasoning, which have brought conviction to the greatly larger number of cultivated minds, and led to the advocacy of the Christian religion, men who were no less acknowledged masters of reason than exemplars of moral excellence, it is hardly on such persons that we can

hope to produce any wholesome impression in the prosecution of this subject.

Jesus Christ and his apostles, consistently with their demand to be received as messengers from God, and the assumption that they were adequately accredited as such to all impartial witnesses, ascribed the disbelief of those who rejected their pretensions to the prevalence of vicious propensities, or the defect of a reigning principle of obedience to the Creator. But as it was not our design, and has not been attempted, in these discourses, to maintain the sufficient evidence of the Christian religion, we are not entitled to affirm the justice of that imputation, or to speak of the unbeliever as though we had directly met his objections, or accumulated arguments which might urge him to a conviction of its truth. Our purpose has been to lay open the reasonableness of Christianity so far as it inculcates the responsibility of mankind in forming their religious belief; and to enforce the peculiar necessity of personally realizing our probationary condition in this respect, in order to a just estimation of the claims of that religion in particular:—a religion which so manifestly makes its appeal to the dictates of the conscience against the solicitation of the passions, and arrays the presumptions of a future state against the seductions of the present world. But were we strictly to assert that a depraved bias of the

affections is the root of unbelief in general, and that the accusation of the Scripture against the unbelieving is a just one, then, instead of seeking to possess the mind with the conviction of an accountableness in dealing with the Gospel, and thereby promoting an impartial inquiry into the evidence of its truth, we should anticipate the result of the inquiry itself. We should be taking for granted that the presumption of its being a revelation from the Deity, which is pressed upon the conscience by its congruity with our moral constitution, is fully sustained by additional and decisive proofs of its divine authority; borne out, for example, by historical testimony, or various internal marks of veracity in writings whose authors declared themselves to be inspired by the Spirit of God.

At the same time, we cannot but perceive that a correct apprehension of the accusation in question, in its reference to unbelievers in our own time, is of peculiar importance to a just personal sense of that responsibility, to which the Gospel forewarns us we are subject, in judging of the grounds on which it demands our credence as a divine revelation. The condemnation which Christ denounced against those who disbelieved his divine commission, was provoked, as we have been careful to insist, by the dispositions which they evinced in rejecting him,—dispositions, which, it is evident according to the account in

the Gospels, created an enmity to the doctrine which he taught, irrespective of its title to their belief, or the evidence on which it was founded. It applies to a state of the understanding which can no more exist apart from a perversion of the will—apart from an aversion or carelessness to know the truth relating to the Creator, than actions can be constituted criminal in his sight in the absence of the motives and inclinations from which they are presumed to spring. The question, in consequence, suggests itself, How far are we warranted or bound to assert that *in the judgment of Scripture*, the guilt of unbelief, or its desert of condemnation, is imputable to those who reject the Gospel in our own time. The discussion of this question is so essentially connected with the purport of Christianity itself, and affects so nearly the *spirit* of inquiry which is drawn to the investigation of its claims, that we shall make it the subject of the present discourse.

It cannot be allowed, then, that because, in the judgment of the Scripture, the guilt of unbelief attaches to the principles by which a man is actuated in his rejection of Christianity, it is also the judgment of Scripture, that there is no proper general connexion between an upright conduct of the understanding, and a belief of that particular religion. Such an inference, singular as it may seem, has been actually deduced from the doctrine of the Gospel on this

subject. It has been broadly maintained, and may be observed to be sometimes assumed, that inasmuch as the Scripture, in imputing guilt to the unbeliever, imputes it to him strictly on account of his partial, insincere use of evidence, it offers no general ground for inferring the dispositions or motives of individuals from the nature of their religious opinions, from their belief or disbelief of Christianity; and that it were agreeable to the drift of the Gospel, that those who refer its distinguishing tenets to a merely human origin should be accredited for a purity of intention in the business of religious inquiry—that is, should be presumed to possess faith as a moral principle, equally with those who receive it as a divine revelation;—in a word, that faith or belief, in the sense affixed to that term in the Scriptures, has nothing to do with creeds. Such an inference has been judged to flow from an intelligent and enlarged construction of the doctrine of the Scripture, and offered, with whatever purpose, as a correction of the popular opinion on the subject. But it is here forgotten, that though the accusation in the Bible, against the unbeliever, is directed against a reckless or uncandid dealing with the evidences of its truth, and was originally brought against contemporaries of Christ and his apostles; yet that these professed to teach a religion divinely adapted to engage the faith and hopes of mankind

in general, and imperative on the belief of all to whom it should be published, or proposed as a divine revelation; and, accordingly, that the language which they addressed to particular individuals and communities, was recorded for the guidance and admonition of succeeding generations.—These are facts which admit of no dispute, and we need only bring them to remembrance. Clearly, then, if the Scriptures had instructed us, or allowed us to infer, that a belief of Christianity was no mark of an upright purpose towards God, and a rejection of its doctrines no proof of the contrary; and that of persons similarly circumstanced, to human observation, for the discovery of religious truth, the comparatively devout and virtuous amongst them would be as probably led to reject, as to embrace, the Gospel; it would follow that the Scriptures had represented the Deity, as demanding from his creatures the belief of propositions in themselves repugnant to human reason, or unattended with evidence adequate to a conviction of their truth. And thus would be exposed, on the part of those who had penned them, an utter thoughtlessness of the power and veracity of God, in arrogating the inspiration of his Spirit, and assuming to reveal his counsels and dispensations. Refine then, as we will, upon the uncontrollable effect of education and circumstances in the formation of opinions, the conclusion is inevitable,

that the Gospel virtually affirms a general permanent connexion between an integrity of disposition towards the Creator, and a belief of its own declarations,—in other words, between a due attention to the dictates of natural religion, and a reception of its own instruction and authority.

And this should be well considered by the unbelieving and sceptical, who appear to be surprised, and are often moved to disgust and indignation, at the discredit which, in a Christian community, attaches to the secret motives, the interior character, of persons who avow or betray a disbelief of the Scriptures. They resent, as a groundless and unjust imputation on their religious and moral principles—we say *religious* principles, for it was not proposed, in these discourses, to combat the opinions of those who have altogether discarded the persuasion of their accountableness to the Creator, or who deny the *existence* of duties towards him,—they resent, we say, as a groundless and uncharitable imputation on their religious and moral principles, the unwillingness of Christians to allow their professions of sincerity in the search of religious knowledge, and to esteem their love of truth and goodness to be as genuine and ardent as their own. But what else, we ask, could they expect from consistent believers of Christianity? How could these receive the Gospel as it is delivered

in the Scriptures, and there set forth as authoritative on the belief of all to whom its message is sent, and its privileges offered, and yet admit the supposition that unbelievers might, equally with themselves, be subject to the dictates of conscience, and concerned to fulfil their inalienable duties towards God and man,—equally disciples of moral rectitude, and governed by the love of truth? Or how could they stand in awe of the sentence denounced against those who despise and neglect the Gospel, and respect the writings which hold it forth as a divine communication, if neither their own experience, nor their observation of human nature, furnished proofs that the strength of unbelief, the suasive efficacy of unchristian reasoning, lay in the power of wayward and irregular passions—the dominance of things present—a proneness in human hearts to “depart from the living God?” The disbelievers of Christianity should, in all reason, account a common disallowance of their sincerity and conscientiousness in the search of true religion, as, of necessity, involved in a prevailing belief of that religion. If the imputation on their inner character be the effect, as they assert, of a narrow intelligence, or an illiberal spirit; if, considered as applying to the impugners of the Gospel from age to age, it be founded on erroneous views of the conditions and progress of the human intellect;—these are objections

to the Christian religion itself, and proportionately darken the lustre with which it may be otherwise invested as a presumed institution of God. On that supposition, however—although we might well be surprised that an error of *such* a nature should have spread so far, and prevailed so long—on that supposition, a course of active and conscientious inquiry, or the advancing intelligence of upright minds, will bring the injustice to light, and an ignorant unmerited stigma on a portion of our species will be done away. The reasonable conscience will no longer answer the appeal which the Gospel makes to it—answer it willingly or with reluctance, in hope or in fear—will no longer confess in its announcements the oracles of truth, the voice of God. Meanwhile, the dissentients from Christianity do but vainly reproach an opinion relating to themselves, which could only be overlooked, or unfaithfully suppressed, so long as that religion obtained acceptance in the world.

But though it undeniably follows, from the declared purpose of the Gospel, that the charge which it has put on record against the unbeliever, implies a proper enduring connexion between a love of truth and a belief of its doctrines, yet we are not compelled or warranted to infer, that it comprehends all, without exception, who withhold their assent from the Christian religion; still less that it applies to every

one amongst them in an equal degree. We have first to ascertain whether, or how far, an individual who fails of believing Christianity is qualified to receive a conviction of its truth; by his amount of knowledge, or the past experience and discipline of his mind; so far as these may be properly regarded as resulting from the circumstances in which he has been placed. In other words, we have first to ascertain in what manner, or to what extent, Christianity has been *proposed* to him. Unquestionably, as we have said, it is the present import of the Scripture, that so far as mankind are similarly circumstanced for the attainment of religious knowledge, those who are not conducted to a belief of Christianity are wanting in a rectitude of purpose towards the Creator—that rectitude, we mean, which the Gospel demands in all to whom its doctrines are declared; which it implies to be necessary in order to dispose the mind to entertain its communications; and which it holds to be attainable by man, irrespective of an actual and habitual experience of the purifying efficacy of its doctrines. It follows that we cannot, with the sanction of Scripture, address its condemnatory language to all who, literally speaking, disbelieve the doctrines of Christianity. There are manifestly instances in which we should be bound to abridge, if not forbear, its application. The Brahmin,

for example, who disputes the truth of Christianity—a religious system laid open no farther than may be practicable in a few hours, or days, or a longer period, to a mind taught and nurtured in a different faith—is, literally, a disbeliever of the Gospel; but surely he is not to be ranked with those who, in discarding it, have loosened whatever hold an early and long acquaintance with its doctrines may have given it on their conscience. The instance is a strong one; but it suffices to expose the impropriety of disjoining the letter from the spirit, in our construction of the Scripture on the subject before us, as well as on every other. It must be evident, however, that inasmuch as instances, more or less analogous, may be discriminated among a people collectively subject to the instruction and discipline of Christianity—instances of a deficiency in the means of acquiring knowledge, or of an inaptitude for receiving it, superinduced upon individuals in the operation of causes above their power to obviate or control—it is incumbent on the expositor of Scripture, to restrain or qualify the imputation of that unbelief which consists in being swayed by dispositions that shut out the light of knowledge, and against which, if persisted in, it denounces “the wrath of God,” and the forfeiture of eternal life.

With regard, moreover, to persons distinguished by an activity of intellect, and a large

compass of thought, it should be borne in mind, as has been already remarked, that these are more especially subject to a trial of their moral principles in the exercise of their reason on the doctrines of the Gospel, and the proofs of its divine authority. It follows from that constitution of the Christian economy which was the topic of our last discourse, that such persons are presumed in the Scripture to be peculiarly accessible to views of the understanding, concurring with that *moral* liability to unbelief which it imputes to mankind in general; that is, that they are exposed to a species of temptation to abandon or neglect Christianity, to which the mass of mankind are comparatively strangers. They are presumed to be also proportionately capable of appreciating the excellence and truth of Christianity—of overcoming that temptation; and, we repeat, the testimony of the Scripture is *against* them, if they reject the doctrines taught by Christ and his apostles. Still, as has just been said, the Scripture regards them as eminently tried in this article of human probation; and if, in regard to the criminal conduct of individuals, there are occasions in which we presume the possibility of circumstances in their mental history and experience, which, if made known to us, would considerably mitigate our judgment of their character, there must surely be instances in which we may allow some weight to such a

presumption, in estimating the guilt contracted in the formation of opinions :—instances in which it must equally befit us, to say the least, to reflect upon those “secrets of all hearts” which lie open only to Omniscience, and may not be disclosed till the final retribution.¹

¹ Such considerations admit of a wider application than may at first suggest itself. To believe the Scriptures is not only to believe them to be a divine revelation, but to believe the doctrines which they actually declare : we believe the Scriptures so far as we believe what is affirmed in them. It follows that inasmuch as we are accountable in regard to our religious opinions, there are *degrees* of guilt in errors of belief, as in offences of conduct ; and those considerations which temper the severity of our judgment on what is wrong in the practices of our fellow-creatures, are manifestly proper in reference to what is wrong in their opinions :—considerations, we mean, suggested by our imperfect knowledge of their character, our own liability to a like misjudgment, and *their* susceptibility of correction and amendment as well as ours. “If,” observes the Bishop of London, “men are accountable to God for their faith as well as their practice, it is a necessary consequence that a man must believe rightly in order to salvation. This is the general proposition which we may lay down broadly. It is limited and qualified by him who searcheth the hearts, and can alone judge of every man’s opportunities and means of believing and doing what he requires. The exercise of this prerogative of God’s omniscience and goodness is taken for granted through all the formularies of a Protestant Church, whose language is, ‘This is what we believe to be the true Christian faith ; what, if it be so, must be embraced by all who desire to be saved.’ It is not intended to exclude, but rather to take for granted, the merciful allowances which God will make for natural weakness and inability, and the necessity of repentance and faith. We have reason to believe that some wilful errors in belief, as well as wilful defects of practice, may exclude a man from salvation : but we

Such considerations comporting, as they do, with the injunctions of Christianity, relating to

do not presume to limit the goodness of God, nor to pronounce of any unintentional error, or any sin of infirmity, that it is beyond the reach of his mercy."—*Sermons*, xxi. *Athanasian Creed*. In citing these observations, it is but just to add, that they are far from singular, but rather to be looked for, from a prelate of the *Church of England*; for such have been the views and spirit of the most distinguished divines of that Church, of those most in repute amongst us, as advocates of Christianity in its appeal to the reason and conscience. Their reasonings and expostulations with scepticism and heresy are characterized by the same discrimination, as well as sympathy with the infirmities of a common nature, as all acknowledge we should exercise and feel in reference to the *conduct* of our fellow-creatures. But it must occur to the reader to reflect, that Christians, speaking generally and principally of ages long since past, have been remarkably *less* distinguishing and mitigated in their condemnation of errors of belief, than of offences of conduct the most wilful and habitual. They appear to have supposed that guilt of a *darker* character in the sight of God had been contracted in the *adoption* of erroneous opinions, (the *publication* of opinions is an *act* involving a special responsibility) than in an addiction to vicious practices; as if the duty of inquiring with earnestness and impartiality into particular propositions were *prior*, in our moral perceptions, to the duty of performing or abstaining from particular *acts*; and as if the conscience spoke *more* distinctly and *more* loudly in the former instance than in the latter. The grounds on which the duty of believing the Gospel can be established have evidently lain in no little obscurity; though they are even now far from being always clearly discerned, and are manifestly very easily forgotten. It is implied, however, in the Scriptures, in perfect concurrence with our reason, that our responsibility in reference to our belief, is a certain and imperative *deduction from* premises which determine the moral quality of our actions, and dictate the *practice* of the right.

the judgment which we form of the character of others, are directly promotive of the true spirit of religious inquiry. They are fitted to suspend or abate that offence and irritation of the unbeliever, which, as was remarked, is so commonly awakened by what he conceives to be an arbitrary assumption of a superior rectitude of principle on our part, and an uncharitable judgment on his own character. That assumption, we have seen, is not an arbitrary one; neither is that judgment uncharitable, for it is not the offspring of ill will, nor even of an indifference to his welfare. But he unhappily conceives them to be such. By forbearing, then, as believers of the Gospel, to push the charge against him any further than we are conscientiously bound by a strictly accurate deduction from the Scriptures, or our personal knowledge of his dispositions and conduct, we may, in a measure, preclude the access of feelings seriously detrimental to the free, unprejudiced exercise of his own judgment; springing, as they do, out of a regard, not to the approbation of his Maker, but to the opinions of his fellow-creatures. We may thus, in reality, subserve the purpose for which the language in the Scripture relating to the unbeliever is expressly recorded; and which, we must be assured, is no other than to turn the reflections of individuals on the character of their motives towards the Supreme Being, in dealing with the proofs of a

divine revelation : to warn them lest they judge of the credibility of the Gospel under the influence of a secret aversion to the knowledge which it offers to impart, or a disaffection to that scheme of divine government which it seeks to establish in the mind of man.

It is inexpressibly lamentable, though hardly to be wholly avoided, that in seeking to engage the earnest and impartial attention of our fellow-creatures on the Scriptures, in virtue of an original, universal duty—that of collecting to the extent of our powers and opportunities the will of the Supreme Being—we should become implicated with them in a strife for pre-eminence, whether moral or intellectual; and that, instead of evoking the judgment of their conscience on the integrity of their purpose towards the all-knowing and eternal God, we should occupy and detain them in a comparison and contest with ourselves, who are but dust and ashes. The result is not a mere abeyance of the proper object of inquiry, not a mere suspension of the best powers of knowledge; the imputed defect in our charity confirms the dislike of the unbeliever, and sharpens his opposition, to a religion with which it is deemed to be associated. The proud contentious spirit in man is roused to resist the yoke of the Gospel—to dispute that “saying” which, in our belief, “is worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the

world to save sinners." The opponent of Christianity, whom it surely concerns "to know the spirit he is of" in this matter, is incited to argue with superior energy and skill against the Christian religion, and rivets his own disbelief of its doctrines, through the influence of an opinion which he entertains of the illiberality of one or more of his fellow-creatures. Was it not truly said by the founder of that religion, "How can ye believe which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only"?¹ It might spare the adversaries of our religion an excitement so unworthy and pernicious—it might restrain, if not disarm, these opponents of themselves, for such the Christian must account them, were we to abstain, so far as is permitted us, from pointing the condemnatory judgment of the Scripture upon unbelievers against particular individuals; setting forth, rather, the principles on which it is founded, and leaving these to make their own impression on the mind.

We are sensible, indeed, that the cause of truth is exposed to danger from another quarter. If it be conceded—if it be not absolutely denied, that the inaptitude of an individual to believe Christianity might possibly be traced to other causes than his neglect to moderate his passions, and to nourish a sense of religious duty; or even

¹ John v. 44.

if it be presumed that there may be matter for excuse and palliation in the scepticism of particular individuals, it is easy to perceive that some unbelievers, however deficient in the love of truth, may be still more disposed to conceive a fallacious presumption of their innocence or security; and that others, who are already inclined to relinquish their faith in Christianity, may be emboldened in their objections to its doctrines, and even be confirmed in a state of infidelity. It can hardly be doubted that a bare supposition on the part of Christians, that unbelief may be disjoined from the guilt denoted by that term in the Gospel, is eagerly caught at, as though it lent a countenance and encouragement to a habit of scepticism in religion, by those amongst us who, in religion if in nothing else, embrace no one faith, adopt no particular class of opinions, but prefer argument to truth, and speculation or hypothesis to conviction.

But we have urged the importance of seeking to correct and elevate the spirit of religious inquiry, when occupied with the proofs of Christianity, so far as may be practicable by a strictly accurate explanation of Christianity itself. Still the most careful exposition of the sense of Scripture, in reference to the unbeliever, may be subject to a dangerous misconstruction: and this could hardly surprise us, if the warning which it is intended to convey against a spirit of

self-deception in dealing with the claims of the Gospel, were actually required, or founded upon a knowledge of human nature. Indeed the importance which seems to be attached by unbelievers to an opinion, that even if Christianity be a divine institution, the rejection of it may yet be venial, or not preclude the unbeliever from the mercy of God, appears but to expose still farther the subtle working of the human heart in regard to that religion, and to furnish added proof of the necessity of self-examination in admitting doubts of its truth, and raising objections to its doctrines. It may justly be feared that the sceptic who derives a certain contentment and satisfaction in his scepticism from that opinion, has already acted unfaithfully with his conscience, and is already tainted with the sin of unbelief: for to what other source can such contentment be traced, but his secret apprehension of the truth of the Scripture, and the reality of those momentous concerns, those enduring objects which are placed before him in its pages? If I do not believe Jesus Christ to have been a messenger from God—if, on the contrary, I am convinced he was not, I cannot be concerned to restrain the import of his denunciations any more than, as a Christian, I can be solicitous to avoid the curse of Mahomet, or, as a Protestant, to avert the application of a Papal anathema. Whatever the remorse and hopelessness which

the words of Christ may suggest to my imagination—"Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched"—if I hold such language to have been the utterance of a well-meaning enthusiast, or an artful impostor, it can no more trouble the repose of my conscience than the fabled pangs of Tartarus, or the infernal creations of Dante. The sceptic who would fain be reconciled to his rejection of the Gospel by such a conclusion already boggles in his unbelief: he is even now seeking a license to stifle or forsake his convictions: he is plotting against the awful supremacy of truth, and be the Gospel a divine communication or not, he cannot acquit himself of unfaithfulness and disobedience to that Being whom it professes more clearly to reveal.¹

It may be urged, we are aware, that it is human to err, even though it be the truth which is sought; and, accordingly, that the unqualified condemnation of unbelievers in writings which demand our reception as a revelation from God,

¹ This, it is possible, may appear undeservedly harsh in reference to one unbeliever who differs from another in this, that he has remaining impressions of the truth of Christianity. But the state of mind here referred to, is that of one who, though he *partially* believes Christianity *wholly* rejects it—that is, orders his thoughts and conduct as though he were absolved entirely from the obligation of regarding the doctrines which it inculcates. This, there is reason to believe, is not very uncommon; and surely can admit of no vindication. To

is calculated to disturb the tranquillity of fallible beings. But we find it difficult to believe that a reflecting sceptic can be fearful of provoking the displeasure of the Divine Being, and incurring punishment at *his* hands merely by the errors of a fallible judgment—errors from which a predominating love of the truth would not have saved him. Assuredly, no conception was ever less worthy of that Being who has framed us to acquire the idea of justice, and to contemplate the exemplars of it with awe and love—an idea, which, embodied in the most perfect of human beings, were but a blurred and shadowy image of his own unspotted and unchangeable rectitude—of that Being who has formed us to recoil with loathing and indignation at those of our fellow-creatures, who would extort a blind and servile submission to their caprice and pleasure—who would usurp the sceptre of truth, and trample on the rights of conscience—formed us to resent and abhor their iron, brutal empire. But, we repeat, we find it difficult to believe that such a conception can in reality be entertained of the

abandon all the doctrines which the Scriptures affirm or imply, because we find in them doctrines which we demur to receive, is a conduct of the mind entirely inconsistent with the responsibility maintained in these discourses. Whether it be consistent with reason, or a due humility and teachableness of spirit towards God, to receive one portion of what the Scripture affirms, in virtue of its authority *as a divine revelation*, and to reject another, is a different question.

Author of our nature. It may serve the purpose of disparaging the Christian religion in a rational estimation, by creating an opinion that the Scriptures thus portray the Divinity, and, consequently, we remarked the injustice of this opinion in our first discourse: but the sceptical and unbelieving should look well to the source of their misgiving and inquietude, which, there is so much cause to fear, lies very far deeper than this irrational and superstitious, as well as unscriptural, notion of the Divine Being. The mind of intelligent man can admit no doubt that the "Judge of all the earth will do right,"¹ and responds at once to the declaration of the Scripture itself—"He is a God of truth, and without iniquity, just and right is he."² We cannot but perceive that our liability to error is a reasonable ground of fear and solicitude towards God, not otherwise than as it is constituted by a reluctance and carelessness to perceive the truth which he has laid before us, and placed within our reach; that there is no other peril from unbelief; no other ground to fear the Bible may be true."³

¹ Gen. xviii. 25.

² Deut. xxxii. 4.

³ It must be confessed, however, that the motives to embrace Christianity, derived from our apprehensions of a future state, are sometimes urged in a manner which would seem to excuse such a notion of the Deity. We allude to the consideration, that if Christianity be true, the Christian will gain eternal happiness; if it be false, he can lose nothing; whereas the

Let every individual then “take heed lest there be in him an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God,” and beware in what spirit he looks from his own mind to the minds of others. Whatever consolatory conjectures may be raised upon the errors of others—upon their

unbeliever *may* incur the loss of happiness for ever, but *gain* anything he cannot. When this consideration is applied to reinforce the dictates of the *conscience* in promoting both the belief and practice of Christianity, its reasonableness and propriety, we need hardly say, are unquestionable, and its weight not to be calculated: and, doubtless, for this purpose it is generally pressed upon the attention. But the bidding of the conscience is not always distinctly premised, or carefully kept in view: the consequence is, that God’s arbitration of our destiny in the future presents itself in the shape of a dread contingency, and Christianity proportionately savours of superstition. When Locke argued (Book ii. ch. 21,) that the irreligious man made a *wrong* judgment, inasmuch, as if he were “in the right, he would not be happy, if he were mistaken, he would be infinitely miserable,” we have no doubt that that seeker of truth took for granted that the irreligious man was already convicted of evil in the judgment of his conscience. This essential fact, however, he has left to be inferred by the reader, who, from the manner in which the argument is put, might be led to imagine that the preference of irreligion was a wrong judgment in virtue of that argument, and for no other reason:—as if it could for a moment be admitted that a man might make a wrong judgment in his conduct in relation to God, which was not so in a strictly *moral* sense—in a sense that could be understood and appreciated in this life—at the period of forming and entertaining it. The presumption, that a man may form the “wrong judgment” in question, and, notwithstanding, be under the necessity of waiting the experience of futurity to prove it to be such, is, assuredly, as unfounded in Christianity as it is derogatory to Divine perfection.

disbelief of the Gospel *on the supposition of its truth*—such conjectures cannot, in the smallest degree, relax the obligation which lies upon every individual to seek sincerely and with earnestness to know the whole will of God; or palliate the guilt of neglecting that obligation. When a disciple of Jesus put the question concerning his fellow disciple, “Lord, and what shall this man do?”—rather, “what shall become of this man?” Jesus answered, “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.”¹ Instead of agitating questions relating to the judgment which the Gospel pronounces upon those who fall into error, let every one, in considering the message which it purports to have brought us from the Deity, hearken if the voice of truth be heard in its support and confirmation—that voice which hath been not inaudible to the just and good in all ages,—“What is that to thee? follow thou me.”

We have offered these observations on the language of the Scripture in reference to unbelievers, under an impression that it is liable to a hurtful misconstruction, and in order that it may be judged of in the right spirit of religious inquiry and personal self-examination; and, in the next discourse, we shall endeavour to propose some decisive criterion of a sincere, impartial

¹ John xxi. 22.

mind in dealing with the evidences of Christianity.—In concluding, we cannot but remark that it would have been a more grateful task, as well as more congenial to the views of such an assembly as the present, to have taken the strain of our reflections, not from the accusation of Jesus against the men who rejected him, but from those commendations and blessings which he pronounced upon a portion of his hearers, who, under the influence of a devout and teachable spirit, had been led, notwithstanding the proneness of a degenerate nature, and despite the prejudices prevailing around them, to the belief of his divine commission, and of the truth of his declarations and promises:—commendations and blessings, which he pronounced upon all who evinced a solicitude to approve their faithfulness and sincerity towards God—a desire to receive the truth, though in doubt and hesitation, and could say, “Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.” May we not forget, however, the aim and power of the Gospel to animate and fortify our faith as a holy principle—to nourish that belief of its doctrines which, while it springs up in the exercise of religious and moral principles, is designed to pervade them with new life and vigour. In the consciousness of such a faith, we obtain the approval of our own conscience, while, in the abundance of divine mercy, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” And, be

it added, we have the utmost encouragement in seeking, from time to time, to renew and confirm our faith; assured, as we are, that it augurs increasing communications from the Fountain of truth and wisdom;—that that light will improve which has already shone upon the mind; even till the last shadows of doubt and uncertainty shall have receded from the view of the “spirit made perfect”—emancipated from all error, and victorious over evil; and have given place to an unclouded and eternal day in the presence of “the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, to whom be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”¹

¹ 1 Tim. i. 17.

LECTURE VI.

A TEST OF THE LOVE OF TRUTH IN JUDGING
OF THE CREDIBILITY OF THE CHRISTIAN
RELIGION.

John viii. 45.

AND BECAUSE I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, YE BELIEVE ME NOT.

THE doctrine of the Scriptures, which has been the subject of these discourses—namely, that mankind are accountable to the Divine Being in relation to their belief in religion, is there inculcated in connexion with a recorded accusation against those who disbelieve the Gospel, on the alleged ground of their unwillingness to receive the truth; an accusation originally, indeed, directed against contemporaries of Christ and his apostles, but extending, as was argued in the last discourse, by an undeniable implication, to unbelievers, speaking generally, in after ages. It was observed, however, that we were not entitled to affirm, positively or absolutely, the justice of that accusation, as though we had produced the proper and sufficient evidence of the truth of Christianity. Our part in this dis-

cussion with reference to the language in the Scripture relating to the unbeliever, is to apply it as a special argument for self-examination; and we may here remark, that even in bringing under consideration the *import* which that language was intended to convey in regard to unbelievers in our own time, we have discovered not a little reason for placing a watch upon our feelings and dispositions in judging of the credibility of the Christian religion. It is incumbent then that we should offer some decisive test of an upright, impartial mind in coming to a conclusion on this important question; in order that they who disbelieve Christianity may be induced to discriminate the principles by which they have been actuated in admitting a persuasion of its falsehood; and that others may perceive the complexion of their own feelings, at seasons when they may be led to doubt, and inclined to abandon, those religious doctrines and institutions, through the medium of which we have been taught, as Christians, to contemplate the aspect of Him who hath made us, and to hold communion with the "Father of spirits." Moreover, it is clearly within the limits of our subject, and essential to our purpose in bringing it forward, to support the charge of insincerity and perverseness which the Gospel alleges against those who reject its doctrines, so far as it derives confirmation or probability from

facts and considerations, which, whatever be our judgment as to the truth of Christianity, argue, on the part of any class or number of unbelievers, not a conscientious desire of religious knowledge, but an aversion to that particular religion, or an intentional, voluntary unacquaintance with the proofs of its divine authority; and thus to lay open the danger of *deserving* such a sentence as that which the Scripture denounces against the unbeliever, or of rendering ourselves obnoxious to the righteous displeasure of God.

We proceed then to suggest some grounds for a just conclusion with regard to the source or moral character of unbelief in general; and here it may be well to bear in mind, that unbelief may on the one hand, exist apart from all open opposition to Christianity, or from all expression, public and private, of infidel opinions, and, on the other hand, may be sufficiently discernible in books and conversation, in the absence of all professions of hostility to the Christian religion, and even under the guise of a reverence for its principles. We would direct attention, in the first place and more especially, to that conduct of the understanding which would be essential to demonstrate a predominating desire of the truth in the rejection of the Gospel—in the rejection of a religion which professes to extend, and that so greatly, our knowledge of the relations in which we stand to Almighty God, and the obligations

under which he has placed us. We speak, it is perceived, of those unbelievers who have become such in the course of their own inquiry and reflection; in the progress, as it would seem, of research, and by the weight of argument. It is essential, then, in order to prove their candour and integrity in their disbelief of Christianity, *that they should have exerted their faculties as powerfully in the search and use of arguments in support of that system of religion, as in detecting and enforcing objections against it.* This observation, it will be perceived, applies to the previous conduct of the understanding in appreciating the doctrines of Christianity, and examining, in general, the evidences of its divine authority. The reasoning which a person employs for the conviction of others, on this as on other subjects, professes to establish the ultimate results of his own investigation: what objections to his conclusions occurred to his own mind, and how he disposed of them, or what endeavours he made to discover the truth, are known only to the Searcher of hearts. There must, however, have been an equal disposition to embrace Christianity as to reject it, in order to vindicate the unbeliever from the accusation of the Scripture. But how is an equal disposition to embrace as to reject Christianity, to be made apparent to our own consciousness, except by as vigorous an exercise of the intellect in the search

and use of arguments in support of Christianity, as in the accumulation of arguments which may appear to disprove it? The question, then, which every opponent of our religion should be prepared to answer to the satisfaction of his conscience is this:—Did he try and put out his strength in defence of Christianity, before he came to a determination to undermine and overthrow it? And the question is important to others, as well as to himself: it should be before us, especially, in estimating the scepticism of acute and powerful minds; of distinguished writers, for example, whose reasoning may have shaken our own faith in the Gospel, or disturbed our composure in the belief of its truth. It is fit we should raise the inquiry, Have we, in their works, any probable indications that their reasoning powers were under the regulation of this impartial, equitable principle?

To illustrate our meaning, we may apply the question to a process of reasoning in the works of one of the most eminent of sceptics, on a subject which must itself be peculiarly interesting as matter of theological inquiry. We refer to the Jewish idea of God, when compared with the religious apprehensions of mankind in general. That author regards idolatry as the natural growth of the human mind in ignorant and barbarous ages. “It appears to me,” he observes, “that if we consider the improvement of

human society from rude beginnings to a state of greater perfection, polytheism or idolatry was, and necessarily must have been, the first and most ancient religion of mankind.”¹ The manner in which the author argues this opinion, it is not, for our purpose, necessary to state. Again—the idea of a supreme deity which blended itself with the polytheism of the ancient world, this philosopher ascribes, not to a contemplation of the works of nature, but to “a natural tendency amongst mankind to reduce heavenly objects,” so he expresses himself, “to the model of things below.” “An idolatrous people,” he observes, “may either suppose that in the distribution of power and territory among the gods, their nation was subjected to the jurisdiction of a particular deity, or they may represent one God as the prince or supreme magistrate of the rest, who, though of the same nature, rules them with an authority like that which an earthly sovereign exercises over his subjects and vassals.” By the help of such reasoning, which we need not cite more particularly, he comes to the conclusion, that the idea of that God whose existence and attributes are declared in the Scriptures was of a merely human, earthly origin:—“Thus,” he concludes, “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became the Supreme Deity, or Jehovah of the Jews.”²

¹ Hume's Natural History of Religion.

² *Ib.* sec. 6.

Now, it has ever been regarded as a strong fact in support of the divine origin of the Jewish faith, that it included the idea and belief of one God, the Creator and Governor of the world, at a period when polytheism was the prevailing religion of mankind; a fact, be it observed, which becomes stronger and stronger in proportion to the force of that very argument, by which the author in question maintains an original and universal tendency in human nature to the imagination of more gods than one. Of that fact, and the argument grounded upon it by believers, he could scarcely have been ignorant; and, to say the least, it is exceedingly probable that it occurred to his mind. We may take the supposition that it did. To have reasoned then in the love of truth on this occasion, or to have argued with the approval of an enlightened conscience, he must have made that fact a matter of examination as studious as was the formation of his own theory: a fact, of which *his* account at least of the operation of the human understanding touching the Deity,—touching the creating and presiding Power in the universe, supplied no explanation whatsoever. He must have disposed of that fact in some manner to the satisfaction of his judgment. He must have discerned it to be consistent with *his* thesis that the conception of Jehovah originated in no purer, higher source of intelligence than the idea of Jupiter: that the

conception of that Being who was declared to be, not one of a number of deities, and taking high precedency amongst them, but the Creator of the world, and the sole object of devotion and obedience—not to speak of the perfection of holiness ascribed to him, the *moral* tendency of his laws and dispensations, and the personal rectitude demanded from his worshippers ;—that the conception of that Being was formed in the same process of thought, and sprung out of the same elements of the human mind, as the imagination of the first of the gods of the heathen. It is not impossible, however, that the fact to which we refer was wholly absent from his thoughts. To accredit him for a love of the truth, then, we must suppose that though earnestly disposed to do justice to the Jewish Scriptures, he was either so little conversant with reasoning adverse to his own, or his intellect so wanting in this particular instance, that a great peculiarity of the Jewish theology, as well as a cardinal fact in the religious history of the world, never came into his view, and crossed the path of his speculations. This, we say, is not impossible, but, we must repeat, very far from probability.

The same philosopher, it is easy to perceive, insinuates an opinion that the accounts which are given us in the Jewish Scriptures of the dealings of the Almighty with a portion of his

creatures, are no better worthy of belief than were the traditions of the heathen mythology. He evidently endeavours to expose them to contempt, as conveying representations of the Deity which savour of the weaknesses and imperfections of human nature.¹ But it seems an obvious and pertinent question, In what manner, in the “rude beginnings of society” of which he speaks, in minds *so* rude and gross as to be continually tending to idolatry, to polytheism—in what manner could the feelings of piety and devotion be associated to the idea of One All-perfect mind? Was it not necessary—presuming mankind to be capable of religion, capable of a mental converse with the Creator, at all—was it not necessary and divinely expedient to assist them in their conceptions of his attributes, by the analogy of an inferior nature, and by abundant aid from the senses; to embody the spiritual; to reduce and contract the infinite; to alleviate and disguise the perfections of God, in condescension to this childhood of man’s religious nature? Did the author of whom we speak apply himself to the solution of that question? Did he consider, as he was so well able, whether there was not, in the alleged revelation of the divinity in the Scriptures, a marvellous union of properties; in announcing, on the one hand, his unity and

¹ Natural History of Religion.

essential perfections, and, on the other, depecting and adapting itself to the ways and feebleness of the human understanding? For our part, we cannot conceive that the mind which could frame such ideas of the Deity as are presented in the Scriptures—anticipating or suggesting the best, the most exalted conceptions of his attributes and character—could, in reality, have entertained any apprehensions derogatory to the divine perfection. In our view, that intelligence which pervades the volume held sacred amongst us evinces, if we may so speak, a consciousness of its own condescension to human conceptions and feelings; in exhibiting the attributes of the Deity, and describing his agency, through the medium of such analogies as are inadequate to the declaration of his nature; but, at the same time, naturally adapted to influence the affection and conduct of his creatures.¹

And once more—did this author make any endeavour to trace the progress of the divine revelation, as it apparently unfolds itself in the entire Scriptures; to discern and make out the advancement of one presiding purpose, the completion of one harmonious whole? or, instead of looking at the Bible in the breadth and scope of

¹ The necessity of an accommodation, however, to human modes of thinking in a divine revelation, *universally* and *permanently*, will be perceived, on reflection, to be unavoidable; but this is a larger subject than is above adverted to.

its communications, did he limit his attention to particular, detached passages in it, which could only place before him some strange narration?—as when the eye is fixed on isolated spaces only of the ample sky, little else may be perceived but some quaint and fantastic shape even in the face of sublimity, even in the vault of heaven.—We, however, offer no opinion of our own on the scepticism of particular individuals; but submit this instance of the method by which individuals might ascertain the moral worth of their arguments in their rejection of Christianity; and by which, it should be added, the spirit which has guided them in their reasoning might be not a little appreciable to others.

Certain it is, that that unbeliever cannot effectually repel the accusation of the Scripture against him, as an adversary of the truth, who has not applied an equal degree of attention to views of Christianity suggesting conceptions of its excellence, and to circumstances in its documents and history which raise presumptions of its truth, as to any particulars relating to it which, on the first consideration, may seem opposed to its pretensions; and who has not exerted his faculties in appreciating the necessity and advantages of the Christian religion, as well as in framing hypotheses which would supersede its use and value.—Though, indeed, there *are* opponents of Christianity who, judging from

the nature of their objections, and their mode of controversy in general, appear to have been exclusively occupied in heaping up matter for its disparagement and refutation, and to have been more careful to place the smallest, even atomic objections to its credibility in one scale, than to collect the whole mass of its evidences in the other. That unbeliever, however, cannot clearly acquit himself to his conscience in the rejection of Christianity, who has not endeavoured to reason as acutely and comprehensively, as connectedly and patiently, in the defence of that religion, as in his attack upon its principles. It is of no force to establish the probity of an individual as a reasoner, that the objections which he alleges against a system of religion, or morality, or legislation, are stronger and more formidable than any arguments which others have adduced in its support and confirmation. To vindicate his love of truth, he must have exposed those objections to the encounter of the same intellect by which they were suggested. He must have set himself to overthrow them. Otherwise he cannot have sought, pre-eminently, the truth regarding it: he cannot have weighed its claims with an equal or impartial mind. In opposing that system, he is not so much a contender for the truth as the assailant of a particular class of opinions; in his opposition to which he may be deeply

responsible, in proportion to the magnitude and important nature of the subject to which it relates.¹

It may be said, that there is a pre-disposition to embrace Christianity as well as to reject it; a desire to establish its certainty, as well as to detect its fallacy; and that this may prove as effectual an impediment to the discovery of truth as its opposite. Unquestionably there is such a pre-disposition; but is this a reason for omitting

¹ It will here be remarked, that we describe the proper use of the intellect with reference to objections raised against a system received and upheld by others; and especially one which, like Christianity, offers proofs of a definite, tangible nature, and, moreover, has commanded the faith of nations and ages. We would not be understood to say of a candid reasoner, that, in adopting a system which has originated in his *own* inquiry and speculation, that his natural or ordinary procedure is, in the first instance, to frame his *whole* argument to establish that system, and then to exert his understanding to detect its insufficiency or fallacy; first, to build up his system, and afterwards to endeavour to pull it down again. But then in *constructing* his theory, he deals in the manner described with the particular facts and observations which he brings to prove and confirm it: he applies his *own* intellect to ascertain whether these be severally consistent with his premises, or could be shown to tell against his own conclusions. The man who designs a structure of truth is, of course, continually surveying it from various and opposite quarters, in order to discover mistakes and imperfections, and to assure himself that nothing shall commend it, either in his own view or that of others, but what is appropriate to its character, and rests securely on its foundations. The intellectual action of the mind may vary, but the moral may be equally identified.

to examine, for not seeking to appreciate, a single argument in support of Christianity? Is it the smallest excuse for a slight, evasive handling of its commonly accepted proofs, or an avidity for objections against them? But here it is vitally important to observe, that a desire to embrace Christianity, or rather to adhere to our belief of it, is the natural operation of that love of truth a want of which is charged upon the unbeliever as the essence of his guilt. It springs up in the believer's mind under the experience of a proneness to evade the sense of his duty towards God, and in the effort to maintain a clear and full conviction of his religious obligations. Of that proneness—"of that evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God," who that owns any portion of self-knowledge, and is sincerely concerned to obtain "the answer of a good conscience towards God," is not, in some degree, painfully conscious? Who is not occasionally sensible of a repugnance to the restraining precepts of the Gospel, however he may approve and revere them; as well as to that exposure which it makes of the guilt and depravity of our species, which, however faithful to experience, cannot but humble the pride, and disturb the security, of every reflecting mind? Who then is not incited to desire, and consequently in danger of believing, that Christianity has been founded in error, or is only partially

true. Moreover, there are feelings of a more specious guise and subtle operation, which, in dealing with the doctrines and proofs of Christianity, we must own the necessity of placing under check. In reference to religious as well as other tenets—in reference, if not to the substantive truth of Christianity, yet certainly to its particular articles of belief—who does not at seasons detect in himself a certain impatience of fixed and determinate views?—a disposition merely to speculate and theorize, or to adopt opinions that are new, rather than to appreciate the evidence of old and familiar conclusions? Who is not conscious of various feelings, which, if not in themselves directly hostile to the practice of religion, are decidedly accessory to those that are, and obstruct the growth of that supreme regard to truth, which Christianity so imperatively demands in the servants of God, and the candidates for a life and happiness beyond the grave? The earnestness, we say, with which a man cleaves to his belief of the Gospel—we speak of a secret heartfelt adherence to its doctrines, not merely the open advocacy of the Scriptures—that earnestness originates in a concern to fulfil his duty towards the Supreme Being; a diffidence of his own rectitude towards him; precisely such a self-distrust as is habitually felt by persons of scrupulous integrity, in estimating the claims preferred upon them by

their fellow-creatures, and is felt by most men on particular occasions, when sincerely anxious to do justice to their neighbour. It is precisely in the desire and effort to fulfil the will of God, that the Christian may be carried, as he undoubtedly often is, from the path of just reasoning; adducing arguments in support of his belief which, in a further examination, he would discover to be of no weight, and laying a stress upon others more than proportionate to their value.—Can the reasoning of the unbeliever, when equally ardent and tenacious, be traced to a similar principle? A certain dread of our own selfishness and passions, or diffidence of our own sincerity, in thinking, as in acting, is essential to the fulfilment of our duty, and “the keeping of a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man:” though, undoubtedly, in either case, it is liable to excess or, rather, to misdirection. But what pious or virtuous disposition is not so? In what, the most excellent of our feelings and doings, can we safely dispense with a cautious presiding intelligence?

But we must make some allusion to a class of unbelievers whose minds have been little, if at all, occupied in research and speculation; and who have received not only the doctrines of that religion itself which they now reject, but almost the whole of their opinions, on the authority of others.—It may too surely be concluded of such

persons, that their aversion to Christianity *itself*, their unwillingness to discern its truth, is rendered more or less probable by the mere fact of their disbelieving it. For it has not been unremarked, that that belief which is the effect of early education, that belief which is grounded on a reverence for authority, is rarely brought into question, unless it has come into collision with our interests and passions. The truths which science has unfolded to the astonished contemplation of mankind, as if in despite of appearances and contempt of superficial opinions, are retained, with an implicit and enduring faith, by multitudes unable to comprehend the reasoning by which they are demonstrated, or unobservant of facts which may otherwise bear testimony to their truth: so easily is an assent obtained and perpetuated to propositions which are purely speculative, or which it is indifferent to our wishes whether we accept or refuse. Inasmuch, then, as the influence of education, or the weight of authority, preponderates on the side of Christianity, we are compelled to infer, that the unbelief of this class of persons is but another expression for the resistance of undisciplined passions to the yoke of the Gospel. For on what deductions of reason is *their* scepticism founded? Have they invalidated the evidences of Christianity, and refuted the arguments of its advocates? Have they not merely withdrawn their confidence

from one class of teachers, and transferred it to another? And for what probable, what imaginable reason—seeing that they have abandoned the religion of their country and forefathers, and one that proffers absolution of our guilt, un-failing solace here, and enduring happiness hereafter—but that the latter would disengage them from the restraints of a superior virtue, and that mental disquietude which must ever punish the neglect of a religion believed to be true? These teachers, however, have possessed them with a persuasion as fraught with error, and dangerous to all human welfare, as it were possible to imagine—namely, that inasmuch as the belief of Christianity is the result of an early initiation into its principles, and not the fruit of our own research and examination, it may securely be discarded. So it might be—could it be discarded with a consciousness of innocence, with a lasting security from the sense of guilt, and the dread of divine retribution:—God, we might be sure, would not account us guilty for a procedure of the mind in which we were constituted to discern no evil, or, in any instance, “leave himself without witness” as the Judge of the world. But these teachers and their pupils are together forgetful of a most essential ordinance of his moral government; which is no other than this—that we are subject to religious convictions impressed upon us by education, or

the assertion and testimony of others, which are no less effective to bind the conscience, and satisfy the love of truth as an upright principle, than those which are adopted after personal inquiry and independent reflection. Indeed, the notion that the impressions or prejudices, so called, of education may be rightly and safely abandoned, betrays a grievous inattention to the conditions of human responsibility. The character and desert of accountable beings cannot depend upon the medium through which they receive their convictions, whether the offer of a divine revelation be included in their probation or not; but upon their willingness to act upon their convictions, and consequently their disposition to cherish them—their uprightness of purpose towards God and man. If it were not so, if mankind were at liberty to repudiate their impressions of truth, because these have been made upon them by a pre-established system of instruction, or in the exercise of a deference to the judgment of others, where would be the moral obligation of more than half the world? What sentiments of duty would remain to the larger portion of our species? It must be seen in a moment, that such a conclusion would create a chasm in human thought that would yawn to the foundations of the moral system. But those foundations were laid by a Higher wisdom than that which is labouring to sap and overthrow them. Our religious convictions

cannot be effectually discharged at our will and pleasure, whether the result, more especially, of an early instruction in Christianity or not. They may be suspended or weakened for a season, and possibly destroyed; but their tendency is to revive and recover their strength; returning to confront us in solitude, or to aggravate the pressure of external circumstances, the sense of bodily decay, and the apprehension of our latter end.—And here we should be guilty of a great omission in the discussion of our subject, were we not to instance, as a melancholy but most instructive proof of an uncontrolled bias of the passions in promoting a rejection of the Gospel, that striking and total change which many have observed to take place in the views and feelings of unbelievers, with reference to its doctrines, in the immediate prospect of death, and the retribution expected to follow it. In every such change, whether frequent or not, we seem to have before us a decisive proof that the previous disbelief of Christianity has been mainly supported by desires and propensities, which sink and lie prostrate under the rebuke of conscience, and the overwhelming apprehensions of futurity. For how otherwise can it be explained that a belief of the distinguishing doctrines and unspeakable benefits of the Gospel, should re-enter and fill the mind of an individual in his last hours, who had previously, and, it may be for

a long period, banished such things from his thoughts, as the reminiscences of his credulous youth, and the vestiges of a declining superstition? Such a belief may be lightly regarded as the effect of education merely, the consequence of early associations of thought; but the origin of the belief is not the question, or the manner in which it formerly strengthened itself in the mind;—why, after it had been condemned and degraded in the judgment of any one, should it re-establish itself in the close of his life? Why should the associated ideas which formerly composed its strength, but which had long before, as it seemed, been severed and dissipated, be then found to collect and reunite their links, and wind around him a chain which he cannot again break asunder? Is the intellect of man so affected in its conduct and determinations by a change in his external circumstances merely, or a change in the condition of his physical frame, that propositions which before seemed to his impartial judgment repugnant to reason, or sustained by no adequate evidence, should become, on a sudden, invested with the semblance of truth, and awe him with the power of conviction? Or why, we must ask, when the belief of Christianity returns to the man who has despised it till the hour of death—why should he be oppressed and overcome with a dread of the Almighty, if he be persuaded that his judgment, though it has erred, has been

exercised in the love of truth? What is the test, what the worth of a good conscience, if it cannot endure the shock of calamity or disease, and fail us in the trying hour? We are forced by such examples to the conclusion, that men are liable to resist and forsake their most valuable convictions: to yield them to the intoxication of the passions, and exchange them for foolishness and dreams; mistaking the true end of their existence; engrossed and busied to the last in vain and grovelling pursuits, or such as are comparatively of no worth. So it is told us of Roman soldiers in the Parthian war, that they were tempted in their appetite to eat of a noxious plant, which effaced their memory, disordered their judgment, and deluded their fancy; and were seen, in consequence, to turn up the idle dust beneath their feet, one stone after another; seeming, all the while, to be engaged and absorbed in matters of the highest moment, and did but drivel till they died.—Painful is it to dwell upon such disastrous reverses, such fatal disorders in the human mind; but wise it is to dissect the dead—in their earthly hopes and expectations—for the benefit of the living; and there is a morbid anatomy of the soul greatly worthy our studying, if we would learn aright the frame of our own spirit. The feelings of the dying do not certainly bespeak the verity or the falsehood of their opinions; the truth *may*

be more surely acquired in seasons of mental tranquillity; but they prove the unutterable importance of yielding to our sense of duty, whatever endeavours this may cost us, or whatever be the sacrifice of our present inclinations. They argue the supremacy of the conscience.—But we must draw to a conclusion.

We were chiefly concerned, in this discourse, to direct attention to a simple and certain test, by which any who have abandoned their faith in Christianity might determine the moral quality of their opinions in the matter of religion, and estimate the justice of the accusation recorded against unbelievers, in its application to their own minds. If, indeed, they have taken their final choice and determination as opponents of our religion; if they have planted so hostile a foot on the Christian territory, as to hold in contempt the means and possibility of retreating; if, satisfied of their own integrity, they are prepared to expose their most secret meditations to the eye of Omniscience;—it were idle to suggest to their reflections any criterion of candour and sincerity in the search of religious truth, or the use of the Christian evidence. But we should deprecate, on the part of human beings, so complete a self-satisfaction and confidence in their own rectitude; and would enforce the test proposed in the hope that the unbeliever may be induced to retrace the progress of his own opinions,

and to detect the presence of any disposition or motive which may have acted upon his understanding, in his disbelief of the Christian religion, incompatible with a predominating love of truth, and consequently subversive of an essential principle of natural religion. We repeat the question for the guidance of his judgment on the spirit by which he has been ruled in this momentous inquiry.—Has he exerted his own faculties as powerfully in searching out the elements of truth in Christianity, as in urging objections against it, or in building up theories that would leave it no place in the views and expectations of mankind? If not, as we have said, he cannot be justly accounted a disciple and advocate of the truth. He has looked upon Christianity rather as a religion which claimed to overrule his own inclinations, than as one that demanded his assent in virtue of the evidence on which it was founded; and, in now defending his scepticism, he is chiefly concerned to vindicate his opinions to the judgment of his fellow-creatures. Or he is seeking merely a species of intellectual distinction; a certain repute for acuteness, for independence, for originality. He is chiefly influenced in his powers of reasoning by a desire of “the honour,” in one shape or other, “that cometh from man,” the principle to which Jesus imputed the unbelief of his adversaries; and not by a desire of “the honour that cometh from God only.” Need we say how closely such feel-

ings adhere to us, even in religious inquiry and discussion? And yet how extraneous, how impertinent, how treacherous, and full of danger, when permitted to establish themselves in questions relating to the Divine Being, and our enduring interests! We can but know—yet when will men reflect!—that unless the mind withdraw itself from the excitement of feelings, and the power of motives, brought into existence and kept in activity, through mere dispute and rivalry with their fellow-creatures, there can be no will to hearken to the voice of God, whether he speak to us in the frame of all nature, or in the testimony of his written word: that our life, this scene of trial and preparation, is not an arena of controversy, not a field of competition with our fellow men, but a school of divine wisdom: that we are the pupils of a Master who is in heaven, and that it is only as we cherish a humble, teachable spirit towards HIM, that we can receive into the soul the light of truth, and be made wise—if such wisdom there be—to salvation.¹

¹ It very often happens that the arguments *themselves*, which a person advances on a question, are significant of the spirit by which he is animated in dealing with it. The *nature* of particular objections brought against Christianity by its opponents would supply important matter for consideration, as to the mood or disposition in which they were suggested or dwelt upon: but this is one of the numerous topics connected with our subject which we are compelled in these limits to omit. One objection, however, to the Scriptures is of too expressive a

character to be altogether lost sight of. The *moral* tendency of the Gospel we have assumed in these discourses; most unbelievers have admitted it—admitted it on the whole, however they may have objected to particular detached precepts in the Scripture; some, it is well known, have extolled the teaching of Christ, and, with whatever consistency, have eulogised his character. To argue with an unbeliever who imputed to the Scriptures a vicious, immoral tendency, were a most disheartening business, like craving justice at the hand of a man who met you with animosity, and with nothing else. Yet there are such unbelievers—there are persons who, though they have read in the Scriptures the precepts of Christ and his apostles, and cannot but know that the main purpose of the Scriptures is to fix the attention of mankind on Christ, as the chief messenger and representative of God, are assiduous to promote an opinion—by what particular means, or what part of the Scriptures they select for this purpose, is not the matter—that the Bible is a book calculated to favour vice, to corrupt our morals. Does this objection to the Scriptures expose a repugnance to their import, apart from the question of their truth, or does it not? It may not, indeed, betray a bias of the passions on the understanding: on the contrary, it is difficult to believe that those who speak of the immoral character of the Scriptures are mistaken in their own judgment as to the solidity of *this* particular argument against their divine origin. There is the utmost reason to fear, to say the least, that they are chargeable with affectation and hypocrisy in alleging it, and are assuming a refinement of moral sensibility to which they are conscious they should lay no claim. But if so, it may concern them to reflect that the evidence is only the more complete as to the *animus* of their opposition to the Scriptures—as to what they *would* believe to the disparagement and condemnation of those writings, if they could.

LECTURE VII.

THE DOCTRINE OPPOSED TO THE ASSUMPTION OF INFALLIBILITY, &c.

John v. 39.

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES.

IN prosecuting the subject of these discourses, we cannot and we ought not to be satisfied with opposing it to a spirit of scepticism and indifference, in reference to religious tenets; or with urging it on the attention of persons who either dispute that responsibility which it has been our object to establish, or who, admitting its existence, may conceive that they have discharged the duty which it imposes, so far as Christianity is concerned, by that inquiry into its doctrines and evidences which has led them to a rejection of its divine authority, and who are willing to abide the consequences of that decision. For we are persuaded that the probation of mankind, in this important instance, is very imperfectly appreciated, and often lost sight

of, even by Christians themselves: that, indeed, it is almost entirely overlooked or forgotten by the largest community in Christendom. Moreover, the evils of intolerance and persecution cannot but remind us, that the doctrine which we have undertaken to maintain, is exposed to a serious misconception, and may be readily perverted to the worst abuses of power. In justice, then, to the Christian religion, we have also yet to consider in what manner this liability is anticipated and guarded against in the principles which it teaches:—a view of Christianity which the mass of Christians, for many ages, would seem entirely to have missed; and which, even in our own time, may be but imperfectly comprehended by many, and is evidently too often unheeded. But this latter subject we must defer to the next and last discourse.

¹ When we raise our eyes from the pages of

¹ In entering upon the particular topic of this discourse, we are concerned the Christian reader should at once consider by *whom* this injunction was given. It was given by Christ himself, and afterwards repeatedly by his apostles. *That is*, those who were *divinely qualified* to expound the Jewish Scriptures, and *knew themselves to be so*, enjoined their hearers to search and examine them, in order that they might be led to the conviction that Jesus was the predicted Messiah, and that the Mosaic institution was prophetic of, and preparatory to, the Christian religion. Moreover, Christ and his apostles appealed to the miracles which they performed in proof of their divine commission; and, irrespective of a duty and reasonableness on the part of their hearers of inquiring into the import of the sacred writings, all that could have been necessary to

Scripture to the multitudes who profess to receive it as the word of God, we find the major portion of them endeavouring to promote the

convince the Jews that they were really messengers from God, and, consequently, to induce them to receive their declarations—to receive their *exposition* of the writings of Moses and the prophets, was a conviction of the reality of such miracles. Indeed, the fact recorded by the Evangelists, that the Jews who disbelieved the Gospel, disbelieved it notwithstanding they acknowledged the miracles wrought to attest it, has been looked upon as remarkable by Christian authors, and as requiring explanation. What we are then solicitous should be considered on this subject is, that it was perfectly agreeable to the *design* of Christ and his apostles, that a personal investigation of the writings of Moses and the prophets, by the Jews themselves, should be instrumental to the faith which they demanded, and should concur with the evidence of miracles to promote the belief of the Gospel. Manifestly, it was not their specific purpose that the Jews, who had these writings in their hands, should receive their explanation of them in virtue of an implicit reliance on their ability and authority to explain them; but that they should compare that explanation with their own judgment on their import: inasmuch as this comparison afforded occasion for the exercise and proof of those important moral qualities in the conduct of the understanding, which, as we have seen, it is the aim of Christianity to try and nourish. These Scriptures, prophetic as they were of Jesus Christ, and designed to confirm his pretensions, were properly matter for personal conscientious examination: they had been delivered and preserved to prepare the sincere and faithful servants of God for the reception of the Gospel, and it would have frustrated their purpose, it would have destroyed their use, in this important instance, to have required an implicit, uninquiring assent to any particular exposition of their meaning. We have premised these observations, because they appear properly introductory to our argument in the following pages, and may serve not a little to confirm

belief of its doctrines, or those which they conceive to be such, by the aid of assumptions altogether inconsistent with the fact of a common responsibility to Almighty God, in the adoption of our religious tenets. We find them ascribing to individuals or bodies of men an infallible intelligence, and an absolute authority, in matters of faith; in determining, more especially, the actual import, or the specific doctrines, which the language of the Scripture was intended to convey; notwithstanding the Scripture itself regards mankind as subject to a trial of their rectitude in dealing with its own communications, and liable, through a misuse of their faculties, to many and pernicious errors concerning them. It is true, they cite passages from the Scripture in support of this extraordinary belief and pretension; but the fact which we wish to particularize and single out to attention on the present occasion, is, that they are guided to their own construction of such passages—a construction favourable to the pretension in question—by an antecedent presumption relating to the conduct of Almighty God, which cannot but appear extremely improbable, when we consider the

it. The injunction itself, “Search the Scriptures,” (*Ἐρευνᾶτε τὰς γραφάς,*) is commonly understood as implying the utmost diligence of investigation; an allusion is supposed to the operations of miners in searching the earth for its treasures. But we can want no proof of the stress laid upon the duty of searching the Scriptures by the sacred writers themselves.

nature and conditions of that responsibility which, as we have seen, it is no inferior or unessential object of the Gospel to impress upon our minds. Our purpose, therefore, is to expose the fallacy of that *à priori* reasoning on which this assumption of infallibility is founded, by confronting it with the fact of human accountableness in our reception and use of the Scriptures; and by looking from the one to the other, those members of our community who appear to be growing doubtful of our religious position in our continued secession from the Church of Rome, will be better prepared to appreciate the weight of the reasoning on which the authority of that Church is mainly founded.

Our argument against that authority is this:—Seeing that the Scripture asserts a common responsibility in the use of our reason in reference to the system of religion which it purports to unfold—a responsibility attaching to us, not only in deciding upon the question of its divine authority, but also in deducing the import of its language, (for these are inseparably connected in the business of religious inquiry; inasmuch as we can believe the Gospel only so far as we believe the doctrines which it was designed to unfold, besides that the import which we attach to its language is essentially connected with our belief of its divine authority,)—seeing, we say, that the Scripture holds us under probation to

God in the use of our intellect, in judging of its own communications—in judging of the facts, the doctrines, the precepts which it lays before us—it is a forced and violent presumption, that it should have authorized any particular body of Christians to demand an universal concurrence in its decisions on matters of faith, in virtue of a divine illumination, vouchsafed either to its head, or to any class of its members: thereby, in effect, superseding that responsibility which itself had especially inculcated, and publishing an exemption from the duty of “searching” for that treasure of knowledge which it contains in its pages: or, if we must speak more precisely, reducing that duty to such a degree of self-government, as might be necessary to the reception of the single proposition, that the Church of Rome has an exclusive assurance of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the exposition of the Scriptures. The presumption, we repeat, is a violation of all probability, that the Scripture—which we are now regarding as divinely inspired—should, on the one hand, have instructed mankind to account themselves in a condition of trial as it regards the state of their minds, the bent of their will and affections, in investigating the import and credibility of its own language; and, on the other, should, either directly or by implication, have afforded them any ground or warrant for concluding, that they might

discharge the whole debt of their accountability—redeem it for all time to come, by one compendious final act of belief,—that of assenting to the claim of a single body, the Church of Rome, to be received as an infallible expositor of the word of God: that by a steadfast continuance in that one article of belief, they might, without any farther effort of their own, moral or intellectual, assure themselves of a sufficient and abiding knowledge of the truth: that the whole danger to our faith, in collecting and retaining the sense of the sacred writings, lay in the possibility of our being induced to withhold our confidence from one only infallible authority, or to abandon our subjection to its rule: that that danger escaped, the peril of heresy, with the uneasiness of doubt and the task of inquiring, would be at an end.

Now this is an objection to the arrogation of infallibility by the Church of Rome, which demands the serious examination of all who maintain or allow it; but especially would we press it on the attention of any of our own community, who may not be entirely satisfied that it should meet with our peremptory denial, and persisting opposition; or who, we may add, rejecting the infallibility of Rome, appear to be looking to some other *authority* than that of the Scriptures as constituted to determine the articles of the Christian faith.—For as in past time, so at present, the main

position taken by the priesthood of Rome in their controversy with Protestants, and from which they look with contempt or pity on the various communities among them, is, that the belief of an infallible expositor of the sense of Scripture, or the doctrines of the Gospel, is essential to establish a harmony of opinions, an unity of faith among Christians—that is, to secure nothing less than the universal belief of the *truth*; for, we presume, it is not imagined that unity in error would be agreeable to the purpose of the Deity, any more than it could consist with an universal submission to an infallible authority. We appeal to all who are conversant with their manner of reasoning, when we affirm that the topics which principally engage the attention of Romish teachers of Christianity, and draw forth their zeal and eloquence in the defence and exaltation of their Church are such as these:—the impossibility of obtaining a consent among Christians, in their interpretation of the Scriptures, in the general exercise of private judgment; the certain result, on the contrary, of divers opinions and unceasing controversy; the necessity of a living expositor divinely qualified, and invested with a special authority, to deliver the sense of the sacred writings; the probability, in consequence, or the presumptive proof, that the Great Head of the Church has, in reality, appointed one.—Such are the topics which the

Church of Rome puts most prominently forward, when it is her mood to reason with those who dispute the validity of her title; that is, when she endeavours to vindicate her own exposition of those parts of Scripture which, she avers, have given it to her.

Such, we would observe, particularly, is the strain of reasoning which an eminent divine of that Church, but a short time since, urged on the judgment and conscience of this Protestant people, in a series of lectures delivered in our metropolis; lectures which, on their first publication, produced, as it seemed, no small commotion—a commotion which, for aught we know, may not yet have subsided; inclining not a few to doubt the essential benefits of the Reformation, and the truth of that article of our Church which affirms the sufficiency and exclusive authority of the Holy Scriptures.¹

The pith and substance of Dr. Wiseman's argument on the subject in question, is precisely such as we have stated. He argues that if mankind were left to collect the true import of Scripture on the *Protestant* principle of private judgment, a considerable, nay, the greater number of Christians would inevitably miss it, wanting ability or leisure for the investigation; and that the remainder would be drawn into endless

¹ Art. VI.; but the same import is conveyed with hardly less clearness in Art. XX. and XXI.

divisions and controversy; whereas the Roman Catholic rule of faith “has a necessary tendency”—thus he expresses its benignant and effective operation—“has a necessary tendency to bring all the opinions and understandings of men into the most perfect unity, and to the adoption of one only creed.”¹ Such is the argument by which that author would persuade the Protestant, we do not say to sacrifice the *right* merely, but, in obvious and necessary consistency with the subject of these discourses, to abandon the *duty*, of private judgment, and induce him to believe that the Scriptures, as he maintains, have “given authority to a living power to teach;” “to define what is undoubtedly the written word of God;”² and has “guaranteed the preservation of truth in that authority to the end of time:” thus, in effect, maintaining that the whole duty of searching the Scriptures resolves itself into such a measure of diligence and impartiality as may be necessary to the reception of a single proposition—namely that the Church of Rome is divinely authorized to explain them: that, in virtue of this one act of faith, we may place ourselves beyond the reach of scepticism and all heresy. Such is the security, such the happiness of those who betake themselves to the Church of Rome! We

¹ Lectures on the Doctrines and Articles of the Catholic Church, vol. I. p. 76.

² Vol. I. p. 66, &c.

Protestants are wont to describe the faith of the Christian, as though it demanded a constant watchfulness over self—over “an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.” We look forward to our Christian course as to a long and a perilous voyage; smooth, indeed, at times, and full of peace and hope—but, anon, overcast with doubt, and vexed with the rage of controversy—the wished-for haven we descry far off, not nearer than the end of life. Idle apprehension! that haven is close at hand—the unerring wisdom of the Church of Rome—we have but to clear its entrance—a dangerous strait to curious spirits—but, that accomplished, we have done for ever with uncertainty and error; and so far as these could trouble us, have already entered our eternal rest.¹

¹ We are disputing, more particularly, the pretension to infallibility in delivering to the world the true *import* of the Scripture; but (though, as has been remarked, the import and the authority of the Scriptures are intimately connected) it should here be added and well considered, that the Romanist not only accounts his rule of faith to be essential to unity among Christians in their judgment on the sense of Scripture; but he contends, that on Protestant principles but very few individuals, if, strictly speaking, any, could attain a reasonable conviction of their divine authority, far less determine the canon of Scripture, or separate the writings of inspired men from those which had been untruly ascribed to them; that, in brief, the generality of mankind must continue in hopeless ignorance on the Christian religion. This point is so urged and aggravated by Dr. Wiseman, that we do not overstate his argument in affirming, that its necessary tendency is—we should

In looking, then, at the pages which are covered with reasoning of this nature, to promote the belief of an infallible expositor of Scripture, we are provoked to *insist* upon the extraordinary oversight, the almost entire forgetfulness, which such reasoning betrays of a general responsibility in the conduct of the understanding on the matter of religion. The Scripture confessedly forewarns us that we shall be called to render an account to God for the formation of our belief concerning him; and though such a doctrine may at first seem questionable, and tempt us to dispute its justice, we find, on a closer examination, that our trial, in this respect, is intimately and vitally connected with the great doctrine of all natural as well as revealed religion, that mankind shall be judged according to their *works*; and that hence the commandment in the Gospel to believe its own declarations, is entirely consistent with its title to be received as a divine revelation. Moreover, as we have already remarked, a belief of the Gospel includes, of necessity, a belief of the doctrines which it actually asserts, that is, of the import in general which it was intended to convey, and in reality expresses. Accordingly, we collect from a number of passages in the

be unwilling to believe that this was his purpose in constructing it—to force Protestants to the alternative of becoming infidels or Papists—of renouncing the Gospel of Christ altogether, or of taking it from the lips of Pope or Council. See Lect. I.

Scriptures themselves, that it is the duty of individuals to “search” into their true meaning; and it is observable that we are directly apprised and forewarned of immoral influences upon the understanding in this investigation, by the example of men who though receiving the Scriptures as the word of God, notwithstanding wrested them to their own destruction, “turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness.”¹ Again, we find the Apostles of Christ pronouncing those “accursed”² who preached another gospel than they themselves had preached, and recording an awful denunciation against the man who “shall add unto,” or “take away from,” their “words,” that is, the sense expressed in their language.³ It must surely be apparent from all this, that we are subject to the judgment of God in affixing a meaning to the words of his inspired messengers; and liable to err, in this important instance, from strictly moral causes—liable to vitiate or curtail the real import of his word. And need we cite experience to prove the truth of this presumption, and notwithstanding such previous admonition—to prove that in the pursuit of self-indulgence in its various forms, we are prone to allow erroneous or inadequate views of the duties which the Gospel imposes upon us, and of the doctrines which it delivers in order to enforce the fulfilment of those duties—in order to humble our pride, to exalt our

¹ St. Jude.² 2 Gal. i. 8.³ Rev. xxii. 18, 19.

conceptions of the divine holiness, to expose the turpitude of whatever is evil, whatever is wrong, and to nourish a desire of all moral perfection? Moreover, is it not palpable to our reason, as well as plainly inculcated in the Scriptures, that our responsibility in the great matter of which we are speaking, is proportioned to our intellectual powers, with the external means afforded us of knowing the truth; as it is also impossible not to perceive that these are distributed amongst mankind in the extreme of disparity, and in every variety of kind and degree; seeing that the strongest faculties may be trained to the servitude of vicious passions and an irreligious spirit, as well as the weakest, and prove as powerful in the diffusion of error as of truth?

Who then, we ask, taking but a rapid glance at our probationary condition as laid open to us in the word of God, and prepared, in consequence, for some developement of the good and evil of the human character in the shape of belief or opinion, would allege a difference of opinion in religion, or the existence of error—for a difference of opinion, we repeat, can be no otherwise matter for regret and avoidance than as it involves the reception of error—would allege, we say, the prevalence of various opinions, be they ever so diverse and contradictory, the growth of heresies, be they ever so diffused and pernicious, the strifes of controversy

the most violent and interminable, and fatal to the soul's peace and Christian charity, and even the disproportion in the condition and qualifications of individuals for the search and discovery of truth,—would allege these things as so many reasons on which to ground a presumption, that the Moral Governor and final Judge of the world must have endued some one individual, or body of men, with an unerring insight into the sense of his written word, and authorized that individual or body of men to expound it for the rest of mankind; in order to secure an unity of faith amongst those to whom it had been sent,—that is, to secure the universal and permanent belief of the truth? Who that reflected, but a little, on the conditions of human accountableness, as set before us in the Scriptures, would conceive the supposition, that the Almighty must have provided some specific measure for overruling all difference of character, all contrariety of motives, in the adoption of religious tenets, together with all disparity of powers and opportunities of knowledge amongst us,—must have provided some measure, “having,” in the words of Dr. Wiseman, “a necessary tendency to bring all opinions and understandings of men to a perfect unity, and the adoption of one creed;” and accordingly proceed to put a meaning on the language of Scripture, or the recorded promises of Christ to his Church, agreeable to such a presumption?

How partial and exclusive that view of the procedure of Almighty God as the Moral Governor of his creatures, which could have originated, or can appear to countenance, a conclusion that he would thus interpose to prevent the spread of error in religion, and ensure a consent and harmony in the belief of truth. For are we not forced to perceive his wide permission of criminal actions—those numerous and gross deviations from *unity*, the *one only path* of moral rectitude, the way of the divine commandment? Are we not compelled to look upon a broad and dark flood of guilt, continually issuing from the polluted sources of human volition? And, moreover, are not individuals placed in most unequal circumstances of moral discipline?—numbers in conditions the most infelicitous and adverse for the attainments of virtue; not to speak of others who, through idiocy or mania, are altogether incapacitated and extinct as moral agents? Reasoning apart from experience, or presumptively as the Roman Catholic, on the question before us, the preconception that God would institute such a rule of faith as should merge the exercise of private judgment, in order to harmonize opinions in religion, and secure the universal possession of truth, would rest upon no better foundation than a preconception that he would place some check upon the incursion and spread of crime itself, and produce uniformity of virtuous action; by a

method which should neutralize the difference of circumstances, and supersede the influence of moral suasion on the voluntary powers;—*apart from experience*, we say, for we are disputing the claim of infallibility, only so far as it is upheld by an *à priori* argument. In what manner the claim has been actually supported in the processes and enlightenment of the human intellect, on the part of those who have maintained or acceded to it—whether and how far it has, in reality, produced an unanimity of belief, and what the quality and worth of that unanimity which it has produced, are questions of essential moment; but far beyond the purpose of this discourse.

Do we then, as Protestants, think lightly of errors and divisions among Christians, because we cannot subscribe to the brief and expeditious method which the Romanist would establish for preventing them? As well might we be judged indifferent to the criminal practices, or the scanty virtues, of our species, because we do not choose to wonder at such manifestations of a nature exposed to temptation and prone to evil; and because our thoughts are not intent upon and busied with some measure by which the Almighty might correct the disorders of the moral world; albeit he would thereby suspend the constitution of accountable beings. As well might those be judged insensible to the ills of poverty, and

careless to assuage them, who show no interest in every theory which contemplates their extinction, and the universal diffusion of the comforts and enjoyments of life. The common possession of truth, and of every other element of true happiness, is doubtless an object worthy our earnest thoughts and endeavours; but in proposing some means for its accomplishment, we should surely inquire whether it provide for the exercise of man's powers, and the growth of his virtues. Especially, if it seem good to divines, to ground their scheme for the right interpretations of the Scriptures on a preconceived theory, they should be careful that it show some congruity with the state of mankind as exhibited in the Scripture itself; and allow some room for the fulfilment of duties which it expressly inculcates. This presumption of an infallible expositor in the Church of God, is pronounced by Dr. Wiseman to be "beautiful" as a "theory," as an "idea:" it is dignified with the titles of philosophy, as well as adorned by the phrases of eloquence. To our apprehension of things, it betrays a narrow, exclusive attention to one object—the production of unity in opinion among men: any conception, in such a theory, of an unity of purpose *in the Deity*—any conception of a consistency in his dealings with mankind, we are wholly unable to discover.

But would we could discern in this scheme for

enlightening the world in the true knowledge of God's word, nothing more than a meagre theory, or a poverty of speculation! For who shall tell to what extent this dogma of infallibility has been embraced, adhered to, and propagated through a corrupt bias of the understanding—through a departure from that great duty which it so manifestly tends to set aside, and entirely banish from the thoughts—that of a conscientious inquiry into the import of the Holy Scriptures? Assuredly, of all the questions which could engage the attention of a body of Christians, it were hardly possible to mention one, which it would more severely try their sincerity towards God to decide upon in a candid, impartial spirit, than that which is the subject of the present observations—the question whether they were empowered to determine controversies in religion, or rather to prevent them. For who shall portray the passions which must seek and hope to be gratified, in taking the affirmative of such a question—in the persuasion of such a prerogative as that of expounding the accredited word of God, unfolding the mind of Christ, for the rest of the world—affixing the seal of Divinity to whatever proposition it might seem fit to the subject of human passions to assert and impose! Who shall tell of the ambition and cupidity, the selfish and worldly motives, that would crowd to the defence of such a prerogative—that would grasp

the weapons, and urge the strife, of argument against the men who should impugn it! At the same time, is it possible to compute the consequences, temporal and spiritual, which must hang upon the determination of such a question! Truly, the Church of Rome had need assure herself of the gift of infallibility in pronouncing herself to be in possession of it. She had need be certified of her inaccessibleness to guilty error, in maintaining a pretension which in old time obtained for her, and might, peradventure, restore to her, the highest of the thrones of the earth, a sovereignty over its kings. Nay, she must be in imminent danger of mistaking the master principle which sways her; of mistaking for a love of truth and a zeal for God, that lust of power which is ever lurking in the breast of man, and by indulgence grows insatiate and inextinguishable.¹

¹ But a similar caution, it must be admitted, and, indeed, should not be forgotten, is more or less incumbent on the Christian priesthood in general. In "Discourses upon Tradition and Episcopacy," the Rev. C. Benson, Master of the Temple, animadverts on a bold and incautious manner of applying to the sacerdotal order in our own time, the terms and imagery in which the Scripture has set forth the divine commission and especial authority of the inspired Apostles, and observes most justly and impressively—"When figurative representations of the power belonging to the clergy are introduced, which, if not strictly limited and carefully explained, would lead the ministers of the Lord to indulge in exaggerated ideas of their own office and dignity, and generate in their followers a superstitious reverence for their persons, and a

In putting forward the doctrine maintained in these discourses against the assumption of infallibility by the Church of Rome—against the reasoning by which it is mainly supported, we cannot but perceive that it stands opposed, on a similar ground, to that rule of faith, that *authoritative* exposition of the doctrines of the Gospel, which has been recently pressed upon our attention by divines in our own Church, and appears to have become the reigning subject of theological discussion and controversy. It is now maintained, that an exposition of the doctrines of the Scripture, authoritative on our reception—that is, one which we are bound to receive *in virtue of an intelligence and authority on the part of those who have given it*—it is maintained, we say, that such an exposition of the sense of Scripture is contained in the recorded belief of men who embraced the Gospel in past ages; and certain criteria relating to time, place, and number, are laid down, by the careful application of which, that exposition of the Gospel may be collected—may be detached

dreadful apprehension with regard to the spiritual efficacy, for good or for evil, of their words and acts,—in that case it is most dangerous and unjust to leave such representations without those correctives which are requisite to prevent any objectionable impressions from being made. Every effort should then be employed to bring down the lofty phrases to the simplicity of Gospel truth, and allow no room for pride on the one hand, or ignorance on the other, to fall into mistakes so full of hazard.” P. 34.

and placed apart from all that has come down to us of human judgments as to the true import of the word of God. This general account of the opinion in question, will suffice to our purpose in adverting to it on the present occasion. Now, we are fully persuaded that an incalculable advantage would be gained to the cause of truth, by substituting such a rule of faith, as explained by its most able advocates, for that of the Roman Catholic; and we are far from doubting that those who intelligently and faithfully search the Scriptures, will substantially accord to that exposition of their meaning which this rule of faith is alleged to *bind* upon our acceptance. But we submit with that respect, we trust, and community of Christian sentiment, which we should be loth to want towards Christian teachers, eminent for learning and piety, that the assertion of any scheme or standard of doctrine external to the Scriptures, as obligatory on the faith of Christians, in virtue of a special intelligence and authority appertaining to those who have propounded it, is exposed to a similar objection to that which has been already urged against the arrogation of infallibility by the Church of Rome. It leaves in our religious system no adequate or, rather, no clearly discernible space, for the doctrine of a personal responsibility in the employment of our faculties on the contents of the Sacred Volume. The Church of Rome has taught its members,

and would teach all the world, that by implicitly relying on her infallibility, they may discharge their entire duty in dealing with the Scriptures as matter of belief, and obtain a safe and lasting refuge from any doubt that might otherwise suggest itself as to their actual import. The divines to whom we advert, if we have succeeded in obtaining their meaning, are seeking to establish a rule of faith which would enable us to effect a similar composition of the great duty of searching the Scriptures; and this, whatever be our qualifications, comparatively with others, for deducing the meaning of its language. Our part, it seems, is to ascertain, either by our own research, or from the testimony of others, a particular exposition of Christian doctrines—that is, the collective judgment of the Church Catholic, as to the sense of Scripture; and we have full permission to adopt it; nay, it is our bounden duty to adopt it, inasmuch as a direct promise, so it is affirmed, has been vouchsafed her, that the truth committed to her keeping shall never be lost; and this in consequence of the ever-present care and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, it should be especially remarked of those who advocate this rule of faith, that in maintaining their own construction of the promises of Christ to his Church—that is, in explaining them to guarantee an indefectibility of essential

faith, they avail themselves of a mode of reasoning precisely the same as that which is continually urged against Protestants by the Romish priesthood, in support of their enormous pretension. They insist, again and again, on the necessity of a divinely authorized rule of faith, or explanation of the Gospel, in order to supply the place of inquiry to those who are disqualified for pursuing it; to obviate a diversity of opinions; to put down controversy; to secure a general agreement in the faith of Christians. We have seen that all such reasoning is relied upon in a singular oversight of a common responsibility in dealing with the Sacred writings, which inevitably implies the duty of individuals to inquire into their import in a devout and conscientious spirit; with a view to receive them in that sense which *appears to themselves to be the true one*, whether suggested by their own minds, or proposed to their acceptance by another. In what manner the intellect may be furnished, as well as the heart prepared, for the discharge of this duty, is doubtless a most essential question: and here it would be perfectly apposite to argue, that an exposition of the Gospel upheld by the unanimous consent of the Fathers, or the earliest Christian teachers succeeding the Apostles—upheld by the concurrent voice of antiquity, is entitled to a serious attention; and is one from which a considerate student of the Scriptures would be slow and cautious to

differ.¹ We are contending against the assertion of an exposition of the Sacred writings, which, as has been already stated, *demands* our assent in virtue of an intelligence and authority appertaining expressly to those who have delivered it; and which, consequently, resolves the duty of *searching* the Scriptures into an implicit reception of those doctrines which they have conveyed to the minds of others.

It must be manifestly superfluous to compare an explanation of any part of Scripture, inculcated on our acceptance by an authoritative rule of faith, with any other construction of its meaning. We find, indeed, that those who press the authority of the Church Catholic do, in some sort, commend, and, it may be, enjoin a personal examination of the Scriptures; that is, to *confirm and verify* her decisions. But can it be seriously believed that the Great Head of the Church expects us to examine, with a view to

¹ "As all inquirers into the laws of nature," observes Dr. Hampden, in his valuable lecture on Tradition, "readily avail themselves of former discoveries, and ascertained theories, and even reasonable hypotheses, for aiding their own investigations; so do all sober inquirers into God's revealed ways take along with them, what former searchers of Scripture, and proficients in Sacred wisdom have already obtained from Scripture. And yet it remains that, as what is ultimately learned and taught by the physical philosopher, is the wisdom of God in nature; so what is ultimately learned and taught by the Scriptural student, with all his previous steps and accessions of knowledge from without, is God's wisdom in Scripture." P. 17.

confirm and verify; an exposition of his word, which, notwithstanding, it is his will we should receive in virtue of his own promise, ensuring to the authors of that exposition a permanent possession of the truth?—as if it were possible to confirm and verify what we *already believe* to have been dictated under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit—as if we were required to enter upon and prosecute an inquiry, which might indeed betray us into error, but could not, by possibility, enlarge our knowledge, or strengthen our conviction of the truth? To examine a document *purporting to be* of divine authority—to consider and weigh its import, in order to judge of the probability of its actually being so, is a most rational application of our faculties; but to compare its declarations with our own independent conclusions, *after* we have arrived at a conviction of its divine authority, is, to say the least, not recognised as a duty by the generality of Christians.

But yet further, it should be considered—though we can here do little more than advert to the fact—that the whole body of Christians in past ages designated the Church Catholic, with the exception of the apostles who were divinely inspired to teach the Gospel, were themselves individually responsible in acquiring their views of Christianity, or in dealing with the language of those who had published it to the

world. Need it be insisted that this fact draws an impassable line between all other human beings and the apostles, whose inspiration by the Spirit of God overruled their responsibility on this head, and precludes even a conjecture that they may have erred in their conceptions of the truth? It follows, then, that the promise vouchsafed his Church by the Lord Jesus Christ, in common with the divine promises in general recorded in Scripture, must be received with an important qualification; must be understood as strictly conditional on the fulfilment of a corresponding obligation on the part of his Church, that of rightly using the means afforded them of obtaining and preserving the truth. Otherwise, the idea of their having been tried as to the rectitude of their motives in handling the words of the sacred writers, must be entirely given up; and we must hold them to have been as inaccessible to error as divine inspiration itself could have made them. Suppose, then, we ask the advocates of the rule of faith in question—suppose that you have sifted out their collective judgment as to what the Scriptures were penned to communicate; yet, in receiving that judgment, as authoritative, and calling upon others to imitate your example, do you not assume that they acquitted themselves aright under the responsibility laid upon them as persons to whom the “word of salvation had been sent?” On what ground do you make that assumption? Not by

a comparison of their exposition of the Scripture with the impression made upon your own mind by a perusal of it; for that were to place your own judgment on its import in comparison with theirs. You must travel to that conclusion by some other road. You will allege, then, that their concurrence on essential doctrines is a proof that they have given us the true substantive interpretation of the Scriptures. But suppose we assert that this agreement on essential doctrines constitutes a proof of the perspicuity of the Scriptures themselves, or their proper sufficiency as a divine revelation—a revelation requiring attention and a spirit of impartiality on the part of those to whom it is offered—for such a proof we judge that agreement to be, *outweighing all* that can be urged to the contrary—how will you wrest that argument from our hands, and show that the unanimity of Christians, in whatever age, or in all ages, on fundamental articles of faith, argues, not that the sacred writings are perspicuous or intelligible, but that God has authorized a community of Christians, denominated the Church Catholic, to impose their construction of his word on the belief of others?—a community who were individually and, in consequence, collectively, as we should infer, accounted responsible, presumed to be liable to error, in handling it?¹ But whatever

¹ It is argued, that the Scriptures require to be explained, and that they are explained, by a permanently existing

be concluded from an agreement among Christians in the leading articles of their faith, whether that the Scriptures be sufficient to the communication of Christian knowledge or not, it cannot with reason or probability be affirmed,—that men who were themselves under trial, as we are, in their treatment of the word of God, and have gone to render their own account of the principles which swayed them in the use of it, have, notwithstanding, left behind them an exposition of its doctrines, which it is our duty to receive, irrespective of our own examination; and whether it agree or not with the judgment which, apart from such a duty, we ourselves should form of its import.

Does tradition, then, or the testimony of uninspired men, bear no conclusive testimony to the language delivered by Christ and his apostles?

standard of doctrine in the Church; but the method in which this is attempted to be proved is not a little arbitrary. If the object be to establish the use and worth of such a standard of doctrine, it is alleged that there has been a remarkable *agreement* among the professors of the Gospel in their apprehension of its import—its capital doctrines have been received “always, every where, and by all;” but if the object be to prove the inadequacy of the Scriptures in the absence of the exposition which the Church Catholic has given of them, then our attention is pointed to essential *differences* among Christians, an incurable diversity of opinion, and interminable controversy. All the agreement among them, it seems, is attributable to the light which tradition throws upon the pages of Scripture; all the disagreement to the obscurity of the Scriptures without it.

Unquestionably it does : but we are speaking of the sense which Christians of other and former ages have placed on the words of inspired men ; not of the words themselves. For these they are properly vouchers. But why ? Because they were, either personally, or in the aggregate, *infallible* in preserving them ?—We have always thought that a substantial identity in the language ascribed to Christ and his apostles in the writings of Christians generally—of Christians living in the very time of the latter, as well as in the next and succeeding ages, and in places distant from each other, and moreover holding adverse opinions—supplied some cogent proof that we have in our hands the very words which the inspired writers recorded of our Saviour, and in which they penned their own declarations in their several epistles. Is such a witness to the accurate transmission of language to be held superfluous, or rejected as invalid, in reference to the Scriptures ? May the ordinary principles of evidence in such matters be here dispensed with, or are they to be accounted of no value ?

Before concluding, we would offer a few brief observations on the general subject of this discourse.—In the first place, a peculiar stress is now laid upon the incapacity of the mass of mankind to ascertain the true sense of the Holy Scriptures for themselves, notwithstanding the

materials for forming a correct apprehension of their import, which are and have been so abundantly supplied them from various sources, and pre-eminently by the duly appointed and qualified teachers of religion. This topic must surely be greatly exaggerated, or how many commentaries on the Scriptures, how many treatises on the doctrines of Christianity have been written, so far as the bulk of Christians are concerned, in vain, and have been entirely thrown away. But be the incapacity of mankind in general to search the Scriptures for themselves what it may, as well as the inutility of the helps supposed to be afforded them for that purpose, a special rule of faith, authoritative on Christians universally, must show some better title to our acceptance than the fact, that many or even most who have the Scriptures in their hands do not and cannot understand what they read there. The advocates of the rule in question seem not unfrequently to argue, as if they judged that the ignorance and errors of others, or of mankind in general, were proof sufficient that they themselves had reached the truth, or were authorized to declare it.¹

¹ Archbishop Tillotson, after stating that the books of Scripture are sufficiently plain "as to all things necessary to be believed and practised," observes, "He that denies this ought in reason to instance in some necessary point of faith, or matter of practice, which is not, in some place or other, plainly

Again, it is often and justly lamented that individuals account themselves unblamable, and plead the rights of conscience, in dissenting from particular articles of faith and religious observances, or in abandoning the Established Church—individuals who appear disqualified, by their habits and circumstances, for any adequate dis-

delivered,"—*Rule of Faith*, p. 1, sec. 3,—a work which, apart from some quaint personalities long since banished from our controversial literature, might appear to have been but just written: for the leading features of the controversy on tradition continue remarkably the same. The challenge here given, to point out *instances* in which the Scriptures are insufficient, is a most pertinent one, and may well deserve the attention of members of our own Church, who assert that we are indebted for the belief of distinguishing doctrines—for example, that of the divinity of our Saviour—to the judgment of antiquity or tradition. Do *they* perceive such doctrines to be plainly delivered in the Scriptures? If they do, we submit, whether it be a reasonable conclusion for *them* to maintain that they are *not* plainly delivered in the Scriptures? and that *they* would never have perceived them there, had not the judgment of tradition prepared them to do so? This opinion, now so frequently heard, reminds us of a consideration urged upon us by Unitarians—that the language in the Scriptures with reference to Christ would never have raised in our minds the idea and belief of his divinity, but for the power of association and habit; that is, but for the fact that we have been *taught* to annex a particular meaning to the phraseology concerning him. We freely admit, that those who are in danger of abandoning their faith in the divinity of Christ, under the influence of *this* consideration, may escape that danger by having recourse to the authority of tradition. But we should not allow such persons to be fit judges of the import of language—of the scope of an author—of the sufficiency or intelligibility of the Scripture on the subjects of which it treats.

cussion of those questions wherein they differ both from the wisdom and piety of their ancestors, and the prevailing intelligence of their own time. It follows from the drift of our argument, that the proper and the most effectual means of checking the pride and rashness, the caprice and ambition, which so often betray themselves in the exercise of private judgment, and even under a delusive presumption of fulfilling our duty to God rather than to man, is not to dispute the exercise of private judgment as a *right*, but to inculcate it as a *duty*—one of the most solemn and imperative in its nature. The person who is justly affected with a sense of his probation before God in the search of truth, will, in the first place, consider the extent of his powers and opportunities of attaining it; and, so far as he concludes himself to be wanting in these, he will defer to the judgment of others who have possessed the requisite or superior means of obtaining the knowledge for which he is looking, and who have given him proof of a disposition to promote his welfare. This is an exercise of private judgment, in religion, manifestly proper to a large portion of mankind, as, in reference to the objects of human inquiry in general, it is, in a greater or less degree, to mankind universally:—an exercise of private judgment which is found to answer the demand of the reason and conscience, and a default in

which is commonly followed, sooner or later, by a disquietude of uncertainty, and a regretful compunction. But this intelligent deference to superior knowledge, and dractised faculties—to official qualifications rightly considered, can hardly be expected, while we seem to be questioning or seeking to abridge the right, instead of explaining and enforcing the duty, of private judgment. On the contrary, it must be evident, on the smallest reflection, that we call into action a class of feelings the most adverse to a just sense of the respective conditions in which Divine Providence has placed us, in regard to the attainment of religious as well as other knowledge—the most adverse to a reasonable estimate of the qualifications and claims of the Christian priesthood. And, let it be added, he must have reflected but little on this subject, who imagines that the divine institution of an order of men to minister in religion, and a conscientious exercise of private judgment, are things incompatible; nay, who fails to perceive, in their perfect consistency and auspicious union, another and a conspicuous illustration of that ordination of our Creator, which has rendered mankind, individuals and communities, the recipients of benefits the most precious and enduring, one from another; bringing yet more prominently into view that chain of mutual dependence which traverses in ways without

number, and connects indissolubly, the whole frame of human society.¹

In conclusion, lest any should be inclined to remark upon our freedom in handling the subject of this discourse, we would bring to remembrance the judgment of our own Church concerning it.—The Church of England, in the first place, lays claim to no such authority as that which is arrogated by the Church of Rome; for, be it observed, she does not assert, as that Church asserts, that she *cannot* err; that God has pledged his veracity that she shall not err. She affirms, that it is *not lawful* for her “to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s word written,” or “so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another;” that she *ought not* to decree and enforce anything to be believed against or besides the Holy Scriptures.² These are not the words of a presumed unerring intelligence, the expressions

¹ A recent most seasonable discourse, preached before the University of Oxford, by Dr. Hawkins, is happily entitled the Duty of Private Judgment. That there should be some appearance of novelty in the title is not a little remarkable, when we consider how decidedly the doctrine maintained in these pages is taught in Christianity, and that it would appear scarcely possible to entertain the idea of responsibility in disjunction from that of duty. But it is easily accounted for when we consider the time and energy which have been given to the defence of private judgment as a right, and how much this contest between man and man has encroached upon the proper working of the conscience towards God.

² Art. XX.

of a mind, individual or collective, that holds itself infallible in its exposition of the Scripture. Our Church, in such language, so far from claiming to overrule the exercise of private judgment, appears very clearly to presume it; to direct attention to the Holy Scriptures themselves, and to appeal to the understanding and conscience, in explaining them.

Again, the Church of England asserts, in the most unequivocal manner, the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures, together with their *paramount* and *exclusive* authority. She distinctly affirms the position maintained in this discourse: her language most evidently implying that the fallibility natural to human nature has *not* been done away in uninspired men, as individuals or bodies, who have lived before us; for she expressly declares of “councils and assemblies of men,” that they “may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God, and therefore that things ordained by them have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they may be taken out of the Holy Scriptures.”¹ She avails herself, and wisely, of ancient formularies of faith; but, in doing so, she declares her judgment that “they may be *proved* by most certain warrant of Holy Scripture.”

¹ Art. XXI.

But what is that authority, it may be asked, which our Church in reality assumes? Her adversaries challenge us to define its nature, and some of her members are perplexed to understand it; as if no authority could be assumed in spiritual matters, but such as must conflict with the dictates, or suspend the agency, of a man's conscience, or be upheld by external force and coercion. We interpret her authority in consistency with her high office of instructing men in their duties to God, and preparing them for the final retribution. She declares her judgment that the exposition of the word of God which she receives and inculcates is the true one; that her discipline and ordinances are agreeable to the Scriptures, and the usages of apostolic times—a most weighty judgment, when we consider the learning and the piety which have contributed to form and uphold it—and, in all consistency, she warns this people against the rejection of her doctrines and governance, lest they either fail of the true faith of a Christian, or through inconsideration or wilfulness, make themselves responsible for the evils of disunion and separation among Christians. Seeking to promote the unquestionable advantages of Christian unity, in a manner compatible with the special duty of individuals, and the tried condition of mankind; seeking, moreover, to combine the permanent and effective maintenance

of religion, with the conservation of civil rights and social happiness, the Church of England may expect and, we doubt not, will retain the respect and affection of a growingly intelligent people.¹

¹ Lest it should be supposed that we have not been sufficiently particular in reference to the authority appertaining to our Church, it may here be observed, that in combating the opinions objected to, we were not required to define the precise nature of that authority; but to show that it was taught and urged in connexion with a recognition of the duty of a conscientious personal inquiry into their import. We have disputed the validity of rules of faith which make no such recognition, and it is enough that we are abundantly vindicated in having so done by the articles of the Church to which we belong.

In questioning the authority of a traditionary exposition of Scripture as now maintained by some members of our own Church, we have not judged it necessary, looking at the nature of our argument, to make particular quotations from their writings. Indeed, when the same positions are argued, and argued in a similar manner, by several, such quotations are perhaps, on the whole, better omitted. At least, the absence of *personal* allusion is an advantage in controversy not to be readily sacrificed, so long as the disputants are concerned with arguments, not with names.

LECTURE VIII.

THE DOCTRINE GUARDED AGAINST ABUSE IN CHRISTIANITY.

Phil. ii. 5.

LET THIS MIND BE IN YOU WHICH WAS ALSO IN CHRIST JESUS :
WHO BEING IN THE FORM OF GOD, THOUGHT IT NOT ROBBERY
TO BE EQUAL WITH GOD ; BUT MADE HIMSELF OF NO REPUTA-
TION, AND TOOK UPON HIM THE FORM OF A SERVANT, AND WAS
MADE IN THE LIKENESS OF MEN ; AND BEING FOUND IN FASHION
AS A MAN, HE HUMBLLED HIMSELF, AND BECAME OBEDIENT UNTO
DEATH, EVEN THE DEATH OF THE CROSS.

IN arguing the reasonableness of that doctrine which is assumed in Christianity as the foundation of its claim to our belief—that of our responsibility to God in the adoption of religious tenets,—we cannot but be aware that the association of guilt, or a moral demerit, with errors of opinion, has lent to particular bodies of men a plausible and seductive pretext for the assumption of a special judicial authority over their fellow-creatures, and fostered that spirit of intolerance and persecution which has so grievously troubled the peace of society, as well

as impeded its progress; which, at particular periods, has even shaken it to its very foundations, and threatened an utter ruin of the virtue and happiness of mankind. We cannot but be reminded of these dark and lamentable passages in the history of the Christian religion, as its principles have been exhibited in the conduct of its professors. We would not evade the remembrance of such passages, but would keep them fully in view; for though it were needless to argue the consistency of Christianity with the freedom of human inquiry, and the existence and preservation of civil rights—an argument which it is due to the Church of England to affirm, that many of her most eminent divines have been among the foremost in maintaining—though it may be commonly acknowledged in our time, that bodies of Christians, in bringing to their bar, and claiming to punish, individuals dissenting from the articles of their faith, have erred as widely from the principles of the Gospel as from the dictates of right reason; yet, so important is this topic to a just estimate of Christianity, that we would point attention to the remarkable fact—that whereas, in consequence of the weakness of human judgment, and the exorbitancy of human passions, there is an anti-social and, strictly speaking, a *demoralizing* tendency in the doctrine of a responsibility for our religious tenets—a tendency to embroil the

professors of one faith, the believers of one doctrine, with those of another, and to bring the duties of piety into collision with the social virtues—Christianity, as unfolded to us in the sacred writings, discovers an especial corrective of that tendency. The direction which it has given to the religious affections, in the enforcement of its precepts and exhortations, is such as to preserve the harmony of society in the diversity and conflict of religious opinions, and to establish a sure, unbroken alliance between religion and morality.

In embracing a particular faith, it is manifestly implied, that we are impressed with a belief of its truth, and, in consequence, it is equally obvious, that if all mankind be brought to interpret errors of opinion in religion as proofs of a deficiency in its spirit and practice, each religious community will look upon others as more or less guilty before God, who adopt opinions adverse to their own. Moreover, so far as religion is held to be essential to the support and furtherance of practical morality, they cannot but consider the prevalence of such opinions as inimical to the present and temporal interests, as well as to the more enduring welfare of mankind. It must be readily perceived, then, that a number of persons united in the belief and propagation of particular doctrines in religion, will, if unable to vanquish their adversaries by other weapons, be instigated to the use of force in putting down

their opinions; at least and especially, if we presume such persons to be acquiring a predominance among rival and contending bodies, or to have actually grasped the powers of the state, and to hold the earthly interests and mortal destinies of the so judged unbelievers and heretics in their hands. There is imminent danger of yielding to such an instigation in an unreasoning and passionate age or people; for what will be the consequence? The search and defence of truth, by a diligence of inquiry and the collision of argument, will degenerate into a strife for power: political ascendancy will become the test of truth, and an earnest of divine favour: and, what is well worthy of reflection, a community united in the bonds of one faith, though subject, in their conduct one towards another, to the obligations of justice and benevolence, will deem themselves exempted from such restraints in dealing with those who differ from their creed; holding such obligations to be null and void in their imaginary zeal and championship for the cause of God and righteousness. The more powerful body will act as if they had obtained a special dispensation, a plenary indulgence, for the gratification of their pride and anger, cupidity and ambition; of every selfish and malevolent passion that may chance to be concerned in the propagation of their faith. The influence and power of religion, so called, will be felt in

its rending asunder the ties of moral obligation which bind man to man; though, be it never forgotten, it is in the strength and cherishment of those ties that we rise to the sense of our duties towards God, while we perpetuate our civil rights and social welfare.

We need spend no time, then, in endeavouring to show, that however reasonable the conclusion, that mankind are subject to trial before God in respect to their belief as well as their conduct, it would be egregiously presumptuous and irrational to hold them amenable in their religious tenets to a *human* tribunal. It is remarkable, however, that those who deny the propriety of imputing demerit to a man in the formation of his religious opinions, are continually expostulating with and inveighing against the spirit of intolerance, and deprecating the interference of the civil magistrate as an arbiter in matters of faith—that is, we presume, in any other character than as conservator of the common rights, and the public peace and security:—as if, because we affirm and insist, with whatever earnestness, that mankind are subject to the judgment of God, and may be chargeable with sin, in their belief relating to him, it must of necessity, or could with candour, be inferred, that we admit either the justice or the policy of arraigning and punishing our fellow-creatures for those errors into which, as we conclude, they could not without guilt

have fallen. Are there not innumerable *actions* even of the most vicious character, and peculiarly criminal in the sight of God, of which it is universally acknowledged that human laws can take no cognizance? Is there not a vast amount of guilt in the conduct of mankind, more or less palpable or deducible from observation and experience, on which, however, it pertains to God only to sit in judgment? And is it not equally reasonable, to conclude that there may be a high degree and a great accumulation of guilt under the form of belief or opinion, and, notwithstanding, to repudiate the idea of enlisting the judicial wisdom and power of man in its detection and punishment? Thus much we might say, even if there were not, as we have intimated, especial and insuperable objections to the instrumentality of force and coercion in the propagation of religious doctrines.

For our part, when we consider the consequences that might have been anticipated from the assumption of a judicial power in the promotion of religious tenets, together with the bitter and most convincing lesson of experience, we are disposed to wonder that the possibility, the great likelihood, of a zeal so ill-judged and pernicious, has not in all ages engaged the attention of reflecting Christians, in weighing the pretensions and credibility of the Gospel,—but of this in the sequel. Had they, however,

contemplated the religion which they professed in this most important aspect, they must have perceived that it evinced an evident foresight of the use of force and violence in the establishment of a religion, and that the direct and proper influence of its principles was to prevent and overbear it.

The Gospel, it is every where acknowledged, requires us to cultivate, in an especial manner, a spirit of humility and gratitude to Almighty God; in acknowledgment of the infinite condescension, the compassionate forbearance, the unbounded goodness which he has shown towards us, in the accomplishment of our redemption through the humiliation and sacrifice of the Son of God. Now, it is a weighty and most interesting fact, that the conduct of the Deity towards ourselves is held up and urged upon our attention in the Gospel, as a special and paramount inducement to the exercise of a corresponding disposition towards our fellow-creatures. In other words, the Gospel inculcates humility and gratitude towards God, not only as due to him in themselves considered, but also as motives of condescension and beneficence one towards another; and forbids us to account those affections to be acceptable to himself, unless they operate in this specific manner in the heart and conduct. We are debarred in these limits from insisting on the truth of this position, and on its necessity

and value as a principle of general application ; binding in every relation, and in the whole of our conduct, towards our fellow-creatures. But we may observe, that it were far from being agreeable to our reason, and would evidently frustrate the purpose of the divine instruction and example in this important instance, were we to conclude that God demanded the confession of our own unworthiness, and an acknowledgment of his mercy—demanded a humble renunciation of our own righteousness, and a grateful reliance on the merits of Christ as the ground of our justification before him, solely because such a state of mind were intrinsically, or irrespective of its practical influence, acceptable and pleasing in his sight. Undoubtedly it befits us, and is our bounden duty as Christians, to ascribe to him alone the glory of our salvation ; but it must seem impossible to a meditative mind to separate the glory of God, as a Being of moral perfection, from the tendency of his works and dispensations to promote the rectitude and happiness of his creatures. The Gospel appears to harmonize with the best conclusions of our reason in admonishing us, as it does repeatedly and most impressively, that the sense of our personal demerit and obligation to his goodness in our redemption, is no worthy and acceptable tribute to his praise and glory, unless we entertain it in its proper tendency to restrain the pride, to

soften the obduracy, to open the hearts of men one towards another, as members of the same great family of man, children of one universal Parent, the Father of all spirits: unless we so appreciate the condescension and patience of Christ in our behalf, as to “be clothed with humility” one towards another.

We may also suggest, that unless mankind were especially and peremptorily taught to apply this test to their humility and gratitude to God, or thus to evince their sense of his condescension and goodness towards them, it would not so readily appear in what manner these religious affections would work any extraordinary or considerable improvement in the human character. For our pride and selfishness are not directly confronted and put to shame by arguments, however unanswerable and affecting, which bring us, or would seem to bring us, in penitence and thankfulness to the footstool of the Almighty. We are too ready to perceive that such arguments apply no less to others than to ourselves; too ready to infer that, however we have sinned against God, and are indebted to his mercy in forgiving us, our claim upon the esteem or service of our fellow-creatures remains the same. In truth, unless the Supreme Being espouse the cause, if we may so speak, of our fellow-creatures, and demand the exercise of our benevolence towards our neighbour as some poor instalment of a debt to himself

that can never be told, we are continually in danger of contenting ourselves with acknowledgments of our unworthiness in his righteous judgment; while we propose to our endeavours no higher standard of conduct than such as may be placed before us in our intercourse and transactions with our fellow men.

Now, it is to a prevailing ignorance, or rather a most partial application, of this practical principle, that we must ascribe the fact, that the Gospel failed so extensively in past ages as a moral institution—failed, more especially, as a means of controlling the spirit of its professors, and guiding their conduct towards those who rejected doctrines which they held to be propounded in the word of God. It is abundantly evident, as we have stated, that the practice of persecution is repugnant to reason and to justice; but it is equally evident, that the effect of attaching importance to particular religious tenets has been to commend and incite to persecution; and that reason and justice were for ages wholly ineffectual to restrain it; and that what is especially wanted, if not absolutely indispensable, in a religion, in order to render it effective to the support and reinforcement of morality *in general*, is, that it comprehend, in its own principles, some powerful corrective to the excess or abuse of that zeal which it is its nature and proper object to inspire.

It might have been expected that a religion inculcating the purest morality, the firmest restraint on all the passions, would confer an unmixed benefit on the world. It has fallen far short of this; it has operated very much otherwise. That religion has actually appeared to supersede the obligations of morality towards a particular portion of mankind. It has burst asunder the bonds of justice and humanity which connected the worshippers and servants of the true God with the rest of mankind as neighbours and brethren. Religion has done the work of vice and immorality by a natural process. For the possession of a religion which others have not, the belief of a doctrine which others have failed to receive, offers, in the first place, a stimulus to the pride of human nature. It matters not that the doctrine itself be humbling to mankind in general; it is not so to ourselves, the believers of the doctrine, in comparison with others; in comparison with those who reject it. On the contrary, in proportion as we value it, and embrace it with sincerity, it cannot but suggest reflections peculiarly calculated to reduce them in our estimation, as a more sinful as well as less privileged class of our fellow men. The religion itself is an advantageous distinction; engendering pride, and with it anger and the most malevolent affections. These serpents are at the very cradle of our piety, and must be

strangled in the infancy of our second nature. They who dispute our opinions too commonly irritate our feelings; but, as in this instance, their opinions must appear exceedingly detrimental to the interests of mankind, unless it be held an essential part of our *religion*, that we should regard the errors and wickedness of others, with a spirit that aspires to a resemblance of the divine goodness, our pride will become unusually intolerant of dissent and contradiction; will corrupt the conscience to demand its punishment; and “the wrath of man” will aim to “work the righteousness of God.” Add to this, an excessive apprehension of the spread of error, a distrust of the power of truth, a short-sighted and fallacious policy, and, above all, the readiness of human hearts to reasonings which indulge the love of power and domination,—and what would be the effect of our most humbling religion? The history, we do not say of Roman Catholicism or the Papacy, but of Christendom in general, has answered the question; and records that on the foundations of our faith, laid though they be in the depths of self-abasement and gratitude to Almighty God, was raised the most audacious usurpation, the most abominable tyranny, that ever exposed the pride and rage of mortals, and insulted the supremacy of God. Suffice it to say—the same man—the type of a multitude—who, in his solitary cell,

bewailed his sins against God, and, to evince the depth of his repentance, invented torments for his own flesh; mortifying his craving hunger with some crumbs of bread, and his burning thirst with drops of water; at night pressing his head on the hard stone, and in the day lashing himself with an iron chain, for his own and other men's sins;—the same man who thus felt, in his manner, the deepest humiliation before God, assuaged the bitterness of remorse, and illustrated his gratitude for the mercy which had been shown him, by—founding the Inquisition! But the horrible incongruity was not confined to the age of Dominic, or that portion of Christendom which has partaken most largely of his spirit and counsel. The eager spirit of party, indeed, in our day, not satisfied with exaggerating the errors and vices of the living, or magnifying their wisdom and virtues, is hardly less busy with the memorials of the dead; so that one is almost deterred from appealing even to history for examples. Yet others, the assertors of self-abasing doctrines, composers of penitential liturgies, could lurk for the unwary heretic to take away his life; though confessedly themselves the monuments of an unbounded mercy, which had lavished its treasures on their deep unworthiness. They did not perceive that God had compassionated their own errors and delinquency, that they might imitate, in their conduct towards others, his dealing with

themselves; and hence they defiled their otherwise pure and shining robes, with spots of the most malignant heresy that ever debased the character of Christians, and perilled the immortal soul.—For it is no exaggeration of rhetoric or declamation, but the sober statement of an undeniable fact, that the Persecutor, the full-formed Persecutor, is the Arch-heretic. He it is who errs from “the end of the divine commandment,” who frustrates the purpose of God’s revelation, “which is charity.” He it is who strikes at the vital part of our religion; though often “ignorantly in unbelief,” it may be hoped, as did Paul, when he struck at Jesus in the persecution of his “members.”

It is abhorrent, however, we have presumed, to most Christians of the average intelligence—to members of the Church of Rome, we may trust, as well as to a Protestant community—it is abhorrent to our judgment and feelings to desire the punishment, to compass the injury, of any individuals who either disbelieve the divine authority of the Gospel, or who entertain inadequate or erroneous conceptions of its doctrines; and to seek the promotion of our faith in any other manner than by appealing to the reason and conscience of our opponents. It is almost a postulatam with ourselves, that the life, the freedom, the property of a man is sacred from the hand of his fellow men, inasmuch as his

duty towards God is concerned; exclusively of his duties towards man, or as a member of society. We advert to a distinction which, however difficult to be traced in the complexity of human affairs—a complexity which of necessity often involves the religious opinions of one class of the community with the political rights and welfare of others—few would now call into question. If individuals or sects holding peculiar opinions on religion, should provoke resistance or require coercion, the warrant and justification for that resistance and coercion would be taken, or *assumed* to be taken, from principles which lie at the origin of society, and form the conditions of its peace and security,—principles which knit together the members of the body politic, and which would be of equal force, whatever were the religious tenets of the people. Thus, when dissenters from the Church of England are required to contribute a portion of their property to its support and maintenance, that contribution is exacted from them, not as persons who assent to the doctrines, or approve of the discipline, of that Church, but as the subjects of a government which deems the religious instruction of its people to be of essential moment to their security and welfare, and the Church established amongst them the surest means of administering that instruction. Meanwhile dissenters, so far from being forcibly compelled to

conceal or dissemble their sentiments, are left at perfect liberty to promulgate them; to inform the legislature, if they can, with their own intelligence; to convert the governing power, which all alike acknowledge, to their own opinions; and to induce it to substitute their distinguishing tenets for the creed of the nation; or to disavow the duty of providing for the Christian instruction of the people at all.

We perceive it in our day to be feasible, greatly feasible, to unite an earnest support and advocacy of our own religious tenets, with a care to allow every individual to consult the dictates of his own conscience in things relating to God, and to “stand or fall to his own Master”—that is, with an equality of civil rights, the exercise of a mutual forbearance, and the cultivation of universal charity. And, surely, he but ill deserves the name of a Christian who, perceiving the practicability of such a combination, is, notwithstanding, unconcerned to realize it in his own dispositions and conduct.

We owe this vast improvement in the Christian character, under the favor of Divine Providence, in an incalculable measure, to the general advancement of human intelligence, which is scarcely less necessary to the diffusion of correct and enlarged apprehensions of the Divine economy in the Gospel, than it is to illustrate the wisdom of God in the visible creation; and is

essential to secure the best of his gifts from the worst abuse and perversion. We do not owe this superior knowledge of Christian principles to the simple fact that the word of God may be now read by the whole community, or that the exclusive and authoritative explanation of the Bible has been long since taken out of the hands of the priesthood. The priests themselves were grossly ignorant of that peculiar feature of the Gospel of which we speak. They did not perceive the character and worth of Christianity, as the minister of peace and social concord in the conflict of religious opinions. They did not discern the barrier which it had raised against the pride and ambition which, in the name of God, and to do him service, would be easily beguiled into the commission of actual and even flagrant crimes. It is at once consolatory and rational to believe that they were egregiously mistaken—to what extent they were so innocently, will be made manifest hereafter—egregiously mistaken in alleging the religion of Christ as a warrant for the persecution of those whom they accounted heretics and unbelievers; in presuming, with respect to that portion of their fellow creatures, that they had obtained a dispensation from the ordinary duties of morality, and from the especial obligation of the followers of Christ to the virtues of patience, forbearance, condescension and mercy, in imitation of their Divine

Master and Pattern; and in arrogating, on the contrary, an unlimited power over their persons and substance. They entertained a most inadequate conception of the design of the Gospel. Looking at it through the medium of narrow views and excited passions, they “knew it but in part;” they saw it “darkly,” as we ourselves conceive of that perfect and enduring happiness which it hath set before us, to supplant the love of this world, and the power of its temptations. And it was possible to have been thus ignorant of the moral scope and excellence of the Gospel, notwithstanding they might have read over and over the writings of the Evangelists and Apostles, and have been able to find for every sentence of the original language an equivalent in their own tongue: for this attainment, essential as it is with other appliances of Biblical criticism, is far from being adequate to a just and comprehensive view of the Scriptures. A power and habit of general reasoning must accompany the investigation of particular passages in the Sacred writings, in order to discriminate their true import, and to adjust their relative bearings; as the same power must guide the experimentalist in his researches into nature, and often enables him to discover in an apparent chaos of facts an uniformity of operations, and the harmony of system. The active and increasing intelligence of more recent times, which has drawn into light so many truths alto-

gether unknown, or but dimly visible to few in former ages, and made them the inheritance of multitudes,¹ has brought with it a persuasion, that the attainment of truth as the common property is essentially promoted by the free, unrestrained inquiry of individual minds; as the fund of national and the world's riches is incalculably augmented by the unshackled commerce of individuals and nations. And hence arises a presumption too decisive and commanding to be overlooked or evaded, that a religion instituted by God—a religion demanding our assent as a reasonable service, as the offering of an upright mind to the Divinity, and declaring his displeasure against any who reject its doctrines, must have been constituted with a perfect knowledge of the means and process of a rational and conscientious conviction; accordingly, that such a religion must have repudiated every other mode of establishing itself in the world; and, consequently, must have disclaimed the appeal to bodily terror, or the fear of man only—must have opposed itself to the use of force in the promotion of its doctrines. We find this presumption of an enlightened age completely and abundantly substantiated in the Gospel. It were a mean defence of our religion, and a scanty

¹ 1 Cor. xiii. 12. The ideas of a progressive intelligence and a growing spirit of charity, were evidently blended very closely in the mind of the Apostle.

concession to its merits, to argue merely that its principles cannot be fairly understood to sanction intolerant edicts, and the tribunal of the inquisitor; that it has let the persecutor alone, so to speak, to plead his own cause and to wear what front he may. It expressly prohibits the ebullitions of an angry and hostile zeal against those who dispute our faith, or refuse to receive it. It aims to abash and confound, and utterly overcome such a spirit, and to inspire in its place a most disinterested and unwearied benevolence in their behalf. It opposes to those pretexts and reasonings which so naturally suggest themselves; and, as was foreseen, would appear but too plausible as grounds for some sort or measure of persecution against dissentients from our religion, the example, the supremely authoritative example, of the Son of God, in condescending to assume our inferior nature, “to be made in the likeness of men;” —in “bearing the contradiction of sinners against himself;” in consenting “to die for the ungodly;” —so willingly, so devotedly to die for them, as to implore the forgiveness of men who had arraigned and condemned him as a malefactor, as the worst of criminals, and had nailed him to the cross; and after his resurrection from the grave, in the fulness of his redeeming power, to send his servants on a special mission to reclaim those betrayers and murderers of the **Just One**, and to bring them to repentance, that “their sins might be

blotted out," and the deep wound of their conscience for ever healed. The example of our Lord, it might have been perceived, so far from being restrained in its application to temporal concerns and secular transactions, had a peculiar force and authority as a pattern for the conduct of Christians, in their endeavours to prevent the spread of irreligion, and to promote the knowledge and profession of the Gospel. For was it not to restore and establish the soul in the principles of holiness, in its peace with a just God, and its hope of immortality, that our Saviour divested himself of the glory which he had with the Father before the world was, and endured the suffering of the most destitute and hated of men—endured the cross? But what good, what benefit to the soul of the unbeliever, or the apostate from the faith, could the persecutor have contemplated or dreamed of, who, so far from seeking to "convert the sinner from the error of his way, and to save a soul from death," could cut short his space for repentance, and send him, so far as his knowledge and power extended, unprepared to the tribunal of eternal justice. Did his ill instructed conscience urge him with the reflection that he was thereby securing the minds of others, and the Christian body in general, from contamination and destruction? Doubtless, he "thought he did God service" and man likewise; but such a delusion could surely never have possessed him had he been better capacitated, by the general intelli-

gence of his day, to perceive the certainty that a religion taught by the Creator, and the belief of which is required as an act of the reason and conscience, could not have sanctioned that or any other argument which would have the effect of suspending the proper action, and retarding the progress of both the reason and conscience,—which would commend the extension of its doctrines by measures, that must leave neither an enlightened understanding nor the upright heart any power of determination in embracing them. And in this point of view, the advocate of Christianity may well claim for it a credit and a reverence in every intelligent mind; seeing it has so completely anticipated a tendency of religion in the human mind to break the law of universal justice, and has encountered the injurious principles of human nature in their most specious and seductive form:—a characteristic of the Gospel than which we hardly know a more convincing proof of its vast superiority, and transcendent worth, as a system of religion; a more decisive mark of its intellectual greatness and moral purity; of its unearthly, superhuman character;—a more probable indication of its divine original.¹

¹ The strength of this presumption in favour of Christianity can scarcely be overrated; though, comparatively with other characters of moral truth impressed upon its pages, it has not received that attention which it merits. It is one, however, we may venture to say, that must *grow* in the estimation of reflective minds. The Archbishop of Dublin, we find, in a work recently published, has put the argument most cogently in

That we thus understand our religion is, we repeat, under Divine Providence, the precious fruit of intellectual cultivation. There is ground, we trust, for this opinion; notwithstanding Christ and his Apostles have given their judgment in a manner which now appears so palpable and conclusive against the spirit and policy by which men are instigated to the employment of coercive measures, in promoting their religious tenets; and even though it must be confessed, that the eyes of Christians in former times were not so entirely closed to the injustice and folly of persecution when they were the weaker party as when they were the stronger; when they suffered its terrors as when they inflicted them. It is certain the professors of the Gospel in the mass, like the rest of mankind, have been slow to comprehend the reasonableness, to learn the duty, of toleration: they have resembled the first disciples of our Lord, who were unable to learn it from his own lips, and could not rightly understand and

the following passage:—"Since the natural disposition of man appears to lean so strongly towards the employment of coercion in behalf of one's own faith, as to operate even *in despite* of the precepts and examples of our Master and his Apostles, and leads men to explain away those precepts and wrest them from their obvious sense,—how utterly improbable is it, that men left to themselves—and especially Jews—*not* having before them those precepts, but educated under a far different dispensation, should of themselves have devised the first system of religious tolerance that ever existed in the world."—*Essays on some of the Dangers to Christian Faith.* P. 161.

heartily practise it, till they had been specially taught by divine inspiration.¹ A considerable measure of intelligence appears required to appreciate this duty and excellence of our religion: and if there be an instance in which even the advancement of general knowledge have failed effectually to teach it,—if there be a community of Christians—we trust there is not—which yet seeks to defend the use of force in the promotion of religious doctrines, or hesitates distinctly to disclaim it, that community must be one which has abdicated the authority of reason for the assumption and renown of infallibility: it must be one which employs the intelligence of our day to support and palliate opinions that grew up in “times of ignorance,” and has pinned its faith to the dwarfed or mis-shapen Christianity of the dark ages.

¹ A strong objection has been expressed against the term “toleration,” as though it implied a *right* to suppress and punish opinions in religion. If toleration were not acknowledged to be a duty, the objection would be well founded; as it is so, the objection falls to the ground. On the other hand, the term significantly expresses the temper of the human mind on matters of faith. It has been felt in religious bodies, and, until human nature be greatly more disciplined and purified, it always will be felt, as an act of *sufferance* to permit the free profession of tenets opposite to their own, with a consciousness of the power to prevent it. This, we may be sure, will always require some exercise of *patience*, whatever religious community may be predominant. May the power reside with the highest intelligence! The circumstance is a most auspicious one that we are disputing the propriety of the *word*—no better proof that we have pretty well done with solicitude about the thing.

But there may be some need to apply the instruction of the Gospel to the regulation of our own temper and conduct towards those who dispute the articles of our faith, and would thwart our endeavours to diffuse them. We cannot but perceive that our superior knowledge of the duty enforced on us by the apostle, of imitating even the example of the Son of God himself, while it has saved us from the commission of much evil, has imposed upon us a proportionate responsibility, and leaves us with less excuse if we can indulge or allow any feelings of ill-will or hostility towards that portion of our fellow-creatures:—if we entertain any other judgment of them than that of charity—than that which is entertained in a disposition to appreciate their true character, their real virtues, and to promote their present and enduring welfare. It is not unfrequently said of some Christians, that they show such a spirit, and use such means, in the maintenance of their faith, as to make it evident that they do but want the power to persecute those who differ from them; that they have all the heart and will to do so. The imputation, it is hoped, would apply but to very few, if to any, amongst us. But, certainly, when we observe, as we too often may, in *all* communities of Christians, that a difference of religious tenets has the effect of limiting their kindly feelings, their charitable

offices, their gentle speech, their amiable manners to individuals of their own community, and even to individuals belonging to a section of that community, nay, even a section, it may be, which they would find it difficult to define or discriminate; when we find that it renders them comparatively careless in what manner they act and feel towards others, what good offices they withhold from them, what opinions they admit or express regarding them;—when a difference of religious tenets operates after this manner, there is too evidently a leaven of the old spirit of persecution; a remnant of those times when religion, instead of being the firm ally and persuasive advocate of morality, of all justice and benevolence, became so often their unrelenting antagonist, and well nigh worked their ruin. In our day, indeed, the persons of whom we speak might be shocked at the idea of inflicting an actual or serious injury on those who hold opinions in religion differing from their own: but if they allow their religion thus to interfere with the original, immutable sense of rectitude between man and man, instead of confirming and exalting the dictates of the natural conscience, it can admit of no question that they proportionately fail of a due obedience to the Gospel, and have need to “examine the spirit they are of.” The case, it should be added, is a worse one, when, in our conscience, we do not

believe that the difference of opinion in question involves essential error—error incompatible with the availing faith of a Christian, and the acceptable service of God; but, on the contrary, that it may exist in the well founded hope of an everlasting association, an unbroken friendship, in a better world.

But that which we have probably most reason to fear and guard against, is the use of such language as serves rather to wound or exasperate the feelings of another, than to improve his judgment, or to effect any change in his conduct; language prompted by feelings of personal annoyance and resentment, or a proud consciousness of power against the opponent of our tenets; not by a firm persuasion that we hold the truth, and a pure desire to promote it. “To contend for the faith once delivered to the saints” with such ability as God hath given us, is, we are to remember, a primary duty: the calmness or seeming moderation of men who either have no settled opinions, or are unconcerned to diffuse them, is of easy attainment, and of no value. But “the servant of the Lord must not strive:”¹ he must not approach his subject, or carry on his argument, in a spirit of personal dispute or competition; as though he were seeking to vindicate or exalt himself. The servant of God must not strive, but be “gentle to all men, apt to teach,”¹—a phrase which here properly means

¹ 2 Tim. ii. 24.

not an intellectual but a moral aptitude to teach—an aptitude to secure attention and confidence by the expression of a sincere concern for the lasting welfare of those whom it is his office to instruct, and by the blessing of God to bring to a knowledge of the truth ; for the apostle proceeds—“ patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth ; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.” Such is our duty even with regard to the most vicious and unholy of men—men “ taken captive by the devil at his will ;” and shall we make no earnest endeavours to fulfil such a duty towards others ?

We do not doubt, we have presumed, that both the clergy and the laity of the Church of England, together with other Christians of our time, do unite, in some substantial and effective measure, a zeal in their diffusion of the truth as it is in Jesus, with that universal goodwill and brotherly kindness which the apostle here inculcates ; but it is fit we should review our principles, and be stimulated to yet further improvement. Be it still more our effort and prayer to realize this exquisite combination of qualities, and to exhibit the whole portraiture of the Christian character : that whether successful or otherwise in the diffusion of our faith, and

whether report of us be good or evil, it may be our comfort to reflect, that we are seeking to exemplify the true spirit, the distinguishing excellence, of our holy religion—"letting our light so shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in heaven." ¹

¹ Matt. v. 16.

References have been made in the two last discourses, but more directly in the former of these, to the question of conformity to the Established Church. It cannot but be proper, then, in connection with the subject of this work, and especially at this particular juncture, to suggest the importance, or, rather, the unquestionable propriety, of dealing with that question in a manner consistent with our responsibility in reference to religious opinions in general, as founded in reason and Scripture. It would appear, then, that in explaining and enforcing the claims of the Established Church upon the community at large, we should be concerned to support it by such arguments as those amongst them who are willing, in this instance, to know and obey the truth are, generally speaking, competent to understand and appreciate. Especially, we should bring forward evidence from the Scriptures, direct and indirect, in defence of our ecclesiastical constitution, and, what is peculiarly needful, we should furnish correct explanations of those passages in them which are most confidently cited against us by nonconformists. An advocacy of our Church, however, appears to be growing up, which, apparently, takes no account of the means of knowledge appertaining to mankind at large, or of the *general* susceptibility of a rational and conscientious conviction—an advocacy of our Church which rests its claims upon the *whole* community, that

is, aims to establish the *universal* duty of conforming to its tenets and discipline, by evidence laid open to learned men in the course of their researches into ecclesiastical history, and, more particularly, in their study of the writings of the Fathers. But is it not thus implied that the *whole* community are capacitated and bound to consult such sources of information, or to judge of such evidence when placed before them? Have they who are taking part in such an advocacy of the Established Church considered this implication, and are they prepared to maintain it? They would not assert, we shall here take for granted, that the whole community are bound to receive whatever construction of such evidence the clergy may have placed upon it—to receive their report on the testimony of tradition, touching this or any other question, in virtue of a divine commission and authority delegated to them to arbitrate generally in matters of faith. The *Romish* priesthood, as all know, do arrogate such a commission and authority, and appeal to them whether they expound the sense of Scripture, or deliver the judgment of tradition. But we are not offering these observations to the members of a Church which arrogates infallibility.

The arguments collected to the support of our Church from antiquity or tradition may be perfectly sound and conclusive, and there may be abundant reasons for a more diligent cultivation of this species of learning:—though indeed the ablest defenders of the Church of England have been very far from supposing that such arguments constituted the whole of their case: it was not a species of learning *only*—it was not merely a familiar acquaintance with the writings of the Fathers that produced the “Ecclesiastical Polity” of Hooker, any more than it gave to the world the “Sermons and Analogy” of Butler. But we are pointing attention to that mode of reasoning, that kind of evidence, by which a proposition—this, for example, that the constitution of our Established Church is conformable to the will of God, should be inculcated on the impartial consideration and the conscientious assent, of a *whole* people, or of all mankind. If that be the object for which the reasoner maintains a proposition, it is manifestly not sufficient that the

arguments by which he proves it have satisfied his own candid investigation, or have brought conviction to a particular class of persons: he has to take into his account the manner in which the minds of men in general have been tutored and furnished for that investigation. We have adequate proof of the reality of the miracles recorded in the New Testament from historical testimony, and proof which not a few are responsible in dealing with; but it is not in virtue of such proof—it is not in virtue of the *external* evidence of Christianity that *all* are required to receive it as a divine revelation, and accounted guilty before God in rejecting it. We shall hope that the principles of natural religion, the principles of moral agency in general will never be abandoned, will be inflexibly adhered to, by the divines of the Church of England; whether they contend against the unbeliever or the nonconformist; whether they inculcate a belief of Christianity itself as taught by Christ and his apostles, or a belief of the divine appointment or sanction of a particular ecclesiastical constitution, as the means of preserving and diffusing it in the world.

At the very time our attention is called, with unaccustomed earnestness, to the evidence of antiquity and tradition in support of our Church, a judgment unusually severe, or rather absolutely condemnatory, is pronounced on all communities not Episcopalian: we mean, the most unfavourable, even hopeless conclusions are now put forward touching the reality of their Christian character, and their state of acceptance with God. They are spoken of as though they were in no better condition than that of the heathen in regard to the specific blessings of Christianity; and they are so spoken of in no ambiguous terms. But more—it is affirmed that they do *not receive, that they reject fundamental truths*, which to the heathen have never been offered. Now, if any who assert such opinions have felt themselves bound to adopt them on the particular evidence to which we have just adverted—to adopt them, not strictly on the testimony of the Scriptures from which most persons have derived, and appear necessitated to derive, their knowledge of the revealed will of God,

and the appointed way of salvation ; but on the authority of writings by which the Scriptures are supposed to be illustrated, and the complete essential purport of the Gospel brought out and ascertained—writings which are as a sealed book to a large number, nay, to the mass of the people—we have a yet stronger proof of the necessity of examining, at least of bearing in remembrance, the proper grounds of human responsibility in reference to religious tenets. For, assuredly, we cannot be *required*, by any rational or Scriptural explanation of that responsibility, to judge our fellow-creatures *guilty of rejecting essential truths*, if these be established by evidence which they are unable to examine or appreciate—evidence which, in reality, has never been offered them.

But we must add, presuming our arguments in support of the Established Church to be *apparently* level to the apprehensions of those to whom they are addressed, as well as conclusive in their nature, yet, in forming a judgment of the character and motives of persons who do not assent to our arguments, should we not take other matters into our view and estimation ? Should we not bear in mind the comparative advantages of individuals for the discernment of the truth, in this instance, as well as in others ? Especially, should we not remark the manner in which the religious affections have been appealed to and wrought upon by peculiar methods of theological instruction ? There need be no fear that an institution like the Church of England will suffer in the esteem and attachment of a Protestant people, though such considerations be allowed their due weight, and her advocates be discriminating, as well as earnest, in their remonstrances with those who forsake or oppose her. But she *will* suffer by a hard, undistinguishing judgment upon other communities of Christians. This, there can be no doubt, will be cited to her disadvantage, and not the least, we may be sure, by those amongst dissenters, and such there are, who hold the piety of *churchmen* under strong suspicion, and deem it marvellous, if not incredible, that any can consent with a good conscience to be ordained as ministers of the Gospel in the Established Church. In point of fact, the remarkably severe tone of spiritual

censure, or rather excommunication, which some have recently judged it their duty to assume towards all who bear the name of Christians without the pale of our Church, is raising a prejudice against that Church, which the soundest exposition of her principles will fail to remove, and a spirit of hostility which not even the pastoral labours of her clergy will suffice to appease and conciliate. That language, we are sure, is tacitly objected to and regretted by the major portion of those who minister at her altar; but, happily, it is distinctly and earnestly disclaimed—disclaimed by individuals whose station and eminence in the Church may be expected to secure some general attention to their sentiments. The following is from the pen of one of the most distinguished of our prelates, subjoined to a discourse in which he exhibits the argument for Episcopacy, we need not say, in the clearest light, and, what is of primary importance, admonishes persons to sift their motives in seceding from the Established Church, warning them against “party spirit, and impatience of rule, and envy of a superior, and desire of distinction:”—the following are his words:—“No man is more firmly convinced than myself of the apostolical succession of Bishops and Presbyters in the Church of Christ; and that it is the duty of every member of that Church to conform to this rule, and to submit to their spiritual authority: yet I do not feel myself justified in saying, that without a Bishop there is no Church—that Presbyterian ordination is not valid—that without priests episcopally ordained, the sacraments cannot be administered, nor the Gospel preached. To decide peremptorily in such matters appears to me presumptuous and unwarrantable. To pronounce that those who depart from this rule are thereby excluded from the Christian covenant, I hold to be not only uncharitable, but impious.”¹—We have already had occasion to cite a passage from “Discourses on Tradition and Episcopacy,” by the Master of the Temple—discourses abounding with truly Christian sentiments, and admirably attempered views on the

¹ Bishop of Llandaff’s Sermon, “Who are the Persons authorized to preach the Gospel?”—P. 30.

subjects of which they treat; we extract the following passage, not merely because it breathes the spirit of charity, for we have called in question, not the charity of those members of our Church who assert its claims in the manner objected to, but the grounds on which they judge it to be their duty so to assert them; but we quote it because it keeps in view the essential conditions of man's responsibility in the matter of religious belief—conditions of which we cannot be unmindful, if we impute guilt to those who have fallen into error, or estimate the degree of it, on the principles of the Christian religion:—

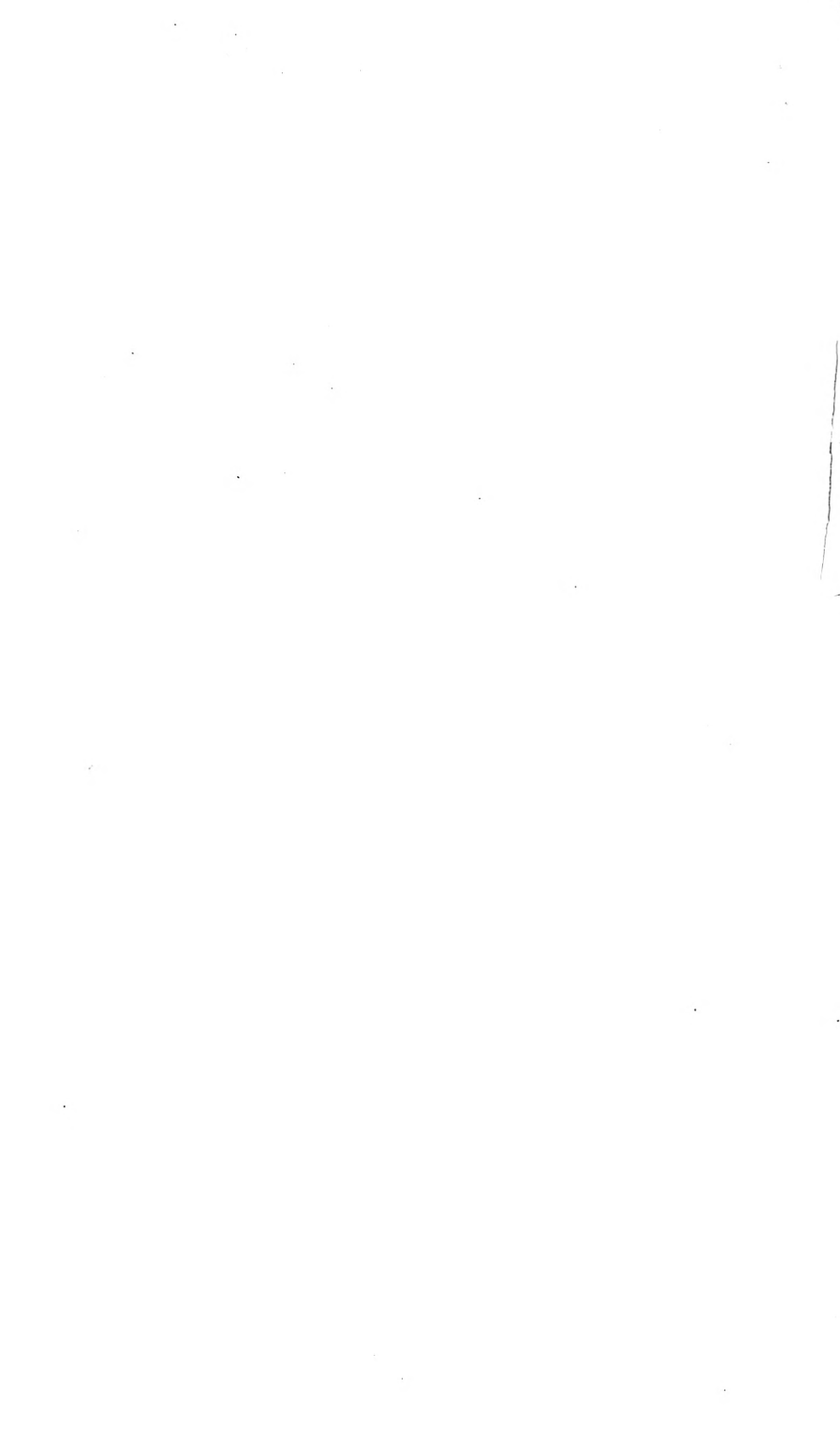
“ But whatever be the affection which our form of sound doctrine, our holy form of prayer, and our scriptural and apostolical method of government demand for our own Church, they demand no judgment or condemnation from us upon that form of government which prevails in others. There are some truths proclaimed so loudly, and delineated so clearly in the Gospel, that we cannot permit any to renounce or corrupt them without showing them their iniquity, and telling them that their heresies cut them off from Christ's favour. But the mode of regulating the ministry of the Church is not one of these. It is too faintly delineated to afford more than a sufficient ground for us to act upon in our own case. Nowhere in the Gospel is a perfect uniformity of ecclesiastical polity so indispensably required as to make it meet for any Christian to pass an absolute sentence of excommunication upon a brother who differs from himself. To his own master he standeth or falleth, and our duty lies rather in persuading him to agreement than in urging condemnation because he disagrees with ourselves. For we have no right, and we should have no inclination, to make the gate of the Gospel more strait, or the way to God's favour more narrow than the express revelations of the Redeemer imperatively demand.”—P. 95.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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