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TWO

SERMONS

ON

INFIDELITY,

DELIVERED

OCTOBER 24, 1813.

BY WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING,

Minister of the Church in Federal Street, Boston.

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REVUE DE LA FRANCE

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

THE author has yielded the following discourses to the wishes of those who heard them, and he hopes that they will not wholly fail of the end for which they were composed. It is not from tenderness to his own reputation, but from regard to an infinitely more important interest, that he begs leave to state, that they were written without a thought of their being offered to the public, and that they do not pretend to give complete views of any of the subjects of which they treat. They are designed not so much to unfold the evidences of Christianity, as to procure for them a serious and respectful attention. He has merely glanced on the most important proofs, and has omitted some which have great weight on his own mind. If he shall be so happy as to awaken candid and patient inquiry, his principal object will be accomplished. He wishes that Christianity should be thoroughly examined. He indeed owes to this religion much of his present happiness, and his best and most consoling hopes. But he does not on this account wish to screen it from inquiry. It would cease to be his support, were he not persuaded, that it is able to sustain the most deliberate investigation.

To those who wish to read on the subject, and who want time for elaborate works, he would recommend the following books: Dr. John Clarke's answer to the question, *Why are you a Christian?* Bishop Porteus' summary; Doddridge's three sermons; Leslie's short and easy method; Bogue's essay; Priestley's sermon on the resurrection of Jesus; and Watson's answer to Paine.

To those whose circumstances permit more extended inquiry, he would recommend Le Land's necessity of revelation, *Paley's evidences*, *Campbell on miracles*, *Douglas' criterion*, Bonnet's philosophical researches, Newton on the prophecies, and Lardner's sermons on the internal marks of credibility in the New Testament.

To those who are disposed to pursue the subject, he would re-

commend *Butler's analogy*, *Paley's Horæ Paulinæ*, Berkely's minute philosopher, Lardner's credibility, Duchal's presumptive evidences, Maltby's illustrations, Jortin's discourses on the Christian religion, Priestley's letters to a philosophical unbeliever, Newcome's observations on the character of our Lord, and the valuable treatises on the evidences of Christianity in Watson's tracts. This catalogue might be extended to an indefinite length.

The author has great satisfaction in informing his readers, that they are soon to be favoured with a volume of sermons from the pen of the late Rev. Mr. Buckminster of this town, in which some important evidences of Christianity are discussed with a clearness, and force, and eloquence, which have hardly been surpassed. Those, to whom this excellent young man was known, well remember how deep, and serious, and operative was his conviction of the truth of Christianity, and how earnestly and persuasively he was accustomed to dwell on the marks which it bears of a divine original. This ripe and accomplished scholar, this ardent lover of truth, this patient and candid inquirer, esteemed it an unspeakable honour and happiness, that he was permitted to devote his splendid powers to the illustration and diffusion of Christian truth. His sermons on the characters of Jesus Christ, and of the apostles Peter and Paul, on the fitness of time when Jesus appeared, on the epistle to Philemon, and on the nature and importance of faith, will delight the reader of taste and cultivated intellect, whilst they will edify and confirm the serious Christian.

TWO SERMONS.

JOHN xii. 37.

*BUT THOUGH HE HAD DONE SO MANY MIRACLES BEFORE THEM,
YET THEY BELIEVED NOT ON HIM.*

IN these words we are informed, that the preaching of Jesus, although accompanied with numerous and unexceptionable miracles, was far from producing universal belief. The leaders of the Jewish people were offended by his humble appearance, and stung by his reproofs; and were unwearied and successful in infusing their own bad passions into the obedient multitude. When we consider the character and expectations of the Jewish rulers and people, nothing is more easy than to account for their rejection of Jesus Christ; and certainly no blame or suspicion should be attached to Jesus, because such men rejected him.

Unbelief has not been confined to the age when Christ appeared. Christianity has in no age been universally believed. We cannot deny, that our religion does not carry irresistible conviction to those, to whom it is offered. It is not accompanied with evidences, which compel the understanding to embrace it, which leave no room, no possibility for doubt or incredulity. This has sometimes been urged as a proof, that Christianity is not from God; but in this respect Christianity agrees with all other moral or practical truth. It has pleased God,

that in relation to such truth our assent should not be extorted; that we should be left to seek it, instead of having it forced on our reception; and that we should be left at liberty to reject it, if, from any corrupt propensity, we are disinclined to its belief. It would be foolish in the extreme to say, that christianity cannot be true, because in that case it would be made so plain, and would be attended with proof so strong, that no one could resist it. Let me ask, where is the truth, which comes to us with this overpowering evidence? Where is the truth, which some minds have not doubted and denied? If we are to believe no religion but that which compels belief, and from which we cannot escape, then all religion must be resigned; then we must give up that fundamental truth—the being of a God; for some minds have been so perverted, as to reject even this most clear and important principle. Yes, some have laboured to shake the throne of the Eternal, to banish him from his creation, to darken and blot out every trace of intelligent agency in his works, and to give his empire to undesigning chance, or to cruel and fatal necessity. How absurd then is the language of the infidel, who denies Jesus to be the Son of God, because he does not offer himself with credentials which none can doubt or disbelieve! How natural is it to expect from God a religion (if he shall be pleased to reveal one) which will furnish room for objections, which will require fairness of mind in order to its reception, and which will meet opposition as well as respect.

Since the first age, Christianity has had opposers. The hatred which it awakened at its birth is not yet laid to rest. There are still those who despise its guidance, and consolations, and hopes; and who, not content with rejecting it themselves, wish to pluck it from the hearts of

others ; who, not satisfied with closing their own eyes on this cheering light, are eager to extinguish it, and wish to bury the world in the same cheerless gloom, which broods over their own understandings. By these remarks, I am far from saying that this is an age of infidelity, or that contempt of Christianity is the prevalent character of the times. There is reason to hope, that the tremendous example, which has lately been given, of the influence of infidelity, has struck a horror into the minds of men, which will not soon pass away. To those who are fond of exaggerating the wars and persecutions, which Christianity has kindled, we would say, go and witness the blessings of infidel philosophy, where it has been permitted to triumph ! Behold the heart hardened into stone, and all the tender feelings of our nature giving place to the ferocity of beasts of prey. Behold murder, and perfidy, and rapine let loose, and scattering ruin and dismay. Behold the best blood flowing in torrents, and observe the secret tears of the widow and fatherless, who dare not utter the anguish which consumes them ! God has given to all nations an awful monument of the nature and influence of infidel principles, and I trust he has not admonished in vain. But whilst our age is not an infidel age, there are still those, and perhaps not a few, who doubt or reject Christianity. This ought not to excite our wonder, because the causes of infidelity always exist. They are seeds sown in every soil, and seeds which are peculiarly quickened by a prosperous and luxurious state of society.

I propose to dwell for a time on some of the principal causes of infidelity, and then to show you that Christianity, however opposed or despised, has yet the strongest claims to the serious and respectful attention of all, to whom it is proposed.

I. One great cause of infidelity is *vice*. That those, who indulge in any vicious habits, should look with an unfriendly eye on a religion, which reproveth them, which condemns them, which arms conscience with new stings, which mingles fear with their guilty pleasures, cannot indeed excite surprise. Such men have an interest in rejecting Christianity. It is their enemy, their persecutor, a fetter, an incumbrance, from which they wish to escape. What single reason have they for wishing Christianity to be true? It is indeed a religion of hope and promise; but to *them* it utters not a word of promise; to *them* it wears a countenance of severity, reproof, and menace. Now to such men it is a very easy thing to resist and escape the evidences of Christianity. This religion claims belief very much on the ground of its purity and excellence, and on the ground of the unparalleled greatness and loveliness of the character of its Author. But on minds seared and polluted by vice, these arguments are lost. The New Testament is read by such persons without exciting one moral feeling. They hear of Jesus, but see nothing of the heavenly lustre which surrounds him; nothing of elevated sentiment in his doctrine and precepts; nothing of sincerity and disinterestedness in his humiliation and voluntary death. A mind, narrowed by selfishness or debased by sensuality, is incapable of discerning and relishing purity and excellence, just as to the diseased eye there is no beauty in creation, and even the sun itself sheds a sickly or oppressive light. There are indeed other proofs of Christianity, besides those we have mentioned; proofs from its miracles, from its progress, from the character and sufferings of its teachers, &c. &c. But these require attention, and a man immersed in the world and in pleasure has no attention to give them. He has

almost a disgust for serious reflection. Nothing relating to religion is voluntarily and deliberately weighed by him. He is happy to escape as much as possible from the subject; and as christian evidences do not force themselves on his notice, he easily succeeds in overlooking them. On the contrary, he welcomes every profane jest, every superficial objection, every ludicrous misrepresentation, which may be employed to bring Christianity into contempt. For these arguments he has a taste. The more corrupt his mind, the more he relishes them. These fall in with his evil life, and relieve him from the fears of retribution. Do you wonder then, that they convince him; do you wonder that infidelity still finds friends and advocates?

II. Another cause, which operates to the production of infidelity, is *pride* or vanity; and this is as operative now as in any past age. The great object of pride is distinction. The object of the proud man is to stand alone; nothing is so mortifying as to be confounded with the vulgar. Is he vain of his understanding? He naturally desires to prove its superiority by looking farther than all around him, by detecting and exposing what he is pleased to call vulgar prejudices, by marking out for himself a new path. To conform to general opinions is, in his view, to be servile. He chooses to be a leader rather than a follower of others. He wishes to prove the vigour of his mind, by unsettling the minds of those around him, by shaking their firmest convictions, and imposing his own peculiar views. To such a mind, the general prevalence of a system or opinion affords no presumption in its favor, but is an argument and a motive for doubting and assailing it. The stronger and deeper its foundation, and the more venerable its age, the greater will be the honour

of leveling it with the dust. Now can you wonder that such men reject and oppose Christianity? This system is the religion of the multitude, and has been established for ages. To embrace it, is to think just as thousands before us, and thousands around us think. In receiving the gospel, we receive a religion which the poor and unlearned profess, a religion which is suited to their limited capacities, which of course requires no profoundness or originality of mind in order to its reception, and sheds no reputation for talents on those who adhere to it. To embrace such a religion is not the road to distinction; but to overthrow it, to bring it into suspicion or contempt, this is to triumph over the prejudices of nations and of ages, to be superior to innumerable multitudes. This principle has been a very fruitful source of infidelity. The leaders in this bad cause have generally been men of unbounded intellectual ambition, supremely devoted to literary fame, who have hoped to signalize themselves by effecting a revolution in the minds and characters of mankind. To such persons, it is not difficult to find or to invent specious objections to Christianity. There is no truth, which men of powerful minds cannot place in unfavourable lights, cannot overspread and obscure with a web of sophistry. It deserves remark, that the very circumstance, which makes Christianity so offensive to the aspiring and vain, furnishes them with weapons for assailing it—I mean the circumstance of its general reception by all classes of the community. Every religion, of necessity, takes a shape and colour from the minds, by which it is embraced. The purest and sublimest truth will have the appearance of weakness, and sometimes of ludicrousness, when professed by persons of inferior understanding. Ask a child to speak of God, and how lit-

tle that is venerable, will enter into the description of this infinite Being? What then ought we to expect, when a religion is embraced by all classes of society; and by different nations, which are in different stages of civilization, and have different manners, passions, and prejudices? Why, this religion, however pure and simple, will be exceedingly disfigured, and will take a great variety of forms. We must expect, that a thousand absurd additions will be made to it. We must expect, that every nation and every class of society will endeavour to make it speak a language, suited to their various peculiarities. All this is natural, is unavoidable, if the religion be generally received; and who does not see, that men of disingenuous minds may easily derive from this source plausible arguments against the religion, although it is in no respect answerable for the mistakes of its professors? From this quarter, Christianity has been most frequently and most successfully assailed. Spread as it is over the world, and descending as it does to the lowest ranks of society, this religion has been exceedingly corrupted and deformed. The superstitious have made it a system of absurdity and terror. The formalist has decked it out in trifling ceremonies. The enthusiast has discovered in it hidden meanings, which support his wildest dreams. The enemies of Christianity have pretended to believe, that the religion thus disfigured is the very religion which Jesus taught, and laboured to crush it by loading it with the weaknesses and even crimes of its professors. Because its followers are divided into sects, we are told, that it is a system of darkness and inconsistency; although the authors of this charge must know, that any religion, however pure, which should be offered to the understandings of infinite numbers, in dif-

ferent ages and nations, would be viewed in a great variety of lights, and would give rise to many sects and parties. Thus we see, that those, who are unwilling to receive Christianity because the multitude receive it, find, in the very circumstance which offends them, arguments to fortify their own minds in unbelief, and arguments with which to shake the faith of others.

III. Let me mention one more source of infidelity, and this is *ignorance*. This, perhaps, is of all the most fruitful. We may wonder, that men, brought up in a Christian country, favoured with all the means of knowledge, should yet know little of the gospel, and still less of the evidences on which it rests. But I fear this is not unfrequent; and perhaps this ignorance arises from the very *commonness* of religious truth. The mind attaches little value to what is easily acquired, and every where diffused. Persons brought up in the frequent hearing of religious truths, in sight of the Bible, and in attendance on the house of God, become too familiar with these to give to them the value and attention they deserve; religion never strikes them as a *new* subject. In early life, they are not disposed to that calm and serious reflection which Christianity requires; and as they advance in life, new interests acquire the control of their thoughts and passions. Hence it is, that many know less of Christianity than of any other subject within their reach; and knowing so little, they are easily impressed by difficulties. They have no means of separating the true doctrine of Jesus from human additions, and yield to objections, which are wholly founded on misapprehension. They have no shield to oppose to infidel arguments, for they have never dwelt on the proofs of their religion. Perhaps they have been brought up to believe, that Chris-

tianity is so sure, that nothing can be urged against it. When such persons are assailed with specious objections, they are astonished, overwhelmed, and pass from the most unsuspecting faith to universal distrust of religion.

I have thus suggested some of the principal causes of infidelity. Others, I am sensible, less criminal, may and do operate—such as an unhappy education; an acquaintance with persons of strong minds, who reject Christianity; or an acquaintance with those Christians who hold very erroneous and debasing views of their religion. In some persons, there seems to be an unfavourable constitution of intellect, a singular want of judgment, an undue ascendancy of imagination, in consequence of which religious truth can never be fixed and settled in their minds. For these and other reasons, I am unwilling to believe, that infidelity has no source but depravity of heart, and that it can never be traced to causes which may absolve it from guilt.

But be the causes what they may, infidelity still exists, and sometimes is as anxious to propagate its principles, as if it were conscious of having acquired the most important truth. Its exertions have too often been successful. The writings of infidels have done much to unsettle the minds of the unreflecting; and as they offer no substitute for the principles they take away, they have precipitated many into vice, by depriving them of the only restraint to which their passions have been accustomed.

These writings have been injurious, not so much by the strength of their arguments, as by the positive and contemptuous manner in which they speak of revelation. They abound in sarcasm, abuse, and sneer; and supply

the place of reasoning by ridicule and satire. Christianity is represented as a delusion of an age of darkness, propagated by fraud, and continued by folly. The intention is, to hold up the religion to contempt; and to produce the impression, that its claims are unworthy serious investigation, that it ought to be numbered with the false religions, which have overspread the world, and to be dismissed with as little ceremony as the system of Mahomet or Brama. Now that this treatment of Christianity is most unwarrantable, and unjust, and wicked, that this religion deserves at least *respectful* and *serious attention*, must be evident to every man, who has any honesty of mind. This religion, even if its truth be doubtful, has yet many marks of truth, of which no other religion can boast. It ought not to be rejected without deliberate inquiry. It deserves to be heard with patience, and to be heard with respect. I wish now to offer some remarks in support of the claims of Christianity to this respectful attention. I am particularly desirous to guard the young against that contemptuous neglect of the truths and evidences of our religion, into which many have been seduced by the language of infidelity. In the remarks which are to follow, I shall notice several of the most important objections, which are employed to destroy our reverence for the gospel of Christ.

1. Christianity deserves a respectful attention, if we consider the character of its Founder. With respect to the excellence of Jesus Christ, but one opinion seems to exist. With few exceptions, infidelity, bold as it is, yet shrinks before the purity of Jesus, and has not courage to lay its unhallowed hands on his spotless character. It is remarkable, that the most unprincipled writers against Christianity, have stopped the tor-

rent of abuse, to pay a tribute of respect to its Founder; and in this, they act prudently. The man who can read the history of Jesus and yet revile him, would prove himself destitute of human feeling, of all sensibility to what is great and good in character, and would forfeit all claim to confidence and attention. Jesus is accordingly pronounced a good man; we are told, that he was pure in purposes, but was seduced by heated fancy, and misguided enthusiasm, into the belief of his mission from God. Now a religion, coming from a teacher so immaculate, that even enmity cannot reproach him, and bearing so strongly the impressions of his purity, is certainly entitled to respectful attention. It is not to be confounded with the systems of men, who were selfish and base, and who pretended to divine communications only for the purpose of establishing their power over the multitude. Besides; the marks of this enthusiasm, which is charged on Jesus, are not so *very* striking, that the charge ought to be received without careful inquiry. Jesus Christ an enthusiast, misled by a wild and heated fancy! What! Could enthusiasm form a character of such singular and inimitable excellence? Is enthusiasm so mild, so judicious, so consistent, so full of dignity, so sublime, as was Jesus? If we follow him through his life, we see him always the same; always superior to the age in which he lived; always acting on the noblest principles, and for the most generous ends; uniting all the great and commanding, with all the tender and gentle virtues, in a degree unexampled in the history of mankind. We see him always collected, never disturbed by passion, ready to answer the most subtle and sudden questions, and habitually borrowing from the objects and events around him occasions for conveying the most weighty truth. Are

these the marks of a disordered mind? In that mild, composed, and benevolent countenance, do you see the traces of derangement? What wonderful enthusiasm! Who would not wish to catch a portion of this wildness of fancy? My friends, the charge is too weak. If this is its only refuge, desperate indeed is the cause of infidelity.

2. Another consideration which entitles Christianity to respectful attention, is this—That Jesus Christ appeared at a time, when there prevailed in the East a universal expectation of a distinguished personage, who was to produce a great and happy change in the world. This expectation was built on writings, which claimed to be prophetic, which existed long before Jesus was born, and which describe a deliverer of the human race very similar, to say the least, to the character in which Jesus appeared. Now this is a very remarkable circumstance, which distinguishes Jesus from the founders of all other religions, and entitles him to serious and respectful attention.

I know it is objected, that the Jewish nation anticipated a different kind of deliverer from Jesus. This is true. But it appears to me a strong presumption in favour of Jesus, that he did *not* conform to the expectations of his nation. We have here a proof, that he could not have been a selfish deceiver; for in that case, he would have flattered, not opposed, the strongest prejudices of all around him. The general expectation of a great deliverer induced many deceivers to offer themselves in this character to the Jews; but these were careful to adapt themselves to the wishes of the people. Why is it, that Jesus offered a deliverance, which, he must have known, was undesired, and would be rejected with contempt?

There is no ground for the assertion, that the interpretation, given by the Jews to their own prophecies, must have been true, and that therefore Jesus, who did not conform to this, must have been a deceiver or deceived. When we read the prophecies relating to the great deliverer who was to come, we find them expressed in the language of the boldest metaphors. They were evidently designed to excite general expectations, rather than to convey any very precise views of the important events to which they refer. Such language might easily be misinterpreted, especially before its fulfilment; and we cannot wonder, that *Jews* beheld in these predictions their own nation raised to universal empire, and enjoying ease and plenty under their victorious leader. Jesus taught them, that the deliverer, who had been announced, was to bless both Jews and Gentiles, not in the manner of earthly sovereigns, not by violence, not by leading armies, and founding a new throne on the ruins of ancient governments; but by introducing, supporting, and extending through the world a pure and peaceful religion, which should sway the minds, and refine the hearts of men, and thus communicate true happiness on earth, as well as prepare for immortality in heaven. This interpretation of the prophecies is evidently more generous and sublime, more worthy of God, and more desirable to mankind, than that to which the Jews adhered; and when we consider that this liberal interpretation was given by Jesus among a narrow and bigoted people, who were panting for universal dominion, what a view does it afford of the elevation and benevolence of his character!

This generous interpretation of the prophecies, although different from that received by his nation, yet accords in a striking manner with the scriptures. There

the Messiah is again and again represented to us as a teacher, a light to the Gentiles; who should communicate to all nations the knowledge of God; who should introduce universal peace, not by violence, but by instruction; and who should encounter opposition and suffering in accomplishing this sublime and benevolent work. These are very remarkable circumstances, such as never met before in any human being, but such as have been remarkably accomplished in Jesus Christ. It is a fact, that one of the great works predicted of the Messiah has been effected by him, in a degree which ought to astonish us; I refer to the extension of the knowledge of the true God among heathen nations.—It is true, that some effects ascribed to the Messiah, such as the general diffusion of peace, and the restoration of the Jewish people, are not yet fulfilled. But this ought not to surprise us. The prophecies are not limited to the commencement of the Messiah's reign; they relate to its whole duration. They unfold the blessings which are to flow from him in the most distant ages. The prophets delighted to dwell on the last and concluding periods of the Messiah's administration, when the full effects of his religion will be felt and enjoyed. We cannot then wonder, that much is predicted which is not yet fulfilled. The works of God are gradual. The seed does not spring up in a moment into the towering tree; and neither does the religion of Jesus, which he compared to a seed, produce at once its richest fruits.—There are indeed passages in the prophets, which may seem to intimate, that at the appearance of the Messiah universal peace and happiness would at once prevail. But when we consider, with what rapidity these writers are accustomed to pass from near to remote events, and with what confidence they speak of the

most distant futurity as already present, we ought not to wonder, that they connect with the advent of the Messiah all the splendid triumphs which were to follow. In other passages, they have taught us to expect a *gradual* accomplishment of his purposes, by declaring, that he was to change and bless the world by *instruction*, and that he was to encounter opposition as well as enjoy success.—The religion of Jesus has already done much, which was predicted of the Messiah, and it may be expected to do more. It is particularly adapted to produce that peace, which the prophets so uniformly ascribe to the Messiah. Was ever character more pacific than Jesus? Can any religion breathe a milder temper than his? Into how many ferocious breasts has it already infused the kindest and gentlest spirit! And after all these considerations, is Jesus to be rejected, because some prophecies which relate to his future triumphs, are not yet accomplished?

3. Another consideration, which entitles Christianity to serious and respectful attention, is this—that the witnesses to the miracles and resurrection of Jesus had every possible advantage for knowing the truth of the facts they relate, and every motive to dissuade them from asserting these facts unless persuaded of their truth. The Gospels are something more than loose and idle rumors of events, which happened in a distant age and a distant nation. We have the testimony of men, who were associates of Jesus Christ; who received his instruction from his own lips, and saw his works with their own eyes; who began their ministry and testimony, in the very country where he lived; and who, without any imaginable interest in his religion, distinct from that which a conviction of its truth inspired, devoted their lives to its diffusion through the world, encountered persecution, and exposed themselves

to violent and ignominious death. Here certainly is testimony the most unexceptionable which can be desired or even conceived, and the existence of which can never be accounted for, but by admitting its truth. If you read the writings of these men, you see in every page a love of virtue, a love of mankind, a sincere desire of enlightening and reforming the world, an artless simplicity of style, and the most unaffected expressions of confidence in God and of the hope of a blessed immortality. Why shall not the testimony of such men be received?

I know it is said, that sincerity is no proof of truth, that men have been very upright in propagating falsehood, and that some have been willing to seal with their blood extravagant opinions received from tradition or generated by enthusiasm and heated fancy. To this objection two answers may be offered: first, that the opinions, which the apostles so zealously espoused, are not to be traced to tradition or enthusiasm. They were such as contradicted all the prejudices of education, and all the hopes on which fancy had delighted to dwell. They were the last sentiments to be embraced by Jews. Whence then did the apostles acquire the strange and invincible persuasion, that these opinions were true, and that it was their duty to propagate them at every hazard, and in the face of death.

But another, and still more satisfactory answer to the objection, is this: It was not to *opinions* merely that the apostles bore their resolute and unwavering testimony. Their great object was to bear witness to *facts*, and to facts which fell under their immediate notice, and which were presented to all their senses. They state to us not their *judgments*, and *inferences*, and *opinions*, but *what they saw*, and *felt*, and *heard*. They relate events, which

passed before their eyes, and the circumstances of which excluded the possibility of deception. They must have been absolutely deranged, or they could not have erred in relation to such facts as they report. But do they write like madmen? Did they act like madmen? Could insanity have persuaded so many persons, that they all saw the same objects, and heard the same words, in such variety of situations, when all was delusion? Could Bedlamites have assailed with success the prejudices, and passions, and established religions of the world, and have planted on the ruins a system so simple and noble as Christianity?

But there is another objection to the apostles, which has been urged as of great importance, and which certainly deserves attention. It is this—that the apostles could not have been inspired, because they have fallen into many errors. We are told, that they have quoted and applied incorrectly passages from the Old Testament, that they disagree with one another in the statement of facts, and that they have adopted many false opinions which prevailed in their age. This is an old objection, and perhaps the most plausible, with which Christianity has been assailed: but it has very little weight, especially when balanced against the strong and unanswerable arguments which support our religion. The objection is not true, at least in the extent to which it is urged; and even if true, it ought not to affect our belief of the gospel.

The apostles, we are told, have quoted erroneously. Before you admit this assertion, you ought to be satisfied, that you understand the passages which they have quoted, and that you know precisely the objects of their quotations. There is reason to believe, that the Jews,

who had few books besides the scriptures, were in the habit of accommodating these to passing events with a freedom which is unknown at the present time. Suppose that the apostles conformed to this innocent usage, and that, for the sake of illustration or ornament, they sometimes applied passages from the Old Testament to events or circumstances, for which they were not originally intended. Would this prove that they mistook the scriptures?

But "the apostles have stated facts incorrectly." Before you admit this assertion, you ought to inquire, whether the appearance of incorrectness is not to be expected in books so circumstanced as the gospels. You will not forget that the gospels are far from being complete and regular histories of the life of Jesus; that, on the contrary, different facts and different circumstances of the same facts are selected and reported by the different writers, according to the diversity of their tastes and objects. Can you be surprised, that narratives so incomplete, and arranged with so little care, should sometimes appear to clash, when a full and methodical history, by supplying the omissions of each writer, might show that each has been accurate, in the particular province to which his attention has been confined. Besides, who does not know that statements, apparently incorrect and absurd, have often been relieved from difficulty, by a discovery of some trifling circumstance, belonging to the times, to which the statements refer. Recollect now, that the gospels were written at a distant period, and are crowded with references to the habits, feelings, and condition of the age when they were composed. Recollect too, what cannot be denied, that almost every addition to our knowledge of that age has shed new light on passag-

es, which before perplexed us. Have we then no ground for the conclusion, that it is to our own ignorance, and not to the apostles', that many of the difficulties which remain ought to be ascribed, and that these will vanish in a more illuminated age. To all this let it be added, that the apostles wrote in a very peculiar dialect of the Greek language, and that the precise import of their words frequently eludes even the most learned. Now every one knows, that a very slight misapprehension of the language of an author is often sufficient to give the appearance of incorrectness to the most consistent narrative.

But, "the apostles adopted popular errors." Before you admit this charge, you ought to satisfy yourselves, that the popular opinions referred to are really erroneous; and then you should prove, that the apostles enforced these as truths, which they were divinely commissioned to preach to the world. This last remark is very important. If the sacred writers merely acquiesce in prevailing errors, it does not follow that they adopted them. They might innocently conform to the popular language on subjects which constituted no part of the Christian doctrine; and might even wink at some injurious opinions, if they foresaw that these would vanish of themselves, in proportion as the gospel should be extended and understood. Had they undertaken to assail every established error, they would have excited needless and endless prejudice against the religion which it was their great and only business to communicate. Suppose that I should be sent to preach Christianity to heathens: and suppose, that I should refuse to speak as they do of the rising and the setting of the sun; that I should rebuke every word which might fall from their lips, implying

that this luminary exerts an influence on vegetation, which belongs only to God ; and, in fine, that I should remonstrate against every expression and sentiment, which, if followed to its consequences, might involve something inconsistent with Christian truth. To what unnecessary irritation should I expose myself and my cause! Ought I to wonder or complain, if the most important instructions, connected with such ungracious severity, should be heard with indifference, or rejected with contempt?

From these remarks it appears, that we ought not lightly to charge the apostles with error. But suppose that it should be proved, what indeed some sincere Christians have allowed, that the apostles have erred in some quotations, some statements, and some opinions? What follows? That they did not receive from God the religion they taught? By no means. This religion is something quite distinct from these quotations, statements, and opinions. Give up all these, and not one truth of Christianity will be impaired; and what is more, not one fact on which it rests will be shaken. The apostles, indeed, will in this case appear to have been men, whose memories and reasoning powers sometimes failed them; but does this destroy their credibility? Shall we reject their testimony to facts, about which they could not have been deceived, because in some minute and unimportant circumstances, their recollections might have been indistinct? Who, that has ever attended a court of justice, or has read different narratives of the same events, does not know, that the most credible and faithful witnesses sometimes fail of perfect correctness? Reject all testimony which labours under this defect, and you put an end immediately to the admin-

istration of the laws, and to the delightful confidence of social life.—Let me further ask, are we authorized to deny, that the apostles received their religion from God, because they may have sometimes employed insufficient arguments or illustrations? By no means. It is one thing to state facts and doctrines with fidelity and clearness, and another to reason about them with profoundness and accuracy. The best witnesses may be unskilful logicians, and may frequently mistake on subjects which do not belong to their testimony. For instance, the apostles to illustrate and confirm the resurrection, have compared it to the developement of the seed, which they tell us *dies* in the earth. Now later discoveries in philosophy have taught us, that the seed does not die in the strictest sense of the word; and infidels have triumphed in this ignorance of the sacred writers. But will any one be so absurd as to argue, that because these men may have adopted a popular error about vegetation, and applied it to the resurrection, they are therefore unworthy of confidence, when they relate to us what they repeatedly heard, and felt, and saw? We see then, that even if we should be compelled to admit the objection, that the apostles sometimes erred, our religion would remain uninjured. Mistake is very consistent with soundness and uprightness of mind. Grant to the apostles this character (and they undoubtedly possessed it) and we need nothing more. Such men were as worthy of confidence, when they related what had been offered to their senses, and were as fitted to receive the simple doctrines of Christianity, as if they had lived in an age of greater light, and had cultivated their reasoning powers in the schools of philosophy. I even think that this objection recoils on the head of its authors, and may be made to give support to the cause it was in-

tended to destroy. Did the first preachers of the gospel fall into so many popular errors, and call to their aid so many feeble arguments? Whence is it then that, on subjects most interesting to human nature, they adopted and every where preached sentiments, which directly opposed the current of popular opinion, and which transcended in purity and sublimity whatever was taught around them? How is it that these men, living as they did among a selfish and narrow people, a nation of formalists, whose religion was little more than a show and ceremony, yet imbibed and promulgated a new system, which enjoins a pure, simple, and spiritual worship of God, and breathes a universal charity?

4. Christianity deserves serious and respectful attention, if we consider the wonderful rapidity with which it was spread through the world, and the unexampled triumphs it obtained over error and superstition. It certainly is not easy to account for these facts, without believing that this new religion came from God, and was propagated by men whom he aided and endowed with miraculous powers. I know the answer which is made to this—that success is no proof of the truth of a religion, because false religions have succeeded. Mahometanism, we are told, triumphed as rapidly as Christianity. This is indeed true; mere success is no proof of God's aid. But success under such circumstances as those under which Christianity was first preached; success without any human means; success in opposition to all human power; this does seem to demand and to prove divine interposition. We indeed believe Mahometanism false, notwithstanding its progress; and why? Because we see the causes of its progress. We see the deceiver joining arms to artifice, brandishing in one hand the sword, and

extending the Koran in the other ; and we see in the state of the world many aids and facilities to the propagation of such a religion as he taught. But in the case of Christianity, we see no warrior, no hosts, no conflicts, and no adaptation to the civil or religious condition of mankind. The only blood which flows, is that of its ministers. They go forth poor, friendless, without eloquence, without power, preaching a doctrine which offended alike the Jew and the Gentile, which was accommodated to no human interest, and no human passions. We see them every where opposed, and see their followers persecuted and scorned—and yet they succeed ; they change the form of society ; they change the religion of nations ; they shake the ancient and venerated temples of heathenism. Never was such a change wrought. We ask, whence their success ? We see no human power at all proportioned to this effect. All history presents nothing parallel with the diffusion of Christianity, and all the attempts to explain it by merely human causes are, to my mind, utterly insufficient. Now such a religion, to say the least, has claims to very serious attention. It is not to be discarded with contempt.

5. This religion deserves attention if we consider its *spirit*, the virtues it inculcates, the character it is suited to form. Almost all the enemies of Christianity have acknowledged the excellence of its precepts ; and indeed, who can read the New Testament without admiring the sublime piety, the divine charity, the elevated sentiments, which it every where enjoins ? This religion is most obviously intended and suited to refine and ennoble human nature, to soften its asperities, to allay its anger, to humble its pride, to eradicate its selfishness, to break its un-governed lusts, to clothe and adorn it at once with the

mildest and the most heroic virtue. Does not such a religion deserve respect? Does it bear no stamp of divinity?

An objection has sometimes been made to the morality of the gospel—that it is extravagant, or requires virtues better fitted for angels than for men. It calls us to love our enemies; to turn our cheek to the smiter; to lay up treasures not on earth, but in heaven. To this objection it may be answered, that the morality of the gospel is to be gathered, not from a few passages taken separately, but from the general strain of our Saviour's discourses; and we should also remember, that the figures and metaphors, which Jesus employed, are not to be received in their literal sense, but with that latitude, which figurative language always requires. The soberest writer may be made to appear extravagant, if every expression is to be interpreted with the utmost rigor. Let us follow these obvious rules of common sense; and the precepts of Jesus will indeed appear to enjoin a sublime virtue, but still such a virtue, as suits our nature, and can alone make us truly happy.

It has sometimes been objected to the Christian precepts, that they enjoin a morose, retired, and solitary piety. A grosser misrepresentation cannot be uttered. What? Shall Jesus be charged with an unsocial piety, when he expressly taught men, that God prefers mercy to sacrifice, and so continually enjoined an active philanthropy? I could much more easily prove, that he exalted benevolence above piety, than the reverse. Who, that reads his gospel, can imagine himself called to fly from the world, and to worship God in perpetual retirement? Who can read it, and not feel himself bound by new ties to his fellow creatures? Let then the excel-

lent spirit of Christianity teach us to regard it with respect.

6. The *effects*, which Christianity has actually produced in the world, entitle it to respectful attention. I know that infidels have collected with care the persecutions, wars, and pious frauds, in which Christians have been engaged, and have charged all these on their religion. This mode of attack is most disingenuous and dishonourable. Christianity is made to answer for the persecutions of its professors, when it is known to enjoin kindness and forbearance towards the erring and sinful. It is made to answer for the wars of Christians, when it is known to breathe nothing but peace. It is made to answer for the usurpation of its ministers, when it is distinguished from other religions, by investing its ministers with no power over their brethren, and by rebuking with indignant severity the desire of spiritual domination. Christianity, it is true, has been employed as an instrument by the turbulent and aspiring : but is there any blessing which has not been abused ? What religion can be given, which hypocrites may not pervert ? Let me ask those, who speak of the unhappy influence of Christianity, whether persecution, and war, and priestcraft had no existence before this religion was heard of ? Did Christianity bring into a peaceful and happy world tumult and bloodshed ? No : it found the earth filled with violence and guilt ; and all that can be objected to it is, that it did not *immediately* extirpate the bad passions from the human heart, that many of its professors continued as wicked as before, and even employed their religion as a cloak for their vices. But is it God's method to work *immediate* changes in society ? Is it not more reasonable to expect from him a religion, which will grad-

ually renew the face of the world? and precisely such a religion is Christianity. It has silently and gradually been operating for good among the nations. What immense and incalculable benefit has it conferred, in delivering so many countries from the worship of false and impure deities! Wherever it has prevailed, it has breathed a mild and charitable spirit, before unknown; given refinement and courtesy to manners; founded many benevolent institutions; banished many gross and cruel habits; exalted the female character, and thus changed the face of domestic life. It is an undoubted fact, that the nations professing this religion have attained a degree of civilization, and of moral and intellectual improvement, never reached before. That Christianity has contributed largely to this effect, no one who understands its spirit can doubt. The only hope, which we are permitted to cherish, of the further progress of society, of a happier and more improved condition of the human race, is founded on this religion. No forms of government, no institutions of policy, can avail much, whilst the character and tempers of men are unchanged; and Christianity is beyond all dispute the most powerful cause which has ever yet operated on human character, and tends to form the very virtues which adorn and bless society.

7. Another consideration, which entitles Christianity to serious and respectful attention is, that it has been embraced, and honoured, and defended by the best and greatest men who ever lived. Christianity is not the religion merely of the vulgar, of the weak and ignorant, on which the wise and refined have ever looked with disdain. For centuries it has been the only religion of the most enlightened nations, and its warmest patrons have

been found in the most enlightened classes of society. The profoundest philosophers, to whose penetrating eye nature has revealed her mysteries, and to whose laborious investigations we owe the extension of human knowledge, have bowed with reverence before the Saviour, and have confessed the inferiority of their discoveries to the brightness of the light which he brought from heaven; and not only the wisest and greatest, but the best and purest of men, have repaired with delight to Jesus, and have acknowledged, that from him their virtues have derived a strength, incitement, and support, which no other system could afford. The pages of Christian history are crowded with names, on which we delight to dwell as the ornaments and boast of our nature. You, who turn with contempt from Jesus, remember, that such men as Newton and Milton were happy to sit at his feet, and to consecrate their sublime faculties to the promotion of his cause.

I do not mean to urge this as a conclusive argument for the truth of Christianity. You are not required to believe this system, merely because great and good men before you have believed it;—the great and good may err. Examine for yourselves. Do not borrow your faith implicitly from others. But the fact on which I have dwelt, the respect which has been paid by the most excellent men to Christianity, should teach you to examine it with respect, and should teach you to frown on those who would hold it up to contempt. A religion which enlists such men among its friends, *must* carry some marks of truth; it must breathe an excellent spirit.

If indeed Christianity had been received by the great and good, without examination, if it had been forced on

their unreflecting minds in childhood, and if inquiry into its truth had ever afterwards been forbidden them, then this argument would lose much of its force. But Christianity has not been thus sheltered from inquiry. It has long been open to discussion, and has had subtle and ingenious opposers. Every objection has been exposed to public view;—and still the religion has maintained its power over the greatest and purest minds. This may be considered an advantage of the age in which we live. Christianity is not now called, for the first time, to contend for its existence. Had its truth never been questioned before, we might fear for the result of inquiry. We should not know the weapons with which our faith might be assailed. But this uncertainty is removed. Christianity has passed the trial. Its enemies have spent their strength upon it, and it remains unhurt. Conscious guilt, ever anxious to overthrow religion, that it may bury its fears of retribution under the ruins; and pretended philosophy, ever anxious to raise a name by demolishing what has been revered for ages, have long fixed their unhallowed eyes on the sacred fabric of Christianity. They have explored its foundations, penetrated its recesses, and surveyed its massy columns, in the hope of discovering some vestige of decay, some trembling and defenceless part, against which to direct their assaults: But the venerable edifice remains, as in past ages, the admiration of the wise and virtuous, the refuge of the humble and distressed. It still rises in simple majesty, founded on adamant, perfect in its proportions, impressed with the skill and power of its heavenly Builder. The storms have beaten on it, and passed by, and left not a trace of their fury. We may now dismiss our fears for our religion. New assaults are not to be anticipated.

After the scrutiny which Christianity has sustained, new objections cannot easily be invented. New books indeed appear, but they are only new editions of the old. We have arguments retailed to us as novel, which have been again and again confuted. We have old controversies revived, which have already been settled. Infidelity can only gather up and hurl anew the weapons, which have fallen blunted from the shield of Christianity. Is not a religion which has been so assailed, so proved, and still so honoured by the wise and good, deserving of serious and respectful attention ?

8. I might add much to what has now been said, but I have only time to offer one more consideration, which should induce a serious attention to the claims and evidences of Christianity. It is this ; Christianity is the *only religion* which is left us. If we give up this, we have no other system to which we can repair. No other has claims to be compared with this. If God did not speak by Jesus Christ, then he has never spoken to our race. We have no instructor but nature, a light not to be despised, but which casts only a faint and trembling ray on subjects most interesting to humanity.

In giving up Christianity how much shall we lose ! This religion, you will remember, rescued your ancestors, and thus it has rescued *you* from heathenism. To this religion you owe whatever pure and generous conceptions you have formed of God. It has placed before you this great and venerable Being, in the mild and tender character of your father in heaven, and taught you to approach him with sentiments of confidence and love. Does this religion deserve no gratitude ? Let its light be extinguished, and who will assure us that the darkness

of ancient superstition, or still more degrading errors, will not overspread the world?

It is Christianity, which has elevated our sentiments respecting our nature and destination, which has taught us to hope for the mercy of our Creator, and to anticipate a happier and purer life. To Jesus, the conqueror of death, we owe the sure hope of immortality. Let the gospel be torn from us, and what new sadness and gloom would gather over the countenance of death, and over the future prospects of our race. How little consolation does nature give us, when we commit to the cold and silent tomb the mouldering dust of a fellow-being! Is that teacher to be scorned, who in the language of conscious greatness says to us, "I am the resurrection and the life!"

The loss, which we should endure in losing Christianity, cannot be expressed. How many minds would be deprived of the only foundation, on which their virtues and their hopes are reared! How many passions, which this religion has softened and restrained, would break forth with new power! How many wounds, which it has bound up, would bleed afresh! Remove the influence of Christianity from society, and with it, how much tenderness of heart, and purity of manners, and active charity, and domestic love and happiness would disappear! Surely we should wish such a religion to be true, and should give to its evidences a candid, and serious, and respectful attention. Surely such a religion should not be treated with contumely, and held up as a mark for ridicule and scorn! Is it possible that any can assail it with *bitterness*, and feel an eagerness for its destruction! What have infidels to give us in its place? When they have blotted out the

delightful promise of immortality from the page of the gospel, whither will they direct us to learn this consoling and ennobling truth? Whom have they to offer us in the room of the pure and benevolent Jesus? Alas! they have no guide and no comforter to give us. They send us to nature; and some of their number have discovered from nature, that there is no God, no futurity, that we are creatures of chance, creatures of a day, without hope and without resource. This is the tremendous abyss to which infidelity invites our steps.

My friends, these remarks have been designed to confirm the faith of Christians, and to persuade those who doubt of Christianity (if to such I speak) to give a serious, patient, and respectful attention to its claims and evidences. That such inquiry will result in a sincere faith I cannot doubt. I hope that these discourses will help to impress you, my hearers, with the value of Christianity. It is a religion which you cannot prize too much; a religion most mercifully adapted to this world of sin, error, affliction, and death; a religion which offers you forgiveness, and brings life and immortality to light; which recommends universal goodness to your love and pursuit, and offers aid from heaven to your prayers and holy efforts; a religion which prophecy announced, and miracles confirmed; which fell from the lips, shone in the life, and was sealed with the blood of the spotless Son of God; a religion which brings peace to the troubled conscience, implants and cherishes the best dispositions towards God and his creatures, gives cheerfulness and resolution to the practice of duty, exalts and purifies the pleasures of prosperous life, and imparts unfailing consolation in sorrow, and in the anticipation of death.—No man, in his last hours, ever mourned that he had believed, and felt, and practised as a Christian.

Note to the third head, page 19.

THIS head might naturally lead us to consider the objection, that the books of the New Testament were not written by those whose names they bear ; but this subject requires a minute discussion, inconsistent with the nature and limits of a public discourse. The serious inquirer may easily obtain satisfaction on this point. Let him read the *Horæ Paulinæ* of Paley, and weigh the external and internal evidence for the book of Acts, and the epistles of Paul, and he will consider the genuineness of these books as placed beyond dispute. But if he receive these books, he will of course admit the genuineness of Luke's gospel, because the Acts is a continuation of this gospel, and implies its prior existence. But if these books, viz. Luke's gospel, the Acts, and Paul's epistles, are acknowledged to be the productions of their reputed authors, the controversy with the infidel on this point is at an end. These books contain all the doctrines and all the facts, which constitute and support the Christian religion. The other writings of the New Testament may all be resigned, and our religion and its evidences will be unimpaired. But let not the inquirer stop here. Let him read the 9th chapter of Paley's evidences, or almost any of the books referred to in the preface, and he will find a body of proof in support of the genuineness of the other gospels, which would be thought sufficient to establish the genuineness of any other writings. The best critics tell us, that the greatest part of the Greek and Roman classics are received without a doubt on testimony much inferior to that which is urged in favour of the sacred writers. It deserves remark, "that Celsus in the second century, Porphyry in the third, and the emperor Julian, all of them men of learning, and bitter enemies to the Christian religion, allow the genuineness of the books of the New Testament." Porphyry, it should be remembered, was not deficient in critical acuteness. We find him examining with minuteness the book of Daniel, and endeavouring to prove, that it was written after the time of the prophet, and after the events which it predicts, that he might thus invalidate its claims to inspiration. Would not such an adversary have laboured to evade the proof, which is derived to Christianity from our Saviour's prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, if he could have adduced any plausible reasons for the opinion, that the books, which contain it, were written, as is pretended, after that catastrophe? How much more easily could he have collected arguments against these books, than against the more ancient book of Daniel; and how much stronger motives had he for fixing, if possible, the charge of forgery on the writings of the New Testament?

