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Usefulness, truth, and excellency of the
Christian revelation defended against the

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This edition is in some few places somewhat
different from the first. The new edition - R.
Table of contents is somewhat fuller - than
the 2^d ed. - The P.S. was added to this.





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THE
USEFULNESS, TRUTH,
and EXCELLENCY

OF THE
Christian Revelation

DEFENDED
Against the *Objections* contain'd
in a late Book,

INTITLED,
Christianity as old as the Creation, &c.

By JAMES FOSTER.

The THIRD EDITION, Corrected.

Μένειν^{ον} ὅτι καὶ τὸ μετατίθεσθαι, καὶ ἔτεσθαι τῷ διορθοῦντι,
ὁμοίως ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡ'ΟΝ ἔστι. Marc. Antonin.

L O N D O N:

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THE PREFACE.

THAT infidelity has increas'd among us very much of late, is a general observation. And as we believe Christianity to be a rational and excellent institution, it must seem the more strange to us, that this should happen in an age that boasts of free inquiry, and would be thought neither to receive, nor reject, any religious opinions, but upon solid grounds. I shall not pretend to assign any causes of it that are universal, and much less to determine positively that it always proceeds from vitious motives, and the influence of irregular passions; because there are innumerable prejudices that insensibly byass and mislead the mind, where there is both a good understanding, and an honest heart; and general charges (which is the utmost length we can go; for of the principles and views by which particular persons are influenc'd nothing can be known certainly, till the secrets of all hearts are reveal'd) general charges, I say, of insincerity, perverseness, and wilful error, are

as easily brought by bigots and enthusiasts against the opposers of false religions, as by the defenders of the true against their antagonists. There is one thing, however, that appears to be a very strong and common prejudice against the Christian religion, which I cannot omit, since it depends entirely on Christians themselves, and consequently, as they might have prevented, it is not yet out of their power to remove it; I mean those corruptions in doctrine, and gross superstitions in worship, by which they have defac'd the simplicity and beauty of true Christianity, and which have been urg'd indeed with greater zeal than morality itself. These the adversaries of our religion, without examining farther, blend with its original and essential doctrines; and thus it is condemn'd for no other reason, but because it has been misrepresented. A melancholy reflection this! that Christians should furnish infidels with the choicest weapons to attack their own cause; but at the same time, on the side of unbelievers, a sure argument of a shallow and superficial judgment in these points, and which destroys all their pretences to fair reasoning. For such a method of proceeding is not doing common justice to the writings of the New Testament; nay farther, if the principles of any religion are to be taken thus at second hand, and rejected without being inquir'd into, there is no rule left whereby to distinguish between true and false religions; and 'tis impossible that any revelation, which God may communicate to mankind, should ever make its way in the world,
even

The P R E F A C E.

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even though it be in itself most perfect, and brings with it the highest and noblest credentials.

THE author of Christianity &c. like most other opposers of revelation, puts on an affected concern for the purity of the Christian religion, and would be thought to do it honour by shewing it to be only a republication of the law of nature, the original and universal religion of mankind. And indeed these writers are not to be blam'd for acting thus in disguise, till they can declare openly against it without danger. But it were to be wish'd, methinks, that all unnecessary terrors being remov'd, they might no longer be forc'd to the inconsistent pretence of exalting Christianity by destroying it, and honouring it by representing all its peculiar doctrines as absurd and senseless. In the mean time, as matters now stand, if we would come at their true sentiments, we must interpret all their books by this key. Then we shall be in no danger of being deceiv'd, either by specious titles, or seeming concessions. For the title, which our author, in particular, has given to his performance, since 'tis most evidently his intention to subvert the Christian religion, can't but be universally understood to mean this, and this only, Christianity as old as the creation, or good for nothing; or, which amounts to the same, Christianity, the moral doctrines of it excepted, superstition and enthusiasm.

I N my remarks upon this discourse I have not consider'd it chapter by chapter (a great part of it being nothing at all to my purpose; and for the rest, the same sentiments being often repeated, and falling in here and there without much method or connection) but have endeavour'd to digest the substance of it, so far as the cause of Christianity is concern'd, under proper heads, both for the greater entertainment, and advantage, of the reader. Nor have I carried the opposition so far, as to dispute all the principles in it on which a great stress is laid; because some of them appear to me, if rightly explain'd (a point indeed in which our author is very defective) to be rational and just; and only the consequences he draws from them to be fallacious and sophistical.

T H U S, for instance, I make no scruple to allow, that reason, if it be rightly improv'd, is sufficient to discover all the principles and duties of natural religion; or, that 'tis sufficient, at all times, to teach men all that God requires of them in their various circumstances; and have shewn, that notwithstanding this, when reason is actually corrupted and darken'd, a revelation is never the less desirable, or useful. But if we go farther, and urge the actual corruption of the world as a proof of the insufficiency of reason, in itself, to teach men natural religion and morality, or
those

those duties, which they are indispensably oblig'd to know and practise in order to their acceptance with God ; and consequently makes a revelation not only of advantage in certain circumstances, but absolutely, and at all times, necessary ; besides that we shall, I fear, hardly be able to account for its not being universal, since all our reasonings are form'd upon the general necessities of mankind ; besides this, I say, we can never answer the very same argument retorted upon us from the ignorance and superstition of Christians, against the sufficiency even of revelation. In truth the argument is bad either way ; for indolence, prejudice, and vitious affections will pervert and darken the plainest rule. And as the corruptions of the Heathen world, if they had been much greater than they really were, would, no more than they do now, have inferr'd the insufficiency of reason as a guide in itself ; it must follow by the same rule, that the degeneracy among Christians, though it could be shewn to be more gross than any Pagans were ever chargeable with, is no rational prejudice either against the perfection, or perspicuity, of the Christian revelation. For 'tis most evident, that in both cases the event is not owing to a defect in the original rule, but to mens not attending to it, or substituting other false rules in the place of it ; and the prevalency of ignorance, superstition, and vice, more in some ages than in others, may arise from a great variety of circumstances, which, when they happen to concur, may make the

plainest and most complete rule of less use, than, in different circumstances, another that is vastly more obscure and imperfect.

I HAVE nothing to add, but that, as I shall be ready, upon conviction, to correct any errors in the reasoning part; so, if the author of Christianity &c. can shew that I have misrepresented his sense, or treated him, in any respect, uncivilly, I promise to ask his pardon, and give him, publicly, all the satisfaction he can desire.

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THE
USEFULNESS, TRUTH, and
EXCELLENCY
OF THE
Christian Revelation
DEFENDED.

S RELIGION is of the highest importance to mankind, *free* debates about it ought above all things to be encouraged. This is the only way to settle the true nature of it, and fix it upon a solid foundation, that *truth* and *falsehood*, *superstition* and *rational piety*, may not equally prevail under that venerable name : and to support it by methods of *restraint* and *violence* is not only an infringement of the most sacred *natural* rights of mankind, but a dishonour to religion itself. It makes a *good cause* suspected, and gives every *little insinuation* of its *adversaries*,

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without proof, the air of probability. And as all honest men have no concern but for *truth*, and never suffer their passions, prejudices, or worldly interests to *influence* their religious inquiries, they can desire nothing more than that the argument should be clearly stated, and urg'd in its utmost strength on *both sides* ; and must be as ready to *give up* any particular scheme of religion upon sufficient evidence of its *falsehood*, as they were to *defend* and *propagate* it while they believ'd it to be *true*. Such persons must be very unwilling that the *civil magistrate* should interpose, to do that by *coercion* and *terror*, which can only be effected by *reason* and *persuasion*.

FOR my own part, I think it an inestimable happiness, that we live not only in an *inquisitive* age, that will take nothing upon *trust*, but in a land of *liberty*, where persons may urge their objections against the *establish'd religion* with much more freedom, than in many other countries that are called by the *Christian* name ; in which the people, not being allow'd the use of their *reason*, and *free inquiry*, are swallowed up in the grossest *enthusiasm* and *superstition*, and *slaves* in a double sense, both to their *Princes* and their *Priests*. May this happy liberty increase, which I take to have a close connection even with our *civil liberty*. Let those who do not believe the *Christian religion* be allow'd to throw off all *disguises*, and attack it with all the skill and strength of argument they are capable of. Let not such as
write

write in defence of it claim any privilege above their opponents, merely because they write on the *popular* and *orthodox* side of the question, since *the natural* rights of *both parties* are equal. We need not be afraid of the consequences : for *truth* can never suffer by being brought to the most *critical test* of *impartial reason* ; and it is the interest of mankind that *falsehood* should be detected and exposed. And as the books which for a few years past have been publish'd in favour of *Infidelity*, particularly *The Grounds and Reasons*, &c. have been of *great service* to *Christianity*, by imploying several excellent pens in its defence, who have set the evidence of its divine authority in a clearer and stronger light than ever ; so I make no doubt but that the author of a *late* book, intituled, *Christianity as old as the Creation*, will be the occasion of such *solid* defences of the excellency and advantages of the *Christian* revelation, as will establish the *sincere* and *impartial* more firmly in the belief of it. If the following discourse contributes to this good design, it will need no farther apology.

THIS book, the argument of which I propose to consider so far as the cause of *Christianity* is concern'd in it, is wrote in the main in a *handsome* and *genteel* manner, and therefore, I think, the author deserves to be treated *civilly*. There are several excellent things in it, especially upon the head of *natural religion*. And what he has offer'd to shew

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the mischievous tendency of *superstition*, and that the *true religion* has been most *abominably* corrupted, by placing it in *insignificant ceremonies*, and *incomprehensible* or *otherwise useless* speculations, which have no influence upon *moral goodness* but to obstruct and pervert it, is unanswerable. But as the *ingenious author* proceeds a great deal farther, and the main drift of his reasoning strikes directly at the *truth of Christianity*, and its *usefulness* as a divine revelation, it will be expected that his arguments upon this head should be fully consider'd; and he must not take it amiss, if this be done with the same freedom which he himself has us'd, in considering the arguments that are urg'd on the contrary side of the question. Let me only observe, that the dispute between us is not all about the *supreme and immutable excellency* of the *religion of nature*, nor whether this, which is by far the *greatest and best* part of *Christianity*, be *as old as the creation*, and *as extensive as human nature*; it is not, whether it be the *chief design of revelation* to explain and restore this *primitive religion* in its original purity and perfection, and to assist and promote the regular and universal practice of it; nor whether *reason* be our *ultimate rule* in all our religious inquiries, a *rule* by which *revelation itself* must be judg'd: for the affirmative in all these questions is admitted. I shall therefore mention them as *allow'd* principles, and no farther than the nature of the argument requires; which may be reduc'd to the following heads.

Chap.

Chap. I. OF the advantages of a revelation, and particularly of the Christian; and of the use and evidence of miracles.

Chap. II. VINDICATING the conduct of Providence in not making the Christian revelation universally known; and proving that this is consistent with the perfections of God, and consequently with the notion of its being a divine revelation.

Chap. III. SHEWING that we have a sufficient probability, even at this distance, of the authenticnes, credibility, and purity of the books of the new testament; and that the common people are able to judge of the truth and uncorruptedness of a traditional religion; with an answer to the arguments drawn from the change of languages, the different use of words, the style and phrase of scripture, &c. to prove it to be an obscure, perplex'd, and uncertain rule.

Chap. IV. A GENERAL defence of positive commands.

Chap. V. A PARTICULAR vindication of the peculiar positive institutions of Christianity.

UNDER one or other of these heads, I shall have occasion to consider all this author's reasoning, so far as the controversy a-

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bout *revelation* is concern'd. But if any part of it shall seem not to fall in so *naturally*, or in *such exact* order as might be wish'd, I hope it will be consider'd, that 'tis very difficult to observe *strict order* in remarks upon so large a book, in which the same things are often repeated; and objections are not urg'd in any *regular* method, but lie scatter'd here and there, and mix'd with other things of a *quite different* kind; and that this will obtain the candid reader's excuse.

C H A P.

C H A P. I.

Of the advantages of a revelation, and particularly of the Christian ; and of the use and evidence of miracles.

I EXPECT it will be suggested here that this part of my design is *needless*, because the author of *Christianity* &c. allows *,
“ *That when* men do not pay a due regard to
“ the most perfect religion of *nature*, but mix
“ with it human inventions, it *may*, then, be
“ agreeable to the divine goodness to send persons to recall them to a more strict observation of it.” And in another place he says †,
“ But first, I must premise, that in supposing
“ an external revelation, I take it for granted,
“ that there is sufficient evidence of a person
“ being sent by God to publish it ; nay, I
“ farther own, that this divine person by
“ living up to what he taught, has set us a
“ noble example ; and that as he was highly
“ exalted for so doing, so we, if we use our
“ best endeavours, may expect a suitable reward. This, and every thing of the same
“ nature, I freely own, which is not inconsistent with the law of God being the same,
“ whether internally, or externally reveal’d.”

THESE, it must be own’d, are *large concessions* ; but as they do not appear to be re-

* P. 283.

† P. 9.

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concileable with *other parts* of this author's performance, nor with the *general reasoning* that runs thro' the whole of it, I think they are not much to be regarded. Very *ingenious* writers are apt sometimes to contradict themselves; or to say things in order to *disguise* their sentiments, and as *salvoes* to which they may have recourse, if they should happen to be push'd hard in the main argument. And thus the author of *Christianity* &c. has in several places spoken of the *Christian religion*, as if he believ'd and acknowledg'd it to be a *divine revelation*; though it must appear to every reader that 'tis impossible it should be so upon *his principles*, since 'tis not a *universal* revelation, and contains some things in it *merely positive*; and consequently, that by urging *these principles* he design'd to undermine it, and reduce mankind to the *mere religion* of *reason* and *nature*. In like manner, notwithstanding the passages above cited, nothing can be more plain, than that he magnifies the *powers of reason* with a view to lessen or destroy the *use of revelation*. But whatever his real design was, since the generality of his readers will most *probably* understand him thus, as all that I have met with do; and some perhaps may be influenc'd by his arguments, if they are not examin'd, and shewn to be *weak* and *inconclusive*, to think that a revelation was *needless*; I look upon this as a *sufficient apology* for my proceeding in the method I at first propos'd, whereby I shall have

an opportunity of doing justice in some measure to this important subject.

Now the *fundamental principles*, upon which our author proceeds, are these. “ If
“ God has given mankind a law, he must have
“ given them likewise sufficient means of
“ knowing it ; he would, otherwise, have de-
“ feated his own intent in giving it : since a
“ law, as far as ’tis unintelligible, ceases to be
“ a law. If *God*, at all times, *was willing*
“ *that all men should come to the knowledge of*
“ *his truth* ; his infinite wisdom and power
“ could at all times find sufficient means, for
“ making mankind capable of knowing what
“ his infinite goodness design’d they should
“ know.” — * “ If God never intended
“ mankind should at any time be without re-
“ ligion, or have false religions ; and there
“ be but one true religion, which ALL have
“ been ever bound to believe, and profess ; I
“ can’t see any heterodoxy in affirming, that
“ the means to effect this end of infinite wis-
“ dom must be as universal and extensive as
“ the end itself ; or that all men, at all times,
“ must have had sufficient means to discover
“ whatever God design’d they should know,
“ and practise.” — And “ the use of *those fa-*
“ *culties*, by which men are distinguish’d from
“ brutes, is the only means they have to dis-
“ cern whether there is a God ; and whether
“ he concerns himself with human affairs,

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“ or has given them any laws ; and what
 “ these laws are.” *

WE may, for ought I see, allow all this, and yet a *revelation* may be never the less *expedient* and *useful*. For if we suppose the utmost the *ingenious author* can justly expect, namely, that the *reason* of mankind is capable of discovering all the important principles and precepts of *natural religion*, all those duties they owe to *God* and their *fellow creatures*, or which relate to the right government of their *affections* and *appetites* ; and that, in this sense, 'tis *sufficient* to direct them how to behave in the various circumstances and relations of human life ; all that can be infer'd from hence is, that it *may*, but not that it *certainly will*, produce this desirable effect. On the contrary, 'tis as plain that it *may not* ; but that notwithstanding their *rational faculties*, men may be ignorant of some *great* and *essential* branches of *morality*. For *reason* can only be serviceable to us in directing our *moral* conduct, if it be *cultivated* and *improv'd* ; and even *self-evident truths* may be unknown, if they are not *consider'd* and *attended to* ; and much more the principles of *natural religion*, of which the utmost that can be said is, that they are capable of *strict demonstrative* proof, but are not *knowable* by *intuition* ; so that those faculties “ by which we are distinguish'd from “ brutes,” and which, † “ if they are us'd “ after the best manner we can, must an-

* P. 5.

† Ibid.

“swer the end for which God gave them, “and justify our conduct,” may be so *perverted* by vicious and irregular prejudices, that the very men who are thus *dignified* by their *reason*, and capable by a *right use* of it of forming a true judgment of what is fit and becoming in every circumstance, may grow *rude* and *wild*, having *very little sense* of the eternal difference of *good* and *evil*, and being *almost entirely* govern’d by *animal* instincts and passions.

THE only thing that can render a revelation absolutely *useless* is this, that *reason* not only *may*, but *must*, bring men to the Knowledge of God’s will ; that it is not only a *sufficient*, but *certain* and *infallible* means to obtain this end. But this is inconsistent with their being *free agents*, and fit subjects of *moral* government, which *necessarily* includes in its idea, that they may *choose* whether they will exercise their *reason*, or not, and by a *neglect* and *abuse* of it sink into the most gross and deplorable ignorance. And in such a state of *corruption* as this (which, ’tis possible, for the very same reason that it may happen in any single instance, may be *universal*) the *advantage* of a *revelation* will be *altogether* as great, as if men were *unavoidably* ignorant of the great truths of *morality*. For how they come to be *out of the way* is not the question, whether it proceeds from a defect in their natural powers, or from want of attention, and not using those powers as they ought. In *both cases* ’tis certain that they *need* to be
set

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set right, and recover'd to a just sense of their duty, and happiness; and that an *external revelation* which rectifies errors their in points of *morality*, the most fatal errors that reasonable creatures can fall into, must, whatever we determine concerning the *sufficiency* of *reason*, if *rightly exercis'd*, to have taught them better, be eminently *useful*, and an instance of *great goodness* in the supreme governor of the world.

LET us explain this matter a little farther, since 'tis of the utmost importance, and what the whole dispute about the *expediency* and *usefulness* of a *revelation* plainly turns upon. Florid declamations upon the *sufficiency* of *human reason* are certainly of very little weight against the *general observation* of mankind, and undoubted matter of fact. Now 'tis unquestionably true in fact, whatever the cause of it be, that there is nothing the bulk of mankind are more averse to, than serious thought and consideration; and nothing in which we are more likely to be disappointed than if we expect from them, that they will set themselves to *examine* and *reason* *clearly* and *distinctly*, even upon subjects of the greatest moment. Their *indolence* makes them take up with commonly receiv'd principles, and swallow them *implicitly*; their *passions* and *prejudices* prevent their making *impartial* inquiries: and tho they are *reasonable creatures*, constant experience teaches us, that if they are not *taught*, if right and just

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sentiments are not *inculcated* and impress'd upon their minds, they are apt to run *wild*, and become a parcel of *uncultivated undisciplined savages*, possessed indeed of the *powers of reason and reflection*, but without *rational and well-digested notions* of the *fundamental points of religion and morality*.

FOR what is it but a *better education*, and *better instruction*, that distinguishes the *politer* parts of the world from the most *ignorant and barbarous* nations? Have they not ALL ALIKE the *faculty of reason*? And yet, notwithstanding this *common gift* of the great Creator and the improvements it is capable of, in *some countries*, knowledge and civility, just notions of God, of human nature, and of the eternal and immutable distinction of good and evil, prevail; while *others* are overrun with darkness and prejudice, and there is scarce any difference, but in the *outward form*, between *men and brutes*. We see plainly, that in *every* age, and in *all* parts of the world, the common people have fallen in with the *established* religion, however absurd and extravagant; and that they have always been *tenacious* of the principles instill'd into them in their education, whether right or wrong. In *Heathen* nations at this day, the *most monstrous* superstition and idolatry is practis'd with the greatest reverence and zeal; and in *Po-pish* countries, the *worst* corruptions of *Christianity*, and even of *natural religion*, are embraced and contended for, as the *only scheme*
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of belief and practice that can render men acceptable to God. The people never once *suspect*, that 'tis so much as *possible* any part of their religion may be false; but, on the contrary, seem to believe, that 'tis a *sin* to entertain any doubts about it: which makes their errors in a manner *invincible*. Nay, does not our author himself *allow*, that mankind are very apt to be impos'd upon, and that notwithstanding the *boasted sufficiency* and *perfection* of their reason, they are *easily* betrayed into the most ridiculous and hurtful superstition, and into a *belief* of, and *bigotted attachment* to, such principles, as undermine the foundations of religion and virtue?

THIS *stupidity*, and *implicit* submission of the understanding in religious matters, is not the peculiar *foible* of the present age, but was most notorious when *Christianity* was first published to the world. The sentiments and practices of mankind were both very depraved, and the corruption was almost *universal*. Idolatry, one small nation only excepted, and they *despis'd* and *hated* by the rest, overspread the face of the *whole* earth. The common people, *every where*, entertained the most unworthy and dishonourable notions of their Gods. The *Jews* represented the almighty and gracious Creator of all things, who has a kind and benevolent regard to the *whole* rational creation, as *confining* his favour to them alone, and *overlooking*, *abandoning*, and *devoting to destruction* all mankind besides; which
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made them *narrow* and *selfish*, *conceited* of their own superior privileges, and *insolent* and *cruel* to all who were not of their religion, And the *poetic theology* of the *Heathens*, which seems to have been their *establiſh'd religion*, and the general belief of the *vulgar*, imputed to their Deities the groſſeſt impurities, and moſt infamous immoralities, ſuch as *murders*, *rapes*, *inceſts*, and other the moſt *black* and *monſtrous* crimes; which had a natural tendency to *corrupt* the manners of their worſhippers, and gave a *ſanction* to the worſt of vices. And accordingly in the *politeſt* nations, ſome of the *ſacred rites*, which were ſolemnized in honour of the Gods, were ſo abominably *leud* and *beſtial*, as to raiſe the utmoſt horror in every mind that has a ſenſe of *virtue* or *decency*.

NAY, even a conſiderable part of that *public-ſpiritedneſs*, and *love of their country*, for which they are ſo highly celebrated, was nothing elſe but a zeal for their own *particular intereſt*, in oppoſition to the *general good* of the world. It was a *rude* and *barbarous* ambition to *aggrandize* themſelves by *conquering*, *oppreſſing*, and *enſlaving* other nations. And of conſequence, their *fortitude*, *contempt of danger*, and the like, which, in the ſupport of an intereſt that is *truly honourable*, and in an aſſerting and defending the *common rights* of mankind, are *great* and *heroic* virtues, becoming the dignity of human nature, being animated by ſuch *baſe* views, and exerted in ſo *unjuſt* a cauſe, were very *miſchievous* qualities, deſtructive

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tive of the true principles of *social* virtue and happiness. Indeed they *eminently distinguish'd* themselves by a noble ardour and zeal for civil liberty *at home*, and by the many brave efforts they made against arbitrary and tyrannical schemes for enslaving and oppressing *their own* country ; at the same time that they were a *faction* against the *natural rights* and *liberties* of mankind, and spread *slavery* and *terror* through the world. But though I would be far from disparaging this *brave* and *useful* spirit, I cannot help observing, that an attachment to the true interests of any *one society*, however excellent in its constitution laws and customs, is but a low attainment, in comparison of a love to the *whole community of mankind*, and a concern for *universal* liberty and happiness ; nay, it may proceed in a great measure from *selfish* principles, the happiness of particular persons, of their families and posterity, being necessarily included in that of the society of which they are members ; and there is too much reason to suspect, that there was *actually* something of this in the case of the old *Greeks* and *Romans*, since by their *arms* and *conquests* they not only violated, in the most notorious manner, the law of *disinterested* and *universal benevolence*, but even the common rules of *justice* and *equity*. Many more instances might be added of the deplorable *corruption* of religion and morality in the world, before our Saviour's appearance. And,

I MAY ask now, where was that clear light of reason all this while, the *universality* of which, and its *sufficiency*, at *all times*, to direct men in every branch of their duty, is so much insisted upon, in order to represent an *external revelation* as altogether *needless*? Was it not very much *clouded* and *obscured*; and were not the notices it gave vastly *imperfect* and *confus'd*; with respect to the very *fundamental principles* of true piety and virtue?

IT must indeed be owned, that God did not *leave himself* entirely *without witness* in the *Gentile* world; having not only implanted in all the *faculty of reason*, but raised up, at different times, several persons of a more *refin'd genius*, who cultivated their understandings with great care and diligence, saw thro' the idolatry and enthusiasm of the vulgar, and made considerable improvements in the knowledge of morality. But, notwithstanding this, *ignorance* and *superstition* triumphed among the common people, infinitely the greatest part of mankind, without controul. So that the state and circumstances of the world *in general* plainly required the *extraordinary* assistance of a revelation, to recover mankind to the knowledge of the one true God, the maker and governour of the universe, and to just and worthy notions of his perfections and providence; to restore *religion* to its *native* purity and lustre, which was buried, and almost quite lost, under a heap of *absurd and entra-*

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vagant rites and ceremonies, many of which were *shocking* to modesty and *scandalous* to human nature ; and to settle *morality*, and the *social virtues themselves* upon their true and proper foundation.

I THINK it will be but little to the purpose to ask here, whether *Philosophy* was not *sufficient* to reform the world without the help of a *particular revelation* from heaven? For the same may be said of *Philosophy* as of the *reason* of mankind in general, that whatever it was capable of in the *abstract nature* of the thing, 'tis plain *in fact* it did not answer this end. And farther, there was very little reason to expect this desirable effect from it. For very few of the people had either *leisure* or *inclination* to attend the schools of the *Philosophers*; or if they had, their lectures of morality were not *plain simple precepts*, adapted to *vulgar* understandings, but such *abstract reasonings* as are above the capacity of the generality of mankind : and which, very probably, instead of fixing them in *clear and distinct* principles, would have puzzled and confounded their *natural notions* of good and evil. The greatest reformation that *Philosophy* seems, *in fact*, to have brought about in the most *civiliz'd* nations, was the introducing *wiser schemes* of government, for the preservation of *outward* order, and the peace of society. But as the most excellent laws which were enacted with a view to this, doubtless a *truly laudable* design, aim'd at nothing farther than

than regulating the *external behaviour*, and did not extend to the *dispositions* of the mind and the *inward principles* of action, nor prescribe rules for the *right government* of the *Passions*, in which *alone* the *essence* of true virtue consists; scarce any thing was *really* done, whatever we allow it possible that *Philosophy* might have done, towards promoting the perfection of mankind, and shewing them their duty; as *reasonable* and *accountable* creatures.

HOWEVER, let us suppose, tho we have no reason in the world to believe that it was really the case, *that the common people actually learn'd from their Philosophers the justest notions of their duty towards their fellow-creatures.* With respect to religion they were entirely under the conduct and government of their *Priests*; who enslav'd their understandings to such *enthusiastic* principles, inculcated such *weak* and *impious stories* of their Gods, and imposed so many *ridiculous*, and some such *sensual* and *barbarous, rites* in their worship, as having a *direct* tendency to corrupt their manners, must of consequence render their *knowledge of morality*, had it been ever so exact, in a great measure *useless*. With these *fundamental errors in religion*, subversive of all true piety, and of the obligations of *moral virtue*, *Philosophy* did but little concern itself. And yet 'tis undeniable, that *in these points* the bulk of the world most needed a reformation, because their religion gave a *low* and *vicious* turn to their minds, and very much *defac'd*

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their *natural conscience* of good and evil. On the contrary, the *Philosophers* generally speaking, tho they might *secretly* despise, and laugh at, the *idolatry*, *weakness*, and *credulity* of the People, whether for want of *honesty*, or *courage*, or because they thought it a piece of *state-convenience* and *policy* that the vulgar should be kept in *ignorance*, rather *encourag'd* than attempted to put a stop to it, by falling in with the *establish'd superstition*. Thus did their example give a kind of *sanction* and *authority* to the general corruption; the admirers of their superior wisdom were *plung'd deeper* into it; and there was *less likelihood*, *perhaps*, than if there had never been any *Philosophers* at all, of their extricating themselves out of it.

AND, not to insist upon their want of *proper authority* to inforce their doctrines, and get them to be receiv'd as *laws binding conscience*, and *standing unalterable rules* for the conduct of mankind; the *differences* there were amongst them even with respect to *some principles of morality*; and several other circumstances that might be mentioned, which plainly shew how utterly *improbable* 'tis, that *Philosophy*, if left to *itself*, would have reform'd the errors and vices of the world; I shall only add, that the bulk of mankind, instead of being *establish'd* in the belief of a *future state*, by the *sentiments* and *reasonings* of the *Philosophers* about it, were more likely to be *unsettled* and lost in *confusion*. For the vulgar seem to have been the only *firm* and *steady believers* of this great article of *natural religion*;
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while, of the *Philosophers*, some *denied* it, and others *doubted* of it, and the *wisest* and *best* did not think and argue *clearly* and *consistently* upon this important subject: but though they sometimes spoke of a *future immortality* with great *plainness*, and with an *air of confidence*, as a thing of which they were strongly persuaded, they deliver'd themselves at other times with the utmost *hesitation* and *uncertainty*.

INDEED the notions which prevailed among the generality concerning a *future state* of rewards and punishments, being little else but *poetical tales* and *fictions*, design'd rather to amuse and strike the imagination, than to give a rational account of things, were in many respects *childish* and *trifling*. And it was *highly desirable*, for the honour of the divine wisdom, and the greater encouragement of virtue, that such false notions should be rectify'd. But how was this to be done? Surely it could not be by applying to the *uncertain light* of *Philosophy*, and submitting to the direction of such *unstable guides* as had not so much as fix'd *their own* principles, without an *equal*, or perhaps *greater*, inconvenience; because, though they might by their *superior reason* have given the people *juster sentiments* of a *future state*, they would have left them in *doubt* about the thing itself. And from *scepticism* with respect to this great principle of natural religion, and, which is the *direct* consequence of it, *infidelity* (the common people, generally, not being exact enough to distinguish between *doubting*

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and *not believing at all*) no good effect could possibly follow: but the *belief* of it, though in some particulars very *idle* and *romantic*, might excite many, *especially* of the lower sort, as far as they had clear notions of their duty, to regard and practise it.

AND now in such an *universal* degeneracy when mankind were abandon'd to the *grossest* idolatry, and swallow'd up in ignorance and superstition, and had scarce any *remains* of the true uncorrupted religion of nature; when the powers of *reason* and *Philosophy* were either not employ'd to restore them to their original state, or after they had done their utmost were found to be *ineffectual*; and tho they dispers'd some good notions of *civility*, *order*, and *decency* in outward life, contributed but very little towards regulating the *principles of morality*, and settling *religion* upon its *rational* and *just* foundation; nay, farther, when, all circumstances consider'd, there was *so little likelihood* that a reformation could come from this quarter: I say, in such a state of corruption as this, nothing of which, I am persuaded, has been *exaggerated*, and amplify'd beyond the *truth*, but rather several particulars omitted, that would give us a *stronger idea* of the deplorable condition into which the world was sunk; who, that has any notion of the importance of religion, and its tendency to promote the happiness of mankind, will pretend to say, that a revelation was not *extremely desirable*, and might not be
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of the *greatest advantage*? or that the *Christian revelation* in particular, which made such momentous discoveries, and *discoveries that were so much wanted*, relating to the unity of God, the rational and acceptable method of worshipping him, and the truths of natural religion, which were *so generally* corrupted and darken'd, was not a *singular* instance of God's great goodness to his creatures, and worthy to be receiv'd with the utmost gratitude and thankfulness?

THIS point is so plain, that 'tis almost a shame to enlarge upon it. Let a man speculate ever so finely upon the *natural sufficiency* of reason, will that convince us, when we look abroad into the world, and consider the *folly* and *enthusiasm* that generally abounds, that men may not *in fact* be stupidly ignorant of those things, which it most of all concerns them to know? Will *reason*, if it be not improv'd and cultivated, carry them any farther than *mere sense* and *instinct*? Or is a *capacity* of thinking and considering a probability that they *will* think and consider? Is it an argument that they *do*, in opposition to the unanimous sense of all ages and nations? May not a revelation then, when men have suffer'd their reason to be *perverted*, so that *really*, whatever it might have done, it affords them no light whereby to discover the principles of true religion, be *in all respects* as useful, as if they were *naturally incapable* of forming right notions of their duty without

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it? May it not be very *useful*, though it be not *absolutely necessary* to the happiness of mankind? *i. e.* Tho we should allow, that the great governour of the world requires of none to know more, than may *fairly* be expected from persons in their circumstances, and surrounded with their particular difficulties and prejudices, for which all *favourable allowance* will be made; and that their acting up to the light they enjoy, *however imperfect*, is *sufficient* to procure his approbation and favour.

INDEED the author of *Christianity &c.* seems to be of opinion, “ that the greatest
“ part of mankind cannot be in a deplorable
“ condition for want of a revelation, which
“ God, out of his infinite wisdom, has not
“ as yet thought fit to communicate to them;
“ at least with that evidence as is necessary to
“ make them believe it *”. If it be, because they are capable by their reason of discovering those rules, that are *sufficient for their present and future happiness*, which is the substance of what he has advanc’d in the preceding paragraph, ’tis evident that this will not support the principle which he would build upon it. For notwithstanding this, men may be ignorant of some of the most *essential* branches of natural religion, which without doubt is a very *deplorable condition* for reasonable beings to be in, if they are brought into it by their own negligence and carelessness.

* P. 195.

IT may be said however, that in this case 'tis not owing to the want of a revelation, but to their not exercising their rational faculties aright. Granting this, is their state *ever the less deplorable*? And may not the corruption be *so great*, and *so universal*, as that there may be but *little probability* of their being recover'd out of it without the help of a revelation? which is all that is, or at least that *needs* to be, contended for. And if a revelation may rectify those disorders, which otherwise are likely to continue, and to be more and more establish'd, and by the continuance of which mankind must be in *very unhappy* circumstances; may it not be justly said, that they are in *a deplorable condition for want of a revelation*? The meaning of which expression is plainly no more than this, that they are in such *deplorable* circumstances, that they very much *want* a revelation to set them right; or at most, that 'tis probable they will *remain* in that *deplorable condition*, into which they have involved themselves by their negligence and vice, if God does not vouchsafe them that extraordinary favour. And to suppose the advocates for revelation to mean by a phrase which is fairly capable of another sense, that *the want of a revelation* is the *cause* why any are in *a deplorable condition*, when they constantly ascribe it to *other causes*, such as *the neglect and abuse of reason, prejudice, vicious passions perverting and darkening the understanding*, and the like; and only assign the

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the general ignorance and corruption of the world, which all the *refinements of Philosophy* either *could not* or *did not* reform, as a reason why a revelation was an *unspeakable advantage* to it ; is *playing with words, and mere cavilling,*

BUT perhaps the ingenious author may think, that because God requires *no more* of his creatures, than *in proportion* to the light and advantages they enjoy ; and will make all the allowances, that can be expected from an infinitely wise and merciful governour, to their *unhappy circumstances*, and the *unavoidable prejudices* they labour under ; and “ *men* “ *of all religions whatever*, if equally sincere, “ have the same title to be equally favour’d “ by him * ;” mankind cannot be in *deplorable circumstances for want of a revelation*. Let us therefore consider the matter a little in this view.

AND I can see no manner of reason to doubt but that ’tis possible men may be *sincere*, and yet be ignorant of some which we account *plain*, and which are *essential* principles of natural religion ; that in the *Heathen* world, some were *sincere* who practis’d idolatry ; and in *Popish* countries, many of the common people are *very sincere*, notwithstanding their ignorance and superstition ; or in other words, that their prejudices are, if not *invincible*,

* *Christianity as old &c.* p. 415.

considering *the manner of their education, their circumstances in the world, the influence of example, custom, and the like*; such however, as *truly honest well-meaning men, who design right, and act right in proportion to their knowledge, may be influenced by*. If our author allows this, as he must do, or else be so *uncharitable* as to condemn all the ignorant idolatrous and superstitious people that ever lived in the world, as *wilful* corrupters of the light of reason, and consequently in a *hopeless* state; the only question that remains is, whether notwithstanding their *sincerity*, which will *excuse* their ignorance, and recommend them to the favour of God, their condition (though not absolutely wretched and miserable upon the whole, which this author knows was never intended by the most rational advocates for revelation) may not be justly styled *deplorable*? Or in other words, whether, besides its being a thing much to be lamented, that reasonable creatures should reap *little or no advantage* from their reason in the most important points, and fall into such sentiments and practices as are contrary to its *plainest dictates*, and *dishonourable* to human nature, it be not attended with such *real and great inconveniencies*, as may render a revelation, that instructs in juster and more useful principles, *very advantageous and serviceable* to them?

AND either this must be admitted, or it can be *no advantage at all* to mankind to have *just apprehensions* of the nature and perfections of God,

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God, *rational* notions of religion in all its branches, and an *exact* knowledge of the obligations, and true principles, of morality ; but it must be the same thing in *all respects* as to its influence upon their happiness, *provided they are sincere*, whether they are governed by *enthusiasm*, or *true piety* ; whether their minds are *improved* by their devotion, or *debased* ; whether they practise their *entire duty* to God and their fellow-creatures, and understand the *just measures* of both, so as never to suffer them to clash and interfere with each other, or resolve the whole of religion into a *blind senseless* superstition, setting it above real and substantial goodness, and the immutable rules of virtue ; or in short, whether they are sunk almost down to the level of brutes, or think and act in all cases becoming the dignity of their nature. But will any one take upon him to advance and maintain such a *wild paradox* as this ? Can they espouse it with any *consistency*, who profess a mighty zeal for the simplicity and purity of religion, and make loud outcries against the mischievous consequences of *superstition*, and its natural tendency to destroy the perfection and true happiness of mankind ? Without doubt, in the opinion of such especially, the *superstitious* in all ages, whether *sincere* or *insincere*, must have been in truly *deplorable* circumstances ; and a revelation to dispel their ignorance, and restore to them the original religion of nature, must have been *as great a blessing* as could be conferred upon them.

THE thing that is apt to lead persons into mistakes in this matter is their imagining, that because “men of all religions whatever, if equally sincere, have the same title to be equally favoured by God, they will be *equally* rewarded, or enjoy an *equal degree* of happiness in the future state.” *Equally rewarded* indeed they will be in proportion to the improvements they have made, and the services they have performed; but notwithstanding this, the *degrees* of their future happiness may be very *various* and *unequal*. Nay, I think, in the reason and equity of the thing, it must be so: or in other words, we must distinguish between the reward of mens sincerity which may be equal; and the reward of real useful virtue, and actual services, which, at the same time, we have the greatest reason to believe, may be very different. For,

1. Two men may be *equally sincere*, and yet *moral dispositions* and *habits*, *benevolent dispositions* for instance, may be much *stronger* and *more perfect* in one, than in the other. They may be improved in the one by a more *large* and *generous education*, a more *clear* and *exact knowledge* of his duty, and by *just* and *amiable* sentiments of the Deity; and in the other very much obstructed and limited by unhappy *prejudices*, and the influence of a *blind superstition*. Nay, false notions of religion, and conceiving of God as an *ill-natur'd, partial,*

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tial, arbitrary, or inexorable being (and there are multitudes in the world, of whom, considering all circumstances, it can hardly be expected that they should form better notions) may *corrupt* mens sense of morality to a great degree, and make them *haughty and insolent, morose, rigid, and unsociable*. And where these cases happen, as I make no doubt they do frequently, if *moral dispositions* are the perfection of human nature, and the only foundation of rational happiness, the *capacity* for happiness must, in the nature of things, be very different. Stating the matter thus, the different capacity does not *depend on bodily organs*, as the author of *Christianity &c.* insinuates *, but on the *temper and habit* of the mind; which there is no reason to suppose will be altered *in the very instant* that men enter upon the separate state; or that those, in whom the *growth and improvement* of moral dispositions has in this life, by *accidental* circumstances only, been greatly obstructed, will find themselves *all at once* possessed of them in the same strength and perfection as others, who, enjoying better opportunities and advantages, have cultivated them to the utmost.

2. Two persons may be *equally sincere*, and yet the services justly expected from them may be *vastly different*. The one, in proportion to his larger knowledge and higher advantages, is obliged to be more *extensively use-*

* P. 417.

ful, and to exercise more care and labour in doing good. And where the *actual services* which men are called to perform are very *unequal*, which may oftentimes subject the one to much greater difficulties and inconveniences than the other, can it be supposed that there will be *a perfect equality* in the reward? At this rate, there is indeed *no reward at all* for the most generous services, nor even for the greatest sufferings to promote the good of mankind (in which *virtue* may be very far from being *its own reward*) if persons who have done and suffered nothing will be rewarded in the same degree, merely for their *equal sincerity*, and because they would probably have behaved in the same manner, if they had been placed in the same circumstances. This principle therefore is a discouragement to virtuous actions, as well as a reflection upon the wisdom, and justice of the governour of the world. To which we may add, that moral dispositions and habits, as it is the nature of all habits, are improved and strengthened by *more frequent* opportunities for the exercise of them; and, consequently, the *natural capacity* for happiness must be enlarged in proportion.

3. As those who have a more complete and distinct knowledge of their duty will, if they fail in it, be more *severely punished* than others who enjoy less light, and fewer advantages for improving in virtue; as this, I say, is *right* and *fit*, and a principle of *natural justice*;

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slice ; there can no *equal proportion* be observed, if upon discharging their duty faithfully, they are not intitled to a *higher reward*. Nay, upon the contrary supposition, the *less* we know, not only of revelation but of natural religion, the better. For if we are *sincere*, and act up to our light, and to what is required of us in our particular circumstances, *be it ever so little*, we are sure of the *greatest reward* ; and out of all danger of the *additional punishment*, that will be inflicted for misimprovement of superior knowledge.

UPON the whole, therefore, a revelation, by instructing men in right notions of religion, and in the whole of their duty, and affording them *better opportunities and advantages* for cultivating moral dispositions, for greater usefulness in the world, and consequently for obtaining *higher degrees* of happiness hereafter, may be of unspeakable use ; and the ignorant and superstitious, though they will be accepted of God if they are *sincere*, may justly be said to be in *a deplorable condition for want of it*.

IN order to represent a revelation as *needless* our author proceeds farther, and tells us, * that “ had God, from time to time, spoke
“ to all mankind in their several languages,
“ and his words had miraculously conveyed
“ the same ideas to all persons; yet he could

* Pag. 27.

“ not speak more plainly than he has done by
“ the things themselves, and the relation
“ which reason sheweth there is between
“ them.” But when men do not *attend* to
the nature of things, the case is very much
the same as if God had not spoke to them at
all. And a revelation may certainly be very
useful to teach them those principles and du-
ties of natural religion, which, notwithstand-
ing it was in their power to have discover’d
them, if they had made a *right use* of their
reason, they are *in fact* grossly ignorant of.
If one man endeavours to rectify the mistakes
of another in points of morality, must such
instructions be *impertinent*, nay, are they
ever the less necessary, because God has spoke
the same truths clearly by the nature of
things, though his voice be not heard? A man
that does not hear or see has as much need
of instruction, as if he was *naturally* deaf or
blind.

‘ BESIDES, when God *speaks to all*
mankind, and his words *miraculously con-*
vey the same ideas to all, this is giving
them an *actual* knowledge of their du-
ty; whereas in the other case, there is, at
most, only a *capacity* to discover it; *i. e.*
they may know it, or they may not; be-
cause their knowledge must be entirely the
result of their own study, and impartial in-
quiry. And,

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A STANDING *revelation*, though men may indeed pervert it, as well as darken the light of reason, and be as ignorant, superstitious, and degenerate, as if it had never been communicated to them ; I say, *a standing revelation*, if it be free to the use of all, and frequently consulted, must, in the nature of the thing, be *a more probable security*, with respect to the bulk of mankind, against gross errors and corruptions, than the leaving them *altogether* to the direction and conduct of their own reason: because it will constantly supply them with proper thoughts, which is what the common people in all ages have most wanted. For though the right exercise of their rational faculties may be *sufficient* to give them just notions of God, and of the great essential principles of religion ; yet this requires more consideration than they *generally* care for. And experience teaches us, that they make but little of it, when they are left to find out the rules of morality for themselves. Indolence, want of use, and the attention of their minds to the necessary business, and the pleasures of life, hinder their making any great proficiency ; and being inclined, to save themselves the trouble of thinking, to be *implicit* in their belief, they are *easily* practised upon, and led into the most dangerous and hurtful superstition. All which inconveniences are in a great measure provided against by *a standing revelation*, which prescribes a plain, intelligible, and complete rule of morals: so
that

that if they will but be at the pains to *read it carefully*, which they will be sooner persuaded to, than to think so much as is necessary to discover every part of it by their own reason, the meanest may be so well acquainted with the perfections of God, and the nature of true religion, as to guard against the two extremes, of *irreligion* on the one hand, and *enthusiasm* and *superstition* on the other.

AND whereas it is urged farther, that “ since ’tis impossible in any book, or books, “ a particular rule could be given for every “ case, we must even then,” *i. e.* upon the supposition, *that God had spoke to all mankind in their several languages, and his words had miraculously conveyed the same ideas to all persons,* “ have had recourse to the light of nature to teach us our duty in most cases ; “ especially considering the numberless circumstances which attend us, and which, “ perpetually varying, may make the same “ actions, according as men are differently “ affected by them, either good or bad * : ” this amounts to no more, than that all revelation can do for us, is to lay down the *general principles* and *rules* of conduct in all circumstances, but that we must consult our reason about the application of these general rules to *particular cases* ; which is granted, but does not, as every one must see, in the least affect the

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present argument. For a man who has the most exact and perfect knowledge of natural religion has only in his mind *general principles*, and not *a particular rule* for every circumstance that may happen. These general principles *alone* are the eternal and immutable law of nature. And therefore, if our knowledge of natural religion, *i. e.* of the *general rules* to be observed in our behaviour towards God, and our fellow-creatures, and in governing our affections and appetites, be a great advantage to us, notwithstanding we are obliged to the constant use of our reason, in order to judge, with respect to *particular actions*, whether or no they *agree* with these general rules, for instance, whether they are *just* or *unjust*, *beneficent* or *hurtful*; the knowledge of a revelation that teaches all *the same* general principles, which for the most part are very easily accommodated to circumstances, must be an *equal* advantage. I forbear enlarging, because it would need an apology to spend much time upon such objections.

BUT the author of *Christianity &c.* “thinks
 “it no compliment to external revelation,
 “though, as he adds, the learned Dr. *Clarke*
 “designed it as the highest, to say it prevailed,
 “when the light of nature was in a manner
 “extinct *.” The plain sense of which is,
 that ’tis *no compliment to external revelation*,

* P. 381.

to say it was given at a season when it must be most *useful*, or that God could not *wisely* and *honourably* interpose to reveal his will to mankind, when their notions of natural religion were corrupted and depraved; and consequently that he could never do it at all, since in any other circumstance of the world a revelation is plainly *needless*. Let us however consider the weight of the reason which is assigned for this, *viz.* that “ then an irrational “ religion might as easily obtain as a rational “ one *.” Suppose it might, is that an argument that Christianity is not a *rational* religion? If it be not, as every one must see there is not the least shadow of an argument in it, to what purpose is it urged?

THE only question that can affect the *credit* of the Christian revelation is this, whether mankind might not be convinced, upon *rational grounds*, of its truth and excellency, notwithstanding their general corruption and depravity; and that they had in a great measure lost the knowledge of the true religion of nature? If it be shewn, that in such a degenerate state of the world *sufficient evidence* might be given, that Christianity was a religion *most worthy* of God, and calculated to promote the perfection and highest happiness of mankind; of what importance is it to inquire, whether or no it be possible that they might have been prevailed upon to embrace

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an *absurd* and *irrational* religion, if God had permitted evil spirits to work miracles to confirm and establish it? The Christian religion might have been *never the less* of divine authority, though mens corruptions and vicious prejudices had determined them to *reject* it; and an *irrational* religion would not have been *at all* proved to have proceeded from God, though it had been *universally received*. The truth or falshood of any religion cannot be argued therefore from the *opinions* which men happen to entertain concerning it, and does not in the least depend upon their *prejudices*; but is to be judged of only by its own *intrinsic* wisdom and goodness, and its having the proper *external credentials* of a divine revelation. And if notwithstanding their ignorance, superstition, and the false notions they have conceived, men may still be convinced that it has all necessary *external credentials*, and is in every part of it *just, wise, and rational*; 'tis evident it may prevail *honourably*, whatever deceptions we suppose them liable to, even of the most gross and dangerous nature.

P U T the case that the world is *universally* corrupted; that they have not only lost the knowledge of the one true God, and practise the most *stupid* idolatry, but entertain the most *absurd* and *dishonourable* notions of the Gods whom they worship; that they attribute to their Deities the *weaknesses* and *imperfections* of human nature; and conceive of
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them as *unjust, arbitrary, cruel, and revengeful*; pleased and offended with *trifles*; and preferring the *follies and extravagancies* of a deluded and *fanciful superstition*, which debases the dignity of human nature, before *solid and real goodness*; and that, in consequence of this, their sense of good and evil, and of the principles and obligations of morality, is very much *vitiating and darkened*, and they are led to look upon religion as a thing *absolutely distinct* from virtue, and to resolve the whole of it into *ridiculous tricks, and idle ceremonies*. It will be *very hard*, if in such deplorable circumstances the great God cannot *honourably* interpose, and by an *extraordinary revelation*, which without doubt is the most *desireable advantage* that can be afforded to his degenerate creatures, recover them to *right sentiments* of their duty and happiness. And it cannot but be the wish of every *generous* mind, that, if possible, some *remedy* might be applied to cure *so great an evil*. Let us consider therefore, whether what every *wise and good* man must desire *might be, may not be*.

Now when mankind are sunk *thus* low; when they have in a manner *lost* the religion of nature; and those principles which they retain somewhat of are so *perverted*, as to be of very little use to them, and indeed to make it a question, whether they are *any thing better* than no religion at all; an *extraordinary messenger* is sent from God, who works very *great and unquestionable miracles*. These mi-

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racles strike their minds, and convince them that there is something *uncommon* in this person's commission. They both *demand* and *engage their attention* to the doctrine he teaches, and *counterbalance* their *prejudices* in favour of the superstition in which they were educated; so that they are prevailed upon to examine this new religion with *care* and *impartiality*.

MAY not then the doctrines of it, if they are *plain*, *important*, and *useful*, and entirely *agreeable to reason*, approve themselves to the understandings of *rational beings*, how *corrupt* soever their former opinions and principles were? May they not, if they will think, and exercise those *intellectual faculties* with which God hath endued their nature, come to the *knowledge* of the one supreme Creator and Governour of all things, and form *rational* and *worthy* notions of his perfections and providence; and of all the *necessary* branches of true religion, and morality? May they not be *recovered* out of their ignorance and superstition? Or are the reasonable creatures of God, when they have once corrupted the religion of nature, in a *remediless* state? Because they may be deluded and imposed upon, and grow worse and worse; is it *impossible* they should use their reason aright? Because a *false religion* may *easily* be obtruded upon them, while they are under the influence of strong prejudices; ought the *true religion*, of the worth and excellency of which they must be *capable* of being convinced, if their reason
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be any thing more than *an empty name*, and which instructs them in the most useful knowledge, and rectifies their moral disorders, to be *the less respected*? Or because truth and error, if *equally* recommended by *supernatural* operations, or by the *artful* management of a *cunning impostor*, may *equally* prevail; does it follow, that the truth cannot be received upon *rational* evidence; Does this render knowledge and virtue ever the less *worthy* and *honourable*, or ignorance and vice ever the less *infamous* and *hurtful*? Must we therefore confound and destroy the *eternal* and *immutable* differences of things?

'TIS certainly a very great mistake to suppose, that men cannot judge of the truth and divine authority of any particular revelation, unless they have in their minds, *antedecently to its being proposed to their consideration*, just and *worthy* notions of God, and of the great principles and duties of natural religion. And yet this sentiment seems to run through our author's whole book. And I expect indeed that it will be asked, how 'tis possible, in the *nature of the thing itself*, that we should *set about determining rationally*, whether a revelation be worthy of God, if we do not know *beforehand* what sort of a being God is; and if instead of conceiving of him as *immutably wise, just, and good*, we form *false and dishonourable* apprehensions even of his *moral character*? Or how we can be capable of knowing whether or no it agrees with natural religion,

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religion, if, before we begin to examine it, we do not thoroughly understand what natural religion means? And, on the other hand, it may be said, that if we have *already* formed right and becoming conceptions of the perfections of the Deity, and believe what the *religion of nature* teaches concerning our duty to God and our fellow-creatures, and the necessary means in order to obtain the perfection and happiness of our reasonable nature, without which we cannot judge that any particular scheme of reveal'd religion is fit to be received and submitted to, a revelation must be *superfluous* and *needless*.

I ANSWER, that the *faculty of reason* which God hath implanted in mankind, however it may have been *neglected* and *abused* in times past, will, whenever they begin to exercise it aright, enable them to judge of all these things. As by means of this, they were capable of discovering *at first* the being and perfections of God, and that he governs the world with absolute wisdom, equity, and goodness, and what those duties are which they owe to him, and to one another; they must be as *capable*, if they will divest themselves of *prejudice*, and *reason impartially*, of rectifying any mistakes which they may have fallen into about these important points. Their noble powers of thinking and reflecting, if they can enable them to find out truth, must be *sufficient*, if they make a right use of them, to recover them from error. It matters not
whether

whether they have hitherto thought *right* or *wrong*, nor indeed whether they have thought *at all* ; let them but begin to consider *seriously*, and examine *carefully* and *impartially*, and they must be able to find out all those truths, which as reasonable creatures they are capable of knowing, and which necessarily affect their duty and happiness. They will soon come to form just notions *in general* of a religion that is worthy of God ; and consequently be fit to judge, whether any *particular revelation* be worthy of him. And to suppose otherwise, is only to make reason serviceable in forming our *first* sentiments about religion : but if we pervert it, and set out wrong, our errors are *incurable* ; and this most excellent and distinguishing gift of the great Creator, which is the highest mark of our dignity above the mere animal world, is render'd *for ever useless*.

THE persons who are in this way of thinking seem to have but *confus'd* ideas, when they speak of mankind as reasonable creatures, capable of discerning the differences of things ; and this makes them talk *inconsistently* about it. For instance, when reason is to be *magnified* in order to represent a revelation as *needless*, then it can do *mighty* things ; it is *sufficient* to teach men all the principles of natural religion, and the whole of their duty ; nay, tho it has been ever so much corrupted and darkened, and men are become ever so *ignorant*, *enthusiastical*, and *superstitious*,
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it is *still* in their power, by the right use of their *natural faculties*, to discover all abuses, to rectify all their errors, and attain to just and rational notions of religion. But at other times, the quite contrary is maintained with a view to the *same* end, to discredit and run down revelation, *viz.* that the *mere capacity* of reasoning does not qualify men to judge whether a religion be rational, and worthy of God; but they must *actually* have in their minds, *before* they set themselves to consider and determine this point, right conceptions of God, and of the laws of reason by which revelation is to be tried. This shifting of principles, as the *exigency* of the case requires, plainly shews, that the *greatest pretenders* to reason are not entirely to be depended upon.

'Tis almost needless, after such *concessions* of our adversaries, however they may upon other occasions *contradict* themselves, and after what has been argued already from the nature of the thing itself, to add any thing more upon this head; I shall, notwithstanding, pursue the matter a little farther. And in my opinion 'tis so far from being *necessary*, in order to our judging *rationally* of the truth and goodness of a revelation, that we come to the inquiry with just sentiments of God, and of the general nature of true religion; that I very much question whether an *atheist* may not, *by means of it*, be convinced even of the being of a God. For tho' a person of this
charac-

character, having now only the *history* of certain extraordinary and wonderful works performed in confirmation of the Christian religion, may *laugh* at the doctrine of miracles, and look upon the belief of them as *ignorant* and *enthusiastic credulity*; yet I believe, if we consider how much more strongly human nature is wrought upon by *sensible* proofs, than by a *traditional* account of things, we shall make no difficulty of allowing, that 'tis very possible, if he had *this evidence*, he might entertain quite different thoughts of them.

LET us suppose then, that he *actually saw* very great miracles wrought; that he had *opportunities* of examining them carefully; and that he was *fully convinced* upon the most diligent search, that they were above all the *known powers* of nature, and contrary to the *established* course of things, and consequently was sure, not only that they were not *juggling tricks*, but that he was not imposed on by one who knew better than himself the *secret* and *invisible* operations of natural causes: suppose, for example, that he saw a person whom he *knew* to be dead, and who had been buried *several* days, restored to life again, and *conversed* with him for a considerable time together; or heard others, whom he knew to be *wholly illiterate*, speak all of a *sudden, easily, and fluently*, various languages. I will not take upon me to say, that these things are *impossible* to be accounted for, if there be not an infinite mind, the Creator and Governour of the universe,

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verse, or consequently, that they are, *strictly speaking*, a demonstration of the existence of a Deity ; but may they not have this effect upon him, to make him *grave and considerate*? May he not conclude, upon seeing such *extraordinary* appearances, that 'tis *at least worth his while* to think a little, whether there be a God, and whether there be any thing in religion, or no? The *surprize* and *awe*, with which men are naturally struck at such *great and unexpected* events, has a tendency to correct the *levity* of their minds, which leads to an *utter dissipation* of thought, and consequently to *scepticism* and *infidelity* in points of the greatest moment. And when they grow *serious*, and begin to *reason coolly and deliberately*, there is no danger of their continuing *Atheists* long: the existence of a supreme and infinite Being, who made and governs the world, being one of the *first truths* the human understanding discovers, and the evidences of it *plain, and level* to all capacities. And a little *impartial reflection* will bring men as easily to form right and honourable conceptions of God, *especially* with respect to his moral perfections ; and consequently teach them what scheme of religion is most *worthy* of, and *acceptable* to him.

AND indeed the truth of all this is *necessarily* supposed by every attempt that is made by wise and rational men, who do not pretend to a *particular commission* from heaven, to reform the
errors

errors and vices of the world. The author of *Christianity* &c. for instance, lamenting the *ignorance* and *superstition* in which a great part of mankind are involved, their unworthy notions of God, which tend to *taint* and *deprave* their minds, and gross *corruptions* of natural religion and morality, in the regular practice of which, both the happiness of private persons, and of civil societies, is so nearly concerned, has wrote a large book, to recover them from their *enthusiasm* and *delusion* to a *rational piety and virtue*. And must they not, in order to receive any *benefit* from so kind and generous a design, be capable of judging of every part of it? Must they not be able to discern, whether the religion he recommends is worthy of God? But *how* shall they come to know this? If while they conceive of the Divine Being as *capricious* and *humoursome*, *arbitrary* and *tyrannical*, *unjust* and *cruel*, and of religion as a thing that consists in *trifling ceremonies*, and *unintelligible mysteries*, and not in the right government of the passions, and the *plain* and *useful* duties of a good life, they make these *false opinions* the standard and rule of their judgement; it is impossible they should rectify their mistakes. And is there no way in which they can be brought to think more justly? Without doubt there is, and *must* be: otherwise, the endeavours of this author and of all others, to instruct the ignorant and superstitious, are *wild* and *fantastical*. And what else can it be, but the *right use* of those powers which God hath given them

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them, to *distinguish* between truth and falsehood; and especially to discover *moral truths*, and the principles of *natural religion*, which are of the utmost consequence to their happiness? As therefore I apprehend, that the author of *Christianity* &c. would have *just* reason to complain, if any should say, "that it was no compliment" to his book to suppose, that the principles contained in it, however *true* and rational, prevailed amongst those who had grossly corrupted the great truths and duties of natural religion, and consequently in whom "the light of nature was in a manner extinct," *i. e.* amongst those, with a view to whose advantage *chiefly* it was wrote; I cannot but think, that there is *equal* ground of complaint, whether of *inadvertency*, or *disingenuity*, when the *same thing* is said, upon the *very same account*, concerning the Christian revelation.

THE *ingenious* author will forgive me if I add farther, that an external revelation seems much *better calculated* to reform the world in such degenerate circumstances, than the most *judicious* and *accurate* labours of any *private man* whatsoever; for the most *excellent human composures* may be neglected, or read with carelessness and partiality, for want of some *previous recommendation*, that is sufficient to bear down mens prejudices in favour of a contrary scheme. But miracles bespeak their attention *so strongly* to the doctrines of *revelation*, that they set themselves to examine
them

them as points of great importance, which they are, in a *particular manner*, called upon to consider. And thus they may *easily* learn those truths by means of a revelation, which otherwise, through indolence preventing *free* and *impartial* consideration; or superstition, a regard to tradition, custom, and the like, *perverting* and *darkening* their minds, they might always have continued *ignorant* of: even the *plainest* and most *useful* truths, which they may be *binder'd* from discovering by the causes above-mention'd, or others of a like nature; but which, when they are inquired into with *ingenuity* and *candour*, soon gain the *assent* of the understanding.

I SHALL conclude this chapter with a more particular consideration of the *use* of miracles, in answer to this question, *how far* they are an evidence of the truth of any religion, and that the person who teaches it is sent by God? And in my opinion, 'tis not rational to suppose, that miracles *alone*, and apart from *all other considerations*, are an *absolute* and *decisive* proof of the truth and divinity of any revelation, but consider'd with ALL their circumstances; either as they attest a *wise* and *holy* doctrine, a doctrine *worthy* of God, calculated to promote the moral perfection and happiness of mankind, and wisely suited to the condition and necessities of those, for whose use it is *particularly* designed: or else, as they are *friendly* and *beneficent* miracles, and bear upon them the strongest characters of

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wisdom and goodness, as well as *power*; and consequently cannot, without the utmost absurdity, and most manifest contradiction to the nature of things, be look'd upon as the operations of *evil spirits*. For,

I. IT cannot, I think, be disputed, that *superior created* beings may be capable of performing *real* miracles; or in other words, that they may enable a man to do such things as are *above* the *ordinary powers* of human nature, and produce effects by an *invisible* operation, which vastly exceed the natural agency of the *immediate* and *visible* instruments. Again,

II. As we know not what *degrees of power* such superior beings may be possessed of, nor consequently the *utmost* they are capable of performing, we can have no certain, nor even probable rule, in most cases at least, whereby to distinguish what operations are *properly Divine*, and what are not so. We cannot from the *effects themselves* conclude that they are wrought by God, because we are not able to shew that they are *above the powers* which he has given to other beings; so that the making miracles the *sole* proof of a divine revelation, of which, *by themselves*, they can be no proof at all, unless we have a probability at least, that they surpass the *skill* and *agency* of all created beings, must render their evidence very *uncertain* and *doubtful*. Especially if we consider farther,

III.

III. T H A T as *invisible* beings, superior in power to mankind, may perform *real* miracles, and such as are of the most *astonishing* and *stupendous* kind; we are not sure that God may not, for wise reasons, *permit* this. As the great Creator has fix'd general rules, the wisest and best that could be, for the government of the natural and moral world, tis not likely that he will let any of his creatures alter those rules at *pleasure*, just as it may suit their *humour*, or *malicious* purposes, and whenever they have a mind to *amuse*, *astonish*, or *deceive* those, who are more ignorant and weak than themselves. But shall we presume to say, that he can never allow any thing of this kind, upon *any occasion* what ever? This we cannot take upon us to assert, without knowing all the *possible* ends that may be served by such *permissions*, which, I think, is much more than we can modestly pretend to.

I N D E E D, we are *certain* of this, from the moral perfections of the Supreme Being, that he will never suffer the *honest* and *impartial* to be *necessarily* deceiv'd, to their detriment and prejudice. But tho this is a *necessary* exception; and may perhaps include in it a great variety of cases; it deserves to be consider'd in general, that the *honest* and *impartial* cannot be thus deceived, if they are not determined by miracles *alone* to give their assent to any doctrine as a Divine revelation, but by the reasonableness

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sonableness and intrinsic excellence of the doctrine itself in *conjunction* with miracles. And moreover, that there are some *supposeable cases* in which, if the reason of mankind be exercised in the *lowest degree* that can be expected from *moral* and *accountable* creatures, it will be a sure and constant preservative from all *dangerous* errors. For instance, if a person pretends to bring a revelation from heaven, that *directly* recommends and encourages *intemperance*, *injustice*, and *cruelty*, and such like most notorious and hurtful immoralities; I cannot see how any *common man*, who makes the *least use* of that understanding which God hath given him, can be prevail'd upon to embrace a scheme so destructive of the *plainest* obligations of virtue, and of the peace and happiness of the world, by *ten thousand miracles*. He has in his power *easily* to detect the falshood of all such doctrines, how pompously soever they are supported. For his reason must inform him, unless he is so stupid as to destroy his *accountableness*, or so indolent and careless as is inconsistent with *sincerity*, that no miracles can prove that to be true, which calls darkness light, and *entirely* confounds the necessary and immutable difference of moral good and evil; and he must *immediately* be convinced, if he will allow himself any time for cool reflection, that such miraculous effects ought not to be ascribed to the power of God, whose nature is the most *perfect* and *invariable* reason, and who cannot contradict himself,

self, nor give the least encouragement to vice and impurity. So that if in such *plain cases*, reasonable creatures, who have an *easy* and *infallible* rule to go by, and of whom, if any thing can be expected, it may *justly* be required that they should discover the fraud, will notwithstanding suffer themselves to be deceiv'd, they alone must answer for the *consequences* : and it can no more be inconsistent with the absolute perfection of the great Governour of the world to *permit* this, than 'tis for him to permit *any other* instance of moral evil.

FROM what has been said it appears, that miracles *alone* do not prove the truth of any religion ; because we cannot pretend to say of any miraculous effects, *at least* not of most of the miracles which are recorded in the old and new testament, that they are performable by God *only* ; or that the Divine Being may not, upon *some occasions*, permit superior invisible beings to work very *great* and *astonishing* miracles ; provided he has put it in the power of every *honest* and *impartial* inquirer to avoid being *seduced* by them into any errors, that are *dangerous* to his virtue and happiness.

IN truth, miracles, *abstractly* consider'd, are only a demonstration of a *superior power* : but whether they are performed by a *wise*, *just*, and *benevolent* agent, whether they are the immediate effects of his power who is

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the *best*, as well as the greatest, of beings; or, which comes to the same, wrought by beings *commission'd* by him; can only be known by the beneficial effects of them, and by the *nature, tendency, and use* of the doctrines, which they are designed to confirm. Let us illustrate this matter a little farther by an instance, by which we shall see, that what has been urged as the *reason* of the thing will, upon a proper trial, be the *conduct* of every thinking and rational man. Would any person, if a pretended revelation was brought him in a book that he was not admitted *to look into*, or know any thing of the *contents* of, venture upon it in the *dark*, and promise *absolutely* to embrace it, and regulate his conduct by it, even though the pretender was enabled to perform *real* miracles? Such a behaviour would show the *forwardness* of his faith, or rather an *easy credulity*; but sure I am, it could be no proof that his faith was *wise* and *rational*. For if the doctrines which this book contains should prove to be unworthy of God, and repugnant to reason and virtue (which is a very *supposable* circumstance, the scripture itself allowing, that *false prophets* may work miracles for the support of an *imposture*) a man must be ashamed of having made so *hasty* a conclusion, or abandon all pretensions to understanding and sincerity. If when he comes to examine it, he finds in it such positions as these, *that God is not to be revered, served, and worshipped by his creatures; that men are at liberty to indulge themselves in all the irregularities*

ties of their sensual appetites; that they may hate, persecute, and destroy one another for religious differences; if, I say, it contains such principles as these, or any one of them, ought he not to reject it with abhorrence, as having much stronger, and more certain, evidence, that such doctrines are false and absurd, than he can have that any miracles whatever, consider'd in themselves, are Divine? And must not then that faith be enthusiastical, and rise vastly higher than the evidence which is the ground and foundation of it, that receives doctrines absolutely, and without deliberating at all about them, upon the testimony of miracles alone? Is it not directly contrary to the nature of true religion, which encourages the utmost freedom of inquiry into all its principles? Or can any thing give more solid suspicion of fraud and knavish design, than the restraining this liberty, which is the most valuable privilege of our intelligent nature, and, indeed, without which, our reason is quite insignificant and useless?

BUT though miracles cannot alter the nature of things, prove falsehood to be truth, virtue to be vice, or vice virtue; yet when the doctrines they attest are all agreeable to reason, and upon the whole honourable to almighty God, and useful and beneficial to mankind; when they give us the justest notions of his infinite perfections, and of the wisdom and goodness of his moral providence, and are suited to the circumstances and necessities of

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those to whom the revelation is made ; they must be allowed to have the greatest weight, and to be sufficient and substantial proofs that a religion, which in its whole frame and design appears to be worthy of God, is *really* derived from him. For 'tis certainly agreeable to our most perfect apprehensions of the Deity to suppose, that such a doctrine as this is his *peculiar care* ; that he should give it the strongest credentials, and impress the stamp of *his authority* upon it ; a doctrine that represents his own nature, and essential attributes, in the most *amiable* and *glorious* light, and is of the *highest advantage* to his creatures : and its being so worthy, that God should interpose in an *extraordinary* way to recommend and enforce it, is a very just presumption, that the miracles which bear testimony to it are the effects of *his wisdom* and *power* ; or at least, if they are the operations of other beings, that they are done *by authority* from him.

THIS argument will appear to be of very great force, if we consider farther, that in any other view of the case it is not to be accounted for. For 'tis utterly improbable, that *evil spirits*, if they might be permitted to perform such wonderful works, would exert themselves in the defense of *true piety* and *virtue* ; and counteract all those measures, by which *alone* the kingdom of *darkness* and *iniquity* is, or can be, supported. The reasoning of Christ upon this head is unanswerable : *Every*
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kingdom, divided against itself, is brought to desolation; and every city or house, divided against itself, shall not stand. And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand*? Besides, to suppose that they employ their superior skill and power to gain credit to a doctrine, which has a direct tendency to promote the *moral rectitude* and *supreme happiness* of human nature, is making them act the part of *benevolent, friendly, and virtuous* beings; nay, it is indeed attributing to them one of the *highest acts* of goodness we can conceive of, and, consequently, quite destroys their character as *wicked and malicious* spirits. And if it be asked, (which is the only refuge left) whether *good spirits* may not think it a *commendable* thing, to attempt the introducing a religion into the world, that is in general so *useful and beneficial* to mankind, by such miracles, as will procure it the *appearance and credit* of a Divine revelation? I answer, that 'tis hardly conceivable that they would attest a *falsehood*; or that having so high a reverence of the Divine Being, they would, upon *any occasion*, make use of his authority without his express command: because this is an error in *morality* discoverable, I think, even by *human reason*, and consequently what we ought not to suppose such *exalted* beings to be capable of. Besides, we cannot *easily* persuade ourselves, that God would *permit*

* Mat. xii. 25, 26.

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this. For if such great miracles as those recorded in the new testament, for instance, may, by Divine permission, be wrought by *created beings*, to confirm the truth of a doctrine that is upon the whole worthy of God, or, in other words, which, for any thing that appears from reason to the contrary, *may be of divine original*; (as we cannot conceive of any miracles, which, if these are all *possible*, may rationally be judged *impossible* to a created agency) it will not be in the power of God himself to make a revelation, and by *certain credentials*, i. e. such credentials as may be *distinguished* from the credentials that other beings may give, demonstrate the truth of it to the world. But this is a supposition so *absurd*, that it cannot be admitted ever to happen in the course of his moral government; because if we should grant that an external revelation has in all ages of the world *hitherto* been *needless*, 'tis possible however, that *some time hereafter* the circumstances of mankind may be such, that it may be of the highest advantage to them, and, consequently, that the wisdom and goodness of God may incline him to communicate it.

I EXPECT it will be objected, that if the foregoing account be true, miracles are of *no use*. For it may be said, they are allowed to be proofs of a Divine revelation *no farther*, than as the doctrine they bear testimony to is worthy of God; and if the doctrine be rational and good, they are altogether *superfluous*,

fluens, because it will recommend itself without them, by its own *intrinsic excellency*, to the unprejudiced reason and judgment of mankind. To this I shall endeavour to give a full and distinct answer. And,

I. I OBSERVE, that miracles are very proper to engage the *attention* of men even to *moral doctrines*. 'Tis indeed true, that these, being all principles and dictates of reason, may prevail by the force of *their own evidence*, without any *external* recommendation; but 'tis as true, that if men will not consider and examine impartially, they will never (so *plain, important, and useful* as they are) make their way in the world. Now this serious consideration, and deliberate unbiaſſed inquiry even about the principles of *natural religion*, may in *some circumstances* be very unlikely to happen, in opposition to the strong prejudices of *education, to custom, general opinion, interest*, and other motives, which have the most powerful influence upon mankind, without something to *awaken and alarm* the mind. Especially if we add, what universal experience testifies, that prejudices of a *religious* kind, being of all others the most *sacred and venerable*, take the fastest hold of us, and are with the utmost difficulty eradicated. If a man, without any thing *uncommon and striking* to introduce his attempt of reforming the world, had applied himself either to the *Jews* or *Gentiles*, at the time of our Saviour's appearance; to restore natural religion amongst
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the former to its original purity, when it was very much corrupted and depraved; or to rescue the latter from their superstition and idolatry; he would probably have been looked upon as an *impertinent, pragmatical, busy* fellow at least, if not punished as a *profane irreligious* person, and a *disturber* of the public peace. But miracles would *at least* gain him an *audience*, and not only convince *wise* men that his pretensions had somewhat *extraordinary* in them, and were worthy to be examin'd, but perhaps rouse the *indolent* and *vicious*. And if they served only to *balance* mens prejudices, and excite them to an *honest impartial* inquiry, they must certainly be of excellent use; because the mind being thus *free* and *disengaged*, and put upon *considering*, a doctrine that was in itself rational and good could scarce fail of an *honourable* reception; and of being heartily embraced and submitted to. But farther,

2. ALL the parts of a pretended revelation may be worthy of God, and yet the reasonableness and truth of them may not be *alike* evident in *themselves*. For besides moral precepts, and *plain unquestionable* natural principles, it may contain others, that upon the foot of *mere* reason are *uncertain* and *doubtful*, but yet, if firmly establish'd, would be very strong motives to virtue; of which kind, I take the doctrine of the *eternity* of future rewards to be. And besides, there may be in it some doctrines that *reason alone* could discover nothing of; and certain *positive institutions* too,

as will be hereafter shewn, useful indeed, either in *particular circumstances*, or in *general*, as being *subservient* to the great purposes of morality; but the obligation of which does not arise from the nature of the things *themselves*, but must be resolved into the *will* of the supreme governour and lawgiver. And such doctrines and precepts as these, against which no objection of any weight can be raised, to shew that they are *unworthy* of God to *reveal* or *enjoin*; especially if they belong to a revelation, that, in the *whole scheme* and *design* of it, is most excellent, and completely adapted to promote true goodness; miracles must prove to be *actually* of Divine original. So that they answer these two *great uses*, among others perhaps that might be mentioned, *viz.* to engage the *attention* to moral doctrines, and the principles of natural religion, which, when considered, will *soon* approve themselves to the *rational judgment* of mens minds; and to give a sanction to others, which though *agreeable* to, are not *demonstrable* by, natural reason. They are a good evidence, that what reason informs us *may* be true is *really* true; that a revelation, which, for any thing that appears to the contrary, is worthy of God, proceeds *directly* from him; and make that, which to reason is *obscure* and *doubtful*, *clear* and *certain*.

THIS is all that I think it necessary to offer, concerning the *use* and *evidence* of miracles in *general*: a particular defense of the *credibility* of the miracles related in the *gospel-history* will be attempted in the third chapter.

C H A P. II.

Vindicating the conduct of providence in not making the Christian revelation universally known ; and proving that this is consistent with the perfections of God, and consequently with the notion of its being a Divine revelation.

IT will be asked, if a revelation was of such *great use* to mankind, as it is represented to be in the preceding chapter ; why was it not given *sooner* ? why not communicated to ALL ? and why is it not *renewed*, as often as gross ignorance and a corruption of natural religion prevail ? The author of *Christianity* &c. puts the question differently thus ; “ Is it not incumbent on those, who
 “ make any external revelation so necessary
 “ to the happiness of all mankind, to shew
 “ how it is consistent with the notion of God’s
 “ being universally benevolent, not to have
 “ reveal’d it to all his children, when all had
 “ equal need of it * ? ” After which he adds several other questions that might very well have been spared, because it will be allowed him, that it “ was as easy for God to have
 “ communicated a *revelation* to all nations,

* P. 196.

“ as to any one nation, or person ; or in all
“ languages, as in any one ; nay, *that he*
“ *could* have made all men, for the sake
“ of this noble end, speak in one and the
“ same language, and that God *cannot* have
“ any need at all of language, to let man-
“ kind know his will *.” These things, I
say, needed not to have been mentioned, be-
cause they are quite *foreign* to the present ar-
gument : the matter in debate being only
this, whether it be consistent with the *wisdom*
and *justice* of God as the moral governour of
mankind, and with his *universal benevolence* to
his creatures and subjects, to bestow upon
some the great advantage of a *particular reve-*
lation, and deny it to *others* ? I shall endea-
vour to give a full solution of this difficulty,
in which the adversaries of revelation seem to
triumph as *unanswerable*. In order to which
I observe,

THAT was a revelation *absolutely neces-*
sary, to enable mankind to know and prac-
tise what it is their *duty* to know and prac-
tise ; was it, I say, *in the nature of the thing*
itself absolutely necessary, to enable men, *as*
men, to know and practise their duty ; we
might fairly conclude from the *justice*, as
well as the wisdom and goodness, of God,
that he would afford it to ALL. But this is
not the case ; the infinitely wise governour
of the world requiring nothing of his crea-

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tures, but what he has given them a *capacity* to perform ; the natural consequence of which is, that every man does his duty, and answers the end of that particular station in which he is placed, who acts up to the *light* and *advantages* he enjoys, *whatever* they are. And upon any other principle besides this of *the absolute necessity of a revelation as above explained*, 'tis, I conceive, impossible for us to prove, that God is obliged to give a revelation *at all*, let mankind be *ever* so ignorant, and fallen into *ever* so corrupt and degenerate a state. The utmost we can say is, that it would be agreeable to our notions of his most perfect goodness, and therefore we might perhaps be *tempted to hope* for it ; but as there are infinite things of this kind, which we are apt to imagine, would be of great advantage to *particular parts* of the creation, and yet are not granted to them, it must be *presumption* and *conjecture* only, and could not amount to a *probability*.

THE great God establish'd *at first* such a course and order of things with respect to mankind, as was most worthy his infinite *wisdom* and *goodness*. He made them *rational* and *free* creatures ; the necessary result of which is, that they are capable of *neglecting* and *darkening*, as well as of *exercising* and *improving*, that reason, which he implanted in them to be the rule of their actions. Suppose then, that by *an abuse of their natural liberty*, they had involved themselves in deplorable ignorance of the plainest principles of morality.

morality. Nay, let us suppose, not only that the most absurd superstition and the grossest corruptions of true piety and virtue had been, for many ages, the *establish'd religion* of a great part of the world; but that the *common people*, having none to instruct them better, and being *strongly prepossessed* in favour of the superstition in which they were educated, and taught that it was the *greatest impiety* to doubt of the sacredness and Divine authority of any part of it, and never meeting with any thing to put them upon *thinking*, and *rouze* them out of their indolence and stupidity, were under the power of *almost invincible* prejudices; and so ignorant even of *moral obligations*, that they practised none of them upon the *true principles* of virtue, but only as *conveniencies* in outward life, and from a *kind of instinct* like that in brute creatures, and consequently no more deserving the name of religion than some actions of *mere animals*. Supposing this, I say, to be the case, whether it has ever actually happen'd in *all the degrees* of it or no, though, I believe, most mens observation will furnish them with some examples *very like* it; will it follow, because they are sunk so low as to be but very little above brutes, so that it may justly be question'd, whether they deserve the character of *moral agents*, or not, (which may be owing more to the unhappy circumstances in which *providence* has placed them, than to any *wilful fault* of their own) that God is *obliged by a revelation*

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velation to rectify these disorders? I think far from it. For the *original constitution*, notwithstanding these *accidental* defects, was, upon the whole, wise and good; and the great author of nature is no more oblig'd to interpose in an *extraordinary way*, to *alter* and *amend* in such cases as these, than in any other instance of *natural evil*. We see in fact, that there are in the human species many *down-right ideots*, who, very probably, were it not for some accidental defect in the *bodily organs*, might think and reason as well as other men. And certainly it must be as consistent with the *wisdom* and *goodness* of God to suffer others to live in *such circumstances*, that they may be almost as ignorant of good and evil, at least as far as rational religion and morality is concern'd, as *ideots*, or *brutes*; and he cannot, strictly speaking, be oblig'd to redress the *one case* any more than the *other*. Nor is it necessary to suppose, if we allow this, that the faculty of reason which he hath given them will be *quite lost*; because they may *hereafter* be placed in better circumstances, in which their reason shall have a *larger scope*, without *any of those difficulties* which now encumber and oppress it. And in the mean while, notwithstanding all the disadvantages they labour under, their happiness, *even in this life*, may be much greater than their misery. And,

IF it cannot be proved that God is obliged to give a revelation even to persons who have
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Christian revelation defended. 67

in a manner quite lost all the advantage of their rational faculties, or to take any *extraordinary* measures for their recovery ; much less can we assert this, when a revelation is only wanted to enable them to attain the *highest degrees* of that happiness, of which their nature may in itself be capable ; and consequently, though it cannot be denied, that when the world is over-run with ignorance and superstition, a revelation is extremely desirable, and might be highly useful, this is no argument at all that God *is necessarily oblig'd* to communicate it, though it be a reason why *he may*.

To apply what has been said to the point we are now considering. If God is not obliged to give a revelation *at all*, provided it be not *absolutely necessary* to enable men, *as men*, to know and practise their duty, or what he *indispensably* requires of them, notwithstanding it would be a great advantage to them ; the *mere consideration* of its usefulness, and of their being in deplorable circumstances for want of it, can be no argument that as a *wise, just, and infinitely benevolent* Being, he must make it *universal* : because what does not prove that he is under an obligation to grant it to ANY, can never prove that he is bound to afford it to ALL. The whole of the controversy therefore is brought within a very narrow compass, and turns upon *this single question* ; whether, what God is not obliged to vouchsafe to *any*, he may not com-

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municate to some, *exclusively* of the rest ; or, in other words, whether he may not bestow his *favours* upon whom he pleases, and in cases in which *right*, and *strict justice* are not at all concern'd, make a *difference* between his creatures very much to the advantage of some above others, consistently with *the most perfect* wisdom and goodness ? Let any man try whether he can make more of it ; and whether, if he will not allow that the Divine Being may act thus, he must not suppose, that he is oblig'd to treat ALL exactly in the same manner, and to communicate to ALL *precisely equal degrees* of moral perfection, and *equal capacities* for happiness.

THE late most excellent and learned Dr. Clarke had observed very judiciously, that
 “ as God was not obliged to make all his crea-
 “ tures equal, or to make men angels, or
 “ to endow all men with the same ca-
 “ pacities and faculties ; so he was not
 “ bound to make all men capable of the
 “ *same degree*, or the *same kind* of happiness ;
 “ or to afford all men the very same *means*
 “ and *opportunities* of obtaining it † ?” But this the author of *Christianity &c.* thinks not to be a sufficient solution of the difficulty. And therefore though he owns, that “ infi-
 “ nite variety of creatures, and consequently
 “ inequality, is necessary to shew the great

† *Sermons at Boyle's Lecture*, 7th ed. . p. 317.

“ extent

“ extent of the divine goodness, which plain-
“ ly appears from the beautiful, and well
“ formed system of the world, and the due
“ subordination of things, all contrived for
“ the happiness of the whole ;” he adds “ yet
“ sure, it does not from thence follow, that
“ God will not either here, or hereafter, be-
“ stow on the rational creation all the hap-
“ piness their nature is capable of; since that
“ was the end why God gave it them *.” Let
us see whether there is any thing in this,
which I think is somewhat *obscurely* express’d,
that will destroy the force of the learned Dr’s
reasoning. And,

IF this writer means no more, by *God’s bestowing on the rational creation*, and particularly on mankind, *all the happiness their nature is capable of*, than this, that all who are *sincere* will find favour with God, and be rewarded by him *in proportion* to their improvements, whether they enjoy the advantage of a revelation, or not ; or, as he himself expresses it at the lower end of the same page, in the language of scripture, that *men are accepted according to what they have, and not according to what they have not* : this is true, but I believe it will be judged to be very little to the purpose ; because every part of it may be allowed, and yet men may be possessed in this life, the state of their trial, of *different capacities*, and *advantages* for obtaining happiness, and

* P. 408.

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consequently be rewarded with *proportionably different and unequal* degrees of happiness hereafter. And since the ingenious author himself allows, that God, for the greater display of his goodness, has *very wisely* created distinct orders of intelligent beings, one above another, and consequently that there is a very great *inequality* between the several parts of the moral creation: so that even in his opinion it is not, *in the nature of the thing itself*, inconsistent with his perfect wisdom, and universal unlimited benevolence, to make *at least as great a difference* between his creatures, as can be supposed to be between such of mankind as enjoy the light of revelation, and others, who, for want of it, are overwhelmed with the grossest ignorance and superstition; this latter case must be entirely agreeable to *the wisest exercise* of his moral attributes in the government of the world, if there are not some circumstances, *peculiar* to it, that make it otherwise; *i. e.* unless it be inconsistent with the perfections of God to make such a difference among beings called by *one general name*, and partaking of the *same common nature*, and not to afford all of them *equal advantages* for obtaining the highest degrees of that happiness, of which their rational nature is in itself capable. If this be our author's sense, as perhaps it may, and not that already mentioned, I would ask, how is it proved,? Nay, how is it possible it should be proved, if the *present constitution* of things be upon the whole wise and good (which may fairly be taken for granted in arguing with persons, who acknowledge

knowledge all the principles of natural religion) when 'tis undeniably *false in fact*?

LET any one of common observation, and knowledge of the world, give himself a little time to consider, and he will find, that men have not only *vastly different capacities* for discovering the obligations of true religion and morality in their utmost extent, but that their *opportunities* and *advantages* are very different. Some not only enjoy greater strength of reason, but are much *more likely*, if their faculties were but *equal*, considering the circumstances in which they are placed, to form right notions about these important points, than others. And if the rectitude of human nature consists in the practice of virtue, do not such enjoy *better means* and *more favourable opportunities* for pursuing their supreme rational perfection and happiness, than those, whose knowledge, and consequently their practice, of natural religion and morality is corrupted and deprav'd by *false* and *dis honourable* notions of God, and by a *low* and *extravagant* superstition? And has it not been shewn, that as they are enabled by their superior advantages to make *greater improvements*, *more completely* to answer the end of their rational being, and to do *more real good* in the world; and as their larger knowledge, and being furnish'd with clearer and stronger motives, require from them a more *difficult* and *extensive* service; 'tis most suitable to the divine wisdom and justice to suppose, that

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they will be rewarded with *higher degrees* of happiness: and, that if we suppose the contrary, considering that if they do not improve more, and act better, than others, they will be more *severely punish'd*, their just sentiments of natural religion, in all the parts of it, must be a *misfortune* rather than an advantage, and happy are the *blind* and *ignorant*? 'Tis plain from hence, that God did not design all mankind, tho' of the same species of beings, for *equal degrees* of happiness; because they have not the *same capacities*, nor the *same advantages*, nor an *equal probability* of obtaining the *highest*, that their rational nature may be capable of. And why may not the great Governour of the world make the *same*, or a *greater*, difference (for I apprehend 'tis impossible for us to fix the *precise bounds* beyond which he cannot proceed) why may he not, I say, make the same difference between mankind by a *particular revelation*, granting it to some, and denying it to others, as is most visibly and constantly made in the *common course* of his providence?

THE difficulty appears to me to be *exactly equal* upon the foot of natural religion, as upon the supposition of a revelation. If it be said, that all who are equally sincere, and whose natural capacities are equal, will be *equally happy* upon the whole, whatever the difference of their particular improvements and services may be, this, I think, has been proved to be *false* upon both suppositions;

ons ; and that they will be rewarded *in proportion* to their improvements, and so far in *an equality*, may be *as true*, if there be a revelation, as if men were left entirely to the religion of nature. If it be urged farther, that a revelation vouchsafed only to some parts of the world implies, that the great creator has not afforded to all his rational creatures, of the *same* rank, *equal* advantages for obtaining that happiness their reasonable nature is capable of, which is inconsistent with his *impartial justice*, and *universal goodness* : I answer, why then has he not done it in the *establish'd disposition* and *order* of things? There is evidently a great *inequality* amongst mankind in this respect, which, upon the scheme of our adversaries, cannot be occasion'd by a *revelation*, but arises from the difference of their *natural capacities*, and *the variety* of their circumstances. And as this difference of natural capacities is the *express will* of the great Creator, and *entirely owing* to him; and this variety of circumstances, and the influence it has upon opinions and practices, results from the *original constitution* of things, that was fixed by his wisdom and power, and consequently was *foreseen* and *design'd* by him; he is as much accountable for the difference that is made between men in a *natural way*, as for any that is made by an *extraordinary interposition*; and what will defend the one must *fully* and *effectually* vindicate the other. For we must limit the infinite wisdom of God much more than is becoming beings of such *weak* and *narrow* understandings, if we

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we presume to say, that it cannot be proper for him to make that difference between his creatures in *an extraordinary way*, which he does make in the *general standing course* of nature; and all objections against such a method of proceeding, which are only designed to ruin the credit of a revelation that is not *universal*, *i. e.* in short, to prove that God never gave a revelation to mankind, and are mightily applauded, upon the account of their supposed strength to gain this *favourite point*; in truth, strike at the perfections and providence of God, and undermine the foundation of *natural religion* itself. And 'tis to be hoped, that the persons who make use of them will consider this, and urge them with more *caution* and *modesty* at least, if they have really such a *high veneration* of the religion of nature, as they would have the world believe.

I EXPECT it will still be ask'd, whether, in what view soever we consider a revelation, be it either as *absolutely necessary*, or only as very *useful* to mankind, the *same reasons* which could induce the divine Being to give it to ANY, will not hold as strong for vouchsafing it to ALL? I answer no: And, I think, I have evidently proved the contrary, by shewing that he may, consistently with his perfections, afford a revelation to *some* nations, and not to *others*; and that this is conformable to the operations of his providence in *other cases*. It may as well be ask'd, whether, if there was any reason for his forming

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ing beings of *superior intelligence* and *perfection* in the moral world, that reason must not be equally good for his making ALL his rational creatures of the *highest order*? The questions are exactly parallel, and the very same answer will serve for both. In each case it may be urged with *equal* strength, that the thing contended for is the communication of a greater good, and consequently most worthy his *perfect goodness*; that ALL are his creatures, and upon that account 'tis most worthy his *universal* and *impartial goodness*. Or, if it should be said in behalf of the *one*, that "variety of creatures, and consequently
" inequality, is necessary to shew the great
" extent of the divine goodness, which plainly
" appears from the beautiful and well-form'd
" system of the world, and the due subordi-
" nation of things, all contrived for the hap-
" piness of the whole;" I see no reason why we may not say the same in vindication of the *other*: since the wisdom, and greater goodness, of God may, for any thing we can prove to the contrary, be as much display'd in a variety, and consequently inequality, among beings of the *same species* (all whose natural capacities do not in fact appear to be the *same*, though they go by *one* name, and are of the *same* compound frame) as in a variety of creatures of *different orders*. And if God is not obliged *absolutely*, and *in general*, to afford all his creatures equal capacities and advantages for happiness, he cannot be bound to it, merely because they belong to *one particular*
species:

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species. For can that *alone* give them a claim to any thing, which they have no ground to expect as the reasonable creatures of God, and from his *essential* wisdom and goodness?

BUT if any should inquire farther, what *the particular reasons* were, which inclined the Divine being to grant a revelation to some parts of the world, exclusively of others? I chuse rather to confess my ignorance of what I do not understand, than to pretend to be able to assign them. Thus much however may be said in general, that 'tis very probable they are of the *same kind* with those, that determin'd him to appoint such a variety, as it is confess'd there is in the rational creation. I may add, that though it be allowed, that the All-perfect Being does not make his *mere will* the rule of his actions, but the *fitness* and *propriety* of things; and consequently that he never acts *arbitrarily*, or without a reason; it does by no means follow, that his creatures must necessarily see *the reasons* of his conduct in *every* instance; or that they have a right to *censure* whatever they cannot *distinctly* account for. Far from it. For the way that we come to know that God is not an *arbitrary* being is not by seeing that there is a reason in all his actions, which is vastly more than the wisest of mortals can pretend to, who are ignorant of the *design* and *uses* of innumerable things, in the constitution of nature, and the course of providence; but we conclude from those surprizing marks of wisdom

dom and goodness which we can *distinctly perceive* in the works of God, and because the more *thoroughly* we understand them, we have the more *clear, strong* and *undeniable* demonstration of it, that the great Author and Governour of the universe is possessed of these perfections in the most *absolute* and *complete* manner; and, consequently, that all things are framed and ordered with the same *wise* and *benevolent* view, though in particulars it does not appear *equally*, and in some *not at all*, to our limited understandings. These therefore ought never to be confounded as *identical* propositions, *viz.* that the Divine being acts *without a reason*; and that we can *see no reason* in a particular constitution, or method of acting; because the latter does not in the least infer the former: but, on the contrary, 'tis rational to suppose, from the *general evidences* of his supreme and most perfect wisdom, that for every part of his conduct there is a *good* and *sufficient reason*, tho we may not be able to discover *precisely* what it is. And whether this may not be as fairly urged to vindicate the conduct of providence in not making the Christian religion *universally known*, as it is by the defenders of natural religion against *Atheists*, to answer many very important difficulties in the *common course* of it, which cannot be *particularly* accounted for; I submit to the judgment of every considerate and ingenuous reader.

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THE learned Dr. *Clarke* had intimated, upon principles, in the main, agreeable to those I have advanced, that a revelation could not, “ be claim’d and demanded as of justice, “ for then it must have been given in all “ ages, and to all nations ;” but “ rather “ wish’d for and desired, as of mercy and “ condescending goodness †.” Upon which our author asks, “ Can a Being be denomi- “ nated merciful, and good, who is so only “ to a few ; but cruel, and unmerciful to the “ rest * ?”. Certainly no: but it has been shewn, that the not bestowing *equal* capacities and advantages upon all, the not affording all mankind the *same* opportunities for obtaining the highest happiness, which their rational nature, if it had all *proper helps*, and helps that *some* enjoy, might be *capable* of, is not *cruel*, and unmerciful ; and moreover, that it is the *true state* of the world, and consequently must be defended upon the foot of *natural religion only*. And I may add, that it is consistent with *impartiality*, so far as that is a *real excellency*, and a proper part of the *Divine character*, as well as with *absolute and universal* goodness. For the *impartiality* of God does not consist in treating all his creatures, even of the same species, *alike* ; it does not cramp him in the *free distribution* of his favours, in dispensing which he may act with what *variety*, and make what *dis-*

† *Sermons at Boyle’s Lecture, 7th edit. p. 315.*

* P. 401.

ference he pleases; but regards chiefly, if not altogether, the execution of justice; and the most that it supposes is, that God is equally desirous that all men should obtain that happiness, which is suitable to their particular stations, capacities, and circumstances; and that in quality of their governour and judge, he has given them sufficient means to know and practise all that he requires from them, and will equally favour and reward the equally sincere, whatever be the difference of their advantages, in proportion to their improvements and services. And what is there in his favouring some nations with the light of revelation, while he leaves others destitute of it, that is in the least inconsistent with this? May not all this, which is the only just and rational sense in which we can conceive of God as a being necessarily impartial, be allow'd; nay, is it not actually allow'd by the best advocates for revelation?

WHEN therefore the ingenious author goes on for several pages, in a popular declamatory way, to represent *these* as their principles, and particularly as the principles of the learned Dr. Clarke, because he had affirmed in the passage above-cited, that, “ as God was not
“ obliged to make all his creatures equal, or
“ to make men angels, or to endow all men
“ with the same capacities and faculties; so
“ he was not bound to make all men capable
“ of the same degree, or the same kind of happiness; or to afford all men the very same
“ means

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“ means and opportunities of obtaining it ;” to represent *these*, I say, because he had asserted this, as his principles, that “ God “ made some people his favourites, without “ any consideration of their merits ; and “ merely because they believe certain opinions taught in that country, where they “ happen to be born ; while others, far the “ greater number, shall, from age to age, “ want this favour ; not upon the account “ of their demerits, but because destin’d to “ live in places, where God, who always acts “ from motives of infinite wisdom and goodness, thought it best to conceal from them “ all such opinions * ;” and that, “ all who “ are equally sincere, are *not* equally acceptable to God † ;” and upon this entirely false account of them, describes his principles as “ inconsistent with the character of God as a “ being of unlimited benevolence, and with “ his being no respecter of persons ‡,” and the like ; such a conduct may justly be complain’d of as *unfair* and *disingenuous*. And I make no doubt, but that though such *little arts* in controversy, as the framing senses for our antagonists which we can easily *harangue* against and expose, senses, which their words even by *torturing* cannot be made to speak, may be a means of imposing upon the *vulgar*, and upon *superficial thinkers* who never examine any thing thoroughly, and consequently, whatever their outward circumstances may be, are in point

* P. 409.

† P. 413.

‡ P. 409, 410, &c.

of *reason* and *sound judgment*, very little, if any thing, above the rank of the vulgar; wise men, and impartial inquirers after truth, will esteem them to be, what they really are, the *weak* supports of a *feeble* and *tottering cause*, and do the writers the justice they *deserve*.

OUR author observes farther upon this head, that “when God acts as governour of “the *universe*, his laws are alike design’d for “all under his government; that is, all mankind: and consequently, what equally “concerns all, must be equally knowable by “all *.” If he means, that God cannot, as the *governour of the universe*, afford some men clearer notions of their duty than others, or reveal his will to some parts of the world, and deny that favour to the rest; I need say nothing to it, having already shewn the contrary. God, as the governour of the world, makes a vast *difference* between his creatures; and even the laws of morality are not *equally knowable to all*, great numbers labouring under such difficulties, that their ignorance, even of important branches of natural religion, seems to be almost *invincible*. From whence ’tis plain, that what might be *equally* useful to ALL is not granted to ALL; or, in other words, all have not in one sense *sufficient means* (such means *as are likely to be effectual*) to discover it. But if he means,

* P. 197.

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that all are capable of knowing the laws of God, so far as the knowledge of them is necessary to render them acceptable to him, this is granted; but what doth it prove? Why only, that the knowledge of any particular revelation is not necessary to those, to whom that revelation is not given. He adds, "And if the universality of a law be the only certain mark of its coming from the government of mankind; how can we be certain, that, which wants this mark, comes from him †?" *i. e.* if we apply it to the present argument, if nothing can be a divine revelation but what is made known *universally*, we cannot be *sure* that any thing which is not made known *universally* is a divine revelation; or thus, if a revelation must be universal, it must be universal: a most certain, and self-evident truth! If this author will be so good, instead of asserting, to prove the premises, the consequence, we allow, will make itself.

VERY much to the same purpose is the following piece of reasoning, equally *particular*, and *remarkable*: "If God was always willing, that ALL men should come to the knowledge of the true religion, and the Christian religion be the only true and absolutely perfect religion; ——— it follows, that the *Christian* religion has existed from the beginning; and that God, both then,

† P. 197.

“ and ever since, has continued to give all
“ mankind sufficient means to know it; and
“ that 'tis their duty to know, believe, profess, and practise it*.” Here the ingenious author asserts, that *if God was always willing, that all men should come to the knowledge of the true religion*, he must always have given them such *sufficient means to know it*, as made it *their duty to know, believe, profess, and practise it*: so that nothing, but what it has been *the duty of ALL mankind*, in all ages, *to know, believe, profess, and practise*, can, in his opinion, be that *true religion*, which *God was willing that all should come to the knowledge of*. I would ask then, has it been the *duty of ALL mankind*, at all times, and in every part of the world, *to know* all the branches of natural religion? If it has, and he means by their *duty*, what is the most *obvious* and only *intelligible* sense of the word, that God justly requires it of them as *necessary* to procure his acceptance, the consequence will be, that all *idolaters*, all the *superstitious*, and all who ever entertain'd *unworthy* and *dishonourable* thoughts of God, are absolutely debarred the *divine favour*; which, if it be the *charity* of his religion of nature, is with me an insuperable *prejudice* against it, and makes me set the higher value upon *Christianity*, as allowing its professors to entertain more *generous* and *pleasing sentiments* concerning the state of their fellow-creatures. And if it has not been

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the *duty* of mankind, in all ages, and in every part of the world, to know all the branches of natural religion, his meaning can be no more than this, that God has given them *sufficient means* to know all he requires they *should know* : but as this is nothing *fix'd* and *determinate*, nothing that is *particular* can be inferr'd from it. This, as far as I can collect from other parts of his book, is really our author's sense ; and I chuse the rather to think it so, because it is the most *candid* interpretation that can be put upon his words.

LET us consider now, what can be made of his reasoning upon this foot. “ If God
 “ was always willing, that ALL men should
 “ come to the knowledge of the true reli-
 “ gion ;” *i. e.* should know all that he requires of them as necessary to secure his favour, which is no *one entire set* of principles, but may be very *various* according to their different capacities, circumstances, and prejudices ; and “ the Christian” (which, supposing it to be nothing else but *natural religion revived*, is a *uniform certain* thing, and a great deal more than God *indispensably* requires all to know) “ be the only true religion ; it follows, that the Christian religion has existed from the beginning ;” or perhaps, that, in all the parts of it, it *hardly ever existed* at all ; “ and that God, both
 “ then, and ever since, has, and *has not*,
 “ continued to give all mankind sufficient
 “ means

“ means to know it ; and that ’tis, *and ’tis*
“ *not*, their duty to know, believe, profess,
“ and practise it.” Upon our author’s principles, as I apprehend them, sincerity is the only thing that is absolutely insisted on to render men acceptable to God, which does not *necessarily* imply in it the knowledge or practise of all the duties of *natural religion* itself ; nor consequently, *that God has given all mankind such sufficient means* to discover this *true religion*, as makes it their indispensable duty to know, believe, profess, and practise it ; but quite the contrary.

ALLOWING however, that God was always willing, that ALL men should come to the knowledge of the true religion, i. e. of some certain and determinate system of principles and duties, the consequence he would draw from it is not in the least just, or natural, nor hardly intelligible. For natural religion was that *true religion*, which God from the beginning designed for all mankind, and which, we will grant for the present, it was their duty (having sufficient means in order to that end, i. e. such means which, if they were sincere, must be effectual) to know, believe, profess, and practise ; and if it had been known and practised as it ought, it would have been sufficient for their happiness, and a revelation would perhaps have been *needless*. But does it follow from hence, that when this excellent religion was *corrupted*, a revelation might not be of great use ; or, that if

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God gave a revelation, it must be just the *religion of nature restor'd*; and that not one *positive* precept could be added to it, though with a view to be subservient to, and aid and strengthen *moral obligations*? At this rate of inferring, we need not mind what our *premises* are, but may *jump at once* to a conclusion. I shall say no more to this point now, because I shall have occasion to consider it more largely, when I come to discourse of *positive* duties.

CHAP.

C H A P. III.

Shewing, that we have a sufficient probability, even at this distance, of the authenticness, credibility, and purity of the books of the New Testament ; and that the common people are able to judge of the truth, and uncorruptedness of a traditional religion ; with an answer to the arguments drawn from the change of languages, the different use of words, the style and phrase of scripture, &c. to prove it to be an obscure, perplex'd, and uncertain rule.

HAVING proved thus largely, that notwithstanding the *sufficiency* of reason, if *rightly exercised*, to discover all the necessary principles and duties of natural religion, an external revelation may be highly *useful*, when the light of nature is darkned, and ignorance idolatry and superstition have overspread the world, which was undoubtedly the case, when our blessed Saviour appeared to publish his religion ; and having fully considered all our author's reasonings upon this head, vindicated the conduct of providence

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in not making the Christian revelation *universal*; and shewn what is the *proper evidence* of the truth and divinity of any particular revelation, and how those, to whom it was given, might be satisfied that it really came from God: I proceed to consider objections of another kind, relating to the proof of it in *after-times*, the method of its *conveyance*, and its authority and usefulness as a *standing rule*. And,

IN general, it must be own'd, that the evidence, whatever it be, cannot be so strong at a *considerable distance* of time, as it was to those to whom the revelation was *first made known*, and who saw with *their own eyes* the miracles that were perform'd in confirmation of it; the evidence of *sense* being undoubtedly stronger, in the nature of the thing itself, than the most *unexceptionable tradition*. However, if it can be shewn, that we have now all the *probability* that the thing is capable of, and such a *probability*, as always determines the assent of rational men in other cases, and upon which it would be thought very unreasonable not to act in the *common concerns* of life; every one that reflects must think it his interest to embrace the Christian doctrine, and not only acts weakly, but runs a great hazard, if he refuses to be determin'd by probability, merely because 'tis *possible* the thing may be otherwise, and will not submit to *sufficient evidence*, because he has not greater than in *cases of this nature* can be justly expected. A
man

man may as well resolve to believe nothing upon testimony, nor even the reports of sense, because 'tis possible these may deceive him, and insist upon *strict demonstration* for every thing.

BUT the author of *Christianity* &c. has thrown together several things, to weaken the probability of the truth of revelation to us *at this distance*, and to persuade the world that no great stress can be laid upon it; and besides, that it is, upon many accounts, a very *obscure* and *uncertain* rule. These I now proceed to examine distinctly, though indeed almost all this part might be trusted to stand without any remarks, if none but persons of thought and judgment were to read it; it being made up (as will appear in the sequel) of general assertions, possibilities, precarious suppositions, some of which the author himself seems to suspect; and which as they cannot conclude against any thing, more than they may conclude against every thing that is a matter of probability only, 'tis hard that an ingenuous writer should give us the trouble to confute.

“ If (says he) it be but probable, that God
“ made any external revelation at all, it can
“ be but probable, though perhaps not in
“ in the same degree of probability, that he
“ made this or that revelation*.” This is

* P. 184.

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very darkly express'd, because a probability that God has *actually* made a revelation can be nothing else but the probability of some *particular revelation*; as this therefore is so very *inaccurate* and *confused*, I cannot apprehend it to be the ingenious author's sense. And it is with me much more than a perhaps, that if it was not antecedently probable, which I suppose he means, that God would make an *external revelation* (as I have already shewn it was not, and *could not* be, this being a matter of pure favour in which the Divine Being is *absolutely free*) there might be a great probability, that he had *actually made* a revelation. For if a doctrine appear'd in all the parts of it to be worthy of God, and was establish'd by unquestionable miracles, no man could doubt its being divine, whether he had any *probable expectation* of such an extraordinary interposition of providence, or not; unless it can be shewn, that God is oblig'd to do every thing for his creatures, that will be of great use to them, in an *extraordinary* way, if, by accident, they miss of it in the *natural* and *ordinary*; or that he can bestow no favour upon them out of the common course of things, but what they have a *particular reason* to expect. Whereas in truth, its being out of the common and general course is an argument, that however they might *wish*, and *hope*, and *presume*, they could have no *probability* that it would happen, if the original constitution and frame of things, notwithstanding the *accidental irregularities* to which

which it is subject, was, upon the whole, *wise and good*; which all must allow, who proceed upon the principles of natural religion, and, consequently, it may be taken for granted in the present argument.

BUT the reason why the probability is so low, that God hath made this, or that, *i. e.* in other words, any particular revelation, is, that “this evidence all pretend to; since, “perhaps, there never was a time or place, “where some external revelation was not “believ’d, and its votaries equally confident, “that theirs was a true revelation; which “shews how easily mankind may in this point “be impos’d on *.” Let there have been ever *so many* pretences to a revelation, and let the several pretenders be ever so *positive* and *confident*, may there not be a rule by which it can be judged, whether any *particular revelation* be from God or no? If it be worthy of God, perfective of the rectitude and happiness of human nature, and confirm’d by numerous and undeniable miracles; will not this prove it to be of *divine authority*? And are not men, if they will examine, capable of seeing this proof? The ingenious author seems to argue, as if the truth of a revelation was to be decided by its being *received* and *acknowledged* as such, and the *confident pretensions* of those that embrace it; and upon this foot indeed, *all* must be received, or *none*; and any particular one cannot be more *probable* than

the rest. But let him not *make* arguments for others, and then confute them. If there may be, in *the nature of things* (which is all that is contended for) a probability of the truth of any particular revelation, it may appear as strongly to all who consider it, let there be ever so many *false claims*, as if that particular revelation stood *single* in its pretensions.

He adds, “ And as there can be no demonstration of the revelation itself, so neither can there be any of its conveyance to posterity *.” If he means *strict demonstration*, 'tis granted ; if only *probability*, which one would judge he intends by the course of his reasoning, it has been already proved, that there may be probable evidence of the *truth* of a revelation ; and I shall now inquire, whether there may not be the same of its *conveyance* ? And as what this author has advanc'd upon this head is not in any *regular order*, but scatter'd up and down in several parts of his book, I shall endeavour, for the greater *clearness*, to reduce it to some method ; beginning with what he asserts concerning probability *in general*, that “ the very nature of it is such, that were it only left to time, even that would wear it quite out ; at least if it be true, what Mathematicians pretend to demonstrate, viz. that the probability of facts, depending on human testimony, must gradually lessen, in proportion to the distance of time when

“ they were done *.” I need not, I think, concern myself with this mathematical calculation, and the rather, because the ingenious author himself does not seem to be in earnest when he mentions it, and introduces it as if he had but little dependence upon it; *At least if it be true, &c.* I would only ask therefore, whether 1700 years will, in his opinion, *quite wear out* this probability; or *lessen* it to such a degree, as that facts related in histories, at that distance, are not to be *depended on*? And whether he will readily admit, that this rule shall be applied *indifferently* to ALL antient histories? Whether, for instance, he has the least doubt about the authenticnes of *Cæsar’s Commentaries*, which were wrote before any of the books of the new testament? Nay, whether he doubts of the truth of some histories of *greater antiquity*? The putting these questions would, I am persuaded, be thought *impertinent* and *ridiculous*, were we not forc’d to it by some modern writers, who make it their business to collect together all they can meet with, in order to furnish out a *plausible story* against revelation.

THE dispute is not, whether the probability was not greater to those who were either *contemporaries*, or lived within a few years after such antient histories were wrote; but only, whether allowing that it was, we may not

* P. 185.

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have such a degree of probability as is *sufficient* to determine our assent, a probability that may be *depended on*, that removes *all doubt*, and upon which, even *a wise man* would venture considerably? If so, this is sufficient to justify our belief of *Christianity*, and acting accordingly. And for the truth of this, I appeal even to the advocates for natural religion in opposition to revelation, who, I make no doubt, will readily allow it, with respect to any other books besides those of the *New Testament*; and every man will find, if he consults what passes in his own mind, that he is not dispos'd to doubt of the *authenticness* of any books of equal antiquity with these, if they are supported by an *universal and uncontested* tradition.

INDEED there is a great difference between *oral* tradition, and *written*. Things which depend entirely on the former may be more *easily* corrupted, or lost; facts may lose some of their most *material circumstances*, or be greatly *exaggerated*; and 'tis hardly possible, that doctrines should be *exactly* remember'd, and transmitted down as they were taught *at first*; or men may think it of no importance to stick to the *original* words, if they preserve their general sense, which being to every man just as he apprehends it, *false comments* may easily pass for the doctrines themselves; or else they may alter *insensibly*. But when they are committed to writing, if we can prove, that the books which contain
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an account of them are *authentic*, and the historians persons of sufficient *capacity* for the work they undertook, and of *integrity*; and that such writings are not corrupted so as to *obscure* and *pervert* the general sense and design of the authors, or necessarily to lead us into mistakes in important points; if we can prove this, I say, we may, at this distance, have the *immediate* and *direct* testimony, not only of persons who were able to inform themselves fully of the facts which they relate, but even of *eye-witnesses*; and consequently a *sufficient probability* of the truth of these facts. And unless we allow this, we destroy the credit and use of all the valuable remains of *antient history*. But 'tis scarce possible to be serious upon this argument with men, who cannot themselves *heartily believe* there is any thing in it. Had the same things been said to invalidate the authority of *Tacitus* or *Livy*, these very persons would have made it the subject of their *mirth* and *ridicule*. And they may depend upon it, (and I am persuaded are too *wise* to make the experiment) that if they will but be *honest*, and *true* to their principle, and apply it in the same manner to *common books* of establish'd reputation, which it is not mens *interest* to dispute, as they do to the *gospel-history*, they themselves will meet with the same *just* treatment. In the mean time it is to be hoped, that the impartial world, from a regard to *truth* and *justice* in general, will not fail to shew their dislike of such *absurd reasonings*
when

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when made use of against revelation, which in any other case they would freely and *unanimously* condemn.

AND now, the mere antiquity of the books of the New Testament being no argument against the probability of the facts related in them, even to us at *this distance* of time; nothing remains but to shew, that they are *authentic* and *genuine*, and contain a *credible history*. And I presume, that if the same evidence be produc'd, as passes for the authenticity and credibility of other books of as *old a date*, it will be allow'd to be sufficient; since 'tis a probability that all readily acquiesce in, where *religion* and *party-interest* are out of the question, and that determines the conduct of the wisest, when a higher cannot be had, in the most important scenes of life.

THE author of *Christianity* &c. seems to have a strong suspicion of forgery, and frequently insinuates it, because we have these books “ through the hands of men, who not “ only in the dark ages of the church, but “ even in the beginning, if we may judge by “ the number of corrupted passages, and “ even forg'd books, were capable of any pious “ fraud *.” Whether the *number of corrupted passages* be so great as is here intimated, will be consider'd hereafter; at present, 'tis only to

my purpose to observe, that there is no *direct evidence* pretended to, that the books of the New Testament were forg'd, but only because something of this kind was done, *a possibility* that it may be so. But what will this prove? Is it so much as the shew of a *just conclusion*, that because some endeavour'd to impose feign'd books upon the world under the name of *Matthew*, or *Paul*, there are none extant which were *really* wrote by them, or that particular books, which were never questioned in any age, are *forg'd*? Wise men are not much influenc'd by *mere possibilities*, because the consequence would be, that they must doubt of almost every thing. And all the effect it can have upon such, in the present case, is, to put them upon using a *prudent caution* that they be not impos'd on; and then, they may have as rational satisfaction that particular books are *authentic* and *genuine*, as they could, if no such forgeries had ever been committed.

FOR either there can be no proof that *any books* are *genuine* because *some* have been *forg'd*, which will not be said; or else, there must be a *special reason* why if some books are forg'd under the name of a *particular author*, no books under *that name* can be genuine. But how can this affect the credit of a writing under the name of *Paul*, any more than of one under *Cæsar's* name, if the *positive evidence* of the authenticity of both be equal? If it be said, that the evidence

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cannot be equal, because there have been forg'd books under *Paul's* name, but not under *Cæsar's* ; and this begets a *suspicion* concerning the one, which is not *natural* concerning the other. I answer, that the ground of this suspicion, though there be an actual forgery prov'd and detected, is but *a bare possibility* that there may be other forgeries, against all *historical evidence* ; and this is possible with respect to *Cæsar's* writings, as well as *St. Paul's*.

BUT in truth, the *detection* of some forg'd writings under the names of the Apostles rather *confirms*, than in the least *weakens*, the authenticity of such as were never *question'd*, and against which, we cannot find, that any thing of *moment* was ever objected. For cheats discover'd had a natural tendency to make men more *cautious* and *wary* ; and the importance of the thing itself, as it relates to religion, which, in the opinion of all the thinking honest part of mankind, is the most *sacred* concern in the world, would make them more upon their *guard*. And 'tis plain, by the instances of their diligence and success in detecting *some frauds*, that as they thought it a thing of great moment not to be impos'd on with respect to the *genuine records* of Christianity ; they wanted neither *capacity*, nor *inclination*, to distinguish between those books which were authentic, and those which were not ; and to expose *counterfeits*. Feign'd writings might *easily be discover'd* by *sincere* and

Christian revelation defended. 99

inquisitive persons, at the time when they were first palm'd upon the world ; and if any were so wicked, as to endeavour to make such writings pass for the genuine works of *Apostolic* and *inspir'd* men, 'tis hardly possible they could be *universally* receiv'd, unless we suppose, that all the professors of Christianity were an *ignorant, tricking, faithless* generation, without either *sense*, or *integrity* ; which is in itself so *mean* and *ungenerous* a reflection, if it did not contradict the *best accounts* of history, that every adversary of revelation, who pretends to the character of a *gentleman*, should be ashamed of it.

BESIDES, forgeries were the more likely to be detected, because in the earliest ages there were *different sects* of Christians, who were *spies* upon one another. And I may add, that 'tis extremely difficult to fix any time when such *impostures* could be *safely* attempted. For if books had been forged under the names of the Apostles in their *lifetime*, they themselves would soon have put a stop to the cheat. If *immediately after their decease*, it must have been an easy matter to know, whether such books were authentic, or not. For persons very seldom leave any thing of this kind behind them, without *communicating*, and *giving directions* about it, to some or other of their intimate friends. Nay, when writings were of great importance, and designed for the *general use* of the Christian world, 'tis very probable, that the

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authors of them would have declared their intentions *publicly*, that so all might be apprized of it; and that they would have been free and open to *every Christian's* perusal, both for the advantage they might receive from them, and to prevent all *suspicion of imposture*. The hand-writing might be compar'd with other undoubted *originals*; and the *style, sentiment, and spirit* of the performance would go a great way towards fixing its real author. Or if he employ'd an *Amanuensis*, 'tis not to be supposed (it being contrary to what is practis'd by all mankind in matters of consequence) but that sufficient care was taken to convince the world that it was wrote *by his direction*: and no wise man would receive it without some proper credentials of this kind. That St. Paul, in particular, took this method, that so the authority of his epistles might not be disputed, is evident from these words in his 2^d epistle to the *Thessalonians*: *The salutation of Paul with my own hand, which is the token in every epistle; so I write**. And with respect to the epistles that go under his name it may be observed moreover, that 'tis absolutely improbable they were forg'd in the time we are now speaking of; because all of them, except those to *Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, were directed to very noted churches in *large and populous* cities, and consequently must have been heard of and known before his death; or else an *appeal* might have been

* Chap. iii. 17.

made to those churches with the greatest ease, and their declaring that they never receiv'd such epistles, which 'tis natural to think they would do *voluntarily*, whether they were appeal'd to or no, must immediately have *detected* the forgery. And if we remove the fraud to a *farther distance*, it will not at all suit with the evidence we have of the *greater antiquity* of the books of the New Testament, from writings that were extant before any such *supposable period*, in which they are *expresly* cited. These things I offer not as conclusive proofs, but only as strong presumptions, which, taken altogether, render it far *more probable* than the contrary can be shewn to be, that the books of the New Testament are genuine.

BUT the probability rises a great deal higher when we consider, that with respect to the far greater part, *viz.* the *four gospels*, the *acts of the apostles*, *thirteen epistles of Paul*, the *first epistle of Peter*, and the *first of John*, we have all the *positive evidence* that the nature of the case will bear. For to prove that they are justly attributed to the persons under whose names we receive them, there is the *universal consent* of antiquity. They were, several of them, quoted as theirs by *contemporaries*, in the very age in which they were wrote, and all in the *immediately succeeding* ages, and have, as far as appears, been constantly acknowledg'd in that character, both by *friends and enemies*. And I would ask

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now, since no man can pretend to assign any one *internal mark* of forgery, what better evidence we have, nay indeed what higher evidence there can be, in *the nature of the thing*, that Cicero, Julius Cæsar, or any other Heathen writers, were the authors of those books which go under their names, than such an *universal and undisputed tradition*.

BUT supposing the books of the New Testament to be authentic and genuine, what proof have we that they are a *credible history*? The greatest that can reasonably be desired. For,

I. THERE is a very strong probability, that the persons who related the extraordinary facts contained in them were not *themselves imposed on*. For of the four evangelists, two at least, viz. Matthew, and John, were *eye-witnesses*; and can any historian record any thing upon better assurance of its truth, than *the evidence of his own senses*? It may be said, that this evidence ought indeed to be admitted with respect to all *common* events, but we must be cautious that we do not trust the senses of others too far in cases that are *supernatural*; because *fanciful and enthusiastic* men have, in all ages, been very *credulous* this way, and equally *positive and confident*: or else, it could be no great difficulty for a *skilful* person to impose upon such *illiterate rude* people as the Apostles, who were altogether unacquainted with the powers of nature, and pass

pass off some secret, and to them unusual, operations of *natural causes* for *real miracles*.

To which it may be replied in behalf of the two writers above-mention'd, that there is not the least reason besides their belief of the miracles related in their history, (and to give this as reason is taking the very thing in dispute *for granted*) to charge them with *credulity* and *enthusiasm*; and that the apostles in general are very much injur'd, when they are represented as persons *grossly ignorant*; which has been carried too far even by some who have wrote excellent defences of Christianity, in order to render the propagation of the gospel, by such instruments, the more *surprising* and *marvellous*. For let any man read *Paul's* defences of himself recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles*, and his epistles, and he will find such a knowledge of mankind, such an artful genteel and happy address, as argue the author to have studied human nature *carefully*, and made the *wisest* observations upon it, together with such *acuteness* and *strength* of reasoning, as few writers can pretend to. Nay, let him read the epistle of *James*, one of the *illiterate* apostles, (of the authenticness of which I can see no just ground to doubt, for reasons which will be mentioned when I come to speak of the controverted books) and even there he will meet with such *judicious* moral reflections, such a *propriety*, beauty, and *elevation* of thought,

as are very much above the capacity of the *fishermen* and *mechanics* of this age, and the farthest that can be from *the strain of an enthusiast*.

AGAIN, several of our Saviour's miracles were of such a nature, as cannot be supposed to have been merely *imaginary*, and in which the most *enthusiastical* could not well be deceiv'd, such as *curing inveterate distempers by a word*, *raising the dead*, &c. and are evidently above all the *known* powers and laws of nature.

BUT let us consider the case more particularly with respect to the *resurrection* of Christ, which, together with its consequences, is the chief strength of the Christian cause; and if it be once prov'd, confirms the reality of all the miracles said to be perform'd by him *in his life-time*, and consequently all the preceding parts of the gospel-history. Now 'tis plain, that the Apostles at their master's death thought all their hopes were lost, and did not *expect* his resurrection; and when they receiv'd the first report of it, were not forward to *believe* it: nay, one of them, *viz. Thomas*, (as is attested by an eye-witness *) was so *scrupulous*, as to insist upon the nicest scrutiny, and the strictest proof that the most prudent and cautious of our *modern unbelievers* could be tempted to

* John xx. 25.

desire; for he would not believe, till by handling the wounds made in our Lord's crucified body he was convinc'd that there was a *real resurrection*, and that his senses were not impos'd upon by an airy *phantom*: so that 'tis utterly improbable that they were deceiv'd by a too *hasty credulity*. And besides, they had such a *perfect remembrance* of their master's person, with whom they had conversed intimately for several years, that they could not take another for him; or if this was possible, had he only made them *one*, and that a *short and transient* visit, it could not be the case, as the circumstances of the fact are related; for he not only submitted to be *felt* and *examined*, but to give them the greatest security imaginable against a *fraud*, appear'd to them *often*, and tarried a *considerable time*, *eat*, and *drink*, and convers'd freely with them, for the space of *forty days*; and if all these things might be transacted in a kind of *dream*, and be nothing but the *reveries* of a distemper'd imagination, 'twill be impossible for any man to prove that he is ever *thoroughly awake*. And since the charge of *credulity* and *enthusiasm* fails, will the most confident opposers of revelation take upon them to say, that this resurrection was not a *true and proper miracle*?

LET me add farther, that with respect to the *miraculous gifts* of the Holy Ghost, we have the accounts from *Luke* in the acts of the apostles, and *Paul* in his epistles, who
were

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were both not only *eye-witnesses*, but the very persons *possess'd* of these *extraordinary powers*. And the nature of the thing itself (as to some of these powers at least) happens to be such, as will not admit of a *deception*. For the *weakest enthusiast* may know (for instance) as certainly, and without a possibility of being impos'd on, whether he is enabled, *all of a sudden*, to speak languages he never learn'd *intelligibly*, and *easily*; he may, I say, as certainly know this, as the *wisest* and *sobereſt* *reasoner*, and the *greatest philosopher*, that ever liv'd.

ALL this, it may be said, only proves, that these writers were not themselves impos'd on, in the accounts they have given us of the miracles by which Christianity was confirm'd; but what probability have we that they have made a just relation of our *Saviour's discourses*, and consequently of the substance of the *Christian Doctrine*? Why in this, they testified only of what they *heard*, as in the other case, of what they *saw*. To these discourses 'tis very likely they gave the utmost *attention*, and heard them for the main *frequently repeated*; by which means they would make the *deeper impression* upon their minds, and be more *easily* remember'd. And if the history of the miracles be true, there is no difficulty at all in supposing, that where their *memories fail'd*, they were *extraordinarily* assisted in recollecting the sermons and parables of Christ, so far as was *necessary* to
give

give a *complete view* of his religion, and enable them to teach and publish the *same doctrine* after his decease. Let us therefore, having briefly consider'd the capacity of the gospel-historians to be perfectly inform'd of all the facts which they relate, proceed to examine.

2. WHAT may be said for their *integrity*, or in other words what probability there is, that as they were not *deceiv'd themselves*, they would not *impose on others*; by which we shall establish, beyond all just exception, the *truth* of their history. And if we look into the history itself, we find an air of *honesty* and *impartiality* running thro' the whole of it. The great design of it, in all its parts, is to recommend the strictest *truth* and *fidelity*, and, in general, the noblest perfection of *virtue* and *true goodness*. The writers punctually relate not only such things as redounded to their master's *honour*, but several other circumstances, which in the opinion of the world, and according to vulgar prejudices, had a quite *different aspect*, such as the *obscurity* and *meannefs* of his birth and parentage, his *low despicable* condition in life, and the like; and are very particular in recounting their *own failings* with all their aggravations, their *ignorance* and *dullness of apprehension*, their *cowardice* in deserting their master, and *Peter's absolute denial* of him with horrid oaths and imprecations. This is very much like the *artless simplicity* of upright and disin-

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disinterested men. But as 'tis possible it might be *put on*, to procure themselves the reputation of *well-meaning* and *credible* historians, I shall lay no more stress upon it than it deserves; and consider it not as direct proof, but as a circumstance that *looks well*, and, in conjunction with others, must have its weight. Let us inquire therefore what was their *general* character. And,

It appears from all accounts, that they were persons of strict and exemplary virtue, against the integrity of whose conduct *upon the whole*, nothing of moment was ever urg'd by the most malicious enemies of Christianity, which certainly gives great strength to their testimony. And the force of this argument is very much increas'd by observing, that they could have no *worldly interest* to promote by publishing such false accounts. They had no prospect of honour to allure their *ambition*, nor of riches to gratify their *covetousness*, nor of ease and pleasure to suit a taste for *indolence* and *luxury*; but on the contrary, were oblig'd to practise *humility*, *mortification*, and *self-denial*, and the *appearance* of every virtue, which could not but be a very uneasy restraint to men of *corrupt* and *vicious* minds; and as their doctrine overturn'd the forms of religion that were establish'd in *all Nations*, and contradicted the general *prejudices* and *vices* of the world, they were sure of reproaches and sufferings; (not only as the *probable consequences* of their per-

sisting

sisting to declare the Christian doctrine, but consequences of which their master had *expressly* forewarn'd them) all which they unanimously, courageously, and chearfully endur'd, and gave the *highest proof* of an *inflexible honesty*, by dying to vindicate the truth of their testimony.

I do not suppose, that mens suffering, or even dying, in defence of any particular religion is *in itself* an argument of the *truth* of it; but 'tis the strongest probability in the world that they *believe* it to be *true*. For to suppose several persons to have enter'd into a *confederacy* to lose their all, and expose themselves to contempt, loss of liberty, torments and death, for the sake of attesting what they *knew* to be a *falsehood*, from which therefore they could expect no possible advantage in *another life* to recompense their miseries here; to suppose them, I say, not to be push'd on by the heat of a *false religious enthusiasm*, but to be *deliberate, cool, and inflexible* in such a purpose as this; and consequently to have entirely extinguished that love of ease, and aversion to pain and misery, which are so *strong and universal* in human nature; is supposing both against its *reason* and *passions*, and against the common *experience and observation* of mankind. And in the present case, if the Apostles ~~themselves~~ *believ'd* the extraordinary facts which they have related, they must have been *true*; because the circumstances that attended them have been

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been shewn to be such, that they could not be impos'd upon.

IF, therefore, it be not *unsuitable* to our wisest notions of the supreme Being, to suppose him to take compassion on the *ignorance* and *corruption* of his reasonable creatures, and make *at any time* an extraordinary revelation of his mind and will; if such a revelation was highly for the advantage of mankind in their *corrupt* and *degenerate* circumstances; and if the *Christian* doctrine (as it is convey'd down to us in the writings of those who heard it from Christ himself, and were appointed to publish it throughout the world) be in all respects *worthy of God*, and consequently *worthy actually to be* this revelation; the contrary to which has never yet been prov'd by the most *learned* and *judicious* of its adversaries; we are certainly under the strongest obligations to believe the miraculous facts by which it is supported, upon the *credible testimony* above-mention'd. For in no case that depends upon testimony can we have stronger evidence of the truth of a fact than this, that 'tis related by *eye-witnesses*, or *actors* in it, and persons of *establish'd veracity*. And if we refuse to admit it upon such evidence, when there is nothing in the *abstract nature* of the thing itself to invalidate their testimony, we destroy the credibility of all *antient histories*, and can indeed believe nothing upon *tradition* or *testimony*, nothing but what is subjected to our own *senses*.

NAY farther, as the ingenious Dr. *Ibbot* has very justly observed, * Since “ the accounts which the Evangelists have given us in their writings, are of things which they saw, and heard themselves, or had from those who did so;” since “ they lived in the time and place, when and where the things which they write of were publicly transacted; their writings deserve greater credit than any other writings whatever. For how few of those things, related by other historians, are such as they themselves were present at, and saw? ’Tis needless to mention *Herodotus*, *Diodorus Siculus*, *Livy*, *Suetonius*, *Curtius*, and other historians who have given us an account of the *Assyrian* or *Persian*, the *Greek* or *Roman* affairs; and who have wrote of things that were done many ages before they were born, and in such parts of the world as were very remote from their own habitations. I shall only instance in one writer, and that is *Cornelius Tacitus*, in that part of his history, where he is giving an account of the destruction of *Jerusalem*, and takes occasion to tell us the whole story of the city and people of the *Jews* from their first beginning. ’Tis scarce credible how many groundless and childish tales, what stupid and evidently false accounts that celebrated historian has heap’d

* *Sermons at Boyle’s Lecture*, p. 97.

“ together, and which he might easily have
 “ known to be such even in *Rome* itself where
 “ he liv’d, from the great numbers of *Jews*
 “ of all sorts and ranks which resorted thi-
 “ ther, and especially from the history of
 “ *Josephus*, which was then in being, and at
 “ the emperor’s command was repositd in
 “ the publick library.”

THUS we have seen, that ’tis *highly probable* the *first propagators* of the Christian revelation were not impos’d on themselves, and did not design to impose on others. The author of *Christianity &c.* supposes, that
 “ we ought to be certain, that they could
 “ not be impos’d on themselves, and would
 “ not impose on others; or in other words,
 “ were infallible and impeccable *.” But,
 (1.) I don’t see how *absolute infallibility* can be necessary in order to their giving such a credible testimony as no rational man can doubt of; for none of the reports of *sense* are, strictly speaking, infallible. Is not therefore the testimony of *eye-witnesses*, if we are satisfied they actually saw the things they relate, sufficient evidence in any case? Shall we reject a *probability* that they *were not* deceiv’d, which in affairs of the greatest moment ’tis reckon’d madness to dispute, only because ’tis *possible they might*? Men can no more doubt of many things for which they have only *probable* evidence, than they could

* P. 213.

if they had the most *certain* and *infallible* demonstration. Indeed, what is it but *probability* that is the great spring of human actions, and determines our most important pursuits? What but a *credible testimony*, a testimony not strictly *infallible*, that decides in all courts of judicature, where our most valuable properties, and even life itself, are concern'd? Is it not then sufficient to establish the credibility of the gospel historians, that the accounts they give are of things which they *saw*, and *heard*; and that to suppose they were impos'd on renders the evidence of *sense itself* uncertain and precarious? Or, must we insist, *in this case alone*, not only upon a good probability that they were not, but an absolute impossibility that they should be deceiv'd? Nothing can be more *perverse* and *unreasonable*. Again,

W H Y must it be thought necessary, to make their testimony credible, that they should be *impeccable*? As without their being strictly *infallible*, we may have the highest probability that they *were not deceiv'd*; so, without supposing they were *impeccable*, we may have sufficient assurance of their *honesty*. Where is the man in the world that is *impeccable*? But is no man therefore to be *believ'd*? May we not be firmly persuaded, upon good grounds, that he has too much *virtue* and *generosity* to deceive us, without knowing that he *cannot*? And would it not be a very strange conduct, if men of *approv'd integrity*

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grity were not *credited*, even in cases upon which the happiness of life depends, only for wanting a character that is too perfect for human nature in the *present state*? Must not, at this rate, all the *business* and *commerce* of mankind, all *mutual confidence*, and intercourse of *good offices* be suspended, and every one stand *single* and *helpless* in the midst of society? Nay, must not societies *disband*, which we are sure can never be supported while there is universal *jealousy* and *distrust*? And let but the *same credit* be given to the testimony of the Apostles, of whom it has been prov'd that they were persons of great sincerity and virtue, as is constantly allow'd to the testimony of *honest unexceptionable witnesses* in courts of judicature, and in all concerns of human life, and we must admit the *truth* of their history. For men have not the least doubt of things which are thus attested, if they are not in themselves *incredible*; they negotiate affairs, and run hazards upon such a *probability*; and therefore if they were fair and impartial, they would not scruple to believe *Christianity* upon the same evidence, and would act as that belief directs.

BUT our author proceeds farther, and advances some things which are more immediately to the purpose of the present argument, as they directly attack the *integrity* of the gospel-historians. These therefore I shall particularly consider, not for any strength that I apprehend to be in the objections

jections themselves, or because I have so mean an opinion of this writer's good sense as to imagine, that *he himself believes* there is any great weight in them, but that nothing *plausible* may so much as *seem* to lie against the truth of their testimony. 'Tis needless to insist largely upon what he urges, from our Saviour's saying to those, who *had prophesied, and cast out devils in his name, Depart from me ye that work iniquity* *, *viz.* " that neither prophecies, nor miracles are absolute securities for men to depend on †," because it may be granted they are not, if the doctrine that is taught be not in itself rational, and worthy of God. And as prophecies and miracles were only designed to attest the *truth* of the doctrine, and not the *honesty* and *virtue* of the persons that preach'd it, nothing can be inferr'd from hence that is a real prejudice to Christianity; especially if we suppose, what was undeniably true with respect to *Judas*, as long as he had the power, which this author speaks of, " of doing miracles, even to the *raising* of the dead ‡," that they were not *openly* and *scandalously* immoral; and, consequently, that their vices could not bring a *dishonour* upon the religion they propagated. Besides, how does this in the least affect the credit of *those writers*, on whose accounts of Christianity we depend? Because some prophets, and persons that did miracles, might *work iniquity*; are they prov-

* Mat. 7. 22, 23.

† P. 245.

‡ *Ibid.*

ed to be *workers of iniquity*? Or, because
 “ one of the Apostles betray’d his master
 “ for the paltry sum of thirty pieces of sil-
 “ ver *,” must they all be thus *base, unfaith-
 ful, and treacherous*?

BUT “ the other Apostles not only fled,
 “ and deserted him, but the chief of them
 “ *forsook him*, as often as he was ask’d
 “ about his being one of his followers; and
 “ he, as well as *Barnabas*, was afterwards
 “ guilty of a mean piece of dissimulation.
 “ And *Paul* and *Barnabas* had such a *sharp*
 “ *contention*, though about a very indifferent
 “ matter, as to cause a separation †.” What
 does all this tend to? To destroy the gene-
 ral character of the Apostles as *honest* and
well-designing men, and prove that the histo-
 ries they wrote are not to be *credited*? Cer-
 tainly no Inference can be more *forc’d*, and
unnatural. For does a man’s committing
 one or two base actions in the *whole course*
 of his life, tho attended with very heinous
 aggravations, absolutely destroy his *credit*,
 when he has given the strongest evidence of
 his having *repented* of them, and practis’d
ever after such a *strict* and *inflexible* virtue,
 as no temptations, no hope of worldly ad-
 vantage, or fear of sufferings, could corrupt?
 Is no allowance to be made for the frailty of
 human nature, and *sudden passions* which *dis-
 arm* the mind, and render the *succours of rea-
 son* useless? May not a person be so *surpriz’d*

* P. 245.

† *Ibid.*

by an unexpected temptation, as to betray the cause of virtue, who would sooner die, than meditate and utter a *cool deliberate* falshood? And was not this beyond dispute the case of the Apostles?

IF when their grief had *dispirited* them, and in the *consternation* they were under at seeing all their hopes of a temporal kingdom disappointed, they *fled*, and *deserted* their master; they afterwards preach'd him boldly, in defiance of all the *terrors* of the world, and bore their testimony to the truth of his doctrine, miracles, and resurrection, with a noble contempt of *dangers* and *death*. If Peter *denied and forswore him*, it cost him a deep and bitter repentance; and this repentance was demonstrated to be sincere by his *unshaken steadiness* and *constancy* afterwards, and chusing *deliberately* to die rather than *again deny him*. And if *he*, as well as Barnabas, *was guilty of a mean piece of dissimulation*, to the betraying the liberty of the *Gentile* converts, in compliance with the stiffness and prejudices of the *Jews*, it does not follow that this was *desgn'd dishonesty*; might it not be a mere error of judgment about the *prudential* part of conduct? And to strengthen this, which is by far the most *fair* and *candid* supposition; was not his behaviour upon the whole the reverse of *wilful falshood*? Or is every one who has *once* or *twice* dissembled and prevaricated, from a *mistake* more probably, than a principle of *insincerity*

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ity, a witness not fit to be *credited*; especially if when we view him in the general course of his actions (which is the only just way of estimating *characters*) he plainly appears to be a person of *honour* and *integrity*, and when all circumstances conspire to confirm the *truth* of his testimony?

NOTWITHSTANDING these blemishes and faults in the lives of the Apostles, we may, I am persuaded, challenge the adversaries of Christianity to produce witnesses so *credible* to any fact, in any *age*, or *history*, as they; men that overcame the strongest *prejudices* against the doctrine they embrac'd, and propagated; that asserted it in opposition to all their *interests*, and without the least distant prospect of *honour*, or *advantage*; whom the cruellest persecutions could not *discourage*; nay, who *bravely dy'd* in defense of it. Let those, who now take an *ungenerous* pleasure in aggravating their failings, consider the *difficulties* they labour'd under, and the *uncommon* temptations with which they were oblig'd to encounter, and then ask themselves seriously, whether they know of any, who they have reason to believe, in such circumstances, would have had *fewer*; and whether upon the whole, they are not very extraordinary examples of *integrity* and *courage*?

EVEN the *weakness* and *cowardice* they before discover'd rather confirms than invali-

dates the testimony they gave afterwards. For that the very same persons should adhere *inflexibly* to the cause of him whom they had *deserted*, with nothing in expectation but *disgrace* and *sufferings*, and dying the death of *malefactors*, can be accounted for no other way than this, that they were sensible of the crime they had committed, and had arm'd themselves with the greater *resolution*. And what could be sufficient to *animate* and *support* such a resolution, but a firm belief of the truth of the doctrine they preach'd? What but their being convinc'd that it was their *indispensable duty* to maintain and defend it; and preferring what they apprehended to be the cause of true religion, and the reformation and happiness of mankind, *to all other considerations*? There is no proof in the world so strong as this of mens being in *earnest*; and to urge their equivocating, and being afraid to own the truth in one or two instances, as an argument why they are not to be depended on, when they asserted and maintain'd it to the hazard of their *ease*, *liberties*, and *lives*, is urging *contradictions* to support each other. With respect to the Apostles, the appearances of danger were not at all lessen'd, but more *near* and *immediate*. And therefore, when we find these same fearful men, who had before manifested such *weakness* and *pusillanimity*, inspir'd with an *invincible fortitude* and *constancy*; we cannot help supposing what has been already suggested, either that they were more *firmly*

persuaded of the truth of Christianity; or that when their fears betray'd them it was thro' *surprize*, whereas their after-conduct, in which they discover'd so much honesty and intrepidity, was the result of their *deliberate judgment*, upon a full conviction of their necessity of such a behaviour; or else, that God afforded them *extraordinary supports* in proportion to the greatness of their trials, that they might bear up in publishing so *excellent* and *useful* a doctrine as the Christian revelation contain'd, against all the opposition that was made to it by the *prejudices* and *vices* of the world.

THE objection which the ingenious author makes against the characters of *Paul* and *Barnabas*, to lessen their credit as *historians*, or *witnesses* to the facts of Christianity, viz. that they "had such a *sharp contention*, tho about a very indifferent matter, "as to cause a separation," scarce deserves a grave answer. For *stiffness*, *heat*, and *vehemence* of temper, are very different things from *dishonesty*; and the proving against a person that he was apt to grow warm in dispute, and sometimes to quarrel with his *best friends*, would not (if his *veracity* was unblemish'd) be of the least weight, nor at all affect his credit as a witness in any *court of judicature*. And yet this is much more than can be shewn to be included in the present case. For the whole of the fact, as it is related in the acts of the Apostles, amounts to

no more than this; that they differ'd once about the *expediency* of chusing a particular person to be a companion in their travels (which might not be quite so *indifferent a matter* as this author represents it) and were each so *intent* and *eager* upon gaining his point, that they *separated* upon it. But it does not appear, that they manag'd the debate in an *indecent abusive* way, or that they parted without a perfect *friendship* and *esteem* for each other.

AND as to what he adds farther with relation to St. Paul, that “ even he says, * *The good that I would, I do not ; but the evil which I would not, that I do.*—— But I see “ *another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin, which is in my members.* And a great deal more to the “ *same purpose †;*” I am sorry to observe, that it shews a determin'd resolution, if possible, to asperse one of the *greatest characters* in history, whose *generous* services for the good of others, *noble ardour* in the cause of *liberty*, and *inflexible self-denying* virtue, none of the opposers of Christianity have ever *exceeded*, and few of them can pretend to *equal* without the most *manifest disadvantage*. Even an *ingenuous adversary* would take pleasure in doing justice to such *extraordinary merit*, and not entertain a thought of detracting from it;

* Rom. vii. 19, 23.

† P. 245.

and the very attempt to represent this excellent Apostle as a slave to his *appetites*, influenc'd by *carnal* views, and one that acted against the *reason* and *judgment* of his own mind, must *sink the reputation* of any writer with considerate and impartial men.

BUT does he not expressly assert all this of himself in the passages referr'd to? Our author indeed *seems* to think so, but it appears from many other instances, as well as this, that the excellency of his genius does not lie in writing *comments* upon scripture; but that on the contrary, he frequently quotes independent passages merely for their *sound*, and the *appearance* they make; which would be exclaim'd against as barbarous treatment of any *other writers*, and can serve only to amuse and confound an *ignorant* and *inattentive* reader. And with respect to the instance now before us, 'tis plain to every one that reads St. Paul's epistles with *care*, and a desire to *understand* them, that he was a most *genteel* and *tender* writer, and oftentimes speaks of things, that might otherwise be ungrateful and offensive, in his *own name*, when the characters he gives belong entirely to *others*, and not at all to *himself*. Thus in this very epistle to the *Romans*, * *If the truth of God hath more abounded through my lye, why am I judged as a sinner?* i. e. not I Paul, but I who make the objection. At other times, he

puts himself into descriptions of the corrupt and deplorable state of *Gentile idolaters* before their conversion. And that we are to make use of *this key* to find out the true sense of those passages in the 7th chapter to the *Romans*, which this author has *abus'd*, is evident from hence; that the description there given is of a *vicious* man, who had pretty strong convictions of his duty, but acted against the light and dictates of *conscience*; of one whose passions were *too strong* for his reason, and brought him into *captivity*; who was *carnal*, and *sold under sin*; a phrase that always denotes a state of *wilful* and *habitual* wickedness. And besides the great absurdity of supposing, that St. Paul design'd to represent his *own character* in this view, at the same time that he set up for a *reformer*, and therefore was oblig'd to affect the *appearance at least* of extraordinary sanctity; besides this, I say, that he had not really such bad thoughts of *himself*, and consequently, that what he says is intended as a representation of others, though he speaks in his *own name*, is plain, beyond all dispute, from several passages in his *epistles*, in which 'tis undeniable he must mean himself *personally*; because he either vindicates his *own character*, or proposes himself as an *example* for imitation, or appeals to those to whom he wrote for his *integrity*. Thus particularly, in his epistle to the *Thessalonians* he says, *Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily, and justly, and unblameably we behav'd*

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*ourselves among you that believe ††. To the Corinthians, This is our rejoicing, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, or according to that excellent and perfect rule of morality which is contain'd in the gospel, we have had our conversation in the world **; that he knew nothing by, or against, himself †; that he kept under his body, and brought it into subjection ‡. And to mention no more, he resents with a generous scorn and indignation the scandalous charge of those, who represented him as *walking after the flesh*; and declares, that though he *walk'd in the flesh*, he did not *walk after the flesh* **. Is it then at all natural to suppose, that he meant himself, when he drew a character directly the *reverse* of this; especially when we find, that it was a very *usual* thing with him (as indeed it is common with writers now) to speak in his own name things that were entirely design'd for others; and when it appears from the whole of his history, that he *fully deserv'd* that all those things should be affirm'd of him, which, notwithstanding his great modesty, he was oblig'd to mention in his own *vindication*, and to silence the *calumnies* of his adversaries? Such a method of explaining passages is contrary to all rules of *fair interpretation*; and whatever other purposes it may serve, is the way to make any author for ever *unintelligible*.

†† 1 Ep. ii. 10.

* 2 Ep. i. 12.

† 1 Ep. iv. 4.

‡ 1 Ep. 9. 27.

** 2 Cor. x. 2, 3.

It will be needless to take much notice of what is farther alledg'd †† from the catholic epistle of St. *Barnabas*, “ That Jesus, “ when he chose his Apostles, which were “ afterwards to publish his gospel, took men “ who had been very great sinners; that there- “ by he might plainly shew, *he came not to call “ the righteous, but sinners to repentance **,” be the words ever so much stronger and fuller in the original †; or of the *scurrility* of *Celsus* (of which I choose to give an *English translation*, that the unlearned reader may not think there is any thing of argument in it) *viz.* “ that Jesus having pick'd up ten or eleven “ infamous men, the most profligate publi- “ cans and fishermen, strol'd about the coun- “ try with them, demanding [or begging and “ mumping for] victuals in the most base and “ shameful manner ‡;” 'twill be needless, I say, to take much notice of this, because whatever their character was before they became the followers of Christ, they behav'd afterwards, in the general course of their actions, with the greatest *honour* and *integrity*, and gave such evidence of an *ingenuous* temper of mind as few histories can

†† P. 49.

* Wake's Translation, § 5. p. 272.

† Ὅντας ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀμαρτίαν ἀνομωτέρας.

‡ The words, as this author gives them in the Latin translation, are, p. 50. Jesum, ascitis decem undecimve famosis hominibus, publicanis, nautisque nequissimis, cum his ultro citroque fugiâsse, corrogantem cibos sordidè ac turpiter. *Origen.* cont. *Celsum*. l. 1. p. 47

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parallel. When they bore witness to the truth of Christianity, their lives in the main were unexceptionable, nay, fit to be propos'd as *examples* for the world to imitate. And nothing but an uncommon degree of *honesty* and *resolution* could break such strong habits of vice, and cause such a prodigious alteration in their conduct.

NOR do I think that what the ingenious author adds, "in support of St. *Barnabas*," either confirms his account of them before they were chosen to be Apostles, or in the least invalidates their testimony, *viz.* "that they
" first became Jesus's disciples upon temporal
" motives; and the belief of Christ's tempo-
" ral kingdom was so firmly rooted in them,
" that Jesus neither during his life, nor even
" after his resurrection, was able to remove
" it †." For does this prove that they were the *basest* and *vilest* of men? Nay, does their falling in with the common error of their country-men prove, even in general, that they were *bad men*? How could persons of *real probity and virtue* become the disciples of one, whom they took to be their Messiah, but upon *temporal* motives, when they had no notions of his kingdom but as a *temporal* kingdom? 'Tis plain, however, that though they retain'd this false notion even after our Saviour's resurrection, they were at length convinc'd of their mistake, and propagated

his doctrine without the least hope of *preference*, or *worldly advantage*. And what better evidence could they give of their honesty than overcoming their strongest *prejudices*; correcting a *favourite* and *darling sentiment*, upon which all their hopes were originally grounded; and adhering to the cause of Christ, not only when the temporal motives upon which they set out *ceas'd to operate*, but in defiance of the bitterest *reproaches*, the greatest *abuses* and *sufferings*, and all the terrors of an *ignominious* and *cruel death*?

T H U S have I particularly consider'd every thing, that I know is urg'd by the author of *Christianity* &c. against the *moral character* of the writers of the New Testament, with a view to weaken the *credibility* of their history. As this is a point of the highest importance, with which the truth of the *Christian religion itself* must either stand, or fall, I was not willing to pass by any part of it; though perhaps I shall be censur'd for taking notice of some things, which may be thought too trifling to deserve a *serious animadversion*. And it must be a great pleasure to the friends of Christianity, that the most *critical* and *malicious* inquirers, who rake together all that looks *plausible*, and *strain* and *exaggerate* every circumstance, can find so few faults in the lives of men, who were call'd to act so *nice* a part, and met with such *extraordinary* temptations and difficulties. Theirs, it must be remember'd, in the whole extent of it,

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was a part but *once acted*; and therefore we can't be sure, that the most virtuous, who struggle bravely with the common trials of life, would behave well in it. And the greatest of their defects are easily to be accounted for by supposing, that, in the beginning especially, they were liable to *surprises*, from which the most *honest* and *resolute* are not always exempted, and by which they may be *betrayed*. We may therefore safely rest the matter upon this issue, the *capacity* and *integrity* of the writers of the New Testament, as what is fully sufficient to establish the *credibility* of their history. But there are some other circumstances that very much *heighten* the probability, which I shall therefore briefly mention. And,

1. IT ought not to be omitted, that the same facts are related in the gospels by *four* different historians (and two of 'em, at least, eye-witnesses) with so much agreement in all material passages, as has greatly the air of *veracity*; but with so much variety, as shews they were not wrote in *concert*.

2. THESE histories were publish'd but *a few years* after the facts recorded in them are pretended to have been perform'd, in a manner open and visible to the whole Jewish nation. The accounts contained in them are also, in several instances, very *particular* and *circumstantial*, with specification of *time* and *place*, and of the *names* and *characters* of the
per-

persons concern'd; which made it much more easy (if there had been any) to *detect* the imposture. And this publication of them was not in *remote* and *distant* countries, where there was no danger of *discovering* the *cheat*, but upon the very *same stage* where the miracles are said to have been wrought. Now all this is a strong probability, that the authors of these accounts were sure of the *goodness* of their cause, and did not fear the utmost *wit* and *malice* of their enemies. For 'tis hardly supposable, that the most bold and impudent impostors would put the entire success of their undertaking upon the *truth* of facts, that to a whole nation were *notoriously false*; and besides, 'tis *morally impossible* such accounts should gain credit; but on the contrary, pretences to *known* and *public* miracles, when nothing at all of that kind was perform'd, must necessarily have been confuted, and consequently have ended in the speedy and entire *suppression* and *ruin* of Christianity.

IT has indeed been objected, that several books may have been written to expose the *imposture* of the first Christians, which afterwards, when they got the power in their own hands by the conversion of the *Roman Emperors*, were *destroy'd*; but that no such *contradictory* accounts were ever publish'd, *early enough* to invalidate the authority of the gospel-history, is to me most evident from a consideration that has been already suggested, *viz.* that the *immediate consequence* of it, the

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world

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world being so little inclin'd to favour Christianity must have been its *utter extirpation*. And since it was not crush'd in its *very infancy*, as without doubt it would have been, if those who propagated it had been convicted of *fraud and knavery*; nay, since it *grew and flourish'd* in spite of all the opposition that was made to it, which, upon the supposition that the gospel-history was *contradicted and confuted*, no reasonable man can account for; this affords the strongest presumption, that a thing of that nature was never attempted, and consequently that the objection is a *mere calumny*, invented by the enemies of our holy religion for want of *better evidence*. I call it a calumny, because it is design'd to throw an *odium* on a body of men upon *mere surmise and conjecture*, which has no solid foundation to support it; and if this must pass for evidence, no histories in the world can stand, because we cannot be sure that they have not, at some time or other, been *contradicted*; and thus men may reject every thing which they have *no mind to believe*. We may observe,

3. WITH respect to the extraordinary and miraculous gifts of the *Holy Ghost* after our Saviour's resurrection, that St. Paul in his epistles to Christian churches mentions these gifts as *very common* among them, appeals to their own knowledge and experience, and leaves the *truth of Christianity*, and *his own authority*, to be entirely determin'd by this

this fact. But can we suppose, that any one of *common modesty*, shall I say, or *common prudence*, would act thus, if he knew that all he had wrote was *false*? Had it not a natural tendency to bring his character, and the cause in which he was embarqu'd, into *contempt*? And can it be thought, that among such numbers, none would have *ingenuity* and *honesty* enough to contradict and expose such an *impudent* and *barefac'd* falshood. Would not such appeals, for which there was no real foundation, soon have been known by the enemies of Christianity; and could a few *insignificant* persons have stood the just *ridicule* and *indignation* of all the *virtuous* part of mankind upon such an occasion? Must not they, and the cause they had espous'd, have *sunk together*?

BUT we find that the apostle *Paul* proceeds much farther, even to blame the *Corinthians* for an *abuse* of their extraordinary gifts, and particularly of the gift of tongues*; and can we think that they would have born this rebuke, if they had been so far from *misimproving* and *perverting* such extraordinary powers, that they were never *possess'd* of them? Or would a man of any sense or knowledge of the world, especially a *cunning impostor*, have made an objection, to which so ready an answer might be given, and an answer that must have been so much to his *confusion*, and

* In the 12th, 13th, and 14th chapters of his first epistle.

have greatly endanger'd his *main design*? Mens *vanity* perhaps may be so *strong*, that when they are commended for extraordinary qualities which they really want, they may think it agreeable enough, and not be forward to *undeceive* the world, by declaring themselves unworthy of the great honour that is done them; but when such gifts are mention'd in a way that is a *reproach* to them, the *same principle* will naturally incline them to detect the cheat. And there must have been the more danger of it in the case of the *Corinthians*, because there was a false Apostle among them, who set himself up in *opposition* to St. Paul, and endeavour'd to *lessen* and *degrade* his ministry; for such a one, with the *faction* he had actually form'd, would undoubtedly have thought this an excellent handle to blast his credit, and it's likely, have made a merit of ruining his reputation by a shew of *zeal for truth*, and by discovering and exposing *imposture*.

It may seem strange, perhaps, notwithstanding all that has been said, if the extraordinary facts recorded in the New Testament were *really* perform'd, that no other historians, who liv'd about that time, should take notice of them; none but *Christian writers*, who are too much a *party* to have any considerable weight in this controversy, because they were engag'd to be advocates for them by their very profession of Christianity. To which the answer is plain (without entering at all
into

into the debate how far the matter of fact is true) that the *silence* of historians as to some things, which are unquestionable, is frequent in *other cases*, as well as in this; that it does not, in the nature of the thing, at all invalidate the testimony of those who are upon all accounts *credible*; that if we could not assign a reason for it, it would be no wonder, considering that we know not the *principles* by which men are *directed* and *influenc'd*; that, however, this omission might be owing to those facts not falling in with the *general design* of their history; and besides, it could not reasonably be expected, that while they continued *Jews* or *Heathens*, they should relate events so favourable to a *new religion*, and by which they must condemn themselves, the one for rejecting their *Messiah*, and the other for persisting in the *idolatry* and *superstition* of their ancestors; and if they became *Christians* upon the credit of these facts, their testimony would no more be admitted than that of other *Christian writers* of *equal antiquity*. But we have, to confirm the *credibility* of the gospel-history, with respect to the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost conferr'd upon the Apostles, &c. what fully supplies the want of this *foreign testimony*, and is indeed abundantly *superior* to it, *viz.* the success of the gospel; an event, which is just what might be expected if this history be *true*, but upon the contrary supposition is *very strange* and *unaccountable*.

THAT a great part of the world is now Christian we all know; we are sure likewise, that it has been so for *many ages* past; and if we look back and inquire when it came to be so, we find by the concurrent testimony both of *Pagan* and *Christian Historians*, that Christianity had its beginning in *Judea*, just at the time in which the *sacred historians* place it. And by the same testimony we learn, that in a very short space, in about *forty years* after, it was preach'd in all the provinces of the *Roman* empire; and that wherever it was preach'd, it made a very *swift* progress, insomuch that in a few years the number of Christians became *very considerable*. For that they had increased greatly at *Rome*, so early as in *Nero's* reign, we learn from the *Roman* historian *Cornelius Tacitus*; who informs us, that when the Emperor, to clear himself from the charge of burning that city, laid the blame of it upon the Christians, and, began, under that pretence, a most severe and cruel persecution of *them*, *a great multitude* * suffer'd. And it was not much above *sixty years* after the Apostles had dispers'd themselves, in order to preach the gospel to the *Gentiles*, when *Pliny* proconsul of *Bithynia* wrote that epistle to the emperor *Trajan*, in which, giving an account of the Christians, then under a severe persecution for their religion by the emperor's order, and

* *Ingens multitudo. Annal. lib.*

desiring to be instructed how he should proceed towards them, he tells him, that, “ he
“ thought it a matter worthy of delibera-
“ tion, chiefly because of the *great number*
“ of persons that [by the laws against Chris-
“ tians] were in danger of suffering. For
“ many of every age, of all orders, and of
“ both sexes are call’d in question, and will
“ be. For this superstition has not only in-
“ fected cities and towns, but the villages and
“ hamlets. The temples of the Gods are
“ almost desolate, the solemn rites of our
“ religion have been long neglected and o-
“ mitted, and there are scarce any who will
“ buy the sacrifices †.”

Now what account shall we give of this great event? ’Tis utterly improbable, that Christianity prevail’d so much in the world, in so short a time, only by *natural means*. The *gift of tongues* was absolutely necessary to enable the Apostles to propagate the gospel in all nations; and if they had a sufficient skill in all the languages of the different countries, without *other miracles*, they could never have convinc’d mankind that their master was a prophet sent from God, nor have engaged them to submit to the authority

† Visa est mihi res digna consultatione; maximè propter periclitantium multitudinem. Multi enim omnis ætatis, omnis ordinis, utriusque sexûs vocantur in periculum, & vocabuntur; neque enim civitates tantum, sed vicos etiam atque agros superstitionis illius contagio pervasit. Prope desolata sunt Deorum templa, sacra solennia diu intermissa, & rarissimi victimarum emptores. *Epist.* 97.

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of his religion. For suppose they had gone into any part of the world remote from *Ju-
dea*, and after they had assembled the people together, made a speech to them to this effect: " We come to preach to you in the
" name of Jesus, and require you to subject
" yourselves to him, whom God hath made
" the Lord of all. He was a great king in
" *Israel*, and did many wonders in that na-
" tion, though he was hated and rejected by
" them, and at length crucified ; but God
" rais'd him from the dead on the third day,
" and we saw him go into heaven, where he
" is enthron'd in most glorious majesty, and
" reigns over angels and men. Cast away
" therefore all your antient Gods ; forsake
" your superstitious rites and ceremonies ;
" believe in him, and submit to his govern-
" ment ; though you get nothing by it in this
" world, but perhaps may lose all you have,
" he will reward you for it in his heavenly
" kingdom." What force, do you think,
there would have been in such a speech, to
persuade the nations far distant from *Jerusa-
lem* to fall down before him as their sovereign ?
Would they not have smiled, and said,
" What do these bablers mean, to bring us
" such strange stories from a foreign land ?
" Why should we acknowledge him to be
" our king, whom his own country-men
" would not suffer to rule over them ? What
" evidence do you bring us that the things
" which you relate of him are true ? As
" you require us to renounce the religion of
" our

“ our ancestors, and the Gods whom we
“ serve, produce your credentials from hea-
“ ven.” This was likely to have been the
most *favourable answer* they would have met
with, in any nation.

BUT the success of the gospel, without
miracles to support it, will appear yet *more*
incredible, if we consider the nature of the
doctrine itself, which is so *strict* and *pure*, as
must necessarily be ungrateful to the *corrupt*
passions of men ; their *strong prejudices* in fa-
vour of those religious principles in which
they have been educated ; that they could not
embrace it without renouncing their most va-
luable *present interests*, and being expos'd to
reproach and *persecution* ; that it was publish'd
by plain illiterate men, of no *figure*, or *influ-*
ence ; and made its way in the most *ingenious*
and *civiliz'd* nations, in opposition to all the
learning, power, policy, and malice of the
world *combin'd* against it. These circum-
stances, I say, render the propagation of the
gospel by *natural means only* still more *incredi-*
ble, and consequently confirm the reality of
the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost men-
tion'd in the New Testament, which were
exercis'd by Christians, according to the ac-
counts they give, at the very time when
Christianity first *took root*, and made such
an *amazing progress*. Can any rational
man then refuse to believe that such extra-
ordinary powers were *actually communicated*,
when it appears *besides*, that there is the most
credible

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credible testimony given to these great facts that can be desir'd in any case, how important soever ; and *the thing in general*, viz. the introducing so excellent a religion as the Christian into the world, is worthy the *peculiar direction* and *care* of providence? Or if he will not allow this, must he not chuse to believe a thing in a way in which he *can never account* for it, when he might give an *easy* and *satisfactory solution* of it to his own mind? Which is the wildest absurdity, and I may add (though our adversaries perhaps will think it strange to be charged themselves, with what seems in their opinion to belong only to the believers of revelation) *enthusiasm*.

I HOPE it will not be thought a *digression* from my main design, if I briefly consider the peculiar weight and force of the argument, from *the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost*, for the truth and divine authority of the Christian religion. And,

I. WE find, that our blessed Saviour, before his death, *foretold* this great event, and appeal'd to it as a future most *glorious* and *convincing* testimony of God in his favour. His words are very *determinate* and *express*, and have nothing of the *ambiguity* of the Heathen oracles: *He that believeth on me, the works that I do, shall he do also: and greater works than these shall he do, because I go unto my Father* *. And again, *nevertheless I tell you*

* John xiv. 12.

*the truth, it is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the comforter (who is the Holy Ghost *) will not come unto you: but if I depart, I will send him unto you, And when he is come, he will reprove, or convince, the world of sin, because they believe not in me; and of righteousness, of my integrity and innocence, and of the truth and justice of my cause, because I go to my Father †. If therefore this great event happen'd (as hath been already prov'd) according to his prediction. it must be a certain demonstration that he was sent of God. For it can't be imagin'd, that the perfectly wise and righteous governor of the world would suffer an impostor to produce such strong credentials of a divine authority; credentials, which, as they appear'd in consequence of an appeal to him, must be look'd upon as his own testimony; and could not but deceive the most honest and impartial of his creatures.*

2. THESE gifts of the Holy Ghost confirm the *reality* of the miracles, said to be performed by Christ in the course of his own ministry, by shewing undeniably that he was a *true prophet*; and put the truth of his *resurrection* out of doubt, by establishing, beyond all exception, the *credibility* of the Apostles testimony. So that they may justly be look'd upon as the strongest and fullest proofs of the truth and certainty of the Chris-

* John xiv. Ver. 26.

† Chap. 16. 7—10.

tian faith, because they render all the other proofs more *clear* and *convincing*, with the additional weight of *new miracles*. But besides this,

3. THERE are some circumstances in the *fact itself*, which render it the most important and complete evidence of the divinity of our holy religion. For instance, what could be more wonderful, than that *illiterate* men should give a scheme of natural religion more perfect than any of the wisest of the *Philosophers* ever did; and that they should be instructed, *all of a sudden*, in those points which they were before ignorant of, or concerning which they had the common mistakes of their countrymen? And as a judicious writer observes, “ There is something in this *gift of wisdom* peculiarly fitted to shew, “ that the doctrine it confirms came from “ God. Works of mere power might be “ perform’d by evil spirits; but that evil spirits should furnish men with the knowledge and ability to publish to the world “ a scheme of doctrine, in all the parts of it, “ the best fitted that could be to reform mankind, seems perfectly incredible *.”

AGAIN, these miraculous powers were communicated to *a greater number* of persons than in our Saviour’s life-time, or any

* Jeffery’s *Christianity the perfection of all religions*, &c. P. 166.

age of the world before ; and that not in one country only, but in *different*, and *far distant*, parts of the world. There was likewise a *greater variety* of them ; and the Apostles were not only endued with them themselves, but could confer them upon others, a manifest sign that the power of God *constantly* attended them. All which circumstances render the proof of Christianity, by this fact, most *sure* and *convincing*. For though if a doctrine be worthy of God, and tends to promote the practice of virtue, and the happiness of mankind, *one* or *two* real miracles are sufficient to establish its authority ; yet in this case, we cannot be so certain of the truth of the facts as when they are *more numerous* ; because 'tis more likely, that *one* or *two* men may have a *lucky* and *dextrous* way of doing a trick, so as constantly to *amuse* and *astonish* the spectators, than a *great number*, some of whom, 'tis highly probable, will, one time or other, by a *bungling performance*, discover the *fraud* ; and the same miracles perform'd in *various*, and *far distant*, parts of the world, where the actors could not have frequent communication with each other, are less liable to dispute, than such as are confin'd to a *particular country*.

To which let me add, that the gift of tongues, is, *in itself*, of all miracles one of the most *plain* and *unquestionable*. For 'tis possible thro' their ignorance of the *powers of nature*, that men, in many instances, may
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look upon those things as miraculous effects, which are only the secret operations of natural causes; but we all know the force of nature so well, that we are sure the knowledge of a language cannot, *in a natural way*, be attain'd *in an instant*; because words are *arbitrary* signs, and therefore can only be understood by *learning*, and *retaining in our memories*, the particular ideas they are intended to express; upon which account, it must take up *a very considerable space of time*, for a man to get himself so well acquainted with *several different languages*, as to be able to converse *easily and familiarly* in them all. So that this, in particular, and the other miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost, by reason of the *peculiar circumstances* that attended them, may justly be esteem'd the *strongest proof* of the truth of our religion; as they are in themselves most *certain and indisputable*, and contain the *united evidence* of miracles, and the accomplishment of most *express and determinate* prophecies, concerning which there can be no *controversy*; and as they corroborate, and render more firm and unquestionable, *every other part of its external proof*. And finally, 'tis to this extraordinary evidence (as we have seen) that we must ascribe the swift and extensive progress of the gospel; which is a kind of *standing miracle*, to supply in a great measure to us, in these *remote times*, the want of those other miracles before our eyes, which were common in the first ages of Christianity.

THE greatest part of what has been said hitherto relates only to the books of the New Testament which were *universally receiv'd*; but what must we think of those which were *controverted* in the most *early times*, when their authority could be best settled; the *epistle* to the *Hebrews*, for instance, and the *epistle* of *James*, the *second* of *Peter*, the *epistle* of *Jude*, the *second* and *third* of *John*, and the *book* of the *Revelation*? I answer, that if the *genuineness* of these books could not be prov'd, Christianity would be but little affected by it; because those which are *uncontestable* contain a complete account of the Christian doctrine, and the evidence by which it is supported; nay, if we were only sure of the *four Gospels*, and the *Acts* of the *Apostles*, these *alone* would be abundantly sufficient. Nor will the determining this question, which way soever it happens, weaken in any *material* point the force of what I have already advanc'd, in which I have taken care all along to argue only from those books, the authenticity of which, as far as appears, was never *disputed*; and consequently of whose being really authentic, we have all the *probability* that the circumstances of the case will bear; as great *at least* (and upon some accounts, I think, it has been shewn to be *much greater*) than there is with respect to *any writings besides*, of equal antiquity. But there are several things urg'd to prove, that the authority of those books, that were not

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at first *universally acknowledg'd*, is not so *dubious* and *uncertain* as it has been represented; and which, tho they may not amount to an *equal probability*, may be thought a *probability* however, that they, as well as the other books which were never question'd, are the *genuine writings* of the Apostles of Christ. The substance of the argument upon this head, I shall give in the words of the late pious and judicious Bishop *Blackall* *.

1. HE says, “ that there is good evidence
“ from antiquity, that these *controverted books*
“ were receiv'd in the most early times, by
“ those who had the best opportunity of sa-
“ tisfying themselves of the authors, and
“ authority thereof, *viz.* by those to whom
“ they were sent, and in general by the whole
“ *Greek church*.

“ 2. THAT 'tis no wonder, that *these*
“ *books* (being written either to Christians dis-
“ pers'd, and consequently only publish'd by
“ giving out copies thereof to some, to be
“ communicated, as there was opportunity,
“ to others; or else to private persons, living
“ perhaps at great distance from the places
“ from which they were sent) were not so
“ easy to be attested, and upon that account
“ were not at first so generally receiv'd, as
“ the others were, which were either written

* *Sermons at Boyle's Lecture* 4to. *Sermon the third*; p. 20, 21, 22.

“ to particular churches, to which the authors
“ hands, and the messengers that brought
“ them, were well known, or which were
“ first publish’d and receiv’d in the same
“ places where they were written. And,

“ 3. THAT even *those churches*, which
“ did for some time *doubt* of the authority of
“ *these books*, were persuaded at last to re-
“ ceive them as the *authentic writings* of the
“ *Apostles*, or other inspir’d men. If there-
“ fore it be suppos’d, that while they doubted
“ of these books they had *reason* for their
“ doubt; that is, that they did it because
“ they were not as yet fully satisfied that
“ they were *Apostolical writings*, (which the
“ objectors, I believe, will readily enough
“ grant) it may be very reasonably presum’d,
“ that they had afterwards *greater reason*
“ to lay aside their doubt; and that when
“ they did receive them, it was, because
“ there had been then lately such evidence
“ and attestation given of their being written
“ by the *Apostles*, or other inspir’d men, as
“ they had not heard of before, such as they
“ could not then, with any reason, contra-
“ dict or gainsay; for ordinarily, a less rea-
“ son will persuade a man to take up an o-
“ pinion at first, than will persuade him to
“ go back from an opinion (how weakly so-
“ ever grounded) which he has before em-
“ brac’d and defended.”

THE fact, as it is here *truly* stated, is just what it might be presum'd *would happen*, with respect to such writings as these. A sufficient account is given why they were not at first *universally receiv'd*; nay indeed, why it was not to be expected they *would be*, supposing them to be *authentic*. But upon this supposition it's natural to believe, that though it might be *a considerable time* before they could be attested in such a manner, as to give satisfaction to *all Christians*, they would *at length* however appear to be *genuine*; and be receiv'd accordingly (as they really were) even by *those churches*, who for some time *doubted* of their authority.

“ So that (as the same author adds) this
 “ objection is so far from lessening, that it
 “ rather strengthens, the proof we have of
 “ the authority even of those once *contro-*
 “ *verted books*; and it is, besides, a very good
 “ corroborating evidence of the authority of
 “ *all the other books* of the *New Testament*.
 “ For the backwardness of some churches to
 “ receive these *controverted books* at first
 “ (when they had nothing to object to the
 “ matter of them) makes it evident, the
 “ Christians of the first ages were not so very
 “ easy and credulous as some have represent-
 “ ed them; that they did not so very greedily
 “ swallow any book for divine revelation,
 “ that contain'd a great many miracles, mix'd
 “ with a few good morals, without making
 “ due

“ due inquiry concerning the author, and
“ the authority thereof. But on the contra-
“ ry, their being so hard to be persuaded to
“ receive these controverted books for some
“ time, while they wanted, as they thought,
“ sufficient attestation, (although the doctrine
“ of them was in all points agreeable to the
“ doctrine of the other books which they
“ had before receiv’d; their being so hard,
“ I say, to receive these books) of the autho-
“ rity of which there nevertheless really was
“ such evidence, as they themselves, after hav-
“ ing well weigh’d and consider’d it, declar’d
“ themselves satisfied with, gives very good
“ ground to believe, that they had, from the
“ beginning, such evidence as was without
“ exception of the authority of *all those other*
“ *books* (that is, of much the greatest part)
“ of the *New Testament*, which were never
“ controverted, which were from the first,
“ and with universal consent, receiv’d by all
“ Christian churches. For if there had not
“ been very undeniable evidence of *their* be-
“ ing the *genuine* writings of the *Apostles*, or
“ other inspired men, there would certainly
“ have been the same doubt and controversy
“ concerning them, that there once was con-
“ cerning these.”

BUT supposing the authority of *all the*
books of the *New Testament* to be fully esta-
blish’d; how can we be sure, that they are
transmitted down to us *just* as they were *writ-*
ten? That, having been often transcrib’d, they

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have not been *corrupted*, and *alter'd* very much by the *ignorance* or *carelesjness* of the transcribers? Or, that several, even material, passages are not *curtail'd* and *mangled*, and others *interpolated* by the different parties of Christians, in the heat of their opposition to each other? By which means the face of Christianity may be vastly *chang'd*, and render'd quite *another thing* from what it was in the beginning. "If no court of
 "judicature, tho in a thing of small mo-
 "ment, will admit of a copy, tho taken
 "from the original, without oath made by
 "a disinterested person of his having com-
 "par'd it; because the least mistake, a va-
 "rious pointing, a parenthesis, a letter mis-
 "plac'd may alter the sense; how can we
 "absolutely depend in things of the greatest
 "moment, on voluminous writings, which
 "have been so often transcrib'd by men,
 "who never saw the original; (as none,
 "even of the most early writers, pretend
 "they did) and men too, who even in the
 "earliest times, if we may judge by the
 "number of forg'd passages, and even forg'd
 "books, would scruple no pious frauds*."

And accordingly, there are *actually*, in the present copies of the New Testament, *no less than 30000 various readings*, which this author (as all others of the same stamp) frequently mentions as a very *formidable* thing; which shews, they think, plainly, that these

* *Christianity &c.* p. 324.

copies are in fact so very *corrupt* and *erroneous*, that they are not to be depended on.

I THINK it very strange, that ingenious men, who are able to entertain the world much better, should tire it with *stale objections*, which have been so often consider'd, and *thoroughly answer'd*; and particularly, that the author of *Christianity &c.* should publish a large book, (that from the *great expectations* that were rais'd concerning it, one might justly imagine, would contain something *new* and *decisive* upon these points) in which old difficulties are *reviv'd*, without letting his readers know that *any solutions* of them have ever been attempted, and what those solutions are; or endeavouring to shew that they are *weak* and *insufficient*. Such a conduct must be *nauseous* to those who are already well-vers'd in controversies of this kind, and looks too much like a design to mislead the *injudicious* and *unwary*. And after all, what do these objections amount to? Why, to a *possibility of forgery*, but nothing at all of that kind *prov'd*; a *possibility of corruption*, but *no one material* corruption, interpolation, or omission *pointed at*, which has not been *discover'd*, and consequently, *being known*, can be of no disservice to Christianity; and at this rate *all the writings* of antiquity may be forg'd, or corrupted; 30000 *various readings*, the common fate of books that have been *often transcrib'd*, but none of them shewn to be of such moment, as to *disguise*, or *alter*,

any important doctrine of the Christian religion: so that they would signify nothing, if they arose *to twice that number*.

BUT there are several things that make it highly improbable, notwithstanding the inclination of some of the first Christians to *pious frauds*, that there are any important *alterations* and *corruptions* in the books of the *New Testament*: and these, I make no doubt, will have great weight, since there is nothing but *bare suspicion* on the other side. We have no *direct reason* to think they are corrupted, and several very *considerable probabilities* that they are not. And if these are sufficient to satisfy a *fair inquirer*; especially, if the copies of the *New Testament* are found to be as *pure* as those of *other* antient writings which are *depended* upon, and are not thought to be so perverted in any particular passages as to create *confusion*, or at all to hinder, but that the *general sense* of them may be easily understood; it matters not, whether, according to present *establish'd forms*, they would be admitted as evidence in a *court of judicature*. For it may be great *perverseness* and *folly* in private persons, in the common affairs of life, and, I think likewise, with respect to *religion*, in which, as it is the most important concern of mankind, *probabilities* ought always to determine, not to believe things, and form their conduct accordingly upon such *proofs*, as may not (perhaps for wise reasons) be

be allow'd to decide in the *administration of public justice*.

THE only question in short is this, whether men ought not to be guided by *real probabilities*, without *inquiring* at all, how far they are admitted in some particular circumstances; and whether such probabilities may not be sufficient to *convince* the judgment of their own minds, as will not sometimes pass in *courts of judicature*? If this be denied, mankind must in most cases sit still, *believe* nothing, and *do* nothing; they must drop their most *laudable* and *useful* designs; and all the great affairs of the world will be *at a stand*. And if it be allow'd, (and nothing in the world, I think, can be more plain) the next thing to be consider'd is, whether, the authority of the books of the New Testament being already establish'd, there be not a *sufficient probability* to persuade us, that they are convey'd down to our times so *pure* and *uncorrupt*, as that all Christians may from thence get a *perfect idea* of the Christian doctrine? If this likewise be proved, the necessary consequence from the whole will be, that it is highly reasonable for us to receive them as the rule of our religious behaviour, when we can advance nothing to the contrary but *possibilities*, and *ill-grounded suspicions*; and that the methods of *courts of judicature* (which insist frequently upon *clearer proof*, than is necessary barely to convince men of the *truth*

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of facts) ought to have no influence or weight at all with us, in the present inquiry.*

BUT to come more directly to the point. Let us examine if there be really any ground to suspect that the text of the *New Testament* is so *corrupt*, as to render its authority precarious and doubtful; or whether *all appearances* do not rather favour the contrary supposition. And,

* I thought what is offer'd above a sufficient answer to the author of *Christianity's* reasoning from the practice of courts of judicature, and therefore did not trouble myself to examine any farther; but I have since been inform'd by a very ingenious friend, who is thoroughly acquainted with the methods of proceeding in these courts, that 'tis a great mistake to say, that they "will not admit of a copy, tho' taken from the original, without oath made by a disinterested person of his having compar'd it;" and that the true state of the case is this. Where the original is extant, or there is a person living who has compar'd the copy with the original, a court of justice will expect, either that the original itself be produc'd, or else the oath of the person, who has compar'd the copy with it, that he believes it to be a true one; and that for this very good reason, because such proof *may be had*. But in cases, where it appears that the original is *lost*, as by fire, or any other accident; or where a deed is of such *great antiquity*, as that it may reasonably be suppos'd to be lost; and a copy is produc'd of such antiquity, that none who could be witnesses to the *comparing it with the original* can be suppos'd to be living; such copy is constantly admitted as evidence, without *any oath of its having been compar'd*. So that (as he adds) our author's argument, drawn from the practice of courts of judicature, can never serve his purpose, unless the original writings of the *New Testament* were *still extant*, or at least had been in being so very lately, that some persons, *now alive*, might be suppos'd to have compar'd our present copies with them; but as the case really stands, is monstrously absurd, since it requires what is, in its own nature, *impossible*, supposing the present copies to be perfectly *genuine and exact*.

WHEREAS

WHEREAS the author of *Christianity* &c. insinuates, that the writings of the *New Testament* are not much to be depended on, because they have been *so often transcrib'd*; it may be replied, that some of the copies we *now* have are of great *antiquity*, particularly the *Alexandrian*, which was made so early as the *fourth century*, and so might be taken from *some* at least of the *originals* themselves, which, *Tertullian* says, were to be seen in his time; or else, from *copies* that were taken *directly* from the originals. However, let what will come of this, we have as good presumptive proof of the *integrity* of these writings as can reasonably be desired.

FOR if we look into the books themselves, we shall find one *uniform consistent scheme* throughout the whole; the same entire *harmony* and *agreement* in all the parts, as might be expected, if they were *carefully* and *faithfully* transmitted down to our times; and none of those *contrarities*, and *clashing accounts* of facts or doctrines, as must have been unavoidable to a *great degree*, if they had been alter'd and perverted in *material passages*. And,

BESIDES this *internal* mark of purity, which, upon the supposition of gross corruption, is not to be accounted for, there are several other circumstances, that, taken *all together*, afford a very considerable *probability*;
viz.

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viz. that these books were, from *the beginning*, read in *all* Christian assemblies; and frequently quoted by the *earliest* Christian writers; that *many copies* of them were taken, and dispers'd in *various* parts of the world; and that they were very soon translated into *several languages*: so that if we suppose that *some* copies might be corrupted, we cannot believe that the corruption could be *universal*, without insinuating, what is too *mean* and *scandalous* to serve any cause, that the *whole* Christian world concurr'd in the cheat. We ought rather to argue (as being a more *just*, as well as charitable and generous way of reasoning) that as all honest men are greatly concern'd for the purity of religion upon which their *highest interests* depend, 'tis utterly improbable such a thing could be effected; and to increase the *improbability*, let it be consider'd, that there were different sects of Christians who *narrowly watch'd* each other, and would have been ready to *detect* and *expose* all impostures of this kind; or if it was possible, that when the Christians had got the *temporal power* into their hands, that party which was *uppermost* might *corrupt* some copies, and *destroy* all the rest; besides, that this is but barely *possible*, but not at all *credible*, considering the *great number* of copies that were dispers'd every where, and the variety of *translations*; a thing of this nature could not have happen'd without being *loudly* complain'd of; it must have put the whole Christian world in an *uproar*, and given the enemies of Christianity a

vast *advantage* against it; some account of which, as of other confusions and disturbances in the church of *less moment*, would undoubtedly have been preserv'd in *some* or *other* of the writings of those ages which are *still extant*, compos'd by men of *different parties*, and *interests*.

AGAIN, we know that some corruptions have been *detected*, which confirms the main of the preceding argument, and shews clearly, that there was far from being an inclination among Christians, *universally*, to countenance and support such *base* and *knaveish* designs; and the same *honest* disposition, the same *capacity*, and *diligence*, would probably have discover'd and expos'd *all* such frauds. And,

FINALLY, our present copies *agree*, in all points of importance, with all the most antient *versions*; and with the *numerous quotations* that were made from the books of the New Testament by the most *early* Christian writers. So that upon the whole, we have *stronger evidence* of their purity, than we can have with respect to any other books of *equal antiquity*, in which, it was not so much the concern of all virtuous persons to prevent *corruptions*; which are not *quoted* by so many other authors; and of which *copies* and *translations* were not so frequent, nor so *widely* dispers'd.

BUT notwithstanding all these seeming probabilities, is there any arguing against *plain fact*? Are there not “30000 various readings in the copies of the *New Testament*, as “it stands at present?” not to mention, “innumerable copies that have been lost, which, no doubt, had their different readings*” also. And does not this prove great *unskilfulness* or *negligence* in the transcribers at least, if not *wilful corruption*? To this several things are replied, viz. that the various readings rather tend to *settle* the true text, than *confound* and *pervert* it;—that those writings, of which there are the *fewest* copies, are the most *corrupt* of any, and cannot be *amended*;—that there have been more copies and translations of the *New Testament* than of any other antient book whatsoever, and consequently, it is reasonable to expect there should be *more variations*;—but that in proportion to the *number*, there are full as many differences in the copies of the *purest* authors of antiquity;—and that the most *corrupt* copies we have are, in all essential points, sufficiently exact to give men a just notion of Christianity, and consequently to answer the end for which those writings were originally design’d. But let us hear what is said upon this head by one, who will be allow’d to be as *accurate* a judge in controversies of this kind, as any age has produc’d.

* *Christianity &c.* p. 324.

“ IF (says this most learned author) there
“ had been but one manuscript of the *Greek*
“ Testament, at the restoration of learning
“ about two centuries ago; then we had had
“ no *various readings* at all. And would the
“ text be in a better condition, than now we
“ have 30000? So far from that; that in
“ the best single copy extant, we should have
“ had hundreds of faults, and some omissions
“ irreparable. Besides that the suspicions of
“ fraud and foul play would have been in-
“ creas’d immensly.

“ IT is good therefore, you’ll allow, to
“ have more authors than one; and another
“ MS to join with the first would give more
“ authority, as well as security. Now chuse
“ that second where you will, there shall be
“ a thousand variations from the first; and
“ yet half or more of the faults shall still re-
“ main in them both.

“ A THIRD therefore, and so a fourth,
“ and still on, are desirable; that by a joint
“ and mutual help all the faults may be mend-
“ ed: some copy preserving the true reading
“ in one place, and some in another. And
“ yet the more copies you call to assistance,
“ the more do the various readings multiply
“ upon you: every copy having its peculiar
“ slips, though in a principal passage or two
“ it do singular service. And this is fact, not
“ only

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“ only in the New Testament, but in all an-
“ tient books whatever.

“ ’TIS a good providence, and a great
“ blessing, that so many manuscripts of the
“ New Testament are still amongst us; some
“ procur’d from *Egypt*, others from *Asia*,
“ others found in the *Western* churches: for
“ the very distances of places, as well as
“ numbers of the books, demonstrate that
“ there could be no collusion, nor altering,
“ nor interpolating one copy by another, nor
“ all by any of them.

“ IN profane authors (as they are called)
“ whereof one manuscript only had the luck
“ to be preserv’d, as *Velleius Paterculus* a-
“ mong the *Latins*, and *Hesychius* among the
“ *Greeks*; the faults of the scribes are found
“ so numerous, and the defects beyond all
“ redress, that notwithstanding the pains of
“ the learnedst and acutest critics for two
“ whole centuries, these books are still, and
“ are like to continue a mere heap of errors.
“ On the contrary, where the copies of any
“ author are numerous, though the *various*
“ *readings* always increase in proportion;
“ there the text, by an accurate collation of
“ them made by skilful and judicious hands,
“ is ever the more correct, and comes nearer
“ to the true words of the author.

“ *TERENCE* is now in one of the best
“ conditions of any of the classic writers;
“ the

“ the oldest and best copy of him is now in
“ the *Vatican* library, which comes nearest
“ to the poet’s own hand ; but even that has
“ hundreds of errors, most of which may be
“ mended out of other exemplars, that are
“ otherwise more recent, and of inferior va-
“ lue. I myself have collated several ; and
“ do affirm, that I have seen 20000 various
“ lections in that little author, not near so
“ big as the whole *New Testament* : and am
“ morally sure, that if half the number of
“ manuscripts were collated for *Terence* with
“ that niceness and minuteness which has been
“ used in twice as many for the *New Testa-*
“ *ment*, the number of the *variations* would
“ amount to above 50000.

“ IN the manuscripts of the *New Testament*
“ the variations have been noted with a reli-
“ gious, not to say superstitious exactness.
“ Every difference in spelling, in the smallest
“ particle or article of speech, in the very
“ order or collation of words without real
“ change, has been studiously registred. Nor
“ has the text only been ransack’d, but all
“ the antient versions, the *Latin Vulgate*,
“ *Italic*, *Æthiopic*, *Arabic*, *Coptic*, *Armenian*,
“ *Gothic*, and *Saxon* ; nor these only, but all
“ the dispers’d citations of the *Greek* and
“ *Latin Fathers* in a course of 500 years.
“ What wonder then, if with all this scru-
“ pulous search in every hole and corner, the
“ varieties rise to 30000 ? when in all anti-
“ ent books of the same bulk, whereof the
“ MSS

“ MSS are numerous, the variations are as
 “ many, or more ; and yet no versions to
 “ swell the reckoning.

“ THE editors of profane authors do not
 “ use to trouble their readers, or risk their
 “ own reputation, by an useless list of every
 “ small slip committed by a lazy or ignorant
 “ scribe. What is thought commendable in
 “ an edition of scripture, and has the name
 “ of fairness and fidelity, would in them be
 “ deem'd impertinence and trifling. Hence
 “ the reader not vers'd in antient MSS is
 “ deceiv'd into an opinion, that there were
 “ no more variations in the copies, than what
 “ the editor has communicated. Whereas,
 “ if the like scrupulousness was observ'd in
 “ registering the smallest changes in prophane
 “ authors, as is allow'd, nay, requir'd in fa-
 “ cred ; the now formidable number of 30000
 “ would appear a very trifle.

“ 'TIS manifest, that books in verse are
 “ not near so obnoxious to variations, as prose :
 “ the transcriber, if he is not wholly igno-
 “ rant and stupid, being guided by the mea-
 “ sures ; and hindred from such alterations,
 “ as do not fall in with the laws of numbers.
 “ And yet even in poets, the variations are
 “ so very many, as can hardly be conceiv'd
 “ without use and experience. In the late
 “ edition of *Tibullus*, by the learned Mr.
 “ *Broukhuiſe*, you have a register of various
 “ *lections* in the close of that book ; where
 “ you

“ you may see at the first view that there
“ are as many as the lines. The same is visi-
“ ble in *Plautus*, set out by *Paræus*. I my-
“ self, during my travels, have had the op-
“ portunity to examine several MSS of the
“ poet *Manilius*; and can assure you, that
“ the variations I have met with are twice as
“ many as all the lines of the book.—Add
“ likewise, that the MSS here used were few
“ in comparison: and then do you imagine,
“ what the lections would amount to, if ten
“ times as many (the case of *Dr. Mill*) were
“ accurately examin’d. And yet in these
“ and all other books, the text is not made
“ more *precarious* on that account, but more
“ certain and authentic.

“—IF a corrupt line, or dubious reading
“ chances to intervene, it does not darken
“ the whole context, nor make an author’s
“ opinion, or his purpose, *precarious*. *Terence*,
“ for instance, has as many variations, as any
“ book whatever in proportion to its bulk;
“ and yet with all its interpolations, omis-
“ sions, additions, or glosses (chuse the worst
“ of them on purpose) you cannot deface
“ the contrivance and plot of one play; no,
“ not of one single scene; but its sense, design,
“ and subserviency to the last issue and con-
“ clusion, shall be visible and plain thorough
“ all the mist of *various lections*. And so it
“ is with the sacred text; make your 30000
“ as many more, if numbers of copies can
“ ever reach that sum: all the better to a

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“ knowing and serious reader, who is there-
 “ by more richly furnish’d to select what he
 “ sees genuine. But even put them into the
 “ hands of a knave or a fool: and yet with
 “ the most sinistrous and absurd choice, he
 “ shall not extinguish the light of any one
 “ chapter, nor disguise Christianity, but that
 “ every feature of it will be the same *.” I
 make no doubt but that the reader will easily
 excuse this long quotation, as it sets the mat-
 ter of the *various readings* in so clear a light,
 and shews that there is not the *least difficulty*
 in it; though at the same time, he must be
 at a loss what to think of the *fairness* and
modesty of those writers, who without being
 able, or pretending to be able, to confute any
 part of it, still go on in the *old track*, and
 think to bear down all before them by *confi-*
dent and *groundless insinuations*.

THE author of *Christianity* (among the
 rest) has not said one word to all this; only
 he seems to think it not sufficient, because
 “ one or two various readings [in the New
 “ Testament] where most things are own’d
 “ to be of the greatest moment, may be
 “ of that consequence, as to destroy the de-
 “ sign of the whole book †.” To which I
 answer, that *may-be’s* go for nothing at all;
 and that it would be time enough to reply to
 this, when he has produc’d any readings of

* *Remarks on a discourse of Free-Thinking*, by Phileleutherus
 Lipfienfis; p. 64 — 68. and p. 76. edit. 5th.

† P. 325.

such great consequence. However, to shew that there is nothing in the objection, let it be consider'd, that *various readings, which destroy the whole design* of revelation, must be such as pervert some *essential* doctrines of it. Suppose then, that in *two, or three, places*, the text of the New Testament was so *corrupted* as to assert, " that God is not wise, just and good ;
" that Jesus is not the Christ ; that men
" might practise idolatry ; or deceive, and
" persecute each other ; or that there is no
" future state," and the like ; such readings could not, and ought not to be admitted as the *true readings*, contrary to the *general* and most *evident strain* of the revelation : but every one would naturally look upon them as the *errors* of transcribers, and not as the *original words* of the writers, to whose sentiments they not only bear no *resemblance*, but are a manifest *contradiction*. And indeed if we judge otherwise, 'tis impossible for us to find the sense of *any author* whatever. So that if men reason fairly, and as they ought to do, *one or two various readings* cannot *destroy the design of the whole* New Testament ; because readings of that *importance* being directly contrary to the *plain* and *unquestionable design* of it, it must be as probable, as a thing of that nature can be, that they are *false readings*.

BUT admitting the credibility of the gospel-history to be sufficiently establish'd, and that we have all the probability we can de-

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fire, that the books of the new Testament are convey'd down to us pure in all material passages, how can the common people upon rational grounds be satisfi'd of these things? " Religion either does not concern the ma-
 " jority, as being incapable of forming a
 " judgment about it; or it must carry such
 " internal marks of its truth, as men of
 " mean capacity are able to discover: or else
 " notwithstanding the infinite variety of re-
 " ligions, all who do not understand the ori-
 " ginal languages their traditional religions
 " are written in, which is all mankind,
 " a very few excepted, are alike bound
 " in all places to pin their faith on their
 " priest, and believe in men, who have an
 " interest to deceive them; and who have
 " seldom fail'd to do so, when occasion
 " serves.

" CAN people, if incapable by their rea-
 " son to distinguish truth from falsehood,
 " have any thing more to plead for the
 " truth of their religion, than that they be-
 " lieve it to be the true religion; because their
 " priests, who are hir'd to maintain it, tell
 " them it was a long while ago reveal'd to
 " certain persons, who, as they, on their
 " *priestly* words, assure them, were too wise
 " to be impos'd on themselves; and too ho-
 " nest to impose on others: and that no
 " change could have been made in their re-
 " ligion in after-times; the care men have of
 " their

“ their own souls, as well as their natural
“ affection for posterity, obliging them from
“ generation to generation, to hand down
“ their religion just as they receiv’d it : and
“ that it was morally impossible innovations
“ should creep in, since it would be the
“ highest folly in any to attempt to introduce
“ new doctrines, as a tradition receiv’d from
“ their ancestors ; when all must know they
“ had receiv’d no such tradition. As this is
“ all, the bulk of mankind, if they are not
“ capable of judging from the doctrines them-
“ selves of their truth, can say for their re-
“ ligion ; so they, in all places, make use of
“ this argument ; and with equal confidence
“ aver, that, though all other traditionary
“ religions are full of gross falsehoods, and
“ most absurd notions, which their priests
“ impudently impose on them as divine
“ truths ; yet our own priests are such faith-
“ ful representers of things, that one may
“ as well question the truth of all history,
“ as the truth of things believ’d on their
“ authority.

“ THIS boasted argument, in which men
“ of all religions so much triumph, if it
“ proves any thing, would prove there ne-
“ ver was, nor could be any false religion,
“ either in whole, or part ; because truth be-
“ ing before falsehood, and mens ancestors
“ having once possess’d it, no change could
“ afterward ever happen : whereas on the
“ contrary, though there have been at times

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“ great numbers of traditional religions, yet
 “ as far as it appears, no one of them has
 “ long remain’d the same; at least, in such
 “ points as were merely founded on tradi-
 “ tion.

“ I SEE no middle, but that we must
 “ either own, that there are such internal
 “ marks fix’d to every part of the true reli-
 “ gion, as will enable the bulk of mankind
 “ to distinguish it from all false religions;
 “ or else, that all traditionary religions are
 “ upon a level: since those, who, in every
 “ country, are hir’d to maintain them, will
 “ not fail to assert, they have all external
 “ marks; such as *uninterrupted traditions,*
 “ *incontested miracles, confession of adversaries,*
 “ *number of proselytes, agreement among them-*
 “ *selves*; and all those other external argu-
 “ ments, that the *Papists* and *Mahometans*
 “ set so high a value on. In this case, what
 “ can the common people do, who under-
 “ stand not a word of the language, their
 “ religion, and its external proofs are writ in,
 “ but be of the religion in which they are
 “ educated; especially, if nothing is suffer’d
 “ to be publish’d, which may, in the least,
 “ tend to make them question its truth; and
 “ all other religions are represented as full of
 “ the grossest absurdities*.” Now in answer
 to this, which I have not abridg’d, that the

reader may see this author's reasoning in its *full strength*, I observe,

THAT the defenders of revelation have no reason to assert, that a *traditional religion* is to be receiv'd upon the mere foot of *authority*; but there are certain *internal characters* absolutely necessary in order to its being a divine revelation, which *men of mean capacity are able to discover*. For instance, the principal design of all *reveal'd religion* must be to restore and establish *natural*; to give mankind *just* and *worthy* notions of God, and ascertain the principles and obligations of *morality*; and to promote the true rational *perfection* and *happiness* of human nature: and all its *positive institutions*, and *peculiar doctrines*, it is reasonable to expect, will be intended as helps and motives to virtue. In general therefore the people are capable, by their *reason*, of judging whether any particular traditional revelation be worthy of God; they are not requir'd to believe it *implicitly* even upon the authority of *miracles*; and consequently, a *tradition of miracles* is not all they have to urge in support of it.

BUT the proving that the *peculiar doctrines* of revelation are not repugnant to reason, nor unworthy of God, is only an argument that they *may* be true, and not a sufficient foundation upon which to conclude they are *really* true. Here then comes in the attestation of the miracles, to convince mankind that what

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their reason approves, as *worthy* of God, *actually proceeds* from him. And therefore it must be own'd, that the common people cannot rationally believe the truth of any traditional revelation, that contains doctrines which reason *could not discover*, unless they can have full satisfaction, that the histories they have of such doctrines, and of the miracles wrought in confirmation of them, are *authentic*, and *credible*. So that the question to be resolv'd is in short this; whether, as they are capable of discerning the *internal marks* of the truth of Christianity, they are not likewise able to form a rational judgment concerning the *credibility* of the gospel-history, and its *conveyance* down to our times without any *material alteration*, or *corruption*.

IF the common people can judge of *such* kind of proofs (as *uncontested miracles* must establish the truth of any doctrines that are agreeable to reason, and adapted to advance true goodness, and which belong to what is upon the whole a most *useful* and *perfect* scheme of morality; and consequently against which, as very fit to be parts of a *divine revelation*, no objection of weight can be form'd) they may have *sufficient* reason to believe the traditional religion in which they are educated; though there are not “such internal
“ marks fix'd to every part of it, as alone
“ will enable them to distinguish it from all
“ false religions.” It will indeed have this *general internal mark to distinguish it from all false*

false religions, that the *wise* and *beneficent* design of its author will plainly appear in the whole frame of it, and that even its *peculiar principles* will stand the test of reason ; but though they may be such as reason cannot condemn, and which, if true, must have a considerable influence upon our moral conduct, 'tis most evident (as has been already hinted) that this of itself does not prove they are true : so that something, besides *internal marks*, may be absolutely necessary to establish the credit of a revelation that is *worthy of God* ; or in other words, of a revelation, which, after the strictest inquiry, we may apprehend it to be *agreeable to his perfections* to communicate to mankind. And farther, if the bulk of mankind are able to judge of the *authenticness* and *credibility* of antient histories, it must be a great mistake of the author of *Christianity* &c. that if such
“ internal marks are not fix'd to every part
“ of the true religion, as will enable them
“ to distinguish it from all false religions, all
“ traditionary religions are upon the level.”
For let “ those, who in every country are
“ hir'd to maintain them, be ever so confident in asserting, that they have all external
“ marks ; such as *uninterrupted traditions*,
“ *incontested miracles*, *confession of adversaries*,
“ *number of proselytes*, *agreement among themselves*, and all those other external arguments, that the *Papists*, and (as he says) the
“ *Mahometans* set so high a value on ;” the
common people being able, as will presently be
shewn,

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shewn, upon a view of what is offer'd on *both sides* of the question, to distinguish between *true* and *false* pretences, are no more under a necessity of being impos'd upon, or of embracing a *traditional religion* implicitly, than they are of believing without evidence in points of the most *pure* and *abstract reasoning*, which do not at all depend upon tradition.

ALL this *shew* of argument therefore is plainly founded upon the supposition, that the generality must take a traditional religion entirely from the *authority* of their *priests*, and that this is all they have to plead for the truth of it: but as we have only the author's bare assertion for this, it will undoubtedly go for nothing. It must pass however for a specimen of a very *extraordinary* kind of reasoning, first to lay it down as a fundamental principle, that if men are incapable by their reason, without the testimony of miracles, to discover every part of a traditional religion, "all who do not understand
" the original languages their traditional religions are written in, which is all mankind, a very few excepted, are alike bound
" in all places, to pin their faith on their priests;" and to think this sufficiently prov'd by asking, what "they can have more to
" plead for the truth of their religion, than
" that they believe it to be true, because their
" priests tell them *so and so*;" and then upon such a slender foundation to declare, that
" all

“ all traditionary religions are upon a level ;” and that the common people have nothing to do “ but to be of the religion in which they “ are educated.” The consequence would indeed be just, if the premises were true ; but there happens unluckily to be this great defect, that the premises, which are the very things in dispute, are *taken for granted* ; and that the author of *Christianity* &c. seems to take the putting a question *how* a thing *can be*, to be an argument that *it cannot be* ; which, it must be allow’d, is a very *expeditious* and *easy* way of deciding all controversies,

I PROCEED now to answer the question directly, how the *common people* may be persuaded of the truth of facts, the knowledge of which depends upon *tradition* ; of the *authenticness*, for instance, of the books of the New Testament, the *credibility* of the accounts contain’d in them, and that they have not suffer’d any material alteration in the *conveyance*. That this is the truth of the case has been largely proved ; the only thing therefore that remains to be shewn is, that the people are capable of seeing this proof. And what is it that is necessary in order to this ? Why only, that they have *proper materials* upon which to form a right judgment, and a *capacity* of judging upon those materials.

To obtain the first, let them set themselves to examine the truth of Christianity
with

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with an *honest, attentive, impartial* mind, and read carefully what is offer'd on both sides, *for it, and against it*; and then, if what has been hitherto written is *sufficient* to determine the controversy, they must know all that is necessary to be known, in order to the making a *rational* judgment about it. Upon this supposition they know as much as the *writers themselves*, who may be presum'd to have deliver'd their sentiments in the *fullest* and *strongest* manner they were able; and consequently have as *extensive* a view of the subject, as men of learning, and much superior improvements. Nor is it necessary to their attaining *sufficient skill* in this controversy, that they read every thing which has been written upon it, or may be written hereafter, (which would be too *laborious* and *voluminous* an inquiry for the generality of mankind, an inquiry that their *opportunities* and *circumstances* in life would not perhaps admit of) for as the subject has been often handled, there are scarce any two writers of note but contain all that is *material*. Thus far then, I think, the case is very plain, *viz.* that if the dispute can be decided by what the learned have written, and consequently by what they *know* about it, the *common people*, who by reading may be furnish'd with all their ideas, must be able to form as rational a judgment; provided the point itself to be determin'd be not above their *capacities*: Nay, 'tis not at all absurd to suppose, that they may often make a *truer judgment*; because they may
pursue

pursue their inquiries with minds more free from *prejudice*, and better disposed to allow every argument its *proper weight* than those, who, with their greater abilities, have too frequently strong attachments to a *particular scheme*, make it their business to *puzzle* and *confound* what they cannot answer, and dispute not for *truth* but *victory*.

Now what is there in the present case, that is above the *capacity* of the bulk of mankind? Are not all, who will exercise their reason and examine impartially, able to judge, upon a view of the arguments on *both sides*, whether the books of the New Testament are prov'd to be *forgeries*; or whether it be prov'd on the contrary, that they were *constantly ascrib'd* to the authors whose names they bear; that they are supported by the same *undisputed tradition* as other antient writings which are universally allow'd to be *genuine*; and consequently, that the rejecting them as *spurious* destroys the authority of all antient histories, which stand upon *no better foundation*? If they are unable to judge, upon having the *whole evidence before them*, whether these, which are plain *matters of fact*, are prov'd or no, they can judge of *no facts* whatever. And what confusion would such a notion of the common people occasion, if it was brought into *civil life*.

AND if the people can judge of the proofs which are offer'd for the *authenticness* of the books

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books of the New Testament; it will sure be trifling with the understandings of men to attempt to shew, that they are able to judge when it is sufficiently prov'd that historians are *credible*, and whether the objections which are made against their testimony are strong enough to *set it aside*. For being convinc'd that these accounts were written by *eye-witnesses*; if they cannot judge whether it be prov'd, that *eye-witnesses* in the relation of such facts could not, considering all circumstances, *be imposed on themselves*; and that they were men of such *integrity* (demonstrated by the general course of their behaviour, by their attesting these things in opposition to their worldly interests, and chusing ALL not only to suffer, but die, rather than retract their testimony) as cannot rationally be suspected of a design to *impose on others*; I say, if they are incapable of judging when this is *fully* prov'd, the consequence will indeed be, that they ought never to believe any thing upon *testimony*, and what would become of the world if this was true? All commerce between man and man must immediately be suspended, and the design of their social nature be entirely defeated.

THE same may be said with respect to *corruptions*; the common people must be capable of discerning, when they see what is offer'd on *both sides*, whether this charge is prov'd or not; whether any instances of gross cor-

corruption are *produced*, and clearly shewn to be such, or the whole of what is advanc'd be only *surmise* and *conjecture*, contrary to all the *probabilities* of things; otherwise, they cannot be judges of probability in *any case*; and consequently, considering in how few of the affairs of life *higher evidence* can be had, their reason must be in a manner *useless*.

So far am I in my judgment from thinking it of service to the Christian religion, that the liberty of writing against it should be at all *restrain'd*, that I would have it *encourag'd* to the utmost; and cannot think of a better method to fix even the *vulgar* more firmly in the belief of the gospel-history, than reading the objections of its adversaries. This, I am persuaded, will give a *greater weight* to the arguments which are urg'd to establish its authenticnes, credibility, and purity, in the most excellent *defences* of Christianity. Let them read, for instance, *Christianity as old as the creation*, &c. or any other book where the same things are said in a much narrower compass, and when they find, instead of *direct proofs* of forgery with respect to the writings of the New Testament, only groundless *suspicion*, and *insinuations* that there *may be* forgery, and that none of the writers on this side of the question are so hardy as to *pretend*, that the *authenticnes* of far the greatest part of them was ever disputed in the most early ages; when they find what trifling things are
objected

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objected against the *capacity* and *integrity* of the gospel-historians, and how they *strain* and *rack* their invention to raise difficulties, which, after all, amount to nothing but to destroy the credibility of the most *unexceptionable testimony*, and make men distrust their *very senses*; and that as there is nothing of moment urg'd against the *authenticness*, and *credibility* of the books, there is not the least probable evidence given that they are corrupted in any *material* branches of Christian doctrine, nor *a single corruption of consequence* pointed at, but what was before discover'd by the honesty and diligence of *Christian writers*, which is a strong presumption that these writings are, in general, *pure* and *entire*; and finally, when they find, that all the stir which has been made about *various readings* comes to no more than this, that there are *the same differences* in the copies of the New Testament as are to be found in the copies of the purest authors of antiquity; and that there is not so much as an attempt made to prove, that these differences are of any *great importance* (only perhaps they *may be*, but *these writers themselves* do not take upon them to say they *are*) or that they *obscure*, *disguise*, and *pervert* any essential doctrine of the Christian revelation; when, I say, the people find, that this is *all* the most *ingenious* and *subtil* opposers of Christianity have to offer against its authority, (which is indeed *nothing more* than may be urg'd against the authority of all antient books) they *will*, and ought to conclude,

that its great facts stand upon so *sure* a foundation as cannot be *shaken*. 'Tis natural for them to reason thus, that if any thing *more material* could be advanced, men of their *skill* would undoubtedly be able to produce it; and they cannot imagine that 'tis for want of an inclination to make a *home thrust*, that they deal in *possibilities* instead of *direct and positive proofs*, but because they know they have *no other arguments* to make use of. The people can have no ground to suspect, that the adversaries of their religion have any more important objections *in reserve*, than those which they have already urg'd. For tho the terror of *penal laws* (which are but weak supports of a *false* religion, and unnecessary to guard the *true*, that being never so well defended, as when it is left to make its way by the force of *its own evidence*) I say, tho the terror of *penal laws* may restrain them from making a *direct* and *open* attack upon Christianity, which is the establish'd religion; experience teaches us, that they are not at a loss for ways, in which to say the *freest things* both against the miracles, and doctrine, of Christ and his Apostles. And it may be justly question'd, whether by this *artful insinuating* method, in which there is more room for *evasion*, and men cannot be kept so strictly to the rules of *close reasoning*, they have not done more prejudice to the Christian cause, than they could, had they been allowed to throw off all *disguises*, and argue *professedly* against it; and consequently, whether

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ther this be not the method they *choose* to proceed in? But be that as it will, it can't be expected that the people should *suspend* their belief of reveal'd religion, till they are sure no more objections *can*, or *will* be made to it: for at this rate they can fix on nothing, but must indulge to eternal *scepticism*. It is not their business to concern themselves about what may *one time, or other*, or perhaps *never*, be offer'd; but to be determin'd by the evidence they have. And therefore if Christianity, upon a serious examination of the reasons on *both sides*, appears to their minds to be a *rational* institution, and supported by *sufficient* evidence, they ought to believe and submit to it; and continue to acknowledge it as a *divine* religion, till these *stronger arguments*, if any such there be, are produced, and convince their judgments of the contrary.

THUS have I shewn, that the common people, if they will give themselves time to *read*, and *consider*, need not take the Christian revelation *implicitly* from their ancestors, or their priests; but are capable of discerning both the *intrinsic goodness* of the doctrine, and its *external proofs*. It must be own'd, that the difficulty is much greater with respect to those persons who *cannot read*, or want proper *opportunities* and *advantages* for making inquiries of this kind themselves: but however, even *these* are so far from being, universally, under a necessity of *implicit faith*, that *very many* of them, at least, may, if they

they will, form their judgment upon a *rational conviction*. Of the *intrinsic excellency* of a revelation they are all judges; and in order to judge of its *external proofs*, let them find out a person that is *well skill'd* in this controversy, and of whose *veracity* they are well assured (and such an one, it cannot be denied, but many of the most *ignorant* and *illiterate* vulgar, if they exercise the same *care* and *prudence* as they would in chusing a person, to advise and manage for them in the common affairs of life, may *easily* find) and let him lay before them fairly and impartially *the substance* of the argument *on both sides*, upon which they may maturely *deliberate* and *determine*. 'Tis evident, that in this case they do not take the judgment of another about a point of *speculation*, but only his representation of a *matter of fact*: they do not trust to his *understanding*, but his *integrity*.

IF it be said, that they trust his *understanding* so far, *viz.* to give them a judicious state of the argument in its full strength: I answer, that the People may indeed make a *wrong* choice; but, as I hinted before, if they are sincerely desirous to be rightly inform'd, there are *vast numbers*, to whom it will be no great difficulty to pitch upon a person whose *capacity* cannot be disputed; so that there will be but little danger of their being *imposed* on, if they can rely upon his *honesty*. However, for their greater security they may

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apply

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apply to *several*, and try how far their accounts agree. And let it but be allowed, that persons who have such *opportunities*, and act with that *prudence* and *caution* which the importance of the inquiry deserves, may have as *good reason* to be satisfied in this case, as they have in other matters of the greatest moment, wherein they depend upon the information of men of *known abilities*, and *unquestionable veracity*, we desire no more. For this supposes, that they may have a *sufficient probability* of the truth of the Christian religion; such a probability as leaves no rational ground of *doubt*; and which it is always, and justly, thought their *wisdom* to be determined by, in all other affairs of consequence. After all it must be own'd, that this method may be attended with *some difficulties*, but, I think, not with greater than men often meet with, and get *successfully* through, in the management of their secular concerns; and with respect to those who cannot inquire *for themselves*, and likewise want opportunities to get *proper information* from others, I make no scruple to allow, that their belief of a traditional revelation must be *implicit*; but yet it may be of great use to them, if they have frequent opportunities to hear it *read* and *explain'd*, by fixing in their minds the principles of *natural religion*, and giving them such just notions of *morality*, as, 'tis probable, they would never have attained by their own *private reflections*.

I HAVE all along taken it for granted (because it is the true and natural state of things which God designed) that the common people will *read*, and consider, and make use of *those helps* which are in their power, in order to understand the proofs of the truth and purity of a *traditional* religion. And 'tis *sufficient*, that if they do this they may form a rational judgment of these points; and as much as can be said with respect to *natural religion* itself. For let the religion of nature be ever so plain to the *diligent* and *impartial* inquirer, men will as necessarily be ignorant of *that*, if they are *indolent*, *careless*, and *unthinking*, if they *neglect* the use of their reason, or suffer it to be darkened by *superstition* and *prejudice*, as of the evidences of an *external revelation*. The knowledge of the *one* is no more to be obtained without proper reflection, than of the *other*; and a careful examination will discover *both*. Nay, I can't help thinking, and appeal to every man who has made observations on the world, that the meanest of the people will judge more easily of the proof of *matters of fact*, and the *credibility* of *testimony*, than of *abstract* and *close* reasonings even upon *moral* subjects.

IF it should be objected, that 'tis not probable that *the bulk of mankind*, considering their education, circumstances, the influence of sensible objects, how little they are used

to reasoning, and how much their thoughts are engaged by the necessary business and cares of life, will *think* and *examine*: I answer, that then they must take the consequence, which is, that they will have no *certain rule* at all of their actions, and know as little of the *laws of reason*, as of the *true grounds of revelation*; so that this proves no more against a *standing revelation* being a proper means of instructing them in their duty, than against *reason itself*. And though it should be allowed, that in countries where *free debate* is discouraged, and forbidden under severe penalties, and the people are obliged to take their accounts both of a *revelation*, and its *proofs*, from certain particular persons authorized and maintained for that purpose, they can have no more reason to believe even a *true traditional revelation*, than others may have for believing a *false one*; this, I apprehend, does not in the least affect the present argument, because it is purely *accidental*; and such accidents, in the present state of the world, while men are *ambitious, designing, and interested*, and apt to *impose* upon their fellow creatures whenever they have it in their power, are *unavoidable*.

THE just state of the question is, whether revelation be not, *in itself*, a proper rule for the generality of mankind, a rule, of which (when things are as they ought to be) they are *able to judge*; whether they can-

not

not discern both its *intrinsic goodness*, and *external proofs* though depending on *tradition*. As it has been already shewn that they are capable of this, must it not be perverse in any to insinuate, that it was not *fit* for God to communicate it, because the wise and gracious design of it happens to be in a great measure defeated by the *wickedness* and *craft* of some, and the *slavish implicit* submission of others? The Christian revelation was undeniably of great use when it was first published, in reforming the corrupt sentiments and manners of the world; and let it prevail now as far as it can *rationally* (particularly in those blessed nations of light and liberty, where *far the greater part* of the people may be judges upon what foundation it stands) and it will continue to be of *eminent* advantage. I shall only add, that if in some countries the common people are so *enslaved*, and kept in such *ignorance*, as to be hardly capable of judging fairly of the proofs of a *traditional religion*; by the same methods of *imposition* and *restraint*, by grafting *superstition* upon their *fears*, and an artful management of their *credulity*, their *natural notions of good and evil* have been abominably, and almost universally corrupted to such a degree, that it was not reasonable to expect, without an *extraordinary* assistance, that they would ever recover themselves out of their degenerate state, to the knowledge and practice of the true *religion of nature*. Of this the old Heathen world, and, if we can cre-

dit modern accounts, Heathen nations at this day, are most *notorious* and *flagrant* examples.

I KNOW but of one difficulty that lies against what has been said under this head, which has not been already obviated, *viz.* that the same exercise of *reason*, the same *thought* and *impartial inquiry*, which is necessary to enable men to see the true grounds of a *traditional religion*, will discover *all the principles of natural religion*, without a revelation. What advantage is there then in a *standing revelation*, above mens being left to the mere light of *reason*? To which it will be *sufficient* to give this short answer, that allowing what this objection supposes to be true, it does not at all affect any part of the preceding argument; my business being only to prove, against the author of *Christianity &c.* who asserts the contrary, that the common people are able to judge of the truth and purity of a *traditional revelation*, without concerning myself at all with the debate, whether they might, or might not, *by the same pains and care*, attain to a complete knowledge of the *religion of nature*. However, I shall add farther, that as this does not render an external revelation in any degree less *useful*, when the reason of mankind is in fact *corrupted* and *darken'd*; it has likewise, when men are upon rational grounds convinc'd of the truth of it, these two great advantages, as a *standing guide*, beyond the sole direction

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direction of natural light ; that it furnishes a more *uniform, consistent, and universal* rule of duty, than could reasonably be expected, considering mens different capacities, humours, prejudices, and the like, if every one was left to *form a scheme of morality for himself*; and affords *stronger motives* to the practice of virtue, particularly by assuring us of the *eternity* of future rewards, which to mere reason is at best *obscure, and doubtful*.

’T WILL be needless to make remarks on this author’s account of the *external proofs* of a traditional revelation ; because though he affirms it is *all* that can be said, the reader, I make no doubt, after what has been so largely offer’d upon this head, will think it such an *imperfect* and *partial* representation, as could not be given but by one, who either had not *thoroughly considered* the argument, or chose to urge it so *weakly* that he might the more easily *triumph*. Let me only observe, that it is so far from being the *whole* of the argument against *innovations* in a traditional religion, “ that it was morally impossible innovations should creep in; the care men have of their own souls, and their natural affection for posterity, obliging them from generation to generation, to hand down their religion just as they received it;” and, “ since it would be the highest folly in any to attempt to introduce new doctrines, as a tradition receiv’d from their ancestors ; when all must know they had

“ re-

“ receiv’d no such tradition,” this, I say, is so far from being the whole of the argument, that ’tis really one of the most *minute* and *inconsiderable* branches of it: the improbability of *innovations* and *corruptions*, with respect to the Christian revelation, arising, as I have shewn, almost entirely from *particular circumstances*, and *plain facts*, which strongly intimate the contrary. And therefore his answer to *this boasted argument*, as he calls it, (though I know of none that use it as an argument of *itself*, much less that *triumph* in it) if it might pass as sufficient, were the argument urged in a general way, and the strength of the cause rested upon it, whether the tradition was *written*, or *oral*, and whatever was the state of the world ; when it is mentioned only as a *collateral* circumstance, confirming other probabilities upon which the *chief stress* is laid, is *weak* and *trifling*.

THERE is another objection still behind, which the author of *Christianity* &c. frequently urges, *viz.* that if the common people could be satisfied, upon rational grounds, of the *authenticness*, *credibility*, and *purity* of the books of the New Testament, yet, considering that the meaning of words is *perpetually changing*, the *difference* of languages, and the *peculiar style* and *manner* in which these books are written, they are a rule not much to be depended on ; nay, a rule that’s very *unsafe* and *dangerous*, unless the people mend and improve it by their *reason* ; as
tending

tending to give them *false* and *dishonourable* notions of God, and of the methods of his *moral providence*, and lead them into great mistakes with respect to *morality*. “None, “who consider how differently the circumstances of human affairs, which are continually changing, affect men; but must “see ’tis scarce possible, that the doctrines “which were originally taught, or the practice originally us’d in any institution, should “long continue the same; nothing being “more easy than to vary the signification of “words *.—— Had there been but one “language, and a book writ in that language, “in indelible characters, (so that there could “be none of those thirty thousand various “readings, which are own’d to be crept into “the New Testament) and all could have “access to it; yet even then, considering how “uncertain the meaning of words are; and “the interest of designing men, to put a “wrong sense on them; it must be morally “impossible this religion could long continue “the same.†—— In short, there are scarce “any words in any one language, except of “such things as immediately strike the senses, “that are adequately answer’d in another, so “as exactly to comprehend the same ideas; “and if the ideas are only fewer, or more, “what confusion may not that occasion? “how great and frequent must the mistakes “then be, in translating the antiquated

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“ languages of people, who liv’d at a vast
 “ distance of time, as well as in countries far
 “ remote ; and affected hyperbolical, para-
 “ bolical, mystical, allegorical, and typical
 “ ways of expressing themselves, as oppo-
 “ site to the usage in other parts, as *East* is
 “ to *West* ? and not only this, but it will be
 “ likewise necessary to have an accurate
 “ knowledge of their manners, customs, tra-
 “ ditions, philosophy, religious notions, sects,
 “ civil and ecclesiastical polity ; of all which
 “ the common people know as little, as they
 “ do of the original languages ; who having
 “ very obscure and incompetent conceptions
 “ of the principal words and phrases used
 “ in the versions, their religion must needs be
 “ a very odd jumble of confused and incon-
 “ sistent notions, were it to depend on words,
 “ and their precise meaning ; and not on the
 “ things themselves and their relations, which
 “ are plain and obvious to common capaci-
 “ ties ; they would be in a manner entirely
 “ govern’d by sounds *.—— Should the
 “ chance of education throw men into the
 “ true traditionary religion, yet considering
 “ its style is not very exact, there being gene-
 “ rally more express’d than is meant ; and
 “ things of the greatest consequence are often
 “ so treated, as that men can’t from thence
 “ perceive the nature and extent of their du-
 “ ty ; and even precepts of the greatest mo-
 “ ment are sometimes so far from being de-

* P. 290.

“ liver’d plainly and simply, that they are
“ express’d after a general, undetermin’d,
“ nay, hyperbolical manner ; so that even in
“ this case, there’s a necessity for the com-
“ mon people to have recourse to the reason
“ of things †.”

Now in answer to this I observe,

I. THAT what is here said *in general* about
“ the changing sense of words, and difference
“ of languages,” affects *all antient books* as
well as the writings of the New Testament;
and must prove, if it proves any thing, that
they cannot be translated into *modern lan-*
guages, so as to give an unlearned reader a
just notion of the design and meaning of the
authors even in the *plainest* passages, or upon
the most *common* and *intelligible* subjects ; nay,
that they cannot be understood by the learned
themselves (for if they may be *understood* ’tis
most certain they may likewise be *translated*)
and consequently that the study of dead lan-
guages, and of all the valuable remains of
antiquity, is perfectly *useless* and *trifling*. The
very same things may be said with respect to
the old *Heathen moralists*, which the writers
of our author’s stamp pretend to *understand*,
and likewise to *translate* ; that “ considering
“ how uncertain the meaning of words is, it
“ must be morally impossible *the sense of them*
“ could long continue the same ;” and “ that

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“ there are scarce any words in any one language, except of such things as immediately strike the senses, that are adequately answered in another, so as exactly to comprehend the same ideas; and if the ideas are only fewer, or more, what confusion may not that occasion?” But though this would be esteemed *ridiculous* enough if applied to common authors, it must pass for very *good sense* when urged against revelation; and why, when the nature of the thing is the same? Truly, for no cause but because they will have it so, as it is necessary to secure a *favourite* point, that must by no means be dropt. Is not this trifling with the name of *reason*, and most egregious *partiality*, and *inconsistency*?

ADD to this, that the sense of the words used in the *original writings* themselves is *now*, just what it was when the books of the New Testament were *first written*; because it is a *dead* language, and consequently has not undergone that *flux*, and those *variations*, to which *living* languages, in a long course of time, may be subject.

BUT is there not great difficulty “ in translating an antiquated language, that abounds with hyperbolical, parabolical, mystical, allegorical, and typical ways of expression, as opposite to the usage in other parts, as *East* is to *West*?” Without doubt, what difficulty there is must ly *entirely* here;

and if the author of *Christianity* &c. had treated this part of the argument with that *good judgment*, which he shews himself to be master of upon some other occasions, he would have insisted *only* on this; and not have said so much about “ the various signification of words, the difficulty of fixing their meaning, and expressing the same thing so, as to convey the same ideas in different languages,” the consequence of which, how *plausible* soever it may seem, is really, that all antient authors are *unintelligible*; and that all attempts to give just translations of them, and express their true sentiments in a modern language, so that persons, who want either capacity, or opportunity, for consulting the originals themselves, may read and understand them, are *idle* and *romantic*. Now in order to remove this objection let it be consider’d,

2. THAT these writings, the obscurity of which is so much complain’d of, were *chiefly* and *more immediately* design’d for the use of that age in which they were *composed*; when figurative expressions were *easy* and *familiar*, and parables and allegories *usual methods* of instruction. The moral precepts of our Saviour, and the doctrines which he taught in person, being *all* deliver’d, either in public discourses to the men of *that generation*, or in private instructions to his *disciples*, ’tis natural to expect the *common phrases, idioms, and peculiar ways of expression*, that were then
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in use; nay indeed, the *usual forms* of speaking were the most proper way of communicating his sentiments to those with whom he convers'd; and it would have look'd odd, if one man should have attempted to frame a *new language*, or if he had avoided those *peculiarities*, by which the language of the country, where he was born and educated, was *distinguish'd* from that of other nations. And the same may be said of writings, which we always find to be in that *style*, and *manner*, which generally prevailed in the places where they were first published.

BUT besides that the books of the New Testament were intended *primarily*, and *more directly*, for the benefit of that age (as all books are that are publish'd in any age) and consequently must be written in the *language*, *style*, and *manner of expression*, that was most *familiar* both to the writers and readers; besides this I say, it may be observ'd more particularly, that several of them are only *occasional*; and were written either at the request of particular persons, which perhaps was the case of St. Luke's gospel, and the *Acts of the Apostles*, both inscrib'd to *Theophilus*; or else, upon some *special incidents* that occur'd, and requir'd that the apostles should interpose, and give directions both to private christians, and whole churches. And certainly 'tis most unreasonable to expect, in such writings, any other than the *common phrases*, and *idioms*, that were then in use in *those parts* of the world,

world, how different soever from the languages of other countries, and especially from the genius of *modern languages*. So that 'tis a mistake of the author of *Christianity &c.* that "precepts relating to morality are deliver'd in the New Testament after an obscure manner, when they might have been deliver'd otherwise :*" This, I say, is plainly a mistake in the sense he intended it, *viz.* That there is an *affected obscurity* in the moral rules laid down in the gospel; because the manner of writing therein used was, all circumstances consider'd, by far the most *natural*; a way that the writers themselves had always been *accustom'd to*; and which took, *most generally*, among the persons directly concern'd.

THE inference I would draw from all this is, that the books of the New Testament, though they may be *obscure* to us at this distance, might, notwithstanding the *figures*, *parables*, and *proverbial* expressions that are frequent in them, be a very *plain* and *easy* rule of morals to the age when they were written, and for whose use they were chiefly and more immediately design'd. For as words are *arbitrary signs* of *ideas*, *figurative* and *proverbial* ways of speaking, or writing, when they are the common turn of a language, may have as certain and determinate a mean-

* *Christianity &c.* p. 27.

ing as the most *plain* and *simple* expressions, and convey precisely the *same ideas* to *all*: otherwise, all the *antient eastern languages* (as well as the *modern* which abound very much in *strong figures*) must have been absolute jargon and confusion, and could not answer the end of language. To which we may add, that the *obscurity* of some parts of the New Testament, to us, may arise from the general method of *epistolary writings*, in which there is a peculiar conciseness; and frequently dark hints, and references to facts, and customs; or to passages in the letters to which they are an answer; all which was perfectly understood by those to whom they were directed. This I take, considering the *time* when, and the *persons* for whom it was *more immediately* written, to be a complete vindication of the *style* of the New Testament; and a sufficient proof, that notwithstanding the *parables*, and the *proverbial* and *figurative* expressions that are used in it, it might be a *clear* and *intelligible*, and most *useful* system of religion and morality.

BUT our author has a text against this, being very dextrous at quoting scripture against its own *authority*, and *sufficiency**, viz.
 “ That *without a parable* Jesus spake not to
 “ the multitude †; and for this remarkable
 “ reason, *that seeing they might see, and not*

* *Christianity &c.* p. 332.

† Matt. xiii. 34.

“ *per-*

“ perceive ; and hearing they might hear, and
“ not understand; lest at any time they should
“ be converted, and their sins be forgiven them *.”

By which he would insinuate, that our Saviour made use of parables on purpose to make his discourses *unintelligible* to the bulk of the people ; and for fear lest they might have been prevailed upon, if he had delivered his doctrine more *plainly*, to forsake their *evil courses*, and be *happy*. A very strange design indeed in one that pretended to be *a teacher sent from God* ; and that it was the chief end of his mission *to call sinners to repentance*.

To set this matter in a just light let it be consider'd, that parables were *common* methods of instruction among the *Jews* ; and that our Saviour, in conformity to the *custom* of the age and nation in which he lived, sometimes used them by way of *illustration*, to inculcate important and useful principles in a more *strong*, and, at the same time, a very *plain* and *familiar* manner. Parables of this kind, as that of the *rich man* and *Lazarus*, of the *Pharisee* and *Publican*, and several others, were *easily* and *universally* understood. Nor was it likely that any inconvenience would follow upon using *parabolical* ways of expression, when they were *common* ; because all the people knowing that there was *one grand point* pursued, would attend *only* to that ; and not

* Mark iv. 12.

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be apt to *strain* every circumstance, which was added to maintain the *propriety* and *decorum* of the parable, and render the whole representation *consistent* and *beautiful*; or extort *mysteries* from it, which were not in the intention of the speaker. So that 'tis most evident, that the view of *Jesus*, when he spake in parables, was not always to *disguise* his sentiments; and much less to wrap himself up in such *impenetrable darkness*, that the people might not understand, nor consequently receive any benefit from his discourse; but on the contrary, to assist their *apprehensions*, and represent the great principles of religion, and moral obligations, both in a more *easy* way, and with greater *spirit* and *force*.

BUT then it must be own'd, that at other times, when he apprehended that the truths he was about to deliver would give great *offence*, he made use of parables to *conceal* his design in some measure, that it might not appear *all at once*, and provoke the *passions* of his hearers. And in my opinion, this is so far from being a reflection upon his conduct, that it shews the great *wisdom* and *tenderness* of this divine teacher; and that he studied the most *effectual methods* to promote the great end of his ministry, the reformation and happiness of mankind. For what good purpose could it possibly serve, to speak ungrateful and offensive truths *openly* and *bluntly*; which, being contrary to mens prepossessions and prejudices, would naturally *irritate* and *inflame* their

their minds? There is a great deal of *art* and *address* necessary in dealing with the multitude; especially in a person who would correct *epidemical* vices, and remove their *favourite*, most *sacred*, and *venerable* prejudices. In such cases, falling upon the point directly will infallibly harden the *vicious*, the *designing*, and *interested*; and perhaps so far engage the passions even of the more *honest* and *ingenuous* in the debate, as to hinder the *cool* and *impartial* exercise of their reason; and by this means, not only frustrate the good effect of our endeavours to reclaim them, but render their errors more *incurable*. Whereas, if we insinuate things in such a way that persons shall not *immediately* see our design, and consequently in a way that gives no *sudden* provocation, nor *alarms* their prejudices; though they do not understand our meaning at first, yet afterwards the *teachable* and *well-dispos'd*, in their private *calm* and *deliberate* reflections, will very probably discover what was intended; and be convinced likewise of its reasonableness and importance; and so receive great benefit by it. And as for those who are enslaved to *evil habits*, and prejudic'd in favour of their *vices*, 'tis no matter whether they understand it or no; because while there is such a *perverse* temper of mind, there is scarce any hope of their being *reform'd*; and the *plainest* and most *important* truths are likely to have little or no influence upon them.

Now that this is the whole of what is meant in that passage of St. *Mark's* gospel, which is cited by the author of *Christianity &c.* is evident from all the circumstances of the history, as it is related by the *Evangelists*. The sense, which he insinuates, is in itself so very *strange, improbable, and unaccountable*, considering the great *benevolence* of disposition, and ardent desire to *instruct* and *reform* the world, which our blessed Saviour always discover'd, that 'tis hard to conceive how any *fair and candid* reader can imagine it to be the *true* sense; but besides, it will soon appear that it really is not. For what is express'd by St. *Matthew* thus, *All these Things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables, and without a parable spake he not unto them* *; is explain'd by St. *Mark* just in the manner I am speaking of, *And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to bear it; but without a parable, i. e. as the connection necessarily requires, because they could not bear a more free and undisguis'd way of talking, spake he not unto them* †. And exactly parallel to what is here said, are our Saviour's words in the 11th and 12th verses. *And he said unto them, [i. e. to the twelve] unto you [who have humble, honest, well dispos'd minds] it is given, or allow'd to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those that are without [and are under the*

* Mat. xiii. 34.

† Mark iv. 33, 34.

power of strong prejudices] *all these things are done in parables ; that seeing they may see, and not perceive, and hearing they may hear, and not understand ; i. e. because such could not bear a plain and naked representation of the truth, it was necessary that the light of it should be somewhat clouded, and veil'd under parables and allegories, that it might not offend their weak minds, which were corrupted and perverted by the force of prejudice, and the prevalency of irregular passions.* The phrases, *that seeing they may see, and not perceive, and hearing they may hear, and not understand*, mean no more than if it had been said, *because seeing they see not, &c. and hearing they hear not, &c.* and therefore it is actually express'd thus in St. Matthew's account of the same discourse, which may be consider'd as a comment upon St. Mark's shorter history, and is a clear and full explication of it. *Therefore speak I to them in parables, because they seeing see not ; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, who saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand, and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive. For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they clos'd ; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their hearts, and should be converted, and I should heal them **.

* Matth. xiii. 13, 14, 15.

ADD to all this, that the *darkest* of Christ's parables might be understood, with respect to their general design and tendency at least, by an *attentive* and *considerate* hearer ; which is a plain proof, that though they might be very proper to *soften* and *palliate* his meaning, when prudence requir'd it, they could not be design'd to render it *unintelligible*, or even *difficult to find out*, to persons who gave themselves time for cool reflection and examination. And therefore we are told by St. Mark, that when his disciples inquir'd about this very parable of *the sower*, which occasion'd the discourse we have now been considering, he seem'd to wonder at their ignorance, and said, *Know ye not this parable † ?* And again, when they asked him the meaning of another of his parables, *Are ye also yet without understanding ‡ ?* By which he intimated, that it was not so much the *obscurity* of the parables themselves, as their own *dulness*, and want of *thought*, that made them not perceive the import of his doctrine.

IT will be asked however, whether, allowing the books of the New Testament, notwithstanding the *figurative*, *parabolical*, and *proverbial* ways of expression with which they abound, to have been *plain* and *intelligible* in the age when they were first written ; their meaning be not very *obscure* and

† Mark iv. 13.

‡ Mat. xv. 10.

uncertain, especially to the common people, in these remote times; when such forms of speaking are *strange* and *unusual*? And consequently, whether they are not very improper to be recommended as a *standing rule* of religion and morality, since 'tis likely they will lead the people into great mistakes even about the *perfections* and *providence* of God; and the moral directions contain'd in them are so *dark* and *confus'd*? Undoubtedly all this must be allow'd, if the scheme which the author of *Christianity* &c. proceeds upon be true, *viz.* that the common people are to make no use of their *reason* in interpreting the sacred writings, but to be govern'd entirely by *sounds*. But what *need* of such a supposition? Do the *advocates* for revelation assert and maintain this? On the contrary, is it not granted by all, that it is the *sense* of these authors, and not their *words barely*, that we are concern'd about? And should not the *same care* be taken in order to understand their meaning, as is necessary with respect to other writers?

'TWILL be sufficient therefore to my present purpose to shew, that the books of the New Testament are so *plain*, as, in all ages, to answer the *great design*, for which, if they are a divine revelation, they must have been *originally* intended; — that the common people, if they will think, and make any use at all of their reason, may *easily* learn from them all the *essential* doctrines of the Christian religion;

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religion ;—— that notwithstanding the peculiar *style* and manner in which they are written, they are calculated to give them *the justest notions of God*, and a *plain*, as well as *perfect*, rule of *morality*, inforc'd by the most *rational* and *powerful motives* ;—— that 'tis not the *natural consequence* of their using *figures*, *parables*, *allegories*, and the like, if any fall into errors about important principles of religion and virtue, because there is a *sufficient guard* against all such abuses to every common reader, but owing to *accidents* which, in the present state of the world, are *unavoidable*, let the rule of action be upon the whole *ever so plain* ;—— and that what difficulties there are, as it must be own'd there will be difficulties after all, are such as the bulk of mankind need not much *concern* themselves with, in order to answer the wise and gracious intention of God in communicating the *Christian revelation*. And in order to shew that this is really the case, I have several things briefly to offer. Let it be observed therefore,

3. THAT *figurative*, *allegorical*, *proverbial* expressions &c. do not *necessarily* render the meaning of a book, even in those very passages, obscure, and hard to be understood. For in *parables*, and *allegories*, the general design and drift of the writer, and the main point he had in view, may be *clear* and *obvious* to every one, that reads him with the least attention. And 'tis not unreasonable to suppose,

pose, that our Saviour's parables, in particular, may be more intelligible to the common people *now*, than to those to whom they were *first* deliver'd ; because they have *his own explications* of some of them ; and others, those, for instance, which represented the *then future* swift and extensive progress of the gospel among the *Gentiles*, may be much *plainer* since that wonderful event happen'd, to which they are so *easily accommodated*, than they were to the body of the *Jews*, whose notions and prejudices in this particular point *darken'd* their understandings in some measure, and hinder'd them from apprehending, so soon as they might *otherwise*, the true intent and meaning of them.

AND all that can be inferr'd from the use of *figurative* expressions in the New Testament is, that these books are not always to be taken *literally*. But what then ? May it not be plain, when *figurative* ways of speaking are us'd, that they are *figurative* ? And may not the sense of them be so *obvious*, that no reader of the least reflection can mistake it ? Without doubt it may. Nay, the author of *Christianity &c.* in his labour'd collection, has given some instances of this kind, and instances, which are, in all reason, too *trifling* to be urged in so *grave* and *serious* an argument ; as that *all the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon* * ; *that if the things*

* 2 Chron. ix, 23,

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which Jesus did were written, the world itself
could not contain the books †. For if, in the
room of each of these passages, he could have
produced a thousand, it would signify just no-
thing; both as they are in themselves of no
consequence, and do not in the least affect the
general design of revelation, nor any of its
important doctrines; and because the common
people must immediately perceive that such ex-
pressions are figurative (somewhat of a like
nature being very usual in languages, which
have not, generally, so much of amplification
and hyperbole) and never were so stupid as to
understand them literally. But to come more
directly to the main difficulty.

4. THOSE parts of the New Testament,
which are express'd in the most *plain* and
simple manner, give a *complete* and most *ra-*
tional account of the perfections and provi-
dence of God, and a noble scheme of *mora-*
lity; so that the meanest of the people, with-
out concerning themselves at all with *figura-*
tive and *proverbial* phrases, *allegories*, *parables*,
and the like, nay, if we suppose that they
are not *capable* of understanding them, have
an excellent system of natural religion, re-
commended upon *more certain* principles, and
inforc'd by *stronger* motives, than can be found
in all the writings of the antient Philosophers.
And these plain accounts, the sense of which
is *obvious* and *easy* to all, are a good general

* John xxi. 5.

explication of all the *dark* passages, and a *sufficient guard* against errors of consequence, with respect to any grand point of religion and morality.

IT will signify but little to say, that the people *actually mistake* figures, parables, allegories, &c. and are led into false notions by them. For if explaining *dark* passages in a book, which, it is generally believed, can contain no *contradictions* and *inconsistencies*, by such as are *clear* and *indisputable*, be the most *natural* method of interpreting it; a method which all who *think* must discern and approve of; and if the common people, provided they follow this method, and make any use of their *reason*, cannot be mislead by the *peculiar style* and *phrase* of scripture into unworthy conceptions of God, or mistake the general nature of true religion; all of which is most evident, and undeniable; it necessarily follows, that these books are upon the whole a *plain* and *useful* rule, and wisely calculated for the instruction of *the bulk of mankind*.

THE question is not how they *do*, but how they *might easily* understand them, by the *common use* of their reason; their *indolence*, *carelessness*, and *prejudice*, is not the least objection against the *sufficiency* of the scripture-rule; because if they will not think *for themselves*, but resign their understandings and consciences *implicitly* to the direction

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tion and conduct of *others*, the plainest rule we can possibly conceive of will be no *security* against the most *absurd* and *dangerous* errors. And accordingly, this is most notorious with respect to *reason*, which the author of *Christianity* &c. and all the writers on the same side of the question, magnify as a most *easy*, *sure*, and *infallible* guide; that its *clearness*, *universality*, and *sufficiency* to direct in matters of religion, have been no *preservative* against the most extravagant superstition, and the vilest corruptions of natural religion and morality. If therefore notwithstanding those *gross abuses* of it, it may, in *itself*, be a plain and obvious rule, so may *revelation*.

AND as for what our author objects against the method which I have proposed, for understanding *dark* passages of scripture, or at least, for preventing the common people from being led into any *great mistakes* by them, that “ if we can’t depend on single texts; and where there are several, the plainest are to carry it; the difficulty will be to know which are the plainest; since the different sects of Christians have ever pretended that the plainest texts are on their side; and wonder’d how their adversaries could mistake their meaning*,” it is saying in effect, that there is no rule, *in the nature of things*, whereby to distinguish between

* P. 325.

what is *clear*, and what is *obscure*; or else, that be the difference, *in itself*, ever so discernible, the common people can form no judgment if there are *strong* and *bold* pretences on both sides, *i. e.* in truth, want a capacity to discern between *confidence* and *reasoning*. I cannot but take notice here, by the way, of the *inconsistency* of this writer's principles, when he has different points in view; for at some times, reason is *so plain a guide* to the common people, that they need nothing else to teach them the *whole* of religion, and prevent *all mistakes* about it; but at other, they are a *stupid herd*, destitute even of *common sense*, who can't distinguish between *plain* and *figurative* expressions, and are under a kind of *necessity* of understanding figurative and proverbial ways of speaking, parables, allegories, &c. *literally*; not only in opposition to the clearest dictates of *reason*, but likewise to the most express and positive assertions of *revelation itself*. This shews, indeed, that such persons have a very strong inclination to run down *reveal'd* religion: but makes it doubtful, whether they have any *fix'd* and *uniform* set of principles of their own, to offer in the room of it. Again.

5. 'TIS very *material*, and worth observing, that the generality of the common people do not, *in fact*, misunderstand a great number of the *figurative* and *proverbial* expressions used in scripture; and are not at a
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loss about the meaning of those precepts, that are deliver'd "after a general, undetermined, nay, hyperbolical manner;" which shews, that such a way of writing does not, *in the nature of the thing itself*, hinder, but that these books may, upon the whole, be a *plain* rule of conduct, fitted for the use of the *bulk of mankind*. I shall give several instances of this kind both from the Old and New Testament; confining myself chiefly to those passages, which the author of *Christianity* &c. has heap'd together as great *obscurities*, and *general, confused, nay false* accounts of things, if taken *strictly* and *literally*.

How few are there among the common people, who interpret those passages according to the *letter*, which impute *bodily parts, human infirmities, and passions* to the Deity*? scarce one in a thousand. The generality firmly believe, that God is an *infinite invisible spirit*; and consequently, that when he is represented as having *eyes, ears, hands, and the like*; as *sitting upon the circle of the earth*†; *riding upon the wings of the wind*‡; and moving *from place to place* to observe the conduct of his creatures; this is only *accommodated* to our present conceptions, and expressing *abstract* truths by such ideas as are most *familiar* to the bulk of mankind; and therefore they take it to denote no more

* *Christianity* &c. p. 251.
Psalm 18. 10.

† Isa. 40. 22.

than his knowledge and power, his supreme majesty, universal providence, particular care and direction of events, and narrow inspection of the actions of men. In like manner, when "God is represented for many days together as visible on Mount Sinai*," the people generally understand it, not as if the invisible God himself was seen, but of some external glory, the symbol and manifestation of his presence. And those elegant and lofty descriptions of the Divine being, with which the poetical parts of scripture, especially, abound, have a natural tendency to strike not only the vulgar, but more philosophical minds, with the most solemn awe and veneration of him; and give the strongest and most elevated sentiments of his power and providence, which are figured with so much pomp and magnificence; and consequently are of excellent use.

AGAIN, ask the people whether repentance can properly be attributed to God, and they will answer almost universally, that *he is not a man that he should repent*; and therefore, when repentance is ascribed to him in the Old Testament, they do not understand it as if he had a different judgment of things, or was sorry for any part of his conduct (and indeed cannot naturally, if they don't consult their reason at all, take this to be the sense of the revelation, because there are other passages that absolutely deny it†) but as a figurative

* Christianity &c. P. 252. † Numb. 23. 19. 1 Sam. 15. 29. Rom. 11. 24.

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expression denoting, that, in some particular cases, *he acted like a person who really repented*. Thus, with respect to an instance which is mention'd by the author of *Christianity &c* *. when God was highly displeased with the abominable corruptions and wickedness of mankind, he did, as far as was consistent with his perfect wisdom, *unmake* them again by causing a general deluge, and destroying the whole human race, eight persons only excepted, who were saved to stock the world *a-new* with inhabitants; and in this acted as if he had *repented of having made man on the earth* †. Again, when he put by *Saul's* family from succeeding to the crown of *Israel* after his decease, and commanded the prophet *Samuel* to anoint *David* in his life-time; he acted as if he *repented that he had made Saul king* ‡. And thus likewise, when he is represented as *weary of repenting*; what can the common people, who generally believe that God can't *properly* repent, understand by this, but the very thing that was intended, *viz.* that instead of *suspending*, or *removing* his judgments, which his prevailing inclination to mercy, and desire of the reformation and happiness of a guilty people, had inclin'd him to do in times past, as if he *repented of the evil threatned*; he was now determin'd, having found gentler methods to be ineffectual, and that they were *incorrigible* offenders, upon their *absolute ruin*, unless they prevented it

* Pag. 251.

† Gen. 6. 6.

‡ 1 Sam. 15. 11.

by a speedy amendment. This meaning of the phrase must have been so evident that none could mistake it, and consequently it would have appear'd, upon the first reading, to be nothing at all to our author's purpose, if he had only been so *ingenuous* as to quote the whole sentence, which runs thus; *thou hast forsaken me, saith the Lord, thou art gone backward: therefore will I stretch out my hand against thee, and destroy thee; I am weary with repenting* *.

FARTHER, when God is said to have *rested*, and to be *refresh'd*, after having finished his work of creation, the common people are not so *stupid* as to imagine, that he was so *fatigued* by hard labour as to need *proper* refreshment; but the *easy* and *obvious* idea convey'd to ALL by this expression is, " that
" in six days God *ended* the creation of the
" world, and was pleased with what his *om-*
" *nipotence* had effected, as answering exactly
" the *model* that was design'd by his infinite
" *wisdom* and *goodness*."

THE same may be said as to other passages. For instance, when it is affirm'd, that God did things to *try* people; the vulgar, in general, know as well as this author, that a being, whom revelation in the most distinct and express terms, as well as reason, declares to be *omniscient*, could not do it for

* Jer. 15. 6.

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his own information, but that the persons try'd might have an opportunity to give an unexceptionable and noble proof of their virtue and integrity; which would be attended with very great advantages with respect to themselves, by affording them a stronger assurance of their sincerity, and consequently the most solid satisfaction in a review of their conduct, and as it is the necessary tendency of difficult and heroic acts of virtue especially, to strengthen very much the inward principles and habits of virtue; and besides it might be of singular use, as a standing example, to animate and encourage others.

AGAIN, can it be supposed that any of the people, when God is said *to swear in wrath**, imagine that he took a rash oath, and swore in a passion? Must they not be convinc'd from the books of the Old and New Testament themselves, as well as by the reason of their minds, that this is *impossible*? The general conception that they form of it is, I make no doubt, that being justly displeased with the perverse and ungrateful behaviour of the *Israelites* in the wilderness, and the many repeated affronts they had offer'd him, he declar'd in the most solemn manner, that, unless they *repented, they should not enter into his rest*†. Add to this, that the meanest of the people *universally* include in their notion of God, that he is the su-

* *Christianity &c.* p. 250. † Ps. 95. 11.

preme being; and consequently, when they read of his *swearing*, are not in the least danger of taking in the *common idea* of an oath, *viz.* an invocation of, and appeal to, a *superior*. And why should the author of *Christianity* &c. mention this, when he knows it is not what the scripture means, when God is at any time said to *swear*? The real sense of scripture is certainly very *intelligible*, and *rational*; for the form of what it calls *God's oath* is, *as I live saith the Lord**, *i. e.* as sure as I *exist* such and such things are *true*, or *shall come to pass*. Now what exception is there in *reason* against this? or must we amuse the world with *idle cavils* about the propriety of *words*, when the thing intended by them is *easily* and *universally* understood, and intirely *just* and *defensible*? In this writer's notion of an oath, 'tis undoubtedly true that God *cannot swear*: and 'tis as undeniable, that there is not *a single passage*, either in the Old or New Testament, that so much as intimates he *ever did*; such objections therefore are *trifling* with mankind in the grossest manner, and a much greater discredit to *the persons that make them*, than to *the scriptures* against which they are urg'd. For the whole of what is said amounts only to this, that an *idea* is fix'd to a word, which the author of *Christianity* &c. does not think *proper*; *i. e.* which is not the usual acceptance of it *now*, though it might be very com-

* Ez. 33. 11. Heb. 6. 13.

monly used this way by the age when these books were *first written* (who, as words are *arbitrary*, had certainly a right, by *general consent*, to fix what meaning to them they pleas'd;) but it cannot be pretended, that any real inconvenience could follow from it, because the sense of the word is so *clearly determin'd*, that none in *that age*, nor in *any age* of the world *since*, could *possibly* mistake it.

IN like manner, when God is said “ *to hiss*; and in one place *to hiss for a fly that is in the uttermost part of the river of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria**,” there are scarce any of the common people that can be supposed to understand it *literally*; nor was there the least likelihood that they would, either *in the age* when these writings were composed, such strong poetical figures being *then* very common and familiar; or *afterwards*, the *scriptures themselves*, if they confine their inquiries there, giving the most exalted conceptions of the Deity, that human reason can form. On the contrary, the general sense of this passage is so very *obvious*, that even a *superficial* reader can hardly miss of it (tho he may not perceive the *aptness* and *beauty* of the allusion) *viz.* that the *meanest creatures* are subject to God's command; and that he makes use of them as the *instruments* of his

* *Christianity &c.* p. 252. *Is.* 7. 18.

wife and righteous providence, to bring *desolation* on a sinful and degenerate people.

'TIS a mistake to imagine, that the *strict* and *literal* sense is always the most *obvious*, even to the *vulgar*. For when such actions are attributed to the supreme being, as are inconsistent with those plain accounts of his nature and perfections which *revelation* always inculcates, as well as with the notions that *reason* suggests; the *literal* sense is evidently *unnatural*. If therefore when God is said to *kiss*, none, who are not quite destitute of all reflection, can take it to be *literally* true; and if the thing intended by it be so *plain*, that all must immediately perceive it; what ill consequence can possibly follow from the use of such a *figurative* expression? 'Tis most certain, that in this passage of *Isaiah*, it is so far from having a tendency to mislead the generality of readers into *false* and *degrading* thoughts of God; that in its most *natural* sense, a sense which it is not conceivable *one* in *ten thousand* will mistake, it gives them a very strong and lively idea of his *universal* dominion and providence.

BUT if the author of *Christianity* &c. design'd to *burlesque* the phrase itself, as well as to represent it as very obscure to the common people, and likely to lead them into *low* and *unworthy* conceptions of the Deity; which seems indeed to have been his intention by his manner of *introducing* it; I think, to

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speak modestly, that he has not shewn any great *judgment*, or skill in *criticism*. For besides that the general and obvious sense of it, which the people cannot well mistake, is *just* and *rational*; the *metaphor itself*, by which it is express'd, is exceedingly *pertinent* and *beautiful*; intimating the *universal* command of the great creator, by his speaking to the *lowest rank of creatures*, as it were, in their *own language*; so that they as *readily* follow him as their leader, as beings of an higher order, who are directed by an *intelligent* and *rational* principle, and are always prepar'd to obey his *summons*, and execute the great designs of his *providence*. And was I to put an author into a method to make himself *completely ridiculous*, I would advise him to write a critic in the same manner upon *Milton's paradise lost*, as is frequently practis'd with respect to *poetical passages of the Old Testament*; in which he would have an opportunity of shewing his *little wit*, by finding fault with several things even in this great poet's descriptions of *the Deity*, which cannot be *literally* true; but have been admir'd, however, by the greatest *genius's* of the present age, both for the *sublimity* of the *sentiment*, and the *elegance* and *grandeur* of the *figuring*. In the mean time 'tis a most undeniable truth, that 'tis really as *absurd* to censure beauties and elegancies in the *sacred writings*, as in any common authors how much soever *applauded*, and *celebrated*; though, through the *partiality* of the age, it may not meet with equal dis-

discouragement. For mean and spiteful criticisms are, in themselves, never the less *contemptible* for being suffered to pass in the world, and because they are not actually received with that *contempt* they deserve.

AGAIN, our author has thrown together several texts of scripture to prove *Moses* to be a God; nay, *the Lord God* of the *Israelites*; in order “to shew (as he says) how little
“we are to depend on words and phrases;*”
i. e. to shew what no body denies, that we are not always to understand them *literally*. But does this writer really believe, that any of the *meanest of the people* ever were, or ever could be, induc’d to think, if there had been twice as many texts of the same kind, that *Moses* was “the eternal omnipotent
“God, the maker of heaven and earth; who,
“by his own immediate power, performed
“all the wonders in *Egypt*, and brought the
“*Israelites* out from thence?”

IF when *figurative* expressions are used, they will necessarily be understood by All (as in the present case) to be *figurative*, they can do no hurt, even though their precise meaning be *unintelligible* to the bulk of mankind. Let us suppose therefore, that the common people are not likely to find out the true sense of *those texts*; what will be the consequence of such a supposition? Will it follow, that the

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books in which such passages are found are of no *authority*? or that they may not, notwithstanding, be, upon the whole, a *plain* and *useful* rule of religion and morality? Not in the least. For let the number of *mere unintelligibles* (by which I mean such things, as *very many* of the common people, in *every age*, are not likely thoroughly to understand) be much greater than, I believe, it really is; if the books of the Old and New Testament give a *plain* and *rational* account of the perfections and providence of God, and a *good general scheme* of religion supported upon the best principles, and by stronger motives than *mere reason* can suggest; if this account may be *understood*, whether the design of *figures, parables, &c.* be seen or not; if there be a *sufficient guard, in the books themselves*, against all errors dishonourable to God, or injurious to the practice of true piety and virtue; and the common people cannot fall into *mistakes of this kind*, if they make any use of their reason, and follow the *natural* and *easy* method of explaining *dark* and *figurative* passages by such as are *clear* and *determinate*; they are certainly of very great advantage as a *standing rule*, and fitted for *general instruction and use*.

I HAVE hitherto put the worst supposition that can be made, *viz.* that a *great part* of the people, in these *remote* times, are not likely to understand the meaning of those texts relating to *Moses*, and shewn that no ill
con-

consequence can follow from it, because they never *did*, and 'tis utterly improbable they ever *will*, put that absurd sense upon them which our author insinuates; but, in reality, these passages have nothing of *difficulty* or *obscurity* in them, but are very *plain* and *intelligible* to every common reader. Thus, for instance, when we consider *Moses* as speaking in the name of God, there is not the least *barshness* or *impropriety* in his promising rain in due season to such as keep his commandments *; and to *Joshua*, that he would be with him in carrying the people into Canaan †; or, in his saying, that he did great works, yea, miracles in the sight of the Israelites, on purpose that they might know that he was the Lord their God ‡. Again, when the Lord said to him, see, I have made thee a God to Pharaoh, and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet **; the obvious meaning of the text, which immediately occurs to *ALL*, is, that God deputed him to act in his name, and give forth his commands, and appointed Aaron, because he was the better speaker, to be his messenger and mouth to Pharaoh: and therefore 'tis expressly said in another place, which may serve for a full explication of the passage we are now considering, that Aaron should be to him instead of a mouth, and he to Aaron instead of God ††. Farther, as God imploy'd *Moses* in bringing the children of *Israel* out of *Egypt*,

* Deut. xi. 13, 14, 15, &c.

† Deut. xxxi. 23.

‡ Deut. xxix. 5, 6.

** Exod. vii. 1.

†† Exod. iv.

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the same work might very justly, and according to forms of speaking that are *common* in all languages, be attributed to *both*; to God as the *principal and immediate author* of their deliverance, and to *Moses* as his *instrument*. As he was the *messenger and prophet* of God, and gave *sufficient credentials* of a divine commission, 'twas fit and necessary that the people should *acknowledge* him under that character; and *believe in him*, as well as in God that sent him. And the phrase being *baptized into*, or *into the name of*, any person, as it is explained by St. Paul in that very epistle, in which he says, *figuratively and allusively* only, that the *Israelites* were *baptized into Moses* *, implies no more than this; that by the ceremony of *baptism* we give ourselves up to his *conduct*, as one authoriz'd and appointed by God to be our *leader*; declare that we are his *disciples*, and make a *public profession* of that religion which God sent him to publish †.

AND whereas it is said, that “ *Moses* is pray'd to, under the appellation of *Lord*, “ *to forgive sin* ;” the true state of the case is this. In one of the passages referred to we are told, that God being displeas'd with *Aaron* and *Miriam* for speaking against *Moses*, smote *Miriam* with a leprosy: upon which *Aaron*, in a submissive manner, begg'd of *Moses* to forgive the offence they had com-

* 1 Cor. x. 2.

† See Ch. i. 13, 14, 15.

mitted against him, as the person appointed by God to be their *commander* and *leader* (which was but a point of *justice*, and a *necessary reparation* of the injury he had done him,) and believing that *Miriam's* cure depended on his prayer to God for her, desired him to *intercede* in her behalf. These words, *Alas, my Lord, I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned **, can't possibly mean any thing else, in their *first* and most *obvious* sense, considering the character of the person who *supplicates*, and the notion he must necessarily have of him to *whom he petitions*; and no prejudice can *pervert* so plain a passage, but what would *obscure* and *darken* every thing; especially if we add what immediately follows, that *Moses*, instead of pretending to do any thing by an authority and power *inherent* in himself, *cried unto the Lord, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee. Let her not be as one dead †*.

THE other text I need but just set before the reader, to shew that 'tis entirely *impertinent*; Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron, and said, I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. Now therefore forgive, I pray thee, my sin, only this once; and entreat the Lord your God, that he may take away from me this death only ‡. What

* Numb. xii. 11.

† Numb. xii. 13.

‡ Exod. x. 16, 17.

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cavilling is here about the words, *sin* and *forgiveness*? I cannot but think, that the author of *Christianity* &c. has, in this affair, *sinn'd* against all rules of *decency*, and ought to *pray to be forgiven*; or, in other words, to ask pardon of the world, for this *extravagant trifling* with the common sense of mankind.

IF it be said, that texts of *this nature* have been *actually* urg'd to prove the *same point*, in one of the most *considerable controversies* among Christians: I answer, that I am as free to condemn that use of them *there*, as *here*; but this is nothing towards proving the main point, the *obscurity* of scripture in *itself*. Nay, the *quite contrary* may rather be *inferred* from it. For as the *very same* sort of texts are *universally* and *immediately* understood when they relate to *Moses*; the reason why they are misapply'd in any other case can't be the *obscurity* of the texts themselves, but it must be owing to some *accidental* prejudice.

LET us now consider briefly some of the texts of the *New Testament*, which the author of *Christianity* &c. fancies to be very *obscure* and *confus'd*; and we shall find, that compared with other passages in which the same things are more largely explain'd, and with the general tenor of the Christian revelation, they have a *natural* and *easy* sense that can't well be *mistaken*. The main of what he has
advanc'd

advanc'd upon this head is, really, finding fault with the *language* in which the New Testament was written, for being different from the genius of *modern* languages ; and indeed, 'tis very easy to talk in general about *figures*, and *peculiar strange ways of speaking*, that render the design of these old books very *dark* and *uncertain* ; but if it be found, that even *those passages*, which are urg'd as the strongest proofs of their *obscurity*, are almost *universally* understood in their just and proper sense, what will become of all this *shew* of reasoning ? It will appear to be only starting *imaginary* difficulties, and amusing ourselves with *empty speculations* against *fact* and *experience*. For if particular texts are *very seldom mistaken* by the meanest of the people, this is the most convincing argument in the world, that they are, *in themselves*, *sufficiently clear and intelligible*.

Now thus the case stands most evidently, with respect to the greatest part of those texts, the meaning of which our author has laboured to prove to be *intricate* and *perplex'd* to the common people ; the true state of the case, I say, is quite contrary to what he has represented it, *viz.* that they are *generally* and *thoroughly* understood. Where is the man who supposes, that when our Saviour says, *Think not I am come to send peace on earth ; I came not to send peace but a sword* *, his

*. Matt. x. 34.

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words are to be interpreted *strictly*; as if it was the *direct design* of his mission to put the world in a flame, and to promote and encourage contention and variance amongst mankind, and the dreadful guilt and miseries of war? Nay, who that knows any thing of the *mild, benevolent, and amiable* temper which the Christian religion inspires, can possibly entertain *such a thought* as this? On the contrary, consult the *lowest* of the vulgar who think at all about it, and you will find that the sense of this passage is *universally* agreed upon among them, and they will all *concur* in some such paraphrase of it as this:

“ Do not expect that I shall be *quietly* own’d
 “ and submitted to, or that my religion will
 “ be *readily* and *peaceably* embrac’d, for if
 “ you do, the event will *defeat* and *disappoint*
 “ your expectations; though I was sent to
 “ refine and *civilize* mankind, and root out
 “ of their nature all *sowre unsociable* and *mis-*
 “ *chievous* passions, and to make them *gentle*
 “ *affable* and *condescending* in their behaviour,
 “ yet, through the prevailing degeneracy and
 “ corruption of the world, I shall prove the
 “ *occasion* of *strife* and *discord*, of *unnatural*
 “ *heats* and *animosities*, of violent *hatreds* and
 “ bloody *massacres*, and men will, upon the
 “ account of *my religion*, break through the
 “ bonds of *nature*, and the strongest ties of
 “ *humanity*; as if indeed the *very end* of my
 “ coming was, not to give peace, but rather
 “ *division* * ; to set a man at variance against

* Luke xii. 51.

“ his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law †”.

AGAIN, when it is said, *if any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple* *; the sense of this text is never the less obvious, because the expressions us'd in it are *figurative*. And accordingly, none of the most ignorant of the common people ever understand it *literally*, (their constant practice, even while they profess to have the hope of good christians, is an evident demonstration of the contrary) but only of a *comparative hatred*; i. e. in other words, that they are oblig'd to forsake their *dearest friends* and *relatives*, and sacrifice their *most valuable worldly interests*, nay *life itself*, rather than *renounce Christianity*, or do any thing inconsistent with the obligations of their *religion and conscience*; which is the very explication that Christ himself has given of it, in other parallel passages. *He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, i. e. who is not always prepar'd to suffer, whenever he is called to it, in defence of my religion, is not worthy of me. He that findeth*

† Matt. x. 35.

* Luke xiv. 26.

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*his life, shall lose it ; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it †. And there is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundred fold now in this time, houses, and brethren and sisters, and mother, and children, and lands, with persecutions ; i. e. in a sense of his Integrity, of the greatness of his mind and his manly heroic behaviour, he shall enjoy such inward satisfaction, and such pleasing views of the approbation and favour of the supreme governour of the world, as must make even a state of persecution vastly preferable to the best accommodations and pleasures of outward life, when secur'd by a base and cowardly betraying the interests of truth and virtue ; and in the world to come shall receive eternal life *.*

THE same is true as to the following texts, which are mentioned likewise as very *obscurely* and *inaccurately* express'd, viz. that the sense of them is *easily*, and almost *universally*, understood. *Blessed be ye poor ‡* is never taken *absolutely* ; but interpreted of *the poor in spirit*, or such as have an humble mind, and moderate desires suited to their circumstances, and are contented with that condition in which providence has plac'd them. *Blessed are ye that hunger ††*, of them that hunger after righteousness. *Woe unto you rich ||* of such per-

† Matt. x. 37, 38, 39.

* Mar. x. 29, 30.

‡ Luke vi. 20.

†† Ver. 21.

|| Ver. 24.

sons only *who trust*, or repose their ultimate happiness, *in riches*, and do not lay out their wealth in acts of beneficence and liberality. *Blessed are they that mourn ‡, blessed are ye that weep ***, not of afflicted and disconsolate *in general*; but of penitent mourners for sin, and those who have a tender and compassionate sense of the sorrows and miseries of their fellow-creatures. And on the contrary, *Woe unto you that laugh now ††* is not interpreted as condemning a *cheerful sprightly* temper, or *innocent recreation*; but of the *vain*, the *impertinently gay*, the *voluptuous*, who make pleasure their business; unmindful of the great concern of life, and utter strangers to those *grave and solid* reflections, which so well become rational beings.

So likewise, *Take no thought for the morrow ††* is never understood to exclude a *prudent care* to provide a comfortable subsistence; or such a *wise and cautious* management of worldly affairs, as is most likely to enable men both to support themselves and their families decently and honourably at present, and to lay a foundation for *lasting* plenty and happiness, and guard against *future* misfortunes; but only that *perplexing* and *anxious* concern about *futurity*, which makes them *suspicious* and *desponding*, destroys their relish of *present pleasures*, and torments them with *imaginary evils*, and argues besides *great dis-*

‡ Matt. v. 4.

** Ib. ver. 25.

†† Luke vi. 21.

†† Matt. vi. 34.

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AND how very few, comparatively, are they, who understand these sayings *literally*, *He that taketh away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also* *; and *resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also* †; how exceeding few, I say, are they, in comparison, who have interpreted these texts with so *rigorous a strictness*, as to think all *self-defence*, and *guarding their property, unlawful*? The expressions here us'd are *proverbial*, and in this view *the bulk of the people* have always consider'd them, and put this *general most useful sense* upon them, “ that instead of indulging a *revengeful humour*, and returning *evil for evil*, they “ ought rather to recede from their right in “ *little matters*, and put up *small affronts*, as “ being the most likely way, upon the whole, “ to preserve the *peace* of society, and prevent the increase of *contention* and *disorder*; “ whereas the insisting upon *full satisfaction* “ for every *trifling injury*, whether *real* or “ *imaginary*, and being intent upon a *strict*

* Matt. v. 40.

† Ver. 34.

“ *retaliation*, has a natural tendency to ir-
“ *ritate* and *inflame*, more and more, the
“ *passions* of both the parties at variance,
“ and make differences and animosities *per-*
“ *petual*.”

ONCE more, *Sell what you have, and give alms**, is generally taken just as it was intended, not as a rule for *all ages*; but as *peculiar* to the *first times* of Christianity. And even then it was not properly a *precept*, as the author of *Christianity* &c. styles it, not a *law* of *universal* and *indispensable* obligation; but only an exhortation to a thing that was thought *expedient* in a *particular circumstance*. Nay, the custom itself was far from being *general*: for we find in the epistles to *Gentile* converts, and even to the *dispers'd Jews*, the usual distinctions of *rich* and *poor* mention'd, without the least mark of *dislike* or *censure*. It seems to me, that this use prevail'd *chiefly*, if not *only*, in the land of *Judea*; and very probably, for a reason *peculiar* to the state of that country and people. For as Christ and his Apostles knew, that the *Jews* would in a little time be *destroy'd*, and that then their *property* would be *ravish'd* from them, and their *possessions* become a *prey* to the injustice and violence of their victorious oppressors; they might, with reason, think it more *adviseable*, that they should be employ'd for the *general good* of Christians, and the *relief* and *support*

* Luke xii. 33.

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of their necessitous and suffering brethren, than fall into the hands of *common plunderers*, and minister to their *riot and luxury*. However this is certain, that, even in *Jerusalem*, a *community of goods* was not *absolutely* insisted on ; for in the case of *Ananias* St. Peter expressly says, that *while his land remain'd unsold it was his own ; and after it was sold, it was in his own power* (free from any obligation, *divine or human*, to make it a *common stock*) and he might have done with it whatever he thought fit. In all these passages 'tis plain that the sense of scripture is very *obvious*, and *generally understood* by common Christians. And indeed, I can't see how they should be led to understand any of them in their strictest meaning, not only if they make use of their *reason to direct* their inquiries ; but if they interpret the New Testament *by itself*, and take the explications *there* given them ; which it is so far from needing any great *pains and labour* to find out, that they will *almost necessarily* occur to every *ordinary* reader.

'TWOULD be endless to follow our author through all his *fancied difficulties and obscurities* ; however, I shall add an instance or two farther. " Things commanded (he says) " are said positively not to be commanded ; " as, *I spake not to your fathers, nor com-* " *manded them in that day I brought them out* " *of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt* " *offerings and sacrifices* *." But for the very

* Christianity &c. p. 335.

reason here given, *viz.* because “Things commanded are said not to be commanded,” ’tis scarce possible that any should *mistake* the sense of the place, and interpret it *literally*. Let us take the matter in this view. This very writer is suppos’d, by the author of *Christianity* &c. himself, to believe, *that burnt offerings and sacrifices were commanded by God*; ’tis therefore a *mere jest* to imagine, that he could be guilty of such a glaring *contradiction* and *inconsistency* as to *deny* this, and it will never enter into the imagination of *any reader*. So that there is not the *least difficulty* in this passage, but taking the whole of it in *connection*, its meaning is as *obvious* as any thing can be; *I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them, &c. concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices; but this thing commanded I them, saying, obey my voice*†; i. e. the *latter*, obedience to moral precepts, was what I *principally* requir’d, and the *former* I laid but *little stress* on in comparison of it; nay, in cases in which they may *interfere*, and come into *competition*, I *never commanded burnt offerings and sacrifices*. Such *clear obscurities*, and *easy difficulties* as these, we may allow ever so great a number of, without at all lessening the *usefulness* of the sacred writings; and I beg leave myself to add two or three of the same kind, which, I know not why they are omitted, but because ’tis undeniable they are *universally un-*

† Jer. vii. 22, 23.

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derstood, and a natural key for the interpreta-
tion of this, and all other texts to the like
purpose. Labour not for the meat which
perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto
*everlasting life**; *set your affections on things*
above, not on things on the earth†; and
 which is a very exact parallel for the sentiment,
 as well as the manner of expression, *I desired*
mercy and not sacrifice‡, i. e. rather than sa-
crifice; for to this sense we are naturally led
 by the latter part of the verse, *and the know-*
ledge of God more than burnt offerings.

I SHALL conclude this head with the
 words of a late most excellent and learned
 writer, who, in observing upon “ the un-
 “ bounded manner, in which the general du-
 “ ty of subjection to superiors, in every re-
 “ lative station of life, is express’d; *children*
 “ *and servants obey your parents and masters in*
 “ *all things***; *let wives be subject to their*
 “ *own husbands in every thing*; says, †† Rea-
 “ son, and the nature of things, and the ge-
 “ neral usage of all language, sheweth, that
 “ in these and all other the like expressions,
 “ the phrase *in every thing* and *in all things*,
 “ must necessarily be understood to mean
 “ only, *in all things* just, *in all things* lawful,
 “ *in all things* that are honest and fit to be
 “ done. In human writings, these general
 “ manners of expression, arising from the

* Jo. vi. 27. † Col. iii. 2.

‡ Hos. vi. 6.

** Col. iii. 20, 22.—Tit. ii. 4.
 mens, Vol. III. p. 38—41.

† Dr. Clark’s Ser-

known and vulgar use of language, are never misunderstood: and therefore to misunderstand them in the *sacred books only*, is mere perverseness. The gospel neither *inlarges* nor *diminishes* any *superior's power*; it neither *adds to*, nor *takes from*, any *inferior's right*. In *these* cases it only confirms and explains the obligations of nature; and inforces the *practice* of the respective duties, with stronger and more powerful motives. As therefore in all *other* writings, so in *scripture* likewise; the true, the natural, and evident meaning of such phrases as these, *in all things*, *in every thing*, and the like; is not what the word, *all*, suggests in its *single* signification; but what the *vulgar* sense of it is, in *such* expressions and sentences. When we are taught that the commands of *God*, or the laws of *truth and right*, are to be obey'd in *all things*; the *nature* of the *thing*, not the *force* of the *single words*, shews that the obedience is to be *universal* and *without exception*. In *other* cases, where the very *same words* are used (as, in the text, *Servants obey your masters in all things*;) the nature of the thing *there likewise* no less plainly shews, that this obedience in *all things* is to be *limited*, by its *consistency* with the commands of any *superior* master either on earth or in heaven. In *all* language, the signification of *every word* necessarily depends upon the *other* words with which it is connected: and where no *controversy* is

con-

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“ concern’d, nor *prejudice* interposes, ’tis al-
 “ ways understood, and cannot but be un-
 “ derstood to be so, by all understandings,
 “ and by all capacities equally, from the
 “ highest to the meanest. When the scrip-
 “ ture mentions *the* everlasting God, ’tis not
 “ the force of the word *Everlasting*, but the
 “ application of it to the *first cause and au-*
 “ *thor of all things*, that makes it denote a
 “ true and absolute *eternity*: for when the
 “ same scripture mentions the *everlasting*
 “ *mountains*, ’tis understood by all men both
 “ of the greatest and of the smallest under-
 “ standings, that it there signifies only *such*
 “ a duration, as is proper to the subject of
 “ which it is spoken.— In the question a-
 “ bout *transubstantiation*, the writers of the
 “ church of *Rome* allege with great confi-
 “ dence, that the *natural*, the *literal*, the *first*
 “ and *obvious* sense of the words, *This is my*
 “ *body*, is plainly in favour of *their* side of
 “ the question. And yet in reality the very
 “ contrary to this is evidently true. For
 “ the *natural*, the *literal*, the *first* and *ob-*
 “ *vious* sense of the *phrase*, is not that which
 “ arises from the signification of the word
 “ *body* singly, but that which arises from its
 “ natural signification in *such* an expression,
 “ wherein *commemorative bread* is affirm’d to
 “ be the *body of him who is commemorated*
 “ *thereby*. When a *picture* is spoken of, as
 “ being the *person* it represents; the *natural*,
 “ the *literal*, the *first* and *obvious* sense of
 “ the expression, is not that ’tis *really*, but
 “ that

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“ that ’tis *representatively*. When our Lord
“ says, *I am the true vine* ; the question is
“ not what the word, *vine*, naturally signifies
“ in *other* cases ; but what it *there* most na-
“ *turally and obviously* signifies, when a teacher
“ calls *himself* a *vine*, and his *followers* its
“ *branches*.” In like manner, when a person
sent from God to instruct mankind declares,
that he that *eateth* his *flesh*, and *drinketh* his
blood, *hath eternal life* * ; ’tis the most *unna-*
tural thing in the world (and what, we may
be sure, none would ever think of but in the
heat of dispute, and under such *violent pre-*
judices as will pervert and darken even *self-*
evident truths) to understand him *literally* ; or
to apprehend that he meant any thing more
by it, than *entertaining and improving* his *doc-*
trine, which tended to promote *purity* and
virtue, the *life* and *health* of the soul ; and
by that means to prepare men for a *happy*
immortality. Our Saviour has indeed him-
self directly pointed out this sense to us, by
saying, *The words which I speak unto you*
they are spirit, and life † ; and the figure
here us’d is the *very same* which we find in
the book of *Proverbs*, when *wisdom* is de-
scrib’d as *killing her beasts*, *mingling her wine*,
and *furnishing her table*, as *sending forth her*
maidens, and *crying upon the highest places of*
the city,—*come eat of my bread, and drink*
of the wine which I have mingled ; i.
e. as it immediately follows, *for sake the*

* Jo. vi. 54.

† Ver. 63.

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HAVING proved thus largely, that the people do not *in fact* misunderstand a great number of the *figurative* and *proverbial* expressions us'd in scripture; and are not *at a loss* about the meaning of those precepts, which, according to the author of *Christianity* &c. "are deliver'd after a general, under-termin'd, nay, hyperbolical manner;" and consequently that *such a way of writing* does not, in the nature of the *thing itself*, hinder, but that the books of the Old and New Testament may, upon the whole, be a *plain* rule of conduct, fitted for *general* instruction, and use: I shall proceed one step farther, and endeavour to shew,

6. THAT the people might *as easily understand* those texts, the true meaning of which they *misapprehend* and *pervert*; or, in other words, that following the *same rules* would as certainly discover the sense of the *latter*, as it does that of the *former*; and that there is as *plain* and *full* a guard, in the books themselves, against the *errors* which they *fall into*, so far as they affect *important* principles of religion, or *moral* obligations, (and these are all the errors that it is of any *consequence* to prevent) as against those which they *escape*; so that the *rule itself* is equally clear

* Prov. ix. 2, 3, 5, 8.

and *intelligible* in both cases, and 'tis nothing but mens *indolence* and prejudice that make the *difference*, with respect to their understanding the *several* parts of it.

For instance, when *bodily parts*, and *human infirmities* and *passions*, are ascrib'd to God, I have shewn, that there are *very few* who take these passages *strictly*, and *literally*; not only because the literal sense contradicts those *natural* notions of the Deity which *reason* suggests, but is directly repugnant to *plain* and *express* declarations of scripture, that he is an *infinite invisible spirit* *. And may they not as *easily* see, that God could not in a *proper* sense, or by an *immediate operation* and *influence* on his mind, *harden* Pharaoh's heart; since this is as evidently contrary to *reason*, and to the most *clear* and *positive* testimony of revelation, that he *cannot be tempted with evil, nor tempteth any man* †; and especially when it is said to be done *only* in *such* a way, as is consistent with Pharaoh's *hardening his own heart* ‡? As our Saviour said of himself, that he *came not to send peace on earth, but a sword* **, purely, because his religion would prove the *occasion* of much confusion and violence in the world, quite contrary to its *design*, and *natural* and most *manifest* tendency; so God is said to have *hardened* Pharaoh's heart, be-

* Jo. iv. 24. 1 Tim. vi. 16. † Jam. i. 13. ‡ Ex. viii. 32.
** Matt. x. 34.

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cause his removing his judgments, and suffering the *Magicians* to perform, for a time, the same miracles that *Moses* and *Aaron* did, was the *occasion* of his *hardening his own heart*. This is the account given in the history itself*; and nothing can be more plain both from the relation we have of the fact, and the *general* doctrine of revelation, than that this dreadful effect was not, and could not be, owing to an *absolute decree* of God that he should not repent, or to any *positive* and *efficacious influence* upon his mind, but *solely* to his own obstinacy and wickedness.

AGAIN, those texts that speak of God as *repenting* are scarce ever interpreted in the *common* and *usual* sense of the word, because it is immediately perceiv'd to be *absurd* and *irrational*; but *chiefly*, because there are other passages which represent it as a thing *impossible*, that he should *strictly* and *properly* repent. Must we not wonder then, how any can possibly be induc'd to believe by the *mere sound* of two or three texts, which, in their most *natural* and *obvious* construction, have a quite *different* meaning, that the All-perfect governour of the world is an *arbitrary tyrannical* being, who, for the ostentation of his *uncontroulable sovereignty*, has absolutely determin'd the final and eternal misery of *great numbers* of his rational creatures? Must we not wonder, I say, how any can be prevail'd

* Ex. vii. 22.

upon to believe this, in direct opposition to what the light of nature teaches concerning his *universal* and *unlimited* goodness; and to the *plainest* testimonies of scripture, that he *is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works**; that he *hath no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that he turn from his way and live†*; is willing all men should be saved‡; and so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved**?

AND to mention but one passage more: Is it not as *easy* and *natural* for the meanest of the people to understand these words, *Jacob have I lov'd, and Esau have I hated, †† only comparatively*; or of God's giving the preference to the one above the other; as to take the *same* expression thus (which they do *universally*) when our Saviour speaks of *hating father and mother, wife and children ††, &c?* And is it not most evident besides from the book of *Malachi*, from whence the text is cited by *St. Paul*, that the effects of this love and hatred affected not directly the persons of *Jacob* and *Esau*; but their descendants the *Jews*, and *Edomites*; by the distinction made between these two nations, in the course of God's providence,

* Ps. cxlv. 9.

† Ezek. xxxiii. 11.

‡ 1 Tim. ii. 4.

** Jo. iii. 16. 17.

†† Rom. ix. 13.

†† Luke xiv. 10.

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with respect to their *temporal* prosperity, and *outward* privileges? *I have loved you, saith the Lord; yet ye say, wherein hast thou loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother, saith the Lord? yet I loved Jacob, and took his posterity under my special protection and care; and I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste* *.

I MIGHT add several other instances to prove the same point, *viz.* that the true doctrine of revelation is as *plain* in cases where it is *mistaken*, as in others, in which it is *generally understood*; but these may suffice as a specimen. Some texts are *rightly interpreted*, others *grossly perverted*; but there are the very *same helps* and *advantages* for understanding the latter, as the former; and the *same guards* against *absurd* and *erroneous* senses; the natural consequence of which is, that the *rule itself* is equally clear and intelligible with respect to both; and that the true reason why men think justly on the *one*, and not on the *other* is, because in the one inquiry they proceed *impartially*, and, being under no *bias*s, take the *first* and most *obvious* sense of scripture; whereas in the other they are *negligent* and *careless*, or else their judgment is *already determin'd* in favour of some *party-scheme*.

'TIS a very *fallacious* way of reasoning, to suppose those texts *only* to be *clear*, which

* Mal. i. 2, 3.

are *universally* understood, and those to be very *obscure*, especially if there be any thing *figurative* in the expressions, that are by *great numbers* misinterpreted : for as the texts, which are generally understood, would have been never the *less plain in themselves*, if they had been commonly mistaken ; so the other would not have been at all the *more plain*, if they had happen'd to be understood. The understanding any rule does not depend more on the *clearness* of the rule itself, than on the *diligence, honesty, and unprejudic'd* temper of those who are to be guided by it. So that 'tis of no moment in the present debate, that men, “ by interpreting texts literally, have run “ into monstrous absurdities *.” For, under the influence of *enthusiastic* delusions and prejudices, they have abus'd *full as monstrously* the religion of nature. *Reason itself* has made but a sorry figure as a *guide*, when it has been overwhelm'd by *ignorance, and superstition*. In like manner, it must be own'd, that *revelation* has been very much darken'd by *mysterious comments*, and straining single texts to countenance *establish'd* opinions, and support the jargon of *school-divinity* ; and when the people take it for granted, that this is the religion of the *Bible*, all they have to do is, in the best manner they can, to *accommodate* scripture to it. But this is not at all the question ; the only point in controversy is, whether the Christian revelation,

* *Christianity &c.* p. 339.

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however it is in *fact* understood, be not in *itself*, in all matters of *real importance*, an *easy* and *intelligible* rule?

AND what has been already said, I think, is sufficient to evince this. For those parts of the New Testament, which are express'd in the most *plain* and *simple* manner, give a *complete* and most *rational* account of the perfections and providence of God, and a *noble* scheme of morality; so that the meanest of the people, without concerning themselves at all with *figurative* and *proverbial* phrases, *allegories*, *parables*, &c. nay, if we suppose that they are not *capable* of understanding them, have an *excellent* system of natural religion, recommended upon more *certain* principles, and enforced by *stronger* motives, than mere reason ever *did*, or perhaps *can* suggest. And those *plain* accounts, the sense of which is *easy* and *obvious* to all, are a good general explication of all the *dark* passages. 'Tis evident farther, that the *literal* sense, in many cases, is not the most *plain* even to the vulgar; but on the contrary must appear *strain'd* and *unnatural*. And accordingly it has been shewn, that they, almost *universally*, agree in the *right* sense of a great number of passages, which are express'd after a *general*, *undetermin'd*, and *figurative* manner; and might as *easily* understand others which they misrepresent and pervert; and that there is a *sufficient* guard, in the writings themselves, against all errors

errors of consequence, with respect to any grand points of religion and morality: so that if the people will but make a *common* use of their reason, and follow the *natural* and *easy* method of interpreting *dark* passages by such as are *clear* and *determinate*; they are in no danger of being misled, by the *peculiar style* and *phrase* of scripture, into unworthy conceptions of God, or of mistaking the general nature of true religion.

AND allowing, what is a *necessary* consequence from these premises, that Christianity is plain in all its *practical* doctrines, and as a *moral rule*, which, without doubt, must be the *chief* design of any revelation, and not to amuse the world with *abstract* controversies; other obscurities about antient *customs*, *manners*, *sects*, *philosophy*, &c. nay, about any points merely *speculative*, signify just nothing. For as God never would have given a revelation, if the errors of the world had not been of a *practical* nature, but consisted only in *absurd theories*; so differences about such things may *always* continue, and yet all the *ends* and *uses* of the Christian revelation, as a standing rule, be *completely* answered. I might rest the matter here, but can't forbear remarking once more,

7. THAT the author of *Christianity* &c. represents some texts quite contrary to their *manifest* design; and others as *obscurities* and *improprieties*, which, taken in their *strictest*

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sense, are most *plain* and *rational* accounts of things, nay, real *beauties*, and *excellencies*, in the moral scheme of revelation. For instance, he tells us, that “ the Jewish rites “ and sacrifices are, in the Old Testament, “ absolutely condemn’d, as *an iniquity*, and “ *an abomination to the Lord*, which were “ only so conditionally*.” And indeed, in the place which he refers to, these words are to be found; but any one that reads the whole paragraph must immediately see, that they are not describ’d as *iniquity*, and *an abomination absolutely*, and *in themselves*; but the particular *reason* is expressly assign’d, *viz.* the *wickedness* and *immorality* of the worshippers, and their thinking to be acceptable to the Supreme Being for such *external* services, while they were guilty of the *worst* of vices; *Your hands are full of blood*†. This method of picking *little scraps* out of a *connected* discourse, by which means the most *moral* authors may be made to talk *impiously*, and the *gravest*, and most *judicious*, *ludicrously* and *ridiculously*, is utterly inexcusable in one that sets up for a *critic*; and the more so, when criticisms are design’d to point out the *defects* of writings, and lessen their reputation; of writings which are of the greatest *importance*, and *generally* in the highest esteem. For, be it either a *careless* or *wilful* mistake, ’tis not only an injury to the authors, but an affront and imposition upon the world.

* Page 225.

† Isa. i. 15.

AGAIN: our author mentions among his difficulties this text, *prove all things*; as if he was afraid that it would be taken, in its *literal* meaning, to be an exhortation to demonstrate and judge of *mathematical* propositions, and abstract *metaphysical* truths, whereas 'tis only part of a sentence, the whole of which, in the judgment of all that read it, must necessarily be confin'd to *religion* and *morality*. And the *natural* sense of it is, that Christians should believe nothing *implicitly*, but use their understandings to judge of the *nature* and *consequences* of *all things* that are recommended to them as *divine* truths, and of their *evidence*; and when they have form'd their judgment upon *mature* reflection and examination, *hold fast that which is good*, i. e. adhere inflexibly to what they apprehend to be right and fit; *and abstain from all appearance of evil**. And certainly in this view, which is the view in which it is always consider'd, 'tis a most *excellent* piece of advice, useful for *all* mankind, and in *all* ages; and I am surpriz'd to find it objected against by one, who is so great a friend to *free* inquiry, and would be as likely as any man to quote, and use it *himself*, upon other occasions, as an express declaration against *bigotry*, and *implicit* faith.

AND must it not be very strange to find it urg'd as an *impropriety*, and great *difficulty*,

* 1 Thes. 5. 21, 22.

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that, "persuasion is call'd compulsion, as, "*compel them to come in* *," by one, who writes in a language in which no expressions are more common, than "the force of eloquence, the force of persuasion, the force of example, the force of importunity," and the like? The best way of answering such objections would be to pass them over in *silence*, were it not to shew the world what *little* things are rak'd together in order to render Christianity useless; things, which, in any other argument, I am persuaded, would be thought *below censure*.

BUT let us consider what he says upon other passages. Why God's *permitting evil* is called *doing it*: *Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it* †? Nay, the Lord is said to have *created evil* ‡. And here I suppose likewise he takes the phrase *creating evil* to signify no more than the *permission* of it. If so, he has not, in my opinion, a just notion of the *sense* of the texts, nor of the *concern* of providence in this affair. For the evil spoken of, in both these passages, is evidently what we call *natural evil only*. Now a great deal of this may *properly* and *strictly* be said to be of God's *appointing*, or *creating*, because it *necessarily* results from the *original* frame and constitution of things. And even when beings who act *freely* are the *voluntary* instruments of pain and misery to

* P. 335. Luke 14. 23. † Amos 3. 6. ‡ Is. 45. 7.

each other, it must be consider'd, that this is *one law* by which God governs the world, that free agents shall, at least in all common cases, be left to the *full* exercise of their natural liberty; and besides, the permission of these evils is not the *indolence* and *carelessness* of one, who is *unconcern'd* about the state of the universe, and the course of human affairs; but must be look'd on in this view, *viz.* as his suffering things to go on in such or such a particular channel, because it is upon the whole *wise* and *fit*, and agrees with the *general scheme* of his providence.

AGAIN: when St. *Peter* says, that, by the gospel, *are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by them we might be partakers of the divine nature**; does our author imagine, that any will think we are capable of being partakers of the *necessary eternity*, and *immensity* of God? Is not the most *obvious*, and only *intelligible*, sense of the phrase, that we may resemble him in his *moral* attributes; or, which is the frequent acceptation of the *Greek* word, and a very common use of the word *nature* in our own language, be of a *God-like temper* and *disposition*? And is not this the *noblest* end that rational beings can propose, and consequently the *highest* that any revelation can pursue? And the same may be said of our Saviour's exhortation to *be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect* †:

* 2 Pet. 1. 4. † Mat. 5. 48.

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when taken generally, it can signify no more in its *first*, and most *natural* meaning, than “imitate the moral perfections of God;” and is never understood otherwise. But indeed the *strict* sense of it, as it is the conclusion of a discourse upon that particular subject, is, that we should practise the most *generous, disinterested, and perfect* degree of charity and mercy, even *good-will and beneficence* to our enemies, after the example of our *heavenly Father*, and that we may be his *children, who maketh his sun to rise on the evil, and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just, and on the unjust* †. And therefore ’tis express’d by St. Luke thus, *Be ye merciful, as your Father also is merciful* ‡.

BUT this leads me to consider what our author has said with relation to the precepts of *forgiving injuries*, and *loving enemies*, which have always been thought very great *excellencies* in the Christian scheme; and will still appear to be so, notwithstanding the objections he has made to them, which are, in reality, very *slight and inconsiderable*. He expresses his opinion about this matter in *general*, in the words of *Celsus*, that “the doctrine of *forgiving injuries* was not peculiar to the Christians, though they taught it after a grosser manner *.” And why? Because the command is given in a *general*

† Mat. v. 45.

‡ Luke vi. 36.

* *Christianity &c.* p. 341. *Origen. contra Celsum*, lib. 7. pag. 373.

indefinite way ; whereas there are certain necessary *restrictions* and *limitations*, without which it would be attended with fatal consequences. It must be “ interpreted consistently with what the light of nature dictates “ to be our duty, in preserving our reputation, liberty, and property ; and in doing “ all we can in our several stations, to hinder “ all injury and injustice from others, as well “ as ourselves †.” Undoubtedly it must : but those exceptions are so *plain*, that they will always be *suppos’d*, and consequently there was no need of their being *distinctly specified*.

THE Christian religion makes no *alteration* in the natural rights of mankind ; it nowhere forbids necessary *self-defence* ; or seeking a *legal* redress of injuries in cases, wherein it may be *expedient* to restrain *violence* and *outrage*, to maintain private *right* and *property*, and secure to the honest and peaceable the advantages of *civil life* ; but all the explications it gives of the duty of *forgiving injuries* are perfectly consistent with this. For the substance of what it recommends and inculcates upon this head relates *chiefly* to the *temper* of the mind ; that we be ready to *pass* by small affronts, and not forward to execute *private revenge* ; that we be dispos’d to put the most *candid* interpretation upon the designs and actions of those who have

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injur'd us, and make all the *favourable* allowances that the nature of the case will admit; and that while we suffer the greatest wrongs, we maintain a *general benevolence* and *good-will* to our enemies, a sincere *desire* of their happiness, and a *constant disposition*, upon all proper occasions, to promote it, and return *good for evil*. This, I say, is the true notion of *forgiving injuries*, as it is stated and explain'd in the New Testament. The gospel therefore proposes the example of God, in his conduct toward sinful men, as the general *rule* and *measure* of that *lenity* and *forbearance*, which we ought to exercise toward each other. Now the utmost that can be inferr'd from hence is, that if our offending brother is so *ingenuous* as to acknowledge his offence, and, by making all the *reparation* that is in his power, gives us sufficient reason to think his repentance *sincere*, we are bound to receive him again into our *friendship*, and ought never to *upbraid* him with former faults, but to be as *heartily* and *entirely* reconcil'd to him, as if he had never given us any just ground of *complaint*; as we expect, that God, upon our unfeign'd repentance and reforming the errors of our past conduct, will receive us into *full* favour, and *remember our iniquities no more*; and that in other cases, after the example of the same most *merciful* and *compassionate* Being, we incline rather to *gentle* methods, than to demand a *hasty*, *strict*, and *rigorous* satisfaction for every affront that is offer'd us; nay, that we *still* pre-
serve

serve *benevolent* affections towards an enemy, though he is *unrelenting*, and *inflexible*. There is nothing at all in this, which, every one who has examin'd particular passages, must see to be the doctrine of the Christian revelation, that in the least disallows of that *self-defence*, which reason and the laws of our country direct to.

NAY, 'tis far from being a *paradox*, that a man may *forgive an injury*, at the same that he seeks a *legal redress* of it. For he is to be consider'd, both as a person who has receiv'd a *private* injury, and as a *member* of society, which sustains likewise some *damage* by the injustice and violence that every one of its members suffers. Now 'tis most evident, that he has no *right* to *forgive* the wrong, so far as the general interests of *society* are concern'd; and therefore must be oblig'd, when 'tis necessary to do justice to the *community*, and for the *public good*, to *prosecute* the offender. But then he may be said to *forgive* the injury, so far as 'tis *personal*, and relates to himself as the *immediate* sufferer, if, according to what the gospel teaches, instead of indulging *rancour* and *malice*, and forming *mischievous* designs against his enemy; he heartily wishes his *welfare*, and is ready *generously* to *assist* him, and do him any *private services*, that are not inconsistent with *necessary self-defence*, and the *general happiness*.

LET me add, that the precept of *forgiving injuries*, if it had stood in the Christian scheme singly, and without any farther explanation, would have been altogether as plain as *Confucius's* rule, "never to revenge injuries;" the latter being full as general and undetermin'd as the former, and requiring the very same limitations, and exceptions. For it will be ask'd, what is *revenge*? And if it be answer'd, that it is not "legally prosecuting a man who has injur'd me;" it will be said likewise, that this is not forbidden by the precept of *forgiving injuries*; and the reason of the thing must as soon, and as easily, be apprehended in the one case, as in the other. So that the author of *Christianity* &c. has shewn only his great partiality, in preferring *Confucius's* maxim to that of our Saviour; and might as well, and, 'tis not unlikely, would have done the very same thing, if the *Christian precept* had been found in *Confucius*, and his in the gospel.

HE goes on to find fault with the phrase of *loving our enemies*: and the sum of his argument is, that "the passions of love and hatred given us by God, are to be exercis'd on proper objects. Actions, abstractedly consider'd, are not the objects of love and hate, but persons for the sake of their actions; and the actions of some men are too detestable to create in us any sentiments, but of aversion; so as to oblige us
" to

“ to bring them to a condign punishment.—
“ If love carries with it complaisance, esteem
“ and friendship, and these are due to all
“ men ; what distinction can we then make
“ between the best and worst of men * ? ”
Mere *cavilling* this about the *use* of a word ;
and, I may add, *idle useless* cavilling, since
'tis *universally* known what was intended by
it.

OUR author himself can't imagine surely,
nor can it ever enter into any reader's thoughts,
that when our Saviour exhorted to *love our*
enemies, he design'd to recommend an inward
esteem of the malicious slanderer, the oppres-
sor, and cruel persecutor, who have discard-
ed all sentiments of *honour, justice, and hu-*
manity ; or a *complacency* in persons of such
vile characters ; but only the having *kind*
and *benevolent* dispositions towards them, and
a sincere desire of their *happiness*. And since
'tis obvious to all, that he could mean no
more than this, what if it does not come up
to the *full* sense of the word, as 'tis generally
us'd *at present* ? This will not so much as
prove an *impropriety of speech*. For might
it not be a very *common* acceptance of it, at
the time when our Saviour deliver'd this pre-
cept ? And have not all people a right to
put what senses upon words they please ?
Or is it reasonable for us to find fault with
any language, merely because the *same ideas*

* *Christianity &c.* p. 342.

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are not fix'd to particular words, as in *our own*?

BUT it happens in fact, (which shews that the objection is entirely groundless) that in all *moral* writings, whether *antient*, or *modern*, *love* most *generally* signifies, what it does in this precept of the Christian religion, *benevolence* or *good-will*; and may be exercis'd towards particular objects, not only where there can be no *esteem*, and *complacency*; but even while we are oblig'd to *punish* them. Thus it is always allow'd, that a parent may love a wicked and disobedient child, though he has the greatest *abhorrence* and *detestation* of his crimes; and to this it is imputed, that he has such an *affectionate concern* for his welfare, and *earnest* desire of his *reformation*. Nay, even *rigor* and *severity*, and a *proper punishment* of his faults, are suppos'd to be not only *consistent* with *love*, but to spring directly from it. I can't help observing upon the whole, that it does not appear, that the author of *Christianity* &c. means any thing more by *not revenging injuries*, than that I am not "to punish for punishment-sake;" and that "common prudence will oblige me, "sometimes, to overlook slight injuries *;" it does not appear, I say, that he thinks himself bound, over and above this, to cultivate a *benevolent* temper, and a *disposition* to do *kind offices* for an enemy. And if this be

* *Christianity* &c. p. 341.

really the case, both his *own* morals, and those of his oracle *Confucius*, are vastly inferior to the *Christian* morality, which inculcates much more *noble* and *generous* virtue.

FINALLY, we are ask'd, *Whether* “ rules
“ concerning morality should not be suited
“ to mens particular circumstances, plainly
“ describing the conduct which they require?
“ *Whether* this is not the design of the muni-
“ cipal laws in every country? *And* what
“ benefit subjects could have, from laws writ-
“ ten in such a loose, general. and unde-
“ termin'd manner; as *lend, hoping for no-*
“ *thing again, &c.*?——’Tis said, *We are to*
“ *render to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar’s;*
“ but must we not learn from the laws in
“ every nation, who is *Cæsar*? *And* what is
“ his due?——We are *to render all men their*
“ *dues*; but what those dues are, we are to
“ learn from the reason of things, and the
“ laws of the country*.”

THE drift of all this *strange* reasoning must be to prove, if any thing, that *general rules* of conduct are of no service to mankind; whereas, in truth, the *whole* of natural religion and morality itself consists in *general* principles, that are of *universal* and *immutable* obligation and use, and *easily* accommodated to particular circumstances. A writer of *morals*, according to this way of thinking, must

* P. 344.

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be reckon'd to talk *loosely*, who advises in *general*
 “ to be charitable to the poor ; to give to
 “ those who are in want ; and be ready to
 “ assist, and support others in their necessities,
 “ without any prospect of a recompense ;”
 which is the *plain* and *obvious* sense of *Lend*,
hoping for nothing again ; or if he exhorts
 “ to yield due obedience and submission to
 “ magistrates ; or to do justice to all men ;”
 and 'tis absolutely necessary for him to specify,
 for every man, the particular *kind*, the
 proper *objects*, nay, I can't see how we can
 help going so far as the very *proportion* of his
 charity ; to understand the *laws* and *constitu-*
tions of every country ; and the *particular*
demands which each man has upon another.
 Whereas on the contrary, *rules suited to mens*
particular circumstances can't possibly be given
 in a discourse of this kind ; or, if they could,
 as circumstances perpetually *alter*, they would
 not be parts of that *eternal* and *immutable* law
 of nature, which it must be the great design
 of a revelation to recommend, and inforce.
 There is not one *natural* obligation this au-
 thor can name, incumbent upon *all* mankind,
 but must be express'd in a *general undetermin'd*
manner ; for if it be *particular* and *circum-*
stantial, it can only be a rule for *individuals*,
 and not for the *whole* rational species. And
 'tis altogether as absurd to expect in a reve-
 lation design'd for the use of *all nations*, and
 to last to the *end* of the world, none but *rules*
suit'd to particular circumstances, as to talk of
 an *eternal temporary* law, or an *universal*
parti-

particular. The rule of *rendering to all men their dues*, if interpreted in *general* of the payment of *just* debts, is altogether as plain, as if the *particular dues* were specified; that of *rendering to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's*, as if we were expressly told who was meant by *Cæsar*; as king *George* for *England*; *Lewis* the *fifteenth* for *France*, and the like: and the same may be said of the duty of relieving the necessitous in *general*, fixing on the most *proper* objects, and in *proportion* to our circumstances; that it is an *easy* and *intelligible* rule, in applying which to particular cases, men of the least reflection can *hardly* ever mistake. Indeed, as I have already observ'd, 'tis a most *wild* and *extravagant* attempt for a *moralist* to endeavour to fix these things *precisely*, and therefore he must content himself with giving *general* directions.

I SHOULD have proceeded farther in the vindication of particular passages of scripture, but that I have reason to hope this part will be undertaken by a very *able* hand, who, I make no doubt, will do *justice* to the argument, and give *entire* satisfaction to the world. Those which I have consider'd have fallen in *incidentally*, in pursuance of my design to shew, that the Christian revelation, notwithstanding the *peculiarity* of its style and manner of expression, and all the *difficulties* and *obscurities* that are charg'd on it, is, upon the whole, very *plain*, and *useful*, as a standing rule of religion and morals;

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and that all its *essential* doctrines, containing *helps, encouragements, and motives* to virtue, are very *obvious* and *easy* to be understood by the bulk of mankind. And after this, all other *obscurities*, about ancient *customs* and the like *extraneous* circumstances, and points merely *speculative*, will be look'd upon as *trifles* by the judicious and impartial; and be thought not at all to interfere with the design and use of the Scriptures, as a *divine revelation*. However, every reader will see, that what I have said upon some of the texts cited by the author of *Christianity* &c. will serve to explain and defend many others, which, to avoid being tedious, I have not mention'd. But because he has endeavour'd particularly to expose several passages in the *historical* books of the Old Testament, I would, before I conclude this chapter, add one remark more, namely, that though these passages may be vindicated, as far as 'tis reasonable to expect we should be able to account for all the things contain'd in books written at so great a *distance*, when the *customs* and ways of *writing* were so different from what they are at present; yet before we allow ourselves to be *oblig'd* to undertake the defence of them, there is a *previous* question proper to be consider'd, *viz.* how far we are bound, by the *quotations* and *references* in the New Testament, to acknowledge the divine authority of the Old, and especially of every *historical account* that is given in it. And I mention this the rather, because

cause 'tis most certain, that, in the nature of the *thing itself*, there is no *connection* between the two ideas, for instance, of *Moses* being assisted by God, in an *extraordinary* manner, in bringing the *Israelites* out of *Egypt*, and forming their *religion* and *polity*; and his *infallibility* as an *historian*. Nay, he may be a *credible* and *unexceptionable* witness to all the facts which he relates upon his own *knowledge*, or of whose truth and certainty he had himself *opportunities* of being *fully* inform'd; even though he should not be exactly right in *every* circumstance of his history of the world, and the state of religion, before his own times; in compiling which, if he had no other helps than from the best *records* and *traditions* he could meet with, there may be some *defects*, and yet the account upon the whole be *authentic*, and highly *valuable*. And if upon stating and examining this question fairly it appears, that we are not oblig'd, in order to support the Christian revelation, to defend *all the historical passages* of the Old Testament, we are eased of an *unnecessary* trouble; if the contrary, we shall, at least, have the satisfaction to know that we proceed in a *just* and *regular method*, and do not reason in the dark.

C H A P. IV.

A GENERAL defence of positive commands.

I Come now to consider the case of *positive* duties. Our author supposes, that if Christianity be a *divine revelation*, it can be nothing else but a *revival* of the universal and immutable law of nature; that it enjoins no *duties* but what are *as old as the creation*, and *as extensive as human nature*; nothing which, *as to the manner* of it only, is *indifferent**; and consequently, that there cannot be the *least* difference between *natural* and *reveal'd* religion, but in the *method* of their *discovery*; and “if instituted religion varies
 “from the religion of nature and reason in
 “any one particular, nay, in the minutest
 “circumstance, that alone is an argument,
 “which makes all things else that can be said
 “for its support totally ineffectual †.” This is the point to be determined; and it must be own'd, that it is a point of very great *importance*; because, as it is undeniable, that the gospel institution does command several things that are *merely positive*, we must be able to shew that such injunctions are not repugnant to *reason*, nor subversive of *moral obligations*, nor inconsistent with the *wisdom, justice, and*

* *Christianity &c.* p. 122. † P. 60.

goodness of God, in order to make a *rational* defence of it. And that we may argue distinctly and without confusion upon this subject, and shorten the controversy as much as possible, let us see what *concessions* are proper to be made, and lay down some *common principles* in which both parties may agree.

I. THEN, it must be allow'd, that the *substance* of true religion always *has been*, and ever *will be*, the same in all ages, and nations; consisting in the belief of *such principles*, and the practice of *such duties only*, as are founded on the nature and *reason* of things; and that this universal eternal and immutable religion cannot be *superseded*, *alter'd*, or *contradicted* by an external revelation.

2. THAT the *religion of nature* is the whole of religion that is *valuable for itself*, as having an *intrinsic* and *necessary* goodness; and consequently *positive institutions* must be entirely *subservient* to it. They are not design'd, as this author very frequently, but loosely, insinuates, to *mend* the religion of nature, but *excite* to the *practice* of it; and are only so far valuable, as they strengthen moral obligations; either by cultivating and improving in our minds *such sentiments*, as have a tendency to promote *true* and *substantial* virtue; or by guarding against *particular errors*, and *superstitious* customs, to which mankind had been *long addicted*, and which

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were found by experience to have *obscur'd*, *perverted*, and almost intirely *destroyed* that *true religion* of rational beings, which results from the *immutable relations* of things. So that they are *insignificant* and *trifling* observances, if they are not *helps* and *motives* to the practice of morality, and if they are *substituted* in the place of it, or *undermine* it in any instance, *hurtful* and *impious*.

'Tis indeed very strange, that any who consider the *necessary differences* of things, should confound the *subordination* of *positive* to *moral* duties, which is as plain, as that *ends* are more excellent than *means*; and that they should think there is any comparison, in point of *real value* and *excellency*, between that, which consider'd *in itself* has *nothing at all* to recommend it, and would be absolutely *indifferent* and *useless*, were it not for the *end* which it is design'd to promote, and the *end itself*, the eternal unchangeable religion of nature, which is *essentially* and *intrinsically* good. 'Tis the consideration of the *end alone* that *consecrates*, and gives a *value* to the *means*, and consequently *that* must be of infinitely superior efficacy; and we can have no rule of judging, if what is in itself good for *nothing* deserves an *equal* regard with the most *excellent* and *useful* thing in the world.

AND agreeably to these most plain dictates of *reason*, we find that the scriptures both of the *Old* and *New Testament* constantly

assert, that *instituted* religion is for the sake of *natural*; and declare in the strongest terms, that positive duties, without moral righteousness, are not only *mean* and *despicable*, but highly *offensive* to God; that he lays *no stress at all* upon them in comparison with the rational duties of *piety* to himself, and *justice* and *mercy* to our fellow creatures; and that we cannot entertain more *unworthy* and *dishonourable* thoughts of him than by imagining, that he is as much pleas'd with *external Services*, that are, in themselves, of no *worth* or *importance*, as with an imitation of his *perfections*, and obedience to *moral* laws, which is the highest *improvement* and *rectitude* of human nature, and the source both of *private* and *social* happiness. This, I say, is the constant strain of *revelation*, as well as the voice of *reason*. And tho the observation of *positive institutions* may, with reason, be *strictly* insisted upon, for the tendency it has to promote *true goodness*; nay, tho God may immediately interpose, and punish the wilful contempt of a *positive* law more *severely*, in this world, than the violation of a *moral* precept; as what may be necessary, upon its first appointment, to give the former a *sanction*, and maintain its *sacredness*, and *authority*, since it wants that *intrinsic goodness*, which recommends and supports the latter; this is far from proving, that the duties of instituted and natural religion are upon a *level*, and much farther from giving *the preference* to *positive* duties above *moral*. The only way

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to come to a rational determination in this point is, to consider, when things are circumstanc'd that one or other of these duties must necessarily be omitted, *which of the two* must give way; and if it be an *everlasting* rule, that, in every supposable instance of *competition*, positive duties must *yield* to moral, this is a demonstration that moral duties are *superior*, and claim our *ultimate* regard.

3. FROM these principles it necessarily follows, that as nothing which contradicts *natural religion*, or weakens *any* of its obligations, can be part of a *revelation* which hath God for its author; and no man who is *wilfully deficient* in any branch of *moral duty* can rationally expect to obtain the favour of God, be he ever so scrupulous and exact with respect to *ritual* and *instrumental* observances; and consequently that it is the height of folly and presumption, by the utmost care and zeal about *instituted* religion, to hope to compound for *irregularities* and *excesses* of the *sensual* passions, or for *pride*, *uncharitableness*, *cruelty* and *revenge*, or any other notorious and hurtful *immoralities*: so, on the contrary, those who sincerely practise the *great duties* of natural religion, comprehended under the two heads of *the love of God*, and *our neighbour*, will not be condemned for their ignorance of the *peculiar* doctrines of revelation, or for not understanding, or not seeing the reason and obligation of *positive* precepts; because they have attain'd the *great end* of religion,
which

which all the *subordinate* duties of it must be design'd to promote, *viz.* rational piety and likeness to God, the right government of their passions, and fixing in their minds habits of justice, and universal benevolence.

HOWEVER, this does not hinder, but that if men *wilfully* neglect any part of *instituted* religion, they may be *justly* punish'd; since such a wilful contempt even of *positive* duties, apprehended to be *commanded by God*, is as truly an affront to his *wisdom* and *authority*, as a contempt of *moral laws*: 'Tis a violation of an *eternal rule of righteousness*, *viz.* that God is to be reverenc'd and obey'd in ALL the known significations and discoveries of his will; and consequently an *immorality*. So that even in this case they forfeit the divine favour, not merely for a failure in matters of *external ceremony* (by which *alone*, the state of mankind with respect to God's most wise and impartial judgment, and their final happiness or misery, will never be determin'd) but for transgressing the *fundamental law* of natural religion itself.

BY allowing these things, *viz.* the *superior excellency* of natural religion; the *moral tendency* of instituted means; and the *necessary subordination* of positive to immutable moral duties; it will appear, that a great part of the reasonings of the author of *Christianity &c.* is fully answer'd; who has *inaccurately*, as I would hope only, and not *designedly*, in or-
der

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der to mislead the *superficial* and *incautious* reader, confounded, throughout his whole book, *the false sentiments* of the weak and superstitious with the *nature of the thing itself*. Let us now proceed to consider what he has advanc'd upon this head ; and whether it is of any weight against *positive duties*, as the *design, importance, and use* of them has been stated and explain'd.

THE argument which the ingenious author seems to lay most stress on, and to think it never could be urg'd too often, is this ;
 “ that the religion, which God gave men from
 “ the beginning, was, without doubt, most
 “ perfect ; since no religion can come from
 “ a Being of infinite wisdom and perfection,
 “ but what is absolutely perfect. Can there-
 “ fore a religion absolutely perfect, admit of
 “ any alteration ; or be capable of addition,
 “ or diminution ; and not be as immutable
 “ as the author of it ? Can revelation add
 “ any thing to a religion thus absolutely per-
 “ fect, universal, and immutable * ? ”

NOW in order to see clearly, whether there be any thing in this *boasted* demonstration, that holds against positive duties *rightly understood*, 'tis necessary for us to consider, what we must mean when we speak of natural religion as *perfect*. And in general, there must be some *rule or measure* of

* *Christianity &c.* p. 3, 4.

perfection, by which it is to be *tried*. A thing may be said to be *perfect*, when, all present circumstances consider'd, it is *sufficient* to answer its end. A *law* or *rule* of conduct therefore, the *perfection* of which must be judg'd by its *suitableness* to the condition of those to whom it is given, and its *sufficiency* to direct to every thing that is *fit*, and *becoming* persons *so constituted*, and *circumstanc'd*, may be *perfect* in that view, or *completely adapted* to answer its design, and yet *comparatively imperfect*: it may be *perfect* in present circumstances, and very *defective* in others.

To apply this to natural religion. The original religion or law of nature, which consider'd men only *as men*, in the *integrity* and *rectitude* of their faculties, and not as *ignorant*, *superstitious*, and *degenerate*, was undoubtedly *perfect*; *i. e.* it was *suit'd* to their circumstances, and *sufficient* to teach them their duty, merely as reasonable creatures, and furnish them with all *necessary motives* to excite to the practice of it; and if they had observ'd it, a revelation would perhaps have been *needless*. But when they had *corrupted*, and in a great measure *lost* the knowledge of the law of their creation, and God, having compassion upon their *ignorance* and *depravity*, thought fit to afford a *revelation*; though the ultimate design of that revelation be, to recover them from their errors and vices to the knowledge and practice of the true religion

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gion of nature, all must allow, that their circumstances are *vastly different* from what they were *originally*; and from those *different* circumstances *different* duties necessarily result. Thus it becomes their duty to acknowledge *the divine authority of the messenger*, that is sent for their recovery; not only as 'tis in itself fit, that in every instance, they should act agreeably to the *truth* of things, and characters; but because without this, they cannot receive the *revelation itself*, nor consequently the *advantage* that God intended them by it *. And it may be *proper* for them moreover frequently to consider, and impress some principles upon their minds, as *motives* and *helps* to the practice of true religion, and

* T H O U G H "faith consider'd in itself" [*i.e.* barely as the act of the mind in *assenting* to the *truth* of propositions] "can neither be a virtue, or a vice; because men can no

† *Christianity* &c. "otherwise believe than as things appear to them †:" yet that they appear in *such a particular manner* to the understanding, may be owing entirely to themselves. *Faith* therefore may be fitly rewarded as the result of *serious consideration*, and *impartial enquiry*; and *unbelief* justly punish'd as proceeding from *wilful negligence*, and *vicious prejudices*. And whenever there is *sufficient evidence* of the truth of a proposition, and it may reasonably be expected, taking in all circumstances, that men should *consider* and *examine* this evidence, which, if *fairly consider'd* and *examin'd*, will not fail of convincing the judgment; to *believe*, must be a *duty*, and *not to believe* a *vice*. This is the sense (as will be evident to every one who reads the New Testament with attention) in which these words are always to be understood, when *faith* is requir'd as necessary to obtain acceptance with God, and *unbelief* condemn'd. The one is consider'd as a *virtue*, and the other as a *crime*, only as they spring from *good*, or *bad* principles; from *moral rectitude*, or *depravity* of mind.

pag. 51.

to prevent relapsing into their former *superstition*, and *wickedness*, which the reason of mankind could not discover from *the beginning*; because they necessarily suppose certain things which did not *then exist*, viz. that they have departed from the *primitive law* of their creation, and that a *revelation* has been given to set them right again. So that mens particular religious obligations may, and must, in some things, be *different* by *revelation*, from what they would have been, had they been left to the *mere unassisted* light and dictates of *reason*; and yet it may be allow'd, that the law of *reason*, the *original* law of human nature, was perfect; *i. e.* *sufficient*, if rightly *attended to*, and *observ'd*, to answer its *end*.

IF the ingenious author shall assert, that those duties, which are only fit, upon supposing a *revelation given*, are, however, parts of the *law of nature*, which “takes in every
“ thing that is founded on the reason and nature of things* ;” that “like the law of nations, or the laws of particular countries,” they “are only the law of nature adjusted, and accommodated to circumstances† ;” and that “if our natural notions of the divine perfections demonstrate, that God will require nothing of his creatures but what tends to their good; whatsoever is of this kind, is a superstructure that belongs to the

* *Christianity &c.* p. 12.

† P. 63.

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“ law of nature ; or, in other words, what
 “ the reason or nature of the things themselves
 “ plainly point out to us.” Let it be so ; the
 religion of nature then may be not only the
original religion of mere reason, but *duties* that
 could not be *known* without a revelation,
 and which are *only proper* upon *supposing* a re-
 velation. And though this way of speaking
 may seem to many *new*, and *inaccurate*, and
 is, by no means, to be reconcil’d to the *gene-*
ral strain of this author’s reasoning ; we may
 be very well contented if he will allow, that
faith in Christ, for instance, the *belief* of a
revelation which is not *universal* (for such, I
 have already shewn, it is consistent with the
perfections of God for him to give) and im-
 pressing frequently and strongly upon the
 mind *such principles*, and keeping up the re-
 membrance of *such important facts*, which,
 though grounded intirely upon the *acknow-*
ledgment of a revelation, have, a *moral* ten-
 dency ; that these things, I say, are parts of
 that religion which is *as old as the creation*,
 and *as extensive as human nature*.

AFTER what has been said concerning
 the *fitness* and *advantage* of the *thing itself*,
 and such *concessions*, all that remains to be
 settled is, whether God may not appoint *the*
manner, in which a thing, that is useful in
 itself, shall be done ; or whether it must be
 left to every man to do it *when*, and in *what*
way he thinks fit ? In the *positive institutions*
 we are speaking of, which tend to fix princi-
 ples

ples and dispositions in our minds, that are the *strongest motives* and *encouragements* to the practice of natural religion; and by perpetuating the *design* of the revelation, to make us careful how we *abuse* and *pervert* it; 'tis plain there is nothing which even the adversaries of revelation can pretend is *absolutely indifferent*, but the *manner* in which we are to inculcate and keep alive such sentiments as are *in themselves proper*, *suited* to our circumstances, and of *moral use*. And therefore if it can be shewn, that there are no objections of any consequence against God's *interposing*, and *fixing* this; nay, if upon some accounts it is *expedient* that he should do it; this will amount to an *entire vindication* of *positive duties*.

THE appointing *particular rites* is not for the sake of the *rites themselves*, but to engage men in *proper* and *useful* reflections, and give them a strong sense of their *obligations*; which is a *rational* means of religion. These *reflections* therefore, and this *sense* of their *obligations*, as a *means* of religion in their circumstances, *reason* might direct to; and if they were frequently inculcated, and had their due influence upon the mind, the design of *instituted rites* would, in a great measure, be answer'd. But if this be *sufficient*, why is any *particular method* fix'd? Because men are apt to be negligent of what is left in a *general*, undetermin'd way; whereas by their being *oblig'd* to *certain observances*, the design of which, they know, is, to engage them

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them in such *meditations*, and fix in them such principles of *moral* conduct, and which they perform *directly* with this view, the end is more *effectually* ascertain'd and secur'd. I might rest the matter entirely upon this foot. For if in particular circumstances such meditations are *proper*; if the firm belief and lively influence of such principles is fit to be *cultivated*, and *improv'd*; if these things are of great importance to strengthen *moral* dispositions, and support the *universal* and *constant* practice of the duties of *natural religion*; the most *probable* way of producing this good effect is certainly a consideration worthy the infinite *wisdom* of God. And if, considering the indolence, carelessness, innumerable avocations, distracting cares, sensual pursuits, and the general conduct of mankind, it appears that things of consequence are likely to be *omitted*, or very much *neglected*, if they are not fix'd and determin'd by a *particular rule*; the appointing such a rule clearly demonstrates to us not only the *wisdom*, but the *goodness* of the supreme Being; since it is the most *effectual* means to secure the *virtue* and *happiness* of his creatures.

BUT to this we may add farther, that the doing a thing in a way which God has *prescrib'd*, and in obedience to his *command*, has a natural tendency, with all who have a becoming *reverence* of his infinite perfections, and consider him as the *inspector* and *judge* of
their

their conduct, to beget greater *seriousness* and attention of mind, and consequently to make a *deeper* impression, than *transient cursory* thoughts, enter'd on at *pleasure*, and not under the *awe* of such an *express obligation*. So that there is very good *reason* why God should interpose his *authority*, and order that to be done in a *particular manner*, which, in the *general* consideration of it, is *useful*; be it either to keep up the *memory* of *certain facts*; or to *impress* upon the minds of men such principles as are evidently of *moral* use, to beget and confirm *good dispositions*, or guard against *corruptions* of the true religion; and if there be a good reason for a *particular method*, it must hold equally strong for *any* particular method which is *significant*, and *natural*, and appears *wisely adapted* to answer the *general end*.

SHOULD it be said, if this be wise and rational, *reason* will direct to it; why then is it not left to every man's *discretion* to fix upon those rites which he likes best; which are most suitable to his *temper* and *genius*; and which, he knows by experience, are most likely to *affect* him? Why must the *same rules* be prescribed to ALL, when their capacities, humours, and passions are so *various*? And why are they not at liberty to *alter* them, as *circumstances* alter, for others which they think will be more *effectual*? I answer, that this is liable to the *same inconveniences* as the not having these things *fix'd* at all, because it being still left *at large*, the general design of

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such

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such institutions cannot be so *effectually* secur'd, as if it was determin'd by the *supreme law-giver*; — that if there be any reason for appointments of this nature, a being of *perfect wisdom* is more *proper* to take the care of them, than *ignorant, mistaken, and fanciful* men; — that the consideration of his *immediate command* must give a greater *solemnity* and *weight* to them, than they can have, if they are consider'd as the result of *mere human prudence*; — and above all, that if this matter be not *determin'd* by some *supreme authority*, to which all will think themselves oblig'd to *submit*, endless differences and confusions must, not *accidentally*, but in the *natural consequence* of things, ensue; and every man's private opinion, prejudice, and humour, being his *only rule*, rites will be multiply'd *infinitely*, and a *boundless superstition* introduc'd.

I READILY grant the author of *Christianity* &c. that the *instituted means* prescrib'd by revelation are not of such *fix'd* and *immutable* obligation, “ but that, agreeably to the “ law of nature,” they are to be *practis'd*, or *omitted*, “ as best suits that end for which “ they were ordain'd. To imagine the contrary (as he judiciously observes) is to make “ things, dependent on circumstances, independent; things that are proper only under some circumstances, necessary under all “ circumstances; nay, to make ends mutable, and means immutable; and that these “ are

“ are to continue in force, though by change
“ of circumstances they become prejudicial;
“ nay, destructive to the end for which alone
“ they were ordain’d *.”

WHEN *external rites* can't be observ'd without great *inconvenience* in particular countries, they may undoubtedly be dropt; in like manner, when the observation of a positive precept would be injurious to *health*, inconsistent with our doing necessary acts of *beneficence*, which are of prior obligation, and the like. But how does this affect the present argument, which does not suppose that instituted means are fix'd, but with such necessary *exceptions*? Does it prove in general, that God cannot appoint the *manner* in which things that are useful shall be done? Or that such institutions may not be of *standing*, and *perpetual* authority in all cases wherein they do not *destroy*, or *interfere* with, their end? May they not be of that nature, as, taking the *general* state of the world, may be proper (so far as obedience to positive laws, which are subservient to *morality*, and the *good* of mankind, can ever be requir'd) in *all* ages, and nations? And may not the observation of them, even with these *limitations*, be of great advantage, and consequently *wisely* enjoin'd by the supreme Law-giver? May not things be requir'd, that are (I mean in the nature of the *things themselves*, for that is the

* *Christianity &c.* p. 104, 105.

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only question at present) of *undoubted use* upon the whole ; though they may not always suit the circumstances of each *individual*, or the state of *all* countries *equally*, in *every* age of the world ?

T H E R E is nothing that can with any shew of reason be objected against the fixing positive laws, in the manner in which their obligation has been explain'd, even “ in a religion design'd to extend over the whole world, and last to the end of it †,” but their being *impracticable*, or not to be observ'd without great inconvenience *in general* ; and not at *certain* seasons, and in *particular* conjunctures only, which can't possibly be avoided. And I shall shew, when I come to treat particularly of these, from what was most probably the true intention of the *legislator*, that this *is* not the case with respect to *any* of the *positive institutions* of Christianity ; and that the observation of them, by perpetuating the memory of certain facts, guarding against the worst corruptions of true religion, and begetting such sentiments and dispositions, as are of evident *moral* tendency, must be very useful *every where*, and in *all times*. 'Tis sufficient at present to observe, that there *may* be instituted means, which, with respect to the nature of the *actions themselves*, may generally be practis'd without inconvenience ; and if practis'd only in *subordination* to moral

† *Christianity &c.* p. 107.

duties, the end they are design'd to promote, be *always* of use: otherwise, all actions must, in themselves, be attended with more *evil* than *good* upon the whole; and it must be denied, either that the *same* sentiments can be always proper to strengthen *moral* dispositions; or, that advancing the great ends even of *natural religion* will be of advantage in *all* ages, and countries.

BUT does not what has been said destroy
“ the use of *all* occasional commands, since
“ it supposes *they* can't oblige people longer
“ than they judge it fit to observe them *?”
Not at all, if they never judge it *unfit* to observe them, but when it is *really* unfit; which, I have shewn, may not be the case upon the *whole*, but only in some *particular* circumstances that *seldom* happen, and must be *excepted* by the *wisest* and most *useful* constitutions of civil government. Let this author prove, that positive commands are *necessarily*, and in the *nature* of the things themselves, *unfit* to be observed in general, and he does something; or let him prove, that because they may happen to be *abused* through “ the
“ ignorant prejudices of the *weak*, and *superstitious*, and the designs of *ambitious*
“ men †,” they ought to be entirely *laid aside*; and not practis'd by those who understand them *rightly*, and to whom they are an *useful means* of religion, in a proper *sub-*

* *Christianity &c.* p. 113.

† *Ibid.* p. 109.

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serviency to their end. But let him take this thought along with him, that if things which are calculated to be always useful are to be esteem'd hurtful, and discarded, merely because they are perverted, the best and most excellent will be condemn'd with the worst; and we shall not be able to stop at giving up instituted religion, but must renounce the use of reason itself.

THUS have I largely vindicated *positive* precepts against the *main* argument which our author hath urg'd against them, that argument in which he seems most to triumph, viz. the *absolute perfection* of natural religion, and have endeavoured to explain the *general* nature and design of them; and shewn, that when he argues against their being of such *strict indispensable* obligation, as to bind at all times, and in all circumstances, he argues not against the *things themselves*, but only against the *mistakes* of enthusiasts, or the *corruptions* of designing men. It will be very easy, upon this state of the case, to answer all his other objections, which I shall therefore more briefly consider.

THUS, for instance, it appears that all his reasonings against *mere arbitrary* commands are nothing at all to the purpose, because 'tis evident from what has been said, that these are not *unnecessary* and arbitrary institutions. The *ultimate design* of them is to inculcate sentiments, or to be a memorial of

of facts (as I shall prove hereafter, with respect to the positive injunctions of Christianity) which, though they suppose a revelation given, are, in such a circumstance, very *proper* to beget *moral* habits, to excite to a more *diligent practice* of the duties of natural religion, and prevent mens *relapsing* into their former gross corruptions of it; and consequently is *wise* and *rational*, and *conducive* to the perfection and happiness of mankind. There appears *in general* to be very good reason, why God may appoint a *particular manner* of doing things, that are *in themselves* useful; both as it is the most *probable* method to *secure* the good effect of them, and that they may be more *regarded*, and make the *stronger* impression; and if so, there must be a foundation in *reason* for ordaining any particular manner which is proper to answer the end. So that there is nothing in all this that is, *strictly* speaking, *arbitrary*, or unworthy the care of a *wise* governour. The general design *good*, and *serviceable* to virtue; the fixing a particular method *best suited* to promote this design; and ALL to be consider'd in entire *subordination* and *subserviency* to the eternal and unchangeable laws of morality. Neither the *substance* of such instituted duties, nor the appointing a certain manner in which they are to be perform'd, are absolutely *indifferent*, but there is a *reason* and *use* in both.

IF any shall be so trifling as to object, that if *two rites* are *equally* adapted to serve the

same design, the choice of *either* of them must be *arbitrary*. I answer, that the general reason for appointing *some particular* rite is a sufficient reason for taking *either* of them; but as there is no *real difference* between the two, one is not, and cannot be, *prefer'd* before the other as *fitter in itself*, which would indeed be acting *without a reason*.

THIS I take to be a full answer to all our author's long and frequent declamations against *arbitrary*, and *tyrannical* precepts, which, though they may deserve to be consider'd by the *rigid* imposers of *human ceremonies*, that only *incumber* religion, instead of having any *useful influence* towards advancing true and substantial goodness; do not at all affect positive duties of *divine* appointment, for enjoining which there is always *a reason* to be assign'd, besides the *mere will* of the law-giver. And he himself has allow'd, that if there be "any reason to deprive men of their liberty " in indifferent things" [and the case is exactly the same, if there be *any reason* for making actions, that are in themselves indifferent, sacred rites of religion] "they then cease " to be indifferent *."

I SHALL add however under this head (though it is not necessary to vindicate positive precepts as above explain'd, in which there is not the least mark of *arbitrariness*, and *tyranny*) that let a thing appear to be, in *itself*,

of no *particular* moral use; let it be allow'd, that we can assign no *special* reason for its being enjoin'd; but that, *abstracted* from the consideration of a *divine* command, it seems altogether *indifferent*, and to have nothing, either in its *nature*, or *peculiar* tendency, to recommend it above *other* things, in which men are left at their *full liberty*; I think it will be very hard, if not impossible, even upon this state of the case, to prove, that there cannot be *any general reason* for appointing the observation of it, and that one such *minute variation* "in instituted religion from the
"religion of nature, and reason, makes all
"things else that can be said for its support
"totally ineffectual*."

FOR let us suppose a *pretended revelation*, the design of which, upon being carefully examin'd, is approv'd of as most *wise, rational*, and *useful*, and which is, in *all other* respects, as *perfect* as we can conceive any thing of that kind to be. Let this most *excellent* scheme of doctrine be not only adapted, in *general*, to promote the highest moral perfection, and happiness of human nature; but suited exactly to the *circumstances* and *necessities* of a corrupt and degenerate world; to enlighten their reason in *those points*, about which it was most perverted and darkned, and reform their most *flagrant* and *hurtful* errors. If, together with these *internal* characters, it has the attestation of *numerous* and *undeniable* miracles; shall one or two positive

* *Christianity &c.* Page 60.

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institutions (I appeal to the *cool*, and *impartial reason* of mankind) shall, I say, *one* or *two* positive institutions, for which we cannot discern that there is any *particular* reason, set aside *all this evidence*, which otherwise would be admitted as most *clear* and *unexceptionable*?

No miracles indeed will prove *irrational* and *immoral* doctrines to be from God, because we are *infallibly certain*, from our knowledge of his *moral* perfections, that he *cannot* reveal any such doctrines; but we are far from being *sure*, that he can *in no case whatever* enjoin the practice of *indifferent* things, for which there does not appear, from the *peculiar nature* or *tendency* of the things themselves, to be any *special* reason; all therefore that we can have to consider is, on which side the greatest *probability* lies. And this may soon be determin'd; because we can give *no account*, how the *pretensions* of a doctrine claiming to be a divine revelation should be *thus* supported, by having such *internal* marks, as plainly demonstrate it could not proceed from *evil* spirits, and by the testimony of *miracles*, which prove beyond doubt the *interposition* of some *superior invisible agent*, if it be not *really divine*; whereas on the other hand, there may be *general reasons* for enjoining certain things, which appear to have no *particular* reason founded on the *things themselves*, or *use* at all. Whoever denies this must deny likewise that
God

God can have a *wise* design in any of the methods of his providence towards mankind, which they do not *perceive*; and upon such a *groundless* presumption, which is contradicted by *universal* experience, refuse to be determin'd by what, himself would otherwise allow, to be the *clearest*, and *fullest* proof possible of a *divine interposition*.

BUT besides, the using ourselves to *reflections* of this kind, which such a command will *naturally* excite in us, *viz.* "that God
" is to be obey'd in *all* the significations of
" his will, because as he is absolutely *wise*,
" and *good*, he can enjoin nothing without a
" *reason*," will perhaps *suggest in part* what the *reason* of such institutions *may be*, *viz.* to *cultivate* this principle, and keep up a *constant sense* of it in the mind. And for the great *importance* and *usefulness* of this I shall only say, that as it tends to *habituate* to us the highest *reverence* of God, and most entire *submission* to his authority; so the *want* of it has been the true cause, that so many *little pretenders* to reason and philosophy have, in all ages, taken upon them to *censure* several things, both in the constitution of *nature*, and course of *providence*, merely because they have *not understood* them; and urg'd their own *ignorance* arising from the narrowness of their faculties, or perhaps from a superficial knowledge, and confus'd way of thinking, their own *mistakes*, and *inadequate* conceptions, as *real faults* in the frame of the universe;

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universe; and consequently as objections against the absolute *wisdom* and *goodness* of the creator, and governour of all things.

AND consider'd in this view, why may not such commands be given to creatures in a state of *trial*, agreeably to the *general end* of their being plac'd in such a state, which is not for the *information* of the Divine mind, but to *exercise*, in a *proper* manner, their *moral* dispositions and habits, and by that means *strengthen* and *improve* their virtue? Let it be granted, that "moral and immoral things *are* the most proper subjects for *this* *;" 'tis enough that *these other* may not be *improper*. And whereas the author of *Christianity* &c. asks farther, "if earthly kings, who may be deceiv'd, and for the most part are so, would be justly esteem'd tyrants, if they require things of their subjects merely to try their obedience; how can we think this of the *omniscient*, infinitely glorious king of kings †?" 'Tis sufficient to answer, that there is no arguing from *earthly* governments to *God's* government of the world; and what would be *tyrannical* in the one, may be very *wise* and *fit* in the other; because the *power* of earthly kings is to be exercis'd *no farther*, than the *end* of their *civil* authority requires, which *end*, the *order*, *peace*, and *happiness* of society, cannot be any way advanc'd by such *arbitrary* injunctions; whereas the

* *Christianity* &c. p. 176.

† *Ibid.*

chief design of God's government being to promote *inward* rectitude, and establish right principles and dispositions in the *mind*, whatever has a tendency to beget or confirm *such dispositions* may be appointed by him, without incurring the imputation of *arbitrariness* and *tyranny*.

THE ingenious author tells us farther that
“ there is no way to avoid this objection, of
“ *God's willing contrarieties*; but by suppos-
“ ing he requires nothing of men, but what
“ is founded on the nature of things, and
“ the immutable relations they bear to one
“ another; and what, consequently, they are,
“ as far as concerns them, capable of know-
“ ing. But this objection is unanswerable by
“ those, who believe the will of God is not
“ always thus founded; but may contain
“ many merely positive things; since men
“ may, after having taken all possible care
“ to be in the right, have very opposite sen-
“ timents; and be oblig'd, by the will of
“ God, to hold, and act contrarieties *.”

IF he means by *things merely positive* such as are *absolutely useless*, or which are *commanded only for commanding-sake*; these are not the things I am bound to defend, because it will hereafter be shewn that Christianity enjoins *nothing of this kind*. And I would fain know, what *contrariety* there is between duties, that

* *Christianity &c.* p. 6.

differ no otherwise than as *means* and *end*? Is there any *inconsistency* between *positive* duties and *moral*, when the *positive* are enjoin'd in perfect *subordination* to, and have a tendency to support the *practice* of *moral* duties. Do they *destroy*, or in the least *clash* with each other? The case is only this, that *some* duties are requir'd of such as enjoy a revelation, which are *not* requir'd of those who want it; *i. e.* in other words, their *duties* differ, according as their *circumstances* differ; and this is as true upon the foot of *natural religion* only, as upon the supposition of a *revelation*; and that, not only with respect to the *means* of religion, but the *substance* of it. What, for instance, can be more different, than the duties of *prosperity*, and *adversity*; the duties which spring from the mutual relations of *parents* and *children*, *masters* and *servants*, and the like? If it be said, that these are *universal* duties, because they oblige *all* mankind in *such* circumstances; this may likewise be affirm'd of *positive* duties, that they would oblige *all*, if all were in the *same* circumstances, and had the *same* knowledge of the revelation. And any farther than they have the *means* of knowing them, they are not concern'd to know them; their *ignorance* will not in the least hinder their *acceptance* with their maker. The sum of the whole is, that upon supposing a *revelation* communicated to *some* parts of the world, and not to the rest, (which has been already vindicated) mens *particular* religious obligations

must of necessity be *different*, tho not *inconsistent*; and the one have *certain duties*, which the other *cannot discover*: In this case indeed, men may, “ after having taken all possible
“ care to be in the right, have very opposite
“ sentiments, and be oblig’d, by the will of
“ God, to hold, and act contrarieties,” or rather, the one to *do some things* which the other *is not bound* to do; and yet neither be *wrong*, because they may both do *all*, that can *justly* be expected from them.

I HAVE consider’d the matter in this view, that I might not drop *any part* of our author’s sense. But, I own, I am not certain whether he means, that positive and moral duties are *contrarieties*; or that “ men are
“ oblig’d, by the will of God, to hold, and
“ act contrarieties,” because some are *bound* to certain duties by *revelation*, which others, with all their care and diligence, *can’t discover*, nor consequently be under an *obligation* to practise; or else, that those who have equally the *use* of the revelation may, after an impartial search, *differ* about the nature of positive institutions, and being *oblig’d* each, *by the will of God*, to follow the direction of his own judgment and conscience, which, in this case, prescribe *contrary* rules, must be bound by the same “ will, to hold and act
“ contrarieties.” The two former senses have been sufficiently consider’d, and to the latter ’tis easy to reply, that if there be any thing in it, it must prove, that God can give *no laws*

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laws to mankind of any sort, but what all who are *honest* and *impartial*, must necessarily understand in the *same precise* sense; but this is not, and 'tis great folly to expect it ever will be the case, with respect to *particular* branches even of *moral* duty. *Honest* men have always *differ'd* (and there is no ground to imagine, that *such differences* will cease in any age hereafter) in explaining both the laws of *revelation*, and *reason*. And it will be an *excellent* consequence indeed of our author's reasoning, if, upon this account, we must throw up both *positive* and *moral* duties, *i. e.* in short, *all religion*, reveal'd and natural, at once.

AND whereas it is asked, "how it can
" be conceived, that God's laws, whether
" internally, or externally reveal'd, are not
" at all times the same, when the author of
" them is, and has been immutably the same
" for ever*?" I answer, that this, if *rightly* understood, infers the *direct contrary* to what it was intended to prove. For the *unchangeableness* of God only supposes in *general*, that he will always *necessarily* do what is *wisest* and *best*. If therefore some things are *proper* upon supposing a *revelation*, for which there could be *no foundation* at all, if men were left to the mere light of *reason*; and if it be upon several accounts *expedient*, that the *manner* of doing such things should be expressly

* *Christianity* &c. p. 103.

fix'd and *determin'd*, which, I apprehend, has been fully prov'd; even the *immutable wisdom* and *goodness* of God must *oblige* him, in these *different circumstances*, to make mens particular duties and religious obligations *different*; and command *certain things* by revelation, which can't be *universal laws* because not *discoverable by all*, nor consequently belong to the *original religion* of nature.

THE only charge, which remains against positive duties, is the charge of *superstition*. Now in order to set this matter in a clear light, and shew that there is no *just* foundation for such a charge, I would observe the following things.

1. THAT there is a sense, in which what the ingenious author seems to think a great absurdity may be true, *viz.* that “ what is “ *superstition by the light of nature, may be “ a part of religion by revelation* *.” I don't mean, that what the reason of mankind must *necessarily, at all times, and in all circumstances, condemn as superstitious, can ever cease to be so*; for this would be to assert, that the *natures of things are not what they are, and consequently to maintain contradictions*; but that what might *justly be esteem'd superstition, if men were left to the direction of the light of nature only, will lose that character if God*

* *Christianity &c.* p. 136.

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interposes, and by an express revelation enjoins
the practice of it.

FOR instance, our author, I make no doubt, will readily allow, that if a thing may “as well be done this as that way *,” the fixing and establishing, by human authority, certain particular rites as *necessary*, and of *universal* obligation, and supposing that men are not at *liberty* to make use of *any other*, or of *none at all*, is rank *superstition* and *enthusiasm*. But this I shall endeavour to shew *is not*, and *cannot* be, the case upon the supposition of a revelation given, and that the matter is determin’d by a *divine law*.

IT has been already largely prov’d, that the *design* of positive institutions is to improve *moral* dispositions, and consequently *rational* and *good*; that there may be a *wise reason* for appointing a *particular method*, in which things, that are *useful in themselves*, shall be done; and consequently, for appointing *any* particular method that is calculated to answer the *general end*; and that if there are *two* methods *equally* proper, the general reason for fixing *any* method at all is a sufficient reason for taking *either* of them. So that the manner of doing a thing, tho in itself *absolutely indifferent*, may be made a part of *mens religious obligations* by the great governor of the world, consistently with his most

* Ibid.

Christian revelation defended. 291

perfect *wisdom* and *goodness*; which, if they themselves took upon them to fix it as a law *binding conscience*, would be *weak* and *superstitious*. If therefore we are convinc'd, that a command of this sort, which has been shewn to be *worthy* of God, is *actually* given by him; the yielding obedience to it is so far from being *superstition*, that it is a branch even of our *moral* duty. Our obligation to submit to it results from one of the *first principles of natural religion*, viz. that God can command nothing but what is *just* and *rational*, and consequently has a right to be *universally* obey'd; and to say that we are not bound to practise *every* thing, which we have clear evidence *he* requires of us by *revelation*, as well as by the law of *reason*, is indeed to make *all religion* superstition.

FOR why is it, that we consider *moral* duties themselves as parts of *natural religion*? Is it merely because they are in themselves fit, and have their foundation in the *immutable* nature and relations of things, without having any regard to the *authority* of that Supreme being, who has plainly declar'd it to be his *will* that we should observe them, by *framing* that constitution, and *appointing* those relations, from which they necessarily arise? Undoubtedly, 'tis not. For however *amiable*, upon this supposition, the practice of those duties might be, however *becoming* rational beings, and *necessary* to promote the happiness of mankind; it could not with any propriety

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be call'd *religion*, if we excluded the consideration of God as our *governour* and *judge*; and did not regard them as *laws* which he hath given us. And, on the contrary, if we do consider him as our *wise* and *righteous* *governour*, this will necessarily lead us to practise *every thing* that we are persuaded is *his will*, whether *moral*, or *positive*; otherwise, we renounce the *dependence* of creatures on their creator; or suppose, that he is an *unjust tyrannical* *governour* who is not fit to be obey'd; and consequently overturn not only all *external revelation*, but the *religion of nature and reason itself*.

I HAVE all along suppos'd, that God may be the author of *positive institutions*, which, I think, has been fully prov'd, and that men are convinc'd, that *particular institutions* of this kind are *divine*; and allowing this, if the observation of them be *superstition*, the consequence will necessarily be the *subversion* of all religion. But if, on the contrary, this principle be *true*, without which even *natural religion* cannot subsist, viz. that the *authority of God*, plainly perceiv'd, ought, in all cases, to determine our behaviour; wilful disobedience to a *positive* precept, though in itself *mutable*, must be an *immorality*, and consequently a violation of the law of reason, which is *eternal* and *immutable*. Though the command itself be *positive*, the argument for obedience is *moral*.

INDEED if men rest in *outward rites* even of *God's appointment*, and are only concern'd about performing the *ceremonial* part, but are not led by them, according to the *design* of their institution, to cultivate and impress upon their minds those *useful sentiments*, which have a tendency to beget and improve *moral* dispositions, and are *alone* the means of religion, the *particular manner* being only appointed as the most *likely* way to *ascertain* their good effect; if they think, that God is pleas'd with *mere external* forms, which, in themselves, are but *trifles*, and imagine, that they shall "propitiate an all-wise and gracious" being by such things as have no worth or "excellency in them*," nay, if they fancy that there is an *efficacy*, to procure the divine favour, in the *best part* of instituted means, inculcating proper reflections, and a becoming sense of their obligations, whether the *great end of all*, producing and strengthening *moral* dispositions, be promoted, or not; their religion is *as truly* superstition, as if it was entirely the offspring of their *own will and fancy*. But if there be a reason, why things, which are *in themselves useful*, should be appointed to be done in a *particular manner*; if *this manner* be thought of importance above *others* that, in the nature of things, might be *equally proper*, only because God, for *wise ends*, has directed to it; if the *whole of insti-*

* *Christianity &c.* p. 136.

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tuted means be consider'd as in a necessary *sub-*
serviency to the eternal laws of morality, and
 look'd upon as *insignificant* and *trifling*, if they
 do not excite to the practice of that religion,
 which is *substantially* and *unchangeably* good;
 if it be thought *impious* to *separate* the means
 from the end, and much more to make them
destructive of it, or hope to compound, by
 the most scrupulous exactness about *external*
 and *instrumental* observances, for the neglect
 of *indispensable moral* duties; here is not the
 least appearance of *superstition*: No “ unwor-
 “ thy notions entertain'd of God; no con-
 “ ceiving of him as an arbitrary, light, or pas-
 “ sionate *” being, pleas'd, and offended with
 trifles; but as a *wise* and *gracious* governour,
 who takes the most *effectual* methods to make
 the means of religion *useful*, and consequently
 to advance the *virtue* and *happiness* of his
 subjects; and has establish'd the due subordi-
 nation of *means* to *ends*, and requires and ac-
 cepts instituted religion only in its *proper place*,
i. e. so far as it promotes a more *strict* regard
 to *natural*, and the practice of *rational* and
real goodness. But,

2. As the observation of positive duties, in
 the manner in which they have been describ'd,
 and the *design* and *reason* of them argued, is
 not, and cannot, *in itself*, be *superstition*; I
 shall endeavour to shew farther, that it has
 no *tendency* to *superstition*. That positive in-

* *Christianity &c.* p. 135, 136.

stitutions have been used *superstitiously*, and men have laid an *equal* stress upon them as upon *morality* itself, can't be denied; nay, that they have resolv'd the *whole* of religion into *external* observances, and instead of making it consist in the necessary duties of *piety*, *justice*, and *charity*, placed it not only in the *means* instituted by God, but in *trifling* ceremonies, *useless* speculations, and *incomprehensible* mysteries of man's *inventing*, and *imposing*; and that their *zeal* for these things, animated by *blind* superstition and prejudice, and under the influence of *interested* and *designing* men, has transported them beyond *all bounds*, even to despise and trample upon the *sacred* and *eternal* rules of natural religion, we have many *sad examples* to prove. And let this wild enthusiasm be *expos'd* to the utmost; let the craft and knavery of *politicians*, or *priests*, who have debauch'd the consciences of men, and their natural sense of good and evil, be represented in the most *odious colours*. But though wise and honest men of *all parties*, who are concern'd for the purity of religion, heartily wish all *possible success* to such a design; the fact *itself*, I apprehend, is nothing at all to the point in question: because the most *excellent* and *useful* things in the world, thro' the *folly* and *perverseness* of mankind, and the prevalency of *irregular passions*; thro' the *weakness* of some, and the *subtilty* and *vile* management of others; may be the *occasions* of the grossest corruptions. Thus *religion itself* has been made use of to

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sanctify cruelty, perfidiousness, treasons, murders, and the blackest enormities; and the *general notion* of *worshipping* God has, *accidentally*, introduc'd superstition and idolatry. Persons therefore, who think impartially, won't be inclin'd to argue from *events*, or the *abuses* of things; but from their *direct* and natural tendency. And this is the true state of the question with respect to *positive duties*, whether *in themselves*, and in their *direct consequences*, they lead to *superstition*; or whether this be not an *accidental abuse* of them (to which the *best* things are liable) quite contrary to their *natural influence*, which is to support *true* and *rational* religion. If the author of *Christianity* &c. could prove the former of these, it would be very much to his purpose; but what he has said directly to this argument is but little, and, I think, of no great *weight*. Let us proceed however to examine it.

'Tis urg'd then, that "the supposing things
"indifferent equally commanded with mat-
"ters of morality, tends to make men be-
"lieve they are alike necessary *". If he means by *equally commanded*, enjoin'd as of *equal importance*, this is undoubtedly true; but every one, that knows any thing of the doctrine of scripture, must know that this is *far* from being the case; positive duties being always represented as *inferior* and *sub-*

* *Christianity* &c. p. 149.

servient to moral, and of no *significancy* or *value* in comparifon with *juftice*, *mercy*, *fidelity*, and other branches of the *law of nature*, which are of *fupreme*, *eternal*, and *indifpenfable* obligation. Let the argument therefore be *juftly* ftated, and as I would fuppofe this author himfelf intended it, and 'twill run thus ; that “ the fuppoſing things indifferent
 “ to be commanded *as well as* matters of mo-
 “ rality, tho they are declar'd to be of *far lefs*
 “ importance, and of *no worth at all*, if they
 “ don't promote a ftricter regard to morality,
 “ tends to make men believe they are *alike*
 “ *neceffary*, and lay an *equal* ftrefs upon both.” Which is, as if a man ſhould ſay, that my telling another light and darknefs are two *very different* things, has a tendency to make him think they are the *ſame*. One would rather be apt to conclude, that the enjoining one thing in *ſubordination* to another, and *conſtantly inculcating* that ſubordination, muſt have a *neceffary* tendency, which, 'tis very ſtrange, ſhould *ever fail* of its effect, to make all, but *ideots* and *mad people*, believe, that they are of *vaſtly different* importance. And if it be likely that the bulk of mankind will always be ſo *indolent* and *thoughtlefs*, as to diſregard ſuch *plain* directions, *the plainest indeed* that can be given them, there is no *poſſible* guard againſt their falling into *ſuperſtition* ; but, let what *caution* will be us'd, as long as there are *means* and *ends*, which muſt be allow'd upon the foot of *natural religion*, as well as of *revelation*, they “ will put a greater ſtrefs on
 “ means,

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“ means, tho of some use in religion, than
 “ their nature will bear; to the confound-
 “ ing things of the greatest moment with
 “ those of the smallest*.”

AGAIN: 'Tis said farther, that because
 “ sensible things make a deeper impressi-
 “ on the minds of the common people than
 “ words; that is a just reason against their
 “ use in religion †.” The deeper impres-
 sion itself can certainly be no reason *against*,
 but rather for them; because it must unde-
 niably be of great use, if it be *corrected* and
bounded by reason, and does not produce *su-*
perstition and *enthusiasm*. But this will be
 the effect, “ because the vulgar, who gene-
 “ rally look no farther than externals, do
 “ not use them barely, as they do words,
 “ to express their meaning; but conceive
 “ in them I know not what internal holi-
 “ nefs; and think such symbolical represen-
 “ tations as necessary as the things represent-
 “ ed by them; nay, by degrees, forgetting
 “ the reason of their institution, come to
 “ idolize them, as the *Israelites* did the bra-
 “ zen serpent ‡.” This is still arguing only
 from *facts*, and not from the *natural tendency*
 of things; whereas the true question is, whe-
 ther the revelation has not laid down very
plain rules to prevent such *misapprehensions*,
 by declaring, that instituted rites have no

* *Christianity* &c. p. 150.

† Pag. 172, 173.

‡ *Christianity* &c. p. 173.

sanctity in them, and are no better than any the most *useless* and *trifling* ceremonies, if they don't promote *moral* goodness; and consequently, whether the common people, if they would use their reason, might not easily avoid such *groundless* and *superstitious* conceits? If it be said, that we may argue however with probability, that those abuses *will always* happen, because they *ever have* happen'd "in all religions whatever, where symbolical representations have been used*:" I answer, that as the design of revelation is to teach men *otherwise*; as it is a very *plain* and *sufficient* rule for this purpose, which if they give the *least attention* to, they will be *better inform'd*; God is not answerable for *consequences*. If *superstition* be so much the *foible* of mankind, as indeed the experience of every age testifies, all that can be expected from the wise governour of the world is, that if he communicates a revelation, *proper care* will be taken to *prevent* it. Now this is, in *reason*, as *effectually* done by declaring, that all external rites are in themselves of no *account*, and have no *virtue* but what they derive from a *subserviency* to their end; as if *none but moral things* were made a part of religion. There is no more foundation for it, *really*, in the *one* case, than in the *other*; and by the same means that it prevails *now*, it would also prevail if *any other* rule was given, the *plainest* and *simplest* that can be

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thought of. For as the matter stands at present, if men would *think*, they must certainly avoid all such hurtful errors; and if they will not, besides that their religion is good for nothing, how can they be secur'd, upon any *possible* supposition, from the *grossest extravagancies*?

OUR author has one passage more upon this head, which indeed is very *extraordinary*. "As long (he says) as men believe
" the good of society is the supreme law,
" they will think it their duty to be govern'd by that law; and believing God
" requires nothing of them but what is for
" the good of mankind, will place the whole
" of their religion in benevolent actions, and
" to the utmost of their abilities copy after
" the divine original; but if they are made
" to believe there are things, which have *no*
" relation to this good, necessary to salvation;
" they must suppose it their duty, to
" use such means as will most effectually
" serve this purpose. — 'Tis to this principle we owe the most cruel persecutions,
" inquisitions, crusades, and massacres; tumults, seditions, rebellions, &c*." *i. e.* "If
" men are made to believe there are things,
" which have no relation to the good of
" society [or which do no good, or harm]
" necessary to salvation; they must suppose
" it their duty to use such means as will

* *Christianity* &c. p. 151, 152.

“ most effectually serve this purpose [of doing neither good nor hurt ;] and upon this principle of doing *no mischief*, do *all the mischief they can*, and persecute and destroy their fellow-creatures.” Does it follow, that because God commands some things, which, if in themselves they *have no relation to the good of society*, are not *hurtful*; the people must naturally be led to think, that ’tis not only an *innocent* thing (which itself is going a *prodigious length*) but their *duty* to commit the vilest injustice and cruelty? If they can draw such inferences as these, they are not capable of being *instructed*, nor fit to be *reason’d* with. I might add, that none of the positive institutions of *Christianity* are of the kind this author speaks of, but have all a tendency to promote *morality* (and one of them, in particular, the most *universal, disinterested, and generous benevolence*) and consequently the *greatest good* of mankind.

BUT my design in citing this passage was not to argue against it, the defect in the reasoning being too *gross* to escape any reader’s notice, who *thinks at all* of what he reads; let it therefore serve only as a specimen (I chuse to censure in the most *modest and favourable* manner) how apt even *ingenious disputants* are, in the heat of controversy, to *overshoot* themselves; and impose upon their own *better understandings* so far, as to join ideas together that have in nature no *connection*,

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nection, or dependance; and put things into the *conclusion*, for which there is not the least foundation in the *premises*. A method of arguing, by the way, whereby *any thing* may be concluded from *any thing*; nay, even *contraries* made to infer each other. Having shewn thus largely that instituted religion is not, *in itself*, superstition; and if *rightly* understood, (and the revelation is so *plain*, that 'tis very *unaccountable* that any should take it *wrong*) has no more a *tendency* to superstition, than natural religion itself; I shall conclude this chapter with observing,

3. THAT Christianity, as it requires only *two* or *three plain* and *useful* positive duties; and strictly obliges its professors not to *add* to them, by declaring against all *impositions**, and asserting more particularly, that the religion enjoin'd in the gospel is *pure* and *spiritual*†, not to be incumber'd and corrupted by *human forms* and *ceremonies*, nay, that we *worship* God *in vain*, if we *teach for doctrines the commandments of men*‡; Christianity, I say, seems, by these things, to have guarded more *effectually* against enthusiasm and superstition, than if it had explicitly requir'd *only moral* duties, and left it to every man's *fancy* to invent the *means* of religion for himself. For, by this *excellent* constitution, all the means of religion, being of God's appoint-

* Rom. xiv. 2, 3, 4, 5. Gal. v. 1, 13. † John iv. 23, 24.
‡ Mat. xv. 9.

ing, will be *wise* and *rational*; and if men understand, and resolve to follow the directions of the revelation, nothing that is *weak* and *enthusiastical* can be introduc'd. But if every one be allow'd to act according to his *private opinion*, and *humour*; or as he is influenc'd by his *fears*, and *foolish* notions of the Deity; he may (and there are many circumstances supposeable, in which 'tis probable he *will*) run the utmost lengths of an *unbounded* and *endless superstition*.

C H A P. V.

A particular vindication of the peculiar positive institutions of Christianity.

'TIS one great excellency of the Christian revelation, that its positive institutions are very *few*, as well as admirably calculated to *promote* and *encourage* the practice of virtue; so that our religion is not *incumber'd* with ceremonies, nor are our minds diverted from more *important* and *useful* duties; the *main substance* of Christianity being the law of nature explain'd upon the noblest principles, and inforc'd by the strongest motives. But it will naturally be ask'd, if the *fewer* the *better*, would it not be *best* of all if there were *none*? That does not follow, because two or three may be very *helpful*, (especially if we consider, that a revelation, design'd to be of *universal* advantage, must be calculated chiefly for the *vulgar*; and if it was suited to the taste of the *few*, in every age, who think and reason more *closely* and *abstractedly*, it would, with respect to the bulk of mankind, be *useless*) two or three positive precepts, I say, may be very *helpful*, when a great number would be *burthensom*, and perhaps too much engage the attention.—However, if this inference will not hold,

hold, does not the observation which has been made reflect on the *Mosaic* institution, in the same proportion as it does honour to the *Christian*? If it be a circumstance very much *in favour* of the latter, must it not be a great *prejudice* against the former, which was a law abounding in *ceremonies*, and *ritual observances*? I answer, that it undoubtedly proves the *superior excellency* of the *Christian* religion; but, I apprehend, will not conclude what the adversaries of revelation would infer from it, *viz.* that the law of *Moses* was not of *divine original*. For though when God gives a revelation that is design'd for *general* use, and consequently considers men only as *reasonable creatures*, and is not adapt- to the *genius*, *complexion*, or *state* of any particular nation, 'tis natural to expect that it will be *plain* and *simple*, and not overload- ed with things of an *external* and *positive* nature; yet there are circumstances supposea- ble, in which even a *ceremonious* religion may answer very valuable purposes. And this I take to have been the case with respect to the *Jewish rites*.

GOD, who was not oblig'd to give an external revelation *at all*, nor consequently to make it *universal*, thought fit, in his infinite wisdom (after having reveal'd himself, at sundry times, to particular persons) to chuse the posterity of *Abraham*, as a reward of his *signal* piety and *extraordinary* virtue, in order to preserve amongst them the ac-

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knowledgment and worship of himself as the
one true God, and the principles of natural
religion (which were almost lost, in other
nations, by the *universal* increase of idolatry
and *superstition*) *pure* and *uncorrupt*, till the
time came, which he had fix'd for a more
general reformation; and order'd it so in
the course of his providence, that by their
captivities, dispersions, and the translation of
the books of their religion into *Greek, &c.*
the revelation he had afforded them might be
of some use to the *Gentile* world; both by
scattering here and there good principles and
notions of natural religion; and raising,
throughout the *East*, about the time of our
Saviour's coming, a pretty common expecta-
tion of an *extraordinary* person, to appear in
Judea. The end therefore, which God had
in view, not being attainable, without pre-
serving them a *distinct* people, in their *reli-*
gion, customs, and manners, from other nati-
ons, the *law of ceremonies* was instituted with
this view; and if it was the most *likely method*
to answer the great purpose for which it was
intended, that will be a sufficient vindication
of the *wisdom* of it.

AND, I think, there will be no great dif-
ficulty in proving this, if we consider how the
Jews were *circumstanc'd*. A people who had
been strongly *prejudic'd* in favour of *idolatrous*
and *superstitious* customs by living in *Egypt*,
in those early ages of the world the most fa-
mous *seat and nursery* of superstition; who
affected

affected a religion of *pomp* and *ceremony*; were incompassed on all sides by *idolaters*; and appear to have been *inclin'd*, upon *all occasions*, to fall in with the *idolatry* of the neighbouring nations: a people, I say, so *situated* and *disposed*, would probably have kept no order, if their *national weakness* and *prejudices* had not been in some measure indulg'd: And the best security against their joining in the *idolatrous rites* that prevail'd all around 'em, and renouncing the worship of the *true God*, was to divert them, by giving them *innocent ceremonies of their own*; which, besides, as they were practis'd in honour of *him*, kept up a constant sense of *his authority*, and, upon that account, must have a natural tendency to *settle* and *establish* their minds. In like manner, *those rites* which were design'd to hinder their *free commerce* with other nations, and imitating the customs and usages among them *especially*, which had any *relation* to their superstition, must have been wisely adapted to the *state* and *circumstance* of things; because an imitation of the *manners* of the *Gentiles*, and contracting an *intimacy* and *familiarity* with them, would have led *naturally*, and almost *insensibly*, to the practice of their *idolatries*: and 'tis evident that rites and ordinances of this kind are a *great part* of the *Mosaic institution*.

I MIGHT add, that several things which are reckon'd to belong to the *religion* of the *Jews*, were only branches of their *civil constitution*;

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stitution; and farther, that as we are able to assign a good reason in *general*, from their *temper, prejudices, situation*, and the *wise views* of providence in preserving them a *separate* people, why they should be indulged in a *ceremonious* worship, as being the *surest* way to keep them at the greatest distance from the manners and customs of their *idolatrous* neighbours; so, 'tis not at all unlikely, that if we were thoroughly acquainted with the circumstances of *those times*, we might see a *particular* reason for chusing the ceremonies that were appointed above others; and nothing strange, if in a period, where we have scarce any light from history to direct our inquiries, we can't account *distinctly* for every institution.

BUT as this whole affair is a sort of *digression* from my main design, I would not enlarge upon it; and shall therefore only make one observation more, *viz.* that lest the people should be diverted, by the *multitude* of *rites* to which they were oblig'd, from an *attention* to those infinitely more important duties, in which the *essence* of true religion must *always* consist; and lay so much stress upon *ceremonial* institutions, as to depreciate and neglect *immutable moral* obligations; all *possible* care is taken, in the writings of the Old Testament, to guard against such *superstitious abuses*. The substance of religion is expressly declar'd to lie in those things *only*, which are *intrinsically* good; and positive institutions

stitutions to be mere *insignificant trifles* in comparison of *piety, justice, and mercy*; nay, to be even *offensive and abominable* in the sight of God, when they are put upon a level with the *eternal laws of natural religion*. The sentiments upon this subject are the *justest, strongest, and most sublime* that can be found any where, and frequently inculcated by prophets rais'd up for *that very purpose*; so that 'twas nothing but *wisful perverseness* that made the *Jews* so zealous for their *ceremonies*, to the contempt and subversion of *morality*; and even the *weakest* among them, if they had read their *own scriptures* with the *least care*, could not have fallen into such a pernicious error, which is so *explicitly and directly* condemn'd.

I PROCEED now to what I at first proposed, “ a *particular* vindication of the *peculiar* positive institutions of Christianity;” and in this I need be but short, because it will immediately appear, upon their being *truly* stated and explain'd, that they are *entirely subservient* to *morality*; the *strongest obligations* upon us to the practice of *universal virtue*; and have a *direct* tendency to encourage and strengthen the *best and most useful* dispositions of human nature; dispositions that will make men most *amiable and easy* in themselves, and most *agreeable and beneficial* to others.

By *baptism* we voluntarily, and in the most solemn manner, make a profession of the Christian religion : And as it is done *freely*, and from *choice*, we necessarily oblige ourselves by this action to imitate the *life* of Christ, and govern our temper and behaviour by *the rules* he has prescrib'd, *i. e.* to copy after the most *perfect* example, and practise the most *entire*, *generous*, and *useful* virtue, that was ever prescrib'd by any scheme of *philosophy*, or institution of *religion* : We oblige ourselves to that *rational piety*, *impartial justice*, *universal disinterested* and *condescending goodness*, and *strict temperance*, which Christianity so clearly recommends, and powerfully enforces ; expecting, upon *these terms only*, the favour of almighty God, and an happy immortality. And can any thing be more *becoming* rational beings, than to bring themselves under the *strictest obligations* to promote the *true dignity* and *perfection* of their nature, and the *general good* of their fellow creatures ?

If it be said, that our *very profession* of the Christian religion *obliges* us to all this, without the use of any particular *rite* or *cere-mony* ? I answer, that doing it by a *solemn rite*, and in a *public* manner, will be an *additional* motive, with all who have a sense of *ingenuity*, to perform their voluntary engagements ; that the doing it in a way *appointed by God*, and in obedience to *his com-mand*,

mand, has a natural tendency to make them more *sincere* in their resolutions, give them a more *lively sense* of their obligations, and leave a *deeper impression* upon the mind : And besides, by appointing a *particular rite*, and making it mens duty to submit to it, *every man* is put, at his first setting out in religion, upon *examining* the evidences of it, and the *different natures* and *consequences* of virtue and vice ; by which means his religion will become the matter of his *deliberate* and *free* choice. For though the bulk of mankind go on in the *beaten track*, and because they are never *call'd upon* to make a particular inquiry, take their religion *implicitly*, just as the *chance* of *education* and *custom* directs ; yet one would imagine, that when they are bound, by a *ceremony instituted on purpose*, to make a solemn profession of it, this should *always* suggest to them, that now is the *proper time* to consider seriously upon what foundation it stands, and the reasons by which it is supported ; and whatever the *real fact* be, I am sure it is the *natural tendency* of the thing : And therefore it must be calculated, in *itself*, to answer the most *useful* purposes, because nothing can be of greater importance towards making men *fix'd* and *steady* in a virtuous course, than their entring upon it after *mature deliberation*, and a *full conviction* of the judgment.

AND if there are these uses of *some particular rite*, it will be a sufficient justification

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of *any single one*, that it is as fit as *any other*, and does not interfere with the *main design* of the institution. This, I say, is as much as can, in *strict reason*, be requir'd. But, beyond this, it may be urg'd in favour of *baptism*, the *initiating ceremony* of the Christian religion, that it is, *itself*, the most *natural* and *significant* that can be, and *expressive* of those very obligations, which we bring ourselves under by submitting to it. This is strongly represented by St. Paul in the following passage (if we understand by *baptism* the rite that was *originally* appointed, and *always* practised in the *first* Christian churches, viz. *immersion* ; otherwise, indeed, the *beauty* and *force* of the comparison is entirely lost) *Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ, were baptized into his death ? Therefore we are buried with him, by baptism, into death ; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life **.

I NEED not set myself to prove, that this is a *rite* which may generally be *practised* without inconvenience, and consequently is fit to be enjoin'd in a religion design'd for *all ages* and *nations* ; because the *constant experience* of those who use it, adhering *strictly* to the *original* institution, is a most convincing demonstration of this ; amongst whom, not-

withstanding some instances of a *precipitate* and *incautious* zeal, it *scarce ever is*, and if but *common prudence* was exercis'd, we have the utmost reason to believe, never would *at all be*, attended with ill consequences; and besides, an attempt of this kind would be *trifling* with the reader in an age, in which the practice of *cold-bathing* is so frequently recommended even to the most *tender* constitutions, and acknowledg'd to have such *excellent effects*,

UPON the whole, there is every circumstance, in this *positive institution* of Christianity, that can *recommend* it, and manifest the great *wisdom* and *goodness* of God in appointing it. The *general design* of it is to *oblige* Christians, in the most *solemn* manner, to a conduct that is *becoming* rational creatures, conducive to the *rectitude* of human nature, and the *good* of society, *viz.* to abstain from vice and impurity of *all kinds*, and practise the most *universal, constant, and amiable* virtue.—The *fixing a particular rite* is of great use, to engage their *attention*, and give them a *stronger sense* of their obligations, and as it binds ALL to a *voluntary and deliberate* engagement to lead a *sober, righteous, and godly* life.—As the *substance* of the duty, or the *principal* thing intended by it, must *always be useful*, the *external ceremony itself* is of that kind, as may *generally be practis'd*, not only without *inconvenience*, but with *advantage*, and is withal very *natural and significant*, and wisely

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ly adapted to the main design. — To which we may add, that there is the *utmost* care taken to prevent *superstitious abuses* of it, not only by asserting, *in general*, the utter *insignificancy* of all instituted means without real virtue and goodness; and constantly inculcating the *moral use* of this particular institution; but by declaring in express terms, that 'tis not the *external* part of baptism, *putting away the filth of the flesh*, for which we are consider'd as good Christians, and intitled to the reward of eternal life, *but the answer of a good conscience towards God**.

ANOTHER positive institution of Christianity is what we commonly call the *Lord's supper*. And as, in this ordinance, the death of Christ is *commemorated* under the notion of a *sacrifice*, I shall, before I specify the *moral uses* of it, endeavour briefly to explain and vindicate *that representation*: Which is the more necessary, because nothing in the whole Christian doctrine has been more *grossly* misrepresented, or given its adversaries, who take their accounts of it from *party writers*, and not from the *New Testament* itself (a method of proceeding that argues great *unfairness* and *prejudice*) a more *plausible* occasion to triumph. But if the matter be rightly consider'd, it will appear, that the advantages, which they think they have against the Christian religion upon this head, are but *imaginary*. For,

* 1 Pet. iii. 21.

* I. THE New Testament nowhere represents God as a *rigorous inexorable* being, who insisted upon *full satisfaction* for the sins of men, before he could be induc'd to offer *terms of reconciliation*. It says, indeed, not one word of *satisfaction*, much less of *strict* and *adequate* satisfaction; not a syllable of the *infinite evil of sin*; of *infinite justice*; the *hypostatical union*, or the *deity's being so united to the man Christ Jesus*, as that the two *infinitely distinct natures constitute one person*, and, by virtue of this union, giving an *infinite value to the sufferings of the human nature*, and enabling it to pay a *strict equivalent to God's offended vindictive justice*. All this, I say, is the *invention of more modern ages* (who, by *subtil distinctions*, and *metaphysical obscurities*, have *deform'd true Christianity to such a degree*, that scarce any of its *original features* appear) and bears not the *least similitude* to the language of the New Testament; in which the Divine Being is always describ'd as *slow to anger*, *merciful* and *condescending* to the frailties and infirmities of mankind; and *forgiveness of sin* represented, not as a thing for which a *price of equal value* was paid, and which might consequently be demanded in *strict justice*, but as a *voluntary act of pure favour*, and the effect of *free and undeserved* goodness. Nay, farther,

* For a defence of the author against misrepresentations, and a clearer and fuller account of the doctrine of Christ's sacrifice, the reader is refer'd to the Postscript.

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2. THE New Testament never asserts, that God could not have pardon'd sin *without a sacrifice*, nor consequently, that the death of Christ, consider'd in *that view*, was, upon any account, *absolutely necessary*. If indeed it be prov'd, that this method is of *divine appointment*, this will and ought to satisfy us, that there are *wise reasons* for it; but it can't be inferr'd from hence, that 'twas *absolutely necessary*, or that the same wise purposes might not have been as effectually answer'd *some other way*. Nor,

3. DOES the Christian religion any where expressly declare, or so much as intimate to us, that natural reason could not discover God to be a *propitious* being, and ready to be reconcil'd to his guilty creatures upon their *repentance*; but, on the contrary, lays down this as the *fundamental* point of all religion, and consequently as a principle that might be argued with great *probability*, that *God is a rewarder of them who diligently seek him* *; and supposes, that the great goodness which he has demonstrated in the general constitution of things, and course of providence, was a *rational encouragement* to the Gentile world to serve and worship him, in hopes of *acceptance and mercy*.

4. IT is of great importance to observe, that the death of Christ (as far as appears) would have happen'd, if it had never been

* Heb. xi. 6.

design'd as a *sacrifice* ; and consequently was not appointed *arbitrarily* and *solely* with a view to that. The true state of the case seems to be this. The wise and merciful God, having compassion on the *ignorance* and *degeneracy* of the world, determin'd, at a certain time fix'd by his infinite wisdom, to interpose ; and when they had corrupted the *religion of nature*, and were not likely to recover the right knowledge of it, teach them their duty by an *external revelation*. The person, whom he chose to be his messenger, is characteriz'd as his *Son*, an *innocent* person of great *dignity* and *excellence*, whom he had *before* employ'd in the most important transactions, and who was highly *belov'd* and *favour'd* by him ; and the principal * reason of his employing one so *extraordinary* as his minister upon this occasion, we are told in the New Testament, was to conciliate greater *attention* and *regard* to his doctrine †. We are to take it therefore, I think, that the * *first* view of God in sending Christ into the world was, that, as a *prophet*, he might restore the true religion, and publish the glad tidings of *life* and *immortality*, and by this means reform the errors and vices of mankind.

BUT as he was sent to preach a most *strict* and *holy* doctrine among a people abominably *corrupt* and *vitious* ; to recommend a *rational* and *spiritual* worship of the Deity to those who were fond of *form* and *ceremony*, and

† Matth. xxi. 27. Heb. i. 1, 2. chap. ii. 2, 3.

* * See the Postscript, p. 349.

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resolv'd the whole of religion into *external rites*, and *traditional superstitions*; and assum'd the character of their *Messiah*, or king, when both his circumstances in life, and the religion he taught, contradicted the expectations they had entertain'd of *temporal pomp* and *grandeur* under the *Messiah's* government, and consequently disappointed all the views of their *covetousness* and *ambition*; he gain'd comparatively but few converts, and was abus'd and persecuted by the *priests* and men in *power*, whom the multitude *blindly* follow'd; and at last put to death with great torment and ignominy. From this plain, and *unquestionably true*, account of the fact it appears, that his suffering was the *natural consequence* of attempting to reform the manners of a degenerate age, and opposing the superstition and darling prejudices of the *Jewish* nation; and could not be avoided but by such a *compliance* on his part, as would have been inconsistent with *virtue* and *integrity*, or by a *miraculous* interposition of providence. And God, who *foresaw* all this, appointed that the death of Christ, which really happen'd in the *natural course* of things, should be consider'd as a *sacrifice*.

LET me observe by the way, that by considering the matter in this light, all objections against the justice of God, in determining that an *innocent* person should suffer for the *guilty*, are entirely obviated. For the death of Christ was not appointed *absolutely*
and

and *arbitrarily* with this view ; but, which is vastly different, and can't sure have the least appearance of *injustice*, it fell out just as other events do, in the *common course* of things; and all that can be *immediately* attributed to God in the whole affair is, that he sent him into the world, though he *foresaw* the consequences of it ; and order'd that his death, which would have happen'd, without a *miracle*, if there had been no such design, should be regarded as a *sacrifice*. Though, I must own, I can't see, if the matter had been *otherwise*, how it could be *unjust*, or *tyrannical*, to propose even to an *innocent* person to suffer, with his own *free consent*, in order to promote so great a good ; especially if we suppose, what the Christian revelation expressly teaches in the present case, that he would be *gloriously* and *amply* rewarded for it. Having thus remov'd all the difficulties of any moment that lie against this doctrine, the only thing that remains is to shew, what *wise ends* might be serv'd by it.

I SHALL not inquire into the *original* of *expiatory sacrifices*, which were as early in the world as the first accounts of history ; whether they were owing to an *express appointment* of God, as may seem probable from the History of *Moses* ; or had their rise from the *fears* and *superstition* of mankind ; who being *uneasy* under a sense of *guilt*, *confus'd* in their reasonings about the *goodness* of the Deity, and *uncertain* whether he would accept

cept them, notwithstanding past offences, upon their repentance and reformation *only* (though, I make no doubt, they might have argued this truth, with a good deal of *probability*, even from the *light of nature*) would naturally fly to every little *expedient*, that their *bewilder'd* imaginations suggested might be *proper*; and so began first with sacrificing *brute creatures*; and afterwards, as their *distrust* and *fears* increased, had recourse, in many *Heathen* nations, to the abominable practice of *human sacrifices*: Which shews plainly, that their reason was more and more *perplex'd*, and *corrupted* and *darken'd* to a prodigious degree, with respect to the very *fundamental* principles of religion and virtue.

IF *sacrificing* was entirely an *human invention*, 'twill be hard to give any account of it, more than of innumerable other *superstitions*, which, in the darkness and extreme depravity of the *Pagan* world, almost *universally* prevail'd. *Human sacrifices* are a disgrace to our nature, as well as in the highest degree dishonourable to God. And for *others*, there is no foundation at all in *reason* to suppose, that they could *expiate* the guilt of *moral* offences; or be of the *least efficacy* towards re-instating the sinner in the divine favour. On the other hand, if *sacrifices* were originally of *divine* appointment, they could not be design'd to *propitiate* the Deity, because the very institution of them

necessarily suppos'd that he was *already* propitious. For what end then were they ordained? Was it because the all-wise and merciful governour of the world delighted in the *blood* of *innocent* animals? or was he fond of being serv'd with great *expence* and *ceremony*? These are *low* and *unworthy* conceptions of him. All the uses therefore that 'twas possible, in *reason*, for sacrifices to serve; or consequently, that they could be design'd to answer, if they were of *divine* original, may, I think, be reduc'd to these two; *viz.* keeping up a firm belief of God's *reconcilableness*, and being ready to *forgive* his guilty creatures upon their *repentance*; and, at the same time, a strong sense of the *evil* of sin, and their own *demerit* upon the account of it. In this view of *standing memorials*, and *testimonies* to the most important truths, they might be very *useful*; but *proper expiations* they neither were, nor could be, whether they began from *superstition*, or *immediate revelation*.

AND now the death of Christ may be very *fitly* represented as a *sacrifice*, nay, describ'd in the *strongest* sacrificial phrases, since it answer'd *completely* all the *rational* purposes, that *expiatory sacrifices* could ever serve. 'Tis a *standing memorial* of God's being *propitious*, and inclin'd, as the Christian revelation assures us, not only to forgive sin *in part*, but *entirely*; and not only to remit the *whole* of the punishment which the sinner had deserv'd,

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but, moreover, to bestow on him the glorious reward of *eternal happiness* upon his sincere repentance and reformation, and persevering in a virtuous course : So that it removes the *uncertainty* of our natural reasonings, and is wisely calculated to maintain, in *all ages*, a firm belief of that *fundamental* principle of ALL religion, which mens *superstitious fears* had very much corrupted and darken'd ; and gives the *strongest possible* encouragement to virtue.

AGAIN, the death of Christ consider'd under the notion of a *sacrifice* will be, to the end of the world, a most *lively memorial* of the *evil* and *demerit* of sin. Nay, as God, in his infinite wisdom, has order'd it in such a manner, that nothing *less* should be consider'd as the sacrifice for the sins of the world, than the death of a person so *dear* to him, and of such *transcendent* dignity and excellence ; he has, by this appointment, declar'd much more *strongly* his *displeasure* against sin, and what the *sinner himself* deserv'd to suffer, and cut off more *effectually*, from wilful and impenitent offenders, all ground of *presumptuous hope* and *confidence* in his mercy, than 'twas possible to do by *any sacrifices* of brute creatures. So that by the way in which he has condescended to pardon us, there is the utmost discouragement given to *vice*, and the greatest care taken, that could be by any method whatever, to preserve the *honour* of the divine government,

and

and the *reverence* due to the authority of its laws. For besides what hath been already suggested, a sense of our *ill deserts* upon account of our transgressions, of which the death of Christ, represented as a sacrifice, is a most *affecting* memorial, has a natural tendency to inspire us with the deepest *humility*, and fill us with *shame* and *remorse* for having deviated from the rule of right, and consequently, to make us more *circumspect* and *regular* in our future behaviour; and a sense of God's *great goodness* in *freely* forgiving our offences, when we had merited quite the contrary, must, if we have any sentiments of *gratitude* or *honour*, make us solicitous to *please*, and fearful of *offending* him.

IF it be ask'd, how the *death* of Christ can answer the purpose of an *expiatory sacrifice*, when it happen'd in the *natural course* of things, and was not appointed *directly*, and *only*, with that view? I answer, that such sacrifices being never design'd to *propitiate* the Deity, or as *proper expiations*; but only as *memorials*, in the manner above explain'd; there is no difficulty in accounting for it. For, in all other cases, it was only God's *appointing*, and *accepting* the sacrifice that made it a proper *memorial*; otherwise it could have no significancy, but what the *fancy* and *superstition* of men suggested. The use of sacrifices therefore depending entirely on *his institution* of them; or, at least, the use of those which were directly of his

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ordaining being *that*, and *that only*, which he intended; it follows, in the very nature of the thing, that if he is pleas'd to call the *death* of Christ a *sacrifice*, and would have it consider'd under that *character*, it must be a *fit memorial* of all he design'd should be represented by it. And besides, it has been shewn, that there are several circumstances which render it a more *useful memorial*, than *any other* sacrifices that were ever offer'd.

LET me add to what has been said concerning the advantages of considering the death of Christ as a sacrifice in *general*, that by its being describ'd as the *one offering*, which has *perfected for ever them that are sanctified**, the Christian religion has guarded, in the most *effectual* manner, against the *use* of ALL sacrifices for the future; and particularly against *human sacrifices*, one of the most *monstrous* corruptions of any thing which has born the name of *religion*, that ever appear'd in the world. And I would hope, that even its adversaries will allow this to be a great argument in its favour; that it was *so wisely suited* to the *state* of the world at that time; and not only *abolish'd* sacrificing, but, in a way, accommodated in some measure to the *general conceptions* and *prejudices* of mankind, and consequently the more likely to take, guarded against the *revival* of a custom afterwards (preserving however all the

* Heb. x. 14.

rational uses of it) which had been the source of *infinite superstition*.

SHOULD it be said, that there is no *need* of such *memorials* as sacrifices were, and the *death* of Christ is represented to be; because if the Christian religion had asserted *clearly*, that God is a *propitious* being, and particularly express'd the *terms*, upon which his guilty creatures might be *reconcil'd* to him; if it had declar'd *absolutely* against the use of ALL sacrifices, and condemn'd especially the barbarity and inhumanity of *human sacrifices*; this alone would have been *sufficient*: I answer, that it might indeed have been sufficient; but how does it appear, (which is the point on which the argument *wholly* turns,) that the appointing a *memorial* of these things, in the sacrifice of Christ, is *useless*? Thus much is undeniable, that these things don't in the least *interfere*; but besides, the great end in view was *most likely* to be secur'd by making use both of positive declarations, and a standing memorial that will naturally give *light* to, and *strengthen*, each other. To which we may add, that the superstition of men will in some circumstances pervert the *plainest words*; but 'tis not so easy to evade the design of a *memorial*, especially in that very way, *viz.* under the notion of a *sacrifice*, to which their superstition would directly tend.

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THERE is nothing, that I can find, advanced by the author of *Christianity &c.* upon this head, but what has been fully *obviated*, or goes upon the *common mistakes* of the scripture doctrine of Christ's sacrifice. Only whereas he says, "that the reasons assign'd for it could never influence those, who never heard of Christ*," I allow it. But what then? Is it not enough that they may be of great use to those who *have heard* of him? Nay, the doctrine of Christ's being a *propitiation for the sins of the whole world* is not therefore *useless*, because a *great part* of the world know nothing of it, since it is of the highest *moral* advantage to those who enjoy the christian revelation; as it represents to them the *universal* goodness of the common father of mankind, and that *in every nation, he that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him*; and consequently encourages *universal benevolence*, and an *esteem* of the whole rational creation, however distinguish'd by *external* privileges; and restrains that *spiritual pride and insolence*, which prompts many christians, to the *reproach* of our holy religion (and is indeed too common in *all religious sects*, who imagine the *superiority* to be on their side) to confine the favour of God to *themselves*, and despise, censure, and condemn *all others*.

* *Christianity &c.* p. 418.

I PROCEED now to point out a few of the *excellencies*, and eminent *advantages*, of that *positive institution* of Christianity, in which we commemorate the *death* of Christ; and particularly under the character of a *sacrifice*. And the moral uses of it are so *plain*, and withal so *various*, and *exceeding great*, that it may be question'd, whether any thing of a *positive* nature can possibly be appointed, that has a stronger tendency to promote the practice of virtue; nay, as will sufficiently appear by just enumerating them, of the most *amiable*, *generous*, and *heroic* virtue.

IN general, as we perform this service in *honour* of Christ, we thereby, as well as by baptism, solemnly profess our belief of his religion, and consequently engage to make it the *rule* of our behaviour, — But to mention some of its *peculiar* advantages. *Frequently commemorating* the death of Christ, as a sacrifice for sin, must maintain in us a *constant firm belief* of that first principle even of natural religion, that God is ready to forgive all sincere penitents, and a *rewarder of them that diligently seek him*; and at the same time, as it sets before us our own great *demerit*, must impress a *strong and lively* sense of the goodness of God, in *freely* pardoning our offences, and rewarding so abundantly our sincere though *imperfect* virtue; the natural consequence of which will be, *shame* for having

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done amiss, and affronted the government of so *gracious* and *compassionate* a being, and the highest *abhorrence* of such an *ungenerous* conduct for the future. If we reflect with becoming gratitude on God's wonderful *benevolence* and *mercy* to mankind, 'tis impossible but this must produce a *cheerful* obedience to all his commands; and especially, a *delight* in *doing good* after his most excellent and perfect example. — Again, when we remember, that the *very design* of the death of Christ was *to redeem us from all iniquity*, and make us *zealous of good works**, and that, upon these terms *only*, we are to expect any advantage from it; nothing can have a more powerful tendency to excite to *strict* and *universal* purity.

FARTHER, if we consider our partaking of this ordinance as a *communion* (the cup of blessing, which we bless, as the communion of the blood of Christ, and the bread, which we break, as the communion of the body of Christ, †) by which we acknowledge ALL sincere Christians, however *denominated*, and *distinguished*, as our *brethren*, members, together with ourselves, of the same *spiritual body*, or *society*, intitled to the same *privileges*, and having the same *hope of their calling*; that we, being many, are one bread, and one body, because we are all partakers of that one bread ‡; this must be of excellent use to promote

* Tit. ii. 14.

† 1 Cor. x. 16.

‡ Ver. 17.

mutual esteem, concord, and harmony; and if the true intention of it was follow'd, would make Christians regard one another according to their *real merit*, and not for the *trifling peculiarities* of any particular sect; and effectually reconcile all *party-differences*: by which means, *impositions upon conscience, violent controversies, unscriptural terms of communion, schisms, persecutions, &c.* which have been of fatal consequence both to *religion, and civil society*, would be entirely prevented. — But lest we should stop here, and confine our benevolence to *the household of faith*; considering the death of Christ as *a propitiation for the sins of the whole world** will naturally inspire an *universal love* of mankind. For there is an *irresistible force* in the apostle's argument, *If God so loved us, we, who are dependent upon, and oblig'd to, each other, and can't subsist without a mutual intercourse of good offices, ought much more to love one another †.*

INDEED, *commemorating the death of Christ*, in a devout and solemn manner, in its *entire design*, and with ALL its circumstances, will suggest the *greatest* and most *generous* sentiments, and afford motives to the most *extensive* and *heroic* benevolence, that mankind can possibly practise. For besides what has been already hinted, if we consider that God gave his Son to die for us while we

* 1 Jo. ii. 2.

† Chap. iv. 11.

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were *enemies**, this must kill all the seeds of *malice* and *revenge* in us; and raise such a *noble spirit* of humanity and compassion, as the greatest injuries shall not *bear down* and *extinguish*; which will be farther strengthen'd by reflecting on the behaviour of Christ, who, under the greatest abuses and indignities, *pitied*, and *pray'd* for, his *persecutors*. — His example likewise, in chusing *to die* rather than forfeit his integrity, and to promote the happiness of mankind, will teach us, (and accordingly 'tis thus inculcated by St. *John*†) to sacrifice all *private* considerations, nay, *life itself* for the *public good*; and besides, has a tendency to beget in us an *entire submission* to providence under the worst circumstances that may befall us, and an *undaunted fortitude*, *resolution*, and *constancy* of mind, when we are call'd to suffer in a *good cause*, and for the advancement of *truth* and *virtue*. — And all these arguments will receive an *additional* force when we reflect, that the example we commemorate is that of a *friend* and *generous benefactor*, an example that is in itself *amiable*, and which we should consequently be *ambitious* to imitate; and from the *innocence* and *dignity* of the sufferer.

As therefore it appears, that we can't commemorate the death of Christ, in the *manner* in which Christianity has *commanded* it, without having our resolutions to practise

* Rom. v. 10:

† 1 Jo. iii. 16.

universal virtue strengthen'd, and improving in the *greatest*, most *amiable*, *useful*, and *god-like* dispositions, which this institution has a *peculiar* and most *admirable* aptitude to excite, and confirm; need I add any thing more to prove that 'tis *worthy* of God, a being of *absolute* purity, a being of most *perfect* and *universal* goodness? Or that 'tis becoming the wisdom of his providence, and suitable to the great end he has in view, the *rectitude* and *happiness* of the moral creation, to oblige us by a law made on purpose, and the practice of a *plain* *significant* rite, to enter frequently upon such reflections as are of the utmost *moral* use, and yet, without some institution of this kind (considering how little inclin'd the bulk of mankind are to think, unless they are *put* upon it) are likely to be *omitted*, or very much *neglected*; and besides, can't reasonably be expected to have that weight and influence in a *slight*, *cursor*y, *occasional* meditation, as they will very probably, when they are consider'd as a *solemn* *act* of *devotion*, which we perform in obedience to an *express* divine command?

A THIRD thing of a *positive* nature in the Christian revelation is, *worshipping* God *through* a *mediator*. Now 'tis most evident, that the *general* notion of a *mediator* *between* God and *man* (the term being *indefinite*) can't in itself be *absurd*; but will be *irrational*, or *otherwise*, just as 'tis explain'd, and the *nature*, *design*, and *uses* of the mediation stated.

And

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And when Christ is stiled a *mediator*, we can only learn from the *New Testament* what the word implies; and in that sense *alone*, in which he is *there* represented under that character, are christians oblig'd to *worship God through a mediator*. So that we ought not to *fancy* difficulties *arbitrarily*, and frighten ourselves with *mere sounds*; but if we would proceed *fairly*, must consider whether there are really any objections against the account which the *gospel* gives of this matter.

AND the sum of the Christian doctrine is this, and this only. (1.) That we worship God in *the name* of Christ, *i. e.* according to *his directions*; encourag'd by the express assurances, which God afforded the world by *him*, that he is a *propitious* being; and that our worship, form'd upon the *principles*, and conducted by the *rules*, which Christianity prescribes, will be *accepted*. (2.) That we worship him as that most *gracious* Being, the father of ALL mankind, who, by *Christ*, has given the *Gentile* world as well as the *Jews* a revelation of his will, and *express promises* of pardon, and eternal life; so that *through him*, we both have an *access*, by one *spirit*, unto the father*. (3.) As a Being who has declar'd, that *we are reconciled to him by the death of his Son* †, who, for reasons above explain'd, is represented as *putting away sin*

* Eph. ii. 18.

† Rom. v. 10.

by the sacrifice of himself* ; the wisdom, and goodness of which constitution we are thankfully to acknowledge. St. Paul indeed speaks of Christ as *interceding* for us, in consequence of the sacrifice which he had offer'd ; but, I apprehend, we are under no necessity to understand these passages *strictly* : for as the epistles, in which such language is used, were written to converted Jews *wholly*, or to churches where there was a mixture of Jews with *Gentiles* ; he might only design by it (which appears plainly to have been his view in the greatest part of the epistle to the *Hebrews*) that there was something *analogous*, in the *Christian* religion, to what they so highly valued in the *Mosaic* institution ; but of a much more *excellent* kind, and attended with more *extensive* and *lasting* advantages.

(4.) Another thing implied in the Christian doctrine of *worshipping God through a mediator* is, that we consider him as one who governs us, and bestows blessings upon us, not *immediately* †, but by *Christ* ‡, whom, as a reward of his *perfect innocence*, and *voluntary sufferings* for the good of mankind, he has constituted, under himself, *Lord of all* || ; giving him all power in heaven, and in earth** ; by whom he has reveal'd his will to us, and given us laws ; affords us *needful assistance* in the discharge of our duty, and *support* under our various trials ; and will, at last, judge

* Heb. ix. 26.

† Jo. v. 21, 23.

‡ I Cor. viii. 6.

|| Acts x. 36. Phil. ii. 9, 10, 11.

** Matt. xxviii. 18.

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the world in righteousness, and render to every
man according to his deeds *. And finally,
 that we worship Christ, as having the *me-*
diatorial kingdom conferr'd on him by the
Father, and in obedience to his command † ;
 ascribing particularly *glory*, and *dominion* to
 him ‡, who, by the wise constitution of God,
 is our *saviour*, and *king*; but always in *subor-*
dination to the *glory* of the *one God and Father*
of all, who alone has a right to our *supreme*
 worship and obedience ||.

Now what is there in all this that is in
 the least *dishonourable* to God, or inconsistent
 with *any principle* of natural religion? Reason
 indeed could never have *discover'd* it,
 but, when it is reveal'd, can *object* nothing
 against it; and what, in the judgment of
 the most *strict* and *impartial* reason, may be
 true, and belongs to a scheme of religion,
 which, in all the parts of it, has a visible
 tendency to promote the highest *perfection*
 and *happiness* of human nature, miracles un-
 deniably prove to be *actually* true. The ap-
 pointing the death of Christ to be consider'd
 as a *sacrifice* has already been *sufficiently* vin-
 dicated; and this *unavoidably* infers the *rea-*
sonableness of worshipping God under the *cha-*
acter of that all-wise and most merciful
 Being, who has fix'd upon *this method* of
 pardoning sinners, and receiving them into

* Acts xvii. 31. Rom. ii. 6, & 16 comp.
 † Heb. xiii. 21. 2 Pet. ii. 18. Rev. v. 13.

‡ Jo. v. 23.
 || Phil. ii. 11.

favour. — His appointing Christ to manage, *under himself*, the government of the world, is repugnant to *no one principle* of reason; but on the contrary, there is a *beautiful congruity* between his being constituted our *Saviour*, and the *immediate bestower* of the divine blessings and favours upon mankind; and we can't but approve of God's rewarding, in so extraordinary a manner, a person of his *unspotted innocence*, and one who *generously condescended* to take upon him the human nature, and both *did*, and *suffer'd*, so much to maintain the cause of virtue, and promote our happiness. — Then as for the *worship* which the New Testament directs us to pay to Christ, since 'tis no more than the respect which is *properly* due to one, whom God has invested with the characters of our *saviour*, and *ruler*, and made *head over all things to the church**; it must be as *necessarily fit*, while *those relations* subsist, as the duties even of *natural morality*. And it can be no *derogation* from the *absolute* and *supreme* perfection of the *first*, and *greatest*, of beings, that an *inferior* is respected *in proportion* to his *merit* and *dignity*, and honour'd with *subordinate* worship, in obedience to his *express command*; because this is, really, an *act of homage* to *himself*, and an acknowledgement of his *unrival'd* and *matchless* excellence; and so far from giving his glory to another, that 'tis only offering that other what he could

* Eph. i. 22.

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not receive; since it would be an *affront* and *disparagement* to him to be serv'd with any worship of an *inferior* kind, with any worship of which he is not the *supreme* and *ultimate* object, and all the reasons for which do not center *absolutely* and *entirely* in himself.

I SHALL only add, that the doctrine of *Christ's mediation* serves, in *general*, the *same* purposes with that of his *sacrifice*. For at the same time that it necessarily supposes God to be *propitious*, it impresses a constant sense of the *evil* of sin, and the sinner's *unworthiness* of the divine favour upon the account of it; and consequently is a *standing lecture* of *humility*. So that 'tis calculated, in *all* ages, to inspire *moral* sentiments of *universal* advantage (especially considering how apt mankind are to be *blind* to their own faults, and *presume* upon the mercy of God) and must, if rightly consider'd, be *always* a strong motive to *purity* and *virtue*.

FROM what has been said it appears, that the scripture doctrine of a *mediator* is entirely *rational*, and subservient to *moral* purposes; and that there is not the least foundation in it for those *low* and *unworthy* conceptions of the Deity, to which (as the author of *Christianity* &c. imagines) "the mediatory
" Gods among the Heathen owe their rise *."

* *Christianity* &c. p. 85.

Nay, the Christian revelation has, in its general doctrine, guarded so fully against all such mistakes, that 'tis impossible even for the weakest to fall into them, if they take their religion only from *thence* (which is a very reasonable expectation, at least among *Protestants*, whose fundamental principle 'tis, that the scriptures are their *only rule*) and not from party schemes, or the wild suggestions of fancy and enthusiasm. No Christian, who reads his *Bible* but with the same care with which he reads any the most common writings, can ever suppose (and that the adversaries of Christianity must know) that a *mediator* was appointed "either to suggest to the supreme God some reasons he before was ignorant of; or that by his importunities he might prevail on his weakness, to do what otherwise he was not willing to do†." And lest the people should be so *absurd* as to think, that the *mediator* had "a greater kindness for, and readiness to do good to mankind than the supreme God himself; and that the sollicitations of the former made the latter better-natur'd than otherwise he would be; which of course would take off their love from the supreme God, and place it on the mediator, upon whose powerful intercession they so much depended*;" particular care is taken, throughout the whole New Testament, to ascribe this constitution entirely to the love of God, to his most free, unconstrain'd,

† Christianity &c. p. 86.

* Ibid.

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may *unsolicited* goodness. He is describ'd as the *original contriver* and *author* of it, prompted by nothing but his *essential* and *innate* benevolence ; and Christ to have acted only by *his direction*, and according to the plan *his infinite wisdom* had form'd. So that 'tis not more *plainly*, nor so *frequently*, inculcated, that we are bound thankfully to acknowledge the *condescension* of Christ in the part he sustain'd, as that our *ultimate* obligations of love and gratitude are to the *supreme God*, and *Father of all* ; even the *Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*, the *Father of mercies*, and *God of all comfort* †, who hath blessed us with all *spiritual blessings*, in heavenly places, through him ; — Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children, by Jesus Christ, to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he has made us accepted in the beloved ; and wherein he hath abounded towards us in all wisdom, and prudence *.

THERE is one remark more, which our author hath made, that I think worth reciting : “ However (says he) the heathens
 “ allowing one, and but one most high God,
 “ did not so far derogate from the honour of
 “ the one true God, as to pretend that the
 “ most distinguish'd among their several me-
 “ diators was equal to him ; *Equality* and *Me-*
 “ *diation* being as inconsistent as *Equality* and

† 2 Cor. i. 3.

‡ Eph. i. 3, 5, 6, 8.

“ *Supremacy.* And they would have made
“ their religion an errant jumble, if they had
“ worshipped these Gods sometimes as me-
“ diators only ; sometimes as sovereign dis-
“ posers of things ; and sometimes as both
“ together †.” I think it, I say, worth
while to recite this passage, not because 'tis a
just objection against *the Christian religion itself*,
which teaches nothing at all of this *myster-
ious incomprehensible* divinity ; but that chris-
tians may see how much it suffers by the
darkness and confusion of human schemes,
which are not only father'd upon it, but
rank'd among its *fundamental* and most *im-
portant* doctrines. And, I hope, since this is
a common cause (the honour of Christianity
being evidently concern'd in it) they will
all agree to lay aside *unscriptural subtilties*, and
distinctive *party phrases*, and be content to re-
present the Christian doctrine just as they find
it in the writings of the *New Testament* ; and
then they will have but *little* to fear from the
skill or malice of its adversaries. For though
some *modern scholastic explications* of it may be
attended with *insuperable* difficulties, and al-
ways *distress* those who undertake the defence
of them ; the *original revelation itself* will, I
am persuaded, stand the test of *reason*, and
bear even a *severe and critical*, provided it
be likewise an *honest and impartial*, exa-
mination.

† *Christianity &c.* p. 87.

AND it will confirm us in this belief, that we find the most *able* of its opposers (not excepting the author of *Christianity* &c. himself) generally bend all their aim *this way*, and level their objections not against the New Testament *directly*, but against those gross *misrepresentations*, and *corruptions* of its genuine and real sense, which the *weakness* and *superstition* of men, or perhaps *worse causes*, have introduc'd; or if they sometimes attack the *original records* of our religion, 'tis by interpreting passages so *strictly* and *rigorously*, as could never be their most *obvious* and *natural* meaning; or else, by picking *little scraps* out of a *connected* discourse, that, *by themselves*, may well seem odd and unaccountable, and yet have a great propriety and beauty, when consider'd in *their connection*: which, it must be allow'd, is a more *cunning*, if it be not altogether *so fair* a way of proceeding. For 'tis much *safer* to fall upon the *confusions* and *inconsistencies* of *party writers*, than upon *original Christianity itself*; or if it be a man's design to *run down* any book whatever, the more *loosely* he reads, and the oftner he quotes passages *merely* for their *sound*, the better; the *less* he *understands* it, the *more fault* he is likely to find; and so the *number* of his objections, at least, which perhaps may influence some *weak* people, or others who are already *disaffected*; the *number*, I say, of his objections, if not the *weight*, will swell considerably. But that any persons

sions who act thus should assume the character of *free-thinkers*, and treat all the rest of the world as *bigots* and *enthusiasts*, is most amazing; since such a conduct is, in truth, the farthest distant that can be from a *generous* temper; and argues, on the contrary, besides intolerable *vanity* and *insolence*, great *narrowness* of mind, and the most *abject* and *slavish* prejudice.

THUS have I finish'd all that I propos'd in this argument, and consider'd, so far as they affect either the *usefulness*, or the *truth* and *excellency*, of the christian revelation, all the *main reasonings* of the author of *Christianity* &c. in the *first* part of his design. And indeed, from what appears, he is determin'd to do *no farther* execution; so that there was no need of staying for the *second* part, which, if there be nothing in it but what the author hath promis'd, will be perfectly *harmless*. Nay, the most *valuable* part of it, (for I think we have but little concern with the sentiments of *Jews*, *Gentiles*, and *Mahometans*, or even of *the fathers of the church*, which are testimonies entirely *foreign* in a matter of *rational* enquiry, but are intended however for the *amplification* and *ornament* of the work;) the most valuable part of it, I say, is nothing *new*, and nothing but what has been perform'd most *excellently*, and with the greatest *strength of reason*, by several *christian* writers *. It may therefore be justly

* Vide *Christianity* &c. p. 427, 429.

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presum'd, that *whatever other works* of this kind the ingenious author may be engag'd in, they will not divert him from the more *necessary* business of *reviewing*, upon all proper occasions, what he has already written ; and that having appeal'd in it to the judgment of the *public*, he will not expect to be believ'd *implicitly* ; but think himself oblig'd either to *defend* it, or else, in a *frank, open* manner acknowledge his mistakes, like *an honest man*, and a *sincere lover of truth*.

POST-



POSTSCRIPT.



WHAT I have said concerning the *Sacrifice* of Christ being thought not to be the *true scripture doctrine* by some CHRISTIANS, whom I should be very sorry to offend, while I am maintaining the common cause of Christianity against UNBELIEVERS; I think it proper to review it a little, and offer a few things for the farther explaining and illustrating this important subject.

I AM persuaded, that those who have excepted against what I have offer'd have, generally, *misunderstood* me. But as my meaning has been mistaken, not only by common superficial readers, but likewise by persons, whose good sense and judgment can't be disputed; I must, in modesty, suppose, that there is some *obscurity* in the ac-

count which I have given, owing to this at least, *viz.* to its being too *short* and *general*.

To remove objections therefore, and set the matter in a clear light, I desire it may be consider'd, that the New Testament only lays down the doctrine relating to Christ's Sacrifice, but does not enter directly, and particularly, into the *reasons* of it; whereas my only design was to shew, against the opposers of revelation, that this part of the Christian doctrine is *wise* and *rational*. In order to which, I indeed took notice of some absurd notions that are father'd upon Christianity, though there is not the least hint about them in the whole New Testament; but allow'd every thing that the Scripture has *plainly* and *distinctly* asserted upon this head, without the least thought of evading the *grammatical* and *obvious* sense of any of the texts, by strain'd and unnatural criticisms. I have expressly affirm'd that "the death of Christ is very *fitly* represented " as a sacrifice, nay, described in the strongest sacrificial phrases *;" and gone all along upon the supposition, that the *first* and most *obvious* sense of those texts, *viz.* that *he* appear'd to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself †, gave his life a ransom for many ‡, that we are redeemed with the precious

* P. 321.

† Heb. ix. 26.

‡ Mat. xx. 28.

blood of Christ *, and that God sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins †, and the like ; I have gone all along, I say, upon the supposition, that the *first* and most obvious sense of those texts is, that by the wise appointment of God, we are to consider the death of Christ as the thing, upon the account of which he pardons our sins, and confers life and immortality upon us ; I say, by the appointment of God, because the whole efficacy of it (the death of Christ not being necessarily, and in its own nature, an expiatory sacrifice) must arise from his ordaining, and accepting it as such. And if this be allow'd, let it be call'd the term or condition of our forgiveness, I shall not think it needful to dispute about mere words, when the utmost such expressions amount to can be no more than this, which I never denied, and now freely grant, that the all-wise Governour of the world thought fit to fix upon this method of pardoning sin, and, in this way only, to declare his accepting his guilty creatures upon their repentance, and reward their sincere, though imperfect, virtue.

FROM this short account, it will, I conceive, clearly appear, that I have not misrepresented the Christian doctrine relating to Christ's sacrifice, and that the objections against what I have written upon this head have been owing, in a great measure, to a

* 1 Pet. i. 18, 19.

† 1 John iv. 10.

misapprehension of my true design. Several of my readers seem to have imagin'd, that what I have offer'd was design'd as *an account of the scripture doctrine*, or as *an explication of texts*, nay, that I thought the word *sacrifice* to signify, strictly, *a memorial*. Whereas my only intention was to shew (allowing the doctrine itself to be just as it is represented in the writings of the New Testament, and taking the expressions there us'd in their most *obvious* and *natural* sense) the wise ends that might be serv'd by it; or, in other words, without questioning in the least that the death of Christ is, *by God's appointment, a propitiation, a sacrifice, an atonement, &c.* to give some account of the *reasons*, which may be suppos'd to have determin'd his infinite wisdom to choose *this way* of shewing mercy to sinners, and receiving them into favour. And my assigning as *a wise reason* for the institution of sacrifices, that they were *proper* and *useful memorials*, was a very clear intimation to the reader, that I had *different ideas* to the two words: For if the ideas were exactly the *same*, I must not only have thought that *sacrifices* were *useful memorials*, but that every *useful memorial* is a *sacrifice*; of which, I believe, I need not clear myself.

AND since it appears, that those texts, which represent the death of Christ as *a sacrifice* for sin, a *sin-offering*, and the like,

and speak of it in the *strongest sacrificial phrases*, contain nothing inconsistent with what I have advanc'd, because I have no dispute, upon this head, with either friends, or enemies, of Christianity (the not mentioning which particularly, in the foregoing discourse, I acknowledge to have been a great defect, as it would probably have prevented the objections of many *honest and judicious* readers) I can think but of one passage, relating to the *doctrine itself*, that needs to be a little explain'd, and vindicated, *viz.* " that
 " the death of Christ would have happen'd
 " [*i. e.* so far as appears to us, or as we can
 " judge from what is reveal'd in the holy
 " scriptures] if it had never been design'd as
 " a sacrifice; and consequently was not ap-
 " pointed *absolutely*, and *solely* with a view
 " to that *." Now this, which I apprehend to be of great importance in the present argument, I can, as yet, see no reason to recede from. I chose to express myself in this manner, because the Gospel-history most evidently represents the matter thus, *viz.*
 " that the Son of God, for publishing the
 " will of his heavenly Father in a corrupt
 " and degenerate age, was abused and per-
 " secuted, and by wicked hands crucified
 " and slain." This is *the plain fact* as it is there related; a fact, which it would be mere trifling to attempt to prove: and, in

my opinion, it can't be denied, that the death of Christ was "the natural consequence of his attempting to reform a corrupt and vitious people, and opposing their superstition, and darling prejudices," without destroying the truth of *that history*, and consequently of *Christianity itself*. Since therefore his death was "the natural consequence of his integrity in his prophetic character," and could not have been avoided but by *insincere* compliances on his part, or by a *miraculous* interposition; we must suppose "that it would have *actually* happen'd if it had never been appointed as a sacrifice," or be forc'd to make *precarious suppositions*, about which *the New Testament is wholly silent*. And if, *as far as appears to us* (the Christian revelation giving us no ground to carry our conjectures farther, and there being not the least foundation in reason to suppose, that God would not have sent his Son into the world with *this view only*, that he might make a revelation of his mind and will, suited to the corrupt and degenerate state of the world, though he foresaw it would end in his death) if I say, *as far as appears to us* "the death of Christ would have happen'd, though it had never been appointed as a sacrifice," it necessarily follows, that, *as far as we can judge*, "it was not ordain'd *absolutely*, and *solely* with a view to that." Nay farther, we may fairly conclude, (at least this is the *utmost* we can conclude, if we

go no farther than we have sure principles to reason from) that the necessity of this method of pardoning sin was not an *absolute* necessity, but a necessity arising from *circumstances*, or more properly, a *fitness* which the circumstances of things suggested; *i. e.* in other words, it was fixed upon by the infinite wisdom of God, which always does what is *best*, because it was an over-ruling and directing a *natural event* to serve the *wisest* and most *useful* purpose, for the honour of his government, and the good of his creatures. But on the other hand, whereas I have said, that “ the first view of God, in “ sending Christ into the world, was, that, as “ prophet, he might restore the true religion, &c.*:” I should now rather choose to express myself thus, that he pitch’d upon so *great* and *excellent* a person, both that, by the *dignity* of his character, he might conciliate a greater *attention* and *regard* to his doctrine, and that the death of this divine messenger, which he foresaw would happen, if not *miraculously* prevented, might answer the wise and valuable ends of a *sacrifice for sin*; without determining which of these was the *first*, or *principal*, reason. For it’s probable that both of them together (since it appears they concur) and neither singly, influenc’d the all-wise governour of the world to employ his *only begotten Son* upon

this occasion ; by whose mediation those ends are more *effectually* promoted, than they could be by that of any other being whatsoever.

THE death of Christ was undoubtedly *predetermin'd*, but that does not prove that it did not happen in the *natural course* of things, *i. e.* in the same manner, and by the same kind of instruments, as the death of other prophets, and righteous men, who have preach'd repentance and reformation to an ignorant and degenerate age. So far indeed it may be ascrib'd to God, that it could not have happen'd if he had not sent him into the world ; nay farther, that he sent him when he *foresaw* this consequence of it, and upon that *fore-knowledge* how the event *would* be, if the malice of his enemies was suffer'd to take its course, determin'd not to *interpose*, but to *permit* it ; or, in other words, determin'd that it *should* be. But to proceed farther than this, we have, I think, no ground in *reason*, or warrant from *Holy Scripture*. On the contrary, St. Peter expressly says, that our Saviour was *deliver'd by the determinate counsel, and fore-knowledge of God** ; the most *obvious* and *natural* sense of which is, by the *purpose* of God to leave the *Jews* to themselves, upon the *fore-knowledge* that they would then put him to death. And to

* Acts ii. 23.

argue from *the nature of the thing itself*; as the destroying such an innocent and useful person, a divine messenger, and the Son of God, was unquestionably a very *wicked* action, it will not, I presume, be thought, that the most *wise*, and *holy* governour and judge of the world could have determin'd any thing about it *further*, than to suffer natural causes to operate, and the event (which he foresaw would happen without a *miraculous* interposition) to take place.

HOWEVER, tho the *death* of Christ fell out in the natural course of things, it was not *thus a sacrifice*. That was owing entirely to the *purpose* and *decree* of God, and consequently, upon the fore-knowledge that his death would otherwise happen, was *absolutely* predetermin'd, and in the *strongest* and *fullest* sense, that any texts, either in the Old or New Testament, speak of it. I shall only add, that those who believe that the death of Christ was *absolutely* determin'd as a *sacrifice*, otherwise than upon the fore-knowledge that it would happen in the manner it did, must be oblig'd to prove, that if there had been no need of his coming into the world as a *prophet*, he would have been sent with no other view, than *to die*; nay farther, that if the *Jews*, who were *free agents*, and not under a *necessity* of putting him to death, instead of rejecting and persecuting, had receiv'd and honour'd him as a prophet, God would *immediately*

mediately have interpos'd, and have appointed *the manner* in which, and *the instrument* by whom, he should have been *directly offered* as a *Sacrifice*; which appear to me to be *mere imaginary* schemes, that have no foundation either in *reason*, or *revelation*.

NOTHING now remains, but briefly to review what I have offer'd concerning the *uses of expiatory sacrifices*, and particularly the *wise ends* that might be answer'd by God's appointing the *death* of Christ to be consider'd under *that character*. And that no sacrifices of this kind (nay not that of Christ himself) were design'd to *propitiate* the Deity, that they could not be necessary with respect to him, to *incline* him to be *favourable* and *gracious* to mankind, follows necessarily from hence, that they derive their whole efficacy and value from *his appointment*; and "the very institution of them" must, in the nature of the thing, suppose "that he was already propitious*," *already dispos'd* to be merciful and forgive the offences of his creatures, and only fix'd upon this as the most *rational* and *proper* way of dispensing his mercy. This I take to be *demonstration*, to which nothing needs be added. However, we may observe, to strengthen and confirm it farther, that the sacrifice of Christ is represented, throughout the whole New Testa-

* Page 320.

ment, as *proceeding* from the *love* and *compassion* of God towards mankind, but never as the *cause* of it; as the *effect* of his *mercy*, not the *argument* or *motive* inducing him to be *merciful*: this is the *constant strain* of the Gospel, and there is not so much as a *single* passage which intimates the contrary.

IN like manner, as sacrifices derive *all their* *virtue* from God's ordaining and accepting them, and forgiveness of sin is always describ'd as an act of *free* and *voluntary* favour in the Deity; it plainly appears, that they neither were, nor could be, in the sense in which I have us'd the expression, *proper expiations*; i. e. that there was nothing, in their *abstract nature*, that could atone for moral guilt, or merit pardon, or, in other words, that there was no *necessary connection* in reason, independent on the will and pleasure of God, between offering the sacrifice, and the forgiveness of the offender.

WHAT other use then could they be design'd to serve (since they could neither be intended to propitiate our most merciful God, nor, in a *strict* sense, to *expiate* the guilt of sin *) besides that of being "standing me-

A a

" morials

* When the words, *propitiation* and *expiation*, are used in scripture, they have, I apprehend, a very different meaning: and the truth of the case I take to be this. God was inclin'd, by his *innate goodness and mercy*, to pardon the sins of mankind upon their repentance, and receive them into favour; but at the same

“ morials of God’s reconcileableness, for in-
 “ stance, and readiness to forgive his guilty
 “ creatures upon their repentance, of his
 “ strict and absolute purity, and of the great
 “ evil and demerit of sin?” And what o-
 ther reason, can we suppose, determin’d his
 infinite wisdom to appoint them, but their
moral influence, and particularly, that he
 might exercise his mercy towards mankind
 in such a manner, as would most *effectually*
 support the practice of *virtue*, and discourage
vice and *wickedness*? By this method of grace
 and pardon, he has most awfully demon-
 strated his *spotless purity*, and *irreconcilable*
aversion to sin, and wisely maintain’d the *ho-*
nour of his moral government, by doing
 what is best calculated to promote the *great*
end of it, the perfection and happiness of his
 subjects.

I H O P E what I have now added will sa-
 tisfy the *friends* of Christianity, as well as

same time was resolv’d to do it in such a way as would be most
honourable to his *perfections* and *government*, and consequently
 was most becoming a *wise* and *holy* governour. As the sacrifice
 of Christ therefore, which he appointed, though it did not *incline*
 him to be merciful, is the way in which he chose *actually* to dis-
 pense his mercy, Christ is *the propitiation*: and because it is the
 method in which he *actually forgives* our offences, and discharges
 us upon our sincere repentance, from guilt; in this sense it may
 be stiled an Expiation. And ’tis upon the same account that we
 are said to be *reconciled to God by the death of his son*, Rom. 5.
 10. though we never meet in the New Testament with such an
 expression as this, that *God was thereby reconcil’d to us*; because,
 perhaps, it would convey to the bulk of mankind a *very differ-*
ent idea, contrary to what has been shewn to be the reason of
 the thing, and the *general tenour* of the *Christian revelation*.

silence

silence the cavils of its *adversaries*: And I can assure the reader, that as I would not pay so much deference to human explanations of scripture, how *popular* soever, as to betray any *important* and *useful* truth; so neither would I deviate, in the least, from *commonly receiv'd* principles, for the sake of being *singular*.



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