

THE BIBLE CHRISTIAN.

UNITARIANISM OF THE APOSTLES. (CONTINUED.)

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If his own words, as the professed historian of our Lord, are to be taken in evidence, then was Matthew a Unitarian; then is his Gospel strictly Unitarian; and its doctrine is—there is but one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. If his own statements, and the whole tenor of his Gospel are to be taken as good authority, then is it equally certain, that he has not taught the doctrine of the Trinity, or that of the Deity of Jesus Christ; and therefore, never heard of them from the mouth of his divine Master, nor did ever believe them. These things, it appears to me, may be established by arguments sufficiently conclusive to satisfy the mind of an impartial inquirer.

I shall endeavor to establish my position, first, by some general observations bearing on the subject, then, by an examination of those passages which have been thought to teach the doctrine of the Trinity, and lastly, by bringing forward all that evidence of a positive nature, in favor of the strict Unity of God, which the Gospel presents.

I. I would remark, in the first place, that as the doctrine of the Trinity is confessedly one not to have been antecedently expected, at which, as an orthodox writer has himself observed, "reason stands aghast, and faith herself is half confounded," it is right to expect, and demand, before receiving it as an article of belief, evidence that shall bear some proportion to its apparent intrinsic incredibility. It is not enough that such a doctrine be darkly hinted at, obscurely implied, doubtfully expressed. If man deals justly by himself, and acts with due reverence towards God and his own reason, he will not feel himself justified in embracing such a truth without the clearest and most ample testimony; like that for example, on the strength of which he believes in the divine authority of Jesus, in a future life, and a state of retribution. But such testimony, it cannot be pretended that the Bible itself, much less the Gospel of Matthew, does any where furnish. There is nothing distinct, clear, definite on the subject. Not a single verse in the whole Bible lays down the doctrine in terms. It is a thing of remote, dark, uncertain inference.

It is here worthy to be remarked, that in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity, the Deity of Christ, and many other supposed doctrines of revelation, the common principles of evidence have been totally reversed. For while on other subjects, it is a universal principle for the conduct of the understanding, that in proportion to the apparent intrinsic incredibility and improbability of a fact or proposition, must be the force, clearness, and abundance of the evidence which is brought to establish it—in religion men have eagerly received, and implicitly believed doctrines, against which there was a strong previous presumption that they could not be true—doctrines of the most momentous import if true, have been admitted, on a show of evidence the least that can be supposed possible in a case of the kind, and which in other matters would be rejected as wholly inadequate, or as warranting only the lowest degree of assent. That which is seemingly impossible, and on the face of the thing incredible or highly improbable, we reasonably require to be substantiated by a proportional fulness and distinctness of testimony. While that which is in accordance with other known facts, and other received knowledge, is in itself highly probable and likely to be true, we admit on a lesser weight of evidence. These just and obvious principles have, I repeat, in religious things been abandoned, if not reversed. Evidence which in a court of human justice, neither judge, nor lawyer, nor jury would take as competent testimony to a fact of even ordinary occurrence and character, or to a point of law—only change the ground to that of controversial divinity, and it becomes with these same persons most ample and decisive, to establish doctrines in themselves the most extraordinary, and most unlikely to be true. In religion, men have been ever ready to believe any thing and every thing, with or without evidence, as the case might be. It has seemed as if they took a strange delight in doing violence to the dictates of reason and common sense, and imagined themselves devout and meritorious before Heaven, in proportion to the easy credulity with which the most monstrous and revolting dogmas were engrafted into their creed. There has been nothing so essentially absurd, so obviously fabricated and false, that multitudes have not in every age of the Church been found to believe it as a part of the revelation of God, at the mandate of a priest, a pope, or a council. Evidence has not been asked for. It has rather been despised. Has it the authority of orthodox fathers? Does it revolt reason and sense? Does it task faith to the uttermost? These have virtually been the preliminary inquiries. Hence, it has happened that doctrines of a purely pagan or human origin, have been handed down from age to age, from church to church, and are unhesitatingly received at the present time throughout all Christendom as vital truths of the Gospel, without even a decent show of evidence in their behalf; and so far, indeed as Scripture is concerned, without being so much as named in it. Of this description, I apprehend, is the doctrine of the Trinity. Though so deep and high a mystery, so difficult to comprehend, so impossible to explain and teach, so little to have been looked for in a revelation, and therefore so natural and necessary to have been distinctly stated, and often repeated—this doctrine has St. Matthew, as it seems to me, wholly

overlooked, and, as I hope will appear in the sequel, closed his Gospel not only without furnishing that proof which the mind ought to demand in the case, but without so much as naming it; nay, without having by chance written but one sentence, [Mat. xxviii. 19.] which, when the doctrine has been otherwise established, can be tortured so as to favor it. Now I put it to the conscience of every reflecting person, if it be credible that the evangelist could have left such a doctrine in such uncertainty. Is it credible, that in writing an account of a religion containing a doctrine like that of the Trinity—one which every dictate of reason assured him would meet with the bitterest opposition, would be received by the intelligent only on the amplest evidence, and which he felt at the same time to be the crowning doctrine of the new faith—is it credible, that he should have left it to be doubtfully gathered from a few dark and equivocal expressions, which will bear, and on every just principle of criticism require, an interpretation fatal to the truth he intended to teach?

II. I remark in the next place, that in taking the evidence of Matthew to the doctrine of the Trinity, we are to remember that he was once a Jew, and would have written with the feelings of one who had been so, and therefore if he had believed the doctrine himself, he would have given it a prominent place in his Gospel.

As a Jew, the most cherished article of his faith, had been the strict unity of God. It was the distinctive feature of his ancient belief. It was that which gave to it its superiority to the surrounding polytheism. The heathen had as imposing ceremonies, as splendid temples as the Jews; but they did not know and worship the one God. This was the exclusive glory of Judaism. This tenet was guarded with most especial jealousy. Idolatry, the having and worshiping more gods than one, was with the Jews the unpardonable sin. The devoted attachment of the Jews to the unity of God stands out more prominently than any other feature in the character of that people. And yet, notwithstanding the plain language of the Old Testament on this subject, men can be found, theologians too, to maintain that the Trinity was a doctrine of the Jewish Church! Of this I will only say, that the man who, after reading or studying the Old Testament could rise from his labor with a conviction that the Trinity is taught or implied in it, is to be as much regarded, as he who should affirm, after a similar inquiry, that Judaism is a system of atheism. The Jew of the present day, as did the Jew of former days, believes God to be one, without division or distinction in name or nature, and now as ever, regards that as the most vital blow aimed at his faith, which invades the purity and integrity of this primary article of his creed; and so far, is he more of a Christian than the believer in the Trinity.

With these feelings, and with such a belief, did Matthew join himself to our Lord. From him, says orthodoxy, as the first and most important lesson, did he receive an account of the mystery of the Trinity. Through his public preaching and private instruction, he must have heard this amazing doctrine often explained and enforced. He must have heard it laid down as the corner stone of the new religion; for if it made a part of it at all, Trinitarians are right in saying that it formed and still forms its most distinguishing feature. He must have regarded it in that light himself. Its novelty and awful nature, its direct opposition to that great truth which he had been accustomed to venerate, the Divine Unity, must have deeply impressed his mind. When sent forth by our Saviour as a preacher of the Gospel, it must very often have formed the subject of his discourse, especially as he was addressing Jesus, who would need to have it distinctly stated and argued, since at first sight it would seem to them but an ingenious, covert system of polytheism. After our Lord's resurrection, when he became one of the great heralds of the new faith, he must have continued to preach and enforce it to the day of his death. He is commonly supposed to have written his Gospel in the year 65. He had of course preached the religion which he afterward recorded, for the space of more than thirty years after his Master's death. During this long interval must he not have become perfectly familiar with the leading truths of the faith he had been disseminating? Must not the vital and essential truths of that faith have been ten thousand times iterated from the house-top and the way-side? Would not, I may confidently ask, these vital and essential truths be the first to present themselves to his mind when sitting down to write an account of the religion which he had so long preached? Would he not, on principles of human nature, have given them the same prominence as a Trinitarian now would, who should sit down to write an account of Christianity? And what truths would a Trinitarian select, and what prominence would he give them? Would they not be the most holy Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, the double-nature of Christ, the deity of the Spirit? And would they not stand out in bold relief on every page, and be proclaimed as the truths, without faith in which there could be no salvation? If the Trinitarian would have written thus, had he been St. Matthew—who can doubt he would have done so—Matthew, with his faith would, it is morally certain, have done the same thing; he could not have written otherwise; he must have written as he believed. But, he has given these dogmas no such prominence. Their names do not catch the eye as it passes over his pages; their sound does not fall upon the ear as those pages are read. Where, I ask, and call for an answer, where are the marks of

Matthew's Trinitarian faith? Open his Gospel, search chapter after chapter, scan every verse and word, and where do you find the slightest trace of his belief in such a tenet? You will say, perhaps, it is implied in the form of Baptism. Allowing it to be there; where else? No where. You will indeed, cull out two or three verses besides, in which you will maintain that divine attributes are ascribed to Jesus, and that therefore he must be God; and therefore there is a Trinity. But—not to find fault with the remarkably excursive nature of this logic—beside these, where else in the whole Gospel do you find indications of the evangelist's faith in the Supreme Deity of Jesus, or the doctrine of the Trinity? I will not taunt with the question, where does he mention the name of this essential dogma—where does he speak of the thing for which the name stands? Is it not but too plain that, although a few texts may be construed so as to bear a Trinitarian sense—is it not plain that their value, whatever it may be thought to be, is wholly destroyed when we consider the general tenor and prevailing language of the Gospel; that with every reason why the evangelist should give the doctrine in question a distinct prominence above all other truths, he has on the contrary kept it strangely out of sight. A few texts like those on which the advocate of the Trinity relies, ought not to be considered as of any authority by an unprejudiced mind, on a question like this. They are, in truth, of no force whatever. Such a doctrine must be able to show a better support, or it can, with the intelligent mind, never be thought worthy to be believed. I should think myself as well warranted in saying that the author of a treatise on the Newtonian system was nevertheless a disciple of Des Cartes, because there were one or two statements which I could explain in consistency with his theory, though opposed by the whole scope and tenor of the book, as that the doctrine of the Trinity is to be found in the Gospel of Matthew, and was believed by him,—while the whole tenor and prevailing language of the history rejects, and denies, and disowns it,—because there are a few passages which will bear a Trinitarian exposition.

Is it credible, now I would ask, that Matthew, once a Jew and a firm believer in the Unity of God, should have sat down and written a history of his new faith, so opposite on so essential a point to his old belief, without once giving his reader to understand, by a single clear statement, that his new faith was different from his old one?

III. I remark in the next place, that we may reason from the general tenor and prevailing language of Matthew's Gospel, to his ignorance of the doctrine of the Trinity. If true it would have entered deeply into the structure and sentiment of his Gospel.

It is obvious enough what is meant by the general tenor of a book. For example, throughout the Bible God is spoken of and described as a Spirit. His spirituality is taught or implied every where. If two, or three, or more expressions should seem to contradict this truth, it is certain that the contradiction can only be an apparent one; and though we might not be able satisfactorily to interpret them in consistency with that truth we still should not be justified in bending to them the current language of the Bible. In many places in scripture, hands and arms, eyes and ears, and a bodily form are ascribed to the Deity; yet we may not therefore believe that the Deity is clothed with flesh and blood like ourselves, but we refer to the general tenor and prevailing doctrine of the Bible, and explain these expressions so as to harmonize with it. Similar illustrations might be abundantly multiplied. But I will only add generally, in this connection, that were the doctrines of orthodoxy rigorously tried by this rule, (and there cannot be a juster one) they could not stand the test. Who will not say, that the general doctrine of the Bible is, that man is able to do well or ill as he pleases? On this, are grounded the promises and threatenings of religion, which run through the whole Bible, and stand forth on every page. But what then becomes of the doctrine of total depravity, which rests for its support on a few insulated texts? What is more evidently the current language, and universal sense of the Bible than this, that the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him? But what then becomes of the doctrine of the Atonement? Orthodoxy rests on detached sentences, insulated texts, strong figures, and remote inferences and analogies. The current sense of Scripture, the spirit of its teachings, the broad and obvious meaning of its most plain and intelligible parts are all fatal to it. The general tenor and prevailing language of Matthew's Gospel show that he had no faith in the doctrine of the Trinity, or the Deity of Jesus Christ. No one can be found to deny, whether orthodox or not, that the Unity of God, and the dependence of Jesus on him, are the doctrines that enter most deeply into the very texture of the Gospel. I am ready to affirm, and with little fear of contradiction by any intelligent believer in the doctrines I oppose, that the general tenor of Matthew's Gospel is so decidedly hostile to those doctrines, that the individual cannot be found of a mind unprepossessed in relation to them, or ignorant of them, who after a diligent perusal and study of that Gospel, would even surmise their truth. Having learned the doctrines from other sources, from catechisms and confessions of faith, then indeed, texts may be found which will bear a meaning consistent with their truth, but not one to require it; still less, one that directly teaches them.

The Catholic gathers a strong argument for the Real Presence, from this Gospel, far stronger than the Trinitarian gathers for the doctrine of the Trinity, from the whole Bible; for he finds it laid down in express terms, "Take, eat, this is my body." And why does not the Trinitarian Protestant receive this mystery? Not because it cannot boast the most express declarations of scripture in its favor—all the evangelists unite in teaching it in definite, intelligible language—but because, among other reasons, it is contrary to the general tenor of the Gospel; it is not in keeping, not of a piece, with the rest; and therefore he understands the evangelists in such places to use figurative expressions, which he interprets so as to harmonize with the other plain and undoubted doctrines of religion. Now, the same principle of proceeding should lead him to interpret the few texts in this Gospel which will bear a Trinitarian sense, in consistency with the tenet of the absolute Unity of God which every where prevails the book. The text containing the form of baptism, is quite as insulated, and solitary in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity, as that which seems to teach the mystery of Transubstantiation is in relation to that doctrine; and yet, here the Trinitarian abandons his adopted principles of criticism which had so kindly saved him from the dreaded faith of the Catholic Church, and most perversely, I am almost ready to say, contends, under circumstances as nearly similar as possible, that the whole Gospel, though diametrically opposed to it, shall bend to the meaning of one verse which is supposed to teach the doctrine of the Trinity.

IV. If the doctrine of the Trinity is one which Jesus taught, and Matthew learned, then is the evangelist's fidelity as an historian brought into question; for he has not taught it with the clearness and frequency that became so important a doctrine, and were necessary to its universal reception.

One of two things must be true,—either our Lord did not, for some reason, teach the doctrine during his ministry, or Matthew has been culpably negligent in recording it—or rather, has altogether omitted to record it.

That our Saviour did not teach the whole of his religion to his immediate disciples, there is no good ground for believing. The fact that it was to be imparted to the Gentiles, was not indeed fully understood and admitted until after Peter's vision. But there is not a single doctrine to be found advanced by any of the Apostles, which is not contained in the recorded discourses of our Saviour himself. That he withheld the mysteries of the Trinity and Atonement, as some of the ancient fathers maintained, reserving them for later communications through John, is mere assumption, and a most unfortunate one too; as of all the writers of the New Testament, John is the most distinct and emphatic in his testimony to the unity and supremacy of the Father. Not to add, that the advocates of the Trinity, by adopting the idea that John first taught it, lose whatever advantage it is now supposed to possess. He must have received it, and believed in it, as the distinctive peculiarity of his Master's religion—the vital, fundamental doctrine of the Gospel. How criminally unfaithful has he been then! He has professed to write a history of our Lord, and to give an account of his religion, yet the most important doctrine of that religion he has suppressed, or has so obscurely alluded to it, that if by any chance his Gospel alone had been preserved, the world would have been for ever ignorant of it!

But it is a moral impossibility that he should have been unfaithful or remiss in such a case. Every motive combined to make him faithful. If he was a man, he could not in such circumstances be otherwise than scrupulously so. Love of the truth, which he had preached so long, and for which he afterwards suffered martyrdom; attachment to his Master, whom he had followed so long; self respect—all united to ensure fidelity and a complete and perfect record. For all he knew or could know, his might be the only history that would ever be written by an eye and ear witness; and how could he be otherwise than most anxiously and minutely careful, that every truth of his Master should be recorded, and in a manner corresponding to its relative importance? But the doctrine is not contained or taught in his Gospel: or at most it is so obscurely implied that it will not be pretended that expert testimony could be drawn from other quarters, it would be possible to establish it on the hints afforded by this evangelist, or even to guess at the existence of such a dogma. Therefore we conclude that Jesus never taught the doctrine to Matthew: that the evangelist never heard of it, and never intended to record it.

I have now presented some general considerations, tending to show that if Matthew really believed the doctrine of the Trinity, it would have occupied a far more prominent place in his Gospel than has been given it; that it would have stood forth in strong, clear statements, as the one great and distinguishing tenet of the religion of his Master. This has not been done. And there arises, therefore a strong presumption that the doctrine is not a doctrine of his Gospel; and that such passages as have been thought by some to teach or imply it, are misunderstood.

[To be continued in our next.]