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"WISDOM IS THE PRINCIPAL THING; THEREFORE GET WISDOM."

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Theology.

RELIGIOUS ERRORS.

CLASSIFICATION AND CAUSES OF RELIGIOUS ERRORS.—There are only four great errors in religion. The first is the religion of the senses and the imagination, or Polytheism and Popery. The second is the religion of sense, imagination, and reason, combined; or Pantheism, with Mysticism; or Pantheism Christianized. The third is the contracting revelation to our narrow faculties, or rational Christianity. And the fourth error is the rejecting Christianity altogether as contrary to our natural understanding, or Infidelity. The last error is swallowing up the three first; but of all these errors it has least subsistence in itself, and is continually wasting itself away.

All other errors are insignificant when compared with these. Other heresies are but the peculiarities of individuals, which have only a partial extent, and a limited duration. These errors, on the contrary, belong to the human mind, re-appear in every age and country; and though they have enrolled in their support very distinguished names in literature and science, are less indebted to any individual aid, than to those permanent weaknesses and propensities of man's darkened understanding which originally produced them.

All the minor sects owe their birth to persons of very inferior talents, and at the same time do not take equally deep hold of the mind itself. They may create a temporary interest and a local alarm. They are lamentable on account of the injury they may inflict upon individuals, but they are of no more consequence in retarding the progress of Christianity, than the loss of one or two out-posts would be in deciding the fate of a campaign. Many of these heresies are but the errors of a few wrong-headed individuals, and are chiefly brought into notice by the vehement outcry that is raised against them.

These heresies are frequently exaggerated, not only in their importance and magnitude, but also in their numbers. Lists of these are handed about by the Papists, as irrefragable proofs of the evils produced by the indiscriminate reading of the Scriptures, and by making the Bible the sole authority in religious controversy. But these heresies have no more connection with the Scriptures, than Popery itself has. They have altogether their rise from the folly, the narrow-mindedness, and the party-spirit of men; and the study of the Scriptures, instead of being the occasion of these disputes, is their only cure.

The list of heresies, filled as it is with barbarous denominations and unintelligible distinctions, has indeed a formidable aspect. Each of the sects is unimportant in itself; but they make up in numbers for the want of weight. Yet when examined, these numbers appear of less consequence. Many of these sects have no existence but on paper; they are merely various names for the same denomination, and others are founded entirely upon misconception.

Others of these sects are the offspring of the reveries of some deranged persons, of good natural talents, it may be, and of pious character, but who have mistaken the deep impressions of religion upon a disordered imagination, for new discoveries of divine truth, or deeper insight into the sacred writings. While the earnestness and the depth of their conviction has procured them a few disciples, who contrasted their zeal with the indifference of many around them, and felt that any opinion maintained with sincerity upon the subject of eternity, was not to be an opinion at all. Still, the folly of minutely characterizing these, would be as great as that of keeping a regular register of the sayings and tenets of Mediam, and arranging its intimates with a scrupulous classification of their respective opinions and systems.

Many of these heresies consist merely in the exaggeration of some particular truth. No positive error brought forward, but many great and useful truths are neglected, and the whole system of belief is out of proportion, still, this is no further heresy than what inevitably proceeds from an imperfect acquaintance with the truth.

A very great number of these pretended heresies consist in differences too minute to be preconceived by the naked eye, and can be seen only through the microscope of Sectarianism. That they do differ from other Christians is but too evident, but why they differ, would require the subtle genius of Thomas Aquinas satisfactorily to account for. Let but the Holy Spirit breathe upon our souls, and the Sun of Righteousness arise without a cloud, and all these differences will disappear as speedily as the morning mists.

Many of the present disputes and peculiarities in religion, arise from the turn of the public mind, more than ever averse to severe thought or patient examination. Man has been defined a thinking animal, but real and severe thought is not common in any age of the world. The public mind, however, is more capable of following a train of thoughts at one time than another. At present a variety of pursuits distract the attention from steadily fixing on any one.

A variety of popular publications, written with little talent or power, produce no spirit-stirring effect upon the reader; the languid curiosity is easily gratified, and information, such as it is, is presented almost before it is required, and passes from the eye or ear to the tongue, without rousing the understanding from its slumber. In education, all difficulties are purposely removed, as if difficulty were not necessary for exertion, and exertion for strength; and the maxim of the heathen moralist is forgotten, that the gods sell all things, and that labour is the price which they demand.

It may easily be supposed, that the religious world partake of the character of the age in which they live, and labour under greater disadvantages, for they have the same temptations to a frivolous turn of mind, with the additional listlessness of not having the same variety of pursuits and objects. Their chief reading consists in a number of ephemeral publications, whose only excellence very frequently consists in their piety; all whose sayings have long been said before, and where an original thought would be as beautiful and unexpected as a pellucid lake among the dry and barren sands of Arabia. It is not surprising that the minds which are nourished by such writings should have little taste or appetite for perusing the Scriptures, and should feel themselves bewildered in the midst of one of Paul's epistles, with the magnificent bursts of his imagination, and the fervid and consecutive energy of his arguments.

While artificial systems of theology are generally disused, the Scriptures are rather studied in detached parts, than as a whole. The present age exults in its freedom from the trammels of ancient authority, but is more quick-sighted to discover the blemishes than the excellencies of its predecessors. The systems of artificial theology have their uses as well as disadvantages; they indeed exaggerated and displaced several scriptural truths, and gave to others a speculative air rather than their true and practical bearing, but they had a great superiority over the partial induction not unfrequent in our time, which selects passages here and there out of Scripture, and accommodates them to its own pleasure, instead of submitting to be guided by the whole scope of Scripture. On the contrary, the artificial systems excelled in fulness; it was not a portion, but the whole of Scripture, that they brought into their method, and every doctrine had a place in their arrangement, though these doctrines might have been more simply and scrip-

turally expressed, and have observed more exactly the natural order of the Bible. The only advantage of giving up these ancient bodies of divinity is, that they should make way for the study of the Scriptures as a whole, and that we should drink the waters of life more freshly from their fountain. But they had better have been retained, if nothing was to succeed them, but the detached and scattered study of the Scriptures in detail, and the collection of a few picked and favourite texts to support some particular dogma. The great danger now is, that many truths should be omitted, and that one or two topics should be insisted on in the forgetfulness of all the rest, and that to occupy the blank thus occasioned, these few topics should be stretched far beyond their just dimensions, as in the old maps of Africa, the names of a few insignificant tribes on the coast were made the denominations of mighty empires, and concealed the map maker's ignorance of that unknown continent, by stretching far beyond their proper bounds into the interior of the country. These, however, are the evils of a state of transition. In the great change which has taken place, the old authority is discarded, before the new authority is properly recognized. It is necessary to have some system. The law of continuity prevails every where, and if in throwing off the artificial systems of theology we do not follow the natural system of the Scriptures, we shall unawares follow a system of our own, and that in all probability a very pitiful one.

REMEDY FOR RELIGIOUS ERRORS.—All errors in religion proceed from trusting to our own understanding, and all the useful truths we possess, are drawn from the fountain of sacred truth, the lively oracles of God. Hence the continual necessity of having recourse to the law and to the testimony, and of studying the Scriptures as we would any other book, as a whole, not picking little detached portions out of them, and putting our own constructions upon these separated fragments. The general scope of Scripture, and the consecutiveness of inspired argument, will preserve us from many errors, into which we might otherwise easily slide. If we mistake the meaning of one passage, we shall be set right by that which follows it; we shall have line upon line, precept upon precept—here a little and there a little; and though human weakness may mistake one or two passages, nothing but wilful and systematic perversion can misinterpret them all. In the Bible we have the continual unfolding of the same eternal plan, and we may trace the divine purposes from the dawn of their manifestation to their clear and unobscured display. We have truths placed in every variety of light, and examples under every diversity of circumstances.

It is a great mistake to think that any part of divine truth should be omitted. These passages which are supposed to be the darkest, are made sufficiently clear in their general design by judicious interpreters. But even if their bearing towards the persons and events to which they chiefly refer, were not clearly discerned, their practical bearing towards us is never doubtful. The particular events to which prophecy refers may require an interpreter, but the moral lessons which it mediates, and the view of the divine character which it exhibits, require none. A humble and patient study of prophecy, attended with much prayer, suggesting the best human help, would not only be beneficial to the Christian himself, but would check the rise of many of those pernicious errors and extravagant fancies, which, upon this subject especially, from time to time, infect the Church of Christ.

Great is the power of the Christian ministry, if rightly used, in all things that pertain to life and godliness, and not least in repressing the growth of heresies. Ministers have but to ask for the prayers of

the believing part of their congregation, and surely they will have them, and if they have them, they will have the large aid of the Holy Spirit also. Accompanied with a divine energy, the word of God will be widely effectual to the conversion of sinners, and open its inexhaustible treasury for the supply of the wants of all believers. The great aim of the Christian teacher is, to make his scholars acquainted with the general scope of the whole Bible, and to make them intelligent readers of it at home. This seems the essential part of Christian instruction. Whatever can be added to this is highly desirable, though not so imperatively necessary, and the minute explanation and enforcement of particular passages will be most advantageous to those who are already furnished with a general comprehension of the Scriptures.

There is one temptation which besets those who have often and clearly preached the Gospel, a weariness of repeating the same truth, day after day, and year after year, and freed only too with little visible effect. They think if they could vary their discourses they would make more impression upon the hearers, and accordingly the Gospel is thrown into the back ground, and in some discourses altogether omitted. The resolution of the Apostle is a necessary one, for all who have to speak to perishing sinners, to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. The more variety without the Gospel, and the less variety without the better. There is no theme through out the whole of existence, where Christ, the Creator of all worlds, and the Redeemer of our lost race, may not with propriety hold a conspicuous place.

Another error, still more hurtful and objectionable, consists in laying aside a doctrine for a time, which happens to be peculiarly patronized by some who are esteemed heretical. The very contrary is no doubt of course what good sense would recommend, the more a doctrine is perverted, the more need it has of being frequently placed in its proper light. If the freedom of the Gospel be exaggerated, and placed on an absurd point of view, the more necessary it is, that the infinite freedom of the Gospel should be clearly and scripturally maintained. If a spurious assurance of faith is gaining ground, the more necessary it is to point out on what grounds scriptural assurance is founded.

One great origin of heresies is the pretension to novelty. Now, it is impossible that there can be any thing new in the essentials of religion. Whosoever is saved, is saved by believing the same fundamental truths, from the dawn of the Apostles, to the end of the world. The only place where novelty can be admitted is in the illustration, or application, of these truths; for, as these truths are facts relating to the divine government, they are as boundless and endless in their influence as space and eternity; they are possessed of infinite variety, and allow of endless discovery.

Since the truths by which each believer is saved are for ever the same, this identity of religious views detaches us from cherishing any peculiar notions of our own, and urges us to maintain the same leading doctrines, and to hold fast the form of sound words which are common to all good men, whether alive or dead, whether ultimately connected with us, or removed far from us in all other views and sentiments, except those which relate to eternal life.

Our belief is, indeed, not to rest upon the opinions of fallible men, but upon the sure word of God. Yet, in casting off human authority, a great and absurd mistake is too frequently made. An independent seeker after truth judges rightly that all men are fallible. Unfortunately, without perceiving it, he makes an exception in favour of himself. He thinks his opinions must be right, because he took them wholly from the Bible; and because he despises all human authority, he forgets that there