

# The Wesleyan.

PUBLISHED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF A COMMITTEE OF WESLEYAN MINISTERS, IN CONNEXION WITH THE BRITISH CONFERENCE.

VOL. II.

TORONTO, CANADA, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 1841.

No. 4.

## Theology.

### THE EXCELLENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN DISPENSATION.

1. The dignity of the dispensation under which we live is not the institution of man, but the wise and gracious plan of God to make us happy. With this view he raised up the people of the Jews, kept them distinct from all others, and gave them such a portion of knowledge as might, in due time, prepare for the display of the Gospel. With this view, a succession of priests was kept up, the eye of prophecy was enlightened, and the hand of Omnipotence stretched forth. After thus preparing the way, our great Redeemer himself appeared upon the earth, lived in humiliation and sorrow, and died in agony and disgrace. During the time of his personal ministry, he had every attestation of the Deity in his favour, and the power of God was often exerted in a most signal manner. After his ascension, a larger measure of knowledge and power was given to his disciples than had been afforded them before. They asserted his character, and affirmed that he had risen from the dead, in the very place in which he had been crucified. They were endued with a miraculous skill in tongues, for the very purpose of spreading the gospel through the different parts of the world; and with what success they did it, and how in the face of danger and death they maintained their cause, whilst many of them perished in their sufferings, is well known, and will draw tears of admiration and gratitude from all succeeding ages. When we see the Saviour descending from heaven as a witness for God, and behold his sufferings and death, we cannot help being astonished at so stupendous a scene, and inquiring into the purpose it was intended to accomplish. One, among many great ends to be answered by it, is, removing the ignorance and error in which we are by nature involved, and giving us the knowledge of God and our true happiness. If there be a moral governor of the world, it must be of great importance to know upon what terms we stand with him, and what expectations we may form from him. A sober, reflecting man could scarcely feel himself at ease, till he attained to some certainty in points of so much consequence; and yet how little information we can derive from reason, in inquiries of this nature, may be seen from the experience of past ages, and those the most enlightened and refined; who, after all their researches, have not been able to come to any agreement, or to gain any satisfaction. We may discover, by the light of nature, the existence of a Being who is possessed of all possible perfection. The works of God sufficiently display his goodness, wisdom, and power; but with respect to the application of these in any particular instance, it leaves us entirely at a loss. We have no measure which we can apply to the operations of an Infinite Mind; and, therefore, though we may be assured that the Divine Being possesses all the attributes which compose supreme excellence, it is impossible for us to say in particular instances, what path of conduct may best consist with those perfections in their most extensive operation. Indeed, to discover not only the leading attributes of the Divine Nature, but to be acquainted beforehand with every direction they will take, would be fully to comprehend the Most High. When, therefore, without the aid of Revelation, we attempt to foretell the dispensations of the Almighty, we are lost in a maze, and are obliged to rest in vague and uncertain conjectures. This holds true more especially when applied to the conduct of Providence with respect to only a small part of creation. In this case our uncertainty is doubled, since we know that all the works of God form one vast system, and the regulation of the parts must be subservient to the administration of the whole. But this situation is ours. Confined to a point in

our existence, and limited in our ideas, we cannot tell what relation we bear to other beings, or how it may seem fit to Divine Providence to dispose of us in relation to those higher and more ultimate designs which are continually carrying on. Our meaning may be illustrated by the following instance. It is certain that the Divine Being is in the greatest degree compassionate and good; but if a number of creatures render themselves unhappy by a wilful rebellion against him, a singular instance would arise. It would be impossible to say whether the exercise of compassion here would best comport with the highest goodness, and the greatest happiness, in the general administration of Providence, because no one could trace every relation which the part bears to the whole.

This, you will perceive, is a case entirely to the point; for disorder and sin have entered into the world. It is evident that things are turned out of their natural and original channel, that they are not what they have been, nor what they ought to be. Men have corrupted their way. A change so singular in the creation, a situation so striking, and so little to be apprehended under the government of a holy and perfect Being, naturally leads us to look for a revolution in the dispensations of Providence. In such a state, some new and awful interposition of the divine hand might well be expected. There is something, at the same time, in the idea of having provoked the displeasure of God, when seriously thought of, too heavy for the heart of man to bear. We cannot leave his presence, we cannot resist his power, we cannot evade his stroke. Hence mankind in all ages have had their fears awakened, and have taken a gloomy survey of an hereafter. They saw death busy around them, carrying their fellow-creatures out of their sight. Anxious and fearful for themselves, they sought for them in the dreams of poetic illusion, and followed them in the gloomy vision of unenlightened fancy. They found that life was filled with vanity and sorrow; they knew not but death would extinguish their existence, or transmit them to still greater misery. They had just light enough dimly to show them the Judge of the universe seated on his throne, in wrath, clouded with darkness, and beset with judgments. They had no certain access to him, no acceptable worship to pry him, no assurance that their prayers would be answered, or their sins forgiven them. They saw not the issue of things, nor could they take any lengthened view of futurity. They knew not, therefore, how to cherish any great hopes, to form any high and extensive plans; they were confined to the present moment, and all beyond it was covered with confusion and horror. The first chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans sufficiently illustrates the truth of these remarks.

Herein then appears the supreme excellence of the Christian dispensation. In the midst of this darkness it rises like the sun in its strength, and all these gloomy shades melt away, and are lost in the brightness of it. It no longer leaves us to the conjectures of reason, which has always erred, nor to the fluctuating opinions of men; but all it declares it confirms by the authority of God. The truths it discovers were proclaimed by the Son of God himself, who lay in the bosom of the Father from eternity; who was acquainted with all his counsels, and created all his works. It raises no hopes within, but what are built upon the promises and oath of Him who cannot lie. In the mystery of Christ's incarnation, who was God as well as man; in the humiliation of his life, and in his death upon the cross, we behold the most stupendous instance of compassion; whilst at the same moment the law of God received more honour than it could have done by the obedience and death of any or of all his creatures. Mercy and truth have met together, righteousness and peace have kissed

each other." In this dispensation of his grace, he has reached so far beyond our highest hopes, that if we love him, we may be assured that he will with it freely give us all things. Access to God is now open at all times, and from all places, and to such as sincerely ask it, he has promised his Spirit to teach them to pray, and to help their infirmities. The sacrifice of Christ has rendered it just for him to forgive sin; and whenever we are led to repent of and forsake it, even the *innumerable* of God is declared in the pardon of it. Whilst we contemplate the gospel, consolation pours itself in on every side, and refreshes our inmost souls. It gives us the prospect of our sins being pardoned, our prayers accepted, our very afflictions turned into blessings, and our existence prolonged to an endless duration. We see Christianity as yet but in its infancy. It has not already reached the great ends it is intended to answer, and to which it is continually advancing. At present it is but as a grain of mustard seed, and seems to bring forth a tender and weakly crop, but be assured it is God's own right hand's planting, and he will never suffer it to perish. It will soon stretch its branches to the west, and its shade to the ends of the earth. The weary will repose themselves under it, the hungry will partake of its fruit, and its leaves will be for the healing of the nations."

Those who profess the name of Jesus will delight in contemplating the increase and grandeur of his Kingdom, and their expectations will not deceive them. "He must reign till he hath put all enemies under his feet." The religion of Jesus is not the religion of one age or of one nation. It is a train of light first put in motion by God, and which will continue to move and to spread, till it has filled the whole earth with its glory. Its blessings will descend, and its influence will be felt in the latest generations. Uninterrupted in its course and boundless in its extent, it will not be limited by time or space. The earth is too narrow for the display of its effects and the accomplishment of its purposes. It points forward to an eternity. The great Redeemer will again appear upon the earth, as the Judge and Ruler of it; will send forth his angels, and gather his elect from the four winds; will abolish sin and death; will place the righteous forever in the presence of his God and their God, of his Father and their Father.

II. If our religion be such as we have attempted briefly to describe, "what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness!" We are conscious that a mere general belief of the Christian Revelation will not purify the heart, nor regulate the conduct. We may calmly assent to the most interesting and solemn truths of Christianity, and afterwards suffer them to slide out of our minds, without leaving any impression behind them. If we look back upon the usual course of our feelings, we shall find that we are more influenced by the frequent recurrence of objects, than by their weight and importance; and that habit has more force in forming our characters, than our opinions have. The mind naturally takes its tone and complexion from what it habitually contemplates. Hence it is that the world, by constantly pressing upon our senses, and being ever open to our view, takes so wide a sway in the heart. How then must we correct this influence, and by faith overcome the world, unless we habitually turn our attention to religion and eternity? Let us make them familiar with our minds, and mingle them with the ordinary stream of our thoughts; retiring often from the world, and conversing with God and our own souls. In these solemn moments, nature, and the shifting scenes of it, will retire from our view, and we shall feel ourselves left alone with God. We shall walk as in his sight; we shall stand, as it were, at his tribunal.

Unions will then vanish away, and every thing will appear in its true proportion and proper colour. We shall estimate human life, and the worth of it, not by fleeting and momentary sensations, but by the light of serious reflection and steady faith. We shall see little in the past to please, or in the future to fret. The feverish dreams will subside, and its enchantments be dissolved. It is much, however, if faith do not upon such occasions draw aside the veil which rests upon futurity, and cut short the interval of expectation. How often has she borne aloft the spirits of good men, and given them a vision of better days and brighter hopes! They have already outstepped the rest that remained for them; they have "gone to an innumerable company of spirits, to the spirits of the just made perfect, and to God the Judge of all." From these seasons of retirement and religious meditation, we shall return to the active scene of life with greater advantage. From the presence of God we shall come forth with our passions more composed, our thoughts better regulated, and our hearts more steady and pure. Let us not imagine that the benefit of such exercises is confined to the moments which are spent in them; for as the air retains the smell, and is filled with the fragrance of leaves which have been long shed; so will these meditations leave a sweet and refreshing influence behind them.

If our religion be genuine, it will be a source of the warmest and most interesting feelings. It will be a spring of consolation within, which will often be full and pour itself forth. If the Gospel have not taken a share in the feelings of our hearts, if it have not moved the great springs of our hopes and fears, we may be assured that we have never experienced its force. It is filled with such views as cannot fail to interest and transport us. Besides, if we do not feel the Gospel, as well as believe it, how can it support against the overwhelming influence of what we do feel? The world steals upon us, and engages our affections on all sides. Its prospects entice, and its pleasures seduce us. With a religion which rests only on opinion, and a conviction at times extorted from us, keep us firm against these assaults, and stem the force of a torrent which never ceases to flow! This can be done only by opposing hope to hope, feeling to feeling, pleasure to pleasure.

Perhaps one of the chief reasons why Christianity does not more purify our hearts, is, that we are apt to confine it to seasons of worship, and to shut it out from the ordinary concerns of life. It is a great and fatal mistake to imagine them so separate, that we can innocently and usefully engage in the one, without any regard had to the other. Our temporal affairs should never be suffered to mingle with the exercises of religion, but religion should always regulate the conduct of our temporal affairs. And the reason of this is obvious. The world and the fashion of it is passing away, and our union with it will soon be dissolved; whilst the relation we bear to God and eternity is ever the same, and extends to all times and to all places. The character, which, as Christians, we sustain, is our highest character, and the hopes, which, as such, we indulge, are our highest hopes. It is but reasonable, it is but just, therefore, that the desire of discharging the one, and attaining the other, should sway the whole of our conduct. Perhaps we shall be ready to think that this advice is impracticable. You will urge the necessity of attending to your worldly callings, which, you will say, cannot be carried on, unless you give them the greater part of your time and attention. Be it so. Remember we do not advise you to spend more of your time in religion than in your ordinary concerns. This would extinguish all human industry. But if we be sincere in our professions of religion, we shall regulate our pursuits by it, and engage no farther in any of them