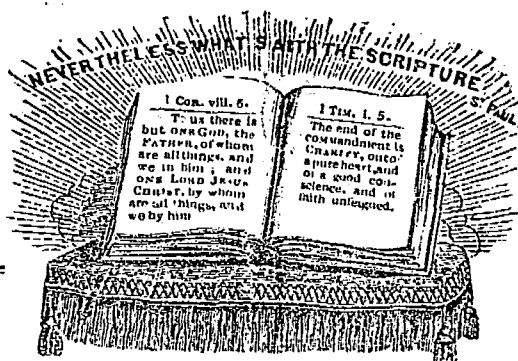


THE BIBLE

TRUTH, HOLINESS,



CHRISTIAN

LIBERTY, LOVE.

Vol. V.]

MONTREAL, NOVEMBER, 1848.

[No. 11.]

CREEDS SHOULD BE EXPRESSED IN THE LANGUAGE OF SCRIPTURE.

FROM WM. PENN'S ADDRESS TO PROTESTANTS.

Opinions pass for faith, and are made articles of faith, and are enjoined to be embraced as the bond of communion.

That this is so, let us take the most impartial view we can, and we shall find it to be true, both of the national and many other select societies. That I may be understood in the signification of the word *opinions*, I explain it thus; *Opinions are all those propositions, or conclusions, made by men doctrines of faith and articles of communion, which either are not expressly laid down in Scripture, or not so evidently deducible from Scripture, as to leave no occasion of doubt of the truth of them in their minds who sincerely and reverently believe the text; or, lastly, such as have no new or credible revelation to vouch them.*

That this is our case, let the several confessions of faith, published by almost every party in England, be perused, and you will find such propositions translated into doctrines of faith and articles of communion, as are, first, not only *not expressed* in Scripture, but, perhaps not well deducible from Scripture; and if one party may be but believed against another, we can want no evidence to prove what we say. And, in the next place, such as are, though not expressed, yet, it may be, deducible as to the matter of them, are either carried so high, spun so fine, or so disguised by barbarous school terms, that they are rather a bone of contention, than a bond of concord to religious societies. Yet this has been the unhappiness of this kingdom, after all the light of reformation, which God hath graciously sent amongst us, "Men are to be received or rejected for denying or owning such propositions." Wilt thou be a Presbyterian? Embrace and keep the covenant, subscribe the Westminster confession and directory; and so on to the end of every society that grounds communion upon conformity to such propositions and articles of faith.

What a stir have we had in England about the word *Episcopos*. He that says it signifies an higher office than *Presbuteros*, shall have no part or fellowship with us; on the other hand, they that will debase *Episcopos* to *Presbuteros*, and turn levellers or degraders of episcopal dignity, shall be excommunicated, silenced, punished. Is not this plain fact? Can any deny it, that love truth more than a party? The fire kindled by this contention hath warmed the hands of violence; it had been well if men had entertained equal zeal against impiety, and been but half as much enemies to sin, as they have been against one another on such accounts.

If we look a little back, we shall find that the debate of *freewill* and *unconditional reprobation* filled this kingdom with uncharitableness and division. In the archepiscopacy of Abbot, reputed in himself a good man, whosoever held, "that Christ so died for all men, that all men might be saved, if they would accept the means, and that none were absolutely decreed to eternal reprobation," was reputed a heretic, and excommunicated as an enemy to the free grace of God; which, it seems, at that time of day, lay in being *narrow*.

In the reign of archbishop Laud the tide turned; and those that held an *absolute election* and *reprobation*, without regard had to the good or evil actions of men and asserted that Christ only died for the *elect*, and not for *all*, must be discountenanced, displaced, and pointed at as men out of fashion, though at the same time conscientious, sober, and, at worst, mistaken; and to be pitied, rather than persecuted; and informed, not destroyed.

This controversy begat the Synod of Dort;

he that reads the epistles of that judicious man, J. Hales, of Eton College, upon the matter and conduct of that assembly, will find cause of being sad at heart; too many of them talking of religion without the spirit of it: men, perhaps, learned in books, but few of the sticklers gave any great testimony of their proficiency in that science, which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated. This flame kindled between Arminius and Episcopius, &c. for the Remonstrants, and Gomarus, Sibrandus, &c. for the Predestinarians, distracted Holland not a little, and had an ill influence upon the affairs of England, at least so far as concerned the church. But the mournfullest part of that history is the ill usage Martinus Crocius, the bishop of Landaff, and others had; who, though they were acknowledged to be sound in the faith of those things, which generally followed the judgment of Calvin, as to the main points controverted, yet, if at any time they appeared moderate in their behaviour, gentle in their words, and for accommodation in some particulars, with the remonstrants, or freewillers, Gomarus and his followers, not observing the gravity due to the assembly, the rules of debate and least of all the meekness of christian communion, fell foul of their brethren, reproached their tenderness, and began to fix treachery upon their sober endeavours of accommodation; as if they intended to execute, as well as maintain their reprobation, and blow up their friends, rather than not destroy their adversaries.

But if we will rise higher in our inquiry, and view the mischiefs of earlier times, flowing from this practice, the fourth and fifth centuries after Christ will furnish us with instances enough. We cannot possibly forget the heavy life some men made about the observation of *Easter day*, as if their eternal happiness had been in jeopardy; for so far were they degenerated from the love and meekness of Christianity, that about keeping of a day, which perhaps was no part, but, to be sure, no essential part, of the christian religion, they fell to pieces; reproached, reviled, hated, and persecuted one another. "A DAY" was more to them, than "Christ," who was the Lord and end of days; and "victory over brethren," sweeter than the "Peace and concord of the church," the great command of Jesus, whom they called Lord.

But the remarkable and tragical story of Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, and Arius his priest, in their known debate about the "nature and existence of the Son of God," with the lamentable consequences thereof, as all writers upon that subject have related, witnesseth to the truth of what I say. The bishop's curiosity, and the strictness of Arius; the presumption of the one to expound beyond the evidence and simplicity of the text, and the captious humour of the other, that would not abate the bishop anything for his age, or the rank he held in the church, but logically exacted the utmost farthing of the reckoning from his old pastor, first began the fray, which as it became the perplexity of church and state for some ages, so it raged to blood; and those that had been persecuted like sheep by the heathen not long before, turned wolves against each other, and made sport for the infidels, doing their work to their own destruction. Nay, so much more christian was Themistius the philosopher, that he, in his oration, called *Consul*, commended the emperor Jovianus for his moderation, and advised him to give that liberty of conscience, which professed Christians refused to allow each other; who seemed to think they never did God better service, than in sacrificing one another for religion, even as soon as ever they had escaped the heathen's shambles.

Did we duly reflect upon the unnatural heats, divisions, and excommunications among them, the many councils that were called, the strong and tedious debates held, the translations of sees, the anathemas, the banishments, wars, sackings, fires, and bloodshed, that followed this unnatural division, that sprang from so nice a controversy, one would verily believe no less, than that religion itself had been in the utmost hazard;

that Judaism or Paganism were overrunning christianity; and not that all this stir had been made about an *Iota*. For the whole question was, whether *Homousia*, or *Homoiousia*, should be received for faith? In which the difference is but the single letter *I*; certainly, we must do violence to our understanding, if we can think that these men were followers of that Jesus, that "loved his enemies and gave his blood for the world," who hated their brethren, and shed one another's blood for *opinions*; the heathen philosophers never were so barbarous to one another, but maintained a better understanding and behaviour in their differences.

But how easily might all these confusions have been prevented, if their faith about Christ had been delivered in the words of the *Scripture*; since all sides pretend to believe the *text*; And why should any man presume to be wiser, or plainer in matters of faith, than the Holy Ghost? It is strange, that God and Christ should be wanting to express or discover their own mind; or that the words used by the Holy Ghost should have that shortness, ambiguity, or obliquity in them, that our frail capacities should be needed to make them more easy, proper, and intelligible. But that we should scarcely deliver any one article of faith in *scripture terms*, and yet make such acts the *rule and bond of christian communion*, is, in my judgment, an offence heinous against God and holy Scripture, and very injurious to christian charity and fellowship. Who can express any man's mind so fully as himself? And shall we allow that liberty to ourselves and refuse it to God? "The Scriptures came not in old time," said the apostle Peter, "by the will of man; but holy men of God spake, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Who can speak better, or express the mind of the Holy Ghost plainer, than the *Holy Ghost*? The *Scripture* is the great record of truth, that which all these parties in controversy agree to be the *declared mind and will of God*, and they unanimously say, it ought to be *believed* and *professed as such*. If this be true, in what language can we so safely and properly declare our belief of those truths, as in the very language of the *Scripture*?

And I cannot see how those persons can be excused in the day of God's judgment, who make men heterodox or heretical, for refusing to subscribe their articles of faith that are not in *scripture terms*, who in the same time offer to declare their belief of God, Christ, spirit, man's lapse or fall, repentance, sanctification, justification, salvation, resurrection, and eternal recompense, in the language of holy Scripture. I must say it is preposterous, and a contradiction, that those who desire to deliver their *faith* of truth, in the *language* of truth, shall not be reputed *true believers*, nor their *faith* admitted. This were to say, that their faith is not to be received, because it is declared in the *language* of that very *truth*, which is the *object* of that *faith*, for which it ought to be received, and which is; on all hands, concluded to be our duty to believe. It seems then, we must not express our belief of God in his words but our *own*; nor is the *Scripture* a creed plain or proper enough to declare a true believer, or an orthodox Christian, without our glosses.

Are not things come to a sad pass, that to refuse any other terms than those the Holy Ghost has given us, and which are confessed to be the "rule or form of sound words," is to expose a man to the censure of being unsound in the faith, and unfit for christian communion? Will nothing do but *man's consequences* and *conclusions*, in the room of *sacred revelation*? I cannot see how any man can be obliged to *receive*, or *believe* revealed truths in any other language than that of the revelation *itself*; especially if those that vary the expression have not the same spirit to lead them in doing so, or that it appears not to me that they have the guidance of that holy spirit. If the Holy Ghost had left *doubts* in Scripture, which is yet irreverent to believe, I see not how men can resolve them; it is the *work* of that *spirit*. And since men are so apt to err, doubts are

better left in *Scripture*, than made or left by us. But it is to cross that order of prudence and wisdom among men, who choose to conform their *expressions* to the thing they *believe*. If an honest man hath related a *story* to me, of something he hath seen, and I am to declare my *faith* about it, if I believe the *fact*, I will choose to deliver it in the *terms* of the *relator*, as being nearest to the truth.

Suppose a father dying, makes his *last will and testament*, and as he thinks so plain, that there can be no mistake made by the *executors*, but what is wilful; if they, instead of proving this will and acting according to the plainness of it, turn *commentators*, make more difficulties than they find, and perplex the whole matter to the children and legatees, and send them to the *law* for right; will we not esteem such executors *ill men*, and justify those persons concerned in their *refusal* of their *paraphrase*? "God hath at sundry times, and in diverse manners," by his prophets, his beloved Son, and his Apostles, Heb. i. 1., delivered to the world a *declaration* of his blessed *will*; but some have claimed and taken to themselves the *keeping, explanation* and *use* of it, so as those that choose to be concluded by the *letter* and *text* of *Christ's testament*, in its most *important* points, expose themselves to great prejudice for so doing; for they are excommunicated from all other share in it, than the punishment of the breakers of it; which is part of their anathema, who, of all others, are most guilty of *adding, or diminishing*, by undertaking to determine, for others as well as themselves, the *mind and intention* of the Holy Ghost in it.

But if it be true, as true it is, that few have writ of the divine authority of *Scripture*, who do not affirm that the very penmen of it were not only inspired by the Holy Ghost, but so extraordinarily acted by him, as that they were wholly asleep to their own will, desires or affections, like people taken out of themselves, and purely passive, as "clay in the hands of the potter," to the *revelation, will, and motion* of the *spirit*; and for this end, that nothing delivered by them might have the least possibility of mistake, error, or imperfection, but be a "complete declaration of the will of God to men," I cannot see which way such men excuse themselves from great presumption, that will, notwithstanding, have the *wording* of *creeds of communion*, and reject the declaration of faith as insufficient, which is delivered in the very terms of the Holy Ghost; and deny those persons to be members of Christ's church, that in conscience refuse to subscribe any other draught than that the Lord has given them.

Two things oppose themselves to this practice; the glory of God, and the honour of the *Scripture*; in that it naturally draws people from the regard due to God and the *Scripture*, and begets too much respect for men and their tradition. This was the difficulty Christ met with, and complained of, in his time; they had set up so many rabbies to teach them religion, that the Lord of the true religion could hardly find place amongst them. And what did they do? "They taught for doctrines the traditions of men;" they gave their own and their predecessors' apprehensions, constructions, and paraphrases upon *Scripture*, for the mind and will of God, the rule of the people's faith. They were near at this pass in the church of Corinth, when they cried out, "I am for Paul, I am for Apollos, and I am for Cephas," though they had not the same temptation.

And that which followed then, ever will follow in the like case, and that is distraction; which is the contrary to the second thing that opposeth itself to this practice, and that is the concord of Christians. For the sake of peace consider it; *Lo here, and lo there, always followed; one of this mind and another of that; as many sects as great men to make and head them.* This was the case of the Jews; and yet I do not hear that they devoured one another about their opinions and commentaries upon *Scripture*; but the Christians have done both; divided and persecuted too. First, they have divided; and