

ought to do to others, on moral principle, we must place ourselves in their circumstances; and to ascertain the meaning of the apostolic epistles, we must place ourselves in the circumstances of the persons to whom they were written. So far a resemblance exists between the golden key and the golden rule. But to develop this principle and to exhibit its practical use, we shall lay before the reader a few considerations which will embrace the chief difficulties in our way, and the best means of surmounting them. What we advance on this subject may be considered as an answer to the question, *How shall we place ourselves in the circumstances of the persons addressed?*

In the first place then, *we are to remember that these letters were written nearly eighteen centuries ago.* This fact has much meaning in it: for it follows from it, that except the prophetic part of the writings, not a word or sentence in them can be explained or understood by all that has happened in the world for eighteen hundred years. We might as well expect to find the meaning of Cicero's orations, or Horace's epistles, from reading the debates of the British Parliament, or of the American Congress of last year, as to expect to find the meaning of these epistles from the debates and decisions of the Council of Nice, or of Trent, or of Westminster—from the ecclesiastic history, the moral philosophy, or the scholastic divinity of any age since John the Apostle resigned his spirit.

From the above fact it follows that the most accurate acquaintance with all those questions of the different sects, with all their creeds and controversies, which have engrossed so much of the public attention, if it does not impede, most certainly does not facilitate, our progress in the knowledge of the Apostolic epistles. As the Apostles did not write with any of our questions before their minds, or with a reference to any of our systems, it is presumptuous in the extreme to apply what they have said on other questions, to those which have originated since. And as they did not write with any design of making out a system of doctrine, it is preposterous to attempt to make out a system for them, and oblige them to approve it.

In the second place, as the Apostles wrote these letters with a reference to their own times, to the character and circumstances of the people with whom they were conversant, a knowledge of the character and circumstances of these people is of essential importance in order to understand the letters addressed to them.

By the *character* of the people we mean not only their character at the time the letter was written, but also their previous character—what sort of persons they were before their conversion, as respected religion and morality—what their peculiar views and prejudices—and what their attainments in the learning and science of their age and country. By the *circumstances* of the people, we mean not merely their political and commercial standing, but as regards unity of views and co-operation—whether they were living in peace and harmony among themselves—whether they were persecuted by those of different sentiments—or whether they were enjoying tranquillity unmolested from without.

In the third place, a knowledge of the character and circumstances of the writer of an epistle, is of essential importance in understanding it.