

S E R M O N S,

B Y

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S E R M O N V.

THE NATURE OF SOUND DOCTRINE.

T I T U S ii. 1.

But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine.

SOUND doctrine is an expression so commonly used by Christians, that few are apt to suspect any ambiguity in its meaning. Every one of those sects into which the Christian world is unhappily divided, applies the expression to signify the whole of its own system of doctrine, but especially those speculative and disputable tenets which distinguish it from other sects, and even those technical terms which it has coined or adopted on purpose to define them with precision. All sects, with equal confidence, appropriate the epithet to their own peculiar systems: yet the distinguishing tenets of different sects

are contradictory. It is certain, therefore, that the epithet is misapplied by some of them. Each affirms, that it is misapplied by all except its own adherents: and as the theological system of every sect contains something of human, and consequently fallible, explication, impartiality can scarce avoid suspecting that the epithet is, in some measure, misapplied by all sects. It will not therefore be superfluous, professedly to ascertain and illustrate its genuine import.

WITH this view, I shall, FIRST, examine its precise meaning in Scripture;

SECONDLY, Explain the several particulars which shall, from that examination, appear to be implied in it; and,

THIRDLY, Conclude with some reflexions naturally suggested by the subject.

SOUND doctrine, sound or wholesome words, sound speech, sound in the faith, are all expressions found in Scripture, and evidently intended to convey the same idea. The original words which express the epithet in all these phrases*, refer primarily to bodily health,

* In one text, the adjective *ὑγιής*; in another, the verb *ὑγιαίνω*; in all the rest, the participle *ὑγιαίνων*.

as opposed to disease : but they are, by classical writers, used with great latitude, for signifying metaphorically whatever is right or approveable. They are all words of the same etymology. One of them * primarily signifies *healthful*, but is also used by Greek authors, to signify *healing*, *wholesome*, or conducive to health. Another of them † signifies, most literally, *healing*, but is used likewise, in several places of the new Testament ‡, to signify *healthful*. We may conclude, therefore, that they are designed to be synonymous when they are applied to doctrine, and to denote such as is healthful, or such as is healing, or such as unites both these characters. What they precisely denote, we shall be best able to determine, by comparing the passages in which they occur, and examining the scope and connexion of each. All these passages lie in Paul's epistles to Timothy and to Titus : and, from the slightest attention to them, it will, I think, be evident, that the Apostle calls doctrine *sound*, in a sense very remote from that in which the term is used by the discordant sects of Christians ; that he constantly means it to express both the ideas which it naturally signifies ; that he intends the genuine doctrine of Christ, but with a par-

* ὑγιής.

† ὑγιαίνων.

‡ Luke v. 31. vii. 10. xv. 27.

ticular reference, both to its being *healthful*, pure, and unsophisticated, and to its being wholesome or *healing*, as having a practical tendency. So far is he from designing it to denote the peculiarities of any human system, that, on the contrary, he is at pains to intimate, that he designs it to express the plainness and simplicity of the doctrine of the gospel, as delivered by Christ and his Apostles, in direct opposition to the precarious opinions, the subtle explications and definitions, the ingenious speculations and refinements of uninspired men: and so far is he from applying the term to any curious or intricate theory, that he no less clearly and constantly intimates that, by calling doctrine *sound*, he means to express its being fit to cure the diseases, and promote the health, of the soul; and that, in opposition not only to tenets directly immoral, but particularly also to the inutility and pernicious tendency of all subtle questions and abstract disquisitions. These two ideas, by which the Apostle characterizes *sound* doctrine, it will be necessary to trace out jointly; for, in every passage of his writings, they are jointly kept in view with the greatest care.

OUR Apostle uses the term *sound* doctrine, in 1 Tim. i. 10. He immediately subjoins a definition of it: it is what is *according*
to

to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which, says he, *was committed to my trust* *; it is what is plainly and expressly revealed by God in the gospel. In the context, the idea of *sound doctrine* is still more precisely defined, and fully illustrated, particularly by being contrasted with its opposites. To perceive this, we must look back to the beginning of the paragraph, ver. 3. The Apostle there reminds Timothy, that he had formerly desired him to *charge some that they teach no OTHER doctrine*: OTHER, he can only mean, than the doctrine of the gospel, which he had preached. And what was the other doctrine which they taught? The next words inform us, *Neither give heed to fables, and endless genealogies* †: the fabulous traditions which the Jews had invented, and which, they pretended, led to the right understanding of the Scriptures; and the fanciful notions concerning certain successive derivations of spiritual beings, commonly called *Æons*, from the Supreme Being, or from one another, which the Apostle justly pronounces *endless* or interminable; because, being founded solely in imagination, they might be, and actually were, varied and multiplied according to every man's caprice. The Christian converts from Judaism, retaining their fondness

* Ver. 11.

† Ver. 4.

for both these, endeavoured to intermix them with, or superadd them to, the gospel, under pretence of explaining some of its doctrines with the greater precision and fullness.— These speculations, which were the human definitions and refinements, at that time heterogeneously interwoven with the gospel, he censures not only as being *another doctrine*, totally foreign to the gospel; but also, very explicitly, on account of their having no *moral tendency*, but necessarily drawing men off from practice; for he subjoins, *which minister questions intricate, perplexing, unprofitable disputes, rather than godly edifying*. That it might appear how contradictory they are, in this respect, to the gospel, he asserts that its *end*, its sole purpose, its direct and ultimate scope, is *love out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned**: and so anxious is he to exclude the subtilizing upon its simple principles, that he represents every such attempt as a deviation from its whole structure and design; *from which*, says he, *some*, the teachers already censured, *having swerved, have turned aside unto vain jangling †*. He proceeds to expose the ignorance and self-conceit which led them into this deviation: and, as they vented their fantastical subtleties

* Ver. 5.

† Ver. 6.

as belonging to the law, and under pretence of teaching it perfectly, he takes occasion to explain what was the real design of the law; not to serve as a foundation for such speculative visions, but to condemn every kind of immorality: many kinds of it he enumerates; and it is inclosing the enumeration that he says, *And if there be any other thing that is CONTRARY to sound doctrine* *. Thus directing us to refer the phrase to the whole paragraph, and to explain it by the whole tenour of his discourse; as marking the doctrine of the gospel as *simple*, and as *practical*, fully taught by Christ and his Apostles, and applied to the sole purpose of promoting holiness; uncombined with any refinements of human ingenuity, which always are another doctrine, and never fail to counteract its tendency to produce, not purity and charity, but indeterminable controversies, and unhallowed, uncharitable contentions and divisions.—The idea of Christian doctrine which he had here given, he is solicitous to keep in view throughout the epistle, and frequently recurs to it. In particular, when he predicts a great corruption of the Christian church, and describes it as a *departure from the faith* †, he plainly intimates, that the departure consisted in a deviation from

* Ver. 7, — 10.

† Chap. iv. 1.

that simplicity and moral tendency which belong to the true faith ; for, in exhorting Timothy to oppose it by *good doctrine**, he gives him this direction, *Refuse profane and old wives fables, and exercise thyself unto godliness †*.

BUT, chap. vi. 3. he speaks again of *wholesome or sound words*; for, in the original, the epithet is the same which he had formerly applied to doctrine. What these were, he immediately explains, *Even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel in the simplicity in which it was at first delivered ; and the doctrine which is according to godliness*: thus studiously unfolding and forcing into view both the ideas which we have affirmed to be implied in the epithet. If farther evidence of this be necessary, the whole context will abundantly supply it. He insinuates, that some *consent not to the wholesome words, but teach otherwise*. Otherwise than what? Certainly one of two things. Either, *first*, otherwise than he had taught, and commanded Timothy to *teach and exhort*, immediately before; and then he must mean, that they teach otherwise than they ought, and not according to the *wholesome words of Christ*, who are not careful to inculcate the several moral duties of life; for he

• Ver. 6.

† Ver. 7.

had immediately before been wholly occupied in giving plain practical directions concerning the particular duties incumbent on Timothy himself, on widows, and on servants. Or, *secondly*, otherwise than was required by the general descriptions which the Apostle had formerly given of Christian doctrine: and that these had been anxiously contrived to mark especially both its practical tendency and its simplicity in opposition to all human speculations and opinions, is evident from the passage which we have already explained, and might be confirmed by other passages. The apostle's idea of *sound words* is farther ascertained by the character which he gives of the man who deviates from them*: *He is proud, knowing nothing, but doating, ailing, diseased, about questions and strifes of words.* It is a false conceit of his own acuteness and ingenuity which impels him to subtilize on the plain doctrines of the gospel; and his doing so betrays his total ignorance of their genuine nature, and is truly a distempered appetite for enquiries, discussions, and definitions, which, profound or important as he imagines them, are in fact trifling or unintelligible logomachies, at the best controversies not about truth itself, but about particular modes of expressing it,

* 1 Tim. 4. 5.

none of them necessary, and perhaps all of them in some respect improper. He stigmatizes these as not only thus foreign to the simplicity of the gospel, but also contradictory to its moral tendency; as speculations *whereof*, instead of *godliness*, cometh *envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth*. In this passage, therefore, as well as in the former, it is the original, simple doctrine of the gospel, studiously opposed to all abstract, curious definitions and questions misnamed theological, that the Apostle calls *sound* or *wholesome*, and he so calls it with a direct and particular view to mark its natural influence on all the virtues of a good life. It will not perhaps be a blameable minuteness to remark farther, that in this passage it is the WORDS of Christ, not his DOCTRINE as in the former passage, that the Apostle calls *sound*; on purpose, it would seem, to intimate, that the words of Scripture are the most proper for expressing the doctrine of Scripture; that the substitution of other terms, as more explicit and precise, and fitter for distinguishing the truth from error, is really a deviation from the simplicity of the gospel, and a certain means of introducing human refinements, and raising vain and subtle questions heterogeneous to its nature and design. At any rate, the Apostle's anxiety to condemn these

these

these is plain and undeniable; for returning to this subject, he concludes the epistle with an earnest exhortation to beware of them: *O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called; which some professing, have erred concerning the faith**.

NOTWITHSTANDING all the pains which the Apostle had thus taken to describe and recommend sound doctrine, the false teachers persisted in their attachment to fanciful and unprofitable fables and questions, and disseminated them in the Ephesian, and other Asiatic churches, with so great success, that he found it necessary to resume the subject in his second epistle to Timothy, and to give almost the whole epistle a reference to it. He commands Timothy †, to *hold fast*, to adhere to *the form*, the model and exemplar *of sound words*. It is the same phrase which he had used in the passage last explained, and he uses it in the very same sense. That he means the simple doctrine of the gospel as originally delivered, he is careful to intimate, by immediately subjoining this test and criterion, *which thou hast heard of me*: not the words or the opinions of any uninspired man, but the words and the

* Ver. 20, 21.

† 2 Tim. i. 13.

doctrine of the inspired Apostle. He is very solicitous to inculcate this; for he soon after exhorts him, *The things which thou hast heard of me, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also**; he tells him, *Thou hast fully known MY DOCTRINE* †; he enjoins him, *Continuethou in the things which thou hast learned, and hast been assured of, knowing OF WHOM thou hast learned them* ‡; and he refers him to *the Scripture given by inspiration of God*, as the only source from which the pure principles of religion can be derived, and declares it to be *profitable for doctrine, and able to make wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus* §.—That it was his purpose, studiously to distinguish this pure, simple doctrine of the gospel from, and to contrast it with, the curious speculations which affected ingenuity might build upon it, the abstract definitions and distinctions by which men might attempt explaining it with precision, the nice and puzzling questions concerning it which they might agitate, and likewise all the unscriptural, technical, and philosophical terms which they might invent or adopt under colour of expressing the exact truth, and effectually excluding the contrary error, is clear

* Chap. ii. 2.

† Ver. 14.

‡ Chap. iii. 10.

§ Ver. 15, 16.

from

from the whole series of his discourse. When he desires Timothy to *put them in remembrance of the things* which he had said, he adds, *charging them before the Lord, that they strive not about words**, about contending modes of expression. When he directs him *rightly to divide the word of truth*, he immediately subjoins, *but shun*, as absolutely inconsistent with this, *profane and vain, empty babblings †*: he could not have used an expression more significant at once of abhorrence and contempt. Intent on stigmatizing them, he again reprobates them in terms of detestation, *But foolish and unlearned questions avoid ‡*: unlearned in truth they always are, however much they may assume the guise of learning or of penetration.—It is no less evident that the Apostle, in this place calls words *sound*, with an express design to mark their wholesome or practical tendency: he even labours to force this into view, and to keep it in view. He declares that this is an essential part of his idea of *the form of sound words*; he carefully includes it in his very description of them; he says, they are the words *which are in faith and LOVE which is in Christ Jesus §*. Whenever he mentions the refinements and subtleties which he so anxiously

* Chap. ii. 14.

† Ver. 15, 16.

‡ Ver. 23.

§ Chap. i. 13.

excludes

excludes from sound doctrine, he never fails carefully to specify their having no moral, or their having an immoral tendency. They are not only *to no profit*, but to great hurt, *to the subverting of the bearers* *. They are so far from producing love, that they *gender strifes* †. They not only do not promote godliness; but, in proportion as they are indulged, *they will increase unto more ungodliness, and will eat as doth a canker* ‡. In the progress of his discourse, he again predicts that apostasy which he had foretold in his first epistle, and described as a *departure from the faith*; and here he describes it as a contradiction to the *practical* tendency of *sound* doctrine; he marks it by the corruption of morals consequent on that apostasy, and after enumerating several vices which were to abound in these *perilous times* §, he sums up the character of them, in this, *Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof* ||. Farther, when he recommends the Scripture as the only untainted source of Christian doctrine, he takes particular care to remark, that it is *profitable for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works* ¶.

* Chap. ii. 14.

† Ver. 23.

‡ Ver. 16, 17.

§ Chap. iii. 1,—4.

|| Ver. 5.

¶ Ver. 16, 17.

IMMEDIATELY after this, he gives Timothy a very solemn charge to indefatigable diligence in *preaching* and applying the *word**; in enforcing which he employs the phrase *sound doctrine*; *For the time will come, when they will not endure sound doctrine* †, and he employs it in the very same sense as formerly. He characterizes it by its simplicity, in opposition to all human refinements and determinations: it is *the word* ‡: it is *the truth*, unmixt with any *fables* §, with any of the precarious or false opinions, the doubtful speculations, the disputable niceties, which, he foresaw, would arise in the Christian church, and usurp the name of sound doctrine. He characterizes it by its moral tendency: it is fit to be applied to *reprove* and *rebuke* sin, and *exhort* † to holiness, purposes to which practical doctrine alone is applicable. He characterizes it by both these qualities, in his description of the persons who *will not endure it* §: their aversion to it is owing to *their own lusts*, to a vitiated taste loathing the plain truths of the gospel, peculiar prejudices producing delight in empty subtleties, or corrupt passions disgusting them against the holy doctrine of the gospel, and attaching them to frigid, abstract notions which touch

* Chap. iv. 1, 2.

† Ver. 3.

‡ Ver. 2.

§ Ver. 4.

not the heart, and to loose opinions which give countenance or licence to their favourite vices. Prompted by such lusts, *they heap to themselves teachers*, such as gratify their ill-directed curiosity or their prejudices, by dwelling on the distinctive subtleties of some human system; such as by amusing them with these, divert their attention from good practices; such as propagate principles consistent with an immoral life; *having itching ears*; taking pleasure in hearing only what tickles them, by falling in with their distempered notions or their corrupt inclinations.

IN writing to Titus, as well as to Timothy, the apostle several times applies the epithet *sound* to doctrine, to speech, or to faith; and he applies it invariably in the same sense. Among the necessary qualifications, and the indispensable duties of a Christian bishop, he specifies this, *Holding fast the faithful word, as he hath been taught, that he may be able, by SOUND DOCTRINE, both to exhort and convince the gainsayers* *. This sound doctrine is the simple doctrine of revelation, as proposed in revelation unadulterated with any thing of human invention: he expressly says so; it is

* Tit. i. 9.

the faithful, the sure, the indubitable word, as he hath been taught. It is doctrine of a practical nature; for by it he might *be able to exhort.* That he was desirous of expressing both these characteristics of it, and that particularly in opposition to all unscriptural and unprofitable speculations, is evident from his description * of the *gainsayers* whom Christian teachers were *to convince* BY this sound doctrine; that is, by shewing that their refinements had no foundation in it, not by setting up other human explications in opposition to theirs. They were *vain talkers*, venting frivolous notions under the specious, boasting shew of wisdom and philosophy, of depth or of precision; and by this means *deceivers, teaching things which they ought not:* Their opinions were immoral; they were *unruly*; they *subverted whole houses*; they flattered the corrupt propensities of the Cretans, who had been justly characterized *always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies.* On account of both these depravities of their doctrine, the Apostle commands Titus to *rebuke them sharply*, to expose the futility and immorality of their notions, *that,* says he, *they may be found in the faith †,* that they may return to the simple and prac-

* Ver. 10, 11, 12.

† Ver. 13.

tical doctrine of the gospel, which is the sole object of faith. To keep in view, by what means they had departed from this, he adds, *Not giving heed to Jewish fables*; what these were, we have already seen; *and commandments of men*, definitions, determinations, and impositions of human invention, by which they *turn from the truth**, or pervert it: and by perverting it, by deviating from its simplicity, they deviate likewise from that holiness which is its end; *they profess that they know God*, often that they know him more perfectly, and understand his will more accurately, than others *but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate †*. It is in direct opposition to these false teachers, that the Apostle immediately subjoins in the text, *But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine*: and what he here principally meant by it, he professedly and largely explains in the following verses, *That the aged men be sober*, and so on ‡: it is the inculcating of the plain moral duties of life in every condition. When, among the duties of aged men he mentions, *sound in faith §*, and among those of Titus, *sound speech ||*, there can be no doubt that he uses the expres-

* Ver. 14.

† Ver. 16.

‡ Chap. ii. 2—10.

§ Ver. 2.

|| Ver. 8.

sion in his ordinary and invariable meaning; and in the latter case he explains it by *gravity*, weight, or importance, and by *uncorruptness**, freedom from all taint of a foreign mixture; and he says, that it *cannot be condemned*; being the simple doctrine of the gospel, not one human explication opposed to another, it cannot be retorted by the adversary, so that *he that is of the contrary part, must be ashamed*†, confounded and silenced. There cannot be a clearer or a stronger proof, how essential a moral tendency is in the apostle's idea of sound doctrine, or how great a part of sound doctrine he reckons morality to be, than this his professed explication of that idea. It is remarkable, that for nine verses after his exhortation to teach sound doctrine, he does not so much as mention even any of the genuine and simple articles of Christian faith; and when at length he comes to mention some of them, it is not curiously to explain or define them, but solely to represent them as powerful principles of good practice. When he mentions *the grace of God*, its having *appeared to men*, its *bringing salvation*, he considers it simply as *teaching us, that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world*‡. When he men-

* Ver. 7.

† Ver. 8.

‡ Ver. 11, 12.

tions *the blessed hope, and the appearing of Christ* to judgment, it is only as the *looking for* these will strongly encourage and urge us to those great duties of life*. When he mentions *Christ's giving himself to death for us*, it is only to inculcate its practical end and influence, *that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people zealous of good works* †. In commanding, therefore, to *speake the things which become sound doctrine*, the Apostle most manifestly and explicitly means to command, to inculcate both holiness in general, and all the particular duties of morality, and to be solicitous not to subtilize upon the doctrines of the gospel, or to define them with exact precision, but, neglecting all human definitions of them, to urge them warmly as motives to the several virtues of the Christian life. So anxious is he that Titus and all his successors should teach according to this model, that he adds this charge, *These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke, with all authority* ‡. He is so full of the subject, that he returns to it, and after recommending some other moral duties §, and enforcing them by a simple view of the peculiar doctrines of the gospel ||, enjoins Titus, to *affirm constantly, that they*

* Ver. 13.

† Ver. 14.

‡ Ver. 15.

§ Chap. iii, 1, 2.

|| Ver. 3--7.

which

which have believed in God, should be careful to maintain good works, but to avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain*. The man who addicts himself to these and propagates them, it is that he calls a heretic †, as by restricting and refining upon the simple truths of the gospel, he gives occasion to divisions and parties in the church.

Thus, by an impartial examination of all the texts in which it is mentioned, we have ascertained the true scriptural sense of *sound doctrine*. The Apostle uses the term so often, and whenever he uses it, unfolds and guards its meaning so carefully, that he has enabled us to ascertain it with the fullest and the most convincing evidence. The evidence is indeed so strong, that when we attend to it, so large an investigation may seem to be unnecessary; but men are so enured to an opposite conception of the subject, that the largest investigation will, I am afraid, be insufficient for striking conviction into the rigid adherents to sects and parties, and will be far from rendering it superfluous; as we proposed, in the SECOND place, to illustrate the several particulars which we have found to be implied in it.

* Ver. 8, 9. † Ver. 10.

1. IN general, *sound doctrine* is the pure *genuine doctrine of the gospel*, the very doctrine taught by Christ and his Apostles: entire, without the omission of any part of it: unperverted, without being strained or wrested: sincere, unmixt with any thing else, either in the matter or in the manner of expression: proposed chiefly in the *sound words* in which Christ and his Apostles delivered it. Certainly it can require but little modesty to own that these are the fittest: the words of Christ are the words of God, they were dictated by his divine nature; the spirit of God superintended the Apostles and Prophets, so as to restrain them from using any words which were not significant of the very truth; and, notwithstanding considerable varieties in their style, the language of them all has a certain common character and general complexion; in respect of which we may affirm, that there is one uniform tenour of scriptural phraseology. This general description of sound doctrine will be, in the main, admitted by all sects: for though their peculiar systems be, in some parts, diametrically opposite, each sect reckons its own system the pure doctrine of the gospel: and though they all employ some technical terms not found in Scripture, each reckons its own set of these perfectly equivalent to the terms of Scripture, but more definite,

nite,

nite, fit for expressing their real sense so determinately as to guard them against misconception or misinterpretation.

2. It therefore deserves our most serious attention, That *sound doctrine* means the pure doctrine of the gospel, *particularly as distinguished from all human definitions, limitations, refinements, and superadditions.* We have all along seen how explicitly and how anxiously the Apostle sets it in opposition to all these. His expressions are levelled directly against the corruptions of doctrine which prevailed at that time: but they are so chosen as to be likewise in strict propriety applicable to all posterior corruptions of it; he foresaw these, and foretold them, and has an eye to them, at least in some of the passages which we have examined. Indeed all the curious or forced explications of Christian doctrine, all the groundless or precarious deductions from it, all the subtle controversies about it, which have infested the church, demonstrate themselves to be such adulterations as he condemns; they are marked by the very features which he has delineated; they have produced the very effects which he has described,

THEY had already begun, and they quickly spread wider and wider. Forgetful

that the gospel was not given to exercise ingenuity, or gratify curiosity; and desirous of recommending it to unbelievers, particularly the philosophers; partly too, it must be owned, swayed by their own preconceived notions, and expecting to display the accuracy of their own apprehension, some Christians began very early to conceive the articles of their faith, according to the theories of the Greek philosophy, chiefly the Platonic; to define them with scientific precision, and in the phraseology of the schools; and to adopt similitudes for illustrating them, and hypotheses for accounting for them, not only arbitrary, but generally improper. They were accused of error. Their accusers were not wise enough to satisfy themselves with proving, that the Scripture did not imply or admit the sense to which they determined it; but, infected with the spirit of the same philosophy, run into opposite definitions, comparisons, hypotheses, and terms of science, often equally improper, and equally involving error. These were justly retorted upon them by their adversaries. Controversies were agitated concerning these contradictory definitions: multitudes ranged themselves on each side; they broke out into contention, animosities, unjust suspicions, and insinuations, mutual reproaches and invectives. Falschhood was
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eagerly sought for, and for the most part easily found, in the abstract, subtle definitions of each party. In the progress of disputation, new terms, new distinctions, new comparisons were invented on each side, for marking with precision the peculiarity of its own opinion; and new hypotheses were contrived for reconciling it to Scripture or to itself, and for evading the objections urged against it. Every such attempt produced new questions; and every new question became more frivolous, more notional, more abstruse than the former. In discussing it, new refinements of distinction, and new intricacies of argumentation, were introduced. Every disputant added something according to his own manner of apprehension.

THE church was distracted, bewildered, and inflamed. Councils were assembled to determine the points in question, and to extinguish the heats which they had raised. But instead of *holding fast the form of sound words*, instead of recalling all parties to the simple doctrine of the gospel, and rejecting the unscriptural, precarious explications by which both sides went beyond it; they entered into all the minutiae of the controversy, they debated them with prejudice and passion, they indulged cavil and chicanery, they broke forth
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into clamour and outrage, into mutual accusations and threatenings, and sometimes they proceeded to tumult and violence. The stronger party overpowered the weaker by their superior vehemence, by the terror of their menaces, by mere force, or by a plurality, it may be, a very small plurality, of voices. They approved all the subtleties, refinements, and inventions of one party; adopted whatever hard words and technical terms they thought fittest for discriminating them from those of the other party; and by a decree of usurped, but formidable authority, they determined all these to be articles of faith, and their chosen terms of art to be the test of the truth. All who refused submission to their impositions, they condemned as adherents to the contrary party, and stigmatized as heretics; and they reviled, anathematized, excommunicated, and, whenever they could get the civil power to enter into their resentments, persecuted, banished, or put them to death. Other councils were assembled, and often gave opposite decisions, established the contrary tenets, and fenced them by contrary terms of art; but still decided in the same spirit of party contention, and violence. None of their decrees ever ended a single controversy. On the contrary, they perpetuated the controversies then subsisting, increased the bitterness of
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of contention, and diffused it wider. They never failed likewise to produce new controversies. The persons who opposed them, contrived new terms, distinctions, and cavils, in contradiction to the subtleties implied in their decrees: they differed about these, and split into lesser parties. Those who adhered to the decrees, disagreed about their meaning, broke out into fierce contention, charged each other with error or with blasphemy, and disdained communion with one another. By the rage of controversy, and the spirit of faction in all, the Christian church was divided, and subdivided, and again and again subdivided into sects innumerable, hating and execrating one another; but distinguished only by verbal differences, or by notions of none of which the Scripture affirms any thing, or of which the human faculties can form no clear conception, and of which any conception or thought at all is both unnecessary and unprofitable.

DIFFERENT systems of philosophy were successively in vogue. With each of these in its turn, the doctrine of the gospel was unnaturally incorporated. By this means it assumed a variety of forms, but all of them very unlike to its original simplicity. When the philosophy of Aristotle obtained unrivalled

valled possession of the schools (a philosophy from the beginning subtle, disputatious, and contentious, and rendered more so by the perversion of the scholastics), the Christian doctrine, by being adapted to it, ranged according to its forced mode of distribution, conceived according to its rules of definition and distinction expressed in its hard words, and reasoned about in the artificial manner of its analytics, was totally distorted from its genuine form. A false ingenuity was laboriously employed in devising questions concerning every article of Christian doctrine, in pushing them to the utmost length of subtlety, and wrangling about them with all the nicety of affected precision. Questions sprung from questions in an endless series; all of them unnecessary, most of them of no importance, many of them mere plays of words, many of them ridiculous, many of them interminable, and even unintelligible, nay some of them impious and blasphemous. They were almost all dogmatically determined: the determinations of many of them were erected into articles of faith; and the technical words employed in the determinations, were the only allowed criterion of men's holding these articles.

By such *oppositions* and contentions of *science*, *falsely so called*, continued and increasing through many ages of intellectual darkness, the doctrine of the papal church became a huge body of tenets, unscripturally conceived and expressed, and many of them, not only destitute of all foundation in the gospel, but directly repugnant to it. The Reformers, raised up in a blessed hour for that very purpose, unveiled this mass of corruption, exposed the perversions of the gospel which composed it, and the fables which it had superadded to the gospel. They pronounced the Scripture to be the only rule of faith, and disclaimed all human definitions of its simple principles. Happy had it been if they had persisted steddily in this. But their adversaries demanded, what it was precisely that they believed; they declared an appeal to Scripture insufficient for fixing this, because the authority of its words was pled by all sides; they cried out that the doctrine of Protestants was altogether indefinite and uncertain; they misrepresented it grossly; they called upon them to publish it in determinate language. Overcome by these importunities, clamours, and accusations, and not perfectly cured of the subtilizing spirit from which they sprung, Protestants were led unwarily, though at first reluctantly, to accept the challenge. The earliest explications of
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their doctrine were tolerably simple; the scholastic mode of arrangement, argument, and expression, was in general rather avoided than affected: but the spirit of abstraction gradually acquired strength and violence; the explications of doctrine given by some displeased others; opposite explications were proposed; questions about them were agitated; they were pushed to greater and greater degrees of subtlety; all the hardest words of the schools were borrowed for expressing the differences of opinion; and all the most frivolous or unintelligible distinctions of the schools were employed in debating them. Protestants were crumbled down into numberless sects, distinguished by peculiarities of belief upon points unnecessary or impossible to be determined. Creeds were opposed to creeds; systems were multiplied against systems; some on all sides, not so much systems of Christian theology, as metaphysical systems of verbal, speculative, abstruse, unimportant controversies, for which a handle was taken from that theology. Each party was tenacious of its own mode of conceiving, and even of expressing the truth; and by this means they have all continued divided and at variance.

SUCH is the general portrait of the departure of the Christians from *the* SIMPLICITY of *sound doctrine*: every part of it might easily be confirmed

firmed by numberless facts in the history of the church. Not content with thus departing from it, they have substituted the very deviation in its place, and given it its name. Every party appropriates the name of sound doctrine to those peculiar explications, speculations, and definitions which characterize itself, and discriminate it, and set it at the greatest distance from all other parties: but these the Apostle expressly, and in terms of abhorrence, excludes from the idea of sound doctrine, and urges Christians to avoid as repugnant to it. What the several sects have extolled as the soundest doctrine is, therefore, in the Apostle's sense, most unsound. According to his sense of it, the only sense which merits the regard of Christians, the bigot of every denomination, the tenacious partizan of any sect, necessarily deviates in some degree, and generally deviates the farthest.

3. SOUND *doctrine* means *practical* doctrine. The Apostle studiously and constantly connects this idea with the former; and they are in their nature intimately connected. All abstract definitions of doctrine, all abstruse questions about it, are in their very essence wholly speculative; they are at best fit only for informing the understanding, too often only for perplexing it: their natural effects are thorny disputes, contentions,

tentions, divisions, not the active exertions of Christian virtue and holiness: *Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles**? The utmost they can claim is, that they may be harmlessly amusing: they never can be profitable, If it were possible to determine them with the greatest clearness and certainty, yet they could not influence practice. Abstract ideas are too frigid to warm the heart; too weak to draw out good affections; too dim to be kept in view in the moment of action. They are always in danger of becoming hurtful: the discussion of them excites passions destructive of mutual love; attachment to them diverts men's attention from applying faith to practice; it leads them to lay too little stress on practice, and too much upon opinion. Many questions have even issued in decisions, on one side at least, sometimes on both sides, directly favourable to immorality. Some of the real doctrines of the holy gospel have been so grossly misrepresented in some pretended explications of them, as to be twisted into unholy principles of impurity and vice: and to the real doctrines of the gospel, spurious doctrines have been superadded in some systems professing to be Christian, which by their necessary consequences make void all moral obligation; and

* Mat. vii. 16.

this so plainly, that their partizans find it necessary to disclaim consequences which they cannot refute, and to throw in cautions, caveats, and distinctions, for rendering them, not conducive to, but barely consistent with, good practice, and which will always be forgotten or disregarded in the hour of temptation. Yet, by the most astonishing and the profanest abuse of words, tenets and explications, in their tendency immoral, are, by those who hold them, pronounced the most essential to sound doctrine, the most evangelical, the most honourable to the grace of the gospel: But so far are they from being sound, that they are in the very worst sense *CONTRARY to sound doctrine*; so far from being wholesome, that however fairly they be gilded over, however speciously they be disguised, they are poison.

No opinion can be a Christian doctrine, whose direct and primary tendency is not to holiness. God gave a Revelation of the truth for this very purpose, by it to purify and improve the hearts, and to direct and influence the practice of men. Every part of it is immediately and powerfully conducive to this purpose: all the precepts of the gospel, and all its principles conspire in promoting it. The former prescribe the purest and the sublimest virtue: The latter are even more directly sub-

servient to it, they excite to that virtue. They delineate those qualities, characters, and relations of persons and objects, which are fit for producing right affections, and prompting to right practice towards them: but of those which, though they were known, could contribute nothing to this effect, the Scripture takes no notice. For temper and action, it is not an apprehension of an object scientifically accurate that is necessary, but a conception lively, striking, and interesting: and such a conception the Scripture is careful to give of all the objects belonging to religion. It sets them only in those points of view in which they can enforce piety and goodness; it is intent on setting them in every attitude in which they can most strongly enforce these; and it constantly and earnestly applies them to this end.

THIRDLY, We shall now conclude with some reflexions naturally arising from this subject.

1. It appears that the Christian church is more closely united, in one common faith, in reality than in appearance. In human systems, it is necessary to distinguish the principles of doctrine which they imply from the particular manner in which they explain them. In the latter they differ widely; and it, being derived
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from fallible men, may very readily be improper or erroneous. In the former they very generally agree; and the former only is either of indubitable certainty or of real importance.

2. LET each of us, for himself, study to adhere to, and be satisfied with the pure, simple, practical doctrine of Christ; despising and avoiding all unprofitable questions and speculative niceties, as absolutely foreign to it. It is by no means necessary for us to be wise above what is written: it is improper to attempt it. It is not needful to have any more precise, abstract, or scientific conception of the doctrines of religion, of the mysteries of the Christian faith, than the Scripture gives. If we find that conception inadequate, we may be assured that it is not requisite, perhaps not possible, to render it, in our present state of weakness, more adequate. Whatever words of human invention pretend to mark it with greater precision and force than the words of Scripture, there is always reason to suspect, will either distort, or add something to, the original doctrine of Scripture.

3. LET us carefully attend to the great end of all Christian doctrine, namely, holiness of heart and life, our purification from vice, and our improvement in virtue. Let us constantly repre-

sent it to ourselves as expressly designed and calculated for this purpose. Every opinion of immoral tendency let us abhor as perfectly incompatible with it, and destructive of its very end. Let us learn all the duties of life; let us urge on ourselves all the truths of the gospel as motives to them; let us consider them in those points of view, which can render them the strongest motives. Let us not rest in believing the doctrines of religion; let us study them with the sole design of becoming better; let us be concerned to comply with them, and to act agreeably to them; *let our conversation be as becometh the gospel of Christ**.

God grant that we *may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God* †: *and this is the will of God, even our sanctification* ‡.

* Phil. i. 27.

† Col. iv. 12.

‡ 1 Thess. iv. 2.