William Nichts

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FAST SERMON.

1797

GOD's

CHALLENGE TO INFIDELS

TO DEFEND THEIR CAUSE,

ILLUSTRATED AND APPLIED IN A

SERMON,

DELIVERED IN WEST-SPRINGFIELD,

MAY 4, 1797,

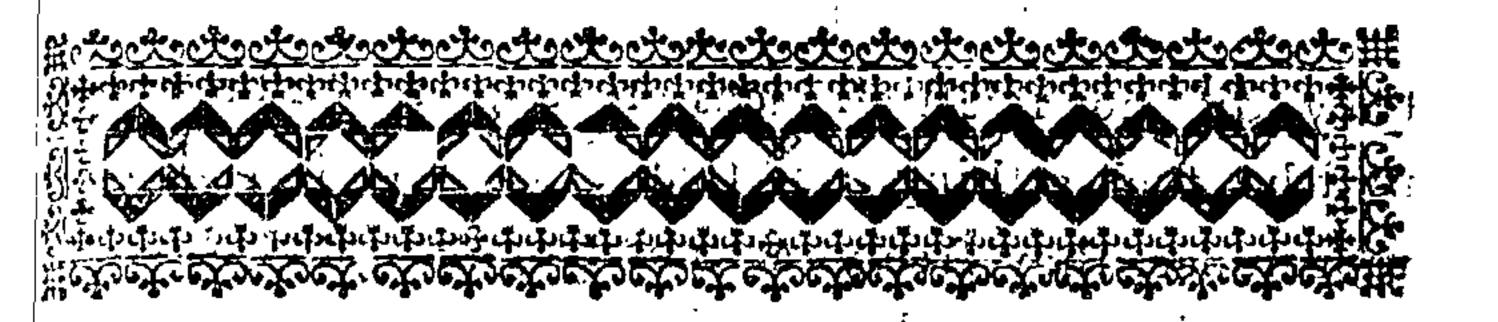
BEING THE DAY OF

GENERAL FAST,

By JOSEPH LATHROP, D. D. MINISTER of the FIRST PARISH in Said TOWN.



WEST-SPRINGFIED:
PRINTED BY EDWARD GRAY.



ISAIAH XEI, 21.

PRODUCE your cause, saith the Lord, bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob.

O preserve the knowledge of true religion, when the world was generally overspread with ignorance and idolatry, God selected a particular people, the descenlants of Abraham, to whom he made known himfelf in a peculiar manner, and committed a distinct revelation of his will. This revelation came to them supported by miracles and confirmed by the fulfilment of prophecies. But in the time of the prophet Isaiah there were many, as in former times there had been some, who, rejecting the true God, and the revelation which he had given them, adopted the idolatrous worship of the heathens around them. To these infidels he addresles himself in the text: And his address is delivered in the most folemn manner—in the name of JEHOVAH, the King of Jacob. He calls upon them, first, to state their cause; and, then, to support it by convincing arguments. 'Produce your cause-bring forth your frong reasons.

THE cause of those ancient infidels was idelatry.

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They did not reject all ideas of religion. That there must be such a thing, and that it was a matter of real importance, they freely acknowledged. But whether the religion taught by the Jewish revelation, or the idolatry practised among the heathens, deserved the preference, was the great question. The cause of modern insidels, at least of many of them, is absolute irreligion. The question is not between Christian another religion assuming to be divine—but be Christianity and no religion at all.

In either cause, it is incumbent on the unbeliever, discarding and opposing the scripture revelation, to exhibit some competent reasons.

THE Christian, who receives the gospel as divine, ought to have some good reasons for his faith; for a wise man will not give himself up to the guidance, nor place his hope on the promises of a religion, for which he can see no foundation. But if the Christian should have a reason for his faith; the insidel should have, at least, as strong a reason for his unbelief. If it is weakness to depend on the promises of a religion which may be false; it is madness to challenge the threatnings of a religion which may be true. If in the former case, a man should be able to bring forth his reasons; surely in the latter case he should be able to bring forth strong reasons, and should declare them, that he may be justified.

As this is a day when infidelity appears with unufual boldness, and advances with threatening progress, to the hazard of our national freedom and happiness, as well as to the danger of our future salvation, I shall consider this challenge of the prophet in accommodation to those who reject the gospel of Christ, and who labour to disseminate the corruptions of infidelity.

I SHALL SHEW,

- I. THAT they who oppose the gospel, ought to bring forth strong reasons to justify their conduct.
- II. What reasons they must be able to produce, before they can be justified.
- III. What kind of reasons they in fact do produce, and how insufficient these reasons are to vindicate their cause.
- I. I SHALL shew, that they who oppose the scripture revelation ought to have some strong reasons to justify their conduct.

It is agreed, that a christian ought to believe and act rationally—that whoever receives the gospel as a revelation from God should have some good reason to believe, that it really is such: For in a matter of this high importance, to believe implicitly—to act blindly—to follow tradition, or custom without examining whither it leads, is weak and childish. But to reject and oppose revelation blindly and without evidence of its being false, is equally childish, and far more dangerous.

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Here is a book, which profess to be divine—a work which calls itself a revelation from God, and which demands our attention and regard. If it really is, what it calls itself, then it must be infinitely important: For the things which it contains, relate to our happiness, not only in the present life, but through eternity. And if a man should have good evidence of its truth, before he ventures to receive it; surely he should have strong evidence of its falsehood, before he presumes to re-

I. THE christian system has long existed in the world, and is regarded, by great numbers of mankind, and by multitudes of wise, honest and virtuous men, as of divine authority. It therefore ought not to be carelessly thrown asside, or rashly opposed; but, at least, to be treated with candour and decency, and examined with fairness and impartiality.

Its general reception in our own country, is not, of itself, a sufficient reason why we should believe it to be true; but it is a sufficient reason, why we should examine whether it is not true. To believe a religion merely because others believe it, is indeed a weakness; but to reject, without enquiry, a religion which is generally revered, discovers an intolerable pride and vanity of heart, and an inexcusable contempt of mankind.

2. The religion of the gaspel is undeniably useful & beneficial in the present life. It tends to make men heurs

better and happier, to improve human nature, and to meliorate the condition of the world. And a man must have some strong reasons to justify him in opposing such a religion.

The gospel contains a pure, uncorrupt, perfect system of morals. It requires all those virtues which contribute to the happiness, and condemns all those virces which tend to the misery of man, in his personal, relative and social capacity. It injoins industry, frugality, temperance, sobriety and self-government on the individual; and justice, peace, truth, sidelity and benevolence on the citizen and the neighbor. It is manifest, that if the religion of the gospel governed the world, there would be as much happiness among men, as is consistent with a mortal condition; and, on the contrary, if practical opposition to this religion should universally prevail, all peace, security, considence and happiness would be banished from the earth.

The great use and design of civil government is to enforce on men the same manners, which the gospel, in sact, recommends. This is, therefore, a mighty aid to government; and, if it only had its proper influence, and produced its designed essect, government would become very simple and easy—It would have nothing more to do, than just to regulate the prudentials of society—It would superfede the necessity of punishments—It would mightily contract the business of legislators

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and diminish the labour of judges. And even the prefent influence of the gospel, where it is acknowledged
and maintained, greatly facilitates and strengthens civil
government, and befriends and meliorates the condition
of human society. Let it once be exploded; and the
state of mankind will soon be changed much for the
worse. If there is no inherent principle to govern
them, they must be held under restraint, and kept in
order by the power of external punishment. There
will consequently be no such thing as civil liberty; for
what liberty remains to those who are ruled like brutes,
or driven like slaves, by pain and terror? In proportion as virtuous principle is weakened, coertion must be
increased; and as the former is strengthened, the latter
may be diminished.

Let a nation assume the purest republicanism, and work into their constitution the most refined principles of liberty; and then explode the doctrines which religion teaches and the virtues which it inculcates; and their fine-wrought threads will be wiped away like a cobweb, and chains will supply the place.

Surely then the infidel, who rejects and opposes the gospel, must have some mighty reasons to justify his conduct—reasons arong enough to overbalance the peace, safety, liberty and happiness of men in the prefent state. But what can these reasons he? What mischief can the gospel do, to be put in balance against all the

the benefits, which men actually experience from it?

If there were any doubt concerning its divine authoriaty, yet a friend to human happiness would wish its creatit and influence, in regard of the real advantage which it brings to the world.

3. The man who believes and obeys the gospel, acts on the safe side; all the risk is on his part who resieds it.

This observation is brought forward, not as a conclusive evidence, that the gospel is true; but as a strong argument, why none should oppose it; until they can prove, it is not true.

The gospel instructs us, that we are moral and accountable beings—that there is a suture state of retribution—that eternal selicity or wretchedness awaits men—that the way there marked leads to happiness, and the contrary course terminates in misery.

In all this is true, nothing can be more important than the gospel. The infidel supposes, all this to be salse. The importance of religion, if were true, he cannot deny. But his security is, that the whole system of the gospel is sictitious—that there is no suture retribution—and consequently nothing to be seared from a course of vice.

Now if the authority of the gospel were ever so doubt-full,

ful, yet the christian has this great advantage, that he has taken the fafe fide. If the gospel should prove false, he ultimately suffers nothing by his faith: If it should prove true, the infidel is undone by his unbelief. At any rate, the christian is as safe, as the infidel; for if there is no future state, there can be no distinction. On the contrary supposition, the sincere christian only is safe: the infidel is miserable. Nothing, therefore, can justify a man in rejecting and opposing the gospel, but absolute demonstration of its falsehood. And where is the man who can bring against it such a strong reason as this? The christian is justified, if he believes and acts only on probability. The infidel cannot be justified in acting on any evidence inferior to clear and decisive certainty. If the former is weak in his faith, the latter is mad in his unbelief. If the christian ought to have a reason why he believes the gospel, the unbeliever should have a stronger reason, why he rejects it; for the: former risks nothing; the latter hazards every thing.

4. STRONG reasons may be, and have been produced to prove that the gospel is divine: The insidel, before he can justify himself in opposing it, must produce fronger reasons to disprove its divinity.

THE goodness of the christian scheme is no inconsider. able argument in its savour. It teaches us the character and government of God; represents him as merciful.

to forgive finners; points out a wonderful way in which he emercifes his mercy towards them; frates the terms of our acceptance, and opens to our view glorious profpects beyond this short life. It instructs us in the duties which we owe to God, to ourselves, and to one another. It furnishes us with the best consolations in adversity and with the most animating assistances to every good work. In a word, it gives us all things which pertain to life and godliness thro' the knowledge of 2 Saviour, who has called us to glory and virtue. Its uniform design and tendency is to promote human happiness-to make men useful to one another, and comfortable to themselves in this world, and to prepare them for, and thus assure them of superior felicity in 2 Suture world. An institution so friendly and benevolent-fo perfectly adapted to the nature and conditions of man-fo conducive to his peace and comfort, hope and happiness, must have originated from a wife and benevolent Being.

THE unity of its defign, the harmony of its parts, the purity of its precepts, and the tendency of its doc-trines, all conspire to establish its credibility.

THE miracles wrought in favour of the gospel provents divinity. For it is certain that a Being of truth and goodness would not miraculously interpose to support the cause of error, fraud and delusion.

That there was such a person as Jesus of Nazaretia-

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who called himself the Son of God, and a teacher sent from him-that this person lived in a very holy manner, took much pains in instructing mankind, and performed many great and aftonishing works, such as were far beyond the power of man-that he voluntarily submitted to a very cruel kind of death, and in a fhort time, according to his own prediction, role again from the dead and appeared to many who had before known him, and who now perfectly recognized him-that this person had a number of disciples and attendants, who were educated under his care, and whom he afterwards sent forth to instruct mankind in his doctrines, and to work miracles in his name—that by their preaching And miracles the religion of their master made a rapid progress, and obtained an extensive spread and credit in the world-that their things were real facts, we have all the evidence, which reason can demand. A number of men-no less than Eight-who were contemporary with Jesus, and some of them his disciples, have written narratives of his life, doctrines, works, death and refurrection; or have written publick letters, in which these things are acknowledged and illustrated. Their writings were matters of immediate and general notoricty, were received as genuine and authentic in the time when they appeared, and as such have been handed along, from age to age, down to the present day. In every age there are historians and others, who vouch the

the credit and reception of these writings, in the age in which they respectively lived. There is no intimation, that the authors of these writings were ever convicted of fraud; nor is there any contemporary or fucceeding historian, who pretends to disprove the facts, which they have afferted, or to show that the christian scheme is a fiction invented to impose on mankind. On the contrary, the leading and most important facts related in the gospel writings, are acknowledged by other ancient historians. We have, therefore, all the evidence, which history, in fuch a case, could be supposed to give us, that there was fuch a person as Jesus Christ-that he taught the doctrines and performed the works afcribed to him in the New Testament-and that he had disciples, who, after him, preached his religion and wrought miracles in his name, with mighty success. And if such miracles were really performed, the religion designed to be established by them is divine.

And to this; There are many prophecies, delivered by Jesus and his apostles, pointing to events, great in their nature, and some of them, in human view, improbable, which were to take place in times then future, and even far remote. These prophecies have, from age to age, been verified by most remarkable completions. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans—the captivity and dispersion of the Jews, and there preservation as a distinct people in their scattered and disorganiz-

ed condition—the apostacy of a great part of the christia an church—the introduction of idolatry into it—its fevere and terrible persecutions-the support of pure christianity in times of the greatest ignorance and corruption—the rife of an impious and tyranical power in the church—the cruelty, growth and long continuance of this power—the miseries which it should produce its decline and final extinction—and the subsequent revival and spread of the pure religion of Jesus, are events' plainly ferctold; most of them have actually been accomplified; and others appear to be hastening toward a completion. Such a remarkable correspondence between the predictions of the gospel and the history of the church, is a firong reason why we should acknowledge the former to be given by the inspiration, and the latter to be conducted by the providence of God.

No false religion has ever produced this evidence. Hence the prophet thus challenges the worshippers of heathen gods; 'Produce your cause—bring forth your Arong reasons. Let them bring forth and shew us what shall happen. Let them shew the former things what they be, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare us things to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods: Yea, do good, or do evil, that we may be dismayed and behold it together. Behold, ye are of nothing, and your work of nought; an abomination is he that chooseth you."

If the religion taught in the scriptures has been re-

the wifest and best of men, who have carefully examined it—if it is a religion highly useful to societies and to individuals—if it is attended with no danger, but all the danger lies on the other side—and if it is supported by evidences as strong and convincing as the nature of the case will admit; then the insidel who ventures to reject and oppose it, must produce some strong reasons, before he can be justified.

- II. WHAT reasons these must be, we shall now shew. As there are different degrees of inside lity, we shall view this case in different lights.
- 1. If the infidel denies all religion, it concerns him to demonstrate, that there is no divine government or agency in the universe—that men are not moral and accountable creatures—and that there is no future state of retribution.—If these are his sentiments, then let him give a rational account of the existence of the world. and all the creatures which he beholds, and of the beauty, order and harmony which nature presents to his eyes. If he fays, This is not the work of a self-existent and intelligent Creator; but the mere effect of chance; let him hew, that chance usually works in this regular and confillent manner. It is abfurd to fay, that chance works rationally in the production and government of the world, if it is irregular in every thing else. Let him then support his theory by obvious examples. Let him shew, that the casual strokes of a pencil will produce a sinished:

landscape—that a case of types thrown down fortuitously will all stand erect, and arrange themselves into a system of philosophy—that ink sprinkled at random on paper will bring forth an epic poem. Let him shew that similar effects will follow a thousand times successively without failing in a single instance. Or,

2. If he acknowledges that men are moral and accountable creatures, but despises the peculiar doctrines. of the gospel relating to the redemption of mankind, then it is incumbent on him to prove that we are in a state of moral perfection—that we have not offended God-that there is no corruption in our nature or wickeduels in our practice—that consequently we stand in no need of that renovation and pardon, which the gospel proposes; and that the atonement of a Saviour, and the influence of divine grace are vain and superfluous. For if we are moral beings and have fallen into depravity and guilt, then we are dependent on the grace of God for a title to, and preparation for the happiness of a future life; and we need information, whether on any terms; and, if on any, on what terms God willexercise his grace towards us. If it is once admitted, that we are moral and finful creatures, the instructions, discoveries and promises of the gospel are credible and important.

If the rectitude, virtue and innocence of the human race are afferted, in opposition to the gospel, then let it be shewn, whence arise wars and fightings among nations; and robberies, murders, thefts, rapes and violences among citizens; or let it be fairly proved that
thefe are not evils, and that they tend not to the mifery, but rather to the happiness of mankind. Or,

3. If he rejects the gospel-scheme as faulty or defective—not adapted to the nature, or adequate to the exigencies of man, or not supported by competent evidence; let him produce one that is better—more agreeable to the divine character—more suitable to human wants—and attended with more decisive proofs of its divinity.

THE gospel has come to men with the words of etcrnal life: They who for sake it, and call others to sollow
them, should first consider whither they will go, and
where they will stop. To set men assoat, without directing them to a shore—to undermine their present
standing without leading them to safer ground, is unkind and inhuman.

If any pretend, that there is a better religion than the gospel teaches, let them produce it and submit it to a comparison. Let them come forward with their more perfect scheme—with something that will render men more virtuous and happy—society more peaceable and secure—government more easy and esticacious—futurity more bright and glorious. Until they can do this, and this none ever have done, let them, at least, be content that the gospel should do all the good it can. Or,

4. If they pretend the gospel is merely a human contrivance; let them not oppose it by loose declamation, or unconvincing ridicule; but bring forth some strong and cogent reasons to disprove its divinity.

Ler them make it appear, to the conviction of a rational mind, that there never was fuch a person as the one described in the New Testament, under the name of Jesus Christ; or, if there was one called by that name, that he never taught the doctrines, or performed the works ascribed to him; that there were no such strange circumstances attending his death, and no such clear testimonies of his speedy resurrection as have been pretended—that there never were such men as we call the apostles and disciples of Jesus; men who went about teaching & working miracles in his name, & who suffered the loss offall things in support of his cause; but that the whole story, which we have in the New Testament, is a groß forgery-anartsul figment and device. Let them not think that, in so important a case, their bare assertions will be sussient to confront all the positive evidence in favour of the gospel. Let them bring forth strong reafons. Let them shew us, when this forgery of the golpel was contrived, and by what means it so strangely succeeded. Let them shew, when it was detected and ! exposed; who were the men that made the discovery, and what was the evidence which convinced them of the fraud. Let them produce a number of historians, living in the time and place of the transaction, and acthe detection. Let them make it appear that these historians were honest, undesigning men, who sacrificed all their worldly interests and prospects in support of their narrative. Let them bring proof, that the history of this important discovery was published immediately, when the affair was fresh in the minds of all men; has been renewed in every age since; is handed down to the present time, and has never been consuted by any, or doubted by those who have examined it. Until inside can do this, they have nothing to put in balance against the external evidence, which accompanies the gospel.

Nothing of this kind has ever appeared, and we are fure, that nothing like it exists. If it did exist, the enemies of the gospel would long ago have produced it in support of their cause. And if there is no historical evidence which can be produced to invalidate that which often has been exhibited in desence of the gospel, the latter must stand sirm and unmoved.

We proceed, as was proposed,

III. To make some observations upon the manner in which insidels oppose the gospel, and upon the weak-ness of the reasons which they alledge for the rejection of it.

They will not meet revelation on fair ground; but rather play around its outworks. They will not enter into the merits of its cause, or rest the issue of it on that

kind and degree of evidence, which is judged competent in all other causes; but rejecting the idea of a revelation as absurd, and all evidence in its favour as insussificient, they employ misrepresentation, wit and satire to render the scriptures ridiculous. They will not take them in a collected view, as exhibiting a scheme of doctrinal and practical religion; but, selecting particular passages, expressions or circumstances, they give these a ludicrous turn, and thus endeavor to discredit the whole.

The manner in which the enemies of revelation have made their attacks upon it, indicates their confciousness of its superior strength. If reason could have stood against it, this alone would have been brought to the charge, and such contemptible auxiliaries as ridicule and lampoon would have been dismissed from the service.

As a specimen of the manner in which insidels oppose revelation, we will state, and answer some of their principal objections.

ture.—And what if there are ?—Is it strange that a book, written so many ages ago, should contain some things hard to be understood? Prophecies are, in their nature, obscure, until they are elucidated by the events. There are, in scripture, some allusions to customs anciently existing, but now obsolete—hence certain passages may be dark to a modern reader. But, then, there

is no duty or doctrine of scripture, which is left doubtsul; for nothing important is made to depend on a single passage. If one text cannot be understood, there are still enough which may; and the doctrine or duty hidden in the dark passage, is fully discovered in a hundred plain ones. Thus the wife Author of this facred book has effectually guarded against any real danger from those accidental obscurities, which might take place in a course of ages. If in reading the statute book of the state, you should find a certain law, or the preamble to a particular act, so obscure, that you were in doubt of its true meaning, would you thence conclude, that the whole book was a forgery, and that it never passed the authority of the state? This would be as reasonable, as to reject the bible, because you now and then meet with a dark text.

2. The infidel alledges, that the miracles and wonders related in scripture are incredible, and that no evidence can render them otherwise.—By why are they incredible? If there is a God, certainly his power is equal to all the works ascribed to it. It is as easy to reanimate a dead man, as to create a living man—as easy to restore a withered limb, as to make a new one—as easy to quiet a storm, as to raise one—as easy to increase a few small loaves of bread into a competency for thousands of people, as to multiply your feed into a plentiful harvest—as easy to check the progress of the sun and moon, as to put them in motion. In reference to

the divine power, there is nothing difficult, and nothing incredible in any of the miracles of scripture. The only question is, whether there is any reason, why the Deity should thus deviate from the ordinary course of . his operations. If there is such a reason, then the miracles are credible. If it is credible that a God of infinite goodness should bestow on his rational creatures a revelation of some important truths, which otherwise they could not learn, then it is credible, that he would give them some kind of evidence to satisfy them of the divine authority of this revelation. And what evidence could be more solemn and decisive in such a case, than miracles wrought by those who were charged with the publication of it? The importance and benevolence of the occasion render the miracles reasonable, and the power and wisdom of God render them practicable. It is therefore highly credible that miracles may be wrought, and historical testimony makes it morally certain, that they have been wrought.

dinary works have been done, why have they not been related by profane historians, so called? Why must we depend, for our information, on christian writers, who must be supposed to be interested and prejudiced perfons?—An idle question this—as if a relater of facts, in order to his being believed, must himself dishelieve the facts, or the necessary consequences of the facts, which he relates. Here are a number of historians, who

relate these wonderful works. They believed these works were really done in the manner which they have narrated. They consequently believed that the religion thereby attested was divine. But must these historians be discarded, because they believed their own narration of facts, or because they felt the evidence arising from these facts? Is this an established rule in examining the credibility of other histories, to reject all those as salse, which the writers believed to be true?

But the truth is, there are profane historians, who mention many of the extraordinary things related in scripture; and if their testimony is of any advantage, this advantage we have.

A PARTICULAR objection has been raised against the Old Testament from the silence of profane historians concerning the changes in the heavenly bodies, in the time of Joshua, and afterward in the reign of Hezekiah, as they are related in the books of Joshua and the Kings. These new appearances in the heavens, it is faid, had they been real, must have been so conspicuous as to be generally observed, and so singular as to be abundantly recorded.

Bur it should be remembered, that there are no profane histories extant, which were written so early as the time of Joshua; and however observable the phenomenon of the sun's standing still might be, no authentic,

cotemporary record of it, but the scriptural one, could come down to us. The retrocession of the fun in the time of Hezekiah is related not only in the second book of Kings, but also in the book of Isaiah, who professes to have been a witness of it. It was noticed in Babylon, so that the king sent messengers to Hezekiah to obtain a more particular account of it. Besides; as Bishop Patrick in his commentary remarks, Herodotus, one of the oldest profane historians, whose works are now extant, and who travelled into Syria and Egypt & other parts to collect materials for his history, mentions a tradition in Egypt concerning fome extraordinary motions of the fun, which had formerly been obferved in that country; but which produced no lasting alteration in the earth, or the river, or in any thing else. This tradition may be supposed to refer to the appearances related in scripture.

4. DEISTICAL writers have charged the scripture with containing many plain inconsistencies and contradictions, and thence have inferred the doubtful authority of the whole.

I know of no literal inconfishences in scripture, of any consequence, but what may be, and have been rationally explained and reconciled. Those which are pretended lie chiefly in the historical and chronological parts of scripture, so that, if they were real, no doctrine or precept is affected by them. If in a book

written so many ages ago, and so often transcribed, some small inaccuracies have happened, it is not strange. The small slips and mistakes of transcribers have never been thought to invalidate the authenticity of other books: Why should they of this?

It is pretended that the evangelists disagree in the accounts which they give of Christ's resurrection; and this is an important article.

Bur christian writers have made it appear, to the satisfaction of candid minds, that these disagreements are only relations of different circumstances of the event, which were omitted by one evangelist, and noticed by another. The differences, if they were real, do not at all assect the substance of the narrative. And if it were conceded, that the historians, writing from their own recollection, and from the information of spectators, related some immaterial circumstances differently, the credibility of the history would not be thereby invalidated. The English historians, in their accounts of the execution of Charles I, place the time of his death at different hours of the day. But does any man, for this difference, throw by the whole book, or thence conclude, that there never was fuch a king in England as Charles I; or, if there was, that he died like other kings, and not on a scaffold? ——Yet such a conclusion would be as just, as a conclusion against the christian history from fuch circumstantial varieties. It is not conceded, that

there are any inconfistences in the narratives of the e-vangelists; but, I say, admitting there were such, it is unreasonable thence to infer, that the substance of the narrative is salse.

5. To weaken the credit of the gospel, and subvert the faith of christians, it has been said, that ' the book called the New Testament never existed, until more than three hundred years after the time, when Christ is said to have lived.'

But this is a gross misrepresentation. Doctor Motheim, a learned ecclesiastical historian, speaks of it as a fact well known, that before the middle of the second century,' i. e. in less than fifty years after the apostolic age, 'the greatest part of the books of the New Teltament were read in every christian society throughout the world, and received as a divine rule of faith and manners.' 'Hence it appears,' says he, 'that these sacred writings were carefuly separated from several human compositions on the same subject, either by some of the apostles themselves, or by their disciples & successors, who were spread abroad thro' all nations.' He adds, from Eusebius an early historian, 'We are assured that the four gospels were collected during the life of St. John, and that the three sirst received his approbation.' And he supposes that the other books of the New Testament were gathered together at the same time.'

Many of these books were directed to particular church-

es, and carried to them by messengers sent for the pur. pose. Those churches, when they gave out copies, would carefully preserve the originals. Paul, to prevent imposition, subjoined to his letters a form of benediction in his own hand-writing, 'which was the token in every letter.' Equal care was doubtless taken to prove the genuinencis of the other facred writings. He orders some of his epistles to be read in the churches, and we may hence conclude, that the same use was made of all the rest. Peter in his second epistle, written to christians in general, speaks of all the epistles of Paul as well known to them. Paul himself alludes to, and quotes a passage from Luke's gospel. Justin, who wrote but about forty years after the times of the apofiles, not only quotes passages from all the four gospels, but says, 'A portion of them was read every funday in the publick assemblies of christians.' And we meet with quotations from almost all the books of the New Testament, in all the early christian writers. It is certain therefore that these books existed, and were held in facred estimation, as early as we have any accounts relative to the subject.

THE authority of the greater part of these books was known so universally, that it never was questioned.

Concerning the epiftle to the Hebrews, that of James, the fecond of Peter, the fecond and third of John, that of Jude, and the revelation, some doubts arose; but, on examination, they were removed, and the books were

admitted into the canon. But the existence of this temporary hesitancy is a presumptive evidence in favour of these and all the other books in the canon, as it shews that the early christians acted and judged in this important matter, not with a rash credulity, but with a deliberate caution.

6. Some have said, that these books, whatever they might once be, cannot now be depended on, for probably, in this long tract of time, they have been essentially corrupted.

Bur do we, on the same supposition, discard all ancient books? Do we give credit to none but modern authors? We may doubtless place more confidence in the purity of these, than of any other ancient writings; for surely, if God has given us a revelation, he will preserve it from essential corruption. And, indeed, we can scarcely imagine such a corruption to have been possible. For these books were publickly read in the churches, and copies of them were foon multiplied. Errors in tranfcribing would often happen; but, on a collation of copies, might be corrected. Among the early christians, there were sectaries, whose distinguishing tenets were warmly controverted; but none of them were ever accufed of corrupting the facred text to carry a favorite point. Had any thing of this kind been attempted by one party, the opposing party would, at once, have observed and exposed the fraud. Such a fraud could not have succeeded; for no man could possess himself of all

the existing copies; and to have corrupted one or two only would have answered no purpose. It should farther be considered, that the scriptures are not written in a systematical form, as a philosopher or logician would have written them, but in that free, eafy and popular manner, which best conveys instruction to common capacities. Hence the great doctrines and precepts of religion, iustead of being confined to particular places, are scattered every where, thro' the whole book, & wrought into almost every page. Therefore a designing corrupter, in order to accomplish any purpose, must transcribe the substance, & alter the contexture of the whole book. A few local alterations would avail nothing; for the doctrine expunged in one place, would still appear in a hundred others; and an error inserted here or there, would be condemned every where else. And a general corruption of the book would at once betray itself, and thus defeat its own design. The idea therefore of an essential change made, either by accident or design, in this holy book, is too illiberal for any candid deist to suggest, and too absurd for any considerate christian to admit.

THE instances adduced are sufficient to shew, what kind of reasons insidels bring forth to discredit the cause of revelation, and support their own. Whether these are strong reasons, let common sense decide.

And now let our hearts rejoice in the revelation which God has given us, and in the convincing evidence which attends it.

LET us adore the goodness of God, that our education has been so favorable to our religious interests; and beware that we abuse not his goodness to the increase of our present guilt and future punishment.

If any have been thrown into doubts concerning the authority of the gospel, let them examine it with an open and honest mind. Your education in favour of christianity is not, in itself, a sufficient ground of faith: But see that you renounce not your early faith without strong reasons. For it is, at least, as necessary that the insidel should have a reason for unbelief, as that a christian should have a reason for his hope.

Let not your faith be shocked by those writings which treat the scriptures with ridicule. The subject is in its nature serious—It demands to be treated with gravity—It spurns drollery and humour. An author, who attempts to banter christians out of their faith, instead of enlightening them into the truth—who endeavors to ridicule them out of all religion, instead of shewing them a more excellent way than they have found, is not worthy of attention. He writes with a wicked design. And they who circulate and spread his writings, are partakers of his evil deeds.

You see the importance of a christian profession. The gospel has always had its enemies; and, in the present day, they are more numerous and arrogant than usual. If these are bold in their opposition to it, let its friends be as bold in their defence of it. You who be-

lieve it to be divine, come forward; openly declare your faith; shew that you are not ashamed of your religion; contribute your influence to its support in this evil day. In such a time neutrality is opposition to truth; and he who declines to confess Christ's name takes part with his enemies: He who is not for us, is against us.

YE who are protessors of Christ's gospel, hold saft the profession of your faith without wavering: Consider one another to provoke unto love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, but cxhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

Among christians there are different sects, which too often, with an indiscreet zeal, weaken the common cause by their party oppositions. It were better, that they would wave their smaller differences, and unite in promoting that great interest in which they all are equally concerned.

Ye who name the name of Christ, depart from iniquity, and be careful to maintain good works. Take heed that your good be not evil spoken of. Provide things fonest in the sight of all men, and by well doing put to alence the malice of the wicked, and the ignorance of the soolish. A practical defence of the gospel is the best. If you would convince mankind, that your religion is better than any other, or better than none at all; see that you live better than the professors of any other, at least, better than they who pretend to have none.

If you value the gospel as a revelation from God, do nothing to weaken, but all you can to strengthen its influence. By no means encourage the young, or unprincipled to read books of licentious tendency—books written with a design, not to inform the mind, but corrupt the manners—not to lead men into the knowledge of important truths, but to shake their faith in the truths which they have been taught.

You will fay, Free inquiry is to be commended. It really is so: But licentiousness is to be avoided. And if christianity may be true, and is undeniably good, then they who have no leisure or ability for a full enquiry into its evidences by reading on both sides, ought not to be cast into doubt and perplexity by reading only on the side of insidelity. Keep in mind what has been observed, that a gospel faith and practice are, at any rate, safe. The contrary may be satal. None therefore should be encouraged to read books written in opposition to it, but such as can and will read those written in its defence.

another religion, pretending to be divine, there would be a reason for reading on both sides; for an honest man would wish to know, which of the two had the best claim to his faith. But the question, as it now stands, is between christianity, and no religion. And since it is safe to act on the belief, and may be fatal to act on the disbelief of this religion, there is not the same reason, as

in many other cases, for reading on both sides. If you shock the faith of the christian, you put him in hazard, without the possibility of doing him any good-You may thus make him a worse man; there is no chance that you will make him better-You thus may destroy his foul; but it is certain you will not fave it. If you attend to the obvious difference between the question concerning the truth of the gospel, and most other questions controverted among men, you will easily see the absurdity of reading, and encouraging others to read licentious books, on pretence that men are bound to examine both sides of a question. A man never ought to read on the licentious, unless he reads also on the religious side; for this partiality may be fatal to him. He may read on the fide of religion, without reading any thing against it; for this is safe—he runs no risk.

If still you plead for impartiality in this case, then be impartial—at least do justice to religion. If you read any thing in opposition to it, read the answer. If you put into your neighbour's hand a book written to subvert religion, surnish him also with a rational vindication of it: Else you are guilty of the very partiality which you profess to condemn; and you indulge it on the more dangerous side.

In the present day, new evidences are rising in favour of the gospel. The destruction of the papal power is plainly foretold in scripture; and the time of its end is certainly drawing near,—how near it is, we pretend

not to fay-It is also foretold that some of those nations which had been the principal supporters of that power, would turn their arms against it and hasten its downfall. Are not these predictions tending, in this day, to their accomplishment. France which, for a leng time, has been one of the chief defenders of the papacy, has now directed her force against the pontisf, and has reduced him to a humiliation, from which probably he never will be fully recovered. And, what is peculiarly remarkable, the great prevalence of insidelity, at this time, when the evidences of truth are displayed with new and increasing light, is most expressly foretold. When the vials of God's wrath are poured upon the fun, and upon the throne of the beast, there is great diltress among the nations, and men guaw their tongues for anguish: And what is the consequence? They blasphemethe name of God, and repent not of their decds.

IF instellity should continue to make progress in our favoured country, we may be assured, that the vials of God's wrath will discharge their dreadful contents here; as well as elsewhere. Let us then be valiant for the truth, and stand up for God against evil doers. It is time to work for the Lord, when men make void his law. Let us repent and give glory to God, that we may avert his anger from our land; or, at least, may save our own souls.