

A  
S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

C O N V E N T I O N

OF THE

PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH

IN THE STATE OF

V I R G I N I A,

ON THE TWENTY SIXTH OF MAY, 1786.

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By J A M E S M A D I S O N, D. D.

PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WILLIAM AND MARY, AND PROFESSOR  
OF MORAL AND NATURAL PHILOSOPHY.

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R I C H M O N D:

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**In CONVENTION of the PROTESTANT  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH, May 26, 1786.**

**ORDERED,** That the thanks of the Convention be given to the Reverend J. Madison for his Sermon preached this morning, and that he be desired to print the same.

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*Evans 19767 gives no collection and  
locates no copy.*

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A  
S E R M O N, &c.

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J O H N 4th Chap. xxiv v. GOD IS A SPIRIT, AND THEY THAT WORSHIP HIM,  
MUST WORSHIP HIM IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH.

**T**HESE words, my Brethren, contain one of those great luminous principles, which the doctrine of Christ was intended to convey to men. The Father of the universe requires from his creatures, a worship which is pure and spiritual, the spontaneous offering of a heart, conscious that those services only are acceptable, which are performed in spirit and in truth.

Yet, in how many regions of the globe do we find this duty of worshipping God in spirit and in truth, obstructed by the vain or the artful restraints, which human institutions impose upon the consciences of Christians! How often have men, forgetful that the very genius of Christianity requires its professors to glow with universal benevolence, arrogantly maintained, that compulsion and violence were necessary to enforce a worship, which they deemed most spiritual and true! How often hath the mild, the humane, the beneficent religion of the blessed and humble Jesus been prostituted to serve the obscure views of political ambition, or to support the cause of intolerant bigotry and oppression!

But thanks be to God, "The hour cometh and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the father in spirit and in truth." America, presents the first glorious instance, wherein religion and policy are no longer connected, by an union as oppressive to men as it has often been disgraceful to Christianity. The Sun of Liberty, which illumines this Western World, hath dispelled, by its refulgence, those dark systems of oppression, at once the monuments of human folly and human wickedness.

wickedness, America, my brethren, I exult with joy and gratitude to the Great Author of the universe, at the recollection--America, displays the noblest field for the prosperity and happiness of mankind, which hath as yet been experienced in any age or country. Crowned with success in a cause, paralleled by none either for its importance, or for the virtue with which it was supported, like the Saviour of the world, she extends her arms to the whole family of mankind, she invites them to partake of so great a salvation; she considers all who become her citizens equally as her children, equally as those true worshippers, whose duty it is to worship the father according to those lights alone, which reason and the gospel afford.

I own I feel upon my mind impressions, which seem to justify a strong persuasion, that Providence hath destined this new world to be the asylum of mankind. It is indeed presumptuous to attempt to unfold the vast and complicated plan by which Providence directs the affairs of men; our views are infinitely too short, for so arduous an enterprise. But when we reflect on those many great and powerful causes which seem constantly operating to the same end, and when we cannot doubt of their producing proportionable effects; when we reflect on those singular circumstances which have attended the rise, progress and establishment of American empire; and when we farther consider that so gracious a design doth not appear unworthy of the Omnipotent Disposer of all events; the persuasion far from being presumptuous, may be thought most rational.

Let us, for a moment, recal to our minds a few of those circumstances in which America has been more eminently favoured, than any other part of the globe. The reflection cannot fail to renovate the warmest sentiments of gratitude, and at the same time perhaps, inspire us with the noble ardour of co operating in the promotion of a plan so full of heavenly beneficence.

What, more grateful, my friends, can be presented to the virtuous and philosophic mind, than a view of that accelerated progress which marks the history of America. How few years have elapsed, since her only inhabitants were those, whose savage and uncouth manners, whose ignorance and barbarism were matter of wonder and astonishment to our forefathers; how few the generations which have passed since nature appeared here, great indeed and majestic in all her works, but almost forbidding the habitation of civilized men! Yet, in that interval, short as it has been, by an increase of power and of wealth, before unknown in the annals of history, she hath taken her place among the empires of the earth. Had our forefathers beheld this event, had some kind Angel, withdrawing the curtain of time, presented to their view, America, thus risen to a state of glorious liberty and independence, their posterity thus numerous; could they have beheld America thus transformed from its then rude and savage state, into a land now flowing with milk and honey, a land where mankind have found rest from those persecutions which had too long oppressed the human race, a land where the worship of spirit and of truth shall at length

length prevail, would they not have exclaimed, " *This hath God done, it is the Lord who hath visited and redeemed his people, who hath shewed his strength with his arm, and raised up an horn of salvation.*"

Reflect also on the *auspicious period*, when America entered into the full possession of her independence. It was a period, at which the human understanding had attained the free exercise of its powers, and had learned to act with vigour and certainty; it was a period, at which, a just knowledge was every where possessed of the inherent rights of human nature, and at which, the experience of past ages presented a long train of the most useful and important facts; it was a period, at which, the writings of those philosophers who loved mankind, philosophers who dared to support the rights of humanity, had diffused their lights through every part of this extended empire. Consider also, that it was a period, at which the true spirit of equality presided over this new world; reflect my friends, on these and many other circumstances which I need not enumerate, and we must be impressed with a high sense of the peculiar manner in which America was favoured, at that important moment, when she assumed that independence, which reason, and nature herself so strongly dictated. These were circumstances equally fortunate for the establishment of her political and religious happiness on a basis the most permanent, the most enlarged, and the best adapted to the nature of man.

I will not here trace the origin of most other political establishments; I need not attempt to shew, that the intellectual world hath had its chaos as well as the material; and that most of the political institutions in those countries, where Christianity is professed, have sprung either from the dark ages of ignorance, or have received their most distinguishing features from the effects of those ages; or that they have been in too many regions, the work of violence and faction, of oppression and despotism, rather than the result of the free determinations of an independent and enlightened people. These truths, I doubt not have already passed in review before you. How was it possible under such circumstances, that any other institutions political or religious could be adopted, than those which tend to depress one part of the human species, and to elevate the other in proportion to the depression of the former. How was it possible, when we reflect on the pride, the ambition, and the blind policy of insatuated rulers, that even a religion which breathes only peace, charity, and universal benevolence, should not be considered as a fit instrument to support the most unworthy distinctions amongst citizens.

Happily for mankind, the circumstances which attended the birth of American empire were far different. Here we beheld realized, what philosophers had before only taught. Here we beheld that glorious spectacle, a people consulting together, respecting the means of securing their political happiness, upon the principles of perfect equality; a people, than whom none ever were more strongly impressed with that simple, but elevated sentiment, that nature knows no distinction amongst  
men,

men, and that their true dignity is inseparable from equal liberty. Here, in a word, we beheld the temple of liberty erected by the joint voice of a people eminently distinguished for the possession of those lights, which should guide them in establishing it, on a foundation the most firm and permanent. I confess, whilst I silently deplore the calamities to which our brethren and fellow beings are exposed in so many quarters of the globe, whilst I lament those chains, under which I see them groaning, chains forged and rivetted by the hands of civil and religious oppression, I feel a gleam of joy to break in on my soul, in turning from so melancholy a picture, to that which America presents. I contemplate the American revolution as a precursor to a general revolution in human affairs. I behold that bright star which hath hitherto conducted her, as still leading her on to the glory of becoming the asylum of mankind. I view that elevated and singular situation in which she was placed by Providence at the commencement of her independence, from whence she could look back to the very sources of the prosperity and adverity of nations, I view such a situation, I say, and the many great advantages she possessed over every other country at that important period, as the indications of so beneficent a design, a design we may hope not unworthy of Omnipotence itself.

God grant that she may never prove herself unworthy of being an instrument in the consummation of a plan, so capable of restoring the human race to its true and original dignity. God grant that those political institutions which she has adopted, institutions, which have ever exhibited human nature in its greatest perfection, may not only be preserved in that purity in which they originated, but may still receive those improvements, which experience and wisdom may suggest, and render America that land of happiness, where men shall be no longer considered as superiors and inferiors, but as equals and as brethren; where at length the doctrine of Christ, uncorrupted by views of state or the ignorance of fallible and presumptuous men, shall flourish in its primitive excellence, where the principles of a morality so sublime, so pure, so godlike, shall conduct men to that sum of greatest felicity, which they were doubtless designed to establish upon earth.

Hitherto, my friends, we have only visited the door, which Providence has opened to us, and graciously invited us to enter. It must be our duty to avail ourselves of this gracious invitation, to endeavour to concur with this auspicious course of Providence, and to be ready and worthy instruments in forwarding those designs which may be so essential to the general happiness of mankind. This is the principal consequence, I wish to draw from what has been as yet delivered. May the minds of all here, be conscientiously impressed with the particular duty of applying the opportunity which is now offered, in such a manner, as to institute a Christian church upon principles, truly consentaneous to that spirit of charity and benevolence which dictated Christianity itself; a church whose liberal, rational and enlarged views, unrestrained by the schemes of political ambition, and uncorrupted by the doctrines of fallible men, may prove the superior excellence, may the

the divine origin of our holy religion; by ultimately accomplishing that arduous task of uniting all the individuals of the human species in the most powerful and sacred of all ties, in that brotherly love, that universal charity which is the bond of all perfection, and which the gospel would inspire, nay kindle with a divine ardour in the souls of men. Here then let us rear on the foundation of the gospel alone, the temple of universal charity. Our fellow citizens, under the auspices of Providence, by their virtue and their valour, have erected that of freedom. Be it ours to rear this sacred fabric, without which, that of freedom shall soon moulder into dust. But, let I beseech you: the superstructure be worthy of the principle on which it shall be founded; a principle as extensive as the earth, nay as heaven itself; a principle, which alone, should render thy religion, thou blessed Saviour of the World, venerable in the eyes of men and Angels, and, like the light, which beams from eternal truth, confound the malignity of impious, unbelieving beholders.

Would to God, those dissensions which too much abound amongst Christians, could at this moment be banished from amongst us! Would to God, instead of those variances that often arise from subjects with which obedience to the doctrine of Christ is by no means connected, that, union and church fellowship could every where be established. This union is often recommended by St. Paul as "*the bond of peace and of all perfection,*" and is enjoined as a duty of strict obligation on all Christians; there being, as he saith, but "*one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*" Could the followers of Christ once be persuaded of the importance of this duty; could they, imitating the noble example of meekness and humility which has been set before them, range themselves under the banners of love, abandon as trifles, unsubstantial as vanity, when compared with the sublime, but simple morality of the gospel, those idle controversies, those "*dotings about questions and strifes of words,*" those "*perverse disputings*" which have too long occupied the minds of Christians, and which serve only to excite "*envy, strife, railings, evil surmings,*" shameful to the professors of a religion, whose basis is universal charity; could men be persuaded to embrace the substance of so pure a religion, "*the wholesome words of our Lord Jesus Christ,* and not dispute about the shadow; could they be persuaded as Christians who acknowledge the same God, the same Jesus; as Christians who look forward to the ~~the~~ celestial commonwealth, at this moment to unite in one church; could they, at this moment, be incorporated as brethren in one happy and glorious society, assemble themselves under the same divine standard, and with conspiring voice, send forth their united prayers, like incense to the Throne of Grace, might we not then my brethren, anticipate the blessings of heaven itself; might we not, in pious confidence, at length raise our eyes to that signal, which should aloft display peace, happiness and victory to the Christian world.

But this moment is not yet arrived. The minds of men are not yet prepared for an event so big with joy and felicity. That change so devoutly to be wished,

is however gradually advancing; the improvements in knowledge, the establishment of the freedom of religion in this new world, the spirit of humanity and benevolence, which, by the influence of Christianity, has already become so prevalent, notwithstanding the burthens which have been imposed upon it, afford us reason to hope the time will yet arrive, when prejudice and jealousy will give way to charity and fraternal affection, when truth shall dispel the clouds of superstition, ignorance and faction; and pervading the universe, shall like the sun, diffuse its light to all, animate, unite and govern the Christian world by the same law, and perfectly join together the followers of Christ in the same mind and the same judgment.

To promote this great event is the bounden duty of every church. It is our duty, and a golden opportunity invites to the performance of it.

Permit me then, to make some observations upon the means most likely to forward such an event. This I attempt with readiness, however imperfect the observations may appear, not only because it is, in my mind, of great importance, that we should particularly attend to those means at this period, but also, because the same means which would most effectually promote the end just spoken of, will be the best guides to us at a time when we are forming as it were anew, our own religious society, for without attention to them, we shall deprive ourselves of the inestimable privilege of worshipping God in spirit and in truth.

Fortunately for Christians, those means are altogether of the negative kind. They depend upon the rejection, not the adoption of any of those human systems of belief, or rules of faith, which have often usurped the place of Christianity itself. They only require Christians to revert to the gospel, and to abandon every other directory of conscience. I will then venture earnestly to recommend to all Christians to reject every system, as the fallible production of human contrivance, which shall dictate articles of faith, and adopt the gospel alone as their guide. Am I not sufficiently warranted, my brethren, in this recommendation? I trust there is scarce any one amongst us who will object to a recommendation of this nature, whether we attend to the fallibility, the ignorance, the prejudice of men, or to the truth, wisdom, and perfection of the author of our divine religion.

I will take the liberty to advance a general proposition, the evidence of which, I persuade myself, may be established by the most incontestible proofs. The proposition is indeed simple and plain; it is, "That those Christian societies will ever be found to have formed their union upon principles the wisest and the best, which impose the fewest restraints upon the minds of their members, making the scriptures alone, and not human articles or confessions of belief, the sole rule of faith and conduct.

It is much to be lamented that the venerable reformers, when they burst asunder the cords of Popish tyranny, ever departed from the simplicity of this scripture plan.



plan; and that instead of adhering to it, they thought theological systems the only means of preserving uniformity of opinion, or of evincing the purity of their faith. The experience of more than two centuries hath proved, how far they are capable of producing either effect. On the other hand, the consequences which such institutions have been productive of, have been more or less severely felt in every part of the Protestant world, from the diet of Augsberg, to the present time. (a) They have, in former as well as in later ages, caused a religion, designed to unite all men as brethren in the sacred bonds of charity and benevolence, too often to disseminate amongst them jealousies, animosities, and rancorous hatred. They have nursed the demon of intolerance; nay, aided by the civil power, they have led martyrs to the stake, and have offered up as holy sacrifices to the God of mercy, Christians, who had the guilt to prefer, what they esteemed the doctrines of Christ, to the commandments of men. Even in America, the effects which they have produced on the minds of Christians, have been seen written in blood. But thanks be to God, those days are passed; may such never revisit the earth! So long however, as we can trace within those human systems of belief, principles oppressive to Christians and injurious to the cause of our holy religion, it matters not in how small a degree, I shall ever esteem it my duty to raise a warning, though perhaps a feeble voice against them.

It is a maxim, self-evident to every one, and which was held sacred by the fathers of Protestantism, "That the scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation, and are the sole ground of the faith of a Christian." This maxim, the basis of the reformation, and which is acceded to by all Protestants, is alone sufficient, independent of what experience hath taught, to induce every Protestant church, to reject all systems of belief, unless conceived in the terms of scripture, not only as unwarrantable, and in the highest degree oppressive to the rights of private judgment, but as presumptuous, and as casting an unworthy reflection on the scriptures themselves.

Yet, many pious and worthy Christians are apt to suppose, that such systems of faith are necessary for the maintenance of true religion, or, for preventing that disorder which arises from a diversity of opinions. But do such Christians reflect sufficiently upon the example which our Lord himself and his Apostles have placed before us. Did they, for this or any other purpose, prescribe or recommend summaries of faith? On the contrary, did not our Saviour constantly enjoin his followers to *search the scriptures themselves*? Do we not find, that the Bereans were commended for their conduct, in not receiving even the doctrine of the inspired Apostles, until they had first searched the scriptures to see whether these things were so or not? Doth not St. Paul expressly say, "That other foundation can

(a) See note A.

no man lay, than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" Doth he not every where recommend to Christians the duty of *examining* the grounds of their faith, "to prove all things, and to hold fast that which is good?" And St. John, doth he not exhort us "to believe not every spirit, but to try the spirits whether they be of God?" Now, if summaries of faith had been necessary for the prosperity of our religion, can we suppose that Christ and his Apostles, would have neglected, not only to leave such as must have been most proper to maintain the true faith, but that, by their precepts as well as conduct they would rather have taught us the duty of avoiding them? No, my brethren, we may be assured, that Christ and his Apostles did not esteem any other summary necessary, than the gospel itself; and, that whatever is essential either as to faith or practice, is there expressed with that clearness which a revelation from Heaven required. We are directed there to *search, and to judge for ourselves*; for religion, to be profitable to the individual and acceptable to God, must be the result of *free inquiry* and the determination of reason. This right of free inquiry, and of judging for ourselves is a right natural and unalienable. It is the glory of our nature, the truest source of joy and triumph to an American, and constantly to recur to it the indispensable duty of a Christian. For should we neglect this duty, where then would be all manly, rational belief, where the sincere practice of piety and virtue, where the surest guide to moral and religious conduct? In their stead, a mean credulity would prevail; hypocrisy would usurp the place of true devotion; religion and morality would degenerate into superstition and sanguinary zeal. To suppose then, that the gospel would authorise a deprivation of this right, or that such deprivation is necessary to its support and progress, is to cast an unworthy reflection upon the gospel itself; it is to suppose, that a religion, which utterly disclaims all dominion over the faith and consciences of men, which is the most friendly to the essential rights of mankind, and which indeed, cannot exist where they are invaded, still requires to be supported by their destruction.

Besides, the very attempt, in matters dark and disputable, to prevent diversity of opinion, is vain and fruitless. It hath existed and must ever exist among all Christians, even those of the same society, so long as human nature continues the same. The God of nature hath for wise purposes bestowed upon different men different degrees of reason and understanding; so that, if they think at all, they must necessarily think differently upon those dark, mysterious subjects, which, however are often reduced into the form of articles of faith. Nor can such difference cease, until the same precise portion of intellect be imparted to every individual of the human race. To attempt then to prevent diversity of opinions upon such subjects, is to oppose the very laws of nature, and consequently vain and fruitless.

But, in truth, that diversity of opinion, which most churches have been so sedulous to prevent, is neither any disgrace to a Christian society, nor incompatible with its  
 peace

peace and good government; unless it be disgraceful to men that they are men, and unless the Christian dispensation be incompatible with the nature of man. On the contrary, such diversity may be considered as most favourable to the progress of Christian knowledge, and should also be equally favourable to Christian peace, by teaching us, that dark and disputable points instead of being made articles of faith, and standards of orthodoxy, should rather be considered as trials of our Christian temper, and occasions to exercise mutual charity; or, that those things alone should be held as *essentials*, which our Lord and Master, hath fully and clearly expressed, and which therefore cannot require the supposed improvements and additions of men. So long as men agree in these essentials, or fundamental articles of our religion, in those great and important truths and duties, which are so clearly expressed that every sincere inquirer must readily apprehend them, where is the necessity, or the reasonableness of attempting to compel men to be of one mind, as to other matters of infinitely inferior moment, and which we may suppose, were designedly less clearly expressed. That *Christian unity*, is strongly recommended to us, as the bond of perfection, does not consist in uniformity of opinion upon abstruse, metaphysical subjects, but upon the great fundamentals of our religion, and in that unanimity of affections, love, peace and charity, which is enjoined the brethren in Christ Jesus, who all *walk* by the same rule, and acknowledge one and the same Lord.

But still it may be thought, that theological systems, or summaries of faith are necessary to exclude from the bosom of a church, men whose principles might endanger it's very existence. But doth experience, or do just observations upon human conduct justify such a belief? What articles, or what system will prove a sufficient circumvallation to a church against a man of a corrupt heart? He will not be retarded in the accomplishment of his designs, or in the gratification of an avaricious appetite, though 19, 20, or 20,000 articles were presented before him. Trust me, articles will never prove a barrier to the advances of a secret enemy, or exclude from any church men of vicious principles, or of no principles. Whom then will they be most likely to exclude? I answer with regret. Men of stubborn virtue, men of principle and conscience, men of that rigid ~~and~~ integrity, which cannot be shaped and twisted to suit the system of the day, men who will not prefer the dictates and decisions of fallible mortals, to the *infallible* word of God.

I conceive, moreover, that no Christian church hath a *right* to impose upon it's members, human systems of belief, as necessary terms of communion. For what I beseech you do we understand by a Christian church? According to the most general acceptance, "every Christian church is a voluntary society of men agreeing to profess

profess the faith of Christ and stipulating to live according to the rules of the gospel." From this definition we find the distinctive terms of union, or the fundamental law of such a society, is to embrace the scriptures alone, as the rule of worship, faith and conduct. Consequently every act of church government, which contravenes this fundamental law, is from its very nature void. How then shall it be pretended, that other terms of communion may be prescribed to the members of a Christian church? But all human systems, imposed as articles of belief, must be held as introductory of other terms. It follows then that every Christian church, so far as it introduces such terms, is to be considered as having departed from its essential characteristic, and consequently to have exceeded its rights as a church. This conclusion is the more incontrovertible, as it coincides with the maxim before mentioned, I should say with that Christian axiom, "That the scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation, and are the *sole ground of the faith of a Christian.* (b)

What then, it may be asked, shall not a church prescribe to itself, terms of communion, shall it not have its particular confessions or articles of belief, *provided, they be agreeable to the word of God?* How many Protestant churches have been built on this foundation of sand, unable to resist the winds and the tempests which beat against them! The condition is inadmissible. For who shall determine with certainty, that those terms are agreeable to the word of God? How is it possible, that all the members of a church should be sufficiently assured of this important point? Or is private judgment to be entirely annihilated; if so, to what end, did the benign Author of our being grant reason to man? Is the conscientious Christian to forget, that it is his *duty to search the scriptures* themselves, or are those human expositions to usurp the place of the word of God? But let us in the spirit of charity admit, that every church supposes, or firmly believes its articles or rules of faith to be agreeable to the word of God. What then is the consequence? The difference between them is surely a proof, that infallibility is not the attribute of all of them. Truth, like the Eternal, is one. In which church then shall we find it? I will presume to say in none of them. He who would search for the truth must search for it in the scriptures alone. (c)

There is another important objection of a different kind from any yet mentioned. The burthen which those systems impose, fall unequally upon the members of a Christian society. The weight inclines too much towards the worthy pastors of the church. They must consider those systems not only as the necessary rules by which their faith shall be governed, but they must publicly teach and enforce them. Thus they, whose particular duty it is to expound the scriptures, and recommend them to the hearts of men, are incapacitated from searching and judging for themselves.

(b) See note (B)

(c) See note (C)

themselves; they see presented before them a *system*, which either renders their search into the scriptures fruitless or of no other importance, than to discover by what means they may be so construed as to support an interpretation, derived from men, whose understandings are as fallible as their own.

I cannot pretend to say, how far the articles proposed to be retained or adopted by the late General Convention, of our church, may be agreeable to the word of God: My arguments are not directed to that point. I speak only of such institutions in general. But if even those which our church may possibly adopt, were perfectly agreeable to my own opinion, and however I might conscientiously acquiesce in them, as to myself, yet I should be no less averse to the adoption of them as a rule of faith. I trust I have too great a diffidence of my own judgment, too much respect for the superior learning and abilities of many excellent members of our church, too sincere a hope, that men still more enlightened may arise amongst us, too ardent a desire for the general prosperity of our holy religion, ever to wish to see a system of that kind adopted, however conformable to my own private judgment.

If after all, certain rules of faith be still adjudged necessary to a Christian church, in order to preserve unity and soundness of doctrine, let them be expressed in the words of the scriptures themselves. Then no Christian will object to them, no one will complain of an infringement of the rights of private judgment. If indeed such a mode were adopted, it would be of little concern, how numerous such formularies were, provided they were fairly and candidly collated. They would however, I conceive, be unnecessary, because, he who adopts the scriptures as the rule of faith and conduct, or he who engages at the altar to preach and inculcate only the pure doctrine of Christ, must acknowledge his assent to all the doctrines contained in such formularies. (d)

Indulge me a few moments longer, and I will endeavour briefly to place in one point of view, some of the many objections which may be made against the introduction of human articles of belief in a Christian church.

1st. Then, they are to be avoided, because the scriptures, being the sole ground of faith afford the only test by which *purity* of doctrine is to be ascertained.

2d Because, the attempt to establish them, is an assumption of power, which can of right, belong to no Christian church.

3d. Because, they impose shackles upon the human mind which not only effectually impede the progress of Christian knowledge, but destroy the essential rights of private judgment.

4 Because,

(d) See note (D)

4. Because, they tend, instead of producing harmony and unity of opinion amongst Christians, to excite dissensions and animosities.

5. Because, they corrupt the pure fountain of Christianity and impregnate the living waters of truth with the impure conceits of men.

6. Because, they are no where enjoined in scripture, as essential to a Christian church.

7. Lastly, because, the great and important doctrines of revealed religion being delivered with sufficient perspicuity, an attempt to express them in a mode, different from that in which they are delivered, supposes an imperfection in the scriptures, which should be avoided.

I fear, my brethren, I have trespassed too long on your patience, by entering even so transiently on this subject. I hope however, that its importance to the Christian world will be my justification, and, from what has been said, imperfect as the deductions may be, that sufficient reasons, have been given in support of the general proposition I advanced, viz. That those Christian societies will ever be found to have formed their union upon principles the wisest and the best, which impose the fewest restraints upon the minds of their members, making the scriptures alone, and not human articles or confessions of belief, the sole rule of faith and conduct.

Let us then abandon all those systems, which to say the least can only involve us in error. Our venerable forefathers erred, or why a reformation? Their descendants will err. Nor shall the resurrection of true Christianity be seen amongst men, until it shall appear in the white garment of the gospel alone. (e)

Yet my brethren, I should have been diffident in delivering sentiments so opposite to the practice of Christian churches, were they not supported by the immortal voice of many, the brightest ornaments of the Protestant church. These worthies would not in vain have exhausted the thunder of their eloquence, could they have occupied the ground on which I now stand. They would have exulted with joy that the opportunity was at length arrived of restoring Christianity to its primitive purity. They would have told us, that now was the time to break down all those vain barriers, which have so long opposed the union of Christians; now was the time to establish the worship of spirit and of truth, and to evince the superior excellence of our holy religion. But why suppose we what the best or the wisest of men would have said or done? Imagine to yourselves the *Son of God*, in all the lustre of his own meekness and humility, again descending to revisit the Christian world

(e) See note (E)

world. Behold in his hands and his sides those wounds which he endured for your salvation, and hearken once more to the salutation of *peace*. What think ye, my brethren, will now be the first sacred lesson which shall flow from the lips of your once crucified Saviour? But, already I perceive, you anticipate him. Already you hear his divine voice calling men to return to the *gospel*, and to receive it as the only rule of faith and conduct; already you hear him, with tears of compassion, lamenting those dissensions, which prevail amongst his followers; and, *with eyes lifted up to Heaven*, exclaim, “*O righteous father, I pray for them which believe on me, that they all may be one; as thou, Father art in me, and I in thee, that they may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. I have given them thy word, sanctify them through thy truth. Thy word is truth.*”

To promote the great event before mentioned, it is also the particular duty of a Christian church, to frame their mode of public worship upon a plan so liberal, so free from all matter of theological disputation, so truly scriptural, that all who call themselves Christians may come to the same communion, and there join in what the “*spirit of prayer inspires*” “*in that adoration pure which God likes best.*” That mode or form is undoubtedly to be preferred which is most plain and simple, best adapted to promote the worship of spirit and of truth, most likely to excite that rational, but true ardour of devotion, which should animate a Christian church, and which, by a kind of reaction, may impress upon our hearts, when prostrate before the throne of grace, the deepest sense of our duty to each other, our dependance upon God, and the inestimable benefits derived from redeeming love. The form which our church hath hitherto used is justly considered as a fit and excellent model in many respects. It possessed perhaps as few imperfections as most other human institutions of a similar kind. Yet, whatever they may be, it is ardently to be hoped they will be removed, and that our public service will be rendered as liberal, as enlarged, and comprehensive, as truly scriptural, as the worship of spirit and of truth requires.

I have my brethren but a few words more to add, I have perhaps already detained you too long; but I cannot yet desist. I feel at this moment a more than usual satisfaction, in reflecting, that whilst we are here convened to promote the cause of our holy religion, and consequently the eternal happiness of men, we are at the same time acting the part of those who best love their country. Religion is the bond of civil society. It penetrates the heart; it extends its influence far beyond the reach of human laws, it takes possession of the souls of men, and there impresses, in indelible characters, the noblest and truest principles of virtue. It presents before men their God, “*who from heaven’s height views all things at one view,*” a God merciful and long suffering, but the avenger of all iniquity. It  
shews

shews to men, that the path which leads to eternal bliss, is the same which conducts them to their greatest temporal happiness. Who can contemplate the religion of Christ, the grand principle of which is universal benevolence, a religion which would revive the sacred sense of humanity, and inculcate a system of morals, the superior purity of which carries along with it the stamp of it's divine origin; a religion which not only instructs men in their duties to each other, but points out the most powerful of all motives to the observance of them; who, I say, can seriously and dispassionately weigh the advantages of such a religion, even to our temporal happiness, and not wish to diffuse it's spirit throughout the globe. Yes my brethren it is a religion destined not only to promote the eternal, but the temporal happiness of men, by disseminating the noblest principles of charity, by uniting the individuals of the human race in the most powerful and sacred of all ties, by teaching us the great but difficult lesson of loving one another, and thus rendering justice and humanity triumphant upon earth. Let not then the wits and pretended sages of this world, affront the gospel by unjust accusations; let them at least reverence it's principles, let them at least, acknowledge as patriots, if not as Christians, that of all the religious institutions yet adopted by men, none ever appeared so amiable, or so capable of promoting general felicity. But ye who love mankind, ye venerable ministers of the gospel, whose office it is to promote the eternal as well as temporal happiness of men, ye who know, that religion is the rock upon which virtue rests firm and unshaken, be it your's to support the dearest interests of humanity, to assert the honour of our holy religion, to restore and vindicate the prerogatives of truth. And you, ye patriot Christians, who love your country, let me entreat you to remember, that in promoting so pure a system of religion, you establish a principle, which alone can give permanence to your freedom and political prosperity. This principle is virtue; on it depends the continuance of your liberties, the existence of your republic. But without the support of religion, you will behold this principle annihilated, and in it's stead, unbounded licentiousness to attack the very vitals of the commonwealth. You will behold those ligatures, which should bind a free and virtuous state, burst asunder, the springs of it's action, the resources of it's vigour dried up and lost, your fellow citizens deaf to the voice of liberty and patriotism, drunk with luxury, debased by corruption; you will then behold, quickly to succeed, that fatal catastrophe which hath hitherto attended all free states. You will behold your beloved republic to expire, with her expiring virtue. Prosperous and happy republic, may the God of heaven and earth preserve you from so dreadful an evil! May that gracious and eternal Providence, which hitherto hath conducted thee, still be the supreme object of thy regard, the preserver of thy faith and morals, thy liberty and peace! May those miserable nations, who have fallen the victims of their degeneracy, may their tremendous fate serve as an example, may their silent though piercing and pathetic eloquence reach



the souls of thy citizens, excite and stimulate them with a becoming zeal for the true and only faith, with ardour for the cause of virtue; and teaching them to prefer public liberty and public good to every private consideration, may they here establish, through all ages, a glorious asylum for mankind.

Let us now, offer up our united prayers to the God whom we serve, and implore his gracious favour in forwarding the work we have begun, and in promoting the worship of spirit and of truth amongst us, to the praise and glory of his holy name.

**F I N I S.**

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N O T E S

TO THE PRECEDING

D I S C O U R S E.

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N O T E (A)

(a) **I**T may not be improper here to present the reader with a short account of the origin of confessions of faith amongst Protestants, and also to lay before him some of the consequences which have arisen from them.

The principles upon which the Protestant reformation from popery was undertaken, conducted and justified, were such as these----“ Jesus Christ hath, by his  
“ gospel called all men unto liberty, the glorious liberty of the sons of God, and  
“ restored them to the privilege of working out their own salvation by their own  
“ understandings and endeavours. For this work of salvation, sufficient means are  
“ afforded in the holy scriptures, without having recourse to the doctrines and  
“ commandments of men, faith and conscience having no dependence upon them,  
“ but upon the scriptures alone, wherein all things needful for spiritual living and  
“ man’s soul’s health, are mentioned and shewed.”

Christians were thus left at liberty to search the scriptures and to build their faith upon them alone; the original Protestant principles maintaining in the fullest manner that right of private judgment which nature had given to every man. But many, led away by the prejudices of the age in which they lived, instead of adhering to the plain fundamental truths of the gospel, soon involved it in all the  
obscurity

obscenity of dark and disputable metaphysics, or attempted to support their own vain and extravagant notions by the authority of scripture. A great variety of doctrines soon arose; sects springing up, some of which were scandals to religion and offences to society. That they were the offspring of the reformation could not be denied. The doctrines which distinguished the sober and serious Protestant churches were not yet perfectly settled. They were only to be found in the writings of some private doctor, whom his brethren were at liberty to disown; or in catechisms for youths, or directories for ministers within their several departments. In order therefore, that the cause of Protestantism, in its infant state, might not fall under the general odium which certain sects had justly incurred, it was thought necessary, in the most public manner, to disavow their doctrines. For this purpose, explicit confessions of faith and doctrine, were published to the whole world, and authenticated by formal attestations of the leading members of the respective churches. That of the Protestant Princes of Germany set the example, which, as Sleiden informs us in his history of the reformation, was read in the hearing of the Emperor Charles the Vth in the diet held at Augsburg in the year 1530. This historian says, "that the Elector of Saxony, &c. entreated the Emperor to hear their confession of faith, that was drawn up in writing. He ordered it to be produced and laid down. They again insisted, and because, it was a matter that concerned their *reputation*, their *lives* and *fortunes*, and the *salvation* of their souls; and because perhaps, he *had been misinformed in the thing*, they desired it might be heard" This precedent, other Protestant states and churches followed on different occasions; and thus, acquitted themselves, at least among all equitable judges, of the scandal of abetting the schismatical and seditious enthusiasts, who about that time infested different countries, under the pretence of promoting reformation.

These confessions, being laid before the public with this formality, very soon became of more importance than to serve a present turn. They were solemnly subscribed by the leading men of the several communions on whose behalf they were exhibited, as doctrines by which they would live and die; and were consequently to be defended at all events. And, therefore, to secure the reputation of uniformity to all succeeding ages, to root out discord of opinion, and also to guard as much as possible against a relapse into popery, an unfeigned assent to the public confession, confirmed either by subscription, or a solemn oath, became in most of the Protestant churches, an indispensable condition of qualifying their pastors for the ministry, and in some of admitting their lay-members to church communion. See that excellent book *The Confessional*.

Such

Such was the general origin of confessions of faith, after the reformation; or, such the motives which induced the first Protestants to deviate from the simplicity of that Scripture plan, upon which they set out, and to draw up systems of doctrines by which belief was confined to the precise measure and dimension which they prescribed.

In that church, from which we are descended, articles were published by the King's authority in the year 1553. They had been agreed upon by the Bishops and other learned and godly men, in a convocation held the preceding year, "to root out discord of opinions, and establish the agreement of true religion," as Bishop Sparrow informs us. But previous to these articles, the reformers had in 1537 published their *Institution of a Christian man*, dedicated to Henry 8th; and in 1540 they again drew up a declaration of the Christian doctrine, for *the necessary erudition of a Christian man*, (Burnet's History of the Reform.) finding even in that short interval, that it was necessary to rectify several things in their first publication, which they now discovered were plainly erroneous. In the year 1562, King Edward's articles were revised and altered, some things added, others taken away, and the number reduced to 39. In the year 1571, they were again deliberately read, revised and confirmed.

One great and laudable object, among all the Protestant churches was to prevent discord of opinions and establish the agreement of true religion. But what were the consequences of the means adopted for that purpose? Will not ecclesiastical history inform us, that animosities and hatred were soon produced amongst the Protestants themselves, no less violent, than what existed between Protestants and papists? The least deviation from the received *standard* of faith was *heresy*; and heretics, it was thought deserved the severest punishment. Nay, it was proved, no doubt to the satisfaction of many at that time, by the most pitiful sophism, that the right of punishing heretics belonged only to Protestants. If any one would find how faithfully this doctrine was observed in Switzerland, Holland, Great Britain, and even North America, he may consult Chandler's history of persecutions.

Nor was it only from the violent animosities thus excited amongst Protestants, that their cause greatly suffered. In vain did the Belgic and Gallican churches attempt, in 1581, to harmonize the confessions of no less than eleven Protestant churches, in order to prove their unanimity in all principal doctrines and all to compose the differences and animosities which prevailed. The want of unity still exposed the  
Protestant

Protestant cause to dangerous attacks from the common enemy. The differences and animosities which prevailed were not in the least composed. Nor was an effectual method of repelling those attacks adopted, until the immortal Chillingworth, disclaiming the defence of the Protestant religion, as it lay in systems and confessions, appealed to the *Bible*. To be equally successful in banishing differences and animosities amongst Protestants, they must revert to their original plan, abandon their vain systems and confessions, and make the same solemn appeal.

But it is not the cause of Protestantism alone which has suffered by confessions. The Christian religion itself has suffered by them. To this truth, the writings of Bolingbroke, Tindal, Collins, Chubb, Hume, &c. will too long bear witness. Nor is it to be wondered at, for Christianity as it appears in the *original code*, as an ingenious writer observes, is widely different from any *human compend* of it, or from the *new edition*, with *corrections* and *amendments* as set forth in rituals and articles.

But, besides these consequences already mentioned, we must not omit the encouragement which subscription to articles has given to gross hypocrisy, to that shameful prevarication, which is inconsistent with every principle of truth and integrity. This is an evil which many of the ablest and best divines of the English church have long lamented. In vain do some attempt to justify the practice of subscribing to doctrines not believed, by what is called a *latitude* of construction. Common sense, and common honesty will still condemn the practice, as not only shameful to those who should be patterns of an uncorrupted faith, but as prejudicial to, nay subversive of society. Bishop Burnet was certainly right, when he declares, in what he considers as a kind of dying speech, "that the requiring subscription to the 39 articles is a *great imposition*;" "the greatest part, says he, subscribe without ever examining them, and others do it, *because they must do it*, though they can hardly *satisfy their consciences*, about some things in them." This will ever be the case where assent to theological systems is required, so long as the *auri sacra fames*, or the *starving* inquisition shall continue to influence the conduct of men.

It is true that many circumstances tend to lessen the censure, to which the venerable reformers may seem liable, for introducing, and thus entailing upon their posterity, confessions of faith abounding with minute points of scholastic theology, and which have been productive of so many evil consequences. They could not,  
perhaps

perhaps in the infancy of the reformation too strenuously disclaim the extravagancies of certain sects, or too carefully prevent a relapse into popery; nor were they sufficiently liberated from prejudices imbibed in their early years, to discover the inutility, as well as injustice of attempting to compel men to be of one opinion in matters of an abstruse and speculative nature. The principles of liberty were, at that time, comparatively but little understood; critical learning was at a low ebb; knowledge of the genuine sense of scripture was far short of that which distinguishes the present age. Men who had so long sat in darkness, and in the shadow of death, could not at once, transport themselves into the regions of truth and light. If any one wishes to have a proof, that such was the state of scriptural knowledge at this time, he may consult Archbishop Cranmer's *catechism*, a man who had a principal hand in conducting the reformation in England, and who was greatly distinguished for his learning and judgment. We may also turn to the first edition of the English liturgy, 1548, where we shall find the old *exorcising* form in the office of baptism still retained. Ridiculous and absurd as it now appears to us, it appeared far otherwise in those days. As it may be some gratification to the reader to have a perusal of it, I have here subjoined it.

*"Then let the Priest looking upon the children, say, I command thee, unclean spirit, in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, that thou come out and depart from these infants, whom our Lord Jesus Christ hath vouchsafed to call to his holy baptism, to be made members of his body, and of his holy congregation. Therefore, thou cursed spirit, remember thy sentence, remember thy judgment, remember the day to be at hand, wherein thou shalt burn in fire everlasting prepared for thee and thy angels. And presume not hereafter to exercise thy tyranny towards these infants, whom Christ hath bought with his precious blood, and by his holy baptism calleth to be of his flock."*

Now granting that these circumstances just mentioned, may apologize for the introduction of theological systems by the reformers, and for their defection from their original principles, yet I would ask, which of them is so applicable to the Protestants of America as to justify a continuance of those, or similar systems? Have we to fear that an Emperor should be *misinformed* of our *principles*, or are our lives, our fortunes, or our reputation at stake; have we impious and seditious sectaries to disavow; have we to fear a relapse into popery; or has the twilight of learning just begun to extend itself to this hemisphere? Are the principles of liberty no better understood than they were early in the 16th century; or is the state of religious knowledge the same with us, as in the time of the reformers? Have those great  
matters,

masters of reason, Locke, Hoadly, Butler, Clarke, Law, Lardner, and many others, in vain attempted to expand the human mind; or has the progress of philosophy in every science been to us, fruitless and ineffectual? Or have not reason and experience yet taught us the vanity as well as the dangerous consequences of attempting to reduce opinions within the narrow limits of a theological system? If none of these pleas or circumstances be applicable to us, if the causes which produced those systems be removed, why should the effect still continue? Or shall it happen in this case, as in a thousand other instances in human affairs, that particular institutions are continued, through the effect of prejudice derived from custom, long after the causes which produced them, cease to operate, or even, long after experience, if attended to, would have proved them to be not only useless, but highly injurious. Let us lament their continuance in those countries, where religion has become an engine in the hands of the *rulers of the darkness of this world*; but let it not be said, that, at the close of the 18th century, the Protestant Episcopal church in America voluntarily preferred a yoke of bondage to that *liberty wherewith Christ has made us free*. Let us rather, with gratitude, avail ourselves of the glorious opportunity which is now offered of vindicating the sacred, the unalienable rights of conscience and private judgment, and of establishing the worship of God in spirit and in truth.

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N O T E ( B )

(b) The observations of an able writer upon the subject of Articles, made public by the learned and Reverend B. Dawson, appear well worthy of our attention, particularly the last here mentioned.

It is next to impossible, says he, for any body of men, however learned, dignified or distinguished, to draw up such a set of articles of religion to be subscribed by the clergy, (I add, and by the vestry of each parish) as will give general and just content, and to which every thoughtful, judicious and conscientious clergyman (or vestryman) having carefully examined and considered them can readily assent and freely subscribe; thereby in effect declaring, that those articles do precisely express his own sentiments upon the several points therein concluded, and that he believes they express the very sense of scripture on such heads.

The reasons are evident.

1. The compilers are but men, frail and fallible, like others of their fellow beings.
2. They

2. They commonly accede to the work with their prejudices about them; their pre-conceptions in favour of this or that particular tenet or system, to which they have been for some time devoted. We have a strong instance of this in the account of the *Irish* articles, drawn up in 1615, by a no less able and eminent divine than the most learned and venerable Usher, the glory of that church, and of the whole republic of letters. He had imbibed early prejudices in favour of some of the narrow tenets of the great Doctor of Geneva, and accordingly took the liberty to incorporate into the body of those articles, the nine decrees of *Lambeth*; which gave just offence to many learned and judicious men of more enlarged minds.

3. When the numerous members of a convocation (*or convention*) meet to draw up articles, are they all of the same mind with regard to the several points to be determined by them? Do they discuss those questions over and over, pro and con, before they come (if they come at last) to a final conclusion? And is it not too well known, how much party and faction generally operate in those Assemblies, and the prevailing influence of authority and interest in the event, determines all? Though many of the members may still at the bottom remain dissentients, and could wish, that matters (some particulars at least) had been ordered otherwise,

4. If the convocation (*or convention*) can be supposed to be thus divided in their sentiments before they come to a conclusion about them, can it be supposed that the rest of the clergy (*and laymen*) so concluded in *their absence*, would not, if they had been assembled in the same convocation (*or convention*) or (which is more feasible) in any lesser departments or classes within their respective districts, have also had *their different sentiments* upon those topics, during the debates about them in those assemblies? How then it will be asked by some, can it be well supposed, that so large a body of men as (the *Episcopalians of the Thirteen United States, or of any one state*) should all at once become so unanimous in their opinions and confessions touching a great number of articles, as readily to assent to every one of them, and to testify that assent by setting their hand to them? And yet some of these articles are supposed by many learned men, to be abstruse enough, and still disputable.

5. It may perhaps be somewhat questioned, and not without reason, *whether or how far the authority of any Protestant church or churches may extend to prescribe*  
articles



articles, or to decide controversies, about matters of faith? or whether upon the whole, such authority may not justly be thought, or at least shrewdly suspected, to border somewhat too nearly upon that usurpation of dominion over the faith and religious liberty of our fellow Christians, which the Apostles, though divinely inspired, absolutely disclaimed, and our Lord himself forbade us to exercise, we bring all brethren to each other, and fellow servants under him the supreme ruler of his Church, and the sole founder of our faith and religion." It is farther to be considered, that, as in matters of faith, no man can have a substitute or representative, it is absurd to suppose, the members of a Convention should have any right, or delegated authority to interfere in what concerns faith.

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N O T E (C)

(c) Perhaps, instead of prescribing certain articles as rules of faith, and as necessary to be assented to by every minister, one or other of the following forms of subscription, which I have also taken from the valuable work last referred to, would be much less exceptionable, and more worthy of a Christian church. I submit them to serious and impartial consideration.

" I do here profess and declare my sincere and firm belief in one God, the Creator, Preserver, and Governour of the world: And in Jesus Christ the Son of God and Saviour of the world: And in the Holy Spirit of God and of Christ, as described in the scriptures; I believe the divine authority of the scriptures, as generally received amongst Christians, and their sufficiency for salvation through faith in Christ, I believe the necessity of a godly, righteous, and sober life, and it's acceptableness with God, to salvation through him. I believe all things revealed in the scriptures for that end; the mediation of Christ, the aids of his spirit, the resurrection of the dead, the general judgment, and the future state of rewards and punishments. I renounce all authority in matters of faith, beside that of the scriptures; and do promise that I will carefully study those scriptures, and that I will teach or preach no other doctrine or doctrines as necessary to salvation, but what I am and shall be persuaded to be agreeable to the scriptures, and to express the true meaning and design thereof." A. B.

Or

Or:

" I declare myself a *Christian*, and a friend to the Protestant Episcopal church. I believe and assert that the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain the whole will of God, relating to the salvation of man, through Christ Jesus; and will make those *scriptures* the rule and foundation of my instructions and exhortations to those who shall be committed to my ministerial charge. Nor, will I teach any other doctrine, either in public or in private, but what I am and shall be persuaded to be the will and doctrine of God therein contained, A. B.

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## N O T E (D)

The only objection of any weight, which is usually made to an abolition of articles of faith, or to a release of clergymen and vestrymen from subscription to them is, that the church would want sufficient security of the *orthodoxy* of her ministers, or vestrymen. But *orthodoxy*, as has been well observed, we apprehend is a term, which, in the mouth of a Protestant, should only mean, an *agreement in opinion with the scriptures*. And for a proof of such orthodoxy, as to ministers, sufficient provision seems to be made in the second question put by the Bishop to every candidate for priests orders, at the time of ordination. Question. " Are you persuaded that the holy scriptures contain sufficiently all the doctrines required of necessity for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? And are you determined, out of the same scriptures, to instruct the people committed to your charge, and to teach nothing as required of necessity to eternal salvation, but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by the scripture?"

Answer. I am so persuaded, and have so determined by God's grace.

" In some manuscript notes by the learned Dr. Clarke on the liturgy, &c. intitled " Amendments humbly proposed to the consideration of those in authority," a copy of which was presented to the British museum, the following query is put at the head of the 39 articles. " Would it not be of service to religion, if all clergymen, instead of subscribing to the 39 articles, were required to subscribe only to the  
the

the matters contained in the questions put by the Bishop (in the office for ordaining priests) to every person to be ordained priest?"

With respect to vestrymen the following subscription is humbly proposed.

" I do hereby declare myself to be a Christian; and promise to assist, preserve and maintain the Protestant Episcopal church in this state, (or the united Protestant Episcopal church in North America) so far as is consistent with Christian charity, making the scriptures, in all things the rule of my faith and conduct "

A. B.

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N O T E (E)

(e) It may be agreeable to the reader, to be presented here with the sentiments of a few great and worthy divines.

No one can have a *faith* of his own, who makes not use of his *own judgment*, in fixing his mind to what God calls upon him to believe, as necessary to a Christian. Without this, he will be so far from contending for the faith once delivered to the Saints, that he cannot *know so much as what that faith is*, nor can have *any faith* at all to contend for. In order to find out the faith once delivered, we must all endeavour, to the utmost of our power, to find out the true sense of those passages, in which any thing is declared necessary to be believed in order to our salvation; and to this purpose, must make use of *our own understandings*, and form the best judgment we ourselves can. Bishop Hoadley's discourse on Jude 3.

" As we enjoy the  *blessing of LIBERTY* in that *perfection*, which has been *unknown* to former ages, and is so still to most *other nations*; let us be *diligent* in using it to *good purposes* for which it is so *liberally* indulged to us; and render ours as much superior to those nations that are yet deprived of it, as most other countries are observed to have been in the like circumstances. *Let us concur with this auspicious course of Providence*, and each contribute our endeavours towards carrying on this progress (of religion) by every serious, fair and *free inquiry*; free not only  
from

from all outward violence and clamour, but also from all inward bitterness, wrath and hatred: learning to bear with one another's mistakes, and labouring as well to reform the errors of our brethren in love, as to promote and confirm their knowledge of the truth; *not for that in either case, we have dominion over their faith; but as being helpers of their joy.* And thus shall religion be at length suffered to partake the benefit of those improvements which every thing besides enjoys." Bishop Laws Could. on the Theory of Religion.

" We cannot, if we would, conform our faith to the dictates of *another*, and believe just as he believes, and because he believes so: Nor can it ever be possibly lawful, upon any account, to comply with, or agree to any thing in religion that is contrary to our judgment, and the inward persuasion of our minds; to profess for truth, what we believe to be a wrong faith, or false doctrine; and to worship God after any other manner, than that which we conceive to be most agreeable to the divine will. In these matters we can neither give, nor can another usurp any authority over our consciences; nor can we *submit them* to any other rules, but *God, and our own reason.* Dr. Ibbot's sermon before the Lord Mayor.

" After *proving and examining* all things, we ought to hold fast that which we find to be good and true; neither blindly submitting our judgment to human authority, nor making our *own opinion* the *standard* of that of other men. In fine, we should earnestly contend for *that faith*, and form of sound doctrine, which was *once for all* delivered to the *first Christians*, and endeavour to *preserve* it in its *antient purity and simplicity*; by distinguishing the *genuine doctrine* of Christ and his Apostles, from the *traditionary enlargements*, with which, in every age, it has more or less been *clogged and blended.*" Dr. Stevenson's sermon at the Bishop of Hereford's visitation.

The reader will doubtless be pleased with the following extract from a sermon of that learned divine and philosopher Bishop Lowth.

" We ought to promote and to encourage the advancement of religious knowledge, and the *only* means by which it can be advanced; *freedom of inquiry.* Christianity has always *flourished or decayed* together with *learning and liberty*: it will ever stand or fall with them. It is therefore of the *utmost* importance to the cause of *true religion*, that it be *submitted to an open and impartial examination*; that

that every *disquisition* concerning it be allowed it's *free* course; that even the malice of it's enemies should have it's full scope, and try it's utmost strength of argument against it. What has been the consequence of all that licentious contradiction, with which the gospel has been received in these our times, and in this nation? Has it not given birth to such irrefragable apologies and convincing illustrations of our most holy religion, as no other age or nation ever produced? Let no one lightly entertain suspicions of any serious proposal for the advancement of religious knowledge, nor out of unreasonable prejudice endeavour to *obstruct* any *inquiry* that professes to aim at the farther illustration of that great scheme of the gospel in general, or *the removal of error*, in any part, in *faith*, in *doctrine*, in *practice*, or in *worship*. An opinion is not therefore false because it contradicts received notions: But whether true or false, let it be submitted to a fair *examination*: Truth must in the end be a gainer by it, and appear with the greater evidence. **Where freedom of inquiry is maintained and exercised under the direction of the sincere word of God, falsehood may perhaps triumph for a day, but to morrow truth will certainly prevail, and every succeeding day will confirm her superiority. By the blessing of God upon the free exercise of reason and private judgment, the labours of the learned have been greatly successful in promoting religious knowledge.**" Visitation sermon at Durham.

See also a late discourse before the General Convention, by the Reverend Doctor Smith, pages 35 and 36

I will add only one extract more. It shall not be taken from the production of a professed divine, but from the works of one whose authority will not be considered inferior to that of any other. The *great and excellent* Dr Hartley (as one of the first philosophers of the age styles him,) in his *observations on man*. Prop. 76th. speaking of the rule of faith, observes, "That it seems intirely useless to all good purposes, to the promotion of piety and benevolence, in the present state of things to form any creeds, articles or systems of faith, and to require an assent to these in words or writing" Why should future inquiries be confined? How can he (the subscriber) *inquire honestly* if they be? How can a person be properly qualified to study the word of God, and to search out it's meaning, who finds himself previously confined to interpret it in a particular manner? If the *subject matter* of the article be of *great* importance to be *understood* and *believed*, one may *presume*, that it is *plain*, and needs no article; if of *small* importance, why should it

it be made a *test*, or insisted upon? If it be a *difficult, abstruse* point, no one upon earth has *authority* to make an article concerning it. We are all brethren; there is no father, no master amongst us; we are helpers of, not lords over, each others faith. If we judge from other branches of learning, as natural philosophy, or physic, we shall there find, that the pure *evidence* of the *things themselves* is sufficient to overcome all opposition, after a due time."

In another place, he says - Let us suppose the person required to assent, or subscribe, to be a real earnest believer. It can scarce be supposed, that such a person should assent to any set of articles, so as honestly to affirm, that he would choose to express his own sense of the scripture language in these words. To strain either the scriptures, or the articles, must be a very ungrateful talk to an ingenuous man; and perhaps there may be so wide a difference in some instances in his opinion, that no straining can bring them together. And thus some of the most earnest believers are excluded from the Christian ministry, and from certain common privileges in society, by a method, which suffers nominal wicked Christians to pass without difficulty.

" If it be objected, that, unless preachers subscribe, they may teach different doctrines; I answer, that they do this, though they do subscribe; and that in the most important practical points. If the scriptures cannot yet produce a true unity of opinion on account of our present ignorance, and the weakness and wickedness of our natures, how should articles do this? Men can put as different senses upon articles, as upon texts, and so dispute without end. Which evidently appears to have been the case in the primitive church. Every decision, as soon as settled, became the source of a new division between persons, who yet still agreed to the foregoing decision in words; till at last, the whole efficacy and spirit of Christianity, was lost in mere verbal disputes. But the best answer is, that preachers ought entirely to confine themselves to practical subjects, the descriptions of the virtues and the vices, with the motives for and against each, the directions to attain the virtues, and avoid the vices; and that in all the various real circumstances of human life. Learned enquiries have their use undoubtedly; but they are much better communicated to the learned world by the press, than to a mixed assembly by the pulpit. It is a kind of sacrilege to rob God's flock of the nourishment due to them from public preachings, and in it's stead to run out upon questions, that minister no profit to the hearers, at least to far the greatest part."

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“ Since God is all-powerful, all-wise, and all good, these attributes must ever turn the scale to their own side. We need not fear therefore, but that true knowledge will at last be increased and prevail, that the wise and good will still stand, the wicked be silenced and converted, and the church of Christ fill the whole earth. It is a great insult offered to the truths of religion, to suppose that they want the same kind of assistance, as impostures, human projects, or worldly designs. Let every man be allowed to think, speak, and write, freely; and then the errors will combat one another, and leave truth unhurt.”

“ Though creeds, articles, &c. &c. seem to have no use now, but even to be prejudicial to the cause of truth in themselves; yet it may be necessary to submit to some form of this kind in *certain cases*. It may be, and probably is the truth, that in the early ages of the church, whilst Christians were Judaizers, entangled in externals, gross in their conceptions, &c. these forms were necessary, *caeteris manentibus*. But now they grow old, and seem ready to die away, and to give place to the worship of God *in spirit and in truth*; in which there is no *Papist, Protestant, Lutheran, Calvinist, Trinitarian, Unitarian, Mystic, Methodist, &c.* but all these distinctions are carried away like the chaff of the summer threshing floors.”

I have now freely, and I hope not without some success endeavoured to support a cause which appears to me most interesting to the prosperity of our church and of Christianity in general. I have been under no other influence, than an earnest and sincere desire to vindicate the sacred rights of private judgment, to turn the attention of Protestants to their original principles, and to point out to Christians the means of uniting in one happy and blessed society, by adhering to the plain truths and duties of the gospel, and leaving open to candid discussion and free inquiry, all subjects of a dark, intricate, and disputable nature. Having performed what duty and conscience required, I leave to the candid and the impartial to decide, how far what has been advanced, is agreeable to reason, the spirit of that religion we profess, and the best interests of our church.

