

JONATHAN SWIFT.

1667-1745.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY.*

THIS day being set apart to acknowledge our belief in the Eternal Trinity, I thought it might be proper to employ my present discourse entirely upon that subject; and I hope to handle it in such a manner that the most ignorant among you may return home better informed of your duty in this great point than probably you are at present.

It must be confessed that, by the weakness and indiscretion of busy, or at best of well-meaning people, as well as by the malice of those who are enemies to all revealed religion, and are not content to possess their own infidelity in silence without communicating it, to the disturbance of mankind—I say, by these means, it must be confessed that the doctrine of the Trinity hath suffered very much, and made Christianity suffer along with it. For these two things must be granted: first, that men of wicked lives would be very glad there were no truth in Christianity at all; and, secondly, if they can pick out any one single article in the Christian religion which appears not agreeable to their own corrupted reason, or to the arguments of those bad people who follow the trade of seducing others, they presently conclude that the truth of the whole Gospel must sink along with that one article; which is just as wise as if a man should say, because he dislikes one law of his country he will therefore observe no law at all; and yet that one law may be very reasonable in itself, although he does not allow it, or does not know the reason of the law-givers.

Thus it hath happened with the great doctrine of the Trinity, which word is indeed not in the Scripture, but was a term of art invented in the earlier times to express the doctrine by a single word, for the sake of brevity and convenience. The doctrine, then, as delivered in Holy Scripture, though not exactly in the same words, is very short, and amounts only to this: that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are each of them God, and that there is but one God. For as to the word persons, when we say there are three persons; and as to those other explanations in the Athanasian creed this day read to you (whether compiled by Athanasius or not), they were taken up three hundred years after Christ to expound this doctrine, and I will tell you upon what occasion. About that time there

sprang up a heresy of people called Arians, from one Arius, the leader of them. These denied our Saviour to be God, although they allowed all the rest of the Gospel, wherein they were more sincere than their followers among us. Thus the Christian world was divided into two parts, till at length, by the zeal and courage of St Athanasius, the Arians were condemned in a general council, and a creed formed upon the true faith, as St Athanasius hath settled it. This creed is now read at certain times in churches, which, although it is useful for edification to those who understand it, yet, since it contains some nice and philosophical points which few people can comprehend, the bulk of mankind is obliged to believe no more than the Scripture doctrine, as I have already delivered it, because that creed was intended only as an answer to the Arians in their own way, who were very subtle disputers.

But this heresy having revived in the world about a hundred years ago, and continued ever since, not out of zeal to truth, but to give a loose to wickedness by throwing off all religion, several divines, in order to answer the cavils of these adversaries to truth and morality, began to find out further explanations of this doctrine of the Trinity by rules of philosophy; which have multiplied controversies to such a degree as to beget scruples that have perplexed the minds of many sober Christians, who otherwise could never have entertained them.

I must, therefore, be bold to affirm that the method taken by many of those learned men to defend the doctrine of the Trinity hath been founded upon a mistake.

It must be allowed that every man is bound to follow the rules and discretion of that measure of reason which God hath given him; and indeed he cannot do otherwise, if he will be sincere, or act like a man. For instance, if I should be commanded by an angel from heaven to believe it is midnight at noon-day, yet I could not believe him. So if I were directly told in Scripture that three are one and one is three, I could not conceive or believe it in the natural common sense of that expression, but must suppose that something dark or mystical was meant, which it pleased God to conceal from me and from all the world. Thus in the text, "There are three that bear record," etc. Am I capable of knowing and defining what union and what distinction there may be in the divine nature, which possibly may be hid from the angels themselves? Again, I see it plainly declared in Scripture that there is but one God, and yet I find our Saviour

* "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one" (John v. 7).

claiming the prerogative of God in knowing men's thoughts, in saying, "He and His Father are one," and "Before Abraham was, I am." I read that the disciples worshipped Him; that Thomas said to Him, "My Lord and my God;" and St John, chap. i., "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." I read likewise that the Holy Ghost bestowed the power of working miracles, and the gift of tongues, which, if rightly considered, is as great a miracle as any, that a number of illiterate men should of a sudden be qualified to speak all the languages then known in the world, such as could be done by the inspiration of God alone. From these several texts, it is plain that God commands us to believe there is a union, and there is a distinction; but what that union, or what that distinction, is, all mankind are equally ignorant, and must continue so, at least till the day of judgment, without some new revelation.

But because I cannot conceive the nature of this union and distinction in the divine nature, am I therefore to reject them as absurd and impossible, as I would if any one told me that three men are one, and one man is three? We are told that a man and his wife are one flesh; this I can comprehend the meaning of, yet, literally taken, it is a thing impossible. But the apostle tells us, "We see but in part, and we know but in part;" and yet we would comprehend all the secret ways and workings of God.

Therefore I shall again repeat the doctrine of the Trinity, as it is positively affirmed in Scripture: that God is there expressed in three different names—as Father, as Son, and as Holy Ghost; that each of these is God, and that there is but one God. But this union and distinction are a mystery utterly unknown to mankind.

This is enough for any good Christian to believe on this great article, without ever inquiring any further. And this can be contrary to no man's reason, although the knowledge of it is hid from him.

But there is another difficulty of great importance among those who quarrel with the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as with several other articles of Christianity; which is, that our religion abounds in mysteries, and these they are so bold as to revile as cant, imposture, and priestcraft. It is impossible for us to determine for what reasons God thought fit to communicate some things to us in part, and leave some part a mystery; but so it is in fact, and so the Holy Scriptures tell us in several places; for instance, the resurrection and change of our bodies are called mysteries by St Paul; our Saviour's incarnation is another: the kingdom of God is called a mystery by our Saviour, to be only known to His disciples; so is faith and the word of God by St Paul. I omit many others. So that to declare against all mysteries,

without distinction or exception, is to declare against the whole tenor of the New Testament.

There are two conditions that may bring a mystery under suspicion. First, when it is not taught and commanded in Holy Writ; or, secondly, when the mystery turns to the advantage of those who preach it to others. Now, as to the first, it can never be said that we preach mysteries without warrant from Holy Scripture, although I confess this, if the Trinity may have sometimes been explained by human invention, which might perhaps better have been spared. As to the second, it will not be possible to charge the Protestant priesthood with proposing any temporal advantage to themselves by broaching, or multiplying, or preaching of mysteries. Does this mystery of the Trinity, for instance, and the descent of the Holy Ghost bring the least profit or power to the preachers? No; it is as great a mystery to themselves as it is to the meanest of their hearers; and may be rather a cause of humiliation, by putting their understanding in that point upon a level with the most ignorant of their flock. It is true, indeed, the Roman Church hath very much enriched herself by trading in mysteries, for which they have not the least authority from Scripture, and which were fitted only to advance their own temporal wealth and grandeur, such as transubstantiation, the worshipping of images, indulgences for sins, purgatory, and masses for the dead, with many more. But it is the perpetual talent of those who have ill-will to our Church, or a contempt for all religion, taken up by the wickedness of their lives, to charge us with the errors and corruptions of Popery, which all Protestants have thrown off near two hundred years; whereas, those mysteries held by us have no prospect of power, pomp, or wealth, but have been ever maintained by the universal body of true believers from the days of the apostles, and will be so to the resurrection; neither will the gates of hell prevail against them.

It may be thought, perhaps, a strange thing that God should require us to believe mysteries, while the reason or manner of what we are to believe is above our comprehension, and wholly concealed from us; neither doth it appear at first sight that the believing or not believing them doth concern either the glory of God or contribute to the goodness or wickedness of our lives. But this is a great and dangerous mistake. We see what a mighty weight is laid upon faith both in the Old and New Testament. In the former we read how the faith of Abraham is praised. Who could believe that God would raise from him a great nation, at the very same time that he was commanded to sacrifice his only son and despair of any other issue? And this was to him a great mystery. Our Saviour is perpetually preaching faith to His disciples, or reproaching them with the want of it; and St Paul produceth numerous examples of the wonders done

by faith. And all this is highly reasonable; for faith is an entire dependence upon the truth, the power, the justice, and the mercy of God, which dependence will certainly incline us to obey Him in all things. So that the great excellency of faith consisteth in the consequence it hath upon our actions; as, if we depend upon the truth and wisdom of a man, we shall certainly be more disposed to follow his advice. Therefore, let no man think that he can lead as good a moral life without faith as with it; for this reason, because he who hath no faith cannot by the strength of his own reason or endeavours so easily resist temptation as the other who depends upon God's assistance in the overcoming his frailties, and is sure to be rewarded for ever in heaven for his victory over them. Faith, says the apostle, is the evidence of things not seen. He means that faith is a virtue by which everything commanded us by God to believe appears evident and certain to us, although we do not see it, nor can conceive it; because, by faith, we entirely depend upon the truth and power of God.

It is an old and true distinction that things may be above our reason without being contrary to it. Of this kind are the power, the nature, and the universal presence of God, with innumerable other points. How little do those who quarrel with mysteries know of the commonest actions of nature? The growth of an animal, of a plant, or of the smallest seed, is a mystery to the wisest among men. If an ignorant person were told that a loadstone would draw iron at a distance, he might say it was a thing contrary to

his reason, and could not believe it before he saw it with his eyes.

The manner whereby the soul and body are united and how they are distinguished is wholly unaccountable to us. We see but one part, and yet we know we consist of two; and this is a mystery we cannot comprehend any more than that of the Trinity.

From what hath been said it is manifest that God did never command us to believe, nor His ministers to preach, any doctrine which is contrary to the reason He hath pleased to endow us with; but, for His own wise ends, has thought fit to conceal from us the nature of the thing He commands, thereby to try our faith and obedience, and increase our dependence upon Him.

It is highly probable that if God should please to reveal unto us this great mystery of the Trinity, or some other mysteries in our holy religion, we should not be able to understand them, unless He would at the same time think fit to bestow on us some new powers or faculties of the mind, which we want at present, and are reserved till the day of resurrection to life eternal. "For now," as the apostle says, "we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face."

Thus we see the matter is brought to this issue; we must either believe what God directly commandeth us in Holy Scripture, or we must wholly reject the Scripture and the Christian religion which we pretend to profess. But this, I hope, is too desperate a step for any of us to make.

SIR ROBERT WALPOLE.*

1676-1745.

ON A MOTION FOR ADDRESSING THE KING FOR HIS REMOVAL.†

[SANDYS, the leader of the opposition against Walpole, made a long speech to the effect that Walpole had been at the head of affairs for twenty years, and that the people were tired of him as a minister, and hated him as a man; he concluded by moving "that an humble address be presented to his Majesty, that he would be

graciously pleased to remove the Right Honourable Sir Robert Walpole, Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, First Commissioner for executing the office of Treasurer of the Exchequer, Chancellor and Under Treasurer of the Exchequer, and one of his Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council, from his Majesty's presence and councils for ever."]

It has been observed by several gentlemen, in vindication of this motion, that if it should be carried, neither my life, liberty, nor estate will be affected. But do the honourable gentlemen consider my character and reputation as of no moment? Is it no imputation to be arraigned before this House, in which I have sat forty years, and to have my name transmitted to posterity with disgrace and infamy? I will not conceal my sentiments, that to be named in Par-

* "The age of Walpole was an age rather of keen debate than impassioned eloquence. . . . They were emphatically business speakers, eagerly intent upon their object, but destitute of any principles or feelings which could raise them above the level of most selfish minds, engaged for a desperate struggle for office and power."—C. A. Goodrich.

† A speech delivered in the House of Commons, February 1741.