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A
DISCOURSE
ON THE
ABUSE OF THE TALENT
OF
DISPUTATION in RELIGION,

Particularly as practiced by

Dr. PRIESTLY, Mr. GIBBON;

And others of the modern Sect of Philosophic Christians.

Preached in the CATHEDRAL CHURCH, NORWICH,
at the primary Visitation of the Right
Reverend LEWIS Lord Bishop of the
Diocese, on June 23, 1784.

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First Epistle to TIMOTHY, I. V.

*The end of the Commandment is Charity,
out of a pure heart, and of a good con-
science and faith unfeigned, from which
some having swerved, have turned aside
unto vain jangling.*

I NEED not mention to this intelligent and learned audience, that Charity, in the extensive sense wherein the sacred writers use the word, includes the practice of all the social duties of men to each other, not only as men, but as rational men, improved by civil and religious institutions, in order to render them more friendly fellow-creatures, and more virtuous fellow-christians: Now this better instruction of men in the whole circle of their practical duties, it was the very end and aim of the revealed commandment by Christ to promote, as St. Paul here in the text reminds us “The end of the commandment (says he) is charity;” and then he immediately proceeds to point out some of those chief qualifications of the mind and heart, which if they accompany our en-
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deavours after the end of the christian commandment, will assist us in our *speculations* as well as *practice*, and thereby give to our acquisitions the summit of perfection. Of these qualifications he mentions three, namely, “That our motives and endeavours should proceed out of a pure heart, and a good conscience, and a faith unfeigned;” or in other words, That *first* of all the *intentions* of men should be sincerely directed to this object of promoting the end of the Christian Commandment, and not be perverted either by any views of self-interest or by any conceited notions of knowledge, but proceed as out of a pure and upright heart: *Secondly* that the *exertion of the faculties* of men should correspond with their intentions, that both the words of their lips and of their pens, as well as the works of their hands, should be conscientiously guided by the purity of their intentions: and also *thirdly* that both of those preceding qualifications should be directed by a clear *conviction of their heads* and understanding. The propriety of this admonition is evident; for purity of intention is not of itself a sufficient guide to action; because men may mean well, yet through indiscretion or ignorance may nevertheless act ill; therefore St. Paul adds in the text as a third and conclusive qualification, necessary to give
force

force and effect to the former two, “ that Christians should have a faith unfeigned,” that is, a clear conviction of their understanding and of their rational powers concerning the nature and excellence of the Christian speculative doctrine as well as practical commandment, so far at least as they tend to promote those duties of men, comprehended under the word charity. Faith, belief and rational conviction are only different degrees of the same operations of the mind and intellectual faculties, founded on such competent evidence, as men are able to obtain in every case, such as they are generally guided by in life, and such as is suitable to the nature of a revealed religion : this then is plainly a third necessary qualification to promote the end of the Christian Commandment*. Where any of these three qualifications are wanting in a Christian teacher or writer ; where the intention of the

* I understand the Greek word Πείσις as meaning *persuasion* or *conviction* of any kind, and not as restrained to the more limited sense of *Faith* : it is indeed generally, if not always, rendered by *Faith* in our translation ; but this sense, I apprehend, was adopted by our translators chiefly, because they found *Fides* in the Latin vulgate : but neither the Latin nor English word seem sufficiently to express the extensive meaning of the Greek word. *Conviction* is that approbation of the mind arising from the fullest evidence, which it is possible for human rea-

the heart is not pure and sincere in its search after truth; where the reasoning of the tongue

son to receive, such as sensible evidence by the eyes or ears, or by self-evident truths, or such demonstrative conclusions as are deduced from self-evident truths in conjunction with sensible ones, as in mathematics, and such sciences as are connected with them, i. e. astronomy, &c. ; which evidence is by all considered to be *certain* and *indubitable*. *Persuasion* arises from the next degree of evidence to that producing *conviction* ; and is derived from *very probable* proofs only, such as in oratory, history and in those sciences, which the ancients called *στοχαστικά*, wherein we can only approximate to truth, and indeed in most of the concerns of life. *Faith* is both in popular language and also by Mr. Lock considered as the approbation, which the mind gives, not to truths of which it is capable to judge itself, but which it acquiesces in upon the credit and trust it has in some other person's evidence and knowledge. But there are no such distinctions to be made concerning the greek word *πίστις*, this equally and indifferently means every one of these kinds of approbation or persuasion ; and not only every kind of conviction itself, but also still farther every kind of *proof* or *evidence*, which produces that conviction. Thus Quintilian shews, that it was used to signify every kind of *evidence*, which could be produced before a court of justice. *Αποδείξις* (*demonstratio*) est evidens probatio—per ea quæ certa sunt, *fidem* dubiis afferens, neque enim certa incertis declarantur: hæc omnia generaliter *πίστις* appellant; quod etsi propria interpretatione dicere *fidem* possumus, apertius tamen *probationem* interpretabimur. 5. 10. Demosthenes uses *πίστιν ἐπιτίθεσθαι*, *fidem dare*, *jurare* to signify oaths, which are reckoned among the strongest kinds of evidence : and Aristotle employs *πίστις* to mean proofs even of an astronomic kind by ocular ob-
servations

tongue and pen is not conscientiously guided by such a purity of intention ; or where both of them are not directed by a clear conviction of one's own head ; the necessary consequence must be, that instead of convincing others to their edification, a man will himself swerve from the end of the Christian commandment, and be turned aside unto vain jangling and uninstruative disputation; which tend only to pervert the cause of truth, and to perplex both himself and all others.

The justness of this admonition of St. Paul concerning the necessity of these three qualifications in the text to guard against the abuse of the talent of disputation, christianity

servations (*de Cælo*. 2. 12.) Quintilian, we see thought *Fides* of too limited a sense to express $\pi\iota\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$, why then should it be tyed down in Scripture to the still more limited sense of *faith*, without including all kinds of persuasion or conviction ? I fear, that both unbelievers and enthusiasts have drawn unwarrantable conclusions from the very restrained sense of our word *faith* : for while unbelievers on the one hand have contended hence, that the evidence of Christianity depends on implicit faith, not on argument or rational conviction; Enthusiasts on the other hand have equally contended, that a christian is able to atone for the badness of his actions by the strength of his faith, as if they thought themselves entitled to the most merit in believing, wherever they found the least evidence and conviction; otherwise one cannot well conceive what merit they can claim from believing, where the evidence of itself, if fairly considered, cannot fail to produce conviction.

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has had repeated cause to acknowledge in all ages from its beginning: It has sustained a variety of attacks from different quarters, which through want of some one or all of these three advantages in its adversaries, have been attended with no better success, than to convince the intelligent part of mankind, that though truth may be misrepresented, yet it cannot be altogether subverted by the perverse disputings of men, which the Apostle here styles vain jangling. To enumerate the different and opposite conduct of the several adversaries of christianity in different ages would require too much time; it is sufficient to observe in general, that having in the beginning of the present century been beaten out of all their pretences for absolute unbelief concerning the origin, nature and utility of the Christian Revelation, they seem now desirous, at the close of this memorable century, to adopt a kind of compromise with christianity; for they now affect to style themselves rational christians and philosophers: that is, they pretend to retain some parts of the Christian Revelation, such as they judge most proper; but to reject other parts of it; and thus they would form some new and peculiar Christian system of their own, differing however according to each man's own philosophic fancy.

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Just as the Eclectic sect of philosophers in prophane times adhered altogether to no one philosophic sect, but selected some of their tenets out of one sect, and some out of another, and thus formed a motley and incoherent mixture out of all: or just as the most antient Christian sect, called the Gnostics, intermixed Christian and Heathen opinions together; so in like manner our modern sect of rational Christian Philosophers pursue a similar plan, but with just as little success; and this because they daily prove themselves to want some one or all of those three qualifications mentioned in the text, either a pure *intention* of the heart to search out truth in their speculations; or else a *conscientious adherence* to the reality of facts and to the right sense of words to which they refer; or else a clear *conviction* of their own understanding concerning the origin and progress of christianity, the nature of its speculative doctrine or its practical tendency to promote the end of the revealed commandment. Hence accordingly this latest class of philosophic Christians is found to end in no more convincing and certain conclusions than the many others, who have gone before them, under the different names of Arians, Sabellians and such like: in which latest philosophic class Dr. Priestly has rendered himself the most conspicuous in his History of the
Corruptions

Corruptions of Christianity. But as this revived plan of the ancient Gnostics, in rejecting or admitting just as much and no more of the orthodox Christian tenets, than shall suit each man's own speculative opinion, could not be recommended to the public except by the aid of misrepresentation; so accordingly we find, that our modern philosophers have dealt as largely in this way as that more ancient Gnostic sect, at the beginning of Christianity: the ancient sectaries, we are informed by Eusebius, altered and corrupted the *words* of Scripture in order to make them suit with their own opinions*; and the modern philosophic sect do much the same thing; for they alter the *obvious sense* of scriptural words, in order to make them favour their own conceptions. Some portion of genius however is necessary to render even misrepresentation itself plausible; accordingly this class of writers is found powerful enough in the faculty of perplexing a cause, in the art of words and the talent of disputation; the produce of which medley of ability and infirmity has too often a very imposing appearance in its favor with those readers, whose own inattention has disabled them from discerning the wide difference, between the talent of separating

* Hist. Eccl. 5. c. ult.

truth from falsehood, and that of confounding both together. The investigation of truth is a slow paced labour of patience, which gains its object only by degrees ; but the art of confusion proves most successful, when like a rushing muddy torrent, it can level all distinctions and boundaries in a moment ; and of course by thus disdaining all confinement, it cannot but often turn aside from those three qualifications necessary to be attended to by a teacher of mankind, the intention of the mind, the truth of one's assertions and facts, and a clear conviction of the head concerning the necessary conclusions resulting from any argument. Yet this abuse of the art of language and reasoning, though a misfortune, is a misfortune incident to human nature only in common with the abuse of all other blessings of our existence ; birth and wealth and strength, commerce and government, power and liberty, all social and all liberal arts are liable to the same abuses ; and by the possessors of them swerving from propriety in the application, they may be diverted from the beneficial ends intended by such human advantages. This misfortune arises from the frailty of our nature, so that the very same means, the same art of words and persuasion, by which Christianity was at first

preached and established, may be now employed to perplex and undermine it: but intelligent men will discern the difference between the right use and the abuse of any human qualification; to define exactly the limits between the two is impossible, yet there will generally be some inherent strong marks, whereby they may be known; “by their fruits ye shall know them.”

With respect indeed to the *intention* of the heart, this by being latent within, is the most difficult to discover, as well as the most disagreeable to display to others; yet even this will in some degree be manifested of itself by its effects, just as an intent in law is manifested by the overt acts which follow it. Hence therefore wherever we meet with continual misrepresentations in any writer, and these all leaning the same way, all in favour of a man's own cause, how can any one fail being tempted to conclude, that these must have been intended, and not be the effects of mere over-sight and accident? The same again when every fact or testimony is omitted, which makes against a writer, and those only produced which are favourable to him; or when we often meet with a more than ordinary insolidity of reasoning in those same persons, who on other occasions reason with justness and accuracy;
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in such cases candor must arrest its favourable judgment of a man's intention, and even Christian charity itself, which teaches us to hope all things and to believe all things in favour of others, must then, I fear, stop short at hope, without advancing to belief.

So also, in regard to the *second* article of a *conscientious exertion of one's faculties*, had those writers in every age, who have turned their philosophic enquiries to the nature of the Christian doctrine concerning the deity, had they kept in view as they ought, the admonitions of St. Paul in the text, they would not have abused, as they too often have, the gracious gifts of God, by turning the arts of language and reasoning into mere arts of perplexed disputation and vain jangling. Thus for instance among the many philosophic disputants, who have succeeded each other since the commencement of Christianity, two of the most conspicuous classes (as I said before) are those of the ancient Gnostics, and our modern rational Christian Philosophers, whom I may call a modern sect of Gnostics; for they have both affected the same style and title in pretending, that they alone of all men deserve the name of clear sighted *learned* men. That ancient sect of Gnostics, being struck with admiration at the rational notions concerning

the Deity in the Christian Religion, as well as its solid morality (both which have indeed been the admiration of every infidel ever since) yet being deluded by a conceited opinion concerning their deep learning and philosophy, they pretended, that the orthodox Christian doctrine concerning the divinity of Christ was not sufficiently sublime; they undertook therefore to amend and improve it by the addition of philosophic opinions of their own, in order to render it more complex and remote from all vulgar notions, and more suitable (they thought) to a *merely speculative* turn of mind. Our modern Gnostics have manifested a similar inclination to alter and amend the orthodox tenets of Christianity, especially with respect to the divinity of Christ; and from a similar motive, a pretence of correcting vulgar notions, in order to render them more conformable to their own *speculative* refinements, rather than to any greater *practical* use, but which they dignify however with the title of rational and philosophic improvements: while in fact the pretended corrections by both sects amount to nothing better than doubtful conjectures of their own, in opposition to the plain evidence of words and facts in scripture, according to the best critical interpretation of the Greek language now within our power; and
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this confirmed by its being agreeable to the sense, which (as we find) was put upon the same scriptural phrases, while Greek was a living language. In one point however the ancient and modern sects have differed, although they agree in so many others: they differ in this, that the ancient Gnostics endeavoured to enoble the dignity of the Christ in a manner, they thought, more consistent with divinity than among the orthodox themselves; whereas our modern Gnostics of the present times take the opposite road, and seek to abase the person of Christ, to deprive him of all divinity and reduce him to a mere mortal man. Now for confirmation of this their opinion concerning the mere humanity of Christ, the latter pretend to appeal, not merely to the words of Scripture, but also to the belief of that ancient sect of Gnostics and other Christian sectaries of the first ages; than which a more ill-founded misrepresentation was never attempted to be offered to the public: for, as I observed before, the ancient Gnostics and other sects sought to exalt the ~~divinity~~ of the pre-existent Christ higher than any others, and neither they, nor in fact any one Christian sect whatever of the first ages, ever held any such opinion as the mere humanity of Christ; I mean in that sense, in which it is understood by our modern

dignity

modern Gnostic Philosophers, that is, as if humanity extended throughout the whole life of Jesus, from his incarnation to his passion. What the Gnostics held was this; they sought to exalt the dignity of the Christ; and they conceived it to be an abasement of that dignity, for the pre-existent divine Christ to be incarnate and born like man; therefore they pretended, that Jesus was indeed mere man from his incarnation to his baptism; but at that time by the descent of the Holy Spirit of God, an union was formed between the pre-existent divinity of the Christ or Savior and the humanity of Jesus; which was dissolved again, as they supposed, and for a similar reason before his passion. The very same likewise were the notions of every other antient Christian sect, which in any respect whatever held the mere humanity of Jesus; namely that this separate humanity continued only for a time, that is, until his baptism and no longer: and there is no sufficient proof extant in any author whatever, that the Nazarenes, or Ebionites differed in this respect from the other Christian sects, as may be easily proved to the satisfaction of any impartial man; nay indeed it is expressly pointed out by Epiphanius, that the opinion held by these sects concerning the humanity of Jesus was either nearly or exactly the

the same with that of the Gnostics. If this fact be true, then it is plain, that all these sects differed from the orthodox chiefly with respect to the time, when the union of divinity and humanity took place, not with respect to the fact itself and the universal belief of the reality of such an union, as well among the Christian sectaries as the orthodox; the latter conceiving this union to take place at the incarnation, the Gnostics and other sects not until the baptism of Jesus.* Notwithstanding this our philosophic Christians have not scrupled to affirm and have repeatedly

* I use *Orthodox* in opposition only to *sectary*, and do not mean the particular tenets of any present established Church. The evidence on which the above assertions are made will be collected more at large in the 4th vol. of *Critical Observations on books antient and modern*, sold by B. White, Fleet-street. At present it may be sufficient to observe, that with respect to the Gnostics it is proved by almost every chapter in Irenæus, that they held the divine pre-existence of the Christ and Saviour and his union with Jesus at Baptism: that the Nazarenes and Ebionites held nearly the same tenets will be plain from the following passages in Epiphanius. Nazaræos Ebion proxime consequitur, *eadem que cum illis dogmata tenuit*; quod horrendum monstrum et multiplex——rursus ad exitium humani generis erupit: licet ex illorum disciplina prodierit, nonnulla tamen, præter-quam ab illis doceantur.asseruit, &c. In giving an abstract of the contents of the Gospel used by the Ebionites, he says it contained to this effect “Cum ascendisset (Jesus) ex aqua, aperti sunt cœli et vidit spiritum dei sanctum columbæ specie descendentis et intrantis in sese, et vox reddita de cœlo dicens,

dicens, *Tu es filius meus dilectus, in te mihi complacui*, et iterum, *Ego hodie genui te* [ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκα σε]—nunc ad inchoatam de Ebionitis narrationem regredior—Jesum, ut diximus, *merum hominem* existisse putant, in eoque rescdisse Christum, qui columbæ specie sit illapsus, cum eoque conjunctus [ἐν εἰδει περιστέρως κατὰ βεβηκότα καὶ συναρθεύτῃ αὐτ.] id quod aliis insuper Hæreticis placuisse reperio. Ita Jesum ex utriusque parentis semine prodatum ipsum devenisse Christum. Rursum vero negant ipsum esse *hominem* ex responso salvatoris “Hi sunt fratres mei et mater mea, qui faciunt voluntatem *Patris mei*.” Hinc ille præstigiis instructus Ebion varias se in effigies deformat, ut esse monstrum quoddam appareat sicut ab initio dictum est. By Epiphanius’s giving at the beginning the same name of *monstrum* to those tenets, which Ebion held in common with the Nazarenes, it should seem, that the union of the pre-existent Christ with Jesus at his baptism was one of those which were common to both sects ; he thus goes on. Duos a Deo constitutos asserunt Christum et Diabolum ; Jesum vero electum fuisse, itaque dei filium in Electione appellatum, quia Christus in eum delapsus est columbæ figura. Negant vero a deo patre ipsum fuisse genitum sed creatum [καὶ φασκousι γεγέννηκότα ἀλλὰ ἐκτισθῆαι] sicut unum ex Archangelis, majorem autem illis existentem, et *dominantem* [κυριον] super Angelos et omnia a creatore formata——Qui Ebionitæ vocati sunt, secus ac Ebion ipse, nescio quam in cœlo virtutem ex Deo obtinuisse Filium asserunt. *De Hæres.* Now let readers determine as they please concerning the degree of divinity, which Ebion attributed to the Christ either before or after the union with Jesus at baptism ; yet thus much is clear, that he did not consider Jesus as being *mere man* any longer than his baptism : and there is no reason to think, that this was not likewise the tenet of the Nazarenes. Another article also appears equally clear from Epiphanius, namely that the later Ebionites after Elxai went still farther, and maintained, that Jesus was born mere man of Mary only ; for that the Christ had descended and become united with Adam and
several

repeatedly exerted their pens to maintain, that not only the first Christian sectaries disbelieved in the divinity of Jesus, but also even the greater part of the primitive Christians themselves; and hence they have sought occasion to accuse orthodox teachers as corruptors of Christianity. If we could suppose, that they knew they were asserting a fact, which was not true, and that they purposely

*in some degree
ably united* several others, ^{that} and by means of the holy spirit of God ^{but certainly at his Baptism} *divinity was pre-*
with Jesus ~~at~~ ^{at his incarnation, as it related} in what fol-
lows the last sentence above quoted, and is confirmed by
the account of the Ebionites in Eusebius. As to Arte-
mon, Theodotus, Beryllus, Photinus and those called
by Epiphanius *Alogi* in general, they were all followers
of the Gnostics and Ebionities with some variations,
in metaphysical expressions at least, more perhaps than
in substance, and we find the same tenet of an union of
the Christ with Jesus pervading them all. Epiphanius
begins his account of Theodotus, by saying that he was
a shoot [*αποσπασμα*] from the heresy of the Alogi: for
which reason he enters but little into his opinions, hav-
ing before often stated the *common* opinions of all those
sects. But in the extracts from the doctrine of Theo-
dotus made by Clemens of Alexandria and published
along with that author, we there find clearly, that
Theodotus also held the pre-existence of the Christ and
his union with Jesus at Baptism, like the others: and
indeed all, who held this doctrine, of necessity supposed
the Christ to be divine in some degree or other both before
the baptism and after; so that the modern opinion con-
cerning the humanity of Jesus through life, has not the
least countenance in its favour from the tenets of any
one of the antient sectaries, how much less then from
the antient orthodox Christians?

misrepresented the evidence concerning it ; this conduct would verify the importance of the Apostle's advice concerning the necessity of that *second* qualification, of a *conscientious exertion of our faculties* to preserve ourselves free from dissimulation or concealment, when not only the truth, but the whole truth ought to be produced : and it would at the same time serve as an example, how often truth at the last comes out, and makes a just distinction between the use and abuse of the talent of disputation. However, I make no such presumption, and am sincerely convinced, that our philosophic sect had no knowledge of the above mentioned circumstance in the belief of the ancient sectaries, viz. that they confined the humanity of Jesus to the time of his existence before his baptism ; but they certainly ought to have known it, and also to have been very certain, that they knew every thing concerning the subject, before they proceeded such lengths, as to rank orthodox teachers among the corruptors of Christianity. Although this error may have arisen from a hasty inattention in those who at first proposed it, yet it must be a less pardonable inattention in others to have adopted it without sufficient examination, as appears indeed but too plainly both in this and many other instances ;

stances; and less excusable still if those examples of indiscretion should induce future writers of the same class to overlook the mistake on purpose, and thus all become assistants in some degree toward misleading the public and turning perhaps many from Christian belief of any kind.

This mistake then of theirs, proves the propriety of attending to the *third* qualification recommended by the Apostle, a very extensive knowledge of the head, and a clear *conviction of the understandings* of men concerning all the speculative doctrines as well as historic facts relative to Christianity, before any of them be brought to public censure: it will also serve as a specimen how often by the abuse of the talent of disputation, truth and falsehood may be confounded together even by those who do not intend it. For indeed what a superstructure of error have our philosophic Christians built upon that above mentioned mistake of theirs as the foundation; the whole of which falls to the ground at once, so soon as the foundation is taken away, by rectifying their misconception of that single fact concerning the humanity of Jesus? If, for instance, they pretend to find any difficulty or matter of objection against the belief of an union of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus; yet they

do not in the least remove the supposed difficulty by having recourse to the creeds of the antient sectaries, those favourite pure and primitive Christians: for they all believed in the same union; and the difference of time when they supposed that union to take place, cannot possibly make the least difference in a conception of the reality of the fact itself. Moreover, if it were actually true (as they contend) that a belief in the humanity of Jesus had been as universal among the first Christians as they pretend; yet if this also was restrained to the time before the baptism of Jesus, it can give no assistance to their own cause in maintaining the mere humanity of Jesus after his baptism: nay on the contrary by its thus appearing, that the whole tide of belief among excommunicated sectaries themselves was in favour of the divinity of Jesus after his baptism; this becomes a certain proof, that no such opinion as that of the mere humanity of Jesus during the whole of his life, could have possibly prevailed among the orthodox Christians of those ages. And still farther, if appeal to the antient sectaries, concerning their supposed belief of the humanity of Jesus after his baptism, be brought forward by themselves as a proof of the same belief among the orthodox, surely, they will not be so inconsistent, as now to change

change sides, and (since we have proved that those sectaries believed in the divinity of Jesus) refuse to admit this as any proof of the belief of the most ancient Christians in the same fact. How much insolidity of reasoning then and how many false conclusions have followed, through an indiscreet abuse of the talent of disputation, from the misconception of a single fact; which requires nothing more to rectify it than to read Irenæus's account of the Gnostics, Epiphanius's History of the Ebionites, and the extracts from Theodotus made by Clemens of Alexandria! If indeed any one should read only Augustin's Epitome of heresies, he might at first be inclined to conclude, that several of the Christian sectaries maintained the humanity of Jesus throughout the whole of his life: but it should be considered, that Augustin's brevity, by contracting often times his account of a whole heresy into a single sentence or two, necessarily led him to notice only some one striking feature of each sect, which distinguished it from the orthodox. If then a reader shall have recourse to the above-mentioned other writers, who have treated of the tenets of those sectaries more in detail; he will find that the Gnostics, Nazarenes, Ebionites, Theodotians and all their followers down to Photinus, had no conception of ever extend-
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ing the mere humanity of Jesus to any later period than his baptism : and that the same principle pervaded them all, namely that of enobling, not abasing the dignity of the Christ ; although indeed they modified it in several different ways, or at least delivered their sentiments in such a different manner, that if they themselves had formed no clear distinctions in sense, yet at least they did distinguish in metaphysical expressions. Now do these examples afford any favourable specimen of the critical, historical, or argumentative attention of our moderns, or any good presumption, that they would be able to interpret the words of Scripture itself with greater accuracy, than they have displayed in these instances ? or with more critical knowledge of language than orthodox teachers, or better than those ancient Christians themselves, whose explanation of scriptural phrases have been transmitted down to us, and were made at first while Greek was yet a living language ? Upon the whole does the modern philosophic sect appear to have any good reason to claim, that a clearer *conviction of their heads and understanding* is attached to the exertion of their own pens and faculties than among orthodox teachers ? We may surely at the very worst be able to say with
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the Poet *Iliacos intra muros peccatur et extra.*

In truth I am inclined to think, that the *policy* of our modern Gnostics is preferable to their accuracy, *to the conviction of their own understandings*, and to the force of their arguments against others. For they being willing to retain some parts of the Christian Doctrine, while they reject other parts ; but being not willing to expose themselves to the odium of presumption in rejecting any portion of the Gospel, and directly setting up their own philosophic speculation as being wiser than Revelation itself ; they could find no more specious method to secure their own opinions from public censure, than by denying the opinions of the orthodox to be contained in the words of scripture, or to have been believed in by the primitive Christians : and they could find no better method to prove this, than by giving a different sense to the words of scripture from that in which they always have, and ought to be understood according to the most critical skill in the Greek language ; and also by greedily catching hold of the supposed state of belief in the first Christian ages, and among the first Christian Sectaries as an argument in their favour. This may be political indeed, but is it not unjust to one's neighbour ? Is it candid

candid and impartial? Is it consistent with the end of the Christian Commandment, or with sincere enquirers after truth as they profess themselves to be? or is it not rather the specious refuge of such, as manifest an *intention* to turn the art of reasoning into a wilderness of disputation, in order to lose truth in the midst of it, instead of helping us to find it? whereby they become the better able to conceal their own presumption in attempting to reduce christianity to a philosophic system, by so puzzling and perplexing the cause, that superficial readers of modern times may not perhaps be easily able to find a right path through the labyrinth. But is this the part of men of real knowledge, who are to mend the understandings of us all, and to mend Christianity likewise? whose profound speculations profess to deal out Christian truths never heard of in the first Christian ages; and who boast of being able to give light to them, that now sit in darkness, in the shadow of death and religious corruption. Alas, true philosophy teaches a different lesson, and true philosophy does indeed demand the respect of all reasonable men; but it no longer deserves that name, than while it pursues its proper object, that of leading us to more certain knowledge and wisdom than we possessed before, and not merely of exchanging one doubtful truth for another :
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when directed to its true object it will teach us, that in all our investigations concerning the nature of the divine being and Christ, man's reason is soon lost in the immensity of the subject, and must at last repose its deepest speculations in the bosom of a rational humility; it may therefore just as well begin with a Christian humility, and this would have led towards candour and justice to the Christian labours of others. For between Christian and philosophic humility there is this difference, that the Christian begins his religious studies with it; but with the same humility the pride of the most sublime philosophy, if it proves to be indeed rational to the very last, must end; it must end with the same humble acknowledgement, that the nature as well as the ways of God are so much above the understanding of man, that they can be nothing better learned from philosophy than from what is written in the Revelation of God himself. But to suppose, that this Revelation was never rightly understood even by those who heard it from the mouths of the Apostles themselves or their immediate successors, is to suppose, that the divine spirit of truth, which promised to lead Christians into all truths, did its work so imperfectly, that it is reserved for the spirit of modern philosophy to set matters at rights

again: which even if it could be supposed without shaking the whole authority of Revelation, yet at the same time it excuses orthodox Christian teachers for having retained those original Christian errors. Our modern Gnostics then might just as well have asserted explicitly at once, that though for decency sake they place those errors to the account of Christian teachers, yet the defects, of which they complain, are defects in the original plan of Christianity itself; and which our modern Apostles have undertaken to correct. But it was plainly the business of Christian teachers only to preach that doctrine most obviously taught by the words of the antient Gospel; which was received as the true sense of them in the first and purest Christian ages, which may be even at present traced back to the earliest times in the writings of Christian authors still extant, and which is confirmed by history as well as by a critical skill in the Greek language: for the investigation of the true doctrine of Christ is an historic and critical rather than a philosophic subject of enquiry. It was the business of Christian teachers only to make known what Christianity actually was at its first publication by Christ and his Apostles; not to enquire what may be now made of it according

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ing to any man's opinion in order to suit his own particular taste ; nor yet what our rational Christians may think it ought to have been, in case their philosophic advice had been consulted. Christian teachers became the historians of this revealed religion, and in order to discharge their trust faithfully, they were forced to confine themselves to the truth of facts, and to the sense of phrases, as they actually found them to have been understood by the earliest Disciples of Christ: had they taken upon themselves to adulterate Christianity with opinions foreign to it ; and as Philo-Judæus did in the Mosaic religion, to assimilate it to the Greek Philosophy, so that the Jews themselves could no longer know their own religion, when exhibited in his writings ; Christian teachers might in that case have been justly accused of having handled the word of God deceitfully ; and our philosophic sect themselves would have been the first to make the accusation. If then there be any tenets, which philosophers can reasonably consider as errors still inherent in reformed Christianity, yet candor ought to acknowledge, that they are so interwoven with the very body of it, or at least arose in so early an age, that it was impossible for Christian teachers to distinguish them with certainty, much less to separate them from

original Christianity. But even taking Christian belief as it now is and has been, whether the good ends already produced by it and which it is daily producing more and more, would be promoted and not rather retarded by any new reformatations derived from Philosophical Theory, this is a matter too full of danger in practice to induce prudent men to try the event, and too full of doubt and difficulty even in speculation to induce reasonable men to attempt it. For who indeed can hope to collect such a new Christian system out of the Gospel, as shall be able to give better satisfaction to the different classes of men, if they do but attend to the fate of all the philosophic reformatations of orthodoxy by the Arians and others since the beginning of Christianity ; none of which have long survived their respective authors, or been received with satisfaction by posterity ? But thus much all men may see most clearly, that if any one shall compare the temper of modern times in war or peace, in the principles of commerce, society or legislation, with the manners of the most civilized Ancients in prophane ages, they will appear to differ as much as two different climates, or as the roughness of winter differs from the mildness of summer : to what can this be ascribed but to the benevolent influence of the Gospel

Gospel in its present state with all its infirmities ; which has been now so long about our path and about our bed and so intermixed in all our ways, in our thoughts and our institutions, that through the medium of religion it has by degrees brought men to the use of reason. Men of experience then and practice in the concerns of life will perhaps know where to stop, although speculative philosophers should not ; and while they find themselves so well at present, while they thus feel so many good effects, they will look back with comfort on that lamentation in Xenophon concerning the unruly wills of mankind in antient times. “ Alas how much more difficult is it to govern man than all other animals ! ” New systems of Christianity therefore will be probably left to those who dignify themselves with the title of rational Christians ; but who at the same time prove themselves to be inconsistent philosophers, while they thus apply the speculations of reason to the subject of divine truths, concerning which no man can possibly obtain any knowledge by the use and conviction of reason only without the information of Revelation ; and this was the very cause why the antient philosophers in prophane times ran into so many extravagant notions upon the same subject : Can the Moderns hope to
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do better in the present age of inconsistency, of visionary reformatations, metaphysical chicanery and popular delusion; which may probably produce as many bankrupts in Philosophic Theories of Christianity, as we daily see produced in commercial and political speculations? So long then as we confine ourselves strictly to teach the words and sense of scripture, as they have been fixed by the doctrine received in the earliest ages, we cannot but be thus far right; and even if the whole system of Christianity itself could be proved in the wrong, yet we ourselves at least cannot, who are only the faithful teachers of what the nature of that revealed law was at its first propagation, and not the formers of it. In the execution also of this our task we are employed upon a subject, which happily is within the compass of human understanding, that is in the investigation of the fact itself, what the doctrine of the revealed Gospel was at its origin and whether it be contained in the words of scripture; the latter is to be learned from the Gospel itself and a critical skill in the Greek language, the former from history and the earliest Christian writers still extant: in these points no man can fail to arrive at a sufficient *conviction* of his intellectual faculties, in case he does but make a *conscientious use* of them; and

and does not first hastily take up new opinions, before he has duly examined them, and then *intentionally* make all the testimonies of ancient writers bend to his own erroneous preconceptions. We see therefore to what degree the *conviction of our understanding* can arrive on these subjects, that it is founded on the most rational principles of investigation concerning *facts*, and the testimony of revelation concerning *truths*, not upon philosophic speculations concerning the internal nature of those truths respecting the Deity; for indeed the things of heaven who can or hath searched out? In the last point Christians, Philolophers and all must equally submit either with a religious or with a rational humility, as being a subject equally above the understandings of us all, in whatever different manner it shall be modified. Now on such a review, if the testimonies to the facts of the Christian Revelation, and if those articles of its doctrine, which are within the compass of our reason, shall appear to be of such a rational kind, as to justify our *faith* in those revealed truths which are above our understanding; we are at the same time *certain* also that no man can possibly arrive by mere speculation at any *conviction of his understanding* to the contrary of those divine truths thus revealed to us.

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It is therefore to be much lamented, that any abuse of the talent of disputation, notwithstanding St. Paul's admonition in the text, should still subsist concerning religious subjects in this enlightned age, and one which is truly philosophic with respect to all merely human subjects of knowledge, so that neither the more rational temper of the times, nor yet the admonition of scripture should have rendered enquiries concerning religion conformable in fact to that spirit of truth, which is too often only professed in words. This doubtless arises from the too great warmth of literary zeal ; but as scripture teaches, that the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God, so neither can a momentary display of an artful talent at disputation tend either to promote the end of the Christian commandment or ultimately of a man's own satisfaction, whenever it shall deviate from truth. For indeed what a poor reward is the vain glory of an aptness at perverse disputings in recompence for the long and painful cultivation of that particle of human reason, which distinguishes us from Savages ! What an unworthy application is it of superior capacity and learning in any man, to be able to make a bad cause a good one, and to turn the best cause into a bad one, by confounding the understandings of men !

men ! If no better effects have often arisen from the superior parts of many writers, it is on account of their having made a shipwreck of all by swerving from those qualifications in the text of pure intentions of the heart in the search of truth, a conscientious conduct in the exercise of their tongues and pens, and a clear conviction in their own heads : but when assisted by these qualifications truth shall be indeed their aim, and sincerity shall guide their words, then the rest of their fellow-creatures must ever receive some profit either from their labours, or at least from their errors. Life itself also is too short, the business of it too urgent, the duties of life too many, and its comforts too few, for any of us to throw away the precious moments of health and time in perplexed disputes and vain jangling. When daily experience proves, that there are still so many truths to learn of importance to the welfare of man and within the compass of our capacities, yet so little leisure to be stolen from the necessities of our being, or from the calls of our several stations ; with what disapprobation ought men to receive the attempts of those, who seek to throw additional clouds of perplexity over any of the first principles of reason or religion ? What a mortifying reflection after all the labours of

others added to our own, to have obtained no clearer view concerning the objects of our researches, than our ancestors had long ago, instead of being enabled through time to emerge more and more from the darkness of doubt and ignorance ! By the lot of humanity we rise by slow degrees from a tedious *Childhood*, in which knowledge indeed is pleasant, but study is painful : even in the next stage of *youth* knowledge must come in the shape of amusement, or else it will come in a questionable shape : and when arrived at *manhood*, both necessity and inclination urge us on to the active scenes of life ; so that the silent hours of intellectual meditation are so often postponed to some future distant day, which perhaps never does arrive at all. For our period of maturity, like the sun ascended to its meridian height, passes on with such rapid haste, that we find ourselves far down the hill upon the *decline* of life, before we even think of where we are : Connected also as we must be with worldly cares, we must contract in return some attachment of interest for the objects of those several cares ; and either domestick concerns, or business and society, either the conversations of the friendly world, the amusements of the polite, or the disputes of the political world, some or other will in every stage intervene too often,

often, and rob us of too many of those vacant hours for study, which the necessary demands of life could really spare ; and thus we are hurried on along the common stream, until at length we feel with sorrow, that the best parts of *life* itself are *already past*, and then we think it too late to begin a new course of conduct. So that all our lives we can but just hold our heads above the surface of knowledge, at the very moments, when we most want a very elevated and extensive view of it for our help. Whilst then there are so many avocations through nature or fashion, so many impediments to knowledge from the necessary course of things ; and while these are augmented by the inconsiderate conduct of the world, which when it claims at our hands both education and learning, yet never considers the time or expence required for either ; and hence after having spent one fortune to obtain what the public demands, we find ourselves at last not possessed of fit worldly qualifications to acquire any other, at least in such an age as this, which expects a sacrifice of all things to gratify the capricious humors and self-importance of wealthy ignorance : whilst there are thus so many discouragements on all sides to the acquisition of learning, Oh ! let not those, who are blessed
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with genius or leisure, add still another and a voluntary obstacle in our way, derived from their own conduct alone, by perplexing the road to intellectual improvement, with unsolid principles, unfair representations, improbable conjectures, and unjust conclusions; in short with all the tricks of the mere talent of disputation, as if they wished for a return of the ages of ignorance. But rather let all, in seeking to advance toward the regions of intellectual light either in reason or religion, remember, that the end of the Christian commandment is connected with practice more than speculation; and that both of these will be best promoted, by ever keeping in our view the admonitions of the Apostle in the text, concerning a pure intention in search of truth, a conscientious exertion of our tongues and pens during the search, and a clear conviction of our understandings, whether or not in regard to every subject it be within the power of human reason to attain to truth, or within the bounds of Christian humility to attempt it by the aid of reason only. 4 OC 58

P. S. Lest too much brevity should have rendered my meaning obscure in the first line of the note at p. 17, enlarge the sentence thus, “and that by means of the Holy Spirit of God Divinity was *possibly* in some degree united with Jesus at his incarnation, but certainly at his baptism.”

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