

EVIDENCE OF CHRISTIANITY,

DERIVED FROM

ITS NATURE AND RECEPTION.

BY

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A NEW EDITION,

REVISED WITH REFERENCE TO RECENT OBJECTIONS.

LONDON:

HATCHARD AND CO., 187, PICCADILLY.

MDCCLXI.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY C. F. HODGSON,
GOUGH SQUARE, FLEET STREET.

PREFACE.

THE republication at the present time of a treatise written nearly forty years ago, has been suggested by the volume of "Essays and Reviews," to which general attention has been lately drawn. Though there is nothing in that volume to disturb established faith, there is much which is calculated to leave a certain class of readers in a state of doubt and perplexity, equally inconsistent with safety and with comfort. Many persons are cast upon the world, and engaged in the business of active life, who have never seriously examined the foundations of the religion to which they nominally belong. They treat it with respect, they acknowledge the benefits which it confers upon society; but vague notions of uncertainty in its evidence, and of difficulties in its doctrines, float upon the mind, and keep them in an unprofitable state of hesitation.

Meanwhile, a volume is put forth by persons of

known talent and position, which insinuates that the leading events recorded in the Bible have been disproved by recent discoveries in science and history; which casts doubts upon the received interpretation of Scripture as irreconcilable with "scientific criticism;" and which rejects as wholly incredible the testimony on which the Gospel revelation was made known to the world, and is now received by Christians. A work of this kind, issuing from those who might rather be expected to defend the Scriptures than to impugn their authority, can hardly fail to have an injurious effect; and may seem to justify the neglect, at least, of a revelation against which so much has been said by persons who might be supposed to be impartial and disinterested judges.

There can be no doubt that this, like other attacks upon Christianity, will result in producing fresh confirmation of its divine authority. There can be no doubt of this sceptical volume receiving such answers as shall reduce it to its proper level. Many such have already appeared. The Author of our religion Himself appealed to proofs, when He required the Jewish nation to believe that He "came forth from God;" and Christianity has never shrunk from the "free handling" of the evidence on which

its claim to be believed depends. But *believed* it must be, that it may avail to any soul. Christianity is everything, or nothing. For any practical purpose, it must be rejected altogether, or embraced altogether. If Jesus Christ is not the Son of God, he is not the Redeemer of the world. But if he is really what the history represents him, "there is no other name under heaven given amongst men, whereby we may be saved."

This it is the more necessary to bear in mind, because it is the system of neological or rationalistic writers to keep it out of sight. Without actually denying the truth of Christianity, they argue about it as if it were a fiction; and professedly remain within the building, whilst they are, in fact, undermining its foundations.

Now, the object of the following treatise is to show that the foundations stand sure; that the truth of the Gospel is established by the Gospel itself; by the internal evidence contained in its own nature, and by the acknowledged fact of its reception in the world. The idea of "an external revelation" may be repudiated; supernatural interference with the order of nature may be pronounced incredible. But still there remains a miracle which

defies all doubt, and refutes all sophistry: The Christian religion exists. How came it to exist, unless the events took place which account for its origin and promulgation?

This is the idea which I have endeavoured to carry out and expand. The argument has, at least, one advantage—it leads to the consideration of the religion itself. And much of the scepticism which prevails would be removed, if the Bible itself were studied, rather than discussions about the Bible.

April, 1861.

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CHAPTER XII.

ON THE EFFECTS OF CHRISTIANITY.

WHEN the question concerns the probability of truth in a revelation, we are irresistibly led to take into consideration its effects upon human happiness. Is it of such a nature as to improve the general condition of those to whom it is proposed? To raise or to depress the character of mankind? A revelation might possibly be made on such evidence as could not be rejected, which had no such beneficial tendency. But this at once strikes our reason as a case so improbable, that we feel it would require an unusual weight of positive testimony before a revelation could be accepted by us as divine, which did not bear witness to its origin by the excellence of its immediate effects.

At the same time, in every question of this kind, the object of the revelation must be kept in view. It will make an essential difference, whether a revelation professes to be designed to place men at once in a perfect state, or to lead them towards one. The Gospel nowhere professes to place men at once in

a perfect state. It professes to address those who are in an unhappy and guilty condition, naturally frail, and morally corrupt: a condition requiring that God should send his Son into the world, that the world through him might be saved. To such a condition it offers a remedy: not pretending to remove all the evils incidental to such a state; but promising, in behalf of those who put themselves under its guidance, to diminish and alleviate them.

Whoever refuses to bear this in mind, is incapable of forming a judgment respecting the operation of Christianity. A world exists, in which sin and sorrow are largely mixed up. To suppose that Christianity should take these altogether away, would be to suppose that it should create the world anew. It makes provision against them: it proposes a cure for them; and we can reasonably look for nothing more.

But there are other causes, independent of itself, of the partial benefits produced by Christianity. We have formerly seen, that the writers of the Gospel foresaw that its effects would always be inadequate to its inherent powers, and fall short of its avowed design, on account of the unwillingness of mankind to receive the remedy offered them. And to this obduracy we must in great measure attribute the evils which disfigure the face of Christianity. The first Christians, in particular, were taught to expect tribulation. And this tribulation was to come upon

them, because their brethren refused to listen to the Gospel, and chose to persecute those who did. No small portion of the difficulties which have always beset Christians, arises from a similar cause: from the too frequent discountenance which earnest piety and Christian circumspection meet with. The dread of this keeps multitudes still at a distance from God; and thus deprives them of the happiness resulting from the conscious possession of his favour, which nothing short of an entire devotion to his service can procure. And the feeling of this discouragement cannot but occasionally disturb the comfort of other more consistent believers.

The remainder of corruption adhering to those who do cordially embrace Christianity, is another cause of the imperfect happiness it procures to them. They have received an impression, with a force which nothing but the Christian religion could have employed, of the dreadful consequences of sin. They have declared war against it, and are striving for the mastery. But the enemy still makes head: is always restless; and will sometimes prevail. This cannot but occasion disquietude. A remedy is proposed to a diseased constitution; is accepted, and tried. But from the nature of the constitution, and the inveteracy of the disease, the effect of the remedy is incomplete. Still the patient, if not in perfect health, is in much better condition than he would have been without the remedy. And so none will

deny that the man who is struggling against his evil passions, and keeping them in subjection, is in a much better moral state than he would have been by giving loose to them: though he cannot enjoy that perfect tranquillity which might belong to a heart brought into complete conformity with the will of God.

These are among the reasons why Christians are often distinguished by a seriousness of deportment, which is ill understood by those who are strangers to their feelings, and misinterpreted as melancholy and gloom. Some persons are acutely sensible of that open ridicule, or even that silent contempt, with which religion is too often treated in the world. Others are tremblingly alive to those remains of corruption which they daily discover in their hearts, and afraid to take home to themselves a comfort which they fear it would be presumptuous to indulge. What shall we say then? To escape the censure of the thoughtless and profane, must principles be lowered down to a standard which none shall think too lofty? This will hardly be proposed; for we know that to whatever depth we descend, a lower depth will still remain; multitudes will still be found, for whom the meanest standard of religion is too high. Or will it be argued, that because a nature originally sinful cannot be altogether purified, therefore it should not be meddled with? That because evil propensities cannot be entirely subdued, there-

fore they should not be opposed? None will avow this; yet anxiety respecting the success of a contest against sin must be inseparable from such a contest; and those alone must be without such anxiety, who never resist their passions, or endeavour to regulate their hearts.

Let it be remembered, too, that most of the complaints concerning the melancholy tendency of religion are made by those who have no just sense of religious obligations; and who adopt their opinion from the demeanour of persons whom their own levity, neglect of God, and indifference about vice and virtue, must naturally render serious. Could they enter into the minds of those persons, or see them in their families, in their daily occupations, or on their beds, they would quickly perceive that Christianity has a cheerfulness and tranquillity belonging to it to which irreligion is a total stranger. The Christian is encouraged by the writings which he maintains to be divine, to look for "all joy and peace in believing;" and the expectation thus raised is commonly, and in most dispositions, fulfilled.

From these preliminary observations, I proceed to consider the beneficial tendency of the Gospel in a few distinct particulars.

The general benefits procured to the world by Christianity are very important, and such as nothing else anywhere received under the name of religion has produced. For a code of duties like that con-

tained in the Gospel is not limited in its effects to those who admit its divine authority. The existence of such a rule, and far more the existence of persons obeying it, has a general influence extending even to those who might seem removed beyond its reach; as the sun softens and brightens every object in the landscape, and not those alone upon which its rays directly shine. In this way a general improvement of habits has followed the progressive diffusion of the Gospel. The inhuman sports of the Roman amphitheatres were gradually discontinued; the most savage features of war have been softened; crimes of particular heinousness have become disgraceful in general opinion; the female sex has been raised to its just level in society; the duty of benevolence has been more commonly recognized and practised. Further, the severity of parental rule has been controlled; the barbarous custom of infanticide abolished; the system of domestic slavery has ceased, which subjected the greater part of mankind to the caprice and tyranny of a few freeborn masters, who regarded and treated the rest as inferior beings. These effects cannot with any justice be attributed to the progress of reason and civilization, because they are, in most instances, effects which directly proceed from the new views of the nature and destination of man unfolded by the Gospel; and, further, because this improvement of moral habits exists in countries very far inferior in literature and the arts to the

nations addicted to those habits which Christianity discountenanced; and because it follows the course and accompanies the growth of Christianity; being more and more visible as that is more and more received, and being most visible where Christianity is best understood, and embraced most cordially.

These effects of the religion have been often set forth at large; and every fresh example of its progress gives accumulated weight to the evidence arising from them. Instead of contenting myself with this general view, I shall descend to a few particulars, and consider the admirable adaptation of the Gospel to the exigencies of mankind individually.

I. There is a provision in the Gospel for comforting affliction. If a revelation is to be suited to the circumstances of human life, this quality must be amongst its indispensable requisites. Events occur in the lives of most persons—the whole life of others is of such a nature—as to admit of but one real comfort; namely, the assurance that they make part of a scheme which may prove the entrance to eternal glory. Those who disbelieve revelation are exposed to the same trials as other men; but what consolation belongs to the supposition that their afflictions are part of a general scheme, which the Creator has ordained as best upon the whole? The Deist who is brought into misfortune has no assurance that it may not be the divine pleasure to afflict

him. The Atheist, who is worn down by sickness, can only suppose that the general laws by which the world is governed bring that sickness upon him without remedy and without compensation. And although partial evil may be universal good, it is difficult to cherish such enlarged benevolence as to feel satisfied that the partial evil should fall upon ourselves.

The Gospel, however, speaks a very different language. It supplies an effectual comfort to the severest pain or the heaviest bereavement, by assuring the Christian that he is the object of tender interest and everlasting care; that he has a protector full of kindness and full of power, who will cause all things to contribute towards his spiritual good and eternal welfare. The Deist may be patient, no doubt, in acquiescence on supreme Providence; the Atheist may be silent, from a conviction of the uselessness of repining; but to call on either to rejoice in suffering, would be cruelty and folly. The Apostles, however, following the example of their Master, not unfrequently use this strong exhortation to Christians, that they should glory in tribulation;¹ that they should count it all joy when they fall into divers trials;² that they should deem themselves happy, if they suffer for righteousness' sake;³ knowing that their light affliction, which is but for a moment, shall work for them a far more

¹ Rom. v. 3.

² James i. 2.

³ 1 Peter iii. 14.

exceeding and eternal weight of glory.¹ And the consolation thus furnished is not imaginary, but real and substantial. It converts, in many instances, the most afflictive dispensations into a source of positive rejoicing. It lends a support to sickness and pain, which makes them appear more desirable than health itself. Incredible as this may sound to those who are strangers to the personal influence of Christianity; to those who have either experienced or witnessed it, it is a matter of certainty and reality, in which they cannot be mistaken.

It may be thought, indeed, that the incarnation of the Son of God was not required for a purpose like this; which might have been sufficiently answered by an assured declaration of the immortality of the soul, and a better world to come. Neither do we pretend that the alleviation of earthly afflictions would have afforded an adequate cause for a design so wonderful. But experience proves, that the indisputable assurance of the good-will of God towards men, declared by the mission of his Son; and the belief that he took upon himself our nature, and lived on earth as "a man of sorrows," to a degree far beyond what any of his followers are called to imitate him in,—ministers a support to the Christian, when suffering under affliction, which no other contemplation would enable him to realize.² The whole

¹ 2 Cor. iv. 17.

² The frequent use of this argument by the Apostles shows that they were well aware of its powerful influence. See 1 Pet. iii. 18; iv. 1. 2 Cor. viii. 9. Heb. ii. 17; iv. 15, 18. &c. &c.

dispensation is represented as one of pity and love. And we must believe, if it was divine, that all its consequences were foreseen and intended, as well as the one great consequence of calling men to repentance, and rescuing them from condemnation. Such beneficial effect, indeed, does not prove it to have been divine. But it adds something to the probabilities, on which its proper evidence is grounded.

II. Wherever the Gospel is made known, a regular provision exists for establishing religion in the world; that is, for bringing men to live in the knowledge and fear of God. Legislators in former times endeavoured to maintain a religious principle, confessedly for the sake of the public good. In order to establish this with additional authority, they pretended to be under the guidance of visions and revelations; and even the philosophers, who laughed at the popular superstitions, were still unwilling to demolish them, for want of something better in their stead.

Perhaps a conviction of this has been unfavourable to the interests of revelation, by causing it to be received with suspicion. It is understood, that a practical belief of Christianity will render men more contented subjects, and more diligent and useful members of society. Regulated by a rule more universal than that of any human laws, they will be restrained in circumstances to which the power of the civil magistrate does not extend; and directing their thoughts mainly to a state beyond the present,

they will not be easily drawn to interfere with government, or join the party of those who are "given to change," except in cases of extreme necessity. This undeniable fact has introduced a vague idea of some mutual understanding between the State and Christianity, and their reciprocal dependence upon each other. Whereas the Gospel was first introduced, and has often greatly flourished, in despite of bitter opposition from the ruling powers. We do not indeed deny that the State may benefit religion, or that religion may benefit the State: but we do deny that a divine revelation ought to suffer disparagement, because it contributes to the present advantage of mankind, and forms the strongest cement of civil society. In proportion as a serious argument would be raised against its authority, if its effects were different; an additional testimony is established in its favour, when it enforces salutary restraints to which men are not naturally inclined to conform.

If, then, it is desirable, as I may venture to assume, that men shall be governed by religious principles, Christianity is beneficial, inasmuch as, wherever it exists, it is constantly exerting a secret influence to this end. It provides that the child, from its very birth, should be dedicated to the service of God; not left to discriminate right from wrong by the slow process of observation, or the uncertain light of reason; not left to pursue its

natural bent, and strengthen passions by indulgence, that they may be afterwards imperfectly and reluctantly subdued; but made acquainted, at the dawn of reason and entrance of life, with the course to be pursued, and the conduct to be shunned. It provides for his understanding, from the first, the business and object of the present life, the real purpose of man's being. That the scene of this world is not final, but preparatory, if true, is the most important fact conceivable to every individual who bears a part in it. It is, therefore, most important that it should be known. Christianity makes it known; and by so doing, requires that the conduct should be regulated according to that conviction.

The duties, indeed, are often neglected, which can alone render such provisions effectual; they are neglected by parents, masters, and other superiors, whose business it is to teach these truths; and they are reluctantly received or listened to by those whose business it is to act upon them. But the religion itself orders otherwise, and is not in fault if its directions are disobeyed; which, if universally followed, and willingly heard, would render every being in a Christian country a disciple of Christ, and consequently a servant of God, and an heir of a blessed immortality.

Christianity, moreover, is constantly holding forth an encouragement to whatever things are honourable,

just, and pure: and discountenancing everything which tends to public injury, or private degradation. Whatever wickedness is committed in a Christian country, is committed in defiance of known obligations. Whatever irreligious conduct is practised, is practised in defiance of warning, instruction, and usually of conscience; unless the conscience has been blunted by continual neglect of its admonitions. Strong as the workings of passion are, and widely as the force of natural corruption prevails, still these checks must operate as a restraint, and weaken the impulse which refuses to be entirely controlled. We regret that the effect is less complete; but without dispute it is, as far it goes, altogether beneficial.

Further still, Christianity is issuing a constant summons to repentance. It declares what course of life the Creator of the world approves, and requires of his creatures, and the reverse of which he will not suffer them to pursue with impunity. But it delivers even this assurance in language suited to the actual character of human nature. It does not involve the disobedient in despair, by representing a return to favour as impossible. On the contrary, it affirms, that God will accept a change of heart, and treat the penitent as if he never had offended.

Indeed, among the leading peculiarities of the Gospel must be reckoned the freedom of admission to all its privileges which it offers to the penitent,

whatever may have been the degree or the nature of his transgressions. This is part of the original system : and conspicuously held forth as such in several remarkable parables. That of the lost sheep portrays in lively colours the way in which the consequences of sin and the necessity of repentance are brought home to the conscience, under the ministrations of the Gospel ; how those who have long remained in a thoughtless, irreligious state, may be restored, through the atonement of Christ, to the divine favour.¹ The prodigal son describes the career of profligate dissipation which too many run, even of those who have been early taught by a Christian education to know the demands of God upon their obedience. It frequently happens, that these, in the day of affliction or adversity, consider the destitute estate to which they are reduced by departing from the God of their youth ; having lost their earthly happiness, and finding nothing in its stead.² The willingness of God to receive, and assist, and complete their repentance, and to number them among his accepted children, is openly and explicitly declared. The parable of the labourers who are sent into the vineyard at different hours of the day, agrees with all experience as to the different periods of life in which religious impressions are made upon the mind ; and summons every age to the service of God

¹ Luke xv. 3—7.

² Luke xv. 11—32.

by the strongest incitement, the assurance of acceptance and reward.¹ These and other parables to the same purpose exemplify the leading and peculiar argument of the Gospel ;—repent, and be forgiven, for the price of your redemption has been paid.

The suitableness of this to the condition of human nature will hardly be disputed. If the favour of God were limited to those who have continued steadfast in their allegiance, and made his laws the guide of their youth and life, mankind must either be a different race of beings, or the divine favour confined to a very small number. We cannot imagine a divine revelation which did not require a righteous and holy life. But we can conceive a revelation which allowed no repentance for an unrighteous or unholy life ; while at the same time we see that such a revelation would be a source of despair rather than of comfort ; would not be available to creatures like mankind ; would confirm some in their sinful state, through want of inducement to reformation ; and would condemn others to a hopeless remorse, when they reflected upon irretrievable transgression, and looked forwards to inevitable punishment. Considering the condition in which men are actually placed, by birth, circumstances, and irregular education, often conspiring to add fuel to a corrupt nature ; we cannot hesitate to allow, that a revelation which admits re-

¹ Matt. xx. 1—16.

pentance, and contains a covenant of pardon, is the one most suitable, most beneficial to mankind.

We could not indeed call it beneficial, if that which offered comfort to transgressors proved an encouragement to sin. And some, in all ages, have brought this charge against Christianity; arraiging it on this very ground, as a religion which holds out an amnesty to the worst offenders.¹ Others, even of its friends, have shown a tacit acquiescence in this allegation, when they have systematically enforced the precepts rather than the doctrines of the Gospel, from the supposed danger of encouraging mankind to the abuse of mercy by the display of mercy. But Jesus "knew what was in man" better than those who call his wisdom in question; and founded his religion on the surest principles of expediency. Suppose the case, of a part of the inhabitants of a country in rebellion against their lawful sovereign. The object is, to reduce them to order and obedience; and how would that object most probably be answered;

¹ Celsus complained, that "Jesus Christ came into the world to make the most horrible and dreadful societies; for he calls sinners, and not the righteous: so that the body he came to assemble is a body of profligates separated from good people, among whom before they were mixed. He has rejected all the good, and collected all the bad."

"True," says Origen, "our Jesus came to call sinners:—but to repentance. He assembles the wicked:—but to convert them into new men; or rather, to change them into angels. We come to him covenantous, he makes us liberal; unjust, he makes us equitable; lascivious, he makes us chaste; violent, he makes us meek; impious, he makes us religious."—See Origen contr. Cels. l. iii. s. 59.

which would be the method most promising success; to make a public declaration of the duties of subjects, accompanied with a denunciation of grievous penalty against all who had violated them; or to issue a proclamation of amnesty to all who should return to their allegiance and persevere in future loyalty?¹ The method which, calmly considered, approves itself to our judgment, is the method pursued in the Gospel. And the method which approves itself to our judgment, is sanctioned by the results of our experience; and wherever it is simply acted upon, is daily swelling the triumphs of the Gospel with new converts to the service of God.

In this manner a constant experiment is in operation, wherever the Gospel is preached or read, upon the moral faculties. It is going on from youth to age; employing every motive by which the human heart can be swayed, and using every means by which it can be governed; teaching, exhorting, inviting, encouraging. No wiser system can be imagined, for beings naturally disposed to evil, and placed in circumstances of temptation. We can easily figure to our imaginations men differently constituted, or more securely fenced in. But for such moral agents as mankind actually are, we can desire no fitter dispensation.

¹ This illustration occurs in a preface, by Mr. Erskine, to an edition of Gambold's works

III. I consider it as a third point deserving particular remark, that wherever the Gospel is established as the national religion, provision is made for elevating the general character of men, by raising them to a higher rank as intellectual beings. The condition of the bulk of mankind is inevitably poor and laborious; and we know the effect of poverty and labour, how they depress the mind, and keep it as it were stagnant, till it has neither inclination nor ability for reflection. Each succeeding generation is content to know what their fathers knew, and to practise what their fathers practised. The ennobling ideas of a Supreme Creator, of spiritual worship and pious love to be exercised towards him, of an eternal state of happiness and purity;—these ideas are far beyond them: their thoughts are chained down to the earth by daily wants and laborious occupations; and do not rise to higher things, except by the aid of some strong external impulse.

And yet experience proves that mankind are capable of high spiritual advancement: that laborious poverty, the common lot of the multitude, though it prevents them from discovering, does not prevent them from receiving, the greatest and noblest truths; and that employments whose natural tendency is rather to depress than to elevate the mind, may yet be conducted on principles which dignify the lowest stations and the meanest pursuits. Few will venture to deny, that if men are capable of

such improvement, it is desirable they should attain it, as exalting their rank in the scale of being. And this is effected by the agency of Christianity. From its first establishment, when the Apostles ordained elders in every church, Christianity has provided bodies of men, whose business it is to instruct the ignorant; to awaken them from torpor and stupidity; to rouse their attention to matters of the highest dignity and importance.¹ Not to remove them from their stations and natural duties, which indeed would be impossible if it were desirable, and undesirable even if it were possible; but to inculcate principles which may soften the roughest, and sweeten the bitterest, and exalt the humblest, of human labours.

Now all this is clear gain, and to be set to the account of the Gospel. Nothing of the kind was ever known or thought of in ancient times, at least beyond the narrow limits of Judea.² We are apt to forget this, and to consider advantages of this kind

¹ The benefit of the Christian system, in this respect, was so evident to the Emperor Julian, that he attributed the success of the religion in some measure to the sanctity and zeal of its ministers; and supposed, that by an imperial ordinance, he could command the same qualities in the heathen priests.—See his letter to Arsacius, in Sozomen. l. x. c. 16; or Lardner's *Heath. Test.* c. 46.

² "Useful as we now know social religion to be to states and kingdoms, it is unlikely that any state should, merely by its own internal wisdom, have instituted a good church, with right provisions, laws, religious exercises, and discipline. Politicians would scarcely *think* of such a thing. Intent on wars, alliances, commerce, taxation, commodious passage of travellers, &c.; religious society must come from

no less of course, than to enjoy the light and breathe the air of heaven. We are so generally accustomed to the instruction of our people, in consequence of what Christianity has done, that we forget to ascribe the benefit to Christianity. We have no idea of the mass of mankind being wholly neglected; being never exhorted to seek religious knowledge: still less of their seeking it in vain. But in the heathen world, there were none whose office it was to teach, even if there had been any who could have taught what it was most desirable to learn. Philosophical lectures were attended by some of the richer class; but by no others. One philosopher alone, of all we read of, seems to have been conscious of some moral obligation in the employment of his extraordinary talents;¹ and he addressed himself to the higher ranks. Had it been otherwise, the philosophers in the several ages were but few; so few, that supposing they were dispersed, and that every man had the liberty of attending them, we should be astonished to calculate the average distance which a person must have travelled in order to get instruction. Further, there could be no unity of doctrine,

religious zeal, though afterwards courted by the State."—Hey's Lectures. If the State, even when administered by professors of Christianity, can afford very little attention or support to the interests of religion: we could hardly expect that it should step out of its way to establish, in the first instance, religious instruction.

¹ Πρώτον μὲν δὴ περὶ θεοῦ ἐπειράτο σωφρονὰς ποιεῖν τοὺς συνόντας. Xenoph. de Socrate. Memorab. l. iv. 3. iii.

because there was no unity of opinion.¹ The very foundation of religion is an intelligent Creator. Philosophers could not lay this groundwork, when they disagreed about the fact; some holding the world to be the work of chance, and others maintaining its eternity. They could not teach moral duties; for besides that they were unsettled as to the nature and extent of these, the one great sanction of moral duty, the declaration of God's will, was necessarily wanting to their instructions. They could not assert

¹ "The matters wherein the philosophers differed, were points which concern the very being of religion and virtue; and those differences rendered the motives and obligations to both, precarious and uncertain. And this shows how unjust the objection is which infidels raise upon this head from the different opinions among Christians. It will appear, that the several denominations of Christians agree, both in the substance of religion, and in the necessary enforcements of the practice of it: that the world and all things in it were created by God, and are under the direction and government of his all-powerful hand and all-seeing eye: that there is an essential difference between good and evil, virtue and vice; that there will be a state of future rewards and punishments, according to our behaviour in this life; that Christ was a teacher sent from God, and that the Apostles were divinely inspired; that all Christians are bound to declare and profess themselves to be his disciples; that not only the exercise of the several virtues, but also a belief in Christ, is necessary in order to their obtaining the pardon of sin, the favour of God, and eternal life; that the worship of God is to be performed chiefly by the heart, in prayers, praises, and thanksgivings; and as to all other points, that they are bound to live by the rules which Christ and his Apostles have left in the Holy Scriptures. Here then is a fixed, certain, and uniform rule of faith and practice; containing all the most necessary points of religion, established by a divine sanction, embraced as such by all denominations of Christians, and in itself abundantly sufficient to preserve the knowledge and practice of religion in the world."—Gibson's Second Pastoral Letter.

a future retribution, because none believed it; all wandering in universal scepticism, or being lost in vague conjecture. The public rites of worship, which the people did attend, were rather calculated to corrupt than to improve them; and consisted wholly of ceremonies performed by the priests, without any moral exhortations or lessons of duty.¹

Christianity, on the other hand, by means of its accredited agents, is constantly making an aggressive movement against that indolence and indifference respecting all things not immediately present and visible, in which the minds of the generality are sure to repose when left to themselves. And the effect of this excitement is wonderfully powerful, notwithstanding the imperfect degree in which it necessarily acts from the nature of those who are the objects of its operation, and of those who are concerned in carrying it on. We can form a judgment of its power, and of the dependence of mankind upon it, from the ignorance and barbarism which prevailed throughout Europe during that long and dark period when the Scriptures were virtually sealed up, and the priests deserted their duty of instruction, at least of useful and evangelical instruction. No sooner was the book of revelation again unlocked, and education promoted, and inquiry

¹ Besides Leland's "Advantage of Revelation," this subject is ably handled in Bishop Gibson's Second Pastoral Letter, and concisely touched on in Hey's Lectures, book i. ch. xix.

stimulated, and divine philosophy laid open to the people, than the faculties of mankind were sharpened and their views enlarged, and a new order of things began which has changed the face of Protestant Europe. On the same extensive scale we still discern the effect of this energy, in the difference between those countries where religious instruction is effectually afforded, and the Scriptures actually understood, and those which possess these advantages in an inferior degree, or in no degree at all. If a map could trace the real influence of the Gospel, it would also delineate the proportion of intelligence and active virtue. The measure of spiritual ignorance and of spiritual knowledge is also the measure of barbarism and of civilization, of mental stupidity or mental illumination.

But the case becomes stronger and clearer when we regard it on a more limited scale, and attend to the individual rather than the general effect; and perceive the difference which is made in a single district, or a single family, or even in a single character, wherever the declarations of the Gospel are faithfully believed.

Looking towards the lower orders of society, we find that excess gives way to temperance; that patience succeeds to discontent; that industry is pursued with cheerfulness; that general good-will takes the place of envy and malice; and a kindly charitable feeling is exercised, not capriciously, but

on principle. Such is the first effect of religious influence. By degrees the faculties become enlarged; the mind possesses a grasp of which it had once seemed incapable; the conscience, no longer insensible to right and wrong, except in the most glaring cases, acquires a moral acuteness which needs no rules of casuistry; and the mind exhibits a clearness of perception, and a nice discrimination of truth and falsehood, which might appear to be the last result of philosophical investigation, if it were not seen in those who have no leisure for investigation, and no education in philosophy.¹

¹“In Loskiel’s account of the Moravian Missions among the North American Indians, I have found a striking illustration of the uniformity with which the grace of God operates upon man. Crantz, in his account of the Missions in Greenland, had shown the grace of God working on a *man-fish*, on a stupid, sottish, senseless creature, scarcely a remove from the fish on which he lived. Loskiel shows the same grace working on a *man-devil*—a fierce, bloody, revengeful warrior, dancing his infernal war-dance with the mind of a fury. Divine grace brings these men to the same point. It quickens, stimulates, and elevates the Greenlander; it raises him to a sort of new life; it seems almost to bestow on him new senses: it opens his eye, and bends his ear, and rouses his heart; and what it adds it sanctifies. The same grace tames the high spirit of the Indian; it reduces him to the meekness, and docility, and simplicity of a child. The evidence arising to Christianity from these facts is, perhaps, seldom sufficient by itself to convince a gainsayer; but to a man who already believes, it greatly strengthens the reasons of his belief.”—Cecil’s Remains.

These reflections, corroborated as they are by still more recent instances, are well worthy the consideration of such persons as object to the employment of missionaries in countries yet uncivilized on the ground of their want of preparation to receive Christian truth. No engine of civilization has as yet been discovered which bears comparison with the Gospel when preached in its native purity and simplicity.

This is a proof both of the excellence and truth of Christianity, which its ministers necessarily enjoy beyond others. When they observe the power which it has, and which nothing else has, of elevating the mind and enlarging its faculties; when they see the Gospel prove to the sincere Christian a safe and ready test of thought, discourse, and action; when they see it furnishing him with additional sources of gratitude in prosperity, and a never-failing consolation in sorrow: when they see it raising him to an elevation of thought and a consistency of conduct which lifts him above his natural rank, and all this the sole effect of Christian knowledge, they possess an assurance of the divine origin of the religion, which is stronger than the soundest argument, and which the most elaborate sophistry can never shake. This, indeed, is a proof which belongs chiefly to the teachers of Christianity; and it is a needful encouragement to them among many anxieties and disappointments. But although it is theirs principally, it is not theirs exclusively. Much satisfaction of the same kind is within the reach of every one who has ever beheld Christianity in practical operation.

I have been alluding to the lower orders, the great bulk of mankind. In the higher ranks, which have access to other modes of improvement and instruction, the results of a Christian faith may seem less decidedly and evidently marked. But it will be

found, on inquiry, that a comparative indifference to the honours and pleasures of the world, a sense of responsibility concerning the employment of the various talents of time, wealth, and influence, an active charity, a spirit of humility and condescension, a lively interest in whatever regards the moral or temporal welfare of others, belongs, in an eminent and singular degree, to the disciples of Christianity. We cannot contemplate such a character without acknowledging its intrinsic excellence. But, to make a fair estimate, we ought to compare this character with what would otherwise have existed in its stead: we ought to remember that, speaking generally, what is benevolence would have been selfishness; what is charity would have been indifference; what is lowliness would have been arrogance and pride; what is moderation would have been intemperate luxury, if the virtues had not been substituted for the vices through the influence of Christianity.

These results are daily arising from the Christian religion, and have done so, in a greater or less degree, from the period of its first promulgation. They are either the consequences of a design contrived by divine wisdom for the benefit of man, or the accidental effects of an imposture undertaken for no assignable motive by uneducated enthusiasts. But surely it contradicts all probability or experience, to believe that a scheme so vague and empi-

rical as that of the Apostles must have been, if they did not act upon divine authority, should have proved so suitable to mankind, so effectual towards the object which it professes, and so beneficial to the world at large.

This, however, like every other difficulty which has been shown in the preceding treatise, to embarrass the hypothesis which ascribes Christianity to human invention, vanishes at once when the divine origin of the religion is admitted. We should then expect that it would prove efficient for all those purposes which are actually answered by it; that it would console the anxieties, trials, and sorrows to which human life is inevitably subject; that it would provide for the dedication of the powers and faculties of mankind to the will and service of their Maker; that it would propose a way for restoring the disobedient to his favour; and, further, that it should be found suitable to every age, and condition, and climate, and capable of improving the general character wherever it was received. And all this it is constantly effecting. Systems confessedly of human origin make no approach towards these results. We see no reason to wish all men Stoics; or all men Epicureans; or all men Mohammedans; or all men Polytheists; or all men Atheists. But no one who has ever witnessed, with impartial eyes, the operation of Christianity in a single family, or a single individual, can resist the

inference, that if the spirit of the Gospel were universal, and all men were practical Christians, there would be little left to complain of even in this imperfect world.