

In Defence of Controversy

Extracted from the "Gospel Magazine" volume for 1824, being a letter written to the editors by a certain "Devonshire Minister" serving at Stonehouse, near Plymouth Rock.

I SHALL begin this important subject by asking, "What it is?" and without hesitation, I shall presume to answer, not only for myself but even for all men; that it is a contention for what we consider to be truth, and an opposition to what we conceive to be error, and as this is as I have supposed, (without I think, any danger of being contradicted) a universal sentiment; it may well be imagined, (if experience be not had recourse unto,) that it cannot have any enemy, at least out of hell, but notwithstanding this, it has enemies beyond my power of calculation, as to their number, and that among those who profess to know truth, and see its importance, and to distinguish error, and see its destructive nature; and to what or to whom shall we attribute this, but to the grand adversary of souls, working upon the minds of professors, whose profession (by the bye) is but little, if any thing, better for the most part than delusion; and who therefore, have never really seen, that their supposed truth is very important, or their imagined error very destructive, and therefore have no zeal for the former, or against the latter.

But hitherto, or thus far, I have only had in view, what professors who are enemies to controversy consider to be truths, and errors; for I cannot imagine they are acquainted (or at least very extensively acquainted) with what is really the one or the other, (I mean in theology,) for I am fully persuaded, that all who are thus far enlightened in this subject, are fully convinced of the superlatively high import of truth, and the dreadfully destructive nature of error; for indeed how can it be otherwise, for most certainly they have not only seen the glory of their God and Saviour, herein concerned; but also the present prosperity and everlasting salvation of their own precious immortal spirits, which to themselves is of more value than ten thousand earthly worlds, and unquestionably then, (for I will not suppose it can be debated) these, all there, are zealous in supporting the former, and opposing the latter, as far as their power and capacity extend; and all such persons of course, are more or less controversialists, and they do not at all mind being accused by their blind unfeeling brethren, of disturbing the peace (the false peace of the church.) I have said, the false peace, because true peace, which comes from the Spirit of God by his

word, can never be disturbed by the contention I am contending for. I have been led, Messrs. Editors, to consider this subject, by the treatment which two letters, which are annexed to this paper, sent by me to my successor in office, on damning errors, into which he is fallen, have met with. The first he answered, but signified his hope that I should not send another; the second fell into the hands of his dearly beloved reverend rib, who to prevent his mind from being disturbed by such illiberal denunciations, would not let him see it, and probably to prove her polished mode of thinking, returned it, and requested I would not continue to trouble them, for that her husband had no leisure for controversy; that is to say, no leisure for contending for what he deems truth, or opposing what he considers to be error.

Let us now see what encouragement we have for engaging in Controversy in addition to the impossibility of preaching the gospel without it, which I think I have already virtually proved; for what is doing so, but contending for truth, and opposing error? and we certainly are also encouraged to engage herein, by the blessed God himself—his own Son in human nature—and all the inspired writers being controversialists, as well as by their commands addressed to us. For instance, the blessed God has had, and I imagine, still has, controversy with all flesh, Jer. xxv. 31; Hos. iv. 1; xii.2; and Micah vi. 2. and is it not notorious to all who read the four gospels, that a chief part of our Lord's time, from the age of twelve, was spent in verbal controversy; and it was at least in one case in favour of that doctrine, which haters of controversy for the most part detest, I mean unconditional election; see Luke iv. 26 and following verses, and which we find so enraged their legitimate brethren of that day, that they attempted to take away the life of the divine controversialist, by pushing him over a precipice; and who will say that it was not controversy on the part of Stephen, that provoked his adversaries to stone him to death; and I flatter myself none will be so fool-hardy as to advance, that either of the apostles was not a controversialist? And did not Paul go so far as to denounce a curse upon the men who promulgated the doctrine, now generally called Arminianism? Gal. i. 8, 9. And who, I ask, ever attentively reads the scriptural history, or any other book of martyrs without seeing that they all died controversialists, and might have saved their lives if they would have ceased to controvert? and no doubt the little simpering effeminate reverends of that day, secretly or internally laughed at them, and would rather have relinquished contention for the existence of God, than to have incurred any risk of being followers of these worthies: and to conclude this part of my subject, I ask, Are we not called upon to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints? Jude ver. 3. And does not this amount to contention for truth, and opposition to error? Let then, the haters of controversy tremble, lest they be therein accused of hating all the great controversialists I have just noticed, God himself the greatest at their head; for common sense alone if duly consulted, will tell them, that hatred to what God and his chief servants did, and do, must be hatred to Him, and to them, particularly if it be also kept in mind, that we, in this

case, are commanded to follow, or to imitate them. I add, although this addition may not be thought necessary, that the haters of controversy are haters of Christianity; some of the chief ingredients, of which it is composed, being controversy in defence of itself-and opposition to all other religions; but, say some of these milk and water, yea and nay gentlemen, it is only controversy about nonessentials that we hate. But what are non essentials, or who is to determine this? Were we to leave the selection to these almost-christians they would fix upon the reverends, who under a profession of what they call Calvinism, have no objection to admitting Arminians into their pulpits, and are in the habit of praying for success to their labours, and the labours of their Missionaries; although real Calvinism (so called,) is so much at variance with Arminianism, that it is impossible their supporters can be led by the same spirit; (namely the Spirit of God,) and what sort of a list should we then have of essentials, and non-essentials? I fear, yea, I am sure, it would be such a list, as no real Christian would adopt. May the Lord confound these haters of controversy, and friends of the devil, and drive them from these situations, where being deceived themselves, they are deceiving others, to their own everlasting ruin, if they should continue to live and die under the influence of their present unscriptural notions; - and in this prayer, I have particularly in view, the poor, vain, empty creature, who unhappily for himself and his hearers, succeeded me in my ministerial labours, and who although he has in some measure increased the number of his hearers, (as might be expected) yet has alarmingly reduced the most enlightened ones, who cannot bear to hear the voice of (it is now to be feared) a stranger to their Lord and Master.

To conclude, it may likewise be said, in defence of controversy, that it quickens, arouses, and draws forth into exercise, our intellectual powers, or faculties, and begets agonising prayer unto God for assistance, in engaging herein, and proves itself to be a delightful and profitable employment, to ourselves, and highly beneficial to the church of God at large, who in every age have been indebted to it, through the Spirit of God operating by it, for fresh discoveries from His word; and if ever it should be silenced, and the church should be left in the hands of those lame, insignificant, half-taught animals, who are continually bawling out against it, what dreadful consequences may not be expected; but let us be at ease, Messrs Editors, for the Lord reigns. I had here intended to close this piece, but a revival of thought, apropos, and with it a renewal of suitable feeling, constrain me to detain your attention, and the attention of all my readers, while I further observe, that all the improvements which have been made in arts and sciences, &c- &c as well as in the knowledge of God's word, have been indebted instrumentally to the proper exercise of thought or consideration; and it will not I think be presuming overmuch, if I add, drawn forth in most cases by opposition or controversy. What would even Sir Isaac Newton have been without these things? and I reply, certainly very inferior to what he at last became by them, and we then had been destitute of many of his valuable

discoveries. All men, (idiots excepted) are naturally, more or less, internal controversialists, and by external opposition, particularly to any favorite, or as they conceive, important point, they are proportionably improved herein.

Controversy within, is a kind of titular deity, given us by the Lord, that may be consulted and exercised, especially on spiritual subjects, or the concerns of our immortal spirits; and it is so, as opportunity offers, by every man who is faithful to himself and his God, in some way, or by some means, suitable to his capacity, or the powers of his mind; for surely, if many (as must be admitted) who are thus characterised, cannot write, they can unquestionably speak, or lisp for God and truth. Avaunt then, ye empty and unfeeling professors, (reverends of this stamp in particular included,) who can hear what you deem truth reviled, without defending it, and error maintained, without opposing it: I say **avaunt**, and do at least cease your squalid yell, or war hoop, against those (who being baptized with the Holy Spirit, and his fire) cannot join you in your frozen indifference and hatred to these things; and we would ask you, whether you have not reason to fear, that Judas, rather than Paul, will be your companion in a future everlasting state, for you are as much betrayers of him you call master in one sense, as he was in another. Do you fear that controversy will shake your faith? this proves it is not the faith of God's elect, and the sooner you get rid of it the better: or, Are you conscious, you have no capacity for engaging in it, and should therefore disgrace yourselves if you did, this cannot be a proper excuse for your hating it, and those who have. Should any of my readers think I have written more degradingly of haters of controversy than was necessary, let them consider the mischief they have done, and are likely to do, particularly among babes in Christ, who are assiduously trained by them into their Satanic undertaking.

Brethren, adieu, A DEVONSHIRE MINISTER, Stonehouse, Devon. Sept. 3, 1824.

A COPY OF TWO LETTERS FROM "A DEVONSHIRE MINISTER," TO
HIS SUCCESSOR IN OFFICE.

DEAR SIR,

As I cannot (circumstances considered) avoid fearing, that you are not living dependant on the teachings of God's Spirit, I must also fear, that no letter of mine on any religious subject will be at all attended to by you; but as duty on my part, must not in consequence be dispensed with, I notwithstanding take up my pen for the last time, to reprove, and inform you, of the dangerous state in which you stand.

I am very credibly informed, that you have thrown off your Calvinistic mask, and declared your belief in general redemption; or (which is the same thing) in Christ having died to put away all sin in the abstract; I suppose you mean original sin from all, but perhaps you prefer the word abstract, because so applied, it is of later ori-

gin, and not so well understood by the lower classes; for I believe it is a pretty general practice, among those who have made shipwreck of the doctrines of faith, gradually to present themselves in their new dress, particularly if they are preaching in a place expressly built for the promulgation of the opposite principle, and which even the church itself cannot apply to any other purpose without losing all claim to it, and giving the trustees authority to seize on it.

Now, as you no doubt, think you are right in your new notion, it behoves you to account for Christ positively refusing to pray for all (or the whole) of the subjects of sin in the abstract, or of original sin; as he does where he excepts the world, John xvii. 9 From another source, credible also, I have been informed, that you in the pulpit in plain terms declared, that we must think very dishonourably of God, if we supposed, that after he has saved the elect, he will do no more, or save no more. If this be true, you can advance no further, in destructive error, no not even if you should turn to Deism, or Atheism. May the Lord in mercy, enlighten your mind, and change your heart, lest where I shall soon be, you should never come. Your's, &c.

Stonehouse, Devon, July 15, 1824.

SECOND LETTER.

DEAR SIR, As so many of my letters remained unanswered, I did not expect the last would have been more successful; and of course its success is the more acceptable, and I thank you for it; but I most certainly cannot feel gratified at your saying, you are glad at my signifying, that I should never write to you again; this signification of mine, was the fruit of my supposition that no answer would reach me.

You appear adverse to controversy, or contention for truth, and the detection of error. I do not know how it is with you, but people in general who are of this mind, are influenced by the fear that their own principles will not stand the test, or be acceptable when fully known to the persons on whom they are dependant. With respect to myself, I am always pleased at having my sentiments scrutinised, so it be by men of talents and civility; for, most certainly, if I am in error, I wish to know, that I may renounce it; and I believe controversy in the church of Christ, has been one of its greatest blessings; to this is it chiefly indebted for an increase of knowledge, and its heavenly fruits; and by it the powers of the mind are delightfully exercised and expanded, whilst those who hate controversy are comparatively stupid, insipid (creatures), and if ministers, they are limited in the pulpit, like (that bird of few words) a parrot, in his cage.

I am very glad to find you are not a Universalist, in the high sense in which you have been accused; but I am sorry you have fancied, that I was told so by an inhabitant of ———, as this is not true.

What you mean by saying, in the eighth article of your creed, that the merit of Christ is limited in its application, but unlimited in its extent; I cannot conceive except it be, that it is unlimited in its extent, on condition of men applying it to themselves; but limited in its application because all do not apply it, and if this be your meaning, you are to all intents and purposes, an Arminian; and do represent the application as more valuable than the things applied. For my own part, I am fully persuaded, that the imputation of Christ's merit by the Father, and its application by the Spirit, are blessings inseparable, and sooner or later, are both partook of by the elect, and by none besides; and that the Lord cannot be unjust in withholding it from the latter, because he would not have been unjust, if he had withheld it from the former also; and that those are indebted to his free, sovereign, independant, unattracted mercy; being in themselves full as undeserving it, as those who do not partake of it: and this you must be brought to believe before you leave the earth, or (remember I now tell you,) heaven will never be your home.

That the commandments of the law are (with other parts of scripture,) the rule for a believer's conduct, I most cordially believe, but separated from the promise to obedience, and the threat against disobedience, they are not the law; therefore to talk about the law being this rule is absurd, and unscriptural: and in fact it amounts to a declaration that believers as well as others, will by it be pronounced cursed, and be everlastingly damned: for most assuredly, if it be our rule, we must be measured by it; and doubtless, no man's obedience can come up to this measure. I have no objection to your showing all my letters to all your new friends, and the church over whom you are pastor: on the contrary, I much wish it. Wishing you well, I am, dear Sir, your's to serve.....

P. S. As you do not deny it, I take for granted, that you really believe, that all original sin, or the condemnation due to it, is removed from all men, by the sufferings and death of Christ, but if you also believe that Christ has done nothing in vain, you will do well to enquire of what use this is to the non-elect. The Wesleyans here, (or at least some of them) say, that it brought all men into a salvable state, or that it removed all obstacles to their saving themselves, by believing and obeying the Gospel, for which, they add, sufficient power is communicated to all, by God's Spirit. Now, if this were true, and it be also admitted, that some do use, and make this power efficient to the ends proposed, whilst others do not: why then it must be also admitted, that the former are as much their own saviours, as though they acted by their own natural power only, and in the day of judgment, they would be correct in saying to the latter, I am saved, rather than you, only because I made that power effectual, which you (possessing as well as myself) did not make effectual.