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THE
FIRST LETTER
TO
PIETAS OXONIENSIS.

1772





THE FIRST
OF A SERIES OF
LETTERS

TO THE

Author of PIETAS OXONIENSIS, in Answer to his LETTER

TO
The Rev. Dr. ^WADAMS, of SHREWSBURY;

OCCASIONED BY THE

PUBLICATION of his SERMON

ENTITLED

A Test of true and false Doctrines.

Nec tamen extincta est prænitus notitia *Naturalis* de Deo. Ideo prima Lex *naturæ* reipsa est agnoscere, quod unus sit deus, mens æterna, sapiens, iusta, bona, conditrix rerum, benefaciens iustis, et puniens injustos, a qua ortum est in nobis discrimen honestorum et turpium, &c. *Melancthon de lege Naturæ.*

Know then, Sir, that under the influence of the Holy Spirit, I esteem reason to be an useful guide.

Author of *Pietas Oxoniensis.*

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Advertisement



Part of the following Letter being printed off, when **DIOTREPHES ADMONISHED** came out; the writer was willing to wait the event of that publication. But finding the *Doctrinal Parts* of the Controversy, either wholly overlooked, or but slightly touched in the **ADMONISHER ADMONISHED**, he thinks there is still occasion for him to go on with his design, and hopes it may help to promote the end for which he first undertook it.

THE FIRST
LETTER, &c.

S I R,

I AM informed, that the Rev. Dr. *Adams* does not intend making any reply to your LETTER, occasioned by the publication of his sermon, intituled *A Test of true and false Doctrines*; and indeed I am sorry to say, that the manner in which you have treated a person of his established and distinguished reputation for learning, meekness, and many other useful and amiable accomplishments, as a Clergyman, makes it prudent and commendable in him not to take notice of it.

As to what you have advanced in defence of your opinions, it will not, I am
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persuaded, have any weight with competent and unprejudiced judges: but since your frequent publications of this kind, written in so imperious and positive a manner, may unsettle the minds of some, and prevent all further examination in you and your friends, as if your arguments were unanswerable; I could wish, for your sake, and for the truth's sake, to enter into a friendly and patient conference with you about them. And surely this can be no improper or improbable wish. It is true, we see things at present in very different lights. But what then? I am sure, you wish to be thought sincere in what you say; and what reason can there be, why you may not think thus favourably concerning me? I will take it for granted, till I am fully assured to the contrary, that you have a zeal of God—that you earnestly wish to see the Gospel take more effect on men's hearts and lives than it does: believe me, I am governed by the same desire.—Let us then not defeat our own purpose by the very means we take to effect it. We should remember, that Religion is the subject, and that nothing

thing can be more absurd, as well as unseemly, than to debate about it with rancour and bitterness. You have no right to judge me wilfully in the wrong; and even suppose my errors (if errors they be) are owing to my obstinacy and perverseness; what is your rule in such a case? Is it not *in meekness to instruct those that oppose themselves**?" This is certainly the true spirit of the Christian disputant. For do but consider—With what view do you undertake the office? Is it not for their sakes, whom you think mistaken? Is it not from a benevolent concern for their safety and happiness? Does any other motive guide your pen in this business?—I am sure both you and I shall be loth to *acknowledge*, and probably we are not *aware* of any other; yet we may deceive ourselves, and we certainly do, whenever our zeal vents itself with sarcasm and severity, which are infallible signs, that there is something amiss in the inner man.

Besides, by being so inconsistent with the spirit of the Gospel, you are doing the greatest injury imaginable to your own

* 2 Tim. ii. 25.

cause. It is the way indeed to inflame the minds of those, in whom the fire is already kindled, but it can never be the way to recommend the truth to general attention. I do assure you, that your late performance hath done you greater disservice, in these parts at least, than any thing that hath ever happened; it hath put those, who have not embraced your opinions, more out of conceit with them, than they ever probably would have been. Men can judge of a writer's temper and disposition, when they cannot of his arguments; so that if you disagree with me in any thing, which I may here advance, I shall hope that, for the future, you will take care to be upon an equal footing with me in this particular, by expressing yourself with that *meeekness of wisdom* which becomes a Christian, and which will also not a little contribute to enable you the better to discern and elucidate the truth, either to my conviction or your own.

At present I think it not likely that I shall embrace your Opinions, as I have long examined into the ground of them, and plainly see whence your mistakes arise.

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However, I pretend not to infallibility, which I am sure you will not contend for; it might therefore be set down for an acknowledged point on both sides, that either of us may be in the wrong, when our opinions are different; and if I could but prevail upon you calmy and dispassionately to enter upon a friendly conference about them, it is possible we may help each other to understand things in a different light, than we have hitherto done; either of us may be held under the bewitching power of prejudice; we may have fixed our opinions without sufficient caution. For, depend upon it, our faculties are of the same kind, and, though they may differ in degree, are yet equally capable of comprehending a plain truth, if properly exerted: that which appears true to me will be the same to you, when it is fairly viewed; and, if in confidence of mutual sincerity in searching out the truth, we were to lay open the strength or weakness of our arguments, examine carefully, and bear a little with each others infirmities, I cannot help thinking, that there would be but very little difference between us in the end. And

And as this is an expedient, which I have long wished to see fairly tried, permit me to add a few other observations, which I think essentially necessary to prepare the way to its success.

1. As we are both agreed, that the only touchstone of truth is the written word of God, the articles of our own or any other Church must be quite out of the question. They were drawn up by fallible men, and consequently *may* be false: they are only true, so far as they can be proved from scripture: By this test, every opinion must either stand or fall in the judgment of a sincere enquirer after truth; so that whoever flies for shelter to the articles in any debate, it should be taken for an acknowledgment, that he is hard pressed; and that the holy scriptures are not on his side, when he is thus seen to quit his hold of them, and is obliged to have recourse to the doctrines of men.

2. In quoting the holy Scriptures we must never make use of single expressions, or detached sentences, so as to lay any stress upon them: it is this which hath done all the mischief; we may wrangle

wrangle for ever without the least hope of coming to an agreement, unless we will have patience to enter into a circumstantial examination of every single passage, by which we mean to prove any thing, and then shew what we take to be the genuine sense of it.

3. We should be very careful to express ourselves with clearness and precision. Fast flowing sentences, which skim over the surface of things, will satisfy none but superficial Readers. Besides, it looks as if we were afraid of having our arguments searched to the bottom, which cannot be easily done, unless they are plainly and briefly set down.—You must pardon me in saying, that this is a distinguishing fault in all your productions, which I have seen, and more particularly in the present, of which I shall be under the necessity of pointing out some remarkable instances.

4. The same rule should likewise be attended to in our examination of each others arguments :—let it be an established maxim between us, that general answers deserve to have no regard paid to them.

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—The exceptionable passage is to be first set down at length, and the proofs upon which the argument is built, separately examined. After this, what proofs we can bring to the contrary are to be produced, provided no new subject is brought in.

I must beg your excuse for taking upon me to lay down rules for your controversial conduct.—However they might have been expressed with greater accuracy, yet I flatter myself, you will not think them unreasonable; and then as to their use, and the expediency of premising them, they will be sufficiently demonstrated by the future examination of your performance now in question.

I expect you to say, and you will say with great truth, that I am preparing for a large undertaking.—It is certainly too large for the hasty production of *last Week**. The controversy divides itself into several articles, each of which require much longer time to discuss it, as it should be. However fluently one who is a perfect master of his subject may convey his

* See Letter, p. 56.

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sentiments to another, who hath been used to think in the same track with himself, yet as this is not our case, I shall think it my duty to proceed with the most deliberate caution, studiously endeavouring so to express myself, that you may clearly perceive the ground and force of my Arguments; and at the same time to keep clear of whatever I think likely to give you offence, as far as is consistent with the faithful discharge of the task I have engaged in. This requires more deliberate thought than is usually bestowed on such occasions. That we may have leisure therefore to weigh every thing distinctly, and with sufficient attention, as well as to avoid the inconvenience of making a great book, which would be unfavourable to the propagation of the truth; it is my intention to make the following points, each of them, the subject of a separate Letter, which shall be addressed to you, at proper intervals, as occasion permits, and as ourselves or our readers may be able to bear them.

The order in which your letter has disposed them is,

I. On the use of reason in religious enquiries.

II. On original sin and free will.

III. On the demerit of sin, and God's method of pardoning and saving sinners.

After the foregoing points have been sufficiently canvassed, and we have calmly examined into the manifest and consistent sense of the Holy Scriptures concerning them, I shall hope to find you much more patient and easy of access on the subject of the articles of our Church. On this account I have reserved it till last; and if you do not in the mean time see reason to retract it, I shall address you,

IV. On what you have unkindly said about the articles, subscriptions, &c. &c.

I shall fill up the remainder of this letter, *On the use of reason in religious enquiries.*

You say that Dr. Adams “ sets out with a fundamental mistake, in supposing that

that man wants *no assistance* but the exercise of his own reason to find out the nature and attributes of God," and it is a fundamental mistake indeed, if he hath done so;—but I have read both the beginning and the end of his sermon with great care, and cannot find, that he hath said or supposed any such thing*. It

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* After this was sent to the press, the second edition of your *Letter* came to my hands, and seeing a long note added in this place, I expected it would have pointed out the passage or passages in the Doctor's sermon, upon which you ground your accusation. But instead of shewing what the Doctor "set out with," it contains a miserable cavil at a sentence or two near the conclusion of his sermon, which none but the most jaundiced eye could have found fault with.—You affect not to understand the Doctor's meaning, than which nothing can be more clearly expressed. But though you are such a *Child in understanding*, you have proved yourself *in Malice a perfect Man*; for you are ready enough to take it in a perverted sense, that you may have a pretence for using *hard speeches*, and *sport yourself with your own deceivings*. It is plain that "this obscure light" refers to the "difficult passages of scripture" mentioned in the former sentence; but you will have it, as if he called the scriptures in general an *obscure Light*, though in the very same sentence he advises to "interpret the more difficult passages by those that are clear and evident, remembering that what is necessary to all, must be level to the capacities of all."

therefore now lies upon you to shew, that it is as you have said; or else you must stand corrected in your own words p. 4, "it is but too usual with writers who are engaged on controversial subjects, to endeavour to cast an odium upon what they cannot confute, by grossly misrepresenting the doctrines of their op-

all."—This is really such an instance of your disposition for quibbling, that I could almost despair of any good effects from my present undertaking.—But I hope you will think better of it, whilst you keep in mind, with me, our Lord's own declaration, that *by our words we shall be justified, and by our words we shall be condemned.*—St. Peter saith, that, among the things spoken of by St. Paul in his Epistles, there are *some things hard to be understood, which they, that are unlearned and unstable, wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.* 2 Pet. iii. 16. And what more hath the Doctor done than advise his hearers to explain those more difficult passages by such as are clear and evident, and so understand the Scriptures consistently with themselves?

But after all, how came this note to be inserted here? The reason is plain—you had made an assertion, which cannot be true, unless the Doctor should be found to reject the use of Scripture, which is what you seem indeed much inclined to charge him with (see p. 13.). But how do you make it out? Why! by singling out a passage in his sermon, and perverting it in the manner above described.—How much more commendable would it have been for you to have owned your mistake, which I expect you will now find yourself obliged to do.

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ponents, and then charging those doctrines with consequences that have not the least connexion with them."——If you cannot clear yourself of this fault, in the present instance, let me help you to a reflection, which you will find suitable to other occasions as well as this. *Alas! how careful should we be to know ourselves!*

I must now bespeak your attention to two other sentences in the same paragraph, in order to examine and compare them with that already mentioned, and with each other.—You say “if it were a truth that man by the exercise of his reasoning faculties could attain *any knowledge* of the nature and attributes of God, then God must not only be divested of his essential nature, but be without one of his most distinguishing attributes, *viz.* his incomprehensibility.”——Now, I do beseech you in the spirit of brotherly love and meekness, to consider impartially this sentence, and then say whether you think it fit to be set down in any argument.—You here maintain that “man by the exercise of his reasoning faculties cannot attain any knowledge of the nature and attributes of God.”

God."—Now see how you go about to prove it. 1st. "For then God must be divested of his essential nature."—You must pardon me (though I can hardly pardon myself) for using your own words on this occasion. But this is the plainest begging of the question, the meekest *brutum fulmen* that ever was shot. * No Giant-killer sure ever used such artillery before. What else is it but saying "Man cannot because he cannot?"—think again, and try what more you can make of it.—2dly, "Because then God must be divested of one of his most distinguishing attributes, viz. his incomprehensibleness."—What an argument have we here! as if ever any body supposed, that what was *incomprehensible* could be *comprehended*. Besides, if you had attended with a little more care to your own Ideas, you would never

* This is the only piece of pleasantry, which I hope you will meet with.—It stole on me before I was aware, and hath convinced me how carefully we ought to guard against such an unbecoming humour. You will say, that I might have struck it out afterwards;—but I thought it might not be amiss for you once to experience how people feel themselves upon such occasions, that you may for the future know how to be more tender of others.

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have thought of reckoning incomprehensibility among the attributes of the deity, — You would have known, that it is the common property of *all* the divine attributes, and therefore cannot be reckoned as one of them. It is no more than a term of comparison between the creator and his creatures; for if God were the only being in the world, there could be no such thing as incomprehensibility.

Attend likewise to what the form of your argument *would* be, supposing it free from these fatal Solæcisms. You say, that “man’s reason cannot attain *any knowledge* of the Nature and attributes of God, because God is incomprehensible,” that is, “man’s reason can do *nothing*, because it cannot do *all*.*” This is, in reality, what
you

* Your manner of quoting *Job xi. 7.* is of a piece with this. *Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty to perfection? It is as high as heaven, what canst thou do? deeper than hell (or the grave) what canst thou know? the measure thereof is longer than the earth and broader than the sea.*—Now what does this mean, but that man cannot find out the Almighty to PERFECTION: that is, man cannot comprehend the incomprehensible nature of God.—But this did not answer your purpose,
you

you have here set down as an argument, which you would certainly never have done, if you had seen it thus stripped of the disguise of words. And little do you think, all the while, that this is as good an argument against *reading the scriptures*, as it is against the *use of reason*. For I now ask you: do you, by means of all the advantages you enjoy, as a Christian, do you comprehend the incomprehensible nature of God?—What disparagement to reason is it then, to say that it cannot do more than the Scripture, and even the highest degree of spiritual illumination!

But you must be patient to hear still more of your own inconsistency, which I would forbear to trouble you with, if it were not for the sake of making out what

you wanted it to prove that man cannot attain *any knowledge* of the nature and attributes of God, and therefore you very skilfully took that part of the text, and just so much of it as you liked best. *Canst thou by searching find out God?* If you had gone on, it would have spoiled all.—Whether it was through oversight or with design, that you have thus mangled this scripture, I will not take upon me to judge, but I think it should be a warning to your most sanguine admirers, to look to it, that they are not in like manner imposed on in every other respect.

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it is that I am to answer. From your foregoing argument, (if it deserves to be called an argument) you conclude, with rather too confident an air, saying “ It is therefore a most presumptuous assertion to affirm, that we ought to form our Ideas of God from our own notions of his nature and attributes, and then to interpret his word agreeable to those notions.*” Now this is, by no means, the consequence of what went before; for supposing you to have proved what you proposed to do in the preceding sentence, *viz.* “ that man by the exercise of his reasoning faculties cannot attain *any knowledge* of the nature and attributes of God, the consequence to be drawn from it should have been, “ that we ought not in *any respect* to consult our own reason in reading the scripture.” — Instead of which, you very unfairly change the state of the question, and in general terms conclude against *forming our Ideas of God from our own notions, and then interpreting his word agreeable to those no-*

* This should have been *Ideas*, if you make any distinction between *Ideas* and *Notions*, or else the whole sentence is a confusion of both.

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tions. This, I say, is unfair. You have put more in the conclusion than there is in the premises. There is a great deal of difference between *having some knowledge of God*, and *forming our ideas of him* in general: but you have all along unaccountably confounded these two things, and by that means have represented the Doctor as holding an opinion which I am sure is far from his thoughts. Do but review calmly what you have here written.—First, you assert that the Doctor supposes “man to want *no* assistance, but the exercise of his own reason, to find out the nature and attributes of God,” (which he hath not done). In opposition to which, you attempt to prove, that man’s reason cannot attain *any knowledge* of the divine attributes: but then the conclusion, you draw from it, consists in condemning the Doctor, as if he held, that man’s reason could attain to a full and compleat knowledge of the divine nature.—Never sure did three sentences so quarrel with each other, as these do. I will not say, that this is done with a design to cast an odium on the Doctor’s opinions; I rather think it
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is owing to haste and impetuosity; it is because your imperious confidence makes you disdain to examine, with sufficient accuracy, what passes in your own mind; which might otherwise be at once the means of making you change your sentiments, as well as be more correct in your manner of writing: and though these strictures may not be so well understood by many of your professed admirers, as to convince them of the emptiness of your argument; yet after what I have here said, you yourself must needs be sensible of it; and I shall look upon you, as unfaithful to them, and to the truth, if you do not take the first opportunity of acknowledging openly your fault.

This confused way of expressing yourself, (of which I could point out many more instances, in the compass of these six pages) makes it not an easy matter for me to fix upon your real meaning. However, if it be your intention to censure the Doctor, (as in words you have done) for supposing, that man by the exercise of his rational faculties can attain *any knowledge*, &c.—Here I am ready to join issue with

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you. I take it upon myself to maintain and prove, “*That man by the exercise of his rational faculties can attain SOME KNOWLEDGE of the nature and attributes of God;*” and this I hope to do to your own satisfaction, not from the authority of great names now in the Church, but from plain declarations of Scripture, and from certain matter of fact.

This is a question of much later date than the Apostle’s times.—It was then (as I shall show) so well known a fact, that the natural reason of man *could* and *did* attain to some knowledge of the true God, that among all the inventions, by which men of perverse minds did, at that time, seek to disturb and unsettle the minds of Christians, no one ever thought of denying it; and therefore we must not expect to find any thing in scripture said with a professed design of opposing the contrary opinion; and yet the providence of God, foreseeing what would come to pass in these days, hath provided us with some passages in *St. Paul’s* writings, so full to the point, and so expressly decisive upon it, that if any one, when it hath been set
before

before him, will not own himself satisfied:—I will not say of him, that he must needs be void of reason, because that may pass for nothing with you, as yet, but surely he must be without ears to hear.

Begin to read *Rom. i. 16*. The Apostle is there commending the excellency of the gospel dispensation, calling it *the power of God unto salvation, to every one that believeth*, or embraceth it, whether they be Jews or Greeks (i. e.) Heathens; and then goes on, at the 18th verse, to show, first, with respect to the Heathens, how much they stood in need of the gospel to save them, i. e. to recover them from that wicked state in which they lived when Christ came.—*For now the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them, for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him, from the foundation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead, so that they are without excuse, because that when they knew God, they glorified him*
not

not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

I think this wants no explanation ; but as I know how hard it is to convince men of what they have set themselves against ; I cannot take my leave of so unanswerable an authority of scripture, without endeavouring to set it before you and our readers, in full view, by drawing it out into the following propositions :

1. That the Greeks or Heathens are the persons, whom the Apostle here speaks of.

2. That they had no other way of attaining *any knowledge* of the nature and attributes of God, than by the exercise of their own rational faculties. For, if they had, St. *Paul* would have been sure to have mentioned it, as he is here setting forth the advantages they enjoyed, in order to show, that they were without excuse, for not making a proper use of them. *They held the truth in unrighteousness.*

3. That this truth or knowledge, was the truth or knowledge of God.—*Even of his eternal power and godhead.*

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4. That their reason taught them this truth, by considering the works of God, in his creation, preservation, and government of the world—these are plain words : *that which may be known of God is manifest in (or among) them. For the invisible things of him from the foundation of the World (i. e. ever since the creation) are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.*

If there be any fixed meaning to words, surely we must be agreed, that these propositions are contained in the above passage, and then there is an end of all dispute about the point in question ; however, you have by this means an opportunity of showing wherein I have mistaken it, and in what respect you can explain it differently.

Exactly to the same purpose is what the Apostle said to the men of *Lystra*. —Speaking of the state, in which the heathen were, before the gospel came to them, he adds, *Nevertheless (even then) God left not himself without witness (which must mean sufficient witness if they would have attended to it) in that he did good, and gave*

gave them rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling their hearts with food and gladness. Acts xiv. 16, 17.

I shall conclude this scripture evidence, by desiring an answer to the following plain questions.

1. What does the Apostle mean, when he says, speaking of the heathens, *Rom. i. 21. Because when they knew God? Or, when he says, ver. 28. they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, if they never knew any thing of him?*

2. What does he mean, ver. 21. by saying of them that *their foolish heart was darkened, or, as it is Eph. iv. 18. having the understanding darkened, if their understanding had ever been naturally dark?*

3. What sense can you put upon the following words of the same Apostle, supposing him to have been of your opinion, viz. *Acts xvii. 26, 27. And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the Earth, and hath determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation, that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him*

him, and find him; tell me by what means all nations of men might haply feel after, and find God, if it was not by the exercise of their rational faculties?

Let us now see how the Apostle's declarations, concerning this point, stand confirmed by the experience of fact.

And here, the holy scripture is my infallible voucher to a fact, which, I expect, will command your assent. — You yourself shall be judge, whether the *barbarous people of Melita* did not believe in a God, who punisheth wicked men by his overruling providence, and whose power no one can escape, who, *when they saw the venomous beast fasten upon Paul's hand, and hang there, said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live.*

The profane writings (as they are called) which are proper evidence in the present case, furnish us with numberless instances in proof of my point.

When *Socrates* had used many arguments to prove that the world could not be made by chance; *Aristodemus* replies,

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“ I am now convinced that these things
 “ are the workmanship of some wise ar-
 “ tificer, who is also a lover of his crea-
 “ tures.” After this *Socrates* tells him,
 that “ if he would apply himself to his
 “ worship, he should be convinced, that
 “ God was so great a Being, as at once
 “ to see all things, to hear all things, to
 “ be every where present, and to take care
 “ of all things. *Xen. mem. b. 1.*

Plato in his researches concerning,
 “ The maker and father of the universe”
 “ —The God over all”—“ The creator
 “ of nature”—“ The sole principle of
 “ the universe”—by which, and many
 other such titles, he speaks of the ONE
 GREAT GOD, says, “ *His will is his ef-*
 “ *fectual goodness.*” *En. vi. b. 8. p. 747.*

Cicero's writings are full of the like sen-
 timents, of which I shall mention but
 one,—“ We see plainly (saith he) that
 “ the conveniences of life, which we par-
 “ take of, the light we enjoy, and the
 “ breath we draw, are imparted to us by
 “ God.” *Pro. Ros.*

Seneca says, “ Wherever you turn your-
 “ self, there you have God meeting you :
 “ nothing

“ nothing is without him, who filleth
 “ every thing that he hath made.”—And
 again, “ God is worshipped not with the
 “ fat carcasses of sacrificed bulls, not with
 “ gold, or silver, or alms cast into his
 “ treasury, but with a pious and well di-
 “ rected mind, &c.” 4 *Benef. c. iv.*—
Epif. 116.

Your own reading will furnish you with
 numberless such instances, out of which
 you may have made a much better choice ;
 but these will be sufficient, I think, to
 exemplify the truth of what the Apostle
 hath said, *viz.* that the reasoning faculties
 of man, by contemplating the *things that*
are made, i. e. the beauty, order, and use-
 fulness of God’s creation, have been able,
 and actually have attained *some* knowledge
 of the nature and attributes of God:—
 At least, you have it now before you, to
 signify what are your exceptions to this
 method of proving the matter of fact.

And indeed, are not the many books in
 our own language, which prove the be-
 ing and attributes of God from *rational*
arguments, a sufficient evidence of the
 matter in question ? You will say perhaps,

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that such writers are obliged to the Christian revelation for their knowledge. It is true, they probably would not have reasoned so well, if they had not been first taught by the gospel; but still, since the arguments, they use, are entirely built upon *rational* grounds, they must be admitted as a proof of what reason *can do*, when it is properly exerted.—And in short, I shall conclude my proof, with desiring your answer to the *following question*: What method will you take to convince an *Atheist*, if you still are of opinion, that the *exercise of the reasoning faculties cannot attain any knowledge of the nature and attributes of God?*

Now, is this supposing that “man wants no assistance, &c?”—By no means. Man’s *own reason*, which God gave him for that end, may enable him in some sort to *feel after and find him*, and yet he may want further assistance, on *many* accounts. It would lead me into too wide a field, to speak of them all; *one only* it is needful for me here to mention, *viz.* That (as daily experience shews) *man-kind do not exercise their rational faculties,*

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as they might and ought to do.—And here I must remind you to distinguish (as a wise heathen hath done *) between what the reason of man *can* do, and what it *hath usually done*. This is a very material distinction, and you will find, that from not attending to it proceeds your mistake thro' the whole of your argument.—Hence it is that you *perceive not, that the beam is in your own eye*, which you fancy to be in the doctor's, whilst you charge him with a “ consequence, which hath no “ connection with any thing that he hath “ said.” Hence it is that you have widely mistaken a very short and very plain text, quoted by you on the occasion. I Cor. i. 21. *The world by wisdom knew not God.*—I think, you are just now going to be convinced, that you have not been hitherto sufficiently careful to guard against prejudice in consulting the Holy Scriptures. It is, some how, become your favourite notion, that man's reason is *totally* and

* Ut nihil interest utrum *nemo valeat*, an *nemo possit valere*; Sic non intelligo quid interest, utrum *Nemo sit Sapiens*, an *nemo esse potest*. Cic. de Nat. Deor. l. 3.

naturally

naturally dark, and therefore you cannot even *read* these words of the Apostle aright. You take it as if he said, that *the world by wisdom* CANNOT KNOW GOD; whereas, the words are, *knew not God*. Let your own eyes convince you. Is there no difference between *cannot know*, and *knew not*? We may say of a person, that he *hath* not done a thing, and yet surely allow that he *may have done it*, if he would; and if you will attend to the former part of the verse, perhaps it may incline you to think, as it does me, that this was in the Apostle's mind, when he wrote it. The whole of it runs thus—*For, after that* IN THE WISDOM OF GOD, *the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.* I never choose to lay too much stress on single expressions, especially when the meaning is not absolutely certain, as is here the case; but all the commentators, which I have had an opportunity of consulting, understand it in the same sense, (and I know no other that it is capable of) which I shall give you in the words of *Doddridge's Paraphrase*, “*After*
“ *that*

“ *that, or since in the wisdom of God, in*
 “ *the midst of the most stupendous dis-*
 “ *plays of the divine wisdom**, with
 “ *which they were always surrounded,*
 “ *the world by all the improvements of its*
 “ *boasted wisdom knew not God, &c.*” If
 this be the meaning of the expression, it
 is plainly a tacit rebuke for their not know-
 ing God, amidst the means they enjoyed
 for doing so, even *in the wisdom of God*.
 And thus the text, you have quoted, is not
 only, not *for* your purpose, but directly
against it, being exactly similar to that in
 the first chapter of the *Romans*, before
 considered.

I am as ready as you can be, to boast
 with the Apostle, that when *the world by*
wisdom knew not God; it pleased God thro’
 the preaching of the gospel (which the
 world, by way of ridicule, called *the fool-*
ishness, of preaching) to save or recover
 from that state of ignorance and error
them that believed or embraced it.—Till the
 grace or favour of the gospel came to their
 assistance, it is certain that the Heathen

* The works of creation and providence. See *Ham-*
mond, Whitby, Pyle, Poli Synop.

world,

world, the generality of them, *knew not God*, but had imperfect and mistaken notions of his nature and attributes.—The Apostle justly calls those, *times of ignorance*; they walked (as he says) *in the vanity of their minds, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that was in them, because of the blindness of their hearts, who, being past feeling, had given themselves over to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.* Eph. iv. 18, 19.—This is the fullest description of the darkness and corruption of the Heathen world, to be found in scripture, and yet when fairly considered, it comes to nothing more than that passage in the epistle to the *Romans*, so often referred to—they were *darkened in their understanding*, which might otherwise have directed them better, and they had **GIVEN THEMSELVES over to lasciviousness**, whereas in *Rom. i.* the Apostle repeatedly says, that *God gave them over*, he left them to themselves, *because THEY DID NOT LIKE to retain him in their knowledge.* Now what doth all this amount to, but that, through
the

the influence of vicious habits, men had abused the light of reason, or (which amounts to the same) they did not exercise their rational faculties, as they might, and ought to have done; insomuch that superstitious opinions, and debauched practices being introduced, they were in the *general** blindly followed without examination, and without remorse.

But we know that this was the case, even where the light of revelation shined, under both the Old and New Testament. The people of *Israel* themselves, with the law of God, and the preaching of his specially commissioned Prophets to instruct them, often fell into idolatry, accompanied with the most cruel and unnatural practices. †

The same hath been also the case, even with the gospel itself—not to mention, that some nations have, through the abuse of it, fallen back into even worse than heathen

* *Cornelius* and his family (*Acts* x.) were an exception to the general depravity; and no doubt there were many more devout worshippers of the true God, who *honoured him as such, and were thankful*, by the due improvement of their reason.

† *Amos* v. *Psalms* cvi.

darkness: Let us look to what was the state of Christianity, when Popery prevailed in this kingdom. The teachers of it themselves were blindly attached to many absurd doctrines, and ridiculous fopperies, which had an immediate tendency to make men secure in their sins, and to hinder the reforming influence of its heavenly truths; whilst the laity were sunk into the grossest ignorance. *The truth of God among them was changed into a lie, as it had been among the idolatrous heathens; like them, they worshipped the creature more than the creator.*—Now, might it not be truly said of our forefathers, in those dark ages of Popery, that they *walked in the vanity of their minds, having the understanding darkened, &c.* that they were *even dead in trespasses and sins*, till the Reformation took place, and brought them out of that state of ignorance and error? And yet, I am sure, you will not say, that the gospel itself was in fault, this while; you will allow, that our forefathers *might* have done better; Why then, should the heathen ignorance and vanity be made an argument against

against the light of reason, as if it *could* give men no direction in their religious concerns? St. Paul (as was before observed) did not so; for in the very same sentence, where he describes, in such strong terms, their blindness, he speaks of them as, at that time, knowing better; they even then *held the truth in unrighteousness*, and therefore *were without excuse*. Very remarkable to this purpose are the words of an ancient Christian writer. *Lactantius*, who lived about three hundred years after Christ, who had so much to do among the Heathens, being employed in combating their prejudices and persuading them to embrace the gospel; who was every day an eye witness of what the unassisted natural reason of man could do, and who would certainly have attributed to it nothing more than what his regard to truth required, hath left us the following account of the matter. “ * When I am, as it
 “ becomes me, often revolving in my
 “ mind the one thing needful, I am
 “ used to wonder, that the majesty of

* *Equidem, sicut oportet, de summa rerum sæpenumero cogitans, admirari soleo, &c. Div. Instit. l. ii. c. 1.*

“ the only true God, who governs all
 “ things, and in whom all things exist,
 “ should be so much forgotten ; that he,
 “ who alone ought to be regarded, should
 “ be most of all neglected : and that men
 “ themselves should come to be so blinded
 “ as to prefer dead men (the Heathen
 “ Gods) to the living and true God ;
 “ men, who sprung from the earth, and
 “ who were buried in the earth, to him
 “ who made the earth ; and yet one
 “ might pardon this impiety, if their er-
 “ ror proceeded altogether * from igno-
 “ rance of the divine nature ; but when
 “ we often see these very worshippers
 “ of false Gods both confess and ac-
 “ knowledge the one great and true God ;
 “ how can they expect to be pardoned
 “ for such impiety, in not owning his
 “ worship, whom it is impossible for man
 “ to be entirely ignorant of ? For both
 “ when they swear, when they wish for,
 “ or are thankful for any thing, they ne-
 “ ver make mention of *Jupiter*, or the
 “ many false Gods, but of G O D HIM-

* *Omnino* might perhaps here signify *at all*.

“ SELF

“ SELF: *so doth the truth, by force of nature, break forth even against their wills;*
 “ which is the case, not when they are
 “ in prosperity; for most commonly they
 “ fall into forgetfulness of God, when
 “ they enjoy his favours, and ought to
 “ honour him for them; but if any hard-
 “ ship presses them, then they remember
 “ God.”*

The testimony of this zealous and skilful defender of the Christian cause carries with it the greater weight, because he hath taken so much pains in his writings to show how insufficient the light of reason had proved, to direct mankind in their religious concerns.† And yet, you see, he knew better than to deny, as you do, that thereby man can attain *any* knowledge of

* To prevent an objection, which you may make to those authorities, which are taken from profane authors, and to this, from a Christian writer; let it be observed, that they only relate to the matter of fact, and therefore are not contrary to my first rule. In point of opinion or doctrine, I shall always have recourse to the sacred scriptures alone.

† The light of reason was indeed quite unable to have discovered those most interesting and affecting truths which are made known to us in the gospel,
 the

of God; on the contrary, he not only allows of, but insists upon it; he (like *St. Paul*) urges it as an argument, to show how inexcusable they were, for not making a better use of the ability they enjoyed.

You alledge also, on the same occasion, these words of our blessed Lord, *Matth. xi. 27. No man knoweth the father but the son, and he to whom the son will reveal him.* Now if I can show, that the phrase *to know God* signifies any thing else in scripture than to have “knowledge of his nature and attributes,” then it falls short of answering your purpose : And this will plainly appear from *John viii. 54. It is my father that honoureth me, of whom ye say, that he is your God. Yet ye have not known him.*—Here then, I ask the following question. Do you think, that these

the knowledge of which was become so necessary to engage men’s attention, and to draw them more powerfully from vain and sensual pursuits; these were such discoveries (saith the Apostle) *as eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man to conceive.* 1 Cor. ii. 9. See *Stillingfleet’s Origines sacræ. B. iii. c. 6.* And then consider how unjustly you charge rational divines with reducing the Gospel to a level “with the philosophy of Greece and Rome.”

phari-

pharisees, who probably were some of them Scribes too, and sat in *Moses's* seat, who were at this time disputing with Christ from the Old Testament, and who (as our Lord expressly says) did acknowledge *his father to be their God*;—Do you think, that these men had not *some knowledge of his nature and attributes*? I doubt not but you will answer, *that they had*; and therefore it must be in some other sense, that our Lord said to them, *Ye have not known him*.—Besides, if the passage, by you quoted, answers your purpose, then *St. Paul* hath flatly contradicted Christ.—For *St. Paul* saith, *Rom. i.* that the Gentiles, of whom he there speaks, *knew God*; and yet, I fancy, we are both agreed, that Christ had not *revealed his father* to them. But the case is plainly this, *St. Paul* speaks of a *head-knowledge*; they *knew God*, but *did not glorify him, neither were thankful*. Our Lord means a *heart-knowledge*, consisting of regard, esteem, and friendship. It is in this sense that he will say to the wicked at the last day—I KNOW *ye not*,—I never KNEW you.—See *Luke xiii. 25, 27.*—*Matth. vii. 23.* also *I John iii. 1.* and try

try what other sense you can put upon the word KNOW in those passages.*

May I now venture to lay it down as, a truth sufficiently made out in the foregoing pages, that *God hath endowed his creatures with reason, whereby they might attain, and have attained to some knowledge of his nature and attributes; but that, thro' the careless inattention of mankind, it was nevertheless necessary, and God hath been graciously pleased, to reveal himself, and make known his will to them, at sundry times, and in divers manners, by his prophets, and hath last of all spoken to us by his Son?—*

By looking back to page 25 and 26, you will find that this *knowledge of God* consisted of the following particulars :

1. To use St. Paul's own words,—*The invisible things of him, his Being and Perfections, which are invisible to our bodily eyes, even his eternal Power and Godhead, or universal dominion and providence, over the whole creation.*

2. That he is Goodness itself, and loveth his creatures.

* See also John xv. 24.

3. That

3. That he is intimately present every where, with all things, and with all persons.

4. That a pious and well directed mind is his delight, and that he punisheth the wicked.

To these agree what Dr. *Adams* hath laid down in his Sermon, as “first allowed “truths,” with respect to God, *viz.* That he is the righteous governor of the world—that he loveth righteousness and hateth iniquity—that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him—and that he will not let the guilty go free—that man is a creature of God, accountable to him for the use of those faculties or powers which he hath given him, and obliged to exert them in a right manner towards God and himself, as well as his neighbour.—In a word, that he is obliged, as he tenders the favour of his maker and judge, to practise what is good, and to avoid what is evil.*

G

And

* There are also two other particulars set down by the Dr. which cannot properly be said to relate to the *Knowledge of God*; although, they are doubtless to be

And now I will appeal to yourself—Is this knowledge of God; as far it goes, *true*,

be reckoned in the number of “ first allowed truths,” *viz.*, “ That Man is endowed with a faculty of understanding, to discern betwixt good and evil—and with a power to choose, or refuse the evil or the good.”—The latter of these is to make part of the subject of my second Letter.—And as to the former, it requires no proof; it is certainly one of those truths, “ which (as the Dr. says) can scarce by any Argument be made clearer and plainer than they are.”—The mind of man discerns between *good and evil*, as the eye distinguishes between *black and white*, or between *crooked and strait*. The last appeal about *good and evil* must be to that fixed standard, which is in every man’s rational and natural conscience, with which God hath endowed him, and which the Dr. rightly calls “ the voice of God within us.”—You will say, perhaps, that the laws and commandments of God are the standard; and so they are, to bring men back, when they forget themselves, and this *candle of the Lord* within them, is grown dim; but then I ask, in what sense is it, that men can presume to say of those laws and commandments themselves, that they are *right and holy*?—Answer me this question, and you will allow the point.—Besides, our Lord says to the *Jews*,—*Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?* Luke xii. 57. And St. Paul hath said, *When the Gentiles which have not the law, do BY NATURE the things contained in the law, these having not the law, are a LAW UNTO THEMSELVES: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, &c.*—Try what sense you can put on the above passages, without supposing that man hath *naturally* a power of judging, what is *right*.

OF

or is it not? Can you, by the assistance of scripture and illumination, object to any one of the above particulars? I call upon you to point out which of these first truths it is, that the word of God *does* deny, or in any respect contradict.—If you do not this, then you admit that it is in every respect agreeable to them. By not fixing your subject, it is an easy matter to deftly plausibly upon it, and, without making one fair conclusion, deceive both yourself and others. But this brings it to its proper issue. Here then, I will fix my foot, and offer you three things, one of which you must of necessity comply with,—

Either shew wherein the above-mentioned “ first allowed truths” are contrary to *Scripture* truths :*

Or deny, (what I have so fully proved) that men ever could attain to the knowledge of these first truths, by the exercise of their reasoning faculties :

G 2

Or

* Among the several instances you have set down, I can see but one that serves your purpose.—If indeed the Almighty did make *Pharoah* wicked, that he might have him to punish, I must confess, it contradicts

Or else allow, that the scriptures are every where agreeable to the plain dictates of reason and conscience.

I trust, there is no need to advise you, what you shall choose in the present strait; especially, when I consider that you express a desire that *yours* should “ pass for “ a rational religion,”—that “ it is only *un-
“ enlightened reason* which is incapable of
“ forming any judgment of the nature and
“ attributes of God, or of deciding what
“ is fit and meet for him to do;” but especially when I have the pleasure of hearing you say (in the *Admonisher Admonished*)
“ under the influence of the holy spirit
“ I esteem reason to be an useful guide.”
This looks well indeed. Certainly we cannot now be far from meeting on the same

tradicts a first allowed truth, which reason teaches us concerning the *divine attributes*. But to my comfort and yours, and for the credit of the holy scriptures, they tell us no such thing: and I cannot help wondering, that without any comment or explanation, you should so abruptly introduce a passage, which you must needs know, by taking the whole account together, hath been, in general, differently understood by the most pious and careful enquirers into the sense of scripture. See *Patrick's Com.*

spot,

spot, that we may jointly set our seals to the original and eternal compact between *reason* and *revelation*. There remains nothing more to do, than to settle what it is, that we mean by *reason*; and I am persuaded, that sincere enquirers after truth would be more successful than they oftentimes are, if they were but careful to use their words in some fixed and determinate sense. For my own part, I know not, and I call upon you to point out, any other sense, in which opinions can be said to be *rational*, than *by concurring with the plain dictates of reason*.—But you say that it must be *enlightened reason*, that is, “under the influence of the holy spirit,”—so say I.—Now I do beseech you to consider how it will stand then.—*Enlightened reason* is *reason* still. The dictates of enlightened reason can be *but* true; and if those “first allowed truths,” *are* truths, then they are the dictates of enlightened reason, and consequently are “an useful guide” in our religious enquiries.*

Let

* Let it be here considered how properly you have quoted the following text—*Whosoever will be wise must become a fool*: these are not exactly the words, (1 Cor. iii. 18.) but I will take them as they are.—

And

Let me now bespeak your attention to the following passage in your letter. “ We ought to form our ideas of God wholly and entirely from what is revealed of him by his own unerring spirit, in his own
“ written

And, do you understand by them, that a Christian must so *become a fool*, as to give up these first acknowledged truths of reason, which you here acknowledge to be an *useful guide*?—If not, the text is nothing at all to your purpose.—You have rightly added, by way of explanation, “ in man’s account.”—So that your meaning must then be; “ Whosoever will be wise (i. e.) of your way of thinking, must become, or be esteemed, a fool by all *rational* Christians.”—But if you will for once hear a rational Christian speak, be entreated to consider how sadly you pervert the Apostle’s words.—When St. Paul wrote; *to become a fool in man’s account* signified, in the account of the *Heathen Philosophers*, who despised the Gospel, because it taught plain and simple truths, and had in it none of those subtile refinements, which they looked upon as the only mark of wisdom; but surely you will not apply this to Christians now a-days, whose guide is the scripture rationally and consistently interpreted.—Upon the same consideration, *Matth. xi. 25.* will appear to have nothing to do with the occasion for which you have quoted it.

There is but one text more quoted by you on this occasion. *1 Cor. ii. 14.* *The natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him, &c.*—I have no doubt but that Dr. *Doddridge* hath given us the true sense of these words in the following paraphrase,—“ Vain and foolish men find a great deal in our preaching to cavil at and
“ object

“ written word ;* and however this word
 “ may at any time speak contrary to what
 “ would be the natural conceptions of our
 “ reason, here reason must stoop to the word,
 “ and not the word to reason, p. 12.”
 This is indeed a very plausible way of talk-
 ing, “ to catch the benevolence” of your
 readers ; and no doubt it passes with many
 for a becoming mark of your pious vene-

“ object against ; and it is no wonder that they do ;
 “ for the *animal man*, who continues under the in-
 “ fluence of his appetites and passions, and is a
 “ stranger to the noble exercises and principles of
 “ the divine life, *receiveth not*, with any inward relish
 “ or sense, *the things of the spirit of God, &c.*” If this
 be right, you see, it is nothing to your purpose, unless
 you conclude that all besides yourselves are “ strangers
 to the divine life ;” which you are indeed too apt to
 insinuate. But I will wave this for the present ; and
 shall only ask this single question : Do you understand
 by the *natural man*, the man who makes *enlightened*
reason his guide, in reading and comparing scripture
 with scripture ? If you do not ; then this passage
 makes no difference between us.

* This cannot be, if what the Dr. says be true,
 that the “ first allowed truths are *every where sup-
 “ posed, and often appealed to in scripture.*” And with-
 out producing instances, to support his assertion ; let
 me only ask you the following question.—How can
 a man know that he ought to receive any thing as
 the word of God, unless you will allow him to have
 some *previous knowledge* of his nature and attributes,
 and of the difference between good and evil ?

ration

ration for the sacred oracles. But I must say, that, as to the subject you are upon, it amounts to nothing at all, and serves only to hide the fallacy of the foregoing argument, perhaps, from yourself as well as others. For if the *written word of God* be *actually* agreeable to those "first allowed truths," (which are all that I am to contend for under the name of *reason*) why should we go to set them at variance? What occasion is there for saying, that we ought to form our ideas of God *wholly* and *entirely* from the one, in contradistinction to the other, so long as we allow them to be both the same? Or, why will you talk of one *stooping* to the other, when there is no need for either to do so?

But you say, "however the scriptures may at any time speak contrary to what *would* be the natural conceptions of our reason, here reason must stoop." Let this be accurately expressed:—say, "however the scriptures may speak contrary to what *are* the dictates of reason," *viz.* these "first allowed truths," and then, I will not say what your tongue or your pen shall do, but I will be bound for it, your heart shall

shall presently disapprove of what you have said.—It is a “first allowed truth,” that “God is the righteous governor of the world, that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him, and that he will not let the guilty go free.” Now, suppose the scripture were to declare the contrary, that “God [pardon the supposition, and yet it is your own] is an *unjust* being, that he *punisheth* those that diligently seek him, and *rewardeth* the guilty”—could your reason in this case stoop to the word? I will answer for you: N O.—But you will object—that this is an unfair supposition, because the scripture never *does* declare God to be unrighteous. Yes! that is what I expected you to say.* So that your own words shall decide the matter. You maintain, that the word of God never *doth* contradict the Doctor’s first allowed dictates of reason; but if it were to do so, your reason could not stoop to it.

I should hope that by this time we begin to understand each other; and to see this matter in the same light.—But it

* If you would have said any thing different from this, please to correct it.

H

will

will be made still more plain, by viewing it on a side, from whence I have long perceived your mistake to arise. I mean, that you are all the while begging the question, with respect to the *Interpretation* of scripture. You seem to have no notion, but that every body else is in the wrong, and you in the right. You represent, as if those of your persuasion are the only persons who are willing to stick to the true sense of scripture as to certain points; and that others differ from you herein, not because they do not find them “plainly declared” in scripture, but because they are, as you say, “determined to receive nothing upon God’s *own* authority, till they have tried it at the bar of their great *Diana, Reason.*”——This way of stating it is indeed finely calculated to catch the ear; but if I can so lay it open, that we may both of us view it, as it really is; it will, I doubt not, vanish into soft air, and we shall find nothing between us, to hinder our final agreement.——Be it observed then, that there are numberless plain passages of scripture, which are perfectly agreeable to the first allowed dictates

tates of reason, about the meaning of which, there never was any dispute among men of the most different religious sentiments.—There are also *some*, but not *many* passages, which are of difficult interpretation, and good men have differed about the sense of them. But, how shall it be determined who are in the right? To which question, the only true answer is this: *They, who pursue the best METHOD of interpretation, are most likely to be the persons.* I trust, you will agree to this resolution of the question. Let it then be a rule of judging between you and me; and let each of us state our case accordingly.—But, in the first place, it must be laid down, that we both of us believe and acknowledge the influence of the Holy Spirit, and put ourselves by prayer under his divine assistance. We *must* be supposed to be upon an equal footing in this respect. It can avail nothing in our present rivalry, for either you or I to make pretension to a superior degree of inward illumination. We may boast ourselves against each other on this head without end, and still have an equal claim to the

regard of mankind, who are the judges.*
 —In other respects, I shall set our several pretensions to preference, one over against the other; *yours*, in your own words, and *mine*, agreeable to what I have been inculcating in the foregoing pages.

The

* I thought proper to settle this as a necessary preliminary, because I observe how ready you always are to assume the assistance of the Holy Spirit, as your peculiar prerogative above all, who hold not your opinions.—To this purpose is the following sentence. “ Thus to set up reason in the throne, is “ absolutely to deny the fall of man, and to make “ the illumination of the eternal Spirit absolutely “ needless.”—This is only a consequence of your own drawing, which I am sure no rational Christian ever thought of.—You go on—“ and therefore we “ shall generally find, that those reasoning gentlemen, who are advocates for the reasoning powers “ in man in the discernment of spiritual things, do for “ the most part embrace the whole *Pelagian* system, “ —superfede the necessity of all divine light— “ and too often treat the whole doctrine of the Holy “ Spirit’s influence and inspiration, as nothing else “ but the fancy of a deluded sect, &c.”—You must look to it for the truth of this accusation; I know of no rational Christian, who denies the influence and inspiration of the Holy Spirit: and till you can produce one instance at least, you ought to beg pardon of the public for such an assertion.

And as to what you mention of the *Pelagian* system; you are under a great mistake about that likewise. By *St. Augustine’s* own account, *Pelagius* held, that

The MAXIMS by which the Author of PIETAS OXONIENSIS interprets scripture.

“ I Profess to believe every jot of God’s word, simply upon the authority of its infallible author; and howsoever this word may at any time” (according to my interpretation of it) “speak contrary to what would be the natural conceptions of my reason, here my reason must stoop to the word.”

The MAXIMS by which the Writer of this LETTER proceeds, in interpreting scripture.

“ I Profess to believe every jot of God’s word, simply upon the authority of its infallible author.” But, I find no occasion for “my reason to stoop to the word,” because they both agree. For although certain difficult passages, if not carefully looked into, are indeed *capable* of being taken in a sense, which contradicts those “first allowed truths,” which are the plain dictates of my reason: yet I find these truths confirmed by numberless other texts, which are so plain, that they cannot be mistaken. So that by interpreting the difficult passages in a sense, which agrees with those first allowed truths, I make the scriptures appear consistent with themselves, and with reason likewise.

I could only make use of your own words on this occasion; but, as I am far from desiring to take any undue advantage,

that “God enlightens us with the various and unspeakable gifts of his heavenly grace;” and again, God “always helps by the assistance of his
“grace,”

tage, I shall suspend my judgment, and hope the reader will do the same, till you have had an opportunity of explaining yourself more fully on this head, which I wish you to do.—And in the mean while, to justify my own method of interpretation, if the reasonableness of it

“ grace,” that power to will, and to do, “ which he had before given to man.” (*See Aug. de Grat. Chr. Tom. vii. p. 768.*) Wherein *Pelagius* differed from *St. Augustine*, or yourself, or whether he was right or wrong in this particular, it matters nothing to me, whilst I have the Bible in my hands. I mean only to caution you to be more sparing for the future in the use of such hard names against your brethren, especially when you are not quite sure *whereof you affirm.*—You know that the disciples of Christ were first called *Christians*; in derision.—*Lollard* was the contemptible appellation, given to those, who first began to sow the seeds of the Reformation among us. The detestable name of *Heretick* belongs to you and me, from the same uncharitable quarter. And the word *Methodist*, in our own time, conveys an unfavourable idea of our christian brethren, to many, who know little more of *Methodists* than the name, and whom I could wish to see like them in many respects.—The Apostle says, that by receiving strangers, some “ have entertained “ Angels unawares :” and be advised, Sir, to beware, lest on the contrary, after fixing on your brethren odious names, which you scarce know the meaning of, you should find *them* at last to be greater than yourself in the kingdom of heaven.

be

be not sufficient ; and to recommend it more effectually to your approbation and choice ; I shall set before you the conduct of an eminent and faithful servant and *friend* of God, upon an occasion exactly similar to the case in question.—God had made known to *Abraham*, that he would destroy *Sodom*. Now, *to destroy Sodom*, signifies, to destroy the whole city and all the people therein : so *Abraham* understood it ; but it appeared to him contrary to the notions he had of the divine goodness, thus to “ destroy (as he thought) “ the righteous with the wicked.” He therefore “ took upon him to *speak unto the Lord*,” saying, “ *That be far from thee, to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked ; and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee ; shall not the judge of all the earth do right ?*”—And what was the consequence ? Did *Abraham* displease the Lord, by thus desiring to reconcile his word, with his own *preconceived* notion of his *nature and attributes* ? By no means. On the contrary, he succeeded in that desire : He was assured that the *judge of all*
the

the earth would do RIGHT; that if but ten righteous persons were found in *Sodom*, it should be spared, *for their sakes*; and tho' there were not so many, and the city was destroyed; we find that *just Lot* was remembered, the Lord sending him, his wife and two daughters *out of the midst of the overthrow*.—I shall be glad to see a calm and sober answer to this scripture-authority, for consulting first allowed truths in the interpretation of scripture.—And it will hold still stronger, in our own case; *we* have the *whole* written word of God, in every page whereof, these first allowed truths are strengthened and confirmed; so that whilst we understand the difficult passages agreeable thereto, the scriptures appear consistent with themselves and with reason together.

I have been hitherto, Sir, your *respondent* on the behalf of reason; concerning which, I will hope, we are at length agreed, that the plain and first truths of it are an *useful guide* in religion. But now, in taking leave of ~~the~~ subject, I mean to change my situation, and to appear upon a different footing with you. Let it not be imagined, that

that I have been defending the use of reason, as if there were a necessity for calling in its assistance, in order to get rid of the most obvious meaning of, what I call, difficult passages of scripture, which is the way in which you would have it appear. —I will suppose reason to be out of the question; let it stand by and look on for a while. Do but allow me common sense, and grace to apply the common principles of interpretation, by consulting the phraseology of the sacred writings, by comparing one passage with another, or even, by understanding those, which have given rise to your particular opinions, agreeable to the general scope and design of their context; and I doubt not to make it plain, even to yourself, if you will but stick to the point, that, in whatsoever instances you shall please to fix upon, they were not written in the sense in which you would have them understood.

See now, how groundless is the sarcastical complaint which is contained in the following words: “ If we remove the
 “ objections of all these wise and reason-
 “ ing gentlemen, I fear that we poor
 “ credulous enthusiasts, who profess to
 I “ believe

“ believe every jot of God’s word, firmly upon the authority of its infallible author, shall have a very small portion of scripture left, for the exercise of our faith.”—For who are they, that believe most of God’s word?—those who interpret a few passages, or single expressions, contrary to the plain meaning of all the rest; or the “ wise reasoning gentlemen,” who understand the whole of it in a consistent sense.—But I here perceive, that you quite mistake the scripture notion of *faith*. It is there described to be a belief of *things unseen*, either already *done*, upon the authority of God’s *declaration*, or *hoped for*, to come, upon the faithfulness of his *promise*. And I desire you to show, that the word ever signifies “ to believe, what is mysterious and contrary to reason.”—I must confess, that this way of speaking concerning *faith* is not unusual with *Christian writers*; but, unless we can find it in *scripture*, I think you and I had better agree to leave it off, and let others talk as they please.

And the words, with which you conclude this part of your letter, are of a still more

more extraordinary nature. — I shall take the liberty of transcribing them at length ; — peradventure, you will view them with a less indulgent eye in *my* page than you appear to do in your own ; whilst you have suffered them to stand in your third edition. “ However the plain declarations of “ God [take notice that you beg the question as to *plain declarations*] may be cavilled at, as mysterious, by some, and “ full of absurdities, by others, yet these “ very mysteries and absurdities (as they “ are deemed) are to the true Christian an “ incontestible proof of the divine original of the scriptures ; for had human “ reason and wisdom undertaken to have “ imposed upon the world in framing a “ religion, they would have freed it from “ those cloggs and impediments which “ now cause it to be a stone of stumbling, “ and rock of offence to so many great “ and learned ones of the earth.” — This is another of those flourishes of words by which the ears of the unstable are to be captivated, like as the ignorant empiric makes his way with the multitude, by crying down the learning, and prudent skill

of the regular physician.—And you *may* avail yourself of this way of talking, if no mischance befall you: *When a strong man armed keeps his palace, his goods are in peace; but if a stronger than he shall come upon him*—if a setter forth of Doctrines should arise, *less learned, but more mysterious, and more absurd*, as he may be deemed, than yourself, he will have a better right to this argument than you; he *takes away the armour wherein* you trust, and employs it against you; he deals with you, as you have served us: the *transcendent* mysteriousness and absurdity of his ravings will be pleaded as a proof that he “*speaketh truly*;” and if you cannot *receive them*, it will pass with all his followers for an irrefragable argument in their favour, that they become “*a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence*” to such great and learned *Earth-borns* as you and I.

And pray consider, that it is under the tyranny of such declamation as this, that our Christian brethren of the Church of *Rome* are now worshipping the Host, by being prevailed on thereby, to stifle the plain
dic-

dictates of reason, and to silence the evidence of their senses.*——Let us try how this language of yours will suit the mouths of their spiritual directors against us—Our Lord hath said, *this is my body*, and *this is my blood*. But from consulting reason, and common sense, and by interpreting these words agreeable to the manifest meaning of the like expressions in scripture, we have protested against the doctrine of transubstantiation ; then comes a Papist, and like you, reproaches us because we do not “ believe every jot of “ God’s word,” telling his blinded followers, that “ however these plain declarations of God may be cavilled at, “ as mysterious, by some, and full of absurdities, by others ; yet these very mysteries and absurdities (as they are deemed) are to a true Christian, &c.

* A writer of that Church, like you, begs the question, as to the right interpretation of scripture, and then, like you also, says, “ Upon this head (the “ authority of God’s word) faith is ever *rational*, “ tho’ reason cannot reach even to the least glympse “ of the truth proposed,” and goes on to observe, that however this may be called a “ blind submission “ by presuming men, yet it is the glory of reason thus to submit, &c.”——*Afternoon Instruct. Vol. I. p. 141.*

I think

I think it proper to assure you, that I have been totally unconnected with Dr. Adams, in writing this letter, so that I may not draw upon him any further effusions of your *satyrical vein*. And though, you will say, it is prudent, in the present case, not to subscribe *my* name, whilst *yours* remains concealed; yet, as I shall be careful to say nothing unbecoming a Christian,—as my only aim is to promote the cause of truth; and hope that I have candour to perceive, and humility to own any mistake, that is fairly pointed out to me; I can see no reason for carrying on this correspondence in masquerade, which might be done, to much better purpose, when face to face: so that if you shall put your name to any answer, you may make to this, or a future letter, if it be a name of character, I shall be ready to follow your example; and am, in the mean time,

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Yours, &c.

E R R A T A.

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