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Christianity Tidings of Joy.

A
SERMON
Preach'd before the
UNIVERSITY
O F
O X F O R D,

At St. *MART*'s,

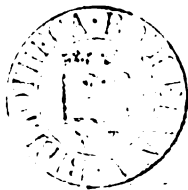
On Sunday, Decemb. 27. 1741.

By **JOHN GAMBOLD, M.A.**
Vicar of Stanton-Harcourt in Oxfordshire.

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O X F O R D,

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LUKE II. 10.

And the Angel said unto them, Fear not : for behold I bring you good Tidings of great Joy, which shall be to all People.



HE Appearance of the Angel of the Lord to the Shepherds, to acquaint them of our Saviour's Birth, was very proper and suitable to the Dignity of such a Nativity. Whether we consider the Angels, as a higher and actually happy Order of intelligent Beings, kindly congratulating the Salvation of the Human Race ; or whether we regard them as the Messengers of the great God, sent down to do honour to his Son, and make a part of the Credentials of his Mission ; or whether we look upon them as the appointed Retinue of the *Logos* himself, attending their own Captain even on his earthly Pilgrimage : In every light, their acting thus, was a decent Circumstance of the Nativity of *Christ*. The Shepherds likewise may be consider'd, as Persons of a low Condition, and of plain and honest Minds, keeping up
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as it were the old Patriarchal Simplicity of Life ; and therefore the fittest of any to be the first Courtiers of that King, who without secular Ornaments, and against human Probabilities, was to restore Peace and a golden Age to Mankind : And their being called to in the dead of Night, when all others were asleep, did but too truly represent what is so often and awfully remark'd as incident to the Gospel, I mean, to pass unobserv'd and unregarded by the unbelieving World, and to take effect only with a few waking Minds. The Angel that appear'd, and spoke first, was the principal Messenger sent with these Tidings ; and the others, who seem only to have been heard and not seen by the Shepherds, were Attendants upon him, who in the fervor of their Zeal could not forbear their harmonious Suffrage on the Occasion. The Light also that attended him, may have been either individually the same which the Wise-men saw, and is in that History called a Star ; or only in general, like that, a Ray and portion of that majestic Light in which God dwells, and which cloaths not only Himself, but even his Messengers as a Garment. But I shall insist only on his Words ; which were these, *Fear not : for behold I bring you good Tidings of great Joy, which shall be to all People.*

The Angel here informs the Shepherds first of all, that the Message he brings is of such a Nature, as to be matter of Joy. Then he proceeds, in the next verse, to shew them What it is: *Unto you is born this day, in the City of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.* Had he only told them, that *Christ the Lord* was born, they from the Character which the Prophets had given of that Person, could not have been ignorant, what Sentiments of Heart were due to the News of his Appearance : Yet to help their Apprehension, and secure their Joy the better, he adds that very Title which must ultimately be the Ground of their

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their Joy, and calls him a Saviour; *Unto you is born a Saviour*. But now if the great Motive to Joy is couch'd in this Title *Saviour*; this directs us to look farther than the Nativity, or to look upon That, only as the Opening of a large and manifold Scene of Wisdom and Love, in the Redemption of Mankind: For *Christ* was not a Saviour to us merely by being born, but by several Seps besides, which he took afterwards. Hence I think I am authoriz'd, to understand the Subject of Joy here mention'd, to be in effect the Christian Salvation itself, with what was done to purchase it, and the happy Fruits of it; or which will come to the same, the Gospel or Doctrine wherein all these things were promulged. Accordingly at present, I shall take the Words before us, *Fear not, for behold I bring you good Tidings, &c.* as containing this Position, *That the Christian Doctrine was intended to be (and moreover was, at the first preaching of it) received with Joy.* This Observation I will

First, Confirm from the Scripture.

Secondly, Enquire, What it was in the Christian Doctrine, which must more particularly be the Cause of this Joy?

Thirdly, Draw some Inference.

I. That the Christian Doctrine was intended to be received with Joy.

If the Words I have read, because they were spoken upon a particular Occasion, may not seem so directly to imply this, the Thing however will be put beyond all doubt by other Places of Scripture. And first, it is somewhat remarkable to our purpose, that the very Terms *εὐαγγέλιον* and *εὐαγγελίζεσθαι* are used in such a manner in the Apostolical Writings. Three times in four that there is occasion to mention the Christian Do-
ctrine,

Erine, or the proclaiming of it to the World, 'tis done by these Words; which yet in themselves were not so very obvious, nor so far as appears, any favourite Phrases of the Age. No reason can be given for it, but that the Truth of the Case so much required, that the Doctrine then delivered should be look'd upon both as News, and Good News; and be received, as in Nature and common Life Good News or Tidings are receiv'd; which we know is, with the most sensible Joy, and therefore those who paint the Passions strong, take the Persons they represent, at the moment when some concerning Event comes first to their Knowledge: I say, this was so much the most suitable Reception of any for our Saviour's Religion, that to insure it, no Repetition of the same Word was thought too much. Agreeably hereto *S. Paul*, in a place where he is very careful to remove wrong, and suggest right Notions of that Matter, gives this Character of his Office as a Preacher of Christianity, *We are Helpers of your Joy.*^a As he does, in another place, apply to himself and his fellow-Preachers, those Words of the Prophet *Isaiab*, where a Bringer of good Tidings (and perhaps 'twas hence the Idea flow'd into the New Testament,) is suppos'd to raise such Joy and Transport in the Beholders even afar off, that his very Person and Motion seem to them more amiable than ordinary: *How beautiful are the Feet of them, &c.*^b And indeed wherever that Prophet speaks of the Christian Dispensation, he calls upon those to whom the Promise is address'd, to Rejoice: *Break forth into Joy, sing together, ye waste Places of Jerusalem; for the Lord hath comforted his People.*^c *Sing, O Heavens, and be joyful, O Earth.*^d *The People that walked in Darkness, have seen a great Light; they that dwell in the Land of the shadow of Death, upon them hath the Light shined.*

^a 2 Cor. I. 24. ^b Rom. X. 15. ^c Isai. LI. 9. ^d Ch. XLIX. 13.

Thou hast multiplied the Nation, and to him (for so the Margin reads it) increased the Joy: they joy before thee according to the Joy in Harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the Spoil.^a Now Prophecy may be so far like the Seeing of things with the Eye at a great Distance, that it may take in perhaps no more than the Gross of the Object, but is sure to do justice to that: And if so, then whatever be the Particulars of Christianity, which will upon a nearer Inspection be separately regarded, yet that which ought first to strike the Eye, that which makes the Bulk of it, and in the Prophet's View swallows up every thing else, is some great Consolation or Matter of Joy.

But to come still closer; Nothing can be a better Rule to judge by, than the Impressions with which the First Converts heard the Christian Doctrine: What they felt, ought to be felt in and from Christianity, for 'tis in them we see the most genuine Effects of it. After that great Conversion on the Day of Pentecost, the outward Behaviour of the Believers immediately thereupon, is described in several Particulars; and their State of Mind, which indeed shew'd itself in their Actions, is sufficiently intimated in two Words, *Gladness* or *Exultation*, and *Singleness of Heart*:^b To which we may add what is said of them before; that, among many others perhaps who were never the better for it, these were the Persons who *gladly received S. Peter's Word*, and therefore *were baptized*.^c In the same Book of the *Acts*, after mentioning that *Philip went down to the City of Samaria, and preach'd Christ to them*, 'tis taken notice of, that *there was great Joy in that City*.^d When the Jaylor who had *S. Paul* in custody, had once heard him *speak the Word of the Lord*, besides the Actions he did presently upon believing, which plainly imply an Alacrity of Heart, and are

^a Ch. IX. 2, 3. ^b Acts II. 45. ^c Vers. 42. ^d Acts VIII. 8.

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somewhat parallel to the Account of those Converts first mention'd, 'tis expressly added in the close, that he *rejoiced*.^a The like we find in the *Ethiopian Eunuch*; as soon as *Philip* had *preached Jesus unto him*, and he was baptiz'd, tho' his Guide was snatch'd from him, yet the Doctrine having sunk into his Heart, gave Proof there that he receiv'd it as good Tidings; for *he went on his Way* ('tis not said, only reasoning, meditating, or the like, but) *rejoicing*.^b

Indeed we have reason to think, that all who heard the Gospel to any good Purpose, heard it with the same Sentiments of Joy. They behav'd at first, like Persons quite amazed and surprized with the Divine Grace and Bounty; and all their Lives after, whatever the Religion of Christ required of them, they *abounded in the same with Thanksgiving*: Which habitual Thanksgiving, so often recommended to Christians by *S. Paul*,^c may be look'd upon still as the Convert's Joy, now more stay'd and mature. And therefore in our Saviour's Parable of the Sower, when the Hearers compar'd to Stony Ground, are said to *receive the Word with Joy*,^d we are not to take it, as if he insinuated some Forwardness in them more than was convenient, or that their Beginning was such that it was not likely they would hold on; but rather just the contrary: He means, that they promised very well as yet, and were disposed towards the Gospel, as all good Converts usually were disposed. I will add but one Place more, of many that I might; because it not only proves that the Hearing of the Gospel was in those Days attended with Joy, but puts us in mind of something, whereby we may measure the Greatness of that Joy; it triumph'd over all Afflictions. And indeed we may observe in Church-History, that Profelytes the very Day they first believ'd, and *tasted the good*

^a Acts XVI. 34. ^b Acts VIII. 39. ^c Col. III. 17, 17. *et*. ^d Mark. XIII. 20.

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Word of God, when consequently nothing of Habit or Improvement could be suppos'd, but only the pure Joy of that Word to support them, were as much raised above this World, and as fit for Martyrdom, as at any time after. But to return; *S. Paul's Words* are these, *Ye became Followers of us and of the Lord, having received the Word in much Affliction, with Joy of the Holy Ghost.*^a This Joy of the *Thessalonians* upon the first hearing the Word, this Chearfulness and Nobleness of Spirit, as it did justice to the Nature and incomparable Worth of the Gospel, so it gave an Example to all the Churches round them: And so excellently right was their Behaviour at that time, that 'tis with a particular Pleasure the Apostle reflects upon *What manner of Enting in he had unto them; and how they* (let us carry with us the Idea of that young Joy, Gratitude and Zeal,) *turn'd to God from Idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from Heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus which deliver'd us from the Wrath to come.*^b

This may suffice to shew, That the Christian Doctrine was intended to be receiv'd with Joy; or that Joy is the Affection or State of Mind, which the Christian Revelation was expected to produce. Nay more than this hath been shewn; it appears that thus it was in Fact: In the first Times, all who heard the Gospel and believed it, did demonstrate thereupon a noble and uncommon Gladness of Heart. I proceed now

II. To enquire, What it was in the Christian Doctrine, which must more particularly be the Cause of this Joy?

This Discovery will not be without its Use, nor will it be very difficult: For we shall have good Ground to proceed upon, I mean the plain well-known Sentiments

^a 1 Thess. I. 4. - ^b Vers. 9, 10.

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ments of Human Nature. Every thing will not produce every thing: And we know very well, what kind of Events or Proposals will create Sadness; what will create Joy and Transport; what will create only a lower sort of Complacence, or some employment of the Thoughts with little or no Emotion at all. The Subject, as I consider it, will admit only of such Arguing, (and perhaps after all there is none more just and satisfying,) as supports itself by a constant Appeal to the Sensations of our own Breast. We must put ourselves in the Place of those primitive Converts, and then try what Part of the Christian Doctrine, would have been capable, or would not have been capable, to affect us in the manner that they were affected.

And first, I think I may venture to say, That what was thus prophesied of before, and proposed when the Time came, as Glad Tidings; what was accordingly receiv'd by these Persons with such Demonstrations of Joy; could not be, principally or properly, a Lecture of Ethicks, a fine Set of Moral Precepts. For in the first place, If this were the case, how could the grand Blessing of Christianity be introduced in such a solemn manner, as something entirely new, and unknown to Mankind till then; something that improv'd their Condition, like stepping at once *out of Darkeness into a marvellous Light?*^a And how could the Impression it made, be an Impression of Surprise, such as sudden Joy supposes? Whereas 'tis certain that Moral Rules, and fine Sayings of that sort, were not wanting to the World before: Those who profess to admire Them chiefly in the New Testament, must own they met them likewise in Authors that liv'd before Christianity; and that with such Strength and Delicacy, that upon those Authors they form'd the Taste, for gratifying which they value these Parts of

^a 1 Pet. II. 9.

the New Testament. 'Tis true, some great Rules of Human Life are discover'd and adjusted in the Gospel, to a Perfection not before understood: But upon the whole, what is additional and new of this Kind, in our Saviour's Religion, was really too little, to be of itself the adequate Cause of the Joy requir'd and shewn in embracing that Religion.

I mean, it was so, had good Rules and Laws been ever so much a probable Subject of Joy to Mankind: But what if they were not? The proper Expression for what we feel in reading a well-writ Treatise of Morals, is, that we are Pleas'd; 'tis an Entertainment of the Understanding: But then are we said to be in Joy, when we perceive some more solid and real Accession to our Happiness. And if the very Word Joy, will not suit with the Impressions we receive from the Writings of *Tully* or *Aristotle*; much less can they, or any better Thing as supposed of the same Nature with them, elevate the Soul so high, as is implied in the Behaviour of the first Converts, who *took joyfully the spoiling of their Goods,*^a *had all things common,*^b and *counted not their Lives dear unto them, so they might finish their Course with the same Joy.* I am almost asham'd to push the Absurdity any farther, of thinking it possible that the mere preceptive Moral Part, could be those glad Tidings, which deserv'd and occasion'd so much Rejoicing: Yet to render it still more inconsistent, it must be consider'd, who those Primitive Converts were? Not Persons of a contemplative Disposition, or philosophical Education; not Men capable of forming, and falling in Love with, abstract Ideas of Virtue, Order and Decorum: But plain People, who had no refin'd Way of Thinking, but which is much better, a tender and faithful Conscience. It could never enter into their Minds, to

^a Hebr. X. 34. ^b Acts II. 44.

make Virtue a Theory, or to enjoy it in the same manner as Prospects and Plans, or the Relations of Lines and Superficies; nor could they be in Raptures for any new Discovery in this Way. No, their Concern about Virtue and Duty was quite of another Nature; they knew they had transgressed the plain Rules of it, and were in Danger of God's Displeasure; so much as they already understood, condemn'd them: Small Matter of Joy therefore would it have been to them, to be told, that the Law was now raised to a still more spiritual Sense, and to greater Perfection. Had this been all, or even the chief Thing that they were encourag'd to apprehend, nay had not this Enforcement of the Law been plac'd as it were in the Rear of some previous and seasonable Mercies, the Greatness and Influence of which made every thing else delightful and feasible; instead of any Joy of theirs, we should rather have read of the deepest Despair, Confusion and Distress.

It seems therefore pretty plain, that however the Precepts and Laws of the Gospel are the Part which some Men affect chiefly to admire, yet the first Profelytes could not directly and nakedly rejoice in these, but must owe their Joy to something else first. But that, you'll say, may be presum'd to have been, the Declaration of the Certainty in general of a Future State of Rewards and Punishments. But neither will this appear a sufficiently probable Cause of such Surprise, and such Joy. The Apostles had indeed some new Proofs, as well as juster Notions to give of a Life to come; but still it was a thing not unheard of even to the Gentiles; and to the Jews, of whom chiefly the first Converts consisted, it was very familiar, it was what their *twelve Tribes instantly serving God day and night*, had a continual Regard to. ^a A future State

^a Acts XXVI. 7.

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therefore in general, to argue as we did before, could not be the new, the surprizing Thing : And we may question whether it could be, simply in itself, Matter of clear Joy. For let us consider the Condition of Mankind, guilty, as I said just now, and obnoxious to divine Wrath: Even the Heathens had a Conscience *accusing, or else excusing* them inwardly, but we may guess which it did most; and the Jews had besides, a particularly strong Idea of Sin and its Demerit, kept up by the Use of their Sacrifices appointed for that very purpose. Now in this Situation; however it might be a Great and noble Thought, That we are Beings of an endless Duration, who shall outlast the present Constitution of the Elements, and see those illustrious Scenes which the Creator keeps in Reserve; yet accountable Creatures, who must then stand a Trial, neither could nor ought to look upon these things in an abstracted and speculative Way, the personal Concern and Fate ought to be settled. And how well shall we suppose this could possibly be settled, upon the foot of their past Life, by the Persons we are now speaking of? Surely not better by the most unblemish'd of them, than very faintly to hope the best; which is far short of Joy. Upon the whole, the mere assuring them of a Life to come, could only have affected them in much the same manner, as *Jacob* was affected upon the News of *Esau's* Approach *with 400 Men with him*: Here was an Object presented to his Thoughts, that might be call'd great and important, but not joyful; for he did not know as yet, whether 'twas a Friend or an Enemy was drawing towards him, but the latter much more likely. So that however the Doctrine of a Future State be indeed confirm'd by the Gospel, yet consider'd absolutely, or as it was an Article of Natural Religion, it could not be those glad Tidings we are in search of. In the Order of Christianity, (for sure such an
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Institution may be allow'd to have an Order of its Own,) it does indeed make a Part of that gracious Proposal, which so sensibly rejoic'd and comforted the first Hearers of it: But yet so, that when it contributed to this Joy, a Confirmation of the old Belief of a future Existence at large was the least of the case; it was attended with something much greater, even a merciful and at present true, tho' according to their Conduct, still alterable, Determination of that Existence to Happiness and Glory, upon their embracing the Gospel. Which Determination also was made, only in consequence of another Grace or Favour; purely in and under which therefore, and not from that Doctrin itself, it was possible for them to conceive such a Prospect of the Future State, as should be joyful.

We see, that no Branch of the Christian Doctrin yet mention'd, can be supposed to have been the Thing, that occasion'd such Joy in such Circumstances. Let us at last simply consult those very Circumstances, to find out what it should indeed be. Mankind were Sinners: What therefore could they so much want, what would they be so glad of, as the Forgiveness of Sins? They especially of Mankind, who chiefly gave Ear to our Saviour and his Apostles, were known to long for nothing more than such Remission, could it be obtained; as indeed he, who knew where the great Strength of his Religion lay, and how it was capable of administering Joy, always invited such to him. * We find also, that the main Subject of the first Discourses of the Apostles, those very Discourses upon hearing and crediting which, such Conversions, and that remarkable Joy we took notice of, did presently ensue, was the Pardon of Sins thro' *Jesus Christ*. But we need do no more for as-

* Math. XI. 28. Luke XV. 7.

certaining this matter, than to keep close to the Test laid down, and ask, Whether in the Nature of human Sentiments, Creatures guilty and obnoxious to Punishment, could upon Any Message from the Creator, other than his declar'd Forgiveness of their Offences, find themselves in such a Condition as to Rejoice? Reconciliation, mere Reconciliation to the great God, tho' the Consequences of it be not specified, and much more if they be, may well be Tidings of the highest Joy to us; but without it, what can? Without this, 'tis certain the first Step is not taken to relieve us; however in it, perhaps all may be done that we need. And as this Mercy was of such a kind, as to be principally wanted, and most sensibly welcome: So before the preaching of the Gospel, not only the Gentiles, but the Jews themselves remain'd in Suspence, *but up unto the Enjoyment of this Blessing by the Faith which should afterwards be revealed*; which Blessing was therefore kept secret in a great measure from them as to the Manner of its Accomplishment, till it should be unfolded and satisfactorily explain'd in the Incarnation of the Son of God.

Thus at length we have found out That, which made the Jaylor, the Eunuch, and all the first Converts to rejoice: Which was capable of justifying the Title Gospel, or Good News: Which therefore the Apostles with such Complacence and Alacrity convey'd to all the Ends of the Earth. It was principally, we may be pretty confident, the Forgiveness of Sins; promis'd indeed and assured in divers Manners under the Patriarchal and Jewish Dispensations, but really, actually, and in an ample manner granted, by the Word's being made Flesh, and by what he did and suffer'd for us under that Manifestation. This was the Point which alone could, by the very Nature of Human Passions or Sentiments, produce that Joy, which both in God's Design and in the Event, was

was join'd with the hearing of the Christian Doctrine:
I may now go on

III. and *lastly*, To draw some Inference more immediately from this last Head.

It may perhaps seem not so necessary a matter, to enter upon any Comparative Consideration of the different Parts of our holy Religion; or so much as to enquire what is the Chief Thing in it. But since every Institution must in reality have Something in it that is principal, more essential and important than the rest; the Mind will of itself be searching out for this, and will necessarily confer the Honour and lay the Stress upon some Particular or other, perhaps such as will least bear it. So that what will of course be done either well or ill, it concerns us to look to it that it be done well. Especially considering the Consequence of a Mistake in this respect: It makes Christianity quite another Thing, and gives it a different Colour and Complexion throughout. Thus, Let but a Man fancy, that some high-strain'd Prerogative of the Church and Church-men, nay of one single See, is the first and dearest Point in Christianity, and what Effect will this have on the many much better Truths, which yet must be brought to comport with it? Let another take it for granted, that the Divine Decrees are what all Theology should open with, be deduc'd from, and use as the Clue and Rule to every thing else, and what an influence will it have? To refer but to one Instance more; but that, the grand Error of the Times. Some^a have of late look'd upon that Inculcation which is made in the New Testament, of several Duties of the Law of Nature, as the great Thing, or Business of Christianity: And very consistently herewith, they have not only allowed the

^a Mr Chubb, &c.

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whole Mystery of our Saviour's Mediation, with its Fruits, but a small and mean Place in their Scheme; but they have even claim'd the very Term Gospel, which we thought above all Words did imply some New Blessings of Christianity, to this Re-promulgation of the Moral Law; This, say they, is *The Gospel*, and other Things are exterior, accidental, and properly no Parts of it.

And as a Mistake in the relative Consideration of the several Parts of the Christian Doctrine, is of such very ill Consequence; so 'tis also almost the only Kind of Mistake, which we are liable to fall into. It is scarce possible for us in the main, either to imagine that some Things are contained in the New Testament, which are not so at all, or that others are no ways contain'd in it, which plainly are: But in deciding between the Particulars that do occur there, which of them deserves our first and more special Attention, which of them is the Point that was intended to rule, and take in all the rest; here It is that we judge amiss. And we may do so, even when we understand well enough, singly, the several Particulars that are touch'd upon; for it may be still as it were another Light, that shews us their due Proportion and Arrangement. Upon these accounts, I think it a Question very fit to be consider'd of, What is indeed the Chief or principal Thing in the Christian Religion, taking it as a System?

And I am in hopes, that what has now been observ'd will be of some Use towards determining This. For thus we may argue. There was Something in the Christian Doctrine, which the first Hearers apprehended to be the chief and most eminent Part of its Contents, and this they were suitably affected with: But the Sentiment they expressed upon the Occasion, was Joy, very great Joy: Now this, as we have shewn, could arise from nothing else, but the Remission of Sins:

Sins: Therefore Remission of Sins, was what they took to be the Great Point in that Doctrine. And we cannot doubt, but it was the very chief Thing in Christianity, that made in fact the greatest Impression upon their Minds; they must principally have felt, and been struck with, what in it was principal: Otherwise they would not have been affected with that Religion, upon the whole, according to the true State of it; and the Apostles likewise ought to have corrected them, if they had not taken proportionable Notice of the main Particular in their Doctrine, or had regarded and been touch'd with any thing else more than that. Thus for instance, Had the Precepts of the Gospel been raised indeed to great Perfection and Exactness, as what God principally designed in sending his Son into the World; but the Mercy, Grace and Favour of that Covenant been very small and narrow, as design'd to have only an incidental Place in the System, and barely to serve under the former: In this case, I say, the Apostles would not have suffer'd their Hearers to run so much into Joy; for Care and Fear would then from the very first have been the proper Tempers. But since they, and God also Himself, did encourage Joy in the embracing of Christianity, tho' temper'd afterwards with Care and Fear; we may depend upon it, that tho' the Precepts too are included in their right Place, yet Mercy and Favour, in one Word Forgiveness, is that which is Uppermost, and gives Laws and Being to every thing else in the Christian Scheme.

How advantageous a Turn, Character and Constitution it will give to the whole Frame of Christianity, to make Remission of Sins the principal Thing, may be expected here to be shewn, since That has been recommended in the room of all other leading Ideas. Now this I can do no better, and need do no farther, than simply by saying, That hereby our holy Religion

gion will prove itself more emphatically a Covenant of Grace: And surely there is something in Grace, Bounty or Free Love, that is particularly worthy of God, and fitted to make very deep and noble Impressions on the Ingenuous Part of our Nature. This indeed is but speaking in general: But no more is requir'd of me in the present Argument. I am not oblig'd to account for the whole subsequent Order and Structure of the Christian Scheme: It may naturally be presum'd, that every thing will follow in the very best Order, when the Foundation or leading Notion is once rightly laid. If we are deceiv'd after this, and still take up with something wide of true Christianity, as some may possibly have done, it must be by running away too hastily and crudely with that first Principle, applying it with some strange Corruption of Heart; or at least not waiting, with due Patience and Impartiality, at the Gate of Scripture and Experience, till the genuine System of Things, with all desirable Adjustment and Connexion, does open and discover itself, after its own Way of Consequence from the same Principle. But, as I said, I am not oblig'd now to look so far: I am only enquiring, What is, however, the Chief Thing in the Christian Doctrine; and from one Reason, the kind of Affection that Doctrine was design'd to raise, and did raise in its first Profelytes, by means of its chief Subject, I have concluded it to be Remission of Sins. To render it still more probable, that This is indeed the Point on which all turns, I will further add a few other Considerations, and then conclude.

And in the first place, Let us reflect on what was hinted before, concerning the Discourses of the Apostles in the Book of *Acts*, what great Regard is there had to the preaching of Forgiveness. They apply themselves indeed sometimes to convince their Hearers of Sin; and more still to set forth the Evidence,

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both from the Actions of our Lord's Life, and from his Resurrection, that He was an authorized and sufficient Saviour: But one may see that the Result of all, is to notify and proclaim the Salvation itself, the Forgiveness of Sins. *Repent and be baptiz'd every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ, for the Remission of Sins, and ye shall receive also the Gift of the Holy Ghost;*^a is the Close of one Sermon. Another ends thus, *To him give all the Prophets witness, that thro' his Name, whosoever believeth in him, shall receive Remission of Sins.*^b Another leaves this upon the Hearers Minds, *Be it known unto you therefore, Men and Brethren, that thro' this Man is preached unto you the Forgiveness of Sins: and by Him, all that believe, are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the Law of Moses.*^c Nay, they themselves declare This to be the proper Business, and great Trust of their Apostleship: *All things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to Us the Ministry of Reconciliation; to wit, That God was in Christ, reconciling the World unto himself, not imputing their Trespases unto them, and hath ('tis said again) committed unto Us the Word of Reconciliation.*^d

In the next place let it be remember'd, what an Idea the Scripture gives us of Sin. Very different from that of our Moral Writers, who consider Sin on Man's Part as a transient Act, that has no Subsistence within us farther than in and by our explicit Commisions of it; and on God's Part, as a Thing very easily overlook'd and forgiven by his infinite Goodness. Whereas the Scripture makes it to be a permanent State, a Manner of Existence, and calls it *Spiritual Death*:^e And what that is, who can say? or how much, and how great Things, a Deliverance from this Death by Forgiveness, may imply and draw after it?

^a Acts II. 38. ^b Ch. X. 43. ^c Ch. XIII. 38, 39. ^d 2 Cor. V. 18, 19. ^e Eph. II. 1, &c.

And

And then as to God's Forgiving of Sin, we may observe, there it Great Difficulty made of it. 'Tis the only Thing that He, who does whatever he pleases with Ease, is represented as finding but with much ado how to accomplish, and put to use Expedients: But when once this is done, every other good Gift flows from him without any farther Deliberation or Labour. Thus I am sure we are led to think, particularly by the Doctrine of Mediation; and who can say, there was no deeper Cause of Things appearing thus, than that they might so appear to Us?

Again, let it be consider'd, That future Salvation itself, and all the Graces of the Christian Life, are acknowledg'd to be virtually contained in, and owing to, the Forgiveness of Sins and the Adoption that attends it: All the Displays of God's Love to us, and of his sanctifying Spirit in us ever after, are but the Continuation or Unfolding of that first Blessing: Thus I say it is granted to be, when Baptism, the Channel of Remission, is acknowledg'd (as it always is) Qualification enough for Heaven, to those who die upon it. The Reason is, because as Sin is no other than our whole natural Condition; so the Remission of it is supposed to admit us at once, to whatever spiritual or eternal Advantages do compose the new State of Christianity: As a man is compleatly a Member of Another World, upon his Soul's being loos'd from the Body. We do not indeed know so certainly, except in the Case of Baptism, When a Man's Sins are forgiven; but if we did, we should always pronounce of him, that then he enjoy'd all the Fulness of God's Love, and Christ's Redemption. For what is said of the Divine Kindness, as ordaining such Means of Remission, is no less true of it as applying the Remission itself: *He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, (and who thereby hath forgiven us,) how shall he not with Him, (and with Forgiveness once granted,)*

granted,) *freely give us all things?*^a *Whom he justified or forgave, them he also glorified.*^b We are apt to think, that therefore in effect God forgives us, that we may serve him in Holiness for the future: But tho' this hath its Truth, yet the Order of things here suppos'd, sometimes (we see) plainly fails, as in Persons dying presently after Baptism; and 'tis universally more just to say, That for this reason God enables us to live in Holiness, because he before hath so loved us, as to forgive and receive us for his Children. In forgiving us therefore, God includes every thing else that can be done for us, whether it pertain to the Life of Glory, or the Life of Grace: And as to the latter, if our Time be prolong'd in this World that we may become Subjects of it, perhaps all he need do, is but to seal and discover more and more to our Hearts this fundamental Mercy we have obtain'd, the Pardon of Sin; the Love and Gratitude arising from hence by the Operation of the Holy Spirit, being indeed our whole Sanctification or New Life in its Principle, which is only enlarg'd by various Ways and Occasions of expressing this Affection.

I will add but one Consideration more, tho' the greatest of any: It was to purchase Remission of Sins, that the Son of God did offer himself upon the Cross, did suffer Death. His whole Incarnate OEconomy throughout, was the most wonderful of all the Divine Councils and Undertakings; and the most important Step of that OEconomy, which He himself speaks so much of beforehand, and on which his Apostles make our Salvation more peculiarly to depend and follow, was directly address'd to the procuring of This Benefit: Which Benefit therefore may be presam'd to hold the same Rank among the Advantages of Redemption, as its Cause, the Death of *Christ*, did among the Means.

^a Rom. VIII. 32. ^b Ibid. vers. 30.

But

But why do I argue from the momentous Appearance of that great Event, our Saviour's Death, to the Importance of that which was purchased by It, Remission of Sins; when the Persons I have all along been opposing, are as far from owning the one, as the other? As God's Forgiveness is with them a little Thing, that has nothing more extraordinary in it, than That has which is the sole Measure of it, our own bare Sorrow for our Faults and better Practice afterwards: So the Death of *Jesus Christ* is look'd upon by them, as a Thing at most only symbolical, popularly apply'd for our moral Instruction, notwithstanding all the Expressions which ascribe a true and real Efficacy to it. But then should not this oblige Us, who believe higher things of the Sacrifice of Christ's Death, to find out some very worthy and adequate Use, Office and Exertion for that Sacrifice; or in other words, to regard That, wherein it is generally confessed to be exerted, as a more considerable Point in the Frame of Christianity, and which may more justly be suppos'd to involve and modify all the rest, than we should otherwise imagine? My Reason for it is this, The Effect and Cause must be proportionable to each other, and our Opinion of both must rise and fall together. It was a Reservedness among Divines at one time, with regard to the Effects of our Saviour's Death and Atonement, such as Justification by Faith only, and Peace of Heart thereupon; whereby in the Issue, tho' not in their Intention, they discourag'd, together with what was weak or wicked, all Zeal or Frequency of Expression on those Subjects; This, I say, gave occasion to some at length, to treat His Death itself as what might almost as well have been spared; From whence we may learn, how we must proceed, if we would effectually defend the Doctrine of our Saviour's Atonement; we must assert and maintain, that very great Things have been done by that Atonement, some very

very real and weighty Benefit obtain'd thereby to those that believe. Otherwise, to say high things of our Saviour's Performance, and not at the same time to be ready to shew, since that will naturally be expected, in how truly high and important a Respect we are actually the better for it, will be a fatal Inconsistency.

What must follow from the whole, by way of Conclusion or Application, is obvious; and I will give it in short.

That we should not affect to bring down Reveal'd Religion, to the Measures of Natural Religion; nor even take it for granted, that That always most deserves our Care, Esteem and Regard in the former, which is common to it with the latter. Indeed a particular Earnestness on this Side has been expedient, and may be again, when any Excesses of misinform'd Zealots shall pervert the plain Rules of Good and Evil: But otherwise, and in general, 'tis certain, That whatever things there are in Our Religion, which are Parts of the common Religion of Reason or Nature, can never be lost or suppress'd; but what it has of its Own, May, and is naturally in Danger so to be. Rather therefore, if the Gospel does contain any thing Peculiar, let us resolve to try what salutary Virtue there may be in this Peculiarity; for certainly it was not added in vain.

Particularly, Let us look well into the Mediatorial Scheme; in which *are hid all the Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge*. And since Remission of Sins is represented, as the more special and eminent Blessing derived to us from the Mediator; let us see if we are duly acquainted with its great Value, Power and Extent. The most desirable Proof of which will be, if we, like the ancient Believers, enjoy an inward Peace and Confidence towards God in the Sense of that Remission; a Peace, as they describe it, *which passes all Understanding*.
But

But if this may seem too particular and confin'd, Let us, in some Part or Respect or other, (tho' none, I think, will be found capable of this Effect, but the Doctrine of Remission,) be filled however, by the Word of the Gospel, with a divine *Joy in Believing*: A Joy, whose Praise and Value in the Course of our Lives, will not so much be, that it can sometimes prove its Greatness by Raptures and Transports, as that it implies, when there appears less of these, a clear strong and uniform kind of Consciousness notwithstanding, of our being unspeakably happy thro' the Grace of the Gospel, and redeem'd from the manifold Miseries of a sinful State. To feel more or less this Effect in general, I mean Joy, is plainly incumbent on us, if the Gospel be the same now, as it was at the Beginning; and if We also are to be mov'd and to act by the real and proper Principles of Christianity; (for I speak nothing here of such Religion, Obligation and Virtue, as subsists upon other Reasons and Views.) If therefore we are sensible of no such Impressions from the New Testament, but can read or hear it with the same Coolness and Indifference as a Piece of Philosophy; I don't know how we can prove to ourselves, that we apprehend it I don't say worthily, but even so much as in the right Sense; for the right Sense and View, seems to be Connected with great Joy: The Thing itself is of such a Nature, *Behold*, says the Angel, *I bring you good Tidings of great Joy, which shall be to all People.* And yet I appeal to Experience, whether this be not a very common Case, To be able to read the New Testament with Approbation more or less of the Judgment and Understanding; nay perhaps with reverent Impressions of Heart, with some Concern and Devotion; and yet not properly with Joy, but rather a secret Uneasiness and Dejection. Nor do I see how a sincere Person, when he reflects upon this, can do otherwise than wonder, what
 should

should be the Cause of it; why the Gospel, which was conceived to be so comfortable a Thing at the first preaching of it, should be to him heavy and foreign in some Parts of it, painful and discouraging in others, and upon the whole affording more of Check than Comfort? The true Cause certainly lies here; That Christianity was intended to be, and accordingly was understood by the first Hearers of it, under a different Turn and View; and with such an Order within itself, as made it appear to them a Dispensation still fuller of a marvellous and effectual Kindness, Bounty and Condescension, than it commonly does to Us.

Could we conceive Things in this true State, and genuine Connexion of them, (whatever that, in the whole of it, be) we may well suppose, there would be no need of those Jealousies and Suspicions, which usually and with some Reason arise in us, when Grace or Faith, when Joy or Feeling are mention'd. Salvation by Grace would then be perfectly rational, sure of the best Effects, and self-guarded from all Abuses. Indeed, Why should we be afraid to have our Obedience flow more immediately from Gratitude; while at the same time, and by the same Gospel, the Obligations of Hope and Fear lie upon us too, and are in as full Force as ever? Gratitude is a very strong Principle, such as carries with it a Readiness and Diligence in the Performance of our whole Duty: And if the Mercy we are thankful for, be no less than such a *State of Salvation* and Acceptance with God already, that we can pray for nothing more, and intend nothing more by our good Actions, than to *continue in the same unto our Life's End*,^a (which indeed we shall by no means do, without the Practice of All good Actions,) our Obedience will be generous, and as near

^a Church-Catechism.

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as need be to disinterested. And if it was in and under the Remission of Sins, that we were admitted to all this, and therefore the Character of Pardon'd Sinners is to be a standing one, and the Affections that belong to it, perpetual in us; this will, above all things, preserve us in such an Humility, as cannot otherwise be so much as conceiv'd. To say nothing of what one may call, in a particular manner, our Love of *Christ*; which *S. Peter* seems to speak of:^a I mean, that He being the Author of all this Grace to us, and therefore the Object of such continual Reliance Contemplation and Remembrance, this must needs create in us a Kind of Personal Affection towards Him our great Benefactor, such as will again render all our Service of, and Regards to him in a Christian Life, the more sensible and lively. So innocent, and free from any but good Tendencies, is that Tenor and State of things between God and us, implied by Grace. As innocent is that Temper of Mind, for which we are forc'd to use Words, which might seem to make it a mere Heat, or Business of Passion: But the Joy we mean, is in truth such, that it can have no wild or improper Consequences. For whatever Degree of it a Believer thus feels upon a right Apprehension of Things, it will never raise him above Prudence and Sobriety; above Civil Duty or Decency, but only above Vice and all that is base and unworthy: Nor will it be to him instead of a Good Life, but a most powerful Instrument to assist him in such a Life. In short, it will be as widely distinguish'd from Enthusiasm in it's Fruits, as it was in its Rise; for this latter always errs against the Plan and Balance of Christianity, before it commits other Errors. To conclude, to Rejoice rightly, with a Confidence and a Lowliness of Mind entirely recon-

^a 1 Pet. I. 8.

cibleable, is indeed a Great Thing: Whether we derive the Occasion of it from the Terms of that Salvation, which in the event was purchased for us; — Or whether we call to mind the more immediate Intention of my Text, as well as the Duty of this Season, by acknowledging in an especial manner that Fountain of so many Mercies, and Dawn of Joy to poor Mankind, the *Word's* being *made Flesh*, and being born of a Virgin; whereby He both honour'd and saved our frail Nature which he assum'd, and bless'd us with his Presence, by tabernacling among us.

