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ON

LIBERALITY IN RELIGION,

TAKEN FROM THE

CHRISTIAN'S MAGAZINE,

EDITED

BY THE REV. DR. MASON, OF NEW-YORK,

TOGETHER WITH

“ AN INQUIRY into the Scripture meaning of CHARITY,” extracted from the writings of the

John

REV. DR. WITHERSPOON.

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ON
LIBERALITY IN RELIGION.



A WRITER of celebrity,* has said, that where “men are without some fundamental and scientific principles to resort to, they are liable to have their understandings played upon by cant phrases and unmeaning terms, of which every party in every country possess a vocabulary. We appear astonished when we see the multitude led away by sounds; but we should remember, that if sounds work miracles, it is always upon ignorance. The influence of names is in exact proportion to the want of knowledge.”

As it is the truth of these remarks, which gives a point to their severity, it would be some consolation; were they applicable to the multitude only. But the same foible, though in a less degree, is discernible in men, who are not to be ranked with the multitude; and to whom, if we cannot yield our confidence, we may not deny our respect. The influence of fashion is so subtile and so imperious; the levity of social inter-

* Dr. Paley.

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course is so adverse to reflection ; dissent from the circling opinion is, for the most part, so ungraciously received ; a fling, whether in jest or earnest, is so convenient a substitute for fact ; and a popular epithet, without expense either of thought or knowledge, is so expeditious a mode of determining controversies, which otherwise would be of stiff debate, that the judgment is surprised through the imagination ; and the mind is hurried into its decisions without firmness to resist, or leisure to pause. He who has access to that sort of company, which wears the reputation of intelligence, and does not recollect to have seen this course of things, has made a bad use of his eyes or his memory. How roughly individuals, communities, and even truth itself is often handled by such summary sentences, every writer on logic or ethics accounts it his duty to show. The design of the following observations is not so much to dwell on the general evil of the practice, as, on the one side, to repel an opprobrium, and, on the other, to sift a claim, which it has been employed to sanction.

From the present state of society, we look back on the intolerance of former

ages with a surprise, which does honor to humanity : but at the same time, it is to be feared, with a loftiness of self-complacency, which proclaims that the retrospect administers as much food to our vanity, as to our benevolence. The pendulum of fashion vibrating in morals, as in dress, from an extreme point to its opposite ; we are now required to open the bosom of charity to every class of religious tenets, if we hope to be enrolled among *liberal* Christians, or to escape the pains and penalties decreed against *bigots*. As revolutions seldom happen in but one thing at a time, this exchange of feeling appears to have been accompanied with an exchange of principle ; and to have included a large portion of the *creed* of our fathers in the same proscription with their sternness of temper. So that what bishop Butler said of Christianity, may truly be said of orthodoxy :—“ It is come—to be taken for granted, by many persons, that orthodoxy is not so much as a subject of inquiry ; but that it is now, at length, discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly they treat it as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all

people of discernment ; and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals, for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world." Or if dislike to principles once held sacred by the most enlightened and excellent of mankind, has not gone all this length, it has, at least, thrown them into the rubbish of obsolete prejudices. Zeal for their purity and propagation is supplanted by a sort of community of persuasions ; in which every one is not only privileged to assert his own right, while he lives in peace with his neighbors, but to demand their aid in repulsing an invader. Whoever shall dare to condemn the opinions of one, is the enemy of all the rest : he must be shunned as an intruder into the sanctuary of conscience ; as a stranger to religious civility and liberal refinement, and unworthy of any rank but that which philosophical Christianity has assigned to the *bigot*.

All this looks grand and magnanimous ; and, no doubt, has its effect ; especially upon youthful, undisciplined, and timid minds. But if it have more of show than of reality ; if it be as intolerant in its own

way as any thing which it calls bigotry ; and if, under the pretext of oblations to charity, it sacrifice the truth of God and the eternal interests of men upon the altar of practical infidelity ; we cannot turn away from it with too open disgust, nor hold it in too deep abhorrence.

One of the things which first strike a critical observer, is the indefiniteness of the ideas attached to the terms “ liberal ” and “ bigoted. ” It is easy to couple them with a man or a principle ; and to extol or decry accordingly : and few are so loud in their panegyric or abuse, as those who do both by signal. But still, what *is* your liberality ? Is it measured by any standard, or confined within any limits ? If not, for ought I can see, it is an attempt to abolish all intellectual and moral distinctions. If it is measured and limited—by what rule ? By the word of God ? Then you are bound to ascertain its sense, and to oppose every opinion which contradicts it ; or else you must contradict yourself : for a rule which you do not apply, is no rule at all.—By your own good pleasure, or your conviction of right ? Then you assume the office of dictator

as much as any man to whom you impute that arrogance ; and if you intend to “ pluck the mote out of his eye,” you must begin with taking “ the beam out of your own.”—By your particular associates ? Every sect under heaven does the same. The Arminian calls the Calvinist a bigot ; the Socinian applies the epithet to the advocate of the atonement, and chants forth his own liberality ; the deist pities the slavish being who believes in revelation ; and the atheist smiles at the “ prejudices” of the deist.—Or are you liberal because you think and speak well of those who think and speak well of you ? So did the publicans, and so do thousands with whom you would not wish to be suspected of any connexion. If your “ liberality takes a middle path between the contractedness of some men, and the licentiousness of others, so that while you cherish the primary interests of religion, you overlook the minor differences among its professors, and embrace them as brothers upon the broad ground of the common Christianity,” you are indeed more definite, but not less embarrassed. For it is impossible not to

perceive, *first*, that your very medium implies a boundary which you may not pass; and consequently, that your liberality is commendable, not for its own sake, but as it is controlled by truth: and *secondly*, that the character of your liberality must be fixed by the relative value of those points which it surrenders under the title of "minor differences." Until this be settled, you can have no permission to glory in being liberal; and to bestow contemptuous appellations upon those who will not go in your train: for you may take credit to yourself for that which shall turn out to be a crime.

Our next inquiry, then, respects these "minor differences." A soft sound with dreaded sense! For, unless the writer grievously err, the characteristic of the liberality now in vogue, is to ask nothing more than a *general* profession of Christianity; and to refer all its modifications to the head of "minor differences;" which, in the affair of Christian and ministerial fellowship, should make no difference at all. If, therefore, one of these liberal Christians shall explain away the whole faith of the church of God

concerning the new birth—if another shall teach the dogma of universal salvation for men, and, if he please, for devils too—if a third shall give up the plenary inspiration of the scriptures—if a fourth shall argue against a particular providence—if a fifth shall deny the influences, or dispute the being, of the Holy Spirit—if a sixth shall abjure the sacrifice and deity of our Lord Jesus Christ: all this, instead of diminishing confidence, or communion, is to be a matter of compromise. Every one retains his own views without contradiction. The generic term “Christian” belongs alike to all: and he who refuses to recognize their Christianity, must be branded as a bigot.

Three questions arise out of this subject:

First, How far such liberality is consistent with the love of *truth*?

Discrimination belongs to the essence of useful research. The man who transposes cause and effect; who classes phenomena without regard to their nature; or who huddles together a mass of incoherent facts, will never enlighten the community, nor obtain the suffra-

ges of its well informed members. They all agree that to encourage such blunders, would be to banish knowledge and science from the world. The effect of such a chaos is the same, whether it be produced by individual folly, or by a sort of *pic-nic* collection, in which numbers contribute their respective shares, and fairly *club* a medley of contradictions. Why should that which is absurd in every thing else, be rational in religion? It is evident that within the domain of this idol-liberality, there is not a spot on which truth can rear her temple or plant her foot. Because truth of every kind, under every form, and in every degree, is necessarily and eternally intolerant of falsehood. And therefore to exempt from challenge a host of discordant sentiments, and that on the most interesting topics, is to wave the rights of truth to the whole extent of the exemption. It takes for granted, either that the truth on these topics is not discernable; or that it is not worth the trouble of contention. The first of these assumptions is a libel on the word of God; and the second on his wisdom. They who thus abandon the claims of truth, by putting

them virtually on a level with the claims of error, are not her friends; and the alternative is plain.

The next question is, How this liberality of theirs consists with fidelity to our Lord Jesus Christ?

He was himself the great witness to the truth; and has commanded all his followers to imitate his example. Not one instance can be pointed out, of his countenancing, in the slightest manner, a catholicism which treats with nearly equal regard all opinions and doctrines that shelter themselves under his name. He has charged us to beware of "false prophets, who come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves." And the apostle, who lay on his breast and imbibed most of his tenderness, has written, "if there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine," (the doctrine of Christ) "receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed, for he that biddeth him God speed, is partaker of his evil deeds," What the doctrine of Christ is, can be determined only from his word. But the liberality which is now on its trial, draws its chief praise from *never determining that point*

at all. Here, then, are two divine precepts of which it mocks the authority by frustrating the application. Who is to seize the "ravens wolf," if it is a settled rule in theological etiquette to look no further than the "sheep's skin?" Who shall chase the "Antichrist" from his door, if it be unmannerly and boorish to ask what "doctrine" he brings? There cannot exist a doubt, that if the Lord Jesus himself were to descend with his apostle, in veiled glory, and mingle again with men, one such sentence a piece as are quoted above, would expel them both from the circle of "liberal" Christians! That evangelical hero, Paul, took the elders of Ephesus to record that he was "pure from the blood of all men." Why? Because he had thrown the reins on the neck of his charity; had represented the precious truths of the gospel and their opposites as well qualified to harmonize; and had refrained to enforce particular views of doctrine, lest he should infringe liberty of judgment, or the maxims of good breeding? No! But because he "had not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God." And they who do, must go to their Judge

with "blood-guiltiness" in their consciences. Let this be solemnly pondered by those ministers who, having had the "form of sound words," have been carried away by the current of a spurious liberality; have gradually dropped the peculiar doctrines of Christianity; and now, through fear of offense or the ridicule of singularity, avoid them altogether. So that the utmost which can be said of them is, that if they do not preach the gospel; they do not preach *against* it—i. e. that their discourses, in every thing, affecting the salvation of a sinner, contain—just nothing at all—*Horesco referens!* Well may their "flesh tremble," when they think, if ever they think, of the interrogatories, which await them at the bar of Jesus Christ, concerning his suppressed truth; his abused gospel; his forgotten cross: and all this, for the feather of being thought "liberal," by men who give themselves no trouble to "escape the wrath to come."

The *third* question is, How far the liberality under review consists with real charity to men?

The treating as non-essentials and matters of accommodation, all differen-

ces which may occur within the precincts of that general term "Christian," is not to be justified but upon the principle, that such differences cannot endanger the "saving of the soul." Is this true? One man believes and teaches that the Spirit of the living God must change a sinner's heart, and unite him to the Lord Jesus, as the Lord his righteousness and strength, before he can be a Christian, and possess a "good hope through grace;" another man laughs at all this as fanaticism, and maintains that nothing more is necessary to constitute a Christian than a rational assent to the truth of divine revelation, and a good moral life. One man worships the Lord Jesus Christ as his *Savoir* and his God; another represents him as a mere creature; it may be "a frail, fallible, peccable man." One rejoices in the sacrifice of Christ, by which he is redeemed from the curse of the law; and another reputes the whole doctrine of redemption through the blood of Jesus to be an old wife's fable. Here are flat contradictions: and contradictions of such a nature, that, if what is usually termed the orthodox side, be true, the opposite involves nothing less than the eternal perdition of

of those who hold it. Yet all these men call themselves Christians. Now it is clear as the meridian sun, that the word of God cannot stand with both sides; but that the one or the other "has made him a liar;" and it is no less clear that he who makes God a liar, by not receiving his testimony concerning his Son, is under condemnation. It follows, that they who enlist themselves under the banner of the prevailing liberality, either by teaching that there is nothing in the doctrines of the different sects called Christian, which ought to excite controversy; or by professing their charity for those who hold these most detestable opinions; or by maintaining a studied reserve toward the peculiarities of the meditorial plan, are leagued in a conspiracy against the "glorious gospel" of the "great God our Savior," and those eternal interests of men, from which the faith of it is inseparable. Deceived by this traffic of complaisances, especially when they see the ministers of religion among the most active in promoting it; many rest in the conclusion, that it is of no consequence what they believe, if their character in society be

fair. "Searching the Scriptures," for the "words of eternal life," becomes an antiquated employment. Occasional misgivings of conscience are relieved by the soothing imagination that we are all Christians, and that is enough. Gross ignorance of the gospel thickens apace, in a clime illuminated by its broadest sunshine. The barriers which ought to divide the church from the world, are swept away, and every trait of discrimination effaced. "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?" is a tale of other times. And thus, in a "land of Bibles," which cannot be opened without the lightning of God's reprobation of their folly flashing in their faces, miserable sinners unjustified, unwashed, unsanctified, are praising each other's Christianity! The delusion is often fostered by the very men, whose office should impel them to counteract and destroy it. And there is too sad reason to fear that the loss of the soul is the first thing which awakens numbers from their dream. Yes, they

“die in their iniquity; but”—but “their blood shall be required at the hand” of those pastors who “warned” them not. That liberality, therefore, which lets all sorts of opinions pass under the large cloak of “Christian;” or which forbears to urge, without qualification, the peculiar topics of the gospel, deserves another epithet than “charitable.” Of charity it has nothing but the abused name. Instead of executing her benign functions, it comes with perfidy, and cruelty, and death, to the souls of men.

If we look a little closer at this affected liberality, we shall perceive that, exclusively of its tendency, the very attribute which it vaunts the loudest, universal *tolerance*, has no existence.

The proof is short. No men are more impatient of contradiction in the affairs of common life, than these liberal thinkers; no men contend for their political views with fiercer zeal, or deeper animosity. Why? Because human speculations are more certain than the truth of God? or civil arrangements of higher moment than the concerns of a future world? That cannot be pretended.

Why, then, do the bosoms of the these "liberal" philosophers swell with rage against a political opponent? And surely no men can pursue others with more contempt and rancor, than do they whomsoever they are pleased to stigmatize as bigots. Yet, what have the bigots done? By the nature of the case, they are under no obligation to be as condescending to a "liberal" man, as this latter to them. He is bound by his profession to be as charitable to a bigot as to any other. But the contrary is true. "Bigot" is a brand of infamy; not less than "heretic" or "infidel," and quite as freely applied. Serious as the subject is, one can hardly forbear smiling at the mistakes which we are apt to commit in estimating our own characters. The man who supposed himself inaccessible to flatter, was not aware, till his acuter friend detected him, that this supposition was precisely the point in which his vanity was centred, and was assailable by the flatterer. As little do they, who plume themselves on their freedom from bigotry, suspect that their "liberality" is the point on which they betray the very temper they

denounce in others. Touch this darling of theirs, and you will find that they have as much bigotry as other folk. There are no more decided bigots on earth, than those who are *bigoted to liberality*. The fact is, that modern liberality is of the same kind and spirit with the old heathen tolerance. One was at perfect liberty to worship his calf, provided another might burn incense to the queen of heaven. And thus Baal, and Jupiter, and Moloch, and Mithras, and all the rest of them, fraternized in the most liberal intercourse. "If you have but a god, no matter who or what; only do not interfere with your neighbors." And it is very possible that, upon the same terms, Christians might, for a time, have fared easier than they did. But the moment they taught men to turn from these vanities to serve the living God, the worshippers of Baal, and Jupiter, and Moloch, and the whole rabble of pagan deities, rushed upon them, and drenched the earth with their blood. So now: compliment my dogma, and I will compliment yours. But let unbending truth fall in with the confederacy, and accost the members of it with-

out ceremony. Let her arraign the carnality of one, the corruptness of another, and the unfaithfulness of a third. Let her deny, at once, the Christianity of all who reject the divinity and atonement of our Lord Jesus; or who, admitting both, live without the practical influence of either; and immediately the cry will be raised. "Bigot," "fanatic," will start from a hundred mouths; and, short of open violence, as little mercy will be shown to wisdom's children by modern, as by ancient toleration. Instead, therefore of a pure and effective benevolence, this liberality of the age is a mask drawn over the face of enmity to God's holiest truth, and to all who espouse it. That "love" which is "without dissimulation," wears no such guise. It consists in kind affections and offices. It can do men good without flattering their corruptions, or sanctifying their mistakes. It is he "who converts a sinner from the error of his way," not he who treats it as harmless, that "shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." Between the incessant agitations of dispute, and the oblivious calm of indifference, there is a

wide scope for the exercise of Christian forbearance.

But let those who desire not to be entrapped into a fatal security, beware how they listen to the siren song. Let them remember, that an air of affableness and magnanimity is often a passport for error, both speculative and practical, to an undefinable extent. There is so much dignity in freedom from little prejudices, and so much flattery in the reputation of it, that generous minds are thrown off their guard by its very appearance. Impressions, slight at first, are deepened by repetition : advantages are imperceptibly gained over the sternness of truth, and the caution of virtue : and the head and the heart are perverted, under the seductive notion of overcoming prejudice. But one image is presented to the eye, and that is liberality. Her features, her attitude, her voice, her weapons, and her attire, are always the same. Her broad mantle covers the approach of the fiend, till the treacherous blow be given, and "truth fall in the streets." Certain it is, that such has been the ordinary course of those who have turned "away from the holy com-

is either wholly impossible, or argues a weakness of understanding; which cannot be the object of approbation, nor consequently of imitation.

Let us therefore suppose, that this duty of forbearance, which indeed I take to be wholly distinct in its nature, is the charity so strongly recommended, and so highly applauded in scripture, and that it is to be exercised with regard to the opinions of others. In that case it must have certain bounds, for the following reasons:

1. If it were otherwise, we should then either want a meaning for many declarations and precepts in scripture; or, which is worse, to perceive them to be evidently absurd and ill-founded. That I may not tire the reader, I shall not adduce the tenth part of what is said on this subject in scripture; but must beg of him to weigh the following passages, and to make some reflections on their manifest purpose: Jude v. 3, 4, "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you, that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ."—Here I think is plainly a duty with regard to opinions altogether different from that of forbearance. The one requires us not so much as to judge our brethren; the other requires us to con-

tend earnestly with them. The one supposes the trifling difference to be wholly buried; the other implies, that it should be kept clearly in view, and all possible pains taken to support the truth, and to refute the error. The one supposes entire peace and union; the other implies a firm and resolute opposition, so as to come to no terms which imply consent or approbation. The phraseology through the whole passage teaches us to interpret it as I have done; "There are certain men," says he, "crept in unawares;" plainly signifying, that if they had not crept in secretly, they would not, or ought not to have been suffered to come in openly. Now, if charity and forbearance be the same thing, here are some persons described, whom we are not to forbear, and consequently for whom we are to have no charity: therefore it must have some limitation. Let it be as extensive as you will, it is not boundless.

Titus i. 10, 11, 13. "For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, especially they of the circumcision: whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake.—Wherefore, rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith." Now, let me ask any unprejudiced reader, whether sharp rebuke be not a very different thing from forbearance? How can you rebuke those whom you may not so much as judge? or why should you attempt to make them sound in the faith, if they are already received of God? As it is expressed, Rom. xiv. 5. Besides, what is the meaning of subvert-

ing whole houses? and of stopping the mouths of the false teachers, to prevent or remedy this subversion? In the same epistle, chap. iii. 10. the apostle says, "A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject." Does not this suppose, that it is possible for a man to be a heretic? Does not the apostle here ordain a sentence of expulsion to be passed against him, after the pains taken to reclaim him appear to be fruitless? It is plain, therefore, that if charity be the same with forbearance, it must have limits; for if every body must be forborne then certainly nobody can be expelled.

I must not here pass by an astonishing interpretation put by some, and men of learning too, upon the following verse of the same chapter: "Knowing that he that is such, is subverted and sinneth, being condemned of himself;" that is, say some, no man is a heretic in the sense of this passage, but who is self-condemned, or is acting contrary to his own conviction; so that he must be rejected, not for the error of his judgment, but for the obstinacy and depravation of his heart. I do not remember to have seen any stronger instance of the power of prejudice, than giving such a sense to the word *self-condemned*. If any man can really conceive a case in his own mind, of a heretic obstinately persisting in his error, and suffering for it, in opposition to his own inward conviction, and at the same time this circumstance clearly ascertained as the foundation of his sentence, I wish he would teach me how to conceive it: at present it seems to me utterly impossible. If any

person thus speaks lies in hypocrisy, is it to be supposed, that he will confess it? and if he do not confess, how is it possible to prove it? The plain meaning of being condemned of himself, in this passage, is, that his errors are so contradictory to the other articles of his faith, such an abjuration of his former profession, and generally tend so much to immorality in practice, that he is condemned as it were out of his own mouth.

In the second epistle of John, the apostle says, ver. 9, 10, 11. "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house; neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed, is partaker of his evil deeds." I shall not stay to examine nicely the import of not receiving such a one into our house, and not bidding him God speed. It is sufficient for my purpose, that no sense can be put upon it low enough to make it agreeable to the treatment we ought to give to our brethren whom we are forbidden to judge. These we are to receive, as Christ hath received them, and to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

To all these I only add, without any reflection upon it, the reproof of Christ to the church of Pergamos: Rev. ii. 14. "But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat

things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate."

2. If charity be the same with forbearance, it must have limits, or it would be the strongest impeachment of divine wisdom and goodness, in not giving marks sufficiently clear to distinguish truth from falsehood. If we are to entertain a favorable opinion of the sentiments and state of others, it must be entirely founded on the supposition, that they have inquired with honesty and impartiality; and that they are not blinded by prejudice or corrupt passions. This I suppose will be readily allowed; because it is the usual way of speaking or writing on the subject. 'They may be mistaken,' it is often said, 'but without their fault: they may have freely and impartially inquired, and yet may, after all, think differently with equal sincerity.' This, I contend, can only hold in matters of small moment, and in themselves of a doubtful nature; and in these the observation is just, and corresponds with reason, scripture, and experience. But in truths of the highest moment, if there are any such at all, to suppose that men equally sincere and impartial, may, notwithstanding, have sentiments directly opposite, seems to me an impeachment of divine wisdom. How can it be, unless the evidences for and against them, be pretty equally balanced? How is the judgment determined at all, but by a sort of compound *ratio*, to speak in the language of mathematicians, of the outward evidence, and the prepossession of the mind?

Strong prepossessions will account for any opinion, however absurd ; but if two persons of equal capacity, and equal integrity, draw opposite conclusions on any question, it must certainly arise from the doubtfulness of the question itself. Now, if there be any truths of moment not attended with sufficient evidence, how can we acquit or justify the conduct of providence ? There does not seem to me to be any alternative ; but we must lay the blame either upon the evidence, or the mind ; that is to say, in other words, it must be put to the charge either of God or man.

3. If charity is the same thing with forbearance, it must have some limits ; otherwise the value of truth itself is absolutely annihilated. If I am to believe a man in as safe a state, and as much accepted of God, in one opinion as another, upon all subjects, it is plain, not only that every truth is of equal moment with another, but that truth and error are of equal value. This, I think, is indisputable ; for if it makes no difference, either in point of character or state, I see nothing else from which their value can be estimated. What then becomes of all the fine encomiums we have on the beauty, the excellence, the importance of truth ? the necessity and benefit of freedom of inquiry ? It would be much better to be satisfied with any opinions, be they what they will, than to give way to doubts and suspicions, to fatigue our minds, and waste our time in long and difficult researches, If it be said, that they may be the same as to the sincerity of the inquirer, but different principles may have different effects in practice ;

this is yielding up the point in debate : for if one opinion leads to holiness, and another to wickedness, in practice, they can never be in the same state of safety, nor equally acceptable to God, who hold these opposite sentiments. Besides, it is common with the advocates for this mistaken sort of charity, in order the better to support their opinion, to deny this difference in effect, and to say, ' It is no matter what a man's opinions are, if his life be good.' Now, it is evident, that this assertion is absurd ; or rather the supposition is impossible, unless the influence of truth and falsehood upon the life, be absolutely equal. Grant but the least superiority or advantage to one above the other, and the argument is destroyed ; for if truth be better than falsehood, it must be some matter what a man's opinions are, in order to his life's being good. How weak and inconsistent creatures are we ! The very same persons who make the greatest stir about a pretended search after truth, and freedom of inquiry, will needs have it, that Christian charity implies, that all opinions are alike, and ought to be treated with equal respect : and then, to crown all, they give us the most hideous pictures of the terrible effects of superstition and certain religious sentiments which they are pleased to condemn. Alas ! Where is the charity then ? Are all opinions equal ? Is it no matter what a man's opinions are, if his life be good ? At last you have found out some whose lives are ill by the impulse of their opinions. Certainly, charity, in the sense of forbearance or approbation, is not due to them.

4. If charity is the same with forbearance, it must have some limits; because otherwise things would be carried to an extravagant length; and such cases might be supposed as very few would be willing to admit, and indeed I think no man can rationally admit. I might give a multitude of possible examples; but, for the greater satisfaction of the reader, shall only mention a few that are real.

(1) Within the Christian church, there are not only different, but opposite opinions, and mutually destructive of each other. Those who hold them, on each side, not only to say, but think, that their adversaries are guilty of impiety and blasphemy. Let us take for instance, the Calvinists and Socinians. Read the writings of the first, and you will see, that they consider their adversaries as taking away the very foundation of the gospel, denying the only Lord God that bought them, and as guilty of vile idolatry in giving divine worship to one whom they believe to be a creature. Again if you read the writings of the last, you will find them charging their adversaries with blasphemy of the most horrible nature, and not only making a god different from the true God, but such a one as is more cruel and vindictive than the very devils.— Now, I desire to know how the one of these sorts of persons can have a favorable opinion of the state and sentiments of the opposite without renouncing their own? I do freely acknowledge, as I have formerly done, that I never did esteem the Socinians to be Christians; and yet find nothing more easy, or indeed more necessary, than to have charity for them,

in what I take to be the scripture sense of that word. But in the modern sense it appears to me utterly impossible. For the very same reason, if any who had embraced these principles should pretend, that he had such charity for me, as to esteem and receive me as a faithful minister of Christ, I would consider it as a profession altogether hypocritical, or that he did not believe a word of his own system. The truth is, I cannot help thinking, from the manner of conducting theological controversies, that it is very common for many to plead for that charity to themselves which they never give to their adversaries ; while the power of prejudice hinders them from observing the inconsistency between their reasoning and practice.

(2.) Those who deny and oppose the gospel altogether, have just the same title to our charity, and we are obliged to believe, that they are honest and impartial inquirers, and therefore accepted of God. Now, if there be any thing in the world clear from scripture, it is, that we are not to approve or receive such persons ; that they are not the objects of forbearance ; and, by consequence, not of that charity that consists in forbearance : on the contrary, the zeal and activity of the apostles was wholly employed in bringing unbelievers to the knowledge and confession of the truth ; for which they deserve very little praise, if their state was safe, and their character unexceptionable, before. And as to persons among us denying the gospel, after examination, I do not see how any person can think them im-

partial in rejecting it, without a very poor opinion of the evidence for receiving it.

(3) Even in point of morals, there have been, and are at this time, opinions so very gross, that few will look upon the state of those who hold them safe; and yet if forbearance is charity, and the charity is unlimited, they must also be taken in. There have been several, who certainly were sincerely of opinion, that fornication and other uncleanness was lawful. So great a man as David Hume, Esq. has adopted a sentence from a French writer: "Female infidelity, when it is known, is a small matter; and when it is not known, it is nothing."—The very same writer seems also either to defend or greatly to alleviate, unnatural lust. And many highwaymen have actually reasoned themselves into an opinion of the lawfulness of robbery, by alleging, that God never made the world with this view, that some should have too much and others should starve; and therefore they had a right to a share, and might levy it wherever they could find it. The truth is, there are more of these gross and erroneous opinions than many are aware of; for men are seldom at ease on the commission of sin, till they have found some way to satisfy their own minds, by wrong principles.—Well, are we to think all these honest and impartial inquirers, and to have charity for them in the sense so often mentioned? I imagine some will at last stop short, and say, there is a distinction to be made; these opinions are formed by the influence of prejudice, and the bias of corrupt affections. Here then your charity fails, and you have set limits to

your forbearance ; or rather you have given up the cause ; for all false opinions arise from the bias of corrupt affections. The falacy of the whole arguments on this subject lies in confounding two things very different, viz. a man's being truly of an opinion, and his being so upon fair and unprejudiced inquiry. A train of reasoning carried on, which is built upon the last of these suppositions, and applied to cases where only the first takes place. Perhaps some may choose to say, as to the case of immoral opinions, that men are not to be disapproved or condemned for the opinion in itself, but for presuming to act in consequence of it. To which I answer, That if any man will prove the innocence of forming such opinions, I will undertake to prove, with at least equal evidence, the obligation that lies upon every one so persuaded, to act according to his light.

5. In the last place, To suppose that charity is the same thing with forbearance, and yet that it is unlimited, is self-contradictory, and impossible, in many instances, to be put in practice. True Christian charity being the indispensable duty of all, must at least be possible to all, and consistent with every other duty. Now, to believe the safety of the state, or the goodness of the character of many persons for whom charity is pleaded, may be to some absolutely impossible. They may have a conviction of the contrary in their judgment. They may think, that the scripture clearly and explicitly commands them to separate from such people, to oppose and detest their errors ; and surely there are many much more

absurd and groundless opinions truly entertained. What then shall they do? The scripture commands them to contend with erroneous persons; and if they do, they are guilty of a breach of charity, one of the most essential of all gospel duties; for the apostle tells us, "Though I speak with the tongue of men and angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal."

Thus, I hope it has been proved, to the satisfaction of all impartial persons, that if charity, in scripture, is the same thing with that forbearance we owe to others who differ from us, it must have some bounds, and be praise or blame-worthy, according to the cases in which it is exercised. If I be asked, Who shall state the bounds beyond which it is not to extend? I answer, Every one for himself, according to the best of his own judgment. Some perhaps will contend with, or judge others, for things in which they ought to forbear them; but many others will carry their forbearance too far, and retain erroneous or vicious persons in their society, when they ought to expel them. For this there is no remedy, as it is the consequence of the weakness of human nature, and no way different from what happens as to every duty incumbent on us as men or Christians.

II. Let us now come to the second part of this discourse, and consider what reason there is to believe, that charity in scripture, is duty altogether distinct from forbearance, and founded on distinct principles.

One general consideration will go nigh to prove this of itself, viz. That forbearance, as

has been shewn in the preceding pages, hath limits, beyond which it is culpable; whereas charity hath none, at least as to its object. There is no person or character that can be conceived, for which we are allowed to be without charity. With respect to forbearance, the object of it is clearly pointed out in the passages where it is spoken of, and is the difference of opinion as to smaller matters, viz. the lawfulness or unlawfulness of meats and drinks, and whether certain days were holy or common. But there is no passage in which charity is spoken of, that gives the least hint, or indeed that leaves room to suppose that it hath any limits as to its object. Charity, we are told, is "the end," or sum, "of the commandment." And indeed it is the same thing with love, which is the fulfilling of the law. And in the explication which our Lord gives of the sum of the second table of the law, in answer to that question, Who is my neighbor? he plainly teaches us by the parable of the Samaritan, that all men are our neighbors. There was a great opposition, in point of religion, between the Jews and Samaritans; yet he shews plainly, that this ought not to obstruct the exercise of charity, in the true sense of that word. For this reason, I think it highly probable, that forbearance is different from charity; the one points out our duty to our fellow Christians in certain circumstances, and the other includes our duty to our fellow creatures at all times.

This will be confirmed, by reflecting that the word which, in some places, is translated *charity*, is the same, in all other passages

without variation in any one of them, with that which is translated *love*. *Agape* is the New Testament word for *charity*, which, as it is generally translated *love*, so I do not see the least reason for altering the translation, in those places where charity is substituted in its room. Charity then is *love*; that is to say, it is a sincere and fervent affection to others, and a desire of their welfare, temporal and eternal. This not only may consist with, but of itself naturally produces, the strongest abhorrence of their wicked principles, and the deepest concern for their dangerous state. There is a great affinity between the sentiments we ought to entertain with regard to error and vice. Our love to vicious persons ought not to carry in it any approbation or indulgence of their vices, and far less any belief of the safety of their state; but an earnest concern to bring about their reformation. In the same manner, a sincere and fervent charity for erroneous persons, does not imply any approbation of their opinions, or supposition of their consistency with soundness in the faith, but an earnest desire to recover them, if possible, from their unhappy delusion. Nay, though a man be so narrow-minded, as to judge those whom he ought to forbear, it may, very possibly, be attended with no breach of charity; because there may be as much love to his neighbor in that person's heart, and as much concern for his welfare, as if he had seen more clearly his own mistake. The apostle Paul calls these *weak* persons, and ascribes their conduct to the imperfections of their judgment. It was the strong, or those who

had more knowledge, that he blamed, as not walking *charitably*, when they would not abstain from meat, to prevent their brethren's offense.

It will be an additional confirmation of this meaning of *charity*, that it makes the several duties of Christians at once clear and intelligible, and consistent one with another, by leaving to each its full scope, and its proper object. If we take *charity* in the sense which I have rejected, there will be a continual opposition between zeal and charity; and in proportion as you increase in any one of them, you must necessarily fail in the other. And indeed this seems to be verified in experience; for those who espouse this sort of charity, do frequently fall into so cool a state in point of zeal, that they give themselves little trouble, either in instructing the ignorant, or reproving the vicious; and are not backward in stigmatizing those, as narrow-minded and uncharitable, who do. But if we take charity for unfeigned love, then, instead of opposition, there is the most perfect harmony between one duty and another. So far from hindering, or even limiting each other in their exercise, they strengthen each other in principle, and direct each other in their application.—The more fervent love I have for my fellow creatures and my fellow christians, it will but excite my zeal to promote their benefit, by endeavoring to convince them of any dangerous mistake, and deliver them from the dominion of every vicious practice. At the same time this love will naturally produce forbearance, where it is lawful and proper; because, if I love any person sin-

cerely, I will judge of him candidly, and not impute any bad sentiment or practice to him without necessity. It will prevent us from interfering with others where we ought not, and will urge us to activity and diligence where the case seems really to call for it.

This subject may be well illustrated by parental affection, when it is both strong in its principle, and well directed in its exercise. It will certainly prevent a parent from judging hardly of his children, or being easily incensed against them, on wrong or doubtful information : but it will be so far from making him think favorably of their mistakes, either in principle or practice, that the more tender his love, the greater his concern to prevent their being misled, or to recover them if they have gone astray. Examples to be sure there are many, of a sort of love in parents to their children, that operates like the false charity I am now pleading against, making them blind to their failings, and even partial to their crimes : but I think it must be allowed, that all such partiality and indulgence is a weakness, instead of a virtue, in the parent, and is commonly a curse, instead of a blessing, to the child. To have just apprehensions of the several duties of the Christian life, we must always consider their relation to, and dependance upon one another. There are some sins opposite to, and destructive of each other ; but there is no truly good disposition, that is not perfectly consistent with, or rather that does not improve and strengthen every other. It is remarkable, that in scripture, the duties of reproof and correction are frequently attributed to love as their principle, not only in God, but in man : “ Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.”—“ He that spareth the rod, hateth his son ; but he that loveth him, chasteneth him betimes.”—“ Thou shalt not hate thy neighbor in thy heart ; but shalt in any wise rebuke him, and not suffer sin upon him.”


Upon the whole, since this interpretation of charity is not only most agreeable to scripture, but most consistent with itself, and with every other branch of the Christian character, I hope it will be received, at least so far as to lessen the cry of uncharitableness against those who, from the united principles of love

to God and man, think themselves obliged to oppose the progress of gross error. I plead for this only when they make use of just and lawful means, and act in a manner becoming Christians, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves. For though I have shewn, that true charity is as favorable to zeal as to forbearance, and to both alike in their proper place, I am sensible that there may be zeal where there is little or no charity; and, in that case, it will shew itself in "wrath, strife, seditions, heresies." This happens chiefly, when a weak person who judges rashly, is also of an envious or malicious disposition. The first of these may be sometimes without the other; they may, however, also be joined in the same person; and then it will certainly be attended with "confusion, and every evil work." But when a deep sense of the evil of departing from the faith to the persons themselves, and the danger of corrupt doctrine infecting the whole lump, induces any to stand up in defense of the truth, to oppose the introduction of erroneous teachers, or to attempt the expulsion of those who have crept in unawares; let them be called unreasonable if you please, and let their mistake be pointed out, but I beg that they may not be abused and vilified as uncharitable. The reason of my request is, that it is more than probable they do this from a strong conviction, that they are obliged to it by the express command of Christ. I declare this to be my own persuasion, after the most impartial search of the scriptures of which I was capable; and certainly it is at least possible, that we may have, notwithstanding, a fervent love to our brethren, and a desire of their welfare. We may love them as men, even when we cannot judge them to be saints; and we may love them as Christians, even when we think they are in many things to be blamed; nay, I hope we may heartily forgive them as enemies, notwithstanding all their bitterness and rancor against us. But if, after all, this request cannot be obtained; if we cannot alter our judgment, and they will still insist that we are therefore without charity, that is to say, without christianity; they must confess, that here is one opinion which they will not tolerate, and to which, in their own sense, no charity is due.—END.





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