

A SERIES
OF
TRACTS
ON THE
DOCTRINES, ORDER, AND POLITY
OF THE
✓
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.
EMBRACING
SEVERAL ON PRACTICAL SUBJECTS.

VOL. III.

PHILADELPHIA :
PRESBYTERIAN BOARD OF PUBLICATION.

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THIRD VOLUME.

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THE

REFUGE OF LIES.

BY A. ALEXANDER, D.D.

Entered according to the Act of Congress, in the year 1843, by ALEXANDER W. MITCHELL, M. D. in the office of the Clerk of the District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania.

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PRESBYTERIAN BOARD OF PUBLICATION.

THE
REFUGE OF LIES.

ALL men have some conviction of sin, which, at times, gives them pain. There are, to most, hours of serious reflection, when conscience will speak, and some refuge is felt to be desirable. If men could divest themselves of conscience, it would soon be done, and they would then sin without remorse or fear : but this is not easily nor soon effected. It requires a long course of obstinate sinning, aided by the blindness which error induces, to get the conscience so seared that it will be past feeling ; when the wretch, abandoned of God, and given up to believe a lie, rushes forward through every species of crime to make sure his own damnation. For those who have reached this desperate state of hardness of heart and blindness of mind, it is not worth while to write, because they are already given up of God and forsaken by the Holy Spirit, who no longer restrains them, nor strives with them. Or, if they are not given up to judicial blindness, they are so filled with dark prejudices against religion, that they cannot be induced to read or hear any thing on the subject. Most sinners, however, have their moments of compunction, and have their refuges for relief, to which they betake themselves when urged by the accusations of conscience.

1. The first attempt is to turn away the thoughts from the disagreeable subject ; and to favour this effort, they run into the company of the gay and thoughtless, and engage in such amusements as have a tendency to exhilarate and fascinate the mind, and to drive away all serious reflection. If this giddy course could be kept up without any interruption, it would be a more effectual refuge from the accusations of conscience than it is found to be ; but after

enjoying a scene of dissipation or debauchery, there is commonly an interval of vacuity, and often of depression; so that the votary of pleasure experiences very painful feelings, rendered more bitter by a conviction that much sin has been committed, and that the course which he is pursuing must lead to the chambers of despair. The acuteness of these feelings will depend very much on the knowledge of religious truth in the mind. Men who have had early religious instruction, in these circumstances suffer far more than those who, having been brought up in ignorance of the nature and obligation of the law of God, have a very dim perception of the nature of sin, except in some of its most enormous acts. To these their ignorance is their source of ease; but where there is light in the mind, this covering is destroyed. Men whose understandings have been enlightened by the knowledge of truth, cannot return to a state of ignorance; they cannot obliterate the ideas of religion which have been inculcated upon their tender minds. They must have some other refuge; and the one which most readily presents itself is some form of infidelity; and that form of it is embraced which they happen to meet with in some corrupting book, or from some infidel companion, or which they find it most easy to believe. Young men, who have grown up in ignorance, do not commonly feel much zeal in favour of any infidel scheme; those who become zealous advocates of errors of this description, are more frequently such as have had religious truth lodged in their minds. Many years since, when infidelity began first to be openly professed by many, there was a classical school, in which a number of young men of adult age were students. Part of these were connected with irreligious families, and knew nothing of religion except what they had heard at home in the way of contempt and ridicule; but another part were the sons of pious men, who had been diligently instructed in the doctrines and duties of religion, and had been kept under restraint. Some of these having been led by their vicious companions into evil practices, and suffering exquisitely from the lashes of a guilty conscience, found themselves in so much need of a refuge from remorse, that when infidel tracts and books were put into their hands, they seized upon them with eagerness, and swallowed the deleterious potion with evident satisfaction, and ceased not to read and collect arguments in favour of the deistical opinions which they

had embraced, and which they found so necessary to the ease of their consciences; whereas those who had never received any religious education, while they were well pleased with any opinions hostile to the Bible and religion, manifested no special zeal in behalf of these opinions; their minds were already much at ease, through their total ignorance of the law of God and of its awful sanctions. They took no pains to establish themselves in error, but took for granted every thing which militated against the Christian religion.

Even when infidel opinions are not explicitly adopted in theory, there is often a state of mind contracted, which, in a great measure, answers the purpose of an infidel theory; that is, a practical disbelief of the threatenings of God's word, or a vague hope that these will never be executed. Persons in this condition are shielded from conviction when they hear the terrors of the law denounced in preaching; they secretly give a negative to all these awful truths, and they take refuge in the same scepticism when their consciences become clamorous.

To such the scheme of the Universalists furnishes a welcome refuge. They do not wish to reject the Bible, since it comes to us so strongly attested; but while they reject infidelity professedly, they avail themselves of every thing in that system of error which is calculated to relieve and soothe a guilty conscience. Universalism, therefore, in our day, has taken the place of open atheism and theoretical infidelity. Here the sinner finds a scheme, professing to be derived from divine revelation, which promises to all a complete immunity from future punishment. Universalists of the old school taught, that the impenitent sinner would be punished in the future world according to the just demerit of his sins; or, as others supposed, until his obstinacy was subdued, and he became truly penitent. And this punishment, they admitted, would not only be severe, but long-continued, even for ages of ages. There was but little in this scheme to comfort the man who was determined to cleave to his sins; but in the new school of Universalists, all the dread of future punishment is done away. They have made the wonderful discovery, that the Bible teaches that all the punishment of sin, however atrocious and long-continued, is confined to this life. This is the only scheme ever invented, which comes up fully to the wishes and feelings of sinners abandoned to iniquity. According to this, repentance would

be folly, and all religion useless. The impious blasphemer may defy the Almighty, may die cursing his Maker, and breathing out vengeance against his fellow men, but he incurs no penalty. He may depart in the full assurance, that as soon as he enters the eternal world he will be admitted into heaven. How poorly such an one will be qualified to join in the hallelujahs of that holy place, every one can see: yet the impious wretch, who spent his life in deeds of malice and wickedness, will receive as great a reward as the devout, humble, and benevolent Christian, who spent his life in doing good, and perhaps died for the honour of his Lord. But in proportion as this scheme is acceptable to ungodly men, it is difficult to be believed. Some determined sinners would give half they possess in the world to have it demonstrated to them: in illustration of which, the following fact may be mentioned:—When an universalist preacher had finished his sermon, and he and his hearers had resorted to the tavern for refreshment, &c., an old drunkard said to the preacher, “I will give you my horse if you will only satisfy me of the truth of what you have preached to-day.”

When men do not love the truth, they are often, in just judgment, given up “to believe a lie, that they may be damned, who have pleasure in unrighteousness.” We need not be surprised, therefore, to see what monstrous absurdities men, under this dereliction, are capable of believing. Many suppose, that no man in his senses can be an atheist: but it is easier to be an atheist than an universalist of this class. Indeed, the system is more dangerous and destructive than blank atheism; for the atheist can promise nothing to impenitent sinners after death. They believe in no futurity: but the universalist pretends to teach his disciples, and from the Bible, too, that live as he may, and die as he may, it matters not how, even if his hand be reeking with his neighbour’s blood, or what is as bad, with his own blood, shed by a suicidal hand, he shall be ushered into a holy heaven, into the immediate presence of a holy God. O! wonderful credulity of deluded men! Surely this is one of the “refuges of lies,” which God will sweep away as with a hail storm.

2. But there are other false refuges into which those who read this tract may be in greater danger of falling. Many among us seem to live at ease, and to be well satisfied with themselves, because they have lived honest and

moral lives. They are good neighbours, good members of society, kind and affectionate to their own families, and often contribute to the relief of the poor and distressed. Now it cannot be denied that these persons are worthy of praise as citizens, and that their characters are amiable in the respects mentioned; and it is painful to be obliged to say to such, If this be all the refuge which you have in the day of judgment, you will not be able to stand. You look around and see multitudes whose conduct is far from being as correct as yours, and you are led to think, if you are in an unsafe condition, what will become of the world? And when one of this character is called away by death, the opinion is confidently expressed by many, that they have made a happy change, and are relieved from all their sorrows and pains. And for any one to express a doubt of the salvation of such persons, is deemed by most to be the height of uncharitableness. By this means the delusion is kept up, and whatever the preacher may say from the pulpit, this current opinion is received in preference, because it is pleasing to the feelings, and tends to lull the conscience into a profound sleep. If the sentiments of the great body of the people could be ascertained, it would be found that nine out of ten entertain the opinion, that if a person leads a moral life, is sober, just in his dealings, a good neighbour, and an affectionate husband and parent, his chance for heaven is as good, at least, as that of those who make a loud profession of religion, whose moral character, it is insinuated, is not better than that of those of whom a description has just been given. There are but two ways conceivable by which men can reach heaven. The one is by their own works; the other by the free and sovereign grace of God through a Redeemer. The first was the original method of life. It is the only one known to reason, and, therefore, men naturally cling to it, and mere doctrinal instruction does not remove them from this false ground. Ask such a one on a death-bed, "on what is your hope of heaven founded?" and he will say, "I have never injured any one; I have endeavoured to live an honest and upright life, and have often relieved the wants of the poor, and done other deeds of charity." "But have you never sinned against God?" "O yes, we are all sinners, and I hope I am not worse than others." "But do you not know that it is written, 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to

do them?" How do you expect to answer for your sins at the judgment?" "O! I trust in the mercy of God. If others can find mercy, I hope that I shall also." Not a word of a Mediator. No thought is entertained of the necessity of an expiatory sacrifice. No such feeling of the burden of sin as renders it necessary to come to the cross for relief. But if you mention Christ as the only foundation of a sinner's hope, they will of course assent to it; but it is evident that they have never yet felt the need of Christ and his justifying righteousness. This refuge of trusting to our own good deeds and moral conduct is the ruin of thousands of souls. If this be a safe way to heaven, then, verily, Christ has died in vain; and all that is said in the Holy Scriptures of regeneration and sanctification, by the efficacious operations of the Spirit of God, may go for nothing. And when such persons come to die, they are not commonly alarmed. They have taken up the notion, that if they can only persuade themselves to be *willing to die*, that is a sign that they are fully prepared. And even if on the near approach to eternity, they should feel some apprehension that all is not right, those fears are soon allayed by the counsel of surrounding friends, who encourage them to believe that there is no danger to persons who have lived as they have done. Alas! that such a soul-destroying delusion should be so common in the midst of gospel preaching. The effort of many, however, when their children or near friends are about to be taken away, is to keep religion entirely out of sight. Not a word is spoken to the dying person respecting preparation; and the access to the bed of the sick, of such as would be likely to mention such subjects, is carefully precluded. If the family has been accustomed to attend any place of worship, from the force of custom the minister may be sent for at the very last moment, when all instruction is out of the question: and then he is cautioned to say nothing which will disturb or alarm. In many cases, however, he is excluded from the sick room, under the pretext that the patient is in such a state as not to be able to converse; and he is obliged to be contented with offering up a short prayer. O the devices and stratagems of the devil to prevent the gospel from reaching the minds of the people! This refuge of lies is among the most dangerous, because the characters of the class now under consideration are so amiable and so respectable in the eyes of

the world ; but unless we renounce Christianity, we cannot believe that mere external morality and decency will ever take any one to heaven. If we seek salvation by our works, they must be perfect. We must love the Lord our God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves, through our whole life, and never fail in one instance : who, then, can be saved by his own morality ? And they who trust to this broken reed know nothing of the love of God by experience. And their external actions, when weighed in the balance of the sanctuary, are found totally deficient. The whole of the duties which they owe to God have been neglected. And they have been guilty of slighting the offers of his mercy in the gospel, and by their trust in their own good deeds have cast contempt on the Son of God, who came down from heaven, and died on the cross, to save guilty sinners.

3. Some, not contented with mere morality, take refuge in a form of religion. We are warned in Scripture to beware of such as have a form of godliness, but deny its power ; “ who have a name that they live, and yet are dead.” “ Not every one,” says Jesus, “ who saith Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doth the will of my Father who is in heaven.” Out of ten virgins, five were foolish, and took no oil in their vessels, and their lamps went out ; and when the bridegroom came at midnight, they were not ready to go out and meet him ; and when these foolish virgins applied for admittance after the door was shut, they met with an awful repulse. O wretched condition of formalists and false professors ! They who are at ease in Zion should be alarmed, for there is a heavy wo denounced against them. At the approaching day of judgment none will be found in a more déplorable condition. Their disappointment will be terrible. They were confident of being received into heaven. They were esteemed to be Christians by the church. They might have stood high as professors. Yea, some of those who will be found in this miserable company of false professors, are preachers of the gospel and workers of miracles. Our Lord represents them as pleading, in that day, the high privileges which they enjoyed, and the high standing which they held in the church. “ Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets.” “ Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord,

have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name have cast out devils, and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then I will profess unto them, I never knew you, depart from me, ye workers of iniquity." Look well to it, ye professors of religion, that you have not taken up with a mere "refuge of lies." Nothing better merits the name of a "refuge of lies," than a profession of religion where the vital power of godliness has never been experienced: for every profession of this kind is in a sort, "lying unto God." Whoever professes religion professes to love God, to believe in Christ, and to repent of all sin: but the false professor has no true faith in Christ, has never repented of his sins, and has not the love of God in his heart. It is easy to deceive men, easy to deceive the elders of the church, easy to deceive yourselves; but God you cannot deceive. And this your false refuge He will sweep away as with a hail storm. O! reflect, in time, how deplorable, how desperate, will be your condition when the midnight cry shall be heard, "behold the bridegroom cometh." Examine carefully, I beseech you, whether your lamps are burning, or whether they are gone out. Look and see whether your vessels are filled with oil, or are empty. Now, while you are in the way, seek that grace which hitherto you have neglected. Your profession, in that coming day of account, will do you no good; it will only serve to increase your condemnation. You may say, "I have been a member of the church from my birth: I have been baptized by a godly minister, and am descended from a long succession of pious ancestors: I have been admitted regularly to the table of the Lord, and my Christian character has never been called in question." All this, or what was equal to this, the Pharisees could have said. The Jews of our Saviour's time did take up with such a refuge; for John Baptist said to them, "Think not to say within yourselves, we have Abraham to our father, for God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." And Christ said, "except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."

4. I shall mention but one more "refuge of lies" into which many fly, and in which they feel themselves to be perfectly secure, and that is, "a false experience of religion." These are professors too, and, commonly, flaming professors, but they are not mere formalists. They are

not destitute of *heart religion*; but their feelings and affections, however lively, are not genuine, and they do not bring forth the fruits meet for repentance. The cases of such deceived souls are various, but one of the most common is this. The person has been awakened, and may have experienced pungent conviction for sin. He has been constrained to inquire with earnestness, "what must I do to be saved?" And while under these distressing convictions, and earnestly seeking deliverance, the thought has suddenly been suggested, and perhaps conveyed in Scripture language, "thy sins are forgiven thee," or something of similar import. Taking this to be a message from God, he is immediately filled with unutterable joy, from the persuasion that the curse is removed, and that heaven is sure. This suggestion, however, may have been from the enemy of souls, who endeavours to keep his subjects at ease in sin, but when they fall under conviction, his great aim is to deceive them by false hopes; and as he can make suggestions to the mind, and is accustomed to use the words of Scripture to answer his insidious purposes, there is no reason why he may not have it as one of his most successful devices to produce a false peace; and if he has power to influence at the same time the nervous system, so as to excite exhilaration, this will account for those extatic feelings of joy which many experience when no suggestion is made to the mind. Besides, by the power of sympathy, when there is great religious excitement in a congregation, the nerves being wound up for many days, there is commonly a natural reaction; so that feelings of great agony are apt to be succeeded by a kind of thrilling joy, which very much resembles that which is produced by inhaling the nitrous gas. Persons thus affected, experience a peculiar buoyancy of spirits, which prompts them to jump up; and, as they express it often, they feel as if they could fly. It is under nervous feelings of this kind, produced by strong religious impressions on the feelings and imagination, that whole assemblies sometimes are agitated with a wild, tumultuous joy, which is expressed by clapping the hands, and shouting glory! glory! glory! and other similar expressions. Now this enthusiastic feeling is contagious. Persons, not before serious, are often drawn into the vortex; and experiencing an unusual excitement and exhilaration, their reason loses its dominion, and their modesty and reserve being overcome, they join in the common expressions of transport: and this sudden excitement, by many who pro-

fess to be teachers of others, is pronounced to be conversion. Scenes of this kind are not confined to one denomination, but are frequently witnessed at camp-meetings, and other protracted meetings where religious exercises are kept up for many days and nights. And it is not uncommon for persons thus affected to swoon away, or to be agitated with spasmodic motions of the nerves; and in this excited state it is not wonderful that their imaginations should be taken for realities. It is, therefore, not wonderful, that ignorant persons of lively fancy think that they hear words audibly spoken to them, and see a glorious light, or more commonly have a kind of vision of a dignified and beautiful person, whom they take to be the Saviour, and who they fondly imagine smiles upon them. It is enough to extort tears from the most phlegmatic, to think how many precious souls are led into this false refuge; and it is lamentable to observe how the ignorant populace are misled by teachers who persuade them that this is vital religion, and that all who make any objections, are cold-hearted formalists, and enemies of true religion.

THE END.