

THE

807

PRESBYTERIAN PREACHER,

OR ORIGINAL SERMONS BY LIVING MINISTERS IN THE PRES-
BYTERIAN CHURCH,

ON

THE IMPORTANT DOCTRINES OF CHRISTIANITY,

PRESENTED IN A CLEAR AND COMPREHENSIVE MANNER, FOR THE IN-
STRUCTION OF THE PRESENT AGE, AND IN DEFENCE
OF THE TRUTH.

The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.—PSALMS.

EDITED BY REV. S. C. JENNINGS.

VOLUME I.



PITTSBURGH:

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY D. AND M. MACLEAN.

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1833.

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1832-33

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THE
PRESBYTERIAN PREACHER.

No. 1.

PITTSBURGH, JUNE, 1832.

VOL. I.

SERMON I

BY SAMUEL MILLER, D. D.
OF PRINCETON, NEW-JERSEY.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOSPEL TRUTH.

JOHN 17:17. *Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.*

THE great end of the religion of Jesus Christ is to deliver fallen men from sin, and from all its consequences. In other words, it is to deliver them from guilt, depravity and misery; to restore them to the image and favor of God; and to make them perfectly blessed in the full enjoyment of him to all eternity. And, truly, the most precious benefit that can be conferred on a rational creature who has departed from God, is to "turn him away from his iniquities;" to bring him back to the likeness and fellowship of infinite Excellence; and to unite him to the holy and happy society over which He who "came to seek and to save that which was lost," presides as the Captain of salvation, as the covenant Head of all who are purchased by his atoning blood, and sanctified by his blessed Spirit. Hence the unspeakable importance of the Redeemer's prayer in our text,—
"Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth."

The original meaning of the word here rendered "sanctify," is to "separate, or set apart" to a particular purpose. Thus we are commanded to "sanctify the Sabbath;" that is, to dedicate it to God; to set it apart from the other days of the week, for sacred employments. Thus, also, the vessels, and other furniture of the tabernacle and temple are said to have been "sanctified." Not that they were made intrinsically holy; but they were set apart to the service of God. This kind of sanctification, however, is only external. There is another sense in which the term is employed, of far more importance; viz. to express real, internal devotedness or conformity to God. To be sanctified, in this sense, is to be restored to God's moral image; in other words, to be delivered from the power, and the pollution of sin, and to be "made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light."

Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit. He opens the eyes of the blinded and alienated sinner. He "takes away the hard and stony heart, and gives an heart of flesh." This work is begun in regeneration. Then a new and holy disposition is imparted to the soul. Then the current of the affections is changed. Then in him who was "dead in trespasses and sins," a new and spiritual life is begun. He has new views, desires, pursuits, and enjoyments. And this benign work is always carried on by the same divine Power which begins it. "Being confident," says the apostle, "of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it," or finish it, "until the day of Jesus Christ." The Holy Spirit enables the happy subject of his grace more and more to "die unto sin and live unto righteousness;" to "crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts;" and to become more and more like his blessed Master, until, at length, when released from his earthly tabernacle, he shall be presented "a perfect man in Christ Jesus; without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, before the presence of his glory with exceeding great joy."

This most precious work of sanctification, we learn from our text, and from many other parts of Scripture, is effected by the instrumentality of the TRUTH. "Sanctify them through thy truth." The great Author of this work, indeed, is able to sanctify a depraved creature without employing any means whatever for the purpose. But this is not his ordinary method. He works by means. He is not, it is true, *confined* to them. But He commonly employs them for accomplishing his purposes in the world of grace, as well as of nature. As the Holy Spirit is the appointed Agent, in the economy of grace, for effecting the work before us; so he has an appointed or fixed instrumentality for the purpose, and that is REVEALED TRUTH. By "truth," we are to understand conformity to fact or reality; that which is opposed to falsehood:—in other words, it is the correct exhibition of the great facts and principles which are contained in the revelation of God for guiding our faith and practice. "Thy word," says the Saviour, "is truth." Every thing revealed in the word of God, relating either to doctrine, order or duty, belongs to that truth which infinite Wisdom has been pleased to impart for the instruction and sanctification of his people. For though all truth is not equally important; yet it is all really valuable:—and in proportion to the degree in which it is understood, embraced, and obeyed, will be its benign influence, both on individual Christians, and on the Church in her collective capacity.

The doctrine of our text, then, appears to be, that GOSPEL TRUTH IS THE GRAND MEANS WHICH GOD EMPLOYS FOR THE SANCTIFICATION OF SINFUL MEN.

To illustrate and establish this position is the design of the present discourse. But before we proceed to the direct discussion of the subject, it may not be improper to interpose a word of caution on two or three important points. And,

First: We are not to suppose that *Truth is able of itself to produce the sanctifying effect of which we speak.* This blessed effect is produced, our text tells us, *through the truth*—that is, by *means of it*—the instrumental cause; not by its own inherent power as a primary agent. The truth, or the word of God, is the “sword of the Spirit.” The power which wields it is Divine. Without that divine energy, it would be as inert and powerless as any other word. Though it were held forth with all the logical force, and with all the touching eloquence that ever attended an angel’s address, still never would it slay a single corruption, or penetrate effectually to the seat of moral sensibility and action, in a single soul, were it not borne home to the heart, and savingly applied by the almighty Spirit of God. We may say of this, as well as of every other saving influence on the soul of man—“Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord.”

A *second* caution, to be ever borne in mind, when contemplating this subject, is, that the Holy Spirit, in applying the truth to the understanding, the conscience, and the heart of the sinner, *does it in a manner fully consistent with his liberty and responsibility as a moral agent.* No violence is done to any faculty. The truth is so exhibited, and the intellectual and active powers of the soul, so benignly influenced and wrought upon, that the happy subject of this influence is not forced against his will, but “made willing” to receive and obey the truth in the love of it. He is not wrought upon, as a workman operates upon a piece of inanimate matter; or as an officer of justice drags a reluctant criminal, contrary to his inclination, to a place of confinement. But by an almighty and sovereign moral influence, addressed to him as a rational creature; an influence immediately impressed on the soul; an influence by which he is made to see the reasonableness and excellence of divine things, and to give up his pride, prejudices and rebellion;—he cheerfully and cordially chooses the right way, and yields himself to the service of God, “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” It has been sometimes asserted, indeed, that man is *active* in his own regeneration. This doctrine is either founded on a *quibble*, or it is *a gross heresy.* If it be intended to say, that the power of God in the regeneration of a sinner is exerted, not upon inert matter, but upon an active being;—that the moment he is made alive by the power of the Holy Ghost, he begins to act spiritually and voluntarily; that in the instant of his vivification, he becomes active in holy affection and choice;—it is, doubtless, true; and there is nothing to complain of, but a vague expression, and a needless controversy about words. But if it be intended to convey the idea that the sinner *originates* as well as *exercises* his first holy choice; that the *principle* of obedience, or the cordial *disposition* to obey, which is prior, in the order of nature, to all holy acts, and from which they spring,—is the product of his own activity;—in a word, that in the production of that state of

the soul from which holy exercises flow, the sinner is not *acted upon*, but *acts*;—then the consequence is obvious. The sinner is the author of his own life. He is regenerated by himself, and not by the Holy Spirit. And, of course, the whole Bible doctrine of *divine influence*, as the only source of sanctification, is virtually abandoned.

The *third* and last preliminary remark which I beg may be kept in view, is, that the *manner* in which the Holy Spirit applies the truth to the soul, and by means of it renews and sanctifies the man, is unknown to us. I mean that what may be called the *philosophy* of this happy effect, is beyond our comprehension. "The wind bloweth," said our Divine Master, "where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof; but canst not tell whence it cometh, or whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." If we cannot unfold the philosophy of nutrition by food received into the animal body; much less can we understand how that Spirit who made every faculty, and sustains them every moment in exercise, can reach and immediately act upon them, without impairing their liberty; can enlighten, control and purify them, by the instrumentality of his own truth, and thus transform them into his own image. Of the *essence of things*, or of the *real nature of causation*, in any case, or on any subject, we know nothing. Surely, then, it is no wonder that we cannot explain the *nature* and *process* of that divine causation by which the spiritually dead are "made alive to God." Our inability, however, to explain the process by which this blessed effect is produced, ought by no means to shake our belief in the fact, that it is by means of the truth that the sanctification of the soul is commenced and carried on. This, it is hoped, will be made to appear by adverting to the following considerations.

I. By attending to THE STRUCTURE OF THE HUMAN MIND. The character of every man is determined by the character of his mind. As it is the soul that may be said, emphatically, to constitute the man; so the state of the soul is decided by the principles and affections which govern it. A man's "principles" are his real impressions or convictions concerning moral and religious truth, or, in other words, concerning facts and duty. His principles are the basis of his conduct. No man is *better* than his principles; it is well if he be *as good*. Indeed, strictly speaking, it is impossible that any man should be better than his principles. This would be to suppose that a man, in pursuing a course of conduct, may deviate from his own deliberate and conscientious persuasion of what is right, and be commendable for doing so; that is, may be more worthy of praise, as a moral being, for going counter to his sincere convictions, than if he had acted in conformity with them. This is impossible. **Nay**, it is the highest absurdity. If a man's principles be wrong; that is, if his habitual belief or convictions concerning truth and duty be erroneous; he must, of necessity, act erroneously. He cannot but



sin, whether he act in conformity with his principles, or in opposition to them. If he follow them, he is, of course, wrong, for he follows a false guide. On the other hand, if he act contrary to his deliberate and conscientious convictions, he no less certainly acts wrong; nay, perhaps, still more criminally; because he directly contravenes the dictate of conscience. Thus *Paul*, before his conversion, "verily thought within himself, that he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." His conscience was honest, in the popular sense of that term; but it was blinded and erroneous. And, of course, as long as it continued such, he could not but sin, whether he obeyed or resisted its dictates.

Can any thing place in a stronger light the importance of our receiving and obeying truth, and nothing but the truth, in reference to the great questions of faith and practice, than the considerations which have been stated? If the human mind is so constituted that no false opinion, no corrupt principle, can be adopted, without a corresponding practical mischief, and a mischief proportioned to the importance and the moral bearing of the principle in question;—then, surely, it behooves every one who values his own temporal or eternal well-being, to give all diligence to know and receive the truth; to "seek it as silver, and search for it as for hid treasures." The infatuation and the injury of daily swallowing poison, are not more unquestionable, than the infatuation and the injury of imbibing corrupt sentiments; of embracing as truth doctrinal and practical error. To the precise extent of their influence, they must, of necessity, prevent the very springs of action, and lead the mind away from God, from duty, and, consequently, from happiness. And, unhappily, in this case, the more sincere the individual, the greater his danger. That is, the more unfeigned and deep his belief of the error supposed, the more powerful and mischievous will be its influence on his mind, and the more extensive and permanent the evil to which it will be likely to lead. But further,

II. The essential importance of truth, as a means of sanctification, is also rendered manifest by considering THE NATURE OF TRUE RELIGION. What is true religion, but conformity to the will of God? And what is the will of God, but truth,—the essence of truth? In this view of the subject, were we to define genuine sanctification, we might say, it essentially consists in knowledge of the truth, in love of the truth, and in walking according to the truth. In other words, it consists in having just apprehensions of things, temporal and spiritual; in cherishing right affections and desires toward them; and in acting out these affections and desires in the temper and life. God himself is truth. His word, our text tells us, is truth; and it must be so; for it is a transcript of his own most holy character. To know and love the word of God, then, is to know and love the truth; and, of course, is to know and love God himself. The word of God,

therefore, that which daily exhibits to the believer the great objects of his love, joy and confidence, is, of consequence, the aliment on which he lives. It is the "meat and drink" by which he is nourished and sustained. The more he contemplates the truth of God, with an humble and teachable spirit, the more he grows in grace, that is, in sanctification. The more his faith is confirmed; his repentance increased; his hope strengthened; his love enkindled; his confidence in God established; and his whole soul brought into a blessed conformity to the divine image. "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

If such be the nature of true religion;—if it essentially consist in affections, desires, and conduct conformed to the will of God, which is his word, his truth; then it is self-evident, that no real sanctification can be either begun or carried on in any heart, but by bringing the mind in contact with truth, and into subjection to its power. Without this, we might just as well expect to "gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles." To sanctify men, is, as we have seen, to excite in them just apprehensions, desires and affections toward those great realities which ought to be supremely regarded by rational beings. Of course, the more we believe in the reality and glory of these great objects; the more we love them, and seek them; the more we may be said to receive and obey the truth;—the more the truth may be said to pervade, to influence, and to govern the mind. The entrance of the word of God into the heart, gives light, and life, and joy, and hope, and peace, and "brings the whole man into captivity to the obedience of Christ." Yes, the word of God, when applied by the Holy Spirit, has a mighty sanctifying power. It enlightens the understanding; it awakens the conscience; it softens the heart; it "cleanses from all filthiness of flesh and spirit." And how does it become instrumental in accomplishing all this? It sets before the mind the most excellent and glorious *objects*. It presents the strongest *motives* for the attainment of holiness. It furnishes the most effectual *encouragements* to seek holiness. It offers the plainest and only effectual *directions* for the culture of holiness. And it is accompanied with "power from on high," impressing it upon the mind, and giving it, if I may so speak, an effectual lodgment and a holy energy there. This *power from on high* is that which imparts to it all its enlightening, purifying, and healing influence. And yet, from the very nature of true religion, while it is certain that nothing truly sanctifying will occur until this divine power is applied; it is, at the same time, equally certain that the application of truth to the mind in some manner, ordinary or extraordinary, is no less indispensable.

III. Again; the importance of knowing and receiving divine truth is placed in the strongest light BY THE EXPRESS DECLARATIONS OF SCRIPTURE. All those passages of the word of God which represent true religion under the beautiful and appropriate figure of "walking in the truth," and of "walking with God," who is the great source and model of all truth; may be considered as indirectly, but most emphatically, teaching the doctrine of our text. But the sacred oracles abound with declarations on this subject still more direct, pointed and solemn;—declarations which proclaim, at once, the value of truth, the necessity of its being known and received, and the fatal consequences of turning away from it. The following specimen of the manner in which the inspired writers express themselves on the subject, surely marks the deep importance of that which they inculcate. "Hold fast," says one apostle, "the form of sound words which thou hast received." "Contend earnestly," says another apostle, "for the faith once delivered to the saints." "Whosoever," says a third apostle, "abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God." And again, "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 a partaker of his evil deeds." And in the same strain it is pronounced,—“if any man come unto you, and bring any other gospel than that ye have received, let him be accursed.” And again,—“Hold fast the faithful word, that you may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” Nay, departure from “sound doctrine,” is every where represented as the seed of all corruption. “In the latter times,” we are told, “some SHALL DEPART FROM THE FAITH, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.” And again, “As there were false prophets among the people (the Jews;) so there shall be false teachers among you (Christians,) who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways, by reason of whom THE WAY OF TRUTH SHALL BE EVIL SPOKEN OF.” And, to crown all, the account given in prophecy of the great Romish apostacy is in the following language: “Whose coming is after the working of Satan, with all power, and signs, and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness, in them that perish; BECAUSE THEY RECEIVED NOT THE LOVE OF THE TRUTH, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be damned, who BELIEVED NOT THE TRUTH, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”

To the same effect are all those passages of scripture which represent “repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ,” as essential to salvation; which proclaim, “He that believeth on the Son of God hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but that he who believeth not on the Son shall not see life, but that the wrath of God abideth on him;” which declare that “other

foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ;" and which exhort the impenitent and unbelieving to "flee from the wrath to come," to "lay hold of eternal life," and having accepted of proffered mercy, to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Now, what are all the exercises of mind here described and enjoined, but so many enlightened and practical views of the radical truths of religion? What is *Repentance*, but a holy sorrow for sin, founded on a spiritual perception of those doctrines concerning God, his character, his law, and the plan of mercy which his word proclaims? What is *Faith*, but believing, with cordial love and confidence, those great truths which the scriptures reveal, especially those which relate to the person, glory, and work of the Divine Redeemer? And what are all the other graces of the Spirit, which his word represents as indispensable to salvation, but so many exercises in all of which the soul lays hold of truth, follows truth, obeys truth, and enjoys the consolations of truth? Hence it is that the scriptures every where represent bringing the knowledge of the gospel, in some way, to men, as absolutely necessary to their conversion and salvation. "How shall they believe in him of whom their have not heard?" Hence it is, also, that when the impenitent are converted, they are said to "come to the knowledge of the truth;" to be "born again by the word of truth;" to be "made free by the truth;" and to "obey the truth;" by all which expressions we are plainly taught, that truth, or, which is the same thing, Christian doctrine, is the grand instrument, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, by which spiritual life is begun, carried on, and completed in every subject of redeeming grace.

IV. Once more; the great importance of knowing and receiving gospel truth, is manifest from the undoubted fact, that **WHENEVER THE FUNDAMENTAL AND PECULIAR DOCTRINES OF THE GOSPEL HAVE BEEN EITHER WITHHELD OR OPPOSED, THE INTERESTS OF VITAL PIETY AND HOLY LIVING HAVE ALWAYS, IN A CORRESPONDING DEGREE, DECLINED.** Not only does the Bible represent all departures from the faith, as evil, and, if they be essential, as destructive of Christian character and hope; but all ecclesiastical history serves at once to illustrate and confirm the melancholy representation. When we open the apostolical epistles to the churches of *Corinth*, *Galatia*, and the *Hebrews*, we shall find, by carefully attending to the strain of address, that many of the members of those churches, had listened to the persuasions of false teachers, and had materially departed from "the faith once delivered to the saints;" and that they had no less degenerated in zeal and practical godliness. Some of the errors which they had embraced, are specifically stated; and the pictures given of their practical influence, are indeed melancholy! In the second and third centuries, when the ministers of religion began to swerve from the simple and genuine doctrines of the gospel, the benign influence of their ministry, and all the most

precious interests of vital piety, and of holy living began, in the very same proportion, to decline. When *Augustine* arose, toward the close of the fourth century, the doctrines of the gospel had been very imperfectly preached for nearly two hundred years. Of course, he found both orthodoxy and piety, at a very low ebb. He and his pious coadjutors, grieved at the degeneracy of the Church, consecrated their whole strength to the great cause of gospel truth. They opposed, with unwearied zeal, the Pelagian and Semi-pelagian errors of the day; and did more to refute heresy, and to extend and establish sound doctrine, than had been done by any since the apostolic age. The consequence of this revival of orthodoxy, was the immediate revival of vital piety, and of gospel purity; the blessings of which, on a large part of the church, were precious and lasting. In several subsequent periods, whenever there was a revival of the knowledge and preaching of sound doctrine, good morals and practical godliness never failed to be revived in a corresponding degree. In the days of *Godescalcus*; of *Claudius of Turin*; of the *Waldenses*; of *Wickliffe*; and of *Huss* and *Jerome*, it was manifest that practical piety rose or sunk, just as sound or erroneous doctrines bore sway. The same great fact was most impressively exemplified at the period of the Reformation. When the great doctrines of the gospel, which had been so long withheld or perverted by the corrupters of the church, began to be proclaimed by the Reformers, in something of their scriptural simplicity, pure and undefiled religion began immediately to spring forth, from this living seed, in the same proportion. And, on the contrary, when, toward the close of the sixteenth century, and during the seventeenth, orthodoxy declined in all the Protestant churches, and in some of them to a deplorable degree; there was a corresponding depression, in every one of them, of zeal, and of all the great interests of practical religion. Of these churches, the history of few is more melancholy and more solemnly instructive, than that of the *Huguenots* of *France*. For more than three quarters of a century after their emancipation from the thralldom of Popery, they were among the most pure and flourishing churches in the Protestant world. And, as long as their pious pastors continued to be sound in doctrine; faithful in adhering to their excellent Confession of Faith; and indefatigable in instructing their children and youth, and all classes of the people in gospel truth, in private as well as in public;—notwithstanding all the frowns and persecution of a hostile government, they prospered, multiplied, and were comparatively happy. But no sooner did orthodoxy decline in those churches; no sooner did *Cameron*, *Amyraut*, and other divines of talents, learning, and influence, begin to verge towards Semi-pelagian opinions, than an immediate and sensible decay ensued in piety, in zeal, and in pure morals. Indeed it seemed as if, from the time that the infection of these errors became in a considerable degree extended, their peace was interrupted; their unity broken;

and their comfortable standing with the civil government destroyed;—until, on their whole state, was written—“Ichabod, the glory is departed!” And, to the present day, their glory has never been restored. As they went on to sink lower and lower in error, they became also more and more depressed in every thing that constitutes the true excellence and happiness of a church.

No less instructive on this subject is the history of the churches of *Geneva* and *England*. As long as simple gospel truth continued to be preached, and generally received in those churches, the effect was uniformly benign. “The word of God had free course and was glorified.” Sinners were convinced and converted; saints were edified and comforted; and the churches “walked together in the fear of the Lord, and in the consolations of the Holy Ghost.” But just in proportion as doctrinal error, gained ground among them, every thing good declined. Discord, strife, division, and moral desolation became more and more prevalent, and held a gloomy reign, until evangelical truth was again revived. But why should we dwell, in detail, on particular cases? The fact is, the principle of which we speak is universal in its application. Never, it may be safely asserted, did an exception occur. The prevalence of doctrinal error, and the decline of practical religion, have always gone hand in hand. And there is another fact, equally remarkable and instructive. When false doctrines have begun to appear in any church, the course has too commonly been from one degree of heterodoxy to another, until the lowest point of depression was reached. And this, however the fact may be explained, is more peculiarly apt to be the case, when those who once professed to stand upon orthodox ground, suffer themselves to be enticed into error. Those who were *originally bred* in some moderate doctrinal error, often remain, during their whole lives, at the same position. But when men apostatize from a scriptural creed, they, with deplorable frequency, have been found to continue in the downward course, until they reached the bottom of the declining plane. A late excellent and judicious writer never penned a more plain and melancholy truth, than when he said—“The progress is easy and almost unavoidable, from controversial opposition to personal election, to the explaining away of original sin, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, justification by faith alone, and even of the atonement and deity of Jesus Christ.”* All history attests the truth of this humiliating and alarming statement.

If ever, therefore, the Presbyterian church shall begin to be infected with Semi-pelagian and Arminian errors; her case will be far more threatening, and the probable result far more deplorable, than those of churches which have, from the beginning, uniformly occupied Arminian ground. The individuals who may take the lead in such defection, will probably continue to the end of

* Dr. Scott's preface to his translation of the *Acts of the Synod of Dort*.

life, to rank *themselves* with evangelical men; nay, they may, possibly, affect *peculiar* zeal and fidelity, and claim to be, *pre-eminently*, the "friends of Revivals:" but both the title and the claim will, eventually, be found equally delusive. Their immediate successors, will, probably, throw off the mask, and fulfil, perhaps, the worst predictions of the faithful watchmen on the walls of Zion. The principle is by no means obscure, which renders it as natural in theory, as it is certain in fact, that apostates are ever apt to sink to a lower point in doctrinal and moral degeneracy, than those who never held a high place in the scale of profession.

From the foregoing discussion a variety of important inferences may be deduced.

1. The first is, that **DOCTRINAL PREACHING IS OF EXCEEDING GREAT IMPORTANCE IN PROMOTING THE INTERESTS OF TRUE RELIGION.** There is, I am aware, in the minds of very many professing Christians, a strong prejudice against dwelling much on doctrine in the pulpit, as being, almost necessarily, dry and unprofitable; nay, as being adapted to repress rather than excite pious affection. This is a delusion as irrational as it is deplorable. It cannot be denied, indeed, that doctrinal preaching may be, and has been conducted, sometimes in such a dry, speculative, and spiritless manner; and, at other times, so much in the spirit of angry controversy, as to prevent all sanctifying influence. But this *abuse* is no argument against its *use*. If men are regenerated and sanctified by the truth;—if "the priest's lips ought ever to keep knowledge;"—if it be the duty of every preacher to "feed the people with knowledge and with understanding;"—and if none are so likely to be brought either to a saving acquaintance with the truth, or more thoroughly and affectionately under the power of truth, as those who have it constantly exhibited to them in a clear, discriminating and powerful manner;—then, surely, that minister of the gospel whose sermons do not contain a large portion of doctrinal and practical truth, clearly defined, adequately defended, rightly divided, and faithfully applied,—applied not merely to the understanding, but also to the conscience and the heart—is chargeable with essential deficiency in his official work. He may, possibly, be instrumental in producing temporary feeling, and even strong excitement; but not, without a miracle, in extensively promoting intelligent and solid piety. Men become Christians, as you have heard, by receiving, loving and obeying the great and precious doctrines of Christianity. Can it require evidence, then, to prove that gospel hearers are never so likely to become enlightened and genuine Christians, as when these doctrines are distinctly, strongly and solemnly presented to their view; and that believers are never so likely to be built up in faith and holiness, as when that which is the daily food of the spiritual life, is most plentifully set before them? All reasoning, and all experience go to

establish the position, that that minister who does not habitually *instruct*, as well as *exhort* his hearers, cannot be, long together, to the same people, or to any people, a weighty, powerful, and edifying preacher.

2. If the foregoing representation be correct, then THE DILIGENT STUDY OF GOSPEL TRUTH IS INCUMBENT ON EVERY CHRISTIAN, AND IS A DUTY OF GREAT PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE. It is truly humiliating to think how great and general is the neglect of this duty! Among those who bear the Christian name, how small is the number of those who are able to "give a satisfactory answer to any one who asketh a reason of the hope that is in them!" But I fear the number of those who have taken any intelligent pains to study the faith and order of Christ's house,—who, in any good measure understand the nature, genius and essential doctrines of his religion; who would be able, even in a private circle, to defend the doctrines which they profess to hold against the most common-place caviller; or to instruct and counsel an anxious inquirer,—is smaller—far smaller still! But does not every professing Christian owe to himself, to the Church, and to his God, to be able and ready to do all this? Does not his own growth in grace depend on his growth in knowledge? Can he have any security that he will not be "carried about by every wind of doctrine;" that he will not become the prey of every plausible pretender or errorist who passes along, unless he be "grounded and settled in the faith?" Can he instruct his children and dependents in gospel truth, when he does not understand it himself? Can he "hold fast the form of sound words," which the church has received, and "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints," if he have no enlightened acquaintance with the great doctrines which he is to "hold fast," and for which he is bound to "contend?" To attempt a formal proof that all this is impossible, would be to insult the understanding of the reader. How shall we account, then, for the melancholy fact, that, when every Christian is bound by so many solemn considerations to be established in the faith, and to grow daily in scriptural knowledge, so many who bear the Christian name, content themselves with continuing all their lives "babes" in knowledge, and, of course, wholly unqualified for some of the most important duties of the spiritual life, as well as grievously defective in one of the most important requisites to their own edification and comfort?

3. If the doctrine of our text be correct, then NO ERROR CAN BE INNOCENT; and especially no error relating to the great system of salvation by grace. If it be by the instrumentality of truth alone that the great work of sanctification is begun and carried on; it certainly requires no formal demonstration to satisfy any reasonable man, that falsehood can benefit no one; but that its effect, so far as it is embraced and acted on, can be mischievous

only. It is not contended, indeed, that all errors are alike mischievous. There are, doubtless, fundamental truths, and others of minor importance. But all truth is precious. The innocence of error,—nay, the *entire* innocence of *any* error,—is one of the dreams of infidelity, and is a sentiment which ought to be abhorred by every Christian. Sanctification may, and no doubt, actually does co-exist with some error. But, in such cases, men are sanctified *in spite* of their errors, in virtue of the truth, and only in proportion to the truth which they embrace. We cannot, it is true, undertake to pronounce *how much* knowledge of sound doctrine is necessary to salvation; or *how much error* is sufficient to destroy the soul. But we know from the nature of the case, and especially from the word of God, that *all error*, like *poison*, is mischievous, and, of course, ought to be avoided. I know not how large a quantity of a given deleterious drug might be necessary, in a particular case, to take away life. Probably more would be necessary in some cases than in others. But of one thing there can be no doubt; that it is madness to sport with poison; and that the less we take of it the better. As nothing but nutritious food can support the animal body; so nothing but Zion's provision, which is truth, can be the means of either commencing or sustaining "the life of God in the soul of man."

4. In the light of this subject we may see THE DUTY AND IMPORTANCE OF CONSTANT CARE ON THE PART OF THE CHURCH TO MAINTAIN THE PURITY OF GOSPEL TRUTH. One great end for which the church was instituted, was that she might be, at once, a depository and a witness of the truth in the midst of an ungodly world. It is, therefore, incumbent upon her, from age to age, to resist all the encroachments of error; to bear a decided and faithful testimony in favor of all the peculiar and most precious doctrines of the gospel; and to maintain in their simplicity, all the institutions of Christ. When the Church fails of doing this:—when she allows important doctrines to be denied and opposed by those within her pale, and especially by her teachers and rulers:—when she knowingly and deliberately permits the truth and order entrusted to her keeping, to be trampled upon by those who are subject to her control, without bearing testimony against offenders, by the exercise of discipline;—she forgets her duty as a "witness for God;" she is grossly unfaithful to her trust; and must expect the frowns and the heavy judgments of the King of Zion. The New Testament abounds with both precepts and threatenings which import all this. If it be asked, how the church can fulfil the duty thus solemnly enjoined? The answer is,—by publishing, from time to time, as exigencies may demand, her testimony to the truth, in the form of Creeds and Confessions; by requiring her members, and especially her leaders and guides, to "witness a good confession," when they enter on the enjoyment of their privileges; by admonishing, or otherwise censuring, those who depart in any material degree from the "form of sound words" which

she is pledged to sustain; and by excluding from her communion those who become radically and incorrigibly erroneous. In this way the apostolic church bore a firm testimony in favor of the truth, and "contended earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints." This duty is, no doubt, always a self-denying and arduous one; and is sometimes rendered peculiarly self-denying and painful by the multiplied arts to which the corrupters of the truth are wont to recur, for the purpose of escaping merited discipline. Sometimes they plead, that they differ very little, if at all, from the orthodox faith, and, if any, chiefly in words. They conceal, cover up, and equivocate; and make it extremely difficult to ascertain what they really do believe. At other times, they insist, that their solemn subscription to an orthodox creed, was intended by them to mean no more than that they adopted it, "as far as they considered it as agreeing with the scriptures;" as if the worst heretic on earth might not, in this sense, subscribe to any creed that ever was framed; and thus, by a solemn perjury, defeat the acknowledged design of the whole transaction! Such are some of the base and criminal arts by which those who "depart from the faith," render it difficult to exercise upon them the discipline which they merit; and, of course, increase the arduousness of the church's duty. Still her duty remains: nor can she acquit herself to her Master in heaven without faithfully discharging it.

5. This subject AFFORDS A SAFE CRITERION FOR DECIDING ON THE CHARACTER OF GENUINE REVIVALS OF RELIGION. By a genuine revival of religion is, of course, meant a revival in which "pure and undefiled religion" is truly promoted and extended. Now, whether that which claims to be such a revival be really such or not, may be brought to a very obvious, fair and decisive test. Is it produced by a blessing on the *Truth*, plainly and faithfully preached? And do its professed subjects manifest a general and cordial love of gospel truth? Are their views of the character of God, of his law, of sin, of Christ, of the ground of acceptance, and of Christian hope, such as, in the main, harmonize with the Bible doctrine in reference to these great subjects? If so, we may hail the work with joy, and bid God-speed to those who are instrumental in commencing and giving it direction. If not, it is a spurious excitement, adapted to bring genuine revivals into disrepute, and to send a blast instead of a blessing on the church of God, and, of course, the more extended and powerful, the the more to be deplored.

It is no uncommon or difficult thing to work upon the animal feelings of assembled multitudes, by stirring addresses, by music, by a great variety of instrumentalities in which the Truth has no presentment or share. Those who are aware what a fearfully and wonderfully made machinery human nature is, and especially how susceptible of strong and diversified impression are the nerves and sympathies of that nature, will be at no loss about facts of the kind referred to, however the philosophy of those facts may sometimes

perplex them. Who does not know, that the far-famed fanatical Unitarians, who call themselves "Chrystians," have their "revivals" of a strongly marked character; their "anxious seats;" and all the most imposing and exciting means that have ever been adopted for making a popular impression? Nay, one of the most active and popular leaders of that sect, boasted, that he had drawn at least fifty persons to "anxious seats" merely by the influence of his own singing, which was, indeed, remarkably touching and powerful. It is, surely, unnecessary to remark, that such revivals are a disgrace to the name; that they are the fruit of animal excitement only; and that every enlightened friend of the Redeemer's kingdom must mourn over their character and tendency.

It is not mere *excitement* then, in which the animal feelings are roused and agitated, and in which the mere principles of nature are addressed, and called into powerful action, that constitutes a genuine and desirable revival of religion. For, as there can be no real religion in any individual heart, without the reception and love of the fundamental doctrines of the gospel; so we must estimate the real character of every religious excitement which claims to be a revival, by the degree in which pure gospel truth is recognized, embraced and obeyed. If the subjects of it appear to be moved by distinct views of truth, addressed to the conscience and the heart; if, in giving an account of their anxiety, their hopes, and their peace, they manifest that their apprehensions of the Saviour, and their grounds of confidence are those which the scriptures authorize; and if they plainly bring forth the fruits of holy living;—we *must* denominate such a revival a work of God, thank him for it, and rejoice in it as a rich blessing.

6. Finally; the doctrine of our text places in the strongest light THE SIN AND DANGER OF THOSE WHO HOLD THE TRUTH IN MERE HEARTLESS FORMALITY, OR IN UNRIGHTEOUSNESS. The great end of all truth is *sanctification*. If it fail of producing this effect, it may render inexcusable, and may finally condemn; but cannot savingly benefit. Though a man had all knowledge, and all orthodoxy; though he were skilful in the word of truth, and "valiant for the truth," against all gainsayers; still if he did not love it, and obey it, and live under its power, what would it profit? Beloved Reader! look well to this matter! You may become by study an able theologian, and even a champion for sound doctrine; and yet, after all, may "know nothing," on the subject of religion, "as you ought to know." You may have none of that spiritual knowledge of God, of the Saviour, and of yourself, which is "life eternal." And if you die thus, it were "better for you that you had never been born." While you seek sound doctrinal knowledge, then, with unceasing diligence; rest not satisfied with mere speculation. Remember that a scriptural creed is not piety. Many a man, we have reason to believe, with a head full of orthodox opinions, while his heart was

unreconciled to God, has sunk to perdition. "The kingdom of God is not in word, but in power. If you know these things, happy are you if you do them. He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." Again I say, then, be not satisfied with speculative orthodoxy. If you possess nothing more, your knowledge will but sink you to a lower hell. Your light will be your condemnation. Let your study of the truth be ever accompanied with humble, fervent prayer for that teaching of the Holy Spirit, who alone can render it effectual to your eternal benefit. And, O that every one who reads this page, may be so taught of God, as that the word of truth may be a "savour of life unto life, and not of death unto death" to his immortal spirit! Amen!