

THE ONLY
TRUE CRITERION OF CHRISTIANITY,

A DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED BY REQUEST,

AT OAKLAND COLLEGE, MISS.

APRIL 3rd, 1839,

IT BEING THE DAY PRECEDING THE ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT,

BY REV. D. C. PAGE,

RECTOR OF TRINITY CHURCH, NATCHEZ.

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OAKLAND COLLEGE, April 4th, 1839.

REV. MR. PAGE,

Dear Sir—The Board of Trustees of Oakland College respectfully solicit a copy of the Annual Sermon this day delivered by you, for publication.

Very respectfully, your obed't serv't,

THOMAS FREELAND, *Secretary.*

NATCHEZ, April 10th, 1839.

THOMAS FREELAND, ESQ.,

Dear Sir—In compliance with the request of the Board of Trustees of Oakland College, that I will furnish, for publication, a copy of the Sermon which I had the honor to deliver at the College on the 3rd inst., the manuscript is hereby placed at their disposal.

I am, with great respect,
your obed't serv't,

DAVID C. PAGE.

SERMON.

"Have any of the Rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him."—Gospel of John, 7th Chapter, 48th Verse.

WE learn from the portion of scripture of which these words form a part, that many of the people having believed on our Saviour, the Pharisees and Chief Priests sent officers to apprehend him. Struck, however, with the majestic wisdom with which he discoursed, these emissaries were unable to bring themselves to execute the orders of their superiors, and when asked on their return to them, why they had omitted so to do, it was their simple reply, *never man spake like this man; then answered them the Pharisees, are ye also deceived? Have any of the Rulers or the Pharisees believed on him?*

This is a question which is virtually asked by multitudes in the present day. Have the intellectual, the learned, the distinguished, believed in Christianity? In every community perhaps there are certain individuals who give tone to the sentiments of a particular circle, by which they are surrounded; whose opinions and conduct exert a powerful influence on the young and the more imitative in especial within that circle, and respecting whom those who thus look up to them, often, perhaps unconsciously, ask the question; Are they pious? Are they religious? Do they believe and exemplify Christianity? And these persons come to the conclusion in their own minds, that if those for whom they entertain so high admiration do not attach great importance to religion, that it is not in point of fact so very necessary and important. I suppose, I say, that in every community, there are persons whose opinions and practices exert a powerful influence upon the estimation in which religion and morality are held, by many around them. But this is more especially the case in smaller

communities, where every individual stands conspicuously out to the view of all the rest. We are all, however, more or less influenced, it is to be feared, by the consideration here suggested. Do men of genius, and men of station, and men of distinction, think it necessary to believe implicitly in the doctrines and to attend strictly to the duties of the Christian religion? I might answer this question in the affirmative. At the first promulgation of Christianity, indeed, it would seem that comparatively few of the great ones of the earth embraced it. There was so little of the brilliant and the dazzling in the circumstances in which our Saviour appeared, and the profession of Christianity involved such great and formidable sacrifices of almost every kind, that those who had much to lose recoiled from committing themselves to the Christian cause. You see your calling, brethren, says Paul the Apostle how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise—and the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty, and base things of the world and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are, that no flesh should glory in his presence. And he says in another place, speaking of the divine wisdom of the Gospel, which none of the princes of this world knew, for had they known it they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. Yet there were some distinguished persons even then who were not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for we read that under the preaching of the Apostles *a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith*, and though most of the heathen philosophers treated Christianity with contempt prior to examination, and the pagan governors tolerant as they were of idolatry in any of its forms, could not endure Christianity because it aimed at nothing less than the subversion of their idol temples, yet even in the early ages of our institute, instances were not wanting in the Gentile world, of genius and philosophy being subdued by the power of the cross. And now in answer to the question, **Have the great and distinguished believed on him?** I am able to point to men illustrious for their achievements in science, who have hailed Christianity as the cause of God:

I can designate others of literary accomplishment and poetic fame, who are sincere worshippers of their God, and affectionate disciples of their Saviour. I could show you men in high and elevated stations who regard the religion of the Bible as the emphatic blessing of the world.

But after all, what if none of the rulers and the Pharisees had believed in our Saviour, what though many of them did reject him, this did not go to prove that he was not entitled to universal belief and homage. The rulers and Pharisees regarded the Saviour with an evil eye, because they were jealous of their own influence with the multitude. They had expected their Messiah to appear in all the pomp and circumstance of outward and tangible royalty, and were proportionably offended at the humble and unostentatious appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. Prejudice and passion, and sin, in a word, *indisposed* them for the reception of the truth. And similar causes restrain some of the great ones of the earth in our own day, from faithfully exemplifying Christianity. Some master passion, some bosom lust will not suffer them cordially to embrace so holy and so pure a system.

But I deny altogether the *right* to ask such a question as that which we are now considering. What right had the men of our Saviour's day to ask, have any of the Rulers or the Pharisees believed on him? in view of the sublime wisdom of his instructions and the faultless excellencies of his life? What right had they to ask such a question when they saw him unstopping the ears of the deaf, pouring the light of day into the sightless eyeballs of the blind, causing the lame man to leap as an hart, calming the rage of tempests, and walking upon the waves of the sea? What a question to ask, I say, in view of such a character and of such achievements.

And in like manner what right have we to ask this question, what right have we to ask, do the great ones of the earth think it necessary to exemplify Christianity? I have shown that this question may be answered in the affirmative, but I contend that it is not at all a legitimate question. The point here to be considered is, is Christianity true? is it adapted to our nature? is it adapted to our wants? is not the service which it requires of us a reasonable service? shall we not be justified or condemned by it? Let

us consider these questions for a few moments in the order in which they are here stated. *In the first place, then, is not Christianity a revelation of God's will to our race? Do we not all feel it to be such? Does it not speak to our consciences? Does it not appeal to our hearts? Is it possible to open the sacred volume without being struck with the immaculate purity, the stupendous sublimity of its doctrines; the artlessness, the simplicity, the candour of its narratives, the fidelity of its delineations of human nature, and of human conduct, and with that divine originality which makes it a book by itself, and imparts to it a peculiar, an insulated, and an incommunicable character.* Yes! apart altogether from the consideration of the miracles which attested its divine original, and of the train of prophecies whose fulfilment mark it out as a part of the mind of God; it is so true to the philosophy of our nature, it is so accordant with what we feel within, and see around us, that it must, it cannot but be "a light from heaven." While the Providence which has watched over Christianity from its earliest promulgation, which has at length established it in the face of the most formidable opposition upon the broadest and most impregnable foundations, and which is now so evidently paving the way for its diffusion among all nations and its final triumph over every form of error and of superstition, will not allow us to doubt for a moment, that it is a communication from above. And is not the service which Christianity requires of us a reasonable service? Is there not an all surpassing sublimity and loveliness in the character of God as it is delineated in the Christian Scriptures, to which a holy and pure mind would be instinctively attracted. And in view of the relations which we sustain to God, and the claims which those relations give him to our homage and devotion, is there not a strange disproportion in the character of that man, who supposing him if that were possible, faithfully to perform the duties of all his other relations, should violate the duties of his relations to God. The moral system of such a man reminds me of a magnificent edifice which has been carried up a certain height and then abandoned; it wants completeness; it wants proportion; and the more I contemplate it the more offensive it is to my taste,—the more repugnant to my judgment.

And there again, how reasonable is the service which Christianity requires of us in view of its admirable adaptation to repress the disorders of our nature, to tame our passions, to regulate our appetites, to introduce order into the minds and serenity into our hearts, and by securing to us the blessing of God, to secure to us whatever is necessary to make us truly dignified and truly happy.

Is not Christianity, moreover, adapted to our nature? What are the elements of our mental constitution, that man is a reasonable being, that is to say, he is endowed with the faculty of deducing sound conclusions from sound principles. This may be said emphatically to be Man's prerogative and is that power which distinguishes and marks him out from all other forms of animal existence. Man is also a voluntary being, he has the power or capacity, in other words, of making choice between distinct and opposite courses of action. He is, too, a sentimental being, that is, he is capable of loving and enjoying, he has a power of sympathizing with whatever is able to excite that sensation in the mind. He has the capacity of being attracted to, or repelled from the various beings and objects with which he stands in nearer or remoter connections.

Now Christianity consults these principles of our nature, she addresses us as reasonable beings. There is nothing in the legitimate doctrines of Christianity which offers violence to our reason; on the contrary, they commend themselves to the calm and deliberate dictates of a sound and enlightened understanding, and are seen to be eminently worthy of their divine author, and eminently adapted to give to our nature its fullest and freest expansion.

Mysteries there confessedly are in the Bible, but where out of it are there not mysteries? I am the greatest mystery in the world to myself, and all existence is a mystery to me, wherever I look it meets my eye and baffles my intellect, and there is not a plant which lifts its head above the earth, that does not suggest questions which no philosopher can solve. And I bless God that there are mysteries in the Bible, for if there were not it would be so utterly unlike every thing else within me and around me, that I could not believe it to be his own book, and therefore could not rest upon it as the charter of my immortal hopes.

Christianity is also adapted to our character as voluntary agents. She exhibits the government of God under no

other aspect than that of a government of motives; choose ye, thus she addresses us, choose ye whom you will serve. If the Lord be God then follow him, but if Baal, then follow him. She speaks, moreover, to the human heart; with what an exquisite thrilling pathos, for instance, does she not make an appeal in the following passages of Holy Scripture to our most natural and constitutional affections; *God is Love*. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and gave his Son to be the propitiation for us. When we were without strength, in due time, for scarcely for a righteous or a simply just man will one die; yet, peradventure, for a good, an eminently philanthropic man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love towards us, in that while we were yet *sinner*s Christ died for us.

There is another feature of the Christian system, let me again remark, in which its adaptation to our nature is not less conspicuous—and that is, *the example* of Jesus Christ. It is not an example of an excessively refined and abstracted virtue; on the contrary, it was, if I may be allowed the expression, eminently and emphatically human. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren. He was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin; he resisted evil, he rose superior to its power, just as we have to resist and just as we have to overcome. What but this could have been meant by the faithful and true witness when he said: to him that overcometh will I grant to sit down with me on my throne, even as I also overcome, and am set down with my father upon his throne.

But further, if Christianity be adapted to our nature, it is also adapted to our wants,—we feel that we are responsible beings, that there is a power above us that will punish sin and reward virtue; we feel that in many instances we have omitted our duty, that in many instances we have been guilty of error and of sin, and in view of the futurity that awaits us we are conscious of moments of uneasiness and solicitude. Now Christianity meets this exigency in our condition, for it teaches us that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance: it points the terror stricken penitent to the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world, it proclaims

it to be a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, even the very chief. Again, we are weak and corrupt, and prone to evil, and Christianity meets our wants in this particular also. It promises to all who diligently seek them the renovating influences of the divine and Holy Spirit; it teaches us that what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the spirit.

Again, we are liable to sufferings and sorrows, and Christianity meets this want of our condition. It teaches us that it strengthens the believer under his trials by the example of the patience and resignation of his suffering Saviour, it promises that God's grace shall be sufficient for him, and that so well that it points to his strength perfect in his servant's weakness.

And this leads me to remark further, that Christianity meets our instinctive desire of immortality. I need not remind you how tenaciously we cling to life; how we shrink from the very thought of the utter extinction of our being. Now, our Saviour, Christ, announces himself as the resurrection and the life, and has given us the glad assurance that whosoever liveth and believeth on him shall never die. Yes! O glorious hope! this corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal immortality and death shall be swallowed up in victory, so that the Christian can exclaim, in the prospect of that event at which the unbeliever turns pale and trembles and from which mere nature recoils. O Death where is thy sting, O Grave where is thy victory. The sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law, but thanks be to God who giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christianity, then, is true; it is a reasonable service, and which is itself one of the most decisive evidences of its celestial descent, it speaks to our consciousness, it is adapted to our nature and our wants. And in addition to these considerations, I would remark, that by the Gospel we are to be justified or condemned. The Gospel is the grand remedy which God has provided for the disorders of our moral condition, and if we reject this remedy, or neglect to avail ourselves of it, there is no alternative but

our perdition. It is the declaration of our Saviour, Christ himself, that he that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life, and he that believeth not on the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him. And how shall we escape, says the Apostle if we neglect so great a salvation. In the view of these considerations, then, and of the others that have been mentioned. how worse than idle are such questions as, have any of the Rulers and the Pharisees believed on him? are any of the great and the distinguished pious and devout, and noted for their exemplification of Christianity? We have seen that this question admits of an affirmative answer, and that there are many such who glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. One thing is certain, however, and perhaps I ought to have made this remark in a former part of this discourse, that history goes to show that Christianity is necessary to produce a due balance between the moral and intellectual qualities of the greatest of men. A writer of our own country, in a lecture on the Augustan age has the following remarks: "In all our investigations concerning the period under review, we must be struck with the abstruseness of the moral sense of the people, and the almost total absence of the principle of honor or probity among them. To read the orations, tracts and correspondence of Cicero, is to be convinced that his mind was richly stored with knowledge, of an amazing scope and power of reach, of the most exquisite and elaborate cultivation and polish; so that whether we view him as an orator, statesman, philosopher or writer, we are ready to venerate him as a paragon of men. But alas! to see how destitute he was of probity and honor; how wavering, truckling and inconstant he was; we are ready to feel humbled that our human nature could admit of such a lamentable obliquity as is clearly seen in much of his life. The same is true of Pompey, and of Cæsar himself, and indeed the whole bright gallery of intelligences that cluster on the page of history, is obscured by the moral darkness and turpitude of the age. How shall we account for the absence of a noble principle from the most eminent characters of the times, but by referring to the great moral code, not yet received among them. The Christian religion had not yet quickened, enlightened and vivified the moral aptitudes of mankind. It is true indeed, that in our own day and generation, many of us do live regardless of the dictates

of that beneficent scheme, and violate without remorse many of its clearest and most dread sanctions. Yet, notwithstanding the contumacy of some, its domain does extend far & wide over the boundaries of Christendom; and it moulds, invites and even coerces under the vast comprehension of its influences, the universal mind and heart of the Christian nations. Turning our eyes upon those countries where the light of Christianity has not yet shot its glad beams, we behold the nations and tribes sunken in the grossest ignorance and immorality. Their governments are despotisms and tyrannies. Their morals are those of Rome, and their mind lies darkling; the touch of science is not lighted there."

In estimating the claims of Christianity to our reception such considerations as these may indeed be brought into the account, but as we have already seen, the question, have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed, is not a legitimate question. No! man's unbelief cannot make the faith of God of more effect; if, which we have seen is the real state of the case, Christianity be true, if it be adapted to our nature and our wants, if our obedience to its requirements be a dictate of the highest reason, it matters not by whom it may be rejected. All are imperatively called upon to embrace it, to embrace it is duty, is happiness; not to embrace it will be condemnation, will be degradation, will be misery unspeakable. Each one for himself must exercise repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ; and how forcibly, how pathetically we are urged to the adoption of this course, in consideration of the great mercy of God in having provided for this redemption from the deserved consequences, and the enslaving power of our sins.

A review of what has been said leads me to remark, in the first place, that the maker of man and the author of the Christian system, must be one and the same being. A system which is so entirely coincident with our intellectual and moral constitution must be from God, nay, is just as truly his work as any thing in heaven above, in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth, and, it is evident from this consideration must achieve a final triumph. A system which is so perfectly true to our nature and our wants, must be permanent, it must ultimately overcome

all opposition, and would venture to affirm even independently of express promise and prediction to this effect, that the period will surely arrive when the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. I remark, in the next place, how necessary it is to divest every question before us, of all accidental and extraneous considerations. There is no question which is not surrounded with considerations which have a tendency powerfully to bias the mind in favor of one side or the other. How important then is it, would we arrive at the truth, that we should judge of every question according to its intrinsic merits, and not under the influence of considerations which are entirely foreign to the true state of the case. We have seen this point illustrated in the progress of this discourse, and that in the momentous affair of religion in particular, we should be governed, not by the opinions of men, the most distinguished of men, but by the force of evidence, and by our deliberate convictions of duty and of right. In this way and in no other can we attain to the truth, and secure the approbation and the blessing of our God.

I remark further, the fearful responsibility of men of high and elevated stations. To such men the eyes of many around them are directed, their example beams from an height, they exert a most powerful impulse on the circle in which they move; and how important, therefore, must be their influence for good or for evil. If their principles be pure and elevated, if they give their influence to the institutions of religion and morality, if they are distinguished for their zeal and devotion to the cause of Christianity, of good morals and of social order, who can estimate the amount of benefit which they may render to those who take their tone and receive their impress from them.

And, on the other hand, what injury may they not do to those who look up to them, if they are characterized by indifference to religion, depravity of principle, and laxity of manners. And yet there are few communities, perhaps, in which there are not men of prominence and distinction, the influence of whose operations and practices, is decidedly pernicious and bad. How tremendous an account will not such men have to render.

We have seen, I would again remark, as an inference

From the contents of the passage which we have had under consideration, we have seen that on the occasion to which my text refers, many of the people believed on our Saviour, and that in view of this circumstance, the Pharisee exclaimed, have any of the Rulers or the Pharisees believed on him; but this people who know not the law are cursed. Now what a beautiful contrast is here presented between the spirit of the Pharisees and that of our blessed Saviour. He says, a distinguished biblical critic condescended to the lowest of the people, and called all who were meek and lowly his friends. The Pharisees, on the contrary, mistook knowledge for religion, and believed in the future happiness of the learned, and the condemnation of the ignorant. All mankind, like the Pharisees of old, seem intent upon despising each other. The learned contemn the ignorant, the gay the sorrowful, the rich the poor, and fashion violently breaks asunder the nearest and dearest ties of relationship, where the deficiencies of wealth are felt.— In this world, pride, rank and affluence, claim the pre-eminence, in the other, the highest rewards of heaven are promised to the most humble and to the most meek, whether they be rich or poor. God prefers the heart to the head, piety to parts and capacity, and is much better pleased with the right use of the will than the advantage of the understanding.

How important it is in view of some of the considerations which have been above suggested that our institutions of learning should be of a character to impart to the rising race, such principles as may qualify them for exerting an influence in favor of Christianity, in those places of power and trust which, in the ordinary course of human affairs, many of them will be ultimately designated to fill. How important that a system of Christian and virtuous instruction should be incorporated with the intellectual discipline of our colleges, that the *indirect* influence created there should be decidedly Christian, and that when the youth of the country go forth from these seats of science to act their parts amid the scenes of the great world, they may be prepared to send down wholesome influences from the high stations to which they may be exalted, upon all within the sphere of their attraction. I am happy to know that this institution is conducted under the sanction of religion, and

trust that the period may not be far distant when such an arrangement shall be regarded as a matter of course in the organization of all our literary institutions, and when through the whole extent of our land, the spectacle shall never be presented of a seminary of education, based upon the fallacious principle of the disjunction of literature from religion. How important, moreover, is it on a review of what has been said, that the evidences of revealed religion should form a part of the system of instruction pursued in our colleges. I do not mean by this that these evidences should be inculcated in a mere mechanical manner, but that in the prosecution of studies in this department, the attention should be drawn emphatically to the fact, that we arrive at a conviction of the truth and the obligation of Christianity, by the very same methods of investigation which have led to the sublimest discoveries of natural science. Let our young men be taught to form their judgment of Christianity not in view of considerations which are wholly foreign and extrinsic to it, but upon the independent ground of its intrinsic and real merits. And with this view let their attention be directed to the Holy Scriptures, to the grandeur of their imagery, the sublimity of their doctrines, the pure and elevating tendency of their moral code. Were such institutions and such a course of instruction as are here contemplated to prevail in our country, and were they to be sustained by an elevated and practical Christianity on the part of those who have the formation of the youthful mind and character, with God's blessing we should ere long witness the extension of a Christianized public sentiment and the realization of that magnificent promise of holy writ--wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy times, and strength of salvation. May God Almighty speed that blissful consummation.

THE END.