

WRITINGS OF WILLIAM CUNNINGHAM

by William Cunningham

A collection of theological writings, sermons, and essays by William Cunningham, compiled for study and devotional reading.

2 Chapters

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S. Infant Baptism

Infant Baptism by William Cunningham The Reformers, and the great body of Protestant divines, in putting forth the definition of the sacraments in general, or of a sacrament as such, intended to embody the substance of what they believe Scripture to teach, or to indicate, as equally applicable to both sacraments; and in laying down what they believe concerning the general objects and the ordinary effects of the sacraments, they commonly assume, that the persons partaking in them are rightly qualified for receiving and improving them,-- and further, and more specially, that the persons baptized are adults. It is necessary to keep these considerations in view in interpreting the general description given of sacraments and of baptism, in our Confession of Faith and the other Reformed confessions; and with these assumptions, and to this extent, there is no difficulty in the way of our maintaining the general principle, which can be established by most satisfactory evidence, -- namely, that the fundamental spiritual blessings, on the possession of which the salvation of men universally depends,-- justification and regeneration by faith,-- are not conveyed through the instrumentality of the sacraments, but that, on the contrary, they must already exist before even baptism can be lawfully or safely received. The general tenor of Scripture language upon the subject of baptism applies primarily and directly to the baptism of adults, and proceeds upon the assumption, that the profession implied in the reception of baptism by adults,-- the profession, that is, that they had already been led to believe in Christ, and to receive Him as their Savior and their Master,-- was sincere, or corresponded with the real state of their minds and hearts. It is necessary, therefore, to form our primary and fundamental conceptions of the objects and effects of baptism in itself, as a distinct subject, and in its bearing upon the general doctrine of the sacraments, from the baptism of adults and not of infants. The baptisms which are ordinarily described or referred to in the New Testament, were the baptisms of men who had lived as Jews and heathens, and who, having been led to believe in Christ,-- or, at least, to profess faith in Him,-- expressed and sealed this faith, or the profession of it, by complying with Christ's requirement, that they should be baptized. This is the proper, primary, full idea of baptism; and to this the general tenor of Scripture language upon the subject, and the general description of the objects and ends of baptism, as given in our Confession of Faith, and in the other confessions of the Reformed churches, are manifestly adapted.

As, in the condition in which we are placed in providence, we but seldom witness the baptism of adults, and commonly see only the baptism of infants,-- and as there are undoubtedly some difficulties in the way of applying fully to the baptism of infants the definition usually given of a sacrament, and the general account commonly set forth of the objects and ends of baptism,-- we are very apt to be led to form insensibly very erroneous and defective views of the nature and effects of baptism, as an ordinance instituted by Christ in His church, or rather, to rest contented with scarcely any distinct or definite conception upon the subject. Men usually have much more clear and distinct apprehensions of the import, design, and effects of the Lord's Supper than of Baptism; and yet the general definition commonly given of a sacrament applies equally to both, being just intended to embody the substance of what Scripture indicates as equally applicable to

the one ordinance as to the other. If we were in the habit of witnessing adult baptism, and if we formed our primary and full conceptions of the import and effects of the ordinance from the baptism of adults, the one sacrament would be as easily understood, and as definitely apprehended, as the other; and we would have no difficulty in seeing how the general definition given of the sacraments in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms applied equally to both. But as this general definition of sacraments, and the corresponding general description given of the objects and effects of baptism, do not apply fully and without some modification to the form in which we usually see baptism administered, men commonly, instead of considering distinctly what are the necessary modifications of it, and what are the grounds on which these modifications rest, leave the whole subject in a very obscure and confused condition in their minds.

These statements may, at first view, appear to be large concessions to the anti-pedo-baptists, or those who oppose the lawfulness of the baptism of infants, and to affect the solidity of the grounds on which the practice of pedo-baptism, which has ever prevailed almost universally in the church of Christ, is based. But I am persuaded that a more careful consideration of the subject will show that these views, besides being clearly sanctioned by Scripture, and absolutely necessary for the consistent and intelligible interpretation of our own standards, are, in their legitimate application, fitted to deprive the arguments of the anti-pedo-baptists of whatever plausibility they possess. It cannot be reasonably denied that they have much that is plausible to allege in opposition to infant baptism; but I am persuaded that the plausibility of their arguments will always appear greatest to men who have not been accustomed to distinguish between the primary and complete idea of this ordinance, as exhibited in the baptism of adults, and the distinct and peculiar place which is held by the special subject of infant baptism, and the precise grounds on which it rests. Pedo-baptists, from the causes to which I have referred, are apt to rest contented with very obscure and defective notions of the import and objects of baptism, and to confound adult and infant baptism as if the same principles must fully and universally apply to both. And in this state of things, when those views of the sacraments in general, and of baptism in particular, which I have briefly explained, are pressed upon their attention, and seen and acknowledged to be well founded, they are not unlikely to imagine that these principles equally rule the case of infant baptism; and they are thus prepared to see, in the arguments of the anti-pedo-baptists, a much larger amount of force and solidity than they really possess. Hence the importance of being familiar with what should be admitted or conceded, as clearly sanctioned by Scripture, with respect to baptism in general, in its primary, complete idea,-- estimating exactly what this implies, and how far it goes; and then, moreover, being well acquainted with the special subject of infant baptism as a distinct topic,-- with the peculiar considerations applicable to it, and the precise grounds on which its lawfulness and obligation can be established.

It is not my purpose to enter upon a full discussion of infant baptism, or an exposition of the grounds on which the views of pedo-baptists can, as I believe, be successfully established and vindicated. I shall merely make a few observations on what it is that pedo-baptists really maintain,-- on the distinct and peculiar place which the doctrine of infant baptism truly occupies,-- and on the relation in which it stands to the general subject of baptism and the sacraments; believing that correct apprehensions upon these points are well fitted to illustrate the grounds on which infant baptism rests in all their strength, and the insufficiency of the reasons by which the opposite view has been supported.

Let me then, in the first place, remark that intelligent pado-baptists hold all those views of the sacraments and of baptism which I have endeavored to explain, and are persuaded that they can hold them in perfect consistency with maintaining that the infants of believing parents ought to be baptized. There is nothing in these views peculiar to the anti-pado-baptists; and there is, we are persuaded, no real advantage which they can derive from them in support of their opinions. These views are clearly sanctioned by our Confession of Faith; while, at the same time, it contains also the following proposition as a part of what the word of God teaches upon the subject of baptism: "Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized." Now, let it be observed that this position is all that is essential to the doctrine of the pado-baptists, as such. We are called upon to maintain nothing more upon the subject than this plain and simple proposition, which merely asserts the lawfulness and propriety of baptizing the infants of believing parents. Let it be noticed also, that the statement is introduced merely as an adjunct or appendage to the general doctrine of baptism; not as directly and immediately comprehended under it, any more than under the general definition given of a sacrament, but as a special addition to it, resting upon its own distinct and peculiar grounds. This is the true place which infant baptism occupies; this is the view that ought to be taken of it; and I am persuaded that it is when contemplated and investigated in this aspect, that there comes out most distinctly and palpably the sufficiency of the arguments in favor of it, and the sufficiency of the objections against it. On this, as on many other subjects, the friends of truth have often injured their cause, by entering too fully and minutely into explanations of their doctrines, for the purpose of commending them to men's acceptance, and solving the difficulties by which they seemed to be beset. They have thus involved themselves in great difficulties, by trying to defend their own minute and unwarranted explanations, as if they were an essential part of the Scripture doctrine. It is easy enough to prove from Scripture that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and that the Holy Ghost is God, and that they are not three Gods, but one God; but many of the more detailed explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity which have been given by its friends, have been untenable and indefensible, and have only laid it open unnecessarily to the attacks of its enemies. In like manner, we think it no difficult matter to produce from Scripture sufficient and satisfactory evidence of the position, that the infants of believing parents are to be baptized; but minute and detailed expositions of the reasons and the effects of infant baptism are unwarranted by Scripture; they impose an unnecessary burden upon the friends of truth, and tend only to give an advantage to its opponents. The condition and fate of infants, and the principles by which they are determined, have always been subjects on which men, not unnaturally, have been prone to speculate, but on which Scripture has given us little explicit information beyond this, that salvation through Christ is just as accessible to them as to adults. One form in which this tendency to speculate unwarrantably about infants has been exhibited, is that of inventing theories about the objects and effects of infant baptism. These theories are often made to rest as a burden upon the scriptural proof of the lawfulness and propriety of the mere practice itself; and thus have the appearance of communicating to that proof, which is amply sufficient for its own proper object, their own essential weakness and invalidity.

It is manifest that, from the nature of the case, the principles that determine and indicate the objects and effects of baptism in adults and infants, cannot be altogether the same; and the great difficulty of the whole subject lies in settling, as far as we can, what modifications our conceptions of baptism should undergo in the case of infants, as distinguished from that of adults; and, at the

same time, to show that, even with these modifications, the essential and fundamental ideas involved in the general doctrine ordinarily professed concerning baptism are still preserved. The investigation even of this point is, perhaps, going beyond the line of what is strictly necessary for the establishment of the position, that the infants of believing parents are to be baptized. But some notice of it can scarcely be avoided in the discussion of the question. The scriptural evidence, in support of the position that the infants of believing parents are to be baptized, consists chief in the proof which the word of God affords, to the following effect: -- that, in the whole history of our race, God's covenanted dealings with His people, with respect to spiritual blessings, have had regard to their children as well as to themselves; so that the children as well as the parents have been admitted to the spiritual blessings of God's covenants, and to the outward signs and seals. of these covenants; -- that there is no evidence that this general principle, so full of mercy and grace, and so well fitted to nourish faith and hope, was to be departed from, or laid aside, under the Christian dispensation; but, on the contrary, a great deal to confirm the conviction that it was to continue to be acted on; -- that the children of believers are capable of receiving, and often do in fact receive, the blessings of the covenant, justification and regeneration; and are therefore -- unless there be some very express prohibition, either by general principle or specific statement -- admissible and entitled to the outward sign and seal of these blessings; -- that there is a federal holiness, as distinguished from a personal holiness, attaching, under the Christian as well as the Jewish economy, to the children of believing parents, which affords a sufficient ground for their admission, by an outward ordinance, into the fellowship of the church; -- and that the commission which our Savior gave to His apostles, and the history we have of the way in which they exercised this commission, decidedly favor the conclusion, that they admitted the children of believers along with their parents, and because of their relation to their parents, into the communion of the church by baptism. This line of argument, though in some measure inferential, is, we are persuaded, amply sufficient in cumulo to establish the conclusion, that the children of believing parents are to be baptized, unless either the leading positions of which it consists can be satisfactorily proved to have no sanction from Scripture, or some general position can be established which proves the incompatibility of infant baptism, either with the character of the Christian dispensation in general, or with the qualities and properties of the ordinance of baptism in particular. I do not mean to enter upon the consideration of the specific scriptural evidence in support of the different positions that constitute the proof of the lawfulness and propriety of baptizing the children of believing parents, or of the attempts which have been made to disprove them singly, and in detail. I can only advert to the general allegation, that infant baptism is inconsistent with some of the qualities or properties of the ordinance of baptism, as it is set before us in Scripture.

It is manifestly nothing to the purpose to say, in support of this general allegation, that baptism in the case of infants cannot be, in all respects, the same as baptism in the case of adults; or, that we cannot give so full and specific an account of the objects and effects of infant as of adult baptism. These positions are certainly both true; but they manifestly concern merely incidental points, not affecting the root of the matter, and afford no ground for any such conclusion as the unlawfulness of infant baptism. In the case of the baptism of adults, we can speak clearly and decidedly as to the general objects, and the ordinary effects, of the administration of the ordinance. The adult receiving baptism is either duly qualified and suitably prepared for it, or he is not. If he is not duly qualified, his baptism is a hypocritical profession of a state of mind and heart that does not exist; and, of course, it can do him no good, but must be a sin, and, as such, must expose him to the

divine displeasure. If he is duly qualified and suitably prepared, then his baptism, though it does not convey to him justification and regeneration, which he must have before received through faith, impresses upon his mind, through God's blessing, their true nature and grounds, and strengthens his faith to realize more fully his own actual condition, as an unworthy recipient of unspeakable mercies, and his obligations to live to God's praise and glory. We are unable to put any such clear and explicit alternative in the case of the baptism of infants, or give any very definite account of the way and manner in which it bears upon or affects them individually. Men have often striven hard in their speculations to lay down something precise and definite, in the way of general principle or standard, as to the bearing and effect of baptism in relation to the great blessings of justification and regeneration in the case of infants individually. But the Scripture really affords no adequate materials for doing this; for we have no sufficient warrant for asserting, even in regard to infants, to whom it is God's purpose to give at some time justification and regeneration, that He uniformly or ordinarily gives it to them before or at their baptism. The discomfort of this state of uncertainty, the difficulty of laying down any definite doctrine upon this subject, has often led men to adopt one or other of two opposite extremes, which have the appearance of greater simplicity and definiteness,-- that is, either to deny the lawfulness of infant baptism altogether, or to embrace the doctrine of baptismal justification and regeneration, and to represent all baptized infants, or at least all the baptized infants of believing parents, as receiving these great blessings in and with the external ordinances, or as certainly and infallibly to receive them at some future time. But this is manifestly unreasonable. "True fortitude of understanding," according to the admirable and well-known saying of Paley, "consists in not suffering what we do know, to be disturbed by what we do not know." And assuredly, if there be sufficient scriptural grounds for thinking that the infants of believing parents are to be baptized, it can be no adequate ground for rejecting, or even doubting, the truth of this doctrine, that we have no sufficient materials for laying down any precise or definite proposition of a general kind as to the effect of baptism in the case of infants individually. But the leading allegation of the anti-pedo-baptists on this department of the subject is, that it is inconsistent with the nature of baptism, as set before us in Scripture, that it should be administered to any, except upon the ground of a previous possession of faith by the person receiving it. If this proposition could be established, it would, of course, preclude the baptism of infants who have not faith, and who could not profess it if they had it. We are persuaded that this proposition cannot be established, though we admit that a good deal which is plausible can be adduced from Scripture in support of it. It is admitted that all persons who are in a condition to possess and to profess faith, must possess and profess it before they can lawfully or safely receive the ordinance of baptism. This can be easily established from Scripture. It is admitted, also, that the ordinary tenor of Scripture language concerning baptism has respect, primarily and principally, to persons in this condition,-- that is, to adults,-- and that thus a profession of faith is ordinarily associated with the Scripture notices of the administration of baptism; so that, as has been explained, we are to regard baptism upon a profession of faith, as exhibiting the proper type and full development of the ordinance. Had we no other information bearing upon the subject in Scripture than what has now been referred to, this might be fairly enough regarded as precluding the baptism of infants; but in the absence of anything which, directly or by implication, teaches that this previous profession of faith is of the essence of the ordinance, and universally necessary to its legitimate administration and reception, an inference of this sort is not sufficient to neutralize the direct and positive evidence we have in Scripture in favor of the baptism of infants. The only thing which seems to be

really of the essence of the ordinance in this respect is, that the parties receiving it are capable of possessing, and have a federal interest in, the promise of the spiritual blessings which it was intended to signify and to seal. Now, the blessings which baptism was intended to signify and seal are justification and regeneration,-- that is, the washing away of guilt, and the washing away of depravity. These, and these alone, are the spiritual blessings which the washing with water in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, directly signifies and represents. Faith does not stand in the same relation to baptism as these blessings do, and for, this obvious and conclusive reason, that it is not directly and expressly signified or represented in the external ordinance itself, as they are.

Faith is, indeed, ordinarily, and in the case of all who are capable of it, the medium or instrument through which these indispensable blessings are conveyed; and there is certainly much better scriptural evidence in support of the necessity of faith in order to being saved, than in support of the necessity of a profession of faith in order to being baptized. But yet it is quite certain, that faith is not universally necessary in order to a right to these blessings, or to the actual possession of them. It is universally admitted that infants, though incapable of faith, are capable of salvation, and are actually saved; and they cannot be saved unless they be justified and regenerated. And since it is thus certain that infants actually receive the very blessings which baptism signifies and represents, without the presence of the faith which is necessary to the possession of these blessings in adults, while yet the Scripture has much more explicitly connected faith and salvation than it has ever connected faith and baptism,-- there can be no serious difficulty in the idea of their admissibility to the outward sign and seal of these blessings, without a previous profession of faith.

If it be said that something more than a mere capacity of receiving the blessings which baptism signifies and represents, is necessary to warrant the administration of it, since the ordinance is, in its general nature and character, distinguishing, and it is not all infants that are admitted to it -- it is not difficult to show, that not only does the admission of this general idea, as pertaining to the essence of the doctrine of baptism, not preclude the baptism of infants, but that we have in their case what is fairly analogous to the antecedently existing ground, which is the warrant or foundation of the administration of it to adults. In the case of adults, this antecedent ground or warrant is their own faith professed; and in the case of the infants of believing parents, it is their interest in the covenant which, upon scriptural principles, they possess simply as the children of believing parents,-- the federal holiness which can be proved to attach to them, in virtue of God's arrangements and promises, simply upon the ground of their having been born of parents who are themselves comprehended in the covenant. If this general principle can be shown to be sanctioned by Scripture,-- and we have no doubt that it can be conclusively established,-- then it affords an antecedent ground or warrant for the admission of the children of believing parents to the ordinance of baptism analogous to that which exists in believing adults,-- a ground or warrant the relevancy and validity of which cannot be affected by anything except a direct and conclusive proof of the absolute and universal necessity of a profession of faith, as the only sufficient ground or warrant, in every instance, of the administration of baptism; and no such proof has been, or can be, produced.

Calvin, in discussing this point, fully admits the necessity of some antecedent ground or warrant attaching to infants, as the foundation of admitting them to baptism; but he contends that this is to be found in the scriptural principle of the interest which the infants of believing parents have, as

such, in virtue of God's arrangements and promises, in the covenant and its blessings. My chief object in these observations has been to illustrate the importance of considering and investigating the subject of infant baptism as a distinct topic, resting upon its own proper and peculiar grounds,-- of estimating aright its true relation to the sacraments in general, and to baptism as a whole,-- and of appreciating justly the real nature and amount of the modifications which it is necessary to introduce into the mode of stating and defending the general doctrine as to the objects and effects of baptism, in the case of infants as distinguished from adults; and I have made them, because I am persuaded that it is when the subject is viewed in this aspect, that the strength of the arguments for, and the weakness of the arguments against, infant baptism, come out most palpably, and that by following this process of investigation we shall be best preserved from any temptation to corrupt and lower the general doctrines of the sacraments, -- while at the same time we shall be most fully enabled to show that infant baptism, with the difficulties which undoubtedly attach to it, and with the obscurity in which some points connected with it are involved, is really analogous in its essential features to the baptism of adults, and implies nothing that is really inconsistent with the view taught as in Scripture with respect to sacraments and ordinances in general, or with respect to baptism in particular.

S. The Principles of the Reformation not the cause of Sects and Heresies

The Principles of the Reformation not the cause of Sects and Heresies Rev. William Cunningham, D.D.

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There is no more common and favourite allegation of the Papists than that the history of the Reformed Churches in general has fully established the unsound and dangerous character of the principles on which the Reformation was based, and especially of the two great Protestant principles of the right of private judgment, and of the sufficiency, perfection, and exclusive authority of the written Word as the rule of faith, the only available external source from which men's convictions of truth and duty ought to be derived; and there is no doubt, that in skimming over the history of the Reformed Churches, they can easily enough collect materials which enable them to present a picture that seems at first sight to afford some countenance to the allegation. The topic on which chiefly they delight to dwell, when discussing this subject, is of course the number and variety of the different sects that have sprung up among Protestants, the differences and disputes that have arisen among men who all profess to be exercising the same right of private judgment, and to be following the same standard—the written Word. They are fond of stringing together the names of all the different sects that have sprung up among the Reformed Churches, the most obscure and insignificant as well as the most numerous and influential (often swelling the number by misrepresentation and by fabricating sects from the names of particular individuals, who may have held some peculiar opinions, but who had few or no followers in their singularities), and then representing the prevalence of all these sects as the natural and legitimate result and consequence of the Protestant principles above referred to. This has a plausible appearance to superficial thinkers, and it is not to be wondered at, that it should have a considerable influence on the minds of those who have been trained in the Church of Rome, in prejudicing them against Protestantism, and in preventing anything like a fair and impartial examination of its claims.

It is, however, no difficult matter to perceive and expose the futility of all this, when it is seriously and deliberately propounded as an argument. The case stands thus. The Papists allege that the two great Protestant principles, of the right of private judgment and of the exclusive authority of the written Word, are unsound and dangerous; and the chief proof which they adduce of this position, that on which they most delight to dwell, and that which alone possesses any plausibility, is, that the history of the Reformed Churches shows, that the maintenance and application of these principles lead to injurious consequences, as is evidenced by the multitude of sects which hold opposite opinions upon many points—a state of things of course involving the prevalence of a large amount of error or opposition to God's revealed truth. In dealing with this allegation, it is proper in the first place to direct attention to the real nature and import of the main position, and to the standard by which its truth or falsehood ought to be determined. The main position is, that the

Protestant principles of the right of private judgment and of the exclusive authority of the written Word are false; and the evidence adduced in support of this assertion is that the practical tendency and results of them are injurious. Now we object to proceeding so hastily to a consideration of alleged practical tendencies and results, and founding so much upon these, without first examining whether the truth or falsehood of the principles themselves may not be ascertained more directly and immediately, by an investigation of evidence directly and properly applicable to this point. Men are very inadequate to judge fully and certainly of the tendencies of things, and very apt to fall into mistakes in estimating the relations of cause and effect in complicated questions; and therefore it is the right and safe course, when we are called upon to determine upon the truth or soundness of a principle, to examine, first, the evidence, if there be any, that bears directly upon the question of its truth and soundness, before we venture to involve ourselves in the uncertainties of an examination of all its tendencies and results. The truth and soundness of the principle itself is the main point, and this, when once ascertained, settles the whole question. A false and unsound principle has, of course, an injurious tendency, and will certainly produce injurious results; and its falsehood or unsoundness may often be confirmed and rendered more palpable by a practical exhibition of these. A true and sound principle, on the other hand, can never have any injurious tendency, or be in itself the proper cause or source, though it may be made the occasion, of injurious results; and the injurious results ascribed to it either stand in no relation to it whatever, or else are to be regarded as exhibiting only the abuse or perversion of the principle, and not its natural and legitimate application. If the direct investigation of the truth or falsehood of the principle propounded, on its own proper merits and evidence, be attended with much difficulty, and the fair result, after all, seem to be involved in some uncertainty, then our examination of its alleged tendency and consequences may be more reasonably allowed to have some weight in affecting the conclusion; though in general, and in all ordinary cases, the right and safe course is to begin with examining and making up our minds, if possible, on the direct and appropriate evidence, and then applying the ascertained truth or falsehood of the principle itself for enabling us to thread our way through the often complicated mass of alleged tendencies or results, and especially to distinguish accurately between what are natural and legitimate consequences, and what are merely abuses or perversions. These observations are of universal application. They are, I think, of some practical importance in controversial discussion; and they admit of being very obviously applied to the subject before us.

Let it be considered, in the first place, whether or not the Protestant principles, of the right of private judgment and the exclusive authority of the written Word, as the rule of faith, are in themselves true and sound, and if their truth and soundness can be clearly established, then let it be maintained upon this basis, as of itself sufficient, that the evils which may have arisen in connection with the application of them, are not to be traced to these principles as their proper sources or causes, but are to be regarded as perversions or misapplications of them, as exhibiting only the abuse of the principles, and not their natural and legitimate application. Now, there need be no hesitation in asserting that the Protestant principles of the right of private judgment and the exclusive authority of the written Word, can be incontrovertibly established, on their own proper evidence, as true and sound, and that nothing can be adduced against them that has any measure even of plausibility, except their alleged tendency and consequences. I do not mean to enter upon anything like a discussion of those topics, but it may be proper to state briefly their true nature and grounds, as this will be sufficient to show something of the conclusive character of the evidence on

which their truth and soundness rest, and at the same time, to illustrate the futility of assigning to these principles any proper tendency to produce, or any causal efficacy in producing, the evil consequences which Papists commonly ascribe to them. The Protestant principle of the right of private judgment does certainly not imply, as Papists commonly represent it, that men have a right to form any opinions they please, or that they are at liberty to gratify their own caprice and mere inclination in adopting their religious profession. There is nothing whatever in the Protestant principle upon this point, which is in the least inconsistent with the maintenance of these great truths, that men are responsible to God for all the opinions they form on religious subjects, that they bear guilt by the adoption of erroneous opinions, that therefore they are bound to conduct all their inquiries into divine things under a deep sense of their being responsible, not only for the application of the right means to reach that truth, but for actually reaching a right result, and that they are bound to employ all suitable means to attain a clear and certain knowledge of the truth, with perfect impartiality, with unwearied diligence, and unshrinking perseverance. All these positions are true in themselves, and of great practical importance. They are perfectly consistent with the Protestant principle of the right of private judgment, and they have been maintained by all true Protestants, and indeed, by all but infidel or semi-infidel rationalists. It is chiefly by insinuating that the Protestant principle of private judgment involves or produces a denial of these great truths, that Papists contrive to excite a prejudice against it, as if it were something very much akin to, or rather identical with, the infidel notion, that men are not responsible for their opinions, but may adopt any opinions upon religious subjects they please, without guilt and without danger. Now, not only does the Protestant principle afford no countenance to the infidel one, but, on the contrary, there is no ground on which men's responsibility for the soundness of their opinions can be firmly based, or so clearly brought out, as in connection with the Protestant principle of the right of private judgment. This Protestant principle may be viewed either negatively or positively. Viewed negatively, it is just a denial of the right of any man, or body of men, to dictate to me or to any other man, what we are to believe or to practice in religious matters, so as to impose upon us an obligation to believe and to practice as they have prescribed, and just because they have so prescribed. And surely this denial is abundantly warranted, for it is manifest that such a right to dictate or prescribe can be rationally based only upon the infallibility of the party claiming it, or at least on his ability to answer for us, and to bear us scatheless, at the tribunal of Him to whom we are responsible; and the claims which Papists put forth to such an infallibility and power, on behalf of councils, Popes, and other ecclesiastical authorities, rest upon no foundation whatever, and are scarcely worthy of a serious answer. There is no man or body of men upon earth who can put forth a claim to a right to dictate or prescribe to others, which has any real plausibility to rest upon. All such claims, therefore, may be openly and unhesitatingly denied; and to deny all such claims is just virtually to assert, that each man must ultimately judge for himself upon his own responsibility—in the diligent and careful use, indeed, of all the available means of forming a right judgment, but certainly without receiving the doctrine of any man or body of men as of itself conclusive in determining what he ought to believe or to do. Now, this negation of all right to dictate or prescribe to others with conclusive authority, is just in substance the Protestant principle of the right of private judgment; and it is not absolutely necessary that any one, in maintaining that principle, should do more in argument than establish this negation. The principle, however, may be warrantably and safely regarded in a somewhat more positive aspect. If no man or body of men has the right to prescribe to me what I shall believe in religious matters, so that I can righteously

and innocently follow his dictation, then the consequence is unavoidable, that I must form my opinion for myself—that I have a right to do so—and am under an obligation to do so—that it is my duty and my privilege to be “fully persuaded in my own mind,” and to receive nothing as true unless and until I am myself satisfied, through some competent and legitimate medium of probation or standard of reference, that it is true. Now, this is all that is involved in the Protestant principle of the right of private judgment; as thus explained, it is clearly and incontrovertibly true; and it stands perfectly clear of all connection, real or apparent, with those infidel or semi-infidel principles with which Papists labour to confound it. It is indeed, only when this right, and the corresponding duty—a right, which viewed in relation to the unfounded claims and pretensions of other men, and a duty, when viewed in relation to men’s allegiance to God and the promotion of their own best interests—are duly recognised and acted upon, that men can have any adequate sense of their responsibility for the formation of right opinions, or will be likely to use due care and diligence in the use of the right means for the attaining of truth; and nothing is more certain, and more fully established by experience, than the tendency of Popery to eradicate from men’s breasts a sense of personal responsibility, and to lead them to devolve this responsibility upon others, who have never produced any evidence of their ability to discharge it. The general substance of these observations applies equally to the other great Protestant principle to which I have referred—viz., the exclusive authority of the written Word, as the only standard of faith. The truth and soundness of this principle can also be clearly and conclusively established—so clearly and conclusively, indeed, that no apparent injurious tendency, and no alleged injurious consequences, should in the least shake our convictions on this point. It, too, as well as the former, may be regarded both in a negative and in a positive aspect. Viewed negatively, it is just a denial that there is any other source than the written Word, from which the mind and will of God on matters of religion can be fully and certainly learned. In this aspect, its truth is to be established by examining and disposing of the claims of other pretenders to anything like co-ordinate authority in determining our faith—such as antiquity, tradition, the consent of the Fathers, the authority of the Church, or the decrees of Popes and Councils. This examination is not attended with any great difficulty. The claims of all these pretenders can be disposed of, and disposed of triumphantly, and the practical result is that we are fully warranted in maintaining as a principle conclusively established, that there is no other external source but the written Word, from which we can learn with accuracy and certainty the mind and will of God. The principle, in the more positive form, is just the assertion of what Protestants have been accustomed to call the sufficiency of the written Word in point of fullness and clearness, and its perfection or completeness as a rule of faith. This may be regarded as a fair deduction from the principle in its negative form, for if the Bible be the written Word of God, and there be no other external source from which we can accurately and certainly learn the mind and will of God, then it follows that the written Word must have been intended to be the only rule and standard of our faith, and must have been fitted by its author of the accomplishment of this object; and these are positions moreover which we can prove to be asserted by the Bible with regard to itself. The Protestant principle of the exclusive authority of the written Word no more implies, as Papists commonly assert, that men may put any interpretation they please upon the statements of Scripture, than the principle of the right of private judgment implies, that they may adopt generally any opinions they please. All deference to mere inclination or caprice is excluded. The true and real meaning of the statements of Scripture as they stand there is to be ascertained. All means naturally fitted as means to contribute to the attainment of this end, are to be employed

under a deep sense of responsibility, with perfect impartiality and with unwearied diligence, and God by the promise of His Spirit has made provision that men, in the due use of these means, shall attain to a correct knowledge of his revealed will, and shall not fall into error, except through their own faults; and it is only when these views are recognised and acted upon, that men can be expected to be duly solicitous about the adoption of all the means, though the use of which they may attain a correct knowledge of the meaning of Scripture, and be animated in their investigation of it by a due sense of their responsibility. The Protestant principles, then, of the right of private judgment, and of the exclusive authority of the written Word, as the only source from which the mind and will of God can be accurately and certainly learned, are clearly and conclusively established—so clearly and conclusively established upon their own direct and appropriate evidence, that we are fully warranted in refusing to enter into an investigation of their alleged tendency and results, for the purpose of ascertaining from this source whether they are true and sound or not. If the Papists could produce direct evidence of their falsehood and unsoundness that was possessed of plausibility, so as to leave the controversy upon this point doubtful, they might have some fair ground for challenging us to a discussion upon their alleged tendency and consequences. But when the direct evidence of their truth is so satisfactory, and when all that has been adduced on the other side is so weak and frivolous, we are entitled to take our stand upon their proved truth and soundness, and to maintain as a position necessarily involved in this, that any injurious consequences which have been ascribed to their operations, are not their natural and legitimate results, but arise from the perversion or misapplication of them. But though we are fully entitled, upon the grounds which have been explained, to dispose in this way of the common Popish allegation as to the conclusion deducible from the history of the Reformed Churches, and though it is important that we should ever remember, that in all discussions of this sort, with whomsoever conducted, the primary question is, are the principles themselves true and sound, or are they not?—yet we do not need to shrink from a direct investigation of the tendency and results of the principles under consideration, and we can at least easily show, that nothing can be proved to have resulted from them, which in right reason should lead us to entertain any doubt either of their being true and sound, or of their being safe and salutary; or, in other words, the evils which have been ascribed to their operation, cannot be shown to be their natural and legitimate consequences, but rather can be shown to be traceable to other principles which may have been held by some Protestants along with them, but with which they have no natural or necessary connection. If men calling themselves, or called by others, Protestants, probably upon no other or better ground than merely that they were not Papists, have openly professed, or have acted as if they believed, that it was of little or no importance what opinions they held upon religious subjects, provided they were sincere; or if they have allowed their opinions to be formed merely by the outward circumstances in which they were placed, or the influences to which they were subjected, without being at the pains to ascertain what was the right standard, and to follow it steadily and faithfully; or if they have sought fame and distinction by indulging in paradoxes, or by propounding what they expected to excite the surprise, and perhaps to shock the feelings of others; or if they have in any measure regulated their professed opinions by a regard to personal and selfish objects, or by mere whim and caprice—assuredly in these cases the Protestant principle of the right and duty of private judgment was not responsible for the errors into which they fell. They were not applying this principle in a right and legitimate way, but were abusing or perverting it under the sway of sinful principles and motives, which they cherished and indulged in place of mortifying and

subduing. These sinful motives, these corrupt influences, were the true and real sources of the evils and the errors, and not the true and sound principle which these views led them to misapply and pervert. In like manner it is very easy to point out, in surveying the history of the Church, mistakes, errors, and sins in the mode in which the Scriptures have been read and applied; and these ought to be regarded as the true sources or causes of the errors into which men have fallen in the interpretation of the Bible, and not the true and sound general principle, that the written Word is the only authentic standard of faith and practice. Independently of those directly sinful motives and influences to which we adverted under the former head, as perverting men in the exercise of the right or the discharge of the duty of private judgment, and which have also operated largely in the perversion of the interpretation of Scripture, it has been very common for men, while professing to be searching into the meaning of the Word of God, to bring their own preconceived notions and fancies to the Scriptures, and to labour to procure for them some countenance from that quarter, instead of really drawing their opinions from Scripture by an impartial and conscientious investigation of the meaning and import of its statements. It has been no uncommon thing for men to engage in the work of interpreting Scripture in a light and frivolous or in a merely controversial, spirit, without any adequate sense of their obligation to investigate carefully its true meaning, and to submit implicitly to its authority. Many have entered upon this work while they had erroneous and defective notions of the principles by which it ought to be conducted, and while they are very scantily furnished with those resources and appliances, which are manifestly useful, if not indispensable, as means to aid and assist in the interpretation of such a book as the Bible is. Many have professed to interpret the Bible without any sense of the necessity of the promised agency of the Spirit to guide them into all truth, a principle true in itself, and always maintained by the Reformers and by all their genuine followers, as a necessary part of their whole doctrine in regard to the rule of faith; and being involved in ignorance or error upon this important point, they have failed to plead the promise of the Spirit, to realise their dependence upon his agency, and to seek his guidance; and on this account, or from this cause, they have fallen into great and dangerous error.

These things are the true causes, the legitimate and satisfactory explanations, of a large portion of the errors which have been broached by men who professed to be acting upon the Protestant principle of using the Bible as the only standard of faith. They are not involved in that principle, or fairly and naturally deducible from it. They are not exhibitions of its legitimate application; on the contrary, they are abuses and perversions for which the principle itself is in no way responsible. They are to be traced not to the natural and legitimate operation of the principle, but to a failure to follow it out fully and fairly, or to the operation of errors and perverting influences which have no natural or necessary connection with it, but which being de facto combined with it in the same persons, have been the real causes of the evils which are unwarrantably ascribed to it.

Even, when we cannot distinctly and specifically trace the errors into which men have fallen in the interpretation of the Bible, to these or to any other abuses or misapplications of the Protestant principle—to these or to any similar errors or perverting influences which have de facto accompanied its application, we are still entitled to maintain the general position, that this principle, rightly used and applied, is not the proper cause or source of error in the interpretation of Scripture, inasmuch as we might contend, that in an strict and proper sense the principle is then only rightly used and applied when the true and real meaning of the Scripture is correctly brought

out. The principle, viewed in its tendency and practical bearing, and laying out of view its established truth and soundness, cannot be shown to involve or to bring into operation any source or cause of error, or to exert any influence directly or indirectly in producing it. It simply asserts, that the truth of God is accurately and certainly set forth in the statements of Scripture and nowhere else, and on this ground directs men to go to the Bible, and to labour in the use of all appropriate means to ascertain its meaning, assuring them at the same time, that by the right use of the right means they will attain this end, and will not fail of it except through their own fault. There the principle stops, its influence and application go no further.

These two great questions, what is the only authentic source of the knowledge of divine things; and 2nd, what are the true and correct views of divine things derived from this source are perfectly distinct from each other, and should never be intermingled or confounded together. Men may be agreed in regard to the first, who differ widely in regard to the second. Each of these questions should be answered and disposed of upon its own proper grounds. If a man, who agrees with me upon the first question, differs from me upon the second, that is surely no reason why I should renounce the principle of the exclusive authority of Scripture as the only rule of faith—a principle which we hold in common, but only a reason why I should attempt to convince him, in the use of all legitimate and appropriate means, that he has made a wrong use, or application of the principle, and that from some cause or other he has mistaken the true meaning and import of Scripture statements. It is true that I have no right to dictate or prescribe authoritatively to him what he is to receive as the true and real meaning of Scripture, any more than he has to dictate or prescribe to me; but the want of any such right to dictate is in no way inconsistent with the doctrines, that the Bible is the only standard of faith, that all its statements are true, that these statements have a certain definite meaning, and that that meaning may be ascertained. It may be true, that I cannot lay my hand upon the motives or influences which have led him astray in the interpretation of Scripture, but such motives or influences may have been in operation, though the Searcher of hearts may have reserved the judgment of them to his own tribunal. Experience, indeed, proves that it is no easy matter to convince men, that the views which they may have formed of the meaning of Scripture are erroneous, and may suggest the apprehension, that controversies and errors upon religious subjects are not likely to be soon brought to an end, without some special enlightening and sanctifying influence from on high; but this only proves, that it was not the plan of God's wisdom so to fashion and form His Word, or so to regulate in other respects the communication of his gifts and benefits, as to secure that all men who have the Bible in their hands, and who profess to be searching into its meaning, should be preserved from all error, and guided into all truth, while it affords no presumption, that he has established any other means, or made any more effectual provision for securing this end, and while it is important to observe that the provisions for effecting this, which the Church of Rome ascribes to the all-wise God, besides being wholly unsanctioned by Him, have in point of fact just as much failed in accomplishing it as the Bible, regarded and treated in the way in which Protestant principle represents it. The great Protestant principles, then, of the right and duty of private judgment, and of the exclusive authority of the written Word, are undoubtedly true and sound in themselves, liable to no objection that is possessed of plausibility; and therefore they cannot be the direct and proper causes of schisms and heresies. Much error, indeed, has been taught by many who professed to hold and to act upon these principles; but it is easy to show that they are not responsible for the errors which have been ascribed to them, and that the errors are really traceable to the abuse or perversion of them.

These considerations should convince us of the utter futility of the common Popish allegation, professedly founded upon a survey of the history of the Reformed Church, viz., that these principles are the true causes or sources of the errors and heresies which have sprung up and still exist; and while they should warn us of the numerous and varied sources of error to which we are exposed in the investigation of divine things, and in the interpretation of the sacred Scriptures, and constrain us to be most diligent and faithful in the use of all the means by which these dangers may be averted, and the whole truth of God may be secure and held fast, they should just lead us to cleave more closely to the written Word, to take it as the only light unto our feet, to study it under a deeper sense of our responsibility for ascertaining its true meaning, and especially to abound more in prayer, that God would give us His Spirit to preserve us from all error, and to guide us into all truth. But while it is easy enough to show, as a mere matter of logic or dialectics, that the Popish argument which we have been considering is destitute of all real weight, and that the only fair result of an impartial examination of the whole subject, must be to confirm us in our conviction of the certain truth of the great principles of the Reformation, and to impress us at the same time with a deeper sense of our responsibility for applying them rightly, so as to bring out a true and accurate result, yet it should not be forgotten, that practically, and in point of fact, the schisms and heresies which have sprung up among Protestants have done a great deal to injure the cause of the Reformation, and to strengthen the hold of the Church of Rome on the minds of her votaries. The Romanists are well aware of the practical influence of this consideration, and take care to turn it to good account. One of the most eminent Popish controversialists of the present day—M. Malou, formerly Professor of Theology in Louvain, and now Bishop of Bruges—goes so far as to say, that the reason why the ecclesiastical authorities think it safe to allow the Romanists a much greater indulgence in regard to reading the sacred Scriptures, in Great Britain and the United States than in Popish countries, is, because the contentions and divisions among Protestants more than neutralise any mischief which the reading of the Scriptures might produce, and prove a powerful and permanent preservative against error. (*La Lecture de la Sainte Bible on langue Vulgaire*, par J. B. Malou, Louvain, 1846. Tom. i. p. 69; tom. ii. p. 277.) There may be some bluster and insincerity in this allegation. But the fact that such an allegation was openly made, is well fitted to impress, and to fix our attention upon one great source of Protestant weakness and Popish strength. It is well fitted, not only to remind us of the responsibility connected with the formation of all our opinions upon religious subjects, but also to constrain us to have it for a great object of desire, and prayer, and effort—first, that all who profess to take God’s Word as their rule and standard should, as far as possible, be of one mind and of one heart; and second, where this cannot in the meantime be accomplished, that the unity of mind and heart—the oneness both in judgment and in affection, which really does exist among all true Protestants, and especially upon the most essential topics bearing upon the answer to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” should be openly and consistently proclaimed, should be publicly and palpably exhibited, and should, so far as may be practicable, be embodied in united and strenuous efforts in opposing the great adversary, and in advancing the cause and the kingdom of their one common Lord and Master.

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