

THE VALUE AND AUTHORITY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE.

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE

CONSECRATION OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH,

AT BALMAIN, NEAR SYDNEY,

ON TUESDAY, 2ND MAY, 1848.

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THE chief hesitation which I have experienced in consenting to print the following Discourse has arisen from the apprehension that it might be found in the perusal, as I experienced it to be in the delivery, too argumentative. But the condition of the Church at the present moment is such that there is perhaps no security to be looked for without a recurrence to first principles, such as a few years since would hardly have been ventured upon before an ordinary congregation. It does not appear to me an encouraging symptom that such subjects are required to be handled in the pulpit; but an unquestionable necessity forces them upon the clergy if they would not witness the leading away of their flocks under captivity to the spirit of error. In the hope, therefore, that some of the representations here set forth in plain and popular language, may suggest to thoughtful minds a reply to the sophistries which are so profusely scattered at the present time by the emissaries of the Church of Rome, I have consented to the publication of this Sermon, and pray that it may do good.

Sydney, 8th May, 1848.

A SERMON.

I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance: that ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandments of the apostles of the Lord and Saviour.

2 PETER, iii. 1, 2.

TO-DAY we are assembled to dedicate this Church to the service of Almighty God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of man. To that one God, the Holy Blessed and Glorious Trinity, Eternal, Uncreated, and Incomprehensible, or not to be limited by space, will religious worship, homage, adoration, and devotion, henceforth be rendered here; but to no other being or substance whatsoever will any sort or degree of worship or adoration be permitted to be rendered. Such is the Catholic faith purely and simply: the faith of the Church delivered and established by Christ and his apostles. For the recovery of this faith from many involving human corruptions and disfigurements, and for its re-establishment in the Church of England, exempted at length from the numerous fables and deceits with which it had been encumbered through the sleight and cunning craftiness of men, we are indebted to that providential and blessed event—the Reformation.

I make an application of the text to this event, and thereby to the special cause of our assembling here this day, by reminding you first, that the Reformation, to which we owe our Church, proceeded wholly upon the conception of ascertaining, fixing, and exhibiting, what the sense of the Church from the beginning had been as to the commandment of the apostles of the Lord and Saviour. In the second place, you will observe that St. Peter refers to this as the purpose for which

both his epistles were written; nor can the same description be less applicable to the writings of the other apostles. He writes, he says, that his epistles may serve as a memorial of what the prophets of the Old Testament had taught; and as a permanent record of the precepts which believers had heard from the mouths of the apostles.

This then is the word of truth: teaching what the Scripture is, what is its appointed use and proper office, and in what light all Christians are to regard it. Scripture is a record of the commandments of the apostles, of their instructions, both as to doctrines and morals; or it is an enduring and unchangeable image of the teaching of the Church. We know that it must be so, because every book of which the New Testament consists, was addressed to those who had been previously instructed in the faith of Christ; or made fully acquainted with the terms of the Gospel, by the preaching of the apostles, and evangelists, and teachers whom the Lord had set in the Church. It is beyond the range of probability, or rather it is totally incredible, that those writings should have been received by the several communities to which they were addressed, as we know on unimpeachable evidence they were received, unless they had been entirely consonant with the tradition which was recognised as having had its origin in the preaching of the eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word from whom every such Church had first received the faith. As to the four Evangelists, we have the most copious and conclusive testimony of the authenticity of their writings. There never has been any objection worthy of consideration raised against it; nor any imputation cast upon their character for fidelity which can injuriously affect it. The infidel indeed may say, and does say, that the whole was an imposture; and that these accounts ought not to have been received with that implicit credit with which even he cannot deny that they were received from the very first. It was not likely that such an objection could weigh with those who either knew from personal experience the correctness of the statements, or had received them immediately from the original possessors of

that knowledge. When the Gospels were first promulgated, there were multitudes who knew all the circumstances as exactly almost as the Evangelists themselves; and they assuredly would not have accepted accounts which their own personal experience enabled them to contradict. The great point which I wish particularly to be observed is this: that the Gospels which we possess are the same which the primitive Church accepted while it yet had the assurance of living witnesses, that the primitive faith had never changed, and that these were faithful representations of it. Who again ever heard that the Christians of Rome, or Corinth, or Ephesus or other cities, ever objected that they found the minutest discrepancy between the epistles addressed to them, and the oral teaching, the preaching of the apostles, which they had listened to? the tendency and substance of which they had fully and exactly in remembrance when these writings first appeared among them. To these, as to a repository of apostolical doctrine, a reference was always made and admitted. They were regarded with reverence accordingly, and deposited and preserved with careful regard to the proofs of their authenticity. It was the unhesitating acceptance of each of these separately, by that Church which could not but know best, nay, know infallibly, what degree of credit it was entitled to, which induced the collective or Catholic Church to accept the entire volume, as a store-house filled with divine things, gathered from the members in particular of which the body was composed. The Scriptures themselves bear frequent testimony that such was the design with which they were written, to confirm the fulfilment of the prophecies in our Lord, and to testify to the commandments of the apostles, which had been previously directed to the Churches. St. John says of his own Gospel, "these things are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God;" thus addressing himself thirty-five years after the death of Christ to persons who had been long before instructed in the truth of the Gospel. Three or four years earlier St. Luke had said, "it seemed good to me to

write that thou mightest know," or be fully confirmed in "the certainty of those things wherein thou hast been instructed," that is taught verbally by catechism. This was the general design with which the books of the New Testament were written; and it is a blessed and happy thing for us that they were thus written, under circumstances which enable us to conclude with a certainty next to demonstrative, that they convey a just representation and report of the preaching of the apostles. They were accepted by those who had believed on the word of the apostles, and who would not, could not, have accepted any writings as the word of God, the authors of which had contradicted with their pens what they had affirmed and taught with their mouths. The apostles themselves encourage believers to watch with jealousy any deviation of the later accounts from those which had been first delivered. What does St. Paul say to the Galatians? "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach to you any other Gospel than that *we have preached* unto you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so say I now again" (such was his anxiety to impress them with this truth,) "if any man preach any other Gospel unto you than that *ye have received*, let him be accursed." And if, then, an apostle had conveyed by writing anything contrary to, or different from, that which had been previously preached and already received, would that writing have been recognised and accepted, by those to whom it was addressed, as a genuine portion of Scripture given by inspiration of God? Unquestionably not. Never could it have found admittance into the sacred Canon, constructed upon the principle of requiring for every writing the voice of the particular Church to which it had been addressed, bearing testimony that it was a genuine and authentic book, conformable in every respect to the deposit of the faith committed to the charge of the earliest converts of that Church to which the writing was afterwards addressed.

As surely, then, as the primitive Churches were acquainted with the true faith, and as surely as we know that we possess the same Scriptures which they accepted as apostolical, we

have a perfect moral assurance that an exact representation of the grace and truth, which came by Jesus Christ, is still in our possession. Suppose the Scriptures not to have existed, you could have no assurance of this kind; none, except through reliance on a perpetual miracle, asserted, not proved, such as is pleaded by the Church of Rome, as insuring to her for ever an infallible acquaintance with divine truth.

But here great difficulties are raised; first, as to how we are to know what is Scripture; next, as to how we are to ascertain the true version, and, still more, the true interpretation.

As to the first of these points, we are not arguing against heathens or unbelievers. Our controversy is with the Church of Rome, and need not detain us long. So far as the New Testament is concerned, question there is none. And, in the very widest sense of the term Scripture, there is but slender dispute: not enough, indeed, to break the unity of the faith, if all other questions, except this, were agreed on. Farther, as to the translation of Scripture, is it any fruitful source of uncertainty? So little that, whichsoever version be appealed to, there is, generally speaking, in the midst of their variations, enough of correspondency to form the ground for an agreement of sentiment, if there were not, unhappily, other causes of divergency.

In the third place, as to difficulties and differences in the interpretation of Scripture, we may safely deny that the disagreement and uncertainty reaches to that extent which, because it appears serviceable to their cause, it has always been the policy of some to represent. We still have common possession of the Creeds which express the faith of the early Church, and which have been adopted (generally in form, but always in substance) by all that were entitled to rank as members of the Catholic Church ever since. According to our view, the Scriptures contain the faith, the Creeds express it. The former point is established, as has been shown, by the very circumstances of the case; the latter, by evidence. The Scripture is the only document which has been adjudged

to be the word of God by those who had means of judging with positive certainty. The Creeds can advance no original claim to authority, but derive it wholly from their agreement with Holy Scripture, by most certain warrants of which they may be proved. Thus the Creeds lead us to Scripture, and Scripture carries us back to the apostles; and the chain of our connexion with primitive truth is thus complete.

The same Creeds, then, being admitted on both sides as expositors of the sense of Scripture, there ought not to be, there could not be, any essential difference of interpretation upon points included in those Creeds, if the Scripture were on both sides acknowledged as the complete and evident rule of faith. It is neither from the difficulty of deciding what is Scripture, nor which version is correct, nor which interpretation, that the variety of opposing doctrines proceeds. The Scripture is not open to just censure on that account. There would be no contrariety of any importance in men's belief, were it not that while some insist on such an unqualified right of private judgment as excludes all deference and regard to the testimony of that early Church, whose faith *must* have found an exact reflection in the Scriptures addressed to it by the apostles, others there are who, with more than equal determination, insist on the introduction of another *rule*, a rule of faith not merely placed upon an equality with the Scripture, but, I think it may even be said, to a great extent superseding its necessity and usefulness. The Church itself, it is assumed, the Church of any particular age, or at every successive point of time, possesses within itself a perfect capacity to pronounce infallibly what points are necessary to be included in that faith which is requisite to salvation. The Church itself, it is said, is, by prerogatives divinely insured to it, maintained in a state of perfect conformity with the original. We know, indeed, the falsity of this pretension, because we have providentially the means of constant comparison between the present and the past, and need no other proof of the wide and fearful opposition between them, admitted from an early date, aggravated by lapse of years, and obstinately

adhered to till now, without prospect of reformation. But according to the theory we are referring to, the Church is supposed to be preserved in this condition of unchangeableness by adherence to what may be not inconveniently termed an unwritten word, or tradition constantly maintained. It is however, in fact, a supposed faculty lodged in the Church of any age, to ascertain infallibly, by due inquiry within itself, every truth which it concerns the Church to know. With this is united an assumed authority to require of every man, as necessary to everlasting salvation, an admission of every thing decreed by the Church on its own authority, even contrary to God's word written, or in addition to the same. It is needless almost to observe, that if there be any such authority within the Church (wheresoever it be supposed to be lodged) in order that it may be qualified to fulfil the designed purpose, it must possess these certain properties:—it must be universal in operation, or have a right to exercise direct superintendence over every member of the body:—it must be infallible, or not liable at any time to affirm any doctrine contrary to truth, or that may be injurious to the Church:—its determinations concerning matters of faith must be pronounced after a rule or course of proceeding plainly pointed out by Christ himself, or approved by apostolic precedent. Unless that living authority which is supposed to reside in the Church for its perpetual conservation and government, be shown to possess these properties derived to it by divine appointment, the entire supposition is nugatory; there exists no authority competent to fulfil the service which is assigned to it. Now it cannot be requisite for me to say, that in the Church of Rome the whole sufficiency of this power, nay and its existence and continuance, depends on the exercise by their supreme Pontiff, of those faculties which are represented as inherent in his office as the successor of St. Peter, the vicar of Christ, the visible head and centre of unity to the Church. The continuance of that presidency established in St. Peter, and supposed to have been the germ or model of the primacy

which is still asserted, is boasted of as the most illustrious example of the operation of that unwritten tradition, or of that inherent capacity divinely imparted to the Church, whereby it is enabled through its visible head to maintain its perpetual and unchangeable resemblance to the original. The entire solidity of this theory, the whole reality and efficacy of the system thus imagined to prevail, depends, it is freely admitted by them upon the certain establishment of the fact, that St. Peter did exercise corresponding powers; that he did afford the first example of that universal authority, of that infallibility, and of that right of presidency in pronouncing the determinations of the Church, which are now vested in the Roman Pontiff as the representative of Peter, and by uninterrupted derivation from him. This then affords a ready and decisive test by which we may try the reality of those towering pretensions. Let us bring under examination those records, the apostolical writings, or Scriptures of the New Testament, which we are sure must contain a true and exact representation of the faith and persuasions of that Church, for the immediate use of which, in its separate branches, they were written. We learn from St. Peter himself, by the words of the text, to what purpose he held those Scriptures to have been written; and they in like manner must communicate in what light the Church of that date regarded St. Peter, and what degree of authority St. Peter attributed to himself. Let us examine these writings, I say, for a very simple purpose; that is to ascertain whether they contain particulars connected with the history of St. Peter, such as prove conclusively that he was during his life-time regarded as *not* possessing the endowments which the Bishops of Rome lay claim to as theirs by inheritance from him. If the Scriptures be only silent, we will admit that it is a doubtful case. If it be plainly declared by them that St. Peter did possess and exercise the prerogatives we have been speaking of, and it be as plainly shewn how and when the Bishops of Rome were made his successors in them, we shall not scruple to acknowledge the justice of

their claim. But we cannot recede from this very reasonable demand; that proof, convincing proof, be given, of such a part having been assumed by St. Peter in the Church as that which his supposed successors have appropriated to themselves, and upon which as upon a central point, the entire machine of Romanism rests and revolves.

First; as to the exercise of a direct universal superintendence over believers, in right of which, they say, it is incumbent on every human being to be subject to the Roman pontiff:—if it be so, then must the same right of interference have been originally vested in St. Peter; and some intimation of his possessing that right, even though but indirect, might be expected to be contained in the history of his proceedings. But this expectation is not confirmed by the event. Our Lord appears significantly and intentionally so to express himself, as if pointedly to contradict every pretension to the exercise of such a universal power of interference. During their latest interview, when Peter saw the disciple following whom Jesus loved, he inquired, “Lord and what shall this man do?” and the reply is well known, “What is that to thee? follow thou me.” What? it may be asked; could it be nothing to him; nothing to Peter who had before this time been constituted, as the theory of Romanism supposes, vicar of Christ, and primate of his Church; and in that capacity endowed with a pre-eminence to which, it is maintained, every human creature must be subordinate? The question is, was such pre-eminence conferred upon Peter or not? If not, how can it have descended from him to any successor? If it were, how could it be a question which he was not entitled to ask, what that *one* man should do? when he could not possibly exercise the primacy which our Lord, it is pretended, had assigned to him unless he had a right to inquire concerning *every* man what he should do. Bring it to the test of inquiry whether the vicar of Christ, that now assumes to be, do not in virtue of that title assume also a right to investigate what every man will do. And yet Christ silences the application of his follower by that

other question, "What is that to thee?" He seems to mean—seek not to be chief among your brethren by asserting a right to inquire into the course which they will pursue. Be content to fulfil your own duty; to bear the burden which will be put upon you; and, leaving others who owe thee no subjection to do the same, "follow thou me."

Secondly, as to the claim of infallibility. We know that when Peter was come to Antioch, Paul withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed. And why to be blamed? for any trivial fault? for some deviation from form or order, or other point equally unessential? No indeed: but upon a matter so important that if the view entertained by St. Peter had been tolerated or suffered to prevail, the middle wall of partition which had been already broken down would have been built up again in perpetuity, and the very purpose for which our Saviour died, that he might make one fold under one shepherd, would have been entirely frustrated. An apostle was indeed to be blamed, who through the fear of man could hazard such a consequence. It reached almost to another denial of his Lord. Frail indeed must be the tenure of that infallibility which affects to be derived from one who, unless his error had been providentially rebuked, and his influence counteracted, would have established a principle which must have entailed perpetual error, perhaps even destruction, upon the Church!*

In the third place, the Roman pontiff claims from St. Peter a right to preside in all General Councils: and it is with his followers an article of faith most firmly established that the decrees and sentence of a Council cannot be valid, unless ratified by him either in person or by deputy acting as president. Now in the Council held at Jerusalem, to decide the very important question, how far the Gentiles under the Gospel must submit to the ordinances of the law of Moses, it has been noticed so frequently as to render it almost unnecessary to notice it again, that Peter did *not* preside; but

* Note (A) p. 17.

that James, the first bishop of Jerusalem, presided. It is evident that he did. It is proved by the terms which he employs in pronouncing the decision, "my sentence is," or "I determine:"* using the same expression which St. Luke employs when he speaks of its being "determined† that we should sail into Italy:" a determination pronounced by Festus the governor,‡ after having conferred with the Council whereof he was president. It is clearly shewn by this what character was assigned to James in the Council of the apostles. He who pronounces the determination of the body is universally the president.||

These are very pertinent and observable instances, proving that St. Peter did *not* possess the supposed prerogative of universal control over the whole body of the apostles; nor the gift of infallibility which should guard him from ever maintaining or sanctioning any error in faith or doctrine; nor the right of presiding in order to give due and lawful effect to the decree of any Council. On the contrary, he himself sate and took part in the deliberation, and concurred in the decree, being subject all the while to the presidency of another. If there be any shade of verity in the pretension that there is an unwritten word, according to which the disposal of the Church in its doctrine and in its ordinances is to be regulated, it must be required that to perfect this theory, and to give it any just claim upon the notice and respect of a reasonable inquirer, those properties which are supposed to be now attached to the supreme and governing authority of the Church, should be proved to have been first of all possessed and exercised by St. Peter. If St. Peter had them not to bequeath to his so-called successors, whence should they obtain them? How in truth can they be his successors; for so far as I comprehend their claim of right, they can advance no pretension to any superiority, or to any of the qualities with which that superiority, if it exist, must necessarily be accompanied,

* Ἐγὼ κρίνω.

‡ Acts, xxv. 12.

† Ὁς δὲ ἐκρίθη. Acts, xxvii. 1.

|| Note (B) p. 18.

unless upon the plea, that St. Peter first of all was the possessor of it. This is the key-stone of the papal supremacy. If this be taken away, the entire edifice falls to the ground.

Oh that it were possible to induce the adherents of that system once to think fairly for themselves. Then, however habituated to crouch under impressions wrought into their minds by early discipline, or taken up at a later period under a predetermination to embrace a particular conclusion, they must perceive how imperfect, how uncertain, how unsound, is the notion that the doctrine of Christ, "the commandment of the apostles of our Lord and Saviour," is to be conveyed by a supernatural necessary agency, enshrined as it were in the contexture of the Church as at any period existing. How inferior to that system which, in search of Christian truth, appeals always to the authority of that Church in which it is known to have prevailed, and seeks the faith in those writings in which we have proof next to demonstrative that it is contained, furnished by the testimony of those who were most favourably placed to know the mind of Christ. The true object of inquiry is, whether we have at the present day the same Gospel which our Lord delivered to the Church; or whether we are removed in to another Gospel. And how is this to be determined but by showing that *we* believe as *they* believed, who as we know, found in the Scriptures nothing contrary to the truths which they had been divinely taught from the mouths of apostles and evangelists. It is not of any submission to these earlier saints that the question is. The supposition is only made that by comparison of our belief with theirs, we may ascertain whether ours is the true doctrine of Christ. There is no later period at which we can venture to make the same fearless appeal to the authority of the Church. The moment we find its doctrines in disagreement with the Scriptures, that same instant we know they must have wandered from the truth. The promise "I am with you always, even to the end of the world," does not contain assurance of invariable exemption from error; nor is it sufficient to bind

us invariably to implicit reliance on the Church, as it may exist at each particular time in succession. So it was written no less concerning the son of Jesse, "I have made a covenant with my chosen: I have sworn unto David my servant. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not fail David: his seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me." There is no pledge herein contained against temporary alienation from truth. In the age that followed, the glories of David's throne were terribly eclipsed. They who sat upon it depraving all his holy institutions, denying his faith, walking not in his ways, fell into abominable idolatry. There was a time when, if the image of truth were to be inquired after, it must be anywhere sought rather than in that line of David with which God had made an everlasting covenant, and had sworn even by his holiness that he would not forsake it—yes! that he would be with it always and un-faillingly even to the end of the world. And so He was, and is. All that the promise conveys is, the assurance that there should be no complete or final failure; that the effect of the infidelity which sat in David's seat, and of that corruption which polluted his holy places, should never attain such a fixed ascendancy as to prevent the return of the reign of truth; his sun might be eclipsed, but never extinguished. So has it fared with us. Even in the darkest period of that almost unutterable corruption which for centuries had profaned the crown of the Church of England, and cast her strongholds to the ground, there was still a fulfilment of the promise "I am with you always." Christ yet was with, and in her; and raised her up; and restored her to primitive honour, by the Word of God, which men had made of none effect by their traditions; and set his love upon her; to re-establish the Gospel; taking care of her and binding up her wounds. Oh that, in the madness of our self-will, we may not tear them open afresh. Oh that, by a renewed, however unmerited, exercise of mercy he would grant us at this time such a reformation in the spirit of our minds, as he granted us three centuries ago, in the

profession of his faith ; that we may be moved for the time to come to live more according to the spirit of the Gospel which we have received, more worthily of the blessings and privileges which he has imparted to us ; that we may lead a holy, sober, and religious life, seeking to promote peace in the Church, and to spread abroad through its agency true piety among the members ; that your heart may be perfect before the Lord your God, as your doctrine and profession are conformable to His word ; that you may walk in his statutes, and keep His commandments, and love Him with all your strength ; and so He may be moved to remember his promise, and by his Holy Spirit to abide with us for ever, even to the end of the world. Amen.

NOTES.

(A.)

The only way in which Roman Catholics answer this, or can indeed attempt to answer it, is by saying that the infallibility resides, not in the man, but in the holder of the office, or (to express their meaning perhaps more nearly), in the office itself. Peter, they acknowledge, might and did err as an individual; but as it was ordained at Antioch that his error should be reprov'd, so in all cases, they think, the course of events will be so ordered that he shall be finally set right. Thus the chain of his infallibility is supposed to remain unbroken, though some links be wanting. In the same way they pretend to maintain the perpetual orthodoxy of papacy, in opposition to the character of individual Popes, who, it is impossible to deny, have been painfully heterodox. But then, it is said, there is always a remedy in reserve, an influence *ab extra*, or in the Church at large, which checks this tendency, and restores to the holder of the infallible See possession of its proper infallibility. But what is meant by an infallibility *in abeyance*? In the case of St. Peter, we know not how long this interval was. We have reason to suppose that he adopted right sentiments at last, and that his concurring with St. Paul in setting up *one* bishop at Rome to govern the Church of that city, composed of Jews and Gentiles, was meant to be a practical acknowledgment and correction of his previous error. But the proper notion of an unerring judge of controversies is surely that he must be incapable of error so long as he continues to hold the office. If he be subject to err on articles of faith (as Peter did) and require to be brought back to the right path by others who do not possess or claim the gift of inerrancy, the infallibility then must reside in the Church at large, or in some portion of it, distinct from the presumed infallible guide. A most inartificial and unintelligible representation which makes the head dependant on the members, and can have been invented only to meet an objection. If the unity of the Church had depended on adherence to the communion of Peter, even in error, there must either have been already *two* Churches, or else St. Paul and those who agreed with him were *not* in the Church. If it were possible, without a breach of unity, to withstand Peter upon a point of faith, and to keep aloof from his society, why might not we do so if the Pope really were (as he *pretends*) the successor of St. Peter? The Church of England has

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 (v... 14); the effect of... a...
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