

A Body of Divinity

Vol. 1 (of 4)

A BODY OF DIVINITY:
WHEREIN THE DOCTRINES OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION ARE EXPLAINED
AND DEFENDED.
BEING THE SUBSTANCE OF SEVERAL
LECTURES ON THE ASSEMBLY'S LARGER
CATECHISM.

BY THOMAS RIDGLEY, D. D.
WITH NOTES, ORIGINAL AND SELECTED,
BY JAMES P. WILSON, D. D.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

FIRST AMERICAN EDITION, FROM THE THIRD
EUROPEAN EDITION.

PHILADELPHIA:

PRINTED BY AND FOR WILLIAM. W. WOODWARD,
CORNER OF CHESNUT AND SOUTH
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1814.

District of Pennsylvania, to wit:

BE IT REMEMBERED, That on the seventeenth day of May, in the thirty-eighth year of the Independence of the United States of America, A. D. 1813, William W. Woodward, of the said District, hath deposited in this office the title of a Book, the right whereof he claims as proprietor, in the words following, to wit:

“A Body of Divinity: wherein the doctrines of the Christian religion, are explained and defended. Being the substance of several lectures on the Assembly’s larger catechism. By Thomas Ridgley, D. D. With notes, original and selected, by James P. Wilson, D. D. In four volumes. First American, from the third European Edition.”

In conformity to the Act of the Congress of the United States, intituled, “An Act for the encouragement of Learning, by securing the Copies of Maps, Charts and Books, to the authors and proprietors of such Copies during the times therein mentioned.”— And also to the Act, entitled “An Act supplementary to An Act, entitled ‘An act for the encouragement of Learning, by securing the Copies of Maps, Charts, and Books, to the authors and proprietors of such Copies during the times therein mentioned,’ and extending the benefits thereof to the arts of designing, engraving, and etching historical and other prints.”

D. CALDWELL, Clerk of the
District of Pennsylvania.

TO THE READER.

In this first American edition the original text remains unaltered, the notes which Dr. Ridgley had subjoined to his work are retained, and for the sake of distinction, printed in Italics. The other notes have been added by Dr. Wilson; and in every instance wherein they have been selected by him from others, they are accompanied by marks of quotation, and the name of the author or book from whence they were taken.

PREFACE.

The influence which the different sentiments of men, in matters of religion, have, for the most part, on their temper and behaviour towards one another, affords very little ground to expect that any attempt to explain or defend the most important doctrines of Christianity, should not be treated with dislike and opposition by some, how much soever it may afford matter of conviction to others. This consideration would have put a stop to my pen, and thereby saved me a great deal of fatigue, in preparing and publishing the following sheets, had it not been over-balanced by what I cannot, at present, think any other than a sense of duty, in compliance with the call of providence. I heartily wish there were no occasion to vindicate some of the great doctrines of the gospel, which were more generally received in the last age, than at present, from misrepresentation, as though the method in which they had been explained led to licentiousness, and the doctrines themselves, especially those of election, particular redemption, efficacious grace, and some others, that depend upon them, were inconsistent with the moral perfections of the divine nature: these are now traduced by many, as though they were new and strange doctrines, not founded on scripture, nor to be maintained by any just methods of reasoning deduced from it, or as if the duties of practical religion could not be inculcated consistently therewith. If this insinuation were true, our preaching would be vain, our hope also vain, and we should be found false witnesses for God, and have no solid ground whereon to set our feet, which would be a most tremendous thought. And, if this be not sufficient to justify my present undertaking, I have nothing to allege of equal weight.

I must confess, that when I took the first step, in order to the setting this design on foot, by consenting that proposals should be printed, about two years since, I reckoned it little other than an expedient to disengage myself from any farther thoughts, and my friends from any expectation of it, which I could not well do, but by having a proof of the backwardness of persons to encourage, by subscription, a work which would be so very expensive to the undertakers; but, the design being countenanced, beyond what I could have imagined, and numbers subscribed for, with more expedition than is usual, I was laid under an obligation immediately to prepare my notes for the press, and set forward the work, which, through the divine goodness, has been thus far carried on; and I cannot but take occasion to express my grateful acknowledgment of the respect that has been shewed me, by those who have encouraged this undertaking. If it may answer their expectation, and subserve their spiritual advantage, I shall count my labour well employed, and humbly offer the glory thereof, as a tribute due to God, whose interest is the only thing that demands all our time, strength, and utmost abilities. If I may but have a testimony from him that I have spoken nothing concerning him that is a dishonour to his name, unbecoming his perfections, or that has a tendency to lead his people out of the right way to the glorifying and enjoying of him, my end is fully answered. Whatever weakness I have discovered, arising from mine inequality to the greatness of the subjects insisted on, I hope to obtain forgiveness thereof from God, whose cause I have endeavoured to maintain; and, to be excused by men, as I may truly say, I have not offered, either to him or them, what cost me nothing. I have, as far as I am able, adapted my method of reasoning to the capacities of those who are unacquainted with several abstruse and uncommon words and phrases, which have

been often used by some who have treated on these subjects, which have a tendency rather to perplex, than improve the minds of men: terms of art, as they are sometimes called, or hard words, used by metaphysicians and schoolmen, have done little service to the cause of Christ.

If I have explained any doctrine, or given the sense of any scripture in a way somewhat different from what is commonly received, I have never done it out of the least affectation of singularity, nor taken pleasure in going out of the beaten path, having as great a regard to the footsteps of the flock, as is consistent with that liberty of thinking and reasoning, which we are allowed to use, who conclude nothing to be an infallible rule of faith, but the inspired writings.

As to what I have advanced concerning the eternal generation of the Son, and the procession of the Holy Ghost, I have thought myself obliged to recede from some common modes of explication, which have been used, both by ancient and modern writers, in insisting on these mysterious doctrines, which, probably, will appear, if duly weighed, not to have done any great service to the cause, which, with convincing evidence, they have maintained; since it is obvious that this is the principal thing that has given occasion to some modern Arians to fill the margins of their books with quotations, taken out of the writings of others, whom they have either, without ground, pretended to have been on their side of the question, or charged with plucking down with one hand, what they have built up with the other.

Whether my method of explaining these doctrines be reckoned just, or no, I cannot but persuade myself, that if what I have said, concerning the subordination of these divine persons, be

considered in any other view, than as an explication of the Sonship of Christ, and the procession of the Holy Ghost, it will not be reckoned a deviating from the common faith of those who have defended the doctrine of the ever-blessed Trinity; and, if it be an error to maintain that these divine persons, as well as the Father, are independent, as to their personality, as well as their essence, or to assert that the manner of their having the divine essence, as some express it, is independent, as well as the essence itself, then what I have delivered, on that subject, is to no purpose, which, when I am convinced of, I shall readily acknowledge my mistake, and count it an happiness to be undeceived.

As to what respects the decrees of God, and more particularly those that relate to angels and men, and his providence, as conversant about sinful actions, and the origin of moral evil, I have endeavoured to account for them in such a way, as, I trust, does not in the least, infer God to be the author of sin; nor have I, in any instance, represented God as punishing sin, or determining to do it, out of his mere sovereignty, as though he designed to render his creatures miserable, without considering them as contracting guilt, and thereby procuring this to themselves. And, when I have been led to insist on the freeness of divine grace, and the covenant of grace, as made with Christ, and, in him, with the elect, and maintained the absoluteness and independency hereof on the will of man to render it effectual to salvation, I have, notwithstanding, said as much as is necessary concerning the conditionality of our claim to the blessings thereof, and the inseparable connexion that there is between practical religion and salvation, which fences against the charge that is often brought against this doctrine, as though it led to licentiousness. This I could not omit to mention, that the reader might not entertain groundless prejudices against

some of the doctrines insisted on, before he duly weighs the method in which they are handled, or considers whether my defence of them against the popular objections, of that or any other kind, be just or no. Some, it may be, will see reason to conclude that it is; and others, who think that there are many unsurmountable difficulties on our side of the question, may be convinced, that there are difficulties of another nature, as great, if not greater, attending the opposite scheme, which they themselves maintain. But this I rather chuse to submit to the impartial judgment of those who are not disposed to condemn a doctrine, without desiring to know what may be said in its defence.

As to what concerns the work in general, it may be observed, that when I have occasion to illustrate an argument, by making use of any criticism that may be of advantage to it, or to give the sense of ancient writers, either for or against what I have laid down, I have inserted it in *Italics* in the notes, that it might not appear to be a digression, or break the thread of the discourse.

Though the title of every page mentions only the general subject of the question, there is a table prefixed to each volume, that comprises the contents thereof, laid down in such a form, as that the reader may easily see the heads of argument, under every question, in their proper method and connexion.

And, at the end, there is an index of scriptures, in which only those are inserted that are either more largely or concisely explained. This, together with the table, was drawn up by a kind brother, which I thankfully acknowledge, as having afforded me more leisure to attend to the work itself.^u

As to what concerns the second edition,²¹ it was undertaken at the request of some who did not expect that the former would be so soon out of print. That which gives me great satisfaction is, the acceptance it has met with from many judicious divines and others, in North-Britain; and I cannot but reckon the honour that the learned professors in the university of Aberdeen did me, in signifying their approbation of it, much more to be desired, than the highest titles that could have been conferred upon me without it.

I have nothing farther to trouble the reader with in this preface; but would only request of him, that, what thoughts soever he may entertain concerning the way in which I have endeavoured to state and defend some great and important truths, he would search the scriptures, and explain them agreeably to the divine perfections, and not think the worse of the gospel, which stands upon a firmer basis, than the weak efforts of fallible men, who use their best endeavours to defend it. If we had not a surer rule of faith, than the methods of human reasoning, religion would be a matter of great uncertainty, and we should be in danger of being *tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine*. But our best security against this, will be our having hearts established with grace, and rightly disposed to make a practical improvement of what we learn; and, if we are enabled to follow on to know the Lord with minds free from prejudice, and, if under a due sense of our weakness, we humbly present our supplications to him, who is able to make us wise to salvation, we may then hope to attain to that knowledge of the truth, as it is in Jesus, which shall be attended with peace and comfort here, and crowned with blessedness and glory hereafter.

May the great God, in whose hand is the life and usefulness of all men, succeed, with his blessing, what is humbly offered to his

service, so far as it is adapted thereunto, and approved of by him, that hereby it may be conducive to the spiritual advantage of professing families, and the rising generation.

THE CONTENTS OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

To The Reader.

Preface.

Contents

The Introduction.

Quest. I.

Quest. II.

Quest. III.

Quest. IV.

Quest. V.

Quest. VI.

Quest. VII.

Quest. VIII.

Quest. IX., X., XI.

Quest. XII., XIII.

THE INTRODUCTION.

Before we enter on our present undertaking, we shall premise a few things leading to the subject matter thereof; and that we may begin with what is most obvious, let it be considered,

I. That it is a duty incumbent on all who profess the Christian name, to be well acquainted with those great doctrines on which our faith, hope, and worship are founded; for, without the knowledge hereof, we must necessarily be at a loss as to the way of salvation, which none has a right to prescribe, but he who is the author thereof.^[1]

II. This knowledge of divine truth must be derived from the holy scriptures, which are the only fountain of spiritual wisdom, whereby we are instructed in those things that could have been known no other way, but by divine revelation.

III. It will be of singular use for us not only to know the doctrines that are contained in scripture; but to observe their connexion and dependence on one another, and to digest them into such a method, that subsequent truths may give light to them that went before; or to lay them down in such a way, that the whole scheme of religion may be comprised in a narrow compass, and, as it were, beheld with one view, which will be a very great help to memory: and this is what we call a system of divine truths, or a methodical collection of the chief articles of our religion, adapted to the capacity of those who need to be taught the first principles of the oracles of God: and if they are designed to give the world a specimen of that form of sound words, which the church thinks itself obliged to hold fast, and stedfastly to adhere to, then we call it a confession of

faith; or, if digested into questions and answers, we call it a catechism. And though systems of divinity, confessions of faith, and catechisms, are treated with contempt, instead of better arguments, by many who are no friends to the doctrines which they contain, and who appear to be partial in their resentment, in as much as they do not dislike those treatises which are agreeable to their own sentiments, by whatever name they are called; yet we are bound to conclude that the labours of those who have been happy in the sense they have given of scripture, and the method in which they have explained the doctrines thereof, in what form soever they have been, are a great blessing to us; though we are far from concluding that they are of equal authority with scripture, or that every word which they use is infallible; nor do we regard them any farther than as they are agreeable to, or sufficiently proved from scripture.

IV. Confessions of faith and catechisms are not to be reckoned a novel invention, or not consonant to the scripture rule, since they are nothing else but a peculiar way of preaching or instructing us in divine truths. Therefore, since scripture lays down no certain invariable rule concerning this matter, the same command that warrants preaching the word in any method, includes the explaining of it, as occasion serves, in a catechetical one.

V. As there are many excellent bodies of divinity printed in our own and foreign languages, and collections of sermons on the principal heads thereof; so there are various catechisms, or methodical summaries of divine truths, which, when consonant to scripture, are of great advantage to all Christians, whether elder or younger.

VI. The catechisms composed by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, are esteemed as not inferior to any that are extant, either in our own or foreign languages, the doctrines therein contained being of the highest importance, and consonant to scripture; and the method in which they are laid down is so agreeable, that it may serve as a directory for the ranging our ideas of the common heads of divinity in such an order, that what occurs under each of them may be reduced to its proper place. It is the larger of them that we have attempted to explain and regulate our method by; because it contains several heads of divinity not touched on in the shorter. And if, in any particular instance, we are obliged to recede from the common mode of speaking, (though it is to be hoped not from the common faith, once delivered to the saints) we submit our reasoning to the judgment of those who are disposed to pardon less mistakes, and improve what comes with sufficient evidence to the best purposes.

The work indeed is large, but the vast variety of subjects will render it more tolerable; the form in which it appears is somewhat differing from that in which it was first delivered, in a public audience, though that may probably be no disadvantage to it, especially since it is rather designed to be read in families than committed to memory, and repeated by different persons, as it has been. The plainness of the style may contribute to its usefulness; and its being less embarrassed with scholastic terms than some controversial writings are, may render it more intelligible to private Christians, whose instruction and advantage is designed thereby. It would be too great a vanity to expect that it should pass through the world without that censure which is common to all attempts of the like nature, since men's sentiments in divinity differ as much as their faces; and some are not disposed to weigh those

arguments that are brought to support any scheme of doctrine, which differs from what they have before received. However, the work comes forth with this advantage, that it has already conflicted with some of the difficulties it is like to meet with, as well as been favoured with some success, and therefore the event hereof is left in his hand whose cause and truth is endeavoured to be maintained.

Quest. I.

QUEST. I. What is the chief and highest end of man?

ANSW. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him for ever.

1. It is supposed, in this answer, that every intelligent creature, acting as such, designs some end, which excites endeavours to attain it.

2. The ends for which we act, if warrantable, may be considered as to their degree of excellency, and, in proportion to it, are to be pursued by proper means conducing thereto.

3. There is one that may be termed the chief and highest end, as having an excellency and tendency to make us blessed above all others: this consists, as it is observed in this answer, in the glorifying and eternal enjoyment of God, the fountain of blessedness.

If it be enquired with what propriety these may both be called chief and highest, the answer is obvious and easy, *viz.* That the former is absolutely so, beyond which nothing more excellent or desirable can be conceived; the latter is the highest or best in its kind, which, notwithstanding, is referred, as a means leading to the other; and both these ends, which, with this distinction, we call chief and highest, are to be particularly considered by us, together with the connexion that there is between them.^[4]

I. We are to consider what it is to glorify God. In order to our understanding of this, let it be premised,

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