

THE
P R E F A C E
TO
THE EPISTLES.

AFTER much expectation, and many inquiries, the last volume of the late reverend Mr. Henry's *Exposition* now appears in the world. The common disadvantages that attend posthumous productions, will doubtless be discerned in this; but we hope, though there are *diversities of gifts*, there will be found to be the *same spirit*. Some of the relations and hearers of that excellent person have been at the pains of transcribing the notes they took in short-hand of this part of the holy scripture, when expounded by him in his family, or in the congregation; they have furnished us with very good materials for the finishing this great work; and we doubt not, but that the ministers who have been concerned in it, have made the use of those assistances, which may entitle this compo-*sure* to the honour of Mr. Henry's name; and if so, they can very willingly conceal their own.

The New Testament may be very properly divided into two parts, the one *Historical*, the other *Epistolary*. It is the exposition of the latter we now recommend; and shall offer some thoughts of the epistolary way of writing in general, and then proceed to observe the divine authority of these epistles, together with the style, matter, method, and design of them; leaving what might be said concerning the several inspired penmen to the prefaces appertaining to the particular epistles.

As to the *Epistolary* way of writing, it may be sufficient to observe, it has usually three properties. It may in some things be more *difficult* to be understood, but then it is very *profitable* and very *pleasant*: these will be found to be the properties of these sacred letters. We shall meet with things not easy to be understood, especially in some parts of them, where we cannot so well discover the particular occasions on which they were written, or the questions or matters of fact to which they refer: but this is abundantly compensated by the profit which will accrue to those that read them with due attention; they will find the strongest reasoning, the most moving expostulations, and warm and pressing exhortations, mixed with reasonable cautions and reproofs, which are all admirably fitted to impress the mind with suitable sentiments and affections. And how much solid pleasure and delight must this afford to persons of a serious and religious spirit, especially when they wisely and faithfully apply to themselves what they find to suit their case! Thus they will appear to be as truly written to them as if their names were superscribed on them. It is natural for us to be very much pleased in perusing a wise and kind letter, full of instruction and comfort, sent unto us by an absent friend: how then should we prize this part of *holy scripture*, when we consider herein that our God and Saviour has written these letters to us, in which we have the *great things of his law* and gospel, the things that belong to our peace! By these means not only the holy apostles, *being dead, yet speak*, but the Lord of the prophets and apostles continues to speak and write to us; and while we read them with proper affections, and follow them with suitable petitions and thanksgiving, a blessed correspondence and intercourse will be kept up between heaven and us, while we are yet sojourners in the earth.

But it is the *divine inspiration and authority* of these epistles we are especially concerned to know; and it is of the last importance, that in this our minds be fully established. And we have strong and clear evidence, that these epistles were written by the apostles of our Lord Jesus, and that they (as the prophets of the Old Testament) *spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*. These epistles have in all ages of the church been received by christians as a part of those *holy scriptures that are given by inspiration of God, and are profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness, and are able to make us wise to salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ*; they are part of that perpetual, universal rule of faith and life, which contains doctrines and revelations we are bound to believe with a divine faith, as coming from the God of truth, and duties to be practised by us in obedience to the will of God, *acknowledging that the things written therein are the commandments of God*, 1 Cor. 14. 37. And for the same reasons that lead us to acknowledge the other parts of the Bible to be the word of God, we must own these to be so too.

If there be good reason (as indeed there is) to believe that the books of *Moses* were written by inspiration of God, there is the same reason to believe that the writings of the *prophets* were also from God; because the law and the prophets speak the same things, and such things as none but the Holy Ghost could teach: and if we must with a divine faith believe the *Old Testament* to be a revelation from God, we cannot with any good reason question the divine authority of the *New*, when we consider how exactly the histories of the one agree with the prophecies of the other, and how the dark types and shadows of the law are illustrated and accomplished in the gospel.

Nor can any person who pretends to believe the divine authority of the *historical* part of the New Testament, containing the *Gospels* and the *Acts*, with good reason question the equal authority of the *epistolary* part; for the subject-matter of all these epistles, as well as of the sermons of the apostles, is the *word of God*, (Rom. 10. 17. 1 Thess. 2. 13. Col. 1. 25.) and the *gospel of God*, (Rom. 15. 16. 2 Cor. 11. 7.) and the *gospel of Christ*, 2 Cor. 2. 12.

We are built up on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief Corner-stone; and as Moses wrote of Christ, so did all the prophets, for the Spirit of Christ in them did testify of him. And the apostles confirmed what Christ himself began to teach, God also bearing them

witness, with signs, and wonders, and divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his will, Heb. 2. 3, 4. The manifestation of God in the flesh, and the things he began both to do and teach until the day in which he was taken up, together with his sufferings unto death, and his resurrection, (which things are declared to us, and are firmly to be believed, and strictly regarded by us,) do give us an ample account of the way of life and salvation by Jesus Christ: but still it was the will of our blessed Lord, that his apostles should not only publish his gospel to all the world, but also that, after his resurrection, they should declare some things more plainly concerning him than he thought fit to do while he was here on earth; for which end he promised to end his Holy Spirit to teach them all things, to bring all things to their remembrance which he had spoken unto them, John 14. 26. For he told them, (John 16. 12, 13.) *I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now; but when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall lead you into all truth, and shall shew you things to come.*

Accordingly, we find there was a wonderful effusion of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, (who in these epistles are called the servants, ambassadors, and ministers, of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God,) under whose infallible guidance they preached the gospel, and declared the whole counsel of God, and that with amazing courage and success, Satan every where falling down before them like lightning from heaven.

That in preaching the gospel they were under the influence of the infallible Spirit, is undeniable, from the miraculous gifts and powers they received for their work, particularly that gift of tongues, so necessary for the publication of the gospel throughout the world to nations of different languages; nor must we omit that mighty power that accompanied the word preached, bringing multitudes to the obedience of faith, notwithstanding all opposition from earth and hell, and the potent lusts in the hearts of those who were turned from idols to serve the living God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus that delivered us from the wrath to come.

Now that they were under the same mighty influence in writing these epistles, as in preaching, cannot be denied. Such infallible assistance seems to be as needful at least to direct their writing as their preaching, considering that these epistles were written to remind them of these things that had been delivered by word of mouth, (2 Pet. 1. 15.) and to rectify the mistakes that might arise about some expressions that had been used in preaching, (2 Thess. 2. 2.) and were to remain with them as a standing rule and record to which they were to appeal, for defending the truth and discovering error, and a proper means to transmit the truths of the gospel to posterity, even to the end of time.

Besides, the writers of these epistles have declared that what they wrote was from God: now they must know whether they had the special assistance of the divine Spirit or no, in their writing as well as preaching; and they in all things appear to have been men of such probity, that they would not dare to say, they had the Spirit of God, when they had it not, or if they so much as doubted whether they had it or not; yea, they are careful, when they speak their own private opinion, or only under some common influence, to tell the world, that not the Lord, but they, spake these things, but that in the rest it was not they, but the Lord, 1 Cor. 7. 10, 12, &c. And the apostle Paul makes the acknowledgment of this their inspiration, to be a test to try those that pretended to be prophets or spiritual: *Let them (says he) acknowledge that the things I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord,* 1 Cor. 14. 37. And the apostle Peter gives this as the reason of his writing, that those he wrote to might after his decease have those things always in remembrance, (2 Pet. 1. 15.) which afterward he calls the commandment of the apostles of the Lord, (ch. 3. 1, 2.) and so of the Lord himself. And the apostle John declareth, (1 Epistle 4. 6.) *We are of God; he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us; by this we know the Spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.*

As to the style of these epistles, though it be necessary we should believe a divine influence superintending the several writers of them, yet it is not easy to explain the manner of it, nor to determine whether and in what particulars the words they wrote were dictated to them by the Holy Spirit, as mere announcements, or how far their own memories, and reasoning faculties, and other natural or acquired endowments, were employed under the inspection of the Spirit. We must believe these holy men spake and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, that he put them on, and assisted them, in this work. It is very probable that sometimes he not only suggested the very thoughts in their minds, but put words into their mouths, and always infallibly guided them into all truth, both when they expounded the scriptures of the Old Testament, and when they gave rules for our faith and practice in the gospel church state.

And yet, perhaps, it may be allowed, without any diminution to the authority of these epistles, that the penmen of them made some use of their own reasoning powers and different endowments in their manner of writing, as well as of their different sorts of chirography; and that by this we are to account for that difference of style, which has been observed between the writings of Paul, who was brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, and those of Peter and John, who were fishermen. The like difference may be discerned between the style of the prophet Isaiah, who was educated in a court, and that of Amos, who was one of the herdsmen of Tekoa. However, the best way to understand these scriptures aright, is not to criticise too nicely upon the words and phrases, but to attend carefully to the drift and design of these inspired writers in them.

The subject-matter of these epistles is entirely conformable to the rest of the scriptures: in them we find frequent reference to some passages of the Old Testament, and explanations of them; in the epistle to the Hebrews, we have the best exposition of the Levitical law. Indeed the New Testament refers to, and in a manner builds upon, the Old, shewing the accomplishment of all the ancient promises and prophecies concerning the Messiah, and explains all the antiquated types and shadows of the good things that were then to come. But beside these references to the preceding part of holy writ, in some of these epistles there are contained prophecies, either wholly new, or at least more largely and plainly revealed, as that in the Revelation concerning the rise, reign, and fall, of antichrist, of which great apostacy we have some account in 2 Thess. 2. 3, 4. and in 1 Tim. 4. 1—3. And in these epistles we have several of the great doctrines of the gospel more fully discussed than elsewhere, particularly the doctrine of original sin, of the sin that dwells in the regenerate, and of justification by the righteousness of Christ, of the abolishing the Jewish rites and ceremonies, of the true nature and design of the seals of the new covenant, the obligations they bring us under, and their perpetual use in the christian church.

The general method of these epistles is such as best serves the end and design of them, which is indeed the end of the whole scripture—practical godliness, out of a principle of divine love, a good conscience,

and faith unfeigned; accordingly, most of the epistles begin with the great doctrines of the gospel, the articles of the christian faith, which, when received, work by love, purify the conscience, and produce evangelical obedience: and after these principles have been laid down, practical conclusions are drawn and urged from them. In taking this method, there is a regard had to the nature and faculties of the soul of man, where the understanding is to lead the way, the will, affections, and executive powers, to follow after; and to the nature of religion in general, which is a reasonable service; that we are not to be determined by superstitious fancies, nor by blind passions, but by a sound judgment and good understanding in the mind and will of God: by this we are taught how necessary it is that faith and practice, truth and holiness, be joined together, that the performance of moral duties will never be acceptable to God, or available to our own salvation, without the belief of the truth; since those who make shipwreck of the faith seldom maintain a good conscience, and the most solemn profession of the faith will never save those that *hold the truth in unrighteousness*.

The particular occasions upon which these epistles were written, do not so evidently appear in them all as in some. The first to the Corinthians seems to have taken its rise from the unhappy divisions that so early rose in the churches of Christ, through the emulation of the ministers, and personal affections of the people; but it does not confine itself to that subject. That to the Galatians seems directed chiefly against those judaizing teachers that went about to draw the Gentile converts away from the simplicity of the gospel in doctrine and worship. The epistle to the Hebrews is manifestly calculated to wean the converted Jews from those Mosaical rites and ceremonies they retained too great a fondness for, and to reconcile them to the abolition of that economy. Those epistles that are directed to particular persons, more evidently carry their design in them, which he that runs may read.

But this is certain, none of these epistles are of private interpretation; most of the psalms and of the prophecies of the Old Testament were penned or pronounced on particular occasions, and yet they are of standing and universal use, and very instructive even to us upon whom the ends of the world are come. And so are those epistles that seem to have been most limited in the rise and occasion of them. There will always be need enough to warn christians against uncharitable divisions, against corrupting the faith and worship of the gospel: and whenever the case is the same, those epistles are as certainly directed to such churches and persons as if they had been inscribed to them.

These general observations, we suppose, may be sufficient to introduce the reader into the book itself; let us now take a short view of the whole work, of which this posthumous piece is the conclusion. It is now about fourteen years since the first part of this exposition of the Bible was made public; in five years' time the Old Testament was finished in four volumes. The first volume of the New Testament was longer in hand; for though the ever-memorable author was always fully employed in the ordinary work of his ministry, yet those last years of his life, in which he drew up this exposition upon the historical part of the New Testament, were less at his own command than any other had been; his removal to Hackney, his almost continual preaching from day to day, his journeys to Chester, and the necessity of more frequent visits to his friends in and about London, together with a gradual sensible decay of health, will more than excuse the three years' time that passed before that was finished. And under such difficulties, none but a man of his holy zeal, unwearied industry, and great sagacity, could have gone through such a service in that space of time. He lived not to see that volume published, though left by him ready for the press. The church of God was suddenly deprived of one of the most useful ministers of the age. We have now been gathering up the fragments of those feasts with which he used to entertain his family and friends, in his delightful work of opening the scriptures.

What remains, is, that we recommend the whole of this Work to the acceptance and blessing of our God and Saviour, to whose honour and interest it was from the first directed and devoted. We need not be very solicitous about the acceptance it may meet with in the world: what has been before published, has been received and read with great pleasure and advantage by the most serious experienced christians in Great Britain and Ireland: the many loud calls there have been for the publishing this supplement, and reprinting the whole, leave us no room to doubt, but that it will meet with a hearty welcome. Though it must be acknowledged we live in an age that, by feeding upon ashes and the wind, has very much lost the relish of every thing that is spiritual and evangelical; yet we persuade ourselves there will still be found many who, *by reason of use, have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil*.

Those that may think the expository notes too long, especially for family-worship, may easily relieve themselves, either by reading a lesser part of the chapter at one time, or by abridging the annotations, and perusing the rest when they have more leisure: for though it must be owned they are somewhat copious, yet we are persuaded those that peruse them seriously, will find nothing in them superfluous or impertinent; and if any where some things in the comment do not seem to flow so naturally and necessarily from the text, we believe, when they are well considered and compared, it will appear they come under the analogy and general reason of the subject, and truly belong to it.

If there be any that think this exposition of the Bible is too plain and familiar, that it wants the beauties of oratory, and the strength of criticism; we only wish they will read it over again with due attention, and we are pretty confident, they will find the style natural, clear, and comprehensive: and we think they will hardly be able to produce one valuable criticism out of the most learned commentators, but they will have it in this exposition, though couched in plain terms, and not brought in as of a critical nature. No man was more happy than Mr. Henry in that useful talent of making dark things plain, while too many, that value themselves upon their criticising faculty, affect rather to make plain things dark.

But we leave this great and good work to speak for itself, and doubt not, but it will grow in its use and esteem, and will, through the blessing of God, help to revive and promote family-religion and scriptural-knowledge, and support the credit of scripture-commentaries, though couched in human expressions. These have been always accounted the great treasures of the church, and, when done with judgment, have been so far from lessening the authority of the Bible, that they have greatly promoted its honour and usefulness.