

## LECTURE I.\*

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Heb. 5. 12.

— *Ye have need that one teach you again, which be the first principles of the oracles of God ;—*

**M**Y design is to open unto you the principles of Christian religion, and for an introduction hereunto, I have pitched on this passage ; without any intention to accuse (much less to upbraid) any in particular, with ignorance of those principles : but only in the general and indefinitely to shew the necessity of their being taught. And considering the matter abstractly, without reference to this or that people, or to this or that age, whether they be Jewish or Hebrew christians that did need to be so taught ; or whether they be English or London christians in particular ; my design is only in general to assert, the necessity of being taught such principles ; that some time or other they be taught and we be instructed in them. And if they have been taught, that they be taught again (as the apostle's expression here is) that you be taught again, taught over and over, for these are things that we cannot too thoroughly have learned, or be too much versed in.

For the expressions here used,—“the oracles of God” and “the first principles” of those oracles—there is not much of obscurity in them. The word rendered *oracles*, doth by universal consent (as well in pagan, as christian and sacred writers,)

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signify divine revelations. It was the word among pagans by which it was usual for them to express the responses of their gods, or those they took to be such. It generally signifies what is divinely revealed, or understood, or taken to be so, nor is therefore the addition "of God," needless or useless. Such pleonasm is ornative of speech, especially when they render the same thing more emphatically so, than if there were not that pleonastical addition. And besides, inasmuch as there are many (as the apostle speaks) that are called gods, and are worshipped as gods, the oracles of God are taken to be from God. And when he saith "the oracles of God," (as the article may be well held, and often is to be understood emphatically,) it may be understood, the oracles of *the* God. He that is really so called, or to be called, and so it is an expression of latitude enough to take in what is of natural revelation, and what is of supernatural revelation; for what is of natural revelation is as truly from God as the other. All truth is from the first truth, there is no beam of light but what proceeds from the Father of lights, in whatsoever way it comes.

And then for the word here rendered *principles*, that is wont to be mentioned in as great latitude as can be supposed: it signifies all sorts of principles, whether of nature, or of art, or science whatsoever: and whereas, the apostle speaks here (as we render it) of the *first* principles: literally, it is the principles of the *beginning*; and that imports to us, that he did intend those principles in a very great latitude, all from first to last that can come under that notion, or within that compass. There is a chain or subordination of principles, even in principles themselves, as we shall have occasion, more hereafter, to take notice of: there are former, and there are latter principles. First principles do suppose within this compass, that there may be latter and last principles, but plain it is, that the apostle doth here intend principles of religion, and chiefly of Christian religion, but not solely. That is, principles of Christian religion, partly whereof it doth consist, and that are peculiar and appropriate to it: and partly, such as it doth suppose, such as it doth necessarily pre-suppose, that may be common with it, either to the Jewish religion while it was to stand, and that still (as being common to that religion with Christianity) are to stand; as whatsoever is common with the Jewish religion, with Christianity must be perpetual; or which is common with natural religion, which we must understand in nature to be before Jewish or Christian. And even in time too, as to positive instructions, that which was natural did precede the other.

That therefore which I intend to ground upon this passage,

you may take briefly thus—That there are principles of religion that need to be taught—And in pursuance of this I shall here,

I. Say somewhat more generally of these principles.

II. Shew the necessity of their being taught.

III. Speak something of the way of teaching them : and then

IV. Make application.

I Of these principles themselves : I shall shew there are such—and what they are—and of what kind.

1. That there are such, is a thing without all doubt. There is nothing, no created thing but hath its principles : principles of being there are belonging to it. Every complete substance that exists in the world, and is a created one, must be supposed to have such principles, and hath such generative and effective principles, and constructive principles : the principles from which it did proceed, and the principles of which it doth exist. There are also principles of knowledge as well as being. There is no piece of knowledge, no sort of science, but hath its principles as you all know. And therefore religion, Christian religion, theology, Christian theology must have it's principles too. It is a science, a practical one and of most absolute and universal necessity, and its principles must therefore be supposed of the most absolute and universal necessity too. Every piece of knowledge is not every one's business; but this is every one's business, to know God, to know how he may be saved, how it may be well with him to eternity.

2. But what are these principles? It is my present business to tell you of what sort they are. What they are particularly, that we must do by degrees as we come to them. Now you may judge of what sort they are by what the apostle mentioneth in this context ; and by the reference this passage, in the beginning of the 6th chapter, hath to that we are upon, we must suppose him to be still speaking of the first principles of the oracles of God. It may be thought strange that he should mention here things so small in their own nature as baptisms (not baptism but baptisms) and the laying on of hands, as if they were to come into the number of the first principles : not of principles only, but of the first principles.

To this I shall only say, I cannot think that was at all meant by the apostle, that they should be so taken for any of those principles. You are to consider to whom the apostle writes this epistle, namely to the Jews. These two, baptisms and the laying on of hands were anciently and (as we know) originally Jewish rites, transferred into the Christian church afterwards. And so the meaning of the apostle is only this ; “ I will not

stand to lay again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith towards God, especially not to you who have been instructed in these things all along so distinctly, they being nothing else but the doctrine of baptisms, and the laying on of hands ;” and then goes on to the other two : that baptisms and laying on of hands did continually instruct them (as usages that did obtain among themselves) as to repentance from dead works and faith towards God, as it is here expressed. And so these words are very fitly to be rendered by way of parenthetical opposition to those that do immediately go before, that is, “not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and faith towards God, (being the doctrines of baptisms and laying on of hands, or the things which baptisms and the laying on of hands, heretofore so frequently used among you, did signify) or the resurrection of the dead or of eternal judgment.” So there are but four mentioned of the first principles of the oracles of God. Against this way of reading this passage I meet but with one objection, and that is, the want of the greek article, before doctrine here, but that is so little an objection, if we consider how many greater ellipsis there are, that are frequent in Scripture, that it seems too light to be put into the balance against the weighty reason that is to be given for the other reading.

But it may be said then, What ! Are there but four principles, as such, which have reference to the whole business of Christianity, which the apostle’s discourse here must have final and determinate reference unto ? “Repentance from dead works, faith towards God, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment ;” are there no more than these ?

Yes undoubtedly there are, but it was none of the apostle’s design to give an enumeration of those principles, but to give an instance of such as he did not now intend to insist upon, but to wave and pass by. He only tells us this was not his principal business and design to deliver such principles, and he tells at the same time, what he thought fit to wave, while his discourse is moving forward to the information he would give them concerning the Melchisedekian priesthood of Christ : to which (after some warm discourse in the greater part of the 5th chapter) he comes in the close of that, and pursues in the seventh chapter.

3. But that I may shew more distinctly what kind of principles the apostle here hath reference to, take these considerations :

(1.) It is plain that they must be meant of doctrinal principles, principles of doctrine that are to be received into the

mind and understanding. There are those that are doctrinal, and there are those that are practical principles. It is true indeed, all principles of the Christian religion are remotely practical, because the main end of Christianity is practice. But the difference between a doctrinal principle and a practical, lies here, that supposing a doctrinal principle to have reference to practice, to serve towards it at a distance, yet a practical principle is that from which action doth immediately proceed. As now, if we speak to the very heads themselves that the apostle speaks of, "repentance from dead works, and faith towards God," the doctrine concerning these makes one sort of principle, and the habit another; the habit of faith, and the habit of repentance, that is a principle in the soul from which the acts of these immediately proceed. But the more essential doctrine concerning both these, must make the doctrinal principle concerning them; as there may be doctrinal principles about the most practical things, and those are the doctrinal principles, as such, that are here intended and which are to be the matter of teaching: which are to be taught, as the apostle speaks. It is very true that the papists do very industriously make it their business to overthrow that distinction of fundamental and extra-fundamental doctrines; of those that are essential and those that are extra-essential; such as are of absolute necessity, and such as are not necessary, or not so necessary. And they mightily insist and urge to have a catalogue particularly of those which we would have to go under the notion of fundamentals: because they think they could cavil and contend about any such catalogue that should be given, and look upon it as impossible there should be any so unexceptionably given, that nothing should be said against it, why this, or that, is taken in, or why such and such things should be left out. Therefore they would conclude there ought to be no such distinction; which is the most absurd thing that can be imagined; for to take away the distinction of fundamental and extra-fundamental is to suppose one of these two things. Either it must suppose that there is nothing necessary in Christian religion, which is a very strange supposition that there should be any such religion wherein nothing should be necessary; or it must suppose all things equally necessary, all necessary alike: and so that it were equally necessary that we know Salathiel to be the son of Neri, as to know that Jesus is the Son of God. But there needs no more to be said at present to this, than that whatsoever is necessary in point of doctrine to the soul's acting of "repentance from dead works, and faith towards God", (for the two

things that follow are no matter of our exercise. The raising of the dead and the eternal judgment are no part of our duty ; but our duty is summed up in these two, repentance and faith ! ) whatsoever, I say, is necessary in point of doctrine to the soul's being exercised in one or other of these with the understanding and judgment of a reasonable creature, so much is necessary to make a doctrinal principle : whatever leads the soul into the exercise of repentance and faith, so much must be necessary under the head of doctrinal principles concerning our duty. It is true we must know the other things too as motives to it, but these are to have the immediate influence upon things to be done. And I might more shortly say, whatever is necessary to bring the soul into union with God through Christ, all that knowledge that is necessarily antecedent to this, so much comes within the compass of what is fundamental in our religion, and indeed nothing comes within that compass but what is one way or other reducible to this, that must not one way or other have influence upon repentance and faith. And I add,

(2.) That as concerning these, some may be more deeply fundamental than others are, even of those that are of equal necessity. That is, there are principles that in reference to things depending on them have that notion of principles and are to be so considered, that yet may be consequential to other things on which they do depend. As in the building of a house (which is the metaphor the apostle, in this context, makes use of) there may be some parts that may be both fundamental to what is upon them, and superstructive in reference to what lies under them. And,

(3.) These principles may be partly of natural and partly of supernatural revelation. Of natural, that there is a God. Of supernatural, that Jesus is the Son of God. Though what is of natural revelation doth not comprehend what is of supernatural, yet all that is of supernatural takes in and includes all that is natural too. The same thing may be supernaturally revealed, and naturally ; as the same conclusion may be both believed and known. And again,

(4.) They are generally the plainest things that are to go for such principles. God hath so graciously ordered it, that that which is most necessary should be most plain. Indeed some may object themselves here, the doctrine of the Trinity, but as concerning that, I hope when we come to it, it will appear that what God hath said about that is very plain ; though what men have said and devised about it, is obscure and intricate

enough, even what they mean for the explication of it. And I only add this, for the present, concerning these principles,

(5.) They must be supposed to be but few. The first principles, or the great principles of religion, do lie in a very little compass: as that which goes amongst us in the name of the apostles' creed (you know) is very short. And (if antiquity deceive us not) was much shorter than it is. Though it is true that the variety of apprehensions and sentiments, and the great dissensions and manifold errors, that have in after-times sprung up in the Christian church have occasioned the enlargements of creeds and multiplying of articles of faith; varying them this way or that, to meet with this or that wrong sentiment as they have been apprehended; yet the things that are in themselves necessary, must needs be but few. And if the Christian religion ever return to itself, and be what at first it was, simple, pure, plain, and unmixed, undoubtedly the sum and substance of it will be found to lie in very little compass. It hath sadly degenerated in point of efficacy, and vigour, and power, as it hath been increased and augmented in point of necessary doctrines: men rendering such doctrines necessary, or bestowing that notion upon them arbitrarily as they have thought fit. And indeed the state of Christian religion hath never been flourishing since (as one very accurately observes in the last age) it became *Res Ingeniosa fore Christianum: a thing of wit to be a christian*. So much at present for the kinds and sorts of these principles. But now,

II. For the necessity of their being taught; as to that, little needs to be said.

1. That the things themselves are necessary is out of question. If any religion be necessary, it's principles must be much more so, especially if first principles. And

2. This doth plainly infer therefore the necessity of their being taught: else how should we come by them? And though there is somewhat pre-supposed to our religion that is natural, it is but pre-supposed as fundamental to all that was necessary to be super-added, for there is not enough within the compass of nature to lead men to blessedness, if there be not great super-additions. And what we have not by nature, how should we come by it, if we are not taught it? if we do not learn it? We read of great promises in Scripture of being taught of God. "Every one that hath heard and learned of the Father cometh unto me," as it is in that, John 6. 45. quoted from the prophet Isaiah 54. 13. "Thy children shall be all taught of the Lord." And "It is written in the prophets, they shall be taught of God:" and then it followeth, "Every one that hath heard and learned

of the Father cometh unto me." And so we read, Jeremiah 31. 34. as that which is foretold to be the great blessing of a time then future (and for ought I see, yet future) that there should be no saying "Know the Lord." They should not need to teach one another saying, "Know the Lord: for they shall all know me from the least to the greatest:" quoted by the apostle Heb. 8. 11. But even such teaching is teaching still. He is the great Teacher: and who teacheth like him? But as to subordinate teaching or human teaching there is nothing in all these promises that can exclude it. And when it is said "They shall all be taught of God:" and that they shall not need any to teach them, the meaning is, that there shall be a greater inclination in men's spirits to learn. Not that they shall know it without teaching, but that an aptitude to learn, shall be given them more generally than had been given, and (so far as we can observe) than is yet given. Men shall not need to be urged and pressed to know the Lord. No, there shall be a greater promptitude in men's minds to learn, and to use, and improve the means of knowing him, than had been before. But that there shall always, to the end of time, be use of human teaching, our Lord's own words just before his ascension plainly enough speak. Mat. 28. and the close: "I am with you to the end of the world." In this work it must be, "to assist you in this teaching through all successions of time, to the very end of the world." But if there should be any such time or state of things on earth, wherein men should no way at all need to be taught the knowledge of God, supervening and coming; that is not yet come, we are sure we see no such time: and if any such time should come, and we should see it, I verily believe there are none of those that now are intent upon the business of teaching, but would be glad in those times to resign their office. And in the mean time nothing is plainer than so it is, and indeed nothing is plainer than so it will be to the end of the world; that there is and will be need and use of human subordinate teachers, to teach and instruct men in the principles, even the first principles of faith in Christ. But,

III. I would say somewhat concerning the way of this teaching. And there be several ways about which we might distinguish and speak to you in distinct heads: there is private teaching and public teaching; and teaching from house to house, and teaching in public assemblies: there is teaching by continued discourse, and teaching in a way of interlocution, by way of question and answer, that to which the name of catechising is now generally appropriated, though indeed without ground from the word itself, or the proper significancy of the word. And this is indeed, in the ac-

count of many, a very formidable and frightful work, the work of catechising. I do not know why it should be so formidable a thing for one person to converse with another, to put questions and return answers; for is not this the usual way of common conversation? And why should it be more formidable to us to converse thus about the things of God, than about other things, that we count necessary, and about many things that we cannot so much as count so? But there can be surely nothing more necessary than religion and the things that concern it. I am for my part very far from that imperious and terrifying way of managing such a work as this, to affright people and make them afraid of it. And indeed were I engaged in such work, I should as leave they should catechise me as I them, if questions could be so judiciously put as to draw forth a full explication of the matter proposed. It would be all one to me, who were the questionist and who the answerer, supposing the question be aptly put so as to draw forth the explication most fully. I should like well it should be said, Pray how is such a thing understood, or what help may be given to understand that point more distinctly and more clearly?

And some considerations I shall give you, at present, about this way of teaching by familiar interlocution; and which indeed the exigency of the case doth require to be in a public assembly, where many meet and are convened together for that very purpose and upon that account. I would not insist upon the word, though it is a very significant word, that serves the purpose for which it is used well enough, but we find divers passages in Scripture where this word is used that fully refers to that way of teaching. And

1. Let that be considered, Gal. 6. 6. "Let him that is taught in the word, communicate to him that teacheth." The word there is catechised. Let him that is catechised in the word communicate to him that catechiseth: this implies it to be a stated business, that there must be continued catechising, and being catechised. The apostle, in 1 Cor. 14. 19. useth the same word when he tells us "I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I may teach others also, (the word is catechised and he speaks of doing it in the church) than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue."

2. That though another sort of word be used in that other language, when Abraham is so highly commended for instructing his household, (in Genesis 18) yet we are to consider what his household was, an household out of which he could draw forth (as we find upon occasion) three hundred fighting men. How vastly numerous must that family be? And when they met to-

gether for the worship of God, that must be a greater assembly than our's usually are : and his instructing was so that they should be all brought to know God and the principles of religion ; which must be supposed and (as the thing speaks) must mostly be when he had them together, though there might be occasion for private instruction and admonition too.

3. There ought certainly to be a very great deference given to usages in the Christian church in the purer and primitive times of it, when Christianity was most of all itself ; and we find very ancient records, even of teaching by this way of interlocation, and in public too. Origen lived very early, and it is matter notorious that he was eminent under the notion of a catechist in his time, whose business it was to teach and instruct in a catechetical way, and we are informed of divers catechists that they had in the church of Alexandria at the same time, that being, it is true, a numerous, great church, and requiring the help of many to that purpose. And all along, in the best times of the Christian church, (before popery was born into it) we find hereupon that there were these two distinct orders of christians, the *catechumini* and the *fidelos* : those that were catechetically instructed and those that having been for a competent time so instructed, were found fit to be admitted into full communion : and hereupon there were particular places appointed them in the assemblies, wherein they were to stand apart by themselves in a sort of inclosure, but in the view of the rest of the assembly. And the nature of the thing doth speak, that there must always be these two orders within the compass of the Christian church, those that are under instruction are *catechumini*, and those that as they are fit, are taken out of them and received into full communion. A thing that nature and common prudence will so much dictate, that long before the Christian name was ever heard of in the world, we read that Pythagoras's school had the same orders, where the business was principally to teach and instruct in virtue. There were those that were *Extra-syndonem* and those that were *Intra-syndonem* ; there was a *septum* or inclosure that did receive those that were looked upon to be thoroughly virtuous. His school indeed was like a church, upon that account, and commonly there were kept seven years expectants without the inclosure, not to be received (as it were) into full communion till they were very well confirmed in virtue and goodness. And thereupon, if any of those that had been received within the inclosure should afterwards degenerate and be guilty of any crimes, there was as solemn an excommunication of them as we read of any among christians, and a funeral besides held for

such a person ; that is, a coffin was brought into the *auditorium* and lamentation made over it as over one dead, dead from among them ; and so such were to be humbled that way and wrought upon. And there can be no such thing as the continuance of Christianity in the world, on other terms than that there must be two such orders. And I add,

4. That it is very apparent that our Saviour's way of teaching when he was here on earth was very much in a way of interlocution, and that often in great public assemblies, as it is obvious for yourselves to take notice in evangelical history. And,

5. That christians generally are under an express charge to be ready to give an account of the reason of their hope and faith, to any one that shall ask it, with meekness and fear : as in that, 1 Pet. 3. 15. And if they were to do it (as that direction hath more especial reference) even to enemies, to persecutors, and when it was to cost them their lives, much more to instructors and teachers, when they desire it, only in order to their own help and to the promoting and furtherance of knowledge among men. And,

6. It is very plain that they who by office are to make it their work and business to instruct others, are obliged to use all the most apt and likely means that may be most profitable and most conducing to that end and purpose. How solemn a charge is that the apostle lays on Timothy ! 2 Tim. 4. 1, 2. "I charge thee, therefore, before God and the Lord Jesus Christ who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom ; preach the word, be instant in season, and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine." With all doctrine, (as it is referred undoubtedly to both the things that go before and that follow the long-suffering) must in all reason intend, not merely the matter of doctrine, but the manner also, for there may be matters of doctrine materially to be considered, that are not so necessary to be so very much inculcated and urged. But that same all-doctrine is every way a teaching that is likely, or by which it may be more probable that good may be done ; and if there be such an obligation upon teachers, there is a correspondent obligation upon hearers to attend thereto : yea, and that not only implied ; but expressly required : "Obey them that have the rule over you." Heb. 13. 17. Hereupon no doubt they are obliged to comply with, and to concur to, set on foot all such means and methods of instruction as may be most conducing to this end. And that this is a means proper to this end may be manifest upon several considerations. As,

(1.) That it most evidently tends to engage the minds of them that are immediately dealt with in this way, to be intent on the matter in hand, as when a question is put to me I am bound under a kind of necessity to consider it, that I may know how to make one answer or another as it is particularly and personally directed to me. There are many things that pass us by in a continued and transient discourse, that a wandering mind takes little notice of, gives little heed to; but when it is called by a particular question to this particular point, it cannot but make the mind intent upon it. As when the apostle, in the midst of his apologetical discourse before king Agrippa, applied particularly to him with that question, "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets?" the king thought himself obliged to consider his question, and you see what kind of answer he gives, so as he never else would have thought, if that question had not been directed to himself. Such an impression did that question make on his mind.

(2.) It tends manifestly very much to engage the attention of all that hear, at such an exercise as that we are now speaking of. Every body presently gives his ear when there is a question put, "Come what will be answered to this question?" and if it need explication, "What will be said in this case?" It makes men exert their minds, and engage their spirits a great deal more, as every one's reason and experience must tell him.

(3.) It tends very much to fix things and make them continue with those that hear and do attend on such a kind of exercise, for that very reason, because it hath set the animadversive faculties so much the more on work; and if the matter be considered, nothing is plainer, than that people do many times blame their memories very causlessly, when it is really the animadversive faculty is not used; for things that once are earnestly attended to are much more likely to be remembered, but people find fault with their memories because they do not mind what they hear at first. If they earnestly minded what they heard, and considered things, and took them to heart, it would contribute a great deal towards the fixing of them in their memories, towards their retention of them. I believe, for the much greater part, when the badness of the memory is complained of, the fault lies elsewhere, that they did not seriously attend at the first, for things will be retained longer that have been well considered at first.

(4.) Hereupon, through the blessing of God, much more may be done towards the conversion of souls by the gospel dispensation, when the things needful to be understood in order hereto, are *well* understood for it; for while they are not so, we speak in the dark and people hear in the dark, and what we say to

them hath an uncertain sound, as the apostle speaks. 1 Cor. 14. 17. They cannot tell what we mean when we speak of the weightiest and most important things belonging to the kingdom of God, but if such things be well understood at first (as it is to be hoped they will be in this way) then there is one great step made, one main difficulty is got over: and so it obtains in discourses that have more directly that design, to make men intend this business, and impress things upon men's hearts to the utmost, which had passed through their minds before or were received clearly and distinctly there before. Again

(5.) It is likewise, by consequence, likely to be the means of introducing a much more fruitful Christianity among us, for undoubtedly, religion is more lively by how much the more it is well grounded: they that do believe this or that doctrine without a ground, they commonly believe it too without fruit. If it have not a good ground it is proportionably inefficacious, and a languid thing; as seed that is sown and hath no depth of earth, (as our Saviour speaks) brings not forth fruit unto perfection. Therefore is that charge given unto the Colossian christians: "As ye have received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk ye in him." Col. 2. 6. One notion under which we are said to receive him is as a teacher, and to receive him (though that be not all) is to receive his truths, his doctrines. "As ye have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built, up in him, and established in the faith as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving." And therefore, so rationally doth the apostle pray for them in that chapter, that they might be "fruitful in every good work, increasing in the knowledge of God." And in 1 Phil. 9. 10, 11. those christians are there prayed for after the same method, that they might abound in judgment and in all knowledge, (that they might become knowing and judicious christians) and then, that they might abound in all the fruits of righteousness that would be through Christ, to the praise and glory of God. And,

(6.) This would be a very great and likely means to bring christians generally to a great deal more of seriousness in the temper of their minds and spirits, that is, to exclude and shut out vanity, replenishing their minds with great and weighty things, things that deeply concern them: for in this way, undoubtedly, such things would come to be more inwrought into their hearts and to have a more settled abode and residence there. Then it would be as ordinary a thing when christians did meet, to catechise one another about the things of God and about the eternal kingdom (if I may use that phrase) as to catechise one another about news, or about the state of the times:

what is doing now in the country, or in the court, or in this or in any other nation or kingdom: the kingdom of heaven surely would look as great as any earthly kingdom or country, or greater, if we were more taken up about the things that relate thereunto. And so might the ancient Christianity come to be restored in some measure among us, wherein (as antiquity tells us) it was so ordinary a thing when christians did meet, presently to fall upon the matters of their religion: and it was usual in their families, even all the day long, when people were about their affairs either in the shop or at the distaff, to mention the great things of the Christian religion, from morning to night mingling discourses of that kind with all their affairs, as they could admit of their being mingled. This was primitive Christianity, and it was in these early days that this course that I now speak of did obtain, even when such familiar interlocutions for the instruction of candidates to Christianity were carried on in their assemblies. And,

(7.) It were much to be hoped that by this means, that faulty shyness would be overcome which doth appear too generally of discoursing at all about the things of God and the matters of religion, and what men find in their own spirits of savour and impression of such things. It is very strange and unaccountable that there should be so peculiar a shyness in reference to the matters of religion, to take discourse of them, especially as to one's own sentiments about them, what one apprehends and what one feels in himself, in one's own breast. There is not such a shyness in reference to things of any other concerns besides, as there is in reference to those concernments that relate to men's souls and their state Godward and for eternity. Nobody is shy to speak of his own or other's ails, for the most part, nobody is shy to speak of an aching head, or an aching tooth: but what a shyness is there to speak of spiritual maladies, a bad heart, a blind mind, and the like? If discourses were in this way more frequently introduced, so as to become familiar, this shyness would be gradually overcome. We find in public assemblies it is usual to give an account of things that are of another concernment, of a most inferior concernment; as in courts of judicature, where persons of the meanest capacity are called frequently to speak their knowledge, to tell what they know about such and such a matter that doth concern *meum* and *tuum*, this or that man's right; or concerning a question depending between the government and any particular person concerning a criminal matter. Nothing more ordinary than to have persons catechised about such things as these in public assemblies, and it is not thought strange. And why should there be a particular shyness, strangeness, and aversion to give an ac-

count of things relating to the kingdom of God? As if it were a criminal thing to have one's mind engaged and taken up about matters of that nature, or as if persons were afraid to be thought guilty of religion, as if it were a dreadful thing, a thing to be dreaded, to be thought guilty of minding God, and the concerns of another world. And

(8.) It would surely be a very likely means to prevent apostacy, especially in a difficult and trying time: indeed there is continual danger of apostacy: there is much danger from daily conversation with this world, there is much danger especially in a prosperous state and condition in it, least there should be heart apostacy, a heart secretly departing from the love of God. And there is great danger in times of persecution for religion's sake, for Christ's sake, and for the gospel's sake. But there is nothing (in point of means and in subordination to the grace and Spirit of Christ) likely to be a better security against it, than in such a way as this, to be once thoroughly instructed in the great "principles of the oracles of God." to have them well inlaid. They that are so instructed at first are not like to be as "children, tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine," or entangled by the cunning craftiness of them that lie in wait to deceive. Some are withdrawn by seduction, some by persecution: there will be the same fence against both in such a way as this. "Nay," will such a one say "I have (through the goodness of God) understood the grounds of my religion well: I did not trifle when I took up this profession;" as the apostle speaks concerning his trust in God, "I know whom I have believed and I am persuaded he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him until that day." So for a christian to say, "I know what I have believed, and I mean to abide by it through the grace of God," this will preserve him under suffering. It is a very uncomfortable thing in point of suffering to be called to suffer for that I never understood and which I never savoured or relished. To suffer for what I never had any clear understanding of, and to suffer for what I never had any taste or relish of in my own soul, though it is possible to suffer upon such an account, yet it is uncomfortable. A man may "give his body to be burned" without love, but it is very uncomfortable so to suffer. And the one of these things is the way to the other; I am likely to savour what I understand in those things that have a real bottom and are in themselves substantial. There are some things indeed that have so little in them, that the more I understand them the less I shall mind them; the more I understand them the more I shall despise them, but it

is not so in the great things of God and that do relate to his kingdom. And,

(9.) It is that which will certainly be a great ornament to the Christian church, and an honour to it, when there is a succession coming up, a rising generation of them that do understand themselves and appear to do so, make it evident that they do understand themselves in the great things of religion; that they receive them and take them in. As it was the reproach of the Christian church (as it was still called) when that barbarous age was upon it, and so great and gross darkness and ignorance did cover the face of it, so will the contrary be it's honour. And when times of greater knowledge do come, then in one sense (though these words have more meaning than that) it may be said to Zion "Arise, shine; for thy light is come; and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." Isaiah 60. 1. Light signifies holiness too, and a prosperous state, but it signifies knowledge as that which is inchoative of all the rest. And,

(10.) Lastly. It is one of the most comfortable presages that can be, when once the spirits of those that are to be learners (as it were) in the school of Christ, come to be engaged and intent upon getting in the knowledge of Christ, and have their souls impressed thereunto. I say it is one of the most comfortable presages of the approach of that time and that season drawing on, when one shall say to another, and even people to people, "Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob, and he will shew us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths." Micah 4. 2. It is a comfortable pre-signification of the approach of that time when "many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased:" when there shall be very much of inquiry and concern to know God and the things of God, then the time will be drawing on, when the knowledge of the Lord shall abound and cover the earth as the waters cover the seas. Isaiah 11. 9.

IV. But to make some brief use of all this. There are principles of religion, or of the oracles of God, which are needful to be taught. Then here,

1. Let us consider and adore the goodness of God towards a wicked and apostate world. How strange a sound should such a word carry with it to us. "The oracles of God!" How transporting a sound, for the oracles of God to be mentioned and spoken in such a world as ours is! when it would be thought that it's so universal revolt from God, should everlastingly have cut off all intercourse between him and it, that he should never have regard for this world any more; not more than for the

angels that fell and kept not their first station. Do we hear of any oracles of God sent down into those infernal regions? Oh! how great thing then is it, that there should be among us the oracles of God! Indeed it argues very great stupidity, if there be not a mighty sense of this upon our spirits. Pagans have had the most grateful sense that could be imagined but of a mock pretence hereunto, the very notion of oracles carries a sacredness and venerableness in it; any thing that is divine, any thing that is of heavenly descent, and so such things, though but feignedly such, have been reckoned of among pagans. Oh! what veneration had those poor Ephesian idolaters for that thing (we read it *image*, but there is no such thing in the greek) that dropped down from Jupiter, how mighty a zeal was there among that people, so as that the city, is said to be a whole *neochoron*; "All Ephesus is a worshipper;" so it is expressed, as if that mighty city were but one worshipper of the great goddess Diana. So great was their zeal, so high their veneration for a thing that their deluding priests made them believe dropped down from heaven. And we know how high their value was, of how much they did magnify themselves for the diabolical oracles they had among them in former days before Christ's time; and how mighty a concern there was among them when these were silent at his coming. So as that some of their wisest men (Plutarch for instance) was fain to write discourse upon discourse to qualify their minds thereupon. Two treatises we read of, written by that author, one why they ceased, which he wrote in verse: the other why they did so totally cease as upon the matter they did.

And when the privilege of having the oracles of God, was a more confined and limited thing, Oh! how did the Jews (to whom they were so great a treasure) magnify themselves upon them, how did they glory in it! And it was acknowledged that they had a mighty advantage. "What advantage had the Jews? Much every way, chiefly as that to them were committed the oracles of God," Rom. 3. beginning. Oh! we do not enough consider the kindness of heaven towards our world! that there should be any beams of divine light (whether by natural or super-natural revelation) shining in it. We do not enough consider that we are quite cut off from God. He doth hereby shew he hath yet a desire to the work of his own hands, in that he will have his oracles known to men upon earth; as elsewhere it is said of his tabernacle: "the tabernacles of God are with men;" and in what a transport doth Solomon break forth (1 Kings 8.) in that seraphical triumph of joy: "Will God indeed dwell upon earth?" Oh! that there should be any abode

of the divine presence upon earth ; and these are some of the most expressive tokens of such a visible presence vouchsafed ; his placing these oracles among us and diffusing the most impressive light that reveals him, and that reveals the great things that relate to his kingdom. And,

2. We may collect hence, that it is a very apt method and accommodated unto intelligent creatures, that God doth make use of, in conveying to them the necessary knowledge of the doctrine of Christ ; for there are principles that are to be begun with ; (first principles as you see) you had need to be taught which are the first principles of the oracles of God. There are the oracles of God, there are principles of these oracles, and the first of those principles. God doth apply himself to us suitable to our nature, he aims to draw us by the “cords of a man, and by the bands of love,” to make reason and love, engineers by which he would take hold of us, sanctify the one principle and the other, that we may be brought nigh to him and held in with him.

And it ought deeply to be considered that there are (as you see) principles wherewith we are to begin, and by which we are to be led on (as the apostle’s expression here is) towards perfection. Principles of truth, principles of doctrine, such as a “form of sound words,” wholesome words may be expressive of. Though (by the way) I am against being tied to a form of words ; in matters of this nature I would have words used for helps, not for bonds. And if I were to inquire how any have profited in the things of God, even in this very respect ; in respect of their knowledge relating thereto, if they could express a sound and good understanding about these things, in their own words, in words of their own choosing, and not which they found in this or that book, I should like it a great deal better. It would argue them so much the more understanding and knowing christians, and likely to prove more stable ones. As I said before, I would have you to make use of other men’s words (as you may any good book you read or sermon you hear) for helps but not for bonds ; to help your understandings, not to limit them. Again,

3. This lets us see the presumptuous and preposterous rashness of such persons as do at random, at all adventures take up the Christian profession, when they never as yet understood the principles of Christianity, and so they really profess they know not what : as if the name christian were a name of nothing, a name that had no signification, a name that did import no real thing. Those that can give no account of their knowledge of principles, and yet will be christians, call themselves christians, what an usurpation is this ! How groundlessly and presump-

tuously do they usurp a glorious name! a title that carries with it a great deal of glory! and I would have you understand it so. A christian is a glorious title, and they will be made to understand it to be so another day, who have usurped it they know not why, who have prophaned it, and could never justify the pretence. It is a far greater presumption than for any man to call himself king or emperor, who is a mean peasant, an ordinary fellow and can have no such pretence. "I will bring them to worship at thy feet (it is spoken to the Philadelphian church Rev. 3. 9.) who say they are Jews and are not, but do lie." For a man to take up a profession that is a mere lie, what a presumption is it! a man to call himself a christian! but he lies, and must do so upon one account, if he live in the continual violation of the Christian precepts, and upon another, if he understand nothing of the Christian principles. It is a lie: it is to suppose that *christian* is a name without a meaning, a name that means nothing. And,

4. We may collect hence, that it is very stupid folly for men to live all their days under this profession, without ever concerning themselves to understand the principles of Christianity. It is very presumptuous rashness to take up that profession, when a man will commence christian all of a sudden without ever having understood its principles. But it is far more stupid folly if a man will all his days, live under the Christian profession in continued ignorance of the principles of the Christian religion. How ridiculous doth that man make himself that will all his time go under the name of a merchant, and yet never understand any thing of merchandize? or if a man will be called a philosopher, when every one that knows him, knows that he understands not any of the principles of philosophy? But,

5. It is of so great importance to understand well the principles of Christian religion, that they need to be taught. Is there so great weight laid upon the teaching of them? are they hereby represented to us to be matters of absolute necessity? then by the importance of the principles judge of the excellency of the end of the Christian religion. And so consider, Hath God thus brought it about that we should be all of us in one degree or other under the Christian institution? What is it for? That which hath so very important principles must have a proportionable end. Then let us see what that is. Religion is a thing that terminates upon eternity, that runs into another world: they therefore that are under the Christian institution (as we all are to be in the church of God while we are here in the world) are to look upon themselves as so many candidates

for the blessed eternity. Here in this world we are training up for heaven, for everlasting glory; and hereupon are the principles of religion, of the Oracles of God, represented as the most important things, that have their final and determinate reference to another world, the glories of the heavenly and eternal state. This were a great thought for us to carry about with us, whenever we are under gospel teaching, to think that God hath provided and taken care that I should be trained up for heaven and fitted for the eternal kingdom, and for an everlasting abode in that blessed glorious state. And when you are training up your child, Oh! how great a thing is it to be training it up in the knowledge of God! for there are some steps that must be taken with it, to make it meet for partaking "of the inheritance of the saints in light." You know there is great care taken about the education of great heirs. The very children of the church are God's children. He calls them so, (Ezekiel 16. 20, 21.) "Is this a small matter that thou hast slain my children?" speaking of Jewish parents making their children pass through the fire to Moloch. In the degenerate state of that church and people, he calls them his children: now I say, great care is wont to be taken in the education of great heirs. Those that are the children of God and are really so, if children they are also heirs; and they are begotten to a lively hope, to an inheritance that is incorruptible and undefiled. And they are, by "the sincere milk of the word" which they receive from time to time, to grow up to a fitness and capacity to partake of that inheritance. We should never think of the principles of the Christian religion, but it should put us in mind of the end of it, and what it refers to. And yet again,

6. We may further learn from hence, that since there is such need that such principles should be taught, men should take heed of neglecting, and much more of opposing any fit methods wherein they may be taught. And why do they so? Why they think themselves too wise to learn, they understand too much already to need being taught. But while they account themselves so very wise, see how the Spirit of God counts them, what notion they pass under with him; "fools despise instruction." Prov. 1. 7. And that is certainly a very ill character, that the contempt of instruction brings upon persons: they think themselves wise, and God thinks them fools; and certainly his judgment is the most discerning and true: and as it draws on a bad character, so it is very likely to draw on a bad end and issue. To hate instruction is to hate knowledge: and he is said to love knowledge that loves instruction. Prov. 12. 1. But to be brought in under the notion of a hater of knowledge,

divine knowledge, Oh! how dreadful a thing is that! "They shall call but I will not answer, they shall seek me early but they shall not find me." Why what is the matter? what is all that resolved into which you read to that purpose in the 1. Prov? Why in the 29th. verse it is said, Because they hated knowledge and would not choose the fear of the Lord; therefore he would be deaf to all their cries and importunities, when destruction was coming upon them as a whirlwind. Why is God so inexorable towards them? Because they hated knowledge, they would not endeavour to learn. And

7. Lastly. If there be so absolute a necessity of being taught such principles of religion or such "Oracles of God," there surely ought to be a very peculiar temper and disposition of spirit in order to learning. And that I would have you to take an account of in a few heads which I shall only name. We are all to be learners here in this world, we must learn as long as we live. And if it be of so absolute necessity that we learn such things we should,

(1.) Apply ourselves to them with very great reverence, for they are "the Oracles of God" that we have to do with: it is something sacred and divine, that we are conversant and taken up about. When any thing of these oracles was to be first given in writing, though it was but a little, to a peculiar and select people of his, we see what an awful business was made of it. God comes down; manifests his glorious presence in the mountain that he had selected for that purpose, the people are there assembled and cast about the foot of the mountain; the mountain is enclosed, and they are forbidden, on pain of death, to approach the borders; "Touch not the borders; for whosoever toucheth them shall die." *Exod. 19. 20, 21.* In that assembly of that people, on purpose to hear the divine oracles that were to be preached among them, there was a glorious revelation that came from heaven. And do we think the gospel revelation that we have is less glorious? No, saith the apostle "The glory wherewith the law was given upon Mount Sinai, was no glory in comparison with this glory that so much excels." Oh! we should be learners with the greatest reverence imaginable, as having from time to time the divine oracles to be opened among us. Here is the most glorious appearance of God. When there was comparatively an unspeakably less appearance even than that on Mount Sinai, that is, when some of the divine glory shone in one bush, it is charged upon Moses (to strike his mind with a due awe) presently to put off his shoes. This was to be significant to us, with what great and profound reverence we are to have our souls impressed and possessed upon an appearance of God; and

these are the brightest and most glorious appearances, in the kind, that we know above any besides.

(2.) We should apply ourselves to learn the things of the kingdom of God with very deep humility; with a most humble sense of our own ignorance, and that we know so little. "He that thinks he knows any thing knows nothing as he ought to know," saith the apostle. And nothing was a more ignominious brand upon a sort of men that did start up early in the Christian church, that affected to be called by the name of gnostick, than that they so much valued themselves upon that knowledge to which they pretended, and but pretended; as that name did signify. Whether they were so soon called by that name, as some imagine, is a matter of doubt, but the genius and spirit of the men undoubtedly appeared early; and many passages in the epistles of the apostles have a direct reference thereunto, as particularly that (1 Cor. 8. 2.) "Knowledge puffeth up, but love edifieth." But (I say) it was the ignominy and reproach of that sort of men that they did so highly glory in an airy kind of knowledge, that they were never the better for, nay, that made them undoubtedly upon the whole matter much worse men: it doth always so where there is not great humility, which doth accompany and go with knowledge. That is, they who are learners ought to consider themselves as such, as we must all of us always be while we are here in this world, such as "know but in part." Here we are to have very self-diminishing thoughts of our own knowledge. Surely it is but little that we know, as we find Agur speaks concerning himself; "I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man." And so the Psalmist speaks of himself (73. Psalm) "So foolish was I and ignorant; I was as a beast before thee." Such diminishing thoughts it becomes us to have of ourselves, as to look upon ourselves, under such a self-despising notion, (as I may so speak) that while we are here we are but in a state of learners, and must be so as long as we are in this earthly state. But then,

(3.) We should be learners still with fervent desire of learning more and more; and this agrees well with a humble sense of our yet knowing so very little. It hath always been mentioned concerning one eminent heathen, as an honourable character he went under, that he was known by that motto, "*Hoc tantum scio, me nihil scire:*" *this only I know, that I know nothing*: though he was one of the greatest and most learned men of his age. If there be a sincere desire of increasing knowledge, nothing better agrees with it than such a sense as this, Alas! it is little I know and I am to be

still aiming to know more and more, in reference to things wherein I am so much concerned. "I opened my mouth and panted," saith the psalmist, "for I longed for thy commandments." Psalm 119. 131. We are to be continually desiring that which is to be the means of our growth in knowledge. "As new-born babes desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby:" and these principles are called "milk," as you see in the close of this 5th. chap. of the epistle to the Hebrews, where the text is.

(4.) It ought to be with a continued pleasant savour and relish of divine knowledge, that we should be driving the design to increase: to increase and grow in it. "Grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ;" labour to have a continual intermixture of grace with knowledge that may give it a pleasant savour. There is very little delight in dry notions that never influence a man's heart. "When wisdom enters into the heart and knowledge is pleasant unto the soul" (saith the wise man) "then understanding shall preserve thee, discretion shall lead thee." Knowledge doth its office effectually, to guide and lead us in our way when once it becomes of a grateful taste and relish to our souls; if it be taken and digested, and we relish a sweetness and pleasantness in it, then it will have power to do its work, that is, to be our guide and director in our way and course, as you have it Prov. 2. 10. And then,

(5.) It ought to be with continual gratitude, adoring and blessing God that he makes any of his light to shine in this dark world; especially that it should shine to any of us; that we have this "sure word of prophecy" put into our hands that makes up the "Oracles of God" in an eminent sense; "till the day dawn and the day star arise in our hearts." And

(6.) Lastly. It must be (or else we do nothing) with a serious design of getting a holy impression in our hearts by the truth we know, or else all is lost. There are too many, (the Lord knows) that if they take pleasure in knowing, and increasing knowledge, they do yet know but for the knowledge's sake, and aim no further. It is a fine thing to know much, to understand more than one's neighbour, more than such and such; and so be able superciliously to look down upon them as comparatively very ignorant. But to know on purpose, that I may be accordingly and do accordingly, is the true end of Christian knowledge. "I desire to know more that I may have a better heart, and that I may be able to love God more, that I may be more like God, more fitted to serve him, and walk with him in this world and enjoy him in the next:" if this be not the design we drive at, in aiming to know, in all our desire of knowing

much of the things of God, and Christian religion we do but labour for the wind and shall at length reap the whirlwind. In what a transport is the apostle (in that 3. Phil:) in the thoughts and estimates that he expresseth there of the knowledge of Christ, "I count all things loss and dross and dung for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord!" Well but what sort of knowledge was it he aimed at? See what it was in what follows, such a knowledge as by which he might be transformed into his likeness, whereby he might be conformable to his death and to his resurrection, such a knowledge as to have the image impressed by it of a crucified and glorified Jesus. And no other knowledge would serve his turn, "I count all things but loss and dross and dung in comparison of the knowledge of Jesus Christ my Lord," so to "know him" as to "be found in him," as to have "the fellowship of his sufferings and the power of his death," and to attain with him the resurrection from the dead.

And I desire in the close of this discourse to leave this with you. It is a dreadful thing to trifle with sacred matters. If at any time we open this book, or any thing out of it be opened to us, and we have not that serious design before our eyes and upon our hearts, that we would know more of divine things, that we may be made more like God, and be more fitted for his service and communion both here and hereafter, we shall be found guilty of trifling with that which is sacred: and though in this world the punishment may not be so visibly severe, yet the guilt is undoubtedly great with, (and indeed incomparably greater than,) what Uzzah lay under when he rashly laid hold on the ark, and the Bethshemites when they opened and would be curiously prying into it. And what! do we therefore make light of God, and the sacred things of God, because in the gospel-days there are not so terrible examples set in view before our eyes? But if we look into the great mysteries of the divine kingdom, with a slight mind and a vain heart, without any serious design of the same thing that these discoveries, these truths, these doctrines that are brought to our knowledge are designed for, we are all that while deserving that, which will be worse in the issue and end, than to have the name put upon the place "*Perez-Uzzah, the breach that Uzzah made,*" and it will be a more dreadful thing than if he did signalize the place by a terrible stroke from heaven upon us. When a man meddeth with the great things of God and can give no account for what, but only to satisfy his own curiosity, and the idle fancy of a vain mind; this will have a sad issue. But let it be for this, and my heart bear me record that it is for this, that I may become a serious, holy, knowing christian, a useful christian;

that I may live up to Christianity through the whole of my course while I am here upon earth, and then shall I be fitted at length for the heavenly inheritance with the saints in light, who shall possess that glorious inheritance.

Our next great work will be to fall upon the first principle, the very first of these principles, that which is the principal of principles; and that is concerning the Deity; the deepest foundation of all our religion.

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