

TO THE READER

I shall not need to detain the reader with an account of the nature and moment of that doctrine which is the entire subject of the ensuing discourse; far although sundry persons, even among ourselves, have various apprehensions concerning it, yet that the knowledge of the truth therein is of the highest importance unto the souls of men is on all hands agreed unto. Nor, indeed, is it possible that any man who knows himself to be a sinner, and obnoxious thereon to the judgment of God, but he must desire to have some knowledge of it, as that alone whereby the way of delivery from the evil state and condition wherein he finds himself is revealed. There are, I confess, multitudes in the world who, although they cannot avoid some general convictions of sin, as also of the consequent of it, yet do fortify their minds against a practical admission of such conclusions as, in a just consideration of things, do necessarily and unavoidably ensue thereon. Such persons, wilfully deluding themselves with vain hopes and imaginations, do never once seriously inquire by what way or means they may obtain peace with God and acceptance before him, which, in comparison of the present enjoyment of the pleasures of sin, they value not at all. And it is in vain to recommend the doctrine of justification unto them who neither desire nor endeavor to be justified. But where any persons are really made sensible of their apostasy from God, of the evil of their natures and lives, with the dreadful consequences that attend thereon, in the wrath of God and eternal punishment due unto sin, they cannot well judge themselves more concerned in any thing than in the knowledge of that divine way whereby they may be delivered from this condition. And the minds of such persons stand in no need of arguments to satisfy them in the importance of this doctrine; their own concernment in it is sufficient to that purpose. And I shall assure them that, in the handling of it, from first to last, I have had no other design but only to inquire diligently into the divine revelation of that way, and those means, with the causes of them, whereby the conscience of a distressed sinner may attain assured peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. I lay more weight on the steady direction of one soul in this inquiry, than on disappointing the objections of twenty wrangling or fiery disputers. The question, therefore, unto this purpose being stated, as the reader will find in the beginning of our discourse, although it were necessary to spend

some time in the explication of the doctrine itself, and terms wherein it is usually taught, get the main weight of the whole lies in the interpretation of scripture testimonies, with the application of them unto the experience of them who do believe, and the state of them who seek after salvation by Jesus Christ. There are, therefore, some few things that I would desire the reader to take notice of, that he may receive benefit by the ensuing discourse; at least, if it be not his own fault, be freed from prejudices against it, or a vain opposition unto it.

1. Although there are at present various contests about the doctrine of justification, and many books published in the way of controversy about it, yet this discourse was written with no design to contend with or contradict any, of what sort or opinion soever. Some few passages which seem of that tendency are, indeed, occasionally inserted; but they are such as every candid reader will judge to have been necessary. I have ascribed no opinion unto any particular person, — much less wrested the words of any, reflected on their persons, censured their abilities, taken advantage of presumed prejudices against them, represented their opinions in the deformed reflections of strained consequences, fancied intended notions, which their words do not express, nor, candidly interpreted, give any countenance unto, — or endeavored the vain pleasure of seeming success in opposition unto them; which, with the like effects of weakness of mind and disorder of affections, are the animating principles of many late controversial writings. To declare and vindicate the truth, unto the instruction and edification of such as love it in sincerity, to extricate their minds from those difficulties (in this particular instance) which some endeavor to cast on all gospel mysteries, to direct the consciences of them that inquire after abiding peace with God, and to establish the minds of them that do believe, are the things I have aimed at; and an endeavor unto this end, considering all circumstances, that station which God has been pleased graciously to give me in the church, has made necessary unto me.

2. I have written nothing but what I believe to be true, and useful unto the promotion of gospel obedience. The reader may not here expect an extraction of other men's notions, or a collection and improvement of their arguments, either by artificial seasonings or ornament of style and language; but a naked inquiry into the nature of the things treated on, as

revealed in the Scripture, and as evidencing themselves in their power and efficacy on the minds of them that do believe. It is the practical direction of the consciences of men, in their application unto God by Jesus Christ for deliverance from the curse due unto the apostate state, and peace with him, with the influence of the way thereof unto universal gospel obedience, that is alone to be designed in the handling of this doctrine. And, therefore, unto him that would treat of it in a due manner, it is required that he weigh every thing he asserts in his own mind and experience, and not dare to propose that unto others which he does not abide by himself, in the most intimate recesses of his mind, under his nearest approaches unto God, in his surprisals with dangers, in deep afflictions, in his preparations for death, and most humble contemplations of the infinite distance between God and him. Other notions and disputations about the doctrine of justification, not seasoned with these ingredients, however condited unto the palate of some by skill and language, are insipid and useless, immediately degenerating into an unprofitable strife of words.

3. I know that the doctrine here pleaded for is charged by many with an unfriendly aspect towards the necessity of personal holiness, good works, and all gospel obedience in general, yea, utterly to take it away. So it was at the first clear revelation of it by the apostle Paul, as he frequently declares. But it is sufficiently evinced by him to be the chief principle of, and motive unto, all that obedience which is accepted with God through Jesus Christ, as we shall manifest afterwards. However, it is acknowledged that the objective grace of the gospel, in the doctrine of it, is liable to abuse, where there is nothing of the subjective grace of it in the hearts of men; and the ways of its influence into the life of God are uncouth unto the seasonings of carnal minds. So was it charged by the Papists, at the first Reformation, and continues yet so to be. Yet, as it gave the first occasion unto the Reformation itself, so was it that whereby the souls of men, being set at liberty from their bondage unto innumerable superstitious fears and observances, utterly inconsistent with true gospel obedience, and directed into the ways of peace with God through Jesus Christ, were made fruitful in real holiness, and to abound in all those blessed effects of the life of God which were never found among their adversaries. The same charge as afterwards renewed by the Socinians, and

continues still to be managed by them. But I suppose wise and impartial men will not lay much weight on their accusations, until they have manifested the efficacy of their contrary persuasion by better effects and fruits than yet they have done. What sort of men they were who first coined that system of religion which they adhere unto, one who knew them well enough, find sufficiently inclined unto their Antitrinitarian opinions, declares in one of the queries that he proposed unto Socinus himself and his followers. "If this," says he, "be the truth which you contend for, whence comes it to pass that is declared only by persons 'nulla pietatis commendatione, nulla laudato prioris vitae exemplo commendatos; imo ut praevidemus, per vagabundos, et contentionum zeli carnalis plenos homines, alios ex castris, aulis, graneis, prolatam esse. Scrupuli ab excellenti viro propositi, inter oper. Socin.'" The fiercest charges of such men against any doctrines they oppose as inconsistent with the necessary motives unto godliness, are a recommendation of it unto the minds of considerate men. And there cannot be a more effectual engine plied for the ruin of religion, than for men to declaim against the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and other truths concerning the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, as those which overthrow the necessity of moral duties, good works, and gospel obedience; whilst, under the conduct of the opinions which they embrace in opposition unto them, they give not the least evidence of the power of the truth or grace of the gospel upon their own hearts, or in their lives. Whereas, therefore, the whole gospel is the truth which is after godliness, declaring and exhibiting that grace of God which teaches us "to deny all ungodliness and worldly lusts, and that we should live soberly, and righteously, and godly in this world;" we being fallen into those times wherein, under great and fierce contests about notions, opinions, and practices in religion, there is a horrible decay in true gospel purity and holiness of life amongst the generality of men, I shall readily grant that, keeping a due regard unto the only standard of truth, a secondary trial of doctrines proposed and contended for may and ought to be made, by the ways, lives, walkings, and conversations of them by whom they are received and professed. And although it is acknowledged that the doctrine pleaded in the ensuing discourse be liable to be abused, yea, turned into licentiousness, by men of corrupt minds, through the prevalence of vicious habits in them (as is the whole doctrine of the grace of God by Jesus

Christ); and although the way and means of its efficacy and influence into universal obedience unto God, in righteousness and true holiness, be not discernible without some beam of spiritual light, nor will give an experience of their power unto the minds of men utterly destitute of a principle of spiritual life; yet, if it cannot preserve its station in the church by this rule, of its useful tendency unto the promotion of godliness, and its necessity thereunto, in all them by whom it is really believed and received in its proper light and power, and that in the experience of former and present times, I shall be content that it be exploded.

4. Finding that not a few have esteemed it compliant with their interest to publish exceptions against some few leaves which, in the handling of a subject of another nature, I occasionally wrote many years ago on this subject, I am not without apprehensions, that either the same persons or others of a like temper and principles, may attempt an opposition unto what is here expressly tendered thereon. On supposition of such an attempt, I shall, in one word, let the authors of it know wherein alone I shall be concerned. For, if they shall make it their business to cavil at expressions, to wrest my words, wire-draw inferences and conclusions from them not expressly owned by me, — to revile my person, to catch at advantages in any occasional passages, or other unessential parts of the discourse, — laboring for an appearance of success and reputation to themselves thereby, without a due attendance unto Christian moderation, candor, and ingenuity, — I shall take no more notice of what they say or write than I would do of the greatest impertinencies that can be reported in this world. The same I say concerning oppositions of the like nature unto another writings of mine, — a work which, as I hear, some are at present engaged in. I have somewhat else to do than to cast away any part of the small remainder of my life in that kind of controversial writings which good men bewail, and wise men deride. Whereas, therefore, the principal design of this discourse is to state the doctrine of justification from the Scripture, and to confirm it by the testimonies thereof, I shall not esteem it spoken against, unless our exposition of Scripture testimonies, and the application of them unto the present argument, be disproved by just rules of interpretation, and another sense of them be evinced. All other things which I conceive necessary to be spoken unto, in order unto the right understanding and due improvement of the truth pleaded for, are

comprised and declared in the ensuing general discourses to that purpose.
These few things I thought meet to mind the reader of.

J.O.

From my study, May the

30th, 1677.